

Cultural regeneration and meanwhile use on the high street

A report for Arts Council England (South-West)

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'Foley' by Collective Kontakt as featured at Weston Arts + Health Weekender. Photo: Andreas Stueckl. Skate Southampton SLAMMA. Courtesy Skate Southampton and John Hansard Gallery. Photo: Sean Black.



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Summary

This report highlights some creative innovations and persistent challenges in relation to cultural regeneration on the high street/urban centres. In particular, it focuses on temporary or ‘meanwhile’ use of vacant properties and public space by artists. The report argues that temporary cultural uses can contribute effectively to reanimating high streets that, in some cases for decades, have faced economic and social shifts resulting in vacancy, decreased footfalls and falling investments.

The findings emerge from interviews and workshops in nine towns and cities in the south-west of England: Gloucester, Stroud, Bristol, Weston Super Mare, Frome, Yeovil, Southampton, the district of Torbay (Paignton, Torquay and Brixham), and the combined local authority area of Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole.

Main findings are clustered into four categories which, when combined, help structure an approach towards *civic cultural leadership* - namely a cross-sectoral and regional approach to organising cultural animations of high streets.

The first cluster, **policy**, suggests that having a cultural policy in place, or in process, is a highly useful framework around which cultural partnerships can be arranged. Very often, cultural policies are located with local authorities that can combine political leadership with some dedicated officer support for implementation. Most local authorities work with stretched resources and capacities which may affect the creation and execution of policies. As a result, policy execution can be delegated to third parties. Yet councils remain in a good position to host cultural partnerships, commission evaluations and act in the wider public interest. They can help to integrate cultural objectives across a range of other policy areas. Councils have a strong voice in indicating the powerful place-making strengths of culture for reanimating high streets. Additionally, the role of community scale authorities (Town/Parish Councils) is highlighted as an under-sung and valuable source of policy-making.

The second cluster is **managing vacancy**. This refers to the technical and regulatory aspects of managing meanwhile tenancies and access to public space. Private sector landlords need support in making unused properties temporarily available for cultural users. This can be a complex process involving legal agreements, service connections and financial arrangements, including opportunities for rate relief. Artists usually bear the brunt (and often the cost) of these technical complexities. Developing expert groups to smooth this process in town / cities (or groups of locations) is desirable.

The third cluster focuses on **regional networks**. Our research uncovered examples of good practice in various contexts, each navigating challenges with diverse innovations. Despite this diversity, many challenges remain both common and persistent. Funding is often limited and short-term, network capacity is constrained, data collection is required but difficult to achieve, and managing or avoiding risk can lead to both institutional and personal stress. Impressive innovation in the region needs to be systematically shared between cities, arts and commercial networks and universities.

The fourth cluster is **open prototyping**. Commercial changes in the high street will continue. The new national government, followed by local government elections in 2025, are likely to produce policy shifts. In the meantime, efforts to develop civic cultural leadership around existing cultural policies, technical understandings of opportunity and regional knowledge exchange partnerships rely on some risk-taking and experimentation. Getting everything right, immediately, is unlikely and much depends on local contexts and the nurturing of cross-sectoral partnerships. The important thing is to be transparent about prototyping positive approaches to meanwhile use and high street animation, so that other regional centres can learn from experience, offer supportive and constructive critical feedback and help to refine prototypes in their own places, while feeding back into collective learning.

1. Introduction

This report outlines a project carried out by researchers at the Universities of Gloucestershire and Birmingham. It aims to highlight selected good practice, challenges and opportunities for cultural regeneration of the high street in the south-west of England. Particular attention is given to opportunities arising from the temporary or ‘meanwhile’ use of vacant town centre properties and public spaces, and also to how place circumstances / characteristics can be explored, understood, and responded to in forward / action planning .

Through primary (interviews, workshops) and secondary (books and journals) research, we identified and explored examples of notable and distinct practice in cultural regeneration, place animation, and place governance. Five case-study sketches are provided to illustrate thematic findings, from Bristol, Frome, Stroud and two from Southampton. These sketches show some unique local circumstances, civic leadership, community scale governance approaches, creative business models, and dedication by committed individuals. Successes are identified in this research, yet we were told, too, about persistent challenges which were shared by respondents in two practice workshops.

Findings are divided into four categories: policy, regional networking, managing vacancy and open prototyping.

2. Background

In 2023, the Arts Council England (ACE) commissioned the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) at the University of Gloucestershire to explore cultural regeneration on the high street (urban centres). The project aimed to understand place circumstances and strategies, and identify good practices, challenges, and opportunities in culture-led animation of place. This included a consideration of public realm, ‘meanwhile’ uses, place governance, asset ownership and management, and place curation within cultural programmes.

This report thus highlights selected good practice and the contexts which enable success to flourish in different locations; the research also covers persistent and shared challenges linked to meanwhile use. The latter may inhibit the ways in which this temporary practice leads to (for example) improved place-making, strengthened creative networks or democratic arts development. In particular, our research collaborators - who very generously shared their experiences with the research team and with each other - helped to identify the need for greater connection, mutual support and knowledge exchange as a consequence of their risk-taking, innovation and creative policy approaches.

In the subsequent sections, the report covers the following:

Section 3 summarises scholarly and cultural sector discourses on meanwhile use of public space and empty high street buildings. **Section 4** describes the research approach and methodology. **Section 5** presents research results. **Section 6** discusses the implications of the findings and sets out a guide for identifying civic cultural leadership. This can help cultural commissioning bodies to review the potential uses of public space and empty buildings for a range of cultural benefits and place-making. **Section 7** provides offers recommendations and conclusions. Dissemination plans follow in **Section 8**.

Research was conducted in partnership with the University of Birmingham, following earlier collaboration on work assessing pride of place for ACE and Gloucester City Council (Keech et al. 2023).

3. Changing high streets

3.1 High streets in crisis?

High streets offer a mix of social, economic and cultural potentials, although retail has dominated this mix for much of the twentieth century (Dobson 2022). For several years, concerns and discussion about the changing nature of high streets have emerged and proliferated. Table 1 provides some selected examples (excluding the range of adaptive high street plans published by many local authorities). Some discourse during the pandemic even introduced the idea of persistently empty urban centres surrounded by vibrant peripheries as the so-called 'doughnut effect' (for example Hubbard and Maggin, 2020).

Table 1 Concern about the changing role of highstreets and town centres (Source: Nicky Marsh, Southampton University; and authors).

