

# The Bath Challenge: Inventing new ways to go

An artist-led research project to reinvigorate Bath's creative ecology.





# Contents

1	Foreword: on the value of being artist-led	Page 4	7.2	Diverse narratives	Page 25
2	Executive summary	Page 5	7.3	Flexible identities	Page 26
3	Framing the Bath Challenge	Page 7	7.4	Locating creative energy	Page 26
4	Introducing the team	Page 8	8	Conclusions: three creative provocations for Bath	Page 28
5	Methodology	Page 9	8.1	Space for the new	Page 28
6	Findings	Page 10	8.2	Creativity, health and wellbeing	Page 28
6.1	Making together - output from MASH's making session	Page 10	8.3	Strategy to retain and focus creative talent locally	Page 30
6.2	Walking together - findings from the walking interviews	Page 11		<b>Appendixes</b>	
7	Reflections on the research	Page 25	I	Summary of methods used in the research	Page 31
7.1	The new and the old	Page 25	II	Materials used by MASH in the installation	Page 31
			III	Local strategies reviewed in the desk research	Page 31

# 1. Foreword: on the value of being artist-led

## This Bath Challenge project was 'artist-led' but why is this important?

The Bath Challenge was run by a collaborative team of seven people, including five Fine Art graduates. Artist-led is most often understood in relation to self-organised spaces in which artists' labour or artistic/cultural activity (making, producing ideas or forming support networks) takes place. From the perspective of the Bath Challenge, we propose artist-led as a condition or way of working that can be understood as a methodology for research into cultural production and the creative industries more broadly.

Ann Hamilton suggests, "A life of making isn't a series of shows or projects or productions or things, it is an everyday practice. It is a practice of questions more than answers, of waiting to find what you need more often than knowing what you need [...] In every work of art something appears that does not previously exist and so by default, you work from what you know to what you don't know."

Working with artists is valuable to the research process not simply because of their visual sensibility or the unique objects they make that can decorate the places we inhabit (although neither of these is insignificant) but also because of the artist's willingness to want to know differently, court uncertainty, value process over outcome and go beyond their own position of knowledge to co-learn with others.

The Bath Challenge proposes art or creativity as a method, condition or verb. If spaces shape society and society shapes spaces, can artists and the creative community play an active role in defining the types of spaces we want, how they should be used and how to make them open and accessible to everyone?

The project commissioned artists with two different approaches to research: researcher Jonathan Eldridge who uses walking as a method for talking with the creative community of Bath, and the artist collaboration MASH, who foregrounds the processes of 'talking with art' or making as a research method. The project was set up to think about the challenges specific to the creative community in Bath and to better understand the barriers to creating a greater sense of connectivity. In asking questions in a different way – through walking and talking or through talking and making – our project placed a high value on the process of coming together. By using this distinct methodology, we were able to tune into the creative hum currently gathering momentum in Bath.

The Bath Challenge proposes that we can shape or reshape the creative future of our city by acting together in the present. To broadly benefit the city and offer new directions the report recommends embedding artists in projects from the outset and valuing not only artistic methods but the nature of creativity itself in order to 'invent new ways to go'.

[Dr Natasha Kidd](#)

# 2. Executive summary

The Bath Challenge project set out to research how Bath's creative communities might become more central to the city – and what the city might do to better connect with and nurture these communities.

Commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded Bristol+Bath Creative R+D partnership, the Bath Challenge ran between July 2021 and March 2022. It engaged more than a hundred stakeholders from the creative industries, wider partners and local communities. The key findings from the research are set out in this report.

## A city

Bath is a growing city of about 110,000, home to numerous creative and technology businesses, two successful universities and a well-performing knowledge economy. However, there is a perception that the city's cultural and creative sector is not sufficiently visible or valued.

As an artist-led research project, the Bath Challenge deployed a range of creative methodologies to engage stakeholders. Valuing the process of making as a form of research, the project team commissioned the artists MASH through an open call. As well as helping hone the project's research questions, MASH held making sessions where participants could talk together with and through art. The shared making was carried into the virtual world where a real-time collaborative web platform, Padlet, was used to capture multimedia insights from participants. MASH subsequently incorporated all of these objects – physical and digital – into their final sculptures and exhibition.

A Bath Spa graduate, Jonathan Eldridge, was appointed to undertake primary and secondary research. Again, a creative approach was followed: walking interviews were used to encourage more open and spontaneous

conversations than might have been achieved through traditional interviewing techniques. Walking also firmly grounded the research in the geography of Bath's diverse community locations.

The Bath Challenge opening event, held in March 2022, extended the conversations to a wider audience. This public event featured a keynote from the project lead, a presentation on the emerging research findings, an exhibition of MASH's work and a panel discussion with both a live and a virtual audience. The event finished with a guided tour of Weston Island, envisaged as the future home for a new 'Bath Art Depot'.

