



# DUDLEY CREATES



lessons in  
place based  
social practice  
programming  
and the  
emergence of  
an ecological  
approach



## 2020-2022

DUDLEY CREATES was a cultural programme produced by Creative Black Country's Associate Producer Kerry O'Coy + Laura Dicken and supported with funding by Arts Council England and Dudley MBC. The programme started as a way to explore the types of creative projects people across Dudley Borough were interested in co-creating together.

## 2022

Dudley CVS was awarded funding by Arts Council England under its Cultural Compact programme to support towns and cities to produce a cultural strategy. Innovative experimental platform, CoLab Dudley is currently developing this Compact.

## 2023

Due to the findings from the programme, alongside the work being done to develop the Compact with local people, Dudley Creates has become more than a 2 year programme and is now: *Dudley Creates - A 100 year strategy in action.*

This document has been researched and written by Dr. Jo Orchard Webb. Jo was commissioned by Kerry + Laura to help bring together key themes and findings that would help us identify how to continue CBC's work in Dudley. The findings come from many hours of interviews, observations, gatherings and research.

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## Who we are

### Creative Black Country

Arts Council England funded National Portfolio organisation that is part of the Creative People and Places network that aims to support more people to take part in creative and cultural activity across the Black Country.  
[creativeblackcountry.co.uk](http://creativeblackcountry.co.uk)

### CoLab Dudley

An innovative social lab based on Dudley High Street that invites people to collaborate and experiment together.  
[dudleyhighstreet.uk](http://dudleyhighstreet.uk)

### Dudley CVS

The local infrastructure organisation supporting all sizes and types of voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises which benefit the people of Dudley borough.

### Dudley MBC

Local authority.

### Creative Associates

Kerry O'Coy + Laura Dicken are freelancers who work in multi-disciplinary creative roles across the Black Country and have over 25 years of combined experience in the sector.

### Research

Dr. Jo Orchard Webb has conducted the research for this document and pulled together the themes and findings. Jo works with CoLab Dudley and has continued to work on the Cultural Compact.

*Dudley Creates* was designed to make possible a diverse and locally relevant programme of high-quality creative participation opportunities for local communities across Dudley Borough. The programme, which started in 2020, included a range of multi-disciplinary arts and creative projects from High Street portraiture and filmmaking, to puppetry design with performances on parks and shopping centres, and animated poetry sessions via Zoom.

Over 18 months two Creative Black Country (CBC) associate producers, Kerry O'Coy and Laura Dicken, worked closely with the wider CBC team and local people, to design and commission a number of high-quality participatory projects.

During 2022 the project also benefited from a partnership with Dudley MBC who asked CBC to support local people to produce creative projects across the Borough. A Summer of Creativity coincided with the Commonwealth Games activities and offered to kickstart a new legacy of cultural activity going forward.

During this period CBC also worked alongside Dudley CVS, via their innovative social lab platform CoLab Dudley, to bring together Dudley's Cultural Compact; a scheme run by Arts Council England to help Local Authorities to deliver a cultural strategy for their area. CoLab Dudley researcher, Jo Orchard-Webb, assisted in bringing together key findings and learning (the text of which follows) that will continue to help the wider cultural ecosystem to thrive in future years.



# LEARNING OVERVIEW

**“Despite sharing a sense of common direction and final destination, every [Creative People and Places] programme must be a unique response to a particular place and a distinct topography. The purpose of the journey, however, has been made clear. To develop a sense of agency and empowerment within communities too long neglected by enabling them to shape and determine their, ‘own cultural landscape’ and environment.”**

**- Power Up by Chrissie Tiller, 2017, Creative People and Places Think Piece**

**Dudley Creates was an experimental Creative Black Country cultural programme designed to make possible a diverse and locally relevant programme of high quality creative participation opportunities for local communities across Dudley Borough.**

Its intentional design focus upon

- commissioning and enabling high quality participatory / social arts practice,
- a commitment to working deeply in place,
- and collaborative approaches (at artist, participant, non-arts collaborator and cultural infrastructure level) speak to normative and practical considerations of realising cultural democracy and ecological approaches to cultural programming, management and practice.

In straightforward terms learning from participants, artists and producers show clearly how Dudley Creates enabled:

- valued community and local artist experiences of cultural **co-creation and co-production** via a diverse range of mediums,
- development of local community **cultural capabilities**, creative skills and confidence,
- local artist **social practice development** and peer learning, new generative relationships and creative collaborations with ripples for future cultural production (both formal and informal),
- a wide range of **mental health and wellbeing benefits** - specifically in relation to overcoming isolation, accessibility and health anxiety barriers to cultural participation and co-production.



*Radio Public by Workshop24 gave participants the opportunity to make the inaudible audible, creating a festival of sound, installations, walks, talks, performances, workshops and transmissions on Dudley High Street.*

**Dudley Creates reminds us of the power of arts in reimagining spaces and places, and how communities value them. In this instance working deeply in place:**

- unlocked new creative interactions with spaces such as nature reserves, community gardens and canals, allowing them to be viewed by local people and artists as important cultural assets,
- enabled participants to reclaim uncared for public spaces that had previously felt unwelcoming and unsafe like subways, tunnels and caverns,
- connected to non-arts spaces, like High Streets, libraries, and shopping centres, as important places of everyday cultural co-creation and cultural identity.

Critically, given when it was programmed - during the global pandemic, the early worsening of the cost of living crisis, and during a summer of climate emergency related extreme weather events - **Dudley Creates** offers essential lessons for what it means to design cultural programmes in an age of permanent and intersecting crises (*Local Trust / Common Vision, 2022*).

Artists were developing social practice capabilities in new spaces, with new art forms, alongside new communities, within the context of shifting government health policy and health risks, extreme weather events, and growing barriers to accessibility and participation owing to social and economic consequences of increased financial precarity.

The programme producers patiently held space for the emergence of a diverse portfolio of innovative quality cultural opportunities in rapidly changing and uncertain contexts. The shared learning collated makes clear that the flexible, experimental and highly empathetic programme design and facilitation, was essential to the success of programming within this uncertainty.

This capacity to flex in response to shifting contexts and changing variables will be critical to future cultural programming with communities as crises evolve. As we show later in the report this is an essential benefit of adopting an ecological approach to the cultural sector in Dudley borough.

A more rigid and less relational approach risks lost cultural opportunities and increasing barriers to cultural democracy. In contrast, **Dudley Creates** design and facilitation was enabling by:

- being supportive of and solution focussed with artists who were working within unprecedented levels of uncertainty and learning to adapt their convening and project design;
- reducing project risks within the programme control by removing overly strict time pressures, fixed outcomes, fixed delivery pathways
- Creating options to test out ideas in pilot workshops allowing artists the space to build their confidence to experiment and ‘try things out’;
- encouraging and enabling artists to take the time to connect with communities, grow new untested artist collaborations, and build relationships with other non-arts collaborators (such as librarians, carers, school assistants, and reserve wardens);
- re-prioritising shared learning, reflection and creative documentation within the context of experimental programming. While artists embraced this to varying degrees, there was clear acknowledgement of the additional cultural value that creative documentation makes possible in terms of: important cultural artefacts, new interactions with existing and new audiences, artist practice development, and lessons in terms of more effective societal understanding of a plurality of cultural value. As systems uncertainty increases a flourishing ecosystem needs more meaningful, timely and inspiring creative documentation and wider learning feedback loops.



*DoFest, which is a project by CoLab Dudley, was supported by Dudley Creates during July 2021 when mask wearing indoors was still mandatory / advisable and most events took place outdoors. DoFest was an opportunity for co-creation with your partners, experimenting with new ideas, shared learning and working in new spaces.*

This experimental, participatory and collaborative programme approach has generated cultural impact ripples in terms of:

- new local artistic partnerships and initiatives,
- new funding applications for scaling up pilot experiments,
- new local community creative group meet ups,
- community requests for project follow-up sessions, iterations and extensions of these projects in new locations in the borough,
- practice development and creative confidence in artists and participants alike
- legacy of an ecological approach taken by Creative Black Country to weaving together different projects, programmes and resources that continues to encourage collaboration and cultural potential across the Dudley cultural ecosystem.

The learning also shines an honest light on the challenges as well as the potential for local artists and creatives of developing a social practice rooted in place. More generally, **Dudley Creates** illustrates the evolving and adaptive role of cultural infrastructure like CPPs in creating conditions for wider and deeper cultural engagement and co-creation by communities in the context of crises.

**Dudley Creates offers valuable lessons in terms of some of the conditions needed for realising greater cultural democracy and a flourishing local cultural ecosystem in Dudley borough. These lessons are important for local cultural ecosystem creatives, communities, guardians, collaborators and stewards in informing their different roles within the stewardship of a flourishing local ecosystem.**

There has been a growing use of ecological language and analysis of cultural value within the sector (*Holden, 2015*). The link between an ecological approach and enabling conditions for cultural democracy has similarly gained greater understanding and acceptance (*Gross and Wilson, 2019*).

In this research and learning we were interested in understanding what insights **Dudley Creates** offers in relation to the practical use and potential of an ecological approach to understanding and enabling cultural opportunity across Dudley. In their CPP research *Creating the Environment* Gross and Wilson (2019) describe this framing as:



**“Cultural ecology is: (i) a condition of the world (an ontological reality). (ii) a descriptive and analytical perspective (an epistemological framework). (iii) an approach to cultural policy, programming and practice (an organisational, managerial or strategic method). In this report we explore the ways in which culture within CPP Places is ecological, needs to be understood ecologically, and how it can be actively nurtured ecologically. It might appear that any place-based approach to cultural policy, programming and practice is inherently ecological.**

**But to take an ecological approach (in the third sense) means engaging at a strategic level with interconnections and interdependencies between cultural resources of many kinds. It means paying attention to the dynamic nature of the relationships between the (tangible and intangible) ‘assets’ that enable and constrain cultural opportunity. Placed-based initiatives are not equally ecological in the approach they take.”**



*Netherton Creative Map gave local communities the opportunity to share memories and tell new stories of the places they live.*

# Potential local Dudley vital signs as surfaced in Dudley Creates in terms of:

Using this ecological framework Dudley Creates learning helps us begin to articulate empirically evidenced examples of local vital signs for a flourishing cultural ecosystem and greater cultural democracy in Dudley borough. Here we offer a handy summary table of the vital signs surfaced through the Dudley Creates programme doing and learning. *[Note: Copy in blue indicates areas of potential and opportunity highlighted by the learning but not realised in Dudley Creates]*

## Flourishing Cultural Ecosystem

New **artist-to-artist collaborations** resulting in sharing of skills, knowledge, and co-creation of new creative initiatives and enterprises.

