



CAN PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES CONTRIBUTE TO THE
SUSTAINABILITY OF CULTURAL AND CREATIVE ECOSYSTEMS?
THE CASE OF THE CREATIVE PEOPLE AND PLACES (CPP)
PROGRAMME (ENGLAND)

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Abstract

Purpose. Participatory and co-creative processes are now widespread in various sectors of our society, including the cultural and creative industries. The study aims to examine their contribution to the sustainability of cultural ecosystems and their integration within cultural policies. It explores best practices and emerging challenges, along with the impacts, both positive and negative, on members and communities, thus informing the development of sound cultural policies.

Design/methodology/approach. Adopting the single case-study methodology, combining multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentary analysis, we discuss the case of Appetite, a project carried out in Stoke-on-Trent (UK) within the framework of Creative People and Places (CPP), a ten-year audience development programme targeting areas of England with below-average cultural engagement.

Findings. The paper highlights good practices and critical issues in applying participatory methods to large-scale programmes in the cultural sector. It reveals that effective participatory processes can lead to greater community involvement and sustainability of cultural projects, but also highlights significant obstacles such as resource allocation and stakeholder alignment.

Practical and Social Implications. The study emphasises the significance and intricacy of implementing participatory processes in contemporary cultural policy discourse, particularly in view of global calls for more inclusive and sustainable cultural development strategies. The study provides guidance to policymakers, cultural practitioners, and community leaders on the application of participatory practices, addressing benefits, potential challenges, and limitations.

Originality of the study. This research contributes to the existing literature by offering a detailed qualitative analysis of a long-term, large-scale, participatory project in the UK cultural sector.

1. Introduction

The debate between “Democratisation of Culture” and “Cultural Democracy” marks a pivotal shift in the way culture is accessed, created, and valued (Belfiore et al., 2023). By acknowledging the value of different cultural expressions and co-creative processes, access and production are democratised, ensuring participation, engagement, and ownership.

Recognising the growing importance of this phenomenon in the cultural and creative sector, researchers, politicians, and organisations have sought to identify effective tools and strategies for the application and management of participatory processes.

This research examines a particular English case study, *Appetite*, a ten-year community-driven and place-specific project that is part of the Creative People and Places England, a national audience development programme, hereinafter referred to as CPP. *Appetite* applied participatory approaches both in the planning and evaluation phases. Its features make *Appetite* an ideal candidate for identifying good practices and critical issues in applying participatory methods to large-scale place-based programmes. The study aims to provide insights to improve the inclusion of participation in the management of place-based cultural and creative activities by exploring the contribution of participatory practices within these programmes. It specifically examines best practices and challenges encountered in their implementation, delving into the immediate and lasting effects on consortium members and the wider communities they engage with. Highlighting both positive and negative outcomes, the analysis seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how participatory methods impact cultural initiatives and improve their sustainability and community engagement or generate new challenges.

This research aims to offer valuable insights into the academic discourse on participatory cultural processes and their practical implications for policy and community engagement. It provides a link between cultural studies and public policy, offering empirical evidence and theoretical interpretations that can influence both spheres. By analysing the implementation and outcomes of participatory practices, the study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on cultural policymaking, funding allocations, and community-led cultural initiatives.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical background of participatory processes in the cultural and creative sectors. Then, the paper introduces the research context (section 3). Section 4 describes the research methodology, a single case study combining multiple sources of data. Then, the findings are presented and discussed in sections 5 and 6. The last section outlines the research limitations, implications, and future perspectives.

2. Theoretical background: participatory approaches within the Cultural and Creative Sector

Since the 1960s, the concept of democratic public participation has gained increasing attention in various societal spheres (Arnstein, 1969). This shift has been particularly evident in the cultural sector, where countercultural movements in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s challenged traditional hierarchies between elite and popular tastes, as well as between different art forms (Belfiore et al., 2023). In England, this contrast led to a “reluctant engagement of the Arts Council with the community arts movement” (Belfiore et al., 2023, p. 3). Consequently, during the 1970s, the idea of “Cultural Democracy” began to spread within traditional arts policies, thus overcoming the top-down principle of the “Democratisation of Culture”, which until then had been designed to make excellence accessible. Furthermore, in examining this phenomenon, it is imperative to reflect on the topic of cultural value creation and the processes through which certain forms of culture are legitimised, while others are not (Bourdieu, 1984; Belfiore, 2020). As Belfiore observed, the absence of acknowledgement of the power imbalance resulted in the UK adopting the “deficit model” (Miles & Gibson, 2016, p. 151), namely patronising rhetoric of “disinterested and disengaged targets” when widening participation in cultural initiatives.

Nowadays, concepts such as “Cultural Democracy”, “Co-Production” and “Culture 3.0” (Sacco et al., 2018; Boehm, 2022) are increasingly used in artistic and cultural policy documents and discourses, showing a strong interest in applying different forms of participative, co-creative, and bottom-up approaches in the management and enhancement of cultural heritage and cultural and creative production. Content created through a co-creative Culture-3.0 phenomena, often using disruptive technologies, ubiquitously available content, and consumer-producer ambiguity, has created new tensions all to do with who owns what and what to do with our gatekeepers (Sacco, 2011). “The era of individualism seems to be receding, and co-creation and co-ownership are increasingly taking their place” (Boehm, 2022, p.49).

Participatory processes are a key characteristic of a Culture-3.0 model of cultural engagement and are perceived to be aimed at achieving Cultural Democracy. Indeed, the use of participatory processes has several positive aspects. They can generate multi-dimensional impacts on communities, individuals, organisations, and governance systems (Cornwall, 2008). Furthermore, the lessons learned from these approaches are potentially useful in the review and decision-making process at different levels and for different stakeholders: for policy reformulation, the management of organisations, and the ongoing self-determination of communities (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Embracing the principles of the Faro Convention (Council

of Europe, 2005), culture-led participatory approaches address place-specific needs and enable local communities to become active players. The Convention's principles provide a framework to ensure that these participatory initiatives not only respond to immediate cultural challenges and empower citizens, but, above all, foster a sustainable development built around "heritage communities" (Council of Europe, 2005, p. 2). One of the main innovations of the Convention is its people-centred approach, with people themselves becoming performers, recipients and decision-makers (Cerquetti & Romagnoli, 2022, p. 42). Indeed, citizens are no longer individual and passive spectators but are now organising themselves into dynamic and changing communities that can play an active role in the management process of cultural and creative activities, from its design to its evaluation. Moreover, it is crucial to remove barriers and ensure accessibility and inclusiveness for all parts of society, recognising the central role of cultural participation in improving the lives and wellbeing of people and communities (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). In this regard, Bonet and Négrier (2018) proposed a discussion on whether participation strategies merely replicate the criticisms of cultural democratisation by maintaining existing hierarchies and excluding marginalised groups. They suggest that mediation may be a way to address and potentially balance these inequities (Bonet & Négrier, 2018).