The value of thinking differently about the city's future direction emerged strongly as a theme at the opening event, linking creativity, health and wellbeing. There was also recognition of the need for spaces for creativity and culture to take root and flourish locally. This report further explores these themes and other ideas and issues arising from the research. These include:

- celebrating the new as well as the old
- the need for more diverse and inclusive cultural narratives
- the strength in flexible, rather than singular, city identities
- physical and virtual spaces working together to enhance Bath's creative energy

The Bath Challenge has helped demonstrate the value of the creative process in stimulating discussion – recognising that where, when and how conversations take place is crucial to building connections and trust and can be as important as specific issues or outcomes achieved.

**Space for the new:** Bath is patterned by its world-leading success in heritage and tourism, but creative communities struggle to find locations where they can take root and grow. Can Bath enable new spaces for cultural production in communities outside the city centre? Can the city find a way to secure Weston Island and deliver the vision for Bath Art Depot? With the development of a new creative quarter in Locksbrook Road, can Bath challenge expectations and stereotypes by providing space for creative and cultural transition?

**Creativity, health and wellbeing:** The economic power of the creative industries is well defined but the potential for creativity to drive the wellbeing of people and nature is less well understood. Could B&NES become a leader for creativity and health and wellbeing, building on its history as a spa town, as well as amplifying the existing University of Bath Beacon for Living Well and Stride Treglown's work on Bath as a Therapeutic City?

**Strategy to retain and focus creative talent locally:** The Bath Challenge highlights the important role artists and creatives can play in strategic conversations about place. How can those working with creative graduates and communities and those working on future civic strategy collaborate to build greater connections? Is there a need for a civic university fund to anchor and retain creative talent locally?

In conclusion, this report suggests that in light of major issues such as the climate emergency and rising inequality, Bath's creative sector has reached something of a crossroads. The title we have chosen for the report – 'Inventing New Ways to Go' – highlights the importance of setting out fresh perspectives that value the creativity of the city's residents and the impact arts and culture can have on a wide range of outcomes. New thinking that seeks to balance economic growth with the limits of the world's natural resources is fast emerging. To be more visible, joined up and impactful (core elements of the Bath Challenge) Bath's creative communities must make a significant and growing contribution to future-facing agendas now and over the coming decade.

### 3. Framing the Bath Challenge

What ingredients or conditions make a city more creative? Is creativity hardwired into the city's DNA or is it dissolved in Bath's famously therapeutic waters? If so, can it be bottled and passed around liberally to those thirsty for more? In setting out to explore how Bath's creative communities might become more central to the city, the Bath Challenge came to ask how the city itself might become more relevant to these communities.

Bath already has a head start on being a successful creative city. The West of England region is recognised as a centre for creative industries and ranks third in the UK for tech investment (Tech Nation 2021). A recent report by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) states that the creative industries contribute £13 million to the UK economy every hour and are growing 'more than five times faster than the national economy.' (DCMS, 2021). Bath's many creative industry sole traders, micro-businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as its two universities – Bath Spa University and University of Bath – has resulted in above-average performance in knowledge production for a small city. The Creative Bath Directory (2022) lists 11,567 creative companies in the city, and TechSPARK's Cluster Map identifies 358 Technology companies within approximately 5 km of Bath's city centre.

Despite Bath's clear strengths, the creative ecology has been described as fragmented, undervalued and lacking a cohesive narrative. Not long ago, however, Bath was known for its energetic and diverse cultural offering driven by different parts of the community. While creativity has become central to the narrative of Bristol's success, many feel it has retreated in Bath's identity, replaced by heritage that frames both the city's cultural offering and the mainstay of its tourism and retail-based economy.

The new 'One Shared Vision' for Bath with North East Somerset (BwNES) – rather than Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) – positions the region as a 'Fair, Green, Creative and Connected City Region' (June 2021). Recognising the significant harm inflicted upon the local mainstays of tourism and retail by the COVID-19 epidemic, the new vision highlighted the need for diversity. The Bath Challenge clearly identified creativity and the creative industries as key pillars of this new vision for Bath within the wider context of the North East Somerset region.

Also in 2021, the AHRC-funded Bristol+Bath Creative R+D partnership commissioned the Bath Challenge to start to build a clearer narrative for Bath as a creative city. As an artist-led project, an additional benefit of the Bath Challenge research was to highlight the new perspectives that artists and creatives as makers can bring to complex, strategic conversations, such as those concerning the nature and future of places.

## 4. Introducing the team

### Dr Natasha Kidd

(she/her) is an artist and Subject Lead at Bath School of Art. Natasha is Deputy Director of the Centre for Cultural and Creative Industries and Co-Investigator on B+B Creative R+D. She is an artist with a research interest in the particular way artists learn. Natasha was the Project Lead for the Bath Challenge.

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### Stephen Hilton

(he/him) is Founder and Director of City Global Futures, working with Industry, Academia and Local Government on Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Placemaking. In 2020, Stephen was a Digital Placemaking Fellow on the Bristol+Bath Creative R+D partnership and is currently a Resident at The Studio, Palace Yard Mews. Stephen recently supported the B&NES Future Ambition Board's work to develop the city's One Shared Vision for Bath with North East Somerset. Stephen worked as Research Supervisor, Strategic Adviser, Panel Chair and Editor for the Bath Challenge.

