

# Social inclusion and SMEs: The case of creative SMEs in Hackney Wick and Fish Island, London

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## A B S T R A C T

Creative cluster urban policy, aimed at regenerating parts of cities in the UK, has been linked with ameliorating social exclusion in the extant policy literature. This is paradoxical given levels of exclusion within the creative and cultural industries in the UK. Moreover, this type of policy favours more publicly funded creative and cultural organisations as opposed to creativesmall and medium-sized enterprises including micro-organisations (SMEs) - those who primarily trade, and who make up the bulk of the sector. This is because creative SMEs have unique labour, organisational and economic realities which might limit their levels of social inclusion practice (SIP). Moreover, what SIP looks like for such an assorted array of organisational and sub-sectoral businesses, and how this benefits them, has not been accurately presented in the literature. If creative cluster policy is to deliver social inclusion (broadly defined) then it must contend with the business realities which exist for creative SMEs. This paper draws on research conducted in the established creative cluster of Hackney Wick and Fish Island (HWFIF) in London. Using an operational definition for SIP derived from the policy literature as well as descriptive and nonparametric correlation analysis of survey data, this paper investigates three questions. First, does SIP by creative SMEs lead to business growth? Second, does SIP by creative SMEs lead to business longevity? Third, what are the implications for creative clusters? By addressing these three questions this paper aims to shed light on the costs and benefits of SIP for specifically creative SMEs and how this affects the clusters within which they are nested. While data limitations exist, findings suggest that short term, immediate rewards identified as business growth, and analysed through annual turnover, are not imminent for creative SMEs that pursue SIP. However, longer term benefits, analysed as business longevity or how long these businesses stay in operation, are apparent for those creative SMEs that do pursue SIP. This indicates a positive impact for creative clusters regarding ameliorating social exclusion but could be markedly improved if policy provides appropriate incentive structures for specifically creative SMEs who pursue or plan to pursue SIP.

## 1. Introduction

Creative industries-led regional development has become a mainstay of urban policy since the early 2000s resulting in a furious race to develop 'creative clusters' across deindustrialising urban economies (Evans, 2005; Mateos – Garcia and Bakhshi, 2016). Creative clusters are mainly located within urban areas where creative and cultural organisations co-locate and where production and consumption oriented economic activity emerge as a result (Mateos-Garcia and Bakhshi, 2016). While there have been significant critiques of this policy approach (see: Campbell et al., 2019; Cumbers and MacKinnon, 2004; Martin and Sunley, 2003; Spencer et al., 2010), it continues to be propagated at speed in cities across the world.

According to the literature, the creative and cultural industries (CCI) have the potential to improve quality of life in cities. Through an interplay of different factors they are able to influence local governance, community involvement, capability building, networking, and social inclusion thereby having a favourable effect on local development (Sacco et al., 2013). This line of thinking has underpinned creative

cluster policy globally; however, significant critiques have highlighted the lack of social inclusion practice (SIP) within the CCI as a sector and thus the appropriateness of such policies for addressing social exclusion (Flew, 2010; Oakley, 2004, 2006; Pratt, 2010). Numerous studies have now emerged showing that far from being a meritocratic sector, the CCI is imbued with social and cultural stratification and exclusion based on race, class and gender (Brook et al., 2020; Eikhoff; Warhurst, 2013; O'Brien, 2018; Virani and Gill, 2019). Nevertheless policy makers in the UK and internationally treat creative cluster-led development as a panacea for both local economic woes as well as the alleviation of social exclusion (see: Bagwell, 2008; Evans, 2005; Isar, 2013; OECD, Noya, & Clarence, 2008; Sasaki, 2010; UNCTAD, 2021).

This tension materialises within, and bears down on, creative and cultural organisations within clusters. Moreover, since creative clusters are primarily made up of specifically creative SMEs - those organisations that do not depend on grant funding but primarily trade - the onus of what social inclusion for the sector looks like seems to tacitly rest at firm level. While creative and cultural organisations that depend on grant funding are incentivised to enact socially inclusive practice because

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their funding depends on it, the same is not true for creative SMEs.

This in turn opens up another set of difficult questions: First, the lack of clarity surrounding how to operationalise SIP for a sector as asserted as the CCI; second, whether or not SIP by creative SMEs is conducive to business oriented growth and longevity given myriad sector and labour peculiarities, and lack of policy support, which highlights challenges not evident in other more traditional sectors; and third how this materialises within creative clusters. While the need for effective SIP in the UK CCI is clear, what this looks like for specifically creative SMEs who make up a significant portion of the sector, and who are mostly co-located within creative clusters, is not.

This paper draws on research conducted in the established creative cluster of Hackney Wick and Fish Island (HWF) in London in 2018. Using an operational definition for SIP derived from the policy literature as well as nonparametric correlation and descriptive analysis of survey data, this paper investigates three overarching questions with respect to specifically creative SMEs. First, does SIP by creative SMEs lead to business growth? Second, does SIP by creative SMEs lead to business longevity? Third, what are the implications for creative clusters? By addressing these three questions this paper aims to shed some light on the reality of what SIP looks like for creative SMEs and the implications for creative clusters within which they are mostly based. Analysis of the survey data shows that short term, immediate rewards identified as business growth, and analysed through annual turnover, are not imminent for creative SMEs. However, longer term benefits are apparent for those creative SMEs that do pursue SIP, analysed through business longevity or how long businesses stay operational. This result indicates a positive impact on creative clusters regarding ameliorating social exclusion but could be amplified if policy provides appropriate incentive structures for specifically creative SMEs.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Social inclusion and creative clusters

