

Covid-19 and Creative Clusters

A real-time study of the impact of Covid-19 and associated support measures on the creative business community in Hackney Wick and the QE Olympic Park.

Summary

This project will investigate the impact of, and recovery from, the Covid-19 pandemic on the creative community in and around Hackney Wick, Fish Island, and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in East London. It will combine quantitative and qualitative research, and will be used to inform London and UK-wide policy on creative clusters.

The Hackney Wick/Fish Island (HW/FI) and Olympic Park (QEOP) cluster brings together small and micro-creative businesses with large and significant creative employers (such as BT Sport and Sadler's Wells Theatre) in a very small physical footprint. It is also home to Loughborough University London, and parts of UCL, Staffordshire University London, and Liverpool Media Academy.

Working with businesses and community partners over 12 months from September 2020, the project will seek to understand how Covid-19 has affected creative community activities and business models, and people's changing attitudes to their future prospects. It will then conduct a programme of collaborative workshops to develop and test new interventions and support measures. It will be led by a steering group of local partners, and will bring together a network of national and regional advisers specialising in creative cluster development.

The research will:

- Monitor how businesses in the cluster have been affected by the Covid-19 virus and their plans for recovery and future growth
- Monitor the impact of Government and other interventions to support small businesses
- Provide insights into the impact of Covid-19 on entrepreneurial attitudes among the creative business community
- Provide insights into the impact of Covid-19 on the broader eco-system, including supply-chain partners, investors and local support networks
- Capture secondary research of the impact of Covid-19 on other businesses and clusters in London and nationally
- Influence future policies to support more resilient creative clusters
- In particular, work with the GLA and other regional partners to inform policy and interventions in London over coming years.

This project is led by Professor Andrew Chitty, with the support of Graham Hitchen and Federico Vaz. It is co-funded by UKRI/AHRC and Loughborough London.

Research goal and aims

The research objective is to understand the experience of Covid-19 of the creative community in HW/FI and the QEOP:

- How has it changed community and business interactions?

- Which (national and local) interventions have worked?
- What can we learn to shape future support/interventions to help build a more robust and agile creative cluster?

Moreover, the project aims at co-developing:

- A common understanding of the factors that make the creative community resilient;
- A set of recommendations for country-wide interventions to support other creative communities.

In achieving the above, the researchers have systematically interrogated participants about three main aspects:

1. How have you and your business activities been affected by Covid-19? What are you doing differently? What are your plans for the future?
2. What support programmes have you accessed? What has and what has not worked?
3. How can we do things better to support a strong and vibrant creative community in the future?

The Research Approach

The research approach to this project has been based on ‘design for policy’, an emerging yet growing field of research and practice, that utilises design tools and methods to provide new understanding of policy issues while co-developing interventions with diverse actors affected by those same policy issues¹. Core to the design for policy approach is capturing insights and developing situated understandings of socio-cultural and economic problems. In this way, the actions oriented to strengthening a particular sector or community are largely based on the protagonists’ understanding of their issues and knowledge about potential solutions. To navigate the particularities of the creative community in HW/FI and the QEOP, a four-phase model was developed.

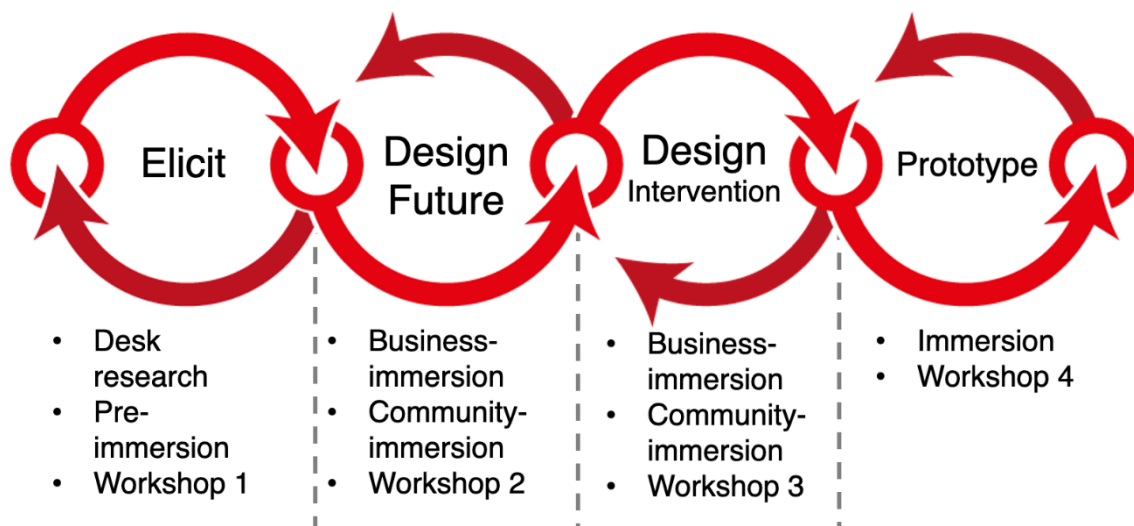


Figure 1: Four phases of the design for policy approach.

¹ Whicher, A. (2020). AHRC Design Fellows Challenges of the Future: Public Policy.

This model visualises the different stages in the research project while emphasising their iterative nature. Each of these phases imply different levels of immersion within the creative community, as well as actions and expected outputs.

Through a series of workshops and engagement activities, the research objectives are to

1. **Elicit what is the current situation and what are the perceptions and outlook for creative businesses into 2021:** This first phase includes the familiarisation with existing and current literature (journal articles, reports, blogs) on the impact of Covid-19 in the Creative Industries (CI) in general, and the characteristics of the area of interest in particular. Likewise, it looks at the pre-immersion of the researchers in the community by participating in diverse activities and forums. Individual and group interviews with a range of diverse actors are conducted at this stage. From these activities a number of themes are elicited.
2. **Develop a shared preferable future for the community:** In its second phase, and through a series of activities involving actors in HW/FI and the QEOP, the research will look at developing shared future visions of the creative community moving into 2021 and beyond. The purpose is to find a common narrative that allows for the alignment of wills and resources towards the attainment of what the community understands as a preferred future.
3. **Generate intervention and policy ideas:** The research's third phase involves the co-design of potential government interventions that could facilitate the realisation of the preferred futures envisioned in the previous phase. To achieve this, a series of activities including co-creative workshops with diverse actors of the creative communities in HW/FI and the QEOP, and policymakers and representatives of the local authorities (LLDC, LBH, LBTH, LBN) will take place.
4. **Prototyping and testing policy ideas:** The fourth and last phase involves the validation of the interventions previously developed. This will be carried out by implementing a series of prototypes to test the assumptions on which the interventions are based and inquiry on the validity of the proposed solutions to help in developing preferred futures for the creative communities within HW/FI and the QEOP.