

CULTURE COMMONS

Local cultural decision making in 'left-behind areas'

INSIGHT PAPER

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This *Insight Paper* explores policy implications arising from a roundtable discussion that took place on 26th April 2024 on **local cultural decision making in 'left-behind areas'**.

The roundtable formed part of a *Knowledge Exchange* session associated with ['the future local cultural decision making'](#), an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of UK-wide partners.

As part of the evidence gathering phase of the programme, Culture Commons organised *Knowledge Exchange* sessions around key questions related to the programme's core research themes with diverse stakeholders across the UK's creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem.

Culture Commons has committed to publishing an *Insight Paper* after each *Knowledge Exchange* session, in-line with the overall approach to an open and transparent programme.

This *Insight Paper* will be formally reviewed as part of the growing evidence base that will inform the policymaking phase of the programme.

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Culture Commons

Culture Commons bring the creative, cultural and heritage sectors together with the research community and policymakers to co-design new policy and influence decision making at the local, regional and national levels. We are leading 'the future of local cultural decision making' open policy development programme.

You can find out more about us at www.culturecommons.uk

The Programme

'[the future of local cultural decision making](#)' is an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of partners made up of local governments, sector representatives, arm's length bodies, grant giving bodies and leading research institutions.

Together, we are exploring how further 'devolution' and/or increased local decision making might impact on the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in different nations and regions of the UK.

More information about the programme can be found on the dedicated [digital hub](#).

Open Policymaking

Open Policymaking was described by UK Government in 2014 as a process that 'opens up the formation of public policy to a wider variety of stakeholders'.

Culture Commons have adopted some of the key principles sitting behind this approach and elaborated on them when designing this programme, particularly the commitment to transparency and inclusiveness.

Disclaimer

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Background

Political parties of all colours have long been exploring policy approaches to address the chronic regional disparities we see both within and between the regions and nations of the UK. We know that these disparities can also be seen when we look at creative, cultural and heritage infrastructures.

The former UK Government's "Levelling Up" agenda has arguably occupied this policy arena most prominently in recent years. New methodologies to identify areas with low levels of investment associated with the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem to prioritise investments are also well-established. For example, the work of Local Trust in identifying and developing policy for so-called "[left behind areas](#)" and Arts Council England's move to direct investments towards "[Priority Places](#)" and "[Levelling Up for Culture Places](#)".

As part of this open policy development programme, we wanted to engage directly with local leaders in areas with lower levels of creative, cultural and heritage infrastructure about what it's like to operate in the current policy and funding landscape. This will help the partners to consider how the policy positions they develop together can work for areas outside established creative clusters or high infrastructure areas.

In addition, we were keen to know how participants think the new UK Government, devolved governments and local political leaders might better support them to activate the creativity that is currently untapped in their area. In particular, we were interested in how further devolution and increased local decision-making might support or hinder these efforts.

For this *Knowledge Exchange*, we invited representatives from areas with lower levels of cultural infrastructure to join the programme partnership alongside programme partners who are closely involved with developing the methodologies mentioned above.

Learning Outcomes

We set the following learning objectives for this session:

- **How is the term 'left-behind places' defined and understood by different stakeholders?**
- **What are the connotations and implications associated with needs-based and asset-based funding schemes?**
- **Can we point to any successes or failures in their development or deployment so far?**
- **What are the drivers and mechanisms that support cultural infrastructures in places with historically low levels of investment?**

- **At what tiers of governance can policy interventions support local cultural decision-making for places with historically low investment?**

About the Contributors

Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based, non-state funder supporting communities to lead, change and improve their local areas.

It was established in 2012 to deliver [Big Local](#), a [National Lottery Community Fund](#)-funded programme that committed £1m each to one hundred and fifty neighbourhoods across England.

Big Local Programme

[Big Local](#) (2012-2026) was established as an asset-based programme to distribute place-based funding while providing residents with expert support and advice to develop their neighbourhood. The programme is described as:

- Long-term: funding was awarded with the understanding it would be spent over 10-15 years
- Resident-led: Local Trust worked directly with residents to understand local needs and priorities
- Non-prescriptive: outcomes were broad at the outset and residents were allowed to spend funding at their own pace
- Patient and non-judgemental: the process allowed for mistakes and disagreements to be overcome and become learning opportunities
- Accompanied by flexible and responsive support: expert advice would support capacity building

Residents were supported through a training and networking programme delivered by Local Trust and its partners.

