Mapping Creative Hubs in Essex

Essex County Council, 2023

Essex County Council

Contents

Photo: Batemans tower, © Benja79, Pixabay.com

Executive Summary

This report presents an analysis of the creative hub landscape in Essex, offering insight into their role fostering creativity, innovation, and economic growth within the region.

The definition of creative hubs used in the report is 'a physical or virtual space that brings together enterprising individuals working in the creative and cultural industries'. These hubs play a key role in talent development, fostering collaboration, skills growth, and business expansion within the creative sector. However, the research found that many creative and cultural organisations do not relate to the term, preferring alternatives like artist studios, production spaces, networks, and collectives. It also found that the concept of creative hubs is evolving and a wide range of spaces, such as galleries, museums, theatres, libraries, cafes, and community centres, support creatives despite not explicitly labeling themselves as hubs. The report attempts to capture this nuance by including a wide range of hubs that offer support and opportunities for creative businesses and individuals. It's important to note that while the research covers hubs that classified themselves as such or were referred by other hubs, it may not have mapped all galleries and cafes, for example, that could potentially fall under this evolving definition of creative hubs.

Mapping

Through an extensive mapping exercise, 63 active creative hubs were identified, and an additional six hubs were found to be in the development stage. These creative spaces span a wide range of models and scales, including networks, retail platforms, print studios, makerspaces, co-working spaces, incubators, community hubs, arts venues, and artist studios, showcasing the rich tapestry of creative endeavours thriving in Essex. Key findings include:

- The concentration of creative hubs varies across different areas within Essex. The highest number of hubs was found in Colchester with 17 hubs, followed by Southend-On-Sea with 12, and Chelmsford with 7.

- While the majority of hubs were situated in buildings, a notable proportion operated without a dedicated physical space, representing 68% with a physical location and 32% without one. This finding highlights the increasing trend of virtual or digitally driven creative communities.

- Among the surveyed hubs, 40% have been active for over 10 years, with 24% active for 16 or more years, showing enduring impact. 27% have a 3 to 5-year history, while 13% are newer, under 3 years old. These findings reveal a dynamic mix of mature and emerging hubs, shaping a vibrant creative landscape.

- Approximately 80% of hubs prioritise hyper-local communities, with 20% expanding engagement regionally and internationally.

- Hubs engage with a complete range of creative industries with visual arts at the forefront, followed by performing arts and crafts. Design, music, and film were also frequently referenced. Furthermore, the mapping revealed additional categories such as printmaking, multi-arts, dance, heritage, drama, digital creativity, writing, manufacturing and engineering, art appreciation and education.

- There is significant variation in membership numbers across creative hubs, with figures ranging from under ten to well over 500 for larger centres. The largest group in the sample, accounting for 34% of hubs, cater to under 10 members, indicating smaller-scale operations.

- Services provided by creative hubs are broad, reflecting the variety of hub scales and missions. Prominent services fall under intangible or 'soft services' and include networking, showcasing events, and workshops. This is followed closely by tangible or 'hard services' like studio space, venue rental, and equipment access.

Impacts

The report was informed by a literature review, survey, stakeholder conversations, case studies, and an insight event, examining the key characteristics, contributions, and challenges faced by creative hubs. It provides insight into their impact on the local community and the broader creative landscape, which can be summarised as follows:

- **Creative and cultural sector impacts:** Hubs serve as nurturing grounds for creativity, innovation and talent. 94% of creative hubs reported cultural impacts through supporting the creation of new work, growing networks, conducting research & development. In addition, 88% stated they deliver educational impacts such as talent development, talent retention, training and skills development.

- **Community building and social impacts:** Hubs actively engage with their local communities through outreach programmes and events, fostering cultural exchange and social connection. They are catalysts for fostering a sense of community and pride in within their local areas. 88% of hubs report making social impacts that include well-being and quality of life enhancements.

- **Place-making impacts:** Creative hubs reported playing a key role in place-making, revitalising neighbourhoods, and transforming underutilised areas into vibrant spaces for local communities.

- **Economic impacts:** Hubs make significant contributors to the local economy. 41% of hubs reported producing economic impacts by attracting talent and investment, stimulating employment opportunities, and promoting the growth of small businesses.

It is this intertwining of economic, place-making, creative and social impacts that makes creative hubs dynamic and essential components of thriving creative ecosystems.

88%

OF HUBS REPORT MAKING SOCIAL IMPACTS THAT INCLUDE WELL-BEING AND QUALITY OF LIFE ENHANCEMENTS

94%

OF CREATIVE HUBS REPORTED CULTURAL IMPACTS

Outlook

The analysis of creative hubs' outlook presents a mixed picture. While they generally display optimism and confidence regarding their future sustainability, concerns about the influence of external socio-economic factors on their operations also exist.

48% of surveyed hubs anticipate an increase in their core membership by 2024 compared to the preceding year (2023), with 40% expecting no change. A small minority (11%) express uncertainty regarding future core membership.

Furthermore, a substantial majority (65%) of hubs project growth in their broader user base and audiences, indicating a positive expectation for community engagement. 34% foresee no change in these numbers, and none of the surveyed hubs anticipate a decrease. This overall sense of stability and optimism suggests that creative hubs are confident in their ability to attract and serve their communities in the forthcoming years.

However, despite their achievements, creative hubs face challenges, notably financial stability, and security of tenure. A significant number of hubs voiced apprehension about external pressures on their day-to-day operations. Specifically, a notable 61% of hubs expressed considerable concern about the cost-of-living crisis. 29% held a moderate level of concern. 5% remained neutral, and a mere 3% felt unconcerned. Numerous hubs reiterated the substantial concern about rising operational costs in their comments.

Recovery from Covid-19 continues to be an issue for hubs, with 14% displaying a high degree of concern, while 50% expressed a moderate level of concern. 29% held a neutral stance, and just 5% revealed no concern regarding the pandemic's ramifications on their activities.

Brexit surfaced as a source of high concern for 14% of hubs and a moderate level of concern for 32% of hubs. A considerable segment (26%) was neutral, and an equal proportion (26%) was unconcerned.

In consideration of the findings, the report recommends the following five key actions to foster the growth and sustainability of creative hubs in Essex. These actions are intended for stake holders including policymakers, creative hub operators, artists and creatives, local authorities, and investors and funders.

1. **Financial stability:** Create support mechanisms to relieve financial pressures on creative hubs, including grants capital or overhead costs, research, and development, as well as projects. In addition, explore innovative revenue sources through partnerships.

2. **Tenure security:** Develop policies that prioritise secure and stable leasing terms for creative hubs, safeguarding against displacement and enabling long-term occupancy.

3. **Impact measurement:** Collaborate with creative hubs to establish standardised metrics and key performance indicators for measuring their diverse social, economic, and cultural impacts.

4. **Collaboration and connectivity:** Facilitate collaboration, networking, and knowledge exchange among creative hubs to encourage resource sharing and joint advocacy efforts.

5. **Skills, training, and capacity building:** Enhance the skills and capacities of creative hubs through mentorship programmes and comprehensive training, promoting cross-hub collaboration and development.

The report elaborates on these recommendations, providing insights into their purpose and potential delivery mechanisms. These actions are intended to strengthen creative hubs, fostering their growth and contribution to their local creative ecosystems. By supporting creative hubs, policymakers and partners can leverage their strengths, ensuring the continuity of their vital contributions and their lasting legacy in Essex's thriving creative landscape.

Headline outputs for the 2022-2023 include:

83%
reported new collaborations

75%
generated new products

66%
produced new services

63%
gained new members

55%
conducted new research

52%
accessed new subcontracting opportunities

Photo: Beach Huts in Mersea, © Jude Mack, Unsplash.com

1

Introduction

In 2023, Essex County Council commissioned Deepa Naik to conduct a detailed mapping of creative hubs across the county. The study aimed to gain a better understanding of the profile of creative hubs, including their members, activities, roles, and impact. In addition, Essex County Council sought to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by hubs, understand their specific needs, and explore avenues for increased engagement and support. The mapping exercise intended to provide a snapshot of the current creative hub landscape in Essex by delving into the unique stories and experience of individual hubs.

The research aimed to enhance existing investment in the arts and cultural sector in Essex, complementing initiatives such as the Cultural Strategy (2023) and the Arts and Cultural Fund grant scheme. There have been a multitude of area-specific cultural and creative initiatives in Essex, accompanied by considerable resources invested in producing impact reports and formulating localised strategies to support this dynamic creative landscape.[i] Essex County Council recognised the importance of unifying these varied initiatives and envisioned this research to serve as a resource in developing a cohesive vision and integrated approach for the county's creative economy. As the conversation around devolution continues, unification is increasingly important, as it brings the potential to harness the synergies of these distinct initiatives and strategically propel the county's creative economy forward. The project fell under the oversight of Essex County Council's Culture, Heritage, and Green Spaces service.

1.1 Methodology

The study aimed to produce a database of hubs in Essex and a report summarising the findings of the mapping exercise. To establish a foundation for the study, a focused literature review was conducted, enabling the identification of knowledge gaps, patterns, and key insights. The fieldwork involved conducting a targeted survey digitally through direct emails and sector-specific mailing lists. The survey was adapted from the one utilised in the research project titled *Mapping Creative Hubs in England* (British Council, 2021). There were two benefits to utilising this established tool: first, it provided a pre-existing benchmark for understanding hub profiles that had proven successful in research conducted in England[ii], Scotland[iii] and Wales[iv]; second, it allowed for increased efficiency given the research's tight timeframe.

To develop the database of creative hubs, the initial focus was placed on those already identified in the *Mapping Creative Hubs* (2021) report. The database was then expanded using desk research and the 'snowball method', wherein survey participants recommended additional hubs to be included. A total of 63 active hubs, plus an additional six in development, were identified, out of which more than half (36) completed the mandatory survey questions.

A series of case studies were produced drawing on both survey results, desk research and interviews with hub leaders. Rather than opting for a random sampling, the case studies were selected deliberately to showcase the diverse range of hub models, activities, and impacts across Essex. The emerging findings from the mapping exercise were shared with hub leaders at an *Insight Event*, and the feedback received on key points was incorporated into this research. The resulting report offers an overview of the creative hub landscape in Essex, a summation and analysis of the survey findings, five case studies, and reflections.

1.1.1 Limitations

As with any research project, the findings of this report were informed by factors such as timescales, priorities of the brief, and the availability of consultation participants. Methodological limitations include:

- Primary research focused on capturing the perspective of hub managers, rather than that of hub users (i.e., creatives managing their own small businesses within the hub), due to the intricacies involved in direct engagement with creative hub users. To address this limitation, targeted questions were directed at hub managers to glean insights into their users' needs, complemented by a comprehensive literature review.

- It is expected that certain grassroots, emerging, and smaller hubs, lacking a strong online presence or staff capacity, may have missed the opportunity to participate in the study. To mitigate this, the survey was directly sent to smaller hubs identified during the desk research, although it is acknowledged that this approach may not fully capture the nuances of their experiences.

One of the greatest challenges in a study of this nature is effectively presenting the diverse stories of unique organisations. It is evident that a one-size-fits-all approach does not apply. Therefore, emphasis has been placed on various themes and emerging narratives, primarily drawing upon sample data and interviews to highlight the role, spirit, and potential of creative hubs across Essex.

The resulting report offers an overview of the creative hub landscape in Essex.

1.2 What is meant by creative hubs?

The definition of creative hubs, used and understood within the sector, refers to 'a physical or virtual space that brings together enterprising individuals working in the creative and cultural industries'.[v] Creative hubs serve as essential agents for talent development within the creative sector, facilitating collaboration among practitioners and offering space and support for skills development and business growth. Their key role lies in nurturing the growth and development of the creative economy through the provision of tailored services to support creative SMEs and micro-businesses.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that many creative and cultural organisations in practice do not readily classify themselves as creative hubs, preferring alternative descriptions such as:

- Artist studios
- Makerspaces
- Innovation centres
- Stage production studios
- Live performance spaces
- Community venues
- Galleries
- Open access print workshops
- Accelerators and incubators
- FabLabs
- Networks
- Collectives
- Co-working spaces
- Educator networks

Photo: 'The Art Box', © Sharon Rawlinson

Photo: TOMA exhibition install, © TOMA

Furthermore, the concept of 'creative hubs' itself may be undergoing a transformation, as numerous galleries, museums, theatres, cultural organisations, as well as places like libraries, independent cafes, and community centres, actively provide support, facilities, and opportunities to creatives, even if they do not explicitly categorise themselves as hubs. In this evolving landscape, the notion of creative hubs is expanding beyond established definitions, encompassing a wide array of spaces and initiatives that foster creativity, collaboration, and skill building. To align more effectively with the evolving perceptions of creative and cultural organisations in practice, a reevaluation of the term 'creative hub' may be required.

However, for the sake of consistency, the term 'creative hub' will still be employed in this report to refer to these creative spaces and their diverse forms. While creative hubs encompass a diverse array of services, ambitions, and purposes, they share a common thread that centers around:

- Cultivating a vibrant creative community, whether physical or virtual

- Providing essential services for businesses and practitioners in the creative industries

- Facilitating collaboration and networking opportunities

- Contributing to place-making and revitalising local areas

The report includes the experiences of building-based hubs, virtual hubs, and networks, emphasising the fundamental aspect that hubs are primarily communities. As such, managed workspaces, where the relationship principally revolves around that of a landlord and tenant, are not included in the study.

The report focuses on creative hubs that cater to the nine subsectors identified by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as constituting the cultural sector. These subsectors encompass arts, film, TV and music, radio, photography, crafts, museums and galleries, library and archives, cultural education, and heritage. However, it is important to acknowledge that the DCMS definition of creative industries did not always resonate with individuals or fully capture the diverse nature of Essex's creative industries, as revealed during stakeholder conversations and desk research. The creative sector operates beyond neatly defined categories, exhibiting richness, nuance, and overlap. For example, independent cafes like Twenty One, which curate exhibitions and feature live music cannot be easily confined to a single subsector category and play multiple roles within the creative ecosystem.[VI]

Despite this, the DCMS definitions will be utilised in this study, given their widespread acceptance in the sector. However, to achieve a more rounded understanding of Essex's creative ecology, future endeavours should allow creatives to define their work in their own terms, thus better reflecting their distinct contributions.

The report focuses on creative hubs that cater to the nine subsectors identified by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as constituting the cultural sector.

1.3 The operating context within Essex

Essex is a diverse and historically rich region located in the eastern part of England. It is one of the most populous counties in the country, ranking among the top ten in terms of population size.[VII] With a coastline stretching over 350 miles along the North Sea and the Thames Estuary, it is one of the longest among all UK counties and is characterised by deep estuaries. Throughout history, this porous coastline has been a gateway for numerous visitors and settlers from Romans to the arrival of Vikings, Anglo-Saxons, and Normans. These varied historical layers have contributed to Essex's unique essence and rich heritage.

While each county in England has its own historical significance, Essex stands out as one of the earliest inhabited regions in the country. Colchester, recognised as England's oldest recorded town, showcases its Roman heritage through well-preserved ruins and ancient walls that weave through the city centre. It first achieved city status in the 8th century, and having regained this status in 2022, Colchester's historical significance is now complemented by its contemporary identity as a city. Meanwhile, Chelmsford, a historic region with a rich history spanning over 800 years, achieved city status in 2012 and serves as a vibrant centre of commerce, culture, and administration whilst Southend-on-Sea was awarded city status in 2022.