Year	Author	Publication	Focus	Link
2002, 2004	Andrew Simms, Julian Oram, Alex MacGillivray and Joe Drury; Andrew Simms, Petra Kjell and Ruth Potts	New Economics Foundation - Ghost Town Britain; Clone Town Britain	Corporate standardisation of high streets erodes distinctiveness and create empty centres if larger brands leave.	Ghost Town Britain Clone Town Britain
2011	Mary Portas	The Portas Review - An independent review into the future of our high streets	Review by leading fashion entrepreneur Mary Portas signalled a 'crisis point' (Portas 2011) in the high street with those responsible for managing them failing to adapt to new shopping arrangements, including the shift to on-line retail. Portas advocated more street markets and lower rates for small business.	The Portas Review
2012	LGA	Alternative high street: Rethinking the town centre challenge	Considers the need for structural change and community empowerment	Alternative High Street
2013	Bill Grimsey	The Grimsey Review	Presented high streets as community hubs incorporating public services; advocated government leadership and rate reform; and networking between local councils.	The Grimsey Review
2013	Department for Communities and Local Government	The Future of High Streets	Government response to the Portas Review	The Future of High Streets
2015	Julian Dobson	How to Save our Town Centres	Scholarly proposal for a citizen-centred agenda focusing on public services and community assets.	How to Save our Town Centres
2019	John Timpson	The High Street Report	Suggested creating a high street task force for data sharing and reusing empty properties.	The High Street Report

2020	Deloitte	What next for the high street?	Considers an 'oversupply' of retail space and the implications of this in future space planning and management	What next?
2021	Jack Shaw, Owen Garling and Michael Kenny	Bennett Institute for Public Policy - Townscapes: Pride of Place	Stressed the importance of strengthening social capital and community cohesion rather than superficial tidying up of run-down town centres.	Townscapes: Pride in Place
2022	Pragmatix Advisory & Trajectory (for the LGA)	Creating resilient and revitalised high streets in the 'new normal'	Provides analysis and insight, and a tool to support strategy making (Interactive tool)	Resilient and revitalised
2023	Power to change	Community powered high streets	Emphasises community led and alternative ownership strategies for high streets	Take back the high street
2024	Institute of Place Management	Making the most of the high street	Discusses the need for structural change and cultivating place confidence	We are open

In addition to professional and policy discussions, academic outputs are also significant. A brief overview helps to emphasise significant high street changes including:

- High street landlords have faced serious challenges in filling all format retail spaces in periods of economic decline and recessions.
- Retail space demand has changed following the collapse of a number of large format/floorspace retail stores, creating large scale floorspace and property gaps in primary retail areas/developments. This includes former traditional ‘anchor’ tenants and core retail location tenants.
- The implications of internet shopping continue to be felt on the high street, with a reduced emphasis upon ‘bricks and mortar’ retail within the wider market.
- A 30-year trend in developing larger, out-of-town stores had a negative impact on high street retail competitiveness (Astbury and Thurstain-Goodwin 2014), which nevertheless remains debated in scholarship (Wrigley et al. 2010) and policy (Seely 2012). The adaption of these into multi-purpose/functional developments continues.
- Many such shifts became consolidated during the COVID-19 pandemic which closed down town centres. This produced an especially disastrous effect for the hospitality sector; on the other hand, the ease of collecting on-line ordered goods from out-of-town locations remained convenient for car users (Jones and Livingstone 2018).
- Changes to planning regulations were introduced in 2020 (Use Class E, bringing together former Class A1, A2, A3, and D1 and D2 of the Uses Classes Order together), allowing flexibility to shift between retail, hospitality, finance and leisure uses. Property owners (and their tenants) are now in a position of greater influence with regards property usage.
- Austerity policies have left a difficult legacy for local government resources and organisational capacity (Gray and Barford 2018).

The overarching picture includes a range of economic, planning, governance, and societal factors that have shifted the functions, viability, animation, and commercial profile of high streets. These factors have emerged from a combination of corporate/technological innovations, planning policy, recession, historical investment patterns in urban commercial property, retail industry performance, and behaviour changes among citizens, including some which have roots before the COVID-19 pandemic but that crystallised under lock-down. As a result, gaps have been appearing, over decades, in high street occupancy and indicating, perhaps, the intrinsic ‘*supply-side inefficiency*’ of the commercial property market (Madanipour 2018), especially when vacant availability tips into a persistent emptiness that causes devaluation in property and a pervading sense of social and economic decline.

Oversupply of retail space is one of four systemic weaknesses that constrain how high streets adapt to challenges, along with fragmented property ownership, high fixed costs and inflexible rates, and taxation rates that don’t affect on-line retail (Brien, Hutton, and Ward 2020). Reviews of the neighbourhood impacts of vacancy in the USA became the subject of a special issue of the journal *Cities*, and highlighted a barrier on revitalisation as towns begin to be ‘*the epitomisation of blight and neglect... [becoming] magnets for illegal dumping and criminal activity*’ (Pearsall and Lucas 2014: 121). More recently, White et al. (2023) offered snapshots of the rising trend in city centre vacancies in five exemplar UK cities (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hull, Nottingham and Liverpool) from 2000-2017.

As a response, *the experience economy* (a phrase coined by Pine and Gilmore in 1998) has become a narrative behind saving the high street, not least through cultural and creative innovations. Diversification of use and purpose, animation of space, and a ‘destination’ approach embracing entertainment, leisure, recreation, and community now underpin strategies concerning place experience and opportunities for vitality, vibrancy, and purpose. Often at the heart of this, sits culture.

3.2 Meanwhile use

A key area of interest within the discourse is the role of vacant property in supporting place animation and activation via temporary or 'meanwhile' use. Vacancy, for landlords, spells a loss of rental income, and brings wider challenges in the context of place vitality and viability. Studies have emerged which outline the complex blend of consumers' behaviours which include a much broader engagement in the high street than shopping alone. These include experiences combining '*retailers, social and community experiences*' (Stocchi, Hart, and Haji 2016). When faced with uninviting or empty high streets this breadth of engagement remains unsatisfied.

Meanwhile use is not a new idea. In recent years, temporary use of vacant buildings and spaces / units has been linked to urban regeneration as a positive catalyst for change, and as the forerunner of gentrification in run-down neighbourhoods. Meanwhile use also has been problematised because the users often remain weak players in negotiating how property ownership contributes to the transformation of places (Leysen 2017). Several cities have indicated meanwhile use in helping to understand the economic value of culture (Ennis and Douglass 2011; De Graaf 2023; Zhou et al. 2017)

Meanwhile use can be positioned as an opportunity within strategies for urban centre regeneration. Recent research in Gloucester¹ initiated by its City Centre Commission, engaged directly with 1500 citizens and found that most considered Gloucester to be '*inclusive, authentic, and with a clear historical identity*'. On the other hand, more than half said they were not proud of the city centre, and a third of all respondents felt '*unsafe in the city centre*', most of whom were younger women. Gloucester has experienced a decline in commercial property occupancy in the central 'gates' area (North, East, South and Westgate) while the former city docks undergo renovation and commercialisation. Linked strategies (economic development, city centre, heritage and cultural) foresee the cultural renaissance and regeneration of the 'gates' by exploiting heritage architecture, accessibility and the public ownership of commercial properties. As part of this, meanwhile uses of space and buildings are now an important dimension and a focus for city centre strategy and action.

