Culture in Communities inquiry: Note of external engagement visits

Visit to Wester Hailes and Craigmillar (Edinburgh), 2 June 2023

1. On Friday 2 June 2023, the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee visited community arts organisations based within areas of deprivation in Edinburgh as part of its inquiry on 'Culture in Communities'. The Committee also visited Dumfries and Orkney. The aim of the Committee's series of visits was to gain an understanding of good practice and any barriers to place-based cultural policy and cultural participation within communities across Scotland.

2. It visited the purpose-built WHALE Arts Centre, a community asset in the Wester Hailes area of Edinburgh, where it held a roundtable with WHALE Arts, the cultural anchor organisation for Wester Hailes, project participants, the Wester Hailes Community Trust, and Puppet Animation Scotland, which delivers work in partnership with WHALE Arts.

3. It also visited Artspace, a multi-arts venue in the Craigmillar area of Edinburgh, where it held a roundtable with creative organisations working in Craigmillar—Lyra, Drake Music Scotland, Curious Seed, Bridgend Farmhouse and Connecting Craigmillar.

4. The key themes arising from the discussions are summarised below.

Role of cultural organisations in the community

5. The Committee heard that community arts organisations being embedded within communities over a prolonged period was beneficial in supporting a longer-term journey in their cultural participation and engagement.

6. Participants shared that it was important for communities to know that cultural anchor organisations are 'not going anywhere'. Instead of getting communities engaged though a specific project which ends due to the funding concluding, and there being nothing for them to move on to, it was important to continue to support participation through other projects and groups.

7. Members were told of the Creativity Community Hubs project which explored links with a network of community arts hubs across Edinburgh and beyond and produced the report '[Working Better Together](#)'. Embedded community organisations were key cornerstone organisations in communities during the pandemic. The longevity of the organisations' work in communities means that there is trust and appreciation of the organisation in the community.

8. The Committee was also interested in how to reach those least likely to participate. Members were told about the importance of organisations being out and active in communities and being visible outwith their premises. Community development work is key to this—meeting people in their space, but also acknowledging that those spaces are theirs. Instead of 'doing the arts' to the community or seeing people as 'targets', it was said to be important to be 'in and of' the community. Co-production was recognised as important in understanding what community members want, and enabling work to be delivered that meets these needs.

9. The Committee heard that there were significant waiting lists for some projects, which demonstrated an unmet need that could be met with greater resource.

10. There was discussion about how cultural organisations support social prescribing. Members heard that this can involve offering existing activities for referral, but it can also be about using the links with referrers to discover gaps in provision. For example, a gap in provision specifically for men led to a men's makers group being developed. Referrals from social work were also received.

Partnership working

11. It was highlighted that cultural anchor organisations need to be selective about which partnerships to enter into, as there was a view that some larger cultural organisations can "parachute" in and use community-based arts organisations and their connections in order to tick a box of having worked in a deprived community, rather than seeking to work with the organisation and the community to meet shared aims.

12. An example of a lack of collaboration was larger organisations having named WHALE Arts as partners on funding applications without prior consulting them. Participants suggested that the Working Better Together report could be used by larger organisations to understand how better to engage with local organisations. It was argued that Creative Scotland could also support embedding these collaborative approaches.

13. There was a sense that the manner in which some larger organisations worked in communities for a short period of time—for example, through 'gifting culture' and providing free tickets to cultural performances—was often on the terms of those organisations and that communities did not have the agency to choose how they wanted to participate.

Funding for community-based culture

14. The Committee was told that securing core funding for community-based culture was a major challenge, with there being a persistent problem of "donut funding" where funding supports project delivery, such as material costs and freelancers, but not core costs such as the infrastructure, overheads of running a premises, and management staff costs.

15. Participants noted that without these core functions of community organisations, the projects they run for communities would not be able to be delivered. There was said to be an assumption from other funders that core funding is met by local or central government, however that this is not the case. An example was provided of an organisation having been rejected for funding on the basis that it received Regular Funding from Creative Scotland, however that this only covered a quarter of its costs.

