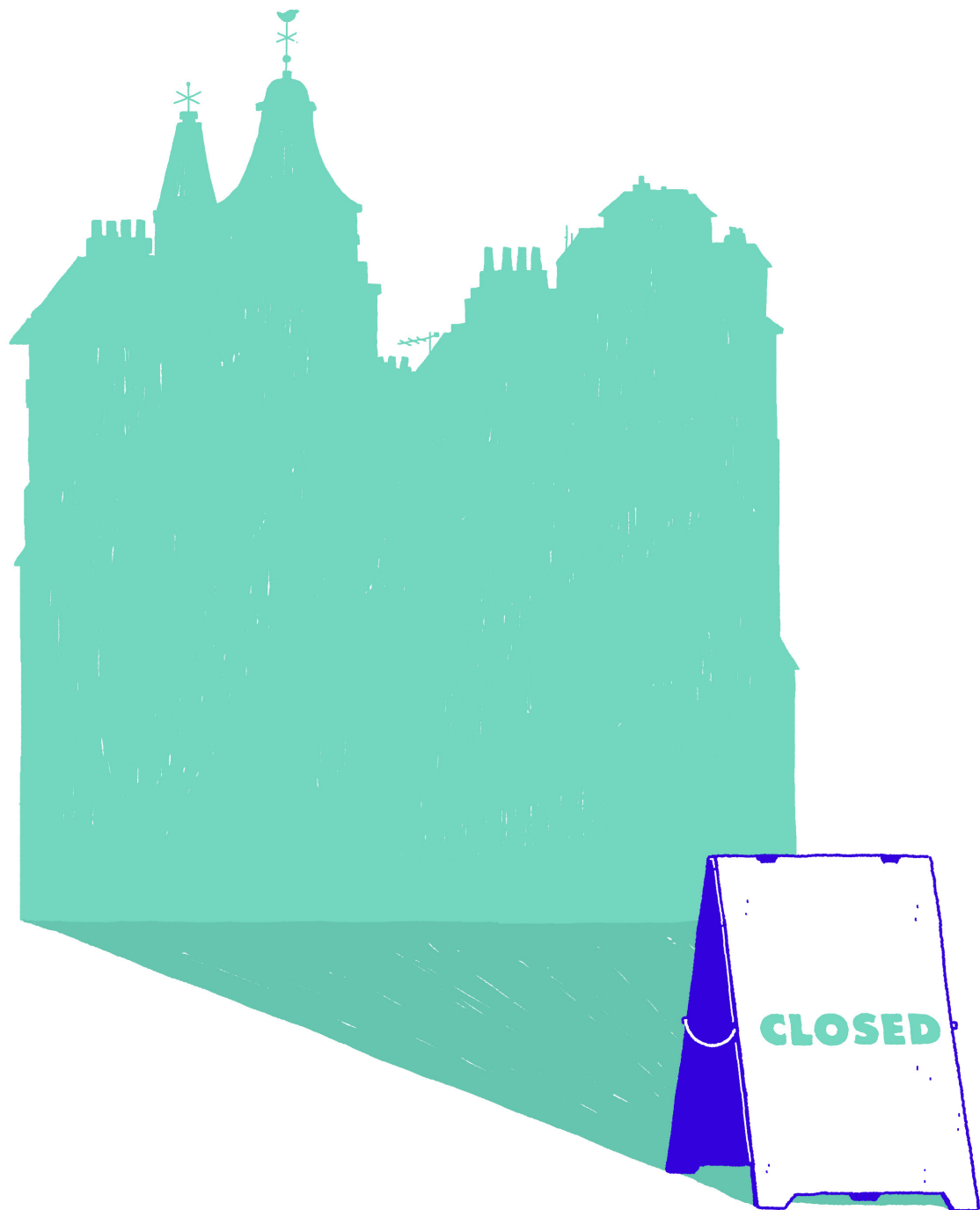


# MAPPING ECOLOGIES OF CARE IN CREATIVE HUBS DURING COVID-19

(MARCH 2021-OCTOBER 2022)



UNIVERSITY of  
**STIRLING**



 **CREATIVE STIRLING**

**RSE**

*The Royal Society  
of Edinburgh*

KNOWLEDGE MADE USEFUL

## Acknowledgements

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## INTRODUCTION



## **Creative Stirling**

The project takes as its focus – and has been developed in partnership with – Creative Stirling. Creative Stirling was founded in 2012 as a small collective of creatives working together to support grassroots arts and culture. Since 2016, it has operated as a social enterprise. Its most visible asset is the ‘Made in Stirling’ store, a community gallery and shop which supports a collective of a hundred local artists and makers. In November 2018, they relocated to their current space in the city centre, 44 King Street, a former department store which has been transformed into a shop, community gallery, workshop and creative studio spaces, venue and event space.

