

CULTURE COMMONS

# Supporting 'Local Voice' in cultural decision making

INSIGHT PAPER

May 2024

Published as part of  
**the future of  
local cultural  
decision making**

An open policy development programme  
led by Culture Commons and Partners



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**Keywords:** Local Voice; Deliberative Democracy; Citizens' Assemblies; Culture Forum

## About the programme

[‘the future of local cultural decision making’](#) is a major open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of over 25 partners made up of local governments, the creative and cultural sectors, arm’s length bodies, grant giving bodies and leading research institutions.

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

At time of publication, the programme partners were:



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

## About Culture Commons

Culture Commons bring the creative and cultural sectors, research community and policymakers together to co-design new policy and influence decision making at the local, regional and national levels.

You can find out more about us at [www.culturecommons.uk](http://www.culturecommons.uk)



## Open Policymaking

'the future of local cultural decision making' is an open policy development programme based on a not-for-profit and collaborative partnership model.

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

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

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# Introduction

This *Insight Paper* summarises a *Knowledge Exchange* session held on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024 between high-level representatives as part of an open policy development programme exploring ‘the future local cultural decision making’, led by Culture Commons and a coalition of over 25 UK-wide partners.

## Knowledge Exchange sessions

The *Knowledge Exchange* sessions are an opportunity for internal partners and external experts to come together, build links, share insights and broaden perspectives on a range of subjects of particular relevance to the programme’s four core research themes.

We will publish an *Insight Paper* after each *Knowledge Exchange* session, in-keeping with the open and transparent approach we wish to take to policy development.

These *Insight Papers* will be formally reviewed as part of a growing evidence base that will inform the policymaking phase of the programme later in the year.

## Knowledge Exchange #3

As one of our programme’s four core *Themes*, we wanted to facilitate learning across the partnership about different approaches to including ‘Local Voice’ in decision making processes, drawing on both ‘successes and failures’, to understand what we might apply to the policy we develop together.

If you would like to get a better understanding of what we mean by ‘local cultural decision making’, you may want to access the very first [Insight Paper we published on this subject](#).

The term ‘Local Voice’ can mean different things in different contexts, but for the purposes of this session we focussed our attention on the inclusion of citizens - members of ‘the general public’.

We draw distinctions between different types of publics as we move through this paper, but we generally take an inclusive approach, incorporating residents, visitors or those who have a connection to the area in which activities that are described in this paper are taking place.

We are lucky that many of our programme partners are already exploring a variety of approaches to involve and respond to a wider range of voices within their planning, programming, and evaluation processes.

Nonetheless, several challenges remain, particularly in terms of ensuring a representative cross-section of voices are included over a suitably sustained period to lead to substantial impacts on creative, cultural and heritage ecosystems on the ground.

In our third *Knowledge Exchange* session, we heard from experts working on live case studies that are supporting citizens to participate in local cultural decision making.

We asked our invited speakers to cover the following questions in their contributions:

- What are the key ingredients that support high quality decision making involving local citizens?
- Who gets to participate in these processes and who is missing? What are the main barriers to citizens participating in decision making processes?
- What 'tools' can enable local cultural decision making (e.g. cultural strategies, physical infrastructure, digital elements, creative and cultural programming)?
- What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of these mechanisms for local cultural decision making?

The session was chaired by **Professors Leila Jancovich**, Professor of Cultural Policy and Participation at the University of Leeds, an expert in many of the themes being explored in this session, Leila opened the session with an introduction to some of the key concepts to set the scene from our experts:

- **David Jubb**  
Co-founder  
Citizens in Power
- **Chris Wright**  
Executive Director  
FutureEverything
- **LaToyah McAllister-Jones**  
Executive Director  
St Paul's Carnival CIC
- **Robin Simpson**  
Chief Executive  
Creative Lives

