Sustaining Creative Careers:
The Arts and Culture in Slough

Research and Discussion Paper April–July 2023

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Executive Summary

Sustaining creative careers: the arts and culture in Slough was a short research project that took place between April and July 2023. It responded to questions defined in early 2023 by Slough Borough Council and Community Interest Companies (CICs) in Slough. The research aimed to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with sustaining creative careers in Slough, with a focus on the town's residents. It also addressed potential for the arts and culture in creating a more vibrant town life.

Our key findings and recommendations follow the core themes that arose from the research 1) Local talent: education, skills, training, and opportunities; 2) Cultural leadership; 3) Infrastructure for the arts and cultural sectors and the digital creative industries. The findings reflect the views of the people who chose to engage in the research, which necessarily defined its scope. Findings in Slough were contextualised in relation to relevant academic research and evidence-based policy research. This means that although the research relates to a particular timeframe, notably before plans for a new political administration in Slough Borough Council were made public, the findings relate to wider and long-term agendas in the creative industries.

There are four major findings of this research.

1. Slough's creative communities have the creative talent and potential to become change-makers in the creative industries and arts and cultural sectors nationally and internationally, driving a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

2. There is an urgent need for a clear arts and culture strategy (including heritage) that integrates the needs and interest of Slough residents, both as creative professionals and in communities. A strategic approach to the arts and culture in Slough would maximise potential for local people to engage in the arts and culture, reducing inequalities and allying the arts to the Council's health and wellbeing agendas. The strategy should also address how to sustain freelance careers and employment in the creative industries in Slough, thereby increasing capacity and identifying opportunities, and raising local ambition and aspiration.

3. There are some outstanding leaders in the creative industries in Slough who have developed their own successful companies, many of whom work together. Leadership for cross-Slough initiatives is poor, and newly established companies adopting leadership roles take time to build trust. There is need for clear, transparent, strategic leadership and leadership structures for cross-Slough and whole town arts and culture initiatives, led by local leaders whose work is informed by knowledge of the sector, policy-agendas, funding streams, and professional expertise in the creative industries.

4. Despite significant financial constraints experienced by Slough Borough Council, the support and guidance of key council officers, notably the Associate Director Community and Public Protection, has been widely appreciated. It is imperative that the new administration at Slough Borough Council prioritises the arts and culture to maximise the significant opportunities in the town to strengthen community wellbeing and the creative industries.

More detailed findings related to the three core themes identified by our research are outlined below:

Local talent: education, skills, training, and opportunities

- Slough has talent. Throughout our research we learned about Slough's talented communities, as well as some of its challenges and opportunities. Talent flourishes where there is confident and ambitious leadership, with people who have strong professional knowledge of the creative industries. There was also evidence that some freelance creatives under-estimate their own value and lack confidence to realise their ambitions.

- There are growing opportunities for young people to sustain successful careers locally in the creative industries, but they are not fully taken up. Increasing engagement requires early access to the arts and, for older students, there is a need for wider awareness of the value of creative careers among families, carers, and schools as well as the young people themselves.

- Access to high quality arts and creative activities for young people leads to a more equitable and inclusive workforce. Local provision for young people ranges from grassroots organisations led by amateur artists to training led by highly skilled professionals and there is a place for both. Mapping routes into creative careers would maximise potential and strengthen awareness and opportunities.

- Slough's Cultural Education Partnership increased teachers' confidence in teaching the arts. This scheme has now closed, but Slough might learn from sustainable models of Cultural Education Partnerships established in Reading and Brighton. Students would further benefit if schools' leadership teams and careers teachers engaged with universities and the creative industries to maximise awareness of local opportunities.

- Local residents pursuing freelance careers in the creative industries would benefit from additional opportunities to extend their partnerships and networks, and for their work to be more visible in the town. Support for the practicalities for running their own businesses would maximise their capacity for freelance work (including tax, grant applications, approaches to evaluation).

- There are some highly successful local companies and organisations, particularly in screen and immersive technologies, that take advantage of the region's infrastructure in this area. Slough-based Creative Academy is the only dance school supported by a local authority in the UK that offers vocational degree-level courses, and there is further potential for other art forms to be supported in the town.

Cultural leadership

- There is a need for stronger cultural leadership across Slough, undertaken by people with professional knowledge of the arts and culture. There were widespread calls for a strategic approach to cultural leadership that is transparent and accountable.

- There is no active cultural strategy for Slough, which limits opportunities that would support the creative industries, freelancers, and the arts and cultural sectors.

- The leadership role of Slough Borough Council is important to freelance creatives as well as the creative industries. The work of Ketan Gandhi (Associate Director Community and Public Protection) was universally valued and highly respected. There were requests for greater clarity about the role of Slough Borough Council as enabler and champion for the cultural sector and creative industries in the town, particularly as the political administration changes in 2024.

- Slough Borough Council's focus on skills development was warmly received. It was recommended that the skills development programme included leadership skills and training for creative producing to build capacity.

- Partnerships between organisations in Slough, and with organisations outside Slough, bring significant benefits that might be clarified and extended as key strategic priorities. Different models of partnership are evident in the town, but often under-explored, under-developed, or misunderstood.

- There is a need to find a balance between an outdated idea that local authorities will provide all resources for the sector and a free market of self-appointed interest groups working in Slough. A transparent system ensuring greater clarity about the different roles, needs, and powers is necessary to strengthen the collective voice of Slough's creative communities and industries and to avoid conflicts of interest.

Infrastructure for the arts and cultural sectors and the digital creative industries

- Cultural infrastructure and creative placemaking create the conditions for Slough's future success. Placemaking agendas that lead to pride in place are best served by an approach that supports communities, artists, as well as businesses.

- The Curve has potential to animate the town centre by becoming the creative and cultural engine room of the town. Programming the performance space and museum activities are beginning to breathe new life into The Curve, and there is further potential for freelancers to use the space. There are further opportunities for Slough's parks, town centre, streets, and open spaces to provide a focus and site for creative, cultural, and heritage activities.

- There is outstanding digital infrastructure in Slough which might be better understood and more widely used for creative activities and by the creative industries.

- Given the pace of change, particularly in the creative digital economies, sustaining long-term careers and competitive advantage requires a robust and flexible infrastructure developed in partnership with education providers, communities, and industry experts.

Vogue shoot at the Moxy hotel in Slough, Berkshire. ©Resource Productions

Recommendations

Practical recommendations for change are integrated throughout the report. There are seven recommendations that cross all aspects of our findings. We recommend that:

- a revitalised arts and culture strategy for Slough is developed as a major and key priority. The strategy should be inclusive, addressing a range of place-based agendas across creative, cultural, social, health, educational, employment, and economic priorities. A working group to consider strategy was announced at Slough Arts Forum in October 2023. Given changing leadership roles at Slough Borough Council, it is recommended that the incoming lead for the arts and culture and the Chair of Slough Arts Forum co-chair this working group.

- there is a refreshed approach to cultural leadership in the town, including a systematic review of the professional skills needed by leaders. Slough's communities and creative workforce would be well-served by a transparent approach, and we recommend that the remit and leadership roles across Slough Borough Council and the town's various interest groups (SMEs, NGOs, NPOs, and Community Interest Companies) are clearly defined.

- an independent organisation (such as a Trust) with capacity for financial management and funding applications is established to support cross-Slough arts projects and lead whole town initiatives in the cultural sector and creative industries.

- aspiration for sustaining local creative careers and animating community engagement in the arts and culture is strengthened by refreshing The Curve, as the engine room of Slough's diverse creative communities, and a place to gather, make, and learn. Slough's parks, town centre, streets, and open spaces should be more accessible as sites for creative, cultural, and heritage activities.

- a joined-up approach to the fast-changing environment for skills development for the creative industries is put in place. This would include an inclusive approach to developing and retaining local talent, based on 1) an audit of university provision in Slough for research and development, work-based placements, training Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and graduate opportunities; and 2) the needs of schools and Further Education (FE) colleges and their students; and 3) opportunities provided by local businesses.

- Slough-based freelancers working in the creative industries should be better supported in becoming more visible in the town, including advertising events and opportunities. A directory of Sough-based freelancers working in the creative industries would enable local businesses and communities to support local freelancers.

- Slough continues to learn by building on the success of nationally and internationally acclaimed arts organisations resident in the town and by maximising strategic partnerships with organisations outside Slough. We recommend contributing sharing good practice and successful case studies more widely to increase local pride, aspiration, and confidence. Slough's creative communities might also learn from increasing active contributions to policy agendas via, for example, providing evidence to All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and inquiries led by PECs (Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre) and related think-tanks.

Nisha Anil recording for a project called 'Arthur'
©Resource Productions, Photographer Matt Fleming

1. Context

This research took place between April and July 2023. Funded by Royal Holloway, University of London a team of researchers from the School of Business and Management joined Professor Helen Nicholson from the School of Performing and Digital Arts to investigate challenges defined by Slough Borough Council and CICs in Slough. The research aimed to address two major questions:

1. How can local people in Slough gain access to, and engagement in, careers in the creative industries and cultural sectors?

2. How can the arts and culture contribute to making Slough a more attractive place for businesses, communities, and residents?

Both questions respond to long-term challenges for Slough. The town is home to major multinationals and a hub for creative technologies, but it also faces significant difficulties associated with socioeconomic deprivation. There are over 150 languages spoken in Slough, with a long and proud history of positive social integration that is valued by residents who love their hometown. Slough is served by a wide range of charitable and community organisations, and the successful #OneSlough[1] initiative, created in March 2020, brought together voluntary and business sectors with faith groups to deliver essential services to Slough residents during the Covid-19 pandemic. Slough has a strong community spirit and culture of voluntarism.

