



# Coventry Creates 2: the impact of artist-researcher collaboration in Coventry UK City of Culture

**WARWICK**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

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# 30 PIECES OF RESEARCH



# 30 CREATIVE RESPONSES



# 1 DIGITAL EXHIBITION

# Introduction to Coventry Creates 2020 and 2021

In December 2017, Coventry was announced as the UK City of Culture 2021. The University of Warwick and Coventry University were Principal Partners in the City of Culture project, with both universities engaged in the ongoing development of the regional cultural sector. Following the announcement of Coventry’s success, the two universities further strengthened their partnership and their connections with the City and its communities, through joint work programmes around monitoring and evaluation and research; a University Partnership group; and a Memorandum of Understanding to underpin long-term collaboration. Seed funding of projects by the University Partnership between 2017 and 2021 has seen researchers collaborating across the two institutions, working with a diverse range of organisations and communities, alongside the universities’ own individual programmes of research.<sup>1</sup> Led by Warwick, both universities are also working in partnership with the City of Culture Trust on the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of City of Culture, measuring this against a clear theory of change.<sup>2</sup>

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During the spring of 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in national and international restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, the University Partnership recognised that research could not go ahead in the usual way. They also recognised that the cultural industries faced widespread venue closures, job and contract losses, along with funding withdrawal. In response to the foreseen critical failure in the cultural industries, the University Partnership designed and funded an innovative project that could support artists local to the Coventry area by commissioning them to work with researchers, bringing new perspectives and new audiences to a variety of academic work.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the first Coventry Creates programme was created.

After a city-wide call out that attracted applications from over 100 artists, Coventry Creates 2020 paired Coventry-based artists with researchers from the two universities to create collaborative art and research projects. Senior academics, arts sector colleagues, administrators and a representative from the City of Culture Trust all worked together in this commissioning process. In total, 18 projects were funded as part of the first iteration of the programme. While many applications came from individuals who were subsequently paired with an artist or researcher, some applied as an artist-researcher pair, allowing existing working relationships to continue through this funding call. The distinction between artist and researcher in Coventry Creates can be seen in the basis on which participants applied to take part in the programme: researchers were all based at the University of Warwick or Coventry University, and artists were based in Coventry. For most participants there was a clear demarcation of roles, but for others the relationship was different and the artist-researcher distinction was more fluid. For example, in *The Artist and the Prof*, participants Heaven Crawley and Laura Nyahuye worked together to create art-research which explicitly discussed their roles.

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1 Warwick’s City of Culture funded projects can be found at <https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/our-research>

2 Details on this work can be found at <https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/monitoring/>

3 The Coventry Creates project was underpinned by the strength of the University Partnership and a wider team comprised of academics and professional services staff from both universities, and a representative from the City of Culture Trust and from Warwick Arts Centre. As an innovative new venture established and operating within a matter of weeks, it represented a remarkable feat of cooperation. We would especially like to acknowledge the support of India Holme, Research and Impact Development Manager (Regional) at the University of Warwick. India played a key role in the design and administration of Coventry Creates and in taking forward the findings from this impact evaluation to develop further training.

Following the success of Coventry Creates 2020, Arts Council England awarded funding for a second round of Coventry Creates projects. The Coventry Creates 2021 call built on the learning gained during the initial iteration to develop enhanced opportunities for relationship development and networking; more extensive audience engagement; and skills training for participating artists. This second iteration of the programme followed the same process of recruitment and selection of researchers and artists, resulting in the funding of a further 12 projects.

The project outputs for both iterations of Coventry Creates are housed in a digital exhibition, launched in September 2020: <https://coventrycreates.co.uk/>. This exhibition space, designed by Peter & Paul and built by Stuart Chaffe, sits outside of university webpages, acting as a neutral site for university researchers and Coventry Creates participants to display their work. The digital exhibition was maintained online throughout Coventry's year of culture, and projects created as part of the second iteration, Coventry Creates 2021, were added to the digital exhibition website in December 2021.

Coventry Creates has had an impact beyond the 30 commissions funded and exhibited. In the development of their work, artists worked with a range of other people, bringing the total of regional artists and creatives involved in Coventry Creates to 75. Researchers also collaborated with colleagues, with 44 researchers involved in the 30 projects. In addition to the digital exhibition that has so far attracted audience views of over 20,000, Coventry Creates commissions formed part of public festivals, screenings, exhibitions and talks within and outside the universities.<sup>4</sup> Artists have been hired to deliver workshops and events, with the value of additional work being in excess of £100,000.

As well as providing new modes and sources of work for local artists, Coventry Creates was designed as a way of increasing the impact of academic research through new and creative interpretations, and by bringing it to new audiences. In order to assess how well this had worked, Professor Jacqueline Hodgson was awarded an ESRC Impact Acceleration Account grant to fund an evaluation of the first Coventry Creates programme in 2020. The results of the analysis carried out were published as a Report that helped inform the bid for funding for Coventry Creates 2021.<sup>5</sup> This document extends the evaluation to include the second programme of commissions, Coventry Creates 2021. A round table event involving artists and researchers was held after the first Coventry Creates, resulting in the production of a reflective guide to support effective future researcher-artist collaborations<sup>6</sup>. Emily Dunford was appointed as researcher on the project as her PhD explores the nature of Coventry City of Culture, complementing Professor Hodgson's social science expertise and her role as University of Warwick lead on City of Culture research. To assess how the artist-researcher collaboration impacted the work of Coventry Creates participants, and how both universities acted at speed to operationalise this novel project, interviews with participants, those commissioning the work, and administrators were carried out from August 2020 - March 2021. Following the second round of the programme, Ragini Khurana, an urban sociology doctoral student, was appointed to carry out additional research. A further seven participants were interviewed regarding their experiences, using the same questions as those used during the initial evaluation. The process of semi-structured interviews was chosen as a methodology in order to provide freedom for interviewees to share their experiences in response to open questions. Following the interviews, a thematic analysis was undertaken to analyse the responses. Feedback forms were also gathered from all artists and all researchers, providing additional insights into participants' experiences of Coventry Creates 2021.

