

LUTON BOROUGH COUNCIL · EXECUTIVE SNAPSHOT

Cultural Space in Luton

A companion to the full feasibility study: the evidence, the diagnosis, and the actions Luton can take to make its existing cultural assets work as a system.

26

creative practitioners consulted

13

cultural facilitators

57

venues & sites mapped

24

comparator towns studied

COMMISSIONED BY

Luton Borough Council

DELIVERED BY

Create Wellbeing Partnerships CIC

FOR

Arts & Culture Strategy Group &
partners

The place this study is about

Before the evidence, the place. The diagnosis is specific to a town with significant existing cultural assets, and a narrow window in which to connect them.

Unlike many comparator towns, Luton begins with significant cultural assets already in place.

This document begins here, because none of the evidence makes sense without understanding the place.

225k

residents, one of the most ethnically diverse towns in England

23%

of the population is under 16, well above the England average

£1.7bn

town-centre investment programme now reshaping the centre

3rd

in the UK for new creative-business growth in 2015 to 2016, behind only London and Manchester

Extraordinary diversity

Successive waves of migration have built a distinctive, layered creative culture, from carnival and sound-system heritage to a young, global-majority creative community.

A regeneration moment

The Stage, Power Court, the airport and the wider masterplan are changing the town centre now. The levers to embed culture in that change are open, and time-limited.

A record of production

Home of the UK Centre for Carnival Arts and fifty years of Luton Carnival, and once one of the fastest-growing creative economies in the country. The talent is here.

A grassroots that fragmented

Over fifteen years the town lost more than ten venues, its forums thinned, and much of its grassroots production infrastructure disappeared without replacement. The pieces exist, but disconnected.

Why this study was commissioned

Luton Borough Council commissioned this study to answer one question, and to test whether the town can act on the answer.

WHY THIS STUDY WAS COMMISSIONED

This study was commissioned to answer one question: is additional cultural space needed in Luton, what kind, and can it be delivered? It answers that, and goes one step further, examining how Luton's existing cultural system operates, where it breaks down, and the practical actions required to improve access, coordination and future investment.

THE CONTEXT

A £1.7 billion town-centre programme is reshaping the centre, with The Stage and Power Court due to open. At the same time, Luton's grassroots creative sector contracted while the national sector grew, losing venues, studios and rehearsal space that took decades to build. The choices made over the next few years will determine whether culture is embedded within that change or left peripheral to it.

WHAT THE STUDY WORKS THROUGH



"This isn't solved with one venue or investing in one thing. This is a long-term problem that requires long-term thinking."

Consultation participant, Luton

WHAT THIS GIVES THE PARTNERSHIP

- A shared evidence base for cultural investment and decision-making
- A diagnosis of the barriers to creative space, participation and growth
- Prioritised actions shaped through consultation and partner discussion
- Delivery options that respond directly to the evidence
- Investment considerations to support future funding, regeneration and policy

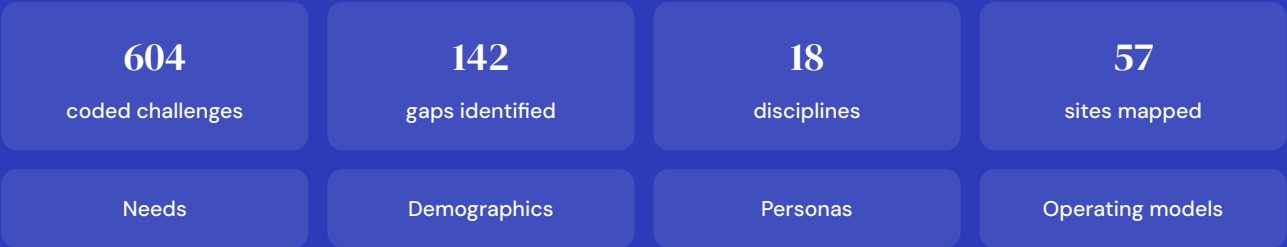
What we did

Every consultation response was coded into a structured evidence base and tested across several lenses, built to reach beyond the usual voices before any recommendation was made.