Creative Civic Change

[Creative Civic Change](#) (2018-2022) was an experimental funding programme that supported fifteen communities across England in shaping, leading and commissioning arts and creative interventions to make positive social change where they lived.

CCC focused on community-led arts and cultural interventions, with the aim of helping local people with creative skills see themselves as creative, artists and cultural leaders.

The term 'left-behind areas'

In 2018, drawing on the experience of delivering the two funding programmes described above, Local Trust commissioned Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) to

conduct a study into the 'conditions for community leadership and action' and develop an objective measure of social infrastructure, particularly in areas that experienced historical disadvantages and lacked investment.¹

The original research, which identified 206 (updated to 225 in 2020) 'left behind' neighbourhoods across England, was produced by combining data from the Index of Multiple Deprivation and the [Community Needs Index](#) (CMI).

The CMI was developed by Local Trust in collaboration with OCSI to understand the extent to which social infrastructure makes a difference in deprived communities. The index is based on three strands:

1. Civic assets are understood as physical places that bring communities together in the sense of creative, educational and cultural infrastructure.
2. Active and engaged community - understood as levels of third-sector civic and community activity.
3. Physical and digital connectedness - understood as access to key services and amenities, transport connections, digital infrastructure.

Combining the Community Needs Index with the Index of Multiple Deprivation allowed Local Trust to:

- Identify a subset of neighbourhoods experiencing double deprivation of economic investment and social infrastructure
- Establish the baseline for an objective and hyperlocal assessment of both strengths and needs at the neighbourhood level.

The term "left behind" was adopted to indicate a historical lack of available investment, which resulted in a lack of services and facilities that help people connect. With Local Trust acting as the secretariat of the [All-Party Parliamentary Group for "left behind" neighbourhoods](#) (active between June 2020 and March 2024), the term also permeated policy discourse at the national level.

Arts Council England

Arts Council England (ACE) is an arm's length non-departmental public body of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Formed in 1944 when the Arts Council of Great Britain was divided into national bodies for England, Scotland and Wales, ACE supports the sector by distributing public funding from the UK Government and The National Lottery.

ACE are partner in the open policy development programme.

ACE Priority Places

¹ See <https://ocsi.uk/2019/09/05/left-behind-understanding-communities-on-the-edge/>

As part of their Delivery Plan for 2021-2024, ACE identified 54 places across England with historically low levels of investment and engagement. ACE worked with local stakeholders across the identified Priority Places by increasing funding and expert development support, with the idea of working in these areas long term.

The [methodology](#) to identify the Priority Places was based on:

- Need - defined by engagement and investment levels
- Opportunity - defined as capacity and ambition at that moment in time to increase engagement.

To establish need, ACE took into consideration the Index of Multiple Deprivation and free school meals data, the [British Red Cross COVID-19 Vulnerability Index](#), and data on cultural engagement.

As for opportunity, ACE's investment in priority places is seen as an 'opportunity to catalyse growth in culture' rather than create capacity. In this sense, the ambition of partners and the existing capacity have been key in selecting priority places where additional funding could help places to.

The original list of Priority Places was further expanded to deliver on the commitment made by the UK Government in the Levelling Up White Paper to identify "over 100 levelling up priority places outside of London that will be the focus for additional Arts Council England engagement and investment".²

In collaboration with DCMS, ACE identified 109 local authority areas all outside of Greater London. These are called Levelling Up for Culture Places and include all the Arts Council's Priority Places outside of Greater London. Levelling Up for Culture Places received an additional investment of £43.5 million for the period between 2022 and 2025.

² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

Implications for Policy

Sense of shame/pride

When exploring how the phrase 'left behind' is perceived by local leaders and communities, several contributors disclosed a general uneasiness with the term.

