"We need each other more than ever"

Researching the Impact of Covid 19 on the Creative Sector in Hackney Wick,
Fish Island and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park

creative wick

Contributing towards a wider research project led by Loughborough University London
March 2021

Contents

Foreword

When in 2005, London was awarded the right to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, it was inevitable that the regeneration of this part of East London would suddenly be concentrated into a mere handful of years. One of the key Olympic legacy promises was that the communities surrounding the Olympic Park would see a benefit. Hackney Wick and Fish Island (HWFI) was a neglected but vibrant Victorian industrial estate with period warehouses and tiring low level commercial buildings housing print businesses, builder's merchants and manufacturers. But there was also a cluster of over 600 artist studios – one of the highest concentrations of creative practitioners in the world – which is now threatened by a range of development pressures. As such, HWFI provides an ideal setting for regeneration research projects.

Despite the benefits of creative placemaking, the grassroots creative sector is often displaced during the regeneration process. The development sector uses the local arts culture to help sell its property, yet it is incredibly difficult to capture and reinvest that value to help sustain the local creative economy.

Since 2012, HWFI has been transformed through massive investment, with Olympic infrastructure repurposed as the Here East Innovation and Technology campus, warehousing replaced with apartment buildings, a new Overground station and an improved public realm. The LLDC, a Mayoral Development Corporation charged with delivering the Olympic Legacy, is working with local authorities, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, to preserve some of the distinct mixed-use character of the area despite rapidly increasing land values. Inside the Olympic Park, the East Bank culture and education district promises world leading institutions with all the opportunities that will bring.

Despite these development pressures, HWFI's creative sector remains an independent, diverse, collaborative and highly effective community, and is one of London's first Creative Enterprise Zones.

The Covid19 pandemic has demonstrated how art and culture can help connect communities and increase resilience and wellbeing. But It's also shown the importance of trusted local networks and the need for reliable information to be shared widely and quickly. The Creative Wick Living Lab is a collaborative endeavour that brings together higher education institutions, developers, businesses and community stakeholders to conduct real time research to explore how social and creative enterprise can build inclusive, thriving communities.

Building on the Creative Enterprise Zone, the Living Lab seeks to identify, model and replicate best practice in sustainable urban regeneration. It is a one-stop-shop, open-source depository for all associated research going forward. We must act now or risk losing the opportunity to capture the learning as it happens. Such knowledge will help withstand development pressures, avoid displacement and help ensure the long-term survival of this and other creative economies and communities.

William Chamberlain
Founding Director, Creative Wick

Executive Summary

This report provides information and insight on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the creative sector in Hackney Wick, Fish Island, and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. It is based on mainly quantitative surveys conducted between February and March 2021. Qualitative input supports this data in providing some important insights into the creative sector's ability to respond to the Covid19 pandemic in an area designated as one of London's first Creative Enterprise Zones. This research project was managed by Creative Wick's Living Lab as part of a larger research project being conducted by Loughborough University London's Creative Research And Innovation Centre (CRAIC) and funded through the National Lottery Community Fund.

Hackney Wick and its surrounding area have one of the highest concentrations of artists, makers, creative practitioners, and creative businesses globally. The area has been subject to various development activities which threaten its identity as a globally important creative cluster. Early in the first Covid19 lockdown, anecdotal feedback suggested that the crisis had had a particularly damaging impact on some of the key features of the local creative community, such as those associated with the area's distinctive work-live spaces. Although the communities are vocal about the need for support, many had expressed 'consultation fatigue', hindering the ability of local authorities and agencies in building an understanding of the specific impact, needs and subsequent support measures.

Therefore, this study looked at gaining a considered understanding of the issues faced by local creative practitioners and businesses and the impact Covid19 is having on their work and livelihood as well as the use and effectiveness of support measures and instruments in place.

The Living Lab recruited and trained community members to operate as 'citizen scientists', based on the principles of active public involvement in scientific research. A group of 16 citizen scientists was recruited to carry out a series of short interviews with artists, makers, creative practitioners, and businesses in the area, capturing quantitative and qualitative data about their experiences. Through participative engagement, the citizen scientists collaborated on collecting and processing the data whilst reflecting on the salient aspects concerning residents and local organisations.

This method will have given the Loughborough University London research team greater insight into the problems and opportunities for creative practitioners in the area than more traditional survey methods.

Like the national picture, people and businesses working in music and the performing and visual arts appear to have been hardest hit; and there was also a more significant impact on minority ethnic groups. 92% of the survey participants had adapted their activity, with around half saying that they were working from home during the pandemic.

Although the majority of the interviewees answered "yes" to the question "Have you made use of any support services from the UK Government (central or local) during the pandemic?", only single figure percentages of respondents had used or benefited from London-wide schemes, such as the Mayor of London's Culture-at-Risk programme, rising to 28% who had accessed support services from businesses and organisations in their local area. This is despite the fact that 81% considered the role of their local community in providing support to businesses and creatives during the lockdowns level as 'important' or 'very important'. The apparent mismatch between the desire for local support and engagement and the lack of awareness of some targeted local or regional programmes is one of a number of interesting insights that warrant further investigation.

The findings highlight, for example, the growing pressures around the access and use of work and living space faced by local creative practitioners and what appears to be a lack of awareness about the available instruments for their support.

Perhaps most notably, the survey results suggest that there is strong adaptability and flexibility among the community, with 39% creating new services during the crisis, and more than 50% saying that they are ready to face challenges like Covid again in the future.

Introduction

This report has been produced from research conducted by the Creative Wick Living Lab (CWLL) in collaboration with Loughborough University London (LUL) in relation to research being undertaken within a framework set by LUL and conducted by CWLL as part of the East London Creative Business Research project.

LUL's East London Creative Business Research project is investigating the impact of, and recovery from, the Covid19 virus on the creative business cluster in and around Hackney Wick, Fish Island and the 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.

Creative Wick has undertaken research to support the LUL East London creative business research project, using grant-funding provided by the National Lottery Communities Fund and the research has been undertaken within a framework set by the LUL research project.

Creative Wick has followed ethical procedures advised and supported by researchers at LUL

The Living Lab's Citizen Scientists
This study is based on the principles of citizen science. This implies the public's active involvement in scientific research by implementing tasks traditionally carried out by scientists (Bonney et al. 2009). This approach serves two primary purposes: it should help gain new insights by gathering large-scale or hidden data inaccessible to researchers (Raddick et al. 2010) whilst increasing knowledge and interest about the subject matter amongst participants (Land-Zandstra et al. 2015). Citizen science sees significant growth as a mainstream approach to scientific research (Irwin, 2018), though it is a less established practice in mainstream social sciences (Heiss & Matthes, 2017). For this project, we implemented a citizen social science methodology following the University College London's (UCL) Institute for Global Prosperity guidelines. The study relied on 16 residents who worked as citizen scientists conducting interviews with creatives in HW, FI and the QEOP, between February and March 2021. The main reasons were to access hard to capture situated knowledge dispersed within the community whilst inviting its members to participate first-hand in the research process.

Citizen scientists' professional experiences, skills and insights into the local area were essential for identifying and asking interviewees to take part in the study. More importantly, residents' involvement as researchers in this study boosted confidence and credibility in the research among the interviewees. The citizen scientists received training on how to conduct fieldwork. They reflected on their research processes in different modes after data collection, including a focus group and one-to-one sessions with their academic partners.

About the research process, citizen scientists said:

"I'm loving it, because it is also an opportunity to approach these creatives that I really wanted to know more about. The interview is a good excuse to connect." —Giovanna, Citizen Scientist.

"It was good for the interviewees to have a chat and discuss what they feel is important to them." —Alexis, Citizen Scientist.

Conducting social science research during the Covid19 pandemic
The initial phase of the study coincided with the second wave of Covid19 cases in the United Kingdom. That situation, and the following announcement of a national lockdown, forced the team to modify the research design so that all activities could take place remotely. The recruitment of citizen scientists was made via phone calls, video chats, and emails. The training (January 29th, 2021), and recap sessions (February 26th, 2021) were held online. Citizen Scientists where recruited to represent different sectors of the creative economy and from businesses operating at different scales.

Most citizen scientists recruited their participants and conducted their interviews online as well. Having considered that scenario in advance, the research team designed a questionnaire, to conduct the interviews. The questionnaire combined both closed and open-ended questions. The purpose was to capture as much information as possible in a limited time frame, whilst also allowing the respondents to voice their experiences and concerns in their own words. The citizen scientists completed and submitted the online questionnaires during the interviews.

The questionnaire was designed to be completed within 20 minutes, however, most citizen scientists reported that the interviews lasted much longer.

One citizen scientists said:

"Generally, it's 40 minutes, and some are like an hour, because they just want to talk and talk about every single question, they want to really break it down. Or they were really confused, and it was me explaining the questions to them. Or they just want to have a chat, because there are so many social issues that have been brought up with this questionnaire." —Josephine, Citizen Scientist.

Hackney Wick, Fish Island and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park's Creative Cluster

Our Interviewees

The citizen scientists interviewed 123 artists, creative practitioners and businesses who work, live or operate in the area. Most of the interviewees are neighbours, housemates, co-workers or industry contacts of the citizen scientists. The responses were anonymised, but we captured data such as location, sex, gender identity, ethnicity, age, and areas of practice within the creative sector to highlight differing patterns that could be determining the impact and responses to the Covid19 crisis in the local creative economy.