## **Covid-19 and the cultural sector**

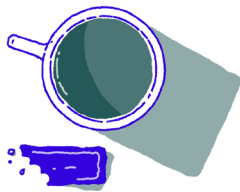
The pandemic and associated lockdown measures had a major impact on creative and cultural sectors, compounding existing vulnerabilities and precarity. With the closure of cultural spaces, creative workers had nowhere physical to perform, create, exhibit or sell their work or engage their audiences. Grassroots and smaller cultural organisations have been particularly vulnerable, with the concern that they would be overlooked in policy and less well positioned to access support compared with more high-profile institutions (DCMS, 2020). At the same time there has arguably been a reappraisal of the local with lockdown restrictions on travel and behaviour reaffirming the importance of place (Walmsley et al, 2022). In response to the challenges during the early days of the pandemic, local community organisations, including cultural and creative hubs, were shown play a vital role in supporting people in local communities, collecting and re-distributing resources, information sharing, coordinating responses and connecting with the isolated. Creative workers and hubs redirected their efforts during the pandemic and along with that came an intensification of practices of care at various scales.

## Ecologies of Care

With the redirection of efforts and activities of creative workers and hubs during the pandemic came an intensification of practices of care at various scales which we were keen to explore.

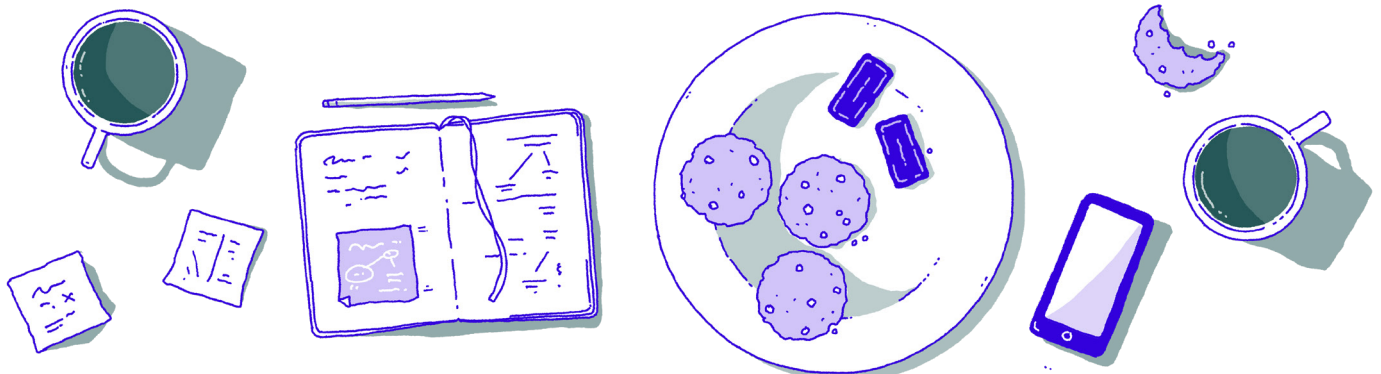
In the project, we draw on the expansive definition of care provided by The Care Manifesto, encompassing the work that people do to look after others' needs, as well as recognising care as "a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life" (Chatzidakis et al, 2020, p. 5).

How creative and cultural organisations responded to the pandemic demonstrated the importance of relationships and care to the kinds of work they do. Research projects such as DISCE and Creative People and Places have sought ways to account for this care as part of both the value and the costs of culture sector work (see Wilson et al, 2020, Belfiore 2021). Researchers have also used the idea of creative ecologies to think about how these relationships happen in a particular place, involving people, labour, and physical assets (see Gross and Wilson, 2019; Holden, 2015). We were interested in this ecological attention to scale and interconnectedness, without wanting to suggest that these relationships happen "naturally". Instead, our overall aim throughout the project was to explore ways in which we could make visible these networks and the work that sustains them, as well as the wider assets and infrastructure mobilised by Creative Stirling and those connected to them at a time of crisis. This, we hope, allows us to think about wider implications for how the sector might be reimagined post-Covid-19.