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### Jamie Eastman

(he/him) is a researcher, curator and cultural producer specialising in human-computer interaction, health and the built environment. Since 2013 this practice has been applied in cultural and innovation contexts for creative industries and HEIs. Jamie worked as a Creative Industries Adviser to the Bath Challenge.

### Abigail Branagan

(she/her) is Manager of The Studio, Palace Yard Mews, where she is responsible for developing the community of creative technology Residents. Abigail has over 25 years experience in the cultural and creative sectors. Abi worked as Producer for the Bath Challenge.

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### Jonathan Eldridge

(he/him) is a creative researcher exploring ecologically conscious ways of thinking about, valuing and interacting with urban places and spaces. Jonathan was previously a Creative Media Resident at EMERGE in Bath and is currently a Resident at The Studio, Palace Yard Mews. He lived in Bath while studying for an MA in Environmental Humanities at Bath Spa University and experienced the city both in and out of lockdown. Jonathan worked as Researcher and Author on The Bath Challenge.

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### MASH

MASH is an artistic collaboration between artists Abi Charlesworth (she/her) and Gwenllian Davenport (she/her). Together the duo explore collaborative making, material investigation and playful experimentation. As recent graduates of Bath Spa University, they have exhibited with Umbrella Cardiff, hosted multiple workshops and have recently completed an online residency with Arcade-Campfa. MASH was commissioned to provide creative support to the Bath Challenge following an open call for submissions.

## 5. Methodology

The Bath Challenge blended a variety of creative research methodologies to explore questions such as: "What connects Bath's creative individuals, organisations and businesses?"; "How do they communicate with and have long-term impacts in Bath's multiple communities?"; "How do they contribute to Bath's success?" and "How does the city define its creative identity in regional, national and international contexts?" Below is a description of the three distinct methodologies used by the Bath Challenge team.

### I. Making together

MASH's practice has an ethos of play and experimentation at its core. In approaching the Bath Challenge, MASH sought to bring communities together through making, resulting in two in-person making-focused workshops and one online workshop using Padlet. The workshops generated a body of work inspired by the city of Bath. Borrowing inspiration from locally sourced textures, forms, shapes and colours, they encouraged participants to think about how they might create a material representation of Bath and how this might feed into experiences of being a creative within the city.

In-person workshops were held with alumni of Bath Spa University's art school as well as with current students where the artists encouraged talking through making. Sharing their process of collaboration, they encouraged cooperation amongst the group as a way of exploring polarities and overlaps in practises to produce physical visualisations.

Works were made with accessible and sustainably sourced materials including cardboard, tape, paper and scraps of material. Works produced within the workshop were digitally edited and printed onto fabric, then installed and showcased as part of the Bath Challenge event in March 2022 (see below).

Sculpture and collage artworks were made during the workshops, prompted by photos taken around different parts of the city. Artworks were made around such topics as homelessness, the city's architecture, the pedestrian landscape and shapes of the city. Some of the questions asked during the online workshop included: "Where is your creative community in Bath?"; "How are you empowered to be creative within the city?" and "Are there barriers to being creative in Bath?"

The Findings section of this report includes images of MASH's work.

### II. Walking together

Bath Spa graduate, Jonathan Eldridge, was appointed to undertake primary and secondary research into Bath's creative ecology. This involved desk research to map the history and policy context of Bath as a creative place, informal and formal interviews and an online survey. Interviewees came from within Bath's Creative Industries but also included people outside of the Sector who might offer valuable perspectives on building strong connections with the city and its communities. In total, more than 50 interviews took place.

Walking interviews with 17 stakeholders formed a particularly active and innovative part of Jon's research practice. Social anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests that when people talk while seated opposite one another, ideas are bounced back and forth as if in competition, but when they walk side by side, people share the same visual field, changing the flow of conversation. The Bath Challenge team hoped that shared understanding would emerge from these walking interviews and that the conversations would be firmly grounded in the geography of Bath's diverse communities.

The Findings section of this report includes accounts of some of the walking interviews.

### III. Meeting together

The Bath Challenge event was held in March 2022, with more than 50 stakeholders attending in person and online. The event started with a keynote from Dr Natasha Kidd, artist and project lead for the Bath Challenge. Natasha highlighted the importance of creative processes in opening space for dialogue where trust and connections can be built, and new ideas and values can emerge.

Stephen Hilton, another member of the Bath Challenge team, chaired a panel discussion, which was also streamed live on the web. The panel was made up of: Professor Kate Pullinger, co-lead for Bristol+Bath Creative R+D (sponsor of the Bath Challenge) and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Industries; Nicola Turner, a Bath-based artist and theatre designer and champion for the Bath Art Depot initiative; Poppy Clover, a local artist and curator; and Alexandra Coulter, Director of the National Centre for Creative Health and Director of Arts and Health South West. The panel explored a wide range of issues and questions with the physical and virtual audiences. A strong theme to emerge from the discussion concerned the relationship between creativity and wellbeing and how cities, such as Bath, could seize this opportunity to become more explicit with its future strategies and plans. The Conclusions section of this report further explores this idea.

