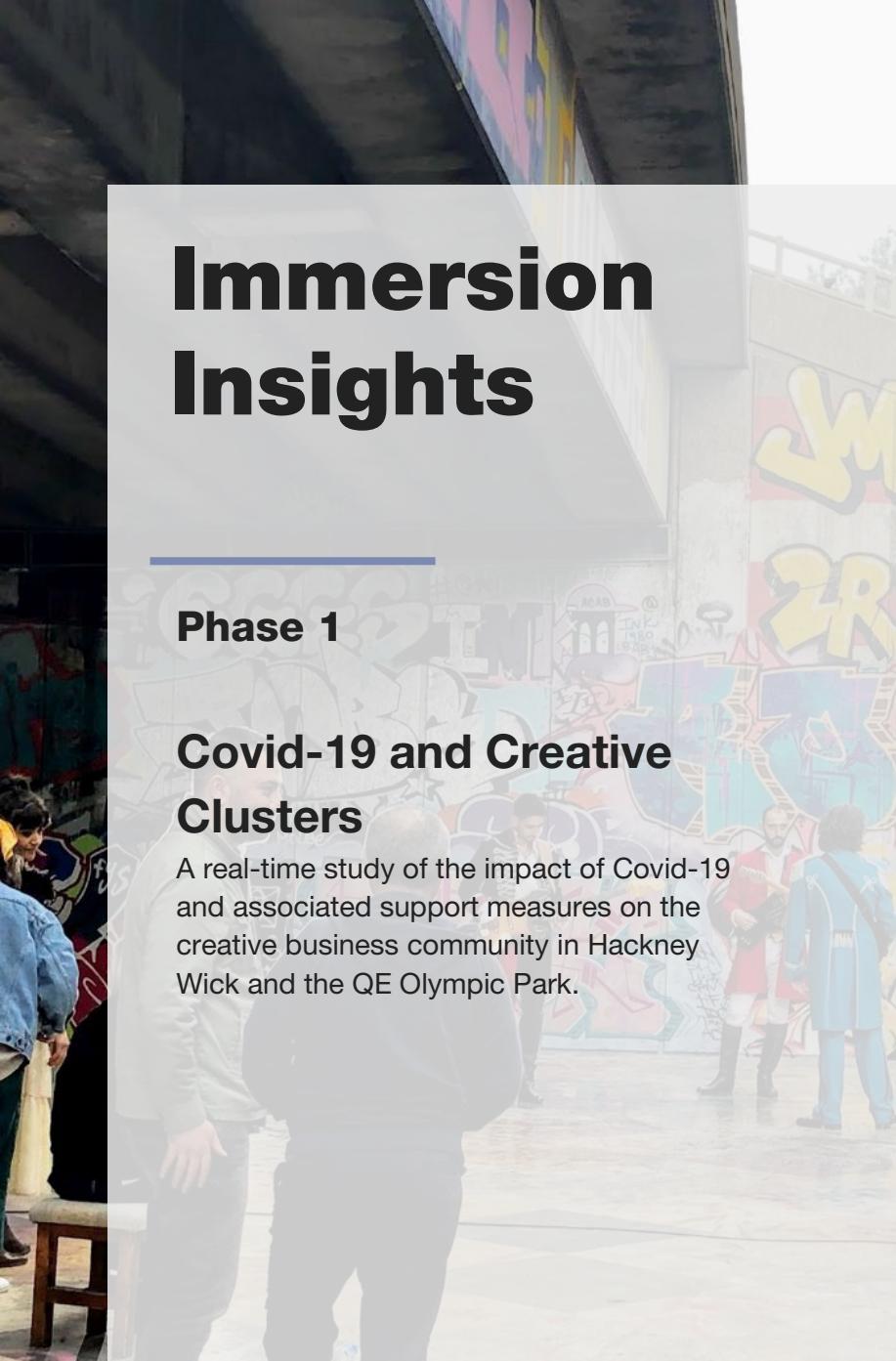


Immersion Insights

Phase 1

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.



DECEMBER 21

#HWCRAIC

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Arts and
Humanities
Research Council



Loughborough
University
London

1. Introduction

This report offers an account of four aspects of the first phase of the HWCRAIC research project: **Insights**. Through a series of activities involving actors in Hackney Wick (HW), Fish Island (FI), and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP), this phase aimed at immersing in the area in order to:

1. Engage local creatives and agencies in the research project;
2. Gather preliminary qualitative data;
3. Refine the project's research questions based on the obtained insights.

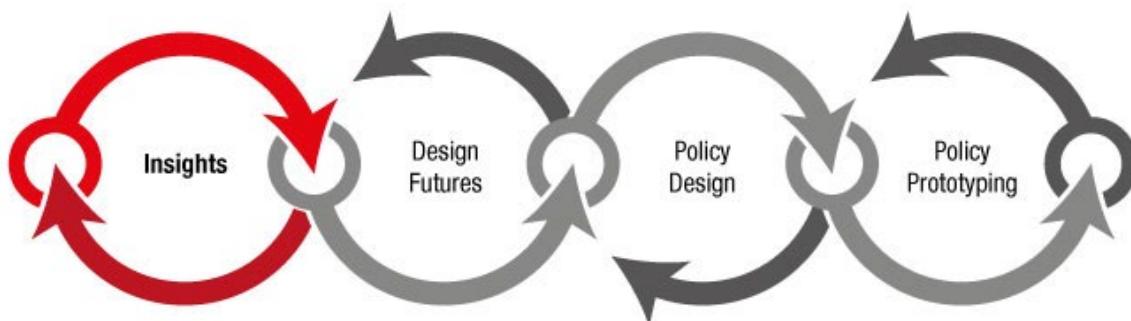


Figure 1: Four phases of the research approach

This phase is the first of four in the design-led approach (Figure 1) adopted by the researchers in the attempt to simultaneously gain a rich understanding of the pandemic's impact (embedded and situated) whilst informing future creative industries support policy. This is the most extensive of the four phases, providing underpinning data and information on which the following three phases were developed. In effect, it provided the real-time information on the extent to which the creative community had been affected by the pandemic. In addition, this phase aimed to:

- 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.

This phase's activities extended from September 2020 to March 2021 and included the immersion of the researchers within the local creative communities by participating in diverse activities and forums. In addition, individual and group interviews with a range of various actors were also conducted at this stage.

Including this introduction, the report is divided into seven main sections. Section 2 introduces the notion of immersion and the methods used for this purpose¹. Section 3 reports on the insights gained from conducting observations; these are further divided into four subsections.

Section 4 covers the unstructured online and face-to-face interviews with diverse actors within the local communities conducted from October 2020 to March 2021. The four themes emerging from these interviews are presented in this section.

Section 5 reports on the insights captured from an online group discussion with a number of local creatives and relevant actors facilitated in November 2020. The section offers a synthesis of the five main topics discussed with the group.

From these activities, a number of themes were elicited. Namely,

- Change;
- Space;
- Knowledge;
- Networks.

Section 6 introduces the Citizen Science work and its main insights. The full report, ‘We need each other more than ever’², is presented as an annex.

Lastly, section 7 collates and offers a summary of the most salient insights gathered in this phase.

2. Immersing

Besides following a design for policy approach, the ethos of this investigation is based on active participation and immersion³. Methodologically, the project followed a multi-method approach that draws on participatory research⁴.

This implied engaging with the creative communities in and around HW/FI and the QEOP to jointly explore the effect of Covid-19 on their creative practices whilst simultaneously developing understandings of how to enhance their resilience. These communities consist of creative businesses based in studios and workshops, local workspaces, live/work spaces (mostly industrial units & warehouses), and other non-profit organisations and individuals that interact and overlap in different ways (see Figure 2).

¹ For a more detailed account of these methods, see ‘HWCRAIC: Covid-19 and Creative Clusters’ report.

