

Cultural Recovery Evidence Review

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Davies, J 2024, *Cultural Recovery Evidence Review*. The Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

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CULTURAL RECOVERY EVIDENCE REVIEW

LOCAL POLICY INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP HUB

June 2024

Dr James Davies, City-REDI, University of Birmingham

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the following for their invaluable support and input throughout the process of writing this review.

Dr Abigail Gilmore, University of Manchester, for detailed feedback and assistance in editing and structuring the report.

Professor Jane Wills, University of Exeter for her help in the crucial framing and presentation of key concepts and themes.

Andrew Mowlah of Arts Council England for his assistance and input.

Dr Abigail Taylor, City-REDI, University of Birmingham for her guidance in ensuring the review's relevance to the aims of the LPIP programme and the contribution of the LPIP Hub.

Dr Matt Lyons, City-REDI, University of Birmingham for his input and contribution.

Professor Anne Green and Associate Professor Rebecca Riley for their feedback and suggestions.

Stuart Mitchell and the whole digital media team at the LPIP Hub at City-REDI, University of Birmingham for their help in the publication of this evidence review, and related blogs.

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Executive summary

Dr James Davies, City-REDI, University of Birmingham and Dr Abigail Gilmore, University of Manchester conducted a review of the existing academic and policy literature relating to the theme of Cultural Recovery, to determine the current 'state-of-play' and identify key themes and issues Local Partnerships should consider when designing interventions that relate to culture and cultural activity. The following is a summary of the key points of the report.



Key finding: The impact of the UK's centralised economy

The UK's centralised economy disproportionately impacts those areas with weaker cultural infrastructure. Coordination of funding for arts and culture between local and national government remains disjointed and uneven.



Key takeaway

Increased competition over fewer resources, in relation to local authority expenditure for non-statutory services, coupled with changes in audience behaviour is providing significant risk to sustainable cultural infrastructure, particularly in places where it is already weak.



Key finding: The importance of local actors

The most effective cultural interventions are predicated on the involvement of local actors with intimate contextual knowledge, and then giving them the autonomy and agency to design those interventions in a bespoke way.



Key takeaway

Local authorities and planners should always conduct detailed local analyses to understand an area's unique features and demands when implementing cultural regeneration projects, including those elements of cultural infrastructure that mean people may be more willing to stay to live and work in that region.



Key finding: Embracing technology

During the pandemic, technology mainly served existing arts audiences rather than attracting new ones, although it did offer improved access for disabled audiences. The capacity of organisations to embrace technology varied based on factors such as their size, location, and digital proficiency, with smaller organisations facing more difficulties than larger ones.



Key takeaway

Digital technology (including AI) is a double-edged sword, offering a potential method of engaging younger people but it needs to be balanced with physical participation. Care must be taken to ensure new technologies enhance our relationship with the existing cultural infrastructure, rather than attempting to substitute or replace it.

Key finding: The need for cultural recovery

The need for cultural recovery has been intensified and accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but there were long-standing tensions before that, dating back to the turn of the century.



Key takeaway

‘Cultural Recovery’ itself is an ambiguous term, one that could mean both economic regeneration and development utilising arts and culture as a means, or the recovery of the arts and cultural sectors specifically from the impacts of COVID-19 and other challenges.



Key finding: ‘Cultural infrastructure’ and ‘creative industries’ as distinct concepts

‘Cultural infrastructure’ and ‘creative industries’ overlap but remain distinct concepts. Cultural assets are a resource that need to be sustained, and they offer value far beyond simple economic growth.



Key takeaway

Articulating culture solely as an industry risks overlooking the other foundational roles that arts and cultural play in place, prioritising economic measures over other forms of cultural value which may lead to the loss of sufficient funding to recognise their potential.

Introduction

About this review

This review is part of a series produced by the LPIP Hub team at City-REDI at the University of Birmingham, offering a state-of-play on the current policy landscapes and debates relating to effective place-based partnerships across the seven primary themes of the Local Policy Innovation Programme (LPIP), as determined by UKRI. The aim of the review is to identify key questions, offer a ‘state-of-the-art’ picture of current academic and policy literature, and consider key themes and strands of research for further investigation throughout the LPIP programme. The review is designed to help those in the Local Partnerships (LPs) better understand how to design effective place-based interventions that relate to a given theme, and to understand the common challenges and pitfalls to effective partnership working in each context, as well as examples of good practice to minimise risk.

The review adopts the following structure: It begins by introducing some important concepts and definitions, and outlines the key questions and debates that have informed the gathering of evidence on this theme: Cultural Recovery. It then provides an overview of the contemporary cultural policy context at both national and local level in the UK, outlines the underlying reasons for uneven capacity of different places and regions to be able to introduce effective and innovative place-based cultural interventions, and proposes examples of what works both from previous initiatives in the UK and elsewhere. Finally, it offers some concluding thoughts and provocations to take forward for the rest of the programme.

What do we mean by culture?

For the purposes of this review, we begin by providing some key definitions. In the first instance, it is vital that we clarify what we mean by ‘culture.’ As is oft cited in cultural policy analysis and research, the definition of ‘culture’ is hard to pin down, and it is argued to be “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1). To help, we propose considering culture as a triumvirate, taking three principal forms, as it relates to place:

1. **Local Culture.** In the broadest anthropological sense, the culture of a place is shaped by its heritage, communities’ shared histories and language (e.g. Welsh, Cornish, Scottish and Irish Gaelic). This is then reflected in the traditions and identities that people develop in place, and can include traditional events like the

Eisteddfod in Wales, the key role of the Welsh language in the Rural Wales Local Partnership, and the cultural value of the Forth Water Basin as the focus of the Stirling Local Partnership.