Essex's location is one of its key assets, with London to the south, Norwich to the north, and Cambridge to the west, forming a strategic triangle that offers easy access to major urban centres. This advantageous positioning has contributed to the county's role as a major commuter belt, drawing individuals from a range of backgrounds and cultures. This multiculturalism has influenced local culinary scenes, festivals, artistic expression, and community activities. With excellent transportation links, the county has developed a vibrant economy spanning quantum technologies, medicine, data science, agriculture, manufacturing, and creative industries. As a whole, Essex is a prosperous county, boasting a robust £40 billion economy, supported by thriving and expanding universities. Notably, 88 percent of schools in Essex hold either a "good" or "outstanding" rating from Ofsted.[VIII]

Essex's urban centres, including Chelmsford, Colchester, Southend-on-Sea, and Basildon, play significant roles in the county's cultural, economic, and social life. This is highlighted by the creative hub mapping, which reveals that these regions have the highest concentration of creative hubs compared to the rest of the county.
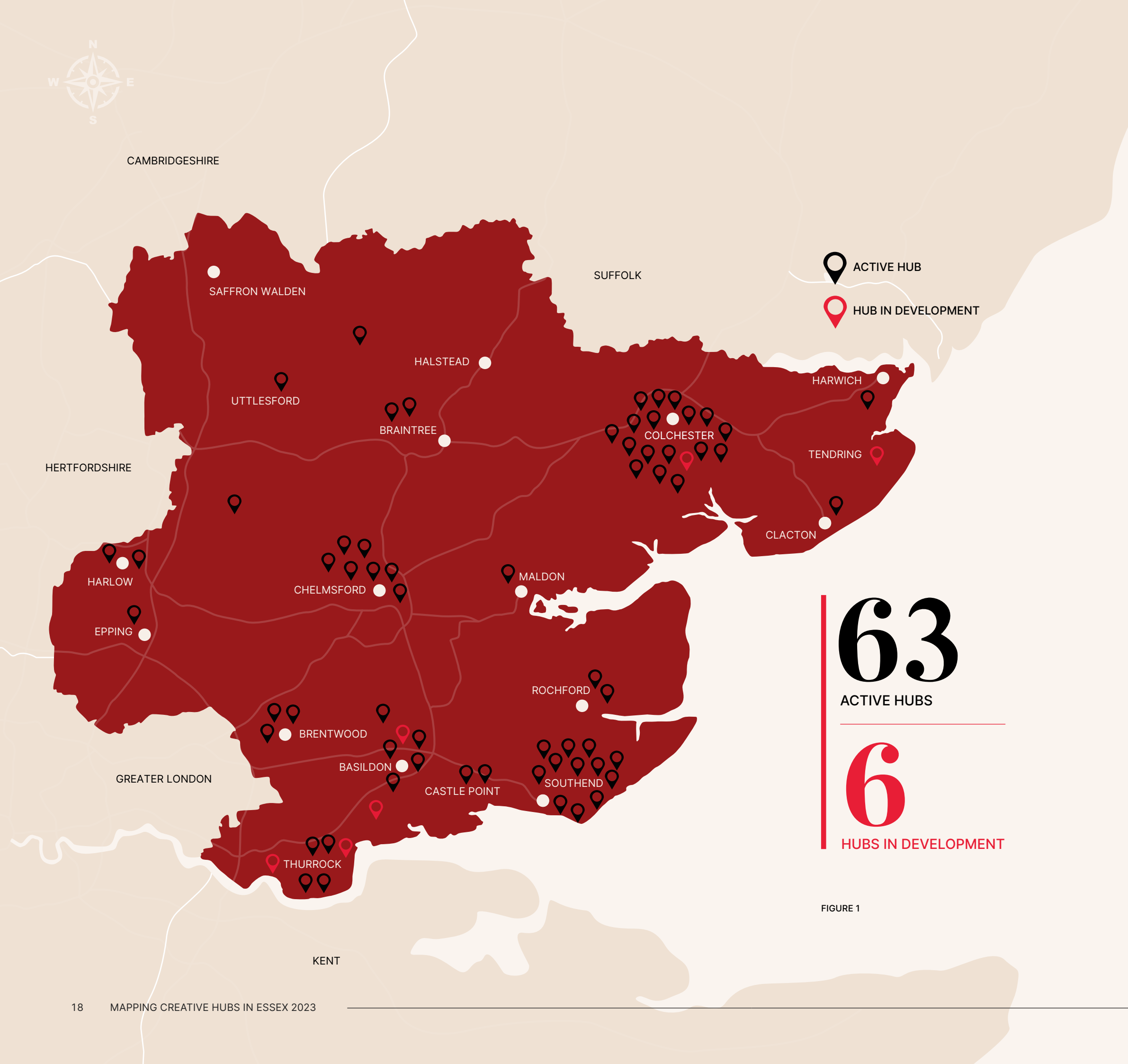
Despite these advantages, Essex faces challenges stemming from its strategic location and population growth.[IX] The county's favourable position attracts people and economic activities, but it also gives rise to housing issues and traffic congestion. Moreover, the concerns are compounded by economic disparities, environmental vulnerabilities, and the necessity for ensuring quality healthcare and education provision add to the concerns. Striking a balance between safeguarding heritage and promoting growth is of utmost importance.

2

The creative hub landscape in Essex

As a sector the creative industries possess a unique characteristic. Unlike other industrial sectors, people working within creative industries typically form micro and freelance networks, often residing and working within their local communities. They contribute to a dynamic economy and play essential roles in education, health, well-being,[x] community building, and place-making. Within this context, creative hubs act as nodes in a network, helping to create the conditions creatives require for collaboration, experimentation, and innovation[xi] This in turn can fuel creative and business development and boost productivity.

In Essex, as in other locations throughout the UK, the creative hub landscape follows a decentralised model, with hubs dispersed across cities, towns, and villages, each serving distinct communities. These hubs, whether located in buildings or not, are accompanied by sector-specific support organisations, which further enhance the creative ecosystem.

ACTIVE HUB

HUB IN DEVELOPMENT

CAMBRIDGESHIRE

SUFFOLK

SAFFRON WALDEN

HALSTEAD

HARWICH

UTTLESFORD

BRAINTREE

COLCHESTER

TENDRING

HERTFORDSHIRE

CLACTON

HARLOW

MALDON

CHELMSFORD

EPPING

ROCHFORD

BRENTWOOD

BASILDON

SOUTHEND

GREATER LONDON

CASTLE POINT

THURROCK

KENT

63
ACTIVE HUBS

6
HUBS IN DEVELOPMENT

FIGURE 1

2.1 Location

The mapping identified 63 active creative hubs across Essex with an additional six hubs in development (figure 1). The concentration of hubs was highest in Colchester with 17, followed by Southend-On-Sea with 12 and Chelmsford with 7. Notably, all areas in Essex were home to at least one hub, demonstrating a widespread presence across the county, with an average of approximately 2.4 hubs in the remaining areas.

The distribution of hubs across different areas can be attributed to various factors. These may include the presence of well-established creative communities, the availability of resources and funding, existing infrastructure and cultural institutions, proximity to educational institutions, and supportive local policies and initiatives. These factors contribute to an environment that fosters the establishment and growth of creative hubs.

The gaps in hub provision indicate areas for further exploration and opportunities to develop initiatives that can foster the growth of creative hubs. It is important to recognise that fewer hubs in certain areas does not necessarily imply a lack of creative activity, but rather underscores the potential limitations of the research methodology in capturing the complete landscape of creative hubs across the county. These gaps present an opportunity for further investigation, enabling a deeper understanding of the hyper-local creative ecosystem and the potential implementation of targeted creative strategies as needed.

2.2 Profile

This section presents the aggregated survey data collected from the hubs. Hubs were asked to share a range of profile data, with the objective of providing insights into the scope and scale of creative hubs in Essex.

2.2.1 Years active

The collected data revealed interesting insights about the longevity and diversity of creative hubs (figure 2). Among the surveyed hubs, 40% have been active for over 10 years, indicating a substantial presence and stability within the creative ecosystem. Furthermore, within this group, 24% of the hubs have been active for 16 or more years, highlighting their enduring impact and resilience. 27% of the hubs have a relatively shorter history, having been active for a duration of 3 to 5 years. A further 13% of the hubs were very new, with less than 3 years of activity.

These findings suggest a dynamic mix of mature and emerging hubs, contributing to a vibrant and ever-changing creative landscape. The presence of long-standing hubs underscores their sustained success and impact, while the emergence of newer hubs reflects continuous growth and innovation.
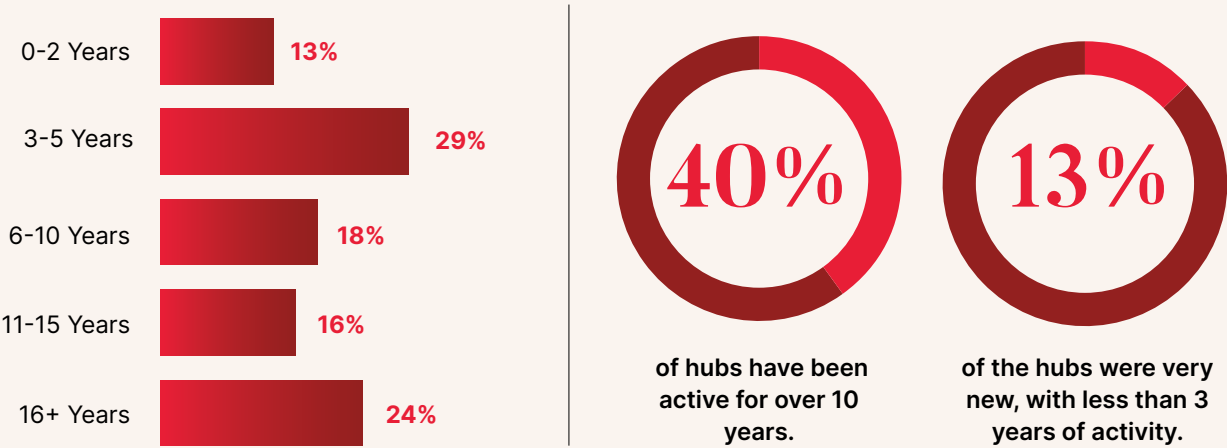
2.2.2 Legal Structure

The survey data reveals a diverse array of company and governance structures among the reported creative hubs (figure 3). The most frequently reported structure is a voluntary or unincorporated association (without charitable status), accounting for 22% of the hubs. Following closely behind is the Community Interest Company (CIC) model, representing 19% of the hubs. Another notable structure is the Company Limited by Guarantee, which combines a charitable status and represents 16% of the hubs.

In addition to these common structures, the category of 'Other' encompasses a variety of arrangements. This includes informal partnerships, consortiums, and collectives formed between different entities. Projects that receive funding for a specific duration and sole traders also fall under this category.

This wide range of company and governance structures reflects the adaptability and flexibility within the creative hub landscape. Hubs have the freedom to adopt the structure that best aligns with their goals, objectives, and legal requirements.
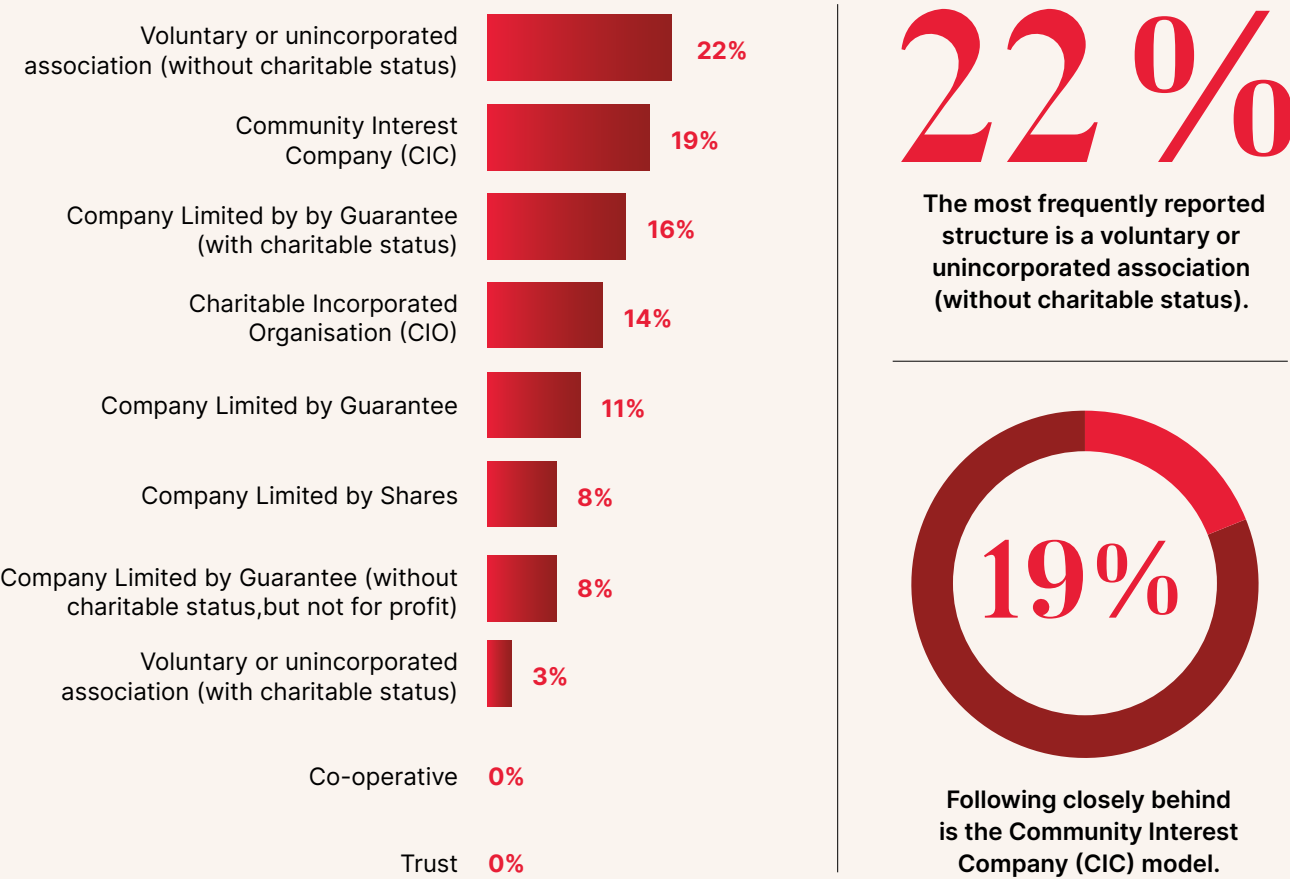
Photo: Morris M Film Premiere

How long has your Hub been active?

FIGURE 2

Years	%
0-2 Years	13%
3-5 Years	29%
6-10 Years	18%
11-15 Years	16%
16+ Years	24%

40% of hubs have been active for over 10 years.

13% of the hubs were very new, with less than 3 years of activity.

What is the legal structure of your Hub?

FIGURE 3

Structure	%
Voluntary or unincorporated association (without charitable status)	22%
Community Interest Company (CIC)	19%
Company Limited by by Guarantee (with charitable status)	16%
Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)	14%
Company Limited by Guarantee	11%
Company Limited by Shares	8%
Company Limited by Guarantee (without charitable status, but not for profit)	8%
Voluntary or unincorporated association (with charitable status)	3%
Co-operative	0%
Trust	0%

22% The most frequently reported structure is a voluntary or unincorporated association (without charitable status).

19% Following closely behind is the Community Interest Company (CIC) model.

2.2.3 Sources of income

The survey data reveals that all the hubs operate using a mixed economy business model and none rely solely on a single income stream (figure 4). Among the surveyed hubs, the most frequently cited source of income is grant funding. However, it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that grant income represents the largest proportion of income on average for creative hubs. Rather, this sample includes hubs that receive regular funding, such as being designated as 'National Portfolio Organisations' by Arts Council England, as well as hubs that have received grants for specific project activities.

Apart from grant income, other substantial sources of income for the surveyed hubs include rental revenue and the sale of products. The sale of services, public sector contracts, donations, and membership fees also contribute to their income streams. Comments provided by the respondents highlight the reliance on self-funding and sustained support from individuals involved in the hubs.

This wide range of income sources reflects the need for creative hubs to leverage multiple funding streams and revenue-generating activities to sustain their operations. By diversifying their income, hubs can mitigate financial risks and maintain a stable financial foundation to support their creative initiatives and activities.

2.2.4 Staffing

The survey data regarding staffing in creative hubs reveals a varied mixture of employment arrangements (figure 5). Among the hubs, there is often a combination of part-time, full-time, and volunteer staff members. The presence of volunteers suggests that some hubs are led by volunteers, while others engage volunteers as part of their programmes or initiatives.

