

Written evidence submitted by Professor Nicky Marsh, Dr Daniel Ashton, and Dr Michael Howcroft

Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda

17/02/2022

Executive Summary and recommendations

Our response to [Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda](#) by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee provides written evidence and recommendations in relation to:

- Question 1: How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?
- Question 2: How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?
- Question 3: How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?
- Question 5: How should Government build on existing schemes, such as the UK City of Culture, to level up funding for arts and culture?

Findings

Our research confirmed the findings of others (Bianchini *et al.*, 1992; Bianchini and Ghilardi, 2007; Gilmore 2013; Comunian and Mould, 2014) who have suggested that significant caution is needed in understanding the role culture can play in addressing the geographic inequalities, structural disadvantages and economic and social decline of many English towns and cities. We found that cuts to local government budgets and national culture and heritage funding have resulted in reductions to local cultural placemaking infrastructures and in local authority capacity for cultural planning and community consultation. These have had significant long term effects, including:

- Local authorities not being fully equipped with the long-term research and sophisticated evaluation metrics that cultural planning and regeneration require.
- Community consultation regarding local cultural planning often involves a very small demographic and the social capital to participate is not evenly spread.
- The interventions of external planning consultants and land and property developers in regeneration programmes do not always understand or serve the cultural needs of local communities.

These processes lead to a narrow vocabulary for imagining the future of places and depend on hard ('glass and steel') rather than soft (skills, capacities, expertise, networks) infrastructures. This significantly limits the range, scale and ambition of local cultural development, can inhibit local creative skills development, and contribute to decreases in senses of belonging, wellbeing and inclusive community building.

We note a commitment to developing civic pride metrics in the Technical Annex to the Levelling Up White Paper (p.35). We have found that the correlation between civic pride and 'thriving' places is an assumed one, in need of further interrogation. We found that : i) there are different

types of civic pride, and not all necessarily evidence policy success; ii) civic pride is temporary and fragile - not only is it difficult to measure, it does not last very long.

Yet, we found that creativity continues to thrive, albeit in an increasingly precarious manner. This is apparent in the entrepreneurial 'pop up' and 'take-over' activities that occupy closed shops- which are generative, creative and inclusive but are under constant threat from insecure premises arrangements and/or weak funding models. We also found that artistic infrastructures have continued to exist in a range of sectors even as capacity was lost elsewhere (e.g. education, healthcare, faith and heritage). Finally, we found that creative practitioners and methodologies can allow innovative forms of place-based consultation and futural imagination to take place.

We recommend the government should:

1. Better understand the legacies of historic programmes (such as ACE 'Great Places') and what the reductions in funding such schemes has meant for communities. Understanding where previous support has worked (e.g. funding, waiving business rates, support with change of use, better connectivity) will help meet the needs of existing and start-up creative enterprises and interventions at the local level. (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3)
2. Support local authority tendering processes to extend their decision-making criteria to emphasise building and sustaining place-based relationships such as grass roots community organisations. (1.3, 1.4, 3.1, 5.2)
3. Focus on the development of a local creative skills agenda, to involve a meaningful sense of place and belonging, wellbeing, intergenerational and inclusive community building.(1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2)
4. Enable smaller-scale organisations and individuals to be better connected to their local decision-making bodies in sustainable and effective ways. Through UK City of Culture (UKCoC) or similar schemes, support cultures of collaboration, instituting locally specific infrastructures which might include funding for training to support networks, syndicates and supporting diversity and inclusion in decision making. (2.1, 3.1, 3.3, 5.1, 5.2)
5. Develop a wider range of metrics to understand what creative initiatives bring to communities, including civic pride metrics which are relevant, nuanced, locally specific and appropriate for each levelling-up activity. (2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 5.3).
6. Make use of the wide range of creative methods to allow for more diverse and imaginative forms of consultation and self-realisation and planning for towns. (2.1, 2.2).
7. Avoid the rhetoric of place boosterism for short-term civic pride 'gains'. Follow the longitudinal impacts of civic pride in areas that receive *and do not receive* Levelling Up funds; develop more nuanced and relevant policy documentation in this field that recognises pride as more than the singular celebration of place. (1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 5.3).

