

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

University of Gloucestershire - DCMS Evidence Submission

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Summary

1.1 The information contained in this report has been collected and presented by the University of Gloucestershire through a case study of existing cultural provision within Cheltenham, investigating key civic and commercial partnerships that facilitate coordinated projects, providing infrastructure as part of a shared cultural network. The University of Gloucestershire has longstanding partnerships with a variety of key cultural organisations around Cheltenham and Gloucestershire, and a focus on these partners forms the core of this report. Supporting evidence has been sourced from data published by these organisations, including notes from commentary and exchanges with stakeholders.

1.2 This report will explore a template for cultural placemaking through an examination of the shared economy between these stakeholders and their program of activities. This has been done by reviewing aspects of the town's contribution to the UK's cultural industry, evaluating the recent economic impacts of government policy. Conclusions are drawn from assessing the impact of the town's *Business Improvement District* (BID) ⁽¹⁾ scheme and core activities undertaken by a key cultural interest within the town, Cheltenham Festivals ⁽²⁾

1.3 The report will conclude with evidence of the emergent cultural network with the local area that has fostered cohesion and encouraged innovation across several areas of creative commercial practice. It will also detail a fragile *creator economy* that is likely replicated elsewhere within the UK's creative industries, and how funding streams could be targeted strategically to achieve specific aims within different areas of society, culture and heritage. It will also suggest roles that Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) could play in coordination, skills development and employability, in concert with the Department for Education's core strategic outcomes presented in the *DfE Outcome Delivery Plan: 2021 to 2022* ⁽³⁾

1.4 It is through this emergent model of collaboration in regional coordination that this report will close with insights into anticipated trends in the sector, recommendations for future practice as well as a suggested framework for build on existing schemes, such as the *UK City of Culture*. ⁽⁴⁾

How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?

2.1 In recent years Cheltenham has actively positioned itself as “The Festival Town”, a rebranding designed to expand the town's reputation as a cultural destination as part of a tourism strategy report commissioned by Cheltenham Borough Council in 2015. ⁽⁵⁾ The southwest was not immune to the impacts of COVID-19 on its high streets, but fared better than most of the UK when considering the impact of widespread closures. ⁽⁶⁾

2.2 To offset the accumulative impact of 11,000 outlet closures and 235,700 job losses across the UK the reanimation of our shared public spaces are presented a dual challenge: a decentralized commercial model ⁽⁷⁾ that struggles to maintain relevance, continually shifting to meet online market demand ⁽⁸⁾, and a vacuum of cohesion in how to address such a modal shift where the expectation is that art and music can provide part of the solution ⁽⁹⁾. One of the areas of focus for Cheltenham BID to address this shift has been to establish regular events and to promote more cultural exchanges within the town center itself. ⁽¹⁰⁾

2.3 Throughout Cheltenham there are formal and informal networks in which local creatives can contribute to decision making and planning. Decision making and event scheduling can occur in many different orientations, from fully funded events programs coordinated by local authority adjacent groups to independent ‘pop-up’ interactions that can be led by venues, independent businesses or community groups. ⁽¹¹⁾

2.4 In a recent consultation Cheltenham BID published responses from the public that included comments such as “*think big – become a capital of street entertainment*” in helping develop a Town Centre Events strategy ⁽¹²⁾ This strategy identified improvement in several areas of the shopping area in Cheltenham, proposing a budget of £447,500 over five years to deliver these events. ⁽¹³⁾

2.5 These events have been guided by policy development informed by multiple stakeholders locally, producing a series of cultural interactions for the regional population throughout the year. Recent data published by a local news resource for local business *Punchline* ⁽¹⁴⁾ suggests a degree of success through the adoption of locally sourced solutions to this issue, with Cheltenham's footfall increasing 31.44% ⁽¹⁵⁾ on the day of the town's annual Christmas Lights switch-on, comparing numbers from 2019. This is supported by additional data that suggests the peak shopping period of November and December saw a rise in footfall of 48.85%, ⁽¹⁶⁾ despite a slump in visitor numbers occurring later in the month as transmission of the Omicron variant began to rise.

2.6 It was suggested that the introduction of an ice rink, along with the return of “*a Christmas market and sparkling lights all helped boost Cheltenham's footfall over the Christmas period.*” ⁽¹⁷⁾ Although the methodology behind the figures included in the report does not provide definitive evidence of this relationship, it does suggest a strong correlation between a locally led strategy and its potential impacts on reanimating our public spaces.