By adopting these principles, communities can co-create, stimulate, and direct the local cultural offer, providing multi-dimensional impacts and ensuring greater sustainability and resilience of the local cultural and creative ecosystem in the long term. Similarly, this focus on a participatory approach is also growing in the design of evaluation processes. Although the adoption of these approaches in evaluation contexts entails some obstacles – including a greater expenditure of economic, human, and time resources –, its multifaceted advantages cannot be overlooked (Smits et al., 2009; Ledwith & Springett, 2010; Thomson & Chatterjee, 2013; Badham, 2015; Morse et al., 2020; Gratton & Reynolds, 2022). Welcoming communities in the entire management process, without neglecting evaluation, represents the paradigm shift needed to practice deep-rooted forms of participation capable of generating change. Evaluation must, therefore, be a reflection tool for cultural and creative organisations, but also an interface for dialogue with communities, so that they can highlight the parameters they consider necessary to assess activities.

Additionally, citizens' discussion and definition of cultural indicators is an effective measurement tool and a powerful means of engagement to potentially influence local change (Fischer, 2012; Badham, 2015). For this reason, in our study, we explore a case that applied a participatory approach to both the design and evaluation phases, providing a valuable example through which to trace the benefits and challenges of permeating participation.

In alignment with De Bernard et al. (2022, p. 340), it is imperative to explicitly delineate the conceptual framework being employed when utilising the term “cultural and creative ecosystem” in order to facilitate coherent discourse. In this case, we are referring to an organisational approach to cultural programming (*Ibidem*), namely that of Appetite, which is framed within the CPP programme. In line with Borin and Donato’s findings, this ecosystem aligns with the concept of a culture-led ecosystem, in which cultural organisations play a leading role in driving change processes (Borin & Donato, 2022, p. 29).

3. Research context Creative People and Places in Stoke-on-Trent, Appetite (England)

Looking at the European context, England certainly hosts one of the most heated and long-running debates on the redistribution of cultural value and Cultural Democracy (Belfiore, 2020; Belfiore et al., 2023). Indeed, Arts Council England (ACE)’s approach to its cultural policy has seen a remarkable paradigm shift in the last decade, aimed at greater inclusion of participatory, place-based, and bottom-up forms in national policy (Jancovich, 2017). The results of this reversal are clear in the new ten-year strategy document, Let’s Create (Arts Council England, 2020), as well as the ACE’s support for Cultural Compacts, an outcome from its 2018 commissioned Cultural Cities Enquiry.

Therefore, we intend to focus on what we believe to be the seed of this new national strategy: a ten-year ACE intervention, namely CPP, a place-based audience development programme started in 2012 and funded by the National Lottery and the UK Government. CPP’s final aim is to enable more people to experience and be inspired by the arts, with investment focused on parts of the country where arts engagement is significantly below the national average¹. The CPP was developed as a participatory action research (PAR) programme with a continuous evaluation and a peer-learning programme. As stated in the report from 2018, Cultural Democracy and community decision-making are of fundamental importance to CPPs. Since it is a participatory action research project, continuous reflection and learning are maintained as core tenets of the work with communities (64 Million Artists & Arts Council England, 2018). The principles of human-centred design have been implemented to place community decision-making at the core of all programming. This approach has been undertaken

¹ The engagement data are provided by the Active Lives Survey, a Sport England-led survey about people’s participation in leisure and recreational activities, including sport, physical activity, and culture (Arts Council England, n.d. b).

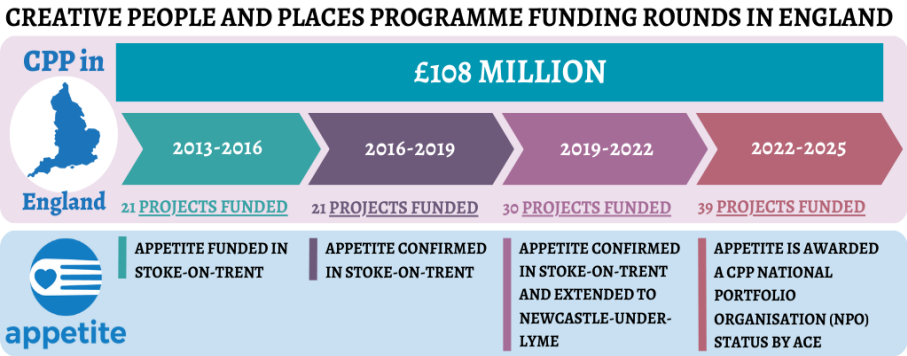
to open up the decision-making process to a wider range of voices, provide space for communities' cultural expression, and ultimately pursue the principles of Cultural Democracy (64 Million Artists & Arts Council England, 2018; Icarus, 2019). The programme, started in 2012 with 21 projects, is now in its fourth funding round, with a total expenditure over the past ten years of £108 million (Fig. 1). The CPP was arguably the first of the three pillars of large-scale ACE-supported place-based arts initiatives, with Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPs), being launched in cooperation with the Department for Education (DfE) in 2015, aiming to align cultural education of young people, and Cultural Compacts, being recognised officially in 2019.

As for 2023, there are currently 39 CPP programmes active in the UK, 140 LCEPs and more than 50 Cultural Compacts covering the whole of the UK, all three focusing on place-based approaches to arts and culture (Arts Council England, 2023).

3.1 Appetite, Stoke-on-Trent's Creative People and Places project

Although there has been a much longer tradition of co-creative approaches to arts, crafts and culture in Stoke-on-Trent, the research discussed in this paper focuses on Appetite, a project active for ten years and among the 21 funded at the program's launch in 2012 (Ecorys UK, 2016). Appetite, one of the West Midlands consortia, initially targeted the Stoke-on-Trent area and later, in 2019, was extended to include the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme. It was also awarded the status of National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in 2022 by ACE, confirming funding for its activity in both areas for three years (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Overview of Creative People and Places funding rounds in England, and Appetite's funding history within the programme



Source: own elaboration

As shown in Fig. 2, the consortium was led by the New Vic Theatre, with a partnership that has evolved over time from 2012 until 2023. At the time of this research, it involved: Partners in Creative Learning, 6Towns Radio, Staffordshire University (SU), Newcastle Business Improvement District (BID), Go Kids Grove, and Keele University (KU) (Appetite, n.d.).