2. **Cultural Infrastructure**, which is understood to include both the physical spaces and amenities, often known as cultural assets, and the wider infrastructural conditions - that facilitate, support and sustain arts and cultural activities. These conditions include the services, relationships and value frameworks that govern resource allocation and produce the human, economic, social and cultural capitals which comprise local **Cultural Ecosystems**. The use of an ecosystem as a metaphor highlights the connectivity between these underlying conditions and their relevance to sustaining and governing local cultural infrastructure (2).
3. **Cultural and Creative Industries**. The terms 'cultural' and 'creative' are often combined or used interchangeably, but represent distinctive activities. The term "creative" is often used to refer to those more 'transactional' sectors like TV, film, and video games, which can be measured primarily by economic outputs such as employment, Gross Value Added (GVA) and productivity. Conversely, "cultural" encompasses a broader set of activities, involving museums, theatres, sporting venues – as well as large-scale events like the Commonwealth Games or Olympics – which may be part of economies but are also commonly understood through non-market values and social benefits. The creative economy pilot in Bradford, a work package of the Yorkshire and Humber LPIP (the YPIP), is an example of how cultural activity might be understood through both monetary and non-monetary valuation.

In sum, there are powerful interactions between local culture, cultural infrastructure and the cultural and creative industries that will evolve in place over time (Figure 1).

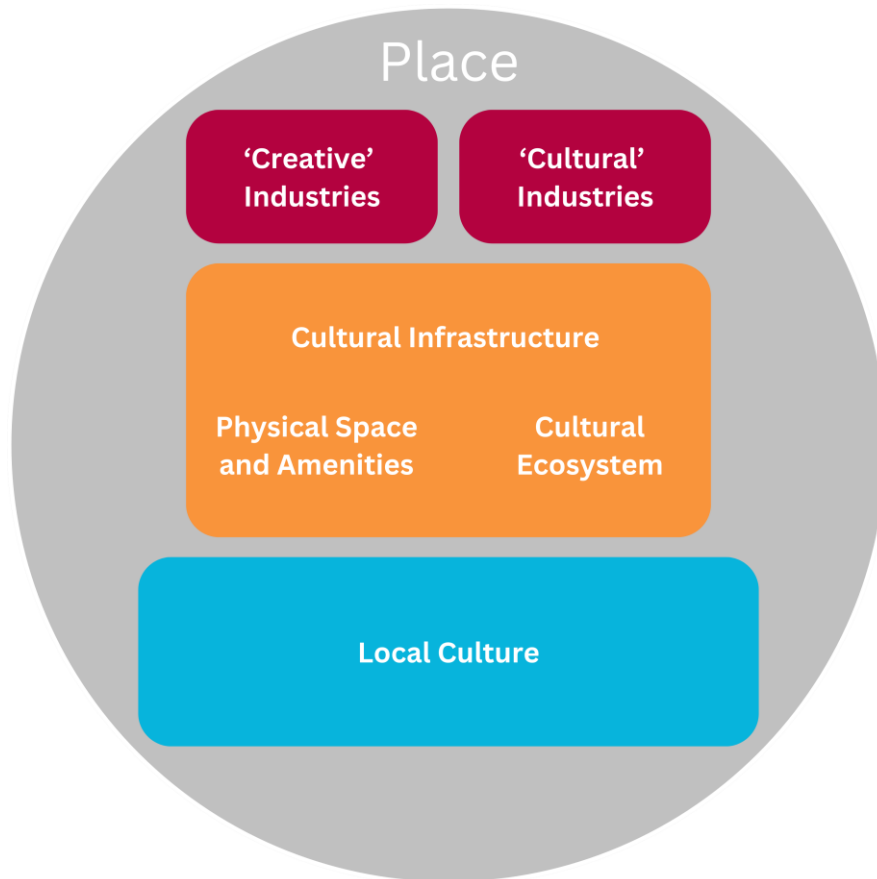


Figure 1- The triumvirate of culture in place.

These three approaches each address different aspects of culture and they obviously interact and overlap with one another, shaping the cultural landscape of place. A foundational understanding of how culture develops, and evolves, within place allows us to see where the different elements support or compete with one another and there are some tensions between them that are discussed later below.

However, these concepts also overlap with another set of terms that need a clear introduction:

1. **Cultural Recovery.** A concept that begs the question ‘recovery from what?’ and is used to capture the potential to support artistic and cultural assets and activities to drive economic growth and development. Cultural recovery has become part of the policy agenda for ‘Levelling Up’.
2. **Cultural Value** is related and is generally used to refer to the economic value of cultural activities. However, there is obviously wider social value gained from cultural activity and it is useful to deploy broader forms of measurement and understanding (3). In the context of place-based partnerships and policy innovation, this review emphasises the value that culture and cultural infrastructure has to places and communities, building pride-in-place and community identity, and

supporting wellbeing and inclusion, *in addition to* regeneration and economic development.

As a final point, it is important to note that cultural investment strategies have often distinguished between, and prioritised, cultural *consumption* and large-scale events and performance, over support for local cultural *production* (rehearsal spaces, studios, practice spaces and funding for related activity).