The town is undergoing a significant period of change. Fast connections to central London via the Elizabeth Line (fully open in 2023) provide new opportunities for students, commuters, and residents to access the capital's resources. In turn, businesses benefit from increased opportunities to attract a skilled workforce to Slough. Most industry executives already live outside Slough with little connection to place, and there is little sign that commuters into Slough (currently bussed from the station to their workplaces) will spend their time in the town. The McKinsey Analysis also suggested that 48% of the UK workforce could work remotely at least one day a week,[2] increasing the need for local sociable spaces for residents but also suggesting that commuters will spend less time (and money) in Slough.

Changes in Slough are both experienced locally and reflect a broader, national picture of social and cultural change as we move towards the mid-twenty-first century. High streets are declining across the UK, and although the demise of retail is often cited as the cause, research from the University of Sheffield on Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) indicates that increased online shopping is the biggest, but not the only, factor.[3] Plans to regenerate Slough's town centre aim to make it an attractive town for residents and visitors, and include a mixed ecology of homes, shops, restaurants, community, leisure and education facilities, offices, public and green spaces.[4] The demolition of the Queensmere and Observatory Shopping Centres provide an opportunity to re-imagine the town centre, and the town's cultural identity, for the mid-twenty-first century and beyond. In the twentieth century Slough flourished as a town of industry and migration, and one of the challenges for the next phase of its evolution is how to maintain the town's sense of community and avoid gentrification, with well-documented consequences for social inclusivity. As Slough reimagines its identity, there is much to be learned from related research on the pitfalls of creative placemaking, avoiding artwashing, and the instrumentalisation of the arts and culture in ways that artists can find compromising.[5] With this context in mind, we were interested in the potential for the arts and culture in Slough in ways that build on equitable approaches to urban regeneration learned in other post-industrial settings.[6]

In this environment, there is a renewed need to balance opportunities for local people to develop their talents and skills with high quality events that attract people across the region to Slough. The dual ambition, to strengthen local opportunities and make Slough an attractive place to live and work, are not mutually exclusive. Arts Council England (ACE)'s ten-year strategy *Let's Create* (2020-2030) cite three outcomes that speak to this agenda:

> The first Outcome, Creative People, focuses on amateur and voluntary creative activity, including by children and young people. The third Outcome, A Creative & Cultural Country, looks at the professional cultural sector, including those seeking to develop a career in the creative industries after they leave full-time education. The second Outcome, Cultural Communities, brings the first and third Outcomes together by considering how the professional and voluntary sectors can work with each other to help shape stronger cultural provision in villages, towns and cities.[7]

Evidence from related research shows that the balance between all three outcomes is not easily struck. It requires local know-how, professional knowledge of the arts and

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1   OneSlough <**https://oneslough.org.uk**> [accessed 2 October 2023].

2   Susan Lund, Anu Madgavkar, James Manyoka, and Sven Smit, What's next for remote work: An analysis of 2,000 tasks, 800 jobs, and nine countries (2020) < **https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/whats-next-for-remote-work-an-analysis-of-2000-tasks-800-jobs-and-nine-countries#/**> [accessed 2 October 2023].

3   Julian Dobson, Kate Swade, Kim Graham and Yael Arbell, Community Improvement Districts pilot programme: Final report (2023) <**https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/publications /community-improvement-districts-pilot-programme-final-report**> [accessed 21/09/2023].

4   Slough Borough Council, Regenerating Slough, [n.d.] <https://www.slough.gov.uk/regenerating-slough> It is noticeable that the section on 'The Future of Leisure' includes no mention of the arts, culture, or creative interests. [accessed 22 September 2023].

5   There are different views on the relationship between creative placemaking and artwashing, and how gentrification through placemaking is displacing less advantaged poåpulations. For fuller discussion of these debates, see Juliet Kahne, *Does Placemaking Cause Gentrification? It's Complicated* (2015) <**https://www.pps.org/article/gentrification**> and Stephen Pritchard, *Place Guarding: An End to the Slow Violence of Creative Placemaking and Gentrification?* (2019) <**https://colouringinculture.wordpress.com/2019/05/27/placeguardingslowviolence**> [accessed 13 October 2023]

6   The *Community Improvement Districts pilot programme: Final report* (2023) stresses the need for 'an approach, not a model' that is generated through community engagement. For research-informed examples of locally-based approaches, see Cara Courage and Anita McKeown (eds) *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020).

7   Arts Council England, *The Strategy* (2020) < **https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030/strategy**>[accessed 22 September 2023].

culture, supportive infrastructures, and strong cultural leadership.[8] With competing pressures on resources and significant hardship experienced by people in Slough's communities, this requires imagination and resilience.

One response, strongly supported by Slough Borough Council,[9] led to Slough becoming a priority for ACE investment from 2021 to 2024. The town was selected one of 54 places in England to benefit from their *Priority Places and Levelling Up for Culture Places scheme,* designed to target areas where engagement in the arts and culture is considered low.[10] There are several ACE funded initiatives in Slough, including new investment in National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) (2023-2025): Amina Khayyam Dance Company; Resource Productions; and Art Classes Group. The new NPO consortium of Norden Farm Centre Trust Ltd (multi-arts centre based in Maidenhead) and Slough Borough Council are focused on revitalising The Curve as Slough's only performance venue of scale; the NPO Museums Partnership Reading (The MERL and Reading Museum) are programming heritage engagement activities at The Curve and across Slough. Rifco Arts, with roots in Slough now based in Watford, maintained their NPO status. ACE's strategic ambition for place-based creative careers is evidenced in the work of Slough's Cultural Educational Partnership, and for capacity-building by HOME-Slough, part of the Community People and Places Programme. Both programmes closed in 2023. Slough Borough Council remains supportive of the arts and culture in the town, and Slough Business Improvement District (BID) harnesses the arts, particularly in the town centre, to improve the environment and boost the economy.[11]

Funding for the arts and culture in Slough comes from a range of sources: public and philanthropic funding has been successfully achieved by arts and cultural organisations in Slough, notably from DCMS for Slough's Music Education Hub and significant grants from The National Lottery Heritage Fund for the Arbib Educational Trust for museum education, The Dionysus Ensemble, and for Apna Virsa, an organisation linking the arts to health and wellbeing that aims to 'explore, share and celebrate South Asian Culture and Heritage with the larger community'.[12] The benefits of a mixed economy for funding are demonstrated by the youth arts collective Beat Routes who received grants from ACE, The National Lottery, Youth Music, the Berkshire Community Foundation, and The Blagrave Trust in 2022 totalling almost £200,000.[13] It is clear, however, that although Slough's third sector have successfully applied for several awards to support cultural activity – often for relatively small grants of under £10,000 – there are also funding streams left untapped.[14] The distribution of public and philanthropic funding is transparent, and illustrate Slough's significant socioeconomic needs, but also suggest that there is further potential to learn how the arts and culture might support the town's economic, social, and health agendas.[15]

The town benefits from successful local networks for artists and cultural organisations. The highly successful Resource Productions play an important leadership role in the town, and in addition to their many roles in supporting skills development and filmmaking, they have generously and successfully brought groups together, including through Arts Forum and Slough Arts Collective. These grassroots initiatives have generated new networks of arts professionals, community interest groups, and freelance artists. Partnerships boost collaboration within the town. A range of partnerships take advantage of the town's proximity to the expanding British film industry and new developments in immersive technologies in the creative industries; Resource Productions leads the British Film Institute (BFI) Berkshire Skills for Screen Cluster programme with partners including the University of Reading, Shinfield Studios, Bedlam Film Productions and all six Berkshire local councils, to invest in state-of-the-art production facility[16] Based at The Curve, Slough was one of the locations for the award-winning StoryTrails, led by

Salt Hill VR. Photographer Mike Swift

8   See, for example, Andrew Miles and Lisanne Gibson, 'Everyday participation and cultural value in place', *Cultural Trends*, 26:1 (2017), 1-3 <**https://doi.org/10.1080/095489 63.2017.1275129**>

9   In July 2021, Slough Borough Council issued a section 114 notice, effectively declaring bankruptcy.

10   This is contentious; ACE use their own data collection which does not recognise the wide range of local, everyday and vernacular creativity. See Nicholson et al., *Theatre in Towns* (London: Routledge, 2023).

11   Slough Bid <**https://sloughbid.co.uk/**> [accessed 10 October 2023].

12   Apna Virsa <**https://apnavirsa.org.uk**> [accessed 20 September 2023].

13   Charity Commission, *Beat Routes* <**https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details /?regId=1148743&subId=0**> [accessed 20 September 2023].

14   This is particularly evident for the Heritage Lottery Fund. Data gathered from Grantnav <**https://grantnav.threesixtygiving.org/search?query=Slough&default_ field=%2A&sort=_score+desc&min_date=01%2F2018&max_date=09%2F2023&exclude_grantProgramme=t&exclude_grantProgramme=r&exclude_ grantProgramme=u&exclude_grantProgramme=e.**> [accessed 21 September 2023].