Creativity on the map

Fig. 1 shows where the participants live or work. The majority (45%) live or operate in Hackney Wick. Around 20% live or work in Fish Island. The remainder are located in the E20, E8 and E5 postcodes.

Fig. 1
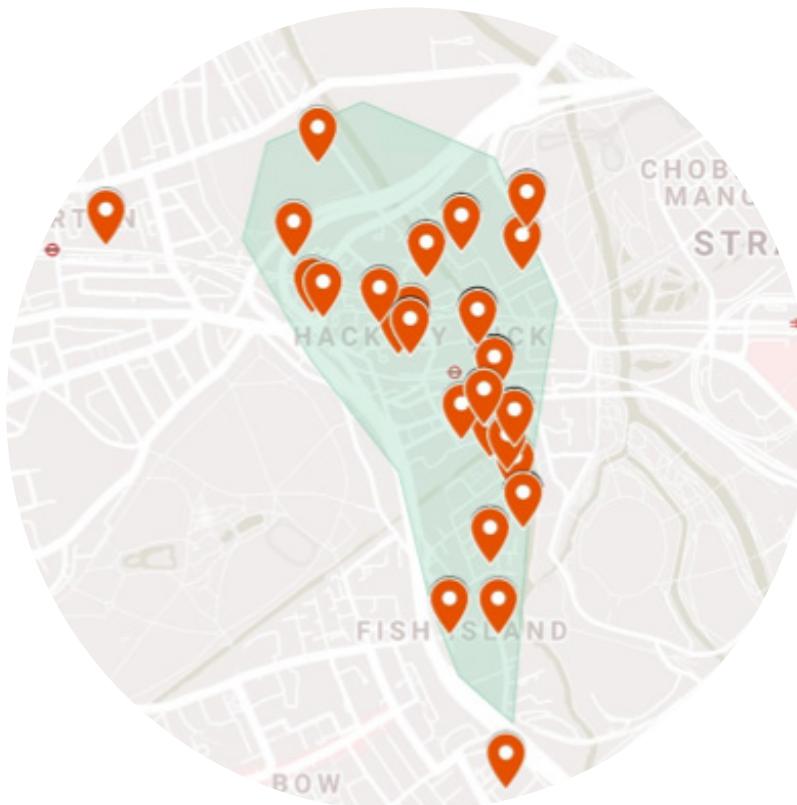
Fig. 2

Fig. 1 and 2 Identify the location of the research participants. The HW and FI area is highlighted in green on the map. The location tags indicate the exact postcodes of the participants who agreed to disclose that information with us.

Almost half of the participants have lived or worked in the area for less than five years.
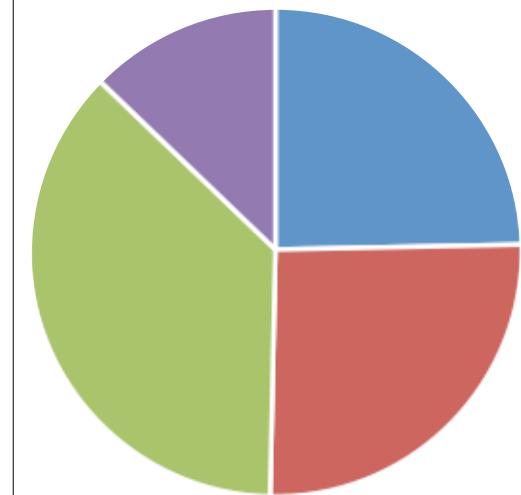
Fig. 3 Length of time the research participants have been based in the HW, FI, and the QEOP area.

- 🟦 10 years
- 🟥 5-9 years
- 🟩 1-4 years
- 🟪 Less than a year

Security of Tenure

Most interviewees (66%) have permissions or agreements to occupy properties or spaces in the area. Within this group, 33 (27% of our sample) specified that they have leases, 15 (12%) licences to occupy, and 11 (9%) tenancy agreements. Tenancy agreements, leases and licences will expire in less than one year for 34% of the interviewees, while for 8%, these will last up to five years.

Interviewees by gender

Male interviewees represent 59% of our sample, while 36% identifies as female. Although these numbers cannot be taken as representative of the gender split within the creative sector in the area, they show a similar pattern of gender representation to that of the creative economy and the creative industries in the UK (Sleeman, 2019).

Only three interviewees said that their gender identity is different from their sex registered at birth—one person identified as non-binary, and one other identified as transgender.

Ethnicity

The majority of the participants (74%) are white, while 23% are ethnic and religious minorities. The representation of ethnic and religious minorities in our study is higher than the percentage (12%) reported by the Arts Council England for its national portfolio organisations (Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case. A Data Report, 2017-2018, 2019). The data shows a pattern of representation of minority groups in our research similar to the London average (23% in 2016) (Pinoncely & Washington-Ihieme, 2019).

Age

Residents aged 35-39 are the largest group represented in the sample (27%). Those aged 40-44 are the second largest group, followed by those aged 45-49. Participants aged 25-29 and 30-34 constitute 11% of the sample, respectively. The largest population groups in Hackney and Tower Hamlets in 2018 were aged 30-34 (Population Estimates Mid2017 for Tower Hamlets, 2018; Hackney. Facts & Figures Leaflet, 2019).

Number of Participants
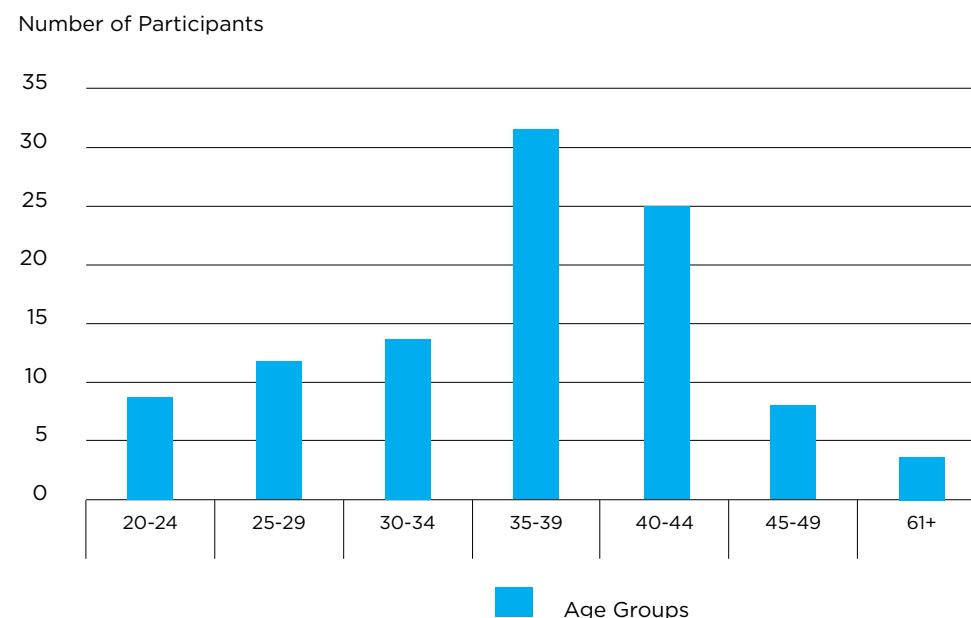
Fig. 4 Interviewees by Age

Types of creative practice and businesses

The interviewees specified their area(s) of creative practice or business type(s). The word cloud was generated by processing such responses with Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software. It points to the prevalence of practitioners in the fields of music, performance and visual arts, and design. Those working in fashion design make one of the largest groups of our sample. The word "creative" was used along with consultancy, branding, director, hub, services, producer, fabricator, community engagement, and workspace provider.
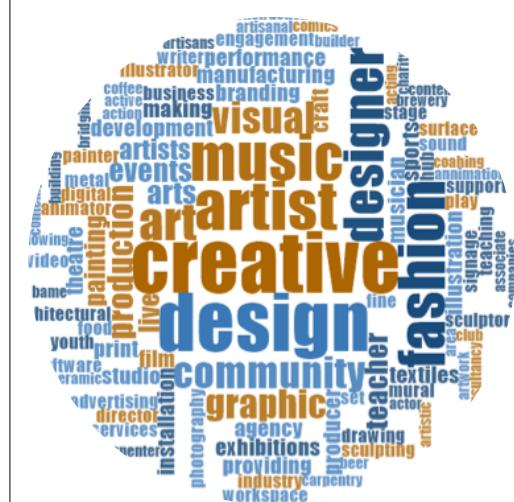
Fig. 5 Word cloud indicating the interviewees' areas of creative practice.