The event finished with a guided tour of Weston Island. Currently used as a maintenance facility for Bath's bus fleet, the aspiration is for this island in the River Avon to become home to a thriving creative community – the Bath Art Depot – set within a new Locksbrook Creative Quarter. The Conclusion and Provocations section of this report further considers the importance of this vision for Bath's future creative identity.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Making together - outputs from MASH's making sessions

Using outputs from the walking interviews (see following Walking Together section), MASH used the outlining shape of the routes that were walked to make wall-based plaster sculptures. These sculptures helped tie the physical work in with the wider research.

A common theme across the project was the pointing hand which not only highlighted important points but represented both the maker's hand and how creativity is born through personal experience.

Larger wooden sculptures were made in reference to the many Georgian crescents that shape Bath's streets. Sculptures were installed in pairs, with one maker's sculpture echoing the others. The artists' hands – printed on vinyl – helped point to the material nature of the work while highlighting the act of labour, tactility and the personal bodily experience of place.

Early on in the Bath Challenge, the idea of Bath's 'creative hum' was identified as a metaphor to connect the city's communities. This hum – creative discussions and the sounds of making generated during the workshops – was something MASH felt was important to collect. The resulting sound piece was installed inside the larger wooden sculpture as a record of the workshops and the creativity that exists within the city.

### 6.2 Walking together - findings from the walking interviews.

Walking or journeying offers a chance for reflection and exploration. When we're walking with others through familiar locales, we sometimes feel compelled to change course and show them things – viewpoints, landmarks, secret spaces – in this way sharing the significance and meaning of places. Sometimes, we wish to show the absences in the landscape where our memory feels for the shape of something that is no longer there or where our vision traces the outlines of what we want to be there. At other times, the motion created by putting one foot in front of the other highlights the landscape streaming past our periphery and unblocks things we otherwise would struggle to articulate.

The quotes below were captured during conversations with walking participants who came from various sectors and backgrounds: social artists, globe-trotting creative technologists, public servants, project managers. These interviews were shaped by their routes through Weston, Whiteway and Bear Flat, slipping through muddy fields in the Somer Valley, tracing the river path to Locksbrook.



MASH installation, Locksbrook Road campus, March 2022. Image courtesy of the artists



MASH installation (floor detail), Locksbrook Road campus, March 2022. Image courtesy of the artists





MASH, work in progress. March 2022.  
Image courtesy of the artists



Southside Youth & Community Centre to The Centurion Pub, along Kelston View, down The Hollow, through Brickfields Park and along the cycle path, crossing the river at Lidl and then back across at Weston Island.

“Shared vision is hard.”

“The biggest issue is that Bath is not perceived by funders as a) deserving of their support very much because it’s a rich city, and b) (...) it’s not seen to have its act together, it’s not seen to have a unified and shared, committed approach.”

“Very practical stuff is the way to start on this. It’s not some sort of theoretical, conceptual level of collaboration.”

“I can tell you now there’s some future professors in Twerton, there are some future leaders of the creative sector in there but it’s all about that individual, what they’ve had, what access, and what you can do is you can make it more likely that those individuals have a chance by creating access, creating equal opportunity...you need to make sure that there are not barriers to steps.”

“You can’t achieve digitally what you can achieve face-to-face...you should always see digital technology as an enabler...but you still need that creativity and quite a lot of that creativity comes from human interaction...it’s those unexpected moments that can trigger the creativity. What digital does is it allows you to quickly create and quickly share.”

“You know, fewer students coming in to do creative writing and those subjects, there’s not the funding for it, so you can’t entice amazing writers to come and teach the course if there’s no money. And if the teachers aren’t feeling inspired or excited to teach their course because they’re showing the passion slowly leach out of it, then that affects the students...it spreads.”

“Thinking more holistically of the system as a technology in itself.”



From Fairfield House to Oldfield Park Station via Weston Island and Twerton Cemetery

“Bath has other stories to tell, so tell them.”

“...there’s that benefit of unlocking that creative part of me (...) and by doing that, there are emotions in that and feelings and thoughts and all that is part of the tapestry of understanding our mental health, so it’s extremely valuable, actually.”

“I don’t want to talk about things that are easy to solve. I want to talk about things that are difficult to solve because those are real problems.”

“I also think that probably in the Creative Industries in Bath (...) it’s not like we’re nurturing organic talent, it’s not like we’re doing much to get people from Bath and the south-west, all we’re really doing is courting people from London into Bath (...) how do we get more of that talent and those people who are actually local into those industries?”