New **trusted connections woven between local artists and local creative communities** resulting in greater community and local artist cultural co-production activity and cultural capability.

An **explicit valuing of experimentation, and iterative project / programme design** approach helped to begin to reframe risk and navigate uncertainty. Creating space for the evolution of project ideas and adaptation of delivery pathways and convening practices. A greater focus upon creative documentation and learning shared and celebrated openly across the ecosystem through a range of mediums.

New **artist-to-non arts collaborator relationships** (e.g. librarians, teachers, wardens, council development officers) that are understood as critical actors within the ecosystem, and important to quality social practice and wider cultural participation.

New **participant and artist relationships to local non arts spaces as places of cultural production** and different local assets 'reframed' as valuable cultural resources (e.g. tunnels, gardens, nature reserve, high street unit windows, shopping mall).

**Ecological approach to cultural sector stewardship** including practices that encourage connection to happen across cultural programmes, resource streams, and increase diverse cultural practices. For example, **nurturing a diverse ecosystem by programming in areas of less visible creative activity, not parachuting into areas of existing high levels of organic creative activity.** This requires insight into where there is creative activity and an openness to what that includes via regular ecosystem mapping, shared learning and feedback loops.

## Cultural Democracy

Greater cultural capability means **communities across the borough have increased freedom and opportunity to co-create culture in a diversity of forms.** A plurality of culture and cultural value is made possible, co-produced, and celebrated. Creative skills, ideas, collaborations and confidence grows.

**Shifting perceptions of what is possible in the Dudley cultural ecosystem.** Forging a new cultural narrative by being intentional about the quality of participant experience and their creative potential in a way that disrupts cultural value hierarchies. This in turn opens up ideas and pathways of what is possible for creative community groups.

A **focus upon empathetic design within the programme and participatory social practice encouraged projects designed for greater inclusion and accessibility** including: hybrid convening, free or low cost access, Covid safe convening, intergenerational convening, or mindful design for safety, comfort and welcome for participants with protected characteristics in relation to race, gender, sexuality or disability. This approach helps artists, producers and collaborators better understand how to create the conditions for more diverse cultural participation and expression in the context of local communities facing the impact of multiple crises that limit cultural democracy.

A celebration of **everyday cultural activity in non-arts places.** Everyday spaces embraced and reclaimed for cultural expression by local people. An active disruption of cultural value hierarchies.

The ecological approach to **governance is inherently non-hierarchical and highly diverse.** It encourages more distributed leadership and governance premised upon an understanding of systems and cultural ecosystem interdependencies. The relationship between publicly funded arts organisations, artists, creative industries, non-arts collaborators and local people are interwoven, with different actors seen as contributing equal value to the cultural ecosystem.

## Flourishing Cultural Ecosystem

Opportunity to encourage the shift from central hub and spoke network models to more distributed, but well connected multi-hub networks to build cultural ecosystem resilience (Krebs and Holley, 2006).

Opportunity to use a process of learning out loud, and rhythms of celebrating activity as a way to make the ecosystem visible to itself. This is important as a “[k]ey condition for a flourishing ecosystem is “the extent to which people recognise themselves as part of a cultural ecosystem” (Gross and Wilson, 2019).

Opportunity to build in long term thinking practices or futures consciousness capabilities into programming embracing the potential capacity for arts and culture to help nurture the regenerative resilience needed to navigate crises and transition to more just futures (Krznicaric, 2021).

Place based practice - **an explicit focus upon building trusting relationships with local collaborators and communities** and convening informed by local knowledges, stories, cultural spaces, cultural artefacts, histories and futures, as well as disrupting limiting narratives of place around who is welcome/ safe/ free to create where and how that is celebrated or valued.

Opportunity to be even more explicit in paying attention to the plurality and interconnectedness of existing and potential cultural activity and cultural opportunities in the borough (Gross, Wilson and Bull, 2017).

## Cultural Democracy

Opportunity to build upon the cultural capability nurtured via these experimental and collaborative place based programmes to create democratic spaces for local people and artists to talk about their hopes and dreams for the future cultural life of the borough. This could be an ongoing rhythm of collective imagining and action learning held by the cultural ecosystem stewards that act as open creative governance spaces that nurture the healthy evolution and growth of local cultural life. [Note this is already happening in part through the organic development of the Cultural Compact network and co-creation of the Dudley borough 100 year cultural strategy.

Opportunities to create more conditions for community co-design and self-determination of cultural / creative action not just co-creation and collaboration within cultural activities. A shift to more community decision making not just pre-determined formal civic institution interpretations of what cultural activity is created and valued. A chance for them to “shape and determine their, ‘own cultural landscape’ and environment” (Tiller, 2017).

New cultural ideas and perspectives were explored and welcomed, acting as a catalyst for cultural production by local people.

Opportunity to expand our working definition of cultural democracy in the borough to include future generations and the more-than-human helping us to build regenerative resilience and take collective cultural action towards more just futures for all.



# How to use this learning for Dudley Creates

In part 1 of this discussion you can read about the cultural value unlocked/ developed through Dudley Creates in relation to four main value categories. Note there is overlap across these categories given the ecological approach within this programme and in the ecological understanding of cultural activity used in this learning. So the categories are offered here to aid signposting through the learning and should not be understood in isolation. That withstanding we seek to illustrate the programme cultural value in terms of:

- nurturing participant cultural capability
- artist practice development in alignment with cultural capabilities and ecological approaches in terms of three related areas of practice:

1. Working alongside communities within a participatory and social arts tradition
2. Developing a deeper place based practice
3. Working more collaboratively across the ecosystem

- Cultural democracy value created and opportunities
- Cultural ecosystem value created and opportunities

In part 2 of this discussion you can read about how the programme design and animation was key to unlocking this value.

In part 3 of this discussion you can explore the core lessons and suggested action learning agendas the Dudley Creates programme has for cultural ecosystem infrastructure stewards, artists and creatives, non-arts collaborators and local creative communities.

These lessons and action learning agendas (areas that would benefit from collective exploration) are both practical and normative in relation to how different members of the Dudley cultural ecosystem can further support cultural capability for all and their opportunity to co-create culture, 'to shape their cultural landscape'.

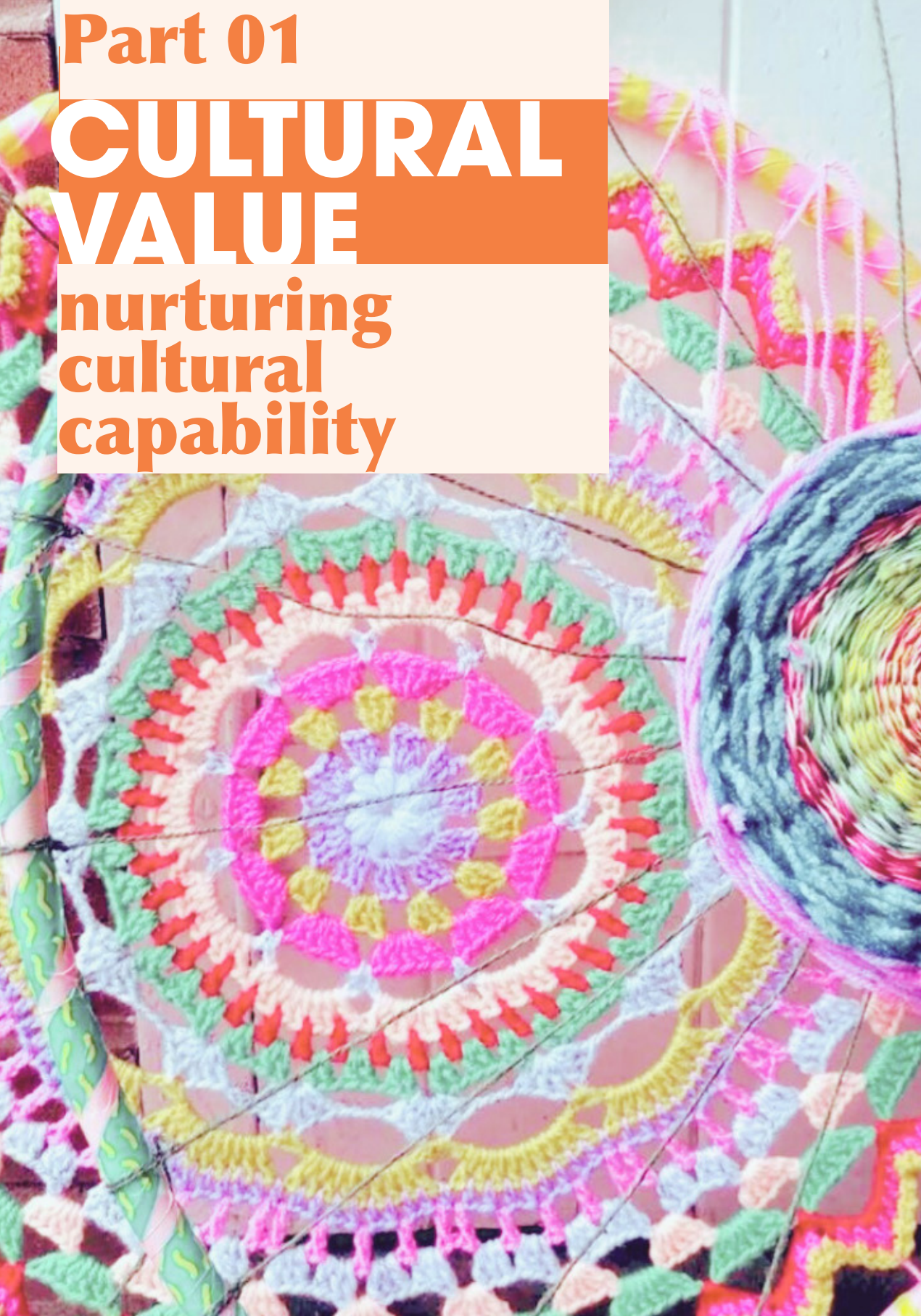
In part 4 we outline the methodology used to capture and critically analyse the programme learning. We outline the wide range of voices included, the range of opportunities to take part in reflection, the layers of analysis and stepped approach used to ensure these lessons are meaningful in terms of how different members of the ecosystem can take action going forward, as well as offering critical reflection of future opportunities for the cultural life of the borough.



