

Creative Community Hubs Project Report

Working Better Together

Tiki Muir & Morvern Cunningham



Working Better Together

Creative Community Hubs Project Report
Tiki Muir & Morvern Cunningham, May 2022

Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Methodology
- 4 Partnership working between
creative community hubs
and cultural institutions
 - Where are we now?
 - How would we like it to be?
(Poster pull-out)
- 11 Initial conclusions and what's next

Introduction

The Creative Community Hubs project was funded by the City of Edinburgh Council in 2021, with an initial funding award of £7000 to WHALE Arts for the first iteration of the project. It was intended as a starting point in developing a network of creative community hubs across Edinburgh, and to better understand the challenges and opportunities for partnership working between 'established cultural organisations' [sic] and community-based hubs.

The project research was conducted by WHALE Community Development Coordinator Tiki Muir and freelance creative Morvern Cunningham over a period of 6 months from October 2021 to March 2022. This report concludes the first iteration of this project and lays the foundations for the work to continue and expand, exploring, amongst other things, the opportunities to build and sustain a network of creative community hubs.

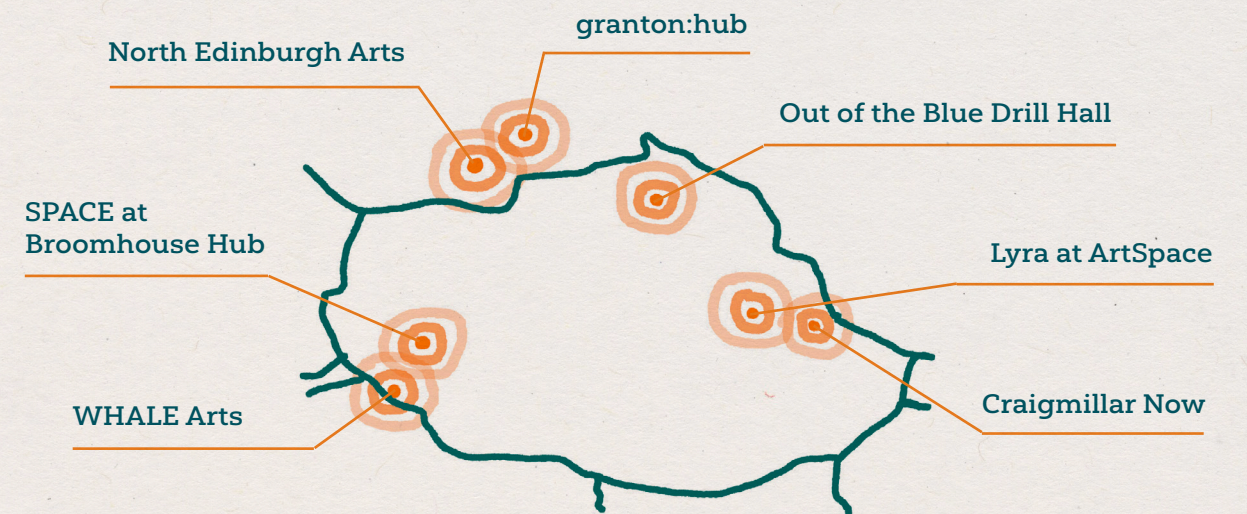
We hope that the findings of this report can help better inform cultural institutions in their partnership project planning and implementation when working with creative community hubs going forward, and contribute to better and more equal partnership working in the future.

Tiki and Morvern

Methodology

We first identified an initial group to approach as part of the project by mapping a variety of hubs across the city. We defined a 'creative community hub' as an organisation that operates out of a publicly accessible building (the hub) within an identifiable community or locality, with culture and creativity as a primary concern. The hubs whom we identified as meeting these criteria and subsequently approached were as follows:

- WHALE Arts** in Wester Hailes
- North Edinburgh Arts** in Muirhouse
- Out of the Blue Drill Hall** in Leith
- Craigmillar Now** in Craigmillar
- Lyra at ArtSpace** in Craigmillar
- SPACE at Broomhouse Hub** in Broomhouse
- granton:hub** at Madelvic House in Granton



We further created a 'long list' of organisations who we identified as potentials to include in a future developing network, but who might not necessarily fulfil the criteria of both being a hub and creative at the current time. (Note: we have not approached these organisations to date but are open to the possibility of expanding our reach in the future.)