² Machado, M., Chamberlain, W., Hitchen, G., Vaz, Federico. (2021). We need each other more than ever, Creative Wick Living Lab 2021. In Hitchen, G. & Vaz, F. (Eds.), *HWCRAIC*. Loughborough University London. (Forthcoming)

³ See ‘HWCRAIC Covid-19 and Creative Clusters’ report.

⁴ Participatory, holistic, critical, realistic, learning-based, emergent, and complex. Lennie, J., & Tacchi, J. (2013). Evaluating communication for development: A framework for social change. Routledge.

Naturally, these communities were affected differently by the Covid-19 pandemic, and their circumstances required specific engagement methods. This report covers four aspects of the research approach that aided in engaging with these communities:

1. Observations;
2. Interviews;
3. Group discussion;
4. Citizen science work.

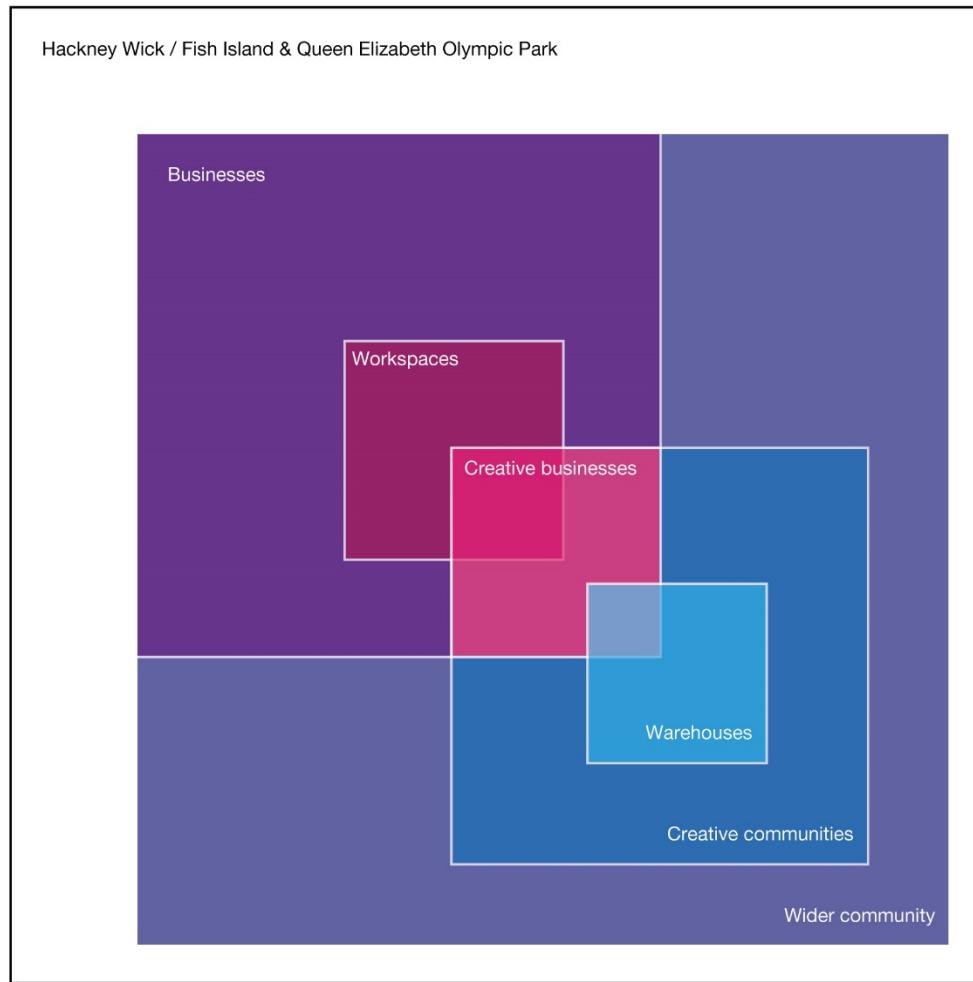


Figure 2: HW/FI & QEOP creative communities within the larger local community.

Although these communities overlap in different ways, capturing insights from each of them utilising the same data collection method proved difficult. For instance, whilst representatives of local workspaces would participate in fortnightly council-led meetups, and therefore, were relatively easy to engage with in those settings, some local creative freelancers work from their homes, making it difficult to identify them. Likewise, whereas some of the local creatives participate in community forums and are happy to engage with researchers, some others occupying live/work spaces are less prone to share information due to their precarious situations. Therefore, observations helped collect data from settings where certain communities gathered, as well as from public spaces. Similarly, interviews helped capture insights from members of the local communities who were easily identifiable and keen to engage in open conversations either 1-to-1 with the researchers or group

dynamics. Likewise, the citizen science approach proved helpful in accessing more secluded pockets of the local communities.

Whereas the observations, interviews, and group discussion activities are respectively presented in sections 3, 4, and 5, the Citizen science (CS) work is treated independently, with section 6 offering a summary.

3. Observations

Conducted from September 2020 to March 2021, the observations carried out in this phase took different forms, ranging from walks in the area and talks to shopkeepers to participation in local events and forums (virtual and otherwise). Since the Covid-19 lockdown implied many activities were taking place virtually, the researchers complemented their observations with extant online content ranging from social media posts to websites and meeting minutes. These aimed at gaining an understanding of the existing dynamics within the area's creative communities and how these are evolving with and because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Loughborough University London is located in Hackney, in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Besides being inside the geographical boundary of this study, its location enabled the researchers to regularly visit the area to capture observational data.

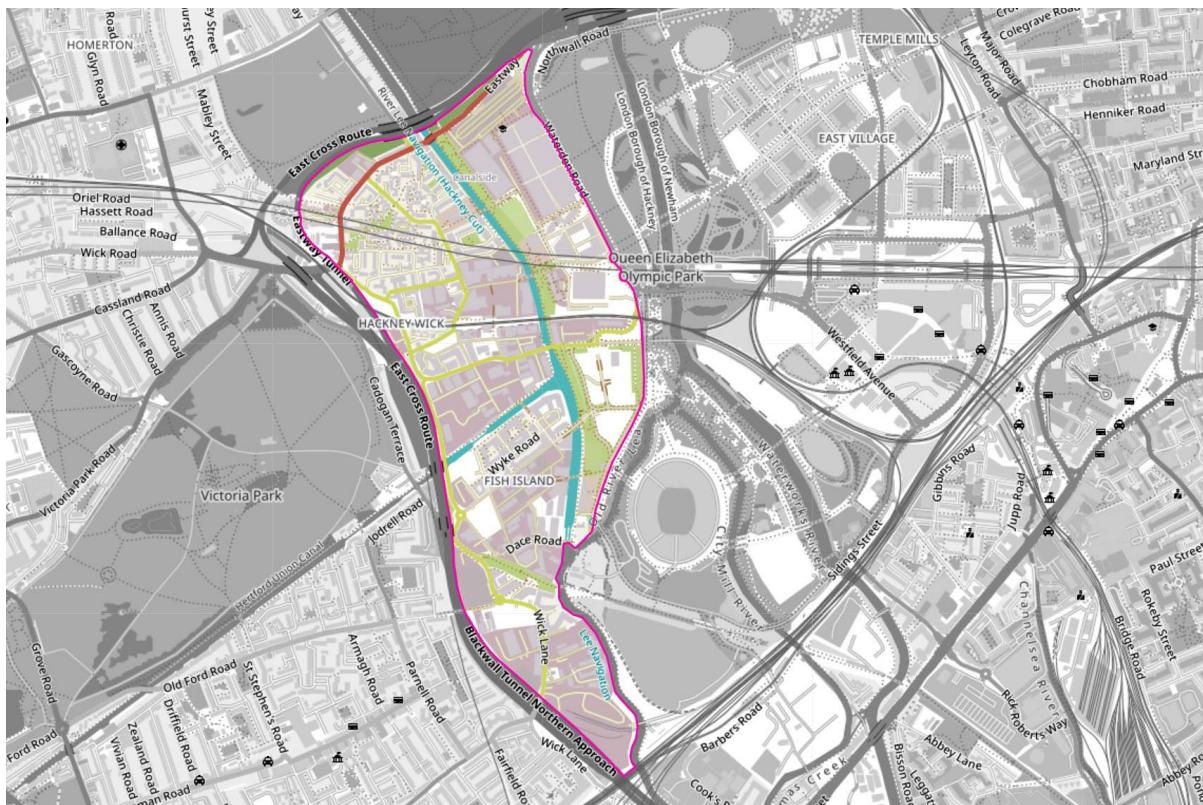


Figure 3: Geographical boundary of the study.

