



Making it Work: Connecting freelancers with local government

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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 very different communities?

A 2020 KPMG report emphasised the need for deeper connections 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 2021 LGA 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). Regional connectivity is often related to bidding capacity, meaning councils in areas with greater civic resources or cultural infrastructure receive more help. 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 creative freelancers from across the Solent and local government officers (LGOs). LGOs are paid employees by a council to help provide services and put policies into practice. 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 creative freelancers seeking local government-funded opportunities and projects.



FINDINGS

Professor Dan Ashton, Professor Will May, and Dr Aiysha Jahan worked with eight creative freelancers recruited through the CHAOS network, a regional hub for creative practitioners, and local government officers and council members from Eastleigh, the Isle of Wight, New Forest, Portsmouth, Rushmoor, and Winchester. 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 or commissions often had few or no applicants.

The post-Covid creative economy had led to many creative freelancers retraining or relocating, so maximising the visibility and viability of an opportunity was vital. LGOs reported several instances of securing money for a creative commission or networking opportunity, and then struggling to find the right person to fulfil the brief.

2

Previous experiences of working with local government have a lasting impact.

Freelancers who had worked with local government before noted that creative commissions were often poorly remunerated, and projects had unrealistic expectations. Delays in payment or invoice-processing also deterred them from applying for further opportunities.

3

Tendering rules sometimes prevented repeat work with particular freelancers. Building a regional culture suggests a network of artists working in a specific place, yet tendering rules often required commissioning LGOs to use different freelancers for each piece of work. Low awareness of these tendering rules had often led to misunderstandings or disappointment from the commissioned freelancer seeking follow-up work.

4

Creative freelancers struggled to find opportunities for work in areas with few networks. Artist-led or artist-initiated networks proved the most sustainable for the creative freelancers in our project. For those working outside these networks, or in areas with little connectivity between freelancers, artists struggled to discover opportunities, build collaborative communities, or develop their careers.

5

LGOs are advocates, not gatekeepers. While some councils include local government officers with a specific culture remit, most officers will be working across education, tourism, health and leisure, or business. Many LGOs have to make the case for any spend on culture, and any advertised commission is likely to be the result of sustained internal lobbying or advocacy on their part.

6

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'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Learn the language to begin the conversation. LGOs work across many areas, and a cultural remit may be combined with health, tourism, or economic development. Don't be afraid to get in touch with your council to ask for more details, and remember your LGO may be learning about an unfamiliar sector with a new language too. Attend a networking event or look at the Local Government Association resources to get you started (e.g. [Creative Places report](#)).

2

Make your work and practice visible. Local government will often be looking for creative freelancers with experience of community engagement, and place-based working. If you have a website, does it show you collaborating with others as well as your own work?

3

Join or develop an artist-run network. Artist-led networks are good ways to share resources, skills and opportunities, and can be effective in building collaborative projects across a region as well as in your local area.

4

Shared expectations make great commissions. If you have been awarded a commission or creative opportunity from an LGO, make sure the engagement process involves a conversation about timelines, invoicing, and shared expectations, including Intellectual Property and the use of your artwork once it is completed. Include materials fees, travel costs, or project admin costs as needed. Remember your encounter will shape expectations for the next time LGOs are advocating for council resources to support a creative commission.

5

Work with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to help unlock their resources as civic assets. Creative freelancers 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 all of you can help you better connect with creative communities, and help unlock resources in your region as community assets.





Find out more

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



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