# Part 01

# CULTURAL VALUE

## nurturing cultural capability



**Dudley Creates** was designed to create the conditions for greater cultural participation emerging from collaborative approaches and place based participatory practice. In this respect the programme is part of the tradition of *Creative People and Places*, and certainly *Creative Black Country* history, that prioritise a capabilities approach to human development and related concern for issues of cultural democracy. *Chrissie Tiller* describes this Creative People and Places purpose as:

**“To develop a sense of agency and empowerment within communities too long neglected by enabling them to shape and determine their, ‘own cultural landscape’ and environment” (Tiller, 2017).**

First advocated by Indian economist *Amartya Sen*, the capabilities approach is a view of human development premised upon identifying improvements in access to certain substantive freedoms required for a flourishing life. This means looking beyond measuring human development in

economic terms, and taking greater account of the granular implications of structural inequalities upon the freedoms and opportunities within our everyday lives. Freedom to co-create culture is the substantive freedom we are most concerned with here. *Gross and Wilson (2019)* describe the freedom to co-create culture as ‘cultural capability’. In describing the capability approach *Hilary Cotham* explains it is “the internal factors and the wider webs and structures we are part of that determine what real possibilities we have in our lives. [In this way the capabilities approach] grapples with these knotty issues of power, access and learnt norms of what is and is not acceptable. ... [In her book *Radical Help* she explains they] allowed space for participants to grow their sense of what might be possible and to develop trust and self-confidence” .. while also working to address external everyday structural issues that affect opportunities.

Viewed within this capabilities approach lens we see **Dudley Creates** participants growing their sense of what is possible, building self confidence, forging new trusted networks, and disrupting learnt norms of what is and is not acceptable in terms of their power to co-

create culture.

**Dudley Creates** participants described

- increased cultural capability in terms of their freedom to take up opportunities to develop new creative skills,
- and being inspired to take further creative action owing to the creative confidence and sense of accomplishment that the **Dudley Creates** projects unlocked.

Thank you for *Portrait of a Place*, I have much appreciated yours, Nafeesa’s and Martin’s guidance and support. It’s been such a lovely environment to share ideas and develop work. As well as really helpful for my practice and has given me a lot more confidence with my written work. [Participant]

**What an inspiring event! I really liked that it was a smaller group**

**which felt intimate, comfortable, safe and friendly. Andrew was inspiring and I came off really thinking about what I want to take and how I want to take it. Some of his comments about positionality have really made me think. Laura and Kerry great hosts. A brilliant way to spend a Monday evening!**  
[Participant]

Really professional and informative and inspiring. Came away with so so, so many ideas and raring to go!! Really excited and proud that the Black Country has this going on for them!  
[Participant]

**I loved it. It was great to make art, chat and learn a new skill. I felt I had accomplished something.**  
[Participant]

Participant experiences highlighted wider socio-cultural value in terms of new relationships developed during co-creation, that participants described as critical for their mental health following the isolation and loneliness experienced during the pandemic. The collective and collaborative element that ran through the design of the majority of the projects was important to participants who expressed joy in creating together. Whether that

co-creation was walking together, weaving together, listening together, singing together, or stitching together - **the relational quality to these experiences of co-creation enhanced their cultural capability by unlocking 'power with' through collaboration.**



**“The positive energy ... it wouldn't be the same going in there alone and singing, experiencing the shape of it through collective sound. It is the community of it. isn't it? Joining together for ONE purpose to make a sound. Singing is good for your soul ... it was very much shared. Singing in a tunnel was amazing, almost cryable. I have really enjoyed it. It was ethereal and trancelike and an escape from other things going on in your head, a trusting and freeing experience. I really enjoyed that collaboration from all sorts of people, different ages, that part of a group feeling. In the tunnel I felt validated, so thank you all because I have enjoyed all your company as well. Community is alive. Did you notice how the water changed as we were singing?!”**  
[Participants in Conversation]

I felt like I was part of a new group of people. And whilst in one aspect, making for other people feels nice and good, what we were getting as well were stories of the Black Country; and some people knew the backstory of the photo or could reminisce about the type of things we did when we were younger.

It was like a web of connection. It was the fun and just the pleasure of sitting together making, we built on that. So that's why I've been keen to want to continue with the project, I don't want to let that go.

[Artist / Participant]

**There were also distinctly cultural democracy related cultural capability benefits reported by participants in terms of their agency to create and right to cultural expression in everyday public spaces.**

Participants described liberatory and democratising implications of feeling welcome, safe and even able to reclaim spaces for cultural production that were otherwise avoided and uncared for. Reimagining spaces - such as shopping centres, High Streets, nature reserves, tunnels, caverns, canals, subways - as valuable social and cultural assets unlocks latent cultural possibilities. This was particularly evident where projects prioritised sensing, listening and embodied connection to place. Participants described the richness of being introduced to different knowledges, ideas and perspectives, and how that opened up a plurality of cultural value and cultural opportunities for them.

**The explicit value of these cultural opportunities to inform worldviews, reimagine the role of places**

**as spaces of cultural expression, forge new relationships through shared experiences of co-creation is a powerful consequence of this programme.**

**I wanted the work to explore the idea of a portrait of an area that you can't find on Wikipedia! ... The way the artists led the sessions allowed the participants to think carefully about their own memories of Dudley, so we ended up with a really varied, personal reflection on the area, including places like Dudley Zoo and the Hippodrome, memories of growing up at home and people they knew. This felt like a great reflection of the area that can't be found on Wikipedia! [Artist]**

Through new relationships, new creative skills and ideas developed, and experiences of co-creation in everyday spaces this programme has actively supported and seeded cultural capabilities. However, this focus upon capabilities is also helpful in pointing to the opportunity for even greater co-design and co-production by local people in future programmes. Dudley Creates was overflowing with community co-creation and collaboration, enabling a shift for participants if they wanted from cultural consumer to cultural co-producer. Yet both project leads and Creative Black Country producers reflected upon how their learning from this programme could be used in future to create the conditions for more community-led co-design or curation of cultural opportunities. Creating the opportunity for local communities to go beyond the critical freedom of cultural expression, both individual and collective, that this programme supported, to being part of shaping the Dudley cultural landscape. This shift in power is key to realising cultural democracy where local people define what counts as cultural activity, how it is valued, and are central to shaping programme design, commissioning, and wider cultural landscape decision-making (Jancovich, 2017; 64 million Artists, 2018).

**We were successful in making the subway a more bright and happy place through ours and the Public presence and communication. The public benefited from having a chat with friendly faces. A cheerful exchange of conversation, in a place that can be daunting and unfriendly. [Artist]**



# artist practice development aligned with cultural capabilities and ecological approaches

“Collaborative arts practices emerging in response to ecological, social and fiscal challenges, to reclaim a traditional role for artists in the community as truth-tellers and agents of change”

- (RSA, 2015)

This programme nurtured local and regional artist practice development in three specific ways that critically align with nurturing both cultural capability (i.e. the freedom to co-create culture) and an ecological approach to cultural activity programming, management and practice that encourages a plurality of cultures and cultural values. Practice development emerged:

- 1. Working alongside communities within a participatory and social arts tradition creating the conditions for greater freedom for a diverse range of local people to co-create culture;**
- 2. Developing a deeper place based practice and so expanding and disrupting what are viewed as cultural assets, how local people relate to them, and so holding open new spaces of diverse practices of culture-making;**
- 3. Working more collaboratively across the ecosystem in a range of directions including: artist to artist, artist to non-arts collaborator/ civic space guardians, and artist to Creative Black Country as a cultural ecosystem steward. This weaving and building of new and trusted relationships across the ecosystem has enabled new creative potential through sharing of knowledge, skills, ideas, and new cultural partnerships.**

# Social Practice

**Dudley Creates** has been an incredibly rich learning curve in terms of developing and growing new depths of social practice in this group of artists. There were varying degrees of comfort and experience with social / participatory practice at the beginning so across the programme there was a continuum of depth of engagement by local people ranging from engaged observation / noticing, active questioning and discovery, and deeper project participation via co-creation and co-production. Where there was more of a blurring of artist and participant roles it appeared to open up even more creative possibilities where everyone was involved in co-creating culture. There was also a balance struck within a number of projects, where they created space for both individual cultural expression and collective expression. By intentionally designing for a large place based collaborative cultural artefact, as well as small take home pieces, the projects rippled into everyday creativity.

**It's definitely changed my practice. This project actually made me realise that you can make great**

**quality stuff with groups of people. And it's just about having extra hands and extra help around you like working with a couple of artists on this project. So it's actually made me realise that my practice is just as worthy as an artist that's in a gallery, because I made some work where we made some work collectively, that I think is really great quality, and could be shown ... But it gave me the confidence that you can make amazing quality work with the participants. [Artist]**

**Three craft connection sessions gave us time and space together to build community and social connection as we learned the art and process of weaving. There was a real beauty in the collaborative approach, chatting and laughing and getting to know each other as the installations developed their shape and form throughout the changing seasons. ... Four large scale weaving frames were developed with different**

**weaving materials including recycled fabric, raw wool, foliage and yarn. There was an invitation to explore the techniques and materials, on both the large-scale installations and smaller scale individual projects for the families to take home. [Artist]**

From the beginning of the programme numerous artists within the cohort expressed care for and designed intentionally to value everyday cultural activity. This manifest in terms of their consideration of accessibility and inclusivity in convening as well as wanting to inspire and enable future creative action by local communities in their homes and places they care for. Even at the early design stage of their projects these artists were mindful of how their social practice would open up potential for a wide range of other benefits in terms of new relationships, creative confidence, mental health improvement, connection to nature, self-awareness, and connection to place.