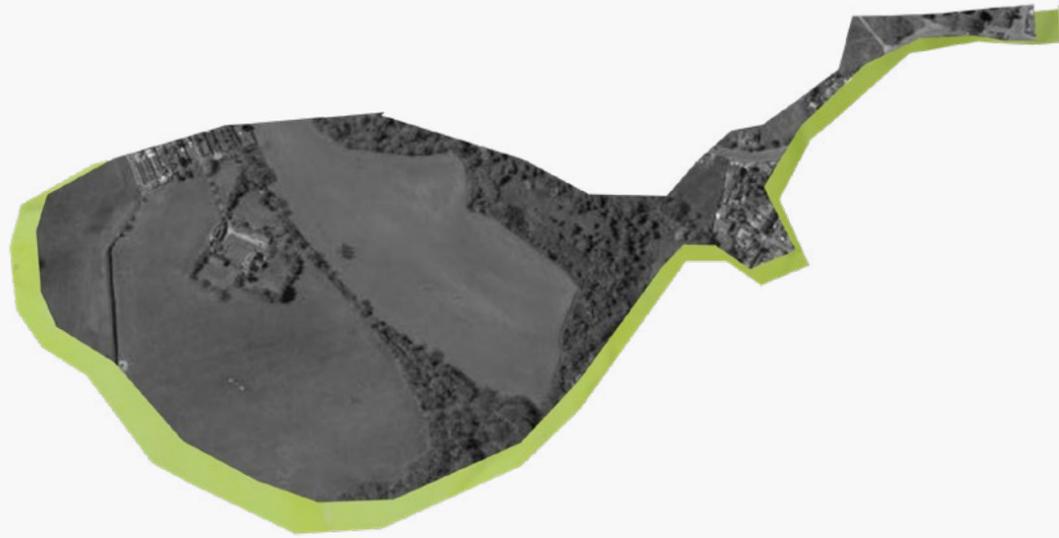
“Bath feels like it’s ready for a new chapter.”

“It’s important, I think, to get different voices involved because we end up with the same people answering questions about the problems and we end up with the same solutions, as well.”

“Coding the pathways to action (...) so for instance if someone came to us with the idea (...) what is their pathway to commission? What is their pathway to proceed? Who do they need to talk to? Do they need to get some funding? Do they need to get some mentoring? Do they need to get some support?”

“If you’re working in a creative industry you will draw upon other people in doing creative things, possibly in order to realise (...) whatever it is you’re trying to create, so that’s more unconscious because that’s about getting the job done...whereas I think the conscious thing is more about connecting...specifically wanting to build links between other people, going out and seeking that or being part of a more formalised network.”

“Not everyone is catered for, in terms of the kind of expressions of culture that are available, so that’s a question of inclusion (...) which also comes down to who decides what we get to experience.”



The Somer Valley walk

“It is the process of working together as much as, perhaps even more than, what you produce that is important.”

“Bath is going to become a giant shopping centre.”

“I think interesting things occur in spaces that are not properly regulated, and one of the challenges that the city has is how to hold both stability and change in its palms (...) There’s a kind of fossilisation that’s occurred - which isn’t unique to Bath - and perhaps the value of what is not always easily valued through a financial mechanism needs to be priced in somehow to inhibit this spreading.”

“Bath is built on its exclusivity, isn’t it?”

“You can say things like ‘creative ecologies’ or whatever, and diversity and integration and stuff like that, you can put them on a mind map and say ‘Oh yes, this is what we need to do,’ but until you actually start putting people into the places, into the communities and start listening to what people have got to say, nothing’s going to change, and that’s not a Bath thing.”

“I really think there’s a missing focus on creative energy for youth and that’s where perhaps the proposition of the city as a cultural space intersects with the likelihood that the creative industries are going to have any bravery...What is our missing energy, and why is it missing?”

“I think the future is not necessarily (...) ‘Where’re you from?’ but, ‘What do you align with? What do you believe in?’ and those kinds of things.”

“Exploring and embracing the temporary could be so good for Bath (...) I think things like experimenting closing streets off, holding events, creating public art, which is maybe on a temporary basis, I think has a real role in (...) capturing people’s imagination and bringing the city to life.”

“I think you can create the conditions including space, funding, networks – non-hierarchical networks – for these bodies to be part of but without feeling that they were sort of beholden to (...) someone else’s agenda, then that could perhaps work, but it might take years.”

“But the problem is who owns and who is driving that agenda, and what for? And it’s likely to be a manifold magnification of the problem that we have with the algorithm at the moment; that it’s driving our behaviour and even controlling what we’re interested in because it’s the major source of how we access what we’re interested in.”



From The Studio, Palace Yard Mews, up to Henrietta Park and Camden Road, along to Bennet’s Lane and coming back down via Snowhill, following the main road down Walcot Street and back through the city centre to end at The Studio

“Bath really needs some grit in the oyster.”

“I think whatever intersections or cross-sector collaborations you’re looking at, the primary things you’ve got to be able to do are listen, understand your purpose within it, and then collaborate to make something happen.”

“...in some of these other cities [the Creative Industries] are valued, and they are zoned for, they’re funded, they’re given extremely generous if not free lease arrangements so that they can get off the ground for the first five years (...) I think there needs to be the incentive and the structure to support people to invest.”

“I guess you need the forums where there is a value base around what collaboration means and why people would want to enter into it (...) you need a certain honesty and transparency in order to be able to then create the links that you can make in order to take things forward (...) you need trust.”

“Digital and tech...is moving so fast (...) we should be thinking about the core skills [young people] could need (...) rather than thinking about jobs, thinking about skills, because that’s where we’re solving real problems, it’s a skill that you need, not a job.”



