

# **Creative Workspaces in the South East Midlands:**

## **Rationale and Lessons Learned**

The purpose of this short note is to showcase good practice in delivering creative workspaces in the South East Midlands (SEM), to support further local (and wider) developments and to help stimulate employment and business growth in the creative and cultural sectors. Such activity can support wider place-making too, as recognised by Government in its recently published Levelling Up White Paper, which states:

*“Economic health is only one element influencing someone’s lived experience. Health, security, green spaces, culture and trust also shape peoples’ decisions about where to locate, and their lived experience once they are there.”*

Indeed, improving access to culture forms one of Government’s 12 Levelling-Up Missions:

*“By 2030, pride in place, such as people’s satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing.”*

With this strong endorsement of culture as a backdrop, this paper sets out regional examples of how creative workspaces have been established in the SEM, partnership exemplars and the lessons to share about the processes. There are four sections to the note, as follows:

- i) Rationale for creative workspaces
- ii) Regional knowledge about locations for creative workspaces
- iii) Diversity about types of creative workspaces offered
- iv) Deliverability of creative workspaces

This paper has been compiled by members of SEMLEP’s Cultural & Creative group, drawing on sector knowledge and experiences from a number of successful projects across the area: the Hat District in Luton (The Culture Trust, Luton), Arts Central (Arts Gateway Milton Keynes), Westbury Arts Centre (MK), West Wing Studios (Luton) and Bedford i-Lab.

## **Rationale for Creative Workspaces**

Creative workspaces can offer the opportunity to regenerate and re-purpose some buildings or a particular part of a place, while also serving unmet demand for facilities for creatives, entrepreneurs and start-ups. They can offer a sound business proposition – there are often lower start-up costs involved in regenerating an old building compared with new build – and be set up in such a way (e.g., not for profit/ trust/ partnership) as to reinvest benefits back into the local community and provide local jobs and training. Indeed, many of the projects featured here talked about creating a community of artists, entrepreneurs and students, alongside a range of businesses and services (mentoring, training, residencies).

*Examples:*

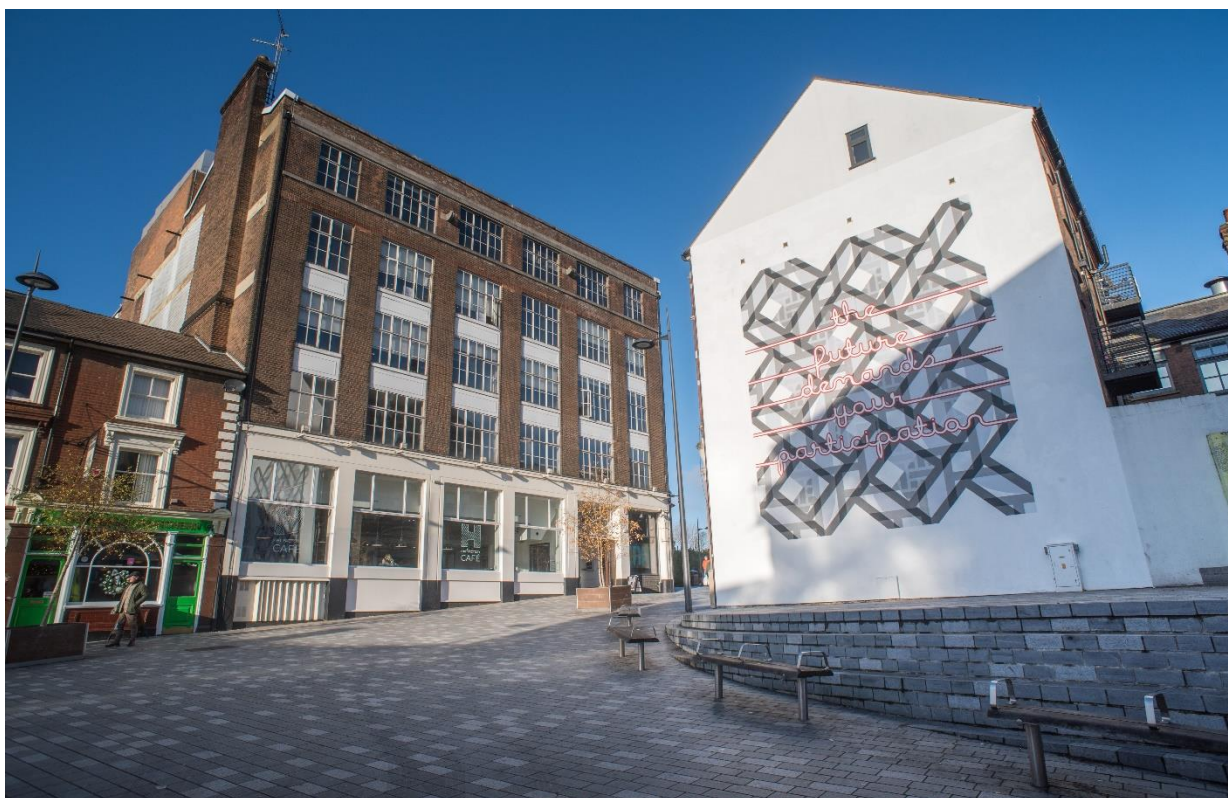
- Westbury Arts Centre and Arts Central were set up to help meet a significant unmet need for creative workspaces in Milton Keynes. At one point, MK College located teaching space within Arts Central.