16. Another issue raised was that the annual funding process makes strategic planning difficult, and takes up significant time and resource of staff members which drives energy away from delivering work with communities. Members were told that if funding was more secure, there would be benefits throughout the organisations and their participants.

17. One participant who was a member of the community said that people can feel that precariousness of the activities they take part in due to the short-term funding and that this is worrying. Freelancers were said to be feeling the strain of insecurity and leaving the sector for other roles.

18. The Committee was told that the experience of the pandemic had built trust with funders, but flexibility is still a challenge. Participants said that organisations suffered from 'the curse of the new' when seeking funding, with funders looking for new projects and organisations trying to maintain a consistent offer and longer-term interventions and stability for communities.

19. Participants were also of the view that community-based organisations, in particular in more deprived areas, were not equally funded with other arts organisations. Members heard that that it was important to consider who is able to access the culture provided by organisations in receipt of public funding.

20. It was noted that community-based arts organisations often support the fulfilment of government outcomes in areas such as health and wellbeing as well as the delivery of cultural opportunities to a wider breadth of people, and that this should be reflected in funding envelopes.

21. The Committee also heard that where there was a need for cultural spaces to be refurbished or become more energy efficient, capital funding is achievable, however, Members were told that the experience in the sector is that it is challenging to maintain funding for core and project work after large capital projects.

22. Members were also told that small amounts of funding can make a big difference in enabling communities to deliver their own cultural activities, for example one organisation had funding of £500 per month to support small local projects such as open mic nights, which it had found to be successful.

Placemaking

23. The Committee heard about the development of the Local Place Plan (LPP) for Wester Hailes, which had involved a range of community organisations coming together, and had built on a longstanding interest in placemaking at WHALE. Participants suggested that LPPs had been important in introducing a mechanism for ensuring local views need to be considered by the local authority. However, it was noted that while the LPP for the area is "exciting", it is only useful if the local authority takes it on board.

Visit to Dumfries, 8-9 June 2023

24. The Committee visited The Stove Network, an arts-led development trust and community organisation based on Dumfries High Street. The Stove building provides a café, meeting place and an events venue with a diverse programme stretching across music and literature, visual and public art, film, and theatre, to town planning, architecture, and design. The Network undertakes place-based work and aims to bring together diverse communities to promote and develop well-being and sustainable local futures.

25. Members took part in discussions with producers and participants of local community-led programmes supported by the Stove Network, including: Open Hoose (supported the launch of 12 new community projects), Creative Spaces (led by and for young people to engage in culture locally), and Community Event Producers (a hands-on training scheme for young people to enter community arts through working at Stove's 'community venue').

26. The Committee then held a roundtable discussion focused on creative placemaking and the role of community arts in regenerating places, with the Stove Network, A' the Airts, and Dumfries and Galloway Council.

27. The final session saw members visit the LIFT D&G project space in Lochside, at the site of the former Lochside Primary School. The building was the subject

of a successful Community Asset Transfer in 2020 and now operates as a community hub for the area. Dumfries YMCA was the lead organisation in the Community Asset Transfer and now manages the building.

28. A discussion was held with the LIFT D+G project, participants in the What We Do Now (WWDN) project (a pilot for a Creative Placemaking Network for Dumfries and Galloway) and artists in residence.

29. The key themes arising from these discussions are summarised below.

Role of cultural organisations in the community

30. The idea behind the Stove Network was to see what the community wanted, taking a broad view of projects, not all of them purely cultural. For example, Doughlicious was an initiative which aimed to empower and inspire people to bake their own bread, provide a place to learn, share skills and experiences, offer opportunities for members of the community to get together, and contribute to a sustainable Scottish grain economy.

31. It was suggested that artists tend to have a collective mindset and want to celebrate the place and its people. This was a DIY ethos of building back the town. Each event and project was grounded in hospitality and ideally free or at least not overly expensive (aiming to keep to a £5-£10 limit).