From Oldfield Park Station to Alexandra Park, via Moorland Road, the cycle path and Bloomfield Green.

“I don’t want to talk about things that are easy to solve. I want to talk about things that are difficult to solve because those are real problems.”



From Bath Spa station, over and back up along the river to Great Pulteney Street, going on to The Holburne, before returning along the canal to and coming back across the river to the station.

“I think there is a lack of ownership and vision.”

## 7. Reflections on research

### 7.1 The new and the old

The research highlights Bath’s many creative identity changes and phases: from the wholesale redesign of the city under the Georgians to the flourishing counterculture in the 1970s. At times, Bath appears to have been carried along on national shifts in housing, education or economic policy. At other times, the city has been at the forefront. Adam Fergusson’s *The Sack of Bath* (1973), for example, not only halted a plan for a traffic-easing tunnel to be bored beneath the city but played a substantial role in reinvigorating England’s conservation and heritage sectors. Other decisions, such as the restructuring of the County of Avon into four Unitary Authorities (1996), Bath’s inclusion on UNESCO’s World Heritage List (1987), and, more recently, the Council’s efforts to declare a Clean Air Zone and Liveable Neighbourhoods have also proved to be important if, at times, controversial.

There is, however, little doubt that Bath’s approach to maintaining the city’s architectural integrity has meant a continued revival of a faux Georgian style, a key example being SouthGate Bath, which paradoxically endangered Bath’s heritage status. As one interviewee argued, part of the requirement of being a World Heritage City is that “there is a distinction between old and new.”

### 7.2 Diverse narratives

While Bath’s history as a city built on the wealth of slavers and gentry has shaped the city, other histories such as the coal mining industry in Bathampton and Combe Down and the Somer Valley, Emperor Haile Selassie’s five year stay in the city (1936–41) and the emergence of Bath Arts Workshop/Comtek on Walcot Street in the 60s and 70s have also made their marks.

The tensions inherent in the processes of inclusion and exclusion tend to re-emerge in different configurations. Bath Abbey and The Holburne Museum have recently made moves

to uncover the city’s relationship with slavery. Bath’s American Museum & Gardens has worked with local third sector organisation B in Bath on decolonisation in the context of its collection and its overall organisational structure. Fairfield House’s ‘Freedom in the City: Festival of Learning’ explored the legacy of the Ethiopian Royal Family in Bath and celebrated Ethiopian and Rastafari cultures and their connections to the UK. Untangling these narratives could be an important way of repositioning the city in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter and the climate and ecological emergencies.

It would be easy to romanticise this process as ‘organic’, but this characterisation masks questions about who makes the choices that shape Bath’s expressions of culture and where important conversations take place. Where are the spaces in which other, distinct expressions of culture can emerge to challenge the centrality of a particular expression or set of expressions? For example, the run-down area in and around Walcot Street in the 1960s attracted proponents of counterculture who felt at home practising their DIY philosophy. Today, because of booming land values and a housing market that seems only able to deliver high-end flats or student accommodation, it is unclear where alternative cultures might be able to establish and grow.

Moreover, Bath’s UNESCO status and attachment to aspects of its heritage have arguably created the conditions for maintaining a cultural conservatism that, while charming, is also viewed as exclusive, attracting wealth that price many out of the city. There is a perception that many of the cultural groups in Bath orbit around reconfigured historical exclusivity made up of people from a narrow socio-economic bandwidth which positions them as difficult to access for many.

### 7.3 Flexible identities

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to creative cohesion within Bath is the city's apparent tendency to cling too fiercely to the notion of a singular identity. What does it mean to be a Bathonian? Good For Nothing's 'Dream Space' project showcased the diversity of voices present in the city. Fringe Arts Bath and Bath Fringe Festival are a testament to the mass of talented artists and creatives residing and practising in Bath and the surrounding area. The Museum of Bath at Work pays homage to the strength of Bath's industrial heritage, amplifying this aspect of the city's narrative, and the Bath Unlimited project draws attention to the array of world-leading businesses located in the city. However, these initiatives have tended to leave shallow imprints on the city's predominant creative and cultural identity.

While Bath need not abandon what currently attracts people to the city, it is important to understand how existing assets might play a role in developing alternative cultural scenes. House of Imagination's 'Forest of Imagination' and its 'City of Imagination' initiative, the Bathscape Walking Festival and the 7 Hills Festival all use Bath's beautiful surroundings as a framework for bringing people together, while The Bath Festival and Bath Carnival have long ensured Bath's culture has a vibrant, noisy, discursive component. In addition, the Bath River Line – a new linear riverside park – brings River Avon into focus as an element around which the city has been constructed and something which could again become a focal thread in the city, tying together North and South, opening the possibility for the soluble Avon identity to play a central role in connecting Bradford-on-Avon, Bath, Keynsham and Bristol.

### 7.4 Locating creative energy

Technology and digital connectivity open spaces where networks can be located and developed. At considerable distances, we can share ideas, stories, templates, prototypes and even (with the assistance of 3D printing) physical objects. Fibre broadband combined with computer-aided design enables the frictionless development of products. However, without physical locations to focus creative energy, these interactions risk dispersed impact and limited visibility.

