Creative Estuary: Final Evaluation

A Final Report by Hatch

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University of Kent

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Summary Report

i. The Creative Estuary programme was an £8.8m initiative launched in April 2019 and delivered up to March 2023. Part funded by the Cultural Development Fund (CDF), its objective was to deliver social and economic transformation through building a global cultural production cluster and expanding cultural consumption across the Estuary. The programme covered the parts of the Thames Estuary Production Corridor that fall within Kent and Essex.

ii. The CDF aims to stimulate place-based and sector-specific growth through cultural investment. Creative Estuary's holistic approach, comprising seven strands of activity (known as Sparks), contributes to the CDF's and programme's **aim to deliver a world class creative and cultural production hub, leading in innovation, talent and class**, through:

- using culture and creative activity to unlock economic growth and productivity
- using culture and creative activity to make places attractive to live in, work and visit
- strengthening local leadership in culture and/or the creative industries and
- enhancing creative skills.

iii. The seven Sparks are as follows:

- **Spark 1**: Delivered Estuary 2021, a large-scale arts festival that celebrated the lives, landscapes and histories of the spectacular Thames Estuary, an ambitious, transformational programme of work, linked to an innovative skills programme delivered by a wide range of arts and agency partnerships across the region.
- **Spark 2**: Supported organisations and individuals through the Creative Estuary co-commissioning programme, investing in the creation of new arts and cultural work across the Estuary area. The co-commissions sought to create opportunities for new creative production and raise awareness of local creative talent.
- **Spark 3**: Pan-estuary branding and campaign to empower places to put creative and cultural production at the heart of their external inward investment and visitor offer. Worked with existing inward investment agencies and Inward Investment Agency, including Locate in Kent.
- **Spark 4**: Worked to develop a long-term collective and strategic model to provide space for Cultural Production, including demonstration through two pilots in Chatham and Thurrock.
- **Spark 5**: Worked to develop two Cultural Co-Location Pilots in Ebbsfleet Garden City and Purfleet-on-Thames to embed arts and culture into the design and functioning of planned new facilities and public spaces.
- **Spark 6**: Developed and carried out RE:Generation 2031 (creative skills development for ages 16-25 in disadvantaged areas) including providing mentoring and support for young people and growing businesses.
- **Spark 7**: Supported a series of innovation labs for sector leaders, artists and academics to discuss new culture-led solutions to contemporary Estuary issues and catalyse new income streams for cultural practitioners/organisations. This Spark also included a Creative Producer programme, led by East 15 Acting School at University of Essex, developing an Emerging Producers' Network for the Estuary and delivering placements and training, developing individuals' and organisations' capacity and experience.

Evaluation Approach

iv. This report provides a final evaluation of the programme, based on an evaluation framework, framed around answering four overarching evaluation questions:

- Q1: What can be learned about how Creative Estuary was delivered?
- Q2: To what extent has the programme achieved what it set out to?
- Q3: What impacts have been, and will be, generated by Creative Estuary?
- Q4: How can the learning from Creative Estuary support future activity?

v. The final evaluation draws upon the findings of a number of research strands, including analysis of output data, consultations with delivery and management leads, a survey of the arts and cultural sector in the area (including programme beneficiaries), focus groups with a range of stakeholders, and case studies.

vi. This evaluation takes an overarching view across the programme activity, providing Spark level detail in places, along with case studies, where appropriate.

Key Findings

Q1: What can be learned about how Creative Estuary was delivered?

The programme evolved in response to changes in the wider context and to lessons learned from ongoing delivery, and it took on some roles that could not have been envisaged at the outset

vii. The Creative Estuary programme has been foundational, piloting a wide range of interventions and approaches to developing the Thames Estuary area through culture-led regeneration. It was intended that the programme would trial delivering interventions in different ways and was flexible and responsive in its approach.

viii. It put in place a robust governance approach to facilitate this, which enabled risks and opportunities to be tracked and acted upon in a timely fashion. The roles of the Accountability Board and external Chair proved to be highly effective in providing leadership, supporting the Director and making onward connections to key external stakeholders such as the Thames Estuary Production Corridor and the South East Local Enterprise Partnership.

ix. Consequently, the programme has evolved flexibly in response to changes in the wider context, to lessons learned from ongoing delivery, and it has taken on some roles that could not have been envisaged at the outset. This includes changes in focus and delivery at the Spark level as well as shifts at the overarching programme level. Some of the key changes include:

- **Shifting delivery in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic** – The impact of the pandemic on both the programme and the wider creative and cultural sectors was momentous. The programme had to adapt in a number of ways, including extending the programme by one year and revising targets. The programme team also used this as an opportunity to refocus activities in response to changing sector needs, as

well as modifying its delivery approach. For example, the investment strategy for Spark 3 and delivery strategy for Spark 7 were revisited. Notably, rather than cancelling the *Estuary* Festival (Spark 1), it was postponed by a year and then reformatted into a "long walk," which meant social distancing regulations could be observed while still generating planned benefits. Spark 1 also significantly increased its reach, by adopting digital content alongside the physical experience.