The chart below shows the percentage of participants per subsector in more detail. A quarter of our interviewees work in the music, performing and visual arts subsector, and around 20% within the design field. The latter includes product, graphic and fashion design. Craft practitioners are also among the most represented in the sample, followed by those who offer creative support of different kinds, ranging from space providers to researchers.
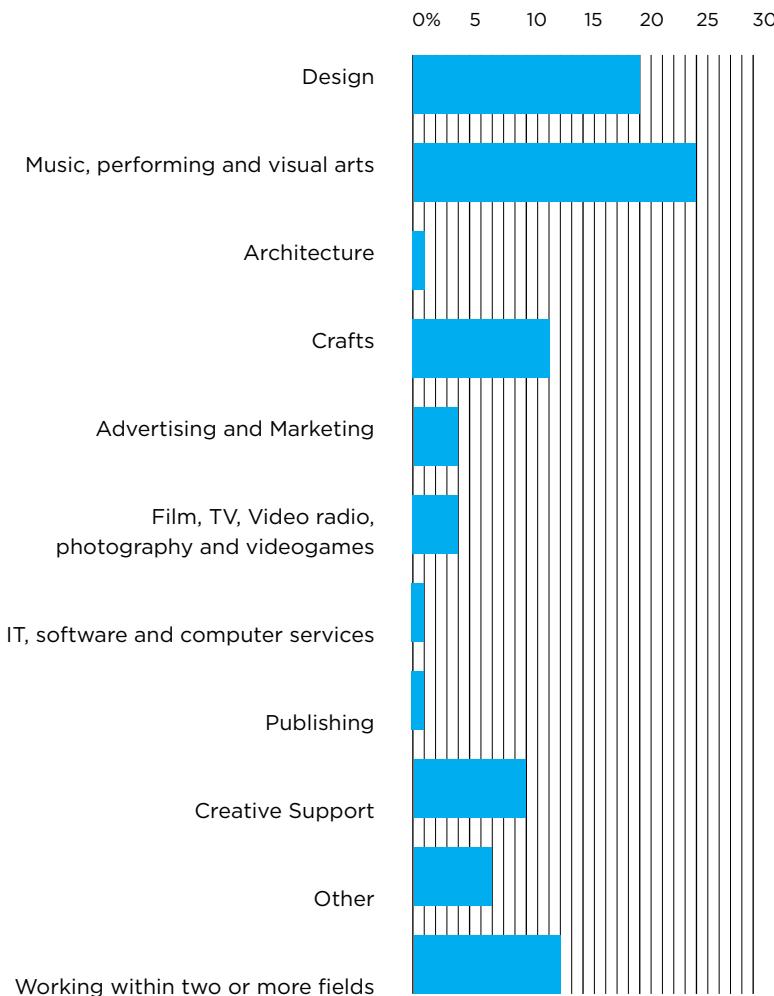
In the following graph, we highlight in blue the percentage of participants per subsector who also work in other areas of the creative industries. The media industry (film, TV, radio, photography and videogames), and the music, performing and visual arts show the highest percentages of individuals working within two fields. Considering the split of participants per sector in our study, it is in the music, performing and visual arts subsector where we find more individuals who also work in other fields.
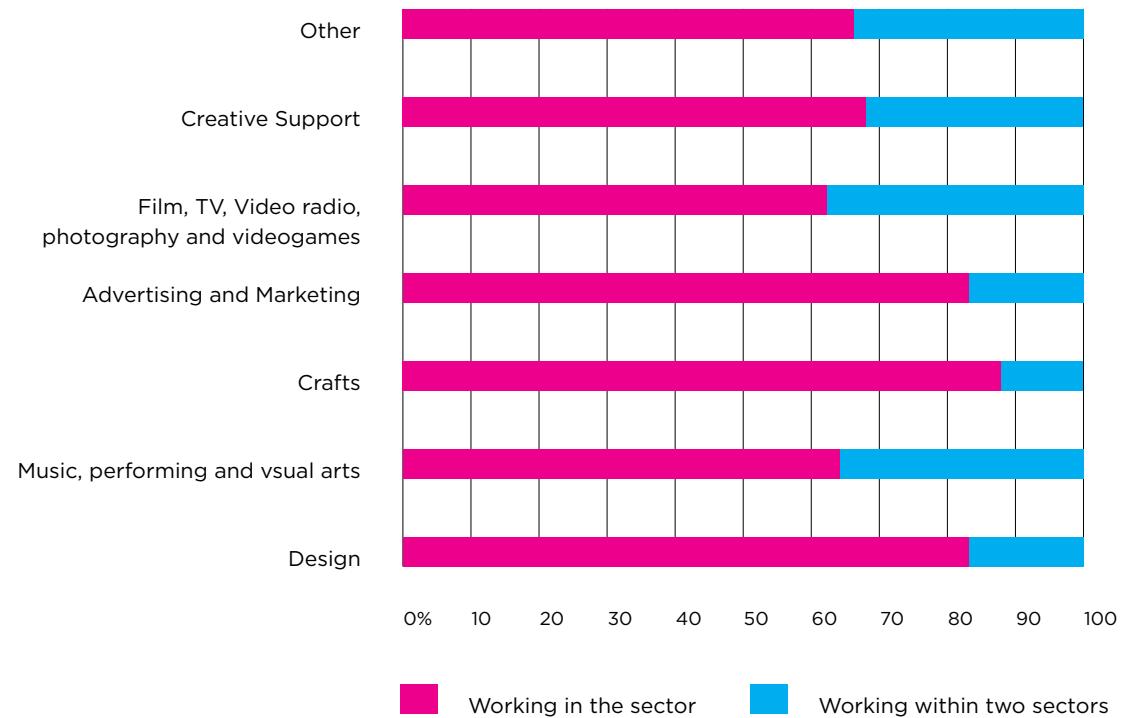
Fig. 6 Subsectors of the creative industries represented in the study.

Fig. 7 Breakdown of interviewees per sector working in just one subsector against those working in more than one subsector of the creative economy.

I. Impact of Covid19

How Covid19 has affected creatives in the area?
The majority of the interviewees (97%) has been affected by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Based on media reports and studies about the impact of Covid19 in the UK's creative sector, we identified 22 common problems that our interviewees could have faced. Around 72% of artists and creatives have had to postpone projects, events and commitments. 57% have had to cancel projects. The following graph shows the percentage of postponements and cancellations within the most represented subsectors in our study. Participants in the music, performing and visual arts were more affected by cancellations than any other group in the sample.

The chart below shows the issues that the interviewees identified as the most pressing for them during the Covid19 crisis, including the postponements and cancellations mentioned previously. Around 55% have been affected by the restrictions to work with the public during the pandemic. The restrictions have also negatively impacted 51% of our interviewees in their ability to make industry connections.

Not reflected in the chart are issues such as a significant income loss, leading to the inability to pay the bills, which affected 16% of our interviewees. Around 15% were unable to subcontract services and staff due to the pandemic, while 9% terminated staff contracts.


Fig. 8 Postponements and cancellations of events, projects and other commitments per subsector in our sample.

Postponements   Cancellations
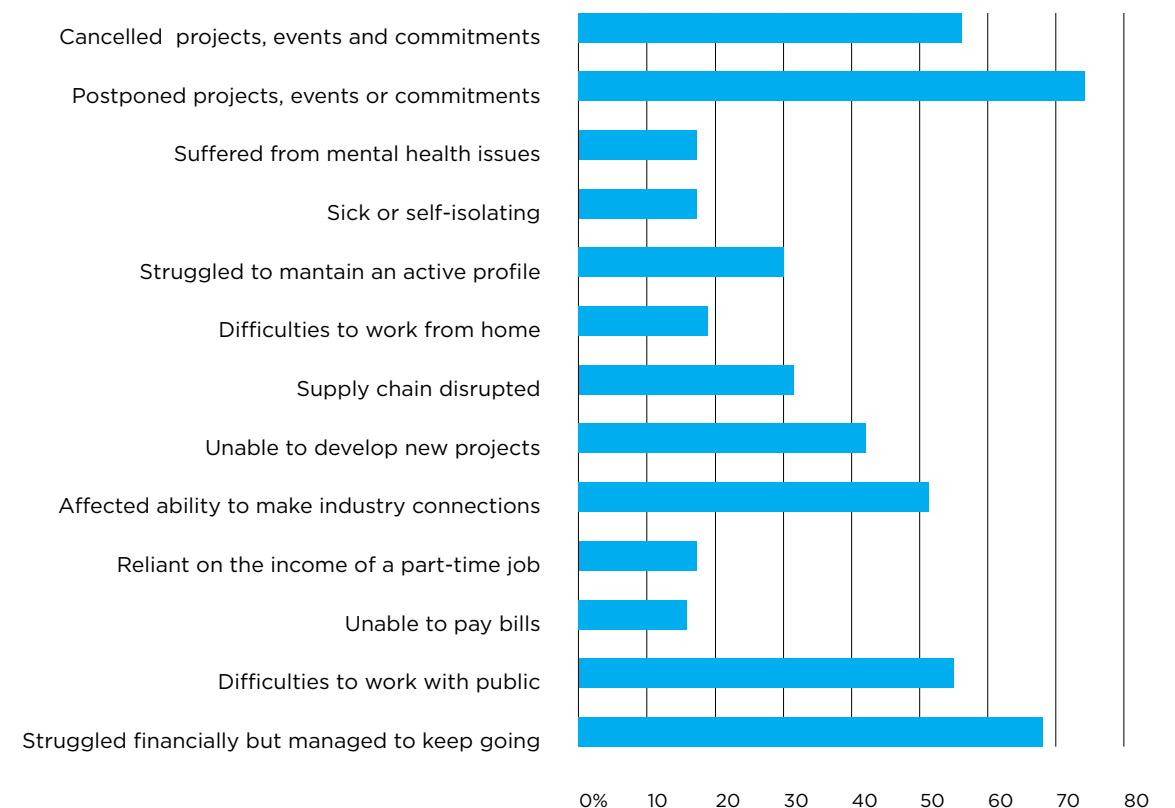
Fig. 9 Issues affecting the interviewees during the Covid19 pandemic.