15   A strong evidence-based for the arts and health, gathered by the Centre for Cultural Value. See Robyn Dowlen, *Vision paper: Culture, health and wellbeing (2023)* <**https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources /culture-health-and-wellbeing/**> [accessed 20 October 2023].
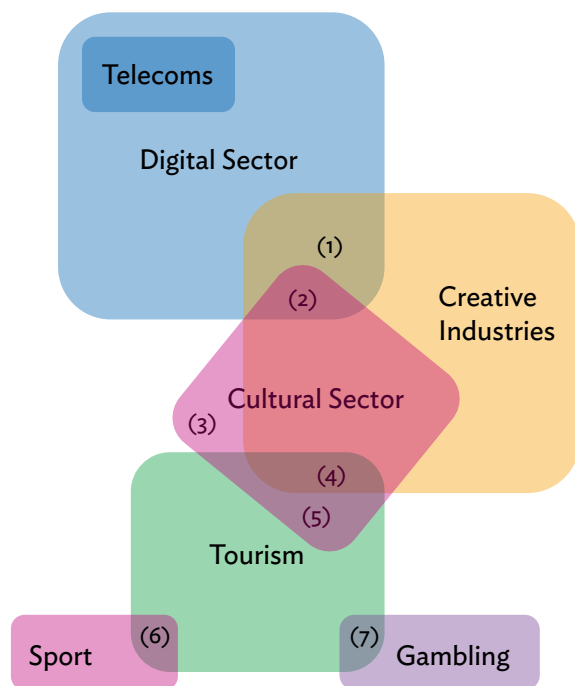
16   Daniel Face, Resource Productions secures BFI funding for Berkshire film skills (2023) <**https://thebusinessmagazine.co.uk/companies/resource-productions-secures-bfi-funding-for-berkshire-film-skills/**> [accessed 25 September 2023].

Royal Holloway, University of London in partnership with the Reading Agency, and the VR experience benefitted from the expertise of director of Salt Hill VR Jay Younes, working on the project as a freelance immersive producer, and other Slough artists.[17] More locally, partnerships with Slough's business community are a key priority for The Slough Job Creation Hub, a CIC founded by Vineet Vijh in 2020 to support employability in the town. There are also productive partnerships that include Slough Museum and the University of Reading, between the Creative Academy and University of West London, and Brunel University and the Trading Estate. In addition, a series of informal collaborations bring resources and expertise to the town, and in turn, they benefit from engaging with Slough's diverse creative communities.

Despite investment in the arts and culture, there is evidence that Slough's young people and adults returning into the labour force are not looking to the arts and creative industries for viable or aspirational careers. Furthermore, talented graduates choose to leave Slough – or not return to their hometown - rather than find sustainable employment in the town's creative and cultural sectors.

1.1 About the Research

The focus of this research was on the arts and cultural sectors, and the creative industries more broadly. Definitions are slippery, and for this research we used the Standard Industrial Classifications (SICs) from the Government's DCMS, and the graph below shows overlap between DCMS Sectors.[18] This taxonomy recognises the relationship between the creative industries, defined as supporting jobs and wealth generation through exploitation of creative work and intellectual property, and the cultural sector which may be less commercially driven.

1. Research methods

Methodologically, the research was very well supported by the arts community in Slough, by Slough Borough Council, and by community interest groups who work in these sectors. Our research methods reflected this response and were largely qualitative and focused on three key groups: arts organisations; freelance artists and creatives; and local authorities. We attended meetings of the Arts Forum, Slough Arts Collective, and the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce. We also led a series of focus groups, including one organised by The Slough Job Creation Hub with Slough residents working in the creative sector (including volunteers in the arts sector, amateurs, part-time and full-time workers, freelancers, and entrepreneurs). We conducted in depth interviews with Ketan Gandhi (Associate Director Community and Public Protection, Slough Borough Council) and over 20 freelance artists, producers, and members of Slough's Cultural Education Partnership.

Thematic analysis was used to uncover common topics, ideas and themes emerging from the data collected. This allowed us to build a meaningful narrative linking the themes from the data with some of the research aims of the project.

2. Limits of the research

The research was limited by lack of engagement from Slough's business communities. Despite many attempts, including the strenuous and much-appreciated efforts of Vineet Vijh (founder, The Slough Job Creation Hub), we were unable to reach anyone in Slough's major businesses (beyond the creative industries) willing to take part in the research. This is in itself a finding. It is difficult to know how to interpret their lack of response, particularly as SEGRO has actively supported

(1) Publishing computer games, software publishing, computer programming, computer consultancy activities
(2) Film, TV, Music, Radio
(3) Heritage, retail of music and video recordings, manufacture of musical instruments, reproduction of recorded media
(4) Arts, Museum activities
(5) Heritage
(6) Renting of sports goods, operation of sports facilities, other sport activities
(7) Gambling

Note: Civil Society has not been depicted in this figure because it spans across all industries, both within DCMS sectors and outside. The overlap between Civil Society and other DCMS sectors is taken into account for All DCMS totals (mainly SIC 90 – Arts, which overlaps with Creative Industries, Cultural Sector and Tourism Sector).

Source: DCMS Sector Economic Estimates Methodology - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

17   Resource Productions <**https://www.resource-productions.co.uk**> and StoryTrails <**https://story-trails.com/locations/slough/**> [accessed 7 September 2023].
18   Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), *DCMS Sector Economic Estimates Methodology (2022)* <**https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dcms-sectors-economic-estimates-methodology/dcms-sector-economic-estimates-methodology**> *[accessed 3 November 2023]*

Slough Museum and other community activities for many years. We had hoped to secure qualitative and quantitative data to understand 1) the attitudes of major businesses and business leaders to developing the arts and culture in Slough and 2) how their business needs (and buying power) might be used to support local people working in the wider creative industries. Due to this lack of engagement, we are unable to report, as hoped, on the needs and interests of industry and business leaders. Instead, this research focused on Slough's creative communities, cultural sectors, and the local authority. This means that we have presented our findings as a discussion document to acknowledge that they reflect the views and values of people who are already invested in the arts and culture.

3. Ethical approval

This study has received ethics approval from Royal Holloway, University of London's Research Ethics Committee, with the approval ID 1050. This research commits to abide by the Data Protection Act (2018). Detailed information on Research Participant Privacy Notice can be found at: **https://intranet. royalholloway.ac.uk/research/documents/researchpdf/ new-intranets/research-participant-privacy-notice.pdf**

1.2 Related Research

Throughout this report we have drawn on related research. This enables a research-informed approach to data analysis that takes account of existing evidence and provides tools to interpret the data generated in the research. We undertook desk-based research in the following areas, in which the team have significant research experience:

- the value of arts and cultural education
- cultural organisation and strategic leadership
- social and cultural value of the arts and creative industries
- freelance labour and employment
- infrastructure and the creative industries
- the value of the arts and culture in placemaking and attachment to place.

Our analysis was informed by the logics framework, a system of thought that aims to understand the different value systems at play. Arts organisations are widely confronted with three main logics: artistic, managerial, and institutional. An artistic logic tends to value creativity, imagination, community collaboration, and collective decision-making, whereas managerial logics apply approaches associated with business, including top-down managerial structures, efficiency, measurement, financial control, and economic growth. Arts organisations can see managerial logics as a threat to their artistic priorities and ways of working and may regard managerial models imported from the private sector as compromising the social and cultural role of arts. In turn, people who have internalised managerial logics from business experiences can find the focus on collective decision-making and consensus in the arts (particularly community arts)

inefficient and confusing. Institutional logics apply to the arts organisations in receipt of public or philanthropic money, requiring them to follow the strategic priorities or charitable objectives of their funding institutions. The relationship between these three logics (i.e., artistic, managerial, and institutional) is often problematic, and sometimes generates substantial conflict and misunderstandings.[19]

In practice, these logic models often intersect, particularly where arts funders' strategic (institutional) ambition expects community consortia to engage imaginatively with artistic programmes and reach consensus (artistic logic) and financial management as businesses (managerial logic). In Slough, the most successful arts and cultural organisations effectively navigate their way through these competing logics, with leaders who respect how each sector works, and are adept at moving between different registers and value systems.

1.3 About the Report

This report is organised into three key themes: Local talent: education, skills, training, and opportunities; Cultural leadership; Infrastructure for the arts, culture sectors and the digital creative industries. These themes emerged as the data was analysed, and reflect the challenges and opportunities identified by the people of Slough who engaged with the research. In practice, these core areas often intersect and are mutually dependent in Slough; where possible we have tried to draw connections between them. Rapid changes in both Slough and in the wider creative landscape mean that agendas move on quickly. By applying related research to our findings our intention is to capture some of the underlying trends and logics that underpin and outlast localised initiatives.

These key areas reflect the different and sometimes competing logics we encountered in our research. We have drawn on related research showing that **local talent and skills** resonate with the underpinning value systems of the logics and actors involved. Talent and skills need to be nurtured and developed in the spirit of openness, flexibility, resilience, and inclusiveness. At the same time, effective **cultural leadership** enable opportunities for interaction and dialogue among the different logics, avoiding antagonism, conflicts and inertia, fostering coordinated action, co-creation and learning. Finally, **infrastructure** provides for the place and the resources, digital or physical, where and through which the different logics meet and merge.

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19   Ingrid Jeacle and Peter Miller, 'Accounting, culture, and the state', *Critical Perspectives on Accounting, 37 (2016), 1-4*

2. Theme One.
Local Talent: Education, Skills, Training and Opportunities

2.1 Context and Challenges

Slough has many talented residents with varied and rich experience in the arts, and they are an important force for change. This section offers a brief snapshot of the opportunities in two key areas: 1) arts education and creative activities for young people in the town (findings 1, 2 and 3 below), and 2) the potential for freelancers to sustain their careers in Slough (findings 4 and 5 below). Both are complex areas, and there is more work to be done to bring opportunities together this area.

Slough has some excellent arts resources for children and training and employment opportunities for people of all ages, but the town also faces challenges at structural, school, and family levels. As a priority area for the government's levelling up agenda, the town benefits from investment from different government departments, we found a lack of cohesion between the Department for Education (DfE) and DCMS, in terms of providing support for arts and cultural education and careers in related sectors.

Freelance artists form an important part of Slough's creative economy, and Creative Collective meetings are well attended. The proximity of the film industry to Slough presents significant opportunities for both creative careers (careers built on creative and artistic talent) and careers in the creative industries that include a wide range of work, professions, and services.