# Insights

## Professor Leila Jancovich

### Professor in Cultural Policy and Participation

School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, UK



<p><b>Bio</b></p>	<p>Leila is currently Professor in Cultural Policy and Participation in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds (one of our programme Research Partners).</p> <p>Leila’s research examines power and decision making within cultural policy with a focus on the implications of participatory governance for the cultural sector. Leila is particularly interested in the relationship between theory, policy and practice, to which end she sits on several policy advisory boards.</p>
<p><b>Focus</b></p>	<p>An introduction to the various ways in which ‘Local Voice’ is understood in existing academic literature and the key concepts of deliberative democracy on which much local or citizen-voice theories rest.</p>
<p><b>Notes</b></p>	<p><b>Key Concepts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A fundamental principle of most deliberative democracy theory is that decisions should be reached through discussion and reasoning <i>between</i> citizens.</li> <li>○ A significant body of work associated with alternative modes of democracy influenced New Labour, local authorities and Arts Council England policy in the past.</li> <li>○ A Labour government introduced a duty to involve citizens in decision making back in 2008. This led to an increased focus on public value and opinion, but also to citizens views <i>informing</i> decisions rather than citizens <i>making</i> decisions.</li> <li>○ Arts Council England’s <a href="#">Creative People and Places</a> programme and other cultural democracy style approaches and programmes have emerged in the last 10-15 years.</li> <li>○ There are now several “bottom-up” well established and evidenced approaches to promoting active citizenship seeing citizens taking power</li> </ul>

and expressing their views rather than merely responding to institutional demands to engage. These approaches include:

- **Co-production** ([Ostrom 1996](#)) is a collaboration between professionals and citizens in decision making processes
- **Community Asset Transfer** ([Quirk, 1997](#)) is the transfer of management and/or ownership, devolving responsibility from the state (national, regional or local) to citizens with a “use it or lose it” principle
- **Participatory Governance** ([Fischer, 2006](#)) goes beyond participating in planning and can involve the management of organisations and assets
- **Participatory Budgeting** ([Community Pride, 2003](#)) came from Brazil and involves the redistribution of decision making associated with public services (which can include culture) are funded. We now see live examples in the UK and around the world
- **Public Value** ([Moore, 1995](#)) originated in the United States of America and takes market-orientated approach to public voice which tends to involve research about public opinion (this approach has often been adopted by organisations such as BBC and Arts Council England)
- In theory, the more voices around the table, the more ideas you have and this can lead to better decision making. But this is not without its critics, nor without its challenges.
- These different approaches shows how Local Voice can mean different things to different people as well as how approaches can vary from place to place.

### **Why does citizen participation matter?**

- The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) enshrines a fundamental right for all citizens to be able to participate in their culture life. Incorporating Local Voice in cultural decision-making processes could be a good way of exercising this right.
- People are not voting much in mainstream political elections, so we could consider alternative forms of democracy. At the same time, large



numbers of people are not participating in mainstream subsidised culture, so we also need to have a dialogue about why this is.

- Within the cultural sector, we do now see examples of Local Voice influencing how existing cultural institutions are constituted and operate which could help with our understanding of what the public needs and wants.
- Overall, research seems to show that the longer processes that include Local Voice go on, the more evidence there is of change; crucially, the number of people who get involved increases where they see real change happening.

### **Counter arguments**

- Including citizens in decision making processes associated with culture, creativity and heritage is not without its critics and there are several observable challenges to doing so.
- Research interviews on Local Voice and participatory decision-making associated with the cultural sector reveals that politicians, including local councillors sometimes say: *"we have democracy, we have a ballot box, why do we have another level of decision making?"*.
- Amongst arts managers, concerns are raised about how the processes is done and how to ensure a wide range of voices are genuinely engaged. Some see citizen participation as a challenge to their expertise, whilst others see it as an opportunity to share expertise - to recognise the lived experiences and knowledge of others and the potential transformational power it might have for institutions, the arts and for funding.

