

ARTISTS+COUNCILS  
ADDRESSING COMPLEX SOCIAL  
ISSUES TOGETHER

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?



THE  
LOCAL  
RESIDENTS



THE  
LOCAL  
RESIDENTS'  
NEEDS

QUESTIONING LABELS ?  
WORDS .

LEARNING LAB  
EXPERIMENT

# CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Learning from our Artists of Change programme

By **Rachel Harris**, Senior  
Producer, We Are Lewisham  
And **Dijana Rakovic**, Senior  
Producer, Counterpoints Arts

*Policy making, if you do it properly, is part science and part art. You gather, segment and analyse the data but then you have to give expression to that analysis in a way that connects to the experiences of everyday people, people who use services.*

[Paul Aladenika, Head of Policy, Strategy and Executive Support at Lewisham Council]

WELCOME TO  
THIS BEAUTIFUL

SPACE TO THINK

WE HAVE  
DECLARED  
A

CLIMATE  
EMERGENCY



We Are Lewisham, The Mayor's London Borough of Culture 2022 began with a manifesto with art, creativity and activism at its heart. A celebration of Lewisham's diverse communities, a call to action on the climate emergency and, as the first council to declare as a Borough of Sanctuary, a commitment to building an inclusive, connected and welcoming place in this great city.

## WHAT DID WE SET OUT TO DO?

*Artists of Change* was imagined as a year-long experiment into how artists and Council teams could work side by side to address complex issues affecting Lewisham's neighbourhoods and communities on the ground. Our provocation was whether behaviour and policy change was possible as a result.

What emerged were two project strands responding to the key We Are Lewisham themes, with artists embedded in residencies within the Council. In the first strand, Lewisham's Climate Resilience team would host theatre-makers Teatro Vivo as integral members of the department. This collaboration culminated in '*Lewisham Speaks*', a piece of community theatre forged from workshops and hundreds of street conversations and performed back to all 19 of Lewisham's wards. In the second strand, arts curator Dima Karout engaged with the work of colleagues delivering Lewisham's commitment to 'sanctuary' strategies, thinking alongside those responsible for Policy, Housing and Resettlement, and the council's delivery partners. Dima produced a community building programme in collaboration with Lewisham's community libraries. The conversation continued through '*Internal Landscapes*', a collective poetry and print-making exhibition presented at the Horniman Museum.

Through these residencies, and some inspiring new art, creative consultation transformed into 'community manifestos', policy recommendations and new social learning, specific to the Borough. We observed what it takes to nurture community bonds, to give us an individual and communal sense of belonging; how we accrue identity through layers of memory and experience interacting with physical place.



*I had a sense after it finished of needing another artist! That's not a realistic prospect in terms of how these things are resourced, I'm not going to have a continual set of artists in my team. Part of this is a way of rethinking around giving ourselves that permission. The reason we had Artists of Change as part of Borough of Culture was understanding that we need to approach these challenges in a creative way. It's about us finding that within ourselves and bringing that to what we do and doing it in a more overt way.*

[Martin O'Brien, Climate Resilience Manager at Lewisham Council]

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT  
MONEY AND  
IT'S ALWAYS  
ABOUT MONEY



WE LOOSE  
KNOWLEDGE  
WHEN PEOPLE MOVE ON

THE COUNCIL  
DOESN'T  
NEED TO  
BE LOVED.

DON'T  
FEAR  
CRITICISM



CHANGE IS NOT EASY

THE WORK DOESN'T  
END WHEN THE  
PROJECT ENDS

MAINTENANCE IS  
IMPORTANT



# WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT A COUNCIL LEADING A CULTURAL PROGRAMME?

*It's a fine line - not being spokespeople for the council. We encouraged the performers to listen and not worry about people being critical of the council. Questions were always open - what are the barriers to getting involved, what do you think should be happening...?*

[Kas Darley, Teatro Vivo]

The premise of a Borough of Culture should be inspiring - could we integrate art into public services, get it to where people are, constructively draw attention to inequalities, simultaneously raise the bar and raise spirits?'

The idea for artists to be in residency within the council structure emerged during the bidding process for *We Are Lewisham*. When she picked up the challenge, Rachel Harris recalls talk of minstrels wandering up and down the council offices and staff art classes. Maybe this would have gained more immediate attention, but we opted to go down a more challenging route and chose to see it as an opportunity to listen and learn, to change the equation of who's in the room when decisions are made. In theory, the *Artists of Change* programme would allow us the freedom to develop strategic thinking alongside artistic practice. It was exciting to be 'on the inside' and to be pushing at an open door to access colleagues with experiences and responsibilities very different to our own.

