

Creative Leicestershire

Animating Leicestershire Towns



Our ambition

The project application stated our aims to be:

To create well-supported creative commissions to allow artists to flourish and for local networks and creative engagement to grow. We said to Arts Council England that Leicestershire's artists needed more supported opportunities and access to professional development as well as showcasing and fair pay. We wanted the towns to try something new and to create partnerships with District and Borough Councils, Business Improvement Districts (BID) and Culture Leicestershire, a National Portfolio Organisation, also part of Leicestershire County Council.

The funding application was successful and the project started in Autumn 2023. Creative Leicestershire Manager Cat Rogers managed the project part-time and contracted Khush Kali and Ruth Singer to develop elements of the project.

Our aim was to commission five local artists to create and host public events in town centre spaces in market towns over a 6 month period. Each artist was supported from application to evaluation by specialist mentors and support programmes. We wanted each project to connect local authorities with local artists, to build networks and engage enthusiastic art audiences.

The commissioned artists created spaces and events to inspire meaningful engagement for local arts professionals, aspiring artists and hobbyists through attending exhibitions, events and networking. We wanted to build relationships between local creative communities and their cultural services / venues and restart networks which floundered during covid. We wanted to spark and nurture collaborative working and to showcase how creative activity can benefit the town economy and cultural identity, alongside the existing market towns museums project run by Culture Leicestershire. Our development programme supported the commissioned artists to develop skills around creating, funding and running their own future projects.

The project structure

Creative Leicestershire

Catherine Rogers
Leicestershire County Council
Creative Leicestershire Manager

Ruth Singer
Freelance Consultant
Writing funding application
Artist development course
Evaluation and report

Khush Kali
Freelance artist mentor
Artist support

Sam Berry
Creative Leicestershire Officer
Social media and other support

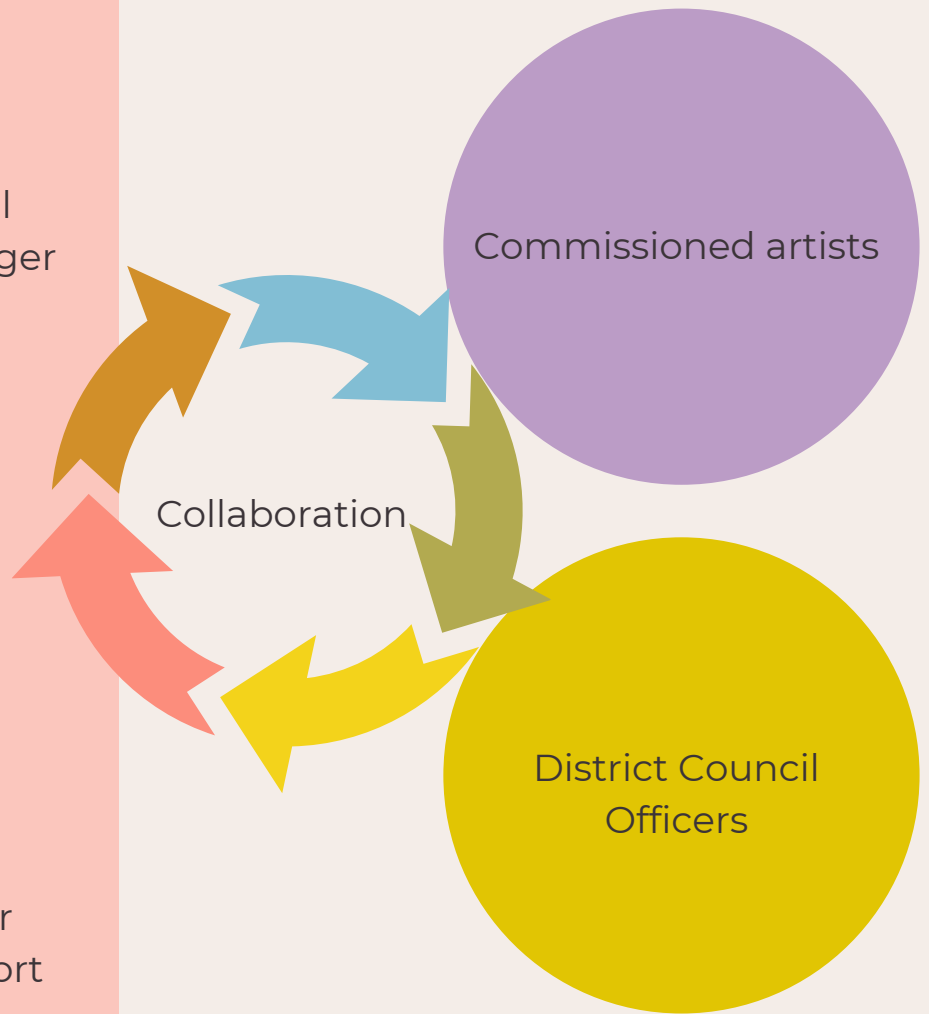


Image: Rosie Reed-Gold for Creative Leicestershire 2019



The Five Artist Projects


Melton Mowbray

Ellie Lovett was commissioned to develop a creative hub in the Bell Centre in Melton. She named her project space Kick up the Arts and teamed up with three other artists to deliver the project. They ran creative sessions and workshops for the public and created an inspiring and nurturing environment. Ellie also worked with local schools to create an exhibition at the venue and hosted a successful networking event with around 15 Melton-based creatives. Kick up the Arts was open for the 7 days of the project and re-opened later to continue to share creative experiences. Ellie and the team are working to make this a permanent feature in Melton. Turning the empty shop into an inspiring and welcoming space was a great success.



Loughborough

Artists Dr Miffy Ryan and Jacqui Gallon chose to work in Loughborough market and created a performance-based project about the waste generated by the market. They spend four days on the market gathering cardboard boxes and having conversations with passers-by about the impact of waste. They created impromptu, site-specific interventions with their own bodies and the waste materials they collected.