Response Authors:

This response comes from the [Southampton Institute of Arts and Humanities](#) (SIAH), University of Southampton.

Professor [Nicky Marsh](#), Director of Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities (SIAH) and Associate Dean for Research and Enterprise, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Southampton. Professor Marsh has two decades of experience working on questions around culture and economics and has been PI on 5 AHRC/ESRC grants and Co-I on a further 2 (worth approx. £1.5 million).

Dr [Daniel Ashton](#) is Associate Professor of Cultural and Creative Industries at Winchester School of Art and Fellow in Disparate Data and Unexpected Evidence with SIAH. Dr Ashton has published and presented internationally on cultural policy, work and industries. Current research focuses on data analytics and practices relating to cultural and creative industries.

Dr [Michael Howcroft](#) is a SIAH fellow and Co-I on *Feeling Towns*.

Projects related to this call for evidence include:

Nicky **Marsh** (PI) and Catherine Clarke, Will May (Co-Is): *Towns and the Cultural Economies of Recovery: A Multidisciplinary Mapping* (AHRC, 2021) This project involved working with local communities, and a range of expert partners and stakeholders, to understand the role that culture and heritage played in the process of developing, writing and launching Towns Fund plans. Our evidence was derived from a range of sources including: a survey of all 101 'Towns Fund' boards, semi-structured interviews with over 120 different individuals and organizations involved in cultural planning and implementation in UK towns, literature reviews, workshops and public-facing events in four case study towns (Bournemouth, Darlington, Southend, Hereford)

Nicky **Marsh** (PI) and Michael **Howcroft** (Co-I), *Feeling Towns: Place and Identity in Local Authority Governance* (AHRC, 2022) This project works with partners (including Historic England, local authorities and cultural partners) to address metrics for civic pride. We will produce a new understanding of the complex roles that civic pride and place attachment play in local government regeneration strategies.

Daniel **Ashton** (PI): *Local government data analytics for culture and creativity* (Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities, 2021-22). This project examines how local government authorities in England design, structure and implement data analytics relating to the cultural and creative industries (CCI). This project is in-progress and involves questionnaires and focus groups with local authorities.

Michael **Howcroft**, PhD thesis, *Pride, shame and the civic imaginary: Hull as UK City of Culture and Brexit* (University of Hull, 2021). This project investigated how civic pride and shame shaped the political cultures and cultural behaviours of Kingston Upon Hull between 2010-2020.

Question 1: How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?

1.1 We found that 'cultural reanimation' which aspired to radical transformation or relied on celebratory events often assumed narratives that begin with territorial stigmatization (the town is failing!) and end with gentrification or short-lived metrics that measure spectacle (the town is now in the news!). In such instances the concerns of local cultures and low-income populations can be marginalized, displaced, or occluded altogether. **We recommend that short-term 'boosterism' and place promotion initiatives be replaced with policies that pay very close attention to the rich, diverse - but profoundly precarious - culture that already exists in our public places and high streets.**

1.2 We found that a jigsaw of funding (ACE and/or local authority), very low rents (either peppercorn or no rent at all) and an enterprising community (practitioners selling art work, renting out studio space and equipment, offering workshops and training, often employed on a part time basis by local FE colleges) had allowed for creative 'takeovers' of former retail space. Spaces such as the Powerhouse in Hereford, Creative Kids in Bournemouth, TOMA in Southend were all active, inclusive and generative. It was also very clear that these organisations were aware of their importance to the community and of their precarity. However, these ventures are precarious and often threatened by gentrification, especially when reliant on residential real estate development. **We recommend more financial and administrative support and recognition of the value of these enterprises.**