Key questions

The questions below offer a starting point for the design of this review, and are areas to address to provide partnerships looking to include cultural recovery effectively into their place-building:

1. What is the national policy context for cultural policy in the UK, and how does it impact local partnerships?
2. What are the challenges for effective local partnerships?
3. How can participation in cultural activity be more inclusive and accessible, and which groups need greater representation and participation?
4. How can local-level cultural infrastructure be preserved, improved and sustained?
5. How does the cultural policy landscape differ across the nations of the UK?

The following section begins by looking at the national policy context, and how the history of cultural policy in the UK impacts upon long-standing issues of regional inequalities and funding challenges.

National policy levers and challenges

An economic focus and continuing regional disparities

National policy in the UK has historically prioritised the economic potential of culture and creative expression for the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), from the laissez-faire policies of the Thatcher Conservatives which privileged free market enterprise and materialist individualism, to the concepts of 'creative industries' and 'culture-led regeneration' promoted by the New Labour government in the 1990s.

Both informed strategies for local economic development, for example, through investment in flagship cultural buildings and incubation of creative industries clusters substantially aided by Lottery funding (4). In common with broader strategies of regionalism, New Labour also grew the soft infrastructure of cultural ecosystems by supporting regional offices of the Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), and working with Government Offices, Regional Development Agencies, regional consortia and local authorities to drive regional and local cultural strategies. Local government was charged with ensuring the performance management of these centrally recommended strategies, which aimed to coordinate the strategic and instrumental development of the wide range of sectors in the newly formed Department for Culture, Media and Sport (5-7).

Just as with the current Levelling Up agenda, New Labour saw culture and creative industries as a way to promote social inclusion in disadvantaged regions, creating positive impact, employment and regeneration in left-behind areas.(8) This reinforced an economic focus, with significant government support for regional *creative* industry development, in a move that has been criticised as revealing neo-liberal doctrine within New Labour, despite the wide recognition of their three-term period as a 'golden age for cultural policy' (4,8).

In the 2010s, post-crash and with the incoming coalition government, explicit cluster policy waned, funds were cut and regional agencies supporting creative industries and arts, culture and heritage were removed. Likewise, many of the institutions and mechanisms that oversaw the performance management of local cultural strategies and investment, such as the regional observatories and local level indicators, were dismantled. Furthermore, the government began an austerity programme which saw significant and ongoing reduction in local authority funding (the largest source of funds for arts and culture) (9), with spend on library services, culture, heritage, and tourism decreasing by £470m since 2010 (10).



Without regional capacities, and with harmful cuts to cultural funding unmitigated by the ALBs which are unable to intervene in local political decision-making, disparities between places attracting investment, whether from private income or public funds, has grown. In 2014, Arts Council England faced scrutiny from a Government Select Committee following a consultancy report revealing disproportionate cultural funding favouring London and the South-East, leading to set goals for rebalancing.

Similarly, London's dominant position as the location of creative industries has long been recognised (11), with active efforts being made to disperse centres of creative production across the UK's nations and regions, including the BBC (12) and Channel 4 (11). Despite recent attempts to encourage arts organisations to relocate to the regions (13) and the increase in places prioritised for specific capacity building and investment by Arts Council, based on criteria of need and opportunity (14), following the Levelling Up White Paper (15), there are still significant disparities between the amounts of per capita investment in cultural infrastructure between places and across regions. There is, however, an acknowledgement of the need for capacity-building, and acceptance that real decentralisation requires long-term investment, tailored to local cultural ecosystems with place-specific initiatives that respond to local conditions, economies and assets (8).

The idea of 'Cultural Recovery' was first defined by the largest national single programme of cultural investment in July 2020, the Culture Recovery funds, led by Westminster, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further targeted funds followed suit in the devolved nations, and with ALBs and local government initially relaxing allocation and evaluation criteria to provide the means for flexibility and 'pivoting' to different activities depending on restrictions (16). The £1.57

billion Culture Recovery Fund aimed to support arts, culture, and heritage sectors impacted by COVID-19. It included grants, loans, and funding for infrastructure projects across the UK. Arts Council England, Historic England, National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the British Film Institute administered the funding in England, and the devolved nations carried out similar processes of distribution, adapted to their governance structures and particular conditions. By February 2021, about £830 million had been awarded, with grants being more popular than loans (17).

These emergency measures have placed further strain on the UK's cultural funding model whilst cultural organisations and the highly impacted freelance sector, which did not benefit from the direct support of furlough arrangements, have struggled to maintain their resilience. Consumer behaviour has also significantly changed, due to risk aversion and the impact of cost-of-living rises. Brexit has complicated matters further, with little intervention to address issues like touring and worker migration that have heavily impacted creative industries (4). Whilst recent tax relief announcements for creative and cultural organisations have been lauded, there remain calls to increase tailored support for creative industries. Furthermore, there is a growing crisis for local government as central settlements continue to fall (18). In such a context, spending appropriately is of paramount importance, and the call for place-based interventions based on local knowledge is ever more prescient.

'Cultural recovery' was also a central feature of the Levelling Up investment in towns and cities, which aimed to address stark regional inequalities in productivity and economic well-being through competitive funding, with a commitment in total of £850m to culture and heritage. The first two rounds prioritising 'oven ready' schemes put culture at the fore of urban regeneration and high street recovery, with the third-round targeting £100m to designated national projects (19). Further regional investments which single out creative and digital industries as economic drivers include the Creative Growth and Investment Zone programmes, which aim to improve conditions for enterprise and innovation within specified areas (20).