THE INTERACTIVE EVIDENCE SYSTEM

Every response, coded and cross-tested

Each interview, workshop and consultation response was coded into a structured evidence system and analysed across seven lenses, so patterns could be tested from multiple angles before informing a single conclusion. Coding the evidence this way, rather than relying on notes alone, is unusual for a study of this kind, and it is part of why the findings hold together. It is also the source of the demographics, personas and operating models here.



ENGAGEMENT THAT REACHED FURTHER

26 practitioners and 13 facilitators, reached through one-to-one conversations, discipline groups, a town-wide forum and a survey, anchored in TOKKO, Jamrock Studios, Luton Irish Forum, Barnfield College and faith and neighbourhood networks.

69% of practitioners were connected to no formal cultural network and required sustained direct outreach, reaching the voices most consultation misses.

SPATIAL MAPPING

57 venues and potential sites mapped across LU1 to LU4, covering existing facilities, vacant council-owned sites and development opportunities.

COMPARATOR RESEARCH

24 towns facing conditions comparable to Luton, coded against six lenses: shared problem, governance, assets, funding, intervention and outcome.



What practitioners told us

What the consultation found, in numbers. The picture is consistent across every discipline: the problem is access, not the absolute supply of space.

£60,000

of funded creative work has already left Luton

And that is from just six practitioners. No organisation measures the rest, so this is the floor, not the total. The cost of a disconnected system is already being paid. It is simply not being counted.

81%

of practitioners were dissatisfied with current provision. Just one was positive.

77%

named affordability as the barrier. Most earn under £5,000 a year from their work.

65%

linked lost venues to the loss of local audiences and a local scene.

42%

hit booking failures, including six-month waits for a reply.

38%

named racial or class-based gatekeeping.

31%

now build their creative careers outside Luton.

No town-wide system records this loss. The barriers compound: unaffordable space, slow booking and gatekeeping push practitioners out, and the funded work they would have made leaves with them.

What practitioners asked for

Ranked by frequency of mention across all 26 responses.



EXISTS, BUT HARD TO ACCESS

- Rehearsal and music space, in venues with restricted hours
- Neighbourhood provision, unevenly spread and hard to book
- Youth space, inside adult venues rather than safeguarded

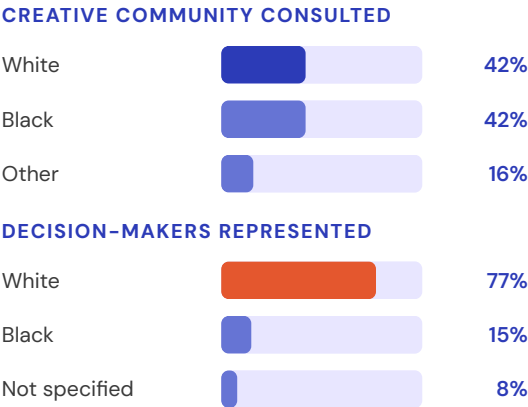
GENUINELY ABSENT

- Multi-use making space, the top-ranked need, does not exist
- A digital studio for photography, gaming and streaming
- Community-owned space outside institutional control

Youth creative space ranked third, yet no permanent youth route into cultural decision-making exists.