Challenges in embracing meanwhile uses as contributions to place vitality and regeneration include availability, property management, logistics, financial consideration, legal obstacles, and the fragility / temporary nature of tenancy for the occupier.

Artistic uses are argued to fit well to meanwhile uses in a variety of contemporary contexts. Public austerity has reduced opportunities for permanent civic installations; and some 'trophy' cultural infrastructures - pursuing the '*Goog effect*' of Bilbao's post-industrial regeneration - have been associated with gentrification, the privatisation of public space and the displacement of intrinsic social challenges (Connolly 2013). Yet many artists (and policy makers) have welcomed the chance to use ordinary and spectacular vacant properties including disused shops, derelict factories, train stations and hotels (for example Polyak 2014; Beswick 2015; Lüber 2014), initiating music and community festivals, visual art installations, theatre, and short-term studio spaces.

A consideration in arranging creative meanwhile use of vacant spaces is to what degree the users become saddled with unforeseen or unwelcome responsibilities. These may be linked, for example, to security arrangements, public tax liability and remedial building and utility works. To overcome this, practice-based guides have been created to support meanwhile innovation. These share and characterise good practice and suggest changes to building use, property taxation and advocate

¹ <https://futureofgloucester.co.uk/>

multiple benefits (Urban Foundary 2021; Todd and Rowe 2021). Scholarship has also been helpful in identifying research gaps and opportunities for strengthening leadership and the collection of more local (or hyperlocal, neighbourhood) data (Marsh et al. 2022).

4. Research approach and emerging framework

4.1 Qualitative interviews

A research approach was used in this project that sought to understand the relationship between, on the one hand, local cultural policy innovations (including place-making policies with cultural dimensions) and on the other hand, the innovation demonstrated by the cultural community (e.g. professional and amateur artists). We were initially interested in what opportunities might flow from the interaction of policy and innovation. Consequently, a set of semi-structured interview questions was generated and clustered into four broad headings, namely:

- The vision being presented for the location via the cultural strategy
- The key assets, initiatives, innovations which have been helpful for high street reanimation
- Experience of ‘meanwhile’ uses of buildings and public spaces
- Persistent challenges experienced and possible solutions

Seventeen interviews were undertaken in nine locations of the south / south-west of England:

- Bournemouth
- Bristol
- Frome
- Gloucester
- Southampton
- Stroud
- Torbay District
- Weston Super Mare
- Yeovil

In addition, we carried out on-line searches of meanwhile projects in the south-west; and a literature search using academic search engines.

4.2 Peer workshops

The interviews revealed variation in local context but also a persistence of some challenges, such as how to balance financial risk and creative opportunity in meanwhile spaces; how to execute cultural policy with limited / no staff capacity; how to interpret the benefits of creative investment. To explore these matters further, two workshops were set up, divided into experience from smaller and larger places. The workshops formed part of the research process, designed to share but also critique good practice and to identify persistent challenges. Participants were assured of confidentiality and were invited to make presentations and discuss, in detail, the innovations they were hearing about. Participants were reimbursed, from the project budget, for travel costs to attend the workshops.

Workshop 1 took place in Frome and included representatives from the smaller towns: Torbay Borough (i.e. Paignton, Torquay and Brixham), Frome, Weston Super-Mare, and Stroud. Eight participants attended this workshop, plus the research team.

Workshop 2 took place in Southampton and was for the larger regional cities in the cohort: the Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole conurbation, Bristol, Gloucester and Southampton. Ten participants attended this workshop, plus two members of the research team.

5. Findings

In this section, main findings of the research are presented, drawing on anonymised participant contributions. Key themes are arranged in sub-sections. There is much to celebrate alongside a range of recurring, persistent or common challenges. Collectively, research participants demonstrated a process of identifying local possibilities and responding innovatively. Even so, in each location, and across the region of study, progress remains uneven and sometimes opportunistic.

5.1 The changing role of the local state and cultural strategies

Cultural / heritage strategies provide an important mechanism for organising stakeholder participation. The role of councils is changing from managing cultural assets and projects, to facilitating cultural networks. One respondent recognised that *'the local authority is now ... an enabler'*, supporting cultural and / or town centre networks, such as cultural compacts. Because councils have planning and community duties *'...the leadership of the local authority comes in [by] enabling the use of public space for [cultural] activities easily and non-bureaucratically.'* This includes *'identifying those areas of public space and working with partners to curate [them]'* [respondent A].

Broad scope in cultural / heritage strategies was evident, including monument conservation, youth training, economic development, public safety and physical fabric, health and well-being, tourism and local inclusion. In some cases, cultural strategies also include cultural landscapes, such as in Torbay, for example. In cases where a cultural policy was absent, smooth dealings with the council was more complex: *'Before [we had a public art policy], everything had to be treated as if it was a potential terrorist event. If you're singing ... that's not an appropriate level of preparation'* [respondent H]. This means that while culture offers multiple connections across policy areas, its integration across other council remits and policies can be challenging. Bristol has proved innovative in this respect.

Sketch no.1 - valuing culture in Bristol

Using national post-pandemic funding, Bristol City Council (BCC) offered £1.3 million in its Culture and Events Grant Scheme to support Bristol's high streets and creative sector, to improve equity and inclusion, and to help grow a green and sustainable cultural economy. The fund supported over 100 events targeted in four areas of the city centre and nine high streets across the city, to help attract footfall, increase dwell time and transform the city's spaces.

BCC decided to use the grant to strengthen existing cultural assets and invested in a wide range of events. These included markets, film, music and locally distinctive projects and public realm interventions designed to help citizens come together and learn about, celebrate and share culture. In particular, the programme had broad social ambitions, namely: to enhance local distinctiveness, to advance diversity and inclusion, to invest in the cultural and events sector and to embed considerations of environmental sustainability and the climate emergency in the cultural sector. As well as monitoring quantitative impacts of the programme, BCC asked for qualitative feedback at the events about people's sense of belonging, well-being and civic pride. Quantitative data suggested that for each £1 invested in cultural activities, £4.50 was generated for the city's economy in associated spending and 210 paid jobs were generated. More subjectively, three-quarters of visitors to events suggested they felt an enhanced sense of local pride.

BCC has taken inspiration from Manchester City Council's 10-year experience of carrying out cultural impact surveys, and is undertaking a pilot cultural impact survey with the West of England Combined Authority, which will be repeated annually and be used regionally. BCC already carries out a Quality of Life survey and the cultural impact survey will complement this. One implication of regularising the

survey will be that cultural and non-cultural sectors across the city will have to collaborate to gather data, the aggregation of which should be helpful inter-sectorally.