**By making memories and physical mementos, we hope to have established**

**a positive link to our incredible National Nature Reserve, that is remembered whenever the craft item is viewed or handled back at home. Each small interaction can hopefully build into a wider legacy. ... Holding the events at the nature reserve also encouraged people to explore the outdoor environment, and to exercise in the fresh air. There were tangible health and wellbeing benefits to visitors to our events which included making a nature-connection and screen-free, family time. [Artist]**

Post project reflections by artists illustrated the lessons learned and value of the **Dudley Creates** experience in deepening their social practice. These lessons remind us of the support needed within the Dudley cultural ecosystem to create shared spaces to learn, to practice, to gain experience working with communities, and reflecting upon that experience.

The **Dudley Creates** programme design and wider Creative Black Country infrastructure were key to this support. In the programme design discussion section we explore the qualities of the programme that were critical to this, from practical everyday things like technology support and facilitation, to more cultural ecosystem stewardship action in terms of holding space that is experimental and low risk

for more diverse culture-making. Social practice is normative in so much as it often responds to the uneven opportunity to contribute to the cultural life of a place owing to wider social justice issues. Social practice can be a pathway to democratising cultural production and disrupting power imbalances. Social practice is not easy, it requires patient and careful navigating systemic barriers to community cultural capabilities. It is often fraught with uncertainty, shifting timescales, and other project parameters which increases risk of failure, and so vulnerability for artists and participants alike. For this reason it requires that artists develop greater comfort with uncertainty, and the inevitable and indeed desirable, evolving and emergent nature of the project.

In the context of these challenges artists stressed how important it is to take time to build trusting relationships, and to pay attention to patterns in the rhythms and movements of communities and of a place. Sometimes this involves taking part in what is already going on to find a bridge into that community.

Creating multiple sessions and interactions opens up this possibility, and of course it takes more time than you ever plan for! Within **Dudley Creates** social practice often had a journey narrative arc. This began with initial testing and familiarising of place and creative materials or

method, then deeper discovery through multiple layers of activity, creating things to take home, but also co-creating in place, with a final element of display, celebration and sometimes shared reflections. The place based nature of this practice in **Dudley Creates** meant each project acted as an intervention in the sociability and social life of that place.

**We attended and continue to attend the fortnightly meet-ups of the Friendship Group. Each session provides another opportunity to engage with the group's memories of the area, as well as just catch up and socialise. We have also had members of the wider community reach out to us in response to our social media call out, wanting to contribute to the project. We had a deeply engaging interview with a local Publican, as well as a lady who grew up in the area but has since moved away. These extra interviews with participants, outside of the workshops, enabled us to gain a wider perspective of the history of the area and helped to contextualise the project with grounded research, above and beyond the initial project intentions. [Artist]**



# developing a deeper place based practice

**Dudley Creates is a programme rooted in place - designed by local cultural producers, working with mostly local artists, alongside local communities exploring together what it means to co-create in Dudley borough.**

The programme highlighted many aspects of working in place including the specificity of experience in: convening in local everyday spaces (High Street, shopping centres, parks); convening in unusual non arts spaces (tunnels, caverns, canals, nature reserves); being inspired by the materiality of local places, and how that relates to local histories, memories, stories, local knowledge and identities; and it meant exploring sensory and embodied experiences of place (via walking, singing, sensing, and touching). As part of their reflection upon their experience artists were asked to explore what it means to work deeply in place, why that matters, and how that shapes what, who and how culture is co-created there.

**Having the work situated on the high street, where you sat by the window and did a lot of the cutting and weaving allowed people passing by to peak their head through to see**

**what we were doing. In any other space I don't believe this would have been possible as we are reluctant to knock or ask. being a central hub in the high street allowed such an unusual space to be seen in a different perspective, it was like bring art to your doorstep. I would definitely want to be more in public spaces doing workshops like that. It allows people who make not necessarily be associated or interested in art as a day-to-day thing, to want to come and see and question. [Artist]**

For the artists, place operated at a range of layers in their process, practice and project. In practical, but important ways, the place was a space to convene - it literally shaped the physicality and aesthetic of the experience and provoked conversations and exchanges of local knowledge, histories and memories.

A number of outside events were postponed owing to extreme weather events bringing forward consideration of co-creating in place in the context of a climate crisis. For some it meant engaging with, and familiarising with forgotten places through counter-

mapping, new rituals of place, and using social practice to reimagine and reclaim them and their function as a space of cultural collaboration and co-production (for example, *Walk and Draw* in the park, *Sound Aloud* singing in the tunnels, *Roaming Flags of Bumble Hole*, and weaving creative artefacts into the urban landscape in *Stories in the Subway*). In this respect working deeply in place can be a political act.

The act of reimagining spaces surfaces the politics of place by bringing visibility and creative imagination to that which is otherwise been left uncared for, or defined for a different purpose, or perhaps even different people. In one instance this creative reimagining was subsequently destroyed, which triggered an intention by the artist and participants to engage creatively with local young people to respond to this act of vandalism.

This was viewed as a chance to work even more deeply in place shining a light on the close interaction of social arts practice and the politics of place. In these projects participants and artists shifted in their power from passive consumer of a space, to active place steward - even if only for a moment.

After some of the initial work was pulled down and destroyed I have also been trying to think about how to engage older children/youth in Greenfield Gardens. I'm continuing to work with Holly Grove Art Club and thinking of new ideas and have made new connections with Wild About Stourbridge. [Artist]

The importance of place being part of any project, it allows us to potentially find spaces that are underused or undervalued. I think the issue with working with places that already exist, I mean art centres, like you know, doing a workshop, at the Mac, or in a gallery or something like that. It's at these, these spaces are already known, I guess. And by us working in place, you actually have an opportunity to create something new, and to connect and potentially be in a quiet or loud way, in my instance, like a bit political as well. And say, well, this, this space is underused, or this is undervalued, and how can we come together to use that? [Artist]

**Dudley Creates** artists illustrated very careful project design and delivery to explore creative routes to connection to place. A small number of the projects introduced consideration of a deeper relationship with nature and more-than-human. What we can't know is how these experiences of connection might trigger stronger and longer term creative pathways to place stewardship that originate through cultural participation, production and co-creation. In section four of the discussion we revisit this rich action learning agenda aligned as it is to futures consciousness creative activity and learning by Time Rebels in the cultural ecosystem stewarded by CoLab Dudley.





**Dudley Creates programming intentionally encouraged collaboration. This is a critical practice within ecological approaches.**

The result was an overwhelming celebration of the generative and abundant creative value of collaboration between different artists.

For many artists this was a new experience with cultural value creation ripples in terms of:

- artists practice development (around quality of work, confidence,
- practicalities and understanding of collaborative process),
- new project plans co-created,
- new creative enterprises developed,
- and new supportive relationships with like minded people in the ecosystem.

Artists reflected upon how working with other artists within socially engaged arts practice improves the participatory experience for participants by enabling artists to better support and engage participants. In addition it brought new skills into play allowing artists collaborating to play to their strengths, particularly around the quality of experience around facilitation and processes of engagement and follow up.

Really importantly in terms of the value of ecological approaches the collaborative practice in **Dudley Creates** extended to working with non arts collaborators (such as shopping centre staff, library staff, nature reserve volunteers) to help make co-creation in non arts spaces both possible and full of cultural potential. This has resulted in new relationships and cultural value ripples in terms of aspirations for further collaboration in future projects. These collaborations and connections will be even more critical in building conditions for community co-design of cultural activity.

# working more collaboratively

**I am currently working ... to explore further Co-Created Story Game ideas, we will be seeking funding to develop more work going forward ... The Magic Flying Ship was the first of these. It has really given us the focus to develop more audio work together as a duo. I also received this feedback from the libraries after the celebration event expressing an interest in further partnership work. [Artist]**

This project was the first time the three of us had worked together as a trio and our different skills all complimented each other nicely to create something greater than the sum of its parts. We're all keen to work together again in future and build on what we achieved here. [Artist]

**This was our first project working together and we have been able to go on this journey together, it was so nice working alongside another artist (this was needed from a safety aspect being in the subways) but also such a positive, supportive and inspiring experience. We have been able to make, work, develop and evaluate together. We now have so many ideas and plans on how we can continue this partnership and develop future ideas. [Artist]**

Children and young people were able to build on existing interests and contribute in their own way. The libraries were brilliant and really gave the spaces over to the sessions. Including when one group wanted to make their visual work 3D (we were working on paper) The result was gathering library furniture and constructing a setting to hold the different elements that had been made! And the library staff were just as joyful about the process and outcome as me and the participants. [Artist]



*Craftivists Ruth and Odette put together a proposal as artist duo 'We Are Makers' for the first time in the Summer of 2022. Their project 'Subway Stories' explored how people felt about using the subterranean network around Stourbridge ringroad.*

**“Cultural Democracy describes an approach to arts and culture that actively engages everyone in deciding what counts as culture, where it happens, who makes it, and who experiences it.”**

*(64 Million Artists, 2018)*

**Dudley Creates was designed with the aspiration of enabling more creative self determination for both local artists and local communities. A hope that they might feel they can make creative action happen that they value, and in their own way.**

The learning shows the programme generated cultural value ripples in terms of;

- community groups self-organising for creative action,
- a noted increase in individual and collective cultural capability by artists and local people;
- as well as local non-arts collaborators, such as library staff and nature reserve volunteers, being emboldened to see themselves as part of that process.