Some of these visits were planned and, when possible, in coordination with members of the local communities, and some were impromptu walk rounds. The latter enabled capturing of the area's activity under different levels of mobility restrictions. Naturally, much of the activity in local hosteries was significantly reduced during this period. However, the area was far from idle.

Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 present the observations captured in the area according to three identified themes: spaces, property development, and markets. Section 3.4 offers insights from the researchers' participant observation of local community forums and events.

From these activities, a number of themes were elicited. Namely,

- **Entrepreneurialism;**
- **Resignification of outdoor and public spaces;**
- **Community identity.**

Section 3.6 offers a summary of the most salient insights from these observations.

3.1 Spaces

The pandemic and the subsequent restrictions imposed on mobility and social interactions had a significant impact on the use of public and private space. A 2020 Gehl Institute's report⁵ claims that as a result of the pandemic, central urban districts were largely deserted, but local meeting places have seen a significant increase in their visitors, reflected in the number of people spending time in public space, exercising and playing. HW/FI and the QEOP has not been indifferent to this global phenomenon.

Street art and graffiti continue to dominate the area's aesthetics, and even during the most stringent months of the lockdown, new murals were being painted (see Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4: Street art mural in Hackney Wick, September and November 2020.

⁵ Gehl, J. (2020). Public space and public life during Covid 19. Copenhagen: Gehl Institute.



Figure 5: Street art mural being painted on Hackney Bridge for its opening, September 2020 (left); empty spray paint can in Eastway underpass, March 2021 (right).

Similarly, the idea that the pandemic negatively impacted all sectors does not appear to be reflected in the area. For instance, some manufacturers not only continued producing their goods but saw a boost in sales. Local family-run mirror manufacturer Yearn Glass & Co. is one such case (see Figure 6). When informally asked about how business was, an employee suggested that spending more time at home was pushing people to spend more money on furniture, resulting in increased sales of their products. Although anecdotal, this is aligned with some reports and news articles indicating a surge in home furnishing sites spending and visitation⁶, along with unprecedented sales⁷.

“How are we doing? We have never worked so much”.

Yearn Glass & Co. employee, November 2020.

⁶ Lane, C. (2020). As millions stay home, home furnishing sites see record spend and visitation. ComScore, Inc. Retrieved 15 March 2021, from <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/As-millions-stay-home-home-furnishing-sites-see-record-spend-and-visitation>

⁷ Collinson, P. (2020). 'It's crazy good': Covid boom leaves UK furniture firms sitting pretty. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 15 March 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/oct/10/covid-boom-uk-furniture-firms-sitting-pretty>



Figure 6: Products waiting to be shipped outside Yearn Glass & Co., Lion Works / Liquid Studios, HW, November 2020.

Likewise, Here East saw its forecourt transformed into a filming location (see Figure 7). Although this is not necessarily unusual, it was still interesting to see these activities continuing during the pandemic.



Figure 7: Filming crew setting up equipment in Here East's yard, November 2020.

In the past year, other locations within HW/FI and the QEOP, including public spaces, were also utilised as filming locations. For instance, Studio Wayne McGregor —located in Here East and whose performing arts and dance activities were severely disrupted because of the pandemic— repurposed and rented out some of their studio space for film and photoshoots.⁸ The continuing level of activity

⁸ "Studio Wayne McGregor is open during lockdown for approved activity": <https://waynemcgregor.com/space-hire-1/>

for filming highlights the varying impact Covid-19 has had in this sub-sector of the creative industries (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Music video filming in Eastway underpass, March 2021.

Comparably, local hostelry, ranging from pubs and restaurants to coffee shops to party venues, transformed their offering to different degrees. Those that were able to began offering a variety of take-out services from pizza and pastries to coffee, beer, and cocktails. Moreover, for some of these local businesses, closing their services to the public did not mean entirely shutting down their operations since their venues are indeed production facilities that supply other sales channels. For instance, this was the case for some local breweries and coffee roasters.

Naturally, these business model changes imply different levels of effort and the incentives to carry out the required adaptations also varied mainly depending on the business reliance on footfall (see Figures 9 and 10). For instance, when attempting to engage with local business owners, many excused themselves based on their need for dedicating their time and energies to ideating new ways of keeping their businesses afloat.

“...my focus is fully on restructuring our business for lockdown.”

Local brewery owner, November 2020.



Figure 9: The Colour Factory cocktail take-out, Queen's Yard, Hackney Wick, December 2020.



Figure 10: Ethical Bean Co. coffee take-out, Fish Island, December 2020.

Beyond the business adaptation, residents and visitors alike also started showing different behaviour patterns, especially in regard to the use of public spaces. In the absence of sitting areas in local pubs and cafés, crowds began moving towards the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. For instance, the green patch at the junction of the Lee Navigation and Hertford Union canals (see Figure 11) which is one of the few green areas in the proximity, has become a place for meetings and gatherings.

Similarly, the recently opened green area between Hackney Bridge and the Lee Navigation (see Figure 11) has become a picnic and leisure space for residents and visitors. Notably, there are no green spaces or leisure areas in Hackney Wick and Fish Island.



Figure 11: Green area in QEOP where Lee Navigation Canal joins the Hertford Union Canal, March 2021.



Figure 12: Green area between Hackney Bridge and River Lee Navigation, March 2021.

Despite the restricted public social interactions during the lockdown, the walk-rounds also offered a glimpse into the residents' sense of community. Because of its extensive waterways, the area has a considerable house-boat community. These residents seem to develop a different community spirit, often reflected in the use of the space surrounding them (see Figure 13). In addition, due to the proximity between the moored boats and the towpaths, these residents naturally share closer encounters with one another as well as with other residents and visitors. This results in particular community-led initiatives that foster a sense of unity and cooperation.



Figure 13: "Give what you can, take what you need". Community Pantry set outside 'The Jungle Boat' under the Eastway Bridge, November 2020.

3.2 Property developments

Just as various creative and retail activities carried on during the lockdown, so other sectors appeared unaffected; this was no more apparent than in property development, with much building activity ongoing throughout the period of the pandemic.

Housing developments in the area are frequently perceived as part of a broader gentrification process that might damage some aspects of the creative communities (see Figure 14).



Figure 14: Sign painted in bar and restaurant Number 90's entrance. Main Yard, Hackney Wick. March 2021.

Our observations during the immersion noted diverse impacts, with new homes being built and advertised alongside buildings in disrepair (see Figure 15). The new housing developments are perceived as having a paradoxical effect: whilst many people are drawn to the area because of its creative communities and distinct look and feel, the former are being priced out of the area, and the latter sometimes simply erased to build the housing these newcomers will occupy. This perception was borne out by some of the feedback in the Citizen Science work, featured below.



Figure 15: Fish Island Village Sales & Marketing Suite overlooking Hackney Wick, December 2020 (left). National Bargee Travellers Association "Stop the extension of gentrification" sign in Eastway underpass, March 2021 (right).

Developers in the area are well-aware of its industrial heritage and creative communities living within it. This is evident in the housing being built, which often resembles some of the warehouses and factories demolished for their construction.