## What we did

In order to capture the interconnected nature of the activities of Creative Stirling during the pandemic, in the summer of 2021 (June-August 2021) we collated eight online interviews with key individuals working in or closely with them during this time. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach. We identified key themes around activities, enabling factors, and relationships. Between August-October 2022 we carried out three group interviews (with three to five participants in each) loosely based around three different groups: Creative Stirling, the creative community linked to Made in Stirling, and the wider community involved in the food project. We shared some initial reflections around the activities we had captured, the factors we conceived of as enabling the pandemic response and the relationships that had emerged as important in this process. The group interviews were recorded and transcribed and a graphic recorder visualised the discussion.



**WHAT HAPPENED FIRST?**

*"I've spent way too long on the Scottish government website [...] we knew what we were and weren't allowed to do. And how different everything was every week"*

*(staff member)*

*"it was THE most full on thing I have ever done in my entire life"*

*(Founder, The Kitchen at 44 King Street)*

*"It seemed like we basically lived here for the first few months and the project ran seven days a week"*

*(Transition Stirling staff member)*

In March 2020, as Covid-19 spread through the UK and many countries had already imposed restrictions on sharing space, uncertainty was the dominant mood. Made in Stirling, like other shops, had intensified cleaning and offered doorstep collection. But as the situation worsened, the decision to close was made one day before the government announcement of a "stay at home" order on 23 March. This difficult decision tried to balance the need to protect staff, volunteers and shoppers, with concerns about the loss of income for artists and makers. From this point onwards, work became even more intense and responsive, split across online and physical spaces.

The most visible change was the start of the Stirling Community Food project. This was a reimagining of a Community Fridge idea that had been in the planning by Transition Stirling in collaboration with The Kitchen at 44 King St, a social enterprise based at the Creative Stirling hub. On the day the shop closed, the Kitchen's founder immediately turned her attention to the parallel crises of food waste and scarcity that lockdown was about to unleash. The next day, 44 King St was transformed into a food distribution hub, with food collected from cafes, restaurants and supermarkets and available free of cost to anyone who wanted it. This became a new focus for volunteers and eventually drew on the logistical support of Transition Stirling.



Around the Food Project, other strands of community support were able to reach more people, which became even more crucial as other public spaces closed. For instance, Stirling Council Libraries brought in books and DVDs for people to take home; school teachers organised their own food pantries; and organisations like Stirling Support for Families and Stirling Champs supported the distribution of creative craft kits. Despite its main functions (as shop and studio space) being curtailed, the building continued to function as a key local hub, and the staff and volunteers redeployed their skills to welcome people into it. As commercial and council services all ground to a halt, the hub became a lifeline for many – both for food and for social interaction. This put huge strain on the few remaining staff and volunteers.

*“this was a hub  
for dozens of other  
organisations, and groups  
[...] the people knew  
they could come, it was  
welcoming”*

*(staff member)*

Gradually, some forms of financial support started to appear in the form of furlough, the Scottish Government’s ‘pivotal enterprise’ fund, and a break from rent obligations on the space. Working quickly to preserve artists’ incomes, two staff members and a commissioned artist transformed the Made in Stirling website into an online shop during the first few weeks of lockdown, and it opened on 2 April 2020. First it was a way to allow artists and makers to make some sales, but it soon became a platform for activities such as art tutorials for children and workshops to do from home using kits that had been posted out. The online shop, promoted through social media, also allowed people to support Creative Stirling and their partners by buying ‘pay it forward’ vouchers. In April 2020, the shop started selling rainbow brooches made by one of the artists (with the help of her children), to raise funds for the Community Food project. This was a practical example of creative collaboration supporting a mutual aid approach. It also showcases a common experience amongst artists who had to find ways to integrate childcare into their working practice during lockdown.

Meanwhile, the Creative Stirling team experimented with ways to support the network of makers and volunteers using online platforms like Zoom and HouseParty, as well as one-to-one peer support via WhatsApp. This support blended practical information, such as applying for government schemes, with social connection and solidarity as people went through very difficult personal situations. Some artists found time to create new work and expand their portfolio, while others had to stop their practice due to lack of time, space, or funds. The uneven impacts of Covid-19 and of lockdowns have shaped individual career paths as well as the broader ecosystem.

When official restrictions started to be lifted, the transitions to new ways of working were multiple and challenging to manage. In July 2020, the shop reopened (with social distancing in place) and the Food Project moved to new premises. Keeping abreast of the changing regulations, some in-person workshops for children were organised that Autumn, until a new series of lockdowns started in November. The subsequent months of further uncertainty and reduced financial support continued to be difficult, and the economic impact of the pandemic on the whole economy continues to be felt.





## Experience – what did this feel like?

It was difficult for participants to clearly recall different periods of the pandemic, especially given the rapidly changing circumstances and restrictions and the diversity of experience. For those who were involved in the immediate response to Covid-19, this time was marked with intense worry, stress and a feeling of heightened responsibility for the core team, volunteers, creative and local communities.