These ripples all positively affect who has the opportunity to create, and how and where culture is co-created, as well as how that is then celebrated and valued across the borough. These ripples go to the core of challenging cultural value hierarchies that have been shown to act as barriers to cultural democracy *(Wilson, Gross and Bull, 2017)*.

**“‘Culture’ as Holden suggests, can no longer be ‘something that is ‘given’, offered’ or ‘delivered’ by one section of ‘us’ to another.’ It needs to be something, ‘that we all own and make:’ by encompassing ‘power with’ as well as ‘within.’”**

**- (Tiller, 2017).**

# prioritising cultural democracy

Yet, the reality remains that “[t]he task of realising cultural democracy requires facing up to all the ways that cultural freedoms (and powers) are interconnected with broader questions of social (in)justice and inequality” *(Gross and Wilson, 2019)*.

This understanding of the interconnectedness of the potential of cultural democracy and wider issues of social injustice is especially critical within the context of intersecting crises of the climate emergency and cost of living crisis.

These crises physically, ecologically, emotionally and socio-economically shape the environments that determine cultural possibilities for local people. Many of the artists noted comments from their participants that they couldn’t afford paid family cultural activities, and so appreciated the opportunity to take part in such valuable cultural experiences that were carefully facilitated spaces where they felt less anxious about costs and could just enjoy creating together.

Meanwhile, some sessions had to be cancelled owing to extreme heat, or postponed owing to the pandemic. These cancellations and postponements disproportionately affect vulnerable members of

**“[C]ulture derives from everyday activities, whether you are a butcher, a teacher, a carer, an artist. We are all involved in producing and reproducing culture. It’s not a question of whether or not we want to produce culture, but rather what kind of culture do we make and what culture do we want?”**  
**- (Bohm, 2019)**

the community, and so we see the interaction of cultural democracy, health inequalities, and the climate emergency. **This raises the critical cultural democracy question of how to design cultural programming and hold open spaces for local culture-making in this time of polycrisis? And critically, how to do this in a non-paternalistic way that enables local people to shape their cultural life and environment?**

Our participants have indicated that family activities are too expensive for them to consider, and they are unable to access workshops individually due to childcare needs, cost or transport. [Artist]

**Verbal feedback during the events reflected on how difficult it is to afford entry into or transport to participate in family activities, that local spaces commonly feel unsafe or inaccessible. That children or families with additional needs feel excluded, unwelcome or unsafe. It was our privilege to offer an event that transcended all of these commonly encountered obstacles.** [Artist]

Within this framing of cultural democracy **Dudley Creates** was not about democratising access to state sanctioned culture, instead it was about weaving and celebrating cultural activity within everyday routines (like shopping and walking), and everyday places of familiarity (like the High Street or subway), where conversations and curiosity about “What do artists do?” can co-exist with shopping, childcare and a walk in the park.

In some ways it was as simple as being visible and showing that creativity and cultural expression by local people is valued, and can occupy non arts spaces and everyday places. It is also about careful designing for people of different protected characteristics feeling comfortable, safe and manifesting their substantive freedom to co-create culture.

The focus upon empathetic design within the programme and through participatory social practice encouraged projects designed for greater inclusion and accessibility. Examples included: hybrid online and in place convening, free access, signing and language translation, Covid safe convening, intergenerational convening, and more generally mindful design for the safety, comfort and

welcome for participants with protected characteristics in relation to race, gender, sexuality and ability. Projects included: women only workshops, projects intentionally working with participants from refugee and migrant communities; also intentional design with participants that identify as LGBTQIA+, People of Colour and women; and with projects created by Deaf/deaf artists for integration of Deaf/deaf and hearing participants.

As part of this mindful and inclusive design artists reflected upon the importance of paying attention to the quality of invitation, making sure everyone felt comfortable and knew what to expect, (including managing expectations around access, cost, health protection), they moved at a slower pace, created multiple entry points to the project so that people could join in where / when it worked for them, they integrated storytelling and organic conversations into a process that worked with where people were at, and what they wanted to do, and what mattered to them to express.

**Awesome! Enjoyed it all, such a fab experience like no other for me. Rupi really did stimulate the space with a great range of materials and I was**

**always Interested in what she would inspire. Feel like a space like this is a game changer compared to the offerings of my education experience. Can we have a follow up please, there was so much more to discuss and share. It was special to learn in a female only space. Thanks so much. [Participant]**

**People appreciated the inclusivity of the Parade, how everyone could take part and create a powerful shared experience. By making the events multi-sensory and multi-disciplinary we enabled people to have a more immersive experience of the reserve than they might otherwise do. [Artist]**

**There were lots of comments from both children and accompanying adults about how the sessions enabled different ages to learn from each other. And how the project promoted collaboration and cooperation. No one was left out and everyone’s voice was heard. It was a genuine shared experience. The sessions were facilitated in a way that invited everyone to contribute**

**and everyone to be an expert and leader. [Artist]**

**Dudley Creates, has illustrated the powerful agency of cultural activities in the production of space and reimagining narratives of place. These new spatial imaginaries are critical in terms of freedom to co-create culture, and so the possibility of realising cultural democracy. They reframe who creates, where, and interacts with ideas of permission, ownership and responsibility.**

These ideas and democratising cultural practices by local artists and participants expanded who occupies space, and the agency they felt in that space. In this way they interact with and go some way to disrupt manifestations of oppression that are expressed in the absence of a sense of permission, or sense of welcome, or feelings of safety, belonging, or solidarity. This has consequences for introducing a diverse range of people, creative activities and modes of cultural production that in turn disrupt dominant tools and technologies of power and representation in place (such as media narratives representation and authorship).

**Participants gained confidence in their**

**artistic outputs; the ‘importance’ of their role as interpreters of the current state of Netherton encouraged them to regard their work as important. Participants were shown that their memories and worldviews mattered. The participants benefited from people listening to their perspectives, and believing them to be worthy of artistic inspiration. Giving the participants the opportunity to get involved with a Digital Time Capsule, is something that will also benefit future generations to understand how things were at the time of its creation in 2022. Similarly, asking participants to write physical postcards to the future strengthened the sense of intergenerational thought and provided fascinating material to abstract for further art/poetry around the topic. [Artist]**

It is relevant that the very experienced local programme producers were clear in wanting this programme to disrupt existing limiting narratives of the Dudley cultural landscape and perceptions of creativity in the

borough. The producers were intentional in programming in areas of the borough with less visible creative community activity, and also careful not to parachute into areas of existing high levels of organic activity.

This ‘whole landscape’ approach requires insight into where there is greater and lesser creative activity - understood in its broadest sense and many manifestations. This intention was supported by deepening existing local artist relationships, as well as building new relationships with a really diverse mix of new local creatives and partners employing a wide portfolio of creative practice and art forms.

The intention was that by working with local artists with a greater connection to Dudley they would connect their own creative networks into existing networks of creative activity in their project area. While this worked with some projects, lack of experience in this element of community engagement showed lots of opportunity for network weaving practices to be more explicitly designed into future programmes.

“[A]ny attempt to understand what cultural democracy might look like needs to begin by abandoning the rigid criteria by which different forms of creative acts are classified and ultimately valued. Taking an ecological approach to understanding cultural participation places a focus on the relationships between different types of creative acts and organisations. It emphasises the extent to which culture is created by the coming together of people, ideas, skills, assets, resources and opportunities, and in this regard evokes the idea of capabilities ... The idea of a cultural ecology is explicitly non-hierarchical and implicitly asserts each element is interdependent, equally important and should be valued as such.”

- Stevenson, 2020.

# cultural ecosystem health



Taking an ecological approach to this programme has enabled shared learning, exchange of ideas, new trusting relationships, and multiple moments of co-creation which supports and gives clearer form to the potential of a flourishing Dudley cultural ecosystem. Creating interconnection between the **Dudley Creates** Black Country programme, the Dudley Council funded *Summer of Creativity*, and the CoLab Dudley supported **Time Rebels**, the programme producers supported the alignment of different types of resources. This alignment unlocked greater social and cultural value than had the activities existed as stand alone programmes.

This alignment was made possible through intentional use of language, practical weaving of activities and different parts of the system together, as well as clear ecological leadership demonstrated by associate producers in seeing the opportunity to bring these activities into relationship.

Throughout and around the edges of this programme producers have prioritised working in partnership, and critically were organisationally encouraged to have the freedom to weave those partnerships and potential collaborations. Paying

attention to the quality of those partnerships, and the behaviours that support an ecological approach has been really helpful in the unusual design of a ground up, networked approach to the local *Cultural Compact*, and a more relational and long term **100 Year Cultural Strategy**. Both are rooted in the considerations for a flourishing cultural ecosystem that this programme has begun to surface (see emergent vital signs table).

Analysis of project design, delivery feedback and artists' reflections of collaborative practices show that it is clear that an ecological approach is instinctive, but perhaps latent in most of the artists in this programme.

Artists proactively made connections locally and built relationships with other organisations such as schools, colleges, care homes, local council, community groups, libraries and charities. As a consequence there were cultural value outcomes for those collaborators - making clear their generative role in a successful programme of this kind where local communities co-create culture.

**The project allowed us to develop new relationships in Dudley and strengthen existing connections. We developed our connections**

**with Priory Community Pharmacy Garden and St Francis's Church. As we were running the carnival making workshops in the afternoons following a morning Walk and Draw session it provided an excellent opportunity for the Walk and Draw group to take advantage of the Foodcycle offer at St Francis's. The group now go every Tuesday for lunch and leave with a bag of food. Whilst there they engage with other Dudley residents. Saturday Books was a very welcoming venue and there is the possibility for Walk and Draw to have an exhibition in the new gallery space. The puppets and processional imagery made will be displayed at Creheart and then used at the Social Prescribing Conference in Brierley Hill in October. Group members are confident enough to lead on activities at the conference. [Artist]**

**Dudley Creates** saw cross sector collaboration with the creative sector working with other sectors including: environment and parks, health and wellbeing, local economy, education, local council and care. The programme surfaced the connective tissue of the cultural ecosystem in relation to non-cultural sector actors - these acted as enablers, co-creators, cheerleaders (such as library support staff) or barriers (such as bureaucratic council licence systems).