- **Responding to the increased awareness around the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK** - In 2020, in response to George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement, the programme team quickly took the decision to increase their focus on supporting people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Spark 2 exceeded its ambitious target (20%), with 24% of the investment in co-commissions going to BAME-led organisations and/or BAME individuals. Within the RE:Generation 2031 initiative, 23% of participants were from a minority ethnic background.

- **Shifts in governance and management approaches** - Given the broad scale of activity across Sparks within the programme, a CDF Delivery Group was set up to bring delivery partners from across the programme (Spark leads and Project Managers) together. This new entity sought to develop better and closer working and identify opportunities for cross Spark working to achieve greater impact, shared learning and better outcomes for places.

- **Taking on a more significant sector leadership role than originally envisaged** - Whilst the Creative Estuary programme always saw itself as having a sector leadership role, the scale and scope of this role became significantly greater and more visible than was envisaged at the outset. This is reflected in the connections and partnerships formed by the programme team, their presence at major sector events and conferences, the contribution made to drafting thought leadership pieces and the cut through of the Creative Estuary brand.

The programme aligned well with, and responded to, the ambitions of other Thames Estuary initiatives

x. The Creative Estuary programme was developed in close partnership with the local authorities within the Estuary, aiming from the start to avoid duplication. As it progressed, these links were strengthened. Indeed, the programme team took on an important role of communicating the value of creative and cultural industries in wider economic development policy. Creative Estuary provided a way to test and implement the TEPC vision, giving confidence that it can be achieved.

xi. Other ways in which Creative Estuary supported wider initiatives included by:

- Acting as a case study for other initiatives to draw lessons from
- Supporting local high streets policy
- Contributing to Local Government Association and DCMS work[1]

[1] E.g. DCMS (2022) *Reimagining where we live: Cultural Placemaking and the Levelling Up Agenda*

xii. While some similar activities are being carried out in the Thames Estuary area, by offering strategic leadership at a more macro, pan-authority level, supporting the region as a whole and seeking to encourage collaboration, the programme amplified, rather than duplicated, similar activities.

Q2: To what extent has the programme achieved what it set out to?

xiii. The original programme targets were set across three themes: economic impact; skills and training; and audiences. These targets were changed in May 2020 to account for the emerging impact of the pandemic and the one-year extension of the programme. The main changes were as follows:

- New jobs created (FTE) over the course of the programme were reduced to account for the impact of the pandemic on the jobs market.
- The target for contractual direct jobs secured was increased to account for the additional year and increased need to safeguard jobs.
- The participants trained target increased to account for the additional year of activity and increased need to support people whose career pathways were disrupted.
- The audience number target was almost tripled to account for the opportunity to reach digital audiences.

Overall, the programme has made good progress to date in meeting targets

xiv. To March 2023, **the programme has created and safeguarded 80.1 FTE job years**. The programme has achieved 41% of the latest new FTE jobs created target and 22% of the contractual direct jobs secured target. It is important to note the highly flexible and freelance nature of the cultural sector which means that far more individuals benefitted from the programme job creation than the FTE jobs figure is able to show. Looking at headcount only, an average of 126 people gained or maintained employment as a result of the programme for each year of the programme. Not included in the jobs generated figures are indirect and induced jobs created as a result of the programme, and jobs which will come forwards in future through the creation of workspace. Sparks 4 and 5 estimate that around 50 direct jobs will be supported as a result of workspace unlocked. It is critical to note that economic impact outputs have been achieved at a time of extreme dislocation in the cultural sector, which was one of the hardest hit by the pandemic.

xv. **The programme has trained 601 participants** out of a target of 384. This includes undergraduate students who worked with higher education staff to gain creative industry experience in responding to briefs to engage with the audiences of the *Estuary 2021,* individuals trained as a result of co-commission spending, and young people on RE:Generation 2031 and Estuary Producers Network placements.