Fig. 2: Evolution of Appetite consortium from 2012 to 2023



Source: own elaboration

Appetite began providing its 10-year vision by putting on a Taster Menu² in Summer 2013 to engage and inspire local communities in the Six Towns³ area.

Over the past eleven years, Appetite has engaged 2,099,735 audiences, 55,910 participants, 1,149 artists and 1,875 volunteers, working closely with community decision-makers at the Supper Club.

This article focuses on the initial life phase of Appetite, between 2012-2016, in which Staffordshire University (SU) carried out the project evaluation, applying “Get Talking”, a participatory-research approach (PAR) (Gratton & Reynolds, 2022). Based on co-production principles, this approach was designed and applied by the SU Creative Community Unit (CCU) (Emadi-Coffin, 2008; Gratton & Reynolds, 2022). Originally developed as a Community Consultation course (Emadi-Coffin, 2008, p. 30), it was later accredited as a short course for continual professional development (Gratton & Reynolds, 2022). Get Talking is based on three dimensions: 1) a set of principles, 2) a clear process and 3) creative tools for consultation (Gratton, 2014). Additionally, it follows a process of planning, involvement, listening and learning, cross checking and action planning (*Ibidem*).

Over the years, Get Talking has been used in various contexts in the UK to train community members and organisations in creative and participatory consultation and evaluation. The consortium welcomed the proposal to use it for Appetite’s evaluation due to the participatory nature of the method, which was considered perfectly in line with the programme’s philosophy⁴.

Over the ten-year programme, ACE’s evaluation of all CPP projects, including Appetite, assessed each funded project against three core questions: whether the programme has resulted in more people experiencing and being inspired by the arts; how well the CPPs have achieved excellence in both arts and community engagement; and which approaches to participation, inspiration and excellence have been successful. The Audience Agency’s evaluation required the timely collection by Appetite of demographic and postcode data on quarterly monitoring forms, covering a congruent representative sample of audiences for all types of activities and events held (events, festivals, exhibitions, outdoor performances, etc.). Furthermore, the evaluation required accurate information regarding the age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status of the sample.

³Taster Menu was a curated programme of free high-profile artistic experiences, designed to raise the profile of the project in the first year. Between April and October 2013, Appetite attracted more than 16,000 people to their Taster Menu.

³The urban area consists of six towns. In 1910, they were united to form a single city called Stoke-upon-Trent, that encompasses Burslem, Fenton, Hanley, Longton, Stoke-upon-Trent, and Tunstall.

⁴For further details of the participatory research approach used in Appetite, see the paper by Gratton and Reynolds (2022).

In the first year of Appetite, an evaluation team from the CCU was appointed, consisting of one project manager and one academic researcher. The evaluation was based on the involvement of all consortium members, who employed twelve Appetite builders⁵, community researchers who worked with the community groups identified in the Six Towns area. The CCU team has trained not only Appetite staff members on Get Talking, but all consortium partners and builders. Broadly, Appetite's evaluation through Get Talking involved a project manager, an academic researcher, a critical friend, and twelve community researchers, including four Appetite builders and eight volunteers (Gratton & Reynolds, 2022). The Get Talking Network was used to engage people in conversations and involve them in decision-making about local issues (Ecorys UK, 2016). Members of the community were invited to participate in training to support the evaluation of Appetite. The training programme offered the opportunity to work towards accreditation from Staffordshire University. Participants were able to acquire new action research skills, and some gained accreditation. Furthermore, the Appetite team benefited from the group's input during the analysis and reporting stages (*Ibidem*).

Training covered participatory principles, interview techniques, and data analysis, with community researchers applying their learning through creative consultation tools such as the Travelling Tea Room, quali-tea pots, an arts wish tree, and acrostic poems. These methods encouraged audience engagement while capturing qualitative insights in a lively and accessible way. The evaluation was embedded into the programme, ensuring meaningful findings that influenced its direction (Gratton & Reynolds, 2022).

Challenges related to scale led to adaptations such as integrating quantitative post-event surveys and commissioning professional artists to refine creative consultation tools (Gratton & Reynolds, 2022).

Get Talking has certainly shaped the programme. According to Gratton and Reynolds (2022), the participatory principles at its heart still positively impact Appetite's work with communities.

This contribution wants to investigate the possible short and long-term effects that the use of Get Talking may have produced on the members of the Appetite consortium, on their knowledge and use of participatory approaches, and how they collaborate and with their reference communities.

Given these premises and focusing on the perception of consortium partners, the research questions are the follows:

RQ1: What are the best practices and issues that emerged in adopting a participatory approach?

⁵ Of these twelve, four were Appetite builders and eight volunteers, motivated by their interest in art or their communities.

RQ2: What are the positive and negative short- and long-term impacts that the participatory approach generated on consortium members and communities?

4. Research methodology

The study applied a qualitative methodology, the single case study, combining multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentary analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2018). The six months spent in the Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme areas were crucial for a better understanding of the research object. From February to July 2023, a desk analysis was also conducted, collecting and studying materials produced by the programme, at national and local levels. The documentary study was principally based on scientific publications on the subject, augmented by documents elucidating the operational mechanisms of the programme. A total of approximately forty discrete contributions were gathered, collectively serving to delineate the research context previously outlined. At the national level, the report for the tenth anniversary of the programme proved to be a privileged driving instrument (Robinson, 2022). It contained references both to the learning of the participatory research programme (PAR) and to the results of the local and national evaluation of the programme. It should be noted that the ACE website provided useful strategic and operational documents on project requirements and evaluation, while it lacked an up-to-date archive of research programme outputs. Fortunately, the *Culture Hive* blog by the Arts Marketing Association, which collects several publications in a section dedicated to CPP, was invaluable for the retrieval of the documents of interest.