The physical and mental health of individuals both within the team and in the wider local and creative communities was a key concern, and a great deal of effort and time went into negotiating rapidly changing health and safety rules within the physical space, off-setting potential isolation and offering guidance and reassurance. The team's close-knit relationships were crucial in terms of providing internal support too.

*"we were on an emotional ledge"*

*(staff member)*

*"I could phone anybody and just cry down the phone and they would be there...I always felt supported, but also everyone supported you if you needed to take a step back, which is really important"*

*(staff member)*



While the team encountered challenging situations during this time related to deprivation and the absence of wider support in/for the local area, there was also a feeling of "huge community spirit" where Creative Stirling "started conversations, we talked to everyone, and everyone talked to us".

## What made this possible? Enablers, Relationships

*"I remember thinking,  
"Oh, could you not just  
give us a break?",  
sitting behind a mountain  
of bread with masks on"*

*(staff member on landlord  
change)*

**Physical Space.** The autonomy over the physical space at 44 King Street offered flexibility over how it could be used in the early days of lockdown after the Made in Stirling shop was forced to close. This enabled Creative Stirling to retain a visible presence in the community in a period when almost everything else was shut and to fulfil their aims of responding to community needs. On the other hand, concerns about the tenancy due to a change in ownership have been an obstacle in terms of securing the sustainability of various projects.

**Funding.** External funding from the government, local authority, charity and third sector organisations was crucial in enabling this work to go ahead, as well as providing furlough schemes and grants to artists.

**Skillsets.** The agile nature of Creative Stirling was supported by existing experience and skillsets. The team and their networks were well-used to working collaboratively, engaging with the public, volunteers and creatives, as well as working with food. In turn, the core team – some of whom were furloughed initially – volunteered, learned new skills and/or changed roles to help with immediate needs.

**Care.** The ethos of care build into a "community first" business model designed to be "supportive and sympathetic to the needs of artists", was reflected in the attitudes of the team, volunteers and their wider networks. In turn, artists and makers spoke of viewing the hub as "more than a shop" and were motivated to give back in various ways as "a nice way of recognising how much [Creative Stirling] means to me, that kind of ethos and the good work that they do".

**Trust.** In a moment of great uncertainty, the underlying relationships of trust within the team allowed them to take responsibility for managing potential risks. There were many questions about what one was "allowed" to do, which required confident decisions based on often incomplete and rapidly changing information.

**Relationships.** Existing relationships within the core team, with individuals, creatives, wider organisations, the local community and local authority network were crucial in driving Creative Stirling's response to the pandemic. Although it was challenging to sustain some of these relationships when parts of the hub were inaccessible, connections were maintained in a variety of ways.

**Networks.** Established relationships with external organisations were also fundamental in enabling an efficient and speedy response. For example, the Food Project emerged out of ongoing collaboration between Transition Stirling and The Kitchen at 44 King St, who were also connected to wider local food networks. Artists and volunteers also link Creative Stirling to the surrounding towns and villages through their own community connections.

**WHAT HAPPENED LATER?**

## After the lockdowns

*“one of the really positive things is that politicians and people are now seem to be seeing us [...] as a vital part of Stirling”*

*(staff member)*

*“new things did flourish and people changed direction as well. People came out with completely new attitudes towards work”*