xvi. **Audience numbers of 12.5m has been achieved**, significantly exceeding the updated target of 1.4m. This largely reflects the broad reach of the 257 events commissioned by Spark 2 (Cultural Co-commissions), as well as the reach of *Estuary* 2021[2]

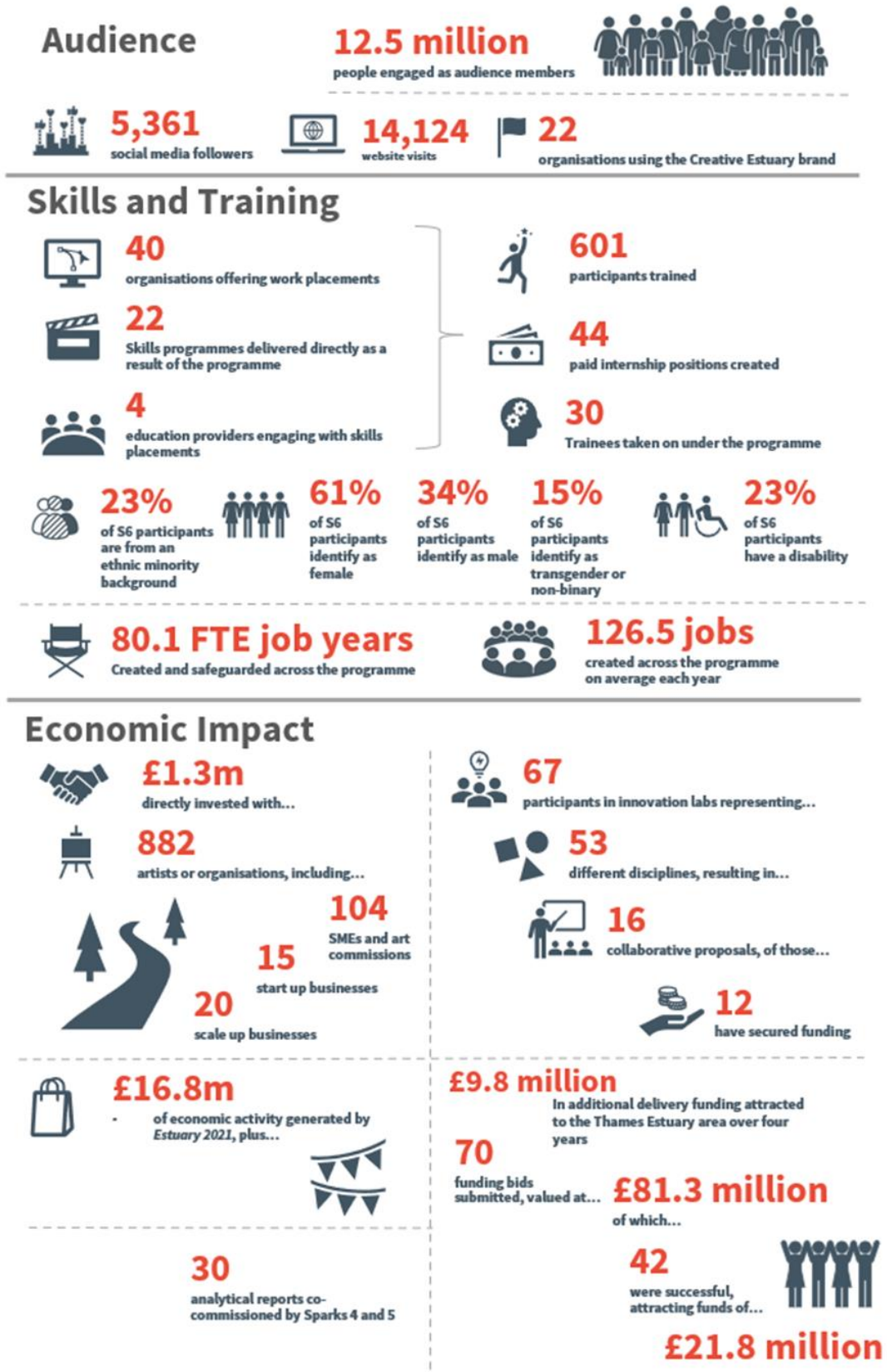
Beneficiaries rated Creative Estuary support as being of high quality

xvii. 87% of Arts and Cultural Organisations survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Creative Estuary delivered high quality support. More than three quarters agreed that Creative Estuary has increased their confidence to undertake innovative work and brought their work to new audiences.

xviii. A headline summary of the outputs achieved across the programme is provided overleaf.