"The project evolved into a form of 'social sculpture' which enabled us to think about several Avant Garde art movements and artists - Dadaism, Fluxists, Situationists, Joseph Beuys, etc. The idea of 'Spectacle' as a social form for within socially engaged practice became an interesting aspect to explore. Making a spatial intervention which invited people to reflect on the nature of waste and where it comes from seemed more fruitful and engagement than purely inviting people to make things (which some did as well)". Jacqui Gallon



Market Harborough

Danielle Vaughan was commissioned to work in Market Harborough. She created a bespoke workshop which travelled around different venues during half-term including a church, the market and the library.

The Imagination Station invited participants to share their thoughts on a more sustainable future for Market Harborough. In workshops, participants made bricks to add to the Imagination Station wall with visual representations of their hopes for the future.

Coalville

Peace of Green CIC set up their outside-inside installation in Newmarket, Coalville for their project. Josslyn and Evelyn ran creative nature-based activities for care homes and nurseries as well as for the general public over a busy four days. They were able to experiment with new ways of presenting their nature-based work in different spaces including a creative writing nook and a calm sensory zone. Activities including felt making and clay creature modelling also took place. The resulting felt wallhanging will be installed at Newmarket as a legacy of the project.



Hinckley

Mandeep Dhadialla was selected to create a project in Hinckley. No suitable shops were available so Mandeep's giant front garden project was installed in Hinckley Library for three weeks and reached hundreds of visitors of all ages. The project was an exploration of how front gardens make us feel and how they support personal and community wellbeing. As part of the display, Mandeep included an interactive board where visitors could share their thoughts. She also spent time alongside the display having conversations with library users about growing plants and growing community.





Project evaluation

Inspired Calm
Inspirational Proud Eyeopener
crazy enjoy Future
Eyecatching Peaceful Great
Passionate Lovely Emotional
Learning Nurtured Positive
animating Happy Brilliant
Excellent Carefree
Relaxing Good Kind Connected Warm
Powerful nature Creative Different
Happiness Super Inclusive
Love Relaxed



Collecting public feedback

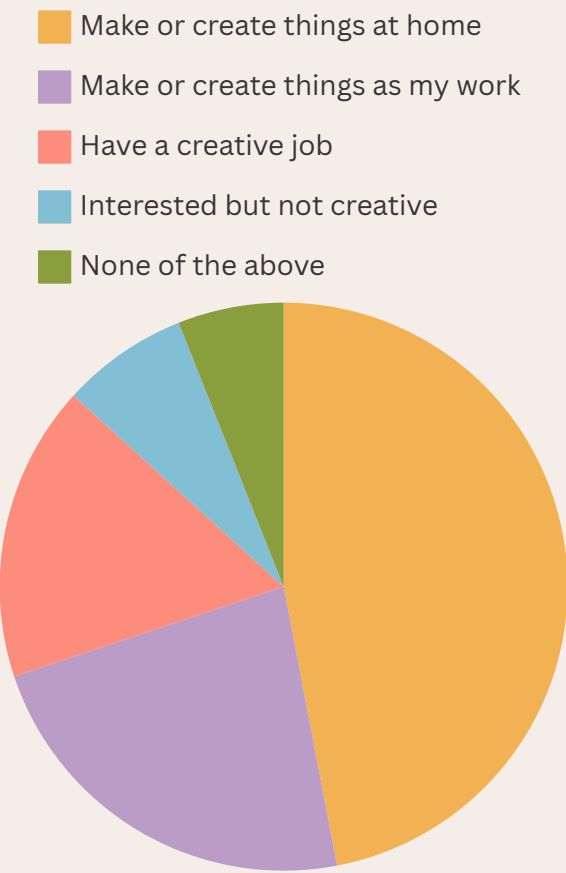
We kept this very simple as our focus was on artist experience. At every artist event we collected single words on tags attached to a tree in response to a short question about how the event had made people feel. I was interested in getting feedback on emotional experience rather than the usual “good” “fun” responses. This approach worked well with adults although children often left more random comments. The tag tree set up was successful at indoor events and allowed participants to feedback themselves without needing staff involved. The word cloud opposite shows the kind of positive feedback visitors left. The larger the word, the more frequently it was used.



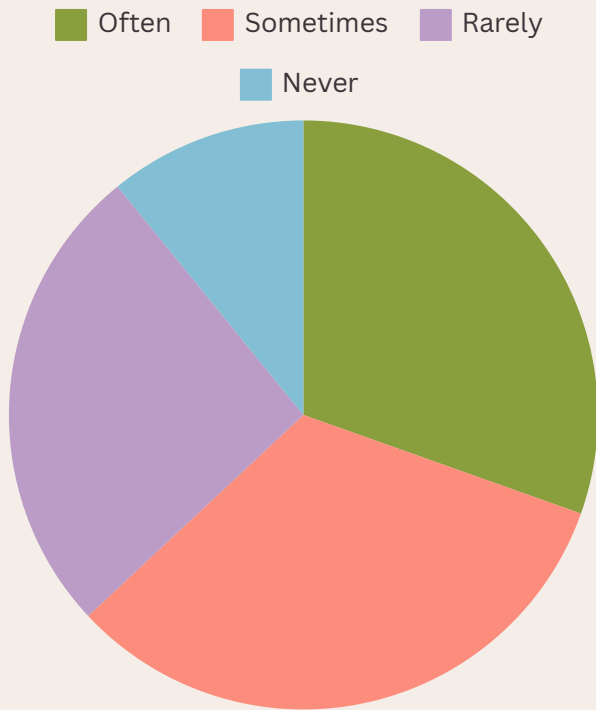
The nature of the event venues of markets, churches, empty shops and libraries also meant that the range of general public audiences was varied and lots of meaningful conversations were had.