### **"Failure"**

- Research examining a cultural project that was supposed to be informed by participatory co-design and co-production found that residents felt *"betrayed"* by the artist and the project managers. It is not uncommon to hear citizens suggest that they can feel insulted when cultural projects claim to involve citizens when they do not do this well.
- It is clearly crucial to avoid tick box approaches and get beyond engaging *"the usual suspects"* to explore complex ideas. Involving Local Voice in setting the agenda from the outset could be one way to achieve this.

### **Managing dissent**

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ We should not always be looking for <i>consensus</i>. We should accept disagreement and different points of view and recognise that it can be difficult to make decisions.</li></ul> |
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## LaToyah McAllister-Jones and David Jubb

### St Paul's Carnival and Citizens in Power

West of England, UK



<b>Bio</b>	<p>LaToyah is Executive Director of <a href="#">St Paul's Carnival</a>. She also works for <a href="#">Involve</a>, an organisation delivering citizens' assemblies.</p> <p>David Jubb is Director of <a href="#">Citizens in Power</a> and former Artistic and Director and Chief Executive of Battersea Arts Centre.</p>
<b>Focus</b>	<p>LeToyah and David talked about an ongoing citizens' assembly for creativity and culture they are working on in the West of England Combined Authority area.</p>
<b>Notes</b>	<p><b>The rationale for the programme</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ The programme brings together a working group of freelancers and cultural organisations to research citizens assemblies.</li><li>○ There was a desire to explore what it would be like if the region's cultural offer were remade taking a citizens' assembly approach.</li><li>○ This would aim to see the people who live, work or stay in a place defining culture for themselves and co-designing a cultural plan for culture, creativity and heritage across the region, including priorities for support and investment by the West of England Combined Authority (WECA).</li><li>○ The group invited WECA to join and agreed to adopt the citizen-led approach - securing the buy-in from local government was felt to be key. Knowing that the regional authority is set to adopt the plan that emanates provides a significant level of assurance that there is an opportunity to influence local decision makers.</li><li>○ Together they have developed ideas for what that citizen assembly should look like and asked people and organisations from across the region to help develop and improve that process.</li></ul> <p><b>Research phase and inception</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ A research phase took place throughout 2022, with cultural leaders, citizens and the <a href="#">Cultural Compact</a>: a prototype was developed.</li></ul>

- To avoid imposing an assembly upon citizens the group was keen to engage members of the public in the design of the programme from an early stage.
- The forming of the assembly itself was an iterative process throughout 2023 working with multiple stakeholders to test key questions.

### **Delivery**

- Having run workshops with citizens who now act as assembly ambassadors, the group will seek to secure funding in 2024 so that they can take on professional project managers to deliver from the beginning of 2025.
- The delivery will be done in partnership with multiple stakeholders. It is important that with so many people at the table (unitary authorities, the *Cultural Compact*, sector organisations, freelancers, community organisations and the public) that there is clarity around roles and responsibilities.

### **Key enablers**

- The three instigating organisations, St Paul's Carnival, Trinity and Citizens in Power joined to bring their skills and insights in culture and deliberative processes together and come up with the project.
- Seed funding for the research and development phase came from Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch) was a significant important jumpstart for the project.
- As leaders of *community arts* organisations, the instigating members have very different relationships with communities than many other arts organisations in the city. We describe ourselves as “custodians” - we want to provide a facilitated platform and so that residents feel the space is theirs.

### **What mobilizes citizens into action?**

There are two core parts of a citizens’ assembly:

- The first is **sortition** and the second is **deliberation**. These are the two really core parts of a citizens’ assembly – and of most forms of deliberative democracy.

- Sortition involves a democratic lottery to involve citizens and make an initial call to action. Ideally, from that process, you create a descriptively representative group of an area or a region. These processes are imperfect and it is impossible to create a truly representative group.

