



# ‘KICKSTARTING THE DIGITAL COMMONS’ EVALUATION REPORT

Evaluation report of the CRF ‘Hastings 2066’ project

Neil Smith, January 2023





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## ABOUT RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

R4C is a socially responsible, employee-owned consultancy with an excellent reputation for innovatively creating constructive interactions between people and places. To achieve this, we focus our work in 4 areas:

We have developed a reputation for ‘bridging the gap’ between sectors and creating real, and long-lasting, results. In short, this means we:

- Act at Grassroots level – with our significant hands-on experience of engaging communities and civil society
- Support the Managers – bringing practical experience of projects, partnerships and improving delivery
- Work with the Strategists – by advising, evaluating, and supporting policy and strategic programme delivery.

We work extensively to support organisations in receipt of NLHF, GRCF and other funding, to deliver heritage and environmental projects, including a considerable body of work relating to monitoring and evaluation. This includes preparation of monitoring and evaluation strategies, working as ‘lifetime evaluators’, evaluation mentoring support, carrying out interim and final evaluations, and supporting legacy planning.

### The report author and the team

Neil Smith is a director of Resources for Change specialising in evaluation. He has a creative and technology background as the director of the creative team in a web design company. In his ten years at Cabinet Office, he led the Community Action / Social Action teams under three governments, developing and managing programmes such as the Community Assets and Community Organisers programmes. As such, he is perhaps uniquely placed to evaluate a project such as this. He was supported by Helen Fairweather, a team member with 50 years of experience in community development, community assets and community-led enterprises.





## INTRODUCTION

### KICKSTARTING THE DIGITAL COMMONS PROJECT

This project worked within the context of the wider Hastings Commons development and in the spirit of community-led regeneration, to enable local people and businesses to experience new and emerging technology as part of the development of the Creative Digital Hub at the Observer Building and immersive exhibition dedicated to The Who rock band. It was a partnership project led by White Rock Neighbourhood Ventures (WRNV) with the support of Cult.Brand Ltd., based on a funding application made to the UK Government Community Renewal Fund (CRF), held by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

#### The project’s planned aims and activities

The project aspired to achieve its overall vision through the following broad aims:

- Provide learning, life skills, inclusion and employment benefits to local individuals
- Benefit and inspire local businesses
- Support a group of local voluntary sector organisations

It planned to do this through three headline projects:

1. The creation and development of a Creative Digital Hub at Rock House, Hastings, with a range of technology-related activities, especially the pilot project ‘People of Hastings’, a 3D scanning project and exhibition, as a way of showcasing new 3D scanning and printing technology
2. The creation of an exhibition dedicated to The Who rock band as a way of showcasing new technology and an ‘immersive single’ using virtual reality technology
3. Support for the renovation of the Observer Building in Hastings, a large community and enterprise asset in community ownership

The main project activities included:

1. Supporting people
2. Supporting businesses
3. Supporting local VSO’s
4. Renovating space in the Observer Building
5. Public engagement in the 3D scanning project (‘People of Hastings’) as a test project for future CDH activity

The assets and resources used to achieve the project’s aims and deliver the projects and activities included:

1. £636,000 from the UK Government Community Renewal Fund
2. Additional value leveraged by the project partners worth more than £1.2m. This included £478,000 from the Towns Fund.

## Project descriptions

### The Creative Digital Hub

The Creative Digital Hub (CDH) sought to explore how new Extended Realities (XR) technologies could be useful to local people and businesses. XR technologies include Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality (VR) and Mixed Realities work, very much showcasing technologies at the forefront of ‘digital futures.’ The activities have been experimental and the learning has contributed directly to the development of the DAH in the Observer Building. Activities included:

- A wide range of workshops with extensive community engagement – in particular the exhibition and related event in the Observer Building in early October, attracting 593 visitors, showcasing the ‘People of Hastings’ 3D scanning and printing pilot project.
- The large-scale SONICS event to showcase experimental and electronic music, hosted in the CDH / DAH space in November 2022.
- Involving students in knowledge transfer through the Zine project with Hastings College.
- Engaging vulnerable children through the CDH, working with East Sussex County Council, covering a wide range of digital behaviours and developing ‘tech ambassadors.’
- Employing and supporting ‘Kickstarters’ placements
- Fully renovating new spaces at the Observer Building for the future CDH, with jobs secured and safeguarded.
- Completing organisation membership of the CDH club and hold a learning exchange event as a key learning legacy for the future with local organisations.
- Scanning local businesses and buildings to create online digital tours. This will provide benefit to local businesses and organisations seeking to promote the area, their businesses and any new products or services.

### The Who Exhibition

Contributing to the digital futures theme, the exhibition showcased live-streamed Virtual Reality technology in the context of a cultural experience, demonstrating the potential of VR technology to change the way in which we engage with music, local and cultural history. Activities included:

- Renovation of previously long-disused spaces in St Andrew’s Mews with the potential future use of the building as an exhibition space for local and other artists.
- Increasing the profile of Hastings as a place for innovation, building on the legacy of John Logie Baird and Alan Turing as pioneering scientists.
- Increasing footfall to Hastings from surrounding areas and from London.
- Supporting new businesses, new products to market, innovation plans and jobs.
- Refining innovation plans across new business and products that have emerged from the project.

### Support of renovation of the Observer Building

About 10% of the grant funding was allocated to supporting the renovation of the Observer Building. This money was used to support the renovation of the mezzanine floor in the building, creating a space for project-related and other activities. The funding was vital to the completion of renovation works to this part of the building, and so whilst this might appear a minor part of the project, the long-term benefit to WRNV and to the community will be significant and long-lasting. The space will be crucial to enabling more and better activities for the benefit of local communities and businesses.

### Project partners

The partners worked together whilst focusing on discrete projects and activities, with WRNV as the contract holder and the organisation which delivered the CD Hub and activities, and the renovation of the Observer Building. Cult.Brand leading a group of organisations to develop and deliver the exhibition celebrating The Who and related support to businesses.

### White Rock Neighbourhood Ventures (WRNV)

White Rock Neighbourhood Ventures Ltd describe themselves as a locally rooted social enterprise developer which ‘transforms difficult and derelict buildings into capped-rent homes and workspaces, creating affordable space for living, working, wellbeing, learning, leisure and community action.’ WRNV are also part of a wider collection of organisations that work with the L&L charity and Hearts of Hastings Community Land Trust.

### Cult.Brand (CB)

Cult.Brand describe themselves as a cultural and creative enterprise, aiming to ‘build bridges between culture, brands and their audiences.’ They provide a full portfolio of brand marketing & communications services, specialising in cultural programming and publicity. Cult.Brand led the development of The Who exhibition, including the renovation of the space at St Andrew’s Mews, and provided support to local businesses. Led by Hector Proud, Cult.Brand worked closely with Rory Scott of AudioVisceral and Bee Hepworth of Mobile Art Disco to develop the exhibition.

### Additional supporting partners

#### ZEROH

Creative Directors for the Digital Arts Hub, a creative business based in the Trinity Triangle, Hastings. ZEROH provide art, creative direction and content for music, film, gaming, TV and print by way of design, animation, video and illustration. They also produce public art works, prints and Events.

#### Visual Skies

Visual Skies is a collection of studios which provides ‘virtualisation’ services, including LIDAR, drones and 3D scanning. Led by Joseph Steele, their knowhow was vital to the development of the Virtual Reality part of The Who exhibition.



## Timings

The project was to run from June 2021, but approval and activity was delayed until November 2021 as the government reconsidered its commitment to the grant scheme. The end date was subsequently extended until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2022.

## Project Funder – Community Renewal Fund

This project was funded by the UK Government through the UK Community Renewal Fund. The UK Community Renewal Fund is a UK Government programme for 2021/22. This aims to support people and communities most in need across the UK to pilot programmes and new approaches to prepare for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. It invests in skills, community and place, local business, and supporting people into employment. For more information, visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus>

It was also supported by Historic England through the Trinity Triangle Heritage Action Zone (TTHAZ). The beginnings of this project were supported by funds from the TTHAZ and they will play a role in developing the legacy of the CRF-funded project.

## Grant Fund Agreement (GFA) outputs

The ‘Hastings 2066 Digital Commons - Kickstarting the Digital Hub’ project was required to report against the following outputs as part of the grant agreement for the Community Renewal Fund. Performance to the end of the funded period (31<sup>st</sup> December 2022) is shown alongside the targets and a positive or (negative) variance in the final column.

Output name	Target	Total delivered to end of December 2022	Variance
People - Economically Inactive	150	140	36
People – Unemployed	118	130	
People – Employed	207	241	
Businesses – Small	50	37	(8)
Businesses - Medium	2	5	
Businesses – Large	1	3	
Organisations - Private	53	45	(5)
Organisations - Voluntary Sector	8	11	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>589</b>	<b>612</b>	<b>23</b>

In addition, the projects were required to report against a cross-cutting set of non-contracted outputs, as shown in the following table. These are essentially the same outputs as above but counted against different criteria e.g., the figure for the number of people supported to participate in education consists of the number of people engaged and listed in the GFA table above who were economically inactive, unemployed or employed.

Output name	Target	Total delivered to end of December 2022	Variance
# Of people supported to participate in education	475	370	36
# Of people supported to engage in life skills		138	
# People with improved social inclusion		3	
# People with reduced social barriers		0	
# Of businesses receiving non-financial support	53	45	

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# Of organisations receiving non-financial support	8	11	(8)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>567</b>	<b>28</b>

In addition, the project was required to report against contracted outcomes which were to be the result of support through the projects.

Output name	Target	Total delivered to end of December 2022	Variance
Businesses introducing new products to the market as a result of support	4	6	2
Number of new businesses created as a result of support	2	4	2
Businesses benefitting from knowledge transfer following support	50	40	6
Other orgs engaged in knowledge transfer activity following support	20	0	
Students engaged in knowledge transfer	40	76	
Innovation plans developed as a result of support	4	8	4
Increase in visitor numbers as a result of support	2,740	3,785	1,045
Buildings renovated (sq.m)	232	382	150
Employment increase in supported businesses as a result of support	11	11	0
Jobs safeguarded as a result of support	7	9	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>3,110</b>	<b>4,321</b>	<b>1,211</b>

### Assessment of output delivery

The outputs achieved by the delivery partners reflect a range of performance, with most targets met or exceeded and others yet to be met. Overall, the project has exceeded the combined targets for the agreed activities. Targets which the project exceeded included:

1. Support provided to 511 people who were employed, economically inactive or unemployed against a target of 475.
2. 76 Students engaged in knowledge transfer against a target of 40.
3. Visitor numbers of 3,785 against a target of 2,740.
4. 382 m<sup>2</sup> of building space renovated against a target of 232 m<sup>2</sup>

Targets which the project has not yet met included:

1. 37 small businesses supported against a target of 50.
2. 40 businesses benefiting from knowledge transfer against a target of 50.

Unlike many other projects where activity ceases when funding ends, there is a firm range of legacy infrastructure, assets and activity in place, with supporting funding, which will continue to deliver outputs and outcomes directly related to the original funding bid. The CRF funding has supported innovation and the testing of concepts with a high degree of success, with a strong legacy and further sustainable activity. The chief outcomes are that the relationships and structures are in place to continue to deliver benefit to local people, businesses and organisations.

## The development of the funded outputs and outcomes

The original funding bid was made by Napster, a tenant at Rock House, next door to the Observer Building and also owned by WRNV. The majority of the outputs were geared to a festival format and so were correspondingly ambitious e.g., to increase visitor numbers by 300,000. There is not space to reproduce the changes in the agreed outputs and outcomes here – the funder has the detail in any case – but it is important to note the effect that the original bid had on the project. Let’s take the increase in visitor numbers as an example:

<b>Original bid outputs, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2021</b>	<b>Revised outputs 31<sup>st</sup> November 2021</b>	<b>Revised outputs 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022</b>	<b>Achieved by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2022</b>
<b>Increase in visitor numbers</b>			
<b>301,000</b>	2,740	2,740	<b>3,785</b>

The figures in the original bid were based on the idea of holding a festival, drawing attention and bringing revenue to Hastings. Match funding of £494,000 was to be provided by Napster but they pulled out of the project. In the cold light of day, the original project was not deliverable in the time and money available, and so the figures were radically changed to reflect the potential attendances at more modest ‘studio and event programme’ and ‘visitors to exhibition’; this became The Who exhibition delivered at St Andrew’s Mews.

Arriving at the point where there were a set of agreed outputs and outcomes was a painful process, primarily because the original bid was not deliverable without support from Napster and a new partner had to be found. WRNV and Hastings Commons were asked to be project partners and to make the Observer Building available for elements of the project, having themselves made an unsuccessful bid to the same fund, focusing on the physical and community development of the Observer Building.

Unfortunately, this was something of a ‘forced marriage’ between partners with different values and outlooks. There was clearly an opportunity that both parties recognised, to deliver an interesting project which would benefit the people of Hastings, but there were significant ideological and practical barriers, all to be overcome in a short space of time. Significant effort was put into developing a workable project which government would still support, with the help of ESCC to facilitate the necessary change requests with the government. This put notable strain on the people involved. To their credit, most stayed involved, although some felt unable to continue and some relationships were badly damaged.

Out of what could have been a disaster has come three projects which have delivered valuable outputs and outcomes, against the odds and in the context of compounding challenges.



## The agreed funding and high-level project breakdown

The changes to the agreed outputs and outcomes led to the refinement of the agreed budget with the final budget lines ending up as follows:

Description	Value
OB core project management & CDH development	£125,673
Immersive studio and events programme (combined)	£160,000
Fat Tuesday Festival	£20,000
Exhibition	£175,000
Mar/comms	£80,000
Evaluation	£12,500
Capital contribution to OB costs	£63,000
<b>Total CRF funding</b>	<b>£636,173</b>

### Funding administration

The Community Renewal Fund was administered in East Sussex by the County Council (ESCC); this was one of a number of CRF projects in the County. The contract holder, WRNV, reported on activity on a quarterly basis and made a corresponding financial claim. ESCC paid out in arrears and were required to fund the projects in advance of receiving money from government. At the time of writing, ESCC had received only half of the funding due from central government, therefore carrying significant financial risk. The effects of the funding regime are explored further in this report; the risks were, in effect, cascaded to the grant recipients, the least able to carry these.

## THE CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT AND IMPORTANT DELIVERY FACTORS

### Introduction

This section outlines important background and context which influenced the project’s delivery, either positively or negatively. It is not an exhaustive list, but a summary of the main factors.

### Delayed decisions

The CRF was to announce grant award decisions in June 2021, but this was changed to November 2021, losing six months of development and delivery time. The project was subsequently extended, but the delay was considerable and a lot can change in six months, as explained above. For example, it’s possible that Napster might have stayed involved had the project started on time, thereby contributing significant extra resource to the project.