The challenges that face Slough are not unique to the town.[20] There is also nationwide interest in attracting more people from lower socioeconomic groups and minoritized populations to work in these sectors. A range of new policy-led agendas are being set in this area, which Slough might usefully influence.[21]

MUA's Likyea McGuire and Shailini Parmer on set of 'Little English', filmed in Slough - Berkshire, glamming cast Simon Rivers and Goldy Notay.
©Resource Productions

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20   Social inequalities in the arts are well documented, and documented in the book by Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor, *Culture is Bad for you: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries (Manchester University Press, 2020).*
21   Professor David O'Brien has recently been appointed to the DCMS as Skills and Diverse Workforce Fellowship, with this brief.

2.2 Key Findings

1. Early access to the arts and culture is essential in encouraging young people to engage in creative careers

Students' career decisions are affected by perceptions from schools and families about which careers are valued. At the family level, if families (especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds) could not afford or were not aware of opportunities to learn about the arts, students from these families are likely to have limited exposure and become uninterested or unaware of creative careers, even when such career opportunities are emerging in Slough. There is also concern that families from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to visit arts, galleries, and museums, and there is less recognition for creative activities and art forms outside mainstream cultures that attract young people from diverse backgrounds.

> Future success in the Creative sector is heavily influenced by childhood experiences. Class-based disparities in cultural engagement, cultural education participation and achievement, and extra-curricular activities profoundly impact the chances of individuals getting into creative occupations.[22]

Although not immediately within the scope of this research, it is important to note that arts education helps developing soft and transferable skills that benefit young people and their employability. There is significant and robust evidence that arts education is essential for young people's wellbeing, language development, socialisation skills, and that engaging in the arts and culture supports health and wellbeing in the wider population.[23]

> 93% of 16-18 year olds report that creative education fostering self-expression, teamwork and empathy, positively impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.[24]

With competing pressures on schools, mental health services, and young people, this suggests that early access to the arts and sustained engagement creative education has further potential to improve the lives and career prospects of Slough's young people.

2. Slough Cultural Education Partnership (CEP) has been a crucial force in connecting local schools

CEP was established in 2016 and supported by ACE and ArtsWorks as part of their investment in places in need of extra capacity, and resources. Currently, there are 52 primary and secondary schools in Slough, and although these schools provide distinct provision in arts education, it is not uncommon for schools and students to prioritise other academic disciplines over arts subjects. Recently, national educational policy has reduced opportunities in the creative arts, with the consequence that numbers for arts subjects

and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and A-level are declining, and students are encouraged to take vocational subjects such as computing and business studies.[25] There have been other challenges too. During Covid social distancing measures meant many activities were abandoned or carried out online. The cost-of-living crisis created another challenge for schools to allocate sufficient resources to support arts education.

When working with the schools, the CEP's Schools Relationship Manager noticed the influence of schools' ethos on the arts curriculum as well as the need for communication and consistency among schools. To address this gap in provision, CEP created the Arts Lead Forum to enable schools to connect. In the Forum teachers show great enthusiasm and share invaluable ideas and resources. The Forum encourages teachers to voice the schools and students' needs (for example, more resources such as charcoal, sketching, block printing, and stop motion animation technology), and they share current projects, suppliers, and resources not available in their own schools (such as kilns and screen-printing equipment). These regular conversations help to inform discussions with the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)'s inspectors. CEP also shares information about high quality and reliable activity organisers, artists, and practitioners; identifies library and visual literacy resources; advertise museums and their programmes designed for schools, and invites guest speakers for film clubs, script writing, and creative careers events. CEP's work and its Arts Lead Forum show the importance of a well-maintained network for arts subject leaders and to enhance teachers' professional development and confidence. Having a network is especially necessary to circulate accumulated knowledge and resources in case of teacher turnover.

> There are art subject leaders who don't feel like they are doing a good job, and they don't know what they are doing. The ones I have been in training with and conversation with are doing a fantastic job. They are better than they think they are, but to filter that down through the school and instil that confidence in the children, in their colleagues, and across their peers is really hard. (Jo Lonsdale, Schools Relationship Manager, Slough CEP)[26]

3. Local organisations, including non-profit organisations and CICs, provide valuable opportunities for people of all ages to engage in arts

Free and affordable activities are important to widen young residents' participation in the arts and culture, supporting both personal development and those who could become talented and competent professionals working in Slough's creative industries. For example, Youth Engagement Slough (a consortium of Slough-based service providers led by Together As One, Resource Productions, and SWIPE) is

22   Heather Carey, Dave O'Brien and Olivia Gable, *Social mobility in the creative economy: Rebuilding and levelling up?* (2021) <**https://pec.ac.uk/research-reports/social-mobility-in-the-creative-economy-rebuilding-and-levelling-up**> [accessed 3 November 2023].

23   Joe Pick, *Art Works* (2013) <**https://city-arts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Art-Works.pdf**> [accessed 2 November 2023].

24   Joy Williams, Emma Pollard, Joseph Cook and Morwenna Byford, *Enhancing Creative Education* (2022), p.36 <**https://pec.ac.uk/research-reports/enhancing-creative-education**> [accessed 3 November 2023].

25   Rachel Hall, *Languages and creative arts losing favour with GCSE and A-level students* (2023) <**https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/01/languages-creative-arts-losing-favour-gcse-a-level-students**> [accessed 4 August 2023].

26   This interview took place on 23rd March 2023

dedicated to providing free activities every week online and in person for young people who are interested in film, music, performance poetry, and visual arts among other things. EMPOWORD, founded by young people with Aik Saath in 2014, has been particularly successful in making Slough a destination for young poets and spoken word artists in the region, and demonstrates young people's commitment to social justice, diversity, and creativity. The Slough Music Education Hub is organised by the Slough Music Service in collaboration with schools and other organisations to deliver professional and accessible music education for children and young people. The Langley Academy supports students to explore museums and inspires students' interests in cultural lives of the past and future. The Creative Academy in Slough offers vocational undergraduate and postgraduate courses in dance, helping students pursue successful careers in performing, choreography, and teaching. Resource Productions offer regular or concentrated training programmes, including the BFI Film Academy and Arts award projects, on various aspects of filmmaking for children and adults. It is noticeable that their work in supporting apprenticeships is cited as an example of good practice in the report from the 2023 APPG on diversifying creative education.[27] This shows a range of routes into creative carers, including opportunities for people who choose not to follow university degrees and other conventional routes into the arts.

Despite the sustained efforts of local organisations, some young people are not aware of creative careers and local employment opportunities due to limited exposure to arts as an industry and sector. Freelancers and amateur artists from the focus groups showed great interest in arts and culture from an early age, but at the time (about 15-20 years ago) they could not find relevant subjects in schools and would have benefited from encouragement from teachers and family members. It is important that this does not happen to the next generation and requires an integrated approach to learning.

> High quality creative education can engage the expertise of a range of creative practitioners who support on-going creative innovation and effective delivery at a grassroots level. This will include: teachers, governors, employers, cultural partners as well as young people themselves, who can act as ambassadors, mentors, and role models. Crucially, creative education will draw broadly across the local education ecosystem and community and not just from teachers alone.[28]

There is further scope for extending cross-sector and industry collaborations, an approach which would benefit from the recommendations of the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC), whose report on creative education and previous creative education projects has relevance for Slough.

4. There are talented freelancers, aspiring artists, and growing employment opportunities available in Slough, but it remains a challenge to promote local talents, connect key stakeholders, and match the supply and demand in the current and future labour market

Building a successful freelance career requires a set of diverse skills in addition to creative talent, such as understanding the market, developing business strategies, cultivating and managing professional networks.[29] Many freelancers in Slough said they had benefitted from expanding their networks through opportunities provided by, for example, HOME Slough, Slough Arts Forum, Love Slough Festivals, Love Slough's Parks photography competition, Slough Writers, The Dionysus Ensemble, Resource Productions and Winging It Drama Group.

Freelancers and aspiring artists expressed the need for support and training on business skills, including promoting their community and online presence to generate income from their creative skills and hobbies. Some local businesses have initiated collaborations with schools and universities so that students can apply academic knowledge, gain work experience, and develop skills on the job. For example, Jay Younes, the highly successful director of Immersive Computing Labs, valued ongoing collaborations with colleges on T Levels Courses and universities where students explore technologies in the creative industries, develop industry knowledge, and gain work experience. If local stakeholders could facilitate more conversations between schools and local businesses, it would encourage more artist-education-industry collaboration initiatives, upskilling and signposting students and freelancers to local work opportunities.

> It's about empowering the teachers, career advisors and other people in schools, and engaging young people. That's really important because they need to be aware of other job roles (in the creative industry in Slough). (Jay Younes, Director of Salt Hill VR)[30]

Further connections between industry and freelancers, led by professionals with expert knowledge of the creative industries, would strengthen career opportunities for freelancers. A directory of locally based freelancers working in Slough, regularly updated, would support and diversify the talent pool, and avoid gatekeeping.

27   Roberta Comunian, Tamsyn Dent, Dave O'Brien, Tessa Read and Natalie Wreyford, *Making the Creative Majority* (2023) <**https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/projects/creative-majority-education**> [accessed 30 October 2023].
28   Williams, Pollard, Cook and Byford, p.11.
29   Van den Born and Van Witteloostuijn, 'Drivers of freelance career success', *Journal of Organizational Behavior,* 34. 1 (2013) 24-46 <**https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1786**>
30   This interview took place on 2nd June 2023

Dancer – Amina Khayyam and host – Andy Kumar at the Creative Collective Showcase 2022, held at The Curve in Slough. ©Resource Productions, Photographer Spencer Peet

5. Access to careers in the digital creative industries benefits from wide industry engagement

There are relatively limited opportunities for young people to learn about new creative digital technologies in schools. Careers teachers were reported to have few details about the prospects and developmental needs of creative careers in new digital technologies. To maximise digital capabilities, there is a need for better understanding of Slough's digital infrastructure, including what a data centre is. Currently, although the Trading Estate in Slough provides some opportunities for young people to improve their digital skills, we were informed that limited numbers have taken up these opportunities.[31] Slough's business communities have a role in establishing connections with schools and providing students with successful models of work experience that relate to their learning in the curriculum.