Who shapes decisions

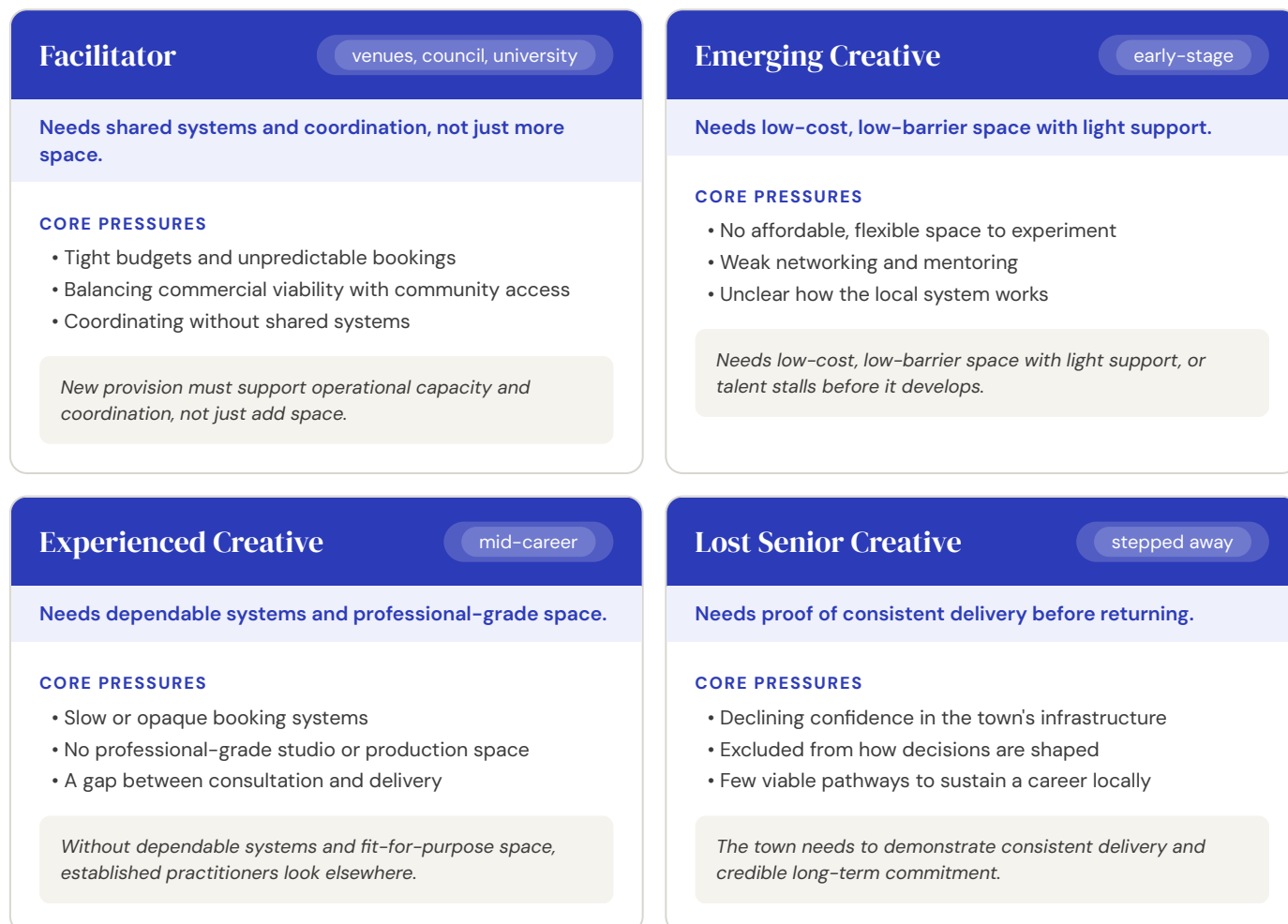
Representation within the evidence base (indicative, small samples).



The consultation broadened the range of voices informing this study, reaching further than the decision-making structures it maps. Future governance should build on that breadth of lived experience.

Creative personas

Four recurring journeys appeared repeatedly across the evidence. They explain why one solution will never work for everyone, and who any response has to reach.



THE JOURNEY THE SYSTEM FAILS TO HOLD



It breaks at three points: entry, professional development and retention.

Commercial hires routinely displaced community activity. Practitioners described being moved or cancelled when a higher-paying booking appeared, reinforcing a sense that community use came second to commercial income, the Experienced and Lost creatives above.

"Am I going to be moved because something with more money came in? I don't feel we are treated the same."

Freelance arts practitioner, Luton

What the evidence shows

Luton already has many of the ingredients of a functioning cultural ecosystem. What it lacks is a mechanism for connecting them. The difficulty is less an absence of space than an absence of a system.

Luton's cultural system has real strengths: committed organisations, an anchor trust, a university and a wealth of creative talent. Behind 604 challenges and 142 gaps sit a small number of connected, system-wide issues that no single organisation can resolve alone.