Respondents highlighted the significant contribution of freelancers to the creative hub ecosystem. Collaborating with freelancers allows creative hubs to access a diverse talent pool, enhancing their offering to the wider community and creating employment opportunities. Creative hubs also provide opportunities for paid internships, apprenticeships, and board positions. This demonstrates a commitment to nurturing talent, supporting professional development, and fostering engagement at different levels within the creative sector.
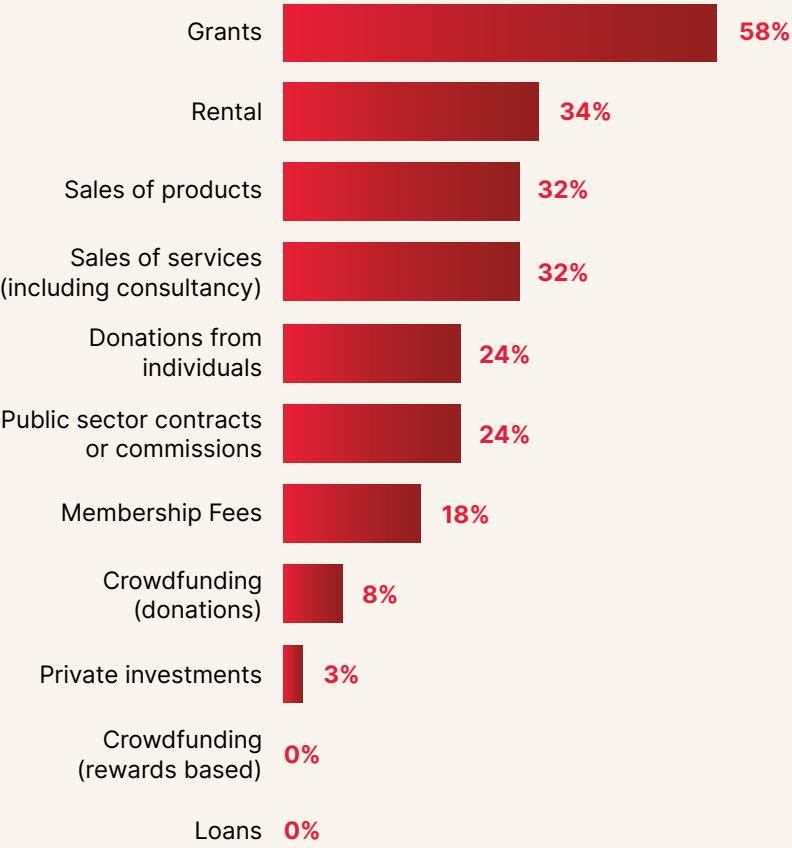
The variety of staffing arrangements observed in the survey data reflects the flexible and collaborative nature of creative hubs. By leveraging a diverse mix of staff, including part-time, full-time, volunteers, and freelancers, hubs foster a vibrant creative ecosystem while offering opportunities for professional growth.

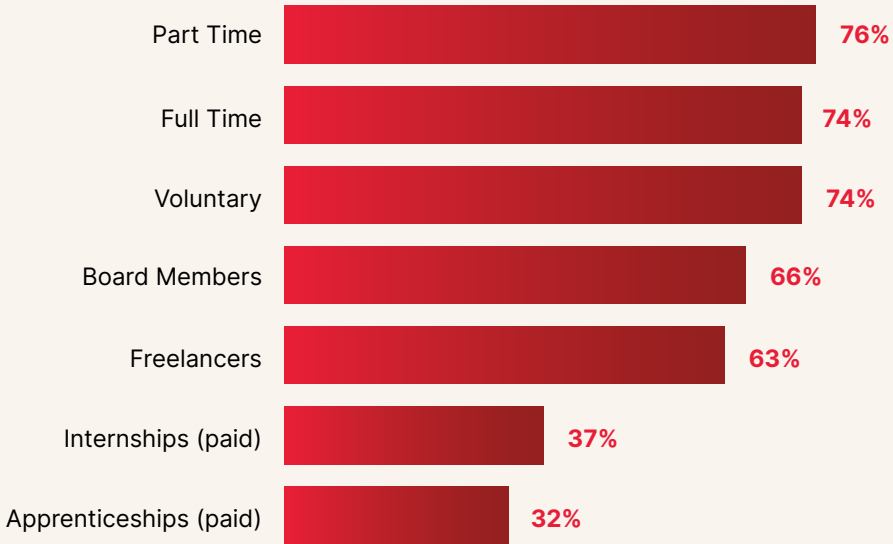Photo: Jaywick Sands, Arts and Cultural Fund Project, © Rob Ball

What are your sources of income?

FIGURE 4

Source	Percentage
Grants	58%
Rental	34%
Sales of products	32%
Sales of services (including consultancy)	32%
Donations from individuals	24%
Public sector contracts or commissions	24%
Membership Fees	18%
Crowdfunding (donations)	8%
Private investments	3%
Crowdfunding (rewards based)	0%
Loans	0%

How many of the following does your Hub employ or engage?

FIGURE 5

Type	Percentage
Part Time	76%
Full Time	74%
Voluntary	74%
Board Members	66%
Freelancers	63%
Internships (paid)	37%
Apprenticeships (paid)	32%

2.2.5 Operating models

The mapping exercise provided insights into the wide array of creative hub models, including networks, retail platforms, open access print studios, makerspaces, co-working spaces, incubators, community hubs, arts venues, and artist studios. Regarding their physical location, the majority of hubs identified in the mapping exercise were situated in buildings, while a notable proportion operated without a dedicated physical space (figure 6). This correlation was further supported by survey respondents who indicated the operating models that closely aligned with their respective hubs, based on the British Council's typology (figure 7).[XII]

The most common operating models reported were networks (35%), which are dispersed groups of individuals or businesses typically focused on a specific sector or place, followed by studio spaces (24%), where small collectives of individuals and/or businesses operate in a co-working environment. Centres (24%) were also prevalent, referring to large-scale buildings that may house additional assets such as cafes, bars, cinemas, maker spaces, shops, or exhibition spaces. Other operating models included clusters (16%), which involve co-located creative individuals and businesses within a specific geographic area, and online platforms (16%) that primarily engage with audiences through online methods like websites and social media.

The survey also highlighted additional categories, such as performing arts schools, music hubs, alternative nomadic arts schools, multi-arts venues with cafes and bars, small venues/arts centres that provide space for other creative organisations, and spaces that are a mix of studios and centres. These findings underscore the complexity and hybrid nature of creative hub operating models, showcasing the varied approaches taken by hubs to support and facilitate creative activities.

HUB TYPES

ALTERNATIVE: Focused on experimentation with new communities, sectors and financial models.

ONLINE PLATFORM: Uses only online methods – website/ social media to engage with a dispersed audience.

CENTRE: Large-scale building which may have other assets such as a cafe, bar,cinema, maker space, shop, exhibition space.

NETWORK: Dispersed group of individuals or businesses – tends to be sector or place specific.

CLUSTER: Co-located creative individuals and businesses in a geographic area.

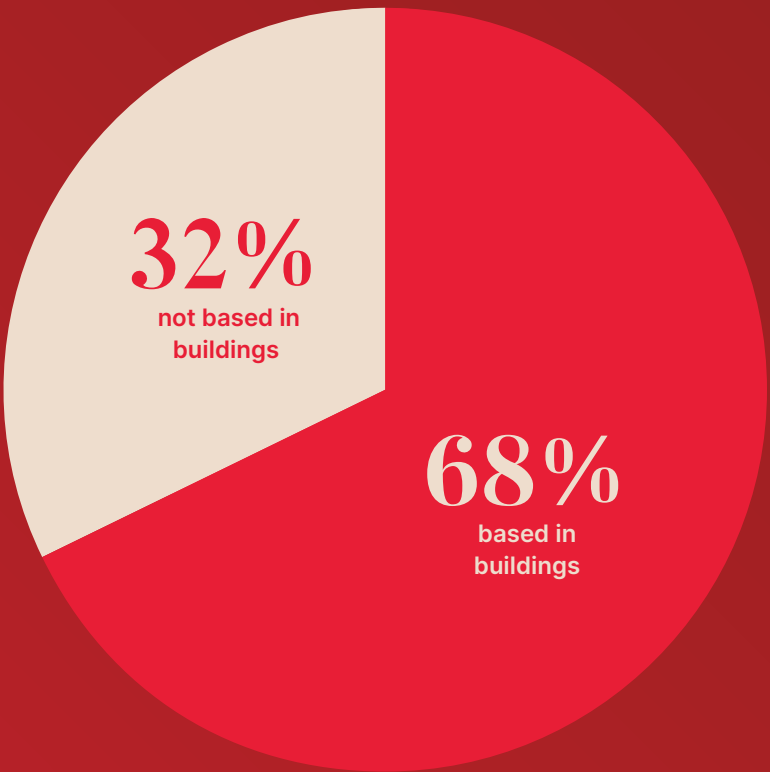**STUDIO:** Small collective of individuals and/or small businesses in a co-workingspace.

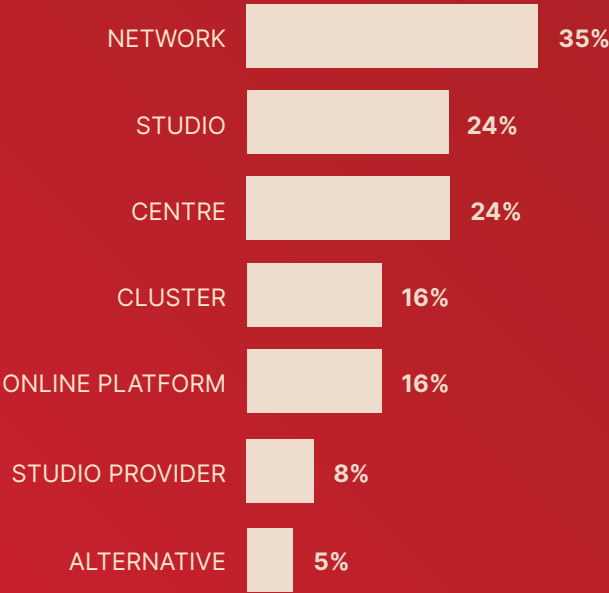**STUDIO PROVIDER:** Manages several studio spaces and buildings.

OTHER

FIGURE 6

32% not based in buildings

68% based in buildings

Which of the following most accurately describes your Hub?

FIGURE 7

NETWORK	35%
STUDIO	24%
CENTRE	24%
CLUSTER	16%
ONLINE PLATFORM	16%
STUDIO PROVIDER	8%
ALTERNATIVE	5%

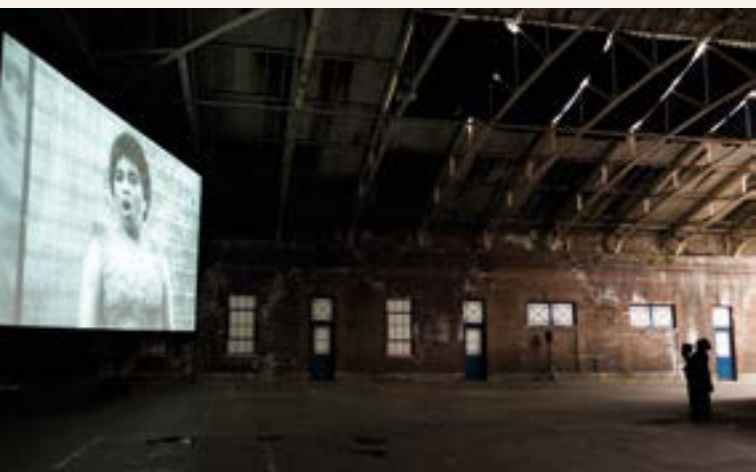# 2.3 Mission, model, and activities

Photo: John Akomfrah Mnemosyne 6 Estuary 2016, © Jon Webber

A substitute to the British Council's hub typology has not been proposed, as it is widely recognised and utilised in the sector. Moreover, introducing another system would encounter similar limitations in capturing the nuanced nature of many creative hubs. However, other data, such as stated mission and aims, have been considered as a supplementary approach to understanding creative hubs and their defining characteristics.

Research conducted in 2021 to map creative hubs across England[XIII] revealed that hubs have unique missions, tailored to their individual motivations, strengths, and the specific needs of their target community. This finding remains consistent in the case of Essex, where a more focused study further exemplifies the multifaceted nature of hub missions. The four primary drivers can be broadly classified as the impact on art, creativity, and culture; social impact; economic impact and place-making impacts (figure 8). Additional prevalent themes include education and skills development, research and innovation, and the enhancement of the local area as a thriving place to live and work.

To support the development of Colchester as a centre for culture, creativity and digital innovation, through having culture, creativity and digital innovation embedded in plans for the future development of Colchester, building a sense of identity and growing the local economy.

Creative Colchester

To create a space for creative individuals to interact, network and socialise, and to raise the artistic profile of this area of Brentwood.

ArtsDen

To establish Braintree Museum as a leading community and cultural learning destination in Essex and the Warner Textile Archive as a National business design archive.
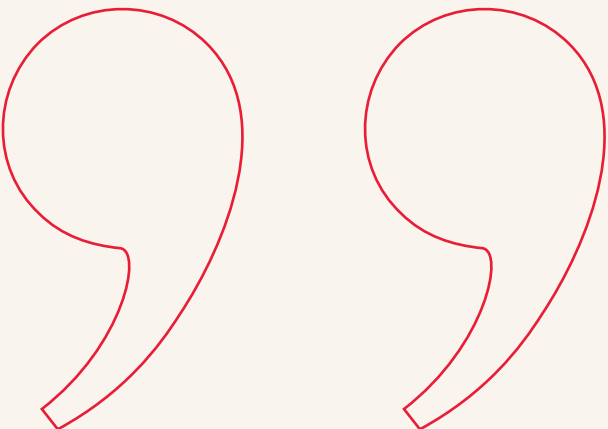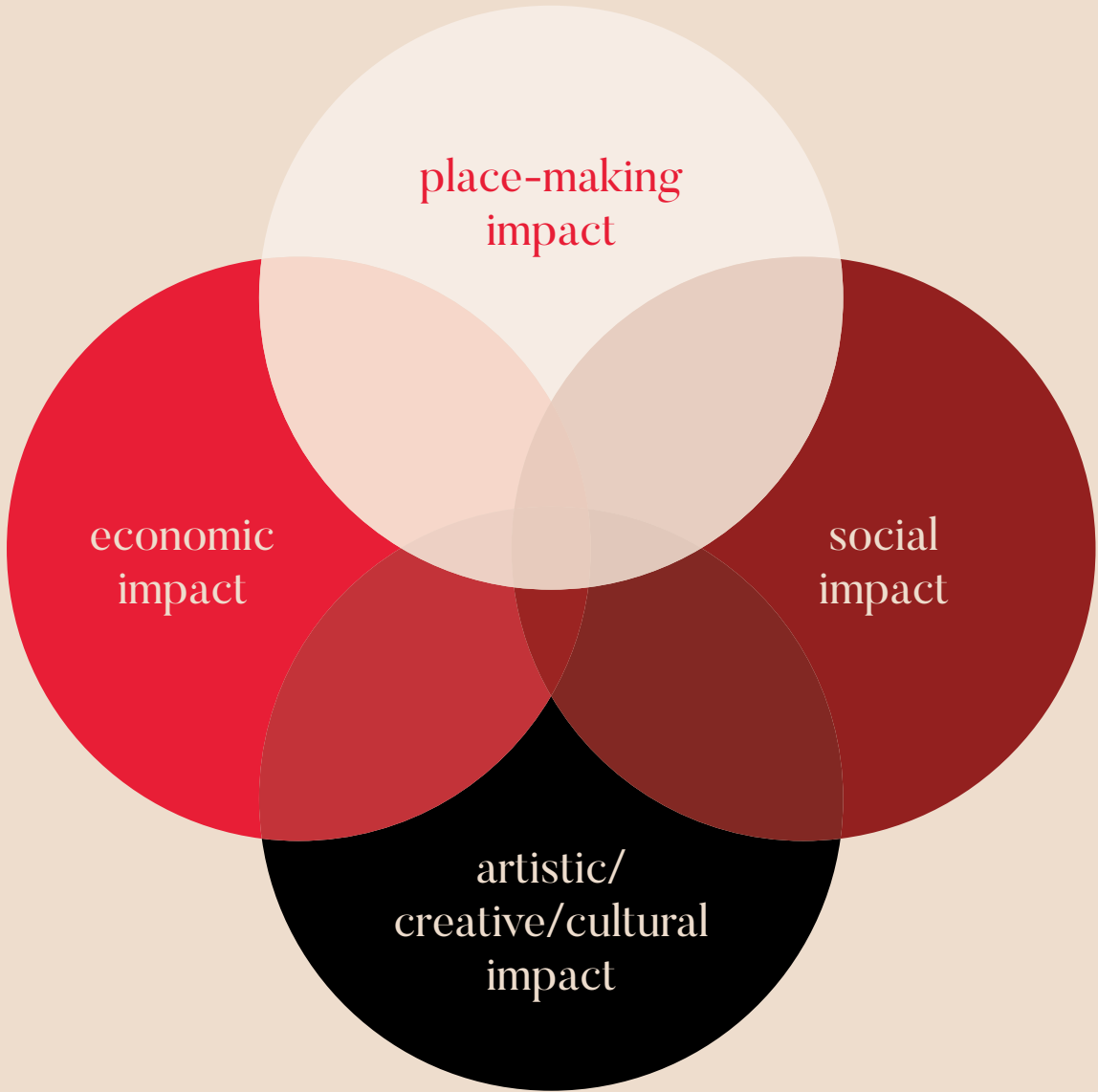
Braintree Museum

FIGURE 8

An examination of key words revealed that facilitative activities are integral to the core purpose of most hubs in the sample – for instance, share, support, develop, and promote (figure 9). There is also a notable emphasis on people, with artists and community being frequently mentioned. This suggests that convening communities and fostering connections and partnerships is a key driver for hubs.

