

## 1. Introduction

Dunoon and Cowal Co-works is a research project developed by Tacit-Tacit, a design and research agency based in Dunoon. The project set out to respond to the unmet support needs of freelance and home-based workers located on the Cowal peninsula. The initiative responded to the findings of a Masters of Research (MRes) project undertaken by Hannah Clinch during her tenure as a student at Glasgow School of Art's (GSA's) Innovation School (2016-18).

Hannah relocated to Dunoon from Glasgow in 2011, leaving secure employment in the community enterprise sector, to work as a freelance designer and enterprise consultant whilst being the primary carer for young children. The research was started informally following the many conversations Hannah had with other carers, mainly women, who were struggling to sustain part-time jobs in Glasgow (the closest city to Cowal) or freelance work, around raising children or looking after parents in the local community. Many of these women were highly skilled and motivated, but felt disconnected from opportunity, often volunteering or accepting low levels of remuneration to retain work.

In 2016, Hannah obtained a place on a new Masters of Research programme at GSA's Innovation School. Her place was funded via the Creative Futures Partnership<sup>1</sup>, a collaboration between GSA and the economic development agency Highlands and Islands Enterprise<sup>2</sup>, whose area of operation includes Dunoon and Cowal. Geographically the two year research project focused on Cowal, a west coast, Scottish, peninsula classified as rural and economically disadvantaged.

An ethnographic research methodology was adopted, to understand the contextual realities of place and the power dynamics within the community impacting on creative production. Through interviews, observations, policy research and co-design processes with creative practitioners living in Dunoon and Cowal, the project gathered data about the structural barriers to creative enterprise in the context. This research produced a thesis titled *The Culture of Creative Enterprise*.

In January 2018 Hannah was provided with a small grant from the Argyll wide Place Partnership<sup>3</sup>, the Cultural Heritage and Arts Assembly (CHArts)<sup>4</sup> to develop a second phase of research. This phase responded to the findings of her original thesis which included:

- The high levels of social isolation felt by many creative practitioners working from home

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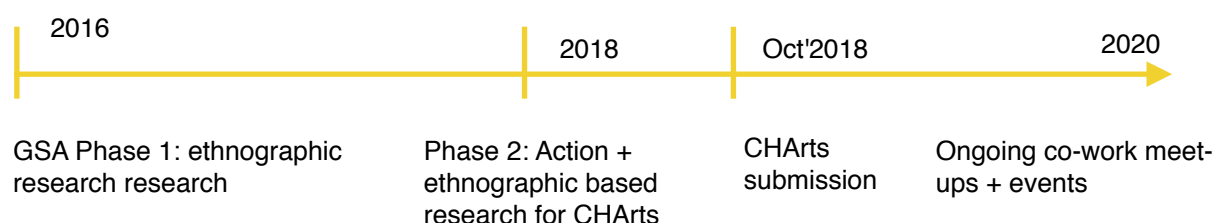
<sup>1</sup> A research partnership between GSA and HIE <https://gsadesigninnovation.com/research/highlands-islands/creative-futures-partnership/> & <https://www.gsainnovationschool.co.uk/programme/highlands-and-islands-enterprise>

<sup>2</sup> Highlands and Islands Enterprise: <https://www.hie.co.uk>

<sup>3</sup> Place Partnership Programme: <https://www.creativescotland.com/funding/funding-programmes/targeted-funding/place-programme>

<sup>4</sup> Cultural Heritage and Arts's Assembly: <https://www.chartsargyllandisles.org>

- The 'thin' networks of support and known urban biases surrounding creative practice
- The narrow framing of work regarded as culturally valuable
- The lack of local visibility that freelance and home-based creative workers are able to build in rural places, and the limited data available about people who work in this way.
- The structural weaknesses and lack of diversity at a strategic level within the creative and cultural sector, leading to high levels of volunteering, as apposed to paid work.



This second phase of research aimed to gather more data about the physical and social support infrastructure surrounding freelance and home-based workers, through action based and participatory approaches to research and further ethnographic investigation.