A major initiative is Slough Borough Council's Local Skills Improvement Plan, which moves from short-term funding into a longer-term strategy to face the future digital infrastructure challenges and opportunities. To facilitate collaborations with colleges and schools, the Council repurposed its Old Town Hall to a skills development centre. This strategy speaks to the need to map existing skills in the creative industries sectors to sustain clear professional pathways and, at same time, understand where the skill gaps are to look for opportunities

to offer targeted training. There is an expectation that colleges and schools will create and run related courses to improve digital competences for local people based on their skills, needs, and career stage.[32]

Although Slough Borough Council's resources are limited, it is striving to connect with schools and colleges to ensure young people become aware of the potential for careers locally in the creative industries. We heard repeated calls for local businesses to contribute to this infrastructure, including contributions from Slough Trading Estate, which were under exploited.

> [T]he delivery of creative education is increasingly reliant on local factors to protect what is offered – that is senior leadership support, a highly committed and capable teaching workforce and local community creative practitioners, including creative employers.[33]

Increased access to opportunities in the creative digital economy is beginning to place Slough in a leadership role in generating an inclusive, diverse, and equitable workforce in the creative industries. Realising this ambition would be transformative for Slough, placing the town increasingly firmly at the forefront of national policy-agendas to diversify the creative industries.

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31   Unfortunately, we were unable to verify this claim as no-one from Slough Trading Estate responded to our – and Vineet Vijh's – repeated requests for interviews during the research period.

32   From the interviews, there was no mention of specific companies that are engaging in this activity apart from Royal Holloway's StoryTrails. This does not mean it is not happening, but we were unable to verify the claim.

33   Williams, Pollard, Cook and Byford, p.36.
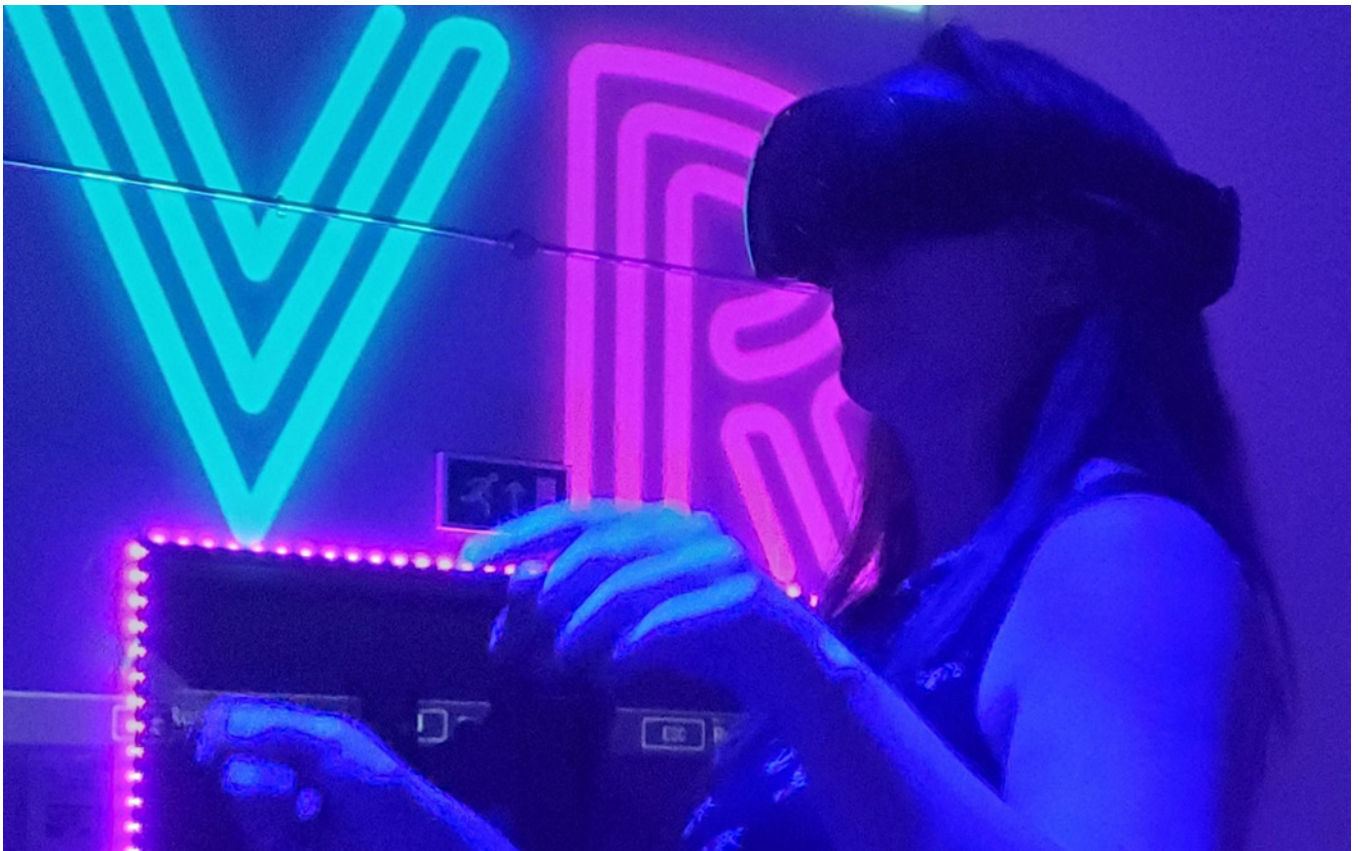
3. Theme Two. Cultural Leadership

3.1 Context and Challenges

The development of the arts and cultural sector has historically been a priority for Slough Borough Council and for Slough residents working (or aspiring to work) in the creative industries. This ambition is clearly demonstrated by "CULTIVATE: SLOUGH", [34] the first Cultural (Arts) Strategy commissioned jointly by Slough Borough Council and ACE and developed in 2019/2020 through the work of consultants, key stakeholders, and partners. The strategy set out a 5-year plan (2020-2025) with a vision that recognises the strengths of the arts and cultural sector working in the Borough as well as the sector's contribution not only to the social wellbeing of residents, but also to the enhancement of skills and employment, community cohesion, regeneration, and growth. Although the plans and ambitions set in the CULTIVATE: SLOUGH strategy slowed down due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the financial issues experienced by Slough Borough Council, the findings of our research demonstrate the ongoing willingness and commitment of Slough Borough Council and the artistic community to revisit those ambitions, nurturing the arts and culture to make Slough an attractive place to live, work and stay. A new working group arising from Slough Arts Forum was set up in October 2023 to revisit Slough's cultural strategy. Initiated by Dominique Unsworth (Resource Productions) and Vineet Vijh (Slough Hub), the working group intends to consult with arts and culture organisations, Slough Public bodies and local businesses to propose a renewed cultural strategy for the Borough. Given changing leadership roles at Slough Borough Council, it is recommended that the incoming lead for the arts and culture and the Chair of Slough Arts Forum co-chair this working group.

Cultural leadership, broadly defined as the act of leading the cultural sector,[35] will play a pivotal role in fulfilling Slough's ambitions. ACE's ten-year strategy *Let's Create* (2020-2030) emphasises how leadership and governance are crucial in fostering the arts and culture's agenda. In addition to specialist knowledge about the arts and culture, they advocate for developing the entrepreneurial skills required to respond quickly and effectively to a rapidly changing external environment:

> Good governance and leadership will be critical in inspiring positive change and growing teams that are happy, inclusive and able to draw on the widest possible range of ideas and experiences in order to build successful businesses over the next decade. Cultural organisations will need to become more entrepreneurial and develop business models that help them maximise income, reduce costs and become more financially resilient.[36]

Salt Hill VR. Photography by Salt Hill staff.

34   Slough Borough Council, '*Cultivate: Slough' A Cultural (Arts) Strategy 2020 to 2025 (2020)*.

35   British Council Creative Economy, *What is Cultural Leadership? (2013)* <**https://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/uploads/files/Cultural_Leadership_2.pdf**> [accessed 25 September 2023].

36   Arts Council England, *The Strategy* (2020) <**https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030/strategy**> [accessed 22 September 2023].

As highlighted in the CULTIVATE SLOUGH strategy as well as by participants in our research, Slough lacks clear leadership across cultural and arts provision, rendering it difficult for the sector to flourish and grow. There is widespread recognition that there is a lack of professional cultural leadership in Slough.

> Slough has lots of 'musicians' but no 'conductor'. (Ramesh Kukar, Chief Executive Slough CVS, cited in CULTIVATE: SLOUGH)

There is no agreement on what cultural leadership might look like in the town. There are different models on which to draw: cultural leadership can come from a variety of different 'leaders' (e.g., senior managers and directors in subsidized cultural institutions; public officials developing and implementing policy for the cultural sector; and range of producers, innovators and entrepreneurs in small companies, production houses and creative teams). Many people in Slough's creative communities we interviewed felt strongly that Slough Borough Council's skills agenda should also include reflection on the skills needed by arts and culture leaders as a key priority. Extant research on leadership in the UK arts sector confirms that in the current climate of change, instability, and all the associated pressures on leaders, it is very important not only to examine what expectations are placed on leaders but also to carefully consider the skills, behaviours, and attributes needed and how these can be developed most effectively.[37]

There is widespread evidence that, in towns, people often operate within multiple roles and networks. At best, this generates close bonds and strong community allegiances. At worse, it means that the same people make decisions across different aspects of town life, leading to mistrust and conflicts of interest.[38] There is, however, agreement that a 'joined up' and strategic approach to leadership would benefit cultural organizations active in Slough. This would take advantage of local talent, infrastructure assets and shared resources. Clear leadership would support a refreshed cultural strategy, seen as a central element of success, creating a cohesive and coordinated approach with bespoke support for a wider range of art forms and sustaining careers across the creative industries.