Fish Island Village, Hackney Wick E3



"The final phase in this creative, canal-side community, a ten-minute walk from Hackney Wick station, launches this Saturday and consists of 42 one, two and three-bed apartments designed to reflect the site's industrial heritage".

(Dean, 2021)⁹

Likewise, most developers explicitly emphasise Hackney Wick and Fish Island as thriving cultural creative hubs in their advertisements and brochures. For instance, Fish Island Village developers Peabody and Hill state on their website that "this thriving, cultural creative hub will comprise modern apartments and unique spaces to live and work, making it the ultimate place for like-minded people to collaborate. [...] Ideal for both budding entrepreneurs and anyone looking to embrace the creative vibe of this hidden gem"¹⁰.

⁹ Dean, A. (2021). New builds for first-time buyers on sale with Help To Buy – in London and beyond. *Metro*. <https://metro.co.uk/2021/04/06/new-builds-for-first-time-buyers-on-sale-with-help-to-buy-in-london-14348789/>

¹⁰ Fish Island Village website: <https://www.fishislandvillage.co.uk/>

Despite the charge of erasing parts of the creative heritage, some developers are working alongside creative companies. For example, one major project on Fish Island aims:

“to create a waterside community that captures the creative vibe of this bohemian borough of London, whilst being true to the spirit of Fish Island. Building on the area’s legacy, this bold vision of a village fuses traditional industrial architecture with forward-thinking design. The creation of a sustainable and supportive environment for all that live and work here is front of mind and this vision has been conceptualised in partnership with The Trampery. [...] This inclusive nature combined with the energetic atmosphere, means that this will be a place where you can be yourself and feel inspired to achieve whatever you put your mind to”.

Fish Island Village’s Vision¹¹

This is interesting as it belies the notion that the new developments are excluding creative companies. According to Trampery¹² founder, Charles Armstrong:

“Fish Island Village is the first development of this kind in the UK with facilities that are affordable and essentially priced at the same rates that people are paying now. [...] I really believe that what we are doing is establishing a foundation for the creative community to continue for the next generation.”

Charles Armstrong. Founder, The Trampery

The Fish Island Village development is a striking example of maintained activity during the pandemic – with building work ongoing, while creative businesses were struggling, but with the intention of creating new spaces for creatives in the longer-term. Perhaps the most significant development during this period was the Creative Land Trust (CLT) first studio acquisition. As part of their goal to secure 1,000 affordable workspaces for London’s artists and makers¹³, the CLT announced in March 2021¹⁴ the acquisition of a 33,000 square foot space to provide “long-term, genuinely affordable studios and ensure that artists can continue to flourish in one of the capital’s creative hotspots”¹⁴. In doing so, the CLT invited studio providers to tender for the management of up to 180 artist studios in the Telford Homes developed space at Stone Studios¹⁵. Workspace provider Cell Project has

¹¹ Fish Island Village website: <https://www.fishislandvillage.co.uk/our-vision/>

¹² The Trampery is a workspace provider operating in six locations in London, including two in the geographic footprint of this study: The Trampery on the Gantry in Hackney Wick, and The Trampery Fish Island Village.

¹³ Mayor launches ground-breaking Creative Land Trust: <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-launches-groundbreaking-creative-land-trust>

¹⁴ Creative Land Trust announces its first studio acquisition: <https://creativelandtrust.org/press-stone-studios/>

¹⁵ Creative Land Trust invites studio providers to tender for Stone Studios: <https://creativelandtrust.org/tender-stone-studios/>

partnered with the CLT to manage the space. In doing so, Cell Project¹⁶ returns to its former site in Hackney Wick¹⁷.

2020 also saw the opening of a new creative workspace provider in the QEOP. Make Shift Community Ltd., the platform behind Pop Brixton¹⁸ and Peckham Levels¹⁹, launched Hackney Bridge in October 2020 (see Figures 16 and 17). The space located on the east bank of River Lee Navigation “close to Hackney Wick”²⁰ offers workspace and studios for artists, makers, and small businesses, as well as space for food businesses, retailers, markets, events, and a community garden. Notably, Hackney Bridge defines its location in terms of the proximity to Hackney Wick instead of its actual location in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Likewise, for its inauguration, a Hackney Wick-like graffiti mural was painted on its façade (see Figure 5). Perhaps, this could relate to the positioning pursued by Hackney Bridge and their ambition to bring to life a cultural destination for local people to use and enjoy²¹. In this scenario, the graffiti could be aimed at bridging its proximity to Hackney Wick by means of aesthetic assimilation.



Figure 16: Hackney Bridge Housewarming event – interior. October 16, 2020.

The existence of murals and graffiti are seen as an important part of the creative community, and – throughout the pandemic – there was ongoing activity and debate. For example, in March 2021 a petition campaign²² was launched asking Hackney Council and London Borough of Tower Hamlets to consider developing a paint area for the artists to continue to express their creativity for locals and visitors to appreciate. Similarly, during the April 2021 CIG meeting, one participant asked a housing development representative about their plans to keep the street art in the facades of the Dace Road property acquired for the development. The answer indicated that no provisions were taken to preserve the artwork.

¹⁶ Cell Project is a non-profit gallery and artist studios, with a mission to provide affordable workspace for artists through Cell Studios.

¹⁷ Creative Land Trust Partnership with Cell Studios: <https://www.cellprojects.org/content/creative-land-trust-partnership>

¹⁸ <https://www.popbrixton.org/>

¹⁹ <https://peckhamlevels.org/>

²⁰ <https://hackneybridge.org/>

²¹ It should be noted that up to the opening of the East Wick + Sweetwater (<https://www.eastwickandsweetwater.co.uk/>) development in 2021, there were no local residents in the QEOP, and the closest lived in Hackney Wick or in boats mooring alongside the Hackney Cut.

²² Save Hackney Wick Street Art: <https://www.change.org/p/hackney-council-save-hackney-wick-street-art>

Street art is part of the lifeblood and identity of Hackney Wick. It draws people to the area and developers should have to make an effort to retain that identity, knowing that it will also benefit their marketing of Hackney Wick as a trendy area.

User comment on the Save Hackney Wick Street Art petition's webpage



Figure 17: Hackney Bridge Housewarming event - exterior. October 16, 2020.

3.3 Markets

Echoing a localised approach to empowering and creating more resilient communities in a post-Covid era²³, the move towards localism had already been palpable during most of 2020. In Hackney Wick and Fish Island, this has meant, amongst other things, the opening of several markets, especially during the festive season. Amongst them, we find:

- White Post Lane Makers Market;
- Barge East's Wick Wonderland;
- White Post Café Vintage Market;
- The White Building Market;

²³ Walker, A., Diamond, P. (2020). Power down to level up: resilient place-shaping for a post-Covid world. *Local Government Information Unit*.

- Hackney Wick Underground Market.

In conversations with local artists and creators, the need for spaces to display and sell their work emerged repeatedly. However, given the area's size, a number of visitors greater than the number of residents is required for local markets to thrive. Fortunately, due to the area's increased popularity, which has also attracted hundreds of new residents, the likelihood of successful local markets has risen. Yet, the idea of fixed street makers' markets has been resisted by some of the oldest residents in the past. Naturally, this poses a dilemma between local growth and the protection of the area's existing communities.

In an attempt to exploit available space, some businesses successfully repurposed parts of their venues during the past year. For instance, with the Michelin 'Green Star' restaurant²⁴ unable to operate, Hackney Wick saw the opening of a new marketplace in its iconic White Building (see Figure 18). The boutique shop claims to have "scoured the country to bring you some of the UK's most innovative designers, skilled makers and local producers. All with a drive and focus on sustainable living"²⁵. It is surprising to note the emphasis on sourcing from all around the country, given that it is in an area with such a large concentration of makers, producers, and designers – implying that there are not enough local creatives offering a wide range of sustainable products.