This research was completed in October 2018 and submitted to CHArts. Due to the positive impact of the project, which had brought a diverse range of working age people together from the community, the decision was made to continue monthly meet-ups and peer to peer support activities. The group, which still meets is called Dunoon and Cowal co-works. The place-based co-work group consists of:

- A Facebook group with 100+ members and contributors
- A basic website / landing page promoting monthly meet-ups<sup>5</sup>
- The delivery of monthly meet-ups
- The delivery of meet-ups and socials that reflect member's interests and support collaboration across the public, private and voluntary sector: Cowal Heritage and Ladies of Wine and Design<sup>6</sup>

Dunoon and Cowal Co-works is being co-ordinated on a voluntary basis by Hannah's company Tacit Tacit, which was established in 2018 as a design and research agency. In-kind support has been accessed from a local regeneration initiative called the The Dunoon Area Alliance and various local businesses have hosted events on a pro-bono basis.

GSA's Innovation School contributed £1500 to the project in April 2019 to facilitate a stakeholder consultation event. Avenues of financial assistance have been explored over the past 12 months from multiple sources to the develop of the Place Based co-work concept and resource the ongoing co-ordination of Dunoon and Cowal Co-works which to-date has used 600 hours of skilled volunteer time.

<sup>5</sup> Dunoon adn Cowal Co-works website: <https://www.tacit-tacit.co.uk/dunoon-and-cowal-co-worksurvey>

<sup>6</sup> Ladies of Wine and Design: <https://ladieswinedesign.com/>

### **1.1. An overview of the Phase 2 research methodology**

This section provides an overview of the research undertaken in the second phase of this three year plus initiative. Research was conducted in the distinct geographic context of the Cowal peninsula, a rural and relatively remote region in the local authority area of Argyll and Bute. Hannah Clinch lives in Dunoon, which is the largest town in Cowal. Dunoon has a population of 10,000 people, and wider Cowal has a population of a further 3,000 people living in multiple settlements scattered across the peninsula.

### **1.2. Co-work training**

In May 2018, Hannah received training from the Co-work Accelerator initiative<sup>7</sup> on 'quality' co-working practices. This training underpinned the ethos and development of Dunoon and Cowal Co-works - the area-based co-work group which was established during the research<sup>8</sup>. The group met for the first time in December 2018.

### **1.3. Survey**

A ten-question online survey was used to gather further data about the challenges of working freelance and from home in Cowal. This was promoted by a local arts centre and community organisations and 18 participants took part in the survey. Participants were contacted and invited to take part in semi-structured interviews about their working practices, and in two further focus groups to discuss their experiences of work.

### **1.4. Meet-ups**

Fifteen monthly meet-ups have taken place in various free venues in Dunoon, starting with a freelancers' Christmas event in December 2018. These meet-ups have been promoted via social media, posters, and a web page. They were informal, child-friendly gatherings, and were open to anyone working at home, or in a freelance capacity, or starting up an enterprise in Dunoon and Cowal.

### **1.5. Working Lunches**

Three working-lunch sessions themed around topics that had been identified as areas of interest by the research participants, including 'Financial guidance for freelancers', 'Worker wellbeing' (stress management), and a tour of a local commercial print facility. These sessions were delivered by members of the co-working group and the local business community.

### **1.6. Workspace research**

Through desk-based research and site visits, information was also gathered about enterprise facilities and accessible workspaces in Dunoon and Cowal, including community managed village halls, public buildings, cafes and private rental facilities.

### **1.7. Support provision**

Interviews and observations with organisations providing enterprise support were carried out to gather data as part of the research. Desk-based research into business support services, economic

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<sup>7</sup> Support to people and organisations setting up co-working to support social and enterprise innovation: <https://www.coworkingaccelerator.network/>

<sup>8</sup> Research website <https://www.tacit-tacit.co.uk/dunoon-and-cowal-co-works-survey>

development initiatives, and other related issues such as childcare provision was also conducted to build up an understanding of the wider economic development challenges.

### **1.8. Stakeholder consultation**

In April 2019, a stakeholder consultation was facilitated by Hannah Clinch and Dr Micheal Johnson from GSA's Innovation School. The consultation was attended by representatives of Dunoon Area Alliance ((DAA) a local regeneration initiative backed by Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum), Argyll and Bute Council's economic development team, W-Power (a European-wide research initiative into female entrepreneurship in remote and rural regions), local freelance workers, Live Argyll, Dunoon Burgh Hall (a local arts centre), and local freelance and home-based workers.

Data from this research has been partially analysed using thematic and situational analysis. The voluntary nature of the project has meant that this phase is currently incomplete; however, a summary of initial observations is presented below.

## **2. A summary of Phase 2 insights**

### **2.1. Participants**

Over the course of this second phase of research, 100+ people of working age, representing a wide range of sectors, engaged with the project via a Facebook group. 45 participants have attended co-work meetings and discussions online. 17 participants attended more than five meet-ups; out of this group, 9 had care responsibilities and 8 were female.