We also used a feedback form (facilitated by staff) to collect information from selected visitors. This data is intended for the councils to learn more about local people and their interest in creative events.

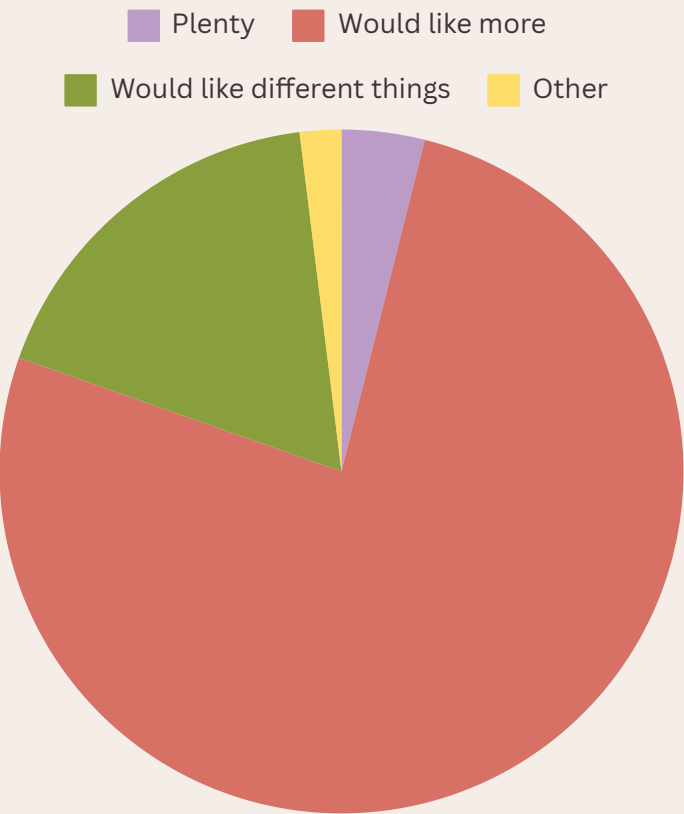
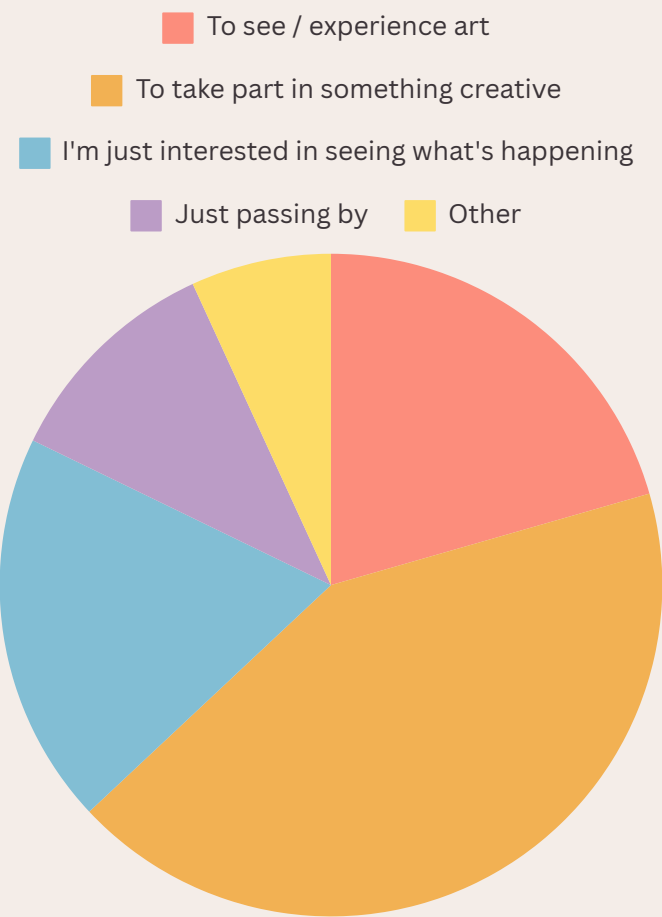
Do you....



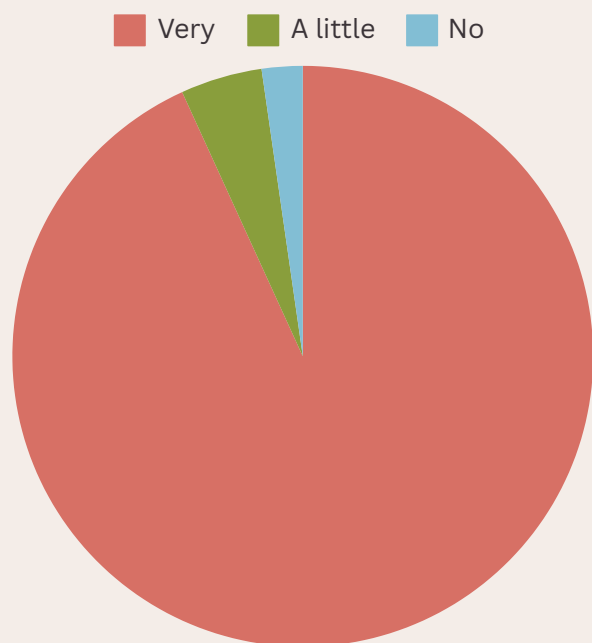
How often do you go to creative or art events in your town?



What was your reason for coming today? What do you think about the creative opportunities in your town?



Are free art events in your town important to you?



This demonstrates that we successfully targeted people who are creative, either as a job or hobby. The majority (62%) were there to experience, see or take part in creativity / art. 36% of people rarely or never went to art events in their town, so we reached people who might not normally attend. Over 90% thought free art events in their town was important.