[2] Note that EVEWRIGHT's two Tilbury Bridge Walkway of Memories events in conversation with Joanna Lumley attracted a total digital audience of 7.9 million.

Figure 1.1 Programme output performance summary



Source: Creative Estuary Outputs Data, 2023. Please note: The audience number include digital audiences of 7.9m for a TV programme; The value of funding bids submitted includes three Levelling Up Fund bids supported, each for £20m. S6 stands for Spark 6. The average 126.5 jobs created per year are counted in terms of a headcount rather than FTE measure.

Q3: What impacts have been, and will be, generated by Creative Estuary?

To what extent has Creative Estuary strengthened the Creative Cluster and visitor economy in the Estuary area?

Creative Estuary has developed valuable connections between arts and cultural organisations

xix. Consultees report that the Creative Estuary helped creative and cultural organisations to recognise their role within the Thames Estuary creative and cultural sector. For example:

- the **Creative Estuary business directory** provides an online list of creative business and their supply chain across the Thames Estuary and wider geography. The directory is organised by business type and location for easy identification[3].
- **Ideas Labs** resulted in 16 collaborative project proposals, 12 of which secured funding. Consultees found that this increased the rate of Knowledge Exchange and started to build better relationships in the industry and across the Thames Estuary area.

xx. 93% of respondents to the arts and cultural sector study reported that Creative Estuary has generated collaborations, and 83% said that the programme has strengthened links between cultural and creative organisations. 85% thought that partnership and knowledge sharing had been improved.

Creative Estuary has helped to develop sector-relevant skills of the local workforce

xxi. Evidence shows that the programme played an important role in supporting creative practitioners and those looking to develop skills for work in the creative and cultural sector throughout the pandemic. The programme directly supported skills development through the Estuary Producers Network, Ideas Labs and RE:Generation 2031 projects. The quantitative evidence on this shows that:

- 40 creative organisations offered a placement as part of the programme
- 22 creative skills programmes were delivered, training 150 participants
- 44 paid internship positions were created
- 76% of respondents to the Arts and Cultural organisations survey reported that the programme increased their confidence to undertake innovative work
- 67 people took part in Ideas labs, representing 53 different disciplines, resulting in 16 collaborative project proposals
- 85% of respondents to the Arts and Cultural organisations survey reported that the programme has improved partnership working and knowledge sharing

[3] Creative Estuary | Estuary businesses

The impact of Creative Estuary on the local visitor economy has been more indirect

xxii. Our Survey found that 68% of respondents believe the Creative Estuary programme has strengthened perceptions of the Thames Estuary as a place to visit. There are signs that the visitor economy could continue to be impacted over the longer term, with 84% of survey respondents indicating the programme has helped inspire more local art and cultural work and 90% indicating it has raised the profile of the local creative sector.

xxiii. There has been a particular impact on visitor perceptions with the *Estuary 2021*. One consultee described the festival as a 'game changer as a way to bring people into the area'. The evaluation of the festival found that the event secured over 200,000 visitors, as well as over 100,000 digital visitors, generating a net additional economic impact of £6.5m and supporting 58 jobs. Support from the programme is widely seen as enhancing the scope and reach of the festival compared to the 2016 event.

What impact, if any, has Creative Estuary had on forging a new cultural identity for the Estuary area and increasing local cultural activity, engagement and pride in place?

Creative Estuary has increased local cultural activity

xxiv. The programme has delivered a significant amount of activity over the past four years, some of which is reflected on the ground as public cultural activity. As examples:

- The programme invested £1.3m with local arts and cultural organisations and engaged 12.5 million people in arts and culture[4]. The RE:Generation 2031 project trained 84 participants with arts and cultural organisations.
- 27% of *Estuary 2021* audiences from the four 'least engaged' Audience Finder defined segments of the population, exceeding South East levels of 19%[5]. The *Estuary 2021* evaluation report notes that presenting works outdoors, in public locations and within local businesses meant that there were multiple points of connection for new audiences.

xxv. 88% of survey respondents agree that Creative Estuary has engaged local audiences with new arts and cultural experiences. 72% of survey respondents agree that Creative Estuary has increased appetite among local audiences to attend more arts and cultural activities.