Photo credit to Westbury Arts Centre

- The development of the Hat District creative cluster has demonstrably contributed to the economic regeneration in Luton. The Culture Trust, charity led the freehold purchase and adaptive re-use of Luton's former hat factories has led to animation of this area by established and emerging creative industries, jobs, creative commissions and arts activities including collaboration with the University of Bedfordshire Art and design School and other creative and cultural venues also located in the District. (A key aspect of this creative cluster is the freehold purchase of the buildings into Trust for the long-term purpose of arts and culture. As the area regenerates, the voluntary and creative industry sector shall not be priced out of the town centre. Considered to be the best located cluster in the UK, the Hat District has the enviable location of being next to the station (21 minutes to London) and with close connectivity to the airport and Motorway network.





The promise public art and Hat Factory Arts Centre in the Hat District, Luton

Image is credited by Shaun Armstrong photography.



Hat Works Grade II listed building and creative start-up workspace, Hat District, Luton

Image is credited by Shaun Armstrong photography.





Creative Workspace 'Majessa' in Hat House, Hat district, Luton

Image is credited by Shaun Armstrong photography.

### **Lessons learned about Locations for Creative Workspaces**

All the projects featured in this note agree that location is key to success. Particularly important locational factors include transport links, affordability and proximity to existing facilities and complementary businesses.

#### *Examples:*

- West Wing is ideal for use by creative and media companies due to its location and proximity to existing facilities, as well as perfect transport links for car, train and plane. It is also more affordable than existing space elsewhere in Luton, thus proving more cost effective for many creatives.



Photo credits to West Wing

## Types of Creative Workspaces in the region

The case-studies featured here agree on the importance of tailoring any creative workspaces offering to the local market, while also maximising flexibility of use. This can be done by having (and maintaining) a focus, but also offering varying sizes of studio and office space, varying rental offers (both short and long term leases) and varying types of space (some plug and go, some fitted out in detail, and some bespoke e.g., darkrooms). Shared spaces and spaces for hire and/or for performances and exhibitions can also strengthen the offering.

### *Examples:*

- i-Lab Bedford has spaces ranging from single occupancy to organisations 20 strong.



Photo credit of Bedford i-lab

- Westbury Arts Centre has studio spaces offered as short-term rentals to give artists experience of being part of a busy creative environment.



- Arts Central maintains a focus on fine arts graduates and creative businesses, but also accommodates hobbyists and those there for well-being, and has continually adapted to demand for 60-80 different sized spaces, currently ranging from 4 to 40 sqm. It also contains newly configured multi-purpose public presentation space.



Photo credits to Arts Central MK

### **Deliverability of Creative Workspaces**

The projects featured here agree that security of tenure and development of a business model are both critically important. On the first of these, they recommend creating a strong relationship with a freeholder/landlord or acquiring a freehold. On the second, they recommend thinking carefully about where the money will come from, and ensuring that marketing, pricing and market testing is undertaken before determining the appropriate structure to adopt (not for profit/charity/partnership). Once a structure has been determined, it is important to be clear on governance: to make responsibilities and accountability explicit, including the relationship between the management of the facility, the tenants and the responsible entity. Relationships should be continually fostered over time, to support revenue and/or career opportunities for creative tenants.

#### *Examples:*

- West Wing has a very strong business relationship with its freeholder (The Mall Luton): their cooperation is a win-win for both parties (staff, tenants and visitors create positive foot fall for the surrounding shops and food venues). From day one, West Wing planned for the lead tenant to be able to support itself and sustain the facilities without public funding; then, through third party usage of West Wing, the lead tenant has been able to take on more staff, allowing other users to grow within West Wing too.
- The Culture Trust, Luton successfully applied for Local Growth Fund support from SEMLEP, which was matched by fundraising to deliver the £10m Hat District project with other funders such as National Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council and Luton Borough Council. The creative ecology of the District feeds

itself with talents, skills and ideas as well as income which, as a not-for-profit organisation, is fed back into the organisation (with the aim to be self- funding by 2025).

For further information please contact;

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3. Arts Central – [Arts Central MK](#)
4. Westbury Arts Centre - [Westbury Arts Centre](#)
5. i-Lab - [Bedford i-lab](#)