Absolutely love this place. Staff were so helpful, setting me up and so encouraging when I finished. Please we could do with a space like this. This really should be a permanent venue where people can explore and discover artistic talents in a friendly, creative venue.

Meeting physical people in spaces makes me catchup and feel part of a group

Absolutely fabulous event. Very friendly people, lovely activities, brilliant for helping people with mental health issues, wish it was here all the time, thank you.

Found the activities relaxing and it's always good to meet new people

Coalville



We asked which image expressed how audiences felt about the event they attended. These are the images chosen, with the most popular at the top



Our artist development offer

The main focus of our project was artist development in and around the five towns including:

- **Application support**
- **Feedback to all unsuccessful applicants on request**
- **Develop Your Own Projects course for commissioned artists**
- **10+ hours of 1:1 mentoring for commissioned artists**
- **Access consultant 1:1 sessions for all commissioned artists**
- **2 x artist networking events**

The quality of applications was high so we decided to offer some spaces on the Develop Your Own Projects course to selected applicants and some project collaborators. We offered 10 spaces, nine were taken up and four were highly engaged in the course. Another four attended some events live and some recorded sessions, in addition to excellent engagement from commissioned artists.

Accessibility of the application process

We offered:

- informal discussions available before application by phone and email
- alternative application formats if needed
- made it clear that access support funding available should a successful applicant need it
- gave all the application questions on the brief
- made the artist fee and materials budget clear
- outlined the support and development programme offered
- gave clear criteria for selection

Creating a brief which would work with five different towns was tricky. We would probably do this as separate briefs if we did this again as the different deadlines for different towns caused issues.

Artists reflections on their projects

At the end of their projects, we asked commissioned artists to give their reflections on their learning and development from the project in the areas we aimed to support. We also had conversations with the artists about why they felt this way.

We were interested in how successful the project was in supporting artists to take creative risks and try new things, rather than present existing work. The scores on this are some of the most variable, showing that some did get to do something original while others felt they had delivered their usual work. Where this happened, it was felt that the town contact was more comfortable with a less-risky project and / or had a preferred way of doing things which led to projects being less ambitious or creative. The artists who felt most able to take risks were ones without closely-involved town contact and were supported more by the Creative Leicestershire project team, or artists whose project concept was less-risky or challenging. Closer engagement between the town contacts and the Creative Leicestershire team could have supported town staff to take more risks and encourage greater artist ambition to try something different.

By pushing my practice boundaries to introduce a new and different way of creating, I have been able to develop take risks, learn new skills, build peer to peer and organisation connections. I have also been able to implement materials that are environmentally sustainable in the making of the artwork. Working from 2D to 3D has been hugely influential in moving my practice forward with new opportunities presenting themselves. The project as a whole has been pivotal growing my artist practice and my creative / networking confidence; I am also able to talk about my work with more confidence.

This project has highlighted the fine line between allowing artists total autonomy and self-development opportunities and them feeling unsupported, and the fine line between being supportive and micro-managing. Different ways of working and different overall purposes between towns and artists can be challenging to reconcile.

Artists reflections on their projects

We asked about how the project supported the development of their wider practice, how much they built networks and connections for their work and how much they benefitted from support systems created by the project team. These questions were aimed at finding out how the project succeeded on its aim of “*create well-supported creative commissions to allow artists to flourish*”. We wanted these projects to be stepping stones to future work, to establish creative networks and increase the confidence and resilience of the artists involved. Scores in these areas were good with averages from 3.4-3.7 and plenty of people scoring these areas at 5. The mentoring and course made a significant impact on the overall supportiveness score and the course was considered beneficial for networking and very beneficial for developing their own practice.

Our second aim was “for local networks and creative engagement to grow”. We wanted our artists to come from the town they worked in or to have a strong local connection and to build networks and future developments in the town. This was successful in Melton where the project Ellie Lovett proposed and ran was all about creating networks and connections in the town. In Loughborough both the artists were from the town and utilised their existing networks to share their project. The two networking events also took place in these towns which are discussed later. The average score for building relationships with council / town was 3.7 with three artists scoring this as 5. These experiences vary across the towns depending on the availability of a town contact - where there was no engagement, the score was much lower than in towns where there was a strong relationship and support structure. The question about *better understanding of local audiences / communities* scored an average of 4.4 which shows that these projects really worked for creating positive engagement between the commissioned artists and the public. The feedback from the public also backs this up. The nature of the venues in markets, churches, empty shops and libraries also meant that the range of general public audiences was varied and lots of meaningful conversations were had. This is also backed up with the audience feedback.

The question around sustainability is covered in a later section.

Artists reflections on their projects

We asked the artists:

How do you rate your work / project ?

