

## DCMS: Call for Evidence

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



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#### **1. Introduction and Summary**

The Institute of Place Management (IPM) at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) is the professional body and learned society for people who serve places. We represent professional place managers and leaders in local authorities, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), and other place partnerships, as well as consultants, academics, and policymakers. We publish the Journal of Place Management and Development (an international, peer-reviewed journal), and deliver post-graduate training programmes (including an MSc Place Management and Leadership). The IPM is the lead partner of the DLUHC-funded High Streets Task Force (HSTF)<sup>1</sup>.

Whereas the 2019 House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee Inquiry into High streets and Town Centres in 2030<sup>2</sup> identifies several valuable recommendations more generally, it is now appropriate to consider the potential of cultural placemaking to address geographical inequalities between places, thus contributing to the levelling up agenda. In responding

to this call for evidence, we drawn research by IPM members concerning cultural placemaking<sup>3</sup> to addresses the following questions:

- **How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?**
- **How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?**
- **How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?**

## 2. The wider context: the role cultural placemaking and high street recovery

The pandemic caused a significant in footfall, particularly in larger town and city centres, which reduced the scope, not only for retail and commercial revitalisation, but also for cultural provision of all kinds<sup>4</sup>. This development compounded pre-existing structural challenges to the British high street. The question arises, therefore, about what the future high street will look like. Debates on reviving high streets mainly focus on retail activity. By contrast, issues concerning cultural placemaking in relation to high street revitalisation remain neglected by comparison.

Importantly, there is evidence people want their local high streets to be more than just places to shop<sup>5</sup>. Fifty-six per cent of visitors to the site “this place [of mine]” (a virtual high street platform) said they wanted more opportunities to make art on future high streets<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, during lockdown people missed engagement in arts and culture; survey findings in 2020 suggesting that 57% missed going to cultural events and venues, whilst 81% expressed interest in attending outdoor arts and cultural activities. Since 2020, debate has moved beyond the impact of COVID-19, to focus more on the future of the high street. There is evidence of how investment in both culture and heritage has enabled some centres to recover more quickly, to support the idea cultural placemaking can play a more substantive role in high street revitalisation<sup>7</sup>.

The evidence presented below draws on IPM expertise and knowledge in relation the vitality and viability of high streets. To structure this we use our established regeneration framework, comprising the 4Rs (Repositioning, Reinventing, Rebranding and Restructuring). This framework is used by numerous places and is recommended by the HSTF as a tool places can use to support the recovery of their high streets and centres<sup>8</sup>.

## 3. Repositioning the high street through cultural placemaking

Repositioning refers to the collection and analysis of local data, trends, and evidence to develop understanding of challenges to high streets and inform local visions which communities will support. There are several places in the UK, where culture is central to town centre visions e.g., Stratford Upon Avon, with the Royal Shakespeare Company and theatre. Whereas few places can call upon internationally renowned cultural assets such as this, all places should be able to draw on some form of local culture to underpin the construction of a shared vision for change in relation to public spaces and shopping streets.

The establishment of the HSTF, however, demonstrates how local leaders require support to make the best decisions on the future of their high streets, how they best serve their communities, and how to build long-term capacity for place transformation<sup>9</sup>. It is important places have a vision where centres form the heart of their communities, with a unique sense of place and a strong identity - and

culture can be an important driver of this. The Arts Council England have created dashboards of data sources where different organisations can explore, by geographical location, investment in arts and culture, adult engagement with this offer, and economic contribution<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the HSTF is distributing hundreds of free data dashboards which enable local stakeholders to monitor footfall and measure impact of cultural events on activity rates in their high street<sup>11</sup>. With these tools available, stakeholders responsible for driving high street change might start to develop stronger a base of evidence to support cultural placemaking within visions for change.

#### 4. Reinventing the high street through cultural placemaking

Reinventing focuses on place activation and animation in the light of analysis of data. Through reinvention, places can move from vision(s) to delivery. In this context, cultural placemaking plays a significant role through temporary artistic interventions, cultural events, and pop-ups, and providing spaces for creative talent in town and city centres. This may involve both the reuse of vacant units and underused public sites for community arts and culture.