Social inclusion is difficult to define and this is discussed more in the methods section of this paper. However for the sake of clarity social inclusion is understood as 'the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society—improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity' (World Bank, 2021). Employment in the CCI is characterised by stark inequalities relating to gender, race, class, age and disability (Virani and Gill, 2019). As Dave O'Brien (2018) has argued the arts and creative and cultural sector in the UK is not representative of the UK population. It has been found that inequalities are often significantly worse than in other more traditional sectors (Brook et al., 2020). While the lack of ethnic and racial diversity in the CCI is stark (Arts Council 2018; Hunt and Ramon 2015), class distinctions are also apparent. Brook et al. (2020) found that 18% of people working in the arts have a working-class background, and in publishing, film and TV this was only 13%. Gender inequalities also exist and are characterised in multiple ways. On the one hand, there are distinctive patterns of exclusion or underrepresentation that are contingent on sub-sector or field – for example more tech oriented fields are male dominated; on the other, there are marked patterns of horizontal and vertical segregation within industries such as within theatre or television or the music industry (Virani and Gill, 2019). In general, women are much less likely to be seen in what can be understood as the 'top' creative roles. The gender pay gap perpetuates this and is also worse in creative fields than it is in the rest of the economy (see ONS 2018).

Clearly the CCI in the UK has an inclusion problem, nevertheless urban policy aimed at regenerating areas of cities in need of redevelopment champion the CCI as a tool for social inclusion (Oakley, 2006) and economic development (Oakley, 2004). Oakley (2006) posits that:

In the UK, arguably more than other countries, the rhetoric of Creative Industries has been tied into political ideas about the links between

economic competitiveness and social inclusion. The stated aims for creative industry development have thus been twofold—to increase jobs and GDP, while simultaneously ameliorating social exclusion and countering long-standing patterns of uneven economic development (p: 255).

This is in part a result of the lasting impact of Richard Florida's seminal book *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002; 2010). His work on the creative city stands out as the policy exemplar regarding combining creative economy, the city, social inclusion, and local development and how creative clustering of the creative class achieves this. While being maligned as reductive and not representing the realities of power and privilege (Peck, 2005) – which he acknowledges in more recent work (Florida, 2017) – Florida's policies still abound globally (see: Della Lucia and Trunfio, 2018; de Figueiredo, 2019; Sasaki, 2010). Importantly while Florida's work remains influential in policy circles, in the UK the reality behind CCI-led place-based regeneration is different and policy lags behind this reality.

Andy Pratt (2010) identifies four typologies in the UK none of which fits into the Creative City/Class model discussed by Florida. These are: One off-mega projects, associated with a single event (such as the Olympics or city wide Expos); flagship developments, where normally a building is the cultural anchor of a wider urban regeneration scheme; social and cultural practice based upon community engagement; and, innovation and critical exchange, linked to economic and cultural practice and excellence. In these types of schemes social inclusion is assigned a preeminent role and becomes an important criterion to be delivered while these projects are put out to tender. Thus in these cases achieving social inclusion rests within the instrumentalisation of culture for consumption via involvement in 'cultural activities' which are provided or produced by creative and cultural organisations. Thus the responsibility of enacting SIP rests with these organisations. This produces a problem: while there is clearly a distinction between different types of creative and cultural organisations within the wider CCI sector (see da Cunha and Shiach, 2020; Holden, 2015), these types of schemes benefit those organisations that depend on grant funding much more than creative and cultural organisations who primarily trade. 'Cultural' organisations are much more oriented towards the arts and cultural sector while 'creative' organisations are more oriented towards business oriented ecosystems and have to navigate the vacillation of global market forces (da Cunha and Shiach, 2020; Holden, 2015). This partition within the CCI is reinforced by entirely different funding and financing models (see Holden 2015). Those organisations who depend on grant funding are able to bid for tenders, or become part of consortia bids including local authorities, consultants, and higher education institutions, that are provided through local and regional government and that cover the aforementioned typologies of place-based redevelopment. For many this is very much their 'bread and butter', and in most instances social inclusion is an output, a deliverable, that these organisations must show they can offer through their cultural provision. Tokenistic approaches to social inclusion becomes a danger here (see Foord et al., 2004). Nevertheless those organisations that do not depend on grant funding and who solely trade are left out of this incentive structure even though they make up the bulk of the sector in the UK (see Mateos-Garcia and Bakhshi, 2016). This is because policy assumes social inclusion is achieved by merely bringing creative SMEs into the fold, or because they assume that creative SMEs can simply choose to become more socially inclusive. These are not easily achieved and might be at odds with established business models for the CCI. More recently there has been an acknowledgement by the UK government about class inequalities in the sector (Gov.uk, 2021). While this is a positive step it reinforces the problem being discussed here, namely that creative SMEs are simply expected to become more socially inclusive without a real understanding of the labour and business realities that underpin some of the reasons for social exclusion in the sector (discussed later).

Some may question the need for incentive structures for creative SMEs based on the opinion that SIP for them is merely a choice. However

Oakley (2006) suggests that placing the onus on the creative industries in this way is problematic due to, especially, the patterns of informal hiring and career progression in these sectors which is indicative of the peculiarities that exist within this sector as opposed to others. Moreover, no studies exist which claim that social inclusion has indeed been achieved in this way through formal policy. In the meantime, inequalities become exacerbated as gentrification - and more increasingly studentification - intensifies the social and geographical exclusion of local populations within creative clusters.

## 2.2. Creative SMEs

Research has long showed the importance of SMEs to the macro-economy – they have a considerable impact on employment growth (HM Treasury, 2008; Lukacs, 2005; Madsing 1997, OECD, 2019; Rhodes & Ward, 2014). In a majority of OECD countries, enterprises between 5 and 99 employees account for more than 50% of total net employment creation (OECD, 2019). The CCI in the UK are made up of primarily SMEs (European Commission, 2013); and as of February 2020, the UK's creative sector was a colossal engine of growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its rate of growth was five times that of the national economy contributing almost £13 million every hour (DCMS, 2020). It employed over 2 million people and contributed £111.7 billion to the economy (Virani and Blackwood, 2021). For the purpose of this research creative SMEs are identified as those organisations that are: registered as companies limited by shares or sole traders, primarily trade, and have between approximately 0 and 100 employees – these definitions are derived from previous work in this area (see Pratt and Virani, 2015).