3.2 Key Findings

1. There is a need for stronger cultural leadership across the town, undertaken by arts and culture professionals

The development of the arts and cultural sector has been historically a priority for Slough Borough Council. The absence of a dedicated arts development leadership team within the Council was keenly felt by Slough's creative communities. Ongoing internal financial management issues and difficulties associated to short term funding at national level, led the Council to cut their dedicated arts development team as they needed to focus on the delivery of statutory services. The arts and culture have a significant role to play in making Slough an attractive place to reduce inequalities, improve cohesion, wellbeing, skills and employment, all key priorities for Slough Borough Council that require strong political leadership as well as local talent.

It was widely acknowledged that Slough's cultural leaders should have a deep understanding of, and experience in, the arts sector, together with a strong connection to Slough as a place. Slough's residents working in the creative sectors would like the leaders to be "champions, rather than gatekeepers and working bees" (focus group members), to have professional knowledge of the arts, a deep sense of community, collectiveness, cohesion, and creativity. At the same time, it would be important for leaders to have capacities for strategic thinking and to work in alignment with local businesses and the regional creative industries that employ people in Slough.

Access to high-quality training opportunities to further enhance cultural leadership would support the cultural economy, including creative producers and freelancers in Slough. Sector-specific leadership development opportunities, such as the Clore Leadership Programme and ACE's Developing Your Creative Practice and other specialist and/ or institutional schemes, might provide for important training opportunities to enhance the towns capacity for cultural leadership.

Although criticism of Slough Borough Council was a regular refrain in interviewers, there was also significant evidence that members of Slough's creative communities (particularly freelancers) felt that cultural leadership should be held by Slough Borough Council as an accountable public body. For these people, the recent increase in businesses, charities, and community interest companies without professional knowledge of the cultural sectors was considered opportunistic, and concerns were voiced that significant power and influence was held by a small number of people in Slough which made them feel vulnerable. Consequently, many advocated re-appointing an arts development officer in the Council, recruited as part of a transparent process. Some residents also noted the need for a digital officer within the Council to support the work and opportunities around AI, immersive technologies, digital infrastructures, and data centres for the arts and beyond.

2. Slough's creative communities would welcome greater clarity about Slough Borough Council's capacities, capabilities, and role

Despite all challenges, many resident creatives wish and expect the local authority to play a key role in the development and enactment of cultural leadership. Our findings point to different expectations and needs of the residents working in the creative sectors and Slough Borough Council. While recognising the current challenges around the need for stronger cultural leadership in Slough, the Council is committed to provide support, by undertaking an 'enabling' role.

> The Council's role in terms of leadership is to be an enabler. (Ketan Gandhi, Associate Director Community and Public Protection, Slough Borough Council)[39]

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37   Sue Hoyle, Kirstie Hewlett, Laura Jones, Alex Talbott, Ruth Hogarth and Benedict Wilkinson, *Changing cultures: Transforming leadership in the arts, museums and libraries* (2018) <**https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/changing-cultures-transforming-leadership-arts-museums-and-libraries**> [accessed 29 September 2023].

38   The University of Southampton's Feeling Towns project identified the challenges of leadership in towns that resonate with our findings in Slough. **https://www.andtowns.co.uk/** [accessed 07 November 2023].

39   This interview took place on 3rd April 2023

This enabling role is currently enacted mainly through:

- allowing public venues to be hired at a charity rate
- championing any kind of promotion related to arts and culture projects
- providing letters of support when people working in the creative sectors apply for funds

There was unanimous and widespread respect for the outstanding contribution made by Ketan Gandhi in supporting the arts and culture in Slough. Beyond his work, however, the 'enabling' role of the local authority was not widely understood. At the same time, creative people in Slough also recognise the efforts and difficulties of the Council and the need for the creative sector to be supportive and proactive.

> They're [Council] doing the best they can, we need to be supportive and just make things happen. (Jay Younes, Director of Salt Hill VR Immersive Computer Lab)[40]

Greater clarity about the different roles of Slough Borough Council, the BID, CICs, and charitable organisations in Slough would be enabling. There is a balance to be struck between an outdated idea that local authorities will provide all resources for the sector and a free market of self-appointed interest groups working in Slough. A transparent system is needed to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts of interest.

3. There are plans to enhance strategic leadership for the arts, culture, and creative industries in Slough through the setting up of a Cultural (Arts) Trust

A clear and up-to-date Borough-wide strategy for the arts, cultural and creative industries is crucial to developing a supportive environment in which creative careers can flourish. Funding for the arts and culture is increasingly place-based and needs-led, and in a town with many complex and sometime conflicting needs, it is increasingly important to articulate clear and shared strategic priorities. Funding applications informed by synergies and strategic alignment between the town, the applicants, and the funder's priorities are most likely to generate success.

As part of the medium-long term plans to improve culture leadership, at the time of the research, Slough Borough Council was planning to set up a Cultural (Arts) Trust, with a main focus on ensuring that everyone in Slough benefit from the social and economic impact of the arts and culture. By working closely with all stakeholders, the Trust aims to embed the arts and culture in the Council's projects and strategies and ensure that they registered in developers' and planners' spatial and economic growth strategies.

The Trust would ensure that Slough is engaged with government agendas and participates in national programmes related to arts and culture. It would also take care of funding strategies, allowing for a fair redistribution of any major funding (and funding applications) among local artists and arts companies in Slough. Capacity for holding budgets and financial management of significant grants was a major concern across Slough's creative networks, and wide and transparent consultation about the proposed Trust would be welcome, particularly to ensure it does not overlap with other initiatives.

Conclusions

The data reveals promising opportunities for dialogue and conversations between the parties involved to realise the same ambition: enhance cultural and strategic leadership in Slough. The findings also demonstrate that cultural leadership in Slough (and elsewhere) needs to be enacted as 'shared leadership' or 'consortium leadership' to avoid hierarchical structures, allowing for coordinated action, co-creation, and learning among the different actors and stakeholders. Our findings show the need for more reflection on the leadership skills needed, as well as the importance of strong connections between local leaders and Slough's diverse and talented creative communities.

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40   This interview took place on 2nd June 2023

4. Theme Three. Infrastructure for the Arts and Cultural Sectors and the Digital Creative Industries

4.1 Context and Challenges

Slough aims to become a town with many routes to cultural engagement and creative careers. To achieve this ambition, Slough Borough Council's pre-Covid cultural strategy was designed to support the development of a cultural quarter, in which infrastructure development was one of the key goals in the next five to ten years.[41] As this report has noted, this strategy is now under review.

This section focuses on the infrastructure, presenting findings in terms of the cultural sectors and the digital creative industries, and the overlap between them. Slough is the second largest place in the world for data centres, potentially a major asset to its infrastructure for the creative industries. There are many local infrastructure resources already outlined in this report, particularly the digital infrastructure in the Slough Trading Estate and the fast-growing film and immersive sectors. Slough Borough Council, local Chambers of Commerce, and people who work in the arts and cultural sectors in Slough consistently emphasised the need to invest in the cultural infrastructure to take full advantage of these opportunities. Investment in infrastructure and cultural centres is key to enhance communication, collaboration, and innovation.

In this section we highlight findings in four inter-related areas: 1) cultural infrastructure and creative placemaking; 2) improving cultural infrastructure in the town centre; 3) building the infrastructure and capacity for financial management; 4) increasing access to the digital infrastructure for the creative Industries.

MUA Likyea McGuire and actor Jennie Page on set of film simulation of 'Chosen Mum' by Grace Derriman, at the Screen Berkshire launch 2023. ©Resource Productions, Photographer Rishi Rai

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41   Slough Borough Council, 'Cultivate: Slough' A Cultural (Arts) Strategy 2020 to 2025 (2020).

4.2 Key Findings

1. Cultural infrastructure and creative placemaking have a central role in Slough's future

Place-based cultural policies draw attention to the relationship between creative placemaking, cultural leadership, and skills development, connections that are widely acknowledged.[42] Historically, Slough has struggled with its identity: while internationally it is viewed as a great place to do business, nationally and locally there are negative feelings about community safety, a failing and unattractive town centre, and missing opportunities compared to more successful neighbouring towns. Arts and culture are considered as key drivers for changing feelings about Slough, with hopes that its 'rebranding' will lead to positive outcomes for the town and its reputation, while supporting the ambition to become a destination town and a cultural borough.

In this context, the Council, The Slough Job Creation Hub, Slough BID, and other local partners have started conversations as part of the "Reimagining Slough" initiative. This aims to discuss what can be done to change perceptions of the town, rebuilding the residents' pride in Slough, and making more and more people come to Slough to meet their social and cultural needs and interests.

> Part and parcel of our challenges is rebuilding the pride in Slough. (Ketan Gandhi, Associate Director Community and Public Protection, Slough Borough Council)[43]

Pride in place has been increasingly adopted by national policy-makers, and the arts and culture are now widely associated with generating the kind of affective qualities leading to place-based pride. A series of nationwide initiatives (such as Heritage Action Zones and Creative High Streets) are designed for this purpose, as well as a network of BIDs from which Slough benefits.[44] Findings from research about Hull City of Culture, however, urge caution about narratives dominated by business logics, arguing for a more inclusive version of cultural and creative placemaking.[45]

Slough's creative communities would welcome the opportunity to open conversations with Slough Borough Council about the use of, and access to, community spaces, including The Curve and other public spaces, such as parks, green spaces, and Slough's streets. A recurring theme in our interviews was that there are still too many barriers, red tape, complicated procedures, and prohibitive fees to hire spaces. This is inhibiting the development of cultural initiatives, and widely regarded as a barrier to using the infrastructure effectively in Slough. In their view, obtaining permissions to use public places for creative activities is very complicated, requiring a lot of paperwork and long time to get approvals. It is also not clear who the 'permission givers' are, why some community organisations are granted access over others, and on what basis decisions around permissions are taken.