Figure 18: The White Building, Hackney Wick, November 2020.

Conversely, the White Post Lane Makers Market set up in the run-up to Christmas showcased gifts from some of the borough's makers, artists, and designers (see Figure 19). This market had the

²⁴ Silo: <https://guide.michelin.com/gb/en/greater-london/london/restaurant/silo-1183942>

²⁵ The White Building Market: <https://cratebrewery.com/venue/the-white-building-market>

support of local authorities, including the Creative Enterprise Zone and allowed local creatives to increase sales after months of lockdown.



Figure 19: White Post Lane Makers Market, December 2020.

In April 2021, with the easing of the restrictions, two new markets opened: Hackney Wick Underground Market and Hackney Bridge's 'Spring in the courtyard' (see Figure 20).



Figure 20: Hackney Wick Underground's digital flyers for their Makers and Flea markets.

Hackney Wick Underground's Makers and Flea markets occur in a space in White Post Lane, opposite the Hackney Wick Overground station (see Figures 21 and 22). These are part of the offering of Hackney Wick Underground, the recently launched grassroots non-profit organisation led

by social enterprise Civic State²⁶. This space, and consequently the markets that take place there, seek to reflect the ‘grungy’ atmosphere of Hackney Wick. This unapologetically aesthetic pursuit appears to present itself as a response against the area’s gentrification process.

“We are practically exploring our rights to use land, to organise, to empower and to influence. To practice our rights as citizens.”

Neil McDonald, Co-Founder²⁴



Figure 21: Hackney Wick Underground's Flea Market, April 2021.



Figure 22: Hackney Wick Underground's central hall (left), and resident artist Emily Hana painting (right), April 2021.

²⁶ <https://hwunderground.co.uk/about/>

Newcomer Hackney Bridge, on the other hand, transformed its open space into a food market (see Figures 23 and 24). In April 2021, Hackney Bridge launched 'Spring in the courtyard'. The programme offers a bar (which is destined for Hackney Bridge Kitchen's street food market) and a number of street food traders operating in the outdoor courtyards with seating until the end of July²⁷. In this way, Hackney Bridge complements the local offering instead of directly competing with the existing markets. This is an interesting new addition to the local economy since previously, the closest food market operated in Victoria Park, west of Hackney Wick.



Figure 23: Banner included in the CIG April's newsletter.



Figure 24: Hackney Bridge's 'Spring in the courtyard', April 2021.

²⁷ Hackney Underground's Spring in the Courtyard: <https://hackneybridge.org/spring>

3.4 Community Forums

As noted above, participant observations were also carried out in local forums. Two, in particular, offered valuable insights into the local creative communities: Hackney Wick & Fish Island Cultural Interest Group (CIG) and the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Workspace provider drop-in meetings.

3.4.1 The Hackney Wick & Fish Island Cultural Interest Group

The CIG was founded in 2010 to advance the arts and culture within Hackney Wick and Fish Island by facilitating a sustainable creative local community. The CIG supports the local creative economy by encouraging links between: Local creative practitioners; Creative practitioners and the local residential population; and the local, regional, national and international creative community.

This is achieved through engagement, partnership building, resource sharing and collaboration²⁸.

The CIG typically meets fortnightly at various venues in Hackney Wick and Fish Island. Though, due to the pandemic, these meetings have been taking place online since April 2020. The researchers regularly joined the CIG meetings since August 2020. Although in most opportunities, the participation has been limited to that of a mere observer, on occasions, the researchers have used the forum to present the project's progress and to engage with its participants by, for instance, inviting them to take part in workshops or focus groups.

On a usual meeting, the hour and a half long session follow the agenda shared in advance in a rather organised and timely manner. Creative Wick's founding director, William Chamberlain, chairs the CIG meetings. These involve a diverse range of actors, including residents, local artists and creatives, businesses, representatives from housing developers working on the area, and authorities from the local councils, including the Hackney Wick Ward Councillors.

In conversation with the CIG's chair, he commented these are invaluable sources of insights as "the community holds the knowledge". Likewise, regarding the area's makeup changes, he expressed "new creatives coming to the area are willing to join and preserve the community".

Although the sense of community is always palpable in the CIG meetings, it is under specific circumstances when the collective spirit becomes more apparent. The CIG meeting of December 11th, 2020, presented one such moment, triggered by the announcement that from January 1st, 2021, Stour Space –a staple of Fish Island— would no longer be in its historical location due to the landlords' decision not to extend the lease²⁹. Stour Space was deemed the most affordable studio provider in HW/FI, and having operated in the area for twelve years, it represented its spirit.

After the announcement, many CIG participants expressed strong feelings in what they see as another blow against their livelihood and spirit of the area:

²⁸ Hackney Wick & Fish Island Cultural Interest Group website: <https://hackneywick.org/beta/>

²⁹ December 2021 CIG Notes and Actions: https://mcusercontent.com/e62fa9be788c0593fca695e87/files/f96acc77-de1b-4bfa-b33a-72a3283c8009/CIG_Meeting_Notes_Actions_December_2020.pdf

*"Can't even articulate the symbolism of this. If the Overground is the hopeful future, then this is the same old story playing out. "Yeh, we'll keep the good stuff, honest..." From Hackney to Berlin to New York - capital kills creativity. It's not just for the old guard - the new incomers have been sold on a 'vibrant' neighbourhood. Why are landlords never accountable? Why are *they* never here? No apologies for the rant, this is a massive loss. My jewellery maker friend is in a state."*

CIG meeting participant.

"Stour has been the greatest pillar of community building in HW. We are here to support you."

CIG meeting participant.

Similarly, representatives from other workspaces in the area expressed their solidarity:

"Shocking news [...]! Let us know if we can help anyhow."

HW/FI workspace representative during CIG meeting.

"Such sad news! Our members adore Stour so much & know the importance of its place in the local cultural community. Pure love [...]."

HW/FI workspace representative during CIG meeting.

Shortly after the news was broken to the CIG participants, a group decided to take immediate action. Making and putting up posters in the area was one of the proposed initiatives. Once again, the communities' support was evident here, with local businesses even offering to print these posters free of charge.

This instance was particularly valuable, as it showed the interaction between the officials participating in the CIG and the local creatives and artists. Whereas some expressed their concerns about what they saw as tokenistic behaviour by the bodies tasked with preserving the area's creative value, some voiced their support to the authorities:

"Politically, how does it look for the new CEZ to have the rug pulled from under by a single landlord???"

CIG meeting participant.

"I know some of you have to wear your official personas here but are doing what you can in the background for Stour, so thank you for your efforts. We see you."

CIG meeting participant.

Besides the anecdotal, this episode was substantial as it clearly represents the fears held by many within the creative communities. Moreover, it highlights the highly politicised arena in which the local creatives interact where land represents the central resource at stake.

This type of discussion takes place somewhat regularly. Only in the past months, new entrant Hackney Bridge found itself at the centre of a contentious issue around the impact of a proposal that came before licensing and emphasised the high proportion of entertainment venues in the new space. Diverse concerns ranging from potential conflict with current trade, community, and consultation, to the lack of engagement with local councillors were raised. This prompted Make Shift's CEO and Community Growth Manager, along with Hackney Bridge's Engagement and Partnerships Manager, to participate in a CIG meeting, where Make Shift's CEO apologised and promised to include more consultation going forward³⁰.

Similarly, the Manager of the newly opened Sainsbury's shop in Hackney Wick was confronted by a local Councillor regarding the installation of an advertising totem on the sidewalk. According to the Councillor, this installation was in breach of mobility and accessibility regulation in a pedestrian path, and the forum was used as an amicable warning towards its removal. As a result, the totem was removed shortly after³¹.