1.3 We found a variety of approaches to transforming former industrial sites (factories, warehouses, mills) into public spaces that combine creative workspaces and studios with retail and hospitality offerings. There are a number of commercial property developers that specialize in this type of cultural regeneration with varying degrees of emphasis on creating higher value market property and creating social and community engaged resources. These developments are often insufficiently engaged with the needs of local communities, organisations and practitioners. In contrast, research highlights how creative entrepreneurs already located within a specific place support relationships with the past that are sensitive to community histories and identities and prioritize the needs and support networks of existing creative communities. **We recommend that local authority consultation processes relating to cultural regeneration explicitly engage with local organisations who can evaluate opportunities for creative practitioners and business, and help communities tell stories of their pasts and have a say in plans for their future.**

1.4 We found that the tight time-scales and conditions attached to central government funding, and the diminished capacities of many local authorities, meant that councils often turned to external consultants/ providers/ pre-existing plans and responded to them in ways that didn't meet the needs of local communities or reflect the innovations and specificity of place. **We recommend that if councils and local organisations are made to compete for this funding, training resources should be provided, to focus on the creative case for diversity and consultation and also to develop tenders that ask critical questions about place identity and meaning.**

Question 2: How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?

2.1 Our research demonstrated that many towns have a narrow collective vocabulary for imagining renewal or transformation. In particular, places which emphasise a single narrative about themselves struggle to imagine their futures in plural or inclusive ways. We confirmed the value of creative methodologies in opening up alternative spaces, modes and idioms (e.g. Kelemen *et al.* 2018). Facilitated creative activities - by poets, visual, sound and installation artists as well as story-tellers - are vital not only in allowing for a range of voices across the community to engage but also for allowing policymakers to see in 'real time' how relationships and cultural ecologies operate. Such methodologies and their inductive toolkits can allow policymakers to remain alert to (and to support) non-traditional, relational assets such as experience, networks, ideas, innovation and creativity. They can also be used to allow towns to work across, and with, cultural differences in new ways. ***We recommend that the government supports such opportunities to share learnings about creative practices – with other locations, with other cultures, with other communities – at a variety of different scales (within a town, region, nationally and internationally).***

2.2 Creative methodologies also provide important tools for moving beyond consultation towards genuine co-production with local communities and participation in place development and policy. They can also help those involved in consultation and policy-formation explore freer, more open-ended (and potentially more ambitious) ways of imagining the future. They enlarge capabilities for imagining futures, developing and evaluating policy and engaging multiple perspectives and stakeholders. ***We recommend the government supports and resources the use of creative methods for local decision making and participation in cultural placemaking.***

Question 3: How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?

3.1. Smaller-scale cultural events and organisations had the flexibility to resume cultural activity quickly after the first wave of COVID-19, yet, they were often absent from key strategic forums. As the AHRC *Understanding Cultural Participation* project and ACE *Let's Create* strategy explore, creative activity and infrastructure extend beyond dedicated cultural venues to various sites across an area that are transformed or occasionally used to enable making and participating. Better understanding the challenges of developing and maintaining infrastructures will enable effective support of local culture placemaking. ***We recommend that a comprehensive and nuanced mapping of local cultural and artistic infrastructures is conducted to understand what exists, what did exist, and what could exist. We also recommend developing more nuanced typologies for place that take into account economic and labour histories, previous funding and investment. These would enable sensitive sharing of practice and 'twinning' between places to occur.***

3.2 Art infrastructure exists with dedicated arts and cultural organisations and then extends and is embedded within a range of sectors and organisations, including health (e.g. art in hospitals projects), education (e.g. schools and cultural education partnerships), faith and heritage. Mapping and supporting these initiatives through funding is crucial. This means that health and education organisations should not have to make blunt budgetary decisions between 'core' activities and costs and 'artistic' activities and costs. Similarly, it is important to note that the distinction between cultural and heritage organisations is often a thin one in small communities and that heritage bodies, such as Historic England, are also sites of creative practice. ***We***

recommend encompassing and comprehensive mapping activities that identify and connect artistic and cultural infrastructure where it is 'hidden' or located within a range of sectors and organisations.