*As a local authority, we had this ambition to be net carbon zero by 2030. It's about radical change in society and that's not something the council can switch on. A big part of the job is about trying to reach out and connect, and I can sometimes struggle to do that with a 10 page report that goes to a council meeting, for some reason that doesn't elicit a huge response. You get reactions from interested parties but it doesn't connect to the borough. I had the sense that this was an opportunity to make that happen.*

[Martin O'Brien]

We felt strongly that before speaking to artists or anyone outside the Council we needed reassurance that the residences would be real; that the role of creative provocateur would be welcomed, and the commissioned artists would have access to all areas. A fine line was required between encouraging the constructive disruption of habitual thinking, and activism that would unhelpfully 'other' the council. Risk-taking that Lewisham's senior management embraced.



CULTURE

PUBLIC SERVICES



MR PINK'S HOUSE

OUT OF REACH

ART

WITHIN REACH

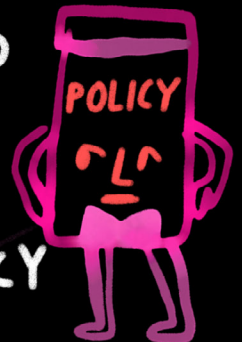
HOW CAN WE PROTECT PUBLIC SPACES FOR THE LONG TERM?

COCO COLLECTIVE

CAN ART BE TRANSFORMED INTO



POLICY?



LANGUAGES

EXPECTATIONS

RESPONSIBILITIES



TRYING TO GET 'CULTURE' THROUGH THE DOOR

? ? ? ?



*My interaction with Dima gave me thoughts about how can we do this in a completely different way. How can we look not just at collecting empirical data but also collecting soft data, experiences and first hand accounts*

[Paul Aladenika]

Ambitious language was developed around attempting to change policy, which was exciting, but felt audacious. Firstly to claim we would 'make change' - even if this happened, who's to say it was a good thing - and how would we measure it? To 'influence' attitudes, behaviours and policy became something more realistic to aim for, not forgetting the possibilities for artists to develop their own practice throughout the process. We challenged ourselves on certain overused words such as 'engagement', what we actually mean by 'community integration', who it's for, and if we're honest, whether in 2023 it is working. What opportunities and barriers arise when we use labels like 'artists' or 'refugees' in different contexts. In developing the vocabulary of the project, it was emphatically noted that creativity didn't sit just with the artists, something empowering to recognise within Council teams.

*I've been sitting with these loaded words, change, sanctuary, diversity, and everyone has a different perception of what that means. I engaged with over 100 people in conversation - we sat and talked about things we care about - what does it mean to have a place of sanctuary in a borough. How do we live together with a sense of inclusivity?*

[Dima Karout]

Working within the context of local government clearly has many benefits, for example, utilising public service networks to reach beyond conventional arts marketing, as well as the possibility of making impact at places of real social need. The potential is profound but there are pitfalls in meeting it. Cultural programmes and festivals evolve iteratively, working in an integrated and porous way across specialisms and project boundaries. Councils don't operate in that way. We found that structures can be inflexible, departments siloed and workloads onerous, leading to frustrations as to why it's hard to convene ostensibly natural collaborators. Hierarchies are pronounced and counter-intuitive to developmental work, even within a progressive and values-driven council. Of course in dealing with themes that have consequences in housing and resettlement decisions and the needs of people in the asylum process, there are real and complex challenges that needed to take precedence.

*The Sanctuary theme was a difficult thing to sit with. When we started the residency, another war had happened and its influence has altered the way I was perceiving the work.*

[Dima Karout]

We witnessed inspiring, dynamic and mutually constructive partnerships forming through the *Artists of Change* projects, however in wider spheres of governance, stories like this need to break through a barrier of professional trust to be taken seriously. In pressurised local councils, cultural expertise can be under-valued, with the risk of art being seen primarily as entertainment, sitting within generic 'events', as a tool for local PR, or at the other extreme, only for its instrumental benefits.

It can be lonely being the cultural producer within this context, translating the 'value' of content backwards and forwards in order for it to succeed through multiple lenses. It was our job to give confidence pre-emptively where there was an understandable fear that Council colleagues might be exposed, and to counter nervousness about progressing work where the outcomes are deliberately unknown.