The interconnectedness of the cultural landscape and working to make those relationships healthy and supportive is part of the work of creating the conditions for a flourishing cultural ecosystem. **Dudley Creates** encouraged social arts practice and created the space, time, reduced risk, and flexibility of approach that enabled artists to focus upon the relational and collaborative nature of this practice.

The relational quality of the programme design, as well as the behaviours modelled by associate producers (in terms of partnerships and relationships with artists), also by artists collaborating with each other, and non-arts collaborators, building relationships with new communities, and then participants working together to co-create their culture, all sends a very clear message about the importance of tending to the quality of relationships across the cultural ecosystem (*Boiling and Thurman, 2016*).

**We have worked well as a group, supporting each part of the project utilising the specific skills of the individuals involved. We would like to develop the work we've created together further, as well as perhaps**

**do another high street / community based project in the future, again as a group with support from more / other partners. [Artist]**

I definitely hope to work with the other artists again as their collaborative approach worked really well, and they each brought different skills to the project that fed off each other. [Artist]

**For these cross-sector and cross discipline practices to become embedded then cultural ecosystem stewards need to adopt long term thinking around what cultural sector support, spaces for culture-making, programme designs, and policy encourages this practice. Also key to this stewardship and ecological leadership will be efforts to make the ecosystem explicit and known to itself:**

**Maybe if there's something that allows us all to know what each other are doing, in the wider cultural sense, not like just artists, knowing what's happening ... I can see everyone nodding, like, how do you actually get to people and meet people? Is it that we all sit in pubs and social clubs**

**for a year, and then after that, then the projects happen, I don't know. Something about finding, finding these amazing little cultural nuggets around the region, maybe there's a group of Latvians that like sing or a group of I don't know, whatever they might be, and you can find these these people and then celebrate their cultures alongside artists and develop together, I think that's really important. [Artist]**

I think that it was about sticking to the Creative Black Country values, but just making it more visible and more accessible to different creatives and to different audiences and different participants. [CBC Producer]

*Gross and Wilson, (2019)* describe the issues of power that flow from the consciousness of the ecosystem. These are issues that are key to future health of the ecosystem:

**“We need to consider whether, once a cultural ecosystem is conscious of itself it can do active work on its collective self-understanding and self-representation. This, potentially, is one of the important possibilities of ‘placed-based’ initiatives such as CPP. Of course, subsequent questions need to follow. Who is involved in the process of a cultural eco-system’s process of self-recognition? Who is in the room? Who holds open the space for self-recognition? And how?”**



## Part 02

# PROGAMMIE DESIGN

**Flexible,  
relational,  
empathetic and  
experimentation  
orientated**

**A flexible, experimentation approach, with a focus upon building relationships and opportunities for creative collaboration, was key to how Dudley creates held open spaces for greater diversity of culture making by local communities and local artists.**

This is a critical consideration within a flourishing ecosystem (*Gross and Wilson, 2019*). For example, the open brief increased artist self determination with project agreements being co-developed rather than imposing a strict target led brief. *Creative Black Country* producers supported this artist freedom to experiment (in new spaces, new art forms, new communities, new project models) by giving them the time needed to work out alternative routes and ideas in the face of project challenges and extended timescales allowing for deeper relationships to form with local communities. This flexibility of time created space for adaptation and mitigation in the context of the uncertainty that is universal in social arts practice, but amplified when convening in interrelating crises.

**This (programme flexibility) was one of the main reasons I applied. I had an idea for a project that required some flexibility and responsiveness in terms of the participants and other artists I worked with. Once the project had started we were able to respond more fluidly to the needs of the group and create something that suited everyone.**

**[Artist]**

**To be able to work together in that way and build relationships like that with creatives, that they felt it was a safe space to make mistakes, or they felt that it was a safe space to experiment, or they felt that it was a safe space to take risks with their creative practice. And the emphasis being on place, as well giving artists whatever stage of their career that they're at, that safe space and kind of buffering them. [CBC Producer]**

I think actually having more empathy, and giving that leeway. And being elastic, actually enhanced the relationships with the communities and with the artists, and with the team, rather than it being rigid in 'this is the plan, and everyone's just got to stick to it and grit your teeth and get on with it', I think it was actually more valuable. [CBC Producer]

*Dudley Creates* offers valuable lessons in cultural programming for increased cultural democracy and a flourishing cultural ecosystem in the context of multiple intersecting crises. It offers both practical insights in terms of supporting artists to navigate such extreme uncertainty, AND normative arguments for the importance of taking a capabilities approach to programming in place that interacts with the politics of place and ideas of cultural democracy, and power. This approach points to an opportunity for local people to shape their current cultural life or landscape, as well as raising questions about the potential of shaping a just cultural future (*Boiling and Thurman, 2016*).

**There's just a lot of learning there about programming during the times that we're in. And even though we're coming out of the pandemic, now we're looking at the cost of living crisis. And, you know, we had events cancelled because of the extreme heat, which is likely to continue next summer and going forwards. So I think it's been a**

**good learning ground for what community work will look like, going forwards, in Dudley, and in the Black Country and throughout the country. [CBC Producer]**

The innovative roles of two associate producers within this programme created the capacity to support artists in a range of ways,

- both practical and nurturing of their cultural potential,
- creating space for rapid feedback loops,
- as well as reflection spaces to draw out practice insights,
- and helped build their confidence to experiment and develop their practice.

Creating opportunities for experimentation in a safe way, through the initial taster workshops, was key to this confidence building, as well as illustrating the action research element of this programme creating space to fail, learn and adapt.

Artists reported how having trusted advisers helped build their confidence to take creative risks and empowered their sense of agency, with ripples in terms of the quality of work created, as well as catalysing new projects.

From a cultural stewardship perspective there was clear value in having two associate producers on the programme in terms of different support needed by different artists, as well as offering programme capacity resilience as their availability changed over the course of the programme.

On a day to day practical level there was a lot of producer support in terms of facilitation, convening and technological support.

This was particularly critical during the pandemic with reliance upon engagement online a real challenge for some artists who were convening online for the first time. The overall success of this experience and increased comfort in convening online or hybrid convening creates greater adaptability for their social practice going forward with understanding of participant accessibility, and consideration of recording, captioning and signing.

Certainly this *Creative Black Country* support helped build non traditional arts skills that improve and create flexibility in social and participatory practices. These capabilities are important in terms of realising access issues related to cultural democracy and so an area of opportunity for artist shared learning going forward.

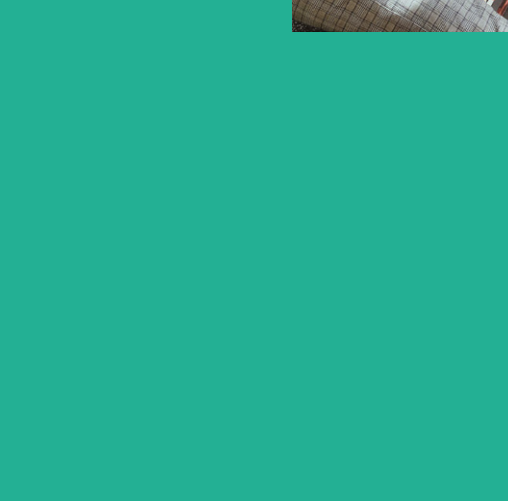
Both participants and artists appreciated the focus upon quality of convening and hosting in this programme, stressing the importance of safe, friendly, welcoming and non-judgemental (often) small group convening.

*Dudley Creates* also highlighted how social practice benefits from skills or support in terms of multimedia communication to find ways to extend meaningful invitations to communities that resonate. While the programme offered this support, it is clear more artist capacity building in this area, along with greater programme design focus upon how artists will connect to existing and new audience networks would be useful.

**I have had so much support from CBC during this project, being able to talk through the initial ideas/plans and flyers enabled me to feel confident about my project while gaining valuable advice. Also support during the sessions, as Kerry O'Coy visited each session, taking photos/videos and I was able to give feedback on how the**

**project was going as well as ask advice on any queries I had for the next sessions. This was so important especially as I can sometimes feel isolated as a freelance artist so working with others is really good for me. [Artist]**

I've been able to develop my workshop facilitation skills with a focus on areas that are important to me such as having a safe space for women and girls. I've become confident to continue carrying workshops across 2023 as well. [Artist]







# Artist and participant cultural capability

**“The substantial social freedom – cultural capability – to co-create versions of culture is enabled and constrained by people’s environments. There is huge potential for going further to ensure that each neighbourhood of the UK is one in which varied and sustained opportunities to co-create versions of culture exist, for everyone.”**

*- Wilson, Gross and Bull, 2017*

The intentional programme design focus upon: a. working deeply in place, b. adopting collaborative approaches, and c. commissioning (mostly) local artists to engage in participatory social practice with local communities, had positive cultural ecosystem and cultural democracy implications. Supporting artists to take a people and place centred approach meant understanding local context, local challenges to taking part, and being relevant in a way that nurtured a freedom to co-create, and in so doing increase the

creative potential of local people and Dudley as a place.

The focus upon co-creation and collaborative practice extended to the CBC producer teams freedom to weave connections across the ecosystem of different linked cultural activity to increase cultural opportunity ripples, build connectivity, and shared learning. In short, to demonstrate ecological leadership.

In terms of partnerships; the learning with CoLab Dudley, the work to get money from the council, the strategy as part of the Compact, this work, this learning, allows us to tell a much bigger vision of what people want. ... the way that the people approach creativity, it's very much this top down approach. And we're always about the bottom up and what people want on the ground. And just that knowledge, I think it's just going to be really important. [CBC Producer]

The social practice focus helped create access to cultural opportunities and relationships in order for participants to build their cultural capability (their capacity to co-create culture). It also created space for artists to do the same in terms of space to grow their practice and build new relationships across the Dudley cultural ecosystem of artists, communities, stewards (e.g. *Creative Black Country/ CoLab Dudley*) and non-arts collaborators.