In parallel with the study of these documents and scientific publications on the programme, it has been possible to make a first-person observation of the local cultural and creative ecosystem. In this sense, it was particularly useful to follow the work of the local emerging Cultural Compact⁶, Stoke Creates, whose board includes members of Appetite and its consortium, such as SU, KU and The New Vic Theatre. Cultural Compacts emerged in 2018 from the ACE commissioned Cultural Cities Enquiry, as an acknowledgment that what was needed was a step-change in cross-sector partnership and leadership. Stoke Creates, incorporated as a Community Interest Company (CIC) in 2021, reinforces a horizontal leadership mechanism to

⁶ Cultural Compacts emerged in 2018 from the ACE commissioned Cultural Cities Enquiry as an acknowledgement that what was needed was a step-change in cross-sector partnership and leadership.

influence co-creation to make a positive change to regenerative place-making across the city and its region. An Away Day of the Board of Directors, Staff and Associates of Stoke Creates was held on 3rd of February 2023. Taking part in this meeting, it was possible to identify the connections between the different organisations that collaborate to this joint effort and the common aims that move the cultural and creative sector in this area. It was also useful to better understand the recent local history, strongly linked to the failure in the competition for the City of Culture in 2021, and the consequent reflections made, and challenges faced. The observation was carried out using detailed fieldnotes and photographs – of the whiteboard and sticky notes – taken during the participatory brainstorming sessions of the away day, which enriched the understanding of the dynamic interactions and collaborative spirit that characterised the event.

Lastly, the research included semi-structured interviews with the consortium partners (Table 1). For a comprehensive understanding, we invited both current and past consortium members to participate in the research. Indeed, the consortium is led by the New Vic Theatre, with a partnership that has evolved over time. Some organisations, such as B Arts and Brighter Future, involved in the first phase, 2012-2016, are no longer consortium partners. Current consortium partners are Partners in Creative Learning, 6Towns Radio, SU, Newcastle BID, Go Kidsgrove, and KU. Five partners out of nine participated in the study. However, the total number of Key Interviewees (KI) was six, as the sixth interviewee, a former Appetite builder, was also part of B Arts, already represented among the five interviewed partners.

Table 1. Interviews

Partner	Role	Date	Length	Modality
KI-1 Appetite	Director	26/05/2023	1 h 16 m	In person
KI-2 Keele University	Development Manager for Arts & Public Engagement	05/06/2023	46 m	In person
KI-3 B Arts (Beavers Arts Ltd)	Artistic and Executive Director	06/06/2023	1 h 32 m	In person
KI-4 B Arts (Beavers Arts Ltd) / Appetite	Creative Producer at B Arts and Appetite Builder (2013-2016)	07/06/2023	1 h 9 m	In person
KI-5 Staffordshire University	Associate Professor (of Community and Civic Engagement)	12/06/2023	1 h 10 m	In person
KI-6 GoKidsgrove	Volunteer coordination	14/06/2023	1 h 5 m	Online

The interviews were conducted in English between May 2023 and June 2023 and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 32 minutes. They were held in person, with one exception online, and the audio was recorded, transcribed, and analysed manually.

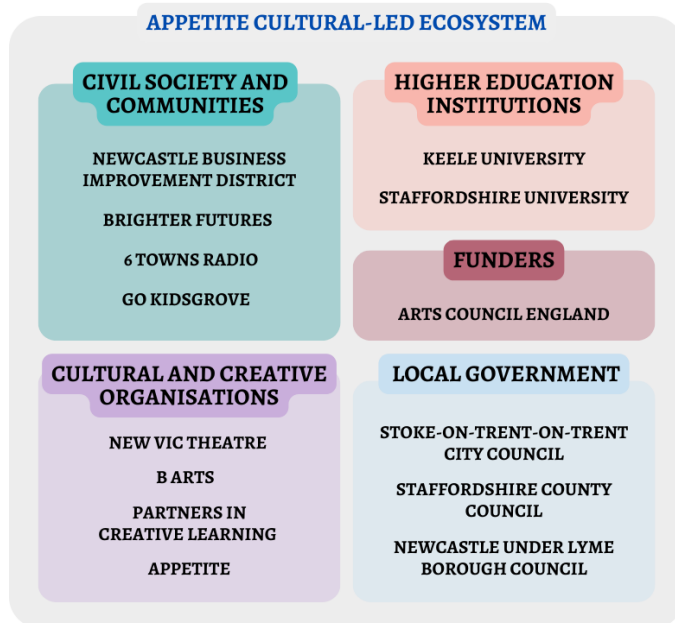
The interviews aimed to investigate the following five aspects:

- *General Perception of Appetite*: All respondents were asked to describe their perception of the work done in the ten years of activity and to describe it by choosing only three adjectives.
- *The role and impacts of Participatory Design*: We explored interviewees' understanding of participatory design and its pros and cons in the Appetite project. Participants were asked about short-term and long-term effects on communities and consortium members, and whether their organisation had used a participatory approach before Appetite.
- *The role and impacts of Participatory Evaluation*: We first clarified each respondent's idea of participatory evaluation and discussed its pros and cons. Then we explored its short- and long-term effects on communities and consortium members. Finally, we asked whether their organisation had used participatory evaluation before.
- *The role of the Universities within the consortium*: Considering the partnership with SU, since 2013, and KU, since 2019, the intention was to deepen the perception of this collaboration by the other partners.
- *CPP evaluation compared with other ACE evaluation approaches*: This aspect was not explored with all respondents, due to its specificity.

5. Research results

Field research has returned the image of a context populated by different actors from different areas of society. As already stated, in agreement with Borin and Donato's findings, the cultural ecosystem described in this paper falls within the definition of a "culture-led" ecosystem, in which cultural organisations can play a leading role in change processes (Borin & Donato, 2022, p. 29). The current ecosystem includes citizens and communities as "active partners of cultural organisations in steering an emerging culture-led environment", and no longer "simply stakeholders of the cultural ecosystem" (Borin & Donato, 2022, p. 27). Thus, this research outlines a cultural-led ecosystem that includes, as shown in Fig. 3, a) Cultural and Creative Organisations; b) Civil Society and Communities; c) Higher Education Institutions; d) Local Government; e) Funders. In this scenario, two key events were the recent history of the area: Appetite's project and the bid for the UK City of Culture. This second moment represented a key turning point that consolidated the cooperation between diverse local actors and left a cohesive momentum, which survived failure and was still traceable.

Fig. 3 Overview of the proposed Appetite Cultural-led Ecosystem



Source: own elaboration

For clarity, the interview results presented and discussed below were organised by topic, as presented in the methodology section.

5.1 General perception of Appetite

Interviews showed a positive overall perception of the programme, both in terms of benefits for the local context and in relation to the results established and achieved by the project itself. Indeed, the work done by Appetite was described as: a) innovative and transformative (KI-2; KI-3; KI-5; KI-6); b) engaging and accessible (KI-2; KI-1); c) entertaining and spectacular (KI-4; KI-6).