FIGURE 9

2.3.1 Who do hubs serve?

The survey data revealed that have a significant majority of hubs, approximately 80%, primarily focus on serving their hyper-local communities, while 20% of hubs extend their engagement to members and users regionally, nationally, and even internationally.

The data showed the specific community-focused approaches of certain hubs. Examples include The Blok House Studio, Harlow Rock School, and Signals Essex Media Centre, which prioritise engagement with young people, recent graduates, and emerging artists. Hubs like the Chelmsford Secondary Drama Teachers Network and Braintree District Cultural Education Partnership provide support specifically tailored to educators in the arts and cultural sector. Furthermore, there are hubs such as the Essex Cultural Diversity Project that specialise in engaging diverse communities.

However, the majority of hubs engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including professional and amateur practitioners, businesses, local community members, emerging artists, and more established creatives. For example, the Creative Science Foundation collaborates with various groups, including businesses involved in product and service innovation, educational institutions centered on creative thinking and entrepreneurship, and community-focused efforts primarily aimed at helping children develop skills to break free from the poverty trap.

80%

of hubs primary focus is on serving their hyper-local communities.

Photo: Essex Cultural Diversity, 'Bhaji on the Beach', 2021

"

We work strategically with creative practitioners, culture and heritage sectors, diverse communities, and the voluntary sector to help develop skills, build sustainable networks and infrastructures, alongside creating opportunities to enhance diverse artists' work.

Essex Cultural Diversity Project

Harwich and Dovercourt and surrounding areas. An Arts Council England cold spot. Over 400 people use the centre every week.

Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre

The whole of Thurrock.

Thurrock CAN

In terms of sectors, the full range of creative industries defined by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) were represented (figure 10). The visual arts sector emerged as the most prominent within the sample, closely followed by performing arts and crafts. Design, music, and film were also frequently mentioned. In addition to the standard creative industry sectors, the survey identified a range of other subsectors and categories. These included printmaking, multi-arts, dance,

heritage, calligraphy, drama, digital creativity, writing, art appreciation, manufacturing and engineering, and education. This highlights the DCMS categories may not fully encompass the breadth and nuance of Essex's creative sector, which displays a rich interplay between different disciplines and sectors.

The survey data showed a significant variation in membership numbers across creative hubs, with figures ranging from under ten for to well over 500 for larger centres. Members are classified as fee-paying associates, regular or registered users, studio holders, or tenants. The largest group in the sample, accounting for 34% of hubs, cater to under 10 members, indicating smaller-scale operations. The hub members are distributed as follows (figure 11):

- 15% of hubs cater to 11-20 members

- 12% of hubs cater to 21-40 members

- 12% of hubs cater to 41-70 members

- 12% of hubs cater to 101-250 members

- 6% of hubs cater to 501+ members

- 3% of hubs cater to 71-100 members

- 3% of hubs cater to 251-500 members

The data indicates a healthy creative landscape with a good mix of scales, ranging from small collectives to larger centres.
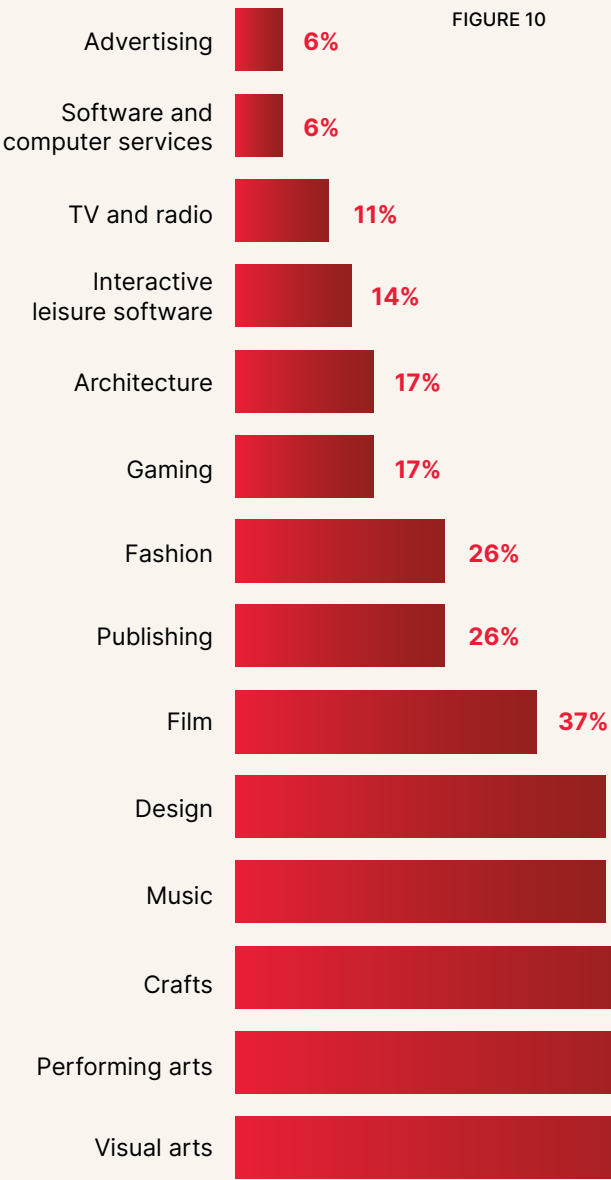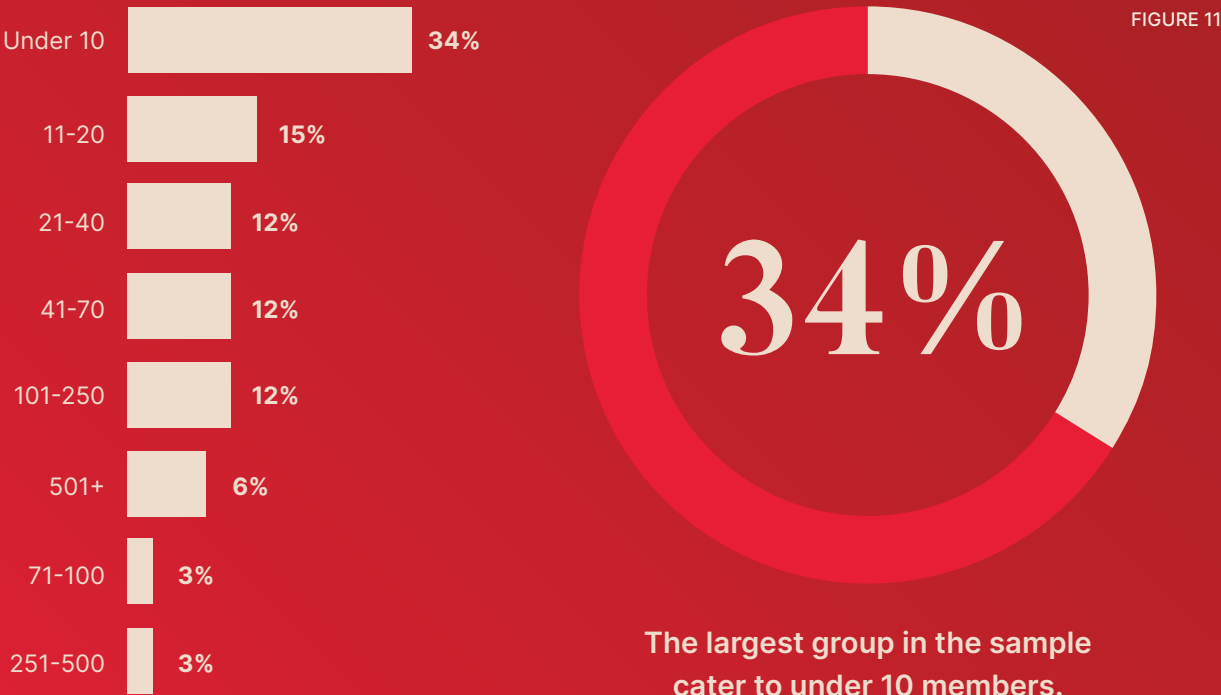
Which creative sectors currently use the Hub?

FIGURE 10

Sector	Percentage
Advertising	6%
Software and computer services	6%
TV and radio	11%
Interactive leisure software	14%
Architecture	17%
Gaming	17%
Fashion	26%
Publishing	26%
Film	37%
Design	46%
Music	46%
Crafts	57%
Performing arts	66%
Visual arts	71%

Photo: INSTAR, 'Infinity Forest', 2021

How many 'core members' does the hub have?

FIGURE 11

Core members	Percentage
Under 10	34%
11-20	15%
21-40	12%
41-70	12%
101-250	12%
501+	6%
71-100	3%
251-500	3%

34%

The largest group in the sample cater to under 10 members.

2.3.2 Service provision

The services provided by creative hubs are broad, reflecting the variety of hub scales and missions (Figure 12). The most cited services could be described as 'soft services' and included networking opportunities, showcasing events, and training and workshops. This was followed closely by facilities or 'hard services' such as studio space, venue hire, and access to equipment.

In addition to the survey options, hubs reported offering several other services including:

- Residency opportunities with accommodation for visiting artists or creatives

- Social and well-being activities

- Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for educators

- Library and creative resources

This varied range of hard and soft services showcases the multifaceted offerings that creative hubs provide within the creative landscape. The data underscores the vital role of hubs as community builders, which can occur regardless of having a dedicated building, occupying temporary spaces or operating primarily online.

Photo: Essex Dance Network Association workshop, © Rachel Cherry

2.3.3 Headline outputs

The survey data provided insights into the outputs generated by creative hubs, using indicators commonly requested by funders. The results show that hubs are not only thriving creative spaces but also sites of productivity. Notable outputs include:

- 83% New collaborations

- 75% New products

- 66% New services

- 63% New members

- 55% New research

- 52% New subcontracting opportunities

It is worth noting that 25% of hubs identified their outputs under the "Other" category, indicating additional outputs that may not fit into the predefined indicators. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of these diverse outputs, allowing recipients to provide comments would be beneficial in future surveys.

The data highlights the ability of creative hubs to generate a range of outputs that contribute to the growth, innovation, and vitality of the creative ecosystem. Their ability to foster collaborations, produce new products and services, attract members, and support research showcases the value they bring to both their immediate communities and the broader creative landscape.

The results show that hubs are not only thriving creative spaces but also sites of productivity.

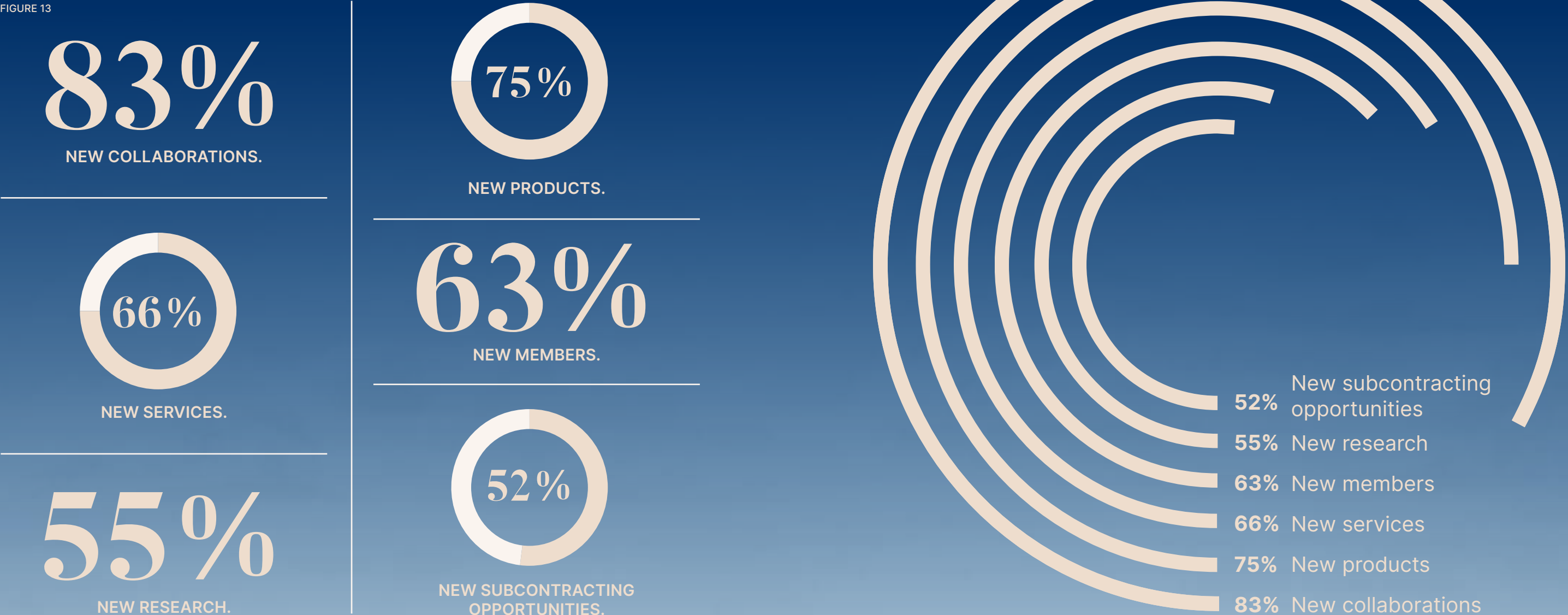## What services does the hub provide?

FIGURE 12

Service	Percentage
Networking events and opportunities	66%
Showcasing / exhibition events and opportunities	63%
Training and workshops	58%
Studio space	45%
Venue hire	42%
Access to equipment	39%
Performance space	32%
Membership	29%
Café	29%
Access to online resources	29%
Co-working space	26%
Rehearsal space	26%
Link to academic institutions	24%
Promotion via an online directory	16%
One to one business support (mentoring, coaching or consultancy)	13%
Retail opportunities	13%
Funding (e.g. grants, bursaries)	8%
Bookshop	8%
Incubation	5%
Financing (e.g. loans)	0%

66% of hubs provide networking events and opportunities.

What outputs did the hub create?

FIGURE 13

83%
NEW COLLABORATIONS.

66%
NEW SERVICES.

55%
NEW RESEARCH.

75%
NEW PRODUCTS.

63%
NEW MEMBERS.

52%
NEW SUBCONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES.

52% New subcontracting opportunities

55% New research

63% New members

66% New services

75% New products

83% New collaborations

Photo: © Kevin Grieve, Unsplash.com

3

Impact

Creative hubs have interconnected impacts that extend beyond the realm of the creative industry, touching on economic, cultural, social, and place-making aspects. Economically, creative hubs foster entrepreneurship, job creation, and innovation, contributing to the growth and sustainability of local economies.

On a social level, creative hubs act as community builders, fostering collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and networking opportunities. They create platforms for dialogue, promoting social connection and well-being. In addition, creative hubs can play a crucial role in place-making, revitalising neighbourhoods, and transforming underutilised spaces into vibrant hubs of creativity.

Importantly, hubs have a significant impact on arts, creativity, and culture by fostering artistic expression, nurturing creative talent, supporting cultural initiatives, and contributing to the overall vibrancy and diversity of the creative ecosystem.

3.1 Profile of impacts

This section provides an overview of the broad impacts of creative hubs, while the case studies delve into more detailed and unique outcomes. The survey data demonstrates the diverse range of impacts, with cultural impact being the primary focus for most hubs, followed by social, educational, economic, and environmental impacts.

- **Cultural** (i.e., creation of new work, networks, research & development) – 94%

- **Social** (i.e., well-being and quality of life enhancements) – 88%

- **Educational** (i.e., talent development, talent retention, training, skills development) – 88%

- **Economic** (i.e., employment, financial, regeneration) – 41%

- **Environmental** (i.e., ecological) – 23%

It is this intertwining of economic, creative, social, and place-making impacts that makes creative hubs dynamic and essential components of thriving creative ecosystems.