### Covid-19 and Brexit

As everyone knows, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the period since March 2020 was enormously challenging for everyone. Within the project context, lockdowns and social-distancing restrictions have meant that potential project activities were impacted until July 2021, with various social distancing restrictions in place until December 2021. The delay to the project timeline from June to November may have helped in this regard, but delays were not helpful overall.

Additional challenges then arose from the lifting of Covid restrictions in the UK and elsewhere in the world, increasing demand for materials and shipping at a time when transport systems were still in disarray, and when industries were still experiencing workforce shortages. Brexit compounded materials and labour issues, especially in relation to the building works.

### Funder payment processes and timing

There were lengthy delays of payments to the contract holder and in turn to the people they contracted with to deliver the project. This had a detrimental effect on the project and on the people involved and this is explored more in the report’s findings and recommendations.

### Partner relationships

As noted in the ‘development of funded outputs and outcomes’ section, the project required joint working by organisations with incompatible values, held together by a common desire to do something positive in and for Hastings. This meant that the partners largely focused on their part of the project and that opportunities for collaboration were missed. Relationships were further strained by the funding administration pressures. WRNV felt strongly that the delivery partnerships should be with local businesses, whereas Cult.Brand brought in expertise from London. This difference in approach brought further tensions and missed opportunities.

## EVALUATION METHOD

### EVALUATION OF ‘KICKSTARTING THE DIGITAL COMMONS’ PROJECT

#### Introduction / overview

Resources for Change (R4C) were appointed as the project’s evaluators in October 2022. For the purposes of the evaluation, we interpreted the overall purpose of the project as follows:

*“Within the context of the wider Hastings Commons / Trinity Triangle development and in the spirit of community-led regeneration, to enable local people and businesses to experience new and emerging technology, bringing to life a range of ‘digital futures’ for the people of Hastings.”*

As explained earlier in the report, there were three main areas of activity delivered in pursuit of this purpose: the Digital Arts Hub, The Who exhibition and the renovation of the Observer Building mezzanine floor.

#### Evaluation aims and objectives

The evaluation sought to objectively assess the learning from the project in order to inform future working and to comply with funder requirements. Broadly, the evaluation explores and describes the following:

- The project’s successes – what went well and why
- The project’s challenges – those parts of the project which did not go as well as planned and why this was so
- The main learning points and subsequent recommendations
- The main achievements
- The learning from the quantitative analysis of data
- The learning from the qualitative analysis of interviews and other feedback

For the funders, this report is in addition to any monitoring reports and information provided for financial claims, again with an emphasis on learning so that future engagement achieves better and more sustainable outcomes:

- The extent to which desired outputs have been delivered
- The extent to which desired outcomes have been achieved
- The potential legacy of the project i.e., what will remain once the funding ends

#### Evaluation framework – what difference has the project made?

The appointment of R4C as project evaluators happened relatively late in the project and so there was not time for the usual evaluation development process. However, we did prepare an initial evaluation logic model / theory of change to help structure the approach to evaluation evidence gathering. This is in the report appendix.

## Evaluation Report – ‘Kickstarting the Digital Commons / CRF 2066’

The task was primarily to collect sufficient quantitative and qualitative data to enable us to form a rounded view of the project’s achievements, challenges and outcomes. Fundamentally, we were concerned with showing what difference the project made to people, looking beyond describing the activity so that we can answer the ‘so what’ question. The data collected included:

- Quantitative output and outcome data provided by the project, largely through the monitoring reports provided to the funder
- Qualitative outcome data and project reflections from interviews with the project’s delivery partners and the local funding body (ESCC)
- Qualitative outcome data from interviews with organisations which engaged with the project in some way
- Qualitative outcome data from interviews with individuals who were project participants

### The interview questions

The interviews with delivery partners, organisations and participants were conducted through semi-structured interviews with the following questions providing the core structure:

1. What has been your role with or in connection to the digital futures project?
2. What do you think has gone well and why? Example?
3. What do you think has not gone so well and why? Example?
4. What would you do differently next time and why?
5. What has been the most significant project outcome, do far? Why do you think this?
6. What might be the legacy?
7. What are your thoughts on the sustainability?
8. Any other comments?

Supplementary questions were asked in light of the responses made by the interviewee.

### The Online Survey Questions

A survey was circulated to people who engaged with the various project activities, for example as attendees at The Who exhibition, or as participants in the ‘People of Hastings’ activity. The survey aim was to gather quick responses from a broad range of people. Respondents to the survey were incentivised to leave an email address agreeing to further contact from R4C. The intention was to arrange an interview with some people to discuss their responses in more depth. The incentive was a prize of a 3D Christmas-themed body scan and avatar creation.

The questions were as follows, introduced with explanatory text to explain the purpose of the survey:

1. Which project(s) have you experienced or been involved with? [choice of three – The Who exhibition, Digital Arts Hub, renovation of the Observer Building.]
2. On a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), how would you rate your experience(s)? [sliding scale for the response]

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3. Why did you give this rating? [free-form text entry box]
4. What was the best thing about your experience and why? Please select all that apply:
  - a. It was enjoyable
  - b. I learnt something
  - c. It made me think differently
  - d. It inspired me to do something new
  - e. I made new friends
  - f. I’m going to do a course
  - g. Other (please specify) [free-form text entry box]
5. What changes would you make, if any, and why? [free-form text entry box]
6. What stands out to you as the most memorable part of the experience and why? [free-form text entry box]
7. Any other thoughts or comments? [free-form text entry box]

Respondents were then invited to leave their email address in return for entry in the prize draw.

### The evaluation report

This report serves a number of functions:

1. To explain and describe the project and the activities.
2. To present what people thought of the project and its activities – what they thought was good or not so good and so on.
3. To present the distilled learning from the evaluation activities.
4. To present recommendations for the contract holder, funder and delivery partners to consider.
5. To share wider perspectives from the evaluation team, drawing on their considerable evaluation experience, involvement and knowledge of the arts and technology, and knowledge of ‘community assets’ (which is how the Observer Building could be considered).
6. Overall, to tell the story of the project.



## WHAT THE PROJECTS DID – SUMMARY OF ACTIVITY

### CREATIVE DIGITAL HUB (CDH)

#### People of Hastings

The CDH is the term used to describe the whole concept for this part of the CRF-funded project. Within this, the Digital Arts Hub was the vehicle for the ‘People of Hastings’ activity. This was a four-month community 3D portrait project by the Digital Arts Hub, a new creative technology studio located at the Observer Building. The aim of the project was to create a lasting record of the diverse local communities of Hastings in 2022 and also to open up access to new and emerging creative technologies for creativity, gaming, portraiture, heritage and interactive learning. More than 300 individuals, families, community organisations and businesses were invited to the studio to be 3D scanned. From these scans 3D printed models were created, viewable on mobile phones using augmented reality via a QR code and archived online as a permanent record at: [dah.hastingscommons.com](http://dah.hastingscommons.com). At the closing exhibition on the 8th of October 2022 (see photo), the participants were invited to collect and keep their 3D print.



The activity also provided opportunities for people to gain digital experience, knowledge and skills through helping with the project. The CDH has more broadly served as a platform for other digital projects and partnerships, such as the SONICS electronic music event and the Neurodiversity event in November 2022.

The following photographs were taken at the SONICS festival. See the case study section for more information on this activity.



### Level 3 Neurodiversity Festival 2022

Level 3 was a 2-day festival of playful media for and by autistic, learning disabled and neurodivergent people. The event included:

- An exhibition of video game art created by autistic, learning disabled and neurodivergent artists
- Walk-in accessible workshops where you can come and learn a range of different video game technologies
- Talks and panels with the artists
- A community-built video game artwork
- A retro gaming corner where you can relax and play some old classics.

See the case study section for more details.

## Meet the OBX

Meet the OBX was a two week-long open consultation with the community of Hastings where local organisations, businesses and individuals were invited to help define the future of the OBX and benefit from its ongoing activities – benefits that include: access to space, fast data, opportunities for collaborations, and the chance to share expertise and gain inspiration from each other.

## Virtual Triangle Project (ongoing work)

The ‘Virtual Triangle’ project aims to demonstrate how new imaging technologies can be used to promote local businesses such as cafes, bookshops, pubs, shops, and to raise awareness of the unique and distinctive heritage of the area, such as its history and architecture.

To do this, the CDH team are creating a large-scale immersive, online, interactive 3D re-creation of the Trinity Triangle area. The project uses low-cost, new and emerging techniques of photogrammetry to build a detailed three dimensional near-photorealistic model of the Trinity Triangle area. The final Virtual Triangle will be freely viewable online via a web browser.

Additionally, VR headsets will be made available to visitors at the Observer Building to view the project in VR. Viewers will be able to ‘walk’ around the triangle area on their computer or mobile phone, entering cafes and shops, browsing restaurant menus, and looking at the business’s website for purchasing goods. Highlights of heritage interest will be signposted throughout the Virtual Triangle giving insight into local characters, events, architecture and elements of historical interest.





## THE WHO EXHIBITION

The Who exhibition brought together a range of ‘traditional’ exhibition content with ground-breaking Virtual Reality (VR) experience which was developed specifically for the exhibition. This fulfilled the digital futures remit of the CRF-funded project, providing something both nostalgic and forward-looking for Hastings.



*Exhibition visitors experiencing the VR technology*



*Rooms from the exhibition space at St Andrew's Mews*





## Evaluation Report – ‘Kickstarting the Digital Commons / CRF 2066’

A long unused building at St Andrew’s Mews was renovated to create the exhibition space. The images above show how the space ended up; the following images show how the space began.



## RENOVATION OF THE OBSERVER BUILDING

Whilst this was the smallest part of the project financially, there have been immediate outcomes from having a good quality space which can hold a diverse range of events. Getting the space to the point where it is useable and accessible was a major task with a long history; the CRF funding has enabled an important ‘completion phase’ for a significant part of the building. The following photographs show ‘before and after’ views.









## WHAT WAS LEARNT

### MAIN FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION

#### Summary

This has been a good and successful project overall which:

1. **Delivered against the overarching aim of creating and showcasing ‘digital futures’** to the people of Hastings and the surrounding area. The project activities have brought this aim to life, and made this a tangible possibility for individuals, groups, organisations and businesses in Hastings and further afield.
2. **Raised awareness of Hastings as a place which has a history of technological innovation and innovators**, and which can again lead the way in relation to ground-breaking technology built on the foundations of effective community engagement.
3. **Delivered high levels of enjoyment and learning** for the people who engaged with any or all of the projects and activities.
4. **Supported impressive levels of multiple outcomes** which, in turn, should lead to stronger, longer-lasting impacts, especially if legacy activities can build on these outcomes.

There were some significant challenges which hindered timely delivery and the overall impact of the project:

1. Partner relationship problems resulting from mismatched values.
2. The timing of CRF funding payments to the contract holder, WRNV.
3. Ideological limits on who should be involved in helping to develop digital, commercial and community futures in Hastings.

However, the contract holder and delivery partners have delivered some strong, ground-breaking outcomes which have real potential for the future, both in Hastings and further afield.

#### Creative Digital Hub (CDH) / Digital Arts Hub (DAH)

The evaluation analysis showed the considerable potential of the Creative Digital Hub, both in terms of what it offers and in terms of how it works. It exemplifies the ambitions of WRNV to be deeply rooted in the community and to offer inspiring and visionary experiences, raising expectations and aspirations. Key learning points include:

- The CDH has built a broadly-based engagement platform with a wide range of groups, organisations and projects from Hasting’s communities. We think this will serve it well in 2023 as it strives to build on the success of the work done through the CRF project

*“The engagement with 300 local people and businesses around 3D art project. (Working with) very different people and organisations is a significant outcome for us.”*

- As such, the CDH offer is unique in Hastings, but it does not stand in isolation – the partnerships and connections it has built have led to productive collaborations

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- It has demonstrated technologies which were at the forefront of digital practice, solving a range of problems in order to make it work well and to make it accessible
- Associated with this, the activities have delivered hard outputs relating to training and employment, supporting young people to develop their interest in technology beyond gaming to encompass technology-focused careers, chiefly through the ‘People of Hastings’ 3D scanning and printing project
- Other activities have demonstrated the potential of the space and of the team as it looks to broaden its appeal in other creative areas and with a broad range of audiences e.g., the SONICS electronic music festival and work with neuro-diverse audiences.

*“The work of the CDH has shown how people’s lives can be changed when they are provided with opportunities and support.”*

- The work with Level 3 and with autistic, learning-disabled and neuro-diverse young people and their families showed them that they could have careers related to digital technology. This was a significant outcome for the people taking part in the ND event at the Observer Building
- The CDH has shown that ‘digital futures’ have and can happen in Hastings and that it has an important role to play with others in supporting these

*“The legacy in relation to digital tech for Hastings from all parts of the project is a great outcome.”*

The project was subject to similar delays and problems as the other parts of the project, with limited initial access to a suitable working space and difficult funding conditions.

*“Working in a building site was a challenge and we could not access the space we wanted to. We needed better space and lighting, but we worked around this.”*

### The Who Exhibition

The exhibition combined a range of content, including a ground-breaking Virtual Reality experience, in an unused space in Hastings which the project renovated. It demonstrated digital futures in a similar way to the CDH but targeted a broader audience. It attracted people, artists and entrepreneurs who might not otherwise come to Hastings, showing the town in a different light, reminding people of the area’s technological legacy. The main conclusions from the evaluation are that the exhibition:

- Helped to put Hastings on the ‘digital map’, linking to the creative and technological traditions of the town, developing and demonstrating a challenging ‘live stream’ VR experience in a contemporary music context
- Demonstrated the ‘Immersive Single’ idea, showing both a proof of concept and how we might consume music, video and audio in another ‘digital future’
- Demonstrated the value of collaboration across different creative disciplines, covering digital tech, music and exhibition curation

*“The immersive single concept worked really well, even if it was smaller than planned - it moved some people to tears. It put Hastings on the world’s digital map.”*



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- Made skilful use of renovated and unused space for the exhibition, ready for future use, and bringing attention to a quieter corner of the town centre – a useful additional outcome
- Brought media attention to the exhibition and to Hastings, making ‘digital futures’ a real experience and attracting people from outside the area
- Provided opportunities for training and experience for the project’s Kickstarter employees
- Created a visually appealing exhibition with a strong graphic identity

*“Aesthetically, the exhibition worked really well, beyond Hastings Contemporary, broadening the appeal of arts in the town. There is a brilliant mural on the end of the building which will endure.”*

The project was ambitious and attempted a lot of new VR development in a short space of time, whilst also developing an overall concept for the exhibition and renovating a space for it. There were also challenges in the relationship with the contract holder and funding delays which made things harder still.

*“The exhibition got scaled back and so merch (merchandise) could not work – it needed the larger venue (the Observer Building). It should have been possible to involve larger brands, but this could not happen because of all the politics (between the partners).”*

### Renovation of the Observer Building

The funding support for this part of the project helped to bring more of the building into use thereby helping to sustain the organisation. It has become an important local facility with the potential to support local businesses, communities and organisations of different types and sizes. The imposing building was a Hastings icon where up to 500 people once worked, now having fresh life breathed into it. The growing number and range of activities have showed people who came to the building what is being done there and have showed its potential.