3.4.2 Hackney Wick and Fish Island Workspace provider drop-in meetings

Organised by Hackney Wick and Fish Island's Developer and Business Engagement Manager³², these fortnightly sessions are an opportunity for workspace providers to receive updates and raise issues relating to workspaces on Hackney Wick and Fish Island.

The regular attendees to these drop-in meetings are representatives of:

- [Arbeit Studios](#);
- [Cell Projects](#);
- [Grow Hackney](#):
- [Plexal](#);
- [Space Studios](#);
- Stour Space;
- [The Trampery](#);
- [V22 Collection](#).

³⁰ Issue addressed on the CIG meeting of Friday 11th September 2020. See CIG's Notes and Actions: https://mcusercontent.com/e62fa9be788c0593fca695e87/files/cf7c173f-0328-4f8e-98f4-289091b78072/CIG_Meeting_Notes_Actions_September_2020.pdf

³¹ Issue addressed on the CIG meeting of Friday 12th February, 2021. See CIG's Notes and Actions: https://mcusercontent.com/e62fa9be788c0593fca695e87/files/79ca67cd-8a9d-483a-9f0a-12000d1835f1/CIG_Meeting_Notes_Actions_February_2021.pdf

³² This role is jointly employed by the London Legacy Development Corporation, London Borough of Hackney and London Borough of Tower Hamlets, to deliver appropriate workspace in Hackney Wick and Fish Island and support the local business community throughout a large-scale Olympic regeneration programme.

During these half-hour sessions, the attendees can liaise directly with a local council representative where their businesses are based and receive first-hand information about changes in regulation, policy, and other aspects relevant to their businesses. Especially during the pandemic, it served as a direct channel of communications between the boroughs and some local businesses mediated by the workspace provider representatives. Likewise, this communication channel has worked both ways, allowing the workspace representatives also to provide feedback based on their tenants' needs about the instruments and support mechanism offered by the authorities.

For instance, during one meeting, a specific point was raised about the financial support to businesses that had not been able to access support previously, that are not part of the retail/leisure/ hospitality sectors but can demonstrate links to those sectors (e.g., graphic designers working in events). This feedback was then passed onto the officers outlining the details for Discretionary Grant 4³³ to consider accommodating those requirements.

Likewise, it has helped the authorities in disseminating some of their activities in a gradual manner, mediated by the workspace providers. For instance, the 'Love Hackney, Shop Local' campaign³⁴ where Hackney Council partnered with online platform My Virtual Neighbourhood³⁵ allowed businesses who have had to close their premises by law under the new restrictions but were still able to sell their goods online or through click-and-collect to add themselves to the business directory free of charge. This initiative which was promoted to the borough's 280,000 residents as a convenient way to purchase goods from local retailers while their shops are shut, was also shared with workspace providers during the drop-in sessions in an attempt to include their tenants in the business directory.

Similarly, free third-party business advice, such as the [Property Advice Service](#) offered by [London Business Hub](#), is also typically shared in these meetings.

3.5 Observations summary

In sum, the observations regarding the natural and built environment highlight a number of issues some of the communities currently face. Whilst some of these are longstanding and have been deepened by the Covid-19 pandemic, some appear as a consequence of the pandemic or at least have only recently reached an acute level. Likewise, the observations offered insights into the behaviours of the local creative communities during the first year of the pandemic and their resilience and adaptability in the face of hardship under different levels of restrictions. Amongst these, we find:

- **Entrepreneurialism:** The continuation of certain commercial activities and the transformation of others to both cover existing demand and cater for new needs. The observations have shown how the communities have adapted their offering to respond to a newly generated local demand. Besides the new or adapted business models from new and existing businesses, the communities' entrepreneurial drive can be seen in the repurposing of existing space and the development and reinforcement of support networks. The latter not only

³³ London Borough of Hackney Business Grants: <https://hackney.gov.uk/business-grants/>

³⁴ <https://www.lovehackney.uk/shop-local>

³⁵ <https://www.myvirtualneighbourhood.com/>

speaks of the goodwill of residents and local organisations but also about how the pandemic reconfigured the purpose of some of these, which have since reinforced their local focus. Moreover, it is worth remarking on the fact that during the period of observation there were a number of new creative workspace developments taking place, even under the difficulties and constraints imposed by the pandemic. Despite Stour Space closing, in one year Hackney Wick Underground and Hackney Bridge were opened, the CLT acquired new space, and Fish Island Village developments started to open.

- **Reorientation of outdoor and public spaces:** Residents and visitors seem to have adopted new behaviours regarding the local area and their relationship to public spaces, forced by the restrictions on mobility but reinforced by a new sense of belonging. Likewise, this has revealed deficiencies in terms of the availability of recreational spaces for residents and local communities. New local developments, the majority of which are in the gastronomy and hostelry sector, have reshaped the movement of people. Interestingly, the green spaces in the east bank of the Hackney Cut have seen an explosive increase in their use. This phenomenon that started with opening the pubs and restaurants in Here East's Canalside has now been accompanied by the green areas next to Barge East and Hackney Bridge, shifting the area's centre of gravity further east.
- **Community identity:** Localism appears to have heightened during the pandemic. This is reflected in the community-led support networks and individual activities, but also in the preoccupation to maintain a specific look and feel to the local area (ethics and aesthetics). Despite the reduced mobility, graffiti continued to be painted on walls across the area. However, there are now fewer available surfaces for artists to intervene in due to the significant development of new housing in former industrial buildings. To some extent, the struggle for Hackney Wick's identity is evidenced in the ratio between street art and new buildings. This also highlights the influx of new residents to the area and its impact on the local communities' make-up. The opening of chain supermarkets in the area also accounts for changing reality. Grassroots movements such as the one petitioning to protect Hackney Wick's street art or the National Bargee Travellers Association "Stop the extension of gentrification" campaign are examples of how different communities in the area are opposing some of these changes. Nevertheless, the continued support to local creative networks and forums throughout the pandemic, such as the Cultural Interest Group, not only legitimates their existence but accounts for a group of individuals committed to work towards a permanent, sustainable, creative economy in Hackney Wick & Fish Island.

4. Interviews

As part of Phase 1, 21 unstructured interviews were conducted with 24 people³⁶ between October 2020 and March 2021. These interviews were conducted with different members of the local communities, including:

- **Agencies:** Creative Enterprise Zone, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, London Borough of Hackney, and the London Legacy Development Corporation.
- **Workspace providers:** Stour Space, HW Underground, Here East, Plexal, The Trampery, Here East, Cell Project.

³⁶ The mismatch between the number of interviews and interviewees refers to instances where more than one person were simultaneously interviewed.

- **Cultural and education institutions:** The Yard Theatre, Studio Wayne McGregor, Liverpool Media Academy, V&A.
- **Local businesses:** Colour Factory, ECHO, This Big Adventure, Revolution of Forms, SI Games.
- **Researchers:** Loughborough University London, Creative Industries Federation, PRD.

These interviews looked at gaining a situated understanding of the realities faced by the local creative communities. In particular, they aimed to carry out a preliminary assessment of the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic affected local creatives and other relevant stakeholders whilst inquiring which support instruments and mechanisms had contributed the most toward the communities' subsistence.

From these interviews, three main themes were elicited:

- The existence of diverse and incohesive communities within the area;
- Precarity and vulnerability of many local creatives;
- Physical space as the battlefield.

4.1 Diverse and incohesive communities

According to Porter's definition,³⁷ "[a] cluster is a geographically proximate group of interconnected companies and associated institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities". With this in mind, the research's initial framing considered the creatives within HW/FI and the QEOP as part of a cluster. Very early on, however, it became apparent that the term was not welcomed by all actors. Instead, some of the interviewees claimed they felt part of a creative community. Yet, when the researchers tried to adopt the term, some were explicit in the existence of several communities in the area, as well as various creative communities.