While there are different articulations of what constitutes creative SMEs, recent work has shown that there are aggregated characteristics that are similar across sub-sectoral types (Pratt and Virani, 2015). Creative SMEs have specific particularities which require a different policy approach than SMEs from other sectors (Pratt and Virani, 2015) and which also lay bare the vulnerabilities of running such enterprises. First is the proclivity towards project-based work. Teams are made up to work on projects, either drawn from within an organisation, or more commonly from freelancers (Grabher 2002a, 2002b; Pratt 2006) and projects can last anywhere from a few weeks to a year or longer. This leads to the apparent fragility of the CCI where firm births and deaths are a regular occurrence.

Second, is the diversity of sub-sectors and markets within the CCI. In part this is related to the range of product investment required for a product, and what resource is required. As Pratt and Virani (2015) point out the level of investment and the degree of risk involved may be enormous depending on the product (De Vany 2004; Epstein 2005), where the cost of making a film, for instance, far outweighs the creation of a photograph. This results in a 'winner takes all' character to markets and institutions (Frank and Cook, 1996; Caves, 2000). As such most cultural producers are organised in one way or another to produce a portfolio of equally expensive products that are of high quality, however success is not guaranteed. For instance, the ratio in the film industry is approximately 1 in 10; however, which of the 10 is successful is unpredictable (Pratt and Virani, 2015).

Third, in the UK the landscape of the contemporary CCI is primarily made up of four organisational types: freelance workers, charities/not-for-profits, small-to-medium-sized enterprises including micro organisations (creative SMEs) and large, often multinational, corporations. Within these organisational types are numerous legal entities that exist in order to make sense of their finance structure for taxation purposes such as: companies limited by shares, companies limited by guarantee, sole traders, partnerships and more (see Fleming, 2007). In the case of creative SMEs most legal typologies consist of companies limited by shares and/or sole traders. These legal typologies have significantly more risk attached to them regarding business survival than other legal arrangements because they depend on trade; and given that they make up the bulk of the sector they add to already highly visible

precariousness.

Fourth, the CCI deal with 'value in creation' (Pratt and Virani, 2015). It is impossible to predict the worth of products, artefacts, or performances before they occur because they depend on cultural contexts which determine their level of relevance. As such reputation and appreciation matters, which are shaped by those who determine the cultural discourse of the day and hence are able to influence the forming of opinions, for instance the media. Cultural production then is situated within an ongoing discourse that influences how audiences and markets for products grow, or not. When combined with the 'winner takes all' characteristic the challenges become formidable. In the end, they have to navigate a complex and emerging knowledge pool as they seek to alleviate these challenges.

In sum, creative SMEs in particular face a number of challenges and while the rewards are great the pitfalls are plentiful. The four aforementioned peculiarities above show that creative SMEs work in an environment that is highly variable and which is more acute at early stages of business development. Given this reality, value for money and time implications are high priorities which complicates the notion that SIP can simply be undertaken without any risk to their core business especially without immediate rewards or incentive structures being apparent in order to ensure a workable transition. This is not to say that creative SMEs should not pursue SIP, but that: (1) in many cases it might be easier to not pursue SIP given these constraints; and (2) the ambition to pursue SIP might not be within their power given the day to day realities of running their organisations.

## 2.3. Social inclusion practice (SIP) and creative SMEs

One of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (No. 11) is 'to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'. Additionally, 'urban inclusion' is further elucidated in global blueprints like the New Urban Agenda with a tagline of 'Leaving No One Behind' (UNSDG, 2016). Moreover UNCTAD declared 2021 as the Year for Creative Economy for Sustainable Development where a clear connection is made between urban policy and the potential for creative and cultural industries led growth to lead to attaining specific SDGs (UNCTAD, 2021). Thus the amelioration of social inclusion through urban policies like creative-industries led regional development is a clear policy agenda. While it has been relatively easy to suggest that the creative industries leads to social inclusion, it has not been easy to suggest how, given the complexities of manoeuvring through these aforementioned challenges. In fact much of the literature that discusses social inclusion and creative and cultural organisations attempts to align with work on the social economy through the emergence of social enterprises and the CCI (see Comunian et al., 2018), and does not go into the necessary levels of granularity needed in order to articulate what SIP looks like for creative and cultural organisations whose financial structures often oscillate between grant funding and trading. For instance SIP might be relatively straight forward for a creative community interest company (CIC) which relies on grant funding and who can make a relatively strong case that their projects have fulfilled social inclusion parameters laid out in funding applications that are met if funded (see Arts Council England, 2021). This however is not straight forward for creative SMEs that are primarily profit driven and might understand social inclusion in a different way i.e. as a mechanism to increase the diversity of say the ethnic, class or disabled make-up of their organisation – which in many cases are their primary barometers for achieving social inclusion. For creative SMEs SIP often looks inward, to within their organisations whereas for creative and cultural organisations that depend on grant funding SIP is predominantly outward. The latter is thus incentivised through its financial structure to enact inclusive-oriented activity and meet funding requirements; however, the former has no such construct.

To emphasise this point, the UK government recently released a *Socio-economic diversity and inclusion toolkit for the creative industries*

(Gov.uk, 2021). At the beginning of this document the business case for diversifying an organisation's workforce is made, emphasising competitive advantage:

Diverse teams think more creatively, understand their audiences better, and deliver more innovative, inspirational products. Increasing socio-economic diversity gives your organisation a better perspective on what the groups you serve want to see, and a wider range of skills and experience to help you deliver for them (p:12).