Creative Estuary has begun to transform the local sense of place and started to improve overall pride in place

xxvi. This is one of the areas of qualitative feedback on which our strategic consultees are most emphatic and vocal when reflecting on the impact and legacy of the programme. Consultees were unanimous that in only four years, and indeed as early as two years in, the programme has begun to transform the positioning, identity and profile of Thames Estuary as a place for cultural production and consumption.

[4] Most of this engagement was via digital methods, including a digital audience of 7.9m across the two broadcasts of a documentary featuring EVEWRIGHT's Tilbury Bridge Walkway of Memories installation.

[5] Metal and Cement Fields, *Estuary 2021* Report on Activity and Reach, January 2022

xxvii. The programme was particularly successful in creating a strong brand, which has been widely seen as helping to reinforce culture in the identity of the place. The brand has been used extensively by partners and amplified in wider messages. It has been described by one of our consultees as "an institution in its own right."

xxviii. The clear feedback is that through the development and cut-through of the brand, the work of the programme leadership to facilitate connections, to represent the sector in Government and at events, the overall narrative for the Thames Estuary has begun to shift. The importance of the cultural and creative sectors is becoming more engrained in the positioning and branding of the Thames Estuary overall. The survey findings lend some support to this:

- 83% of respondents agree that perceptions of the Thames Estuary as a cultural and creative place will continue to grow
- 77% agree that pride in place will continue to grow in the Thames Estuary.

How successful has Creative Estuary been in attracting additional external funding and inward investment into the Estuary area?

The programme has helped to attract funding

xxix. The programme has attracted a total of £9.8m of funding into the Thames Estuary area over the four-year delivery period. The highest contribution has been from the public sector – a notable success given the difficult funding environment – but funding has also been secured from private sources, for example, match funding from Bow Arts and Peabody housing association to commission works on and around the Lakeside Centre studios in Thamesmead as part of *Estuary 2021*.

xxx. Delivery consultees commented that this had been facilitated by the programme moving quickly and flexibility in response to funding opportunities, and pump priming projects (e.g. Docking Station) through the feasibility stages. They also explained that developing strong relationships, a clear brand, as well as confidence in the programme delivery, helped to unlock match funding.

xxxi. It is notable that in the 2023 round, the number of Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) increased from 12 to 18 compared to the 2018 round. Organisations in Medway experienced a 33% increase in NPO funding, with five organisations gaining NPO status for the first time. There were also two new NPOs in Thurrock, one in Canterbury and one in Thanet.

xxxii. The majority of Arts and Cultural Organisation survey respondents (56%) reported that the support they received has enabled them to secure additional funding. This included local authority and Arts Council England funding, funding for professional development, equipment or to offer work placements, and funded co-commissions.

The programme enabled a large number of funding bids to be submitted

xxxiii. The programme also supported the submission of 70 funding bids with a total value of £81.3 million. 42 of these were successful, with a value of £21.8m secured. An important way in which the programme has helped organisations to attract funding is by articulating, and providing evidence around, the argument for creative and cultural investment, including by contributing to bid writing.

xxxiv. Various Thames Estuary authorities have positioned creative and cultural industry commitments within their recent government funding bids. This includes, for example, Swale Borough Council's and Medway Council's Levelling Up Fund bids, Essex Council's and Thurrock Council's Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plans. Thurrock Council's Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan explained the need to fund a Cultural Development Officer role, local cultural Festival activities and a cultural strategy for South Essex. The consultees from Thurrock Council commented that the influence of the Creative Estuary had a direct impact on the subsequent focus on culture in these investment plans.

xxxv. As examples:

- The Docking Station project in Chatham has been awarded £3.5m of Round 3 Cultural Development Funds, £375k of National Lottery Heritage Funds, and was one of three projects in receipt of Levelling Up Funding through Medway's successful bid to Round 1 of the Fund. This paves the way for an application to secure a further £3.6m following a successful delivery phase. Creative Estuary investment kickstarted the project.
- Basildon Council has been awarded £4.4m from the UK Government Cultural Development Fund Round 3. The funds will be used to turn empty properties in the town centre into a creative facility for screen and immersive digital industries. The Cultural Development Fund is a good example of an opportunity which Basildon Council has harnessed following Creative Estuary support and investment.