##### Cultural placemaking and the high street

IPM research (2018) reveals how significant investment in culture, marketing and events by Bristol City Council and BID provided new attractions in the city centre for residents and visitors<sup>12</sup>. Whereas this is driven by a top-down strategy, the IPM also draws attention to community led-initiatives, such as in Holmfirth (West Yorkshire), where culture, music and events are also an important facet of the town's vision for change. The Withington Walls<sup>13</sup> project (Manchester) utilises crowd-funding and micro-grants to improve store fronts and building facades, together with a placemaking programme, notably through murals created by local artists, including the famous Marcus Rashford mural, which featured on many national news bulletins in the summer of 2020. Such interventions contribute to improving the appearance of the high street, but also help to change perceptions of the place, which in the case of Withington has resulted in new commercial development and the reactivation of vacant units, together within a renewed sense of pride within the local community<sup>14</sup>.

Cultural placemaking was also important during the COVID-19 pandemic. BID Leamington (Warwickshire), for example, in contrast to the largely functional measures which appeared in many high streets, used large flower stickers on the ground to mark the two meters social distancing requirement in key areas of public space<sup>15</sup>. This illustrates how creative interventions might contribute not only to safety, but also to improving the appearance of the high street and making it a more welcoming environment. Ultimately, the IPM's research demonstrates that places which are adding functionality to their high street, to construct a strong nonretail offer, not only proved to be more resilient during the pandemic<sup>16</sup>, but will also be more sustainable in the future<sup>17</sup>. Cultural placemaking, therefore, can underpin local strategies to create more vital and viable high streets.

##### Festivals and events

Festivals are often viewed as a short-term solution to place-based issues. Increasingly used for their regenerative power and tourist draw, they can be problematic in terms of impact on residents. As Finkel and Platt demonstrate, processes of 'festivalisation' in our urban centres can lead to the exclusion of certain groups<sup>18</sup>. Instead, Platt and Ali-Knight suggest festivals which emerge from within communities are often more successful because they underpin a sense of ownership and local pride. For example, Prestwich Arts Festival (Bury) is delivered on a voluntary basis by residents who

have the energy and passion to make a difference in their local area. Drawing on community funds organisers generated media attention through innovative place-based activity such as the Mark E. Smith mural (by artist Akse) on the side of the local chip shop and walking tours featuring narratives and locations connected to local band The Fall. Place-embeddedness might not generate substantive economic impact, but is essential in a community festival and how social capital is activated. Whilst more high-profile schemes like the UK City of Culture may bring prestige and capacity to generate economic impact, it has been found that to deliver this 'in place', meeting the needs of the local community, is a challenge, with many cities pulling out of bidding as evidenced in the lead up to the 2025 shortlisting. Work by Cunningham and Platt<sup>19</sup> found that the will to engage with communities is evident in bidding teams, but the deadlines and competitive nature of the programme creates barriers to meaningful co-creation. Instead, better ways, perhaps, are needed to support and nurture volunteer networks at a local level to sustain community-led festival, especially within the context of the high street.

### Activating the high street through pop-ups and temporary activity

In recent years, 'pop-up' has become a synonym for virtually any kind of temporary event within the urban arena, in a range of commercial, non-commercial, and cultural contexts. Its use has been seen as a means of enabling retailers to be more flexible in their locational decisions, enabling occupancy of vacant retail premises in town centres that would otherwise remain vacant<sup>20</sup>. Pop-up activity is, moreover, increasingly used for cultural purposes as a means of helping to reanimate high streets - a good example of which is the '50 Windows of Creativity' initiative in Manchester city centre, where art was exhibited in windows of empty shops, thereby showcasing local artists<sup>21</sup>.

The 'Historic High Streets' Heritage Action Zone in Sunderland was deprived and in decay as historic buildings became vacant and unused. These spaces have been transformed for multiple creative uses, such as lectures and exhibitions, a community mural, and a pop-up café<sup>22</sup>. The Heritage Action Zone in Chester Rows aims to physically improve shop frontages, fill vacant units with a diverse range of uses, and bring the rows back to life through a range of cultural activities<sup>23</sup>. These examples further demonstrate the potential of culture to both bring life back into centre and support their diversification beyond retail.

IPM research in Withington (Manchester) shows pop-up events in vacant units (including a beer festival held in a former bank), a maker's market (The Curiosity Collection), and local craft-ale pub (The Lock Inn) can produce lasting impact. Here, such was the success of these temporary interventions, the market now permanently occupies a vacant shop, and the organisers of the pop-up pub subsequently renovated a dis-sued working man's club and took permanent residence there. However, it is important to stress these connections and synergies between high streets and local cultural activity did not emerge by accident, but through collaboration and coordination facilitated by networks and partnerships. Such networks later proved essential during the pandemic, by supporting local traders during lockdown and promoting Withington's high street when shops were allowed to reopen<sup>24</sup>. As such, there is a reliance on local voluntary/community groups here, which needs to be nurtured and supported for cultural placemaking to be sustainable.