Although this point seemed anecdotal at first, it became apparent that there are significant discrepancies among local creatives. This is relevant because the conflicting political and personal agendas of some members of these communities have adverse effects on achieving the synergies and complementarities typical of a cluster. In turn, this is because clusters operate across networks between a variety of actors familiar with each other's expertise, trustworthiness, reliability, and willingness both to share relevant assets and engage in normal business relationships based on market exchange³⁸.

Moreover, the interviews also highlighted the existence of gatekeepers within the communities. These, for instance, act as intermediaries between other members of the community and different agencies and other stakeholders. Although this may appear as a natural development of the dynamics in a certain social group, given the characteristics of these communities, the existence of these gatekeepers hinders the flow of information and resources.

³⁷ Porter, M. (1998). *On Competition*. Harvard Business School Press.

³⁸ Cooke, P. (2001). Clusters as key determinants of economic growth. *Cluster policies-cluster development*, 2, 23-38.

To some extent, these dynamics appear to arise from the fact that some members of the creative communities also live in the area. This dual condition seems to foster certain defensive attitudes by resident creatives toward changes that could affect their livelihood and way of living.

4.2 Precarity and vulnerability

Linked to the previous theme, the interviews also showed that the survival of some of the local creative communities is threatened by the precarity of their work and living conditions. Many of the local creatives, such as those in live/work spaces, are subject to insecure contracts and agreements whose cancellation would mean not only the need for a new workspace but, in some cases, also their complete relocation outside the area.

Especially during the pandemic, the precarity of the conditions of some local creatives added another layer of vulnerability to them since many were not able to claim certain benefits nor support instruments due to their unregulated living or working conditions. This suggests precarity is an intrinsic condition of the makeup of some of these creatives since the live/work spaces which first attracted many creatives to migrate into the area³⁹ are not only being redeveloped but do not offer their tenants legal security.

Despite the arrival of new creative and potentially more secure workspace, in the short term there is real pressure on space; this and rising housing prices in the area puts these creatives in a vulnerable position with some feeling being pushed out. Despite research showing the size of the live/work community⁴⁰, two interviewees from organisations on the QEOP questioned the value of policies to support what they considered to be a very small community. Moreover, they asserted that creatives from specific creative economy sub-sectors, such as the musicians, “are all gone from Hackney Wick [...] even London”. Along with the arrival of new heavyweights in the area, such as Sadler’s Wells and the V&A, this poses questions about the reconfiguration of the local creative make-up in the area, and the shifting geography - with the creative centre of gravity moving away from HW/FI.

4.3 Tensions for physical space

The question of physical space appears to be an unavoidable topic. This is somewhat predictable since the study’s scope is based on a specific geographic footprint, thus driving the interviews toward issues about space. However, most of the interviewees refer to housing and workspace affordability as the main issues affecting the local creative communities, which also appear highlighted in the Creative Enterprise Zone’s 2018 baseline report⁴¹.

Moreover, tensions between some of the local creative communities and the area’s post-2012 Olympic games redevelopment also surfaced during the interviews. Besides driving the area’s urban development and gentrification, the influx of new firms and organisations has also meant that the spaces (and other resources) for new creative businesses significantly differ from what was

³⁹ Virani, T., Piza, A., & Shiach, M. E. (2018). Creative clusters, social inclusion, and sustainability: The case of Hackney Wick and Fish Island. *A Report for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the London Borough of Hackney, and the London Legacy Development Corporation*.

⁴⁰ Virani, Piza, and Shiach, (ibid) claim over 33% of residents’ dwellings in HW/FI are live/work spaces, making it an important part of its identity.

⁴¹ “Disproportionate recent increases in industrial and office rents (over 200% since 2012)”: Hackney Wick & Fish Island Creative Quarter: A Creative Enterprise Zone Research Study 31/07/18.

previously required. For instance, once an area of printers, publishers, distributors, binders, and other print suppliers due to the affordability of large spaces close to Central London, Hackney Wick and Fish Island have lost an important proportion of these businesses in the last fifteen years⁴². Instead, new creative businesses have moved to new buildings in the QEOP, where they can access the required infrastructure to develop their digitally intensive business models.

5. Group discussion

Besides individual interviews, a group discussion was conducted on November 6, 2020. This session was run online over Zoom from 9:30 to 11hs with a number of local relevant actors.

Invitations to participate were sent directly to local creatives part of the research's database and through referents in the community and existing networks such as the HWFI Cultural Interest Group and the HWFI Workspace provider drop-in meeting. Participants were invited to join an online group discussion with various actors from the creative community in HW/FI and Here East to exchange opinions and help build an understanding of the HW/FI and QEOP creative community's experience of Covid-19. In particular,

- How Covid-19 changed activities, behaviours, and business models?
- Which interventions have worked?
- What can we learn for future interventions to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of the community?

On this occasion, six members of the local communities joined the call:

- A maker resident of Fish Island;
- The Head of a social innovation agency based in Hackney Wick;
- The Chief Operating Officer of a video game company in Here East, QEOP;
- The Studio Operations Manager of a workspace provider in Hackney Wick;
- A Further Education Lead at a Higher Education Institution in Here East, QEOP; and
- The Director of a Creative company at a studio in Hackney Wick.

From this group discussion, four high-level themes were identified.

5.1 Need for investing in local skills longer-term

Upskilling and developing local talent is a requirement to guarantee the sustainability of local creative businesses. Proximity to work was highlighted by Covid, and there is a need to think about opportunities that can be created for people locally.

It is acknowledged that Brexit will have a significant impact on recruitment for firms that depend on foreign talent; thus, investing in skill development will be crucial - this includes apprenticeships and internship schemes, as well as new ways of incorporating talent.

Participants identify clear opportunities for more collaborations between HEIs and companies at Here East and between these and local schools.

⁴² Muf Architecture/Art. 2009. CREATIVE POTENTIAL: Hackney Wick and Fish Island. *Design for London*.

5.2 Physical Space

There is a need for rethinking the use of public spaces that enable new forms of interaction in the area. Participants think making better use of the expansiveness of the QEOP and the open spaces in Here East will be important to create a more liveable environment for residents and people working in the area. Conversely, they see open spaces in HW/FI are rapidly reducing, although ways of reclaiming these should be sought after. Likewise, they believe that moving forward, new ways of arranging the built environment will be required, such as hybrid spaces for social-distancing activities – i.e., covered open areas (e.g., Here East's yard; at/near Hackney Bridge; in the park), as well as exploring the possibilities of hybrid activities (e.g., open markets, crafts fair, etc.).

5.3 Future of work

The work experience has changed significantly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants believe there is a seemingly permanent change in working dynamic towards more hybrid modes (home/office). Furthermore, they recognise that all of the businesses at Here East (and some on HW/FI) will be thinking and experimenting with new ways of working. Post-pandemic, understanding what the best arrangements for their staff are will be key for lots of companies.

Participants also mentioned there is currently a concentration of immersive/digital and other companies in Here East, which means there might be scope for some collaboration to develop new types of business and home experiences. According to the participants, this should not be just digital. New ways of working should also consider how physical spaces are used to create new types of interaction (e.g., outdoor markets, as above). During the group discussion, the participants became excited about the possibility of discussing with Here East and Plexal's management about creating a working group on 'the future work environment' - so that they can offer it as a service to their tenants, but also use it as a way of finding out what their tenants want in the future. A similar approach could be taken by the workspace providers in HW/FI.

5.4 More precise support instruments and mechanisms

During the discussion, participants also emphasised the need to move from research focusing on policy recommendations to action-based engagement. This, they claimed, is rooted in the need for understanding the requirements of makers and creatives in terms of their survival as businesses, as well as understanding the importance of face-to-face interactions for some sectors and the power of narratives in closing deals and making sales. Likewise, they mentioned the need to foster local networks to develop and strengthen the local economy and the possibility of exploiting existing networks and developing business opportunities with prominent new actors entering the area. The idea of operating as a unified front to negotiate conditions for the commissioning of work from local creatives was also discussed.