To further understand the impacts that hubs make, the survey included a question about whether they align with and deliver against the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Out of the surveyed hubs, 75% reported actively delivering against the SDGs, while 25% either expressed uncertainty about their alignment or found that the criteria were not applicable to their specific work. Among the hubs that aligned with the SDGs, three goals stood out as top priorities:

- **Goal 3:** Good Health and Well-being – 73%

- **Goal 4:** Quality Education – 63%

- **Goal 5:** Gender Equality – 60%

The next set of priorities for creative hubs were:

- **Goal 8:** Decent Work and Economic Growth – 40%

- **Goal 9:** Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure – 40%

- **Goal 10:** Reduced Inequality – 40%

These findings underscore the impacts made by creative hubs in fostering economic growth, promoting innovation, and addressing issues related to inequality, aligning with the broader global agenda for sustainable development. By actively working towards these goals, creative hubs contribute to creating a more sustainable and equitable future.

Interestingly, despite the primary objective of creating positive social impact, the term 'social enterprise' did not strongly resonate with creative hubs. Only 35% of the surveyed hubs described themselves as a social enterprise, while a higher percentage of 38% responded with a straightforward 'no' to being a social enterprise. 26% of hubs expressed uncertainty or were unsure whether they fell under the classification of a social enterprise. This finding suggests that while the social mission is significant, creative hubs may have varying preferences when it comes to describing their organisational structure and purpose.

Photo: SILT by Arbonauts commissioned for Estuary 2021 by Metal © Nina Photography
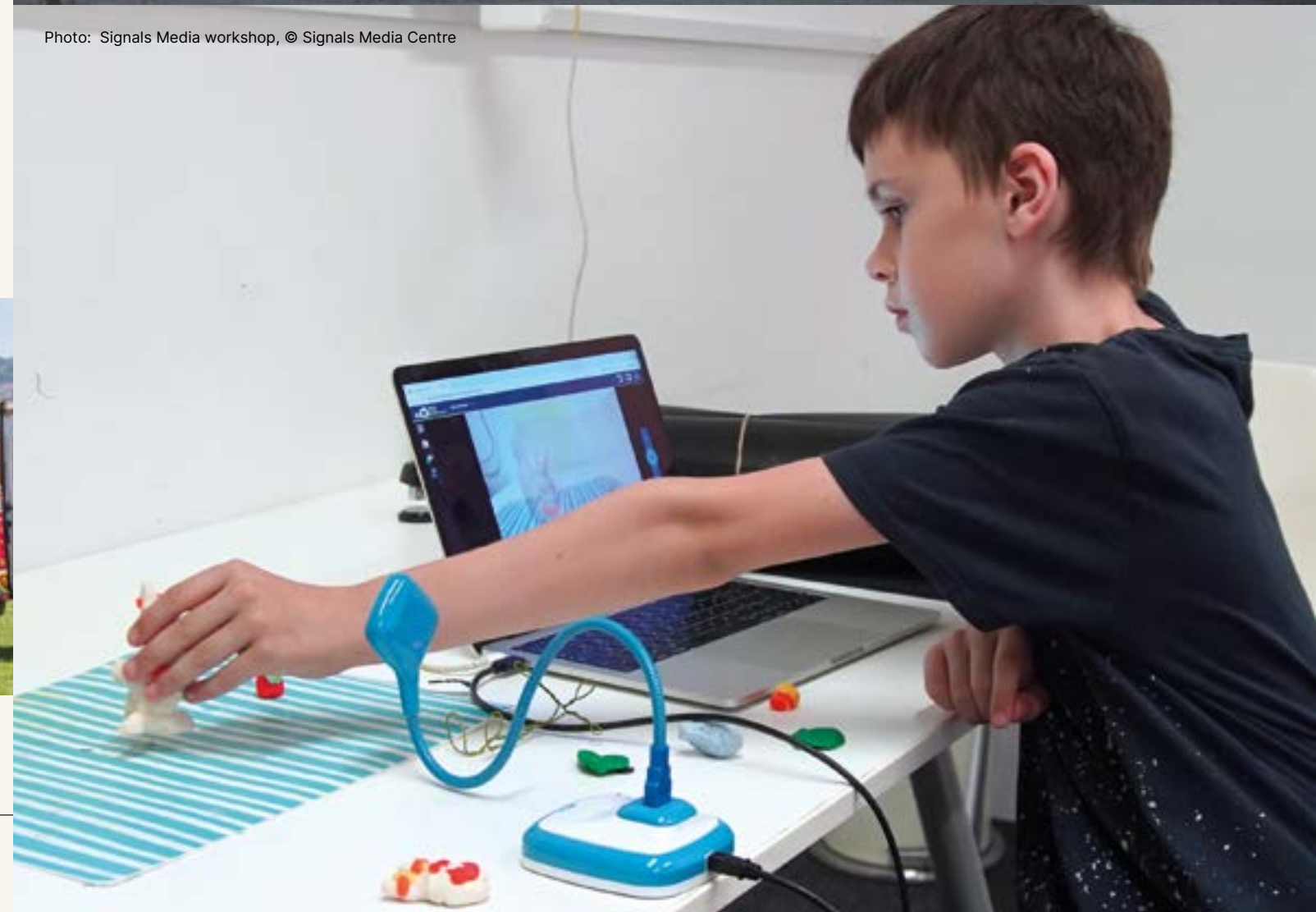
Photo: Signals Media workshop, © Signals Media Centre

Photo: Lata Upadhyaya Arts in Transit Estuary 2021, © Rob Harris

IMPACTS

CULTURAL 94%

SOCIAL 88%

EDUCATIONAL 88%

ECONOMIC 41%

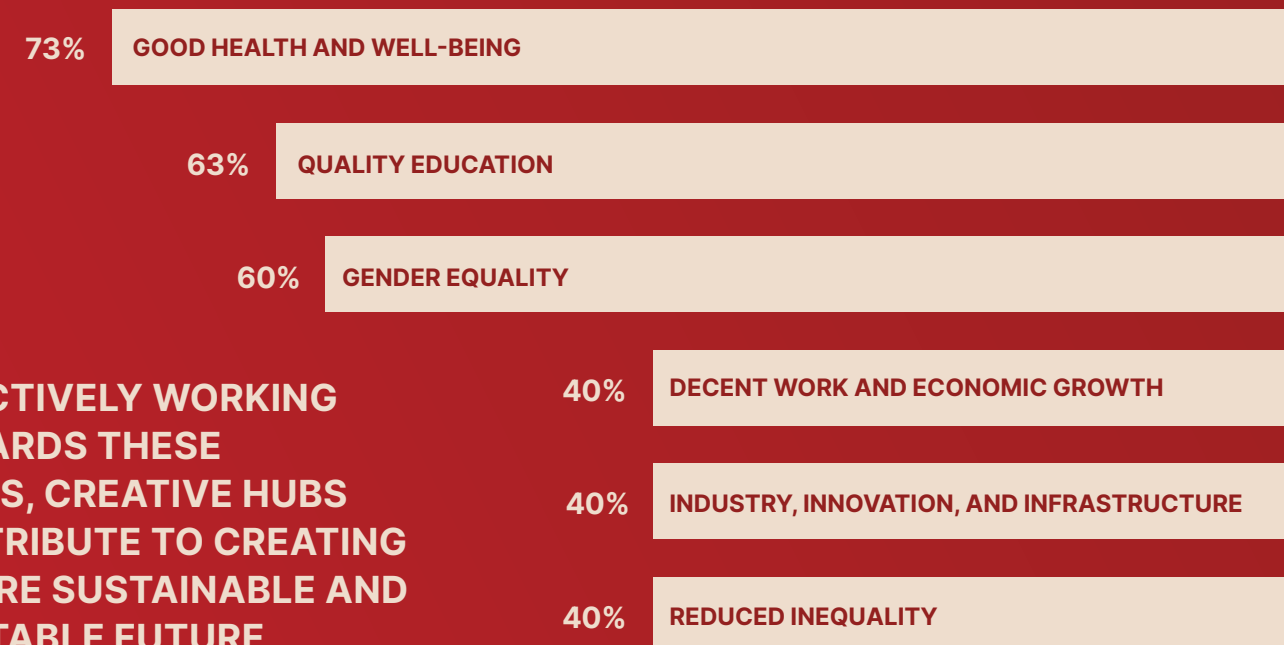ENVIRONMENTAL 23%
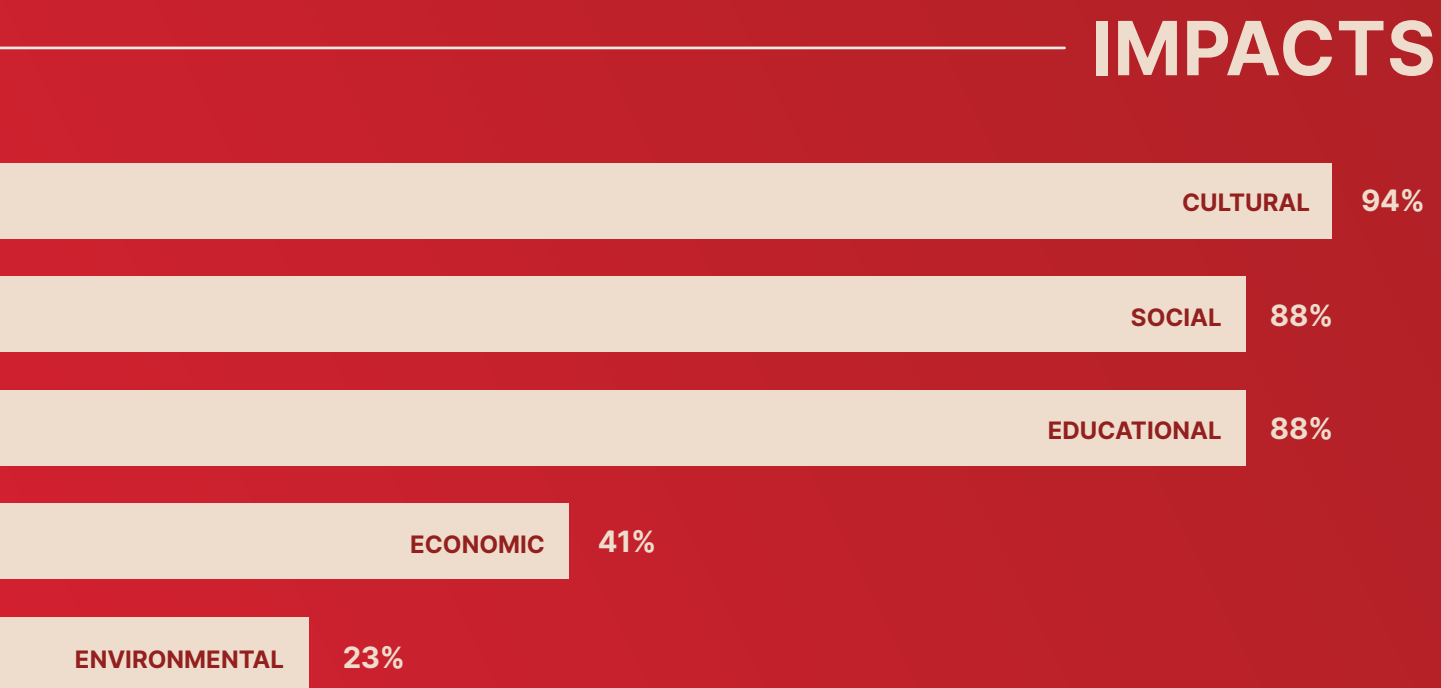
94% CULTURAL IMPACTS.

88% SOCIAL IMPACTS.

THREE GOALS STOOD OUT AS TOP PRIORITIES:

73% GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.

63% QUALITY EDUCATION.

60% SOCIAL IMPACTS.

GOALS

73% GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

63% QUALITY EDUCATION

60% GENDER EQUALITY

BY ACTIVELY WORKING TOWARDS THESE GOALS, CREATIVE HUBS CONTRIBUTE TO CREATING A MORE SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE FUTURE.

40% DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

40% INDUSTRY, INNOVATION, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

40% REDUCED INEQUALITY

3.2 Roles

To gain a deeper understanding of how hubs make impacts, it is helpful to examine the roles they play. Drawing insights from previous research[xiv], open-answer survey questions, and case study interviews, seven key roles have been identified below:

Role	Potential impacts
Creative community convenors and builders	• Acting as a meeting point for creatives to converge, network, receive business support • Providing shared spaces and opportunities for collaboration and interaction • Reducing isolation and creating a sense of belonging
Audience developers	• Contributing to arts and cultural tourism • Increasing visibility of the creative businesses • Engaging wider community and growing appetite for creativity and culture
Talent developers	• Addressing graduate talent attraction and retention • Growing skills among entrepreneurs • Fostering cross pollination of ideas leading to new products, services, and innovations
Business developers	• Providing pathways into creative sectors through apprenticeships, internships, and work placement • Creating jobs and employment opportunities • Supporting business startup and scale up
Brokers and anchors	• Brokering cross-sector collaborations and links between the hub community and the wider creative ecology, institutions, funders and partners • Enabling Research, Development and Innovation (RD&I) collaborations with academics
Place-makers	• Reimagining and repurposing disused industrial space, empty high streets and forgotten heritage buildings • Contributing to place-making and place-based regeneration
Sector leaders and advocates	• Taking the strategic lead, driving cultural strategy and policy, regeneration • Advocating for policy change and championing the voice of creative social business on Local Economic Partnership

The roles have been categorised under headings for clarity, but it is important to acknowledge that in practice these roles are dynamic and interconnected. Hubs' ability to adapt and take on different tasks adds to their varied impact on the creative community.

Photo: Colchester Arts Centre, © Jeff Scott

Photo: Raspberry Jams

Photo: Midsummer Madness 2023, Essex Book Festival

Photo: Making Visible 2022, © Hannah Jane Walker

Photo: Colchester Art Society

Photo: Netanya Marie Smith

4

Outlook

The analysis of hubs' outlook presents a mixed picture. Overall, they display optimism and confidence regarding their future prospects and sustainability. However, they also express concern about the impact of external socio-economic factors on their work.

Nearly half of the hubs surveyed (48%) expect an increase in their core members by 2024 compared to the previous year (2023), and a significant portion (40%) anticipate their core membership to remain the same. Only a small percentage (11%) expressed uncertainty regarding future core membership numbers.

Additionally, most hubs (67%) expect their wider user base and audiences to grow, reflecting a positive outlook for engaging a larger community. 37% of hubs foresee their wider user and audience numbers to remain the same, with none of the surveyed hubs expecting a decrease. This overall sense of stability and optimism suggests that creative hubs are confident in their abilities to continue attracting and serving their communities in the coming years.
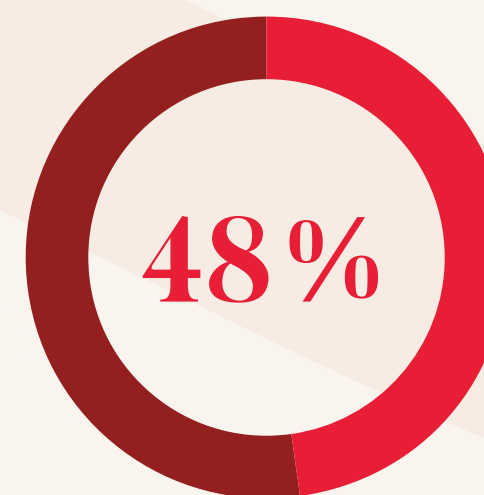
48 %

expect an increase in their core members by 2024.

67 %

expect their wider user base and audiences to grow.

Photo: Shoeburyness, © Giorgio Pili Gippi, Pixabay.com

45
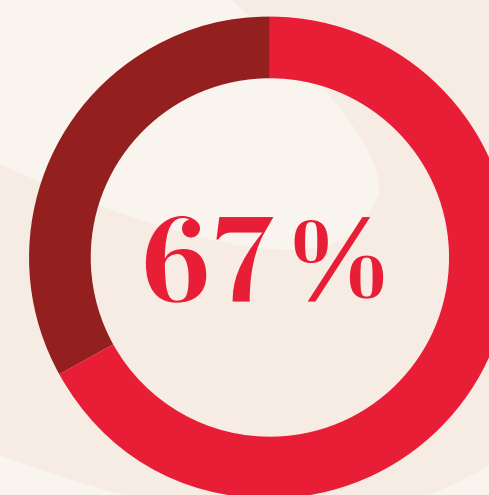
This confidence is reflected in the scope and range of ambitions that hubs have for their future. The most frequently mentioned goals are as follows:

- **Improving financial viability:** Financial sustainability is a key concern for hubs, and they are actively seeking ways to improve their financial stability and self-sufficiency, particularly related to the increased cost of living.