A participant from a so-called **"left-behind area"** expressed that the term can create both **"a sense of shame and a sense of pride"**. On the one hand, it is perceived as highlighting deficiencies in local communities, implying a lack of skills and cultural assets and, thus, compounds the inability to attract investment.

"It is seen sometimes as a badge of failure, and it doesn't necessarily recognise the unique progress that's been made in recent years as well."

However, as Local Trust colleagues at the meeting pointed out, the organisation had:

"done lots of work with residents of those neighbourhoods to assess...what language feels fair and accurate. We've [Local Trust] tried to be very clear that we're not using that language to characterize these neighbourhoods or infer any blame, or to detract from the pride in place that is central in so many of those communities."³

While not always received positively, the term was meant to emphasise how the historical lack of investment in these areas had produced several disadvantages for local people, such as a lack of **"services and opportunities"** to prosper and develop.

Research and experience on the ground has nonetheless found passionate communities and rich heritage assets.⁴ Similar evidence was also uncovered by the evaluation of [Creative People and Places](#) (2012-present), a funding programme initiated by Arts Council England. The 10-year evaluation report *Ten Years of Learning from Creative People and Places* states:

"Even communities lacking in visible cultural infrastructure are rarely 'cold spots'. They are rich in creative practice and have spaces and festivals..."⁵

This reveals a potential tension between using indices and data to identify needs and disparities on the one hand and creating funding programmes that still take into account the strengths and existing assets of local communities.

During the meeting, low levels of investment over time were reported to have had an impact on younger generations in terms of their career prospects and personal experiences of place. For this reason, working with young people appears to be a key priority in some deprived areas, to not only to provide young people with skills

³ On the topic of 'pride in place', see "Pride in place" beyond the metrics: Insights from the Feeling Towns project, available at https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_1055334_smx.pdf

⁴ See <https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/left-behind-neighbourhoods/>

⁵ See <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/20800/download?attachment>

and pathways into work in the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem, but also to counteract feelings of inadequacy that they may be feeling:

“There are nuanced perspectives in terms of the demographics where it's often the older communities who have that [enhanced sense] of pride and the younger communities who are struggling with the shame of their perceived historic failures...”

One of the participants commented on a project where young people had been involved in co-producing the locality's cultural strategy. While this had required updating the Council's approach to working with young people, in the long term, the project also created 100 or so traineeships for young creative producers.

One of the main findings of our session was that, while the term is contested and generally associated negatively, there were no immediate obvious alternative to the current **“left behind”** framing. Elsewhere in policy documents and academic literature, these places have been variously described as ‘cold spots’,⁶ ‘cultural deserts’, ‘satellite towns’, ‘deprived’, ‘marginalised’ or ‘lacking infrastructure’.⁷ Participants recognised the **“complex set of issues in any locality in terms of left-behind places”**. These can often be places struggling with their

“post-industrial demise and the challenge of how you move on from that”.

Power of collaboration

Local Trust research has found that social and cultural infrastructure is crucial to community development and has spillover effects that have benefits beyond the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem.

“Communities which have higher levels of social infrastructure overall but including creative cultural infrastructure, spaces, group activities, tend to perform better across health, well-being, employment, education, outcomes...”⁸

A cultural leader working in local authorities mentioned the power of effective partnerships between local authorities and local stakeholders, although these are not always easy to establish in areas with less cultural (or other civic) infrastructures.

“It could be very isolating when you come in as a leader within the cultural sector to try and make things happen. It's very difficult to do it on your own, and you do need good quality partners. Sometimes you find them within the cultural sector. More often, you find them within the community sector, and that's really important”.

⁶ For a critical understanding of the term, see Gilmore (2013) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09548963.2013.783174>

⁷ See Tomaney (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1080/2578711X.2023.2254997>

⁸ See “What impact did Creative Civic Change have on communities?” <https://localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/creative-civic-change/what-impact-did-creative-civic-change-have-on-communities/>

These partnerships are beneficial in lifting projects off the ground and beginning to make change.

“I think there's something really important about the power of working in a collaborative way...establishing trusted partnerships from the get-go has been essential”.

