ROYAL DOCKS ORIGINALS

Partner Meeting Notes – Tuesday 13th October 2026

Thank you to everyone who joined our recent Royal Docks Originals (RDO) Partner Group meeting.

Following an update on plans for the festival, we explored three themes together:

Engaging Royal Docks Communities, Cultural Placemaking and Sector Development.

The discussions generated a range of ideas, opportunities and questions to help inform the development of RDO and its contribution to the wider Royal Docks. The notes below capture the key points raised across the three strands.

1. Engaging Royal Docks Communities

The discussion focused on how RDO can reach a wider range of people across the Royal Docks, build relationships with communities who may not currently engage with the festival, and create more opportunities for local people to participate.

Reaching different communities and audiences

The group identified a range of potential audiences, networks and places to connect with, including:

- Young people: New student accommodation in Canning Town, the LBN Youth Empowerment Team, the Cultural Producers Programme and football networks, including the West Ham Foundation.

- Families and parents: Recognising that many young professionals who have moved into the area are now starting families, creating opportunities to engage parents of young children.
- Existing community networks: Library users, local groups and organisations already bringing people together.
- Different age groups: The success of Newham's Got Talent for over-50s, which attracts audiences of more than 1,000 people, was highlighted as an example of the potential for targeted programming.
- Young audiences: Comedy and magic were identified as art forms that may particularly appeal to young people.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of understanding the different interests, needs and motivations of local audiences, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

Building trust and reaching underrepresented areas

Partners highlighted that some parts of the Royal Docks may feel less connected to the festival, with a perception of "them and us" between different areas and communities. Beckton, Custom House and North Woolwich were among the places mentioned, alongside concerns about how residents in the RV area might be better supported to attend.

There was a strong emphasis on the need to **go to communities, rather than expecting communities to come to us.** This could mean:

- Building relationships with trusted local individuals and organisations who can help introduce RDO to their networks.
- Joining existing activities and events in neighbourhoods, rather than always creating separate opportunities.
- Working with local partners who understand the history, interests and needs of their communities.
- Exploring the potential for activator roles to help build relationships and encourage participation.

- Reviewing how RDO communications reach people, including concerns that existing mailouts may not always be reaching their intended audiences.

The group also highlighted local knowledge and experience of previous events, including Africabana and Newham Mela, as valuable resources to draw upon.

Opportunities to explore

- Map local groups, networks, venues and events that could help RDO connect with a broader range of residents.
- Identify trusted community contacts and potential partners in areas where engagement could be strengthened.
- Explore ways to participate in existing community activities and reach people through established networks.
- Consider how the programme might appeal to different audiences, including families, young people and older residents.
- Review communications and outreach approaches to ensure information about the festival reaches the people it is intended for.

2. Cultural Placemaking

The discussion explored how the Royal Docks could become a more visible, welcoming and distinctive cultural destination. A key theme was the opportunity to connect existing spaces, venues, public areas, transport links and cultural activity to create a more joined-up experience for residents and visitors.

Making better use of spaces and venues

Partners identified opportunities to make greater use of existing and underused spaces, including those emerging through the wider regeneration of the Royal Docks.

Ideas included:

- Exploring opportunities for pop-ups, temporary bars, performances and other cultural activities in public and underused spaces.

- Considering how spaces are used at different times of the week and at weekends.
- Making spaces feel more open, accessible and welcoming.
- Investigating new spaces created through regeneration, including opportunities associated with Phase 6.
- Exploring parks, green spaces, the docks and locations such as The Big Fridge as potential cultural destinations.
- Considering how active greening and other small-scale public-realm interventions could improve the experience of an area.

There was particular support for the idea of pop-up bars and temporary activity, with North Face referenced as an example.

Improving arrival, wayfinding and visibility

The group discussed how people arrive in the Royal Docks and find their way to cultural destinations. Transport connections, including the cable car and DLR, could be treated as gateways that introduce visitors to the area and encourage further exploration.

Ideas included:

- Improving the visibility of cultural destinations from transport hubs and surrounding streets.
- Using flags, signage, floor graphics, stickers and maps to help people navigate between arrival points and destinations.
- Exploring the use of planters or other interventions to create clearer routes through spaces.
- Improving the external visibility of buildings and venues, including The Big Fridge.
- Making better use of the journey itself as part of the cultural experience, including opportunities to encounter creative work from the cable car or DLR.

The discussion highlighted that the visitor experience begins before someone reaches an event or venue. The route, the arrival point and the ease of finding activities all contribute to whether people feel encouraged to explore.

Developing a distinctive cultural identity

Partners discussed how public art, cultural programming, placemaking and local storytelling could help establish a stronger identity for the Royal Docks.

This included opportunities to:

- Develop a more compelling narrative around the character of the Royal Docks.
- Connect local stories, heritage and contemporary culture.
- Make the area more recognisable through creative installations, public art and cultural activity.
- Explore links with nearby destinations, including Canary Wharf and central London.
- Create a cultural experience that reflects what makes the Royal Docks distinctive, rather than replicating approaches used elsewhere.

A central question was how the Royal Docks can build on its existing character and **assets to establish a recognisable cultural identity.**

Encouraging discovery and participation

The group explored how to make cultural activity feel more unexpected, engaging and discoverable.