1

Access, not supply

Luton has more cultural space than many practitioners realise. The barriers are largely operational: where pricing is unpublished, booking is slow or hours restricted, space that exists on paper can be hard to use in practice.

2

A broken progression pathway

The stepping-stone between grassroots activity and mid-scale performance was lost when Edge, Exchange and The Heights closed, and was never replaced. Talent has nowhere to develop before it is ready for a venue like The Stage.

3

No single organisation connects the system

Venues, libraries, community centres, an anchor trust, a university and council assets all exist. No single organisation currently holds the role of connecting them, a gap in the system rather than a failing of any partner.

4

Confidence to rebuild

Practitioners described stepping back where earlier engagement had not led to visible change. This is a shared challenge, understandable and reversible, rebuilt through visible delivery rather than further consultation.

5

Widening the voices in governance

No permanent mechanism yet exists for young people to inform cultural decision-making, and the creative community consulted was more diverse than the decision-making structures the study mapped, a consideration for future governance.

HOW THE CHALLENGES CONNECT



Comparator research across 24 towns

To test whether Luton's challenges were unique, we reviewed 24 towns and cities facing comparable structural conditions: major regeneration without an established cultural role, vacant civic and industrial buildings, fragmented cultural governance, declining grassroots infrastructure, high-street vacancy, and difficulty retaining creative talent.

EACH PLACE EXAMINED THROUGH THE SAME LENSES

- Problem
- Ownership
- Partnership
- Assets
- Funding
- Intervention
- Outcomes

Their approaches and outcomes were coded and compared, not read as isolated case studies, to surface recurring sequences, delivery models, transferable lessons and cautionary cases.

Regeneration and cultural identity Major change without an established cultural role	Bradford, Middlesbrough, Milton Keynes, Stevenage, Margate, Hull, Barnsley, Doncaster
Industrial and civic asset reuse Vacant civic and industrial buildings	Stoke-on-Trent, Leicester, Wakefield, Blackburn, Grimsby, Rochdale, Wolverhampton
High-street vacancy and meanwhile use Empty units and shopfront vacancy	Hastings, Oxford, Plymouth, Dumfries
Fragmented governance and weak coordination Scattered activity, no single delivery body	Folkestone, Bedford, Coventry, Gloucester, Sunderland

WHAT REPEATED ACROSS THE SAMPLE

20 of 24 began with a strategy, a coordinating body, reuse or meanwhile activity, not a new building. **18** embedded culture in regeneration. **17** created a coordinating body. **15** reused existing buildings first. **5** tested meanwhile use. Only **4** built a flagship first.

TOWN	WHERE IT STARTED	WHAT FOLLOWED
Hull	A coordinating title and delivery body	£676m leveraged, ~800 jobs
Barnsley	A masterplan and cultural anchor	£180m Glass Works, ~1,100 jobs
Wakefield	Reuse of derelict listed mills	135,000 sq ft , heritage funding unlocked
Stevenage	A ten-year cultural strategy	£37.5m Towns Fund, second-highest nationally
Hastings	Meanwhile use and community ownership	8,500 sq m , 50+ workspaces
Coventry	A stand-alone, under-capitalised trust	Collapse owing £4.25m

Across all 24 towns, one finding repeated. Places that began with coordination, governance and better use of existing assets attracted investment more consistently than those that began by building new cultural infrastructure. A new flagship was rarely the starting point; where one existed, it followed a stronger cultural system rather than creating it.

The same challenges, answered elsewhere

Each challenge established in Luton also appeared in the towns we studied. Here is what they did about it, what changed, and why it matters for Luton now.

Luton has a £1.7bn regeneration programme, but culture is not yet embedded in it. Finding 7

ELSEWHERE	Barnsley and Hull faced the same risk, and wrote culture into the masterplan before delivery.
WHAT CHANGED	Barnsley's £180m Glass Works delivered an estimated 1,100 jobs and 6m+ visitors; Hull's City of Culture title levered £676m and ~800 jobs.
FOR LUTON NOW	The leverage exists while sites are still being designed, and reduces once they complete.