An initial meeting took place between the majority of the identified hubs in November 2021. The group discussed ideas of how best to initiate the project and what the resulting outcomes might be. This initial conversation also focused on shared good and bad experiences of partnership working as a starting point of discussion, revealing commonalities of experience amongst the group. As agreed at the initial meeting, Tiki and Morvern then went on to visit the community hubs in person, conducting in-depth interviews with hub representatives, in order to find out more about their organisation and their history of partnership working. In total, five interviews were conducted (which were both recorded and transcribed) between November 2021 and February 2022, with a follow up group meeting to report on the project's progress in February 2022. This report is the result of our findings from those conversations with the community hub representatives and the quotes used throughout are theirs.

A note on language: One initial challenge we experienced when undertaking this project was how best to describe non-community based arts organisations in the city, and in turn to define their difference to creative community hubs. For the purpose of this report, we have therefore settled on the term 'cultural institutions' to describe these organisations, as we felt that 'established' was a redundant term - given some of the community hubs involved in the project are decades old.

Experiences of partnership working between creative community hubs and cultural institutions:

Where are we now?

Examples of good practice in partnership working


During interviews, hub representatives talked about their experiences of previous partnership working, both positive and negative. It was clear that some cultural institutions were working hard and taking the time to develop meaningful relationships with a number of creative community hubs around the city, and that this effort was leading to positive results for both organisations involved in the partnership as well as the community participants.

"We did an event in 2019 and it really worked because they brought the best of them, we brought the best of us and it was just like a phenomenal event. Then you think, 'Okay, it's worth it - worth doing this.'"

"There are some organisations which are really good... [who] totally gets it...because they've been having these conversations with us."

Negative experiences of partnership working

However, while there were specific examples of good practice discussed during our interviews, we found that all of the community hub representatives we spoke to had a great deal of shared experience of significant challenges to partnership working with a range of cultural institutions across the board. Some of the issues discussed included the following.



Not enough lead time prior to engagement

Hub representatives reported regular experiences of time-based issues involved in partnership working with institutions.

“As much as we possibly can, we want to be sure that [the project is] aligned with our values and our ethos, and that it’s going to actually serve the community. And that takes time too. I think there’s an expectation that we will just make sure that there’s an audience and that the community will get involved. And we’re not going to do any research, or even safeguarding, about what the project is.”

Free isn’t free

Cultural institutions may offer free tickets or programme a free event through community hubs, however this does not mean there is no cost to the hubs themselves. Staff time, room hire, marketing costs, transport and other provisions for participants are all regularly not accounted for in project budgets and funding applications.

“Why would I want to support you to engage with people, if you feel like this is so secondary that it’s not even worth you paying to contribute anything towards the running of this space?”

Barriers to participation are not considered fully

Hub representatives described that there are multiple, complex and intersectional barriers to access and participation; these range from practical considerations such as travel to more intangible, but no less essential, factors such as trust and a sense of ownership. These can be over-simplified by some cultural institutions in their approach to community engagement.

“Basically, handing out tickets just doesn’t really, it doesn’t really work. Yeah, it doesn’t necessarily get people there.”

The ‘bums on seats’ approach

Hub representatives described scenarios where institutional partners prioritised audience numbers, or reaching a specific audience demographic, as opposed to achieving a quality experience for those participants who might be the hardest to reach.

“What we want is: the people that we feel would get the most out of that experience, or might find it hardest to access, or it might be the people who have the least opportunities that might need the most support. And are the hardest to reach. And because they’re the hardest to reach, actually, you can end up with very small audiences”

Disregard for experience and knowledge of those working with communities

Community hubs are often run with a person-centred ethos or are community-led through their governance structures. Over time, hubs become a key source of local knowledge and connections, embodied by the people who work with and inhabit the local communities. Disregarding this approach, knowledge and experience can be frustrating, and is detrimental as it leads to dysfunctional partnerships.

"When it's like 'oh, we've got this event in two weeks, could you bring 10 children to a workshop? It won't take very much work...' That's when it becomes frustrating, because you're like, don't tell me how much work it's gonna be! Because I know."

Helicoptering

Coming into communities from outside for one off events or projects with no long-term investment can do damage. Participants may be put off from engaging again if they have a negative experience, and this can lead to a breakdown of trust between the local communities and their hubs.

"If you're providing a lot of support for people to attend something, and then it's not great - it's really destructive, it has really bad consequences for everybody. It's disappointing for the people that take part."