A BCC respondent in this project suggested that *'Bristol City Council has an important role as a quantitative data gatherer and interpreter.'* Finally, BCC procurement regulations have been adjusted so that 20% of all contract tenders over £25k will be assessed for their social value.

Challenges remain: Councils tend to work in departmental silos, but culture can act as a connector. For example, in creating the Liveable Neighbourhood Scheme, the Transport department wants to create liveable/ playable neighbourhoods which will include the employment of art practitioners for socially engaged activations and public events, in a form of meanwhile use that, it is hoped, will become permanent. Such initiatives and collaborations are excellent, but it can be hard to measure their impacts and longer-term outcomes.

Cultural strategies and compacts, as public documents, should *'enable the artistic community to understand the language of the business community and vice-versa; and map projects and partnerships that deliver the cultural strategy, but don't undermine the artistic community's integrity'* [respondent A]. In other words, multi-functional cultural policies can help to coalesce broad and cross-sector stakeholder alliances, but they may need (i) some kind of facilitation, by organisations with place-based public benefit interests and (ii) a policy framework to win local support and (iii) don't lose the focus on arts and culture among efforts to lever broader social change.

Some cultural policies (Southampton and Gloucester are good examples) highlight local distinctiveness as the basis on which to involve more local people in cultural activities. In Torbay and Weston, residents have been encouraged to share local (hi)stories as a way to underpin several meanwhile occupancies. Respondents suggested it is important to complement local stories with external influences. These can be in the form of acknowledging a global or non-local story, for example by recounting histories of trading or seaside resorts, while also investing in renowned artists to work and exhibit in a place, raising its profile as a venue for high quality creativity. One respondent emphasised the power of local knowledge as a way to celebrate and culture and make art. This can lead to broader cultural engagement.

'A lot of our work is focused in the two wards that are the most deprived... and they fall, I think, in the bottom 2% nationally on the UK Index of social and economic deprivation. We work with panels in each area, in order to get them involved in making work, and seeing work, and pushing on work. Last month, a whole coach load of young people from the estate went up to Manchester to see a big artwork that they co-created. It premiered in Manchester and it's coming here next month, so there's a lot local engagement and ownership.'
(respondent H)

In some locations, councils were praised for facilitating meanwhile use of vacant buildings and public space in partnership with arts networks. Developing this on a medium-term, contractual basis has helped some groups and NPOs become more stable, and helped them increase their credibility in the eyes of funders and potential meanwhile landlords. Yet some arrangements remain insecure (as suggested by respondent E): *After our 6-year lease expired, the space has remained empty ever since'*. In this respect, even longer-term leases can remain meanwhile: *'...[with one exception] all our venues are local authority owned. They are offered on a rolling annual lease and a peppercorn rent. I prefer not to consider the prospect of this arrangement ending.'* ...

Some commentators suggested that working with public rather than private landlords is preferable because local authorities tend to *'share outcome objectives around building use, public benefit and augmentation of sense of place and are responsive to public opinion'*. Even so, while political backing *'has been great ... there is quite a churn of political representation in the cabinet/local political leadership'* [respondent E) and culture and heritage are not always political priorities (Respondents G and I), or may not overlap neatly with administrative boundaries (respondent A).

5.2 Other Anchor Institutions (AIs)

Anchor institutions are large public or private institutions that are more-or-less fixed in places, employing a substantial local workforce and buying local goods and services. As well as local councils, other AIs can help support cultural animation and innovation. We saw excellent partnerships with local universities who helped organise exhibitions, collect local data from communities about their aspirations for culture and who can support creative connections between arts students and permanent local residents in celebrating local distinctiveness. Universities can open up creative access to buildings and studios during semester vacations and help to enhance opportunities to retain trained artists beyond their graduation. Universities have featured as important AIs because they hold and can share cultural capacity and assets which can support the retention of graduating artists and creative entrepreneurs. In some cases, they can permanently re-use vacant buildings, while private landlords may have more time-limited scope for innovations.

Sketch no.2 - Ripe Bananas, Southampton

Ripe Bananas (established in 2018) is a project run by *A Space Arts* for Winchester Art School and Solent University. The scheme encourages arts graduates to stay in Southampton after they graduate, rather than move to other creative magnets such as London, Brighton or Bristol. In collaboration with a local landlord, a small shopping arcade with vacant retail units was secured as an incubation and exhibition space for seven graduates during a summer season, for three years (with a hiatus due to the pandemic). *Ripe Bananas* artists were offered a support grant funded by the two universities, each of which contributed modest sums to support the artists, which *A Space Arts* was able to match. Each year there is a different fruit, *Ripe Bananas* was the first in 2018 - in 2024 it will be *Ripe Papayas* - <https://ripesouthampton.org.uk/> The *Ripe* initiative led to the establishment of ZEST, a network of *Ripe* alumni, which now has attracted substantial Arts Council England investment, in recognition that 24 graduates have stayed and become established in the city.

While strategic asset management and NPO relations are often associated with primary-tier city, county or district councils, town councils should not be overlooked (see below). Additionally, in this region, private sector actors have been influential, such as private landlords, Business Improvement Districts and sports clubs.

While artists can confidently indicate that different place-based benefits can flow from their work, *'they may not be well-prepared to evidence this to policy-makers'* [respondent G]. AIs such as health trusts often work with artists to support well-being programmes and have the capacity to quantify and articulate the impacts of creativity where artists may struggle.

Large portfolio landlords, typically head-quartered elsewhere, were identified as potential meanwhile partners. Yet engagement with these stakeholders to negotiate meanwhile use can prove very difficult and marginal to their commercial interests.

5.3 Asset transfer and risk

Asset transfer to community networks can be an empowering mechanism for supporting creative asset usage and renovation and some initiatives have successfully shifted assets from on-going grant-dependency towards self-sustaining management models. Long leases are beneficial for securing grants and loans to support property renovations. *'Better still would be an asset transfer. Ownership is very important'* [respondent C]. But asset transfer needs careful management and capacity building to avoid risk-taking and costly maintenance liability, which can simply shift from pressed local councils to community organisations with limited capacity, expertise and professionalism. Transferring assets for creative uses helps formalise meanwhile spaces; but asset transfer can also become a route out of meanwhile use into permanence.

Sketch no.3 Stroud – Town Council leadership and integrated cultural management

Stroud Town Council (STC) sought to ensure the provision of community buildings and spaces via asset transfer and purchase, as well as the management of place through effective governance, policy, and strategy. STC has responsibility for several of open spaces, including parks, allotments, and a cemetery. It owns Thanet House, Landsdown Hall, and the Subscription Rooms (since 2019).