Funding programmes based on needs and established assets - such as the one delivered by ACE with Priority Places - were seen as a catalyst that **“enables the sector to get the right people around the table having those conversations”.**

“Co-production has been absolutely essential. Even before we called it co-production, [it] has been really, really key [to] working with communities.”

Working with communities allows cultural leaders to direct funding towards projects that are true community priorities and to **“know your own soil”** and **“to grow what will flourish”**, as someone put it succinctly during the roundtable.

Trust deficit & relationship-building

The flip side of relying on partnerships is that this is a time-consuming process requiring trust-building and the overcoming of historical mistrust, as participants from multiple places noted.

“It often takes a very long, long time, because usually there's a trust deficit that you're working with, and that's understandable, and often you have to get over some very bad and arrogant practice on behalf of the local authority, for example, or [in] particular, large organisations.”

“It really is about partnerships, and that isn't always easy...You've got to overcome all those barriers and things that have happened before. And it is about very much having that vision to go forward together and bringing everyone along with you.”

A participant commented on the reaction of the local community they served to the attempts to start conversations about 'culture-led regeneration':

“People weren't ready to have that conversation in the slightest. The first thing we got back was ‘there is no point. There is no point having this conversation. We've had it a million times before. It never goes anywhere’. And the sense of deep disempowerment of the community...like that literally somebody else is in charge.”

This was echoed by another cultural leader who had also experienced resistance from communities who felt unconfident in the interventions they had planned.

“[The] community will not welcome workshops with open arms, you need to take them on a journey with you”.

As we explore in our *Insight Paper* on 'Local Voice' as part of this programme⁹, this suggests that inviting local voices into cultural decision-making is neither a

⁹ See <https://www.culturecommons.uk/publications/supporting-%E2%80%98local-voice%E2%80%99-in-cultural-decision-making>

simple process nor always successful, especially if the conditions for success are not established from the outset.

Resistance from local authorities

Local residents are not the only stakeholders who can be resistant to attempts to make change in a left behind area. Local authorities are also described as nervous at the downward transfer of power to communities, but one participant who had been successful at bringing members on board with their programmes, reported that involving them in the process can really make a difference.

“What I'm trying to do is involve members in the process so that not only we secure sign off from them, but we are involving them in the workshop so that they can see that. Now, what we've been briefing them is that in those workshops they need to keep quiet, because often local politicians are the ones who shout the loudest in any forum.”

This assertion is supported by evidence that shows that people who take part in participatory practices are more likely to experience their benefits and therefore and feel more confident about using them again in the future.¹⁰

Another cultural leader recalled the local authority's nervousness about the idea of using a citizen assembly to bring local people into direct decision making. In their view, the compromise is to find genuine ways to empower communities that also feel appropriate to local authorities, which have had to

“take a strong leadership role because of the challenges being faced, and now are struggling with the transfer of power.”

Preparedness of left behind areas for more decision making powers

While the contributors we spoke to seemed to have a desire to see more powers devolved to a hyperlocal level, one question nonetheless recurred during the session: **“are people ready?”**.

Participants instinctively recognised that it takes time to build up the desire for new governance structures and to get people used to exercising decision-making powers. If capacities and infrastructures have not been developed, not all communities are equally ready or equipped for local cultural decision-making.

“We've brought in a creative, democratic engagement expert to have discussions with our communities about what's important to them, what makes them proud about the borough, in a set of workshops that are very much about shifting the power dynamic...We can't simply pass on responsibility to communities and expect them to welcome that with open arms. We need to take them on a journey with us.”

A roundtable contributor described the process as **“tempestuous”** and suggested that **“we should be teaching people to be on boards at school”** so that people can build up the skills to take

¹⁰ See Jancovich et al (2024)

part in decision-making meaningfully and constructively in their area.

The 'added value' of culture, creativity and heritage

During the discussion, contributors offered up a variety of ways that they felt culture, the creative industries and heritage assets can support left behind areas; they can be summarised as:

- creating a sense of pride in place
- raising aspirations for local people and businesses
- building confidence in new approaches to decision making and governance structures

Firstly, local leaders commented on how local residents are taking pride in their heritage and their unique local stories. Secondly, they emphasised how working with artists or working through culture with communities can open up new ways of thinking about a place and patterns of collaboration.