All interviewees identified the primary goal of the programme, namely, to encourage greater participation in arts and culture through a community-focused and place-based approach. One respondent advanced a critical perspective on the national narrative, suggesting that the lack of cultural engagement was due to systemic disinvestment rather than disinterest from the people (KI-3), reframing the issue.

Among the limitations that emerged, was the impossibility of covering the entire area with the same success (KI-1). Moreover, the Taster Menu was a source of friction during the initial phase of the project, mostly related to the co-creation level to adopt (KI-4). One of the most complex con-

cerns raised by an interviewee concerned the exploitative and “extractive” nature of the partnership relationship (KI-3). The issue was explained by reporting the episode when one of the local actors, already engaged in co-creative practices, identified a community need and brought it back to Appetite; this latter took charge of the issue and did not consider the possibility of responding to that need by collaborating with the partner who had reported it. The relationship established was perceived as not good and has led to a break within the first configuration of the consortium. The resulting scenario was defined by the respondent as a “pots of plants” approach, in contrast to their personal “forest” approach (KI-3). The metaphor wanted to describe how the use of the funds, which arrived in the area thanks to CPP, resembled the practice of beautifying the avenues with some pots of plants. These activities were not rooted in the area; they were self-sufficient, thanks to national support, so they were not searching for a mutual exchange with the local context to guarantee their long-term sustainability. Conversely, the image of the forest wanted to convey the multifaceted and living ecosystem structure of exchanges, contamination, and mutual support that should characterise the local sector, according to the interviewee.

To conclude, the findings showed that Appetite was perceived as innovative, transformative and highly beneficial in promoting cultural engagement through a community-focused approach. However, challenges and issues were highlighted, such as uneven success across areas, initial tensions in co-creation practices and concerns about the ability to develop integrated and sustainable partnerships.

5.2 The role and impacts of participatory design

The interviewees shared a general understanding of what participatory design meant and how it was applied to Appetite. However, it was possible to highlight the difficulty in separating the design phase from the evaluation phase. The two moments were perceived as a whole and often interchanged with each other, and so were the different tools and approaches applied to each one.

This section presents the perceived positive and negative aspects of participatory design, followed by the effects on communities and partners.

A positive factor was the sense of ownership developed by the people involved (both consortium partners and communities), and the consequent greater inclination to actively engage in the project (KI-1; KI-2), whose participatory design has been described as “very inclusive” (KI-6). However, at the same time, participatory processes can never reach the entire community, leading to the risk of making someone feel excluded and losing trust (KI-1; KI-2; KI-6). Among the downsides was mentioned also the

greater expenditure of economic, human, and temporal resources (KI-4) poured into a programme from the delivery neither easy nor fast (KI-5). Indeed, according to one interviewee, in the first three years, the programme has been characterised by a large investment, which allowed to cover the expenses for unprecedented research and the involvement of participants in co-creative practices, leading to a great understanding of community's needs (KI-4). The interviewee recalled that "luxurious" moment, rich in possibilities, as unusual compared to typical working conditions characterised by scarce resources (KI-4). However, the consequent challenge was how to make that structure sustainable in the long term and maintain that level of quality even after the end of the project in the absence of resources.

Partners whose work was already based on co-creative practices have felt a kind of divergence in the initial phase setting. As mentioned above, the choice of the Taster Menu has been perceived as a deviation from the community-driven approach, and this friction has determined a first divergence between consortium members. From another point of view (KI-5), the Taster Menu, despite initial hesitation, was subsequently acknowledged as the optimal solution.

According to one respondent, the longevity of the programme was crucial to creating long-term effects on participants (KI-2).

Considering the effects on communities, the short-term effects were related to: a) the creation of a new mental openness towards "all the different types of art's experiences that are out there" (KI-2); b) a shared sense of appreciation, belonging, and empowerment (KI-1; KI-4). Interviewees also highlighted several long-term impacts on communities, noting a growing sense of ownership, belonging, and empowerment together with behavioural changes and increased confidence among residents (KI-1). In addition, locals have gained confidence in their area's ability to host excellent art forms and now "expect to see more of them in the future" (KI-6).

Subsequently, the effects of the programme on consortium members were discussed. According to one interviewee, the consortium structure implemented the confidence of some smaller partners, who felt equally involved in the dialogue and as peers from the very beginning. It was shared that the programme had allowed expanding horizons, thanks to the mutual exchange of knowledge between the various members of the consortium, leading to a consequent general growth (KI-1; KI-2; KI-5; KI-6). In the case of SU, for example, the application of Get Talking in such a large project made it possible to understand the possible limitations of the tool and how to improve it (KI-5).

One respondent reported that because of Appetite's experience, which was not entirely satisfactory for them, they decided to create a new consortium independently. When describing this effect, the respondent said it was an "unintended consequence" that shaped the future of the organisa-

tion (KI-3).

Finally, one respondent reported how working as an Appetite builder provided an in-depth understanding of the needs of the area and its communities. Although it was a personal experience not entirely satisfactory, the interviewee claimed to have learned “a huge amount very quickly”, and to have transferred this learning and competence into individual practice (KI-4).

In conclusion, the participatory design of Appetite has fostered a strong sense of ownership and involvement among community members and consortium partners, contributing to long-term impacts such as empowerment, increased confidence and behavioural changes in the community. However, several challenges were also identified, including a) the difficulty of providing initial support for practices that require resources; b) the challenge of reaching all members of the community inclusively; and c) the challenge of aligning partners’ different expectations. In conclusion, the longevity of the programme and the mutual exchange between members of the consortium were instrumental in promoting growth and learning. Indeed, some partners even adapted their practices and created new initiatives based on their experiences.

5.3 The role and impacts of participatory evaluation

The topic of participatory evaluation needs a brief reminder of how evaluation has evolved within the project. Appetite first started with a strongly qualitative co-created evaluation, which characterised the first three years of the project. As mentioned in the research context, this evaluation failed to meet the demands of large numbers of quantitative data requested by ACE, necessitating a change towards more quantitative data collection.

Among the six respondents, only one respondent (affiliated to a new consortium member) was unable to give an immediate definition of participatory evaluation and requested further clarification on the question. When recalling this first phase of the evaluation, one of the respondents pointed out that it was a sort of victory to see for the first time legitimised that type of evaluation, which they, as an organisation, had “always wanted to do”, and had always done (KI-3). Another said it was nice to see the “creative outcomes” of the evaluation (KI-4). Moreover, it emerged also a perception of the participatory tool as a means of redistribution of power, which moved from a pyramidal configuration to a circular one; a change that was possible only if the tool was used genuinely and not tokenistically (KI-3).