Important learning points from the evaluation are as follows:

- The mix of capital and revenue came at a crucial time for the work on the building
- The works overcame significant challenges to create a large, good quality space, including dealing with the effects of a flood
- The power of good quality, community-focused physical space defines its potential to drive change in an area and the Observer Building is developing into a new icon for Hastings, housing and supporting digital and other ‘futures’
- The Observer Building, in our informed view, is on the cusp of becoming such a building, driving change and community benefit, leveraging its space in exciting and innovative ways

*“I’ve seen the ground floor and it’s great. It could be a huge asset for the town’s creative activities – I believe it will have a massive effect on the town.”*

### Main learning points from the quantitative survey analysis

An online survey was done to reach a broad cross-section of people who had experienced one of more of the projects, gathering 107 responses in a three-week period. The following list presents

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the main learning points from the survey. The qualitative, in-person interviews were consistent with these.

- Overall, 67% of respondents rated their experience as excellent, and 90% rated their experience as excellent or good, with 8% rating their experience as poor. Those rating their experience as excellent were in a range from 57% for The Who exhibition to 75% for those who experienced the renovated space at the Observer Building
- In addition, 34% of respondents rated their experience as enjoyable, especially those who attended The Who exhibition (45%). 28% said that they learnt something with the results evenly spread across the projects
- 14% of respondents said that they thought their experience had made them think differently and 10% said that it had inspired them to do something new
- Cumulative outcomes, where respondents reported more than one outcome, show that a third found their experience both enjoyable and that they learnt something, whilst 17% enjoyed themselves, learnt something and believe they think differently in some way.
- 90% of people who responded on the CDH / DAH and The Who exhibition, rated their involvement as excellent or very good, whilst 92% of those expressing a view on the renovated Observer Building rated this as very good or excellent
- 90% of people who responded on the CDH / DAH rated their involvement as excellent or very good
- 28% of people who responded on the CDH / DAH found their engagement enjoyable, 27% said that they learnt something and 18% said that it had made them think differently
- In comparison, 45% of people who responded on The Who exhibition found their engagement enjoyable, 29% said that they learnt something and 10% said that it had made them think differently
- The ratings for those commenting on the Observer Building were very similar to the responses for the CDH / DAH, with 30% who said they found their engagement enjoyable, 27% who said that they learnt something and 16% said that it had made them think differently

Full analysis of the online survey is in the ‘Quantitative Survey Analysis’ section of the report.

### Partnership working and the delivery partners

There was a challenging start to the project as the diverse partners struggled to find a way of working together. The project was not able to use the Observer Building as planned, there was a mismatch of values and worldviews, and there was missed potential e.g., the ‘People of Hastings’ 3D scanning and The Who exhibition Virtual Reality activities did not really connect.

### Funding regime

The funding process required three months of activity, then a report and claim at this point. It took three months for the money to then be disbursed by ESCC as they took the claim through their

internal processes. This meant that for the contract holder there was six months of unfunded activity, apart from some ‘catalyst’ funding early in the contract. This meant that suppliers to the contract holder were significantly out of pocket for lengthy periods of time. In turn, suppliers to these organisations and small businesses also had to wait for long periods to receive funds, with the same adverse consequences. Such organisations do not hold the financial reserves to fund activity and materials costs over such long periods of time. The funding administration requirements from government pushed the risk downwards, through ESCC (who were also required to carry significant financial risk) to the contract holder and beyond.

The evaluators have between them some 75 years of experience in voluntary, community and charity settings, as well as experience in the public and private sectors. It has been depressing to hear of the funding challenges the contract holder and delivery partners have endured as we thought that funding relationships had moved on from this style of administration. In our firm view, this is not how to secure good output or outcomes, and it is not how to do business with smaller organisations and businesses who do not have the cash to fund lengthy funding gaps, or the legal ability to borrow. The funding conditions, ultimately set by government, were largely destructive, not constructive, and they increased the risks to public money.

There were undoubtedly challenges for ESCC as they worked hard to mediate between the contract holder and government on the significant changes to the original, approved funding application. The delivery partners accept their part in these complications which did lead to delays. However, the remoteness of the ultimate funder further exacerbated the issues by lengthening the communication chain. It would have been far better to have been more engaged with the grant recipients in order that changes were better and more quickly understood. Whilst ESCC has a vital role to play in local regeneration, it might also have been better to have worked with a partner with more experience of administering such funding, such as Power to Change or the Lottery, whilst including the relevant local authorities to leverage further resources and strategic alignments.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our analysis of the learning in this project, we offer the following recommendations for consideration by the contract holder, the delivery partners and the funder.

### Build on the successes of the project, create a strong legacy

The project has achieved significant outputs and outcomes in all activity areas and the challenge now is to build on the legacy of these achievements. Funding is just part of the mix – it will also require WRNV, Hastings Commons and all the other partners to make the most of opportunities to build and maintain relationships. There is considerable potential in the concept of ‘digital futures’ which can bring together private, public and third sector expertise, energy and creativity. This should be addressed through the development of a detailed legacy plan which examines the relationships, money, places and purposes of the assets developed through this project.

### Learn the lessons from the factors which limited the outcomes

There were two main factors which had a significantly negative effect on the project:

1. The relationships between the partners
2. The funding administration

The funding administration is dealt with in the next recommendation. The relationships between the partners were challenging and we understand why, but we also believe that opportunities were missed to make more from the projects’ obvious overlaps and connections e.g., between the VR work of The Who Exhibition and the 3D scanning and printing project by the CDH / DAH.

There is real and considerable potential in partnerships which work across different sectors, not least as, in this case, there are often shared goals but different ideas on how to reach those. We recognise the challenges this brought and could bring in the future, but there could be considerable benefit for local businesses and organisations if some way of working together could be found. There are benefits for all in working with businesses and entrepreneurs who are based in Hastings, London and elsewhere – if you can learn from each other, you should.

### We strongly urge funders to engage closely with grantees as this is the better way to manage risk

A different approach to managing risk is needed and the funding requirements for any similar programmes in the future need to have a far more constructive approach to managing risk. The emphasis should be more on creating good outcomes, with risks managed as part of that process, and not the other way around.

There is substantial grant funding expertise available through bodies familiar with administering funds with the third sector, such as Power to Change and the Lottery. Their experience of administering funds, often for government, offers good value for money by working in ways which ensure the security of public funds whilst facilitating the best possible outcomes.

### Consider new ways of supporting young people into employment

The Kickstart programme was successful, providing important benefits to the participants (see the case study section of the report). DWP have not announced a further version of this, but perhaps there is some other way in which WRNV can work with local businesses, organisations and education to provide a supportive programme to help a similar cohort into work. The placements delivered through the project were meaningful and varied, and the young people had important support on a weekly basis which was invaluable. Replicating this could continue to help young people and to help the digital futures agenda in Hastings.

## THE LEGACY OF THE ‘KICKSTARTING THE DIGITAL COMMONS’ PROJECT

We describe legacy as what remains once the funding ends, and we separate it from sustainability, which is more about how the legacy can be built upon or maintained. We describe outcomes as typically being more medium to long-term in nature and as being closely related to the outputs and activities, whereas we see impacts as being longer-term and more closely linked to the cumulative effect of the outcomes. Legacy items can be both ‘soft’, such as relationships, and ‘hard’, such as tangible, physical assets with a probable lifespan of years, if maintained.

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We think this project clearly and strongly makes the case for continuing the work on ‘digital futures’ for Hastings and the surrounding area, bringing in the considerable creative talents of local people and blending these with technological innovations. The project’s vision remains potent and compelling. The ‘hard and soft’ legacy assets should be focused on to pursue this vision further.

We identify the legacy of this project as having the following ‘hard’ legacy items:

1. The creation of the CDH (to be the OBX) space and the equipment therein.
2. The renovation of formerly redundant space at St Andrew’s Mews.
3. The renovation of space at the Observer Building.

The hard legacy items alone only work if there are the relationships and funding to enable good use of the assets. This project built on and created a range of productive relationships which should lead to further benefits for Hastings.

We also identify the legacy of this project as having the following ‘soft’ legacy items:

1. The relationships built between the team at WRNV, the CDH and local partners such as ZEROH who have supported the development of the asset, and with organisations like Level Three who were users of the space and facilities.
2. The relationships with Cult.Brand which, perhaps, can be built on in some way. There could be scope to build a relationship with the (new?) owners of St Andrew’s Mews, extending the reach of WRNV and Hastings Commons to another part of Hastings which could benefit from fresh engagement and development. The space used for The Who exhibition could make a valuable ‘satellite’ location for further digital activities.
3. The continuing relationship with the Trinity Triangle Heritage Action Zone (TTHAZ), in turn supported by the Historic England.
4. The relationship with ESCC which could be pivotal in terms of linking to county-wide and regional opportunities, bringing the strengths of WRNV’s and Hastings Commons’ values to future community-focused regeneration efforts.
5. The practical learning legacy such as the organisation membership of the CDH club and holding the learning exchange with local organisations, and the project to scan local businesses and buildings to create online, digital tours.

The legacy potential of the project is further reinforced by the success the delivery partners had in leveraging additional resources into the project, as shown in the following infographic. It ought to be possible to continue this flexible and open approach to securing further resources to sustain the future activities of the CDH and the Observer Building.

ADDITIONAL VALUE

**Kickstarting the Digital Commons - Additional Value**

**£ 1,202,425**

**Cult.Brand**

Cult.Brand negotiated additional value from artists, designers, sound and tech specialists, and from team members to create significant extra resource for the project.

**£ 347,750**

Additional value

**WRNV**

White Rock Neighbourhood Ventures brought additional value mainly by leveraging considerable additional funding to help with the renovation of the Observer Building.

**£ 854,675**

Additional value

**Staff time**

Free time from Hector Proud (C.B) & Rankin Photography, greatly reduced day-rates from Visual Skies VR and other team members.

**£ 279,000**

**Towns Fund**

Additional capital funding towards CDH/OBX during the project - mezzanine and equipment.

**£ 478,692**

**Art, design & curation**

Discounted day rates / charges, commission from Dave Broian (curation), Studio Fury (design), My Dog Sighs (artist) and The London Police (artists).

**£ 39,000**

**WRNV Reserves**

Further capital match claimed during the period.

**£ 316,233**

**Hardware**

Discounted computers from Lenovo, donated amps from Marshall, speakers from KEF.

**£ 20,000**

**Heritage Action Zone**

Staff match funding, Virtual Triangle project matched funding, match to evaluation costs.

**£ 43,250**

**Resources**

Discounted vinyl printing, discounted images from Getty Images, licensing and albums free from Universal.

**£ 9,750**

**Volunteers**

40 students on Zines continuing volunteering, 15 students working on Virtual Triangle.

**£ 43,250**



## QUANTITATIVE SURVEY ANALYSIS

### OVERVIEW

This section of the report is based on the responses to an online survey which ran from 28<sup>th</sup> November to 16<sup>th</sup> December 2022. Respondents were asked the following questions:

- 1. Which project or projects did you experience?** Respondents were able to select the Digital Arts Hub / 3D printing, The Who Exhibition and the Observer Building renovation, or combinations of these as appropriate.
- 2. On a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), how would you rate your experience(s)?**
- 3. Why did you give this rating?** Respondents could provide a freeform text response.
- 4. What was the best thing about your experience and why?** Respondents were able to select all which applied from the following pre-set responses:
  - a. It was enjoyable
  - b. I learnt something
  - c. It made me think differently
  - d. It inspired me to do something new
  - e. I made new friends
  - f. I’m going to do a course
  - g. Other (freeform text response)
- 5. What changes would you make, if any, and why?** Respondents could provide a freeform text response.
- 6. What stands out to you as the most memorable part of the experience and why?** Respondents could provide a freeform text response.
- 7. Any other thoughts or comments?** Respondents could provide a freeform text response.
- 8. Respondents were invited to leave an email address so we could follow-up with a phone interview, with the inducement of a Christmas-themed 3D body scan and print.**

The analysis is structured around each of the projects and the questions, with evidence and quotes (see the report appendix). The analysis in the body of the report details the combined results for questions one to four. The qualitative (comment and feedback-based) analysis follows in the survey sections for each project.

The survey had limitations – it was ‘broad and shallow’ – and so we do not know why people responded as they did unless they subsequently left a comment or agreed to a follow-up interview.



## COMBINED RATINGS FOR THE THREE PROJECTS

### Response levels

The survey collected 107 responses in the following proportions by project:

Responses for the Digital Arts Hub also included responses for the Observer Building renovation in more than a third of cases. Responses for The Who exhibition included responses on the Digital Arts Hub in 10% of cases, and 3 responses for the Observer Building renovation. People who were involved in the 3D printing project and / or who attended the 3D printing ‘People of Hastings’ exhibition had an opportunity to see the progress with the renovation of the Observer Building at the same time, but generally people have experienced the projects separately.

The proportion of responses was dominated by people who experienced The Who exhibition, but there are sufficient responses on the DAH for the findings to have value. This is less so for the Observer Building renovation, but this was not an activity which actively engaged people through events, but which provided a backdrop to things they might have attended.

	Number of responses
<b>Digital Arts Hub 3D</b>	30
<b>The Who Exhibition</b>	61
<b>Observer Building renovation</b>	16
<b>Total</b>	107

The number of responses is greater than the number of respondents because some people reported on more than one experience.

## Overall ratings for the project experience(s)

Respondents were asked to rate their experience of the project(s) from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) and the combined results for the projects were as follows:

Overall, 67% of respondents rated their experience as excellent, and 90% rated their experience as excellent or good, with 8% rating their experience as poor. This is a positive and encouraging result.

As already explained, the responses levels were dominated by those for The Who exhibition where 57% of respondents said they thought the exhibition was excellent, and 90% thought the experience was excellent or good. The Observer Building had the highest overall rating but from the smallest survey sample. The responses for the Digital Arts Hub were also very positive with 70% of respondents said they thought the exhibition was excellent, and 90% thought the experience was excellent or good.

The more negative responses are fairly evenly spread across the projects and the reasons for this are explored below.

## Overall ratings for what people got from the experience(s)

Respondents were asked to select from a range of possible outcomes chosen as the likely and / or desired outcome for each project – the thing or things which were the best part of their experiences. The combined results for the projects were as follows. Note that the survey provided some options which appeared more applicable to one project than another, but they still got a response e.g., people thinking that the Observer Building had made them think differently. It would be good to explore this i.e., the relationship between people and spaces beyond the practical and physical.

Overall, 34% of respondents rated their experience as enjoyable, especially those who attended The Who exhibition (45%). 28% said that they learnt something with the results evenly spread across the projects.