- **Securing tenure and/or acquiring a building:** A significant number of hubs are determined to establish a stable physical presence by securing suitable venues or acquiring dedicated buildings to house their operations.

- **Expanding or improving existing space:** Several hubs aim to enhance their current facilities, either by expanding the available space or making improvements to provide better services to their members and the creative community.

- **Investing in new equipment and facilities:** Some hubs are focusing on upgrading their facilities and investing in new equipment and technology to enhance the services they offer to their members.

- **Increasing impact across the board:** Many hubs are striving to amplify their overall impact, intending to have a broader and more significant influence on their members and the communities they serve.

- **Increasing visibility:** Hubs recognise the importance of building a strong brand identity and increasing their visibility within the creative sector and beyond.

- **Increasing public engagement and reach:** Several hubs are eager to engage with a wider audience, foster stronger connections with the public, and expand their reach to diverse communities.

- **Growing core hub membership:** Many hubs aspire to expand their core membership base, attracting more creative professionals and individuals to be part of their community.

- **Being better networked regionally and nationally:** A notable ambition among hubs is to establish stronger connections and partnerships, growing their local networks and exploring broader opportunities.

Despite this optimism, many hubs expressed substantial concern about the impact of external factors on their operations. Specifically, 61% of hubs expressed significant concern regarding the cost-of-living crisis, while 29% were moderately concerned. Only a small percentage (5%) remained neutral, and 3% were unconcerned.

The recovery from Covid-19 also remains a significant issue for hubs, with 14% being very concerned and 50% moderately concerned. 29% of respondents were neutral, while only 5% expressed no concern about the pandemic's impact on their operations.

Moreover, Brexit emerged as a notable concern, with 14% of hubs expressing a high level of concern and 32% indicating moderate concern. A substantial portion (26%) were neutral, and an equal percentage (26%) were not concerned about the effects of Brexit.

These concerns are further explored in the section on challenges below.

"

To be a new model for art school provision. To grow and diversify our membership, to develop a community outreach programme, to broaden our equipment, to build a professional development programme.

To improve the energy efficiency of the buildings while remaining financially viable, in a time of economic challenge and rising utility costs.

Increase quality and scope of work, more work in Tendring. Increase core staff. Improve the lives of local people through creative digital learning.

To maintain our core goals, to grow the Society, to continue working with partner organisations, to further develop a professional image.

To increase footfall and to appeal to new demographics. To improve buildings and facilities and to develop areas of the building into new workshop space.

To grow a sustainable business model that allows us to plan more long-term initiatives.

61%

of hubs expressed significant concern regarding the cost-of-living crisis.

14%

of hubs expressed a high level of concern regarding the recovery from Covid-19.

14%

of hubs expressed a high level of concern regarding Brexit.

4.1 Opportunities

Hubs demonstrate remarkable resilience and flexibility, adapting their business models and finding innovative ways to connect with their communities. The agile and entrepreneurial spirit of many hubs enables them to seize various opportunities arising from their specific contexts. Although the cited opportunities are distinct for each hub, the following common patterns emerged within the sample:

- **Partnerships and collaborations:** Many hubs demonstrated an increased emphasis on forming partnerships, networks and collaborations with other organisations, both within the creative sector and beyond. These partnerships have allowed hubs to pool resources, share knowledge, and collectively address challenges, thereby fostering a more cohesive and supportive creative ecosystem.

- **Place-based initiatives:** Creative hubs are increasingly focusing on place-based initiatives that contribute to the development and enhancement of their local communities. These initiatives aim to enrich the cultural fabric, promote local talent, and contribute to the overall well-being and vitality of the neighbourhoods in which they operate.

- **Growth of home-based work:** The survey identified a notable shift towards home-based work among hub members, as opposed to commuting to larger cities like London. This shift was likely influenced by changing work patterns during the pandemic and reflects a growing trend towards remote and flexible working arrangements.

- **Policy alignment:** Many hubs expressed a greater emphasis on aligning their activities with relevant policies and initiatives at the local, regional, and national levels. By aligning with policy priorities, hubs can access funding opportunities, gain support from governmental bodies, and further integrate their work into broader development strategies.

- **Health and well-being initiatives:** Another common pattern is a growing emphasis on health and well-being initiatives for their members and the broader community. These hubs are proactively addressing issues related to mental health and social isolation, providing support networks, and fostering a sense of belonging and community among their participants.

Developing new collaborative strands of programming for partnership work with collectives/hubs across the region.

Solidarity, strong local artistic community, collaboration over competition.

Growth in working more close to home rather than commuting, the unaffordability of London.

Community focus, place making, health and well-being.

Creating a space for collaboration and reducing social isolation and contributing to well-being.

Photo: Colchester Film Festival

The People of 1381 outdoor exhibition commissioned for Estuary 2021 event for academics 10 June 2021 -2

Funding, cost of living impact on users, limited income generation.

Lack of finance, currently the leaders and strategists are all unpaid meaning that prioritisation is difficult.

Reduced/standstill funding.

Cost of living, soaring overheads, not owning our own premises.

The condition/maintenance of the buildings; the number of voluntary hours available; possible re-development of the site.

Getting a new lease. Cost of living crisis. Falling attendances.

Lack of strategic local vision for place-making and liveability, lack of understanding among senior stakeholders for what the creative sector contributes economically and socially.

Greater connection and active participation between local authorities and the sector.

4.2 Challenges

While creative hubs exhibit diverse opportunities tailored to their unique contexts, they face common challenges:

- **Financial stability and cost of living crisis:** 84% of hubs expressed significant concerns about financial stability, particularly due to rising costs of living. This has implications for both the financial aspects of the hubs, including operational expenses and staffing, as well as the financial well-being of their members. Organisations without secure long-term funding and that rely on commercial income (i.e., venue hire, café) face uncertainty. Organisations dependent on local authority funding and donations, also expressed concerns about the reduction of income.

- **Security of tenure:** Many hubs are grappling with issues related to securing long-term leases or ownership of venues, which is crucial for establishing a stable and sustainable hub environment. The common threats of rising rents, displacement, and short-term contracts for those utilising meanwhile spaces add to their challenges. The uncertainty surrounding tenure can hinder the long-term planning and development of hubs, potentially affecting their ability to continue supporting local creatives.

- **Political recognition:** A notable challenge for creative hubs is gaining recognition and support from policymakers and government entities. The lack of political recognition can result in limited funding opportunities, reduced access to resources, and limited collaboration with public institutions. Hubs are striving to advocate for their role in fostering creativity, innovation, and community development, seeking increased acknowledgment and support from the political landscape.

4.3 Success factors

The research findings suggest that the success and growth of creative hubs are influenced by several common factors, regardless of their unique contexts:

Photo: © Lucy J Toms Photography

- **User-centric approach:** Successful hubs prioritise their users by actively listening to their needs and concerns, responding to their feedback, and ensuring that their offerings remain relevant and responsive to the community they serve.

- **Strong partnerships:** Building and maintaining partnerships with the local community and broader networks is crucial for hubs. Collaborating with other organisations and stakeholders helps them achieve their goals, access resources, and maximise their impact.

- **Impact measurement and evaluation:** Successful hubs recognise the importance of measuring, evaluating, and sharing their impact. They implement systems to assess the outcomes and effectiveness of their initiatives, ensuring transparency and accountability in delivering positive results for their communities and stakeholders.

- **Compelling storytelling:** Effective hubs can articulate a compelling narrative that highlights their distinctiveness, role, and impacts. This skill helps them communicate their value to stakeholders, funders, and the public, fostering greater support and recognition.

- **Diversification of income streams:** Successful hubs strive to diversify their sources of income. By avoiding overreliance on a single funding stream, they build better financial resilience, enabling them to navigate economic challenges more effectively.

- **Suitable space development:** For building-based hubs, securing and developing the right space is essential. The physical environment should be conducive to fostering creativity, collaboration, and community engagement, supporting the hub's mission effectively.

Photo: Signals Media Workshop, 2022

Policymakers interested in investing in creative hubs should take these factors into account. Aligning interventions with these drivers can lead to more effective support for creative hubs, enhancing their potential for success and fostering a thriving creative ecosystem.

5

Case studies

The following five case studies showcase the breadth and range of creative hubs in Essex. The profile survey data has revealed a rich tapestry of complexity and nuance, reinforcing the notion that creative hubs are far from homogeneous. Essex's hub landscape is a dynamic and diverse ecosystem that encompasses everything from artist-run centres, emerging virtual networks and creative zones, to established, multi-site building-based hubs. The case studies offer an opportunity to delve into the intricacies and variations of operating models, missions, activities, and impacts within this vibrant creative hub landscape. What unites them, however, is their shared commitment to convening and sustaining creative communities through their partnerships and activities.

5.1 Metal, Southend-On-Sea

Photo: Chalkwell Hall

We believe that everyone deserves a rich and cultural life, and where you live should not be a barrier to this. We hold time and space for artists of all ages and backgrounds to forge new ideas and realise their potential. Our approach celebrates place, builds local connections and nurtures talent, encouraging experimentation, collaboration and co-creation.

Photo: Essex Writers House 2023

Photo: Chalkwell Hall, © Mark Massey

Metal is an influential creative hub that is making a significant impact on the artistic landscape in Essex through its innovative programmes and initiatives. As a catalyst organisation they support artists, develop new creative businesses, convene networks, and offer support that often leads to the initiation of independent projects and programmes, which make an important impact on the regeneration of the regions in which they operate.

Founded in 2002 by Jude Kelly CBE, Metal have been active in Liverpool since 2004, Southend-On-Sea since 2007 and in Peterborough since 2012. The establishment of the organisation was driven by the recognition of the pressing need to breathe new life into empty or derelict buildings of historical significance, transforming them into dynamic cultural and community hubs. In Southend, they renovated Chalkwell Hall, a Grade II listed Georgian house situated within the grounds of Chalkwell Park. Chalkwell Hall overlooks the Thames Estuary across to Kent.

Chalkwell Hall has four floors containing staff offices, pop-up bar, kitchen, public sharing space, project room for workshops, bedrooms as accommodation for artists and a multi-use top floor space for anything from creative hot-desking to rehearsals and project hatching.

Metal Art School is in the stable block adjacent to the Hall and has been renovated and managed by Metal since 2015. Here, they have an art studio where creative practitioners can run their own classes and workshops honing their skills at public facing work. Metal Art School hosts a busy programme of workshops, classes and creative socials, led by independent creatives within the local community. They support local creatives in reaching new audiences, sharing creative practice, and building their portfolios. They also host a partnership project called *NetPark Wellbeing* which supports adults living with mental health challenges through creative workshops.

Hub model

Metal is a building-based hub that provides a range of support to creatives and artists in Southend. Metal's core offer to creative practitioners are residency programmes, staff expertise and mentoring, fundraising advice, workspace, rehearsal space, studios, opportunities for research and development, and accommodation for visiting artists and makers, within a large-scale heritage building situated in a public park. They play a role in network and creative business start-up offering expertise, incubation space, mentoring, and connections.

Activities

Helping build stronger, healthier, and happier communities through art, culture and creativity.

Metal supports artists of all ages and backgrounds to strengthen their practices and build connections, by providing opportunities to learn, collaborate and co-create. From their base in Chalkwell Hall, Metal produces a multi-faceted programme that encourages conversations and exchange with the wider community in South Essex. Activities include:

- Artist residences (bedrooms and workspace)
- Mentoring
- Community hot desks
- Collaborative meeting spaces and communal kitchen
- *Metal Art School,* hosting local artist-led classes, talks and workshops
- *NetPark Well-being* project, in partnership with Southend City Council
- Volunteer opportunities
- Creative business support

Through their programme, Metal provides artists with the necessary facilities, support, and guidance to further their creative careers. They offer incubation, including one-to-one business support, mentorship, and access to online resources. By nurturing creativity and fostering professional development, the hub helps artists refine their practice, gain recognition, and establish meaningful connections within the wider community.

Metal believes the most impactful and relevant work comes from building connections across all parts of community and place. Their programmes often offer national networking opportunities for Essex creatives through connections with their sister sites – such as the *Metal New Artist Network*. Similarly, it gives the communities of Southend access to international artists and their practice. Artists in residence regularly deliver sessions on the *NetPark Well-being* programme supporting vulnerable adults in the community. They have developed several partnerships including local authorities and agencies, arts organisations, community groups, schools, HE and FE institutions, to build connections across all different parts of their local community. Collaborations enable the hub to deliver larger-scale projects, reach broader audiences, and create a multiplier effect that extends the benefits of its programmes.

In addition to their regular activities, Metal curate, commission and produce cultural events such as *Essex Writers House* in partnership with Essex Book Festival, or Village Green (until 2009 - 2019) and *Estuary Festival* (2016 & 2021). Metal is a catalyst organisation often establishing projects which go on to have their own independent life. *Estuary Festival,* for example, is now established as an independent CIC. In this way, Metal leverages resources, expertise, and networks to amplify its impact.

Metal's success in understanding the needs of creatives and local communities has been recognised by local authorities, who have commissioned them to produce insight reports and cultural strategies (More Than A Place, 2021; Cultural Drives Change South Essex Culture & Creative Industries Strategy 2023 commissioned by ASELA).

Photo: Literature Culture LAB

Financial sustainability

Metal is a National Portfolio organisation (NPO) and as such has core funding until 2026 across all three sites. Across the whole organisation 35% of Metal's income is from the NPO, 8% from local authority agreements, 34% through fundraising and 23% through other earned income. Metal has developed a range of different income streams including private donations, grants, public sector contracts or commissions, and the sales of services (including consultancy). As well as sales from tickets for events, hire of space, pop-up bar/café and online book sales.

Metal believes the most impactful and relevant work comes from building connections across all different parts of community and place.

Impact

As a catalyst arts organisation, Metal creates two primary impacts. Firstly, they empower and influence creatives and artists by providing mentoring, fostering collaborations, incubating projects, and businesses, and supporting networks and programmes. Secondly, Metal extends its reach to the broader social, cultural, and economic ecosystem of the region. They achieve this by initiating place-based creative initiatives that flourish independently, resulting in the generation of employment opportunities and the attraction of funding that benefits South Essex. Notable projects facilitated by Metal include *The Old Water Works,* a charity in Southend-on-Sea that offers artists studios, facilities, and research and development opportunities, as well as the *Estuary Festival*, an interdisciplinary arts and culture event spanning Essex and Kent.

Additionally, Metal has provided support to initiatives such as The Other MA (TOMA), *NetPark Well-being Project, Southend Creative* and *Culture Network, Project Hath Theatre Network*, and the *Agency for Creative Projection CIC*.

Highlights from 2021 – 2022 include:

37,985
physical audiences reached

61,560
online audiences

22
performances

37
residencies

305
FE/HE volunteer/work placements

33
talks/workshops/events/debates

437
artists supported

2260
hours of volunteer time

£16,818,418
Estuary 2021 generated £16,818,418 of economic activity in the Thames Estuary area.

212
contractual artists

2
paid internships

£6,514,7942
Economic impact on the Thames Estuary area was £6,514,7942

43
commissions

240
well-being sessions

"... the residency programme has been such a standout for me during the pandemic. At a time when so many organisations have ground to a standstill; this is a practical, outward-looking, committed programme of support direct to artists. Which leads to great work, not just right away but in the future too. Flexible, considered, focused. Each time the residencies come up, I recommend to one and all...".

Artist Laura Trevail

"The mentorship has been very useful, it has been refreshing talking to someone in the arts and the conversation is so honest and open. He has been so generous with sharing knowledge and experience and made me feel comfortable in each session. He helped me set goals and pushed me to put a plan into place and enjoy the journey of curating an exhibition."

Metal New Artist Network participant

"Volunteering is incredibly important to me. It is my chance to give back to the project that has done so much for me. Through volunteering my confidence and self-esteem continue to grow. I can talk to people now, where before I couldn't. I can help and support participants. It is enormously rewarding."

NetPark Wellbeing Volunteer

5.2 Signals Media Centre, Colchester

WEBSITE: www.signals.org.uk

LOCATION: Colchester

STRUCTURE: Company Limited by Guarantee (with charitable status)

YEARS ACTIVE: 35

TURNOVER: Approx. £180,000

EMPLOYEES: 2 f/t, 4 p/t, 12 freelancers, 2 volunteers, 2 interns (paid), 8 board members

**CREATIVE INDUSTRIES SUPPORTED:** Digital arts including game design, film, animation

An award-winning arts and education charity that provides courses, workshops, and projects across the region.