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4 For example, as part of the University of Warwick Resonate Festival; the Coventry Creates showcase and celebration; and Warwick's new Faculty of Arts building launch - Fab Fest. Artists are also involved in a new set of University of Warwick Commissions focused on regional sustainability: Getting Creative with Sustainability

5 Emily Dunford and Jacqueline S. Hodgson (2021) "Coventry Creates: Developing impact through artists-researcher collaboration". The Report can be found at: [https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/artists-researchers/coventry-creates/evaluation/coventry\\_creates\\_evaluation\\_18\\_june\\_2021.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/artists-researchers/coventry-creates/evaluation/coventry_creates_evaluation_18_june_2021.pdf)

6 Emily Dunford and Jacqueline S. Hodgson (2021) "Artist-Researcher Collaborations with Coventry Creates: sharing knowledge and inspiring innovation" This guide may be found at: [https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/artists-researchers/coventry-creates-knowledge-sharing/edit-contents/94663\\_artist-researcher\\_collaborations.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/artists-researchers/coventry-creates-knowledge-sharing/edit-contents/94663_artist-researcher_collaborations.pdf)

All participants in the first iteration of Coventry Creates were invited to take part in two 30-minute interviews, one between the conclusion of the Coventry Creates project and the launch of the digital exhibition, and one after the launch of the digital exhibition. The first round of interviews was concerned with topics including: participants' experiences of Coventry Creates, skills built during their participation in the programme, challenges and successes, and engagement with research/art networks and audiences.

For those who had participated in the first round of interviews, topics in the second round of interview questions included: participants' experiences of the digital exhibition, participants' perceptions of their own work following Coventry Creates, networking, and lessons learnt during the programme. Some interviewees only took part in an interview after the digital exhibition had been launched. In these instances, the first-round interview questions were used alongside additional questions about the digital exhibition.

Those who had been involved in the design and administration of the programme were invited to participate in one 30-minute interview. Topics discussed during these interviews included: the participant's experience of the Coventry Creates project, challenges associated with the university collaboration and managing the call, lessons learnt during the process, and the participant's perception of skills gained through the collaborative project.

The final set of interviews, carried out in 2022, took place after the launch of the digital exhibition in December 2021 and so participants were interviewed only once.

Overall, interviewees from Coventry Creates 2020 and 2021 expressed a positive sentiment towards Coventry Creates and gave fascinating insights into the impacts that the programme had had on them - from providing new opportunities to present their work, to the development of new skills and practices for artists and researchers, and for many participants, the opportunity to forge their first connections with Coventry City of Culture. Key areas raised by interviewees also included relationship building between Coventry Creates participants, their collaborators and organisations associated with the programme, and the emotional and financial support provided by Coventry Creates during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although conceived of as project that would strengthen the impact of researchers' work through creative interpretations and by bringing it to new audiences, it quickly became clear that impacts were being created in both directions. Artists appreciated the profiling of their work to new audiences in ways that they felt validated not only their own work, but also the contribution of arts and culture more broadly. For their part, researchers gained new insights into the significance of their work and how it might be presented and experienced in unexpected ways. For artists and researchers, working in this collaborative way required them to communicate their work to those outside their sphere of expertise, helping them to reframe their work and the ways in which it was presented. The scheme also provided a seed-funding function for the development of new collaborative projects and continued engagement with university researchers. Several collaborators who began working together during the Coventry Creates programme continued or intended to continue collaborating further; others took on new work with the university or registered for further academic study.





# Skills and Personal Development

## New Approach to Research and Artistic Practices

Many participants used a new approach to working in their Coventry Creates project, collaborating with an artist or researcher for the first time, or applying a novel practice to their project. Most of the researchers interviewed had not previously collaborated with an artist, and many of the artists had not collaborated with a researcher; the mode of working was unique in this respect. There are several factors that might have contributed to the use of new approaches to research or artistic practice during the programme. Both in 2020 and in 2021, Coventry Creates projects took place over a relatively short period which allowed participants to carry out their work in a defined time frame. The collaborative process itself may have encouraged participants to use a new mode of working in order to accommodate the artist or researcher collaborator. In addition, in Coventry Creates 2020, the constraints imposed by Covid-19 restrictions forced participants to approach their projects in unusual ways, with online workshops and video calls a key feature of many participants' processes.

Some participants applied new working techniques such as data collection and analysis methods (e.g., gathering emotional narrative data from workshop attendees), artistic practices (e.g., novel approaches to audio-visual art), and new ways of working with interview or workshop participants (e.g., online performance workshops with newly arrived people in Coventry). In general, participants found that their collaborator supported them to develop their practice and reflect upon the project progress.

*"Her experience and knowledge fuelled the art in different ways than I would do on my own. It allowed it to push and stretch in different ways that I wouldn't have achieved on my own because I don't have the knowledge of how that works, or the right way of engaging those communities or talking about those communities." (Paul O'Donnell, Artist)*

*"It was an iterative process, with the research turning into the artwork and, for us, flipping back into the research thinking." (Victoria Barker, Researcher)*

*"It was really great...It was more collaborative than I was expecting it to be. And it involved a lot more discussion about my work with different people than I'd expected. When I put in the application I had assumed that I'd give a brief to an artist, and then they just produce a response and I hadn't really anticipated how much exchange that there would be in that process" (Naomi Pullin, Researcher)*

Others noted that the process of working to a timetable and in an area that was new to them, challenged them in positive ways.

*"It's stretched me in terms of writing about a topic that wouldn't come naturally...It's helped me to...to collaborate more broadly as well because in this project I collaborated with four other people...it also helped me to, I think, stretch in terms of the previous project being one song and this project being two songs and a monologue." (Verity Pabla, Artist)*

Several participants recognised that their work for Coventry Creates was very similar to their usual practice. Some had previous experience of working as part of an artist-researcher collaboration, while others found that their usual approach to working with a collaborator or client aligned with the requirements of their Coventry Creates project. Here, there were still novel elements of the working process. For example, some researchers found that the short timeframe necessitated a different mode of working to the highly structured, slower pace of their usual academic projects. Other participants noted that they could call upon the expertise of their researcher or artist collaborator to enhance their work; many interviewees commented on the benefit of dialogue with their collaborators for illuminating their practice.