Cultural institutions often adopt a copy and paste approach to all 'marginalised communities'.

This approach can result in increased stigma, which has the result of solidifying rather than alleviating marginalisation.

"That's another thing that I find frustrating with the partnerships is that I find I'm often up against people not changing the way that they want to do things, because they've done it in the same way in another area... almost like we're just the same homogenous community, defined by poverty"

"We tend to find that attendance and engagement is much better when [participants have] had a choice - which makes sense."

With these challenges in mind, a key question for our research was:

If some cultural institutions in the city are conducting partnerships with creative community hubs well (i.e. the experience is positive on both sides), where might these reported experiences of poor partnership working stem from?

During interviews, community hub representatives described their experiences of poor partnership working as outcomes arising from two main systemic issues. The first being the inequitable distribution of funding and other entrenched power inequalities across Edinburgh's cultural landscape, and secondly, a commonly held understanding that the root causes for this lie in fundamentally differing values systems, reflected in divergent attitudes and priorities across the sector.

Power Inequalities

"There is often a power imbalance, even if it's just the amount of people around a table"

The community hub representatives that we spoke to described a fundamentally unequal relationship between their own organisations and cultural institutions in the city. This imbalance of power appears to be systemic and is upheld in part by inequitable distribution of funding across Edinburgh's cultural sector, and by the huge lobbying power which Edinburgh's cultural institutions have access to through numerous well-funded advocacy groups who operate on their behalf.

"Because if it's not at least an equal relationship, it's always going to be really difficult. There's always somebody who has the power and the money, there's always somebody who has the crumbs."

Cultural institutions have the ability to use this power imbalance to their benefit before a partnership has even begun. For example, there are instances of hubs discovering that they have been named as partners in funding applications by cultural institutions without any prior knowledge, therefore having no agency in the process. Hub representatives also found that their flexible and adaptive ethos could be exploited by institutions when shaping collaborative work. In situations like these, 'partnership' quickly loses meaning and becomes a catchall term which can disguise unequal relationships.

"And it's this tension... Because I think it's really important that you're open and that you are genuinely collaborative, but sometimes that can be exploited and seen as: 'you don't really know what you need, this is what we need, so can you fulfil that?'"

Attitudinal issues and differing value systems

"Part of it is around costs, part of it is around attitude. And that, the sort of tokenism. There's a really endemic issue around seeing community arts as less than, or in a kind of bracket - 'oo it's community art.'"

It was clear from our conversations with creative community hub representatives that there are fundamental attitudinal issues present within certain cultural institutions. These underpin some of the more negative experiences of partnership working which interviewees spoke about and are based in the undervaluing of community-based arts practices. These include: the use of community hubs as tokenistic or exploitative in order to leverage funding or meet funding criteria without prior commitment to centring community engagement; viewing people as 'bums on seats' rather than individuals and/or participants; and a basic misunderstanding (wilful or not) of non-city centre areas as places of culture in their own right - instead believing in the misplaced concept of a 'benevolent' gift of culture from the centre to the margins. These attitudes are evident in the misguided distinction that exists within many cultural institutions between programming on the one hand and community engagement on the other.

Initial conclusions and what's next

During the course of the last six months, we feel privileged to have met a series of passionate individuals based across a range of amazing community-based spaces in Edinburgh, all of which are committed to providing a creative service locally to their communities. Our one regret is that we didn't manage to get round all the hubs originally identified at the start of the project, and plan to rectify this as soon as is practically possible.

As a result of our research, it has become clear that it is not only the cultural institutions in the city we should be directing our findings towards, but also cultural policy makers and funders operating in Edinburgh. It has been made obvious from our conversations that the current funding system is problematic, as funding is inequitably distributed across creative organisations operating in the city. In addition, funding that stipulates partnership working and community outreach, but does not question the quality and nature of those relationships and engagements, can contribute to unequal and potentially exploitative relationships.