Considering the disproportion of female and male participants in this study, we calculated how the issues mentioned above impacted both groups independently, to establish comparisons. Around 55% of the interviewees in both groups said they have struggled financially but have continued working throughout the pandemic. Male and female interviewees have also been affected in a similar proportion by cancellations.

Ten per cent of male interviewees have been more affected by postponements and disruptions to supply chains than female interviewees. Compared to females, mental health issues impacted more male participants. They also experienced more difficulties working from home than our female interviewees (over 10%).

However, female interviewees have experienced more difficulties as newly-self-employed than male participants (12% more). Females were also more represented (23%) within the group of creatives that relied only on the income from a part-time job due to the pandemic.

Other noteworthy results emerged when we looked at the impact of Covid19 in individuals from ethnic and religious minorities. The vast majority of the respondents in this group (92%) were affected by postponements, while over 71% had to cancel projects and commitments. More than half said that they struggled financially but managed to continue working, and 43% mentioned that they had to deal with mental health issues. A quarter of the respondents in this group indicated that they were unable to pay the bills at some point during the pandemic. Also, a quarter indicated that they had to rely only on the income from a part-time job.

Following the recommendations by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre in their 2020 Industry Champions' panel on the impact of Covid19 on diversity in the sector (Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, 2020), we looked at age as a possible factor underlying different responses to the crisis. We did not find significant differences in the responses from the participants aged 55 or more and younger participants. According to the study's data, the impact on the youngest group (aged 20-25) does not appear to be considerably different from other age groups.

Our interviewees mentioned other ways in which they were affected by the Covid19 crisis. They highlighted the paralysing effect of lockdown and the negative consequences of disruptions to international travel, public transport, and facilities like art spaces and gyms closed.

"Music gigs have stopped, so the ecosystem which funds my business has stopped."

"Photographers and brands (customers) have been very deeply impacted due to COVID, so that has affected our studio income."

Others mentioned difficulties to recruit new staff and how production teams and artists have been stagnant.

"Each lockdown led to brain freeze. I didn't know what to do."

The pandemic has also opened opportunities for some creatives, despite the adverse effects on the majority. Some interviewees mentioned that they had the chance to improve their businesses and expand their networks.

"I thrived creatively by making connections with artists in the Wick."

How creative people reacted to the crisis?

The responses to the Covid19 crisis are varied. Most participants (92%) confirmed that they needed to adapt at least one aspect of their creative practice, business or routine to navigate the new situation.

To indicate how they adapted or changed, each participant selected one or more options from a list in our questionnaire. We grouped the responses into five categories: the workplace, time balance, activities, skills and other changes.
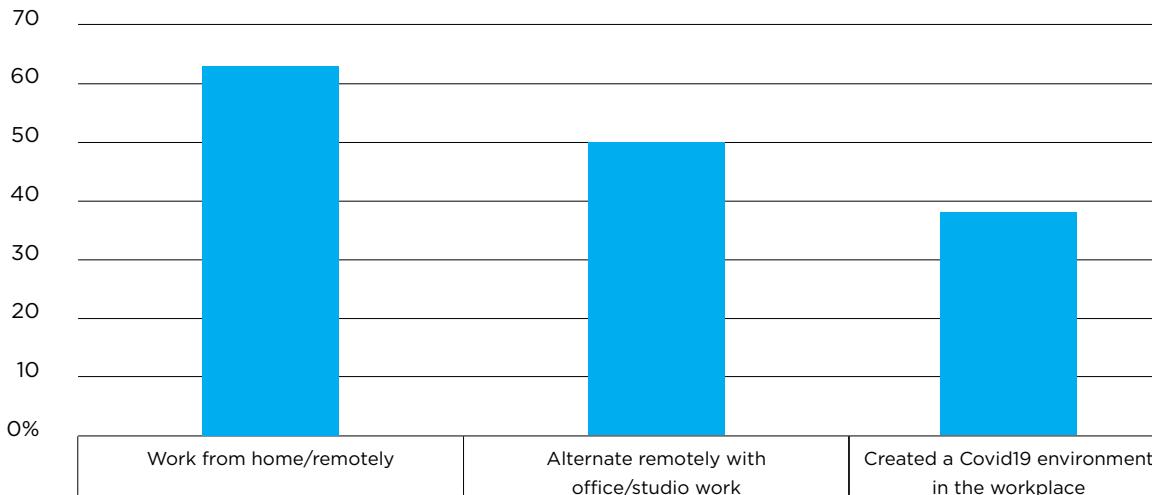

Fig. 10 Changes in the workplace during the pandemic.
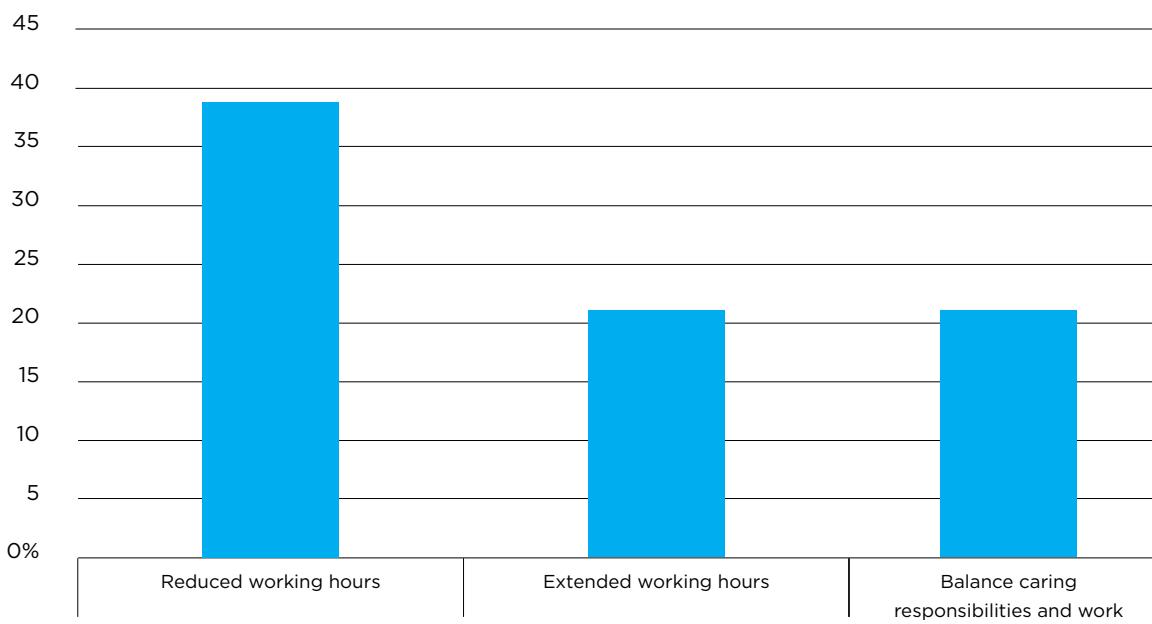
Fig. 11 Changes in the participants' work routines during the pandemic.

The workplace

Half of interviewees said that they had to work from home or remotely during the pandemic. More than 50% mentioned that they worked between both places. These responses suggest that alternating work at home and at the workplace has been a common practice among our interviewees.

We did not ask the participants whether working remotely was a regular practice in normal times. Neither did we count how many creatives live and work in the same place. Considering such practices and conditions in further research would offer more information about the actual changes that creatives had to make to their routines and workspaces due to the pandemic.

Over 35% of the interviewees said they had to make changes to building interiors, offices, shops or studios to create Covid19-secure environments. Since restrictions have tightened and eased at different points during the crisis, we do not take that as an indication that the interviewees remained at the workplace most of the time.

Time balance

Covid19 pressures led to changes in work schedules. For a third of the respondents, that meant reducing working or business hours. Around 29% mentioned that they had to dedicate more time to responsibilities at home, including home-schooling.

Activities and services

The pandemic also led creative practioners and businesses to modify activities and services and to develop new ones. More than 39% of the interviewees created new services during the pandemic.

Although online seems to be the new normal during the pandemic, only 14% of the participants in this study were able to move all activities online. Around 41% of the respondents said they transferred some activities to online platforms, and 28% created activities and content exclusively for digital environments. During the crisis, 23% of the respondents also improved online commerce and digital marketing.