"I felt it was really useful to do practice in this way, in a very short period. So, the quickness of the project allowed for someone to just make decisions and run with it and see what happens, rather than take six months to come up with a project, dissemination plan, who your key stakeholders are, what are the questions to ask, how are you going to ask those questions...Here it was boom, boom, boom. I appreciated that."

*(Rosa Cisneros, Researcher)*

"I come from a strong public health background anyway, so the use of digital and arts I'm very familiar with and present on health issues, but to have somebody that has that expertise to work and bring those disciplines of health, psychology, mental health, and arts and creativity together has been a fusion in some ways."

*(Anne Coufopoulos, Researcher)*

## Technical Skills and more

Through the Coventry Creates project creation process, participants gained a variety of technical skills related to technology, artistic practice, and research methods.

Owing to the projects being carried out remotely for the most part, Coventry Creates encouraged participants to build technical skills relating to working online. Videoconferencing was a key area of technical development, with participants building skills in leading remote meetings, and carrying out workshops and research interviews online. One interviewee was able to develop their live translation skills on the realisation that speakers could be translated for all project participants in real time using the video-conferencing chat function, instead of translations being provided when the speaker had ended their remarks.

Some participants used Coventry Creates as an opportunity to try new primary research software, such as Qualtrics, or a new artistic skill. Participants also learnt about the technical skills applied by their collaborator, with one researcher learning about animation techniques by working with an animator. The constraints of lockdown encouraged innovative approaches to carrying out different types of work and interviews indicate that participants experienced Coventry Creates as a safe and low-risk environment for experimentation. The collaborative nature of the projects also meant that the technical requirements of the artist-researcher collaboration differed from the participants' usual work. For example, one artist created a response to their collaborator's research using new audio-visual software and a novel approach to the material.

**"I made something new that was out of my normal skillset. I had to learn some new stuff to make it, and it worked - which is really cool - and I'm proud of it." (Artist 1)<sup>7</sup>**

However, other participants applied familiar working approaches to their Coventry Creates project, in some cases because the artist-researcher collaboration process was not a new venture for them, but a familiar experience.

Some participants valued the way the project required them to be organised in different ways - learning how to budget for example, or to project manage across different partners.

## Emotion in Research

Researcher participants frequently commented that one of the advantages of working with an artist collaborator on their Coventry Creates project was the emotional element brought to the project by the artist.

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<sup>7</sup> Some interviewees chose to be named. Those who preferred not to be were assigned a number - so Artist 1, 2 3 etc.

Some researchers found that the artist collaborators helped to capture emotional responses to the research. This represented a new area of data collection or research focus, which was valued by researchers as being of significance to the research and how it was understood, or as a unique feature of the Coventry Creates project.

**“We have had emotional responses but not captured them as much – so, people being very angry that they haven’t known about this history before and they feel that they should have been taught this sort of stuff at school, and they shouldn’t have been taught something else, and that type of thing. That’s been incidental, but it’s not stuff we’ve captured as much.” (Sarah Richardson, Researcher)**

Researchers also noted that collaborating with an artist enabled the presentation of research data in an accessible, and sometimes emotive manner. In the *Communication* section, we discuss the development of communication skills through the Coventry Creates collaboration process. Some researchers noted that the involvement of the artist collaborators rendered the project output with a personal, emotional quality. For example, researchers working on a resource developed for carers, the Care Companion, found that the artists enabled the researchers to consider the emotional and sensory aspects of caring during the project. The artists personified the text-based Care Companion through the art, through which this resource to support carers was presented as a caring entity in itself.

**“It was more personalised, which was great, because we wanted it to be personalised for people. It also felt more like a person itself, which was really abstract and different.” (Nicky Thomas, Researcher)**

As part of the *Homeless Monopoly* project, the artist collaborator illustrated the testimony of a project participant who had experience of homelessness. The artist’s illustrations created for Homeless Monopoly weave the complexities of homelessness together into dream-like images. The researcher, and the participant whose testimony had been illustrated, found the artist’s interpretation of the testimony emotionally moving, the illustration being seen as a mechanism through which to reflect on and honour the testimony.

**“There’s a narrative by the person with experience of homelessness, and a very beautiful illustration. The person, whose testimonial it was, was really moved by that artistic rendering of their life...Having that story being given that kind of value and visibility and presence in a very beautiful way was moving for them and, in turn, me.” (Nadine Holdsworth, Researcher).**

In her *Say My Name* project, Jane Bryan appreciated the different way that her work could be expressed through collaboration with the artist Verity Pabla.

**“To be paired with somebody who does do that form of expression, that can resonate so widely and to have her use my material and get across my messages in a way that would be different to the way I would do it, but would have a wider impact and probably a more visceral impact than I was able to achieve – it’s just really positive for me.”**

## **Communication and Translation**

For artists and researchers, communicating with those working outside their professional sphere and areas of expertise had an impact on how they understood and framed their own work. Researchers interviewed commented overwhelmingly that collaborating with an artist had benefits for research communication, particularly with regard to the artist’s ability to present work in an engaging and accessible manner. Artists, those commissioning projects and administrators also agreed that artists could help to translate academic research for a non-academic audience.