32. There was support for young people as trainees to get experience of the sector and learn not just from work in Dumfries and the south of Scotland but looking beyond – e.g., Dundee and Wester Hailes – and seeing what works and exchanging ideas and experience. Creative Spaces began with an emphasis on word of mouth but has since progressed to engage with schools, colleges, and universities.

33. One of the challenges faced by the Stove in terms of evaluation as a wellbeing service was being in competition with front-line providers like food banks. It was suggested that a strand of financial support that backed culture and community participation was required, rather than the "silo" of the Creative Scotland model.

34. The LIFT D&G project was aimed at changing negative perceptions about Lochside and creating community confidence. The organisers wished to ensure their activities, projects and trips were accessible to all and based on a belief that a postcode should not define you. There was a clear understanding that nothing could be imposed, that ideas had to come from the community. The key was to build trust and not do anything that would add to what were seen as previous broken promises.

Cultural need in Dumfries

35. The Stove Network worked on the basis of a simple inquiry process: what do you want and how can we deliver it? Autonomy was considered key, the aim being to give people a voice.

36. Rural transport was a huge issue for people in the area and a barrier to cultural participation. Since the pandemic, there's been more awareness of the need for a hybrid approach – recognising the need for direct human connection but also in keeping engaged those who might not be able to travel to events in person.

37. Language needed to be accessible and relatable. There was also a sense of wanting to move away from the "culture's not for me" perception that some people experience from school. It was suggested that the focus ought to be on the quality of the experience and not so much how well it was delivered. It was felt that the pandemic had caused some people to re-prioritise and some cultural activities had suffered as a result.

38. LIFT D&G's work went from a wish for space for local children to play hopscotch and have an outdoor tap to fill paddling pools during the summer to cover things like the ambition to have community art to look at and feel ownership of (whether murals or stained glass), a portacabin that it was hoped could become a creative hub for the area, running art and photography lessons, spoken word sessions, herbalist classes, a Dungeons and Dragons club, bonfire nights, gala days, and trips to the seaside, Blair Drummond, and Comic Con. There was a big appetite in the community for these activities.

Local cultural infrastructure

39. The Stove was both a café and a community arts space, the café part being a good way of inviting people in and starting a conversation / piquing their curiosity. Being community led was central to everything the organisation did and they now ran five buildings in the town, cited as an example of creative place-making.

40. Others would approach the organisation seeking advice on how to approach a community buy-out. You needed to think about spaces, and somebody needed to take responsibility, leading to the question: where was the support structure? The arts couldn't stand along, the sector needed to be connected to the schools and local transport and the community of course.

41. The experience of similar work in Castle Douglas and Stranraer was also shared. In the latter, the loss of the ferry port had hit the town hard, and it took

time to build trust and partnerships, to understand what local people wanted and to give them the support they needed, to build momentum in a place that had experience market failure and flowing from that some very negative perceptions. People had to learn about revenue streams and how to pursue what were relatively tiny pots of money. The work of Creative Stranraer, part of the Stove Network, was highlighted, a project based on community engagement and co-creation, including capacity building, and developing a shared vision. The benefits could be demonstrated to those who were sceptical in terms of jobs and investment in the town.

42. The work and support of the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency was discussed in positive terms, the agency adopting a strategic overview and encouraging what was seen as a shift in the approach to community engagement and finding support for individual projects. Stranraer Oyster Festival was cited as an example of where that engagement worked well.

Impact on wider outcomes

43. The work of Doughlicious was aimed at reducing depression and isolation, mingling the generations, and encouraging the fun there was to be had in learning about baking.

44. Another example of what can be achieved for the community was the restoration of the Dumfries Fountain, an important part of the social history of Dumfries (the introduction of fresh water marked a turning point for following the devastating cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1848). Phase One of the restoration process took place in 2021 and included an extensive community engagement programme led by The Stove, offering opportunities to young people and the wider community to take part in a summer programme of events centred around the history of the fountain, the restoration process, and its future as part of a reinvigorated town centre. The project worked with local artists and historians to deliver a wide variety of workshops, walks, talks and activities.