Steps have been taken towards attracting inward investment

xxxvi. Generating new inward investment in the Estuary's cultural sector is a long-term project, and a number of consultees commented that they felt growth in the sector was more likely to come from indigenous businesses than from inward relocations. To date, there are limited examples of inward investment. One example is CAMA's investment in a 28,000 sq. ft site in Southend-on-Sea which will be the headquarters for the business' reuse and redistribution facility. CAMA report that the new base will be designed to service studio development in the Thames Estuary Production Corridor.

xxxvii. That said, our consultees agreed that the Creative Estuary programme has supported the Thames Estuary area to be more ready to respond to investment opportunities in the cultural sector, and promoting the area as such to prospective investors. 88% of Arts and Cultural Survey respondents felt that the Creative Estuary programme will help attract further inward investment activity.

What do the findings indicate about further impacts of Creative Estuary that might be generated in the future?

Impacts of the Creative Estuary programme will take more time to be realised

xxxviii. Whilst we have seen clear evidence of the impacts of the programme over its four-year period, given its foundational nature, its ambitious coverage, and the long-term nature of culture-led development, the impacts of the Creative Estuary programme are not yet fully realised.

xxxix. Indeed, the actual delivery period for several of the Sparks has been shorter than four years. For many Sparks full activity did not start for some time due to the need for induction time and the heavy disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some delivery consultees suggested that

more induction time could have been built into the programme to allow Spark leads to get to know the area and the needs and opportunities associated with the workstream.

xl. There is convincing evidence that the programme has generated momentum across a number of areas, which will create a legacy. Taking the pulse of the regional cultural sector on this, over 80% of respondents believe the programme will generate future benefits through increased cultural activity, collaboration, the strength and continuation of the Brand, and by continuing to trial new models.

Strategic leadership has facilitated an important shift in mindsets on the value of culture

xli. Representatives of the constituent local authorities and the GLA all noted that through the influencing work of Creative Estuary, it is easier to make the case for the inclusion of creative and cultural industries in investment and development plans without first having to explain their additional value for the wider economy.

xlii. Moreover, senior local authority representatives we consulted noted that the strong presence of the programme at a pan-authority level facilitated the building of trust and collaboration between the Estuary authorities, enabling them to speak with one voice to Government and to maximise the opportunities from cross-authority working. Creative Estuary worked closely with ASELA and the Thames Estuary Growth Board. The management team note that working across borders increased the sight of Thames Estuary needs and opportunities with UK government, helping to mutually amplify the impact of the work of cross-authority partners.

xliii. At a wider level, Creative Estuary has been cited as a best practice example in the collaboration between creatives and anchor institutions. The House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report *Reimagining where we live: Cultural Placemaking and the Levelling Up Agenda*[6] cites the Creative Estuary programme as an example of a successful partnership between creatives and anchor institutions.

The programme has developed the understanding of the potential of assets for cultural activities

xliv. Some of the activities undertaken by the programme will take more time to generate benefits, but the foundations have been laid. For example, the cultural co-location Spark (5) needs time to make the case for the space, to deliver it and draw businesses into it, before benefits of co-location can be realised. Work supported by Creative Estuary to develop cultural sites across the Thames Estuary is ongoing including:

- the Dreamland site following participation of Creative Estuary team on the TEPC Steering Group
- Northfleet Industrial sites following the demonstration of their potential at *Estuary 2021*
- Ebbsfleet Garden City following the co-location pilot and the launch of a Cultural Infrastructure Prospectus
- Use of Basildon's Cultural Development Fund allocation to turn empty properties in the town centre into a creative facility for screen and immersive digital industries

[6] House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Reimagining where we live: Cultural Placemaking and the Levelling Up Agenda, November 2022

- Investment in Gravesend to create a Cultural Quayside adjacent to the river
- Affordable workspace following the RIBA Stage 2 development at HHPP
- To deliver feasibility work for the Royal Air Forces Association building in Chatham including the potential linkage and improvements to the use of space in the library hub in partnership with Medway Council and as part of the planned delivery of the Creative Chatham Quarters Strategy.

xlv. The Cultural Planning Toolkit – commissioned by Creative Estuary and produced by the Town and Country Planning Association - will help to unlock these and other cultural spaces, and have national impact and relevance.

Skills developed will continue to generate benefits for individuals and businesses

xlvi. Although at a relatively small scale, there is evidence of ongoing benefits from the skills interventions. Various stakeholders reported that placements have led to interns being taken on as in full time employees, for example Ebbsfleet Development Corporation. At an industry level, one consultee reported that by linking businesses with people developing their skills, the programme has clarified that there is a pipeline of talent in the industry.

xlvii. Consultees also believe the programme has boosted the capacity of the creative and cultural sector in the Thames Estuary. This has included upskilling of:

- Members of Creative Estuary Spark advisory groups who have not had this type of decision making and accountability experience before
- Commissioned organisations through mentoring and developing local partnerships
- The public sector around opportunities for strategic coordination.