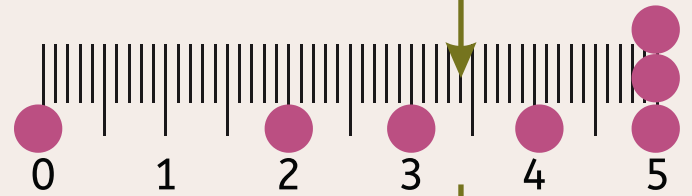
0=low

5=high

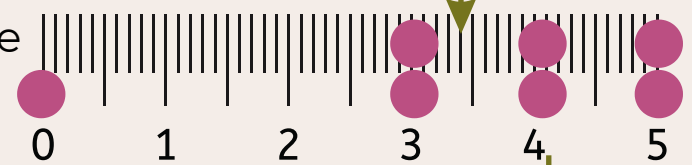
● Artists self scores

↓ Averages

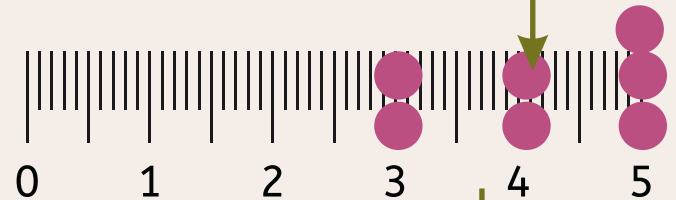
Able to take risks and try new things



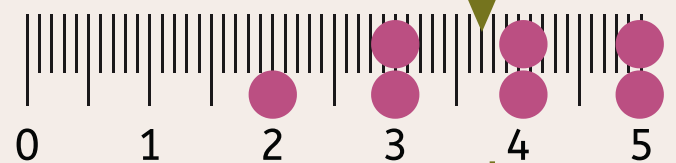
Developing and growing your practice



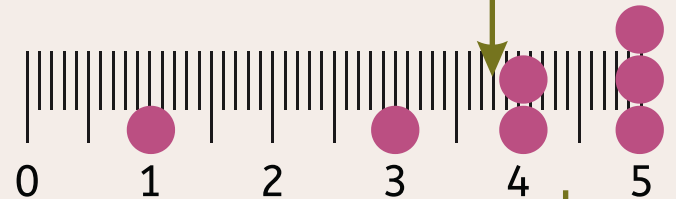
Building networks and connections



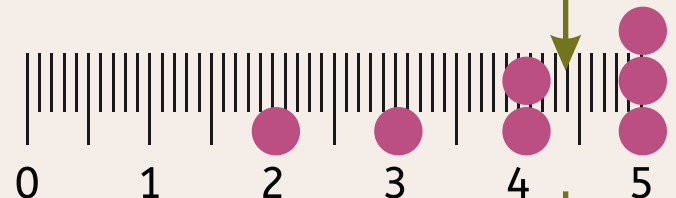
Benefit from support structures



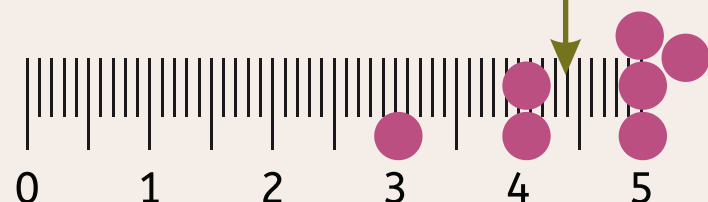
Building relationships with
District Council Officer / town



Better understanding of local
audiences / communities



Create an environmentally
sustainable project



1:1 Mentoring

Offering meaningful, professional development and support was important to the success of this project. The five commissioned artists (or pairs of artists) were offered 10 hours of 1:1 mentoring with artist Khush Kali, delivered via Zoom. Some of this included Khush attending meetings to support the artist in project development discussions with District Council Officer or other staff such as marketing and events teams.

Artists used their mentoring time in very different ways: some worked on the bigger picture of their practice while some focussed on the details of developing and running their commission. With this project, some artists had a District Council Officer within their town who they worked with on the practical and marketing aspects. Artistic exploration and understanding creative practice is outside of the remit and experience of most of the District Council Officer who worked on this project. The artist mentor therefore played a vital role in enabling the artists to explore their practice, test out ideas and get feedback on their project concepts.

In other projects artists are commissioned and either left to work it all out alone or micro-managed and given little autonomy. All artists have different needs and requirements for support, but the availability of someone knowledgeable and impartial was highly useful. One approach does not work for everyone, so a flexible and experienced mentor allows the artist to take what they need from discussions and steer the mentoring in the direction that is most useful to them.

Access Consultancy

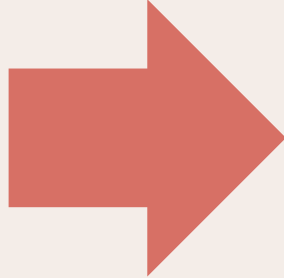
We commissioned Door In The Wall Arts Access (DITWAA) consultancy to support us with this project. We had a consultation for the project team (Cat, Ruth & Khush) at the start of the project and decided to do more work with DITWAA.

We invited DITWAA to run a session on access for events and projects as part of the Developing Your Own Projects course, and offered 1:1 consultation sessions for all commissioned artists to discuss their own projects. We also had a follow up session at the end of the course to look at Access Riders, documents which artists may wish to develop which shares their personal access needs when working with organisations.

Mentoring feedback

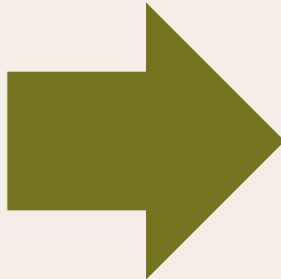
At the end of the project, we asked commissioned artists to give feedback on their experience of mentoring. The following questions used a 0-5 scoring scale with 0 as no use at all and 5 as extremely useful

How useful has mentoring been to you in developing this project?