### **2.2. Barriers identified by research participants**

The majority of survey participants and attendees at co-work meetings expressed a sense of professional and social isolation, which they attributed to their mode of work and a lack of visibility within their own communities. The participants found the meet-ups useful, as they established a point in time when they could share ideas and strategies, and receive advice from peers at various stages of business development. For an estimated 18+ people in the co-work group the meet-ups led to new paid freelance work opportunities, other work-related networking opportunities and practical support such as lifts to events, the exchange of materials, event information and equipment the and the co-production of funding applications and events.

The practical barriers to work identified by participants during meet-ups, and in interviews and survey returns, were wide-ranging. They included:

- Confusing information about local enterprise support services and a lack of communication across agencies with a stake in support
- A lack of connection to the working community from wider community initiatives
- A lack of reliable printing facilities
- A sense of personal and professional isolation
- Poor access to flexible childcare
- Poor access to Skype conferencing facilities

- A lack of affordable meeting spaces
- A lack of affordable rehearsal space, desk space, and/or storage space.
- Poor information about work related events and opportunities

Over the course of the research, it became apparent that some of the facilities identified by research participants, including Skype conferencing facilities, meeting space, and hot-desking provision already existed in the area. However, a fragmented approach to the marketing and management of these assets had made them inaccessible to workers locally.

### **2.3. The physical infrastructure to support work in Cowal**

Every village and community in Cowal has a village hall, sometimes multiple facilities managed by volunteer-led trusts or charities. These spaces are generally available for community and private hire. Some have internet access, but the majority of these spaces are not geared up for remote working practices, although some village halls are used by freelancers for events.

In addition village shops, pubs and restaurants, including a large marina and hotel complex in Portavardie, provide informal work space for local freelancers in exchange for the purchase of drinks and refreshments. We did not have the capacity to look at all these facilities, but through interviews established that they were a useful alternative to working from home for some people in the co-work group.

#### **2.3.1. Desk space and room booking in Dunoon and Cowal**

A purpose-built tech hub located a mile outside of Dunoon called the Fairmile Building is owned and managed by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). This facility has hot-desking spaces in it; however, the cost of desk hire (£200 per month) is a third higher than comparable facilities in urban settings, with limited access over weekends and for evening working. This provision is therefore neither affordable nor flexible to many freelancers working part-time or starting new businesses. The research participants we interviewed had a very low awareness of this facility. When HIE staff were asked for information about the take up of the hot-desking in April 2018, it transpired there had been no take-up of the service and no plans to adjust the provision at that point in time.

In Dunoon, Live Argyll (a charity who have a remit for health, wellbeing and culture across the region), manage the Queen's Hall, which is a large multi-purpose building. There is an open plan cafe area on the ground floor which has an area with free-to-use desk spaces. The workstations are used by several people in the co-work group. The location is not designated by the organisation as a co-working space, but is clearly designed to accommodate people with laptops. A low-quality internet signal and the multi-purpose nature of the surrounding cafe makes the area noisy and impractical to use for all types of work, but it is used and valued by a diverse range of workers. Simple adjustments to this area through the introduction of signage, enterprise information and co-work meet-up information could help improve the user experience and add value to the space as an information hub for local workers and visitors. However, these introductions would require partnership working and funding to implement.

Similarly, The Dunoon Burgh Hall is a multipurpose arts venue managed by a charity with a remit to support the arts and creative industries. A cafe within the Burgh hall provides free, quality internet access and rooms for meetings and events. Laptop charge points and 'freelancer friendly' signage encourage the use of the space for working people.

Both the Queen's Hall and Burgh Hall are free to use and charge for meeting space. Neither venue has adopted an automated, online approach to room booking, which would reduce some of the inconvenience associated venue hire and align the venues with best practice co-work facilities. However these facilities are clearly valued in the community and support work.

### **2.3.2. A summary of workspace research**

In Dunoon and Cowal, there are multiple spaces in existing public buildings, halls and businesses which are used for work by people living in Cowal and by visitors to the area. However, awareness about freelance and home-based worker support needs and how to capitalise on this growing community of need is variable. Some local spaces are chronically underused and in a poor state of repair. They can also be difficult to access with a low uptake of digital booking systems which are common place in co-work facilities and support income generation through removing the barriers to use. Investment that had been made to support people with workspaces was being severely under-utilised because of a disconnect between workers' needs and the publicly-funded and designed service provision.