### **Sortition**

- An ideal group of participants for a citizens' assembly can be designed using census data, but there needs to be recognition that there are actually all kinds of people who will not engage with the process. The process of sortition requires its organisers to engage constantly with how it might be improved.
- In the West of England, approximately 15,000 households will be receiving an invitation. However, many people do not have letterboxes or will not open what comes through the letterbox in the first place for a variety of reasons.
- Having active partnerships with organizations that connect the group with different communities is crucial in terms of how a sortition process might be augmented.
- The group anticipated circa 1,500 responses from 15,000 households.
- The democratic lottery is focussing on mailings to poorer areas because we know that response rates from people in less well-off areas or with lower educational attainment ratings can be much lower. Responses tend to be heavily weighted towards people who are living in wealthier areas or have higher levels of education.
- When you then take the 1,500 respondents down to 40, you can begin to match the ideal composition of your group, which is much more representative of the area being covered.
- Onboarding and supporting citizens is an important part of the sortition process. People need to be looked after well if a citizens' assembly is to be run well: this is crucial to create an environment of care, support and nurturing for people.
- People will have all kinds of needs to even take part - from caring responsibilities, to access to a laptop or broadband, and other additional access requirements. How you provide that support to people is incredibly important to making sure citizens can participate equitably in the process.

- It is also about acknowledging that there are different kinds of thinkers and learners: kinaesthetic learners, auditory learners, visual learners etc., and thinking about how you put the process together to support those kinds of people too.

### **Deliberation**

- The programme has gone out to tender for a professional facilitator to work with the group and ensure that the facilitator is independent from the programme team.
- *Deliberation* is different to debate. Debate can be about winning an argument, whereas deliberation is about weighing things up. This means that you need to listen to each other and recognise that people have different ideas.
- *Dissent* is a crucial part of the assembly process. Respectfully asking people to be clear through the process and make sure people feel empowered to contribute their thoughts is critical. Giving people techniques and support, and making sure people are aware of their own biases - confirmation bias and other kinds.
- Bias cannot be ironed out of these processes entirely but bringing an assembly together to be more aware of the individual biases helps in the discussions and debate, encouraging people to think critically.
- Taking people through a process to support their understanding of how to take on evidence that they're going to hear, and building consensus proposals can be effective.
- There is often a misunderstanding that building consensus means that you end up in a "mushy middle"; in reality in citizens' juries and assemblies, you must take into account that there are different truths in the room at the same time. Local and national citizens' assemblies are often innovative because they have to deal with multiple truths along the way.

### **The challenges**

- This work takes time but political cycles favour short-termism. This work does not operate in a linear way and going back and iterating and asking if you heard the question the right takes time - that is something that must be considered.
- It is challenging to get representation across the board and to get quieter voices involved. One of the learnings has been to augment the

	<p>process with an even more targeted approach for communities that are systematically excluded.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Deliberation has posed significant challenges: the process needs to be designed with citizens otherwise it does not feel authentic.</li><li>○ Participants have fed-back that they really want to hear more about what is going on. They wanted to hold the group to account and want it to check back in after activities.</li></ul>
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## Chris Wright

### Future Everything

Greater Manchester, UK



<b>Bio</b>	<p>Chris Wright is the Executive Director of <a href="#">Future Everything</a> - an arts and cultural organisation which exists at the convergence of art, technology and society established in Manchester in 1995.</p> <p>Previously a festival, Future Everything ran a year-round programme of cultural activity that has been shaping digital culture locally, nationally, and internationally for over 25 years.</p> <p>Future Everything brings audiences together to discover and share new ideas and to imagine better futures through three programme strands called Public Artworks, Cross-Sector Collaborations and Digital Debates and Knowledge Exchange.</p>
<b>Focus</b>	<p><a href="#">This Place of Mine</a> is a project which took place during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Chris presented how Future Everything worked on engagement, providing insights into the development of a mechanism for including young people citizens in future cultural decision making.</p>
<b>Notes</b>	<p><b>Project background</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Future Everything was commissioned by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), to create a digital artwork that would imagine the future of high streets and town centres and tour around five of the participating local authorities in the city region. One of the key enablers was funding, which came from the <i>Great Places</i> scheme.</li><li>○ The project focussed on the shifting function of town centres in recent years and a select number of high streets in Greater Manchester that have seen investment from the national level. Arts and creativity has been playing a role in innovative place-based strategies with support through <a href="#">Future High Street Fund</a> and <a href="#">Heritage Action Zones</a>.</li><li>○ The project sought to build upon the progress leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic, and also link to other priorities including things like the <a href="#">Greater Manchester Digital Strategy</a> to further demonstrate the role of digital arts in priority areas across the region.</li></ul>