However, the opportunities for place-based funding and working are under-explored (21) and, at a national level, rationales for investment lack coherence and are often driven by ideological policy discourse (4). Additionally, the declared economic benefits of culture and the creative industries are based on assumptions drawn from an influential body of research which focuses on economic outputs (11,22, 23), but lacks an understanding of 'place sensitivity'; the relational aspects of cultural infrastructure, which are often contested (3, 24, 25, 26). The following sections examine some of these challenges at a local level and how they may be overcome.



Local level overview of key policies

The complexities of 'Local Culture' and the role of local government

The term 'Local Culture' is broad, and encompasses a wide range of cultural assets, including heritage, arts, parks, community initiatives as well as the creative industries (27). Through supporting these assets as non-statutory services, and through the enabling and connecting the role local authorities can have with other service delivery, planning and regulation, local government plays a crucial role within these complex cultural ecosystems (27,28). As an example, urban regeneration in London has included the introduction of Opportunity Areas since 2011; selecting brownfield locations for new housing, jobs and infrastructure, illustrating that cultural policy needs to consider the complexity and dynamic nature of local ecologies and design recommendations to safeguard the infrastructural conditions that encourage diversity in the urban public culture.

Local authorities play vital roles as funders, leaders and conveners of culture. They have a responsibility for enabling culture to work in ways specifically related to place, creating more resilient places, increasing social mobility and contributing to addressing health inequalities, alongside economic development (27). The financial pressures for local government mean both statutory and non-statutory services are faced with huge challenges, and the political case for investment into cultural-related services through local representation is even harder to make. As a result, local partnerships which can increase and share capacity and coordinate resources are central to the future of cultural ecosystems. Furthermore, shared learning between local

governments can help demonstrate how to use community assets and needs to drive collaboration, as is the case with the devolved combined authorities (29).

The complexities and challenges suggest an "upgraded levelling up" is needed focused on further decentralisation, stronger central-local government relations, long-term sustained investment and a framework of accountability to overcome historical mismatches between national and local cultural policy (30).

The differential capacity of places for policy innovation in cultural recovery

Cuts to arts and cultural budgets

There are several factors that affect the different capacities across the UK to support local cultural infrastructure through place-based initiatives and practices. Chief among them is the nature of the UK's funding model (31). Arts, culture, and heritage organisations in the UK predominantly have business models that require public funds to support R&D, subsidise market failure and to help them deliver non-market values. This public investment is typically disbursed through funding competitions to the responsible Arm's Length Bodies or government departments, combined with local authority grants and service agreements, and with private giving, earned income and sponsorship. Similarly, whilst creative industries are lauded for their commercial and export value, their potential for placemaking and local economic development, through the stimulation of visitor economies, agglomeration effects and spillovers, has informed policy rationales for state intervention, as outlined in the section above.

External factors such as cost of living, economic downturns and political and ideological changes can derail the balance of this 'funding mix', as is the case currently. The most significant decline has been in local government revenue funding, with implications for the type of arts and culture that is supported (32).

This funding model also remains highly centralised, serving to reproduce the dominant position of London and the South-East. Cuts to arts and cultural budgets disproportionately affect regions with weaker cultural infrastructure, highlighting the impact of political buy-in and governance decisions on cultural development (9). This in turn affects the capacity and capability of places to attract further funds and to navigate the fragmented funding streams available to local partnerships, reinforcing the need for more sustainable planning and funding cycles (33).

Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and public spending cuts have intensified difficulties, particularly evident in job losses and impacts on music and other industries. Rex and Campbell argue the cuts stem from austerity policies prioritising deficit reduction over other spending, which represents an ideological shift in rationales for arts funding (9, 34). The cuts have

challenged the sustainability and resilience of many local cultural ecosystems. Arts Council England's 2018 report, "What is Resilience Anyway" (35), provided an emphasis on organisational resilience, but also highlights the individual perspectives among the interviewees, arguing that the significant presence of self-employed workers in the cultural sector, in contrast to the broader UK economy, underscores the relevance of considering individual well-being for the overall well-being of the sector (31).

Regional variations fluctuate widely and impact the stymying or emboldening of cultural initiatives, highlighting the importance of understanding local dynamics (30). Cuts disproportionately affect places with weaker cultural infrastructure and wider socioeconomic disadvantage, which often rely more on public funding. Increasing public investment in culture is recommended to mitigate inequalities, with place-based approaches attuned to local cultural infrastructure needs. Organisations must increasingly rely on commercial income which may not suit their mission (9). A major step towards a renewed consideration of resilience and its implications within UK cultural policy discourse might involve funding councils (including Arts Council England, Creative Scotland, Arts Council Wales and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland) taking seriously the limitations of focusing on the resilience and survival of organisations (31).

Further challenges for cultural investment

Top-down investment in urban regeneration can lead to local economic growth, but such success may be isolated and not beneficial for broader communities. A lack of community participation in the planning stage of cultural investment risks failure to recognise the existing, and regionally/locally unique, cultural values and local infrastructures. Likewise, relying solely on selected quantitative economic indicators does not comprehensively reflect the success of investment in cultural infrastructure, from a social and local perspective (36).