The Studio at Palace Yard Mews is Bath Spa University's city centre space for enterprise and innovation. Home to a fast-growing creative technology community, The Studio has successfully provided a physical and virtual space for creatives to meet, collaborate and develop. It enables the serendipity that people are hungry for post-COVID. It's also a safe space to fail, which sets it aside from other local incubators that focus on high growth. The Studio's Residents are creating projects and companies that are engaging local talent and providing a reason for graduates to stay in Bath.

Anchoring creative energy in geographically specific locations such as The Studio can contribute to people's cultural orientation in the city, enabling targeted communities to more readily contribute to projects and initiatives that seek to engage them. Creativity Works in Radstock and Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC) in Bristol are both examples of organisations embedded in communities where local people are deeply involved in the process of projects, from design to outcome. In this light, questions of where things are located as well as created assume greater significance, not only for the relevance and impact of projects, but also for their visibility.

Recent Bath projects like Little Lost Robot's 'In the Meanwhile' (also funded by Bristol+Bath Creative R+D partnership), 'This is not a shop' and 'Sinking House' act as visible markers of cultural narrative, allowing people to interact and respond. Little Lost Robot is currently working with B&NES Vacant Unit Action Project to secure an empty property in Twerton, one of Bath's most deprived areas, to host a new site for community-focused cultural production. These markers are like creative and cultural waypoints showing the direction of travel and are a key part of 'active narrative' creation.

While serendipity was severely limited during the COVID-19 pandemic, new ideas and opportunities, such as the vision for Weston Island at the heart of a Locksbrook Creative Quarter, have found space to emerge. During this time, we have heard people both trying to adapt to the 'new normal' and talking about 'getting back to normal.' Perhaps one of the most striking things about the pandemic is how profoundly it has challenged us and our notions of value. The promise of technology as a point of exchange became more apparent, and simultaneously, the dangers of it magnifying divisions and spreading misinformation loomed ever larger. In order to navigate an unstable future, we require a foot in both worlds – a hybrid approach – and the ability to pivot.

## 8. Conclusions: three creative provocations for Bath

### 8.1 Space for new

The idea of flow – of materials, of people, of ideas – plays an important role in the creative economy. The imposition of limits to this flow posed by multiple crises has invited new ways of thinking about how to maintain it – from online exhibitions to digital placemaking – but it has also drawn attention to what sort of values this flow is contributing to, what impact it has on our environments and how friction can allow us to look more closely at things.

Bath's infrastructure, like the infrastructure of most cities, guides the flow of people inwards. One participant mentioned that things tend to get "gummed up in the middle." The centre is predominantly where interactions and friction occur, but the weight of the heritage that defines the centre can push people and ideas out as easily as draw them in. Restructuring Bath around multiple creative pools or local centres of gravity might contribute to a more even distribution of the value that creativity and the creative economy provide.

In Bath, hidden and undeveloped neighbourhood locations, such as Weston Island, are rare. Focussing on certain types of value reinforces inequity in knowledge and value exchange. While areas such as Twerton, Whiteway, Foxhill, Radstock and Midsomer Norton are often seen as needing rehabilitation, recognition of their wider – not merely economic – value may allow for relationships built on mutual trust and respect centred on local community empowerment and wealth-building. As pointed out in the interviews, "there's a limited opportunity for new, different voices to come into leadership roles [in the creative industries]". Building new connections

and pathways to encourage active participation from a diverse range of creative industry leaders is essential to the future relevance and success of the sector and the wider city.

#### Creative provocation #1:

*Bath is patterned by its world-leading success in heritage and tourism but creative communities struggle to find locations where they can take root and grow. Can Bath enable new spaces for cultural production in communities outside the city centre? Can the city find a way to secure Weston Island and deliver the vision for Bath Art Depot? With the development of a new creative quarter in Locksbrook Road, can Bath challenge expectations and stereotypes by providing space for creative and cultural transition?*

By understanding the inherent value of an area and its ability to facilitate change, Bath may be able to move from a singular cultural identity to a pluralistic city which celebrates the old and the new, providing space for creative communities to flourish

### 8.2 Creativity, health and wellbeing

The climate and ecological emergencies, COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical instability and renewed dialogue around race and inequalities are challenging how we view, think about and act with and towards the world. Perhaps the 'challenge' in the Bath Challenge partly stems from the fact that we have reached such a crossroads – though many would argue that difficult conversations around value, creativity, culture and policy have been ongoing for decades.

Creativity is about problem-solving as much as it is about the technical ability involved in producing a work of art, project or product, and navigating a crossroads forces us to consciously choose a route. The Bath Challenge research highlights the important role creativity plays in overcoming barriers, helping to identify and explore possible new routes and pathways.

At the Bath Challenge opening event, the panel was asked to consider not just what makes a city creative but what makes it both 'healthy and creative'. The economic power of the creative industries is well understood at national and regional levels but the potential for creativity and health to drive the wellbeing of people and nature is less well explored. It was, therefore, compelling for the audience to hear how the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is embedding health and creativity into its strategic vision and plans. Our desk research also noted the ambition set by the City of York in its York Culture Strategy, 2020–2025 for the city to be "recognised nationally for its innovative work in culture for health and wellbeing, including social prescribing, which residents can benefit from throughout their lives."