The above outlines the critical need for creative SMEs to meet strategic aims which involve bringing in new ideas at firm level to help amplify and make more relevant cultural products for markets. The danger for not doing so is that creative SMEs become less culturally relevant as society becomes more and more diverse at multiple dimensions. However, this is not always possible given the sub-sectoral differences, labour challenges, different and often temporary working arrangements, and predisposition to being negatively affected by external shocks (such as the pandemic for instance) that impact on being a creative SME. For instance if a creative SME routinely works with freelancers, which is usually the case, the guidance in the toolkit is to widen their talent pools. Of course the reality is that pressing deadlines and chasing contracts means less time to invest in this type of activity. Most creative SMEs' founders and CEOs do not work in a 9–5 arrangement, they often self-exploit and work within what Gill and Pratt (2008) call the 'social factory' where immaterial labour takes up most of their time and switching off is rarely an option (see: Banks 2010; Harney, 2010; Lazaratto, 1996). As such this study has attempted to operationalise what it means for creative SMEs to enact SIP and test whether or not they garner any organisational benefit from such practices. Framing the question in such terms forces us to engage with the structures and realities in which creative SMEs work within.

Attempting to operationalise SIP for creative SMEs is equally problematic due to the vagueness in the extant policy literature. This is primarily because, regarding place-based regeneration policy, social inclusion is understood through the lens of cultural activity – or more specifically the cultural consumption of/or the result of these activities (Pratt, 2010). The logic here is that by making cultural products that the CCI engages with or creates (games, festivals, arts and crafts, technology) more accessible to people from different backgrounds and with different needs there is an assumption that social inclusion is somehow achieved. The problem here is that cultural consumption risks addressing social inclusion in a tokenistic way since it is within the production structure of cultural products that social exclusion manifests.

### 3. Methodology

While there are numerous studies that use a qualitative approach to examine the CCI and social inclusion, studies testing specific hypotheses at neighbourhood level with a viable sample of creative industries organisations are rare. Moreover a generalizable testable model for understanding social inclusion practice for the sector does not exist. This study used a quantitative approach in order to come up with a testable and generalizable model for understanding how social inclusion practice affect creative SMEs and by extension creative clusters. This paper examines the link between SIP and specifically creative SME growth, and longevity in a live creative cluster. SME growth is measured through annual income/turnover and longevity is measured through years in operation (see Virani et al., 2018). The main research questions are: (1) does SIP by creative SMEs lead to financial growth, (2) does SIP by creative SMEs lead to business longevity, and (3) what are the implications for creative clusters.

#### 3.1. Hackney Wick and Fish Island (HWFI)

HWFI is a unique and mature creative cluster in east London and emerged (as many parts of east London) alongside the larger forces of deindustrialisation since the late 1960s. The subsequent

deindustrialisation of the 70s and 80s took its toll on the manufacturing industries and their workers who were concentrated in London's east end (Hall, 1998; LBTH, 2009). As the city began to shift from an industrial to a post-industrial, service-based, economy the changes inscribed 'a spatial injustice onto its geography, with most service industry gains in West London and most manufacturing losses in the east' (Hall, 1998). Fast forward to the late 1990s and early 2000s, and where there is consensus, creatives began to congregate in HWFI in late 2006 and 2007 (Acme, 2011). At one point HWFI boasted the largest concentration of artists and creative people in Europe and in a time where many suggest that organic creative clusters are slowly disappearing from London due to unrelenting market pressure, HWFI's creative core remains. However, HWFI faces a number of challenges stemming from unsustainable rent rises that are pushing artists out of the area in large numbers.

HWFI is a useful case to examine in the context of what we are asking here as it exemplifies an area that was very much at the centre of creative cluster based regeneration in the UK context. Its alignment and proximity to the 2012 Olympic Games meant that it was supposed to reap the benefits of planning policy that has effectively been underway since the early 2000s when the games were in the early stages of planning. Alleviating social exclusion was central to this planning and in the end HWFI remains a creative cluster that still faces challenges with social inclusion as the findings later will show.

#### 3.2. Operationalising social inclusion practice (SIP)

The project used quantitative methods to investigate the research questions through a specially designed survey. The survey was distributed within the creative cluster in HWFI and received respondents from numerous sub-sectors and organisational types – more about the survey is discussed below. The literature review showed that there are no quantifiable examples of SIP in creative clusters and no international comparisons addressed by previous research. Moreover there are no UK based empirical studies that attempt to draw a link between SIP in creative clusters and organisational growth and longevity. It was necessary to attempt to develop a mechanism for capturing quantifiable and testable data through our survey. In order to do this the need to 'operationalise' SIP to generate testable data was evident.

The methods here were developed in order to support a bid to the Greater London Authority (GLA) for HWFI to become a Creative Enterprise Zone – A Mayor of London flagship programme beginning in 2018 aimed at supporting sustainable creative industries growth in six boroughs in London: Croydon, Haringey, Hounslow, Lambeth, Lewisham, and a single Zone across both Hackney and Tower Hamlets, namely HWFI (see Mayor of London, 2021). As the Creative Enterprise Zone programme is partly funded by the European Social Fund, the research team approached operationalising social inclusion as per the definitions used in the Social Inclusion Indicators for ESF Investments' report (ESF, 2018) and expanded the remit of enquiry from further policy literature, including the Greater London Authority's Social Integration Strategy (Greater London Authority GLA, 2018), UNESCO's Creative Economy Report (Isar, 2013), and OECD social inclusion measures (OECD, Noya, & Clarence, 2008). Tables 1 and 2 provides the main questions that represent the independent variables for hypothesis testing from the survey – see Table 1.

Approaching operationalising SIP in this way has advantages and challenges. The advantages were that the terminology used throughout the policy literature remained somewhat constant meaning that there was consensus on what the parameters of socially inclusive activities are for creative and cultural organisations – Table 1. For instance providing access to those with mobility problems, alleviating discrimination and providing safety and security featured highly in these reports. This allowed for the creation of specific questions around these areas of activity which could be associated with SIP.