“The role of artists in provoking in modelling change is really critical in particularly in those disempowered situations”.

For communities that have not benefitted from much investment historically, engaging with cultural production and decision making processes will require not only trust, but self-confidence. This seems to be where culture can play a crucial role.

“One of the things that's important is that they [artists and cultural producers] offer optimism and hope, which are generally seen as

privileges...and it can take time for people to feel confident in terms of some of the opportunities that are available”

One project developed by an artist-led organisation described its work as a **“process of empowerment”**, after facing initial rejection by disenfranchised local communities. This gradually led to building “confidence and an upswell of community movement”. In practice, artists and cultural workers seem to be able to create intangible infrastructures that organisations like the Local Trust identified as essential to community development.

Thirdly, participants mentioned the ability of culture to model new approaches to local cultural decision making processes.

“The role of culture [is] in beginning to set up the desire for governance structures and then I think culture can also play a role in humanizing and modelling some better governance practices as well”

The onus on revenue

However, cultural programming and activities alone cannot compensate for the lack of infrastructure – physical, social or cultural. One cultural leader noted how quickly local authorities and communities can get behind culture-led regeneration projects but how rarely these are allocated core funding, leaving the sector with an often considerable **“revenue bill”**.

“You end up with new organisations that are forming, filled with enthusiasm and excitement about

being able to run a venue and make stuff happen. And then there's no revenue backup support...There isn't the strategy to follow through at local authority level, to say 'if we're going to invest in capital assets, we also need to put in place revenue streams to support those things to keep happening'. And that isn't coming through those Levelling Up funds at all”.

The majority of local leaders in the session agreed that funding is often project-based and, more often than not, the support for cultural activities comes through competitive yearly funding pots focused on social impact, such as UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), innovation funding and regeneration funding.¹¹ In this sense, cultural leaders have to think and act entrepreneurially in order to keep their projects running.

But with significant hard and often unpaid work and an **“opportunistic attitude”**, culture-led place-shaping projects were reported to be able to achieve remarkable success and drive substantial change in a place - including left behind places. For instance, one of the participants shared how a project that began from a small art collective evolved into a community benefit society that now **“owns five buildings on the high street”**.

Key in this process was establishing good relationships with local authorities.

“One council officer managed to convince the local authority to use the

council tax from second homes and direct it into something called the Town Center Living Fund, which was absolutely foundational towards getting that town centre project going”.

Fragility

As repeated often during the session and from different stakeholder groups, capacity and infrastructure are essential to growth in culture, creativity and heritage in deprived areas because **“there is a fragility and a precariousness that comes with high investment”**.

During the session, three main challenges related to funding were identified:

- sustainability
- competitiveness
- prioritisation

Arm’s length bodies and grant giving bodies in the room emphasised that their investments cannot catalyse growth on their own and that they are therefore more likely to invest in places that are making a concerted effort to invest too. But, as one local cultural leader noted, while **“funders need to be able to respond to people developing fundable projects”**, this often requires tweaking a project to meet funders’ criteria and requirements, at the expense of local vision and needs.

Equally, local leaders told us that they have a concern about the long-term

¹¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus>

sustainability of their local cultural projects.

“We've completely benefited from Shared Prosperity and Levelling Up, and it's allowed us to do so much that we wouldn't have been able to do before. But then my fear is: when that funding stops in March 2025, how are we going to continue to support our creative industries and these grassroots community organizations who we've been distributing funding to?”

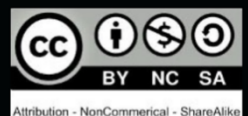
Participants from different UK nations reported severe struggles in the budgets of their local authorities. As a result, when culture has to compete for funding with health and food banks, securing funding for cultural projects becomes exceedingly difficult.

The competitiveness of funding applications also places significant stress on small, disadvantaged areas, but it remains unclear what would be the consequences of a needs-based allocation of funding. One participant also reported a struggle in trying to attract funding for smaller towns sitting within a city region in England.

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