Suggestions included:

- Creating “hidden” events and unexpected cultural moments that people encounter as they move through the area.
- Developing activities and content that extend the experience beyond the event itself, such as podcasts, walking tours, playlists or bespoke creative activities.

- Exploring local partnerships and volunteer welcome teams to help visitors feel more welcome.
- Improving online information, targeted marketing and the ways in which people discover what is happening.
- Using branded materials, such as lanyards and T-shirts, to help create a visible and welcoming presence.

Opportunities to explore

The discussion suggested several areas for further investigation:

- **Audit existing assets:** Map spaces, venues, events, transport gateways and visitor routes across the Royal Docks.
- **Review the visitor journey:** Explore key arrival points and identify where signage, visibility or the overall experience could be improved.
- **Test temporary interventions:** Consider pilots such as pop-ups, flags, floor graphics, signage and small-scale cultural activations.
- **Connect the experience:** Develop a more coherent approach linking public spaces, venues, heritage, cultural programming and partnerships.
- **Strengthen the cultural narrative:** Explore how the Royal Docks' local identity and stories can inform a distinctive cultural offer.

The overarching ambition is to move beyond a collection of individual spaces and destinations towards a more connected cultural experience, making it easier for people to discover what the Royal Docks has to offer.

3. Sector Development

The discussion explored how RDO's commissions and wider programme could contribute to the development of the Royal Docks as a creative cluster, supporting local artists, organisations and creative businesses to connect, develop their practice and build a sustainable creative ecosystem.

Building a more connected creative community

Partners emphasised the importance of collaboration in strengthening the local cultural offer. The more people and organisations work together, the more connected and cohesive the programme can become.

Ideas included:

- Creating opportunities to connect artists, creative practitioners, organisations and spaces through introductions and matchmaking.
- Using information gathered through RDO applications to better understand the interests, activities and needs of local creatives.
- Using this intelligence to broker connections, signpost opportunities and support collaboration.
- Building a vibrant creative community that extends beyond the festival itself.
- Identifying where creative practitioners currently gather and exploring how accessible, affordable spaces for networking and collaboration can be sustained.

An important question was how RDO can help foster relationships and networks that continue to develop after individual commissions or the festival have ended.

Using commissions to support longer-term creative development

The group discussed how commissions could act as more than standalone projects, instead contributing to sustained creative development and the wider cultural ecosystem.

Suggestions included:

- Asking applicants to identify the anticipated cultural legacy of their proposals from the outset.
- Using commissions to test ideas and proof of concept, creating opportunities for successful approaches to be developed further by the wider creative community.

- Ensuring commissions form part of a longer-term process of creative development.
- Considering different levels of investment and support for artists at different stages of their practice.

This raised the question of how RDO can balance delivering a strong festival programme with creating opportunities for learning, experimentation and future development.

Reaching and supporting emerging artists

Partners highlighted the need to ensure that emerging artists know about RDO and understand the opportunities it offers.

Points raised included:

- Exploring how best to reach emerging artists, including through word of mouth and existing creative networks.
- Improving signposting to spaces where artists can make, develop and present work.
- Helping artists navigate the opportunities and resources available across the Royal Docks.
- Considering how support and investment might differ according to artists' experience, needs and stage of development.

The group also highlighted the importance of accessible and affordable spaces where creatives can meet, collaborate and build their practice.

Celebrating the distinctive creative character of the Royal Docks

The discussion explored what might constitute the Royal Docks' distinctive creative identity, or its "DNA", and how this could help shape the development of the local creative cluster.

Partners identified a number of characteristics and assets:

- **Post-industrial heritage:** The area's industrial history, including the Ironworks and connections with West Ham.
- **Water and the docks:** The physical landscape and waterfront setting.
- **History and regeneration:** The relationship between the area's past and its ongoing transformation.
- **Diversity and community:** The people, communities and cultural influences that shape the Royal Docks.
- **Space:** The distinctive spaces available across the area.
- **Transport:** The variety of transport connections and modes that link the Royal Docks to other parts of London.

The group also discussed the fact that the Royal Docks does not have a traditional concentration of purpose-built cultural venues, such as theatres. Rather than viewing this solely as a disadvantage, there may be an opportunity to celebrate the ways in which artists, organisations and communities create their own cultural spaces and develop a distinctive creative landscape.

The potential to work with unusual or non-traditional venues and spaces was identified as a characteristic that could distinguish the Royal Docks from other parts of London.

Opportunities to explore

- Use RDO's application and commissioning processes to build a better understanding of the local creative sector.
- Explore matchmaking and introductions between artists, organisations, creative businesses and spaces.
- Improve signposting to affordable spaces, resources and opportunities, particularly for emerging artists.
- Consider how commissions can support experimentation, learning and longer-term cultural legacy.
- Identify opportunities to sustain creative networks and gathering spaces beyond the festival.

- Develop a clearer understanding of the Royal Docks' distinctive creative identity and how its heritage, people, spaces and character can inform future cultural development.

Closing reflections

Across all three strands, the discussions highlighted the potential for Royal Docks Originals to contribute to a more connected, inclusive and vibrant cultural ecosystem.

This means strengthening relationships with local communities, making better use of the spaces and assets already available, creating a more distinctive and accessible cultural experience, and supporting the people and organisations who will shape the area's creative future.