Another interviewee noted that the participatory approach to such a large-scale programme risks disappointing participants and failing to meet their expectations. One of the early events illustrates this tension: the local population expressed a desire to self-create artworks, but this request from

ACE was rejected, as the programme was not conceived as a participatory art initiative but as an audience engagement programme. This response led to a significant loss of public trust and damaged the credibility of the programme, reinforcing the perception that participation was merely tokenistic (KI-5).

In brief, the advantages of participatory evaluation, as perceived by the sample, were its accessibility and capacity to engage hard-to-reach groups, foster trust and encourage participation in evaluation (KI-1; KI-2; KI-6). It was “quick” and “fun” and stimulated contributions, overcoming participants’ mistrust by integrating evaluation into the creative process (KI-1; KI-4; KI-6). It encouraged listening, open dialogue, critical thinking, and active engagement (KI-1; KI-2; KI-4; KI-6) and facilitated a city-wide conversation about the arts (KI-5). Furthermore, it was deemed suitable for longitudinal studies (KI-3).

The interviewees identified several potential weaknesses in participatory evaluation. These included the risk of not obtaining sufficient data and not gathering demographic information (KI-1), the possibility of the process being perceived as “tokenistic” (KI-5), and the overwhelming sense of responsibility and accountability on the part of evaluators towards communities (KI-5). It demanded considerable financial, temporal, and human resources (KI-1; KI-2; KI-4). Furthermore, some initial creative tools were perceived as “childlike” and this could alienate participants from the evaluation or diminish its credibility (KI-5). However, this risk was mitigated by the involvement of professional artists (KI-5). Yet, when participatory evaluation involved an artistic product, it had to be in line with the spirit of the event, thereby intensifying the workload (KI-1).

Regarding the impact of the participatory assessment on the members of the consortium and communities, one of the respondents had recently had a meeting with the trainer of the Appetite builders, who stated that one of the builders still used what learned during that training (KI-1). The same respondent also knew that other partners treasured and still used some of the methods learned and implemented during the project. This idea was confirmed by two other interviewees (KI-3; KI-4).

The effects of participatory evaluation on communities and partners were mostly perceived as positive and useful “in building critical thinking in the community”, and “better social connections” (KI-1).

From the point of view of the internal management of the organisation, the adoption of these tools then led Appetite to always look for a way to collect that kind of knowledge from participants and partners and consequently incorporate it into the mechanism of continuous improvement (KI-1). One of the partners said they benefited from the evaluation done by Appetite to better understand the local context and “implement their own practice” (KI-4).

Finally, one interviewee emphasised how the existence of Appetite led to a strong awareness in the area and how, together with the presence of BCB⁷, it made the subsequent competition for the City of Culture possible. The respondent pointed out that “having those things” demonstrated that the “city could deliver large-scale programmes” and that, locally, there were “tried and tested tools in terms of engaging communities in conversations about culture” (KI-3).

In conclusion, the results of this section demonstrated that participatory assessment within Appetite has yielded considerable benefits, including a) the promotion of trust; b) the encouragement of participation; c) the development of critical thinking; and d) the fostering of social connections within the community. This approach has been demonstrated to be accessible and engaging, integrating evaluation into the creative process and supporting continuous improvement. Nevertheless, the potential for tokenism, the necessity for resources and the initial alignment with community expectations highlighted the difficulties of implementing large-scale participatory approaches. Notwithstanding these challenges, implementing participatory evaluation has reinforced the local cultural infrastructure, enhanced the quality of practice among partners, and contributed to the area’s capacity to host large-scale cultural programmes.

5.4 The role of the universities within the consortium

The participation of the two universities was different in terms of both time and content of the partnership (KI-1; KI-5). SU played a key role in the first 6 years of the programme in which it took care of the evaluation and “shaped the methods of consultation with communities” (KI-1). To date, SU’s contribution to the consortium is not as clear as it was in the first six years, and it can be “more fruitful” and engaged (KI-5; KI-6).

On the other hand, KU only joined the consortium in 2019 and aspired, through its work with Appetite, to connect the university (campus, students, and staff) to the city and communities of Newcastle-under-Lyme (KI-1; KI-2). As one interviewee stated, it was about “positioning the university more in a community and a cultural place in people’s minds” (KI-4).

Even if a partner acknowledged that “as an organisation”, they “haven’t particularly benefited from the university’s involvement”, they still thought that it was “invaluable to have them as part of” the consortium (KI-6).

Collaboration with universities brought several positive aspects, such as reaching a wider audience and gaining greater visibility (KI-1; KI-3; KI-5; KI-6), adding “gravitas” and reliability to the project (KI-1; KI-2; KI-3), and creating new opportunities by diversifying funding possibilities (KI-2).

⁷ British Ceramics Biennial.

However, there were also difficulties in engaging with universities, such as the complexity of interacting with such large organisations and their agendas. Furthermore, there was the risk of the relationship becoming perceived as “extractive” due to a non-cooperative way of working that drives the university and the individual dimension of research and its impact (KI-3).

The findings of this section demonstrated the distinct contributions of the two universities involved in Appetite. SU assumed a pivotal role in developing evaluation and consultation methods during the initial stages of the programme, whereas KU joined at a later stage and has concentrated its efforts on fostering connections between the university and the local community. Collaboration with universities has resulted in notable benefits, including enhanced visibility, credibility, and diversified funding opportunities. Nevertheless, the difficulties of aligning with the agendas of larger institutions and the risk of perceived extractive relationships demonstrated the complexities inherent in university partnerships. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the involvement of academic institutions was considered a vital asset for the consortium.

5.5 CPP evaluation compared with other ACE evaluation approaches

Due to its specificity, this aspect was investigated with a limited number of respondents. Consortium members from the early days showed greater awareness around evaluation requirements from ACE, whereas newer Appetite partners lacked this understanding. The ACE’s demand for extensive quantitative data was perceived as challenging for the consortium (KI-1).

Additionally, learning on participatory practices, produced within CPP, was shared by ACE only between CPP projects and not with the whole sector or with NPOs (KI-3).

A significant limitation was linked to the financing structure: Appetite was part of a funding plan for audience development, and this made it impossible to pursue some of the lines that emerged from the wishes of the community, such as actively engaging in the arts, because CPP was not a participatory arts development programme (KI-3; KI-5). This division in the funding scheme was functional and necessary, but the resultant obstacle was not easy to communicate to participants and generated a loss of hard-won trust.

