

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda, HC 1040

Thursday 21 April 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 April 2022.

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Members present: Julie Elliott (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Steve Brine; Clive Efford; Dr Rupa Huq; Jane Stevenson.

In the absence of the Chair, Julie Elliott was called to the Chair.

Questions 70 - 124

Witnesses

[I](#): Sanaz Amidi, Chief Executive, Rosetta Arts; Keith Merrin, Director, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums; and Clare Reddington, Chief Executive, Watershed.

[II](#): Councillor Abi Brown, Council Leader, Stoke-on-Trent City Council; and Tim Joel, Head of Culture, Preston City Council.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sanaz Amidi, Keith Merrin, and Clare Reddington.

Chair: I welcome everybody to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee today. This is the second hearing in our inquiry into reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling-up agenda. That is not easy to say but, there we are, I said it. We have three witnesses today. We have Sanaz Amidi, Chief Executive of Rosetta Arts, Keith Merrin, Director of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, and Clare Reddington, Chief Executive of Watershed. Welcome to you all and it is lovely to see you here in person and getting back to more normalised meetings. I will open by asking Kevin Brennan to start.

Q70 **Kevin Brennan:** Good morning, everybody. Sanaz, what role do arts and cultural organisations like yours play in the local communities where you are situated?

Sanaz Amidi: To say something about Rosetta Arts, we are an organisation that is relatively new to the Arts Council. We have only been part of the NPO since 2018, but we have been operating in the borough of Newham for almost 30 years. The work that we do is very much about reflecting in our work fundamentally how people live. Our role is about reflecting in our programming the ever-changing and expanding lives that people live.

Rosetta Arts has two key aims as an organisation. The first is to improve wellbeing. What we mean by that is: how do we make people feel happier and healthier in life? How do we improve the quality of their lives? How do we support them out of loneliness and social exclusion?

The second part of our work is making artists sustainable, and by that we mean if we want to hear the voices of people from under-represented groups, if we want to have their voices contributing socially, culturally, economically, we need to sustain their practice in the sector. They need to be able to earn from their creativity. They need to be able to put food on their tables so that they do not just survive but thrive in the sector and contribute effectively.

The role of arts and cultural organisations like Rosetta is to do this. It is to offer those opportunities and create the ladders of opportunity for people to engage effectively and efficiently.

Q71 **Kevin Brennan:** Thanks. Keith, in expanding on that a little bit and talking about your own work, what do you think the idea of using culture for levelling up—that phrase we hear a lot of these days—ought to look like in practice if we are serious about it?

Keith Merrin: To give you a little bit of background to Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, we run nine museums and galleries—including two Roman forts—not just in Newcastle but also in Gateshead and North Tyneside and South Tyneside, and our archives cover Sunderland too. We



tell the stories of the communities, of the people of the north-east. One of the great things about my organisation is that people in those communities really love what we do, love the organisations. They see themselves as part of those organisations and venues.

On what that means for levelling up, everywhere is slightly different, so people in South Tyneside are different to the people in North Tyneside and the people in North Tyneside are different to someone in Newcastle. I am sure you all have your own bits within your constituencies. The idea that one size fits all is not really the right sort of approach, so giving people in communities the opportunity to decide what levelling up looks like in the local context is a much better way to go.

Q72 Kevin Brennan: Clare, the same for you. Please tell us about your work in Bristol and more widely. Also, do you think cultural organisations can supply solutions to issues like economic inequality or inequality between different areas, social mobility, wellbeing, quality of life and so on?

Clare Reddington: "Supply" is an interesting word, but "co-produce", I think definitely. Watershed was founded in 1982 and it was the UK's first media centre. We are based in Bristol on the harbourside. We have a turnover of about £5 million and we employ over 100 people. We have a mixed business model. Our funding comes in public funding terms from Arts Council, BFI and Bristol City Council, but we also work with AHRC, UKRI and universities. We work across cultural cinema and creative technology, which are our main artforms, but we are also a cinema, a landlord, a bar, a conference space. About 14 years ago we set up the Pervasive Media Studio, which is an innovation and co-working space with about 150 residents, and we gift space in prime harbourside Bristol real estate to artists who are at the heart of placemaking in the city.

