From the Margins
to the Centre

Supporting contemporary craft and creative
workers in rural and remote geographies

Contents

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Project Background

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Creative and cultural industries are an increasingly significant element of rural and island economies, but investigation of the support of creative processes in such areas has remained neglected. It has been argued that creative hubs can be used to mitigate issues associated with precarious patterns of work by offering opportunities for a supportive, safe context as well as economies relating to proximity. Funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), this research focused on the Northern Isles of Scotland and aimed to explore the role of such hubs in supporting the work of creative and craft workers in the region.

Researcher

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Creative Hubs

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The idea of a creative hub is one that is commonly invoked in policy, but has been identified as an under-examined term. There is a level of ambiguity found when examining the concept of creative hubs which finds clusters, cultural quarters, co-working spaces, incubators, festivals, virtual networks and more all included in contemporary definitions. Recent examinations, such as the British Council's Creative Hub Toolkit (2015: 4), have tried to address definitions, but conceptualisations remain characterised by breadth:

A creative hub is a place, either physical or virtual, which brings creative people together. It is a convenor, providing space and support for networking, business development and community engagement within the creative, cultural and tech sectors.

According to the British Council report and others (for example Crogan, 2015), hubs can mitigate issues relating to the precariousness of creative work by offering opportunities for a supportive, safe context for creative work as well as economies relating to proximity. The overwhelming focus has been urban, often deindustrialised centres, with examples such as WASP studios founded in Glasgow, Watershed in Bristol and The Sharp Project in Manchester presented as diverse, yet paradigmatic, case studies. Indeed in a report for the British Council by Andy Pratt and Jon Dovey, creative hubs are described as 'lighthouses for the new urban economy' (2016: 2). This is not unexpected given that the dominant policy focus around the creative economy has tended to preference larger cities, as either iconic global centres of production or reinvented postindustrial powerhouses.

The Non-urban Creative Economy
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Despite a tendency to overlook and even denigrate the non-urban creative economy, there have been some policy efforts to highlight the value of creative activities taking place in more rural and remote locations (BOP, 2009, NESTA, 2007). Similarly to policy reports which emphasize the regenerative power of the creative economy in cities undergoing urban restructuring, the effects of a buoyant creative and craft sector in rural areas have been articulated in a raft of reports. Identified benefits include enhancing cultural tourism, supporting retail and experience economies, skills development, contributing to community resilience, building cultural capital, diversifying land-based economies, place-making, providing new uses for local waste materials and more (BOP, 2009; Yair 2011; Markusen, 2007; NESTA, 2007; Roberts & Townsend, 2015).

Within the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, there is a lack of in-depth research on creative industries and the region faces particular innovation challenges, including dispersed working communities and an attendant lack of infrastructure which have been seen as limiting opportunities across the creative economy (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, HIE, 2013). The development of hubs has been suggested by the regional development agency as a way of mitigating such issues.

There is, however, a need to develop local hubs because of their capacity to nurture creative businesses through creative co working; shared experiences that are both collaborative and competitive; and their potential to spark innovative new approaches and business models (HIE, 2013: 73).

As a first step, this project therefore aimed to develop a better understanding of what helps to support creative workers within a non-urban context.

The Research

The project aimed to develop a better understanding of how creative hubs might support contemporary craft and creative work within an island context and, in particular, contribute to knowledge regarding the factors that support sustainable and successful careers for the creative workers active within them.

Focusing on creative and craft workers active in the Northern Isles of Scotland, the research asked:

- How do craft and creative workers navigate the complexities of their employment in rural and remote contexts?

- What kinds of educational, social and cultural capital and infrastructure help craft and creative workers in rural and remote areas reduce their precarious status and build successful careers?

- How can creative hubs' infrastructure and support help galvanise networks to build up more opportunities for increased sustainability and growth?

In order to explore these questions, to date a total of 24 participants have been interviewed from across the Northern Isles. These interviewees were drawn from a range of sub-sectors, with their activities including knitting and textiles design, jewellery, music, filmmaking, print making, digital communications, photography, architecture, furniture design and fashion design. Amongst them were multiple participants who were formally and informally involved in the development or running of creative hubs in the region. A broad understanding of what might constitute a creative hub was employed and participants were asked to identify the infrastructure, spaces and places that helped support them. Such hubs included, but were not limited to, entertainment venues, educational institutions, studio spaces, networks, events and festivals, arts and heritage organisations, public sector support, cafes, pubs and retailers.