"I might have livened up a PowerPoint slide to put some graphics to interpret the data, but [the artist] has taken that another step further entirely and re-worked those questions and presented that back as a creative piece, which I've then used in presentations to other people." (*Victoria Barker, Researcher*)

"I hadn't quite expected there to be so much discussion, for me to have quite so much input...so it took me in a different direction. I think what's been produced has had greater impact for my research and has enabled me to talk about my research in different ways, and probably to a much larger audience. And it's kind of nice to be able to have a really visual and really accessible accompaniment to my work...It's made me ask different sets of questions [about my 17th and 18th century research] to try and appeal to a more modern audience" (*Naomi Pullin, Researcher*)

"One of the music tracks which she calls a liquid drum and bass track...it's going to be used in a Coventry schools project. So that's really exciting. And I think there's not much that we could have offered to teenage people...that would resonate as much as what Verity has been able to offer...probably that kind of age group, they're going to listen to that and understand where it's come from. With my research...I just don't think I've got access to that group without Verity's work. (*Jane Bryan, Researcher*)

Some of the participating researchers developed their skills in specific styles of communication through the Coventry Creates process. Script-writing, writing copy for public-facing webpages and social media, and writing in a personal or emotive manner were all mentioned as having been learnt during the participant's Coventry Creates project. Again, researchers were supported to develop these skills by their artist collaborators.

During the interviews, artists were less likely to comment that their communication skills had developed during the Coventry Creates process. However, some artists noted that discussing their work with someone from outside their discipline helped them to communicate more effectively. Discussions with a researcher collaborator allowed the artists to deepen their understanding of their art and the thought process surrounding the work. One artist found that the process of developing the communication around their work during Coventry Creates helped them to write a PhD research proposal.

"It's always been very good to try to talk about your work to someone who doesn't really speak that language... It is so useful to do that, to be able to communicate much more efficiently about my work. Just the fact of communicating about the work - it's not only communicating because, when you try to communicate, it has an effect on you." (*Lucie Felix, Artist*)

"The process of writing the funding application has helped me to develop the language that I use around my work and develop the links to other things that aren't just within the art world." (*Jo Gane, Artist*)

The digital exhibition platform was also appreciated as a different means of showcasing artists' work.

"There have been new audiences for the music that have been created because it's been quite a different platform...So, university students, staff, for the mapping women suffragettes project...that was distributed to a lot more people involved in history, British history, women's history, women's rights for example. I believe in fact one of the ancestors of the suffragette movement...she heard it, and she sort of retweeted about or tweeted about it. And that was amazing. So that's the kind of person that wouldn't necessarily typically I believe, hear my music." (*Verity Pabla, Artist*)

Working with non-academic collaborators also benefitted researchers. Researchers agreed that engaging in discussions about their work with artists enhanced their ability to communicate research ideas in a language clear to their artist counterpart. This is significant for academic skill development as communicating research to an audience outside of academia is a critical step

for research impact. Some researchers commented that the discussion process facilitated a re-framing and re-thinking of the research.

*"I've become very conscious of trying to use a different language in explaining the research processes in ways which are going to be understood, appreciated in their terms. There's something in the sharing and reformulating and reframing of research which is a skill that I'm honing through these collaborations." (Nadine Holdsworth, Researcher)*

## Confidence

Both participants and administrators reported increased levels of confidence in their work following Coventry Creates.

Some commented that they felt more confident owing to the ongoing dialogue and peer support during their collaboration with their project partner.

*"It gives me confidence, because the problem with artists is we all work very solo, we're very isolated people, and we work on our own. Unless you have those communication perspectives like being able to talk to somebody, you don't have the support." (Sherrie Edgar, Artist)*

The supportive nature and ethos of the Coventry Creates project was also appreciated.

*"Crucially, the environment of support and creative freedom was warmly welcomed. I find traditional film funding lacks this and stifles proceedings with elements of pressure and opinion. I felt nothing negative throughout my experience, only a liberated joy...It finally gave me the license to work with sound, something I've not had the proper opportunity or confidence to explore." (Paul Daly, Artist)*

Others noted that they perceived a greater level of importance in the subjects of their work following the collaboration. In some cases, participants felt that their work had been validated through their participation in Coventry Creates (discussed in *Perception of Validation through Collaboration* below) but, for others, Coventry Creates was an opportunity for reflection on their work. One artist chose to model the adornments she had produced; modelling the pieces was a new experience and one which ultimately formed a deep relationship between the artist and her work.

*"I had this long day of photoshoots, really modelling my work in a different way than I'm normally used to. That, for me, was a great outcome. That day was inspiring and exhausting, but I would put myself forward for modelling my work over and over again. Of course, the photoshoots in the past have been amazing, because I've had great models - they were amazing. But I felt a deep intimate relationship with my pieces when I did it on that day." (Laura Nyahuye, Artist)*

Some participants noted that they, or their collaborators, had gained skills in assertiveness and presenting their ideas confidently through the collaboration process. In many cases, this was augmented by the supportive environment in which the participants were working, with participants learning from their collaborators and forming positive relationships.

*"At the end [the co-researcher] said, "I've done this Instagram thing." I was going, "Great!" She'd gone from being on the periphery to pushing her own stuff. That was really nice." (Researcher 3)*

*"This project has really given me the confidence to just talk in front of an audience without necessarily having prepared or really thought about what I'm going to say. But just having the confidence in my own research that it's interesting enough that people will be able to follow and understand." (Naomi Pullin, Researcher)*

However, a small number of artist participants reported that they had perceived their researcher collaborator to be the project lead and, on reflection, had considered how they would assert their

role as a co-lead during future projects.

*“One of the main things I’ve learned from a lot of the projects I’ve been doing recently: being more assertive as an artist. Having confidence of your own importance in the equation, because I think I was too led by the researcher in this circumstance; kind of mentally thinking of them as the lead or the person in charge.” (Artist 1)*

## Perception of Validation through Collaboration

The perception of art and of artists by the general population was raised by several artist interviewees. This was raised in relation to the artist’s own work, to the City of Culture programme, or to art more broadly.

Several participating artists perceived that their collaboration with a researcher could validate their artistic outputs as valuable or “worthy” for a wide audience. These artists generally commented that they felt that art was not always societally valued, or that their art form had been dismissed in the past.