Landsdown Hall has spaces for gallery, theatre, film, and workshop use, was purchased to become a community venue and is run by a community charitable trust. The Subscription Rooms is a public building funded by subscription. Intended to be a focal point for the town, it has a history of diverse public usage, with culture as a core focus. In 2016 the District Council announced it could no longer afford to run and maintain the building, and offered it for sale. Ultimately, the building was secured by the Town Council for £1, despite an attempt by another party to secure the property as a commercial opportunity. This meant that this cultural asset was retained as a community building, and it continues to offer a very significant programme of arts and entertainment. It remains one of the critical assets within the Stroud cultural landscape.

STC has a dedicated Cultural Strategy, and a Neighbourhood Development Plan for the central section of this large parish. STC also supports cultural initiatives through grant-making. The significant annual programme of arts and cultural events in Stroud includes activities coordinated with a vibrant and large artistic community within the area. This community, has made use of the availability of under-utilised industrial and other commercial buildings associated with cloth industries, arts, and crafts, and have created a notable cultural ecosystem.

Drawing upon the precept as well as generated income, STC is an important stakeholder in the town's arts and cultural life. In combination, the cultural policy, ownership of cultural assets and spaces, and support to a programme of events and activation of initiatives creates a vibrant and relatively secure and resilient environment for the arts.

5.4 Capacity building

In some cases, especially among local authority officers with primarily non-cultural responsibilities, cultural activity is seen as an answer to a problem, such as town centre vibrancy, better health, occupancy, and community enjoyment. Yet some interviewees felt that, for culture to thrive,

community capacity needs to be strengthened. *'How could we begin to think about culture as an engine of change... looking at [a] skills development agenda.'* [respondent H]. In other places, having a strong cultural network is a foundation for success, not an outcome of meanwhile use: *'it's worked here, largely because of the culture here ... A lot of businesses take part are in the creative and cultural sector. If you didn't have that base, you might be having to drag businesses in from other locations to make it viable'* [respondent C].

Sketch no.4 Frome – outdoor retail and community asset management

Frome is a market town in Somerset. In 2013, in an attempt to attract people to the streets around Catherine Hill, a local entrepreneur started an artisan market. Subsequently supported as a regeneration scheme with Town Council grant, this became [The Frome Independent Market](#), which takes place once a month from April-December, covering its costs from market trader fees. As well as offering local food and crafts and a vintage flea market and seasonal activities, the market offers a free stage for emerging local musicians and DJs and showcases local designers. The market expanded from Catherine Hill and now covers the whole town centre, which closes for the day. The Town Council helps to gather anonymised visitor data. Market staff estimate an annual benefit to the town's economy of £2million and footfall of up to 80,000.

The Town Council has also piloted cultural asset transfer, taking on The Cheese and Grain concert venue from the former district council. This is let to a community-run company for a peppercorn rent until 2040. A social enterprise business model and bonded ticket income arrangement separates the venue's governance, services (which include recording studio, concert venue, catering and bar services and ticket sales) and minimises exposure to risk while maximising earnings for staff costs and building maintenance. The Town Council emphasises that its relative financial freedom and a more limited range of public services, compared to higher tier councils, has enabled it to broker asset transfer and make major investments (totalling approximately £1 million) through the precept (a proportion of council tax). These investments help to secure cultural infrastructure and reduce the need for on-going maintenance grants. The Town Council is working closely with Somerset Council to identify further asset transfer opportunities.

Challenges remain for the market, including rising costs associated with closing the high street and balancing the need to make the market affordable to local traders and emerging artists/designers. It is hoped that by becoming a Community Interest Company (a limited company with immobile assets and public benefit objectives) will help with fundraising and improve governance structures.

5.5 Financial pressures and material responsibilities

Closely linked to capacity is the need for innovators to balance financial pressures. This includes the need to offer financially accessible spaces, resources and incubation opportunities to low-income constituents (artists with precarious careers), while building the ability to maintain the fabric of those spaces. New income strategies which sit alongside the core mission to support artists need to be developed. These can include catering, retail, venue hire, energy regeneration or education. The fabric of meanwhile spaces may also be poor and will need initial work and maintenance to keep it going:

'...this place is freezing; that's the downside of meanwhile space.' [respondent G].

'...water ingress remains a concern and a cost... There was a difficult period 15 years ago, when roadworks went through the water supply pipes and the [studios] flooded. As well as damage to the building fabric, tenants' artworks were also damaged.' [respondent E]

Landlords can secure business rate relief if their empty building has no services, the absence of which severely delays and financially burdens creative occupancy. On the other hand, cultural occupancy can act as a way of securing an unused building and preventing fly-tipping and posting, vagrancy and material deterioration. Councils, landlords and arts networks could benefit from integrated development of meanwhile tenancies, rate incentives and sustainable materials re-use opportunities. A meanwhile tenancy cluster for the south-west, led by estates experts and landlords representatives could develop prototype occupancy templates for refinement through iterative use. Lessons can already be learnt from other regions such as the [London Artists Affordable Studios Network](#).

Sketch no.5 Southampton - from meanwhile to mutually worthwhile?

A *Space Arts* is an Arts Council National Partner Organisation and manages artists' studios and exhibition spaces. Over 20 years ago, its artist-founder was motivated by the lack of affordable studios to search for opportunities to occupy privately-owned vacant spaces. These included rooms above restaurants, disused garages and vacant shops. Later, a request to the City Council's leader led to a review of properties and disused storage arches were offered at a peppercorn rent. Additional arches became available and now [The Arches Studios](#) offer 21 affordable studios, meeting rooms and exhibition spaces to tenants within five rental bands from between around £95 and £150 a month. Further collaboration with the City Council enabled temporary use of, and exhibitions in, The Arts Vaults and Bargate Monument, which are scheduled ancient monuments. Today, *A Space Arts* is based within and manage [God's House Tower](#), also a scheduled monument, museum and a remnant of Southampton's mediaeval walls. Collaborations with private landlords and the city's two universities provided studio and exhibition space for art students, offering them a chance to stay in the city after graduation. Clearly, the relationship between *A Space Arts* and the City Council is mutually beneficial: the Council has outsourced asset management to a creative network in line with the objectives of its cultural strategy. This has resulted in a significant strengthening of the city's creative network and infrastructure. *A Space Arts*, in meeting its objectives to increase access to affordable space, has found it possible to broaden its commercial and rental income streams, for example by running the God's House Tower cafe, becoming licenced for weddings and offering its facilities for meetings.

Challenges remain. The leases for The Arches are rolling year-on-year arrangements and *A Space Arts* is responsible for maintaining these Victorian structures, while keeping tenants' rents affordable. Catering, commercial and public visitor duties substantially broaden the responsibilities the organisation carries, compared to its original objectives.

5.6 Curation and co-ordination of place promotion

Several commentators emphasised that their places did not lack cultural activities per se, but were critical about how activities and their benefits were being promoted, effectively dissipating the message of the town's/city's vibrancy. This indicates a diffuse and silo-approach to place promotion to be resolved. '*...it's not about adding more things in, it's about co-ordinating what actually goes on and presenting [the place] as a cultural hub*' [respondent A].