45. Participants talked about the trauma experience by the community over the last 10 years (with the economic downturn, the pandemic, and cost-of-living crisis). What the Stove could offer through its various projects was creativity, social connection, and building people's levels of confidence. An example was given of a key member of one of the writing programmes, who had first become involved when facing serious challenges in their personal life.

46. The Nith river festival was established to explore the town's relationship with the river and its importance to the people and communities that it connects. This celebration of the river became even more pertinent during the pandemic, as an appreciation of nature became every more important to people.

47. On a photography course, part of the WWDN scheme, it was reported that 4 out of the 7 young people who'd done the photography course went on to study photography at college level.

48. There was discussion about the wider benefits of culture and parallel arguments that had been made for grassroots sport. It was suggested SportScotland had made that case brilliantly, and there was learning from that approach for making the case for the health and other benefits culture could bring at the community level. It was pointed out that Active Schools Co-ordinators were still working in schools but not so Cultural Co-ordinators.

49. The view was that the 1950s founding ethos of the first Arts Council of Great Britain, "It is about the best not the most", persisted, and although Creative Scotland did its best, it was still informed by that approach.

50. It was suggested, as set out in a [Stove Network blog](#) from April 2023, that a Participation in Culture Initiative framework could include—

    • Percentage for culture across government departments
    • Accountability/collaboration across departments in implementation of Participation in Culture
    • Regional/place-based approach to implementation
    • Innovation in funding models.

51. Comparison was made with Ireland, which makes distinctions about how it supports different types of culture, and where there were three core agencies supporting culture: the Arts Council (the equivalent of Creative Scotland), Create (an independent agency but one directly funded by the Arts Council, and supporting community-based creative practice), and Creative Ireland (which was understood to run mostly national initiatives for grassroots participation in culture).

52. LIFT D&G set out on its [website](#) the aim to "shift attitudes towards poverty through innovation and flexibility in the designing of events and activities" and with those activities directed at promoting "better understanding and respect between generations, while contributing to building a socially cohesive community". It provided food parcels to the most vulnerable in the area, created a nature and nurture area (the NANA project), promoted the integration of refugee families and their children, bought a caravan near the sea where 30 families from the area could enjoy a free holiday each year, and ran a shop

Visit to Orkney, 18-19 June 2023

53. On Sunday 18 and Monday 19 June 2023, the Committee visited Orkney.

54. The Committee met with a local ranger for Historic Environment Scotland at the Standing Stones of Stenness, and some Members took the opportunity to attend events at the St Magnus International Festival. The Committee then visited various cultural sites in Stromness—the Stromness Museum, Soulisquoy Printmakers and Wasps Stromness Studios, and the Pier Arts Centre—before holding facilitated group discussions with local stakeholders, community groups and cultural organisations.

55. The following groups participated in the discussions: Birsay Heritage Trust, Culture Collective (Creative Islands Network), George Mackay Brown Fellowship, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Hoy Heritage Trust, Orkney Arts Society, Orkney Folk Festival, Orkney Heritage Boat Society, Orkney Islands Council (Councillors and officials), Orkney Japan Association, Remembering Together, Soulisquoy Printmakers and Wasps Stromness Studios, Stromness Community Centre, Stromness Community Council, Stromness Development Trust, Stromness Drama Society, Stromness Museum, The Pier Arts Centre, Voluntary Action Orkney, and Westside Cinema.

56. The key themes arising from the discussions are summarised below.

The role of the community

57. The Committee heard that there was an immense commitment from the community to make cultural activity happen in Orkney, with high levels of volunteering and the vast majority of cultural activity run by small organisations. Members heard that there were over 650 voluntary groups.

58. This 'bottom up' approach was owed to being an island community and isolated from the Scottish mainland, with there seen to be a greater onus on the community to be self-starting and sustaining in providing cultural opportunities. Where national bodies come to Orkney to deliver work, it was considered that this works best when they work with the community to develop this.

