

1. Introduction

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

This second phase of research was designed to gather more data about the lived experiences of freelance and home-based workers living in a remote and rural context and look at the broader enterprise support infrastructure. This was achieved by setting up an area based co-work group which brought research participants together for regular meet-ups over a seven month period (Dec 2018 - June 2019). This phase of research and the approach responded to the following observations:

- the high levels of social isolation being felt by creative practitioners working from home
- the 'thin' networks of support surrounding practice and enterprise support
- the narrow framing of work that was regarded as culturally valuable
- the lack of local visibility that freelance and home-based workers have in rural places and the limited data available about people who work in this way.

The majority of the research was done on a pro-bono basis, with some financial assistance from the Argyll-wide cultural heritage and arts initiative CHArts¹ and GSA's Innovation School.

1.1. Research Methodology

The research was conducted in the distinct geographic context of the Cowal peninsula, a rural and remote region in the local authority area of Argyll and Bute. Hannah Clinch lives in Dunoon which is the main town of Cowal. Dunoon has a population of 10,000 people and wider Cowal has a population of a further 3000 people spread over multiple settlements across the peninsula.

1.2. Co-work training

In May 2018 Hannah received training from the Co-work accelerator initiative² on 'quality' co-working practices. This training underpinned the ethos and development of Dunoon and Cowal Co-

¹ Cultural Heritage and Arts (CHArts). An Argyll wide initiative to support the growth of culture and the creative industries, supported by Argyll and Bute Council and Creative Scotland.

² Support to people and organisations setting up Co-working to support social and enterprise innovation <https://www.coworkingaccelerator.network/>

works - the area based co-work group established during the research³. The group met for the first time in December 2018.

1.3. Survey

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

1.4. Meet-ups

Seven Dunoon and Cowal co-work monthly meet-ups took place in free venues in Dunoon from December 2018, starting with a freelancers Christmas event. These meet-ups were widely promoted via social media, posters and a web page. They were informal, child friendly gatherings, open to anyone working at home or freelance or starting up an enterprise in Dunoon and Cowal.

1.5. Working Lunch

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

1.6. Workspace research

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

1.7. Support provision

Interviews and observation with organisations providing enterprise support was also gathered as part of the research. Desk based research about business support services, economic development initiatives and other related issues such as child care provision was conducted to build up an understanding of the wider economic development challenges.

1.8. Stakeholder consultation

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

³ Research website <https://www.tacit-tacit.co.uk/dunoon-and-cowal-co-works-survey>

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

2. Initial outcomes

2.1. Participants

Over the course of the research 64 people of working age, representing a wide range of sectors engaged with the project via a Facebook group. 34 participants attended Co-work meetings and discussions online. 17 participants attended more than three meet-ups and out of this group 9 had care responsibilities and 8 were female.

2.2. Barriers identified by research participants

The majority of survey participants and people attending co-work meetings expressed a sense of professional and social isolation, attributed to their mode of work and a lack of visibility within their own communities. Participants found the meet-ups useful as they established a point in time for people to share ideas, strategies and receive advice from peers at various stages of business development. For 6 people in the co-work group the meet-ups led to new freelance paid work opportunities and other work related networking opportunities.

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

- confusing information about enterprise support services locally
- no connection to a working community
- a lack of reliable printing facilities
- a sense of personal and professional isolation
- poor access to flexible childcare
- poor access to Skype conferencing facilities
- no affordable meeting space
- no affordable rehearsal, desk space or storage space

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

2.3. The physical infrastructure surrounding work in Dunoon and Cowal

Every village and community in Cowal has a village hall managed by a voluntary led trust and charity. In Dunoon there are multiple spaces in existing public buildings or voluntary run halls which could be used for work. However, there are low levels of awareness about freelance and home-based worker support needs and no research into how these community spaces, some of which are chronically underused, could be utilised better to support working age people in their local communities.

There is also a mismatch between publicly funded enterprise support provision and the needs local of workers. A purpose built tech hub located a mile outside of Dunoon called the Fairmile centre is owned and managed by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). The facility has a hot-desking spaces in it. However the cost of desk hire (£200 per / month) is a third higher than comparable facilities in urban settings. The provision is not affordable or flexible, with limited access over weekends and evening working. Research participants we interviewed had a very low awareness of this facility. When HIE staff were asked for information about and the take up of the hot-desking in April 2018, there had been no take-up of the service, but no plans to adjust the provision at that point in time. Therefore investment that had been made to support people with work space was being under utilised because of a disconnection between worker need and publicly funded and designed service provision.

2.4. The Queen's Hall work area

In Dunoon Live Argyll, a charity who have a remit for health, well being and culture across the region, manage the Queen's Hall. There is an open plan cafe area on the ground floor which has an area with free to use desk spaces. The work stations are used by several people in the group for work, but the location is not defined by the organisation as a co-work space. Low quality internet and the multi-purpose nature of the surrounding cafe makes the area noisy and challenging to use for all types of work. However simple adjustments to this area and the introduction of signage and co-work information could help change perceptions of the space and define it as Dunoon's first co-working space. However, this requires partnership working and funding to implement.