*“Sometimes, making art because, to people, you’re just making art - they don’t see it as valuable in the same way as if you’re connecting with research and academics and things that are useful and helpful to people’s lives. It kind of validates the art basis to it a bit more, which I quite like. I quite like having that underpinning of an academic focus.” (Artist 1)*

One artist noted that working with a researcher allowed their art form, children’s literature and visual art, to be discussed in a broad forum rather than relegating it away from “adult” art.

*“Things that are aimed at children tend to stay in that range. It’s difficult to interact with artists who do adult things. So, I was surprised to see that a photographer, and a researcher in photography, would actually be interested in children’s books. I was really happy about it. I thought, “Wow!” because, actually, our questions, our themes, were really close.” (Lucie Felix, Artist)*

In general, researchers did not raise the topic of artistic or research validity during their interviews. By contrast, researchers overwhelmingly commented on the valuable skills and impressive talents that the artist collaborators contributed to the Coventry Creates projects. One researcher also felt that, in being chosen to participate in Coventry Creates, her research subject was perceived as valuable by the partner institutions.

*“The collaboration has allowed me to very naturally bring in a research interest, like hip-hop, that sits outside in a marginal space, into the university. The fact that a committee felt that this research, or this dance form, or this practice, was valuable and deserved to be part of this collaboration, was really important. I work with the Roma community, disadvantaged community, flamenco, it’s always these “misfits” of the arts. It was nice that the work has been done, and the advocating for this art form has been done, and now I can play and collaborate. That was really important and, I think, very helpful.” (Rosa Cisneros, Researcher)*

## Career Development

Participation in Coventry Creates aided both artists and researchers in thinking about possibilities for their career development, with regard to relationship building and the focus of future projects. Coventry Creates was perceived by several participating artists as an opportunity for career development, in addition to being a paid commission. One artist, Verity Pabla, who worked with the band The Pips as Executive Producer for a Coventry Creates project, described how participating in the programme could be beneficial to the musicians:

“That might enable them to get more commissions, for example, or some other funding – Arts Council England or PRS [Performing Right Society] Foundation. And there are other more specific music industry things, like they will be able to register the track on PRS to collect any money if the track gets played on radio, etc. There are multiple strands where, as artists, it’s very beneficial.”

Participation in Coventry Creates built the profile of one researcher who had recently started working at Coventry University. Through participating in Coventry Creates, the researcher felt that she had built some “fantastic links” with researchers at Coventry University and the collaborating artists in addition to feeling part of the City of Culture year. Additionally, some participating artists gained further commissions directly as a result of their work for Coventry Creates. Artist Paul Daly described the new opportunities this work had opened up for him.

“I’m weaving Naomi into a previous project of mine that was cut short due to the pandemic. Before landing on the idea of making a film portrait about my father and I, I came up with overly ambitious imagery that have formed into the second part of this previous project. Your opportunity has birthed 1.5 projects!”

Naomi Pullin, a researcher at the University of Warwick, commented that her work was now known much more widely across the university and the profile of Coventry Creates had led to new collaborations, such as a joint screening event in Coventry with Professor Jackie Hodgson’s ‘Emerging from Lockdown’ project.<sup>8</sup> It had also helped her to develop the impact of her work.

“I guess one of the really important things that I didn’t mention is that a lot of funding that I will be applying for in future, to finish writing my book, often they do expect an element of impact as part of it, and I think just being able to say that I’ve done this and that there’s something really tangible that’s come out of it, and to be able to say that I could possibly develop that collaboration further, I think it’s really, really helpful for, and potentially really appealing for, funders.

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<sup>8</sup> This happened as part of the University of Warwick’s Resonate Festival. For information on the ‘Emerging from Lockdown’ project see: [https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/artists-researchers/emerging\\_from\\_lockdown/](https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/artists-researchers/emerging_from_lockdown/)

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# Relationships and Networking

## Connection to and within the Coventry Cultural Sector

Although several of the artist-researcher collaborators applied to Coventry Creates as a pre-existing collaborative unit, most participants were paired during the project selection process. As such, Coventry Creates connected artists and researchers who, in many cases, were previously unknown to one another. This was perceived as an advantage of the scheme for participants, with a Coventry Creates administrator noting that many artists had told them that, “a big driver in applying was the opportunity to work with researchers, work with research, and potentially establish new relationships.”

Many of the artists were not previously known to those on the Coventry Creates selection panel; the panel included representation from the universities (academics and those with experience working with or for the cultural sector), Coventry City of Culture Trust, and Warwick Arts Centre.

*“I can honestly say I do not know 80% of the artists. They weren’t regularly funded. They were new or emerging or hadn’t come across our radar. That has been a lesson - you don’t know what’s on your doorstep.” (Peta Murphy, Administrator)*

For some researchers, collaborating with an artist created links between the researchers and Coventry audiences in new ways that went beyond previous research and dissemination activities. Here, the involvement of a local artist in the project may have affected potential audience perceptions of the work or broadened the network of contacts that the project organisers could reach out to.

*“We’d gone out to disseminate in Coventry and visited various venues and different local groups. It did bring a different perspective and a different audience by working with a local artist.” (Sarah Richardson, Researcher)*

*“I think it’s just been a really nice way to rethink Coventry. And after all these years, that’s quite nice. And I think it’s brought a freshness to it. And you know, it’s revitalized a lot of things. So yes, I’ve been really glad to have been involved with it and I wouldn’t have been involved with it if it wasn’t for the Coventry Creates project. That was my way in to getting involved, which I was really glad to do.” (Jane Bryan, Researcher)*

Artists worked alongside researchers, Coventry Creates administrators, and research study participants such as workshop attendees; this was seen by some artists as broadening their professional networks. In particular, several artists perceived Coventry Creates as a route into the partner universities and expressed a hope that they would be able to continue working with the universities in future. This is already starting to happen, with some artists who took part in Coventry Creates continuing to work with the partner universities. Paul O’Donnell has continued to work with Reem Doukmak following their *Reintegrate* project; some artists who participated in Coventry Creates have been paired with researchers for further collaboration; and artists have also been commissioned for additional work with the universities on the basis of their contributions to Coventry Creates.