The programme is likely to unlock further funding as decisions are announced

xlviii. Further funding is expected to be unlocked once grant decisions are announced, including future Levelling Up Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund rounds, and funding for continued creative sector infrastructure projects like those at High House Production Park.

How has the combination of seven Sparks contributed to impacts?

xlix. Although the Sparks were each designed to address distinct aspects of cultural sector development, our research has highlighted several examples of cross-Spark working and synergies in impact. For example:

- knowledge sharing between Spark advisory groups, including the Creative Assets Development (Spark 4) and Cultural Co-location Sparks (Spark 5) continue to share learnings from each of their projects due to similarities in their focus on workspace and physical spaces for creative businesses to influence planning policy and investment in culturally led placemaking.
- Sparks 2 (Co-commissioning of work) and 6 (RE:Generation 2031) co-invested on projects on a number of occasions, thus enabling the commissioning of new work and skills development opportunities for young people to happen at the same time. Similarly, Spark 1 (*Estuary 2021*) acted as a showcase for works co-commissioned by Spark 2, providing a platform for commissioned creative practitioners to develop their audience

through the Associated Programme. In return, co-commissioned works added to the breadth of the festival offer.

- Sparks 4 and 5 (Creative Assets & Cultural Co-Location respectively) co-delivered Creative Estuary's Planning for Culture Symposium event.

l. While on the whole cross working between Sparks was useful, some delivery consultees reported that more information sharing between Sparks would have better enabled Spark leads to act as advocates for each other and to reduce the risk of activities being duplicated (see also Section 3 above).

Q4: How can the learning from Creative Estuary support future activity?

Do the aims of the Creative Estuary programme remain relevant and a high priority for the area?

There continues to be a high level of strategic alignment of the programme at the national and regional level

li. The aims of the Creative Estuary programme remain relevant for the Thames Estuary area. At the national level, it supports the UK government's strategy for Levelling Up, which seeks to end geographical inequality by improving economic dynamism across the whole country[7]. It also has a strong fit with Arts Council England's Let's Create 2020-2030 strategy, which focuses on inclusivity of involvement in creative activity[8].

lii. There is also clear alignment with strategies at the local level, with the cultural and creative industries featuring heavily in a number of new strategies and policies.

There continues to be a need for Levelling Up of the Thames Estuary area

liii. The Thames Estuary area falls behind the UK average on various measures of prosperity. For example, as the Creative Estuary itself states in its recent, successful bid to Arts Council England for a Place Partnership Project Grant, 8% of the Thames Estuary working age population have no qualifications compared with only 7% across England (equivalent to 29,000 additional people with no qualifications). Only 19% of school leavers the Thames Estuary area of Kent and Essex go on to university compared with 43% in the Thames Estuary area of London.[9]

Key elements of the Creative Estuary programme are now being taken forward

liv. The most vivid proof of the continued relevance of the programme is in the fact that it has been awarded further funding to continue some of its key activities. £1.15m has been awarded from the Arts Council's Place Partnership Fund. This will see a focus on three areas where there is strongest need for ongoing intervention, and where momentum has been built already:

[7] HM Government, Levelling Up the United Kingdom, 2022

[8] Arts Council England, Let's Create – Strategy 2020-2030, 2020

[9] Creative Estuary, Arts Council England Place Partnership Project Grant bid

- Knowledge Exchange Partnership: working across regeneration, planning, economic development and culture and including Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, to develop and capture best practice for delivering pro-cultural policy and actions
- Creative Assets and Place: Developing leadership and access to specialist skills and creating opportunities to deliver new cultural infrastructure; Rolling out the Planning for Culture Toolkit and activating a number of sites
- Made in the Estuary: a programme of co-commissioning, a new vehicle for the *Estuary Festival*, and Young Producer Placements

lv. These three areas of activity will be supported by continued leadership support and skills capacity to drive the programme forwards. This will be underpinned with the key marketing channels and activity continuing to build on the success of the brand, and continuing to champion the Estuary as a creative place.

