Mapping Three City Networks – A Summary.

1. Introduction

This is the summary of a review of three city networks conducted by *Ekos* between January and March 2014. The review was commissioned by *Creative Scotland* in association with; *Creative Dundee, Creative Edinburgh* and *Creative Stirling*, the **Creative City Networks**.

The review intended to provide information on the impact of each network on its respective city, identifying potential for future development, and any lessons that might be adopted in other cities. Each network is independent, focussing on their own distinctive aims and objectives tailored to each of the three cities. Each has received funding support from Creative Scotland

Although the networks differ in terms of characteristics such as size, objectives and focus, they each offer similar activities and are contributing positively to the creative and cultural profile within their respective cities. The networks have taken a bottom up approach to network delivery and creative support, responding to the needs of those within the industry.

This summary draws together the *Ekos* findings and offers some initial conclusions for further discussion. The conclusions are structured into three main areas, in line with the study objectives:

- operational models;
- impacts;
- future development.

Ekos also offered comment on some of the wider lessons that might be drawn from the experience of these three projects.

2. Operational Models

Each of the three projects has evolved a distinctive model, albeit with some common characteristics. In particular, each network shares the following:

- a broad and inclusive focus that seeks to encourage collaboration right across the spectrum of creative activity;
- an emphasis on largely informal styles of networking activities and events;
- a 'bottom up' approach that is firmly grounded in the needs of the sector and maintains close connection to the creative community in each city;
- a strong feel of being 'of the sector' rather than 'for the sector', a function of fact that those leading each network come themselves from the creative community – this enables a high degree of trust;
- a commitment to working in partnership across the creative industries and the public sector;
- provision of information via digital means;
- and a focus on signposting to existing business support rather than direct provision.

3. Impacts

All three projects are reportedly creating benefits for participant businesses and practitioners as well as for their wider constituencies (sector and city). In each base, the feedback from beneficiaries was positive, and it is clear that the networks are providing valuable opportunities for cross-sector networking and facilitating collaboration across disciplines. This is entirely in line with their organisational ambitions. It is also worth noting that even though economic impact is not an explicit objective of any of the projects, evidence was found of some such benefit, even if modest. This simply underlines the important role of networking in supporting growth in the creative sector.

In fact, this last point is part of the central rationale for these projects, and three issues are important in this respect:

- contrary to popular myth, the creative process is not a solitary pursuit. It is more often a collaborative effort across disciplines. Networking is an essential means of facilitating this collaboration;
- innovation is what drives growth and development in the creative industries, and the very process of innovation is also highly collaborative and interdisciplinary. Networking is again crucial in creating the opportunities for innovation to coalesce;
- the creative industries congregate at regional rather than national levels. It makes good sense to support networking at a local (city) level.

Clearly then the networks are achieving impacts insofar as they are creating the opportunities for knowledge sharing, peer learning and support and collaboration. At the city level, impacts and benefits are far harder to evidence.

4. Future Development

Each of the three city networks are still relatively young, and all need to consolidate and stabilise following their initial set-up time. All are also very stretched in terms of resources, and need to evolve their financial models.

However, it is important to be realistic about this, and to recognise that these organisations will continue to require support from the public sector for some time. Importantly, this should not just be in the form of financial support, but there is a valid and important role for the public sector in supporting the development of their organisational capacity. Nonetheless, financial support will remain important and the public sector partners (currently local authorities and Creative Scotland) will need to be in a position to assess the return on their investment. This means clear plans and objectives together with an appropriate means of assessing the extent to which these are being achieved.

There is a balance to be struck in this respect. The networks lack the organisational capacity and resources to support demanding target monitoring systems, but the current lack of performance information could be an issue for funders. It is also a vulnerability for the projects themselves, and is in their own interest, as well as those directly and indirectly involved in the network, to put better monitoring procedures in place for future viability.

There is a risk in the public sector being overly directive with these projects. Getting behind individuals with drive and vision is an appropriate role for cultural policy and should be encouraged, so long as there are appropriate conditions in place to ensure proper accountability in the use of public funds. It should be for the organisations, in consultation with their communities, to set future priorities.

It is also important that the networks are fully embedded within their cities and with the civic authorities. Local relationships are already well established and should continue to the nurtured with the councils in particular. The networks provide a voice for the creative sector in their respective cities, and create benefit for those cities. This is of direct interest to the councils.

Creative Scotland also has a role in helping to enable the embedding of the networks in each city by voicing the importance of the creative community at a city level. Impacts and benefits need to be visible and recognised for their importance not only at an individual level but also as a city.

The role of Creative Scotland in the future development of each of the networks is about finding the right balance between a "hands off" approach and a more target driven path. The current light touch approach allows the networks to develop organically and this is important.

Creative Scotland can also increase awareness and promote each network at city and strategic levels. It can also play an advisory role to the networks, providing advice/signposting when required, and there are still some capacity issues to address.

5. Summary of conclusions

A number of summary conclusions can be drawn as follows:

- the three city networks have successfully built a profile and positive reputation within their communities and have done so through an approach that is closely connected and inclusive;
- they are delivering key benefits to participating businesses and practitioners by building the collaborative capacity of the sector in each city;
- they are also supporting stronger relationships between the sector and the public sector, and are a valuable route into the sector for these partners;
- all are under resourced, and there is a need to stabilise operations and ensure that staff resources are adequate;
- there is potential for future growth, but this should be managed such that it retains the core value of the networks, and extends their reach into the areas identified above;
- and clearer objectives and measures of success are now required to evidence the value of the projects and provide a robust case for ongoing support.

6. Wider Lessons

While it is never appropriate to simply lift a model from one place to another, there are some important lessons that arise from the review and can usefully inform the development of creative networks elsewhere:

- networks should work closely with their local creative community to identify their needs and priorities – a highly bespoke approach is necessary;
- leadership from the sector, or that is at least highly sensitive to the needs of the sector, is essential;
- networks should be led and owned by the sector itself and not developed by the public sector on behalf of the creative community – the bottom-up approach has proved its value;
- networking should appear informal, yet conform to high quality standards in terms of speaker input etc.;
- digital engagement is very effective but again must be of a high quality and tailored to the needs and character of the local sector;
- strong partnership is essential – both with the civic authorities and with other support providers; and
- a broad and inclusive approach is valuable as it brings multiple perspectives to the network and encourages the kinds of less predictable collaborations from which innovation often arises.

The Creative City Networks:

Creative Dundee connects creative talent with opportunities and amplifies the city's creative pulse by: encouraging collaboration and networking to develop the local creative and cultural sectors; increasing awareness of the local scene, within and out with the sectors and city; acting as a partner and broker to impact positively on communities, the city and the local economy. www.creativedundee.com

Creative Stirling is a not for profit creative enterprise with values and aims based around re-energising the city through partnership working, retaining talent and connecting people through cultural experience. We have a portfolio of projects, activities and services devised for and with the arts and creative industry sector and within an overarching principle that everything we do is accessible for wider community as participants and audiences. www.creativestirling.org

Creative Edinburgh is a not for profit membership organisation. They are the channel through which creative industry businesses and individuals in Edinburgh can connect to available support, programmed events, business-to-business networks, skills development and investment opportunities. They endeavour to promote their talent both nationally and internationally and inspire, nurture and value their members. www.creative-edinburgh.com