- The project wanted to enhance the role of young people across Greater Manchester in place-shaping and decision making, giving them a voice, even during the challenging pandemic period. A *Young Producers Scheme* working with a group of young creators across the five partner districts was formed.
- The overall aim was to engage young people across five boroughs to collaborate with an artist and contribute content that would result in a touring artwork that would appear around the area. Discussions centred around what people might want our high streets to look like, and the potential cultural impact.
- Roll out was due for March 2020, starting with engagement with young people's groups in five boroughs. Covid-19 hit in March 2020 and the programme had to be reimagined.
- Maintaining the ethos of capturing local young people's voices, generating a cultural and creative offer, and also trying to impact on decision making for the future, the programme made some key changes:
  - The project went online
  - The final artwork would be a virtual experience of some kind
  - The programme would seek to build capacity for digital skills amongst the young people to ensure they could participate
  - The mission would be to create something that would encourage town planning and regeneration departments in local authorities to consider alternative methods of public consultation and collective decision making
- Through a series of online workshops with national and international artists, young people explored themes of 'place', heritage and the future of high streets to create new digital artworks and co-design an online immersive experience. They were mentored by a group of emerging artists in Greater Manchester to create these digital artworks.

### **Challenges**

- Engaging with young people in a lockdown situation was made difficult for all the obvious logistical issues that could be expected during the pandemic.

- Solutions had to be found for ways to empower and provide a platform for voices and impact decision-making at a time when personal connection was limited.
- The project team implemented an R&D phase including a detailed scoping of Greater Manchester localities and youth provision, and landed on working in five areas. This was a combination of where the boroughs were perceived to be the most active and keen to participate, but also where there would be maximum impact because of the limited platforms for young people in terms of being heard in cultural decision-making processes.
- Originally, the project was going to engage with almost 100 young people, and this had to be whittled down to about 20% of that to give a higher quality experience and a more in-depth experience.
- Obstacles around digital inclusion were overcome by partnering with the Manchester Tech Fund to supply laptops and tablets so nobody was excluded in participating in the activity.

### **Learning**

- The project was a welcome gateway for young people to join the conversation about 'place' and the young producers embraced the opportunity to connect with other young people across the city region to articulate a vision.
- The immersive experience of the digital artwork and hub allowed people to go online, pose and answer questions, and have their say on what the future of the high street should be like. This digital forum kept the conversation between the young people and other local citizens going after the project concluded.
- Never assume anything about what young people want! Some responses were both fascinating and powerful - for example over 50% of young people called for more nature on the high street.
- The programme brought forward unexpected and insightful voices that conventional consultation may not have uncovered.
- For the young producers, there has been a newfound interest in 'place making', and several of them are moving on to study architecture and place making courses at university level.

### **What would we do differently?**

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ The project did not deliver the impact the project team had hoped. For example, it had been hoped that the participating local authorities could adopt <i>This Place of Mine</i> as an alternative consultation tool for working with young people. It has not yet had the impact wanted but this is seen as connected to post-pandemic challenges.</li></ul> |
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## Robin Simpson