Working in an environment where key services are habitually delivered in a conventional way means that legacy is fragile. The new and precious collaborative thinking is dependent to a large extent on the continuity of council staff and the degree of corporate risk aversion. In this context, openness, real listening and respect for each other's practice and timescales were what enabled this project to build such fruitful partnerships; to allow for honesty and constructive risk-taking.

*It wouldn't have been a success if the council team involved had not been open to the process.*

[Kas Darley, Teatro Vivo]

*I didn't think change was me coming in and bringing the change with me, it was already there, we just needed to see where it is and link it together.*

[Dima Karout]

# SOFT SUPPORT

NOT THAT EXPENSIVE  
+ MAKES A DIFFERENCE

It all comes  
down to  
relationships



WALKING  
TO THE  
LIBRARY  
TOGETHER

ENGAGE AND TALK TO PEOPLE  
LEARN TOGETHER



HEAD \* ACTIVATE PEOPLE \*

HEART

HAND

HOW  
DO WE  
BRING MORE  
PEOPLE IN -  
INSTEAD OF COMPETING?



# THE COMMISSIONING BRIEF

*At first I thought having artists in the team would be just like an aside. but I very much became part of the process of the artist callout and looking at the responses that came back.*

[Martin O'Brien]

Counterpoints Arts came on Board as partners and critical friends and we worked together on the brief which we hoped would inspire artists and collaborators to be bold, curious and provocative whilst being sensitive to context. The brief covered **4 areas**:

- 1.** Developing an understanding of council policies and infrastructure
- 2.** Creating the context for new forms of dialogue
- 3.** Becoming a bridge between council policy and its impact on the ground by engaging with the people who both shape and are affected by it
- 4.** Reflecting back recommendations and any tangible ways to influence the Council's policy and day to day work.

We were asking for a lot - for artists to be experienced and high profile enough to make impact, whilst being able to commit to months on the ground. To have a strong vision, but enjoy working collaboratively and with flexibility. We spent a lot of time talking about the qualities we hoped for and the balance of process and outcome across the year. We had an interesting interview process after a London-wide callout; asking artists for ideas and a clear vision we could discuss, whilst being mindful that the most important element of the work was that it should be responsive and not defined in advance.

The two commissions followed **three stages** across the year:

5. Residency (listening, observing, exploring, researching, interacting)
6. Devising an artistic response gathered from multiple conversations and workshops
7. Creating new public facing work in the form of performances, films, a poetry and print exhibition and book to share questions, challenges and insights and to generate further creative conversation

*It was easier for us to act as naturally as possible because you were just absorbing and it felt like you were there to listen. You genuinely did get some access to some difficult meetings - you were in a meeting with Lewisham's Mayor and XR - you sat in and it didn't change the dynamic of it.*

[Martin O'Brien]

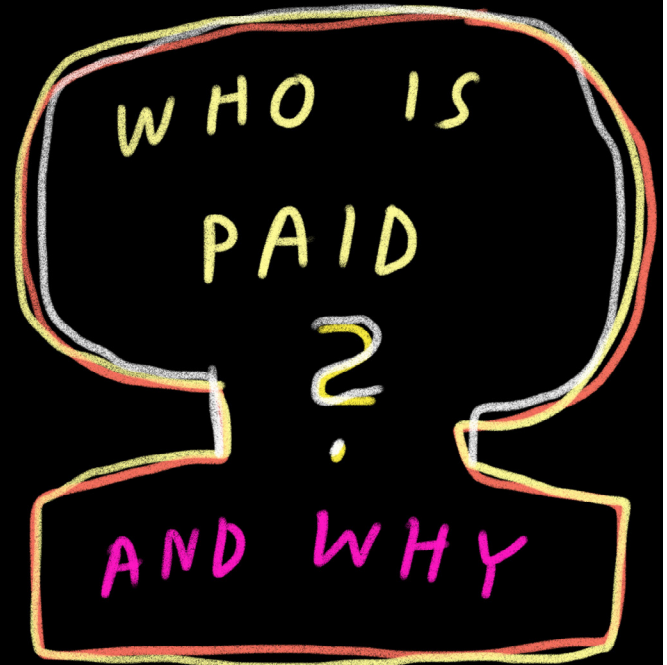
# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN...