Deliveries and collection services were among the most popular alternatives for coping with the impact of Covid19. Businesses that expanded delivery and collection options (18%) were five percent more than those who developed new services of this sort from scratch.
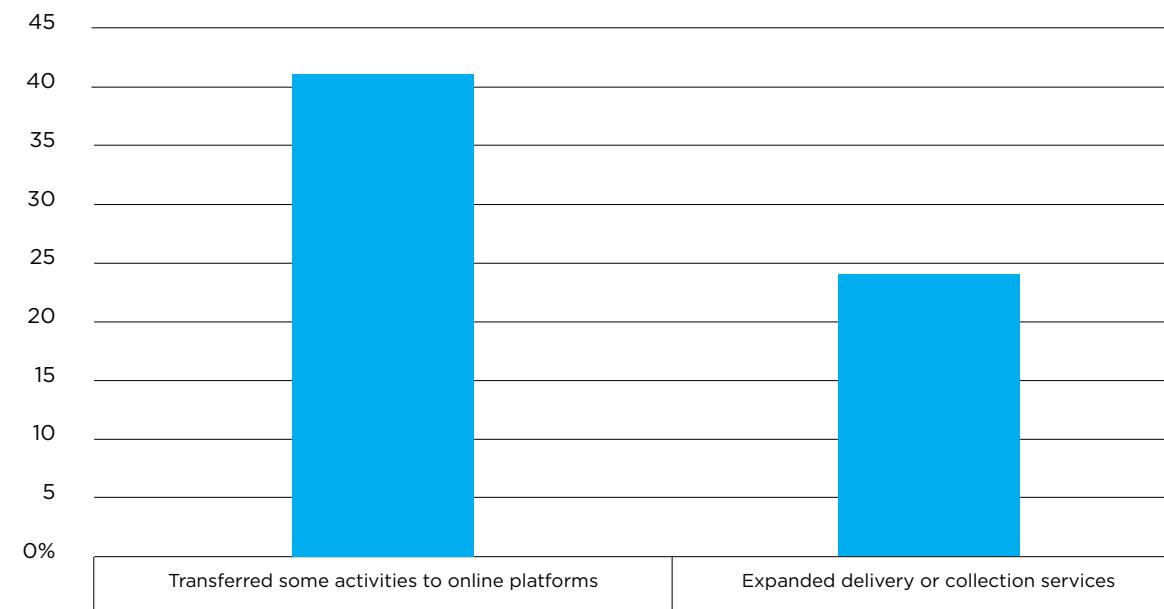

Fig. 12 Transfer of activities to online platforms and expansion of delivery or collection services.

Skills and flexibility

Over 36% of the interviewees acquired news skills during the lockdown, while 18% said that their portfolio careers helped them to respond to the challenges posed by the Covid19 crisis.

The following quotes from the interviews offer further examples of how flexible people and organisations have been during the pandemic. Still, some suggest that flexible work options were contemplated or implemented before Covid19.

"We are working more local and being more flexible with hours of work and type of work as there are lots of requests for safety signage for brands now."

"We had flexible studio working hours in place before crisis."

"I am developing a teaching module in sculptural metalwork."

"I've been busier than ever. Used to being resourceful and self-motivated and have been able to take advantage of the situation. Something of a career resurgence and have been re-discovered."

New opportunities emerging during the pandemic made 28% of our interviewees think that their businesses or creative practices will thrive in the near future.

Other changes

Around 25% of the respondents joined forces with other peers or businesses to keep going. However, 28% had to change their business model or start on a different job due to the pandemic.

What next for the local creative sector?

More than half of the interviewees said that they are ready to face challenges of the kind posed by the pandemic in the near future. That is 12% more than those who think they will need to implement minor changes in their creative practices or businesses, 30% more than those who see their business totally transformed, and 33% more than those who will need to implement other major changes. On the other hand, a third of the respondents believe that their business will continue as usual in the coming months. The following graph shows what else our interviewees are planning to do to continue working and expanding their practice and businesses.
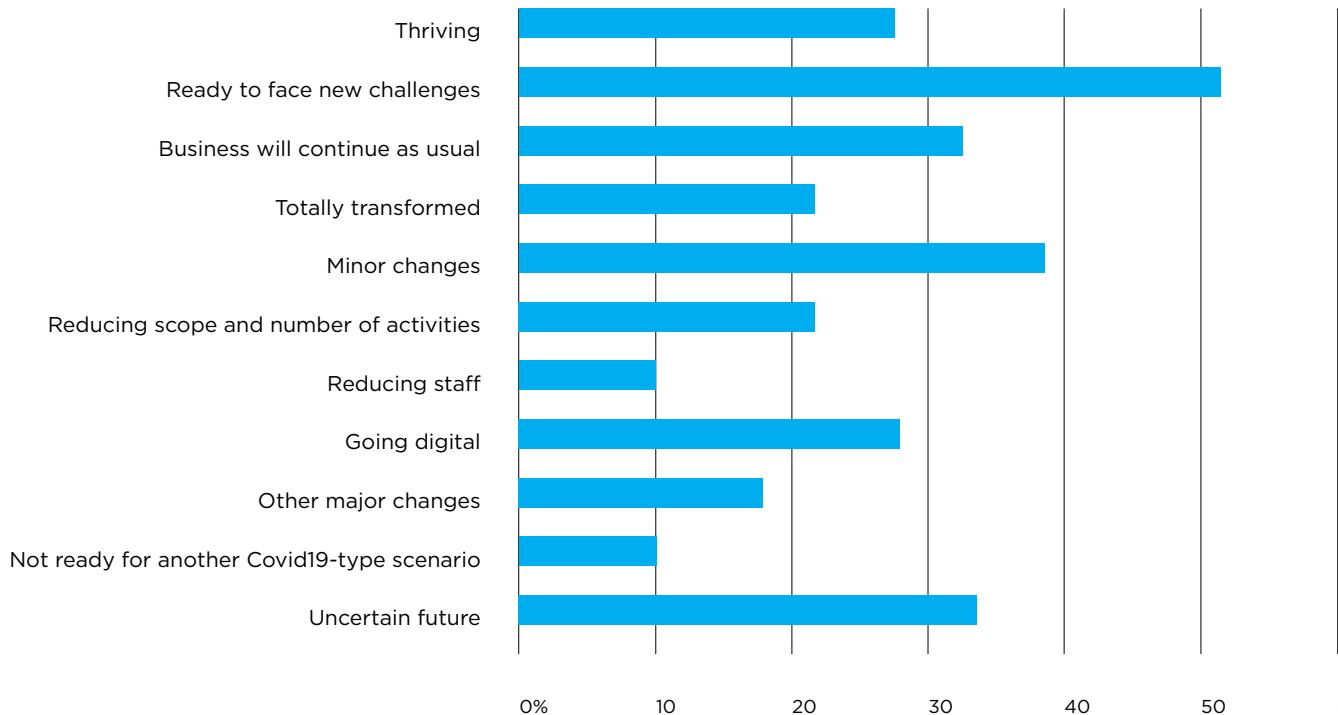

Fig. 13 Indicating how participants see their creative practices or businesses in the coming months.

As reflected in the graph, over a third of our interviewees believe that their creative practice or business's futures are uncertain. Around 10% said they are not ready to cope with a situation like the Covid19 crisis again. Nine per cent said that they would be unable to continue working without external support. The sources of support are varied and may include anything from the family to the public sector.

However, 18% of our respondents specified that they would need professional help to continue operating. This suggests that respondents in this group do not have the skills or the means to continue working normally in the coming months and to thrive. A more significant number of interviewees (41%) indicated, in particular, that they would need financial support to stay afloat.

4% of respondents say they will move outside the UK, and seven per cent have decided to move away from London. Another 7% said they would need to move outside the HW, FI, and the QEOP area in the coming months.

II. Support and interventions to tackle the impact of the pandemic

We asked participants if they have been using any support services from the UK Government, the Greater London Authority, and the local authorities (LB Hackney, LB Tower Hamlets and LB Newham) or any other institutions and organisations in their local area. We compiled a list of schemes and initiatives, and the respondents had the option to tick multiple boxes.

The citizen scientists reported that this question generated a lot of interest among the interviewees. Many of them were unaware of the available support options and wanted to take notes and pictures of the questionnaire. Interestingly, most of these schemes and initiatives have been promoted through the council's websites and other platforms such as the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Cultural Interest Group´s newsletter.

Another issue emerging from the interviews is that some groups in the creative sector (i.e., freelancers, the recently self-employed and small companies,) need more tailored measures from the public sector to deal with crises like the pandemic. We elaborate on this point in chapter III of this report.

"Interviewees basically said that they are unable to access the… government support, because it is not targeted or tailored enough to specific groups… A lot of these funds have really been 'one size fits all' and the problem is that it isn't 'one size fits all'."—Alexis, Citizen Scientist.

"I've seen and spoken to a lot of my network, a lot of them are asking: has anyone applied for this before? How do I do it? How do I get some practical advice for applying? It doesn't seem that that information is readily available." —Edie, Citizen Scientist.

From the UK Government

The majority of the interviewees answered "yes" to the question "Have you made use of any support services from the UK Government (central or local) during the pandemic?".

Of those who answered "yes", most (78% of participants) said that they have used National Government schemes. Cash grants helped 24% of the participants in this study, while the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (Furlough) and the Employment Support Allowance (Universal Credit) supported 22% of the interviewees, respectively. The Self-Employment Income Support Scheme benefited 24 (19%) participants, while 23 (19%) obtained loans from the government.