Chief Executive of Creative Lives

UK



<b>Bio</b>	Robin Simpson is Chief Executive of <a href="#">Creative Lives</a> - a national charity founded in 1991 to be the voice of local non-profit and volunteer-led creative community groups.
<b>Focus</b>	<p>Creative Lives works with local people in a place to map existing community-based creative groups, which are identified by walking around and visiting places (like the post offices and cafes), talking to people and looking at noticeboards to find out what activities are happening around them.</p> <p>Creative Lives then brings groups together to develop a sense of network and provides a degree of peer support to encourage new groups to assist each other with the various challenges they face in their own communities.</p> <p>Creative Lives also provide training and development sessions, seed funding grants, micro grants - all at a very small scale - to address barriers for grassroots groups. The stories of these groups are celebrated through programmes like Creative Lives' partnership with BBC Local Radio, Creative Lives on Air.</p>
<b>Notes</b>	<p><b>Engaging communities differently</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ There is a large but largely hidden world of volunteer-led creative activities that bring people together in their communities to engage activities such as amateur arts groups, choirs, brass bands, Morris dancers, lacemakers, quilters, and a range of a broader definition of creative activities, encompassing creative gardening, cookery, DIY, 'knit and natter' groups, and other self-led creative hobbies.</li><li>○ Based on research in England in 2008, Creative Lives estimate there were around 63,000 volunteer-led creative groups across the UK and Ireland and that figure is expected to be higher today based on population growth and trends in hobbies.</li><li>○ 10 million people regularly take part in some sort of creative hobby group. People often come together in their communities because they want to do things like sing or dance or paint.</li></ul>

- These groups may have a variety of impacts on the wider community, but the most explicit reason for joining these group is often reported as being 'to do fun and creative activity' as opposed to specifically 'making the community a better place'.
- Most of the groups are self-funded and do not receive any public money whatsoever; in this sense they are self-sufficient and can be very sustainable.
- Creative groups exist in almost every community across the country and involve a wide spread of people - the mainstream population, including all those people who don't engage very much with professionally subsidised arts organisations, as well as just about every minority group going has its own form of voluntary creative activity.
- Creative Lives conducted a significant study in 2015-16 looking at local creative groups in black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in the UK which found that creative groups are active in those communities despite more traditional statistics telling us there's little art going on in them. There is plenty of arts and cultural activity going on at the grassroots level that is simply not counted properly yet.
- One of the other issues the research surfaced was people's sense of having 'no voice' in what happens in their communities, and that they felt somewhat excluded, on the margins and slightly ignored.
- In follow-up research as part of [Common Ground, Rewilding the Garden](#), local creative groups in areas of high deprivation were found in almost every community - they were facing challenges, but still finding a way to exist and to do their creative activity.
- There was a strong theme emerging from that research that some people's and organisations' voices get heard a lot by policymakers; participants felt that there should be more ongoing efforts to identify voices missing from policy level discussions and create forums for them.
- Creative Lives have started to develop their own programme strands on place-based development, mainly focusing on areas facing particular challenges or underinvestment. Case studies include:
  - Creative Lives' work in Middlesborough, specifically the wards of Brambles and Thorntree, Berwick and Pallister. This is an area high on most of the indices of deprivation but there are now 100 local creative groups in those two wards of alone. From tech start-up clubs to Lego family clubs, singing groups, etc. Something 'DIY' is

happening in the area and following consultation with the council, this Everyday Creativity dimension is recognised in the 10-year cultural strategy. Many participants said that felt the engagement with Creative Lives was much better than direct consultation with the Council.

- In Reading, Creative Lives are working with the two wards of Whitley and Church, sandwiched between the city centre and the M4 motorway - an area high on indices of multiple deprivation. The team looked at census and other data sets, and discovered it was not two separate areas, but seven different demographic communities in different parts. Understanding how a place works and the sorts of groups that emerge from that place is key. In Reading, once the wards were conceptualised as seven communities rather than two, we quickly found 150 local creative groups - often associated with faith-based groups, faith venues, some festivals, and informal small-scale groups that are not listed in any directory. 32 microgrants were awarded in the week of this discussion to groups across Reading, and a new project with BBC Radio Berkshire to tell the stories of those groups, is due to start soon.
- Finally, a group initially set up as a single coffee morning in the local library to support women who'd moved to Coventry with their families and grew into a network of meetings in five libraries involving a mix of 250 families, including dance, music, art, crafts, fashion, jewellery and more. This was not a professional intervention, nor was it funded, it was something that the population in that area had seen a need for.