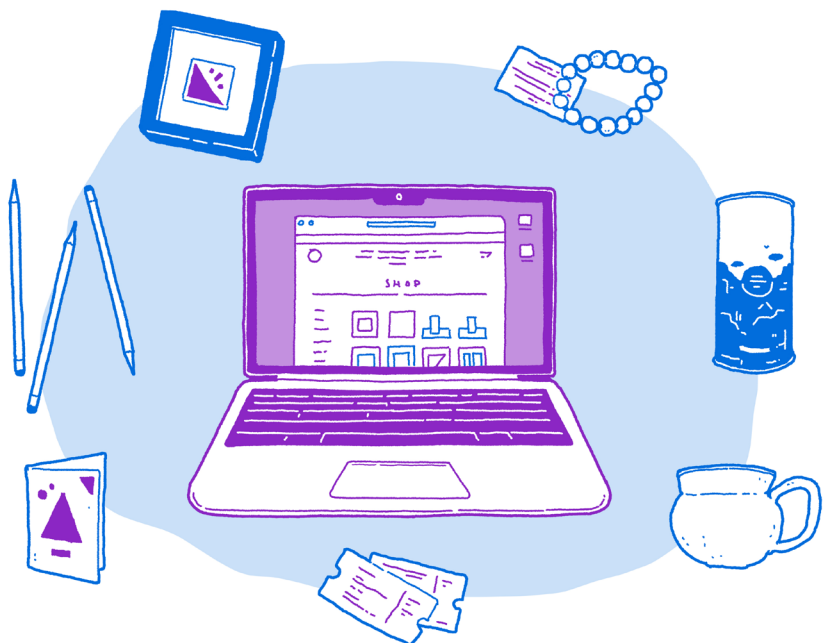
*(staff member)*

*“it showed that if you can release money into an organisation like this, it can turn that around into brilliantly innovative things that can help the community in a way that institutions struggle to get the cogs turning”*

*(board member)*

The intense shared experience of working together during the most challenging moments of the pandemic consolidated existing relationships and created new bonds of trust. The visibility of Creative Stirling as a key space during lockdown, and their collaborative work with other organisations, have given them greater recognition in the local landscape. This included an awareness of connections between arts and culture and other aspects of community wellbeing such as food distribution and programmes for young people. The Food Project is now run by Transition Stirling in their own premises, and local authority support for events is now more likely to also include food.

The digital platforms and skills developed as a matter of emergency are now becoming established parts of artists' business models. The online shop continues to grow, online booking systems are more streamlined, and even operational aspects such as health and safety training have been improved for online delivery. Home-crafting kits accompanied by online tutorials have continued to prove popular with Made in Stirling customers.



The funding streams available during the pandemic emergency response were perceived as more flexible and less bureaucratic than usual. This allowed organisations like Creative Stirling to mobilise with more agility and respond to changing needs in a more efficient manner. There is a concern that this learning will be lost. With the return to in-person events, hybrid forms of delivery have tried to retain some of the accessibility offered by online participation, but this tends to lose priority.

At the time of writing, the pandemic continues but government restrictions and support measures have mostly been removed. Hopes for a 'new normal' or an optimistic recovery have been dampened by a drastic fall in living standards due to inflation and cuts to public services. Millions of people continue to shield, are newly disabled from Long Covid, or are forced to risk their health in unsafe environments. As one crisis unfolds into another one, learning from the lockdown experience becomes even more urgent.

**WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?**

## **The labour of care work**

The redeployment of efforts and assets during the pandemic were at points described as ‘effortlessly’ efficient and certainly reflect the flexibility of the organisation and those connected with it. These relationships did, however, embody vast amounts of labour whether that be voluntary or paid and encompassing both physical and emotional. Given the intensity and scale of the challenges faced, continuous individual and peer support was required as well as constant activity. Keeping busy for many was a comfort and provided a sense of purpose but at points threatened burnout and raises the question as to whether workloads have recalibrated.

## **Sustainability of funding models**

In the frenetic and often reactive delivery of hub activities shaped by short term funding models there had been traditionally less opportunity to develop more sustainable models and practices. During lockdown with less delivery of activities whilst the hub was closed and less prescriptive emergency funding, there were more opportunities to attune activities to the needs of the local context. One of the recommendations of the Scotland National Partnership for Culture (NPC) established in 2020 following Covid-19 is to move away from short term project funding to longer term arrangements essential to maximising the impact and effectiveness of investment. How such models can be effectively actioned especially given the current circumstances remains hard to see.

## **Relevance and visibility**

Despite already being a longstanding organisation, over the pandemic period Creative Stirling’s visibility has certainly grown among local organisations and community groups as well as in policy circles (whether related to the local authority, politicians or support agencies). The crucial role of their activities during this period within the local area, and as they continue to develop and grow, have demonstrated their resilience and community-first approach. They, in turn, have felt less pressure to constantly communicate their value as there was greater awareness of their role in the community.

## **Deeper understanding of interconnected nature of challenges**

The abrupt impact of the pandemic and its devastating consequences forced most people to re-evaluate aspects of our lives and certainly there was intense reflectiveness within Creative Stirling especially during the first lockdown. As they responded to challenges and were closely connected to interventions like the food project they deepened their consideration around rebuilding most effectively, better serving communities and responding to challenges like food waste; the climate crisis and poverty.

## **THE PROJECT**

## Mapping Ecologies of Care in a Creative Hub during Covid-19 (March 2021-October 2022)

The project explored the ways in which Creative Stirling transformed their activities, mobilised their networks and redeployed their assets during Covid-19 and lockdown. The project aimed to make visible how people pooled efforts and resources during this time of crisis and to consider how this is shaping future activities and sustainability.

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