No single organisation coordinates Luton's cultural system. Finding 8

ELSEWHERE	Folkestone's coordinating body has run for 15+ years; Coventry's under-capitalised trust collapsed owing £4.25m, including £1m to its own council.
WHAT CHANGED	Capitalisation, not arm's-length governance, was the difference between the two. 17 of 24 towns used an independent body; most endured.
FOR LUTON NOW	Name a coordinating owner, and resource it to survive a funding shock.

Luton has 57 mapped sites, including six vacant council buildings, none yet in cultural use.

ELSEWHERE	Wakefield, Leicester and Stoke converted derelict civic and industrial stock rather than building new.
WHAT CHANGED	Wakefield returned 135,000 sq ft to use, unlocking £8m Levelling Up and £625k heritage funding; Leicester's former depot now holds 150+ creative businesses.
FOR LUTON NOW	Existing assets can be tested before, and instead of, new capital.

Luton's town centre is changing, but no meanwhile programme tests demand.

ELSEWHERE	Hastings and Plymouth used community ownership and meanwhile use before permanent investment.
WHAT CHANGED	Hastings brought 8,500 sq m into use from a £75k seed grant; Plymouth reused a quarter of one street with a £205k community share raise.
FOR LUTON NOW	Demand and operators can be tested at low cost before capital is committed.

WHAT TRANSFERS TO LUTON, AND WHAT DOES NOT

TRANSFERS DIRECTLY

- Coordination and strategy before capital
- Reuse of existing buildings, with meanwhile testing
- Public funding used to leverage private investment

DOES NOT TRANSFER

- Hull's City of Culture title, a one-per-cycle national designation
- Folkestone's single £50m philanthropist
- Barnsley's £180m public borrowing appetite

What this supports: investment and jobs in Luton

Where these towns embedded culture in regeneration, the return was economic, not only cultural. The evidence strengthens Luton's case on investment, employment and town-centre viability.

Inward investment

Hull's title helped attract **£676m** of investment; Margate's **£18m** public funding leveraged **£35m** private; Stevenage secured **£37.5m** Towns Fund.

FOR LUTON The mechanism to design for is leverage, not fully-funded delivery, from decisions still being made in the £1.7bn programme.

Jobs created

Barnsley's regeneration delivered **~1,100 jobs**; Hull created **~800** cultural and visitor-economy jobs; Margate supports **~300**.

FOR LUTON Culture-led regeneration is a measurable route to creative and visitor-economy employment.

Creative workspace from reuse

Leicester's reused stock holds **150+ creative businesses**; Wakefield created **135,000 sq ft**; Hastings **50+ workspaces**.

FOR LUTON The 57 mapped sites can build a creative-economy base without flagship capital.

Footfall & viability

Barnsley's Glass Works drew **6m+ visitors**; Margate's Turner Contemporary **2.9m+** since 2011.

FOR LUTON Cultural draw underpins the commercial case for the town-centre programme.

Community wealth retained

Plymouth reused a quarter of one street with a **£205k** community share raise; Preston lifted locally-retained procurement from **5% to 18%**, redirecting **~£74m**.

FOR LUTON Social value and procurement can retain regeneration spend locally, with Section 106 a longer-term mechanism.

Long-term sustainability

Folkestone's coordinating body has run **15+ years**; Coventry's under-capitalised trust collapsed owing **£4.25m**.

FOR LUTON Whatever body is established needs reserves and diversified income, or the economic case unwinds.

Why Luton can act now

Feasibility is a test, not a matter of ambition: is the need proven, do the assets exist, are the first actions deliverable, and is the timing right? On all four, Luton passes.

1 The evidence is complete enough to act

39 practitioners and facilitators consulted · 604 coded challenges · 142 gaps · 18 disciplines · 57 venues and sites mapped · 24 comparable towns reviewed.

The need has been tested from many angles. Further general consultation is not the next requirement.

2 The first actions need no new building

A shared directory, published prices and access, consistent booking, clearer ownership, a youth governance route and small-scale access tests.