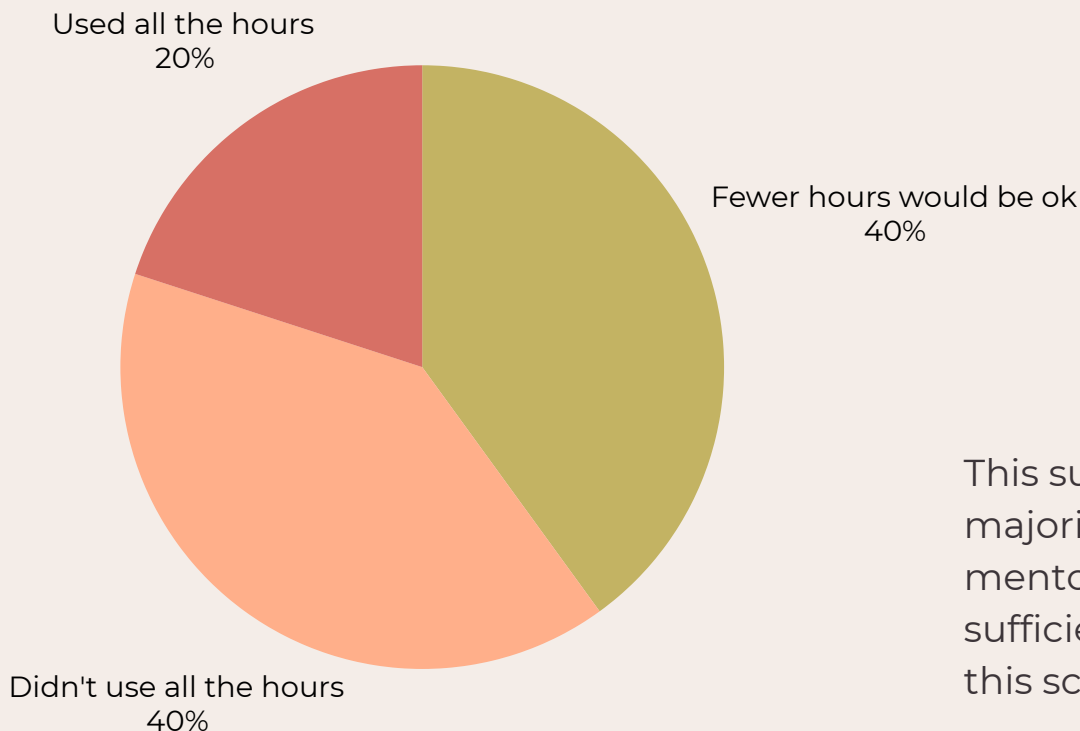
Average score of 4.4

How useful has mentoring been to you in developing your other work?



Average score of 3.8

The mentoring has been highly useful for the majority of artists for this specific project. The usefulness for other work is a bonus, it was not the intention of this project. However, it demonstrates that good support programmes can make an impact across an artist's practice which is an important outcome for them.



This suggests that for the majority, under 10 hours of mentoring would be sufficient for a project of this scale.

It's been very helpful to have a dedicated person to hear and help develop thoughts and ideas into potential strands I may not have thought of.

The support given in taking my work in a new-to-me direction has been very useful to talk through, including looking at alternative ways of exhibiting work created.

Introduced different perspectives of exhibiting work which is useful to bear in mind with my other work, albeit this was more focussed on this project.

It was invaluable being able to select a focus area for discussion.

Khush was very accessible, attentive and engaging. She was skilled at helping me reflect on specific areas.

Extremely valuable to have this support as part of the project. To bounce ideas around and explore new things I'd not thought of. This has helped me build my knowledge and confidence whilst working on the project.

Developing Your Own Projects Course

The course was developed by Ruth Singer from her extensive experience of artist mentoring, running training and previous research projects for Creative Leicestershire. The course content was devised to support the commissioned artists in their Animating Leicestershire Towns projects and to equip them to apply for and produce their own projects in the future. This kind of detailed, artist-specific training is very hard to find and rarely free-to-access.

The sessions were focussed on

Understanding and Working with Your Values

Project Practicalities

Audiences and Sharing your Project

Writing about Your Project

Support Strategies and Networks

Evaluation

Accessibility

The course was devised to support applications to Arts Council England and other funders to run independent projects. One participant developed her first application during the course

Making the course accessible

Our aim was to run in-person sessions at each of venues in the five towns. We offered a small travel bursary to those who attended in person and full travel costs to commissioned artists. All sessions were recorded, including in-person sessions and the notes, resources and captioned video or audio transcript were added to an online course which is available to all for 6 months following the end of the course.

We added three further online sessions to the course to include an introduction, a feedback session at the end and an additional session with our access consultant who had run a session early in the programme. The access consultancy was valued by participants and many of the learnings were immediately implemented in their projects. The first session was a general overview of access issues in relation to exhibitions and programming and solutions for increasing access. Following this successful session we added an additional session focussing on access riders, creating your own and supporting the needs of others.

Developing Your Own Projects Course

With this small group, we were able to create a supportive group who freely shared challenges and experiences for the benefit of the other members. The course has also created long-lasting networks, opportunities for participants and further professional development activities.

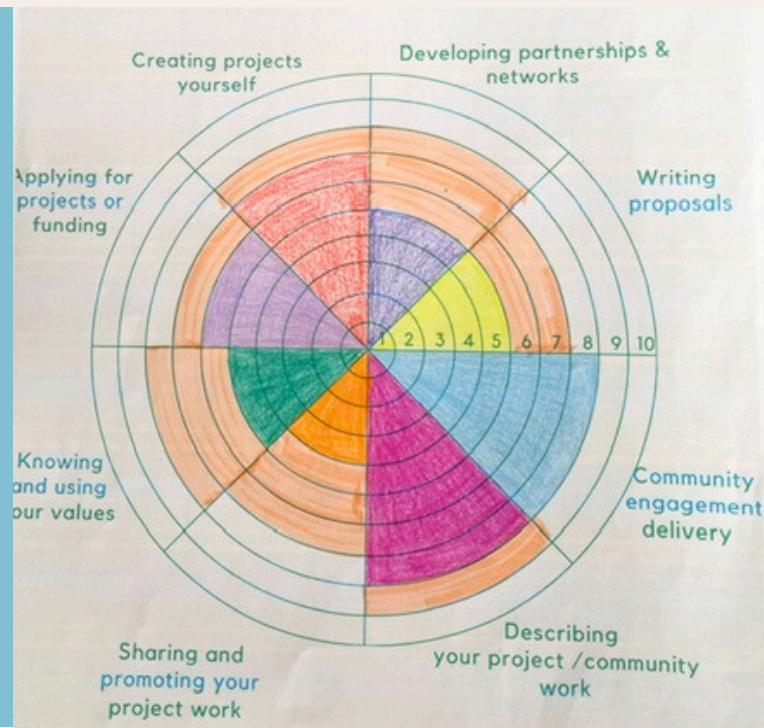
Access session was well-planned and clear workshop, great discussions and questions answered very thoroughly.