Culture can also provide a mechanism for engaging younger people in the High Street. A good example is the Teenage Market, which provides free market stalls for younger people. Lowering

barriers to entry provides new creative enterprise with a presence in town centres and a showcase for the creative talents of younger people. This example was identified as good practice by the IPM in the evidence provided for Sir John's Timpson's *Review of the High Street*<sup>25</sup>, commissioned by former High Streets Minister, Jake Berry. Crucially the Teenage Market is not just about retail. Through an attempt to create a temporary pop-up event engaging wider creative arts, through a fusion of music, crafts, and live entertainment, the market drives place-making through place activation.

### High Street traders and cultural placemaking

Reinventing high streets through cultural placemaking can also engage independent traders in supporting local artistic and creative infrastructure. For example, research commissioned by The Booksellers Association published in 2022<sup>26</sup> reveals the importance of independent bookshops to the high street, not just in terms of the sales they generate, but also in diversifying the high street, and in some cases evolving into community hubs. As one bookseller responded:

“We work closely with other businesses and the local council, to provide a range of events for the community: markets, children's entertainment, mini festivals”.

Indeed, this report shows 92% of booksellers contribute to the non-retail offer and attraction of the high street, and 99% to innovation and experimentation, including literary festivals and events.

### Rebranding the high street through cultural placemaking

Rebranding involves changing perceptions of a place, particularly for those who use and visit high streets. In this context, engagement of creative practice in place branding and marketing can also support high street revitalisation, through the construction of place-based identity based on local arts and cultural scenes, such as the Arts Council's *Creative People and Places* scheme<sup>27</sup>. There is substantive research on this but concerns over sustainability and legacy remain. In smaller places such as Hay on Wye, success has been built over time, with investment in local infrastructure to ensure the sustainability of the literary festival (and subsequent franchising globally). One-off activity cannot be sustained without investment and the evidence for legacy planning is negligible when it comes to high profile cultural schemes. For example, West (2021)<sup>28</sup> suggests that whist Liverpool's year as European Capital Of Culture was deemed a success, ten years later narratives of renewed confidence and 'swagger' in the city are contested.

Place branding through culture, however, does not necessarily need to build on major cultural programmes. Platt's (2017)<sup>29</sup> work on knitting groups in Liverpool, and Edensor and Millington's (2009)<sup>30</sup> research on Christmas light displays and 2013 research on Blackpool Illuminations<sup>31</sup>, illustrate how ordinary places (such as local high streets), might draw on local cultural practices, which may not necessarily generate economic development outcomes, but are hugely valuable in terms of their social benefit. In many parts of the country, places with high streets where commercial investment through retail-led revitalisation is now improbable, cultural policy which funnels creative talent into otherwise vacant high streets can start to change place image and reputation for the better. Work undertaken by the IPM for Manchester City Council as part of an INTERREG project, for example, reveals how the local high street in Withington utilised connections to pop-music heritage to develop a collaborative place brand, utilising iconic graphic design associated with Factory Records in local digital social media channels, flyers, posters, and websites

to promote local traders and events, encapsulated by the We are Withington online brand. This example of community led high street revitalisation is recognised as good practice by INTERREG<sup>32</sup>, with the findings also supporting Manchester City Council's review of policy support for local centres<sup>33</sup>.

## 5. Restructuring the high street through cultural placemaking

Restructuring involves ensuring local governance and networks are appropriate to deliver the vision for a place. However, sometimes places are stuck in a state of inertia around decision-making, or when decision-making happens. Either little happens, or interventions have little impact. In some cases, moving forward may require a major physical regeneration to address.

The Booksellers Report mentioned above demonstrates continuous efforts linked to both place collaboration and local decision-making and planning, by revealing how booksellers collaborate with other high street actors on shop window appearances, (online) place-marketing activities, and opening hours. Importantly, 86% of booksellers contributed to local redevelopment plans whilst 68% were in some way involved in setting the vision and strategy for their high streets. This example reveals how quite often, there is an existing infrastructure through which to involve arts and cultural practitioners in local networks and partnerships responsible for high streets. We have drawn attention to similar connections in the case of Withington, whereby culture and creativity is embedded into the vision and strategy through the involvement of local creative practice in networks and partnerships. However, these outcomes follow long-term efforts to instil collaborative activity in policy and removal of blockers to achieve this. In Manchester's case, this involved the establishment of place management pilots in district centres across the city, which established the evidence base to underpin change in local policy<sup>34</sup>.