14% of respondents said that they thought their experience had made them think differently and 10% said that it had inspired them to do something new. These are harder outcomes to achieve and so it is not surprising that the response rates are lower for these options. A more sustained engagement typically increases responses in these areas.

Most of the responses marked as ‘other’ related to The Who exhibition, with the balance of comments largely relating to memories being stirred, but also one comment which stood out:

*“It felt it had been put together as a ‘labour of love’.”*

## Multiple outcomes analysis

Respondents reported a combination of outcomes as a result of involvement in the project(s). The combined results for the projects were as follows, showing the proportion of cumulative outcomes e.g., where a person reported enjoying themselves, learning something and thinking differently because of their Digital Arts Hub experience (22%). The analysis focuses on the first four options.

Cumulative outcomes are where projects can have the bigger and longer lasting impact. Experiences which combine a range of outcomes are more likely to lead to changes in knowledge, understanding, attitudes and behaviours. The effects will be stronger still where the outcomes are repeated over time; this is where the potential legacy of the projects can play a role.

Care must again be taken in the interpretation of the results given that the Digital Arts Hub, and especially the Observer Building renovations, have a small sample size. However, the larger sample size for The Who exhibition shows that nearly a third of respondents reported both enjoying the experience and also learning something, with 11% reporting that they also thought differently as a result. This indicates changes in knowledge and understanding (learning is the proxy) and thinking differently (a proxy for potential changes in attitude).

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

### OVERVIEW

This section of the report provides detailed analysis of the qualitative evidence gathered from the project’s partners, participants and beneficiaries. The evidence was gathered by using a semi-structured interview approach, with a standard set of questions asked of each interviewee, and follow-up questions asked in line with the responses. The responses are anonymised and the analysis is structured around the questions asked of the different groups with evidence and quotes. The responses are subdivided between those for the Creative Digital Hub, The Who exhibition / Immersive Single and the renovation of the Observer Building. In addition, two significant evaluation themes are examined through the comments and reflections of the interviewees: the relationship between the delivery partners, and the impact of the funding regime on the project and the people delivering it.

24 interviews were held with project partners, beneficiaries and participants in November and December 2022. The main aim of the interviews is to establish the difference made by the funding, answering the ‘so what?’ question. The high mobility of the agreed outputs and outcomes underpin many of the responses, reflecting the time and effort invested by the partners in ensuring there was good quality delivery in support of the project’s overarching vision and aims. Also important is ‘explanation’ – the accounts by those delivering the projects of what went well and what was hard – creating the story of the project.

### THE CREATIVE DIGITAL HUB / DIGITAL ARTS HUB

The main interview relating to the CDH was with Simon Crab from WRNV, with useful contributions from Bob Thrust and Jess Steele, also of WRNV. Performers and partners also made helpful contributions, as did a Kickstart programme participant. The CDH enabled key activities as ‘proof of concept’ and there are case studies which examine the value of these in more detail.

#### What do you think went well and why?

A strong theme in the responses was the development of this part of the project to be more community-oriented, more strongly aligned with the values of WRNV as it sought to ensure the CDH was built on good community engagement. This desire was most visibly expressed through the ‘People of Hastings’ 3D scanning and printing project.

*“The community aspect was missing from the original concept and so we turned it around to be a community-based project - the 3D scanning of local residents. We involved people in the production, we involved the young Kickstart people, involved Hastings College and some freelancers.*

*We looked also at involving community needs groups, for example, kids in care with an interest in technology and community groups from Westhill and Clifden, through workshops. neurodiversity.”*

Evidence of this wider engagement strategy is provided elsewhere in this report, supporting the claim that the CDH has begun to build a broad base of support and awareness in a wide range of

groups, organisations and projects from Hastings’s communities. In particular, the ‘Digital in Care’ programme case study demonstrates both the strong community engagement principles at work, and the potential of focusing on digital technologies and behaviours as a way of engaging and better equipping young people for a more digital future. As such, there is no other space like the CDH in Hastings, with perhaps the nearest comparable space being 40 miles away in Brighton. The WRNV community-driven ethos has ensured that the activities in the CDH have developed with a firm foundation, and not in ‘rootless’ ideas. Providing this at a local level is very important for the development of ‘digital futures’ in Hastings as many local people do not have the means or opportunity to access similar opportunities in other coastal towns.

This furthers the aim of showing people in Hastings a range of ‘digital futures’ by demonstrating technologies, and then engaging people with activities which use these. The 3D scanning and printing project was a good example of this – it engaged with a wide range of Hastings’ residents who were then body-scanned. The community were also involved in the production in order to show that these technologies can be accessed by non-technology specialists, breaking down some of the mystique around digital technologies.

*“Playing games is distant from actually creating games, so we wanted to inspire people to get involved in developing ideas, especially the 3D printing and VR (virtual reality) by showing them that it’s actually easy to do and can be accessible.”*

The subsequent exhibition of the 3D models and the development of a phone app with the person’s avatar was a further step towards connected people’s lives more tangibly to what might appear as esoteric ‘high-tech’, beyond the reach of local people.

As well as building this wider awareness and confidence, the ‘People of Hastings’ activity delivered hard outputs relating to training and employment, supporting young people to develop their interest in technology beyond gaming to encompass technology-focused careers.

*“We achieved lots of hard outputs for training and employment and built these on a sound (community-based) ethos.”*

*“We have created jobs and opportunity based on digital technology. The CDH could be a mainstay of the (digital) offer for Hastings.”*

A further significant activity in the CDH was the Sonics electronic music festival, held over three days in October, the first public event in the Observer Building. The purpose was to engage with the vibrant local music scene, providing an opportunity for local musicians to perform and for performers from further afield (e.g., London, Newcastle and Europe) to perform for a Hastings audience. Initially, there were concerns that the space might not be ready or suitable, or that specific equipment would not be available, but these fears proved unfounded.

*“Venue generally fantastic, unsure it would be ready and most of it was - all worked tremendously well.”*

*“On the morning of the workshop, some speakers came through which were really, really good.”*

There are questions over the suitability of the Observer Building as a music venue because of noise, especially bass frequencies, and whether it is worth investing in the PA and sound systems needed to make the space a viable music and performance venue.



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*“Question for the venue going forward is whether there is permanent infrastructure in place for such events, rather than events bringing in the kit each time, which is not sustainable due to hiring and movement costs. It would work better if there was a complete venue to hire.”*

The venue is large but the festival generally managed to fill it. Comparable spaces locally are hard to access currently e.g., St Mary’s in the Castle. Sound proofing could be an issue if the venue is to develop in this way – there was lots of sound transmission via the windows and this would be hard to change given the heritage value of the building.

In terms of the overall project remit on digital futures, the interviewees felt the festival was a success:

*“It could be a superb venue bringing people in from local and further away. Some people came from Berlin to play and so the audience was pulled in from London, raising awareness of Hastings as a place to come, as well as bringing in a large local audience, younger and more mixed. It did show a ‘digital future’ to the people of Hastings.”*

The work so far done using the CDH has fulfilled the CRF grant’s remit of supporting innovation and learning which can be built upon for future benefit. The CDH has helped WRNV to secure further funding from the Towns Fund:

*“We are working well with colleges, we held a great event on 3D scanning, involving young people, feeding into new projects. It has a great platform and model for the future as part of our Towns Fund bid (which we have won). It has also opened up other opportunities, such as the Youth Investment Fund as a possibility.”*

In relation to the long-term sustainability of the CDH and WRNV, the project has helped to recruit and establish a team which has developed a wide range of relationships with partners, and which is working in close alignment with the organisation’s values. Having a digital team and capacity has been really important to the CDH and to WRNV, both to build technological capability and as a way of building community engagement.

The backdrop to this is a lot of hard work to get things going, to establish viable projects and to overcome a range of technological challenges. The timing was interesting; following the lifting of Covid restrictions, the ‘People of Hastings’ activity offered people a chance to come together, ‘imagine a new future’, as one interviewee put it.

*“People who don’t care about tech were engaged for the first time and across generations. They were able to see and experience things such as the 3D printers in person. This might sound simple but it is an important approach to helping people imagine different futures.”*

In this regard, the WRNV team feel that the CDH has very much helped with the overall aims of the CRF-funded project by offering transformative experiences which show ‘levelling up rather than leaving’ as a realistic prospect for people interested in technology-related careers.

*“The CDH is helping us to change the dynamic of ‘futures happening elsewhere’.”*

## PUBLIC RESPONSES

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Only one member of the public made themselves available for an interview relating to the CDH. However, we considered them a well-informed respondent as they run an ‘inclusive community centre in St Leonard’s for users with a wide range of special needs’.

They felt there were a good number and range of positive attributes to the space and the team. They felt it was truly inclusive and that it paid attention to how to involve people with different needs:

*“I was impressed that they made the effort to reach people, e.g., SEND, addicts, blind people and in wheelchairs, who were not the usual audience for what they do. Also, the two photographers who came [to our community centre] were very young, with one from the technical college. This gave them an opportunity and also some responsibility to local young people, a really good opportunity. The final exhibition (for the ‘People of Hastings’ activity) at the Observer building was very inclusive and everyone got a personal invitation.”*

They felt that the quality of what was offered was outstanding, and that something of this standard was perhaps new for Hastings:

*“It is incredible to live in Hastings and have this quality, wow - everything was top quality. It was inspiring all round.”*

The experience provided opportunities for new learning, and they also found it innovative and inspiring:

*“I didn’t know about this technology, using LIDAR (to scan a 3D space). It made me think I could do more and that I want to do that at my community centre. It also adds to my own way of working as a ceramicist. Overall, the People of Hastings exhibition was very moving and very good.”*

These responses, from someone providing community services, illustrate the effect which investing in facilities and people can have beyond the immediate space and organisation, in this case by inspiring someone running a community centre to do more and better with their community.

They offered no negative points.

### What do you think did not go so well and why?

There were a range of significant challenges to successfully developing and delivering the CDH part of the CRF project. First, the Observer Building is essentially still a building site and the project had to work around this as renovation works continued.

*“Working in a building site was a challenge and we could not access the space we wanted to use, so to start with we were in a state of flux and a space that was not ideal. We needed better space and lighting, but we worked around this - all due to building delays.”*

In addition, the nature of the projects within the CDH space was innovative with ‘flexible boundaries’ – defining neat and tidy job roles was often not possible. The work required a high tolerance of ambiguity and to working in a fast-changing environment, with team members who can ‘press forward and take initiative.’

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*“We had a continual cycle of testing and learning, quite a loose way of working was needed, it did not suit everyone.”*

The team recounted how they were working in new ways for which there are ‘no textbooks’:

*“Everything we were doing we were learning as we went - there are no textbooks to explain how to do 3D tech with the community. The technology was evolving as we were delivering the project.”*

As mentioned earlier in the report, the payment regime affected cashflow and that was ‘really hard, - we were under-staffed and overworked in general.’

*“Enormous cashflow burden which has hindered the project delivery, increasing risk. Projects are not as linear as the funder seems to think.”*

There was a tension at the heart of the funding programme which on one hand sought to support innovation (by definition, experimental and with uncertain outcomes) and on the other to commit the contract holder to very specific outputs and outcomes.

*“There were over-tight metrics set in advance after the award of the grant, after the agreement was signed and before any money was provided, on top of the delay in making the funding decisions.”*

It is not unusual for funding applicants to be ‘bent out of shape’ as they seek to align their goals and resources with a funder’s requirements, but these pressures appear to have been particularly and unusually acute in this project with a lot of strongly felt comment from the delivery partners on the administrative challenges they faced. Further sections of this report explore this in more detail.

### What would you do differently next time and why?

Some delivery partners were tempted to say, ‘to not do it at all’, reflecting the considerable delivery pressures they experienced, and the effects of the tension between the different delivery partners. Having said this, all then said that overall, they were glad they persisted.

*“It was so, so difficult, you really need to pick your partners carefully and always have trust in place - this was lacking with some partners, and with the government / ESCC. You need both ‘vertical and horizontal trust’ – the horizontal trust between the partners did repair, the vertical trust with government and ESCC less so.”*

In relation to the CDH specifically, the hard work to establish the space and the principles which underpin it will mean that future activities and projects will be better defined, enabling tighter delivery. New projects are already underway. This would not have been possible without the CRF funding to support experimentation and innovation.

*“We have another project underway to build a 3D model of the Trinity Triangle area, working with local residents and connecting to businesses, reflecting the heritage and history of the area. We can now clearly define the roles and expectations, have a clearer technology scope, with more defined outcomes to test. We will have more structured projects e.g., around neurodiversity.”*

The learning here was nearly all around how the project was funded rather than about changes to how things would be delivered – again, an unusual dynamic. As experienced evaluators, we observe

that the outputs and outcomes related to the CDH have been hard-won, but they have been well-imagined and doggedly pursued by a capable and committed team. There is definite potential for the future with ideas and capabilities which can make a difference to Hastings as a whole.

### What has been the most significant outcome so far and why?

The ‘People of Hastings’ 3D scanning and printing project was offered as a prime outcome, rather than the development of the CDH itself, but the analysis of what went well / not so well illustrates the value of the CDH space and concept as an outcome. For the ‘PoH’ project, the main remark was:

*“The engagement with 300 local people and businesses around 3D art project. Very different people and organisations.”*

The outcome touched on in this remark is the value of bringing together a diverse range of people and organisations so that they can make new connections and reaffirm existing connections. In the context of a space which aims to play a significant role in the digital and creative future of Hastings (see legacy question below), this is an important outcome. The added value on a number of levels:

1. In bringing people together, creating the conditions for creativity, learning and inspiration.
2. In forging connections with other significant organisations and institutions in the town which have similar aims e.g., skills, community engagement with purpose.
3. In delivering the People of Hastings project, a combination of technology and creativity.
4. In developing and equipping a space with the right kit and people to facilitate further beneficial outcomes for Hastings.

In addition, the team commented on the transformation of one of the Kickstart employees, demonstrating for them the power of the right opportunities being available at the right time for young people:

*“The thing more than anything is the change in (named person) - their development; it shows how someone’s life can be changed. The experience boosted their confidence, they became ‘star scanner’ - great with people and with the technology, and good at talking about it. They have become a good ambassador for the CDH and what it stands for.”*

This is one example of how the project has shown the potential of different ‘digital futures’ for Hastings, with the potential to do more of this for other individuals and also other businesses.

For other interviewees, the most significant outcome was in relation to the project’s legacy.

*“The legacy in relation to digital tech for Hastings from all parts of the project.”*

### What are your thoughts on the legacy of the project?

The development of the CDH and the activities within it will form a central part of the Observer Building’s future in Hastings as a base for digital skills and creativity, ‘building on the foundations of the project.’ The overall aim of the project was to demonstrate that there can be a future in Hastings – digital, creative, engaged – which local people can be a part of.