The collaborative approach (working with other artists and non arts collaborators) built ecosystem connections and catalysed new cultural

opportunities. From an increased cultural capability perspective the learning points to an opportunity to more systematically consider ripples and follow ups given the cultural opportunities created by some of these projects (including new cultural enterprises, new follow-on projects, new funding applications, and new community groups). Participants appreciated the relatability of local artists whose projects were supported through the design process to be relevant, contextual and accessible for participants. Participants clearly expressed an appetite for follow-on events, or longer sessions for those moved to create and share more. The community building quality of the convening was particularly valued - especially the collective experience of co-creating.

**Participants were able to make connections, discuss local matters, chat about memories, talk about their lives, share ideas and stories. The project encouraged confidence in talking to others, learning new skills and taking part in a collaborative artwork. It allowed for discussion about local history, art and craft. People were able to share local information while making. Craft was a tool to help**

**people to feel at ease and open up. [Artist]**

Going forward the learning highlights opportunities to and a real desire by artists and producers to support local community members who want to go beyond cultural participation in the form of collaboration and co-creation, to more explicitly being involved in co-creation and co-design of new projects. So not just co-creating culture, but also co-creating the cultural landscape. We explore this opportunity further within the action learning agenda section below.

**For future projects we would use face-to-face engagement at the exploration, design and invitation stage. [Artist]**

Collaboration allows for decentralisation of voices. That sounds really fancy, doesn't it, but it allows them to have horizontal voice, um, if you're working with powers, ... if you're working to try and get rid of power structures, which I think the arts is trying to do, sometimes it's to allow people to have more voices in collaboration, it makes that more horizontal. [Artist]



*Portrait of a place gave participants an opportunity to bring their stories of Dudley to life through poetry and animation workshops.*

CBC enabled us to provide these activities free of charge and to make a real and positive impact and contact with the public. We were enabled to engage with visitors who we had not yet managed to work with. It encouraged us to think about how we advertised the events, how we should best record data about the events and the need to evaluate each event to inform the next. We have developed our skills of recording our events through photo collage and video which has led us to create our own YouTube channel to showcase what we are doing. CBC's support has also helped us to hone our skill set and focus our ideas for future creative opportunities. Thank you!

[Artist]

# Programme design focus upon the role of creative documentation

As an action research programme *Dudley Creates* encouraged creative documentation, with monies and materials resources made available to artists to support this aspect of project design. Again there was no tight prescriptive outcome brief, rather the freedom to explore what creative documentation meant for them and their project.

There were varying degrees of comfort or familiarity with this practice and what it could make possible. But for a few of the projects creative documentation was a critical part of the creative process, bringing new dimensions to the cultural production as well as deeper ripples in terms of participant experiences and appreciation of the reflection triggered. For some it was an act of celebration and reflection with participants at the end; for some it was a valuable opportunity to reflect with new collaborators triggering learning and ideas for future projects. For others it was a more straightforward act of documentation using a range of mediums that were used to make the project more visible and accessible to new audiences.

A deeper dive with some of the projects leads revealed a much more diverse set of ideas around the potential value of creative documentation.



*On The High Street was a photography and film project that utilised the opportunity to invite another collaborator to capture the project.*

In terms of the range, breadth and quality of the content, we collected far more than we had expected at the initial preparation stage. The final curation will give a good sense of the perspectives of a wide age range of people (from 8- 94) from the area; particularly in relation to the documentation of thoughts pertaining to the canals and green spaces. The final digital output aims to act as a legacy for the project but also a digital 'Time Capsule' for the area and the participants involved.  
[Artist]

Artists described creative documentation:

- as an artefact for celebration and sharing;
- a creative pathway to building new audiences and cultural ripples;
- a reflection tool for participants and artists; an important capturing of the things we don't see (as project leads) thus expanding the understanding of the range of experiences and cultural value created;
- for some it was another piece of art in its own right, one that logs and offers a critical historical record of the culture co-created, this in itself a democratising practice that erode barriers to cultural democracy.

One of the projects was inspired by an absence of cultural documentation in the Dudley archive reminding us that who records history shapes cultural heritage. In short there is an argument for civic responsibility to nurture creative documentation in community cultural programmes like this. From a practice development and ecosystem knowledge sharing perspective creative documentation helps by recording the process and enabling these insights to be exchanged.

**It enables an extra audience, like after the event. So I guess it's when it makes people that were part of it feel quite proud of what went on or what was done, and what could carry on in their life, what could happen next. It's also quite fun. So we did quite a lot of audio recording of conversations and sounds and the editing was quite fun. Because when we had a little zoom after the event, and actually hearing that back was quite emotional. Because I created these little snippets of conversations and realising some of the little things that we said, all the little moments that we had, that wouldn't have happened without that, creative documentation. So it's good as a reflection tool, it's good to remind us and to capture the things that maybe we didn't see. [Artist]**

With some artists anxious about when and how to do creative documentation well as part of their social practice, (for example, ensuring this is a process of co-creation not extraction), there is an opportunity for a collective action learning agenda here that could be explored in future programmes. In addition, and importantly for the ecosystem health, documentation helps with ecosystem visibility to itself and so helps with knowing that you are part of a bigger network of cultural activity that in turn encourages more sharing, co-creating, and collaborating.

I think very often it feels like a project is perceived as this process. And then there is a project where it's actually recording the process. And recognising the process, I think that is as important as you know, achieving that end product. And I think it's something I need to do more often and better. [Artist]

## **PART 03**

# **ACTION LEARNING AGENDAS**

## **1. Cultural capabilities focussed programming**

“Within the openness of the capabilities approach, we can pose the question of how specifically cultural capabilities – what we suggest calling the substantive freedoms to give form and value to our experiences – may in turn nurture and nourish other capabilities. How might the freedoms to make and experience music (and other cultural products and processes) together enable agency within other domains? How does this vary across different conditions and contexts of culture-making? And what role might policymakers play in cultivating conditions conducive to these cross-fertilising effects?”

-  
*Gross and Wilson, 2018*



*Sound Aloud, led by artist Gavin Rogers, was a project that was given space and time to flex and iterate around the uncertainties of social distancing, unusual and inhospitable outdoor spaces and changeable social issues and group uptake.*

**Dudley Creates** has shown us a really hopeful example of what it means to design a cultural programme in the context of crises. We learnt that by designing and facilitating a cultural programme that is flexible, relational, empathetic and experimentation orientated you reduce artist risk and vulnerability and increase their capacity and confidence for practice development, innovation and adaptation.

Within the context of extreme uncertainty owing to intersecting crises this programme patiently held open space for emergent and diverse cultural opportunities.

This capacity to flex in response to shifting context and changing variables will be critical to future cultural programming alongside/ with communities as crises evolve. This is an essential part (and benefit) of adopting an ecological approach to the cultural sector in Dudley borough. A more rigid and less relational approach risks lost cultural opportunities and increasing barriers to cultural democracy.

Further, the intentional programme design focus upon:

- working deeply in place,
- adopting collaborative approaches, and
- commissioning predominantly local artists

to engage in participatory social practice with local communities, had positive cultural ecosystem and cultural democracy implications.

What we can see from this learning is a picture of more connected elements of the cultural ecosystem (artists, communities, collaborators) and increased community and artist cultural capability (or freedom to co-create culture). By expanding who co-creates culture and where and how they do that this programme has gently disrupted cultural norms of what is / is not expected, while growing what is perceived as possible for those that took part.

**This capabilities approach within cultural programming and strategy will become even more critical if communities are to nurture the regenerative resilience required to navigate crises.**

**The role of social arts practice in enabling citizen artists to take cultural action to imagine and create just futures - described here by author, theatre maker and activist Lucy Neal - becomes a critical part of this conversation:**

**“I saw we could reclaim a more**

**liveable world but only if we’d the space to first imagine it. The participatory arts became charged for me in new ways with this practice of a great imagining with living within ecological limits and community at its heart. artists use the word practice, but it’s one that everyone can use to describe a daily life that combines creativity and intentional change. This was life as a citizen artist. What art critic Susie Gablet calls the re-enchanting of our culture, where personal and collective creativity connect to social moral ethical and ecological responsibility. Not responsibility for the world in general, but one that is specific and practical and different for each one of us. The line between community activism and art making and community making got blurry” (Neal, 2015)**

## What other aspects of the ecosystem can support this capabilities approach?

## How to design a cultural capabilities approach to cultural programming and cultural ecosystems so we are better able to ... so we are better able to:

1. Respond to intersecting crises?
2. Enable just flourishing cultural futures for everyone in Dudley borough?

For example, might this capabilities and ecological framing contribute to nurturing emerging models of regenerative resilience described here:

**“This emerging model of resilience focuses on adaptation, repair, and renewal. Drawing from systems and ecological theory, resilience becomes about how a system behaves under pressure, and how risk is distributed. In this model, resilience is tied to equalities because without systemic resilience, risks are shouldered by the most vulnerable. At the national level resilience is about building better social systems, rather than patching-up existing fragile systems, and communities’ self-determination, autonomy, and intelligence are important not just for specific groups or localities, but society as a whole.”**

- *Local Trust, 2022*

**“Belfiore and Hadley (2018) trace the contested history of cultural democracy, including its overt political- ideological manifestations in the 1970s and 80s community arts movement. They suggest that the movement recognised the revolutionary nature of cultural democracy as a bigger debate about societal inequalities and fundamental structural change. They argue that a “historically informed yet present- and future-oriented theoretical elaboration of cultural democracy for the twenty-first century” is needed to approach questions of fairness, equity and equality within all cultural lives beyond the hierarchy of publicly funded culture (Wright, 2022).**

Building upon this suggestion by Belfiore and Hadley (2018) as part of this action learning agenda we might explore an expanded working definition of cultural democracy. One that embraces long term thinking and so considers future generations, ancestors, and the rest of nature. This action learning agenda would build upon an abundance of shared learning through creative experiments by local Time Rebels over the last two years stewarded by *CoLab Dudley*.