MARKETING  
BUDGETS



BECOME  
ART BUDGETS

WE ASK:



WE  
STOP



CHASING



FUNDING

APPLICATIONS

WORD COUNTS

FINANCIAL

YEARS

BECOME AS

FLEXIBLE

AS ARTISTS

# THE LEARNING LAB - WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT COLLABORATION?

Counterpoints devised an integral Learning Lab event at the end of the year in collaboration with Cultural Organiser Joon-Lynn Goh. It was a chance to explore the project's mixture of idealism and pragmatism, share what we learned about the processes of collaboration and to hold ourselves to account. The central question was 'how are artist-led methodologies and cultural programmes in local government transforming civic participation, service provision, policy-making and governance?'

Counterpoints Arts' Learning Lab Programme is all about the collective power of public learning and the constructive risks entailed in pushing the boundaries of accepted knowledge and practice. Over the years the Programme has explored migration, the creative arts and social change, together with the role and value of the arts and culture as a necessary, democratic right. Individual Labs facilitate lively exchange and debate, forging alliances between artists and activists, cultural workers, curators, educators, community residents, human rights advocates and policymakers. Breaking down silos and responding to need – where no one participant can claim hierarchy of thought or skill.

With 'Catalyst for Change' Lab we wanted to explore the principle of artists and councils working together to encourage two-way public discourse - could our experiences in Lewisham have wider resonance? We wanted to imagine a better future together through more connected, nuanced conversations based on the work that engaged so many Lewisham residents. We wanted the day to include both broad discussion and detailed calls to action: Was our hope to influence a local authority's day to day work real? How can similar partnerships create the conditions for artists to be resourced and enabled to interrogate policy and democratic processes? We wanted to take advantage of opportunities for useful, achievable next steps and to capture, amplify and share our findings.

*What's happening with these methodologies in areas that are very much about uncertainty! - at odds, sometimes with policy which wants to be definitive and needs to be solid otherwise it won't be implemented. What we have here is that space between uncertainty, risk and genuine speculation on the part of the artists but ways in which the council and partners received and listened and engaged with this level of speculation.*

[Áine O'Brien, Co-Founder and curator of Learning and Research at Counterpoints Arts]

The Lab participants were specifically invited to represent different, but complementary perspectives from across London and from other organisations, including representatives from prospective Boroughs of Culture, giving us the ground for new thinking to emerge. Those Lewisham Council colleagues outside of the culture team had an opportunity to imagine how they could take up the baton.

*How can we have a society in harmony if we don't have everyone in the room. How do we engage with democratic processes if the people we want to involve cannot engage with us in a language we understand.*

[Dima Karout]



FREELANCERS

→ ASK

↓  
THERE IS MORE MONEY  
THAN PEOPLE THINK

CONTINGENCY  
OF THE  
FUNDER

CONTINGENCY  
OF THE  
PRODUCER

CONTINGENCY  
OF THE ARTIST

↓  
HONEST  
+  
TRANSPARENT  
BUDGET  
TALK

↑  
EMPLOYEES

ASK  
IN  
MARCH

I'VE  
WORKED  
FOR 2  
MONTHS  
FOR FREE



# **LEARNING LAB INCLUDED THREE WORKING GROUPS - REIMAGINING COMMISSIONS, WHOSE LEGACY, AND MANIFESTOS INTO POLICY. HERE ARE SOME SPECIFIC LEARNINGS THAT CAME OUT OF THE THREE DISCUSSIONS:**

The Catalyst for Change Learning Lab encouraged a diverse group of participants to broaden their understanding of commissioning processes, particularly within public projects that involve complex partnerships aimed at addressing local issues. These projects were shaped through collaboration between artists, local communities, and council teams.

Both sets of Artists of Change commissioned artists engaged in extensive research by cultivating relationships with various local partners. Consequently, the six-month residencies produced 'final' creative outcomes that had been requested in contracts. These were presented to diverse audiences but also fostered in-depth conversations and consultations with various local groups. These included those groups providing mental health support, services to newly arrived migrants, and individuals who don't regularly participate in art activities. These interactions occurred within the framework of local civic infrastructure, including community-run libraries, local museums, and newly arrived migrants' accommodation centres.

A central topic of discussion was "who makes the decisions" in this type of commissioning, given the significant involvement and collaboration with local communities as collaborators and co-creators at different stages of the project.

We asked whether artists' contracts genuinely acknowledge and recognize the labour invested in this type of work. We explored the need for a flexible contracting process that accommodates process-driven artistic practices. A "live" contracting approach, allowing for discussions and negotiations on outputs, engagement and co-creation layers, safeguarding, timelines, and budgeting, was seen as beneficial. However, it was noted that often artists find contract language problematic and daunting, as some contracts resemble complex legal documents that place undue pressure on them. Shared responsibility for delivery, communication, evaluation, safeguarding, and ethics within partnerships and the contracting processes was proposed, empowering artists to take risks and experiment with methodologies to engage others in their work.