### **Conclusions**

- Ensure that these local creative groups have the capacity, resilience and connections to enable them to work collaboratively towards solutions to local challenges.
- There is enormous potential within these informal and community-led creative groups, which seem to emerge in every community, to bring together a range of people who do not engage in any other form of voluntary action or civic engagement or activism.
- Creating forums or networks to allow them to work collaboratively to solve problems in their communities, to engage with the local council and so on could be very exciting.

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ But the team learned to be cautious of pushing groups too far. The reason they attract a wide range of people is because they are about the fun, creative activity and the social element. Harnessing how culture and creativity brings people together and creates that enthusiasm to get involved could translate into a more positive impact on those communities down the line.</li></ul> |
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# Implications for Policy

## The democratic deficit

One of the recurrent themes emerging from this *Knowledge Exchange* session was the perception of a democratic deficit in the UK. Citizens across the UK are not always using the ballot box to engage with decision making at a local, regional or national level, though we know that election turnout does differ across these tiers.

At the same time, institutionally supported creative, cultural and heritage programmes are often funded by the public purse to some degree, whether that be from UK Government or devolved governments directly, via arm's length bodies or by a local authority.

With these two points in mind, there was a broad consensus across the speakers that "the public" – from young to old – should be afforded the opportunity to contribute to decision making about how programmes are designed and implemented in their own locality.

## A 'Right to Culture'

Access to culture as a fundamental human right was raised several times during the session and this brought to mind the ongoing debate that Culture Commons are participating in about the opportunities that a new constitutional settlement between the UK Government and citizens could bring about, which we explore in more detail in this *Extended Briefing*.

The team at Culture Commons team are now working with colleagues at the University of Warwick and others on a *Research Paper* to extrapolate some of the key questions around how cultural rights might interact with devolution and increased local decision making in the future, including in a new Bill of Rights.

## Who leads

The speakers helpfully illuminate some of the ways in which different types of stakeholders, including creative organisations, wider civil society groups and even self-led community organisations, can develop meaningful place-specific programmes that engage citizens in creative activities. Wider programme conversations suggest that different places have a different blend of stakeholder picking up these kinds of activities.

More work could be done to understand whether these differences in blend are related to levels of public investment, citizen demographics or other important indicators. This could help us to determine which kinds of interventions are best led by which kinds of organisations based on the assets likely to be in play in a area.

## Smaller investments go a long way

Each of our speakers talked about the transformational power of relatively small amounts of seed funding: micro-grants were singled out as particularly useful in enabling hyper-local interventions that can have real impacts.



However, recent *Insight Gathering* roundtables we ran with arm's length bodies and grant giving bodies suggest that they recognise the role that they play in funding new citizen engagement programmes, including through micro-grants of the kind we heard from in this session.

Specialist cultural organisations dedicated to engagement with the public and that have close working relationships with citizens on the ground seem to be better placed than others to deliver micro-grants to the communities they are working within.

### **Deliberative cultural decision making**

Citizens' Assemblies, and the robust sortition processes associated with them, could one way of helping policymakers to get beyond those who are already highly engaged in more traditional creative, cultural and heritage activities and decision-making processes, and bring new understandings of what constitutes "culture" to the table. This could open up new opportunities for citizens to exercise their cultural rights in the places where they are actually based.

Of course, these kinds of interventions are still relatively new, and we need to monitor their impacts over time. We welcome the important work that Citizens in Power and others are doing to develop a new network to share best practice and assess impacts for this reason.

### **It takes time...**

Deliberative democracy, like 'devolution', is a *process* and this process requires

time and concerted attention if it is to be truly meaningful.

### **...and resource.**

Of course, formalised structures of citizen engagement and decision making need resources to be delivered effectively.

We will need to consider to what extent resource can be found at the scale needed to make change, and/or to what degree experimental activity will be needed to direct resources to areas. We draw attention here to earlier insights shared during this programme that competition-based models of funding seem to favour areas that already have well established infrastructures and that needs-based approaches might be more appropriate for this kind of policy intervention.