2.7 During consultation for this report it was suggested by one local business owner that barriers to cultural expression on the high street could be streamlined by working in step with both Local Authority (LA) and Safety Advisory Groups (SAG). The challenges presented by business occupancy rates and LA administrative protocol were given as anecdotal examples as to why art installations could not be presented in empty shop windows that could have provided exhibition space for local artists.

2.8 It was also suggested during consultation with executives at Cheltenham Festivals that “Street art (e.g. key local figures of culture who are 'on the map' nationally), pop-up culture in shops/bars to coincide with local/council events; participative installations - which the community can contribute to” would be key cultural activities that would help reanimate public spaces within Cheltenham. This approach forms a core ethos of the charity’s Education and Outreach Program ⁽¹⁸⁾ suggesting alignment between commercial, civic and third sector is a productive avenue of operation to explore further.

2.9 It is recommended that the effectiveness of regional schemes and their suitability to address the current challenge of reanimating public spaces and shopping streets (as well as their capacity to operate in the future) should be the subject of further investigation as a potential model of delivery to progress the ‘levelling up’ agenda, and could be a possible target for both local coordination and future funding allocation.

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

3.1 In 2019 the Cheltenham Culture Board sought a mandate from Cheltenham Borough Council to develop a Culture Strategy ⁽¹⁹⁾ to “support the implementation of the Cheltenham Place Vision” ⁽²⁰⁾

3.2 This vision built upon an already successful system that “achieved 5% growth in the value of the visitor economy year on year from a baseline of £154 million”, where the “festival and events offering is broader, more frequent and more diverse”. This localised strategy appears to be successful beyond the region, as well as evidencing benefits to local commerce and hospitality, report observations in “increased numbers of domestic overnight stays and overseas visitors” having “improved the environment of the town centre and this has led to an improvement in our retail rankings” ⁽²¹⁾

3.3 As this Culture Board has grown from a model based on coordinated, cross-sector strategic planning, it has come to represent the interests of multiple stakeholders across the town ⁽²²⁾ A model such as this also presents a potential framework to allow non-statutory members to access information, funding and programming opportunities that are expressed as either the result of local strategic development, or centrally funded by the government or other benefactors.

3.4 One of the core members of this board are Cheltenham Festivals, who have established a series of comprehensive education, community and talent development programs delivered through their partnerships throughout Gloucestershire and beyond. Their education partnership alone involves over 25,000 school children from 250 schools, and the *Around Town* fringe programming ⁽²³⁾ (delivered in partnership with Cheltenham BID) provides free performances for the public around retail and business spaces in Cheltenham. These opportunities extend to the wider UK music industry through partnerships with The PRS Foundation (Music Talent Development) ⁽²⁴⁾, Jerwood (Musical Encounters) ⁽²⁵⁾ and Birmingham Conservatoire (Musicate) ⁽²⁶⁾ amongst many others, providing talent development and performance opportunities to the next generation of musicians. The impact of their charitable work is similarly comprehensive, with a variety of models in place that connects these programs with investment through shared delivery of corporate social responsibility agendas.

3.5 The creative democratization of a network like this could potentially provide new avenues for creatives to access cultural opportunities, but also to allow for local specialisms when approving future projects or funding allocations. As stated by a member of Cheltenham Festivals executive team creatives can contribute through “having a route through to a local culture board which works collectively to plan and achieve local KPIs.” It is important that a cross-sector strategy is undertaken, which takes into account structural matrix impacts when planning and executing cultural events within a commercial context.

3.6 This cross-sector framework is already in place to a large extent, where it is suggested that “In Cheltenham the Board has representatives of visual arts, performing arts, music, festivals, cross-arts, heritage, voluntary and community sector, university, local council, local secondary school network, Marketing Cheltenham, the cyber/tech community. Each person is the representative not only of their organisation but their wider sector - meeting with representatives between each culture board.”

3.7 This standard of convening, and the scale of integration within the local creative community is likely to be specific to each area of the UK and their own, unique cultural identity. Recognition, funding or formalisation of cultural groups within their own rights could similarly enhance these networks’ abilities to improve community input and shaping into decision making and planning of space.

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

4.1 Cheltenham has an established artistic infrastructure that still has significant room for development, facing a unique set of challenges that are specific to its location, history and the composition of its creative community. It could be suggested that this model is replicated elsewhere around the UK with towns and cities at various stages of development towards some form of cohesive cultural infrastructure.