*There are set ways that these things are done so you are reaching the usual suspects but it's hard to reach beyond that. Lewisham recognises this.*

[Mark Stevenson, Teatro Vivo]

*I was interested in reading Lewisham Council's 5 year vision and understanding how it was translated to the here and now, in practical terms. We know we want to welcome everyone - but how to do it in the right way?*

[Dima Karout]

The significance of human relationships between creative producers and artists emerged as an essential factor for successful projects. Personal investment by producers in the process of creating and communicating the work can greatly contribute to its success. Acknowledging the “politics” (the possible assumptions and agendas that we all hold) that may arise at the beginning of these relationships and supporting their development throughout the project, fostering quality conversations, is crucial.

An important question was raised about promoting and distributing commissioning open calls to ensure accessibility and diversity of participants, thereby broadening opportunities beyond the usual suspects. Additionally, we explored how to inspire institutional, in this case the Council’s, inter-departmental collaboration when supporting place-based projects addressing policy areas. By leveraging inter-departmental knowledge and expertise, and supporting an artist’s practice with that rich knowledge, we sought to approach specific issues on the ground more effectively.

Regarding “Legacy,” the term sparked a discussion about what it truly means for Borough of Culture initiatives or any place-based projects to leave a lasting impact and for whom. Finding language that recognizes legacy’s significance is vital to avoid neglecting or overlooking it in public art processes.

*Listening to Dima made me realise that people are talking all the time and we’re just not listening as a local authority. That if our residents are going to food banks and other networks then we need to go where people gather if where people gather we don’t go.*

[Paul Aladenika]



SOCIALISING SPACE THAT IS  
'FREE' = CULTURE

CREATE  
CAPACITY FOR  
LISTENING

SLOW  
THINKING

ACTIVATE  
PROGRAMME

LEGACY

3 YEARS

BOROUGH OF  
CULTURE

REDISTRIBUTE  
REPARATIONS

EXPLORING  
IDEAS  
INSTEAD  
OF JUST  
EVIDENCING  
ISSUES

MAINTAINING  
THE  
ENERGY

CORE  
FUNDING

10 YEARS  
MINIMUM

TIMESCALES  
OUTSIDE OF  
POLITICAL  
CYCLES

HABITS  
APPROACHES

WHERE DOES  
CREATIVITY  
IMAGINATION  
JUSTICE LIVE?



The journey from community manifestos to policy was explored, emphasising the importance of collecting both empirical and soft data, including experiences and first-hand accounts. We considered how manifestos, comprising lived experiences and calls to action, can influence local policy plans and Council culture, especially when co-produced and performative in nature.

The yearly format of Borough of Culture received attention, with suggestions to stretch it over a longer period to build in flexibility, evaluation, and legacy, facilitating knowledge exchange with other boroughs.

*It helped me to better understand that partnership is what you need in that moment, for that particular challenge. It is diverse and it needs to be as diverse as the situation and circumstances that you face are diverse.*

[Paul Aladenika]

Regarding artists' practice, we discussed the lasting effects of legacy, particularly on local artists, and the networks that can support their methodologies, relationships, and learning. Examples were shared, such as Teatro Vivo's work becoming an all-staff training module within Lewisham Council and funding discussions for English language classes resulting from Dima's work with newly arrived families.

In conclusion, the Learning Lab fostered dynamic exchanges between artists, activists, producers, and Council colleagues, generating new possibilities for creative engagement and innovative approaches to addressing complex issues. The Lab participants recognized the value of interdisciplinary collaboration based on shared power, trust, and openness. Efforts to promote policy transparency and the empowerment of community leaders were highlighted, along with the need for diverse communication channels to promote cultural activities and community engagement. Ultimately, the Lab emphasised that change can happen through creativity and collaboration, leaving lasting impacts on artists, communities and the workings of the Council.