*“I think in my next steps as an artist I can push that further, in who I work with and whose stories I can share. So, it’s definitely pushed me in that sense. Like I say, as well, potentially building relationships with the university and other areas of the university.” (Paul O’Donnell, Artist)*

## Artists’ Connections to the University of Warwick and Coventry University

For several participating artists, Coventry Creates was the first direct interaction with the University of Warwick and Coventry University. The opportunity to forge relationships with researchers at the partner universities was an incentive for many of the Coventry Creates applicant artists. Some artists reported that Coventry Creates provided a way into the institutions, which were perceived as being otherwise difficult to engage with.



"A lot of the applications - there were over 100 artist applications - did state that a big driver in applying was the opportunity to work with researchers, work with research, and potentially establish new relationships." (India Holme, Administrator)

"I feel strongly connected with the universities, but it feels one sided. I don't know how aware they are of me and of my contribution. I want to continue being engaged in what they do." (Artist 1)

When asked directly about their relationships with the two universities, artists described a stronger relationship with their research partner than with the institutions. This is unsurprising; artists and researchers were paired to work together directly resulting in artists having a greater level of engagement with the individuals from the partner universities than from the university at an institutional level, as an official entity. That said, some artist participants noted that their experience of Coventry Creates introduced them to the workings of universities and the mechanisms through which they might engage with researchers in future.

"I do feel like I could find someone to reach out to, to say, 'oh, I'm interested to maybe work on some new creative stuff, but I would like to do that with...you know, in academia with the researcher, maybe on this topic'. And I do feel like I've got the connections now to be able to do that and to see whether that would be viable with anyone. And I do feel like I could probably do, for example, an Arts Council application for funding and be more proactive and be more of the leader in terms of making that happen." (Verity Pabla, Artist)

Participants generally commented on the importance of institutions such as universities engaging with the cultural sector. Some interviewees stated the importance of creative communication methods for public health and research communication. Others perceived barriers between universities and artists in the cultural sector and asserted that there ought to be points of access for these groups to understand the activity taking place in the region. Mutual knowledge of local art and research activity, and a clear process through which to connect universities and artists, were desirable to Coventry Creates participants. One approach to this could be the creation of a university-artist network for ongoing dialogue and information sharing.

Although participants recognised that Coventry Creates was introduced in a context of Covid-19 and Coventry's tenure as UK City of Culture 2021, they hoped that the host universities would continue to engage with Coventry's cultural sector long-term.

"I think it would be a shame if the funding just lasted for the City of Culture year. I think we've got some lessons to learn, collaborations made, and ideas started. It would be a shame if that had to go with City of Culture. It would be nice to think that this incubated things that then made Coventry at a richer place, and the University a place with wider impact. I hope that this starts something rather than being the end of the project." (Jane Bryan, Researcher)

## Connection to the UK City of Culture 2021

Participants were keen to discuss their experiences of Coventry 2021 and their perceptions of the Coventry City of Culture Trust. There was a great deal of enthusiasm expressed towards Coventry's term as UK City of Culture, particularly with regard to the potential legacy that the year of culture could leave for Coventry. Some participants were frustrated that there were perceptions of the year of culture as a misuse of money by some members of the public, experiencing this as a rejection of artists and the cultural sector. There was some concern regarding the ability of the Trust, and the year of culture itself, to attract and engage with underrepresented groups on a sustained basis.

"I felt quite sad when the City of Culture people on Twitter announced their new video and

some people's replies were like, "What a waste of money!" or, "What's the point in this?" I actually felt personally saddened by it, because I was like, "You're not understanding that this could be a really good thing and a really important thing!" (Artist 1)

"If they're not attracting the underrepresented voice, is there room to learn? Is there room for this voice to be heard?" (Laura Nyahuye, Artist)

Participants had varying degrees of prior engagement with City of Culture projects. A small number of artists and researchers had worked with the Coventry City of Culture Trust directly in relation to one or several artistic project(s) or a piece of research. Some participants had experience of creating, or planning to create, a piece of artistic or research work as part of the City of Culture year. For most of the participants, however, whether artists or researchers, Coventry Creates was their first experience of creating a piece of work for the City of Culture year. One of the artists who had worked with the City of Culture Trust on an ongoing basis noted that the Trust's mode of working allowed her to practice a variety of skills in her portfolio as a musician, producer, and music licensing practitioner.

"I think with the City of Culture, it appears to be that you can actually be more authentically whole and say, "This is what I do in my portfolio career. Let's see how we can collaborate on that basis."" (Verity Pabla, Artist)

Despite Coventry Creates taking place prior to the beginning of Coventry's tenure as UK City of Culture, participants felt that Coventry Creates was part of the year of culture, in part owing to the digital exhibition remaining online throughout the year. Many of the participants indicated that they were proud or excited to have been part of a project which contributed to the overall year of culture. This involvement in a City of Culture project had been a motivator for some Coventry Creates applicants.

"At Warwick, we've had three projects from the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Medicine come through Coventry Creates. One had really wanted to be involved in City of Culture but hadn't really seen a way in, and this created a way in for them." (India Holme, Administrator)

One researcher noted that, while she had been interested in Coventry 2021, she hadn't felt like a participant of the year of culture until she took part in Coventry Creates. Feeling part of Coventry 2021 was a recurrent incentive for participation for artists and researchers.

"I'm actually part of City of Culture. This is what we have done. This shows Coventry as a City of Culture." (Reem Doukmak, Researcher)

The Trust contributed to the initial iteration of Coventry Creates during the selection phase - a member of Trust staff sat on the project selection panel - and during the promotion of the digital exhibition on social media. In all other respects, the project was organised, supported and funded by the two universities. This didn't appear to be understood by project participants, a number of whom expressed confusion as to the role that the Coventry City of Culture Trust played in the Coventry Creates programme. Some believed the Coventry Creates administrators to be Trust staff. Others felt that the Trust's role in the programme had not been fully articulated, noting that official Coventry 2021 social media accounts had shared information about Coventry Creates participating projects and the digital exhibition, but that it was unclear as to whether the Trust had selected or endorsed the projects. This lack of understanding is indicative of a wider challenge in communicating the role of the Trust in Coventry 2021 projects given that many projects under the City of Culture umbrella are organised by groups and individuals external to the Trust.