In the words of the project team,

*“Hastings is a place that you ‘escape from’ unless you can’t.”*

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Our assessment is that the CDH has and is fulfilling this goal, as evidenced by the number of people engaging with the projects there and the feedback on their experiences. The project and the space has demonstrated a ‘proof of concept’ which is being used to secure new funding helps to maintain and build on the potential of the CDH and the Observer Building.

The team were keen to demonstrate that Hastings could be a place for digital excellence.

*“The relationships with the work experience students showed them that they can have a future in Hastings.”*

An interviewee involved in the Sonics music festival reflected that:

*“It showed what is possible, bringing on younger people - 20-something and younger who are doing things (in music). There is the potential for a new, high-quality project, if that's what the building wants.”*

In terms of the wider agenda for WRNV of community-led generation, this work was as much about how it was done as about what was done. Their values are particular and strongly held, very much wanting to develop Hastings as a better place to live and work, but without pushing out the very things which give the town and the ‘Trinity Triangle’ area its notable character. Developing and strengthening local businesses is seen as preferable to bringing in large franchise companies e.g., they would rather support a local coffee shop than the Costa coffee chain.

*“Gentrification creates a class divide; it does not connect to younger people often. We need continuity of training and work opportunities.”*

The team see the way in which the CDH and Observer Building operate as a way of treading a careful balance between attracting investment but maintaining local character and values. It is a fact that ‘Down from London’ people (DFLs) have moved to the town during and after Covid as the housing is more affordable than London, there are rail links back to London and Hastings offers access to the sea and to high-quality countryside. ‘Shoreditch by the Sea’, as one interviewee put it. How this dynamic moves forward is something which WRNV want to influence.

This outlook was not shared to the same extent by all the project’s partners, with Cult.Brand seeing more overtly commercial opportunities as a beneficial regardless, depending on how the revenue generated is then used. These dynamics are explored more fully in the partnership working analysis below.

The attitudes are significant because they will affect the legacy and sustainability of the CDH and the Observer Building. People moving to Hastings may bring more spending power and accessing this could bring more opportunities to the town e.g., by providing a high-quality digital offering to the community, for art, music, training and experience. We presume that the team would not want to alienate any part of the community but would strive to bring all parts of the town, old and new, together in pursuit of a common vision.

## THE WHO EXHIBITION AND IMMERSIVE SINGLE

The main interviews relating to The Who were with:

- Hector Proud (Cult.Brand)
- Rory Scott (AudioVisceral)
- Bee Hepworth (Mobile Art Disco)
- Joseph Steele (Visual Skies)

There were further contributions from the WRNV team, Kickstart programme participants and Ben Dawson, the originator of the CRF application when he was a tenant at Rock House and working for Napster. Four members of the public who responded to the online survey made themselves available for a short interview and some of their comments are included below.

### What do you think went well and why?

The four main interviewees were consistently positive about the quality and impact of the finished exhibition and concepts in relation to the projects and the funder’s aims. The summary list of successful exhibition elements covers:

1. Developing the exhibition as a whole, with exhibits and the VR element
2. Developing the VR ‘Immersive Single’ concept, software and technology
3. Renovating unused space, ready for future use, and bringing attention to a quieter corner of the town centre
4. Bringing media attention to the exhibition and to Hastings, making ‘digital futures’ a real experience and attracting people from outside the area
5. Providing opportunities for training and experience for the project’s Kickstarter employees

Fundamentally, the diverse exhibition team emphasised how the exhibition had helped to put Hastings ‘on the digital map’, building on its history of ground-breaking technological developments and helping to demonstrate new and exciting ‘digital futures’ through the virtual reality (VR) ‘immersive single’ music experience.

*“The immersive single concept worked really well, even if it was smaller than planned - it moved some people to tears. It put Hastings on the world's digital map.”*

*“Brilliant exhibition, involving world-class photographers and The Who's official biographer. It was beautifully dressed with props, creating a micro / capsule exhibition, covering the 1969 to 1971 story of the band and local cultural history. The immersive single was a world first – a new and exciting technology released in Hastings.”*

*“Validated the idea and that it (demonstrating new technology) did not need to be in London - it worked in Hastings and this is in line with the grant and funder ethos.”*

*“The project demonstrated a novel use of VR that was appealing to a broad range of demographics. One of our key goals was to make sure this experience would be as enjoyable to a 70-year-olds Who fan and a 15-year-old video gamer alike. This was a very difficult*



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*challenge for a virtual reality experience to achieve, but we succeeded by making the project experiential and immersive and just fun, rather than overly interactive.”*

The team were pleased with the visual quality and atmosphere of the exhibition, starting with the mural on the external end wall of the space:

*“Aesthetically, the exhibition worked really well, beyond Hastings Contemporary, broadening the appeal of arts in the town. There is a brilliant mural on the end of the building which will endure. The artist does this work all over the world and he did this for next to nothing (MyDogSighs).”*

In the evaluator’s opinion, the team made good use of the long and narrow floor area, creating a series of intimate spaces, similar to rooms in a suburban house, with a varied range of photographs, posters, sound, commentary / quotes and film. There was a strong graphic identity, built around the RAF-roundel motif and the red, white and blue colour scheme associated with ‘mods’. The feel was graphically clean and crisp, whilst the memorabilia created a more homely feel through which the exhibition visitor could make a connection to the band members. The exhibition brought them within ‘touching distance’ through the exhibits, the overall feel and the VR experience. The end result was a mix of traditional and cutting-edge exhibition practice. The team felt similarly:

*“It thought the exhibition was a ‘beautiful thing’ - the whole thing – and I’m really proud to have been involved. It needs the right space in London, not open spaces.”*

The team also noted the benefits for St Andrew’s Mews brought about by renovating unused spaces and drawing attention and investment to this part of the town centre.

*“We renovated dead space in an unloved part of town to house the exhibition.”*

*“Local regeneration of the mews and the market, promotion of the area, renewed three units, two of which were closed for 100 years.”*

*“The Mews have been purchased and there will be more investment - a positive outcome, helping the market to thrive further. This is a brilliant example of how you can regenerate communities and an area.”*

They remarked upon the high level of media interest in the project, including a news excerpt which was streamed across the BBC World News.

*“Great PR - on BBC World News, reassuring that they were on the right track and had done a good exhibition.”*

*“It created a buzz, with positive press and TV interest, and interest from around the world.”*

The VirtualSkies team emphasised the technological challenges they faced in developing and delivering a reliable VR experience for a public exhibition, within a tight budget and with some technologies which were stretched to the limit.

*“There was a fantastic team in place to make it happen e.g., sort out bugs, develop the technology before they could make the experience. There were lots of interdependencies, point-cloud streaming under pressure, with lots of data pushed through wifi rather than a 10gb tether! Looking to leverage this into new projects e.g., at The Tate.”*

As for the CDH, the role of and benefits for the Kickstarters warranted mention in the interviews:

*“Working with local Kickstarters (was a good outcome).”*

In addition, we observe that this was a complex project which required inputs from a wide range of disciplines. Cult.Brand’s contacts were essential to this, drawing on skilled and experienced people and leveraging reduced day rates and free time from them.

## PUBLIC RESPONSES

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Members of the public who attended the exhibition were generally enthusiastic about the experience and felt it would have wide appeal. All were ‘older’ people who were fans of The Who or of / near that generation (remembering that the music of The Who was popular again in the early 1980’s). They made comments like:

*“In the 60s you were either a fan of the Beatles or the Who”*

Other typical comments included:

*“Enjoyable, affordable and local.”*

*“I hope it went somewhere else; I think there is an audience for it.”*

They typically felt that the different aspects of the exhibition worked well together. The VR experience was new to them and they found it very enjoyable:

*“They complemented each other.”*

*“That was a first, it worked really well.”*

*“VR experience was a high.”*

*“VR was incredible – felt like I’d taken something.”*

They found the staff at the exhibition were very helpful and knowledgeable (these were most likely the young “Kickstart” placements):

*“I work in the trade, can be a harsh critic of customer service - I felt I was privileged, the staff were really nice.”*

*“They guided us through [the VR], they were very good – I am not techy.”*

The exhibition brought people to Hastings who wouldn’t have otherwise come, helping to fulfil an important aim of the overall project. They also liked the venue and thought it suitable for the purpose:

*“We need a reason to go there (from Eastbourne) – we went to a restaurant & shopping afterwards”*

*“Not formal, quirky, a community feel.”*

*“The whole space was great, I’ll go to any similar exhibition.”*

In addition, they said that they learned new things and came away feeling inspired:

*“Made me realise what a genius he was.” (Pete Townsend)*

*“I was inspired to look at relevant art.”*

*“I thought I knew everything as I am massively into The Who.”*

### What do you think did not go so well and why?

The range of challenges which the team detailed was almost as fulsome as the range of things they felt had gone well. The main points summarise as follows:

1. Mismatched values and attitudes
2. The impact of delays from a number of sources
3. Attempting too many technological innovations at the same time and in a short development period

The problems around values and attitudes is a consistent theme throughout this evaluation, with the projects ultimately organised according to the orientation of the different delivery partners – Cult.Brand and partners focusing on The Who exhibition, WRNV and partners focusing on the CDH and building renovation. The missed opportunity was in the overlapping work of the CDH and The Who exhibition, both of which sought to develop access to new technologies and demonstrate them to new audiences in Hastings, as part of the effort to ‘level-up’ places which ordinarily would not often have this sort of opportunity. The dysfunctional arrangement was a painful disappointment to all concerned, and to specific members of the exhibition team:

*“Attitudes killed the project. It could have had a great legacy e.g., bringing in designers from the V&A. The exhibition got scaled back and so merch (merchandise) could not work – it has to be mass-produced and therefore it needed the larger venue (the Observer Building). It should have been possible to involve larger brands, but this could not happen because of all the politics (between the partners). Do they have a problem with commercial people, or a problem with people they perceive as being from a privileged background?”*

This long quote encapsulates most of the attitudinal issues at the heart of the relationships between the main partners. WRNV had an explicit agenda to avoid the negative aspects of gentrification and, it appears, the way in which Cult.Brand and its partners wanted to work epitomised qualities which they saw as working against their community-driven agenda. These and related themes are explored more in the partnership working section below, but on a practical note, WRNV would assert that the Observer Building was not ready for an exhibition because of delayed building works. This was mentioned by some of the exhibition team.

Our view is that whilst each partner definitely bought into the levelling up agenda, they had very different ideas of how to achieve this. Whilst there was some partial conciliation on these points, it is clear to us that the mismatch in values undermined the project and weakened the overall outcomes e.g., by restricting collaborative working on complementary digital activities.

The problems with delays were common across the project, whether that was to complete important project elements or to payments. The impacts of delays for team delivering The Who exhibition were expressed as follows:

*“Would have been good to open in the Observer building but this fell through, but this did lead to the regeneration of the Mews.”*

*“Funding has been a challenge, cashflow has been a big problem. The finance is a corrosive issue and lots of goodwill has been needed to keep the project going.”*

We know that the late payment of team members led to financial problems for the companies concerned, in turn requiring financial support from individuals to keep things going. This degree of delay is in our view unacceptable, especially for small organisations, businesses and charities. That the partners stayed involved is due in part to their commitment to the project’s aims, and to the harsh reality that if they wanted to receive any funding they had to stay engaged to the very end. The problem with this approach to funding projects is that it risks the very outputs and outcomes it squeezes the partners so hard to provide.

Developing the technology was challenging, especially in terms of the scope (too ambitious) and the time available (in this case, compressed by funding decision delays, major partner withdrawal and building delays). The exhibition opened later than planned, missing the main tourist / summer season.

*“We attempted too many innovative techniques and technologies at the same time. This led to unnecessary complexity and a significant increase in the workload to ensure a stable VR experience. It became clear to us that the experience would have been as successful with 2/3 of the innovation implemented.”*

*“Launching in October made it hard to achieve the target number of visitors, it took more time than expected to sort out the technology gremlins, but I’m proud of the result. Would have been good to open in August.”*

Whilst some of the delays were not in the control of the team, other elements were more predictable i.e., the ambitious scope of the VR part of the exhibition. With hindsight, it is easier to see that the ambition may have been too far ahead of the capabilities of the technology. To the credit of the assembled team, they did manage to make a workable VR experience – the ‘immersive single’ – which streamed participants in real time into the VR space. They did this on a small budget, with late payments and by pushing some technologies to limit. They have proved that the idea can work and that it is worthy of further investment and development. It is also fair to say that many people do or will not appreciate the amount of work needed to make this idea work e.g., sets needed building and dressing, an actor was needed, the quarry scene was 3D scanned with drones and LIDAR (this takes time to get right), the sky dome was a time-lapse sequence which took lots of scheduling and organising alongside developing the technology.

### PUBLIC RESPONSES

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There were about half the number of negative responses compared to the number of positive responses. Issues identified in the online survey were repeated in the interviews, which is good from the perspective of consistency:

*“Booking was a nightmare. So confusing, I booked twice. When I found where it was, I could have booked on the door.”*

Others found the venue hard to find and thought that the marketing was poor:

*“Couldn’t find it with satnav, we parked at a shopping centre and wandered around with phones, no signage.”*

*“No signage, it was hard to find it.”*

*“They missed a trick with merchandise, e.g., they could have sold prints of photos.”*

### What would you do differently next time and why?

The things the team would do differently break down into the following themes:

1. Having access to a larger space
2. Opening in the summer
3. Control of funding
4. A different approach to the creative and technology development process

Ideally, the exhibition would have taken place in the Observer Building, enabling cross-fertilisation of ideas and learning with the CDH, promoting the building, attracting more people and providing a space with better, more accessible facilities. However, using St Andrew’s Mews has brought additional benefits to the project and to Hastings.

*“All in one building would have been perfect! E.g., next to the digital hub (CDH). But now Hastings has a new gallery space (St Andrew’s Mews).”*

*“Not being able to use the Observer building was an issue - the builders ran into delays as well e.g., supply issues, costs, staffing etc., but the Mews is a good outcome.”*

The missed opportunities for more collaboration between the projects has already been noted. We are unsure whether the practical issues which made the Observer Building unavailable would have been the only problem had the exhibition gone ahead there, given the difference in values. In the end, the exhibition gained something from being in a smaller space which had to be carefully laid out to maximise vertical display space and this part of the exhibition’s experience may be a feature when it moves to London (as the team currently plans).

The problems with opening in October rather than August have already been discussed and the learning has been recognised, but this was a source of disappointment to the team:

*“Dates - opening times - but this was unavoidable. Wanted more than 5,000 people but this was hard to achieve. It took time to sort the space and the technology - a good piece of learning to allow more time for this in future.”*

Given the difficulties in the relationships and the issues with payment, it is not surprising that one delivery partner wanted to take control of the contract themselves:

*“Manage the grant ourselves! We should have retained control, vetted partners more carefully. We thought we were getting a good local partner but the reality was different.”*

There was an interesting reflection on the extent to which the VR part of the exhibition was developed, with comment on the degree of overlap between the creative process and testing the technology:

*“In hindsight, the creative development process should extend far more into the technology testing so that production can be streamlined and more efficient. More time would have been great but you can bug fix forever, so a deadline is helpful.”*

In our view, this suggests a more iterative relationship between the development of the exhibition’s content and the development of the technology-dependent parts of the experience, with less separation between the two. However, this suggests a way of working which would have been hard

to facilitate without better funding e.g., to cover the time needed for more creative meetings between the lead parties. The learning is though worthy of note and future consideration.

