



# Create: Networks

## Reflections and learning for network builders



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](#). It is tailored particularly to be useful to those who are building and leading local creative networks, or are looking to do so in future.

## This is not an Executive Summary

The wider evaluation report focuses heavily on learning emerging from this Create:Networks 2024/25 for policy-makers, funders and those looking to support communities and creative networks. In terms of learning for network-builders, many of the learnings shared by Create:Networks-funded projects are specific to this opportunity (for example, with hindsight, networks might have been more confident to propose changes to delivery plans and budget allocations as the realities of delivery became clearer, but there is no guarantee that a future fund will be equally sympathetic to such adjustments).

Accordingly, these reflections and learnings should not be understood as an executive summary of the full paper; rather they are a series of observations capturing some of the more transferable lessons that network-builders learned from their experiences, offered here in the spirit of peer sharing and advice. There is significant potential for more activity focussed on sharing expertise between those who lead creative networks, and the following is only one step along that journey.

### Make space to step back and think ahead

Create:Networks-funded projects valued the opportunity that applying for funding gave them to think about their future. It prompted conversations with partners, exploration of big questions about ambition and future direction, and brought considerations to the fore that could easily disappear under the demands of day-to-day operation. Writing a funding application is not the only (and may not be the best!) way to do this, but creating the space to have these bigger deliberations can be challenging. Try to find some way of carving out space to think about where you're going, and to check if everyone involved has shared aspirations for the future.

### Budget generously

When seeking funding (for the development of creative networks, or anything else), it can be tempting to squeeze as much activity into the available budget as possible. The costs of providing appealing, flexible and genuinely accessible provision can

quickly mount up, especially when considering the time and support that some people may need before they are ready to engage. In particular, Create:Networks-funded projects consistently found the cost of venue-hire (and especially accessible venues) to be higher than expected. Try to resist the temptation to spread the budget too thinly.

### **Test in practice**

Create:Network funded projects that developed new programmes of activity frequently found that what prospective network-members say they want in surveys or discussions is not always the same as what they'll show up to in practice. Provision that is much in-demand in theory may prove unpopular in reality. Learning by doing may show up experiences that no amount of consultation or planning will tell you. Try to create a delivery model that allows space to try things and adjust as you go.

### **Work with people who aren't like you**

For networks that seek to support a broad membership (for example, creative practitioners in a given geographic area), projects in this cohort were conscious that networks can very easily become cliques. As networks adjust to meet the needs of their members, those not already involved can easily find themselves 'squeezed out'. To resist this, networks tried actively to extend their reach, built long-term partnerships with people from different backgrounds, diversified the leadership of networks as much as possible and sought regular opportunities to invite new people to join (for example, by hosting open calls for new opportunities, rather than just offering them to existing members).

### **Look after yourself**

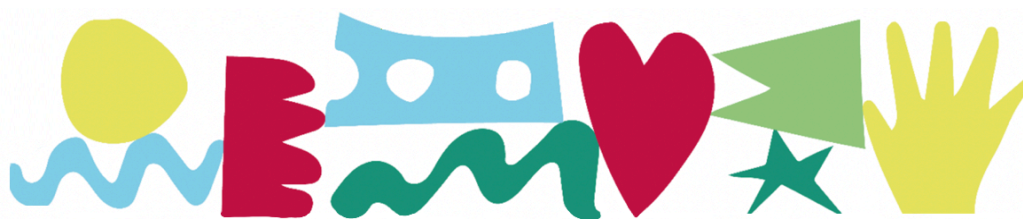
It was evident from conversations with network-builders that these roles ask a huge amount of those at their centre. Working to try to keep some of the weight off your shoulders, where possible, can support both the sustainability of network activity, and the wellbeing of those who lead them. From day one, consider how you can build a pool of network leaders who can share the load. Upskill members, create shared leadership roles, outsource or delegate tasks whenever possible, seek funding to create paid roles or offer paid opportunities to those who can support the operation of the network. Consider from the beginning what will happen when you need to step back.

## Build networks of support

Creative networks, and those who lead them, frequently face similar challenges or barriers. Network-builders found that there was much to be gained from sharing learning, asking questions, pooling knowledge or simply understanding how things work in a different context. Try to find spaces where you are learning as much as you teach, gaining as much as you give. Seek, as well as offer, support.

## Aim high

It's easy to underestimate the potential and impact of local, low-budget or fledgling creative networks. The experience of reflecting on the activity of Create:Networks projects illustrates that local networks have much to offer in terms of their ambition, their potential, their impact and their deep connectivity with a wider social, economic and political context. There is perhaps a confidence and credibility to be borrowed – should you need it – from the evidence of this cohort of creative networks. They illustrate the ambition, leadership, skill and expertise evident in creative networks, and evidence the impact that local networks can make in the creative sector, in communities, for individuals and in the wider world. They demonstrate the importance of the work of creative networks, and the value to be gained by investing in them and recognising them as a vital part of the cultural ecosystem of our places.



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

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