Other programmes from the UK Government that benefited fewer participants are reflected in the graph below.
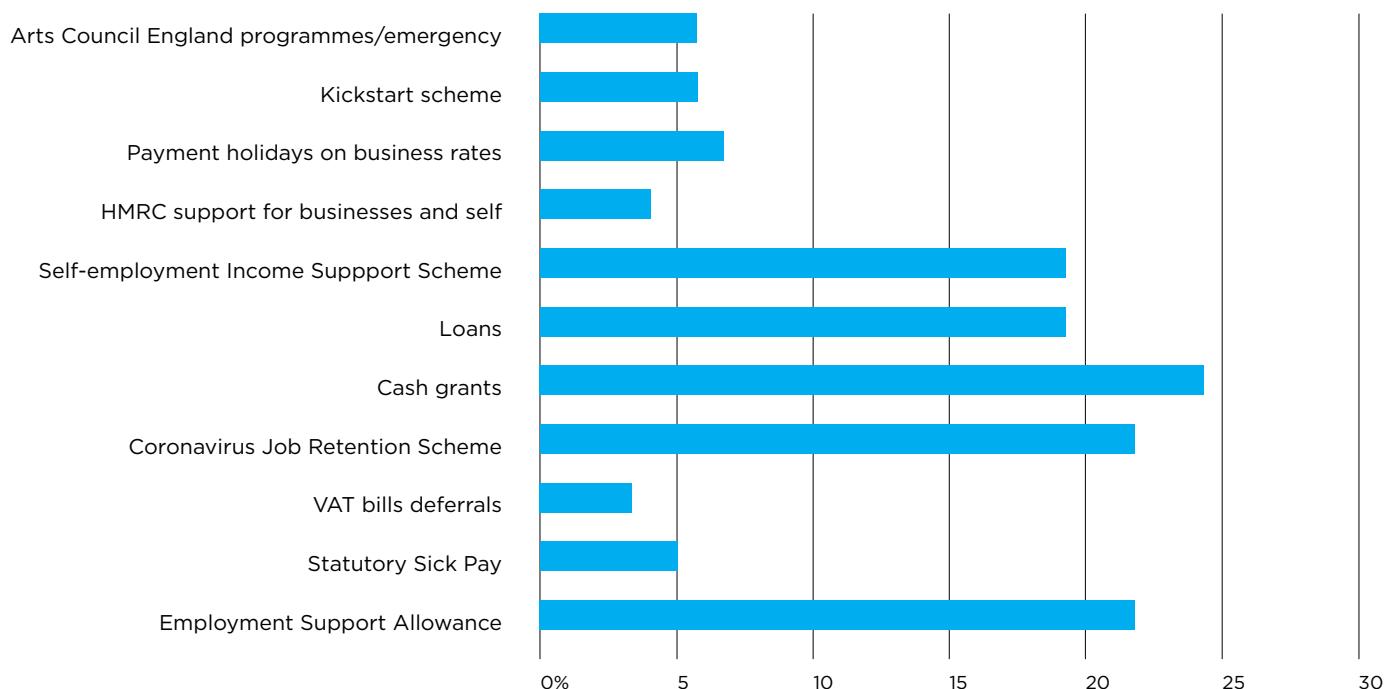

Fig. 14 UK government schemes accessed by the interviewees.

Only 6% of our interviewees benefited from schemes put in place by the Greater London Authority. Four participants (3%) reported having used the London Business Hub´s services and schemes. The Culture At-Risk programme from the Mayor of London helped one of our interviewees.

A higher percentage of participants (19%) indicated that their local councils had supported them in some way. Eight creative practioners (6% of the sample) reported having succeeded in their applications to the Tower Hamlet´s Small Grants Fund, while five (4%) used the Hackney Council Discretionary Fund.

Fewer interviewees (less than 3% of our sample for each case) reported they used the following programmes:

- Hackney Council Webinars
- Love Hackney, Shop Local
- Tower Hamlets Funding for Voluntary and Community Sector organisations
- Tower Hamlets Funding Searches
- Newham Active Spaces
- London Community Response

Getting support from the local authorities is perceived as challenging by more than a third of our interviewees.

In the local area
Over 28% of our interviewees had access to support services from businesses and organisations in their local area. However, few respondents said they had used programmes, services or funding options targeting specifically HW, FI, the QEOP (or East London) residents and organisations. The chart below indicates the types of initiatives accessed by our interviewees.

The funding schemes, networks and activities mentioned by at least three participants in this study are:
- Funding: Neighbourhood Priorities Fund; Westfield East Bank Creative Futures
- Learning, networking and professional support: The Creative Wick Master Class Series; London Creative Network (LCN); East London Business Alliance (ELBA).

We also asked the interviewees if they knew about (or had access to) some of the initiatives that the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Cultural Interest Group disseminated through its weekly newsletter, social media channels and monthly online meetings during the pandemic. The aim was to better understand how communication and information flows within the local creative sector. We were also interested to learn about other programmes and support schemes that creative practitioners and businesses are finding helpful. The businesses and platforms mentioned at least twice in the responses to this question were:
■ People's Pavilion
■ Spacehive
■ Hackney Wick and Fish Island Creative Enterprise Zone Commission
■ SWEN Innovative Newsroom
■ The Match
■ Evo Accelerator Programme

While some participants said they did not know about the opportunities listed in our questionnaire, others said that they are "aware but have not used" these platforms or that they have not used them "yet".

The interviewees also offered their opinions about the interventions and support that have been most beneficial for them and the area during the pandemic. Half of the participants valued funding opportunities as the most important. Peer support was mentioned in 36% of the responses, followed by learning opportunities (19%) and expert support (13%).
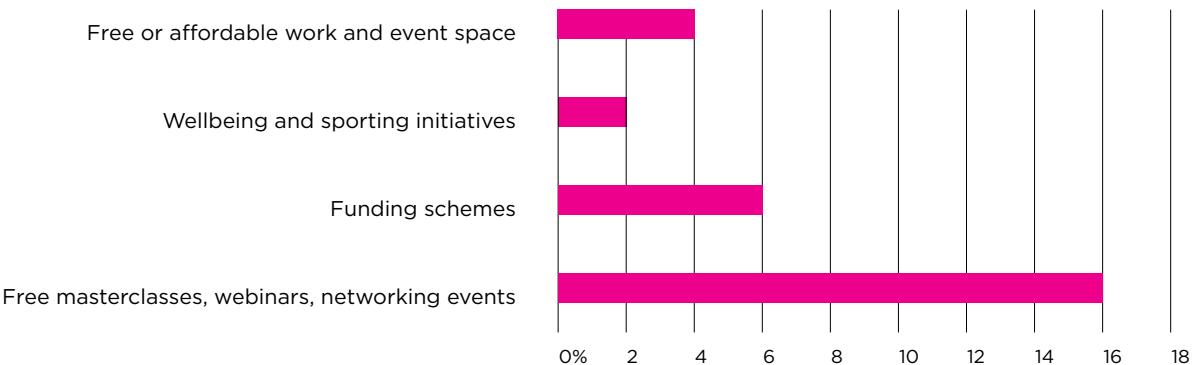

Fig. 15 Support services in HI, FI and the QEOP most accessed by the participants.

The role of the local community during the pandemic

Most of our interviewees rated as "very important" the role of their local community in providing support to businesses and creatives during the lockdowns.

Not important
Somewhat important
Important
Very important
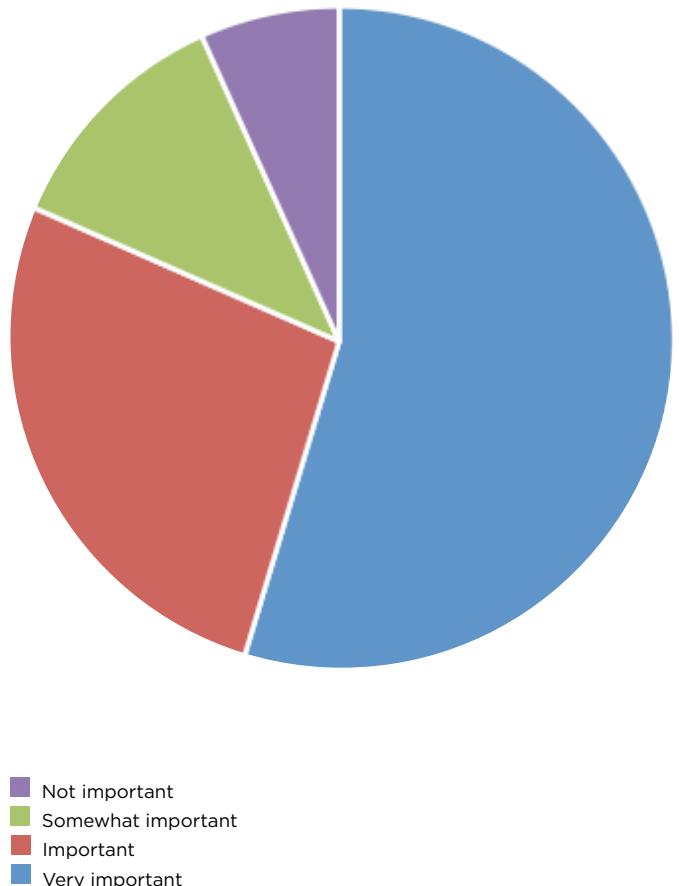
Fig. 16 The split of interviewees per sector working in just one subsector against those working in more than one subsector of the creative economy.

Initiatives from the creative sector

More than half of the respondents (54%) have provided bespoke or targeted support to other community members or groups during the pandemic. Over 23% of participants specified that they had offered expert advice to other residents. Talks, workshops, and job or volunteering opportunities are also among the initiatives implemented by more than 20% of the interviewees, respectively. Participants who have made donations and those who have created social media campaigns supporting the local community constitute 14% of the sample, respectively. Around 13% of the sample have provided support for vulnerable residents.