### What has been the most significant outcome so far and why?

The themes which emerge from the team’s comments break down as follows:

1. People’s positive reaction to the exhibition (reinforced by our interviews of attendees and the online survey responses)
2. The renovation of St Andrew’s Mews
3. The development of the ‘immersive single’ concept
4. Showing the potential of regional art exhibitions
5. The key innovation of ‘beyond the avatar’

The team found the reaction of the public both validating and inspiring as it stimulated a range of positive responses, ranging from emotional to intellectual, physical to analytical.

*“For me, it was the consistency of people’s responses – them saying that ‘this is brilliant’. I saw that youngsters were impressed, as well as older people. It has inspired me to do more.”*

The renovation of St Andrew’s Mews was not planned at the project start but became a necessity as the team sought to find an exhibition space. Without the exhibition, it is likely that the space at the Mews would have stayed unused, but now there is a space which can be used for other exhibitions (and apparently the owner of the Mews is open to this idea).

*“The renovation of the Mews - spreading the regeneration effort.”*

The significance of the work done at St Andrew’s Mews was also commented on by a member of the WRNV team:

*“St Andrew’s Mews is a good outcome, restoring the space after 50 or more years. Now a new space in Hastings with creative potential, restored at a good price - lots of good space has been brought back into use.”*

The development of technological concepts and proof of viability was the more important outcome for some of the team. They see great potential for the immersive single / VR music experience to change how we experience music, building on existing consumer technology and making more use of visual and audio material which goes back 60 to 70 years.

*“We have developed a world first with the immersive single and want to develop an immersive album next. Media coverage has generated world-wide interest. This is a new musical format - a nice validation of the project.”*

The specifics of the VR technology is the most significant outcome for the technology-oriented members of the team, with the development of the live-stream avatar as an alternative to the existing ‘modelled’ avatars used in VR experiences.

*“A key innovation was the ‘beyond the avatar’ technique that we developed. With a desire to make the experience accessible to many people at once whilst also appealing to a wide demographic, we opted to stream the visitors in 4D into the VR experience thus allowing us to bypass the need for cartoonish avatars that could be off putting and experience breaking.”*



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*This was a completely novel experience where people could see each other in the VR at the same time without the need for an artificial avatar. There is commercial potential going forward for this approach which could link back to Hastings e.g., through the immersive album for The Who, like a 3D jukebox you can share with others.”*

The obvious opportunity for the link back to Hastings would be to link with the CDH.

The fact that the exhibition went ahead at all is the most significant outcome in some people’s view. Something of this type would more typically start in London and perhaps move to a larger gallery before moving to the regions, if successful (in the same way that theatre performances move out from London). The probable ‘journey’ in this case is in the opposite direction, with interest already shown by London venues in staging the exhibition. The concept of the exhibition attracted artists of repute to the area, although this was little recognised locally.

*“The best outcome was getting the calibre of artists involved in Hastings, spreading the potential (of the talent) and showing that it (the exhibition) does not need to be at a big gallery to work. It shows the potential of regional art and exhibitions. There was not much at this scale going on in Hastings.”*

We were struck in our analysis by the diversity of the outcomes in response to this question, covering the whole range of the exhibition’s outputs, and without collusion between the contributors.

We were also struck in other interviews by the cynical attitude towards the exhibition, with misinformed opinions which do not recognise the value of what was done in a somewhat old-fashioned corner of Hastings, in the face of considerable challenges and with limited resources and little or no payment. The following composite account typifies some of the local perceptions. Note that this is from people who did not attend the exhibition:

*“Looked like a pretence to grab money, created by a parasite class who soak up local development money. It was done in a couple of cupboards in a pokey corner of town. It was done for apparent community benefit when there was private benefit at the root of it.”*

Our view is that this is inaccurate. It reflects the attitude of some towards ideas and people who come from outside Hastings. It reflects the view that commercial activity is intrinsically bad. It certainly does little to encourage inward investment from small to medium size enterprises who might find Hastings a creatively fertile place to develop their business, to everyone’s benefit.

Creating a brighter, inclusive digital future for Hastings needs to appeal to as wide a range of people, organisations and businesses as possible. What matters, and where the change comes, is in the interactions and dialogue between these diverse groups. All should be given the opportunity to engage and constructive conversations facilitated which promote challenge and understanding. Development approaches which self-select and which promote tropes will not work as well as the harder, messier approach of engaging more widely.

### What are your thoughts on the legacy of the project?

The team talked about the following areas which will retain potency in the short to medium term:

1. The potential of the space
2. The potential of the technology

3. The potential of the people
4. The potential of the businesses

Taken together, the combined potential combines to create opportunities for developing the immersive single and album concept, combining the audio, coding and VR technology developed for the exhibition. One interviewee sees this potential as an opportunity for WRNV:

*“WRNV and Hastings Commons has the potential to be a vital network centre e.g., by connecting creatives, schools and businesses - a vital resource for Hastings.”*

Others in the team echo the broad sentiment this comment expresses:

*“It (the exhibition) should have a lasting effect as a hub of technological development, through the CDH and the work that has been done for the exhibition. Lenovo invested alongside Marshall speakers and so on - in-kind and cash contributions, shining a light on Hastings as a place which embraces technology.”*

This feels like the offering of an olive branch to WRNV, recognising the significance of the work done at the Observer Building, alongside the work done for the exhibition, identifying the common factors between the activities (VR, sound, music, pushing technology, making it more accessible) and the values which, despite the tensions, the partners share.

For the purely technology-driven partners, the legacy was far more about creating an accessible VR experience and what this enabled:

*“The biggest legacy for us was the ‘beyond the avatar’ technique, this we believe was truly ground-breaking and was a considerable factor for the immersive quality of the experience and major reason it enthralled such a wide demographic equally.”*

For others, the legacy was more practical and tangible, the striking mural painted on the outside of the exhibition space.

*“For me, the mural is a key legacy item.”*

## RENOVATION OF THE OBSERVER BUILDING

There was far less comment in relation to the renovation of the Observer Building than for the other project elements, reflecting in part the much smaller proportion of the funding which went to this activity. The primary purpose of the funding – approximately £60,000 – was to support the larger renovation work and the redevelopment of the mezzanine floor. Given that the amount of comment is limited, it makes more sense to present the learning as a single narrative rather than broken down by the questions used in the interviews.

WRNV report that the mix of capital and revenue came at a crucial time for the work on the building. There were significant delays to the works, not least the effects of a flood which needed to be addressed before works could continue. In common with many other building-related projects we have evaluated lately, the combined effects of Covid and Brexit also had an impact. The effects of Covid were on the availability and cost of materials, including those vital for any building project e.g., cement and timber. Supplies of these and other materials such as plumbing supplies have also suffered from long delays, partly as a result of surging demand and partly because these supplies

were often stuck in transit. Brexit has had an effect on building labour, both skilled and unskilled, as people have returned to eastern Europe, exacerbated by shortages of skilled and unskilled labour in the local area.

The effects of these delays had a material effect on the project. The Observer Building did not have space available for The Who exhibition; the issues this caused were compounded by the tense relationships, and in turn made things harder for the exhibition team. A core project asset became unavailable for wider use, with an area only available for the CDH (and this had its problems e.g., with suitable lighting). This reduced the immediate potential of the building to support a range of outputs and outcomes, delaying important project work.

In the end, the CDH was able to make use of space in the building e.g., to house the 3D printers and to host the ‘People of Hastings’ show. The building has also hosted CDH-supported activities such as the Sonics music festival (the first truly public event in the building) and other activities. It has demonstrated the potential of the space to support meaningful community engagement and purposeful activity. The potential of the building is in line with the high-level aspirations of the project, to showcase new digital futures, and with the overarching aims of WRNV, to offer community-led regeneration and offer appropriate opportunities to the local area and Hastings.

The power of good quality, community-focused physical space defines its potential to drive change in an area. If power equals force multiplied by the rate of application (or speed), then a community building needs flexible and robust areas which are in frequent use (a high rate of utilisation). Over time, the investment needed shifts from requiring a blend of more capital with supporting revenue funding, to requiring more revenue to ‘apply the force’ – the building – as an ‘engine for change’.

The Observer Building is, we believe, on the cusp of becoming such a building, driving change and community benefit, leveraging its space in exciting and innovative ways. It will have to prove itself and the outputs and outcomes of this project show the potential power of the spaces. The CDH – to become the ‘OBX’ – is developing an inclusive agenda which is already delivering important community benefits, by improving knowledge, skills and understanding, changing attitudes and developing positive behaviours in the people it engages with.

The building alone cannot deliver these benefits and the CRF funding has helped to develop a team which can deliver good quality outcomes. Further developing and retaining this team should be an organisational goal. In this regard, we would challenge the WRNV to reconsider how it engages with commercial interests and how it regards people with different values. If it is true that ‘there are no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests’, then what role could different sorts of partnerships play in the regeneration of the local area and in Hastings?

### PUBLIC RESPONSES

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One member of the public made themselves available for an interview relating to the Observer Building. Their comments were largely positive and they are presented as a narrative account:

*“I’ve seen the ground floor and it’s great. It could be a huge asset for the town’s creative activities – I believe it will have a massive effect on the town.*

*Hastings Commons has a drop-in at which all sorts of things are going on, e.g., with refugees. I have seen how these encounters can be life changing. I think a CIC is running the building, so it should have longevity. A lot of projects come with just 2 years’ funding, after which all*

*the benefit disappears. Hopefully, it won't end up in a sordid situation like Hastings' pier. I'm optimistic (about the building) but prices are too high for me and the other artists I know."*

The comments reinforce the potential of the Observer Building as a centre for creativity, whether that is through digital or other mediums.

## PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

As this report frequently mentions, relationships between the partners were often difficult. The fundamental issue lies in an apparent mismatch in values, even if there was ‘overlap’ around the purpose of the funding to ‘level-up’. The following diagram illustrates the relationship between the partners at the start of the project and partnership.

With the withdrawal of Napster, the successful CRF grant applicants, Cult.Brand and its partners needed WRNV to help them deliver the project but discovered that each organisation was quite different from the other. WRNV had made an unsuccessful CRF application, despite encouraging noises to the opposite. The Napster application had assumed use of the Observer Building but without making WRNV fully aware of this. Not surprisingly, the initial meetings were tense and pressured – there was a lot to sort out in a short space of time in a relationship where neither partner would ordinarily work with the other.

In terms of WRNV's community-led regeneration agenda, this work was as much about how it was done as about what was done. Their values are specific and strongly held, very much wanting to develop Hastings as a better place to live and work, but without pushing out the very things which give the town its particular character. Developing and strengthening local businesses is seen as preferable to bringing in large franchise companies e.g., they would rather support a local coffee shop than the Costa coffee chain.

*"Gentrification creates a class divide; it does not connect to younger people often. We need continuity of training and work opportunities."*

The WRNV team see the way in which the CDH and Observer Building operate as a careful balance between attracting investment whilst maintaining local character and values. They have a well-

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developed vision for the ‘Trinity Triangle’ area of Hastings as a creative quarter which is wary of the risks which more commercial outlooks might bring. The following statement from the evaluation logic model clearly expresses their vision:

*“The Creative Quarter is a beacon of community-led regeneration offering local people life-changing opportunities and the chance to shape the place physically, socially, economically and culturally. Building on the strong historical identity to face the challenges of dereliction and gentrification, improving the neighbourhood without displacement. Tapping into an extraordinary level of community energy and existing collaborative work, to help to achieve a vision developed over 14 years of sustained community engagement.”*

This outlook was not shared in the same way by all the project’s partners, with Cult.Brand seeing more overtly commercial opportunities as a beneficial regardless, depending on how the revenue generated is then used. To not take these commercial opportunities was bewildering to them.

*“We wanted to bring in appropriate brands such as Lambretta (relating to Mod culture), so really struggled to see what the problem was. We feel that WRNV tried to push us out completely instead of working with them. Really difficult start and all very odd. Massive shame as we believe we could have brought in 100,000 people from London if we’d had the Observer Building to use, putting it on the map for future work, opened things up, and achieved some LEVELLING UP, the purpose of the grant. It does not now have this legacy and that is a lost opportunity, but WRNV were not interested – they appeared to just want money to do up the building.”*

*“We believe more in creating great commercial opportunities which will benefit the town, bring jobs and prosperity. This is very different from the WRNV outlook. It’s about the passion that you have for a place, not where you come from.”*

There was some understanding of this different approach within WRNV:

*“Cult.Brand were commercial and innovative - this delivered in a good way against the aims of the project and benefits will come to Hastings in different ways e.g., more exhibitions, more local development. Their approach is different but they did do what they said they would and we are very pleased. WRNV were their ‘grant managers’ and in many ways, it could have been managed better on both sides.”*

From the perspective of the evaluation, we are clear that the tensions between the partners made it harder to collaborate, especially where there were obvious opportunities to do so. The project was primarily about creating digital futures – both the CDH and The Who exhibition worked really hard to develop new approaches with technology and, we observe, with very similar goals. Both projects wanted to engage the community with technology, making new technology accessible and tangible.

*“I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.”*

In our view, this experiential maxim captures the approach of both projects as they sought to show the people of Hastings what different digital futures could look like and how people could get involved. **The work of the two projects really should have been linked and this was a missed opportunity.**

Reassuringly, the partners have, over the course of the project, developed a better mutual understanding and a degree of trust. There is some recognition that, in their own ways, there was a

shared agenda albeit with different approaches to achieving the ‘digital futures’ goals’. There ought to be further opportunities to work together for mutual benefit, in and for Hastings, if a way of working can be found.

## FUNDING REGIME AND CASH FLOW

Something which all partners agreed was a considerable burden in the project was the way in which funding was disbursed. The process was managed by ESCC in response to quarterly reports and claims in arrears which depended on the meeting of outputs and outcomes. In practice, this could lead to a six-month delay between expenditure and reimbursement:

The criticism from the partners was strong and consistent as they felt the funding risks flowed downwards to them and their suppliers, with significant adverse impacts. The criticisms reflect the structural challenges for the local grant administrator – ESCC – as they worked to intermediate between the government and the contract holders.