These rely on coordination and operating change, not capital construction.

3 The assets already exist

36 mapped facilities, libraries, community centres, Culture Trust assets, university facilities, independent venues, six vacant council sites, plus planning, procurement, social value and Community Wealth Building.

The partnership does not begin without assets or powers. It begins without a coordinated route for using them.

4 The regeneration window is live

A £1.7bn town-centre programme is in progress, with major sites still being designed. Cultural requirements can still shape procurement, planning, public realm, meanwhile use and social value.

The opportunity is time-sensitive. These decisions become harder and costlier to retrofit later.

FEASIBILITY TEST	EVIDENCE	STATUS
Demonstrated need	Consultation and coded evidence	Established
Available starting assets	57 mapped sites and existing networks	Established
Deliverable first actions	Operational changes within nine months	Established
Long-term capital case	Requires options appraisal and validation	Next stage

Priority actions from the workshop

Agreed at the 19 June partnership workshop, grouped by theme. The tag shows the horizon; the owner is who took it in the room. Full detail sits in the report's Prioritised Action Plan.

Governance & ownership

- NOW** Clarify roles across the partnership · Arts & Culture Strategy Group
- NEXT** Structured engagement with the sector · Council and all partners
- LATER** Move the Strategy Group toward independent governance · Arts & Culture Strategy Group

Space & assets

- NOW** Asset register and directory of all cultural space · Asset team, Step Forward Luton, Culture Trust, University of Bedfordshire, VCSE
- NOW** Financial review of all spaces and costings · Luton Borough Council
- NOW** Pilot sheltered green-space youth provision (with toilets) · Council Parks / Youth Services, young people
- NEXT** Map all venues and available space · All venue owners
- NEXT** A micro pop-up venue fund · Council and partners
- LATER** Community ownership of cultural assets · Council, community partners

Access & communications

- NOW** Visibility of pricing and a venue booking toolkit · Culture Trust, Create Wellbeing
- NOW** Transparency on how the council supports events · Council
- NEXT** Business support and procurement how-to guides · Council, partners

Investment & Community Wealth

- NOW** Track social value on regeneration spend · Council procurement
- NOW** Community and venue support fund · Council, with local MPs
- NEXT** A social value plan: how the money is spent in the town · Council, anchor partners, Community Wealth
- LATER** Review Section 106 through a cultural lens, including airport S106 · Council, Luton Arts

Skills & employment

- LATER** Talent pipeline and employment programme · Culture Trust, ACSG
- LATER** Build trust and the artist pathway · Arts & Culture Strategy Group

Ownership of the process, in the partnership's own words: the council and Culture Trust set the standard; community and strategy partners own the engagement.

From evidence to action

This study is about systems, not only space. Each finding points directly to an action.

THE FINDING

THE ACTION

Provision feels inaccessible despite a substantial mapped asset base

→ **Fix booking, pricing visibility and access before creating new space**

Access is structurally unequal, with 38% citing racial or class-based barriers

→ **Set a community access standard every supported venue meets**

Talent is leaving: 8 of 26 now develop their practice outside Luton

→ **Build a progression pathway and an employment route**

No youth-facing creative space is fit for purpose

→ **Co-design safeguarded youth space, and pilot sheltered green space**

Flexible multi-use making space is the single biggest gap

→ **Prioritise multi-use making space as the first infrastructure need**

Confidence needs rebuilding where engagement has not led to visible change

→ **Deliver visible early wins and report back on what changed**

No strategy yet links the £1.7bn programme to grassroots need

→ **Write culture into procurement and social value now; treat Section 106 as a longer-term mechanism**

The system has no shared owner or shared systems

→ **Name a coordinating owner and shared booking and data systems**

Booking failures have cost £60,000+ of funded work

→ **Publish a shared directory and booking toolkit**

Luton has the assets, the evidence and the partnership. The evidence is collectively owned; what it has lacked is a coordinated route for using it, and a single accountable function to lead delivery. The strategic feasibility is complete; site-level and financial feasibility follow. The next decision is who owns delivery.