Effective communication around the many cultural initiatives already happening in Slough, alongside investments in public relations and marketing, is key to increasing visibility and building awareness. Audience development was outside the scope of this research, but Slough residents working in the creative sectors strongly emphasized the need for a community noticeboard to create a wide audience for arts and culture. Slough Borough Council acknowledged that they lacked the appropriate level of communication skills, citing other local organisations that are better equipped in this area.

Salt Hill VR. Photographer Mike Swift

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42   Alexandre Frenette, 'The rise of creative placemaking: Cross-sector collaboration as cultural policy in the United States', *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 47. 5 (2017), 333-345. See work (and cautionary tales) from economic geographer Jim Russell Burgh Diaspora: Big Fish Small Pond Talent Migration <**https:// burghdiaspora.blogspot.com/2013/01/big-fish-small-pond-talent-migration.html**> [accessed 9 October 2023]

43   This interview took place on 3rd April 2023

44   Historic England, *Creative High Streets* (2022) <**https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/We%20Made%20That_231_SELEP%20 Creative%20high%20streets_220131.pdf**> [accessed 13 October 2023]

45   Michael Howcroft, 'The cultural politics of civic pride through Hull UK City of Culture 2017', *Arts and the Market*. 13. 3 (2023), 138-158.

All of the above constitute barriers that inhibit live and more 'spontaneous' creative activities, such as street parades or pop-up festivals, and activities that would aminate the town centre. There is significant evidence that static displays, though appealing at first, are less successful in high street regeneration than on-going programmes of live performance, creative activities, VR experiences, and cultural events (including wider community-led cultures such as pop-up street food and craft markets). Related research on high street regeneration through the arts and culture might inform approaches in Slough that balance the interests (and logics) of CIDs with BIDs.[46]

> I think the longer-term vision for Slough will be with the development that's going on. There will be a lot more green space there, a lot more areas for people to congregate. That might lend itself to the natural development of an area for performance starting to take place on an ad hoc basis. More of spirit of the moment rather than having to put your submissions in place six months in advance... There's a vision here that culture is about mental wellbeing. It's about the environment. (Slough Arts Forum focus group)[47]

These findings point to important developments and conversations between the local authorities and the creative communities on how to make Slough a vibrant cultural centre, emphasizing the critical need for improved communication and coordination around the many cultural activities already happening in the town. The findings also show that, while the above conversations are ongoing, it would be beneficial to give more consideration around accessibility of cultural spaces, community assets, and open spaces.

2. Improving Cultural Infrastructure in the town Centre: Re-imagining The Curve as Slough's creative Engine Room

The role of The Curve in Slough's cultural infrastructure was a recurring theme throughout this research. Built in 2017 to bring together a library, a 280-seat performance space, teaching and exhibition spaces, and information services, The Curve represented significant investment in the cultural infrastructure by Slough Borough Council and was part of its vision for urban regeneration.[48] Slough's well-publicised financial challenges have resulted in a lack of investment in a professional staff team to manage the venue. Multipurpose venues are notoriously challenging to run, and without a clear vision and investment in sustained activity, they lack a clear sense of purpose. Well-thought-out displays (such as the Museum Pods about Slough's history and heritage) become stale and unremarkable without activity to animate the exhibitions. There was widespread agreement that The Curve has excellent potential to become a valued community resource, to attract visitors to the town and become a local hub for creative activities and freelance artists, but it has been uninspiring and under-used.

Through StoryDen Ltd, the company established to manage the new NPO consortium proposal from Norden Farm and Slough Borough Council, new life is being breathed into The Curve's performance space—Slough's only active performance venue of scale. This includes developing venue management and booking systems and collaborating with local partners on volunteer recruitment and improvements to the visitor experience. Programmed by Norden Farm's professional producers and with a new Community Programming Group in Slough, there is an ambition to provide opportunities for local community groups, emergent local performers, and established acts, storytellers, and performers with wide appeal. Norden Farm is widely connected with national and international networks, including House, led by Farnham Maltings, whose multiple programmes support theatre and theatre-makers in the region, and Future Arts Centres, a national network of over 130 arts centres who champion the artistic and social contribution to the cultural and civic life of UK towns and cities.[49] Norden Farm also working with Slough Libraries to develop a nationwide network of library-theatre venues for sharing learnings and best practice. Slough has been missing from these important networks; we found evidence of some resistance to learning from people outside Slough, particularly from long-established organisations. However, by building on Norden Farm's professional expertise and their sustained commitment to Slough, and on the museum's collaboration with the University of Reading (already providing a shared programme of activities), there is significant potential for The Curve to become a vibrant cultural centre for the town. Theatres boost the night-time economy, and there is evidence that town centres benefit from an innovative, creative central place to gather where there are shared values, good collaboration, and sense of place.[50]

If the growth of creative careers is limited by the lack of local cultural infrastructure and continuous centralised support, The Curve might provide an important focus for freelancers and emergent artists to support each other. Slough's freelancers find it difficult to connect with each other, grow their communities, and develop the skills needed to sustain creative careers, when there is no affordable local place to work nor a dedicated team to support their activities. In the focus groups with freelancers, they strongly stated the need of a cultural hub to substitute the West Wing Arts Centre and the TVU building designed by Richard Rogers Partnership which provided office spaces for emergent creatives (including Resource Productions) before its demolition in 2017. Without a central space as a point of connection, freelancers and related interest groups felt that their talents are not seen or visible. Working independently as an artist can be isolating,[51] and networking and collaborations are important for the creatives to spark new ideas and work together. Therefore, having a continuously funded and well-managed cultural hub is essential to exchange resources and offer advice to facilitate

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46 Julian Dobson, *Community businesses and high streets: 'taking back' and leading forward* (2022) <**https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/publications/community-businesses-and-high-streets**> [accessed 8 August 2023]

47 This focus group took place on 26th April 2023

48 CZWG, *The Curve* (2023) <**https://czwg.com/projects/community-and-public-use/the-curve/**> [accessed 13 October 2023]

49 Farnham maltings (2023) <**https://farnhammaltings.com/**> [accessed 6 November 2023]

50 See Julian Dobson, *How to save our Town Centres* (London: Verso, 2015).

51 Tom May, Katey Warran, Alexandra Burton and Daisy Fancourt, 'Socioeconomic and psychosocial adversities experienced by creative freelancers in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative study', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12 (2021), 1–11.

easy access to cultural infrastructures. This would establish local and national networks for various cultural interest groups and freelancers to grow and pursue exciting opportunities around the UK and internationally. The Curve is also a logical place to host a community noticeboard, improving local people's awareness of the cultural infrastructure and strengthening interconnections with the local community. Smart Coop (smart.coop) is a successful example. It is a member-owned and -governed cooperative with centres across European countries, with experts in law and marketing to protect members' social rights and support their career development. This and other successful ventures could be a point of reference for the development and operation of a similarly supportive cultural centre in Slough.

With good cultural leadership, an inspiring community and artist-led programme could transform The Curve from a functional municipal information centre to the creative engine room of the town. The performance programme is an important aspect of this regeneration, and its popularity might be supported by imaginative partnerships (suggestions included pop-up restaurants that mirror the cultural focus of the repertoire and discounts on nearby bars for ticket holders). With creative people regularly on site, there is increased potential for the museum collection and gallery to be animated in ways that would serve the arts communities and enrich the lives of Slough residents. Strong and vibrant place-based arts and cultural infrastructure facilitates activities and strengthens project collaborations, stimulating artistic and cultural innovations. As a creative engine room of Slough, freelancers and partner organisations might use the space as an incubator for creative, cultural, and heritage activities that take place elsewhere in Slough, enlivening parks, town centre, streets, and other open spaces via a curated programme of events.

3. Building the infrastructure and capacity for financial management

Discussion about financial management for the arts and culture in Slough took two forms: the first related to how freelance creatives sustain their careers, and the second opened questions about the infrastructure and capacity for Slough's organisations to manage budgets in ways that supports freelancers and sustains their own organisational agendas and/or institutional ambitions.

Freelancers and SMEs wishing to sustain their careers in the creative industries identified their needs in terms of personal financial management and transparent approaches to funding applications. They recommended sharing knowledge and resources and drawing on the expertise of local experts in the town and beyond. For example, training on the effective use of social media and comms might be provided by Resource Productions and Asian Star Radio; advice on freelancers' tax from members of The Dionysus Ensemble; business and company finance led by The Slough Job Creation

Hub; and advice on grant applications to ACE and Trusts and Foundations from a specialist consultant in funding applications. Training on evaluation principles to develop practice and to leverage further funds is available free online from the Centre for Cultural Value, but sharing learning about evaluation principles and how they relate to Slough would be supportive. Members of Slough Arts Collective also recommended that local employers might show their commitment to freelance careers by adopting best practice, and the principles developed by Stockton Arts centre, widely recognised across the industry, might be more widely adopted in Slough.[52] An audit of available and needed financial, business, and entrepreneurial skills might define a programme to enable local people to move from emergent artists to established creatives.

