Bridging the Gap:
Connecting local government with creative freelancers

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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Artists help shape our places: councils serve the people that make them. How can we better build and sustain relationships and develop understanding between these different communities?

A 2020 KPMG report emphasised the need for deeper connection between different layers of government and diverse local communities to find 'augmentation of local capabilities' (Selfin: 2020). This is particularly timely for the creative and cultural sector. Recent research on arts governance shows the work still to be done on regional collaboration and connectivity: O'Brien, Rees and Taylor (2022) note more innovative networks and structures are needed if regional arts are to have a 'genuinely transformative role'.

The LGA's Commission on Culture and Local Government has noted that despite the £1billion spent per year on culture by local councils, strategies for regional cultural communities are often fragmented, relying on often under-engaged decision-making processes (Young: 2021). Councils in areas with greater civic resources or cultural infrastructure may ask for and receive more help, meaning regional connectivity often increases bidding capacity. How can cross-council regional initiatives help share resource and best practice?

Our networking research project, *Diverse Capacities*, explored new ways to build regional cultural infrastructure. We ran a series of interconnected workshops at the University of Southampton with local government officers (LGOs) and creative freelancers from across the Solent area, building on the mapping work of the **Solent LEP**. Pre-project engagement with these groups had shown low levels of mutual understanding, and sometimes points of friction.

Who is this for?
This policy brief is for local councils wanting to work with creative freelancers.

FINDINGS

Professor Dan Ashton, Professor Will May, and Dr Aiysha Jahan worked with local government officers and council members from Eastleigh, the Isle of Wight, New Forest, Portsmouth, Rushmoor, and Winchester, and eight creative freelancers recruited through the CHAOS network, a regional hub for creative practitioners. Through a series of interconnected workshops, provocations, discussions, interviews, and creative interventions, we reached a better understanding of the barriers that prevent closer collaboration. Our analysis showed:

1 **Creative opportunities were often not visible on websites or shared widely.** Freelancers felt creative projects or commission opportunities were either poorly signposted or difficult to access due to complex procedures such as tendering. Access to opportunities was also impacted by the way they were shared and advertised, with many freelancers being uncertain where they could look for opportunities to work with local government.

2 **Previous experiences of working with local government had a lasting impact.** Freelancers who had worked with local government before noted that creative commissions were often poorly renumerated, and projects had unrealistic expectations. Delays in payment or invoice-processing also deterred them from applying for further opportunities.

3 **Training is an opportunity for everyone.** Our project identified freelancer training needs around self-employment, from completing tax self-assessments or securing business insurance to invoicing. LGOs are often constrained in securing training budgets for freelancers rather than staff: networking events offer a chance to share best practice and deliver training while building trust and better mutual understanding.

4 **Consultation helped support better creative outcomes.** Freelancers want to understand the limitations that constrain LGOs, and those conversations can be productive. The most positive examples of councils working with creative freelancers were on collaborative projects that built working relationships, rather than creative commission work which had been 'outsourced'.

5 **Advocates can also be gatekeepers.** Local government officers with a cultural remit often work across many portfolios, and must 'make the case' and advocate internally for cultural activities. Yet externally, this complexity isn't visible, encouraging freelancers to see LGOs as government gatekeepers rather than enablers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 **Make it visible to make it viable.** Your website needs a named point-of-contact. Ideally, the LGO with a culture or creative industries remit should be searchable on the local government website and their contact details made freely available. Opportunities to work with local government can be shared via mailing lists or on the website.

2 **Map your freelancer's journey through your organisation from the outside.** Before developing work for a creative freelancer, consider how someone external to your organisation would use your website, or understand your acronyms. Consider making a 'how-to' guide to help freelancers navigate your systems, and price in 'organisational admin' to any commission fee. You can engage freelancers in reviewing and revising tendering and procurement processes to make opportunities as accessible as possible. This needn't be another document on your to-do list – try a 'freelancer-in-residence' day, a skills swap scheme, or an annual freelancer satisfaction survey.

3 **Work with Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to help unlock their resources as civic assets.** You can contact local HEIs about possibilities for working more closely, from finding spaces to host networking events, or co-running training for creative freelancers, to accessing research data about local cultural infrastructure. While universities are complex institutions, look for contacts in the outreach or public engagement unit, or academic contacts in creative industries or humanities departments. Using 'third space' or out-of-office locations that are new to everyone will help you better connect with creative communities, and transform resources in your region as community assets.

4 **Community engagement needs creative methods.** Is a social media post or website the best way to engage a community who find it hard to reach you? Our findings supported existing research and policy guidance which highlights the need for 'innovative and original approaches' to engage communities in conversations about culture (LGA, 2020: 10). Our pilot scheme invited freelancers and LGOs to write postcards to ask questions and share ideas before meeting, using art practices reflecting a range of communities from their areas. Don't be afraid to try something new.

5 **Creative practitioners would benefit from professional mentoring and talent development.** Regional cultural infrastructure is characterised by small organisations and initiatives led by individuals, often leaving little capacity to access training, development, or mentoring. Freelancers we interviewed noted the difficulties of managing multiple commissions and developing their skills in a project-led environment. Think about development, pairing, or mentoring schemes: supporting an artists' network will have more impact than a one-off commission.

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Find out more

Visit www.southampton.ac.uk/research/projects/diverse-capacities-building-a-knowledge-exchange-network-for-creative-industries

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