One interviewee affirmed that CPP ended up “creating clones”, as ACE, instead of consulting the participatory knowledge already consolidated in previous experiences, preferred to build an audience development programme from scratch, leading to redundancy in many areas (KI-3).

The 10-year consistency of the three core evaluation questions⁸ was regarded as a positive aspect, as it has facilitated the continuity of the work and enabled the data to be comparable over time (KI-3; KI-5).

Finally, comparing the CPP evaluation with the one required for the NPOs, the perception was that the attention given to the qualitative dimension of CPP projects was then absent in the NPO assessment. According to one interviewee, that kind of conversation should also happen around the work of NPOs (KI-3).

A final reflection about the new ACE's strategy, Let's Create, has been made by one of the interviewees, regarding the strong focus on "co-creation and working with people who've been traditionally excluded and not represented in the arts". The respondent argued that, despite this attention, ACE is still monitoring and evaluating with a kind of "one-size-fits-all" approach, just looking at tickets, reservations, and numbers; then, the interviewee added how strange it was that they did not realise the contradiction that this evaluation created with the mission of the strategy (KI-4).

This concluding section of the results elucidates the principal challenges and opportunities inherent in comparing CPP evaluation with other ACE evaluation approaches. While the consistency of the ten-year CPP evaluation questions was commended for facilitating continuity and comparability, the demand for extensive quantitative data and the disconnection between funding structures and community aspirations were identified as significant challenges. Furthermore, the lack of wider dissemination of participatory knowledge beyond CPP projects and the perception of redundancy in ACE's audience development programme were identified as additional limitations. In addition, the qualitative focus used in CPP evaluations is not found in NPOs' evaluations, suggesting a lack of opportunity for wider sectoral learning. These insights underscored the necessity for ACE to align its assessment methodologies more closely with its mission, as reflected in the Let's Create strategy, in order to prevent contradictions between its objectives and monitoring practices.

6. Discussion

The research results show a rich and interconnected cultural-led ecosystem that certainly places Appetite among its cornerstones as one of the

⁸ The ACE's general evaluation of the national CPP programme was guided by three core questions, namely: 1) Are more people from less committed places experiencing and being inspired by the arts through CPP? 2) To what extent has the aspiration of CPP for excellence in the arts and excellence in community engagement been achieved? 3) Which approaches to involvement, inspiration and excellence have been successful?

earliest learning initiatives into participatory approaches for content production and evaluation.

In the next section, following our research questions, we return to what emerged on good practices, challenges, and impacts generated by the programme, classifying this information according to the different spheres of the previously presented cultural-led ecosystem. Indeed, Appetite has had a demonstrable influence on various sections of society, including a) Creative and Cultural Organisations; b) Civil Society and Communities; and c) Higher Education Institutions, Funders and Local Government.

6.1 Creative and Cultural Partners

The programme has benefited partners and provided a step change in confidence in embedding participatory approaches in various processes for cultural initiatives. Appetite consortium obtained knowledge and competence in using participatory approaches. This learning would have been unattainable without the CPP extraordinary investment.

As Gratton and Reynolds (2022) already pointed out, the interviews also showed challenges in using Get Talking for Appetite. First, the highly creative and qualitative nature of the method was unsuitable to meet the demands of a large sample of data desired by ACE. Secondly, evaluating many activities in a short time required a huge commitment from the people involved, very often volunteers who felt subjected to a lot of stress. Thirdly, the small community research team could not engage at all stages of the evaluation, and ended up mostly participating in the data collection, which is the listening phase of Get Talking. Consequently, because of these difficulties, the method was first implemented and adapted in the second and third years and finally replaced in subsequent evaluations.

From the interviews, it emerges that the co-created approach, first rooted in Appetite, was seen to lose its central role and was consequently perceived to be adopted as a philosophy rather than as an operational paradigm. The risks associated with adopting participatory processes are not limited to the tensions when needing to respond to requests of funders. Indeed, the controversy around the Taster Menu illustrates the inherent complexity and delicacy of aligning the diverse perspectives of consortium members and the funder on the concept of co-creation and its practical implementation. There is the risk of projecting a potentially controversial image of the project, unfaithful to professed principles and tokenistic in its use of participation, reduced to a buzzword. The already present and deep-rooted knowledge about the use of co-creative practices made local actors, involved in the consortium, very competent and raised their expectations for participating in the project. This might have led to a naturally occurring divergence and a subsequent split that can be perceived as a weakness

of Appetite or, alternatively, as a source for evidencing the polyphony of needs and desires generated in the area.

However, in the competitive context created, Appetite is seen as a two-faced Janus. On the one hand, its beneficial contribution to the area is undisputed and acknowledged, while on the other, its limits in terms of impact on the ecosystem are under the spotlight. The programme is sometimes perceived as an advantaged competitor in the local context, which benefits from substantial national investment to deliver a product whose vision is close to other cultural actors in the region, often competing for the same central funding.

This polarisation is triggered by the mechanism of the extraordinary funding programme, which leads to intense competition in a context that was not only suffering from prolonged structural disinvestment but also labelled as a low cultural engagement area according to the “deficit model” (Miles & Gibson, 2016, p. 151). This context would, perhaps, benefit more from widespread reinvestment rather than a massive flow of funds focused on a single actor. Undoubtedly, in this framework, Appetite proves to be a great showcase for the area, which, through the great lens of CPP, can put in place a great project and can rehabilitate itself as a place of culture and creativity, to gain new visibility in the national landscape.

Finally, a reflection on the approach to the evaluation emerges from the study. The ability to build a conversation through results, without limiting it to mere numerical data, seems to be the wish of all. The consortium members and the NPOs interviewed liked a way of working that involves starting with a dialogue with ACE, focusing on measuring long-term changes and making them feel part of a sector that compares and grows together, caring for the qualitative as well as the quantitative.

6.2 Civil Society and Communities

The following reflection on Communities and Civil Society is limited in scope as it is based solely on the present research, which did not focus on this aspect. However, it is important to note that this perspective should be thoroughly studied in the future.