The Northern Isles of Scotland is an archipelago consisting of two main island groups: Shetland and Orkney with a total of 26 inhabited islands. Traditionally the island economies have been reliant on agriculture (Orkney) and fishing and oil (Shetland) and, more recently, tourism constitutes an important income. Both island groups also have a rich history of creative, particularly craft, work including the internationally recognised traditions of Orkney chair making and Fair Isle knitting and lace making in Shetland (EKOS, 2008; Matarasso, 2012; Orkney Islands Council, 2012; Scott & Marr, 2012).

The remainder of this report will explore some of the challenges faced by creative practitioners both linked to nature of work in the sector and to the particular island context within which they were operating, as well as some of the formal and informal hub support they accessed in order to mitigate such issues.

Challenges of Island-based Creative Work

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Precarious Creative Work

A common, and not unexpected issue amongst participants was the precariousness of the income from creative work and a common need to supplement their creative work with more financially sustainable activities. Creative workers noted significant peaks and troughs in work and, whilst this is common to the sector, it was exacerbated by the geographical limits of the market.

It's kind of a tough time for me actually right now because there was supposed to be £3000 worth of work happening next month, that's not happening now. It was two separate jobs that for one reason or another have cancelled but because you're in a small place like Shetland you can't replace that work with something else (Filmmaker, Shetland).

There were also issues with how some creative work was valued, partly related serving local markets:

We've given lots of clients incredibly good value for money in the past by undercharging to begin with and then doing far too much work compared to what we initially planned to do… I'm kind of trying to keep the people happy in a local community, so it's actually easier first to be a bit more confident and forceful selling our services elsewhere (Communications Professional, Shetland).

In common with most creative workers, the interviewees often struggled to survive solely on income derived form their main creative practice. Musicians, filmmakers and craft practitioners recounted having to supplement their activities at various points in their career with work in some cases linked to their practice but often outside of it too including cleaning, shop work, work in the oil sector as well as very commonly balancing caring responsibilities. Possibly more unique to non-urban locations, many of the respondents also reported having multiple community commitments and roles which also took up a proportion of their time.

It's difficult to run a business in some ways …because when you come from a very small place then you have a lot of other commitments to the community and you do find yourself sometimes being spread a bit thin because the community needs to survive with your input as well (Textiles Designer, Orkney).

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Catering for the Visitor Market

Interviewees noted that seasonality had a considerable impact on the work available. For example, some practitioners from the craft sector were particularly reliant on tourists, including the big influx of cruise liner visitors, who visited during the summer months plus a number of high profile events held throughout the year such as Wool Week held in Shetland or The St Magnus Festival in Orkney. This brought considerable benefits to some of the practitioners particularly if they were also able to exploit online selling out of season.

The visitor market is huge, there's always festivals and the market here is really buoyant…I started to realise that you know we travelled to find markets but there's an international market on our doorstep you know, three or four times a week from March till September and it's just right there and what we also realised from that market was that the initial purchases that were made, we were then having return purchases via the website (Textiles Designer, Orkney).

Within certain sub-sectors the preponderance of hobbyists coupled with the tourist market was, however, sometimes seen as driving down the pricing structures and the value that could be leveraged for creative products. This was very resonant within the interviews with craft practitioners where what could be charged for a product often did not correlate with the time needed to produce it.

I don't really sell very much but if I'm asked to knit a jumper I'm trying to think how many hours it's going to take me and even when I multiply the hours, if I put a living wage on it nobody would ever…so it's not even the minimum wage (Textiles Designer and Maker, Shetland).

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The Infrastructural Gaps of Island Life

Many of the practitioners reported infrastructural issues related to their island location and these included investing in equipment, for example film makers could not hire expensive kit, self-training, working from home because of a lack of cheap workspace. For those who had to travel (touring musicians, to generate leads for filming work and to attend trade fayres) the high costs and time associated with living on an island.