Established in 1988, Signals Essex Media Centre (Signals) was founded by a dedicated group of filmmakers who recognised the potential for creating a community media and video resource in Colchester to provide accessible opportunities and resources for filmmakers. Over the years, Signals has grown into an important hub for filmmakers and digital artists, specialising in film education, digital art, and leveraging media production for social, learning, and creative outcomes. They support the creative sector by providing facilities, equipment, training, and production opportunities.

With a mission to address social needs within the region, Signals actively supports and facilitates the development of innovative approaches in utilising digital technology. Signals collaborates closely with artists, communities, and various organisations to achieve their shared objectives. This commitment to innovation and adaptability positions Signals as a dynamic centre for local creativity, offering not only its own curated programme of activities but also providing a supportive environment for other creative organisations and individuals to thrive within its vibrant ecosystem.

We educate and inspire students to become digital creators rather than just consumers, increasing their understanding of and participation in digital arts (filmmaking, animation and video games).

Hub model
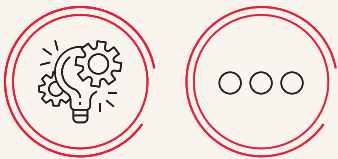
The hub model of Signals is characterised by its hybrid nature. Serving as both an arts centre, with educational programmes and showcasing opportunities, as well as providing facilities such as workspace and equipment for creatives. Signals actively engages in experimentation, exploring new avenues for community involvement and financial support.

Photo: stopframe animation

Photo: Signals Video Game Making

Photo: Editing Day 2018

Photo: Plug In

Activities

Signals has developed three core offers, each designed to cater to the diverse needs of their creative community:

1. **Learning opportunities and community projects**
Signals offers a diverse range of learning opportunities primarily targeted at children and young people. Their programmes include digital workshops delivered in schools for students from KS2 to KS4, tailored to meet individual needs and covering various subjects such as history, literacy, maths and science through film, animation, creative coding, and video games. They also provide workshops and courses like Games Academy, autism friendly tech camps, stop motion animation, video game making, and robot making. In addition, Signals offers free online making guides related to games, animations and film, as well as continuing professional development for creatives. They collaborate on projects that engage communities, empowering people to share their stories and explore relevant issues in a digital format.

2. **Specialist facilities, equipment, and workspace**
Signals provides the necessary infrastructure to support creative practices. They offer a large studio and exhibition space which is a fully accessible and self-contained ground floor space with access to a kitchen and accessible toilet. This can be hired and can be used for meetings, workshops, courses, conferences, screenings or as a rehearsal area. They also provide office space for longer-term lets. Creatives can also hire equipment including cameras, tripods, lights, reflectors, track, microphones and sound kits available.

3. **Production**
Signals has developed a commercial arm of their hub through which they produce promotional films, events coverage, games, interactive work, documentaries drama and animations for clients. Their committed team of industry professionals help develop concepts and produce high quality productions. Their client's range in scales from large commercial companies to small creative businesses that require support producing promotional or documenting material.

Financial sustainability

Signals has diverse income streams with no high levels of dependency in any one area. Signals became National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in 2023 to 2026 providing core funding which is 28% of income 55% of income is project grant funding and 17% is earned income from commissions, workshop, donations and hire fees.

Impact

Signals has a profound impact on the lives of individuals, offering transformative experiences that go beyond the acquisition of technical skills. Through their diverse range of learning opportunities, community projects and facilities, Signals has become a catalyst for personal growth, providing individuals with newfound confidence, skills, and pathways to explore new career opportunities.

Signals works directly with approximately 4,000 people per year, 75% are children and young people aged 7 to 19 years. Currently, 50% of participants exhibit protected characteristics, encompassing economic disadvantage, with approximately 20% identified as having SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities).

In 2022 feedback from participants who engaged with Signals through their digital workshops reported:

- 96% would like to do more similar work.

- 92% rated workshops as good or excellent.

- 100% of children and young people on workshops were engaged and able to develop new skills.

Perhaps most notably, 100% of project partners (schools, libraries, and youth organisations) were keen to work with Signals again. This highlights the effectiveness of Signals teaching methods, even within short one-hour sessions participants gained valuable skills and learning experiences.

Signals has developed its own framework for measuring impacts and success across a range of indicators, including increased audience and participant numbers, heightened staffing levels, and the successful funding of more long-term projects through three-year grants. These success criteria reflect Signals' commitment to fostering growth and advancement within the creative community.

Their impact indicators extend to creatives at all stages of their careers and include:

- Ongoing opportunities for progression at all levels

- Freelance opportunities

- Local resources hire

- Platforms to share resources, experience and skills

- Networking events aimed at early careers development

In addition to its influence on individual creatives, Signals plays a role in stimulating the local economy. The hub generates local work and progression opportunities through placements, internships, and freelance assignments. Furthermore, Signals actively supports training and advancement towards industry careers, exemplified by their involvement in initiatives like the BFI Film Academy. By fostering sector-focused events such as Plug In, Signals also contributes to the broader creative industries and educational landscape, promoting best practices and collaboration.

100%

of children and young people on workshops were engaged and able to develop new skills.

5.3 High House Production Park, Thurrock

WEBSITE: www.hhpp.org.uk

LOCATION: Purfleet-on-Thames

STRUCTURE: Charitable Company and Private company limited by guarantee without share capital

YEARS ACTIVE: 15

TURNOVER: N/A

EMPLOYEES: 0, 14 board members/trustees

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES SUPPORTED: Cultural education, artistic creation, specialised design activities, performing arts

Photo: High House Production Park Open Space

Our vision is to become an international centre of excellence for creative industries-led growth.

High House Production Park (HHPP) is a unique creative cluster located in Purfleet-on-Thames in Thurrock, Essex. The park occupies a 14-acre site and consists of purpose-built facilities for artists, designers, and performers. It was established in 2008 by Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation (TTGDC), the Arts Council England (ACE), the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), Royal Opera House (ROH), Sector Skills Council for Creative and Cultural Skills (CCS) and Thurrock Borough Council (TBC), as part of the Thames Gateway regeneration project. It was formed to support the relocation of ROH Production Workshop, with the ambition that this would act as a catalyst for inward investment in Thurrock, including the planned National Skills Academy and relocation of SMEs.

The first phase of development was complete in 2010 with the opening of the Royal Opera House's Bob and Tamar Manoukian Set Production workshop, marking a significant milestone in the establishment of HHPP as a thriving creative hub. This state-of-the-art facility brought high level production capabilities to the park and served as a catalyst for further growth.

In 2011, HHPP underwent a significant transition when High House Production Park Ltd, responsible for its management and operations, transferred from the public sector into the charitable sector. This transition brought a new governance structure, with a Board of Trustees ensuring a strategic and sustainable approach to the park's future, and charitable objectives to support the advancement of education and training for the benefit of the public, the advancement of arts, heritage and culture and the advancement of community development and the promotion of social cohesion. Since then HHPP has been able to fulfil some key strategic objectives, which include:

- Support economic growth: The HHPP contributes to the economic growth of Thurrock and the wider region by fostering a vibrant creative industries sector. It does this by attracting and supporting businesses, creating employment opportunities, and generating economic benefits for the local community. HHPP's presence has resulted in job creation, both directly within the park's facilities and indirectly through the growth of ancillary services.

- Develop the local creative and cultural sectors: HHPP promotes and develops creative and artistic excellence. It aims to support the growth of the creative industries by providing a supportive environment for artists, companies, and organisations involved in theatre, music, dance, and other performing arts. Through purpose-built facilities, artists, designers, and performers have been able to grow their skills, collaborate with others, and produce high-quality work.

- Foster collaboration and innovation: HHPP encourages collaboration and innovation within the creative sector. It aims to bring together artists, businesses, and educational institutions to foster partnerships, knowledge exchange, and experimentation, driving forward new ideas, practices, and technologies.

- Education and training: HHPP provides educational and training opportunities in the creative industries. It aims to engage with the local community, schools, and colleges, offering programmes and initiatives that promote skills development, talent nurturing, and lifelong learning.

This state-of-the-art facility brought high level production capabilities to the park and served as a catalyst for further growth.

Hub model

HHPP serves as a vibrant creative cluster providing facilities and services to a concentration of local creative businesses, cultural organisations, and artists within a 14-acre site. The hub offers numerous benefits to its members and partners, including attracting talent and investment and creating a vibrant ecosystem that stimulates creativity, innovation, and growth.

Activities

Inspiring creativity – offering a specialist live events rehearsal and training venue, conference and hospitality facilities, theatrical production workshops and artists' workspaces.

High House Production Park has developed state-of-the-art facilities and activities to support the growth of the creative sector, drive economic development, and provide accessible cultural experiences. It's core offer includes:

1. **The Backstage Centre:** An innovative production facility that offers rehearsal space, workshops, and technical resources for performing arts companies. Designed in consultation with industry experts, The Backstage Centre offers fully equipped spaces for TV, filming, adverts and training requirements.

2. **ACME Artist's Studios:** A purpose-designed three storey building containing 39 self-contained studios and four work/live units office for creative businesses, artists, and designers. It offers a collaborative environment that encourages networking and knowledge-sharing among professionals.

3. **High House Production Park Open Space:** The park includes landscaped areas, public art installation, and outdoor performance spaces. These spaces are used for events, exhibitions, and community activities.

4. **High House Production Park Barns:** Grade II listed Barns providing event space for community and commercial hire.

5. **Royal Opera House's Bob and Tamar Manoukian Production Workshop:** This facility supports the creation and maintenance of stage sets for opera and ballet productions. A team of 30 carpenters, metalworkers and artists make the sets and scenery for more than 10 new productions each year, as well refurbish sets from productions already in the repertory. Apprentices work in the workshop, alongside staff, as well as attending local colleges to gain their qualifications.

6. **Royal Opera House's Bob and Tamar Manoukian Costume Centre:** This facility is home to more than 20,000 costumes from the current ROH repertory, as well as historic costumes, musical instruments and furniture from the archive collection. This facility also provides a training facility for BA (Hons) Costume Construction students, delivered collaboration with the Royal Opera House and South Essex College.

Financial sustainability

High House Production Park generates revenue through rental income from tenants and other earned proceeds from the hire of spaces for events, meetings, film/TV productions, and photoshoots. Recently, HHPP received funding from the Creative Estuary program to update their business plan, vision, and masterplan. As part of this initiative, they will also be focusing on creating a design concept for a new artist/maker studio at their site.

Impact

HHPP has formulated its own success criteria and metrics to assess the impact of its activities on creatives and the wider community. While public activities delivered by HHPP have been limited in the past, efforts are underway to reinvigorate them. A recent event organised by HHPP attracted over 1000 visitors during a 3-day period, showcasing the growing interest and engagement from the community. Additionally, the site benefits from the Royal Opera House (ROH) offering tours of their Production Workshop and Costume Store. Visitors participating in these tours have the opportunity to explore the site's gardens as well, providing a well-rounded experience.

Other notable impacts include:

*   Attracting significant public and private sector investment in cultural and creative industries;

*   Enabling communities and creatives to deliver engaging and meaningful events and activities;

*   Supporting collaboration between tenants and external creative and cultural organisations to the benefit of local communities;

*   Enabling creative SMEs to locate and start their creative practice in Thurrock;

*   Collaborating with national, regional and local creative and cultural programmes to attract engagement, activity, and funding.

Photo: High House Production Park

5.4 Cuckoo Farm Studios, Colchester

WEBSITE:
www.cuckoofarmstudios.org.uk

LOCATION: Colchester

STRUCTURE: Company Limited by Guarantee (without charitable status)

YEARS ACTIVE: 30

TURNOVER: Approx. £40,500 (2022)

EMPLOYEES: 0 (30 volunteers; 10 of whom form the Steering Group)

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES SUPPORTED:

- Visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography)
- Crafts (ceramics, textile, woodwork, book binding, metalwork)
- Mixed media arts

Proving safe, secure, and affordable studio space for artists and craftspeople in a supportive and stimulating creative environment.

Established in 1992, Cuckoo Farm Studios (CFS) was established by a group of artists in rural Colchester. They recognised that converting disused farm buildings presented an ideal opportunity to address the need for affordable studios, providing a suitable space for local artists to pursue their creative practices. Collaboratively led by the Colchester Arts Forum, tenant farmer, and Colchester City Council, the conversion and renovation of multiple buildings was initiated, resulting in the provision of low-cost studios for artists and craftspeople. Over time, this artist-run site has flourished, expanding to house 30 studios, and serving as a vibrant venue for a diverse range of events held throughout the year. CFS is based in the northern outskirts of the historic city of Colchester and this rural location proudly shapes their work.

In addition to its role supporting local visual artists, CFS has evolved into an important resource within the wider community and has developed collaborative links with We are the Minories, Colchester School of Art & Design, Colchester Art Society, Firstsite and the University of Essex. They support emerging talent through their Graduate Award Scheme and provide opportunities for artists at different stages of their career. Through these partnerships, CFS extends its reach beyond the studio walls, actively contributing to the cultural fabric of the region while fostering connections and creative collaborations.

Hub model

Cuckoo Farm Studios has become a vital arts hub in rural Colchester, offering affordable studio spaces for local artists. By providing accessible facilities, fostering collaborations, and providing show-casing opportunities, CFS plays an important role in nurturing the artistic talent in the region.

Photo: Cuckoo Farm Studios

Photo: Cuckoo Farm Studios

In addition to its role supporting local visual artists, CFS has evolved into an important resource within the wider community and has developed collaborative links

Activities

CFS seeks to be a local and regional centre for visual arts in Essex. To reach this ambition, they are developing and improving their facilities and increasing awareness of their creative offer, which includes:

1. **30 artist studios**
   Affordable studio space is available for artists who are at various stages of their careers and who work in a variety of media. The studios can be accessed 24/7 and are secure. All tenant artists have access to on-site facilities, open days, and networking activities. Applications for studios are reviewed by CFS Committee who are particularly interested in selecting artists that demonstrate how a workspace at CFS will benefit their artistic practice and how they will contribute to the creative community. The latter can be intellectually, socially, at public events or with day-to-day running of the studios. Selected artists are required to contribute 40 hours annually to the CFS.

2. **Associate Artist Membership** (limited to 20) provides local artists with a wide range of benefits and opportunities. Members are invited to participate in Open Studios and exhibitions, and they can access online resources, project space, workshop space, equipment and grounds at discounted rates. In effect, they receive the benefits of being a studio holder without having a studio space.

3. **Print workshop** is run as a small cooperative and is equipped with an etching press, Columbian press for relief printing, proofing press and a large pinch press. It has a separate room with a fume cabinet and an air-extractor for etching plates with acid. Basic materials are available and paid for at cost. Various courses such as etching, collagraphy, relief and mono printing can be arranged on an ad hoc basis and specialist tuition is also available. The cooperative has members at various stages of technical and artistic development and their expertise is visible through their work, which ranges from traditional etching to contemporary prints.

4. **Benham gallery and project space** is a large open plan flexible space used for exhibitions, residencies, talks and workshops. The versatile space, with white walls, vaulted ceiling and spotlights create a welcoming space for artists and the local community. The space can be used by studio artists and hired at discounted rates by members. It is also available for outside hire. In all cases, users are required to submit a proposal for approval by the Committee.

5. **Events** throughout the year, such as workshops, exhibitions and talks, organised by artists. Open Studios are held annually and provide an opportunity for artists to network, showcase their work and sell directly to customers.

Sustainability

Cuckoo Farm Studios is owned by Colchester City Council. CFS Ltd leases a complex of former farm buildings, and a designated area of the surrounding grounds. The 25-year lease was granted in 2016; the first rent review is in 2026. CFS Ltd is responsible for maintenance, repairs, and utility costs. To sustain itself, CFS has three main income streams – studio rentals and services charges, membership fees, and grants. Aware of the likelihood of rising utility costs, CFS is piloting ways to increase earned income, to meet its aim to keep rents affordable for artists.

Photo: Studio holder Jeantte Lazell

Photo: project in Benham Gallery

Impact

Cuckoo Farm Studios has achieved several notable milestones, positively impacting both artists and the local community:

1. **Artistic support and development:** The provision of affordable studios has enabled artists to focus on their practice, leading to artistic growth and professional development. Many artists associated with Cuckoo Farm Studios have gone on to achieve recognition and success in their respective fields. To foster emerging artists CFS, in partnership with Colchester Art Society, offers an annual Graduate Award of a free studio (CFS) and a materials budget.