The second area is perhaps more challenging. It was widely reported that ambition is frequently curtailed because there is no organisation with the capacity to hold and manage large cross-Slough grants. There is evidence that insufficient capacity has led to lack of investment. There are, however, useful infrastructure models that might inspire Slough's creative communities to think differently. Create Gloucester describes itself as 'a community led movement making it possible for arts to be everyday for everyone' and has a range of arts partnerships across education, health, and cultural leadership to realise this objective.[53] PEC has usefully analysed a range of ways in which local arts organisations and freelancers have developed their businesses. This might complement the pioneering work of The Slough Job Creation Hub by strengthening artists understanding of themselves as contributing to the local economy and part of the business community.[54]

4. Increasing access to the digital infrastructure for the creative Industries: Research and Development, high-tech talent, and community engagement

Slough has a world-leading digital infrastructure, and the highly successful local film industry and the immersive digital experiences benefit from Slough's location. The collaboration between Resource Productions and Rifco Theatre and arts led to the critically acclaimed film, Little English. Immersive Computing Labs made a major contribution to the award-winning Storytrails, part of the award-winning Unboxed Festival led by Royal Holloway, University of London, with historian David Olusoga as Executive Producer.[55] What these collaborations demonstrate is not only that Slough has talent, but also that creative work of world-leading quality can be achieved through partnerships within and beyond Slough. Furthermore, their success demonstrates that high-quality work in the creative industries and community engagement are not mutually exclusive, but mutually beneficial.

There are further challenges and opportunities for Slough to benefit from the digital creative economy. In the screen industries, there is a national shortage of high-tech talent

52   ARC Stockton Arts Centre, *Policy for the Employment of Freelancers (2023)* <**https://arconline.co.uk/policy-for-the-employment-of-freelancers/**> [accessed 6 November 2023]

53   Create Gloucestershire (2023) <**https://www.creategloucestershire.co.uk/**> [accessed 6 November 2023]

54   Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, Business Models and Access to Finance (2023) <**https://pec.ac.uk/research/business-models-and-access-to-finance**> [accessed 6 November 2023]

55   StoryFutures Academy, StoryTrails Executive Producer David Olusoga Premiers New Documentary At LFF (2022) <**https://story-trails.com/news/storytrails-executive-producer-david-olusoga-premiers-new-documentary-at-lff/**> [accessed 17 August 2023]

Salt Hill VR. Photographer Mike Swift

and well-qualified people who may take work outside both the Slough area and the UK or move to other countries to take training and work. This leads to a loss of local high-tech talents and a waste of digital infrastructure resources. Screen industries are global, and it is difficult to prevent demographic flows between countries. To maximise digital capability and infrastructure, there needs to be a better understanding of Slough's digital infrastructure, including how a data centre works, and how local people might benefit. This returns to the question of training; it is not considered cost-ineffective for major film studios to train people regularly, so they rely on apprenticeship routes to train digital talents. Resource Productions are model of best practice in this, and Slough Borough Council's Skills Improvement Plan is designed to further improve local people's digital skills, access and awareness of creative careers.

Collaboration with universities

There are two primary ways in which universities and Slough's digital creative economies can collaborate. One is via research and development, and the other is via student education and graduate employment. Both contribute to a drive towards training and retaining local talent. We found that local businesses valued support from local educational institutions, including University of West London, Brunel University, Royal Holloway University of London and the University of Reading. Although currently data from Slough Borough Council evidence that 90% of Slough's graduates do not return to the town, the significant rise in commuting students to local universities suggests that this is likely to change in the near future.[56] Placements in or near Slough as part of their degrees and graduate-level entry jobs would support retention.

Universities are increasingly being recognised as having a role to play in supporting their local creative industries ecosystems. Universities support their creative economies by upskilling the local population and attracting creative workers. However, there are some key challenges with how well HEIs can achieve the objectives placed upon them. Firstly, whether universities are overloaded with competing objectives. Secondly, there is argument as to whether HEIs are nimble enough to provide the skills most in demand by creative industries in their region. Thirdly, there is a question about whether the host regions have the necessary capacity to absorb creative graduates.[57]

Given the emphasis on screen technologies, it is not surprising that Royal Holloway and Reading were the universities most regularly cited by Slough's creative communities; the two universities have complementary strengths and interests in this area. Royal Holloway, University of London is a global leader in immersive creative technologies. Their StoryFutures programme, in partnership with the National Film and Television School, has brought significant economic benefits to the industry.[58] In June 2023 it was announced that Royal Holloway is the preferred bidder for the national Convergent Screen Technologies and performance in Realtime (CoSTAR) lab, part of the government's Creative Industries Sector Vision to maximise the potential of the UK creative industries and grow the economy. This includes an award of £75.6million to build the largest virtual production research and development network in Europe to put the UK at the forefront of advancements in visual effects, motion-capture technology, and AI for the screen industries and live performance. The programme will be supported with an additional £63million investment from industry. Slough's immersive companies

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56   30% of undergraduates at Royal Holloway, for example, are commuting students.

57   Source: Role-of-Universities-Enhancing-Creative-Clusters-PEC-Discussion-Paper-September-2022.pdf (svdcdn.com) Nesta, *The Role of the University in Enhancing Creative Clusters* (2022) <**https://creative-pec.files.svdcdn.com/production/assets/images/Role-of-Universities-Enhancing-Creative-Clusters-PEC-Discussion-Paper-September-2022.pdf**> [accessed 7 November 2023]

58   StoryFutures catalysed 40 new research and development (R&D) industry and academic collaborations, created 16 new products, unlocked a further £2.1m investment for creative industries' R&D, built a network of over 100 companies, stimulated growth or support of 75 jobs and a 3.2% - 18.6% increase in SME turnover, and introduced over 20,000 audiences to new experiences.

have already benefitted from this work. For example, Slough-based Royal Holloway students used their computer science knowledge to construct AI models, helped manage VRcade in this business company, and contributed to the StoryFutures collaborations.

The University of Reading is home to the Shinfield Studios, and the university's world-leading research in film is key to successful collaborations with Resource Productions. Shinfield Studios is part of the University of Reading's 'Cine Valley' project, which aims to foster a film and TV hub, developing expertise and skills in the area.[59] This world-leading infrastructure project will lead the way in TV and film, and Slough's TV and film companies, particularly Resource Productions, have already found strong synergies with the University of Reading's collaboration with Shinfield Studios. This partnership has led to Resource Productions securing £600k lottery funding from the BFI to form one of six national 'Skills clusters', launched on 3rd October 2023 as 'Screen Berkshire'.

Skills in the creative digital industry change quickly, requiring flexibility and high-level capabilities. With world-leading, research-intensive universities close by, each with a strategic priority to contribute to the digital creative economy, there will be many opportunities for Slough residents, both young people starting on their careers and adults at different career-stages and interests. Employers highlighted the advantages of including science graduates in the creative arts industry; science graduates who majored in disciplines such as computer science, mathematics, and physics can contribute their digital skills to animation and simulations, for example. Degree apprenticeships are also a viable route into the creative digital economy, and a more coherent approach across all universities in Slough would strengthening this provision.

Therefore, we recommend that both young people in schools and graduates from various disciplines become aware of local initiatives in the digital creative economy, and their potential to contribute to the industry. Slough's diverse residents, in turn, can reshape the creative industry by making it increasingly inclusive, an approach that will retain talent with expertise across disciplines.

Enhancing connections with the community and creating an infrastructure for artists with different art forms

Screen industries in the region are exciting developments and attracting major funds to the area. Our research showed that the digital skills centre in Slough is welcomed, and highlights the need for alignment among digital infrastructure, resources, support, and community expectations. Local data centres are eager to connect with the local community, with wide benefits the Slough people to connect with the art world beyond Slough. However, the challenge for the digital infrastructure for the creative sectors in Slough is that the community has limited access to opportunities arising from this infrastructure investment, largely attributed to a lack of education and digital skills. Although there are some good examples of existing

digital infrastructures in Slough, including musicians and visual artists who use immersive technologies to enhance their artwork and generate content innovations, this work might be more widely accessible and promoted more broadly by increased engagement of the data centre hub from the local community, and support for digital officers to connect and bridge to the community.

Building infrastructure that drives the digital creative economy and supports artists across art forms is not mutually exclusive. The screen industries and immersive performance require a range of talents (musicians, designers, make-up artists, actors, choreographers and so on) whose portfolio careers might move between (for example) live performance, community arts and film or gaming. A rich local creative ecology and infrastructure would enable local people to progress and take advantage of this, including support for creative development in a wide range of settings and places.

Slough High Street, Photographer from Slough Hub

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59   University of Reading, Shinfield Studios plans take next step (2021) <**https://www.reading.ac.uk/news/2021/ university-news/business/pr860693**> [accessed 14 October 2023]

5. Concluding Discussion Points

This report is intended as a starting point for discussion. The executive summary and recommendations capture our findings, but there is much more to develop. These key questions build on findings captured in the research and are offered in a spirit of generosity and dialogue.

1. What is the role of a cultural strategy for the town, and how might it lead to tangible benefits for sustaining creative careers?

2. There was significant discussion about cultural leadership in the town. What skills and expertise already exist, and what qualities would you like to see in leaders?

3. There is some lack of clarity about the different roles played by key organisations in Slough. How might the roles of different interest groups be clarified and shared for greater transparency? What complementary skills and knowledge do they bring?

4. There is a balance to be struck between an outdated idea that local authorities will provide all resources for the sector, and a free market of self-appointed interest groups working in Slough. What might this look like?

5. What are the benefits and limits of partnerships inside and outside Slough? How can Slough's arts and cultural organisations take better advantage of external expertise in the creative industries?

6. How can financial management and capacity for large grants be improved in Slough?

7. If The Curve became an engine room for Slough's creative communities and activities, how would it be used? What would be the barriers and opportunities it would bring?

8. How would the arts, culture, and heritage sectors use parks, streets, and open spaces as sites for creative activity?

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