Infrastructure assets can be both digital and physical and can be specific to sub-sectors. For example, in the music industry, a mix of digital innovation and offline infrastructure is required. Policy interventions around business support, funding, promotion and planning can help strengthen and sustain regional music industry clusters, but might not fit as well for a region whose cultural infrastructure is based heavily on heritage, for example.

Cultural infrastructure should also be understood to include a set of physical and social spaces which present the conditions that build, support and sustain the creative sector. Cultural investment strategies have often prioritised cultural *consumption*: large-scale events as visitor attractors, over creating spaces for local cultural *production* (28).

Megaevents like the Olympics or the Commonwealth Games do, however, involve significant investment in infrastructure. The tourism impact associated with such events can be highly significant and the legacy impacts can be varied with different organisers prioritising different objectives. The cultural impact of such events can be far-reaching. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in narrow economic terms the impacts of such events are mixed (37).

Local authorities and planners should always conduct detailed local analysis to understand local areas' unique features and demands when implementing strategic planning and cultural regeneration projects, including those elements of cultural infrastructure that mean people may be more willing to stay to live and work in that region (38).



Prioritising economics

Long-standing concerns that cultural interventions may prioritise financial values over other essential factors, potentially neglecting public participation and social considerations remain (36, 38, 39). Urban regeneration plans need to be carefully crafted, and consider the local community's specific characteristics and needs.

Ultimately, economic measures that can demonstrate growth potential remain a priority, overshadowing considerations of culture in terms of quality of life, health, and societal well-being. The wider value of culture for communities and economies must be recognised in budget decisions. Place-based approaches for improving community health and wellbeing, such as 'social prescribing' - where local people are prescribed social, cultural, environmental, or economic community-based activities that help address medical and non-medical issues - require a focus on community assets rather than deficits, instead of traditional partnership arrangements, being more focused on community decision-making (29).

The appraisal of business cases and evaluation of public policy relies on economic measures, however, as enshrined by the Treasury's Green Book. Whilst there are methodologies for measuring the values of culture outside of economic impact (such as contingent valuation) these are still in their relative infancy, and measures for productivity based on economic output are unsuitable for activities which require extensive skill and specialist training, and which are not primarily organised for economic gain. Furthermore, the emphasis on agglomeration and clustering inevitably leads to uneven geographies of opportunity and access to progression, creating barriers to inclusive growth.

Shared understanding, evidence and accountability

As suggested above, working in a place-based way is challenging, particularly when there is a lack of understanding of the distinctive needs and priorities within places, and the optimal ways to measure and evaluate the public benefits of cultural infrastructure. Evidence of both strategic need and outcomes of investment is important not just for demonstrating value for money, but also for articulating and coordinating the lines of accountability across public and private partnerships and between local and central government. The development of a shared terminology and research agenda is needed to improve the overall quality of the evidence base, and to test and develop the potential for creative ecosystems in many locations (21).

A better, evidence-based creative economy strategy is needed, serving wider inclusion, access and sustainability goals, rather than narrowly chasing growth. Cultural governance structures, both nationally, and at a range of local levels, are also often based on unhelpful binary distinctions (funded vs. not funded; producers vs. audiences; public vs private etc.), failing to grasp the lived realities of creative and cultural ecosystems (21). Different regions and events are influenced by various factors, including scale, proximity to major population centres, available resources, local priorities, and the availability of data (40). There is an increased demand for an informed framework for planning arts and cultural facilities from local and regional government and from within the cultural sector (41), but the evidence base remains sub-standard, hampered by a lack of data standardisation, continuing cuts to public sector budgets, and a reliance on data that is quantitative and statistical, rather than offering deep, qualitative insights to lived experience and less tangible contributions to culture (42, 43).

Large-scale events' impacts are best measured across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, emphasising their interconnectedness. Evaluations blend quantitative data (e.g., surveys) with qualitative evidence (e.g., interviews, case studies). Tailoring measurement approaches considers event type, scale, frequency, resources, local priorities, and data availability. Instead of uniform indicators, hosts align them with the event's specific vision and goals (40). There are many common indicators used to measure impacts in each area, like visitor spending (economic), diversity of participants (social), and carbon footprint (environmental). But indicators need to align with the specific goals and context of each event (40).

The benefits of effective and appropriate cultural mapping include helping partnerships identify shared priorities for joint investment decisions, persuading evidence-based policymakers to take culture seriously by compiling and presenting asset data (often allied with consumption data) in a systematic way and familiar medium, helping project partners to get to grips with spatial planning, recognising a “symbolic” value, in addition to a utility value and by representing a cohesive, focused and “spatially aware” cultural sector (42).

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s (DCMS) Cultural and Heritage Capital Framework is recognised as a step towards providing an evidence base for cultural policy, indicating a move towards a more structured and informed approach in decision-making (44). The research, in collaboration with Arts Council England, Historic England, and the British Film Institute, aims to establish the economic contributions of cultural and heritage institutions. The framework aims to offer guidance for better evidence production, evaluation techniques surveys, and Benefit Transfer reports. Valuations range from regional galleries to digital culture, shedding light on public perceptions and monetary values.

Standardising data across projects is necessary for effective comparison, emphasising the need for a more robust evidential foundation in cultural initiatives (42). Co-ordination across different policy domains is essential to maximise positive synergies and mitigate unintended consequences. The theory of change can be a useful tool to map out these connections from the outset (40).