### **2.4. Care and work**

For people with care responsibilities, a collective frustration was expressed by freelancers with the lack of accessible childcare, especially during the school holidays and after school. Services simply do not connect up to provide wrap-around care. People with precarious freelance work arrangements living in this rural area incur longer travel times to attend meetings and school pick-ups, making it harder to engage in professional networks or work meetings. Childcare provision is not regarded as an economic development issue by local enterprise support agencies or by Argyll and Bute Council, and no obvious route has emerged to progress discussion with the local authority.

The lack of flexible childcare provision was linked to family and financial stress. This issue seems to have a particular impact on women's ability to generate income over a sustained number of years, as enterprise and freelance work opportunities have to be developed around care responsibilities. People have patched together arrangements, but these arrangements regularly fail. For example, if adverse weather conditions affect the ferry service between Dunoon and Gourock, leading to cancellations, childcare pick-up times can be seriously impacted causing stress, additional financial costs, and inconvenience to all parties.

Live Argyll and a small local charity provide after school care, sports clubs, and holiday clubs. However, poor marketing and communications for these services (e.g., no web presence; last minute information about bookings), no transport from remote schools, and limited capacity all make these existing services difficult for freelance workers to access or rely on.

## **2.5. Support landscape**

Research participants felt that the enterprise support landscape was difficult to understand. It was widely acknowledged that Business Gateway training was helpful, but it was difficult for people to find out what other types of support were available. A Google search for 'enterprise support Dunoon' showed that none of the local agencies featured in the first 5 results. This suggests a lack of user-centred thinking around the design of support services and how they are marketed to people in this community.

Business Gateway, Skills Development Scotland, Third Sector Interface (TSI), First Port, the Creative Entrepreneurs Club, and HIE all have a remit for business development in Dunoon and Cowal. Of these bodies, only Skills Development Scotland and TSI have a public-facing presence, while all the other agencies operate regionally. The advisors and consultants providing support via enterprise initiatives are not always people who live in the area, and this lack of connection to place and community seems to restrict the development of local knowledge networks. There appears to be very limited communication across these agencies about shared support services for clients with known additional support needs.

Current funding opportunities available via Business Gateway require enterprises to achieve a level of turnover of £50K over three years. If a freelancer's work is being developed around care responsibilities, this figure is less achievable for people. This situation has left some women feeling they had to exaggerate their enterprise growth rate or face not qualifying for investment. The funding has not been adapted to reflect part-time work and there seems to be a low awareness within the Business Gateway staff team that this presents a barrier to people with care responsibilities in developing enterprises.

Those attending co-work meetings have wanted to talk through ideas, rather than necessarily receiving formal training. Participants at the meetings have come from a diverse range of sectors, and have a wide range of skills, from people working in archaeology and IT to a painter and decorator and a woman setting up a new play therapy social enterprise. It was felt that the co-working network had created a forum that was helpful to participants and gave them a greater sense of collective identity and support.

## **2.6. Stakeholder consultation**

The stakeholder consultation was attended by people with roles in economic development across the region alongside local creative practitioners. Through discussion, it became clear that there were gaps in knowledge about the needs of freelance and home-based workers. People working in economic development widely held the belief that freelance and home-based work was a lifestyle choice, rather than a pragmatic response to maintaining skilled work in a rural context. There was very little understanding of how living in a rural context made permanent full-time work more challenging, or of how issues such as childcare impacted upon work and wage progression.

### 3. Summary of Phase 2 findings

Argyll and Bute is a fragile rural region which faces challenges including population decline and a downturn in enterprise start-up rates.<sup>9</sup> The self-employed workforce, including freelance and home-based workers, represent a growing proportion of the total working-age population<sup>10</sup>. Self-employment is estimated to be at 8% within Dunoon and Cowal, higher than the national average of 6.4%<sup>11</sup>, although these figures are lower than the 15% estimated by the Office of National Statistics for people in self employment and working freelance in 2018/19.<sup>12</sup>

Accurate data about the level of freelance and home-based workers is challenging to find, as not everyone working this way is visible via traditional data collection methods. Very little data exists on the lived experiences of this group. The research presented here goes some way to bringing qualitative information together in order to highlight the challenges faced by people setting up rural micro enterprises, working from home, or operating freelance in Dunoon and Cowal.