Ten per cent of the interviewees have organised webinars, while a similar number of participants have made available spaces for other people to work or showcase their work. Other forms of support and the percentages of interviewees who delivered them are reflected in fig.17.
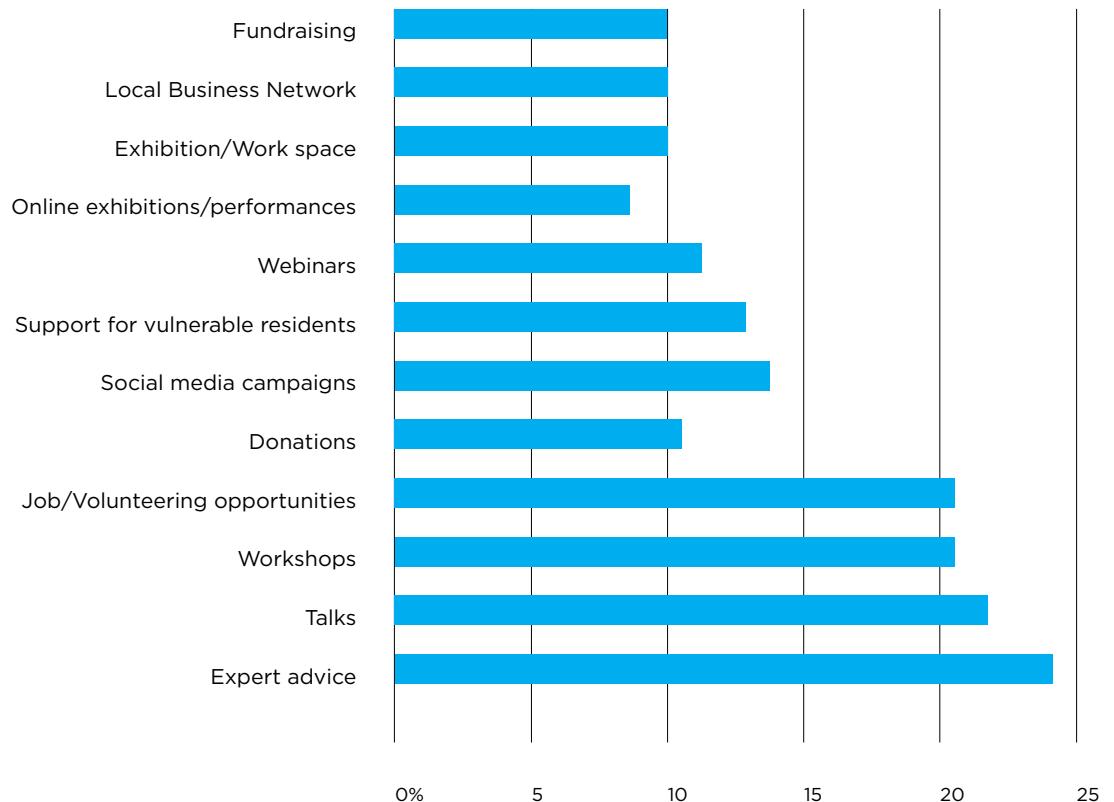

Fig. 17 Showing how the interviewees rated their local community during the pandemic.

III. The road to recovery

The interviewees told us what could be done differently to support creative practioners and businesses in a new lockdown or similar event. Most specified that meaningful (ie better targetted) and more financial support would be needed (78% and 68%, respectively).

The second-largest number of responses indicates that freelancers and local businesses would require more support to cope with a new lockdown or restrictive measures such as those imposed during the Covid19 crisis.

The graph opposite shows the most common responses:

Fig. 18 Shows the percentages of responses indicating what can be done differently to support businesses during a new lockdown or similar event.

What could help the creative sector to recover and thrive?

We asked all interviewees to tell us in one sentence in their own words what they would most like to see in the near future that could help the creative sector to recover and thrive. The responses are consistent with the data that emerged from the question discussed in this chapter's introduction. The evidence presented in the following sections is mainly qualitative. Therefore, in the following sections, the participants' responses are organised according to the main themes ranked in order of popularity.

Financial Support & Investment
Over 32% of our interviewees mentioned that the creative sector needs better, quicker and more targetted financial support to recover from the pandemic's effects. Most interviewees identified the UK Government as the vehicle that should provide this kind of assistance.

According to the interviewees, other actions that the government could take are a reduction of business rates and an adjustment of tax policy to benefit taxpayers in lower income brackets.

Our interviewees said:

"Financial support needs to trickle down to the individuals and small business in the creative sector rather than just venues. It's no good having venues left if there is no talent to put in them."

"Targeted funding support that allows for flexibility for insecure workers and creative professionals."

Space

We use the notion of "space" in this report to refer to the physical environments and places in which creative practice and community life happen. This space is clearly defined within the boundaries of HW, FI and the QEOP. However, for some participants, concerns around the uses and transformation of the space go beyond their local area. Some responses touch upon wider issues such as the character of regeneration in London. For instance, one of the interviewees suggested that one thing that could help the creative sector to recover and thrive in the near future is a "**... continued focus on creating more local infrastructural support to push the 15-minute city concept within London."**

In the quote, the participant refers to a planning model that seeks to improve the quality of life of urban residents by making basic services and other amenities available to them at distances reachable (either by foot or bicycle) within 15 minutes. According to this planning model based on the idea of proximity, the reduction of travel times could have a positive impact on the environment and community life. Other participants in this research specified that Covid19 has had an impact on how people engage with their immediate surroundings:

"Something in keeping things close and local through this time has been a real eye-opener. Local residential community has spent more time than ever around where they live and engaging with local businesses."

Participants seem to see more advantages than disadvantages in the kind of planning models that focus on proximity. However, most responses reflected anxieties about gentrification and displacement. As we shall see later in this report, such concerns seem to be mostly related to the character of some redevelopment initiatives in HW, FI, the QEOP and beyond.

Regeneration

The interviewees expressed concerns about the uses and transformation of space. Over 13% expressed reservations around regeneration in HW, FI and the QEOP when asked about the actions that could help the creative sector recover and thrive. Such concerns manifested in the responses to other questions that touched upon the development prospects for the area. For instance, when asked about the challenges and opportunities for HW, FI and the QEOP, 45% of the participants said that the nature of the redevelopment projects could be a challenge for the creative economy.

Empty buildings and the redevelopment of industrial units into residential properties taking precedence over the construction of affordable workspace were among the key problems highlighted by the interviewees.

An interviewee specified:
"For all the luxury apartments that have been built and the wealth that has been created privately, none has trickled down, not just to the creative community but also to the entirety of the local community."

Others said that they would like to see:

"Buildings owned by creatives or artist cooperatives."

"Easy access to meanwhile space."

"Social value of the creative sector recognised over the monetary value of the redevelopment process."

Affordability

The second-largest group of responses to the question "What would you like to see in the near future that could help the creative sector to recover and thrive?" indicates that participants would benefit from rent reductions and access to affordable workspace in HW, FI and the QEOP. In their responses, residents showed concerns about rising rental prices in the area that may lead to the displacement of creative practitioners and businesses. This could be sensed as well when we asked the interviewees about the challenges and opportunities for the creative sector in the area in 2021—more than three-quarters identified rent affordability as a challenge. Around 84% see the possibility that members of the grassroots creative economy would be displaced as a challenging reality.

According to two of the citizen scientists, the problem not only affects emerging but also more established businesses.

"What I found within my network is that quite a few people that I am in contact with —who have quite established businesses or studios— have had to move out... And part of that is because rent has been too high or because they have not been able to support themselves within Hackney. Some of them have had to move in with partners or have had to relocate the studios completely... It has been a road shift... I was relying on some of them to be in Hackney, but they are not. It's been a mass exodus..."—Edie, citizen scientist.

"I interviewed a very successful business, and he was talking about rent rates... That person, who is very successful, was trying to find a second warehouse in the area, but it was almost impossible. I also interviewed someone that does light industrial metalwork, which implies noises. She got evicted and was trying to find a place to live in the area. It was almost impossible; they (the places) were either too industrial —for heavy, heavy work—, or too commercial. What artists are feeling here at the moment is that either we (the area) are becoming too industrial or too commercial. And the rent of those commercial spaces is so expensive that people have not been able to pay for it. That plays a big role in why people are considering moving as well... I feel like if something could come out of this research and this group that we are uniting, some kind of initiative to propose that: a reduction in rents or (other) initiatives for creatives." —Giovanna, citizen scientist.

Protected spaces
Participants hoped for more than ad hoc measures to solve the issues around affordable living and workspaces. A number of interviewees pointed to the need for long-term solutions such as **"controlled subsidised rent"** and **"secure"** or **"protected"** workspace. The interviewees said:

"Dedicated long term space for businesses and small businesses to grow."

"Artists need more protection from unscrupulous landlords"

Community spaces
The pandemic has revitalised the interest in community spaces where residents can support and see each other. Initiatives such as **"Community Spaces at Risk"** by the Mayor of London have acknowledged the importance of grassroots clubs, educational hubs, sports and cultural centres. Some participants in this research confirmed the significance of that kind of space for the creative sector in HW, FI and the QEOP.

Some interviewees said they would like to see:

"A local hub for creatives to relax and network - since Stour Space disappeared, as well as a public gallery."

"An artist zone where street artists can come down and do their thing. A weekly artists market"

Another respondent emphasised the crucial role of the government in supporting community spaces:

"The importance of physical spaces to engage has never been clearer as we've been forced to isolate. As HWFI evolves, through central and local government, those businesses doing vital social outreach through their community spaces should be supported."

Value the hyperlocal
In the interviews, participants also mentioned the notions of **"the local"** and **"the hyper-local"**. Some have noticed how **"hyper-local has thrived"** throughout the pandemic. One of the examples mentioned was the success of **"shop local"** initiatives.

Another interviewee mentioned the need for

"more local production, distribution and shopping experiences (which became so vital during lockdown) to harness the new desire to engage with local business in your residential area. Feel this can be a big boost for the creative economy in HWFI if managed right post-pandemic."