However, even within the UK’s culture of “evidence-based” cultural policy, “evidence” is rarely the sole driver of decision-making (26). The process of getting research to policy is not a linear process, it is more an ongoing interplay of ideas (45). Significant policy change is slow, and it is unlikely that a single source of evidence could affect change resulting in significantly increased investment into the cultural sector (46). Nonetheless, the renewed focus on place, decentralisation and devolution, enhanced by the combination of national policy initiatives such as the metro ‘devo deals’, the Industrial Strategy (47), and Levelling Up agendas, and reinforced by the interest of research councils and institutions in investment in place (e.g. AHRC Place programme and Civic University Network), suggests that new models and approaches which address the root causes of regional cultural inequalities may be forthcoming.



Cultural inclusion & greater participation

Cultural venues offer a variety of values, beyond just the economic, to their communities. The effective planning of cultural and social infrastructure that can appeal to the wide variety of ethnic, social and socio-economic groups that might interact with them relies on local cultural knowledge. Theatres were cited as being of increasing importance, creating strong ties with their local communities, maximising their civic responsibilities and furthering ongoing engagement with their communities and audiences over short-term activities (48). Strategies for promoting greater inclusion are vitally important for a more egalitarian level of cultural participation. Wider social and economic benefits can be unlocked by investing in cultural capacity, convening local partnerships through Cultural Compacts and Forums and taking a strategic, inclusive approach tailored to the strengths and needs of each place, as evidenced in the approach of work package 2B of the Yorkshire and Humber LP (YPIP): The Creative Economy Pilot, in Bradford (49).

Emphasising socio-economic diversity is crucial for genuine representation, as solely focusing on disabled and Global Majority communities may overlook the varied demographics, especially in rural locales (50). Leguina and Miles discovered a far higher discrepancy of engagement between ethnic groups in regional social spaces than had previously been suggested in literature, and a discrepancy that varied regionally (51).

Evidence also suggests that local interests, or content relating to local identity, are of greater importance to lower socio-economic groups than any other (52). A broader spectrum of socio-

economic backgrounds participates in libraries in comparison to arts and museums (53). Collaborating with libraries presents an opportunity for artists and cultural organisations to enhance diversity within their sectors and reach underserved groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated “digital pivot” (as more services and interactions occurred online) has drawn the impact of digital exclusion on cultural institutions into stark relief (54). The digital pivot was a ‘proof of concept’ demonstrated through the pandemic, but more support is now needed for institutions, as well as individuals. Digital activities have changed from being ‘nice to have’ to becoming ‘essential’ to cultural institutions (55). Larger, well-funded institutions that had invested in digital access and skills prior to 2020 had a vital resource for engaging and maintaining audiences. Those that had not – most often smaller, regional institutions – were left behind (56). More than 80% of European museums think they need additional support with digital skills, and 23.2% require new digital infrastructure (57).

What digital technologies *can* offer to arts and culture is a potential way to engage with children and young people via a language with which they are more familiar. Demographic variables such as gender, socio-economic status and age significantly influence involvement in arts and culture. Young people tend to perceive arts and culture as a collection of separate activities, rather than as a unified concept. Engagement with arts and culture among this demographic is impeded by the perception that it is elitist, conventional, distant, and not tailored to their age group, indicating a need for dispelling such misconceptions (50).

Finding the right balance between digital and in-person experiences will be a significant challenge in revitalising cultural spaces. During the pandemic, technology mainly served existing arts audiences rather than attracting new ones, although it did offer improved access for disabled audiences. The capacity of organisations to embrace technology varied based on factors such as their size, location, and digital proficiency, with smaller organisations facing more difficulties than larger ones.

Practicalities – including cost, time, and the availability of local provision – remain a significant factor in whether children and young people engage with arts and culture. Children and young people’s relationship with the digital world presents a great opportunity to engage them further, with social media offering a potentially powerful platform for advertising what arts and culture can offer (50). Policy priorities should focus on providing more funding for innovation, particularly for smaller organisations, addressing diversity issues exacerbated by the pandemic, enhancing creative education, and acknowledging the role of digital arts and culture in the government’s efforts to promote regional equality (58).

Increasing participation in decision-making

Participatory Design and Planning enables community members to engage in the design and planning of public spaces to ensure their preferences and needs are accounted for. Various initiatives across the UK exemplify this approach.

[Place-making Scotland](#) promotes community involvement in urban design and planning, fostering vibrant public spaces.

[Coventry City of Culture 2021](#) in England, which involved locals in planning cultural events and projects to celebrate the city's heritage.

The [Royal Town Planning Institute's Community Engagement Network](#) assists planners in involving communities in planning processes, particularly concerning cultural and heritage projects.

The [Creative People and Places Programme](#) supported by Arts Council England, empowers communities to shape local arts and cultural experiences, aiding in cultural recovery efforts.

In Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations Act(59) encourages public bodies to include the community in long-term planning, particularly regarding cultural and heritage recovery initiatives.



Participatory Budgeting empowers community members by directly involving them in decisions regarding the allocation of a portion of the public budget, allowing for the prioritisation of local projects. The definition is as follows:

“Participatory budgeting directly involves local people in making decisions on the spending priorities for a defined public budget. This means engaging residents and community groups representative of all parts of the community to discuss spending priorities, making spending proposals and vote on them, as well as giving local people a role in the scrutiny and monitoring of the process.”