The artist development course has been absolutely brilliant - informative, helpful, supportive, engaging - and provided a great focus every two weeks. The consistency came with opportunities to think deeper into my own practice development amongst the network of artists which was also great energy to be around in for discussing ideas and generating future conversations.

Mandeep

We asked all course participants to self-assess their confidence about types of work at the start of the course and again at the end of the course. The results on the next page show their scores at the start and end of the course.

The participants' skills and experiences varied hugely so the average scores show a small improvement in each area. Individual scores show considerable increases in scores in areas they were low in confidence with to start with.

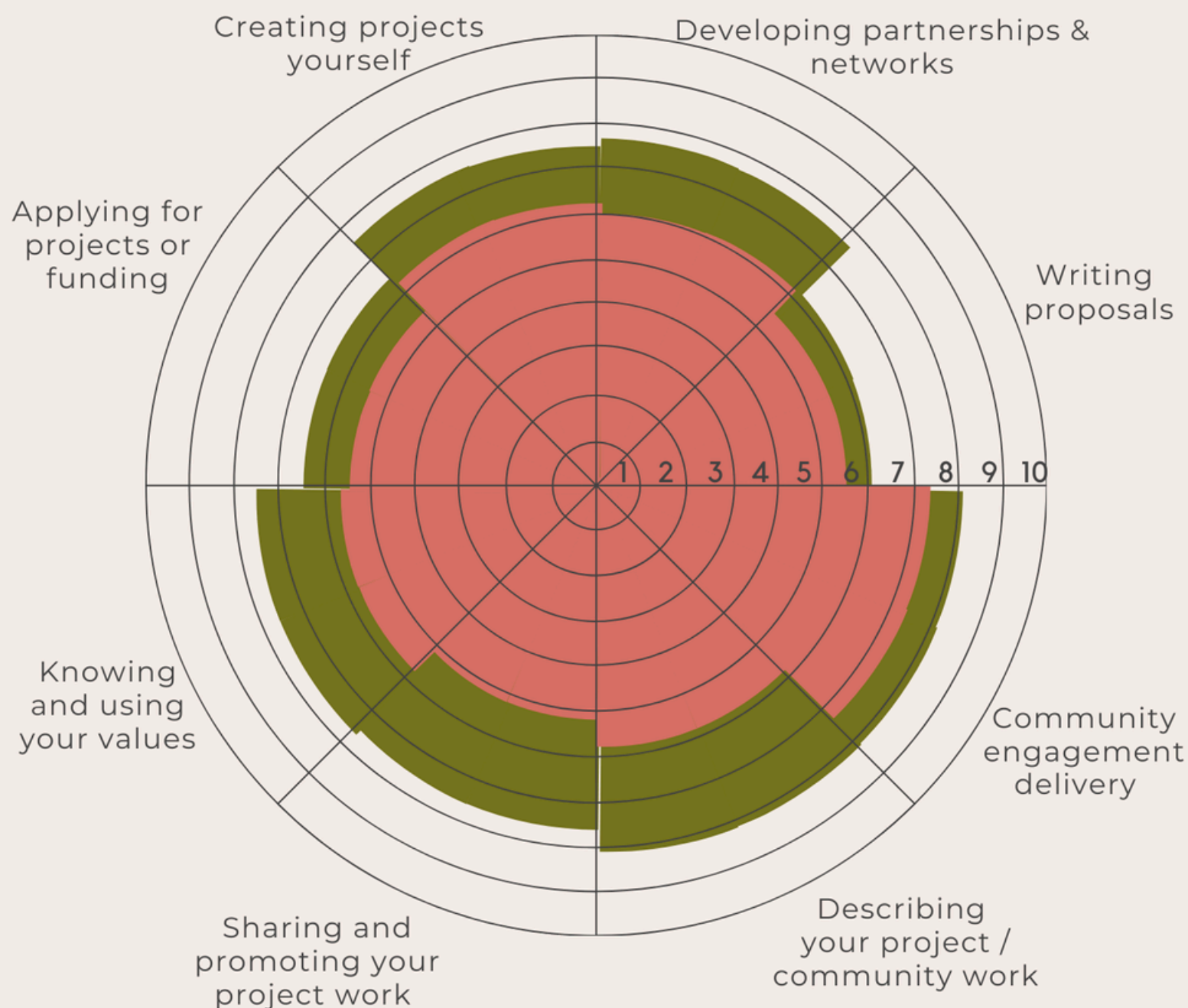


How confident do you feel right now about these types of work?

We asked all course participants to self-assess their confidence about types of work at the start of the course and again at the end of the course.

Start of course

End of course



Artist Networking Events

We ran free events for artists in Melton and Loughborough to build connections and networks around the projects and venues. Both were successful events with a wide range of creative people attending. We also ran activities to gather feedback on the cultural networks and connections already in the town and / or ideas for development and growth. In both cases discussions were fruitful.

These events and other Creative Leicestershire networking we have run in the past demonstrate the appetite for easy ways to connect for those working alone at their artist practice.

Facilitation and free venues as well as marketing of events to wide audiences are really vital to making such activities worthwhile. Networks in some towns are taking off independently of this project too. It would be beneficial to all towns if an agency supported a local artist-led network to flourish through the provision of venues and promotion and ideally, a paid facilitator or co-ordinator.

We asked networking participants to share their main takeaway or action from the networking sessions

The want and need for a network and an ongoing creative space/hub in the town.

How wonderful to meet an amazing collection of creative people.

Great to realise there are so many people that are creative locally.

Great discussions & connections.