We will argue strongly that the implications of such a lengthy period without payment for charities and for small businesses should be obvious to any funder, for example:

1. Cashflow problems which can lead to job losses and / or company closures
2. Personal debt taken on by business owners to meet costs for their suppliers, pay people their wages
3. Charities accessing their reserves to meet costs, exposing them to undue financial risk
4. Project delays because bills cannot be paid



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5. Pressure on relationships where payments are not timely leading to conflict, ‘downing tools’
6. Significant pressure and stress on those involved
7. Consequent delays to outputs and outcomes and, in turn, to the delivery of the funder’s aims

These impacts are eloquently expressed in the words of the project partners:

*“There was an enormous cashflow burden which hindered the project delivery, increasing risk for us. Projects are not as linear as the funder seems to think. This made life difficult with the partners, and this all comes back to the funding regime. We sometimes felt like we were a number on a spreadsheet somewhere, and that there was a lack of trust.”*

The outputs and outcomes took time to develop and deliver (this is usual), and so most are likely to come late in the project, but the requirement is for all to be done by the end of December 2022. The projects are not making kettles, they’re working with people and organisations, so this deadline is artificial and unrealistic. It may also miss valuable additional delivery:

*“All is to be done by December but the delivery will continue way beyond this but might not be captured. There is a strong legacy element which will continue to deliver value for the funder and to the local community.”*

The partners described the experience with the funder as ‘tortuous’ and ‘painful’ e.g., with repeated requests for further information when they believed they had supplied all that was required. It was unclear who or what was driving this ‘back and forth’ but it was immensely frustrating for the project and had real consequences.

*“We felt like we were being gaslit; ESCC seemed very risk averse, but that’s not how the council works in our experience, so we’re not sure why there appeared to be such nervousness in relation to this grant fund.*

*It is unclear what the government are saying to ESCC – we are not able to reach them (govt. officials), they seem guarded and withdrawn. ESCC would not visit initially, said they were not allowed to.”*

Further comment highlights the lack of clarity around how the funding relationship works, and the lack of access to government – this lack of contact has made things more difficult and it has prevented sensible dialogue which might have resolved many of the funding issues:

*“ESCC seem to struggle to interpret and reassure government, the relationship is dysfunctional - is this true of other grant recipients? We’ve never been allowed to know the name of the contact of the person in government and that seems bizarre, and unlike any other government-backed grant scheme.”*

The practical impacts were expressed in this feedback:

*“Would independent and external validation have helped reassure the council?”*

*We needed funder visits earlier in the project, especially where the activities are different. Money was an issue as there were times when we could not pay Cult.Brand. We had to pay out money from our reserves as we felt so bad about the delays – this is not what they are for. We tried hard to be sympathetic to our partners, we needed to pay people.”*

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The evaluators had a virtual meeting with the funders on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2022 to discuss the evaluation’s initial findings which were critical of the funding regime. They made a number of points:

1. At the time of the meeting, they had received only 50% of the costs of the funding scheme from government. They have been required to fund from the council’s own cash.
2. They reported the same pressures for the other projects which the council are overseeing.
3. ESCC feels they have worked hard to keep the wheels turning with government, communicating and clearing changes to the project profile; there have been more changes to the 2066 project than to any other project.
4. ESCC stated that they will be sticking tightly to payment in arrears as this is the agreement with government, under an SLA, to protect public money.
5. They wanted more publicity from the project.

Guidance for funders illustrates what good practice can look like, recognising the need for proper scrutiny but also the need for trust:

***“Fund flexibly:** Our funding and development support has flexibility at its core. Unrestricted grants and a programme of tailored capacity building investing in the ability of frontline charities to change, adapt and respond, and thrive beyond the life of our grant.*

***Lighter touch doesn't mean less robust:** Letting go of some of the structures of our old approach meant giving up control. But it has also been liberating for staff & charity partners. Streamlining our processes hasn't sacrificed the robustness of due diligence and learning.”*

***Relationships unlock progress:** Relationships sit at the heart of the Foundation’s approach. Strong partnerships are rooted in trust and combine both support and challenge.<sup>1</sup>”*

Our conclusions are that the way in which the project was funded undermined the ability of the partners to deliver the desired outputs and outcomes and, as a result, this presented a greater risk to the public’s money than a faster, more trusting approach to such funding. It is not entirely clear where the fault lies, and fault matters in this instance because the effects were real and damaging. We recognise the pressure that ESCC were also under but building a better relationship with the contract holders would have gone some way towards easing their concerns, promoting better mutual understanding and towards building trust.

**We strongly urge funders to engage closely with the people they are funding as this is by far the better way to manage risk.**

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyds Bank Foundation ‘Lessons for Funder Practice’ 2022, extract:  
<https://www.lloydsbankfoundation.org.uk/influencing/research/lessons-for-funder-practice>

## CASE STUDIES

### CASE STUDY ONE: ESCC’S DIGITAL IN CARE PROGRAMME

The following case study was provided by Rachel Nahum of the Digital in Care programme and has been amended for concision and to be in the voice of the report.

The case study demonstrates the value and potential of the CDH, in this instance to support children who may be more vulnerable than most and for a variety of reasons. It is important to note that increased digital access and activity, largely through smart phones, can increase the risks for young people who are already vulnerable.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME

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Digital in Care began in summer 2021 with the aim of creating cultural change about how care-experienced young people access the digital world.

There are 4 areas to the project:

1. Digital Ambassador network – our ambassadors are central to the programme and include children in care, care leavers, carers and social care practitioners. They help us develop the training and resources and crucially, keep us current.
2. Digital Hive: a one stop shop website for training, resources, advice and support (<https://www.thedigitalhive.info>)
3. Integrated Digital Strategy – embedding digital consideration into all aspects of social work practice.
4. Consultation service for high-risk young people.

#### WHO WAS INVOLVED?

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- Over 300 people have accessed training.
- A 20 strong Digital Ambassador team of foster carers, practitioners and young people.

#### THE DIGITAL AMBASSADORS’ ROLE

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- Sharing stories/experiences
- Creating content for use in training and on the Digital Hive (video and audio)
- Involvement in the development of the Digital Hive (user experience, navigation, design)
- Co-delivering training
- Offering practical advice to others in similar situations.

A crucial part of their role is making sure the programme remains current and responsive to latest trends and risks online. Thanks to the Ambassadors, the programme discovered BeReal and Omada apps before many of the online safety national companies.

## INSPIRE EVENTS

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The programme created Inspire events as a reward/incentive for the Ambassadors, providing opportunities to explore new technology and careers within the digital world, and to be empowered to be confident with innovative technology.

Some attend small schools that do not have well-equipped IT departments and this project enables them to get access to the latest, most expensive equipment such as 3D printers and VR headsets.

The first Inspire event, in partnership with Brighton MET, provided access to Virtual Reality (VR) headsets and games. Most young people had not used VR before, some had not been to Brighton for many years, so although there were benefits to the Brighton sessions the programme really wanted to find a local project.

## WHY DIGITAL ARTS HUB? (IN THE CDH)

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The Digital Arts Hub is a new project in Hastings based in the newly developed Observer Building; a local charity committed to ensuring that the community is at the heart of their work. It came to the programme’s attention through a social media campaign during the 2022 May Bank Holiday and Hastings Jack in the Green festival.

Rachel met with the Digital Arts Hub team to discuss involvement in one off-events and to identify opportunities for progression. It was agreed that the programme would take local care-experienced young people to the DAH project, all of whom would benefit from the team’s expertise. For the DAH, this created an opportunity to reach a typically vulnerable hard-to-reach group.

## THE STORY SO FAR

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Two events have so far run with the Digital Arts Hub. The young people have had the opportunity to be 3D scanned and have their model 3D printed.

<https://instagram.com/digitalarts.hub>

You can experience the project’s outputs by accessing Rachel’s QR code, just point your camera at the QR code and accept access requirements, whilst at all times keeping the camera pointed at the screen.

<https://www.digitalartshubhastings.com/content/RachelNahum>



The young people loved this activity, commenting:

*“This workshop and the activities included were really interesting and fun. We had a lovely day”.*

A second activity involved animating the 3D scans so that the figure moves as you choose. Examples included: street dancing/fighting, martial arts, gymnastics and much more. The young people used their phones to record themselves with great delight! They have also used their VR headsets with an art activity.

The most recent Inspire event included an exclusive tour of the (Observer) building; the shared co-workspace, events room, and the floor where building work is beginning for affordable rented flats. This initiated conversations about price of rent and the ethical stance that the Observer Building is taking.

The next Inspire event is in December 2022, and the programme are delighted with how the partnership with Digital Arts Hub has progressed.

*“Thank you so much for arranging yesterday all the boys had a great time. They were so excited telling us all about it.” Foster carer*

## BENEFITS FOR DIGITAL IN CARE PROGRAMME

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The benefit of Digital Arts Hub being a local project means that Hastings is seen as an attractive place to both live and work. The programme is working with vulnerable young people who often think of Hastings as somewhere that they want to leave. This project helps them see Hastings as a viable option for their futures.

The fact that young people loved these events and become so enthused means that they are more motivated to support the Digital in Care programme by sharing their digital experiences.

Rachel Nahum commented:

*“We are delighted to be working with Digital Arts Hub. I had never heard about 3D scanning and sometimes my work is always about the risks online. Working here has brought the fun back into technology. I look forward to these sessions and am so grateful to all the staff at Digital Arts Hub who have been welcoming, patient and willing to answer all our questions. All of us have been inspired by your work.”*

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*I have shared my 3D scan in ESCC management meetings, who were impressed with the technology and how it would inspire young people to get involved.*

*We hope that as our programme progresses, we continue to host our events at Digital Arts Hub. Thank you.”*

Lucy Hogg, Programme Manager said:

*“It has been fantastic working with Digital Arts Hub – seeing the young people get excited about new technology and indeed the redevelopment of a well-known landmark in Hastings (even though I did find the roof a bit of a challenge – I’m afraid of heights). I look forward to future events and exploring more new technology; illustrating the possibilities to our young Digital Ambassadors.”*



## CASE STUDY TWO: THE NEURO-DIVERGENT EVENT WITH ‘LEVEL-3 PRODUCTIONS’

Material for the following case study was provided by Willow Ritchie, a co-director of Level-3 Productions Ltd., based in Brighton and established in 2000. Level-3 is a video production company which supports marginalised groups in the arts, particularly neuro-divergent (ND) groups.

The case study again demonstrates the value and potential of the CDH, in this instance to support young people and adults who can be described as neuro-diverse, autistic or learning disabled, this time through a neuro-divergent event held in early November 2022 at the CDH.

### OVERVIEW OF THE EVENT

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The event provided workshops for video game creation and a video game exhibition, all created by and for autistic, learning disabled and neuro-divergent audiences. The event also included a 3D scanning workshop and a panel session.

The event format was also used in Folkestone and Brighton. The event was marketed to relevant ND groups as well as in general via social media.

### WHO WAS INVOLVED?

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The event targeted young autistic, learning disabled and neuro-divergent audiences and their parents, living in and around Hastings. The two-day event was free to enter.

### WHY DIGITAL ARTS HUB? (IN THE CDH)

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The Digital Arts Hub provided a new and suitable space for such an event in Hastings. The amount of space available was important to the needs of the attendees, providing sufficient ‘breathing room’ so as not to feel overwhelmed (this is an important consideration when engaging with ND groups).

*“A benefit of the space was they could create a calm environment for the attendees.”*

The additional benefit of a café area was also very helpful to encouraging people to stay longer by having a break away from the workshops and exhibition before re-joining activities. Parents will stay longer if they feel it’s a positive experience.

*“The space is very useable and the café space is a great way of bringing in the audience – people stayed for two or three hours, and some came on both days. There was a fair amount of equipment they could use for the event which made life easier.”*

The 3D scanning equipment was particularly helpful and exciting for the attendees. This and the other equipment enabled them to provide a good range of experiences to the attendees. The skill and expertise of the team was also of great help, and they were great at welcoming people. The space was though ‘a bit echoey’ but this was not an issue once the event started as the materials were accessed using headphones.

On this occasion, the CDH provided a free venue but if it is held there again it will probably need funding support.

## BENEFITS FOR THE NEURO-DIVERSE EVENT

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For Willow, the experience was ‘all positive, all really brilliant, including working with Sarah’. She reported that they got motivational and strategic support from the CDH team, and some marketing support. In many ways, the event held in Hastings was the most successful of the three held along the south coast:

*“What was great about Hastings was there were a massive amount of people just walking in, in contrast to other places. It was a free event so this made it more accessible.”*

Willow’s assessment of the space was that it was ‘bang-on’ with the digital futures agenda, clearly meeting a need for a wide range of audiences. For Level-3, the audience is ND young people and adults and she reported:

*“There was lots of positive feedback from the parents of autistic children who had not thought their children could have a role in video gaming. The 3D scanner workshop was a great opportunity, especially for low-income families. It made attendees excited about what they could do next.”*

This demonstrates an outcome very much in line with the aims of the project – making digital futures possible for young people in Hastings.

Willow reported that the event also appealed to ND adults as it showed them possibilities for the future.

*“Also great was that the children's were the dominant voices, explaining the art to adults and their parents. The event was more accessible for a younger rather than an older audience.”*

There is potential for such an event to run again at the Observer Building, targeting similar or different audiences, continuing to demonstrate digital futures.

## CASE STUDY THREE: THE KICKSTARTERS

The project supported three ‘Kickstart’ placements. The DWP Kickstart Scheme provided funding to employers to create jobs for 16- to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit. The scheme ran for two years from September 2020 until the autumn of 2022.

### OVERVIEW OF THE KICKSTART PLACEMENTS

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WRNV supported 11 Kickstart placements in all, with three specifically placed in the CRF-funded project. Two of the placements focused more on and around the overall CRF project, then moving to work on The Who exhibition, and one more on the activities of the CDH.

The DWP scheme required delivery against three broad aims:

1. Help the young people get a CV together.
2. Help them with literacy and numeracy skills.
3. Support them into long-term employment.

The scheme funded 100% of the national minimum wage for 25 hours work per week, and with employers’ NI contributions and pension costs, for six months. Additional hours and pay were at the discretion of the employer, and a further £1,500 per placement was available for set-up costs such as IT and safety equipment.

The Kickstarters were supported each week with employability sessions from WRNV’s general manager. Acting as a mentor, he provided a range of interventions for four hours per week with the overarching aim of improving confidence, drawing on his 20 years of management experience. His approach to building confidence was a mix of building capability and building self-belief through positive dialogue – ‘a focus on achieving success – I knew they could succeed’. There was a strong desire to help them develop the confidence to get into the world of work.

*“I focused on building confidence, developing literacy skills, which again was down to confidence, showing that they do in fact know how to express themselves.”*

*“I responded to the mood and the needs of the group, identifying gaps in their skills and experience.”*

### WHO WAS INVOLVED?

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The typical story for the young people involved in the WRNV Kickstart placements was one of having finished college or university in the run-up or during Covid, and then coming into the employment market at the time of lockdowns. This situation severely restricted employment opportunities and many found themselves ‘living in their bedroom’, cut-off socially and from work. The main consequence of this enforced isolation was low confidence and, sometimes, the beginnings of mental health problems. Re-entering the job market once the lockdowns lifted proved hard for them as their self-belief was at such a low ebb. Many also had little or no work experience to put on a CV, and little idea of where to start with finding meaningful work.