3.3 Understanding what is not always apparent is an important approach for developing and supporting artistic infrastructure. This requires arts and cultural sector specialists who have the expertise to identify soft or intangible infrastructures, build relationships and plan for the future to be permanently located within an area. Further, understanding the interconnectedness of less mobile communities - and their relationship to other communities outside of their immediate environment - is crucial. Putting in place this expertise to ensure stability and fulfill potential requires a long-term strategy. However, analysis by the [Public Campaign for the Arts](#) shows that local authority expenditure on cultural services has fallen by 50% across England since 2009-2010. **We recommend a review of the long-term implications of reduction to local authority expenditure and of inefficiencies of short-term funding associated with the continual demands of applying for funding and reporting on and evaluating projects.**

Question 5. How should Government build on existing schemes, such as the UK City of Culture, to level up funding for arts and culture?

5.1 Weak legacy planning for Hull2017 (CPPI, 2019) compounded existing frustrations in the city's cultural sector, especially amongst grassroots and independent creatives. Anecdotal evidence suggests a similar pattern emerging through Coventry2021. For some, Hull2017 [failed to strengthen Hull's cultural infrastructure](#), resulting in a lack of trust and fractious relationships. A stronger, more confident legacy might have emerged if the city's grassroots organisations were nurtured (and supported financially) to deliver their own agendas rather than support the top-down delivery. This would ensure more robust follow-up stakeholder relationships, event curation, research and wider place-based cultural development. **We recommend that legacy should be 'baked in' to UKCoC and similar initiatives with clearer delivery mechanisms which are adequately and sustainably funded. This might involve employing senior teams for two or three years beyond the delivery period, as well as safeguarding legacy funding.**

5.2 Perhaps due to the high stakes and competitive framing of cities of culture, top down, bullish and singular management leadership styles have arisen which can alienate and demoralise local cultural ecologies. Resolving this is of importance in 'left behind places' where being part of a relatively small cultural ecosystem raises questions around currencies of trust, knowledge sharing and 'speaking out' – especially over time (Umney and Symon, 2019). **We recommend: i) Government, UKCoC bid and delivery teams should self-monitor boosterist language which leads to unrealistic expectations from communities and local cultural ecologies. Guidance could be provided and monitored by bid panels and DCMS evaluators; ii) Consider what alternative forms of governance such high profile, short term and fast paced events could take.**

5.3 Reflecting on City of Culture bidding and evaluation processes and a related project on how local governments collect and analyse data, it is clear that a lot of valuable data are collected through different questionnaires, consultations, etc. but there are challenges in linking, analysing and using this data for coordinated decision-making. A variety of "data observations" projects exist and there is scope to develop a coordinated approach to sharing and aligning data

relating to arts and culture. ***We recommend identifying and evaluating the extent to which arts and culture feature within data observatory initiatives***

References/works cited

Bianchini, F., Dawson, J. and Evans, R. (1992) Flagship projects in urban regeneration, in P. Healey, S. Davoudi and Toole, M. O. (eds), *Rebuilding the city*. London: Spon Ltd, 134-153.

Bianchini, F. and Ghilardi, L. (2007) Thinking culturally about place. *Place branding and public diplomacy*, 3(4), 280-286.

Comunian, R. and Mould, O. (2014) The weakest link: Creative industries, flagship cultural projects and regeneration, *City, Culture and Society*, 5(2), 65-74.

CPPI (2019) Cultural transformations: The impacts of Hull UK City Of Culture 2017, main evaluation findings and reflections. Hull.

Gilmore, A. (2013) Cold spots, crap towns and cultural deserts: The role of place and geography in cultural participation and creative place-making. *Cultural Trends*, 22(2), 86-96.

Kelemen, M., Surman, E. and Dikomitis, L. (2018) Cultural animation in health research: An innovative methodology for patient and public involvement and engagement. *Health Expectations*, 21(4), 805-813.

Umney, C. and Symon, G. (2019) Creative placemaking and the cultural projectariat: Artistic work in the wake of Hull City of Culture 2017. *Capital & Class* 44(4), 595-615.