With the number of individuals accessing mental health services increasing dramatically during the pandemic, creativity and culture can play an important role in allowing individuals to access routes out of collective and individual impasses. Bath's identity as one of the Great Spa Towns of Europe is not only constructed around leisure and recreation but also around the healing quality of the waters. Events like The Therapeuticity Festival have tried to breathe life into this neglected conversation, while projects like Stride Treglown's Waters of Bath and the Bath River Line seek to reinvigorate the central role played by water in the city. The potency of water as a metaphor is precisely in its ability to continue its flow despite obstacles. As a research method, walking interviews also played on the idea of unblocking things, the change in environment loosening mental inertia brought about by remaining static. Digital connectivity, too, has helped us traverse the distances between each other over the course of the pandemic, keeping us connected personally and professionally.

#### Creative provocation #2:

The economic power of the creative industries is well defined but the potential for creativity to drive the wellbeing of people and nature is less well understood. Could B&NES become a leader for creativity and health and wellbeing, building on its history as a spa town, as well as amplifying the existing University of Bath Beacon for Living Well and Stride Treglown's work on Bath as a Therapeutic City? Can artists and creatives explore what living well within environmental limits will look like, be like and feel like, and how government, industry, third sector, educational organisations and grass-roots communities can be encouraged and enabled to make the just transitions required? What more can Bath's creativity bring to this complex but essential agenda?

### 8.3 Strategy to retain and focus creative talent locally

West of England Combined Authority's (WECA) pursuit of funding for the construction of a cultural compact – “a common vision,” that creates “shared values, and...a framework for creative partnerships between local governments and cultural leaders in their respective community” (Simmons, 2019) – places culture at the heart of strategy. While funding is stretched, clear messaging about what is valued combined with working in partnership with bodies external to government could place the creative industries at the heart of BwNES's own recovery, whether cultural compact funding is granted or not.

Also significant is Bath Bridge's proposal for BAhub, “a partnership between arts organisations, businesses, the community and the Council to enhance and promote the local sector” made up of a rotating membership “to retain freshness and diversity.”

Despite these ambitions, MASH's work on the Bath Challenge highlights the difficulty of retaining creative talent locally. Graduates leave Bath for more affordable towns or cities where the cultural and creative sectors are more visible and celebrated.

Money and finance remain the most effective and visible ways of demonstrating value, unlocking spaces in which creatives can work. There is a feeling among many creatives who rely on funding for their creative practice that they spend more time writing funding applications than practising their craft. While funding criteria remain necessary for decisions about financial allocation, no-strings-attached grants and spaces might be a good way of stimulating creative processes and retaining creative talent.

Just who gets to decide where money is allocated is also part of the puzzle. Alternative

localised funding mechanisms offer a chance to democratise this decision-making process. Bath Women's Fund, for instance, is a collective giving circle that funds projects “empowering and supporting women and girls in the Bath area and beyond.” A creative industries fund could challenge the traditional notion that philanthropy is only for the wealthy by allowing local people to have a role in defining creative industry outcomes.

#### Creative provocation #3:

*The Bath Challenge highlights the important role artists and creatives can play in strategic conversations about place. How can those working with creative graduates and communities and those working on future civic strategy collaborate to build greater connection?*

Given Bath sometimes struggles to retain graduates, could a shared fund be created as part of a wider civic university strategy to place creative talent into key city projects and programmes at the formative stage to shape and deliver different outcomes as well as help retain talent locally?

In summary, while the Bath Challenge set out to explore how Bath's creative communities might become more central to the city, our research led us to a recognition that the challenge is also about how the city itself might become more relevant to these communities.

## Appendixes

### I. Summary of research methods used in the Bath Challenge

- Self-completion Creative Community postcards.
- Virtual and physical making sessions.
- Padlet.
- Digital and physical objects/art works.
- Exhibition and gallery talk.
- Review of existing B&NES policy/strategy.
- Exploration of wider theory on the conditions needed for creative ecology to thrive.
- Informal interviews with stakeholders.
- Walking interviews with stakeholders.
- On-line survey.
- Opening event – physical and virtual.
- Key-note talk.
- Live-stream panel discussion.
- Walking tour of Weston Island and exploration of the Vision for the Bath Art Depot.

### II. Materials used by MASH in making the installation

Plaster, Cardboard, PVA, Pigment, Emulsion Paint, Digitally printed fabric, Audio, MDF, Flexi-ply, Dowel, Printed Vinyl.

### III. Local strategies reviewed as part of the desk research

- Ambitious Together, One Shared Vision for Bath with North East Somerset, City Global Futures, (2021).
- B&NES Creative and Cultural Strategy, Bath Bridge (2021)
- B&NES Corporate Strategy (2020/24)
- B&NES Creative and Cultural Strategy Review (2015)
- B&NES Arts Development Business Plan (2014)



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