## WHY WRNV?

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The organisation’s delivery of the CRF-funded project provided a range of useful work experience opportunities across different parts of the project and with different areas of work. The opportunity was to provide a wide range of experiences to two of the Kickstarters in particular, and a narrower but more specialised opportunity in the CDH to the third participant which reflected their skills and interests.

*“I came on to the scheme with Cult.Brand as a digital marketing assistant for the first 6 months, learning how to market the exhibition with one other person. I have a journalistic background, so I worked on the website and blogs. In the first six months I was based first in Rock House with Napster, then we moved to Eagle House, and then to St Andrew's Mews.”*

## BENEFITS FOR THE KICKSTARTERS

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For the Kickstarters, the experience was generally one of gaining a lot of experience in a short period of time. The comments were illuminating and are presented here with little change.

*“I got copywriting insight and knowledge, digital marketing experience, tailoring a website, graphic design skills, content development skills to find and then write a story with the right images and video. It was exciting!”*

*“I mostly worked with Bee. It was all very positive to work with her, a person with lots of experience and who was willing to share that with us. I was given the space to develop and follow my interests in this area.*

The experiences tended to follow the general ups and downs of the project, with periods of intense activity and some quieter periods:

*“The Kickstart project kind of plateaued following lots of online learning which was to set us up for the later work. The system for allocating tasks seemed to dry up and this was 'stir crazy' time with not enough to do, twiddling our thumbs.*

*This then switched when they became gallery assistants at St Andrew's Mews. By August, we were suddenly very busy sorting out merch, photos etc.”*

They felt that they got a lot from the experience e.g., of dealing with the public:

*“One of the hardest things to deal with was the community factor – there was lots of hostility from the traders in St Andrews and from the public on charging for entry. We got shouted at by people. Not sure why the other traders were angry but it was an uncomfortable atmosphere. It seemed odd given that this could have brought more custom to them.”*

But overall, the experience was positive, and there is particular praise for the role and work of the mentor. For one Kickstarter, the sessions were life-changing:

*“Every Wednesday at WRNV for employability training, job advice, CV building – this was the difference between me leaving for London for an internship or staying locally. The mentor explained how corporates work and I decided I would stay locally. This was a really helpful realisation; it changed my trajectory completely and I was able to really think about how I want to work now. The free-space and time for reflection, the space to do things without too*

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*much supervision, developed my own working schedule is what I want and this was a really positive thing to learn.”*

In terms of seeing a positive and local ‘digital future’, this was a great outcome:

*“Hastings is a really good town start out in, really positive, different sort of place, good creative influences, so there are networks to engage with. Music scene is good, wide variety of opportunities. Lots of shops and 'lots of doors' which you can knock on, volunteer, gain experience and develop a track record, converting that to employment or freelance work.”*

The mentor commented on the positive effect of the employability sessions. He had lots of experience of hiring people and was able to help the Kickstarters with interview practice, and sometimes by being the interviewee so that they could get an idea of how to manage the pressures of the situation:

*“They also interviewed me as a way of learning what is appropriate, how to keep calm, improve their responses to difficult questions. I know that some of them used this experience and have now secured jobs.”*

The important success factor was the more informal approach to the mentoring which focused on getting to know the young people and tailor the content accordingly. The mentor reports that they

*“Read and responded to the mood and needs of the group, identifying gaps in their skills and experience, rather than following a rigid syllabus.*

*Some sessions were pitched at a high level and others at a level which addressed more basic skills.”*

There was a structure and ethos which underpinned the success of the mentoring:

*“I designed a programme to deliver the requirements without them feeling they were learning in a formal way. They seemed to get a lot out of it. I focused on confidence as they seemed to have very little, post-Covid, straight out of college and into lockdown.”*

Our reflections are that this was an important subsidiary part of the project which could be reproduced in some way if funding can be found. Apprenticeships might be one route, but these are more tightly structured. The issue which the DWP Kickstart programme addressed has not gone away and it is still difficult for young people to get a foothold in the workplace with jobs which provide good skills and experience. The Kickstart approach also identifies the importance of building confidence by building capability – the confidence was not built on empty platitudes but on real achievements, however small some of these might have seemed. Such opportunities are surely an important ongoing part of creating digital futures in Hastings.

## APPENDIX

### QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

#### THE CREATIVE DIGITAL HUB / DIGITAL ARTS HUB

##### Response levels

28% of the online survey responses related to the Creative Digital Hub / Digital Arts Hub (30 people).

##### Ratings for the project experience

Respondents were asked to rate their experience of the project(s) from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) and the results for this project were as follows:

Clearly, the people who experienced this project largely had an excellent experience and 90% of them rated their involvement as excellent or very good. Comments included:

*“I give the Digital Arts a 5, excellent (but probably not advertised enough).”*

*“The experiences and sense of belonging to a vibrant, exciting community were significant.”*

*“Good quality, innovative, community led.”*

*“It was a fabulous thing to do and loved the exhibition. Great way to truly involve people.”*

*“Interactive well explained included everyone showed people who else was part of the town introduced people to new technologies and their potential gave people something to take away.”*

Only one person who rated the experience as poor left a comment, but this related to The Who exhibition.



## Ratings for what people got from the experience

Respondents were asked to select from a range of possible outcomes chosen as the likely and / or desired outcome for each project – the thing or things which were the best part of their experiences. The results for this project were as follows:

## Multiple outcomes analysis

55% of the respondents reported both enjoying the experience and learning something, although this does not necessarily demonstrate a causal link. 73% of respondents found the experience enjoyable, felt they learnt something and also reported that it made them think differently. The multiple outcomes people experienced are presented in the following pie chart.

## What people would change about the experience

There were three responses which were to ‘change nothing’ and a suggested improvement:

*“Make the event to hand out the figures more of a significant exchange...”*

*“Making picking up models easier perhaps.”*

These are interesting ideas, perhaps for more ceremony around the presentation of the 3D printed figures to the people who they represented. It is not clear what form this could have taken, but the potential significance of ceremony and ritual is noted in a community context.

## THE WHO EXHIBITION AND IMMERSIVE SINGLE

### Response levels

57% of the online survey responses related to The Who exhibition (61 people).

### Ratings for the project experience

Respondents were asked to rate their experience of the project(s) from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) and the results for this project were as follows:

90% of people who experienced this project had a good or an excellent experience. There were comments from 60 respondents, a representative sample of which included:

*“Very interesting, informative and fun.”*

*“Very original exhibition in a wonderful venue. Obvious so much care and effort had been made in the displays. Essence of the Who was really captured. Such a treat for the people of Hastings.”*

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*“So brilliant to have this in Hastings. Also, a great venue, and very friendly staff.”*

*“Thoroughly enjoyable and fantastic staff.”*

*“Really not impressive or worthwhile.”*

*“It was hard to find!”*

*“My son is a big Who fan and we took him for his birthday. He loved it.”*

Given the sample size, this was a more reliable set of responses than for the other projects – we would expect to see a range of positive and negative responses and comments from such a sample.

### Ratings for what people got from the experience

Respondents were asked to select from a range of possible outcomes chosen as the likely and / or desired outcome for each project – the thing or things which were the best part of their experiences. The results for this project were as follows:

### Multiple outcomes analysis

73% of the respondents reported both enjoying the experience and learning something, although this does not necessarily demonstrate a causal link. 12% of respondents found the experience enjoyable, felt they learnt something and also reported that it made them think differently. The multiple outcomes people experienced are presented in the following pie chart.

## What people would change about the experience

There were 61 responses to this question in all. Of these, 14 were to ‘none’ or ‘can’t think of any (changes)’. The remaining comments and suggested improvements which break down into four themes:

1. Better promotion and signage
2. Bigger venue and better ticketing
3. VR-related (Virtual Reality) comments and scale of the exhibition

### Better promotion and signage

This theme attracted around 20% of the suggestions for improvements, with typical examples being:

*“Signage to the Exhibition more obvious.”*

*“Better advertising, I only found out in a totally random way but at least five people went because I did. Luckily it was extended and promoted better.”*

*“More advertising and maybe more signage as it was a little difficult to find.”*

St Andrew’s Mews is certainly tucked away and the entrance can be easily missed. Raising general awareness of the exhibition required marketing and promotion which may have been delayed as a result of preparing the venue, the exhibition having been moved from the Observer Building. However, the exhibition organisers accept that more marketing would have been a good thing.

### Venue and ticketing

This theme attracted around 30% of the suggestions for improvements, with typical examples being:

*“I’d have changed the venue for the Who exhibition and advertised it more and given reduced priced tickets to Hastings’ residents.”*

*“It is a pity it was so small and tucked away. Should have had a higher profile in the area.”*

*“More accessible venue. It deserved better.”*

## Evaluation Report – ‘Kickstarting the Digital Commons / CRF 2066’

*“Put all exhibition on ground floor level.”*

*“Within the space available it was excellent. If there was a larger space I'm sure there are many more elements that could be included.”*

The venue was a smallish space in which the exhibitors constructed a clever arrangement of ‘rooms’ to present the exhibition content, rather than using a single, rectangular space ‘with stuff on the walls.’ This created an intimate atmosphere and experience, but one quite different from most people’s experience of an exhibition. The exhibition intends to move to London where it will have more space; the format is yet to be finalised. It is a shame that the exhibition could not be held at the Observer Building, as originally intended, as this would have provided a venue with more space, facilities and a higher local profile. The reasons for this are explored elsewhere in the report.

The exhibition space was up a metal staircase and so was not wheel-chair accessible, but the comments around accessibility may also have been making a wider point about having a venue which was easier to find, larger and more prominent.

Comments relating to the ticketing included the following:

*“I booked tickets for 4pm. I checked the website a few days before the event which stated the event closed at 4pm. I did manage to change the time of our tickets however as we do not live in Hastings and had arranged to meet friends for lunch our arrangements were ruined. I am disappointed and really confused as to why tickets had been sold for a time when the event was open????”*

Ticketing was handled by Eventbrite, a platform we know other projects have had problems with in the recent past. The next iteration of the exhibition will use ‘Fever Ticketing’ instead.

### VR-related comments and scale of the exhibition

This theme attracted around 40% of the comments and suggestions for improvements, with typical examples being:

*“I would want the immersive section to be longer and contain more content.”*

*“The immersive experience was good, but a bit glitchy & could possibly have been a bit longer, but overall, I enjoyed the whole exhibition.”*

*“Better promotion and more comfortable VR surroundings - one chair and only one working head piece the day I went. Meant had to take it in turns and standing during the VR wasn't a safe option for some of us.”*

*“The virtual part wasn't working when we went. This should have been checked.”*

As the next section of the report will demonstrate, this does not mean that people did not enjoy the VR part of the exhibition – quite the contrary – but they had ambitions for it to be bigger and better. Some recognised it as innovative, but others they may have expected more of a ‘finished article’ than a developing technology is likely to be. Developing the VR experience was challenging and delivering it reliably pushed the boundaries of what was possible with computing power and Wi-Fi signal, and a relatively small budget. Nevertheless, some visitors were a little disappointed with the VR experience. In their defence, the team wondered what iteration of the experience the comments

related to (we have no way of knowing) as they assert that they were improving it weekly and that the VR experience in the latter stages was a more reliable experience.

### Other comments and suggestions

The following remaining comments and suggestions centre around the variety and quantity of merchandise available:

*“...better choice of merchandise.”*

*“Sell merchandise.” (The exhibition did have some merchandise available)*

### Conclusions

The Who exhibition was innovative and featured ground-breaking technology. It brought into use a redundant space, bringing new people to Hastings and to St Andrews Mews. It was a striking and professional exhibition with distinctive features, such as the strong graphic identity (red, white, blue, primary shapes) and developing VR technology. It was enjoyed by the large majority of those who attended.

There were some things which could have been better, chiefly:

1. The ticketing experience (in hand)
2. The varied VR experience (this improved as the exhibition progressed)
3. The venue. This was in part a positive part of the experience, bringing into use a neglected part of St Andrew’s Mews (itself something of a backwater) and brightening up the area. The exhibition design made very good use of a relatively small space and this added to the quality of the experience. However, having a larger space for the exhibition at the Observer Building would have had a higher profile and offered better facilities. The benefits for St Andrew’s Mews would then have been lost, so it is hard to judge which would have been the better outcome.
4. Larger-scale marketing and promotion would have helped local and regional awareness, but there was some good media coverage.



## RENOVATION OF THE OBSERVER BUILDING

### Response levels

15% of the online survey responses related to the renovation of the Observer Building (16 people). Clearly, this is a small sample size and conclusions taken from the survey data should be treated with some care. They may give an indication of overall sentiment in response to a question, but this is untested. However, this part of the CRF-funded project was not as ‘public facing’ as the work of the CDH or The Who exhibition. People are only likely to have noted any change to the Observer Building if they attended an activity or event there, so in this case that would be activities around the CDH / Digital Arts Hub.

### Ratings for the project experience

Respondents were asked to rate their experience of the project(s) from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) and the results for this project were as follows:

92% of the responses rated the Observer Building renovation as good or excellent, a great result. However, the responses in relation to this question are not a good fit with the project activity of supporting the physical renovation of the Observer Building. The responses are far more likely to relate to what people think of the renovations and the way of working, as shown by the comments:

*“The experiences and sense of belonging to a vibrant, exciting community were significant.”*

## Ratings for what people got from the experience

As for the other projects, respondents were asked to select from a range of possible outcomes chosen as the likely and / or desired outcome for each project – the thing or things which were the best part of their experiences. The results for this project were as follows:

As such, the responses in relation to the renovation of the Observer Building make little sense; they are more likely to overlap with people’s experience of the CDH, Digital Arts Hub and the events and activities there. All the respondents who fed back on the renovation also commented (and more clearly) on the CDH / Digital Arts Hub / ‘People of Hastings’ activities. However, there were a good range of responses across the options.

## Multiple outcomes analysis

31% of the respondents reported both enjoying the experience and learning something, although this does not necessarily demonstrate a causal link. 23% of respondents found the experience enjoyable, felt they learnt something and also reported that it made them think differently. The multiple outcomes people experienced are presented in the following pie chart.

## What people would change about the experience

There were 7 responses to this question in all. Of these, 4 were ‘none’ or ‘can’t think of any (changes)’. The remaining sensible comment (one person wanted more chocolate) was as follows:

*“I didn't like the purple colour.”*

EVALUATION LOGIC MODEL

KICKSTARTING THE DIGITAL COMMONS / DIGITAL HASTINGS PROJECT  
CRF2066, FUNDED BY THE UK COMMUNITY RENEWAL FUND

Logic Model, 17<sup>th</sup> November v2

**Overall purpose:** "Within the context of the wider Hastings Commons / Trinity Triangle development and in the spirit of community-led regeneration, to enable local people and businesses to experience new and emerging technology, bringing to life a range of 'digital futures' for the people of Hastings."