6. Discussion

6.1 Understanding the local picture

The research reveals some insecurity in even best examples of practice and innovation. For example:

- In Southampton, *A Space Arts* has successfully reanimated a range of unused public and private buildings to support artists gain affordable studio space. Yet the rolling tenancies are time limited. Some tenancies secured from private landlords can be for a matter of weeks.
- In Bournemouth, the wealth of arts activity linked to meanwhile use still may not secure lasting commercial usage in a way that suits landlords of vacant properties. In other words, meanwhile use does not necessarily stimulate commercial security.
- In Bristol, the evaluated success of *SPARKS* has not substantially shored up the careers and livelihoods of artists and activists.
- Governance arrangements independent from councils can be helpful at securing multi-sector buy-in to the vision of cultural strategies, but can't guarantee execution. That may depend on the right blend of individuals (and money).
- In Frome, Stroud, and in Southampton, on the other hand, asset transfer initiatives are linking assets to income generating mechanisms to avoid long-term liabilities. In Southampton in particular, *A Space Arts* have made an arrangement with the City Council to manage the medieval scheduled monument God's House Tower.

Consequently, we recommend a 2-stage approach which combines an initial *reflective* approach before more forward-facing *planning* and activities are undertaken. This should start at the community/place scale to capture, firstly, key partners and sources of vulnerability or insecurity in any place. The key influencing factors upon opportunities, successes, and vulnerability include:

- Public or state bodies (including local authorities and regional/national organisations)
- People / partners
- Governance
- Capacity
- Audience
- Policy / Strategy

The first stage of the approach is the recognition of the uniqueness of place (which also affects the transferability of ideas or good practice). Therefore, the dynamics / dimensions of impact and resilience at the local scale become critical. Understanding the characteristics and circumstances of any given place underpins subsequent reviews of cultural impact. We emphasise that the 'state' in the diagram, represents multiple scales and formats of the public sector, from local to national arms, including regional arrangements. The overarching position of the state is not to suggest a dominating role, but rather a foundation from which the five local scale elements can be discussed and developed.

Figure 1: Impact and resilience factors

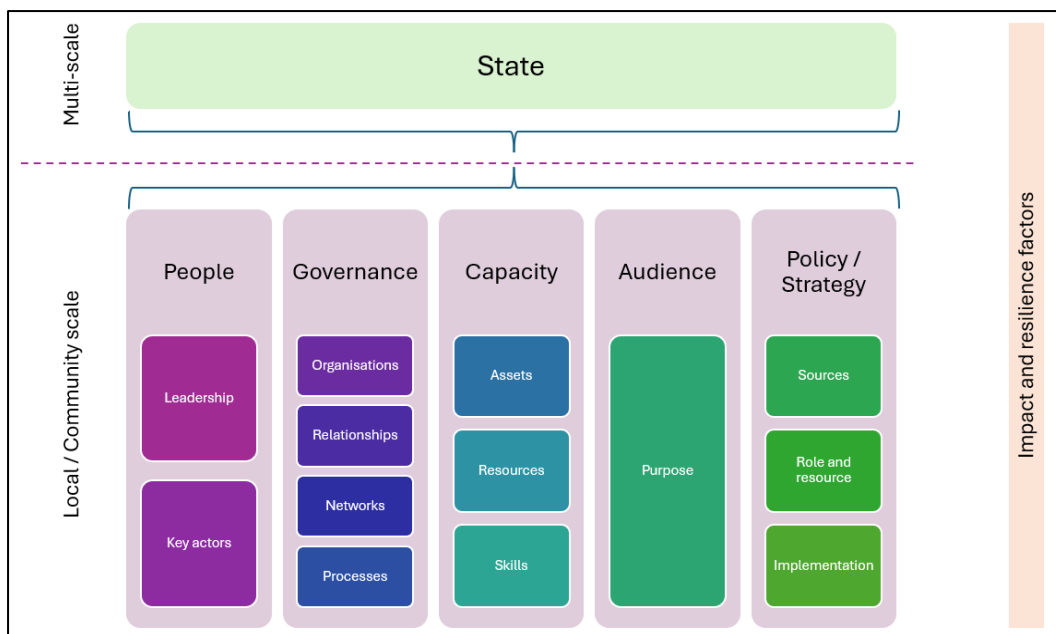


Figure 1, above, suggests an initial approach which could then be reviewed with a RAG (Red, Amber, Green) assessment, for example as set out below in figure 2:

Figure 2: Potential framework for discussion (illustrative)

	Define	Position / Analysis	RAG
People			
Governance			
Capacity			
Audience			
Policy / Strategy			
State			

Exploring the impact and resilience factors at the local scale can support an assessment of areas of vulnerability and insecurity, but also opportunity. For example:

- (i) *People*
 - a. Leadership – Where/who are the sources of leadership for the arts and cultural ecosystem?
 - b. Key actors – Around which key persons and/or roles does resilience depend? This must include the artistic community themselves. What would be the implications of the loss of a given person? Or the loss of funding for a key role?