(60, pg. 5)

The approach, exemplified by initiatives such as the [Participatory Budgeting Project](#) in the UK, including Edinburgh, enables residents and community groups to engage in discussions, propose spending plans, and vote on them.

Moreover, research findings highlight the effectiveness of combining Participatory Budgeting with other community engagement strategies, citing its ability to attract additional funding to underserved areas, engage marginalised groups, foster inter-organisational cooperation, and strengthen civic engagement. However, the success of Participatory Budgeting is contingent upon maintaining trust through the delivery of projects and adapting to changing political, economic, and organisational landscapes at both national and local levels.

Culture and devolution in the UK

Any consideration of truly place-based interventions in arts and culture must also acknowledge the complex fabric of devolved nations and Local Authorities in the UK. Instead of focusing on culture, it is argued the “state-economic” (61) part of the creative and cultural policy inevitably connects digital technology and physical infrastructure to knowledge-based economies and the influence they have (62), mixing the rhetoric of creativity with local symbolic resources drawn from their cultural, historical and socio-political contexts. Across England, regional identities and political ideologies shape policy approaches, for example, in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. The West Midlands emphasises creative economies that transcend specific sectors with spillovers that diffuse to other industries, drawing on manufacturing and automotive heritage. Greater Manchester, by contrast, focuses on its reputation as a hub for creative industries, leveraging its history of industrial manufacturing and concentrating creative clusters within the city (62).

Across the UK, there are notable differences in how government support for the cultural sector is approached, evidenced by the recent policy response to the pandemic. Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales prioritised investment in individuals, while England focused more on safeguarding organisations. This contrast is evident not only in financial allocations but also in policy rhetoric. Scotland and Northern Ireland particularly emphasised supporting individual

artists, with a focus on serving diverse communities. In terms of funding per capita, Northern Ireland allocated significantly more than the rest of the UK, with a specific focus on individuals, including support for D/deaf & disabled artists. Scotland adopted similar policies, offering bridging bursaries to freelancers who did not qualify for UK government schemes (63).

While much cultural policy decision-making revolves around economic relief, both the Scottish and Welsh Governments are increasingly shifting towards forward-looking policies that integrate culture with wellbeing, health, and education sectors, especially post-pandemic. Scotland and Wales are also integrating culture into their socio-economic recovery plans, exemplified by initiatives like Scotland's [Culture Collective Programme](#) and Wales' emphasis on culture within major regional and national projects, aligning with their cultural strategies and legislative frameworks; the Culture Collective Programme and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act seeing culture as a 'pillar' within every major project delivered regionally and nationally (63). Elsewhere, recommendations from the evaluation of the Wales Cultural Recovery Fund included ensuring COVID-19 recovery is in the national Culture Strategy, as well as the mapping and support for freelancers, realising the potential of initiatives like 'Cultural Contract' (64).

Key challenges to fair work for Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs) in Scotland include fierce competition, heavy reliance on freelance/casual work, restrictive structures and business models and unfavourable market conditions (64). These make it difficult to implement security, opportunity and fulfilment.

Scotland aims to establish a creative sector Fair Work task force to set direction and standards through 2025, setting clear public funding requirements for Fair Work, incentivising an aligned support strategy maximising resources, and the development of a sector skills and career pathway action plan. Additionally, there are plans to implement a stakeholder communications strategy around culture change (65).

Designing effective place-based interventions: What can we learn from existing interventions?

While an understanding of the national and local level policy landscape, and the factors influencing differential capacities from place to place is key, of greatest value to those engaged in place-based interventions is to understand how best to tackle the issues facing them, and to learn best-practice from similar initiatives already underway. This section offers some discussion on what interventions work in building resilience, overcoming budgetary shortcomings and increasing inclusive participation in cultural activity in the UK.

[UK Cities of Culture](#) provide evidence of the importance of legacy and evaluation planning being integrated from the start (49). All bidding cities will benefit from the process, even the unsuccessful ones. Key Cities will collaborate further with universities, industry, and

government on this via Cultural Compacts – partnerships across the city's cultural sector and extending out to sectors and stakeholders beyond culture to provide leadership and strategic capacity – seen as an effective mechanism to maximise the impact of culture in cities and towns (49).

Arts Council England (ACE) conducted a meta-evaluation of its large-scale arts and cultural interventions in England in the period 2010-2020 (65). The Creative People and Places (CPP) employed action research and assets to boost arts engagement in underrepresented areas, prioritising community-driven initiatives and cross-sector partnerships. Other notable place-focused interventions include Cultural Destinations (CD) which aimed to foster collaboration between cultural and tourism sectors, enhancing local culture and sector resilience. Creative Local Growth Fund (CLGF) targeted interventions to grow economic potential in arts organisations through various services like advice, workshops, and financial aid. The Great Place Scheme (GP) piloted new collaboration approaches, enriching communities with heritage at the core. The Cultural Development Fund (CDF) aims to drive economic growth, creating jobs and supporting businesses. Cultural Compacts (CC) broaden support across sectors, strengthening the local cultural sector's role in development.

Commonalities among projects reiterate a focus on collaboration and skillsets that are crucial for generating impact, and that building that collaboration, and developing such skillsets, requires time. Legacy and residual impact are considered across programmes, and are also dependent on having the time to fully develop. Project design benefits from individual freedom on the part of project managers and teams. Ultimately, growing sector capacity and skills are lasting impacts across programmes. Where the projects differed was often associated with scale; CPP stands out for its broad positive outcomes and longevity, shorter programmes without allocated time for collaboration struggled. Funding is, unsurprisingly a crucial component; bigger grants enable greater devolution of decision-making (66).