The main challenge involved how to combine these parameters and

**Table 1**  
Operationalising SIP – Questions derived from policy literature.

Questions	Source
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice provide support for those with mobility problems?	European Social Fund/ OECD
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice provide health and/or wellbeing support?	European Social Fund
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice conduct outreach activities to communities or individuals who might not be able to access what you provide?	UNESCO/ESF/GLA
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice provide access to material resources?	OECD
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice provide training and/or upskilling for young people?	European Social Fund/ GLA
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice provide equal access to employment?	European Social Fund/ OECD
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice provide equal access to finance and business support?	European Social Fund
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice provide access to public services?	Greater London Authority
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice alleviate discrimination in any way and on any grounds?	Greater London Authority/ESF/OECD
Does your organisation's core offer or organisational practice improve local safety provision?	Greater London Authority

**Table 2**  
Operationalising SIP - Questions developed by the research team drawn from policy literature.

Questions	Source
Does your organisation make donations or other financial contributions for SIP for staff or other workers?	GLA/ESF/OECD/ research team
Does your organisation support staff to donate time for social inclusion?	GLA/ESF/OECD/ research team
Does your organisation make skills and knowledge about SIP available through any type of resource?	GLA/ESF/OECD/ research team
Does your organisation practice provide non-monetary resources for SIP?	GLA/ESF/OECD/ research team

develop questions in a way that would be pertinent and relevant to specifically creative and cultural organisations including creative SMEs from numerous sub-sectors – ensuring a wide breadth of respondents. It would not be relevant to ask a games company with three employees who also freelance and who work out of a co-working space whether or not their core offer or organisational practice provides mobility support for potential employees with mobility problems. However a question like this might be pertinent to an independent theatre company that perhaps receives grant funding. Thus while the survey included the aforementioned questions it also allowed respondents the option of replying as it pertained to their organisations' offer and allowed the meaning of SIP to be interpreted by them. For example what 'providing mobility support' can be understood as was left to respondents to decipher in whatever way it pertained to their business' core offer or organisational practice. The survey questions were worded in a way that would make the most sense to most organisational typologies, and also included four specifically designed questions that aimed at addressing the sub-sector disparity problem in order to use them as accurate independent variables – see [Table 2](#). These questions were the most open ended with regards to self-articulating the meaning of SIP for creative SMEs.

The reason behind combining, reconfiguring, designing and folding these indicators in such a way was because, as far as we were aware, no questionnaire like this has been conducted in order to 'measure' and subsequently operationalise SIP as it pertains to creative and cultural organisations in a creative cluster. Seeing as the policy literature has

been the most informative regarding providing a framework for specific parameters we decided to derive our questions from them – although as stated earlier, the policy literature implies a certain take on SIP that might not be relevant to all companies who primarily trade.

### 3.3. Survey and sample

The survey was composed of 76 closed-ended questions. It aimed to ascertain to what extent creative and cultural organisations in HWFI provided and/or benefited from activities that support social inclusion across a number of challenge areas as identified by the policy literature. These sections were formatted into a Likert scale survey for more in-depth statistical, nonparametric analysis. The survey also asked for demographic, sub-sectoral, and financial/business information.

The survey sample was  $N = 110$ , with a response rate of approximately 67%. Recent data by consultancy firm [We Made That \(2019\)](#) shows that there are approximately 400 creative and cultural organisations, broadly defined, in HWFI from a range of sub-sectors in 2018. The survey sample is reliable given that with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 8% the minimum required sample would need to be  $N = 110$ . This being said, our analysis had to control for organisational types primarily oriented towards grant funding and donations such as charities, and companies limited by guarantee as they are not defined as 'enterprises' according to EU commission definitions used here. They state that an enterprise is (1) 'considered to be any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form. This includes, in particular, self-employed persons and family businesses engaged in craft or other activities, and partnerships or associations regularly engaged in an economic activity' and (2) 'The category of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is made up of enterprises which employ fewer than 250 persons and which have an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million, and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 43 million' ([European Commission, 2003](#)).

The survey data was refined to include only companies limited by shares and sole traders which are viewed as creative and/or cultural organisations that 'trade' therefore constituting 'economic activity' and aligning with the definition of 'enterprise' given by the EU Commission. This meant that our analysis was limited to 42 creative SMEs. Given that the real number of creative SMEs in HWFI is not known we can surmise that while 400 creative and cultural organisations (including charities, CICs and companies limited by guarantee) exist in HWFI, over 50% are probably companies limited by shares and sole traders – which according to the literature is a consistent pattern across the creative sector in the UK ([Mateos-Garcia and Bakhshi, 2016](#)). That said if all 400 organisations were companies limited by shares or sole traders then the sample of 42 is viable at a 90% confidence level and 13% margin of error. Given that this is most likely not the case, the sample is still viable with regards to this study although results should be taken with a note of caution due to the challenges associated with deriving independent and dependent variables.

### 3.4. Dependent and independent variables for analysis

It is important to acknowledge the inherent complexity that exists when trying to think about what economic viability for creative and cultural organisations means here. There are a number of reasons why creative and cultural organisations are able to sustain themselves and how this success is measured in this context can be done in numerous ways. For the purposes of this research, we focussed on limited companies by shares and sole traders as mentioned which meant that organisations who traded were our target cohort – these are understood here as creative SMEs. The dependent variables derived from the survey are: (1) business longevity - which is length in years of business operation within HWFI and (2) annual income which can be understood as annual turnover. This has been done in other studies thus validating our

approach – especially in the entrepreneurship literature mainly concerned with SMEs (see Lee, 2005; ). In the research literature on entrepreneurship, management and organisations, the notion of ‘business survival’ is discussed within the context of ‘business longevity’, success, and performance. According to Lee (2005) ‘in order for a business to remain solvent, it has to not only sustain itself but also be successful in its venture’. Our independent variables were drawn from the social inclusion policy reports mentioned earlier with an eye to what could feasibly be operationalised – see Table 3.