How might creative documentation become a more usual part of co-creation, shared learning and reflection, as well as celebration within projects?

**How to ensure this process is not extractive or imposed, but rather generative and supportive of artists and creative communities in their ability to co-create their cultural landscape?**

## **2. The potential of creative documentation**

As an action research programme Dudley Creates explicitly encouraged creative documentation. There were varying degrees of comfort, or familiarity with this practice, and what it could make possible. But for a few of the projects creative documentation was a critical part of the creative process, bringing new dimensions to the cultural production as well as deeper ripples in terms of participant experiences and appreciation of the reflection triggered. In 'Power Up' Chrissie Tiller reminds us of the wisdom of Horton and Freire and the importance of learning through doing, but also learning through reflection:

**“As part of this conversation, the pair discuss the notion of ‘praxis’: the understanding that comes from the interface between our actions and reflections. Whilst agreeing with Horton we only learn from ‘doing’, Freire insists on a parallel need for reflection. ‘Without practice there is no knowledge’, he proposes, but in order to use that knowledge we need to underpin it: with ‘a theoretical type of practice’ (Tiller, 2017)**

This echoes our experience within this programme learning process where seven project leads took part in deeper reflective sessions where they illustrated how much they care about the programme learning, and the valuable wisdom they have to share beyond the usual feedback questionnaire. It also showed us how much they valued the space for shared reflection with fellow artists and producers. The insights they shared in terms of the potential cultural value of creative documentation show this is a rich area of action learning for the ecosystem.

**Might we explore and test out an approach that better aligns with a form of creative documentation that feels more empowering as described here:**

**“More than illustrating or simply presenting information in the form of a report, for example, creative documentation produces an artwork or cultural product that is a form of knowledge. Chris Johnson states: “Creative documentation serves as another form of knowledge generation that has the potential to shift power by offering a better understanding of creative and cultural practice in communities” (PolicyLink, 2020).**



### **3. Nurturing an ecological approach to cultural ecosystem stewardship**

**“Collaborative, non-hierarchical leadership by many hands widens the circles of influence while making relevance more likely. ...The ‘multiplying leadership’ approach most useful in delivering the aims of Creative People and Places can be summarised as being rooted in activities which: connect people and ideas to each other; collaborate and co-create with people through exploration of shared purpose; multiply the visibility and awareness of the effect, range and diversity of people involved, and also the collective learning from experience; know the community and the context and ask useful questions; hold open spaces for others while developing and delivering strategic plans; develop collective capacity”**

*- Robinson, 2022.*

The type of “multiplying” leadership described above by *Mark Robnison* reflects the ecological approach manifested in the **Dudley Creates** programme across different members of the ecosystem.

From artists, to non-arts collaborators, to community members, to cultural infrastructure bodies we saw common practices of connection, co-creation, collaboration, exploration around shared creative ideas which succeeded in bringing a diversity of cultural experiences and perspectives more explicitly and knowingly into the ecosystem. With wider, intentional and more visible application these ways of working point to the value of an ecological approach to culture in the borough which encourages shared responsibility and more collective leadership practices.

While specific responsibilities will differ with roles, ecological leadership and governance will require a more diverse collection of voices, distribution of power in co-creation and decision making, and shared action towards a flourishing cultural ecosystem.

***How might we nurture this type of ecological leadership, governance and way of organising?***

**“[C]ultural opportunity needs to be understood not as located within single organisations or spaces, but through the interconnections and interdependencies between cultural resources of many kinds”**  
*(Gross and Wilson, 2018)*

The interconnectedness of the cultural landscape and working to make those relationships healthy, known and supportive is part of the work of creating the conditions for a flourishing cultural ecosystem.

The flexibility of approach within **Dudley Creates** enabled artists to focus upon the relational and collaborative nature of their practice that takes time and requires trust. Importantly, by holding open the space for diverse practices of culture making, **Dudley Creates** was able to make possible local community cultural co-creation with an incredible range of cultural outcomes.

Holding open the space means conditions for surfacing the interconnectedness of the cultural ecosystem in relation to new artist collaborations, non-arts spaces, unfamiliar cultural assets, and non-cultural sector actors who acted as enablers, co-

creators and collaborators (e.g. library support staff). This focus upon collaborative practice extended to the CBC producer team freedom to weave connections across different linked cultural activity in order to increase cultural opportunity ripples, build connectivity, and shared learning across the ecosystem.

In short, to demonstrate ecological leadership. Paying attention to the quality of those partnerships, and naming the behaviours that support an ecological approach has been really helpful in the ecological design of a ground up approach to the local Cultural Compact that has focussed upon open spaces and rhythms of sharing, connecting and learning by creatives and collaborators.

Furthermore, the considerations for a flourishing cultural ecosystem that this programme has begun to surface (see emergent vital signs table) offer timely lessons for the emerging Dudley 100 Year Cultural Strategy.

**What next steps might we explore in nurturing an ecological approach in relation to ecosystem visibility?**

**“We need to consider whether, once a cultural ecosystem is conscious**

**of itself as such (so to speak) – and, perhaps, once it has the resources to engage with itself as such – it can do active work on its collective self-understanding and self-representation. This, potentially, is one of the important possibilities of ‘placed-based’ initiatives such as CPP. Of course, subsequent questions need to follow. Who is involved in the process of a cultural eco-system’s process of self-recognition? Who is in the room? Who holds open the space for self-recognition? And how?”**  
*(Gross and Wilson, 2019)*

As Gross and Wilson (2019) state clearly above this requires us to question who is involved in that process of self-recognition, self-understanding and self-representation?

These are questions of power, access and cultural norms and so cultural democracy. So as the Compact builds and the Strategy emerges we need to be critically reflecting and asking questions about ecological governance and leadership. Specifically, co-designing these spaces, structures and practices to meaningfully engage with redistribution of power and support the realisation of cultural democracy  
*(Jancovich, 2017).*

**“As one CPP director, quoting Aboriginal artist/activist Lilla Watson, explained, creating ‘power with’ is about finding solidarity with your community through collaboration and co-creation: ‘If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.’ It is also dependent on whether, having given people a voice in creating, commissioning or curating work, ‘they feel that voice will continue to be listened to’ and that they will be able ‘to influence future outcomes’. In order to do that, communities need to see themselves not only as participants but ‘co-creators’ and ‘initiators’ of programmes.”***(Tiller, 2017)*

**How are local people part of the ecological governance and open spaces of decision-making that shape their cultural landscape?**

**“Questions about how culture is made and by who, and which creative activity gets recognised and supported, are matters in which we all have a profound and ever more urgent interest.”**  
*(Wilson, Gross and Bull, 2017)*

**What is the role of ecosystem stewards in unlocking that distribution of power?**

**In addition to the critical freedom of everyday cultural expression, how might community members, alongside creative industries and publicly funded arts organisations co-create and steward the cultural landscape. How to support local community members (who want to) to be involved in co-creation and co-design of new projects, or shaping wider cultural ecosystem activity?**

**How does this form of governance create the opportunity to expand / disrupt hegemonic norms that limit what is ‘valued’ cultural activity and where that should happen, and by whom?**

**How might ecological governance practices nurture connections to local places that encourage long term thinking and so help us develop a cultural legacy mindset?**

**A brief note on the approach we have taken in collating and exploring Dudley Creates learning. The focus of this learning wasn't a report, or a form of evaluation to share with a funder. Instead this was a process integrated into the programme to create spaces for:**

- **practice reflection for artists and programme reflection for producers,**
- **continued practice of an experimentation and learning approach adopted throughout the programme not just in design and delivery,**
- **the bringing together of different types of knowledge and perspectives from participants, artists and producers;**
- **emergence of practical action learning agendas developed to build upon the lessons and creative momentum of Dudley Creates as part of the action research tradition of CPPs,**
- **but also an emerging ecological approach to the cultural sector in Dudley and so the ..**

intentional weaving this learning into wider engaged research and cultural animation as part of *'Rehearsing the Futures we Want'* Cultural Compact open gathering in December 2022 and then Dudley's 100 Year Cultural Strategy.

The learning synthesised survey feedback from project participants, twenty one artist leads, artist and participant creative documentation, in depth informal interviews with the programme producers, and deep dive shared learning spaces with seven of the artists to explore the initial learning themes, plus documentation by the programme producers.

This multi-layer and multi data source approach has been analysed and explored in relation to cultural sector and CPP programme specific research and thinking.

In parallel to this learning piece the **Dudley Creates** producers authored documentation of the programme as a whole. Their learning offers more granular detail in terms of a record of the individual projects; their participants; the resources and policy context in which the programme emerged and related first order outcomes.

The two pieces of learning serve to complement each other in understanding an emerging ecological approach. The first offers valuable practical in place project management insights and future opportunities regarding ecological stewardship; the second builds upon these reflections to consider more normative issues around the future role of ecosystem stewards, the shift to a way of understanding the sector as non-hierarchical, interdependent, inter-woven in place, and a function of the quality of relationships it encourages.

It has been a joy to weave together and identify patterns within the rich layers of knowledge shared in **Dudley Creates**.

# approaches to this learning

# a thank you note

There are a couple of reasons for this, and they go to the heart of this thank you note.

This was by no means your typical obligatory end of programme reporting. Rather, this learning piece is simply another step in the ongoing journey of experimentation adopted throughout this cultural programme. Starting from a place of experimentation, a willingness to flex to shifting contexts, and a commitment to the potential of cultural life in the borough shifts how learning in this process has been valued as critical to creative action, and ultimately how insights are already being fed back into the cultural ecosystem.

I wanted to express how grateful I am to Kerry and Laura (**Dudley Creates** associate producers) and the relational approach to their practice that embraces learning as an important creative and social endeavour critical for individual and collective development.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge the time very generously given by artists and producers in the programme to dive deeper into initial learning themes and questions. I hope this learning reflects their honesty, their hard won insights over the lifetime of this programme, and their passion for the transformative potential of a flourishing cultural life for all in Dudley borough.

*Thank you everyone for sharing your time and wisdom.*

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