



Create: Networks

Executive summary: funding reflections, learning and impact of Create:Networks 2024/25



Funded by Creative Scotland and delivered by Creative Dundee, Create:Networks 2024/25 offered a programme of support and funding (£10k-£20k per network) to nine place-based creative networks in Scotland. This work aimed to bring local creative businesses together to learn and share, access new opportunities and pilot new activity - delivering public benefit by helping creative practitioners and businesses to grow and become more sustainable.

This paper offers a brief summary and key learning points from [the full evaluation of Create:Networks 2024/25](#). This summary is tailored particularly to draw out the key learnings pertinent to those looking to invest in, support and enable the potential of creative communities – for example through funding, advocacy, strategy interventions and policy development.

The impact and potential of creative networks

Create:Networks 2024/25 funding realised impact at a number of levels. For the directly funded organisations (and the individuals at the heart of them), funding offered space for experimentation, innovation and adaptation, and created new capacity that has strengthened organisational sustainability. Members of creative networks have benefited from a significant programme of new activity, seeding shared projects, new connections, inspiration and support. The impact of creative networks was multiplied beyond the directly funded activity. Many projects shared examples where investment in a network spawned offshoots of creative activity, including new networks, collaborations, collective bargaining and the creation of new work opportunities for members. And beyond that, many creative networks are intimately engaged with a (re)imagining the political, social and economic context in which they work. As such, Create:Networks exemplifies the potential of relatively modest investments in creative networks to drive much bigger, broader and longer-term changes for communities and places.



Supporting the future of creative networks

Both the Create:Networks 2024/25 programme, and the nine funded projects, made a positive impact on the opportunities available to creative businesses. Reflections from many of those involved shaped a series of recommendations that could usefully inform the development of future funding, policy, or other initiatives that aim to support the sustainability of creative businesses, networks, and place-based enterprise:

Leadership of creative networks is key.

Burnout is common amongst those leading creative networks, as are challenges associated with succession planning and future-proofing. These obstacles can threaten the sustainability of creative networks and initiatives. The value of investing in leadership support and capacity building is well-recognised in other contexts, but support tailored to leaders working on a small scale, outside of formally-constituted organisations, in non-hierarchical structures and / or in resource-scarce environments is less common. Initiatives that enable learning to be shared between networks are important and valuable.

Time to think is both impactful and scarce.

People leading creative businesses, and those at the heart of creative networks, are typically already working at (or over) capacity. Much of the impact of this sector relies on informal networks, voluntary efforts and people who go 'above and beyond' and formal or paid roles. Fair work should be at the heart of all initiatives to support creative networks. Paid time for founders and leaders to work with their communities is vital for networks to consider their future ambition, needs and opportunities, and builds the foundation from which all impactful activity can flourish. Simplify application processes to avoid adding to the pressure on leaders' capacity.

Practical support is helpful, too.

There is a widespread need for tailored, affordable infrastructure for creative networks. Challenges with everyday processes such as HR, governance, accounting and membership management were experienced in similar ways across the Create:Networks cohort, and absorbed a huge amount of time and energy. Traditional legal and governance structures don't lend themselves terribly well to the network context, and useful support could explicitly focus on tailoring such structures to suit the devolved ethical and logistical experiences of networks.

Consider accessibility.

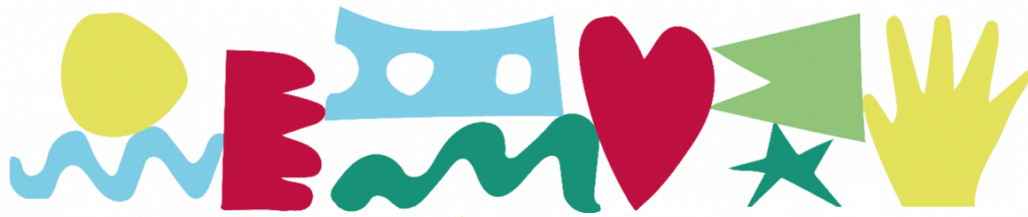
If opportunities are to benefit as many creative businesses as possible, it is essential to support the costs of accessibility in the broadest sense. This may include specifically resourcing leaders from within marginalised communities, creating flexibility in terms of timescales and deliverables, and ringfencing additional access budgets. This is not simply the fair thing to do; projects led by and for those who were excluded from other opportunities were especially treasured by their participants, and realised impact in ways that could not be achieved through non-specialist provision.

Embrace the unknown.

The best creative networks worked flexibly and responsively to meet the needs of their communities. This means that plans changed, budgets were reallocated, timings adjusted. This is what success looks like; processes should be explicitly designed to embrace this way of working. Make it easy, and explicitly welcome, for networks to adjust their activity in response to the changing needs of their communities.

Commit.

Short term funding is helpful, but unlikely to realise the full potential of creative networks in isolation. Support should consider the wider ecosystems into which individual initiatives fit – including predictable cycles of funding, alignment with ‘next step’ funding programmes, and work to influence the social, economic and political climate in which networks operate.



Great thanks goes to each of the networks who contributed their time, knowledge and learnings to this paper, report and project.

Paper and associated report authored by [Kathryn Welch](#)

Illustrations by [Kate Scarlet Harvey](#)

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Creative Dundee centres creative practitioners and communities as powerful catalysts for collective good. We facilitate collaboration, nurture collective leadership and support people to imagine and act together to benefit our communities and place.

Find out more about our work at creativedundee.com.

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