These activities can vary tremendously as SIP has not been standardised for sub-sectors – there are lots of avenues creative SMEs can explore in order to enact SIP, if indeed they do. This might be seen as problematic, however the survey distilled and refined what urban policy understands as SIP for the creative sector in order to test its efficacy for creative SMEs regarding their economic performance, thereby testing whether or not SIP is conducive to growth and longevity. We acknowledge the limitations in this approach, and that for creative SMEs specifically SIP primarily involves inward processes of: recruitment, hiring and contracting, and collaboration. However this also highlights the limitations in the available policy literature as it too has not addressed the specific types of activities needed for creative SMEs to be socially inclusive while at the same time dealing with sector-oriented challenges mentioned earlier – any recommendations that have been made either do not apply or do not come to terms with what it means to run a creative enterprise.

### 3.5. Analysis and data limitations

Analysis of the survey material was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0). Descriptive and frequency statistical analysis was used in order to garner a baseline understanding of creative SMEs within the cluster. This included sub-sectoral and demographic information, mean and median regarding income/turnover and business longevity as well as to conduct normality testing to ensure our sample was viable - see Figs. 1 and 2. Correlation analysis was also carried out in order to test hypotheses that informed the research questions using the defined dependent and independent variables outlined above. For correlation analysis Spearman’s Rho non-parametric tests were carried out as is standard with ordinal data such as Likert Scale survey data.

While some argue that this type of analysis is of limited use with such a small sample, statistical literature around nonparametric tests for ordinal data show that a sample size of between 15 and 25 is the minimum required to conduct such a test (Bonett & Wright, 2000). This being said further studies have shown that confidence level is a strong marker for determining sample sizes in populations where

**Table 3**  
Variables for statistical analysis.

Dependent variables from SIP survey	Independent variables from SIP survey
Business Longevity – how long businesses have been in operation in HWFI	<sup>a</sup> Donations or other financial contributions for SIP in the workplace
Annual Income/Turnover	<sup>a</sup> Supporting staff time or training for SIP
	<sup>a</sup> Providing skills and knowledge for SIP
	<sup>a</sup> Providing non-monetary resources for SIP
	Mobility support
	Health and wellbeing support
	Outreach
	Access to material resources
	Training/upskilling of young people
	Access to employment support
	Access to finance and business support
	Public services access
	Alleviating discrimination
	Improving local safety provision

<sup>a</sup> Questions designed by the research team.

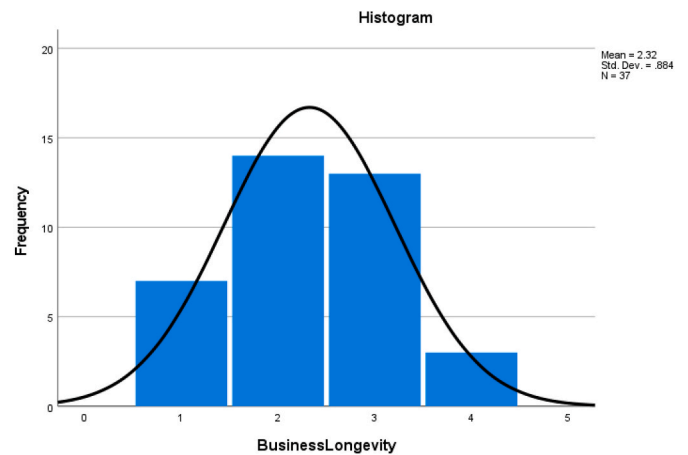


Fig. 1. Business longevity.

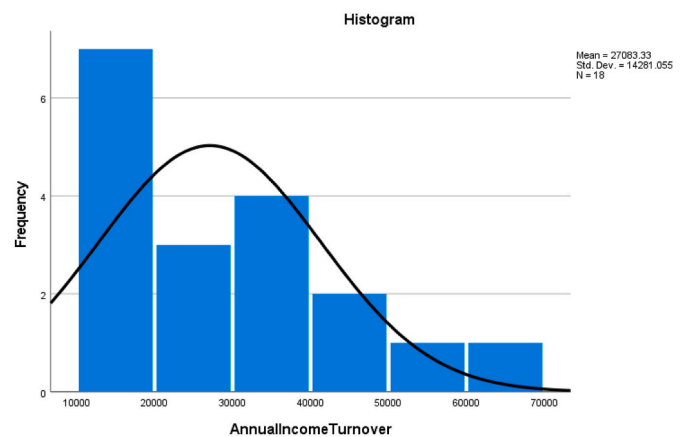


Fig. 2. Annual Income/turnover.

nonparametric tests can be used for analyses (Caruso & Cliff, 1997). Moreover in the medical literature this case is also argued (Gardner & Altman, 1986). Ideally a higher respondent number would have been beneficial. Limitations of the dataset exist with regards to specifically income/turnover given that only 18 of the 42 creative SMEs answered this specific question. While this affects the outcome of analysis generated through looking at income/turnover, the results can be viewed as reliable with a 90% confidence level and 15% margin of error. Business longevity was answered by 37 out of 42 respondents meaning results are reliable with a 95% confidence level and 6% margin of error and both are normally distributed.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Demographic overview of the creative cluster in HWFI

Descriptive statistics of the entire survey N = 110 respondents including organisations that are not companies limited by shares or sole traders shows that most respondents are: between the ages of 30–40, white, British and European, and relatively middle aged. Gender make up breaks down as fairly even and data on disability was not gathered which is a limitation. These are not new findings with regards to creative clusters and supports findings from other studies about the lack of ethnic and social diversity in the creative and cultural sector (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). Thus when it comes to whether or not creative and cultural organisations in HWFI are inclusive with regards to their internal organisational make up, the answer is no because they exhibit homogeneity across the demographic board – see Table 4.