### **Intensity of engagement**

Our speakers shared very different examples of cultural engagement with citizens: light-touch groups of citizens coming together to enjoy culture and creativity in entirely self-directed ways; professional creative practitioners facilitating Local Voice projects for young people through digital programmes; and a grassroots cultural sector-initiated programme that is now bringing experts in to inform high-level decision making at the regional level.

Here, we see three different 'intensities' of engagement captured nicely. We may want to consider how the benefits of them might be monitored and evaluated effectively, as well as how these intensities can be flexed to

accommodate citizens with changing personal circumstances.

We will be exploring the appetite of the public to engage in decision making associated with culture, creativity and heritage at different intensities in a piece of commissioned research with Thinks Insight & Strategy later this year, which will see us running a series of focus groups in the four UK nations and in different regions of England.

### **Added value of combined authorities**

In two of the examples, we see Combined Authorities *initiating* or being *heavily involved* in the development of local cultural decision-making activities.

In both the West of England and Greater Manchester cases, we see these regional governance structures investing strategically in programmes with clear region-wide remits, leaning into their geographical reach and mandate to cover multiple constituent boroughs. The programme in Greater Manchester seems to suggest that citizens can enjoy engaging in cultural activity with citizens across a region.

### **Local authority preparedness**

We know from programme discussions that capacity, a lack of skills within delivery teams and the limited bandwidth of under-invested-in local authorities can be significant barriers to meaningful engagement in decision making processes at the local level.

With less public funding going into the creative, cultural and heritage sectors (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) coupled

with [smaller settlements from UK Government to local authorities](#) overall, it is entirely understandable that some areas are struggling to maintain long-term collaborations in this space.

As part of our research collaboration with the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place at the University of Liverpool, we'll be publishing a *Research Paper* on the general readiness of local authorities to engage with local cultural decision-making processes.

### **Private sector role**

It is noticeable from the contributions that the private sector (including the creative industries) seem to be absent from conversations about local cultural decision making and civic engagement in local areas.

We will work with the Creative Industries Council and others to bring the perspectives of the private sector into our deliberations to understand what role they might be able to play in empowering citizens in a more devolved policy landscape.

### **New forums are need**

In the roundtable that followed the presentations, partners discussed the need to explore new platforms that are dedicated to bringing together citizens, wider civil society, the creative industries, cultural sectors, heritage bodies and established decision makers "under one roof".

This builds on findings we made in 2021 about the need for a [Culture Forum](#) in local areas to build mutual

understanding between stakeholder groups, co-design programmes and mandate elected people to advocate for local people's needs post-pandemic.

We will continue to consider a *Culture Forum* model over the coming months and draw on emergent findings from our meetings with arm's length bodies and grant-giving organisations to do this. We recognise that there may be existing programmes in play that could be adapted for the same purposes (e.g. *Cultural Compacts* in the English context).

The programme in Greater Manchester shows how digital platforms can keep engagements alive over a longer period and facilitate ongoing interactions between citizens too. We will be looking at more digitally orientated programmes associated with local cultural decision making in a *Research Paper* in collaboration with the University of Kent.

### **Need for data**

Within boroughs, towns, and wards, communities are clearly not homogeneous. Exploring census data and engaging with the communities that exist within a place appears to have been important in the success of local cultural policy interventions by our contributors.

We may therefore wish to consider how hyper-local data can be opened up to more creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem operators, so that they are able to take demographic and other key indicators into account when designing their programmes.

We note that excellent local data work is already beginning to emerge (e.g. the [West Midlands Combined Authority](#)) and the [data dashboards](#) being shared by our programme partners at the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.

### **Amplifying local voice**

Whilst we did not spend much time discussing the role of public sector broadcasters (PSBs) per se, the BBC are clearly helping to amplify hyper-local cultural experiences in Berkshire.

We may wish to consider how PSBs could work in tandem with new local cultural decision making processes and forums in more detail in future.

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