From the point of view of consortium members, it emerges that the application of participatory tools, both for design and evaluation, has led to a good level of co-creation since they allowed to reach and engage groups otherwise cut off, to create an equal and collaborative atmosphere, and to build a shared place-based project with the communities involved. The role of Appetite builders emerges as fundamental in bridging cultural organisations and communities. They fulfilled a mediating role (Bonet & Négrier, 2018), facilitating the reporting of the cultural aspirations of the commu-

nities and their actualisation, thanks to Appetite, and fostering a process of cultural democracy. It is recognised that participatory evaluation has the potential to be a tool of democracy, able to collect feedback from all, tearing down access barriers that are embedded in other tools, such as surveys or formal evaluation. Increased ownership and a renewed sense of belonging and identity are among the benefits triggered by the participatory processes used. However, participatory tools have their limitations, as they can only involve a small number of people to be sustainable, which creates a risk of excluding a part of society and generating disappointment. Transparent protocols and clear communication processes are useful tools to mitigate this risk. Nonetheless, they cannot guarantee the avoidance of a tokenistic perception of participation.

6.3 Higher Education Institutions, Funders and Local Government

That Appetite has made an impact on the perceptions of place is evident in the reflections made on the City of Culture competition (2021), which stressed that having had the experience of Appetite, alongside the British Ceramics Biennial (BCB), has provided immense credibility to the area, without which competing for City of Culture would not have been possible. Thus, Appetite represented a step change in the adoption of and the normalisation for embedding participatory approaches, also raising expectations of partners, cultural actors, civil society, and anchor institutions such as universities, as well as, to a certain extent, local government.

Due to this increasing confidence in embedding and demanding participatory, culturally oriented place-based arts initiatives, large-scale partnerships that addressed these ways of working emerged.

In 2019, a large partnership consortium emerged to secure Arts-Council funding as its largest senior leadership programme for cultural actors focusing on placemaking and co-creation. Create Place, the co-creation and placemaking leadership programme was led by SU and was run by a large project consortium of 16 partners, that included all NPOs of both Stoke-on-Trent and Cheshire East at the time, the city councils, chambers and both Universities, as well as Appetite (Stoke-on-Trent region) and Spare Parts (Cheshire region) as two non-constituted participatory-oriented initiatives. This leadership programme ran for three years, supporting another step change in confidence, sharing knowledge and skills for cultural leaders desiring to work this way. The leadership programme itself was designed with an underpinning concept that was aligned to Culture 3.0, that of Boehm's University 3.0 (Boehm, 2022). This in turn applied co-creation of knowledge and learning in its central design ethos.

In 2020, various partners came together to form a Cultural Compact, finally being incorporated in 2021 as a CIC (Community Interest Compa-

ny), with almost the same partners as the Create Place leadership forum or the City of Culture bid consortium, now adding the YMCA and the Local Cultural Education Partnership to the group. Thus, the Cultural Compact had all three pillars of ACE-supported place-based initiatives (CPP, LCEP, Cultural Compact) represented, in addition to local authority representatives, NPOs, chambers and universities. Stoke Creates quickly became the major consortium-based entity to be given the confidence to handle large-scale, levelling up investments that individual organisations would have more difficulties in applying for. By 2023, it had successfully secured ca £2 Million of investment, working with many smaller cultural organisations in the region.

In October 2023, the city, led by Stoke Creates, successfully submitted to become World Craft City, an initiative seen as the next internationally strategic, city-wide cultural act to make its confident mark on the world.

This trajectory of “leaning into” Stoke-on-Trent’s strength of participatory, co-creative and co-production practices started long before Appetite emerged on the streets of the 6 towns of Stoke-on-Trent, but it demonstrably signified a step change in awareness of what participatory processes could do for the city’s arts-led re-envisioning of this place. Other organisations, not just cultural ones, were also adopting rigorous participatory models.

Both universities in the area, KU and SU, had their own trajectories that were given additional buoyancy through the Appetite programmes.

KU established its Community Animation and Social Innovation Centre (CASIC) in 2014, in collaboration with the New Vic Theatre, the organisation that hosted and led the initiation of the Appetite programme. The centre developed its own unique methodology of knowledge co-production, branded Cultural Animation⁹. Its legacy lives on in its current Co-Creato Centre¹⁰, continuing where CASIC left off in 2021/22. Along the way, these initiatives also fed into Keele Deal Culture (2019), a unique expression of the university’s commitment to culture-led, place-based strategies as part of Keele’s civic university mission.

SU has had a long history of socially engaged practice and projects. The CCU had been working in this area since ca. 2005, with the Get Talking method being developed in a project in Shelton and continued to be applied by Quality Streets in 2010. It became a go-to method for community researchers, with external organisations commissioning the CCU to evaluate many of their projects, such as, for instance, First Art of Creative Black Country in the first 10 years of Get Talking’s development. And also, the ArtCity project mentioned earlier, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, used Get Talking as part of its methods. The CCU unit closed in 2018,

⁹<https://www.keele.ac.uk/casic/#>

¹⁰<https://www.keele.ac.uk/cocreate/>

but the main actors spread those methods throughout the university, with Gratton taking the lead in developing the University's Civic University Strategy by connecting it to a Connected Communities Framework¹¹.

Beyond this, the demonstrability of using participatory processes in both the design, delivery and evaluation has had a bidirectional influence on the Arts Council ways of supporting cultural activity itself. The learning made in the various CPP programmes, including Appetite, allowed ACE to much more confidently understand how co-creative and participatory elements in a cultural policy are demonstrably linked to positive impact and can achieve quality at the same time (Blackman, 2022).

Co-creation, participatory ways of working, Culture 3.0 conceptualisations of cultural engagement are here to stay, and its working practices include the dimensions of ideation, curation, content production, delivery, research, and evaluation. The Appetite programme, together with its engagement in participatory approaches, contributed significantly to embedding these kinds of approaches in the region, which is now nationally increasingly known for its socially engaging cultural ecosystem.

7. Conclusions

The study presents some limitations. Firstly, not all consortium partners participated in the study, potentially influencing the comprehensiveness of the findings. Moreover, the interested communities have not been the subject of the study, while their points of view deserve a proper deepening.

Despite these limitations, the implications drawn from the study are noteworthy. The research highlights the benefits and risks of applying participatory tools to large-scale programmes, with consequent managerial implications. In particular, the research examined the point of view of heterogeneous governance, contributing to a wider understanding of the potential impact of participatory processes.

Undoubtedly, exploring community perspectives and a multiple-case analysis can enhance our knowledge of community-based participatory research within CPP. Moreover, the role of universities in contributing to participatory approaches merits further investigation to strengthen the basis for future collaborative efforts.

¹¹ <https://blogs.staffs.ac.uk/connections/connected-communities-at-staffordshire-university/>

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