*A lot of approaches to policy are quite homogenous - we look at the borough as one piece when actually the borough is a multiplicity of a number of geographical layers. Of experience that speaks to people's protected characteristics as described in law, but also communities of experience, communities of identity, communities of geography. And it's been really helpful from my perspective to look at the areas I am responsible for across the board, not just about what we write, but how we engage with local residents and partners and how we think internally as a local authority.*

[Paul Aladenika]

OPEN CALLS  
ARE NOT  
VERY  
OPEN

THE  
BRIEF  
YOU  
GET

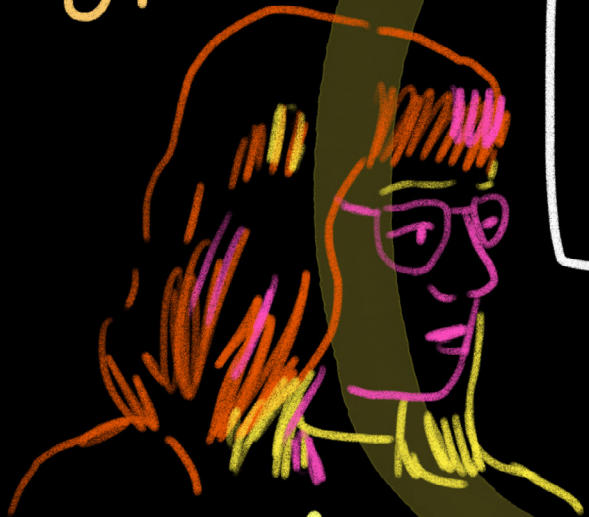


GIVE IT  
TIME

IT'S A  
RESPONSIVE  
RELATIONSHIP

THE  
BRIEF  
YOU  
WRITE

WORDS  
SHOULD  
BE QUE-  
STIONED



Learning Lab is coordinated by Áine O'Brien, Counterpoints' Co-founder and Curator of Learning and Research. Catalyst for Change Learning Lab was designed in collaboration with Joon-Lynn Goh and delivered in partnership with Lewisham Council, the Mayor's London Borough of Culture and the Horniman Museum & Gardens. Thank you to all fifty plus participants who generously contributed throughout the Learning Lab discussions.

Dima Karout and Teatro Vivo's Kas Darley and Mark Stevenson produced work that allowed us to create spaces of exchange and learning. We recognise their impressive artistic practice, their skill and experience in collaboration.

We are grateful to the New Town Culture, 2.8 Million Minds and vacuum cleaner teams and artists for sharing their experiences, methodologies and successes in working with a creative ethos in local government, in a panel facilitated Joon-Lynn Goh.

With thanks to our Lewisham Council colleagues - Paul Aladenika, Fergus Downie, Philip Baker, Martin O'Brien and Victoria Willis - for their expertise, support and openness throughout the Artists of Change programme and at the Learning Lab.

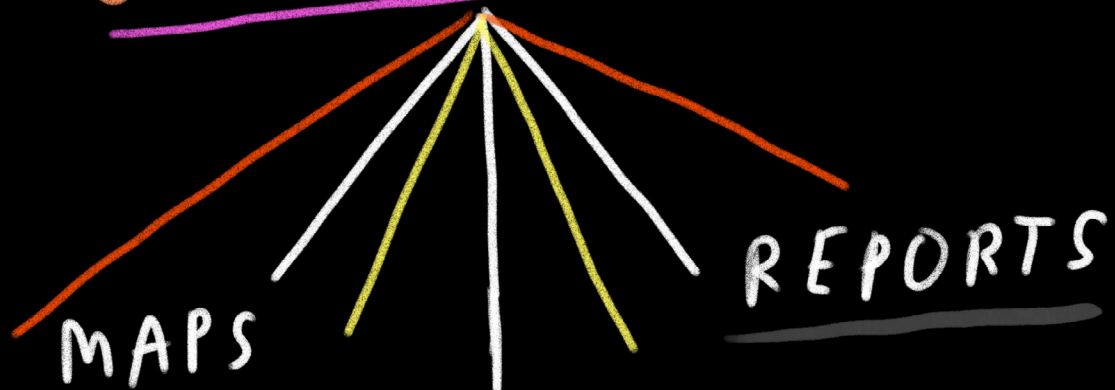
Clara Giraud, Projects and Policy Officer at London Borough of Culture at Greater London Authority, and Áine O'Brien facilitated the two conversations with the Artists of Change artists, thank you.

Thank you to Faruq Adigun (artist and organiser), Lara Deffense (Refugee Week Co-ordinator at Counterpoints) and Joon-Lynn Goh for their notes on the three working groups' conversations. And to Migrants in Culture for the visual note taking.

Lastly, the Learning Lab was produced with the support by Arts Council England and The Mayor's London Borough of Culture.



OUTCOMES



MANIFESTOS

WE CAN FEEL  
THINGS DIFFERENTLY

HOW COULD WE  
SUSTAIN THIS

THE BEST BITS