59. There was a strong sense of pride that Orkney plays host to a range of festivals and has an annual calendar of cultural events. The variety of organisations in the cultural ecology of Orkney and festivals to participate in was also said to support cultural participation across the population, though some festivals were seen to less 'for' local people.

60. The Committee also heard that there is good partnership working between community and cultural organisations, in part due to a strong community spirit, and the nature of many individuals having roles across different groups and projects. Participants spoke of wearing multiple 'hats' in this regard.

61. An arts forum which was set up as part of the community planning process was mentioned by several participants as having had been beneficial in bringing people together to collaborate and to provide a collective voice for the sector.

62. However, participants recognised the reliance on the community to sustain cultural activity as a challenge as well as a strength, with volunteer fatigue and burn-out identified as key concerns. The Committee heard that there was an ageing population, including among volunteers, with concerns raised about the sustainability of volunteer-led culture in Orkney.

63. Members heard that there was a need to encourage younger generations to get involved, and that incorporating cultural activities more into schools could support this. Wider challenges around having the employment opportunities and housing to attract or keep younger people in Orkney were also raised.

Connectivity

64. Members heard that with many community culture groups based in the Orkney mainland and the ferry service often unreliable and unsuitable for attending evening cultural events, it was challenging for groups to engage with those living on the outer isles. This had improved with digital engagement as a result of the pandemic, however there were issues with poor broadband connectivity.

65. The Committee also heard that there were challenges for artists and touring groups to come to Orkney considering the time and cost the travel necessitates.

Funding

66. Participants recognised that the Culture Fund from Orkney Island Council was beneficial in supporting the core costs for community groups, and that this provided good value in terms of its impact despite being a small pot of funding.

67. However, it was raised that the level of funding—around £1 per head of the population—was not enough to support organisations, and it was questioned whether businesses could be encouraged to match fund this in the absence of additional support from the local authority.

68. The local authority having an Arts Officer, unlike many others, was seen as being a helpful resource for cultural groups. However, it was still viewed that

culture was a low priority for the local authority, with the message around the wider value of culture not cutting through over other priorities.

69. Frustration was expressed that many funders only fund projects, rather than core costs, and that these projects have to be 'new' rather than for what is already known to work well. Therefore, having funding from the local authority through the Culture Fund to cover core costs gave organisations the time and space to seek further funding which requires 'onerous' applications.

70. Voluntary Action Orkney was able to support groups with funding applications, but it was still seen as a resource drain on volunteers and staff. Participants identified that it would be beneficial for there to be common practice across funding bodies in what data and evaluation they require from funding recipients.

71. Orkney benefitted from Scottish Government COVID emergency and recovery funding which had enabled artists to deliver projects in the community focused on isolation and wellbeing. However, it had not been possible to continue this at the same level due to a lack of funding. Orkney Islands Council considered that Orkney required a better deal from Creative Scotland and that there was a need to consider how the infrastructure which had been established could be better supported.

Spaces for culture

72. The Committee heard about how some community assets were being used as multi-purpose spaces for different forms of cultural activity. For example, the town hall was used as a concert hall, cinema, and theatre, and different groups using the building were able to share resources. Participants also considered that the hire costs for local authority-run buildings was reasonable.

73. Each community has its own parish hall and these spaces are used extensively across Orkney as places for communities and cultural groups to meet.

74. One participant spoke of there previously being a user group for the town hall which enabled groups to come together to address any issues with the venue that they all used, however that this initiative had fallen away due to a lack of support from the local authority.

75. The physical constraints of venues were raised in terms of capacity and accessibility, which hindered growth. Some venues are in poor condition and in need of capital funds for refurbishment or have closed down. Where spaces are closing, the Committee heard that it was a challenge for the community to take on the ownership of those buildings, especially historic and listed buildings.

76. One participant shared a positive example of the use of physical assets for cultural activity, whereby three voluntary groups focused on culture, heritage and wellbeing had been given a joint lease of a local authority owned building. This was said to have beneficial for partnership working and to be a model that could be built upon.

<div align="right">
CEEAC Committee Clerks
June 2023
</div>