2. **Creative collaboration:** The supportive environment at Cuckoo Farm Studios has fostered collaborations among artists, resulting in innovative projects, exhibitions, and cross-disciplinary works. These collaborations have enhanced the artistic output of individual artists and contributed to the cultural diversity of the local arts scene.

3. **Community engagement:** Cuckoo Farm Studios has successfully engaged with the local community through Open Studios, exhibitions, and workshops. These events provide opportunities for the public to experience and appreciate art, contributing to the cultural enrichment of the region.

4. **Visitors:** In 2022, the Benham Gallery exhibition programme attracted 900 visitors across the year; the Open Studios event in both 2021 and 2022, was attended by c.550 over one weekend.

5. **Sales:** sales made by individual artists during Open Studios (2021) totaled c. £7000. Total sales made by individual artists from exhibitions in 2022 is estimated at £10,000.

6. **Day workshop during 2022:** participants: 150. Artists earning fees as tutors (including one-to-one): 2023 – 26 days.

5.5 Things Made Public, Basildon

WEBSITE: thingsmadepublic.com

LOCATION: Essex, East London

STRUCTURE: Community Interest Company

YEARS ACTIVE: 11

TURNOVER: Approx. £500,000 +

EMPLOYEES: 7

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES SUPPORTED: TMP supports artists, creative practitioners, groups, and businesses across all stages of their development, regardless of the art form or creative practice they engage in. These industries include advertising, marketing, and branding, architecture, culinary arts, crafts, design, fashion, music, performing arts and the visual arts.

Photo: New Town Sounds

Using art and culture to support and inspire communities to live happy, healthy, and fulfilled lives.

Things Made Public (TMP) is a community-driven arts organisation that aims to enhance public spaces and promote community engagement in Essex through art installations, events, and creative projects. It was established in 2012 by Sarah Walters and Lauren Martin, friends from school in Havering, who shared an ambition to make Romford a better place to live. For over 10 years, they have been working at the intersection of private, public and third sectors to make culture a part of everyday life; taking it out of institutions and into communities, high streets and the places that matter most to people.

TMP facilitates connections between developers, private landowners, businesses, markets, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), funding bodies, local authorities, cultural organisations, communities and artists to create meaningful culture, from public art commissions to community-led venues, pocket parks, cultural strategies and festivals. These initiatives include the transformation of the Quadrant Shopping Centre through artist residencies and creative enterprise, the implementation of the Romford Pocket Park programme in partnership with the Romford BID to develop green infrastructure, and the execution of town-wide public art projects like Take a Walk on the Wild Side.

At the core of TMP's overarching objectives lie the beliefs that art should be accessible to all and that culture and creativity has the ability to empower and amplify the voices of local communities. TMP recognises that culture can serve as an important mechanism for tackling an array of challenges. Through their involvement with individuals in areas such as health or the environment, TMP uses culture as a tool for initiating and navigating challenging conversations.

Hub model

TMP develops a programme of bespoke place-based interventions and partnerships that respond to the needs and requirements of local communities.

Photo: Our Towns, Marina Capdevila Final © Doug Gillen

TMP recognises that culture can serve as an important mechanism for tackling an array of challenges.

Activities

Things Made Public provides platforms for collaboration, enterprise and learning through a range of curated opportunities. Based in Basildon, but working across the country, TMP orchestrates a multifaceted programme of community-led cultural activities including:

- **Venues:** TMP develops venues that place culture at the heart of their operations. They run multi-purpose venues such as The Quadrant a 26-unit shopping arcade in the heart of Romford Town, which combines cultural events, artist studios and businesses all under one roof.

- **Meanwhile use:** TMP convert vacant commercial spaces on high streets into temporary artist studios, workshops and galleries. This is a cost neutral way of bringing culture to local communities and providing showcasing opportunities for creatives, while reanimating dead spaces in towns.

- **Public events:** TMP produce public events of all sizes and scales, such as a town-wide arts and music festivals and 'pop up' travelling comedy clubs. As well as increasing access to culture, these events encourage footfall, dwell time and spend in towns and high streets.

- **Public art:** TMP commissions public art and have installed murals across Essex and East London. They work with local stakeholders to develop themes and designs via workshops, think tanks and educational programmes. Partners have included Savills, Amnesty International, The Delta Group, Greater London Authority, Havering Council and Basildon Borough Council. Artists include Ben Eine, DZIA, Nerone and Graffiti Life.

- **Education:** TMP have worked with colleges, schools and community groups to deliver creative education programmes that offer participants 'real life' experiences and opportunities in the arts and cultural sector.

In 2019 TMP were awarded £1,289,002 by Arts Council England to develop BasildON Creative People & Places, a 4-year community-led arts and cultural programme. The initiative was designed to increase engagement and participation in the arts among communities in areas of England with historically low levels of arts engagement. In Basildon, the investment has enabled local communities to direct and produce new cultural activities including the street activation programme Our Towns. Key highlights of the initiative are:

Dedicated to getting the community choosing, creating, and taking part in art experiences in Basildon.

- Over 530 square metres of artworks, created by 8 internationally acclaimed artists animate Basildon town centre

- 311 local people were involved in the commissioning process of art works including a community steering group and public opinion polls

- 156 local people worked with artists to design the murals, through the delivery of 51 hours of community workshops

- 162 volunteers contributed almost 200 hours of time to producing the street art and giving street art tours to visitors

- 3,024 people attended the launch which included street art tours given by local residents, live painting by local artists and 'have a go' street art walls

- Our Towns was featured in local and national press including Colossal, Juxtapoz, Street Art News, Brooklyn Street Art, and Street Art United States

Photo: The Retailery

Sustainability

To ensure financial sustainability and diversify their income streams, TMP employs a multi-faceted approach. In terms of delivery, they engage in various activities such as organising events, festivals, public art commissions, and meanwhile projects, along with managing venues. On the strategic front, TMP focuses on cultural strategies, action plans, social value strategies, community consultation, and meanwhile strategies. This approach allows them to achieve a balanced distribution of clients, encompassing the private sector, public sector, and third sector funding. By actively cultivating relationships across these sectors, TMP secures diverse sources of funding, contributing to their financial stability.

Impact

Since its establishment, TMP has achieved notable milestones, creating a lasting impact on communities and local areas. Their contributions to revitalising local high streets were acknowledged when they received the 'Special Recognition Award' at the Great British High Street Awards 2016. In addition, TMP's dedication to community-led cultural regeneration earned them the 'Innovation Award 2016' and the 'Business Person of the Year Award 2015' at the Havering Business Awards.

The following section provides an overview of the impacts generated by TMP, recognising that their impact measurement is primarily conducted on a project-specific basis. While comprehensive statistics for the hub may be lacking, a compiled overview of key impact areas offers insight into the transformative outcomes achieved.

- **Physical Transformations:** TMP has successfully transformed neglected spaces into vibrant and visually appealing areas. Their installations have become landmarks, attracting both locals and visitors and instilling a renewed sense of pride in local areas.

- **Community Engagement:** TMP's events and interactive projects have brought communities together, fostering a sense of belonging and creating opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. These activities have enhanced social connection and encouraged residents to actively participate in shaping the public spaces around them.

- **Economic Boost:** TMP's initiatives have contributed to the economic growth of the local area. The Quadrant created 68 new jobs and reduced the vacancy rate by 35%. The Retailery supported 400 creatives in developing 520 events.

- **Creative Development:** Through their platform, TMP has supported numerous local artists in showcasing their talent, providing exposure, and creating networking opportunities. This has helped nurture the artistic community in Basildon and contributed to the overall cultural enrichment of the region.

6

Recommendations

Creative hubs in Essex act as vibrant ecosystems, fostering innovation, cultural expression, and artistic exploration across multiple disciplines such as visual arts, design, performing arts, music, film, literature, and digital media. They offer a range of resources, including shared workspaces, studios, equipment, networking opportunities, mentoring, and access to funding, supporting creative professionals in developing and showcasing their talents. By revitalising local areas, stimulating economic growth, and fostering a sense of social connection and pride, hubs contribute significantly to the overall well-being and vibrancy of their communities.

To ensure hubs receive recognition for their contributions and to provide the necessary investment to support their ongoing endeavours, the research highlighted the need for long-term vision and investment in five key areas. These recommendations are directed towards a range of stakeholders, including policymakers, creative hub operators, artists and creatives, local authorities, as well as investors and funders.

Photo: Beach, © Blueprint2015 Pixabay.com

Photo: Harlow Sculpture Town Henry Moore

1. Financial stability

Establish support mechanisms to alleviate financial pressures on hubs. Help creative hubs identify prospective funding partners for securing external capital, research and development, and project-specific financing. Forge connections between hubs and local authorities, businesses, investors, and philanthropic organisations to explore innovative revenue streams.

Purpose:

- To support the financial resilience of creative hubs, enabling them to continue their work and grow their impacts.

- To encourage collaborative efforts between hubs and external stakeholders for mutual benefit.

Potential delivery mechanisms:

- Collaborate with potential partners or investors to co-create tailored grant programmes for creative hubs, addressing their unique financial requirements. One example is the development of a Creative Hub Sustainability Fund, which provides grants covering capital or overhead costs, research and development, and dedicated project funding. This fund could be regularly updated to align with emerging hub priorities. Also, establish a transparent and efficient application process, including local community-led panel assessments for equitable fund distribution.

- Create partnership development initiatives that actively connect creative hubs with local authorities, businesses, investors, and philanthropic organisations. This can involve organising regular Creative Hub Investor Forums where hubs present their projects to potential investors and business partners. Facilitate mentorship programs in which established businesses mentor hubs on financial sustainability strategies. Encourage cross-sector collaborations through themed events or innovation challenges where hubs can collaborate with local businesses on mutually beneficial projects, securing both financial support and business expertise.

2. Tenure Security

Collaborate with stakeholders to develop policies that prioritise tenure security for creative hubs. This could include offering favourable leasing terms, incentives for long-term occupancy, and protections against displacement, enabling hubs to focus on their core activities without the fear of venue instability.

Purpose:

- To strengthen the long-term sustainability of creative hubs by providing them with secure, stable venues, allowing them to concentrate on their core activities and impacts.

Potential delivery mechanisms:

- Establish closer cooperation between the culture and property departments within local authorities (LA), to help creative hubs operating in LA-owned spaces with lease negotiations. This joined-up approach would benefit hubs by ensuring that lease negotiations align with the unique needs and priorities of creative spaces, offering them greater stability and the ability to focus on their core activities without undue financial strain.

- Introduce incentives that encourage private property owners to commit to long-term rentals for creative hubs. By providing incentives such as reduced tax rates, the goal is to motivate property owners to offer stable venues, thereby fostering the growth and contribution of creative hubs to the local creative ecosystem.

- Promote the inclusion of creative hubs as eligible projects within Section 106 agreements. Incentivise developers to allocate Section 106 funds toward the development and maintenance of creative hubs, recognising their value in enriching the local cultural landscape and fostering community engagement.

- Develop policies that safeguard creative hubs against displacement, especially in areas facing gentrification or rapid urban development. The purpose is to establish legal and regulatory safeguards that ensure creative hubs can remain in their spaces, maintaining their vital role in the community even as surrounding areas evolve.

3. Impact measurement

Collaborate with creative hubs to develop standardised impact measurement metrics. Work together to define key performance indicators (KPIs) that capture the diverse social, economic, and cultural impacts generated by hubs.

Purpose:

- To enhance the ability of creative hubs to communicate their multifaceted social, economic, and cultural impacts to stakeholders and policymakers.

Potential delivery mechanisms:

- Partner with creative hubs to establish standardised impact measurement metrics. Collaboratively define key performance indicators (KPIs) that capture the diverse range of social, economic, and cultural impacts generated by creative hubs. These standardised metrics should be adaptable to the unique characteristics of each hub, ensuring that their contributions are effectively captured.

- Provide training and resources to assist creative hubs in tracking and measuring their impacts. Offer workshops, online resources, and expert guidance to enable hubs to implement impact measurement effectively. This capacity building empowers hubs to not only understand their impacts but also to communicate their value more comprehensively to stakeholders.

4. Collaboration and connectivity

Facilitate collaboration, networking, and knowledge exchange among creative hubs.

Purpose:

- To encourage the sharing of resources, opportunities, best practices, and joint advocacy efforts.

- To enhance the visibility and influence of creative hubs in policy discussions and decision-making processes.

Potential Delivery Mechanisms:

- Foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, and informal networking among creative hubs through workshops, forums, and events. Consider re-establishing Essex Network of Artist Studios (ENAS) as a platform for this purpose, promoting resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and the continued support of region-wide initiatives like the Essex Summer of Arts.

- Invest in cultural development resource within Essex County Council. This appreciated service, directly involved in addressing common issues and guiding individuals toward opportunities, could provide valuable support and liaison services.[xv] It would also foster greater engagement with council representatives, thereby enhancing collaboration and support for creative hubs.

- Develop digital platforms or communities where creative hubs can connect virtually, share resources, promote opportunities, and engage in discussions and collaborations.

5. Skills, training, and capacity building

Enhance the skills and capabilities of creative hubs through comprehensive training and mentorship programs, fostering cross-hub collaboration and development.

Purpose:

- To equip creative hubs with the knowledge and skills necessary for sustainable growth, effective resource management, and impact measurement.

- To promote collaboration among creative hubs for mutual learning and support, ultimately strengthening the creative ecosystem in Essex.

Potential Delivery Mechanisms:

- Establish mentorship programs where experienced hub professionals mentor emerging hubs. This knowledge transfer can cover various aspects, from operational management to community engagement strategies. Additionally, explore the possibility of a Hub Twinning programme, facilitating partnerships between creative hubs to exchange valuable insights, experiences, and best practices. This collaborative approach fosters innovation and the sharing of knowledge.

- Organise workshops and training sessions tailored to the needs of creative hubs. Topics may include financial management, fundraising, audience development, and impact assessment. By investing in skills uplift, creative hubs can strengthen their foundations and gain the capacity and tools needed to grow sustainably. This, in turn, enhances their attractiveness to potential investors and partners, increasing their potential for securing further investment and support.

Acknowledgements

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About the author

Deepa Naik is a creative consultant and researcher with extensive experience collaborating with cultural organisations, public bodies, and academic institutions. She has mapped creative hubs, evaluated organisational capabilities, and delivered public engagement initiatives. Deepa's recent projects include evaluating culture-led regeneration schemes, producing impact frameworks for heritage initiatives, and developing creative enterprise programmes. She has worked with Historic England, British Council, Falmouth University, Bishopsgate Institute and the Cornwall Museum Partnership. As a co-founder and co-director of This Is Not A Gateway, she curated cross-cultural festivals, publications, and events, earning recognition for engaging multiple communities within cultural forums.

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Design: Katie Puremont (www.katiepuremont.design)

Appendix

A1 Creative Hub Database

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[i] Southend Culture Vision 2021-2031 (Southend-On-Sea Borough Council, 2021), More Than A Place (Association of South Essex Local Authorities, 2021), Baseline Assessment of Culture, Creativity and the Arts (Uttlesford District Council, 2022), Tendring Creative & Cultural Strategy 2019 – 2024 (Tendring Council, 2021).

[ii] Mapping Creative Hubs in England (British Council, 2021).

[iii] Mapping Creative Hubs in Scotland (British Council, 2021).

[iv] Mapping Creative Hubs in Wales (British Council, 2022).

[v] This definition, established by the British Council, is widely adopted and employed within the sector. https://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/projects/hubs/

[vi] Twenty One in Southend-On-Sea is a new music venue, café and cultural centre. https://twentyonesouthend.co.uk

[vii] The population of Essex is 1,506,345 according to mid-2021 population figures published by the ONS.

[viii] Levelling Up: An Essex White Paper (Essex County Council, 2022).

[ix] Levelling Up: An Essex White Paper (Essex County Council, 2022).

[x] 'Well-being' refers to a person's overall state of health, happiness, satisfaction.

[xi] Honey Pots and Hives: Maximising the potential of rural enterprise hubs (2013)

[xii] Hubs models from the British Council Tool Kit can be found here: https://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/resources/creative-hub-leaders-toolkit/

[xiii] Mapping Creative Hubs in Scotland (British Council, 2021).

[xiv] The Role of Creative Hubs in Cornwall and Isles of Scilly (Falmouth University, 2021).

[xv] This position could play a key role in supporting the delivery of all the recommendations. The role recently filled by Kent County Council, available at https://jobsearch.kent.gov.uk/jobs/job/Principal-Project-Officer-Placemaking-and-Wellbeing/7090, could serve as a model for the post.

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