The current enterprise support interventions seem unresponsive to the challenges identified by the research participants. The known barriers to female work progression seem to be under-acknowledged, leaving gender inequality embedded into the economic development strategy. HIE is currently undertaking research into this issue via their W-Power programme<sup>13</sup>. through the provision of advanced support to women via a digital platform. This project is at an early stage of development and is administered from Inverness. Through locally marketing the project to members of the local co-work group, four participants have signed up to the digital W-Power platform to receive additional support, demonstrating the usefulness of locally connecting people to regional initiatives.

In urban areas, co-working facilities have become an established part of the enterprise support landscape. Many are managed by the voluntary sector or private sector stakeholders, although there are examples of co-working spaces in libraries and public buildings. These facilities provide meeting points for people and provide practical, flexible support, thereby creating richer knowledge networks through which users can develop work opportunities. In Dunoon and Cowal, no accessible co-working facility exists prohibiting tacit knowledge exchange and peer to peer support.

The Dunoon and Cowal Co-works research tested out a light touch, Placed-based co-working model which was designed with the input of freelance workers. Over the 15 months in which the

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<sup>9</sup> Data about the slowdown in rural enterprise start-ups was accessed from: <https://www.fsb.org.uk/standing-up-for-you/national-offices/scotland/press-releases/start-ups-slower-in-rural-scotland?fbclid=IwAR1PZO954IhISEraV3gdZ-1iGE-Vrja0UBhAHgQ3hm3zAzwlPRALUcwuVA>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/labourmarketeconomiccommentary/may2019>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.fsb.org.uk/standing-up-for-you/national-offices/scotland/entrepreneurial-towns/towns-ranked-within-council>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/trendsinselfemploymentintheuk/2018-02-07>

<sup>13</sup> <http://w-power.interreg-npa.eu/>



group have met, the model has proved effective in supporting people, regardless of their business stage or gender.

The research has also identified how local partnerships could be brokered to improve practical support for freelancers and home-based workers working across sectors but particularly in the creative industries. Meet-ups within Queen's Hall and other local venues indicate that existing spaces could be adapted in simple ways to provide a profile and a forum for co-working. This could be a route to improving worker wellbeing, providing more accessible support around care needs, and making hidden enterprise activity more visible in the community, all of which aligns with the current economic development strategy of Argyll and Bute Council<sup>14</sup> and national strategies associated with inclusion and enterprise.

However, the lack of partnership working across agencies with stakes in enterprise support, economic development, and community development makes the above proposition unlikely at this stage. Approaches have been made to HIE, TSI, Argyll and Bute's economic development team, Live Argyll, Dunoon Burgh Hall and the local Business Gateway, but none of these agencies are currently in a position to support this idea, beyond loaning the free space they have due to funding and organisational constraints.

#### **4. Next Steps**

The Dunoon Area Alliance has a local facilitator with a regeneration and community development remit. Tacit Tacit and DAA are working together to deliver and develop the Place based co-work model to complement local regeneration goals.

Over the next 12 months a number of actions have been discussed to support the delivery of the Co-work project.

1. To establish a CIC, called the People's Public House in partnership with Tacit Tacit. This will deliver the Dunoon and Cowal Co-work Project and associated activities relating to public engagement with sustainable community development and enterprise.
2. To raise funds to develop a business plan for the project and test income generating activities.
3. To enhance the digital offer through the development of a local Dunoon and Cowal co-works members website and investigate the scope of sharing data with Argyll wide initiatives.
4. Continue to support Dunoon and Cowal co-works members in their practice through thematic peer to peer networks and events:
  - Monthly meet-ups
  - Ladies of Wine and Design
  - Heritage
  - Environment and Enterprise
  - Digital (Linux Users Group)
5. Work in partnership to develop a freelancer friendly guide to Dunoon, using funding accessed by the DAA from Argyll and Bute Council.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/business-and-trade/economic-development-action-plan>

## **5. Contribution to knowledge**

Alongside project delivery, insights from Dunoon and Cowal co-works have been shared with other research initiatives investigating rural enterprise support, inclusion and the growth of the creative industries. These include:

- A national study conducted by Dundee University into improving female entrepreneurship in rural areas (2019).
- HIE's W-Power project which aims to reduce the barriers to female entrepreneurship in economically disadvantaged rural areas (2019).
- Creative Scotland's Radical Childcare research examining the potential of taking a more holistic approach to enterprise support and care services (2019).
- The International Association for Feminist Economics conference, Glasgow. Presented a conference paper (2019).
- New Economics Forum, Scotland (2019)
- Third Sector Interface consultation to improve support for social enterprises (2020).
- Creative Scotland's Creative Hub survey (2020).