2.5. Care and work

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

The lack of flexible child care provision was linked to family and financial stress. For women in particular, this issue seemed to have an impact on their ability to generate income over a sustained number of years, as enterprise and freelance work opportunities had to be developed around care responsibilities. People patched together arrangements but these arrangements regularly failed. For example, if there were adverse weather conditions effecting the ferry service, childcare pick-up times were seriously impacted causing stress, financial penalties and inconvenience to all parties.

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

2.6. Support landscape

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

Business Gateway, Skills Development Scotland, Third Sector Interface (TSI), First Port, the Cultural Enterprise Office and HIE all have a remit for business development in Dunoon and Cowal. Only Skills Development Scotland and TSI have a public facing presence. All other agencies operate regionally. Advisors and consultants providing support via enterprise initiatives rarely lived in the area and this lack of connection to place and community reduced the development of local knowledge networks. There appears to be very limited communication across these agencies about shared support services for clients with known additional support needs. For example there is no joined up approach to supporting women returning to work after taking time out for children.

Current funding opportunities available via Business Gateway require enterprises to achieve a level of turnover of £50K over three years. If your work is being developed around care responsibilities this figure is unlikely to be met if you work in the creative industries, for example. This situation left some women feeling they had to exaggerate their enterprise growth rate or not receive investment. There was no adaption of the funding to reflect part-time work and no awareness within the Business Gateway staff team that this presented a barrier to people with care responsibilities developing enterprises.

The people who participated in Co-work meetings wanted to talk through ideas and not necessarily receive formal training. Participants represented a diverse range of sectors and skills. These ranged from people working in Archeology and IT to a painter and decorator and a women setting up a new play therapy social enterprise. It was felt that the co-work network had created a forum that was helpful to participants and gave them a greater sense of collective identity.

2.7. Stake holder consultation

The stakeholder consultation was attended by people with a role in economic development across the region alongside co-work research participants. Through discussion it became clear that there were gaps in knowledge about the needs of freelance and home-based workers. It was widely perceived by people working in economic development, that freelance and home-based work was a lifestyle choice, rather than a pragmatic response to maintaining skilled work in a rural context. There was very little understanding of how living in a rural context made permanent full-time work more challenging and how issues like care intersected with work progression.

3. Summary of findings

Argyll and Bute is a fragile rural region, challenged by population decline and a downturn in enterprise start up rates.⁴ The self employed, including freelance and home-based workers, represent a growing proportion of the working age population⁵. Self employment is estimated to be at 8% within Dunoon and Cowal, higher than the national average of 6.4%⁶. Data about the level of freelance and home-based workers is challenging to find, as not all people working this way are visible via traditional data collection methods. There is very little data on the lived experiences of this group. This research goes some way to bringing qualitative information together to highlight the challenges faced by people setting up rural micro enterprises, working from home or operating freelance in Dunoon and Cowal.

The current enterprise support interventions seem to be unresponsive to the challenges identified by research participants. The known barriers to female work progression seem to be under acknowledged, leaving gender inequality embedded into the economic development strategy. HIE is currently undertaking research into this issue via their W-Power programme⁷. However this intervention was at an early stage of development. The project was regionally managed and the solution being tested was regionally delivered, with very little attention to the contextual realities of place at a community level.

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

This research tested out a light touch area based co-working model designed with the input of freelance workers. Over the 7 month period the group have met the model proved to be effective at supporting people, regardless of their business stage or gender.

The research has also identified how local partnerships could be brokered to improve practical support for freelancers and home-based workers. Meet-ups within a facility managed by the charity Live Argyll⁸ suggested that existing spaces could be simply adapted to provide a profile and forum for co-working. This could be a route to improving worker well being, providing more ac-

⁴ Data about the slow down in rural enterprise start-up accessed from : <https://www.fsb.org.uk/standing-up-for-you/national-offices/scotland/press-releases/start-ups-slower-in-rural-scotland?fbclid=IwAR1PZOk954lhISEraV3gdZ-1iGE-Vrja0UBhAHgQ3hm3zAzwl-PRALUcwuVA>

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/labourmarketeconomiccommentary/may2019>

⁶ <https://www.fsb.org.uk/standing-up-for-you/national-offices/scotland/entrepreneurial-towns/towns-ranked-within-council>

⁷ <http://w-power.interreg-npa.eu/>

⁸ <https://liveargyll.co.uk/>

cessible support around care and making hidden enterprise activity more visible in the community, all of which fits with current economic development strategy of Argyll and Bute council⁹.

However, the lack of partnership working across agencies with a stake in enterprise support, economic development and community development makes this proposition unlikely at this stage. Initial approaches to HIE, TSI, Argyll and Bute's economic development team, Live Argyll and the local Business Gateway have been made. None of these agencies are in a position at this stage to support this idea beyond the loan of space due to funding and organisational constraints.

4. Summary of findings

SURF have a local facilitator based in Dunoon who has a remit for regeneration and community development. Tacit-tacit and SURF are now seeking further support to pilot an area based co-work concept and carry out further research to improve data about enterprise support and gender inclusion in rural areas. From September 2019 Dunoon and Cowal co-works will continue to be managed jointly by Tacit-Tacit and SURF, whilst funding is sought for a local pilot and continuation of the research.

⁹ <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/business-and-trade/economic-development-action-plan>