Ecorys' 2017 review of the Arts Council Creative People and Places program noted that the most successful instances of great art combining with community involvement occur because of a conscious and holistic effort to create a strong and beneficial relationship between the arts and the community from the outset (67).

Cultural recovery internationally

Internationally, responses to arts and culture during crises reflect how political cultures shape cultural policy. For example, France, the UK, Spain, and Greece responded differently to the 2008 financial crisis, each tied to their policy legacies. In France, culture was viewed as a vital public service with a protected budget. Spain initially emphasised the economic value of culture but later deemed it a luxury under austerity. Greece faced severe cuts, portraying culture as less vital compared to other services. In the UK, culture was viewed instrumentally for economic and social benefits, but faced significant funding cuts during austerity measures (68). Similarly, research comparing national policy responses for arts and culture during the

pandemic identified an array of different funding models and policy innovations, including the call for a Basic Income for Artists, revealing contrasting ideological positions (69).

Over the last decade in the United States, the rise of creative placemaking signifies a notable change in the principles guiding public cultural funding. Critics argue that it places economic objectives above community needs and artistic integrity, and there is currently limited evidence of its social impacts. The emergence of creative placemaking reflects a substantial alteration in the funding approach for the arts within the U.S. cultural policy framework. This shift towards instrumentalism in arts policy is a subject of debate, with concerns that it may prioritise economic and social objectives at the expense of artistic and cultural goals (70).

In the Spanish city of Bilbao, investing in infrastructure such as the Guggenheim Museum, conference centres, and the revitalisation of public spaces, in addition to initiatives like placemaking, branding, and enhanced transportation networks, contributed to economic diversification, boosted tourism, enhanced inclusivity, and bolstered resilience. Bilbao's success underscores the significance of governance stability and the retention of economic benefits within local communities to facilitate ongoing renewal efforts (30).

The UK can learn lessons from international examples which invest in cultural assets and incorporate them into broader socioeconomic transformations through sustained collaboration across sectors (30). However, the principles of place-based working require acknowledgement of the different conditions for the management and investment in sustainable cultural infrastructure, and these vary greatly both materially and ideologically across different national contexts and their distinctive economic geographies.



Conclusions and questions for future research

This evidence review has aimed to synthesise academic, industry, and policy literature to provide an overview of place-based cultural recovery interventions across the UK. It clarifies key concepts and definitions, examines national and local policy contexts related to arts and culture, discusses community capacities for designing cultural initiatives, and highlights effective practices, both nationally and internationally.

Cultural policy needs to balance national strategic priorities with bespoke local development rooted in place-based research, with more nuanced approaches that recognise different local infrastructure needs and challenges (8). Without such a distinction, governance in cultural policy risks being exclusionary, either intentionally or unintentionally, through processes of 'closure' that restrict access to cultural infrastructure (21).

There has been an increased focus on building 'resilience' in cultural infrastructure post-pandemic, emphasising a need for adaptability and sustainability in the face of these challenges. 'Resilience' has emerged as a key theme in relation to the arts and culture sector (50). There is a need for more strategic, long-term investment focused on capacity-building, rather than short-term projects. Local partnerships are crucial to developing sector strength and coordinating cultural strategies with skills, and other policy areas (49).

Three main themes emerge: the distinction between local culture, cultural infrastructure and creative industries, the diverse forms of cultural value, and the regional disparities and

challenges for arts and cultural funding. Misappropriating foundational arts and cultural activity as part of the creative sector can prioritise economic considerations over other forms of value, like well-being and community participation.

The UK's arts and cultural funding landscape has historically privileged London and the South East, and both regional inequality and overall funding has been exacerbated by years of austerity measures. Austerity exposed vulnerabilities in cultural policy ecosystems reliant on certain funding models or institutional frameworks. More resilient systems are needed (68). In this context, we identify five challenge questions when designing appropriate, effective and efficient interventions in place that maximise cultural recovery in the UK:

1 - Maximising the role of partnerships within local governance: How can the challenges to local and combined authorities, responsible for maintaining foundational social and cultural infrastructure through culture and leisure services, be addressed through working in partnership to create more resilient communities, enhancing social mobility and addressing health inequalities?

2 - Other forms of Cultural Value: How can cultural investment frameworks, coordinated across national and local levels, evolve beyond simplistic binary categories (funded versus unfunded, producers versus audiences, public versus private) to better comprehend the complex dynamics within creative and cultural ecosystems?

3 - Data standardisation and shared terminology: In what ways would the establishment of shared terminology and a cohesive research agenda enhance the evidence base, while also exploring the potential for creative ecosystems in diverse settings?

4 - Promoting greater participation: What strategies are essential for promoting greater inclusion and achieving a more egalitarian level of participation in the context of a diverse range of cultural social spaces and interacting ethnic, social, and socio-economic groups? What opportunities are there for participatory decision making to engage local knowledge and ownership?

5 - The challenge of digital technology: What role do digital technologies play in potentially engaging – or preventing – children and young people in arts and culture through a language they are more familiar with? How do demographic variables such as gender, socio-economic status, and age impact participation in arts and culture?

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