Continue to make artist-led connections, be forward thinking

Good to meet others, and things to think about

Sustainability

One of our project aims was to create eco-minded projects with limited waste. This was part of the project brief to encourage applicants to think about it in developing their proposal. The finished projects were all great showcases for low-impact artist installations using natural materials, paper, recycled materials and actual rubbish.

Melton



Market Harborough



Hinckley

Project Challenges

Suggestions for future projects

Venues

Empty shops proved very difficult. Finding suitable locations needed a lot of work. Venues being secured very late in the project made it very hard for artists to plan their projects leading to a lot of stress. Alternative venues including markets were not ideal particularly as this project took place in winter. Community venues such as libraries proved be more effective in engaging passing audiences.

Promotion & marketing

The promotion of these projects was more complicated than it could have been with different people / organisations involved to different degrees. There was not enough marketing activity about the whole project.

Suggested improvements

- One marketing co-ordinator working across all projects with a project strategy to implement
- Marketing assets, clear website hub for the projects and templates for posters, social media and press releases prepared in advance
- Budget for boosting social media posts
- Support for projects / artists to do their own marketing if appropriate but do not expect them to do all the work

The brief and recruiting artists

Creating a brief which would work with five different towns was tricky. The timings of the events around Christmas made it difficult to promote all the opportunities at the same time but with different application deadlines. We tried to make the brief simple and the application process easy but with the complexity of the project over five towns, the brief was quite lengthy. The application support was used by a number of people and the feedback offered to unsuccessful applicants was valued. We also offered additional opportunities to unsuccessful applicants and this was well-received. Applications like this can be used to build networks and connections between agencies and individual artists and this potential could be taken into account in more project briefs.

Project Team Reflections

The project team (Cat, Khush, Ruth) met at the start to discuss our hopes for the project. We met again at the end to discuss what worked and what didn't, for us personally, for the artists and for the towns.

What we hoped for personally:

Learn new skills
Better understanding of artists practice
Work as a team
Develop access knowledge
Create future project plans
Do work of value

What we wanted for the artists:

Self-reflection and learning
Networks and future work opportunities
Positive experience and pride in project
Able to take risks and try new idea
Being supported
Respect the process

Project Challenges that we identified

Marketing and sharing
Celebration of each project
Clarity of roles and responsibilities
More support for District Council Officers
Personal capacity issues

Positives

Helped understand challenges within towns and councils
Developed confidence in various aspects of work
Appreciated the reflective learning

Learning for artists on collaborative projects

Communication with non-arts staff
Self-advocacy and knowing how to question
Articulating ideas and plans to non-arts staff
Time management agreements with organisations
Managing expectations
Understanding limitations and boundaries with councils

Recommendations

- Guidelines for councils working with artists
- More support for councils on understanding the nature of artist-led projects
- More input into network development / collaborating with existing networks
- Councils would be better with arts-specialist staff or consultants to support projects like this
- Longer-term projects where artists get to collaborative closely with councils and stakeholders to develop outcomes

Artist pay and benefits

The artist fee for each of the towns was £3000 plus up to £500 for materials. This was calculated on the basis of each artist spending 4-5 days delivering their activity in the town and some time developing their work, as well as attending mentoring.

The projects delivered varied enormously so this budget worked better for some than others. Where venues had to be secured, artists spent a lot of time travelling to the town and seeing possible venues, as well as lots of meetings with towns, all of which ate into their budget. Where artists chose to work in pairs, the budget was split between them, leaving each with lower incomes. We also hoped that the artists would attend the Developing Projects course and mentoring within their paid time, but this was over-ambitious and most artists used all their paid time developing and delivering their work and attended professional development sessions unpaid or were unable to attend all sessions because of needing to do paid work in the time.

Expectations and over-delivery

One of the challenges identified through this research has been the differing expectations amongst project partners. Some of the District Council Officers we worked with had not commissioned creative projects before and in retrospect more support was needed in the relationship-building between commissioned artists and councils. Some projects were less innovative and experimental than the artists might have liked because they adapted their ideas to suit either the venue or the expectations of the towns. The Creative Leicestershire team felt that some projects over-delivered and ran more activities than they needed to and some were more workshop-orientated than the original proposals.

Tips for future projects

Very clear expectations and outputs agreed at the start
Closer contact between Creative Leicestershire and the town contacts to support, advise and manage expectations

Artist needs

In order for projects like this to be successful, all project partners need to understand the needs and working practices of independent artists. More training and support would be beneficial in this area. It was identified by District Council Officers that they did not know enough about training, access and development needs for artists in general or their commissioned artist.

Communications

Communication between the commissioned artists and District Council Officers has mostly been good but some improvements have been suggested including:

- a defined day / time for weekly catch ups
- online sharing platform such as Slack to be used to save excessive email threads
- Clearly statements of working days / times as freelancers + part time staff meant some responses took a long time
- Training on working with neurodivergent people

Short-term projects

Our ambition for this project was that it would kick-start local ongoing work. In some cases this has worked but in others it hasn't for a number of different reasons including changing of District Council Officers. It was noted by one District Council Officer member that through this project they had realised that networking and relationship-building, artist support and development work will take much longer than this six-month project.

Identifying skills gaps

Town staff recognised that the skills and knowledge of arts specialists such as arts officers is rarely available in their towns nowadays . Bodies like Creative Leicestershire and Culture Leicestershire are highly valued in bridging the gaps between creatives, audiences and councils.

Additional benefits for towns

This project built recognition in councils that creative activity is valuable across council priorities and reaching different demographics than other activities.

It has enabled networks and connections with creative community which council / town was not previously engaging with. The project demonstrated multiple ways to support creatives other than retail or workshop delivery, including supported networking activity. Councils recognised the need for and impact of (free) events run by artists - something quite different than usually available. Further networking between the town representatives and visiting other projects would have been beneficial in some cases too. The projects provided great opportunities to meet audiences and find out about their needs and interests.



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**Leicestershire
County Council**