The fundamental problem with trying to be a professional touring band in Shetland is not necessarily the time involved in getting off Shetland but the cost. A five piece band with all your equipment trying to go on the plane or on the boat – it's a really expensive business. Logistically, a headache… It's a lot of planning and it's two nights on a boat and hiring a van and all that (Musician, Shetland).

If I just wanted to sell to the Orkney market or the tourist market in Orkney then you know that would be slightly different or if my product was purely suitable for that market but it's not, it's for a wider market so we want to get it further. So, yeah, I would say travel's one thing that can be a headache at times (Fashion Designer, Orkney).

Similarly there were high additional costs for shipping and carriage:

The cost of living is very high here in Shetland, particularly transport to the mainland. Equally the issue of carriage costs to access raw materials, and equipment is a major barrier for any small business…For example I bought a vinyl cutter, it cost £90 to have it delivered to Shetland, if I had been on the mainland it would have been £20 (Designer and Illustrator, Shetland).
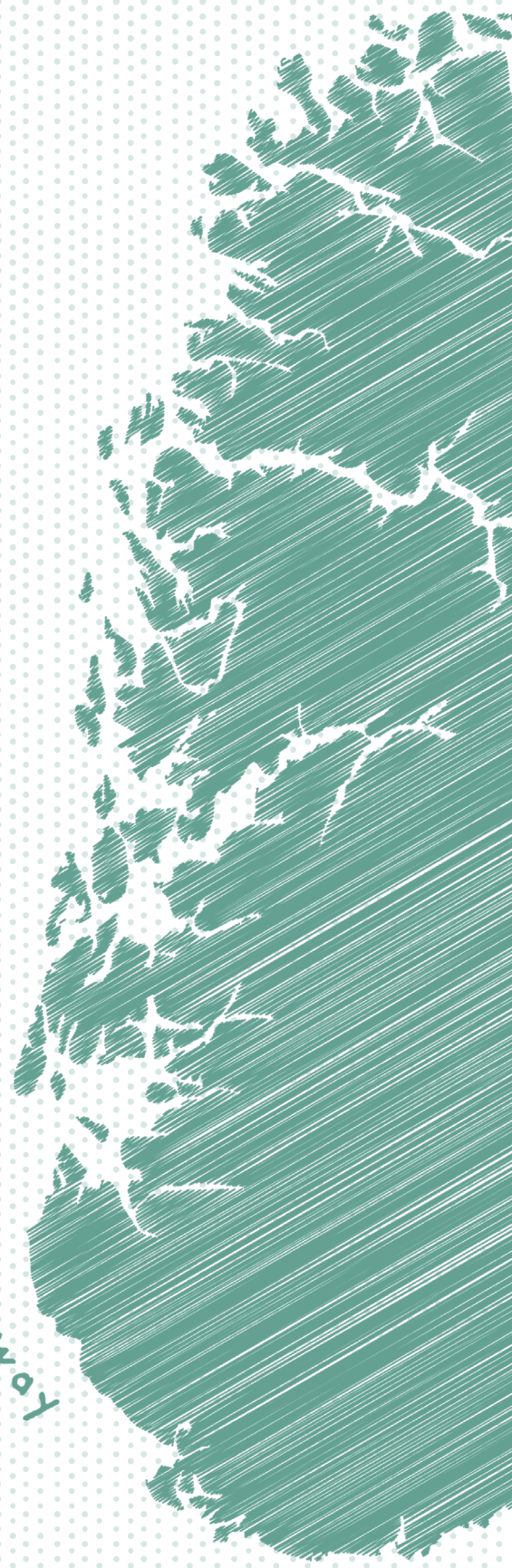
*This part of the report
turns to some of the formal
and informal hub support
accessed by the creative
practitioners in order
to mitigate some of the
issues they encountered.*

Orkney

Scotland

Shetland

Norway

Hubs Supporting More Sustainable Portfolio Creative Work
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A number of interviewees had reached a level of, if slightly uneasy, balance in their portfolio of work with the gap in income from their creative practice addressed by some of the creative hubs the practitioners identified, including arts and tourism agencies, a textiles business and educational institutions. This work sustained them often on a part time basis whilst they could pursue their creative practice in their own time. An interviewee employed on a part time basis by an arts agency in Shetland described how the work there 'smoothes out those peaks and troughs'. One interviewee who had begun to establish her own film making business described the opportunity that an initial part-time post funded by the local public tourism agency had given her at the start of her career as opening doors for her because 'you knew you were going to be getting money from that so you could have that space of time to build up your own business'.