**Table 4**  
Demography of HWFI creative and cultural organisations N = 110.

Age	National identity	Gender	Ethnicity
18–29	9.86%	British	52.05%
30–40	57.75%	English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish	10.96%
41–50	18.31%	EU Citizen	24.66%
51–60	9.86%	Prefer not to say	6.85%
61+	4.23%	Other (please describe)	5.48%
		Male	51.43%
		Female	47.14%
		Trans	0.00%
		Non-binary	1.43%
		Prefer not to say	0.00%
		White	79.17%
		Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	8.33%
		Asian/Asian British	5.56%
		Black, African, Caribbean, Black British	4.17%
		Other	2.78%

4.2. Overview of companies limited by shares and sole traders in HWFI

Sub-sectoral breakdown of creative SMEs identified as companies limited by shares and sole traders in HWFI shows us that most economic activity occurs within design and advertising with significant activity in Film and TV – see Figs. 3 and 4. Demographic breakdown mimics the breakdown for all survey respondents.

4.3. Spearman’s Rho correlation analysis

Only statistically significant results are presented here. Spearman’s Rho tests show a negative inverse statistically significant relationship between providing equal access to employment and income/turnover (SME growth) – Table 5. This can be understood as a tension between the provision of equal access to employment and SME growth. Equal access to employment can be understood in a number of ways however respondents were asked whether their core offer or organisational practice provided equal access to employment.

Spearman’s Rho tests shows a positive relationship between business longevity and donations or financial costs associated with SIP – Table 5. This can be understood as a relationship where how long an SME has been in operation and their expenditure on what they deem as SIP are moderately positively correlated. The question asked whether or not an organisation’s core offer or organisational practice makes donations or other financial contributions for SIP for staff or other workers. A positive correlation here might signify that long term investment into SIP benefits creative SMEs with regards to their survivability.

Spearman’s Rho tests shows a positive relationship between business longevity and non-monetary resources for SIP. The question posed whether or not an organisation’s core offer or organisational practice provides non-monetary resources for SIP?

5. Discussion

This paper examined the link between SIP and specifically creative SME growth and longevity in the creative cluster of HWFI. The main research questions are: (1) does SIP by creative SMEs lead to financial growth, (2) does SIP by creative SMEs lead to business longevity, and (3) what are the implications for creative clusters. Data limitations have

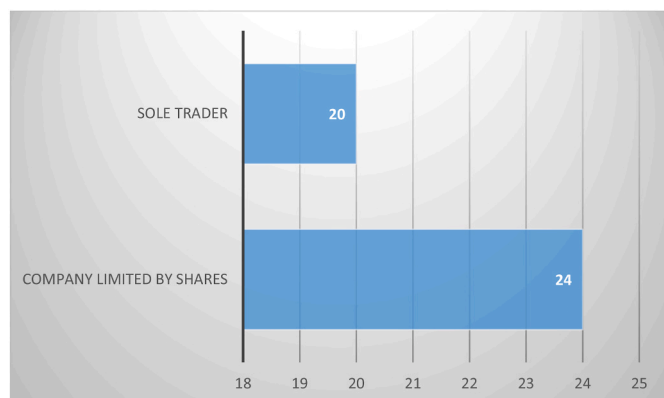


Fig. 3. Count of Creative SMES - companies limited by shares and sole traders.

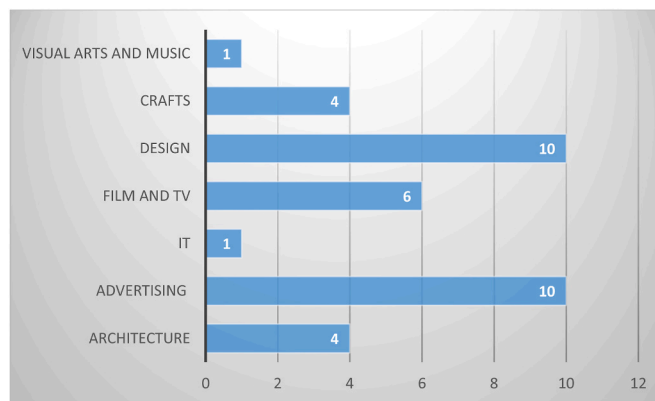


Fig. 4. Sub-sectoral breakdown of Creative SMEs in HWFI.

**Table 5**  
Significant correlation between dependent (DV) and independent (IV) variables.

	Employment Support (IV)	Donations and Financial costs associated with SIP (IV)	Non-monetary resources for SIP (IV)
Business Longevity (DV)	-.182	.446**	.359*
Income/Turnover (DV)	-.491*	-.399	-.030

\*Significant at 0.05.  
\*\*Significant at 0.01.

been acknowledged.

5.1. SIP and creative SME growth

Growth here was measured using annual turnover/income as the dependent variable. Findings showed no significant correlations with any of the independent variables used except for equal access to employment. There was a weak inverse correlation between these two variables which can be interpreted in a number of ways; however, what is clear is that the data shows a cost associated with providing equal access to employment. Equal access to employment here can be understood as the hiring/contracting practices of creative SMEs. While the literature shows that most SMEs will incur costs associated with employment this usually does not impact on their bottom line because they are usually planned for – this is easier to do in more traditional sectors where income is more reliable (Abraham et al., 2015). What is more likely in this case revolves around the realities of what employment looks like for creative SMEs. In most cases creative SMEs rarely go above 3 to 5 employees and those who are newly employed are usually in short term positions or freelancing contracts in order to bring projects to completion. In most cases creative SMEs work with freelancers on a given project and therefore SIP would entail broadening out the pool of labour which they usually use in order to expand the number of people that they work with. If there are costs associated with working with

people that firms usually work with then it is easy to conclude that there is an additional burden of cost in order to develop new working relationships. This is one of the reasons seasoned freelancers are used by the same organisations multiple times, they can often 'hit the ground running' and already have an established relationship. Another persistent problem in the CCI is freelancer burnout, which adds additional costs if projects are not completed on time and if hiring has to take place midway through a project.