The creative sector

The question **"What the creative sector needs to recover and thrive?"** prompted rich dialogues between the citizen scientists and the interviewees. Such conversations revolved mainly around two topics. On the one hand, they discussed the social and economic value of the creative sector. On the other hand, they highlighted the differences between groups within the creative sector.

"Not just entertainment"
About the representations and social perceptions of the creative sector, one of the citizen scientists said:

"I feel that Corona and the pandemic situation helped to increase the mentality that it is not just a hobby of ours to be an artist, it is not just about entertainment or making a beautiful thing. It is actually a fundamental part of our existence." —Giovanna, Citizen Scientist.

Along the same lines, other quotes from the interviewees highlighted the importance of recognising the creative sector's value as the country recovers from the Covid19 crisis. Some participants said:

"A recognition that the creative sector adds monetary and social value and should be treated accordingly."

"Creative sector considered valuable instead of disposable."

"Recognising creative work as actual labour"

Multiple realities

Covid19 has accentuated social inequalities in the country. Such an effect is also visible within the creative sector. One of our interviewees said:

"The gap between 'the haves and have nots' has been spotlighted in a true way. So, we need to learn from this and address it, and make it a level playing field for all. That's creative businesses and local residents."

The citizen scientists emphasised the importance of making distinctions between groups within the creative sector as a crucial step to recover from the Covid19 crisis. In the focus group and the feedback sessions, they underlined the differences between:
- Small businesses and larger businesses
- Fine artists, craft makers and events-based businesses vs creatives in sub-sectors such as design and the film industries
- The self-employed vs fully employed creatives
- Creatives whose main job falls outside the creative economy vs those who work mainly within the creative industries.

The interviewees pointed out that further measures to support those who have been hard-hit by the pandemic could contemplate:

"Better support for self-employed and sole traders."

"A policy that prioritises fine art and galleries"

"Help for studios and artists to be more visible as small businesses in their own right."

"(Support for) profitable businesses that fall through the many cracks of currently available support packages"

"Purposeful inclusion, and more diversity on boards. Grassroots creatives are between 80% -90% diverse but not represented at board level."

Communication & Guidance

As mentioned in chapter II, some interviewees believe that to recover from the crisis, information about support packages and services from the Government and other organisations should be readily available. They said the creative sector could benefit from:

"More Government guidance, quicker and clearer responses to what SMEs can do."

"Post-covid mentoring support (in terms of new business models, working habits, trading) about how to operate in this new business landscape."

Some interviewees mentioned that HW, FI and the QEOP's talents and businesses should be promoted in innovative ways and through different channels.

Interviewees suggested:

"Maybe a platform to connect all the local artists and business through paid talks or workshops that can happen online at accessible prices."

"Distributing a local newspaper."

"More attention for our work through a collective marketing and promotion. Let's reinvent Hackney WickED."

Collaboration & Innovation

Another set of responses underlines the value of collaboration at a local level both between groups within the creative sector and amongst residents and local organisations as an important source of innovation.

They would like to see more:

"Investment in collaborative projects online and skills development online."

"A digital showcase of all fine artists with a workable sales platform."

"Collaborative projects. For example, designers creating together (remotely if necessary) to help develop useful social projects to improve the community"

"Interaction with the local community to learn more about what is available to each other, expand and help each other out."

"Creative community meetings specifically to engage artists in collaborations. The hive mind is where the magic happens."

Short-term actions

As the country comes out of lockdown and restrictions are loosened, our interviewees expect that venues would open with social distancing measures. Others are keen "to celebrate and promote the local creative sector" in a festival or a "grand reopening".

In the interviews emerged that some businesses are feeling the impact of Brexit along with the effects of the Covid19 pandemic. One interviewee mentioned that a **"resolution of the difficulties for working in Europe"** in the short-term would be a crucial step that will enable affected businesses to recover.

IV.   What have we learned from the Covid19 crisis?

In the interviews, participants discussed some of the lessons learnt during the pandemic. In particular, they considered the lessons that could help the grassroots creative economy endure challenging times.

The majority of the responses expand on issues mentioned in chapters II and III. Some of those are long-standing problems that were accentuated by the pandemic but not necessarily created by it. For instance, the participants underlined that the importance of protecting the creative sector from rent rises, **"rapacious landlords"**, and gentrification has become more apparent during the Covid19 crisis.

They also emphasised that the pandemic proved the value of culture and creativity as **"the backbone of any community"** and sources of **"happiness"** and wellbeing. Respondents stated that the creative sector and communities with a high concentration of creative workers should be **"respected and invested in"**. In that regard, a participant said that one of the most important lessons of the pandemic has been **"to not take artists and their work for granted."**

Adapting to change
A group of responses focused on adaptability. They drew attention to **"how quickly 'people's behaviour can be adapted, and how we can apply that to climate change and other issues."**

Other interviewees highlighted the flexibility and openness that have been key for adapting to the new normal.

"Exchange of knowledge, being flexible and asking for help have been key learnings from us that the creative ecosystem could use."

The responses in this group highlighted the numerous opportunities that digital environments offer for innovating and staying connected with audiences and customers. Participants reflected on how businesses and creatives who have a strong presence online have been able to cope better with the challenges posed by the pandemic. However, they also said that it can be hard to earn income out of digital alternatives in many cases.

Another participant said that in this context, it is crucial for the creative sector to **"get organised and be more business savvy."**

Along the same lines, another interviewee said that Covid19 has shown how important it is to **"have more self-sufficiency in the long-term."**

Stronger together
As we have seen throughout this report, most interviewees think that their local community is important for their creative practice or business. When asked about the challenges and opportunities for the area in the near future, over 65% of our interviewees indicated they regard existing local business networks and other forms of collaboration with residents as opportunities. More than half believe that resident organisations are strong.

The pandemic is largely regarded by our interviewees as an event that has boosted community cohesion and collaboration in the area. However, according to the citizen scientists, it is important not to see HW, FI, and the QEOP as just one, unified creative cluster. They pointed out that the notion of creative cluster does not recognise other non-creatives who are also important members of the local community:

"There is this idea of preserving the creative ecomony. But a lot of people in Hackney Wick and Fish Island are not creatives, they may be workers, people who are involved in other things, not necessarily artistic and not necessarily commodifiable or classifiable as artists that fit in that clear model."—Martin, Citizen Scientist.

"In Hackney Wick and Fish Island there are many different creative communities, although with not much cross-coordination. However, now, since we are focused on surviving the pandemic, it feels more coordinated, more like a community as a whole."— Patrick, Citizen Scientist.

The interviewees recognise that the **"gaps between the grassroots community and the businesses that are thriving"** have not been bridged yet. Some also avoided been too optimistic about the positive effects of the pandemic in the community, since it is evident that the different pockets of the creative sector in HW, FI, and the QEOP are not fully synchronised. But in general, the importance of the community was mentioned by the participants as one of the most valuable lessons learnt during the pandemic:

"Valuing the community that we have and not throwing it away for short term gain. The pandemic has shown us the kind of people we have in the area and what they know. As people left to work from home, if anything, that helped us to look around at who is here, and value the people we have."

Participants highlighted the importance of the creative sector for **"influencing change that doesn't delete the past"** and the value of communal living for fostering creativity at a local level.

Other interviewees said:

"Mutual support from-like minded creatives in a community is paramount for success."

"Throughout the Covid19 crisis I have watched the community find new ways to provide for themselves and one another spiritually, financially and collaborate creatively."

"People have been willing to work together and carry on with their community focus."

"There have been lots of examples of generosity this year through the crisis. This small community support needs to keep going. Keep the same spirit alive but make it meaningful. Community cohesion and resilience in HW and FI is strong and very valuable."

According to Martin, a Citizen Scientist who is also a resident in the area, during the pandemic it has become apparent that communality is not just experienced around creativity. It also rests on pillars such as resource and knowledge sharing, connections, emotional support, and a manifest desire to live communally. Martin's comments are part of a wider conversation about what makes the area unique, beyond being one of the zones with the highest concentration of artists and creative practitioners in Europe.

Conclusion

It comes as no surprise that Covid19 has had a devasting impact on some sectors of the creative economy in Hackney Wick, Fish Island, and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, particularly for those artists, creative practitioners, and businesses operating within the fields of music, visual and performance arts. However, many artists and creatives in the area have adapted to the changes imposed by lockdown restrictions, adjusting their business model, and even launching new ventures. In many cases, the creative sector has so far proved itself to be agile, innovative and resilient, and the importance of peer support within the community has come to the fore.

There have been instances where some sectors of the community have been able to come together in significant acts of mutual support and social innovation. Questions have been raised about the definition of 'community' where sometimes it applies to a shared building, work/live unit, warehouse or studio block as well as the wider geography of the area. We have seen the importance of good communication, access to trusted networks and community groups and reliable information, as well as a mistrust of the development sector and the regeneration process.

There has also been a low take up of some of the formal support offers. Additionally we have seen that the lack of security of tenure and informal living arrangements for many people in the creative sector can lead to displacement and high levels of transience.

What is clear, particularly from the qualitative data, is the importance of the hyper-local to the sustainability of the creative economy in the short-term as we emerge from lockdown restrictions. We highlight the need to further research some of these themes to better understand the underlying reasons and contribute to the amelioration of their adverse effects. The Living Lab hopes that there will be more opportunities to engage in such research.

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