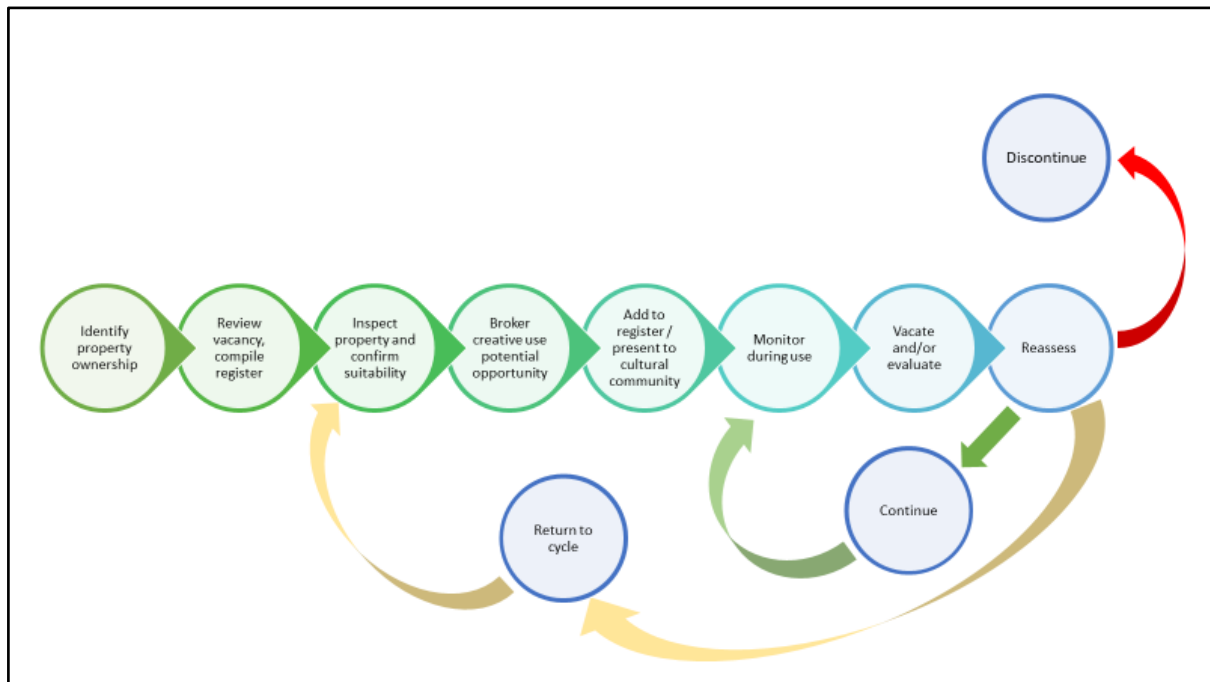
- (ii) *Governance*
 - a. Organisations – Who are the organisations involved in activities across the policy > implementation spectrum?
 - b. Relationships – How are individual organisations, and people, connected?
 - c. Networks – How do the connections create the ecosystem for culture within this location? A ‘wiring diagram’/ network mapping exercise may be helpful for (b) and (c).
 - d. Processes – How is governance operationalised through processes and systems? How effective, efficient, and resilient are they?
- (iii) *Capacity*
 - a. Assets – What assets (buildings, spaces, events, programmes) exist? Who owns / manages / controls these? How resilient is their position and role?
 - b. Resources – What human, financial etc resources exist?
 - c. Skills – What skill sets are present? Required? Absent?
- (iv) *Audience*
 - a. Purpose – For whom is the activity? For what purpose?
- (v) *Policy / Strategy*
 - a. Sources – Where is policy created? By whom? For what? And why?
 - b. Role and resource – What role does local scale policy have in place curation? How present is it (if at all)? What resource is associated with it? What are the implications (value) of its existence?
 - c. Implementation – Is policy (where present) directing/achieving impact?

The intention of this process is to create a knowledge and foundation of understanding upon which resilient forward planning can progress. This can then support a diverse range of ideas and initiatives to be brought forward via a second stage process. The nature of this process will be specific to each initiative / location. In the case of this project specifically, the focus is on meanwhile use, and a second stage follows accordingly.

Once the first stage local assessment has been completed, the second stage of the approach in our project focus is the development of a meanwhile use process. Collectively, participants in the research have demonstrated a process of identifying local possibilities and securing these. In each location, progress through a series of stages is uneven. For example, in Gloucester, council ownership of commercial properties and historic monuments is unusually high, so records are available about vacancy and maintenance needs. By contrast *‘[i]t can be difficult to get an accurate picture of city centre property ownership’* [Respondent 1]. Notably, in Bournemouth, the BID and the council collaborated to develop a property owners’ register.

We have combined stages together into a process flow (Figure 3, below).

Figure 3: Process flow for meanwhile use



Importantly, this pre-supposes that either a group of partners takes on different parts of the process, or that one organisation has the capacity to co-ordinate the process. It specifically includes the idea of a register or other approach to ensure visibility of the space opportunities; these are not necessarily present currently but have been identified in this project as being of particular value. Much of the process is linear, starting from identifying spaces, through to reflecting on the process of occupancy/use. But circuits also emerge, for example a reassessment at the end of one use, which may lead (for example through positive experience or prolonged vacancy) to an immediate or future reuse. Monitoring is a process of understanding the experience of occupancy as it unfolds, undertaken by the occupants. This may include measuring footfall or recording maintenance requirements at different stages of occupancy. Evaluation can be carried out after the event, potentially by a third party, and which critically and constructively reviews experiences, to inform future actions.

In summary, the 2-stage approach identifies specific local contexts and capacities, followed by a process of identifying and using meanwhile spaces. The first stage is important for understanding what can be done, by whom. The second process systematises the use of meanwhile spaces. Together, this process leads to an outcome we call *civic cultural leadership*, which is necessary to structure locally appropriate actions to exploit cultural opportunities for creative meanwhile use.

6.2 Meanwhile use for meanwhile benefits?

UK scholars recently suggested a range of attributes that help make urban centres both viable and vital (Ntounis et al. 2023). These include:

- (i) the need to consider access and green infrastructure
- (ii) improvements in perceptions of safety
- (iii) a dense prevalence of (ideally distinctive) businesses and networks to support them.
- (iv) the opportunity to exploit temporary and alternative uses of vacant space.

Some participants in this research suggested that urban densification, a fundamental undersupply of housing and the shift from commercial retail into private residential use, may combine to substantially undermine the opportunity for meanwhile use in town centres in the near future. As a result, some existing meanwhile spaces may be pushed to the urban fringes or be displaced entirely to other cities.

Of the four attributes in Ntounis' list, our research identified (iii) and (iv) as particularly resonant. Attribute (iii) has a broad scope but within our research, from the perspective of cultural assets and networks, key factors relate to ownership, resourcing, and governance. A present challenge, which seems ever more impactful, is the contraction of the state and associated resourcing and capacity. Critical to successes identified in this research is asset ownership/responsibility by others outside the local state. This includes creating an environment where private artistic and, especially, social enterprise ownership / control of space, or secure tenancy of space, are possible. Difficulties here are linked into wider challenges concerning property and rentable values and the nature of the property market. This research suggests that some opportunities do exist with other forms of facilitative state intervention designed to nurture creative networks and assets.

'First-tier' parish and town councils were identified as an important scale of asset holding, resource, leadership, and capacity (including via the precept). With the effective roll back of the local state, the community-scale state offers space for leadership, capacity, and resource. Where a parish or town council is present, opportunities exist to support asset transfer and ownership/management. Additional, local leadership and place governance capacity may be available. Successes in Stroud, which include Town Council dedicated cultural policy, asset ownership and management, and cultural programme delivery, evidence what can be achieved at this under-studied scale of government. It is interesting to note that in Swindon (currently unparished) there is a move to create a community scale structure of government, bringing with this potential from the (uncapped) precept and associated governance potential. While the new national government reviews resourcing for local government, the parish / town scale should be explored in greater detail with regards place-based cultural leadership. The commercial innovations highlighted in Frome show the potential for a diversity of stakeholders to create and sustain a resilient arts and cultural ecosystem.