What lessons do the findings provide around delivery of culture and creative led approaches to economic development and regeneration in the Estuary area?

lvi. As a successful pilot programme, Creative Estuary has generated a series of lessons, which provide insight both for future iterations of the programme, and for other programmes to support culture-led development:

1) **Experimentation and piloting are valuable in finding what works**. The Creative Estuary programme is foundational. Its Sparks covered a very wide range of objectives and priorities. Whilst this created complexity and spread resources thinly, there has been value in taking this approach. This set up has worked especially well within a programme which is managed in a way that creates space for change and encourages dynamism at the delivery level. The programme leadership enabled projects to flex and react to new lessons and changing circumstances. The programme has enabled momentum to be built across a lot of topics and locations, partnerships to be built, and has enabled experimentation with what works. This was possible given its revenue activity focus. Such an approach is not possible for capital projects, which have made up the bulk of recent national funding streams.

2) **Branding, positioning and networking has a multiplier effect**. One of the greatest impacts of the programme has been to engender a shift in the profile and positioning of the sector in the Thames Estuary and to build new networks. There is a clear consensus that Creative Estuary has "shifted the narrative" of the Estuary area as a place, putting culture on the agenda, showcasing the offer, and highlighting the benefits of culture as a tool for economic development and regeneration. This shift in narrative will have a sustainable legacy well beyond the programme, and needs to be built upon.

3) **Strong Leadership is critical**. The Creative Estuary programme is a highly complex and ambitious intervention, straddling several sub-sectoral policy areas and priorities. It has also operated at a time of monumental challenge and disruption. This required a strong focus and determination to adapt the programme and pivot to areas of new need and opportunity. All of this, along with the management complexity of the programme and its associated overhead, meant that the quality and strength of leadership has been critical to successful programme delivery. Many stakeholders commented that the

programme would not have been successful in this context without the quality of leadership of the programme team which included an external Chair and Accountability Board.

4) **There is value in an overarching voice.** Clearly, with or without the Creative Estuary programme, there is vibrant cultural activity happening across the area and in individual communities. Some local authorities have their own passionate advocates for this. Creative Estuary added value to this landscape by operating across institutional, political and geographic boundaries, bringing together diverse stakeholders and places who may have otherwise worked in silos. It acted as a trusted, independent honest broker. In so doing, it has been able to present a joined-up offer with much bigger collective weight and a clear identity. This has helped these places in their engagement with Government, to articulate the needs and value of the sector, and in the development of successful funding bids.

5) **Changing mindsets and building links between culture and economic development teams amplifies impact.** Related to the above, another achievement of the programme above and beyond the Sparks themselves is the way in which it has helped to integrate and elevate culture in conversations at a local authority level, so that culture now features in the agenda of economic development, regeneration and planning departments as well as simply in the culture sphere. This is essential in ensuring that culture features in economic development plans, and there are a number of concrete examples of this. This will have a positive legacy.

6) **Culture-led development is a long-term endeavour**. Another point made throughout the report is the fact that culture-led development can take a generation to come to fruition. A four-year programme of this sort can only lay the foundations. The programme has done this and there are clear examples of where the activities will generate a legacy. But this then needs to be taken forward and built upon in a focussed manner, with continued resource given to the activities with proven potential and impact.

7) **Engaging locally pays dividends**. Whilst the programme operates across authorities and at a wide geographical level, stakeholders report that the programme team have generally been visible at a local level across the region. The investment of this time from the senior team has helped to foster trust and strong working relationships on the ground. It is important that the associated cost of this activity is accounted for in future place based project funding and in bids.

8) **Multi-workstream programmes should maximise inter-workstream collaboration.** Although we saw some good examples of cross-Spark working, a as a consequence of the complexity of the programme and its management, and COVID-related barriers to communication, links between Sparks were not always as strong as they could have been. There may have been some opportunities missed for synergies and cross-referrals. A simpler programme going forward should help alleviate these issues. Other multi-workstream initiatives need to ensure that there is sufficient resource to manage these matters.

9) **There is a need for focus going forward**. The counterpoint to lesson 1 is that is in taking a wide remit, the programme inevitably spread itself thinly and created significant management and governance challenges. Whilst these were ultimately overcome, going forward, there would be benefit from a tighter focus on a smaller number of priority interventions. This is especially the case given the ongoing strain in public sector

resources. The programme cannot do everything itself and other organisations will be better placed to carry on with some intervention areas. The lessons learned from the programme on what is effective, and where there are still gaps, enable this to be done based on evidence.

lvii. Looking ahead, the award of future funding from the Place Partnership Fund will enable Creative Estuary to build on the learnings of the four-year programme and to take forward a focussed set of impactful interventions for the benefit of the Estuary area.

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