## Collaboration between Artists and Researchers

Coventry Creates paired artists and researchers who, in many cases, were not previously known to one another. In general, participants reported that they had a positive relationship with their collaborator, with some participants becoming friends during the Coventry Creates process.

Others commented that they appreciated the opportunity to work with a new collaborator.

**“What I loved about our collaboration was that we came as two women, who look very different, in colour and background. But the approach that we took was very open, we explored, the similar interests that we have... There was a lot of common ground, perceptions on categories, being boxed, society expectations, childhood, the system. There were a lot of aha! moments and remarks like, “That’s exactly my views on this subject.”” (Laura Nyahuye, Artist)**

There were several benefits of the collaborative process which were reported by multiple interviewees. Participants built a variety of skills during the project creation process, detailed in Skills and Personal Development above, which would be of use to future projects. For example, one interviewee found their collaborator’s workshop techniques effective in eliciting responses from workshop participants and resolved to incorporate these techniques in upcoming work. Khursheed Wadia, a researcher at the University of Warwick, commented that she would have liked to have been more involved in the production of the creative output – in this case a dance piece filmed in Coventry centre.

**“When the artist met with the dancers and conveyed my research to them, I would have liked to have been there. But the problem was that she was so mega busy and because I was busy as well with normal work and, you know, teaching and whatever else, we found it really difficult to create space and time for us to meet. We did meet a lot compared with other people I found out later.”**

Several participants reported that it sometimes took time to understand one another’s work and expectations around how the project would work or what could be achieved, But there was a real willingness to understand one another’s perspectives as part of the process of collaboration. Artist interviewees noted that collaborating with a researcher gave their art practice a specificity of focus. Here, the research findings and practices provided a clear subject and audience focus for the artist’s work.

**“I think actually working with researchers on something very topical, it lends itself to being able to focus quite specifically on that topic and create something that isn’t just for anyone and everything and everyone.” (Verity Pabla, Artist)**

Similarly, researchers reported that their artist collaborators illuminated the research in a new way. Researchers noted that artists illustrated the research themes in such a way that it highlighted areas of the work which the researchers had not previously considered or imbued them with a new emotional resonance. Some researchers found that the art produced moved them in an unexpectedly emotional manner.

Although many participants expressed an interest in taking part in future collaborative projects, most interviewees whose artist-researcher collaboration had been new to Coventry Creates noted that the collaboration came to an end following the launch of the digital exhibition. Interviewees cited funding and their existing workloads as some of the reasons for this; some participants commented that they would be interested in continuing to work with their Coventry Creates collaborator should the opportunity arise. Despite this, several project teams had carried out, and were continuing to undertake, varied activities relating to their projects such as conferencing, blogging, and public-facing presentations.

**“We haven’t done new collaborations with them, but we have continued to work with them to maximise the impact of their contribution and the links with our research, because we felt that there was more that we could still do.” (Sarah Richardson, Researcher)**

A small number of the new artist-researcher collaborations continued post-Coventry Creates. As an example, dance researchers Rosa Cisneros, Marie-Louise Crawley and dancer Marius Mates have continued to collaborate following their multimedia dance project *Dancing Bodies in*

Coventry. Coventry Creates appears to have strengthened the relationship between artists and the partner universities in some cases, regardless of ongoing projects between the artists and their researcher collaborator, and many interviewees commented on the strength of the relationships they'd developed with their collaboration partner. Participants whose collaborations had existed prior to Coventry Creates reported that the collaborative work was ongoing as planned.

*"We've gone on to have already submitted an application for a new project; we're working on another one. So, it's really created a lovely working relationship. I've enjoyed it."  
(Rosa Cisneros, Researcher)*

## Depth of Engagement

During each iteration of Coventry Creates, some collaborative partnerships blurred the lines between artist and researcher. Some interview participants commented on the binary created by the artist and researcher roles, a binary which implied that the artist and researcher roles were distinct. In a small number of cases, participants felt unsure about the level of decision-making input expected from artists, assuming that artists were commissioned to illustrate the research rather than as collaborative participants. Several participants had prior or current experience of working as artist-researchers. Although one such participant found that their researcher role in Coventry Creates provided helpful constraints on their project, other collaborative partners took on hybrid roles.

*"There was kind of an underlying assumption in the commission, which was artists would come in, work with researchers, try and understand what researchers were doing, and then make some kind of - if not illustration, then interpretation...The idea of making more public a researcher's work...was not really our idea of what's interesting about artists and researchers working together at all." (Artist 2)*

One artist described the depth of engagement with her work that had occurred and the profound effect of her collaboration with a researcher.

*"I loved working with a researcher. It was the first time as an artist I felt truly understood. It was an incredible process of conversations, shared learning and it was the first time my own lived experience was truly valued. It was life-changing. It gave me the psychological safety to push through barriers in my own creativity that I'd never explored before. I will always be grateful. It's encouraged me to be bolder, braver and more confident."  
(Navkiran Mann, Artist)*

Discussion around depth of engagement was more prevalent in conversations following the second iteration of Coventry Creates than the first. As discussed in *2020 and 2021 Covid-19 Contexts*, there was often limited opportunity to forge a deep, sustained collaborative partnership in the time available given other working responsibilities. Several new collaborations from each iteration of Coventry Creates continued following the programme conclusion, suggesting that Coventry Creates functioned as a seed-funding platform to develop new collaborative partnerships.



# Covid-19 Context

## 2020 and 2021 Covid-19 Contexts

Comparison of the 2020 and 2021 iterations of Coventry Creates indicates that the functions of Coventry Creates were impacted by the different national and local responses to Covid-19 at the time of the collaboration.