6. Citizen Science

The researchers' observations and participation in different forums indicated that many members of the local communities were experiencing 'consultation fatigue'. Naturally, this hindered not only the research's data collection process but also local authorities and agencies' capacity to comprehensively understand the communities' needs and thus develop effective support measures.

Therefore, the Citizen Science (CS) work aimed at minimising its effects by actively engaging members of the communities in the research process.

This piece of complementary research was conducted in partnership with local, community interest social enterprise Creative Wick⁴³. The report titled “We need each other more than ever” documents the work carried out utilising a ‘citizen science’ approach through Creative Wick’s Living Lab’s⁴⁴ first research project. It implied the recruitment and training of 16 community members to conduct a series of structured interviews with artists, makers, creative practitioners, and businesses in the area, capturing data about their experiences. Unlike the core of this research, the CS report is primarily based on quantitative surveys conducted between February and March 2021.



Figure 25: 'We need each other more than ever' cover

The results show that the music, performing, and visual arts sub-sectors appear to have been hit the hardest. Likewise, nine out of ten participants have adapted their activities as a result of the restriction measures, with about half working from home during the pandemic. Moreover, almost 40% of the respondents declared to have developed new services during the crisis, and half of them claimed being prepared to deal with future Covid-like challenges. Conversely, one of the most problematic aspects highlighted by the survey is the lack of awareness around the government

⁴³ Creative Wick is the trading name of Hackney Wick and Fish Island CIC, an independent non-profit, social enterprise, Community Interest Company “established to help preserve Hackney Wick and Fish Island as a permanent, sustainable creative cluster”: creativewick.com

⁴⁴ Creative Wick’s Living Lab: creativewick.com/living-lab/

support services offer (local or central). This is despite the majority of the interviewees claiming they have used government support services during the pandemic (see Figure 26).

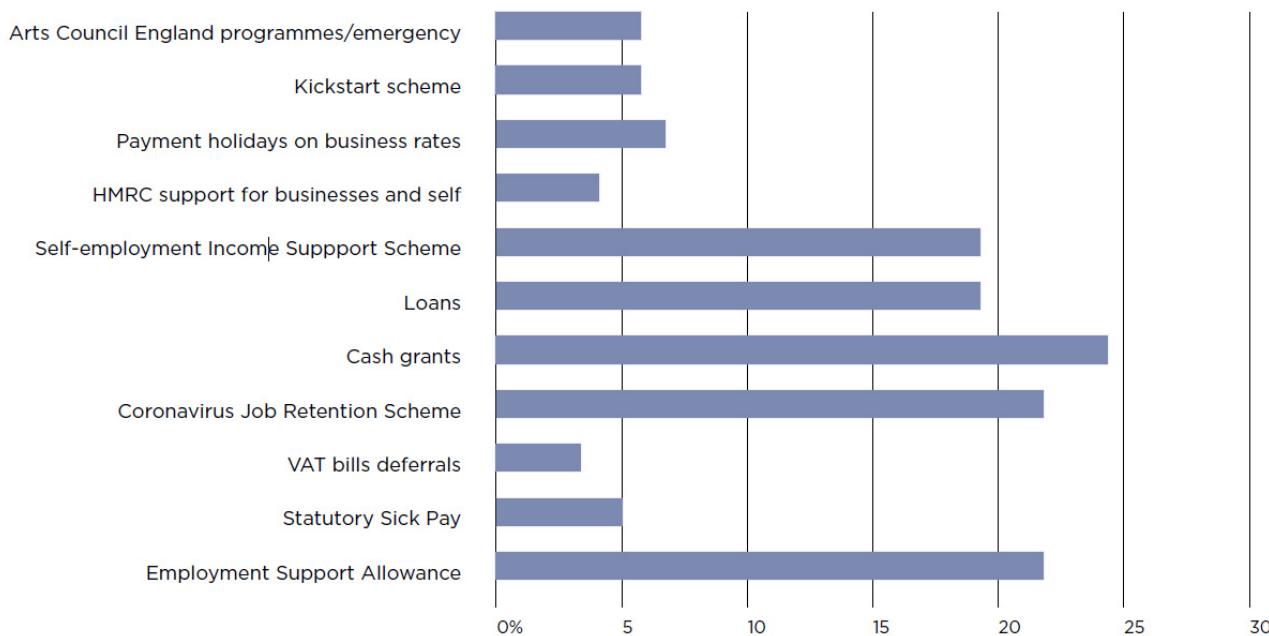


Figure 26: UK government schemes accessed by Citizen Science interviewees (Machado, Chamberlain, Hitchen, Vaz, 2021)

The issue of support mechanisms and where to get this support from is a relevant one, since 28% of the interviewees had accessed support services from businesses and organisations in their local area, and 81% considered their local community's role in providing support to businesses and creatives during the lockdowns level as 'important' or 'very important'. This highlights a disparity in the need for support and the awareness of governmental programmes and how to apply for them. Similarly, the results indicate a lack of awareness about the available support instruments in highly demanded areas such as access to affordable work and living space.

Moreover, the citizen science work also underscored the value of good communication, reliable information, and access to trusted networks and community groups not only to survive during the periods of hardship but also to come together in acts of mutual support and to produce social innovations. Once more, hyper-localism appears as a key driver to the sustainability of the creative economy in the short-term.

The work and results obtained by this complementary piece of work are available on the Living Lab's report⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ <https://creativewick.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CWLL-We-need-each-other-more-than-ever-March-2021.pdf>

7. Summary insights

The iterative nature of this project allowed for the refinement of the insights generated as the investigation progressed. This meant reframing the research questions and revising the methods deployed to achieve the research objectives adaptively.

The first interviews and observations offered several preliminary insights that the researchers used to refine the approach. These early insights comprise:

- The area was not a ‘cluster’ so much as a community or group of communities;
- The existence of a large informal economy;
- There was a physical (the canal) and cultural divide between some of the communities;
- The existing interplay between local and non-local actors;
- The impact of Covid-19 amongst creative sub-sectors was uneven, including on living as well as working conditions;
- Some local creative communities are tired and financially stretched.

These early insights from the pre-immersion stage informed the research methods, which in turn offered a new set of themes. Table 1 presents these themes organised by the method applied during Phase 1.

Observations	Interviews	Group discussion	Citizen Science
Entrepreneurialism	Diverse and incohesive communities	Upskilling investment	Resilient and adaptive creative communities
Resignification of outdoor and public spaces	Precarity and vulnerability	Physical space	Key role of peer support networks
Community identity	Tensions re: physical space	Future of work	Mistrust of the development sector and the area's regeneration process
		Need for bespoke instruments	Low take-up of some of the formal support offers
			Lack of security of tenure and informal living arrangements

Table 1: Themes generated from activities in Phase 1 & 2.

Amongst the main takeaways from these themes, we would highlight the following:

- Many local creative people and businesses were able to adapt and change their business models and practices, which some consider the only constant in the area;
- To a large degree, this level of resilience and adaptability was possible due to solid self-help networks, which, on many occasions, proved more effective than official government networks.
- A new approach to workspace is required. The last decade has seen an increase in pressure on affordable workspaces for creatives in HW/FI, which threatens the survival of some of its

creative communities. With the arrival of new creatives (especially to the QEOP), the physical requirements for these workspaces have also changed.

- These new creatives also bring new knowledge and specific skillsets that are not always abundant locally. In the future, there will be a need to ensure local talent is developed to feed these new creative sub-sectors. Big organisations, including local HEI, will need to play a role to strengthen the creative communities in HW/FI and the QEOP.
- This will require strengthening the current and development of new local networks that facilitate the exchange of knowledge and resources.
- Crucial to the flourishing of social and business local networks is the existence of appropriate spaces to work, meet, trade, exchange, learn, and live.