Edensor and Millington (2018)<sup>35</sup> draw attention to the regeneration of Blackpool's promenade. In recent years Blackpool has failed to attract significant private investment, provoking the local authority to act. The reconstruction of sea defences created opportunities for creating place making interventions in public space on grand scale, including Britain's biggest outdoor artwork, The Comedy Carpet. As Edensor and Millington note, these measures honour the resort's popular culture traditions, its potent heritage, and the importance of innovation. They also foster playful interactions, conviviality and lingering, through a series of installations which might inspire other places to reimagine their local high streets and centres in more imaginative and creative ways. Blackpool illustrates an alternative model, based on major physical regeneration schemes, led by local government.

The HSTF has been conducting visits to high streets across England - , 55 by December 2021, with findings published in reports called *Unlocking your Place Potential (UYPP)*<sup>36</sup>. Based on the 4Rs, these reports indicate the main issues encountered by HSTF Experts in each place. **Restructuring** is seen as the most significant barrier to change in 44% of the places visited. Specific challenges relate to collaboration and partnership working, place leadership and visioning, and concern about levels of civic activity, engagement, and participation. **Reinventing** is identified as the priority in 38% of high streets, whilst in others it is **Rebranding** in 12% and **Repositioning** in 6%. Responding to these challenges is not the case of 'one or the other'. The prevalent issues dovetail together. When it comes to the question about how best culture and creativity might contribute to high street

revitalisation and the levelling up agenda, the priority in many locations needs to focus on improving collaborative working, contributing to high street visions for change, and widening civic participation in local decision making. After that, as we have demonstrated above, culture and creative place making can make a valuable contribution to place activation, the reinvention of the high streets, and improving place image and reputation, but perhaps only when this activity is coordinated and connected to wider vision for restoring vitality and viability to the high street.

## 6. Conclusion

The benefits culture can have for our places can (very simply) be categorised into two key areas, economic development, and social development. These should not be considered on an either/or basis, and both can be viewed as joint outcomes of cultural-led regeneration, with the aim of creating a better quality of lived experience. As Edensor et al (2010)<sup>37</sup> note, “the centrality of... arts and culture to economic competitiveness is not only extended to marketable outputs, it has also become enmeshed in recent efforts at place making”.

Large cultural projects are not an option for many locations, and there is concern about whether such grand schemes ever produce the outcomes they promise<sup>38</sup>. Instead, resource might be diverted to supporting local cultural infrastructure as a mechanism for high street revitalisation, especially in parts of the country where public and private investment is in short supply. However, to strengthen the role of culture in high street revitalisation, places will require continuing expertise to solve the complex and technical problems facing high streets; before the vision and capacity for change is generated from local leaders, businesses, people, and organisations that care about their location. Ultimately, one-off investments in cultural programmes or physical assets, will not be sufficient to sustain cultural placemaking, in relation to levelling up places through high street revitalisation, without necessary investment into skills and capacity building in local place leadership and management.

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<sup>1</sup> High Streets Task Force: partners (2022). <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/about/our-partners/>

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons (2019) *House of Commons: Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee: High Streets and Town Centres in 2030*: Available online: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1010/1010.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=43221>

<sup>4</sup> High Streets Task Force (2022) *Review of High Street Footfall in England*. Available online:

<https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/media/opcelyp1/footfall-report-2021-final-for-publication.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Sustrans (2016) *Reducing car use: What do people who live and drive in cities and towns think?* Available online:

<https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/5501/final-reducing-car-use-report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Future Everything (2021): <https://futureeverything.org/news/what-is-the-future-for-our-local-high-streets/>

<sup>7</sup> High Streets Task Force (2022) *Review of High Street Footfall in England*. Available online:

<https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/media/opcelyp1/footfall-report-2021-final-for-publication.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> High Streets Task Force (2020). *4Rs Regeneration Framework*. Available online:

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<sup>9</sup> MHCLG (2019): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-task-force-to-help-revitalise-high-streets-and-town-centres>

<sup>10</sup> Arts Council England (2020). *Arts and Place Shaping: Evidence Review*. Available online:

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<sup>11</sup> High Streets Task Force (2021) <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/news/claim-a-footfall-dashboard-and-track-your-high-street-s-covid-19-recovery/>

<sup>12</sup> High Streets Task Force (2022): <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/news/claim-a-footfall-dashboard-and-track-your-high-street-s-covid-19-recovery/>

<sup>13</sup> Institute of Place Management (2021) <https://www.placemanagement.org/news/posts/2020/december/effective-local-partnerships-withington-village/>

<sup>14</sup> Institute of Place Management (2021) <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=8ae07aa6-ec43-41e4-b1af-dfe29c7c3d91>

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