4.2 It was proposed by one contributor to this report that the Government could support places without established artistic infrastructure could achieved thusly: “research who the main stakeholders are in targeted areas. Offering fixed-term support from people who have done this in other areas - to support the key stakeholders to establish the infrastructure and become aware of the opportunities”

4.3 Progressing the response to the previous question, is should be considered as to whether there is an infrastructure within the UK cultural sector that *would* allow for skills/experience sharing between various cultural groups, and to investigate whether transposition from templates/models elsewhere in the UK is in fact possible in the first instance.

4.4 It is recommended that a focus for the committee in reviewing the responses to this evidence should be to identify best practice and emergent models in sustainable cultural endeavor in defining a shared national strategy. This is critical if a true picture of the creative potential of communities across the UK is to be revealed, with profound narratives in education, business and economics that would detail the critical importance of integrating arts and culture into all aspects of our society through meaningful, targeted investment.

How might changes to the UK's broadcasting landscape affect investment in cultural production outside the capital, and what could the consequences be for artists and communities?

5.1 There are limited broadcast and production facilities based in Cheltenham, with local BBC operation located in nearby Gloucester. Outside of HEI based production facilities that include immersive and XR production spaces, ⁽²⁷⁾ Cheltenham has an independent film studio ⁽²⁸⁾ and several independent production companies in operation.

5.2 Many aspects of the Cheltenham Festivals program have been impacted in recent years, where they suggest "Significant cuts seen at the BBC have a direct correlation to the impact of culture outside of London. In radio for example as non-commercial national stations, BBC radio plays a critical role covering an eclectic array of artforms and taking them to a wider audience. With live broadcasts and joint commissions becoming increasingly sparse due to budget cuts the depth of this coverage is regularly compromised. As this coverage is a key way into new audiences, organisations will become more risk averse in their work therefore affecting artists directly through less paid work and the communities will have a reduced variety of culture on offer."

5.3 It could be suggested from this statement that the relationship between national broadcasters and regional cultural events that compose at least part of their regular programming is not just observable, but has multiple impacts on business and communities that can result from funding cuts.

5.4 With the Severn region containing examples of progressive cultural maker spaces, specialist production areas, and events there could be value in exploring a regional broadcast model that operates in tandem with several local cultural framework to promote both efficiency and opportunity.

5.5 For example, the rise of Livestream and XR events through COVID-19 ⁽²⁹⁾ such as Melatopia ⁽³⁰⁾ and Lost Horizon ⁽³¹⁾ allowed centralized process, resources, and costs to be reevaluated by creative directors. A temporary network of production facilities and specialists collaborated to produce content for these events, with artists travelling from Bristol and London to have content produced in Cheltenham for a global audience. ⁽³²⁾

5.6 The emergent fields of practice within this sector could offer collective value to the UK broadcast industry in terms of establishing a sustainable and accessible form of shared practice between a regional commercial sector and their local HEIs. It is evidenced they can coexist to deliver creative projects of scale, and could provide avenues to employment and opportunities for local creatives as a result. ⁽³³⁾

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

6.1 There are many ways that the government could build upon existing schemes: expanding 18-25 youth employability schemes such as Kickstart ⁽³²⁾, business levy subsidization for organisations such as Cheltenham BID, VAT exemption on ticket sales and supporting locally identified independent festivals to support their growth and impact.

6.2 From anecdotal exchanges with cultural and commercial stakeholders within Cheltenham it was felt that these schemes had provided foundations for good projects historically, but were perhaps “not suitable for purpose anymore”. It was largely felt that this investigation was timely, and was welcomed by those who contributed to this report.

6.3 A review of the nature of arts funding allocation, and specifically its relationship to policy, could potentially offer a starting point to progressing the level up agenda for arts and culture. As stated by Cheltenham Festivals “Rather than putting so much funding into one specific place - which often results in knee-jerk short-term projects without full consultation with the community - have a pot of money which consortiums can apply for (as opposed to independent organisations) to support excellent schemes (which demonstrate how the local need is being met, with realistic but ambitious goals and measurable etc) which fulfil the levelling up agenda.”

6.4 It is therefore suggested that a regional model for any future funding in this area might be more effective if managed locally. In developing awareness of potential funding gaps, local organisations could also help the government identify and assess distribution of funds on a case-by-case basis to maximize impact.

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7.1 The final recommendation of this report would be to suggest further study of the framework of regional relationships between cultural and community groups, local authority structures and funding models within their unique cultural identities. Alternatively, themes could be drawn from an initial review of written evidence to propose appropriate avenues of investigation. From here it could be suggested that a proactive approach in coordinating, supporting and funding existing creative hubs and third sector organisations would promote an efficient and measureable methodology in delivering the UK Government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda in allowing them to identify, confidently, where funding for arts and culture can be targeted most effectively in the future.

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