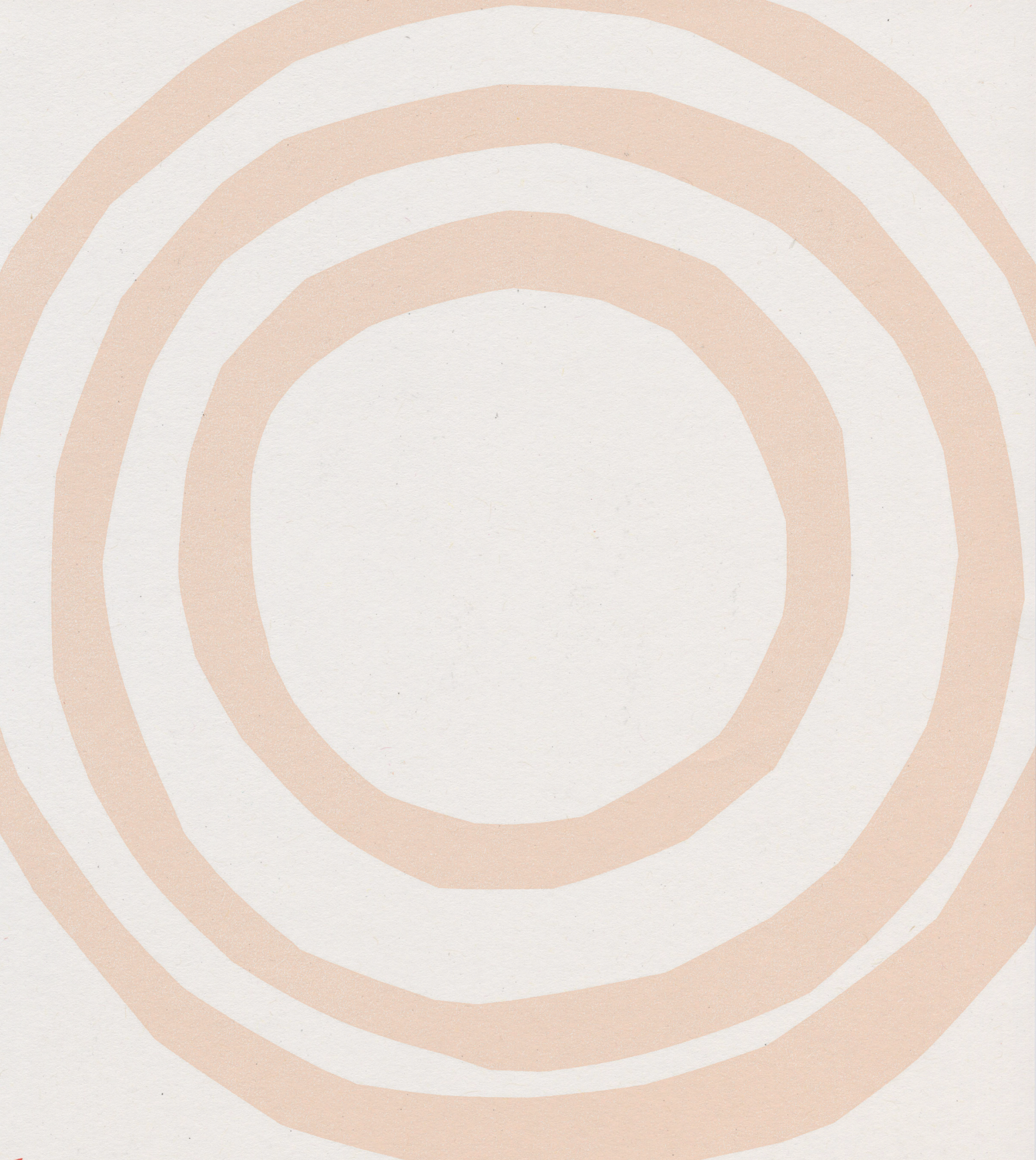
"I don't want funders to push people to go and work in communities if they don't want to do it. And they're just doing it to get money. That is not the way to create diversity and inclusion in the arts"

Therefore, we believe that fundamental structural change to the area of funding would derive the most significant impact for cultural partnership working on the ground and in communities.

We are pleased that the Creative Community Hubs project has been awarded a further £100,000 from the City of Edinburgh Council in order to further develop the burgeoning creative community hubs network into 2022/23. With this increased investment we plan to: increase knowledge sharing and solidarity amongst the hubs; create opportunities for hubs to work together and share resources; lay the foundations for a robust network going forward; and, alongside this, make the case for further targeted funding of community-based and grassroots arts activity in the city. We look forward to seeing what can be achieved in the next 12 months and beyond.

Suggested further reading:

Mapping Cultural Dispersal Report (2022)
by Vikki Jones and Morgan Currie



The Creative Community Hubs project is funded by the City of Edinburgh Council and facilitated by WHALE Arts

Sustainably riso printed by Out of the Blueprint using rice ink on recycled paper