During 2020's lockdown periods, Coventry Creates collaborations provided many participants with emotional support and companionship (see the *Emotional Support* section below) during a time when interpersonal connections were limited.

The first iteration of Coventry Creates supported participants during a period of acute and unprecedented crisis. It seems that participants had sufficient time during this period to develop strong working relationships and finish the project in the limited time available. Moving into an environment with fewer Covid-19 restrictions and the return of normal working responsibilities while navigating the work changes brought about by the pandemic, participants found that there was less time available to commit to the programme.

## Financial Support

One of the intended aims of Coventry Creates was to commission paid artistic work from Coventry's cultural sector. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions had resulted in many artists, including Coventry Creates participants, losing upcoming artistic work and finding that artistic work was unavailable. As such, the Coventry Creates commissions helped to financially support artists at a time of upheaval for the cultural sector.

*"A massive incentive for this project is that we would be able to get £2000 into the hands of 18 artists that may desperately need that money at a time when the sector was getting decimated by the pandemic. Speaking to the artists in an informal way, that has been the case for quite a few of them. I think it has supported people." (India Holme, Administrator)*

Many artist participants of the initial iteration reported that Coventry Creates had replaced some of the work that had been lost during the pandemic.

*"It came at a really crucial time where work had been stripped away from me and I had no creative output. So, it was a really good way to get some finances behind me in a really bad time financially, for everyone, but also to be creative and challenge myself in a different to how I've challenged myself before, working with people that I wouldn't have ever really worked with before." (Paul O'Donnell, Artist)*

Participants praised the Coventry Creates programme for supporting individual artists and Coventry's cultural sector. Several participants noted that the cultural sector was important to Coventry and Warwickshire; this was felt to have been recognised by the partner universities in the development of Coventry Creates.

*"It was great that there was such a rapid response, that responded not only to the city and looking at the City of Culture, but it was also about supporting particularly a sector of the population who are important to Coventry and Warwickshire." (Anne Coufopoulos, Researcher)*

## Emotional Support

Coventry Creates was also a source of emotional support for many participants during the 2020 lockdowns. The regular interaction with project collaborators was widely noted by participants as preventing isolation during a period of limited social contact. In addition, producing a project for Coventry Creates proved a welcome activity for participants whose routine had been disrupted by the pandemic.

*"This call happened in the middle of [the initial lockdown period], and it was a really good thing because it gave me a new breath to keep going in that moment. It was really motivating to know that I was going to meet [the researcher] at some point in the week."  
(Lucie Felix, Artist)*

Some participants noted that the Coventry Creates digital exhibition offered potential audiences a conveniently accessible source of research and art online, providing a remote form of education and entertainment during the Covid-19 pandemic.

*"It's a great example of how, at difficult times, like having to isolate because of Covid, art can reach audiences digitally through different forms." (Sherrie Edgar, Artist)*







# Conclusion

Coventry Creates built a digital exhibition of collaborative art and research which contributes to the wealth of cultural activity taking place during Coventry's tenure as UK City of Culture. Beyond the year of culture, Coventry Creates demonstrated a variety of impacts arising from artist-researcher project collaborations.

The programme saw artists and researchers paired to undertake projects during summer 2020 or 2021. Coventry Creates financially supported artists during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the scheme supporting the local cultural sector during a period of crisis. In addition, the programme provided an outlet for emotional support, friendship and motivation for artist and researcher participants. Many participants met for the first time during Coventry Creates and subsequently developed strong working relationships, with some continuing their collaborations following the conclusion of the programme.

A key finding is in the diversity of skills and attributes developed by Coventry Creates participants through their experiences of the programme. Participants supported one another to develop their communication for new audiences and contexts and, through the researcher-artist dialogue, augmented their understandings of their own work. Coventry Creates projects encouraged participants to approach their art and research in new ways, using new tools and data analysis methods, and incorporating the collaboration into their work. Participants reported increased confidence in themselves and in the value of their work.

Challenges faced by participants during Coventry Creates, in addition to the challenges of remote working and restrictions afforded by the Covid-19 pandemic, varied across the two iterations of the scheme. Participants of the first iteration of Coventry Creates noted that, while they were pleased to be part of a project as part of Coventry City of Culture, they had a limited relationship with the City of Culture Trust and were unsure of the Trust's role in the Coventry Creates projects. Similarly, participants in the first iteration of Coventry Creates commented that they would have appreciated additional networking and sharing opportunities, something which was developed further during the second round of the programme. During the second iteration of Coventry Creates, participants were concerned with depth of engagement between collaborative partners, with a recognition that significant time and trust was required to develop a sustained partnership.

Coventry Creates enabled introductions between artists, the University of Warwick, and Coventry University. We hope that this programme will support sustained engagement between Coventry's universities and the city's cultural sector. As noted above in the introductory section, artists have already been involved in a range of events, commissions and exhibitions, as well as additional work with the universities. Most recently, working with a range of regional partners as well as artists and creatives, the University of Warwick has carried out six new projects as part of its "[Getting Creative with Sustainability](#)" programme. Some of these artists also worked on Coventry Creates commissions. This is part of Warwick's ongoing programme of research committed to engaging regionally with issues around sustainability and continuing to work creatively with local artists and creatives.

A close-up photograph of several large, vibrant pink flowers, possibly peonies, with soft, layered petals. The lighting is bright, highlighting the delicate texture of the petals.

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A woman with long, dark, curly hair is standing in a modern city square. She is wearing a black, long-sleeved, form-fitting outfit. The square is paved and has some greenery in planters. In the background, there are modern buildings and other people walking.

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An abstract digital artwork featuring a vibrant color palette of blues, purples, and pinks. The composition includes geometric shapes, a grid of white dots on a purple background, and a large, glowing blue sphere. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and digital.

COVENTRYCREATES.CO.UK

A scene from a digital or virtual environment. Several people are visible, some wearing bright, glowing clothing. The background is filled with digital elements, including a large blue sphere and a grid of dots. The overall atmosphere is vibrant and futuristic.

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