In order to supplement her craft work, one practitioner worked part time within a textiles retail business and this offered her

sustainability as she noted that she 'wouldn't make enough money off my own stuff' and 'so having a steady job here that is still connected to what I am interested in is very important' (Textiles Designer and Maker, Shetland). Although she wished she had more time for her own work, she reported that the lines between her day job and her own creative work were 'blurred'. For example, the shop allowed her to network within the textiles sector and amongst visitors with an interest in craft.

There were also instances of considerable diversification with craft practitioners, photographers, film makers commonly offering teaching and workshops as a more reliable source of income than relying on selling their creative products as the quote from this textiles maker showed:

They're coming to buy, but they're mostly coming to buy yarn and – because they're makers so… I can easier sell a workshop to make something …… rather than I can sell the actual item (Textiles Designer and Maker, Shetland).

Mitigating Distance with Online Connections
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Another form of hub identified by the interviewees were the online platforms that provided useful support and developed networks for work which mitigated some of the issues of island life.

We've just started launching new colours and new products and you get to see people's reaction to those through social media…and you're opening yourself up to a larger and wider market not just on the island, nor in Scotland but worldwide as well (Textiles Designer, Orkney).

Craft practitioners, in particular, were heavily engaged in social media and online platforms for raising the profile of their work, reaching new markets and collaborating. Online blogs, Instagram, Ravelry and Facebook were commonly used and as one explained, 'on my blog I am getting about 10,000 views a month… I don't think I could do any of that without social media' (Textiles Designer and Maker, Shetland).

Whilst this was offering a large audience or opportunities for collaboration this did not necessarily translate into sales for all. Face-to-face contact and the need to feel and see objects was still considered important especially for some craft practitioners:

Something tactile like wool then you really need people to feel the product so that's the benefit of actually being able to take your stuff away to a trade fayre (Textile Designer, Shetland).

Temporal Hubs
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Across the islands, events and festivals were seen to have a key role in mitigating some of the issues associated with distance and seasonality. High profile examples mentioned by participants included Shetland Wool Week, an eight year old, nine day series of events and workshops, which take place across the islands every September bringing a global profile of visitors generating more than £700,000 to the local economy in 2017 (Shetland News, 2017). As one participant explained before the introduction of this annual event September would have been 'a period that would traditionally have been your quietest time of year, is now our busiest time of year' (Textiles Designer and Maker, Shetland).

A renaissance in craft production and the craft zeitgeist was seen to be driving high engagement with the work of the practitioners and was associated with a recent rise in craft tourists.

Both island groups stage a wide and frequent array of events from the well known like the St Magnus Festival in Orkney and the annual folk music festival in Shetland to a broad range of music, storytelling, craft, nature, film and other festivals which offered opportunities to access new markets and audiences, get paid work and network with possible collaborators.

Concluding Thoughts
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While this research is still at early stage, these initial threads hint at some material differences in the way that creative workers engage in their work in an island context as compared to an urban location. Commonalities around the precarious nature of work could be drawn with the wider creative sector, but were highly accentuated by location with the seasonal aspects of work in the Northern isles, the role of tourism and the high costs of island life.

As a corollary of these conditions, the creative hubs identified by practitioners were often less important for collaborating with other creatives, sometimes due to a sense of competition for a finite amount of work on the island. Instead, the physical hubs were often more significant for offering additional paid work to make their activities sustainable whilst still in a cognate areas to their own creative work. Also online and events-based hubs offered an opportunity to network and collaborative with less exclusive and more international markets and pools of collaborators. Such differences may require consideration of alternative supportive frameworks.

As these initials findings show, lessons can be generated from how island creative practitioners adapt, mitigate and manage their work in distinct and often informal ways which have relevance for the development of future hubs both within island contexts and their mainline counterparts. Further research is required to fully examine and explore the more granular aspects of the distinctiveness of such activities and the possible support that can be offered by creative hubs.

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