This type of churn impacts on annual turnover where, in many cases, they cannot be planned for as projects are taken on as they come in, their frequency not being dependable. Oakley (2006) suggests that the patterns of informal hiring and career progression in these sectors for firms is highly volatile and the analysis here reflects this observation. When translated to how this impacts SIP we can surmise that the pressures and strain of working in this way might de-prioritise SIP as formal hiring practice for creative SMEs. This of course translates across sub-sectors for those organisations who solely trade and might be different for those dependent on grant funding where social inclusion must be an output of activity.

As a result, and with data limitations being acknowledged, we can suggest that a strong case for SIP leading to SME growth in terms of turnover or annual income is not apparent - due in part to the peculiarities of working in the CCI. More often than not SMEs will look for the most efficient way to bring their projects to completion and thereby rely on a freelance labour pool that is both nearby and already in a working relationship. These pools of labour are usually found in the creative cluster where creative SMEs are located and thus if these clusters are not socially inclusive neither will the result of any hiring practices conducted by creative SMEs. This perpetuates a cycle which if not addressed through policy has little chance of changing.

### 5.2. SIP and creative SME business longevity

Business longevity here was measured as how many years each company have been in operation in HWFI. In this case there were moderate positive correlations in two areas: (1) donations or other financial contributions for SIP for staff or other workers; and (2) the provision of non-monetary resources for SIP. In conjunction both of these independent variables show that an investment into SIP for creative SMEs might have long term benefits with respect to business longevity. This might be because longer lived businesses are more likely to provide support for social inclusion practice. Perhaps with regards to policy stable firms are able to play a key/specific role in this area within the cluster. Moreover the identification of more stable firms that would like to pursue SIP but are constrained by market factors might be the first point of contact for policy intervention. This being said, more work is needed to iron out exactly what these activities entail.

### 5.3. SIP and implications for creative clusters

While correlation analysis shows weak and moderate statistically significant relationships between certain SIP and business longevity it potentially reiterates the importance of networks within creative clusters. Most creative clusters have numerous communities and micro-communities which afford creative SMEs various advantages and benefits through networks and ecosystems - this is one strategy to ameliorate the effects of unpredictable market forces. Through sharing resources and investing into the firm SIP becomes a means to gain some form of stability for the larger community as opposed to just at firm level. Creative clusters thrive on amplifying their identity (Virani et al., 2020), which creative businesses sometimes inscribe onto their products to provide the necessary cultural capital and authenticity required to prove the quality of what they produce. By investing into SIP and by sharing non-monetary resources (such as space, equipment, materials, knowledge etc.) they ensure that the ecosystem benefits which keeps their 'brand' alive and most importantly, relevant. Thus some SIP can

have long term benefits for creative SMEs, however this is contingent on a number of other variables within the cluster that are not dealt with in this paper. Whether this translates into a socially inclusive creative cluster is still not clear. As Oakley (2006) suggests the effects of gentrification on creative industry working and living space has a deleterious effect on the stability of these places, which is needed as a platform if policy is serious about ameliorating social exclusion in production processes within creative clusters. Thus the components are there but as always it is market forces that might be the largest threat, and again, this is paradoxical given that policy believes in a seamless bivariate relationship between alleviating social exclusion and economic opportunity.

## 6. Conclusion

While limitations exist regarding the sample size and the design of independent and dependent variables as discussed in the methods section this study provides a viable account and analysis of the reality facing creative SMEs in the UK and their proclivity towards the pursuit of SIP. It is believed that the model for this study is transferrable across different creative clusters in the UK and beyond and it would recommend further studies of this type in order to create comparative analyses across different geographical locations. According to the data analysis SIP for creative SMEs within HWFI - which is predominantly made up of white middle class businesses - provides a mixed picture when it comes to business longevity and growth. What is perhaps emerging through the data is that immediate rewards such as income or annual turnover are not apparent through SIP (as defined here) for creative SMEs. Instead a cost is associated with these activities which can have a negative impact on creative SMEs. However, on a more positive note, investing time and resources into SIP (broadly defined) might be able to deliver longer term benefits for these businesses. This makes sense given the need to keep products relevant and open to as wide a market as possible.

This implies that SIP by creative SMEs is indeed a complex process contingent on numerous factors such as: organisational type, sub-sector, and the proclivity towards social inclusion practice. This shows that the peculiarities of the CCI throw up challenges to enacting SIP which has implications for clusters. First, as we have established creative SMEs rely on freelance labour which is determined by the clusters that they are embedded within meaning that the pool of labour available for such work determines levels of inclusion. Creative SMEs thrive on differentiating their products from other competitors which opens the door automatically to workers from different perspectives, thus inclusion is implied in numerous ways and through levels of agency attributed to the creation of cultural products. However inclusion here is contingent on how inclusive the cluster is. Secondly, practicing social inclusion is itself difficult to define therefore creative SMEs are faced with making their own decisions about what social inclusion means to their particular businesses given their particular inclination towards such practices.

All of this translates to the fact that creative SMEs are both hamstrung by available labour as well as in need of workers with different knowledge, experiences and perspectives. They need to be socially inclusive in order to sustain their activities but might not be able to due to ecosystem or network limitations brought about by the very unique sectoral characteristics that they embody. Thus if policy is serious about inclusion in creative clusters then it must contend with creative sub-sectoral differences and what incentivises inclusion practice for creative SMEs within them.

This shines light on the need for policy to intervene here. Indeed if policy interventions are able to think through the amelioration of organisation, market and economic challenges that creative SMEs face then the amelioration of social exclusion could be improved within creative clusters. Such policies should not be aimed at promoting social inclusion as they do for publicly funded organisations but should take the form of ways to provide relief (not through loans) that might buy time for creative SMEs to invest in social inclusion practices within their



organisations. This has the added benefit of making them more competitive in an increasingly fraught global market as incentive structures are defined. More research is needed here to identify especially what this relief might entail for creative SMEs.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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