Even so, attribute (iv) represents a 'wicked' problem. The idea of meanwhile use possibilities being a permanent asset in urban vibrancy seems difficult in the light of some of our research. The example of Southampton reveals that until recently, artists who were frustrated by lack of access to affordable studios, have spent two decades clinging, through short rentals, to opportunistic niches. These spaces have material maintenance needs that are hard to finance with the low rental income they generate. Similarly, other experiences have revealed the requirement of pro-bono legal advice or the good will of sympathetic landlords. Key to this challenge therefore is the need for permanence in the temporary; that is, an environment within which there is a managed and coordinated approach to permanent opportunities within a necessarily shifting landscape of temporary spaces.

Three ways of realising meanwhile space seem desirable, in ways that avoid the characteristics of decay that high street decline indicates.

The **first** is to ensure that the churn in the *availability of meanwhile space is known about* and shared. Spaces can be offered for use on a temporary basis and managed in a way that neither hands financial risks to artists, nor saddles landlords with unrealistic expectations of philanthropy. As noted earlier in this report, practical arrangements for this scenario include ideas such as an 'atlas (or register) of vacancy', a kind of meanwhile space exchange, linked to policies on rate relief and consistent but flexible temporary tenancies offering supportive access to utilities.

A **second** approach to meanwhile space is to regard it as only one ingredient (cf. Ntounis, above) in a list of many which puts *culture at the centre of local place-making*. This recasts meanwhile occupancy as a form of prototyping, prompting questions about what a refined model could look like.

The **third** approach is to *reposition cultural meanwhile use amongst other uses*. In practice, no commercial space user is truly permanent. Retail and commercial churn is an intrinsic part of the property industry. Tenancy by retailers or other space users may be short- or long-term, and short-term use may be planned or unplanned. Meanwhile use, as a terminology, implies a space between retail tenancies. A short-term retail tenancy could thereby represent a cultural opportunity, if temporary rent reductions and other supportive approaches could be viable in the short-term. Cultural occupancy of space could be considered as one among many types of space use. Model conditions for intermediate use could be pre-designed. This will require, in particular, engagement with 'remote' landlords and local property management agents. Dealing with remote landlords and their representatives was identified as a key barrier to achieving successful meanwhile use.

7. Conclusions and recommendations.

This report sets out a review of selected good practice and persistent challenges in the south-west of England linked to the creative meanwhile use of vacant properties and public spaces. Such uses can help to reanimate town centres undergoing long-term structural changes.

The report draws on literature and primary research with cultural and place-making actors in the region. The latter have shared their experiences in peer-learning workshops composed of local clusters of academics, public and/or private sector representatives and cultural networks. Drawing on these experiences, an approach to organising meanwhile use has been suggested in two phases. The first phase outlines a process of identifying local capacities and actors, while the second approach broadly systematises the identification and use of meanwhile opportunities, through the capacities and actors identified.

In the end, meanwhile opportunities are intrinsically temporary. This means that meanwhile use can only be one element of creative reanimation of town centres. A broader cultural vision is needed within which meanwhile use can be included. The realisation of the broader local vision (which may – and should – include devising and updating local cultural and place-making policies) is what we have labelled civic cultural leadership, characterised by a cross-sectoral and strategic process of articulating how culture contributes to place-making and the improvement of quality of life, for artists and for residents; the two often overlap.

Energising civic cultural leadership is not easy, because it involves resources, time and a sense of shared endeavour. The multiple expectations placed on artists to help revive town centres suggests civic cultural leadership must be cross-sectoral. We suggest the following specific recommendations will help strengthen civic cultural leadership in the south-west:

1. Cultural anchor institutions should play a greater role in civic cultural leadership. Universities, in particular, own cultural assets, train artists who need spaces, and attract money into their cities. Non-arts specialisms, such as social and economic impact evaluations and expertise in designing experimental governance techniques, can be helpful in producing applied research, facilitating place-making partnerships and promoting the arts. Two crucial roles for universities include: supporting transdisciplinary, regional research clusters for meanwhile use and civic cultural leadership; and supporting councils to develop long-term assessments of the *outcomes* of cultural animation of towns centres.
2. NPOs are the backbone of the cultural ecosystem. Other actors need to feel included and valued in expanded local cultural networks. Opportunities exist especially for BIDs and chambers of commerce, which could play a role in brokerage between artists and property owners and agents. Further work is needed in unlocking private sector funding for the arts and especially in articulating how culture contributes to place-making as city centres and their commercial opportunities change. Networks such as BIDs could play an important role in the second stage of the meanwhile approach (see section 5), or in existing networks such as Cultural Compacts. In particular, BIDs understand business interests and have proved a valuable interface between artists and town centre landlords. This experience is dispersed in our region and needs better co-ordination to allow meanwhile use to become less of a place-by-place leap of faith and more part of a broad toolbox available to town centre landlords navigating high street dynamics.

3. In this report, meanwhile use has been framed as a form of prototyping. Places should be encouraged to experiment and be transparent about what they have experienced. This could include practicalities, such as model tenancy agreements, or strategic actions, such as the re-allocation of asset management. Good practice may not always prove transferable, but sharing details of prototyping and refinement processes is very helpful. Additional peer-learning opportunities in the region are needed. We acknowledge the geographic limitations of the research at hand and the opportunities to connect with other towns, cities and, not least, rural districts which can illuminate rural-urban cultural links.
4. Some NPOs can become more secure by taking on cultural and heritage assets under contract. This saves councils money, combines innovative uses in important public buildings and legitimises the NPO in new organisational ways. Innovative business and social enterprise models for the cultural sector constitute hard-won experience. A better grasp of what works and what has been less successful, and why, is needed.
5. Many councils are facing very difficult financial circumstances, resulting in major (in some cases almost total) cuts in cultural budgets. The ability, as shown in this report, of local councils to manage asset transfer, establish new social and community structures to run cultural facilities, manage public spaces and apply precept supplements to invest in cultural infrastructure remains underexplored. Possibilities exist to partner with the Key Cities Network and the Local Government Association in this regard.
6. Lastly, and most simply, cultural meanwhile should be promoted. Emerging research (for example from Bristol) suggests that there is a direct relationship between the opportunity use enjoy cultural activities in town centres and people's quality of life. Energising the desire to enjoy town centres as cultural hubs leads to increased pride and sense of place among residents. Meanwhile uses are part of a wider range of cultural offers.

8. Dissemination

A draft of this report was distributed to the partners involved in informing the research, allowing a limited window for refinements and corrections.

Thereafter, it will be distributed to all Arts Council England 'priority places' in the south-west with the offer of an associated presentation by the lead author. The report will also be sent to the Key Cities Network and the Local Government Association, as well as the South West BIDs.

In November, an associated presentation will be pitched to the Key Cities Innovation Network conference on *Culture, Place and Development*.

Lastly, a podcast about the report and its findings and involving researchers in discussion with Gloucester City Council and Gloucester Culture Trust will be recorded and posted on the CCRI website www.ccri.ac.uk and promoted using the CCRI social media accounts, as well as via the University of Birmingham's publicity office.

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