We believe that to make new kinds of forms of media and to deliver innovation, you need to work with people who are not like you, so you need to bring people from all backgrounds together. Watershed was present on Bristol's harbourside before it was lovely. It was a bit of a cultural desert when Watershed was set up, but over four decades we have championed a version of levelling up, which is about bringing people together to share ideas, failure and risk and to contribute to a vibrant and mixed city centre.

For us, levelling up means that we want to enable everyone to participate in the social, cultural and economic development of the city. We want to ensure that everyone's voices are heard in inventing the future. There is a set of futurists, foresight people, who work for Government Departments and technology companies, and they are pretty engaged in delivering the future that most benefits them. What we want to do through our innovation programmes and our creativity and culture programmes is to make sure that people with multiple lived experiences get a chance to engage and invest in what kinds of futures we might want to live in society and, crucially, how technology will affect their lives, which is obviously something that is pretty fast moving.



Q73 Kevin Brennan: Yes, that is a very interesting point. You are right, “co-production”, because it should not be a top-down process is the point you are making there, isn’t it, rather than someone doing something? There is a definition that tends to be traditionally used by central Government, people like the Arts Council and so on, and policymakers about what culture is. I will throw this open to anyone who wants to have a go at it. Is the definition that is used by people—like the Arts Council and Government—for culture that is happening at the local level broad enough?

Keith Merrin: I think that we get a bit hung up on the definition of culture. We work very closely with all of the other venues in Newcastle and Gateshead under a banner called Newcastle and Gateshead Cultural Venues, and we run a programme, City of Dreams, which is about saying that Newcastle and Gateshead should be the best place in the country to grow up and have the best access to culture.

We did some research recently and we talked to 1,000 young people in Newcastle and Gateshead, working with an organisation called Children North East. We asked them, “Do you get involved in culture?” They rejected the word “culture” and what they were really interested in was creativity—so, having opportunities to engage and explore their identity. We also heard from those young people that they felt creativity was positive for their mental health—this was a big sample size—and they felt mental health was the biggest issue that young people were struggling with. They saw that looking at themselves and their culture, or however they defined it, and exploring their creativity, their opportunities to get involved, had a big impact on that.

Q74 Kevin Brennan: All our activities, whether it is politics or culture and the arts, are riven with jargon. It is ironic to me that sometimes in the cultural sphere, where the use of beautiful language and so on should be absolutely at the heart of it, we churn out the kind of jargon that is needed to fill in application forms for grants and so on. Do you think that one of the problems is that the word “culture” tends to suggest to some people so-called “high culture” and that is not for them, so we need to find a different way of communicating, using a term like “creativity” instead? Is that an important and valid point or not?

Sanaz Amidi: I think that language generally is an issue. We work in Newham, where English is not the first language for many communities there. Sometimes we don’t use the words “arts” or “creativity” because they can create barriers in themselves. What is so great about creativity is the fact that, through a whole range of different artforms, you can express yourself. Certainly, in the visual arts we benefit from that being a universal language.

Often we are working with refugee and migrant communities, where their first point of expression is through the visual arts, because we can help them to orientate themselves, express themselves and communicate their thoughts and feelings. Being hung up on language is definitely a



barrier for many of the communities that we work with. That is going back to my first point about culture fundamentally being about how we live, the way we live, and the way in which the arts and creative sector is a part of that. Culture is ever changing and expanding and so to try to pin it down is very challenging and I certainly understand the DCMS's challenge in doing that.

On the creative side of culture, in the UK people now say, "Happy Diwali", "Happy Christmas", "Happy Hanukkah". Groups come together, things get absorbed, some things do, some things don't, and we see that in popular culture, in fashion, music. It is reflected very much in what we are doing. I think that trying to pin it down is challenging and that is the difficulty with that kind of language.

Clare Reddington: I think that one of the problems is a siloed notion of artforms within culture as well. As an audience member, as a creator, the people we are working with are not seeing themselves reflected in very tight boxes. They are seeing emergent artforms, where on one hand film is mixing with VR to create new forms of immersive experiences. I think that we are bit more fluid in how we understand our cultural forms, and that really helps.

Cinema sits at the heart of Watershed's building, and cinema is a naturally democratic artform. It doesn't have some of the behaviour conventions that other artforms have. The ticket prices are much lower, so our ticket prices are £5 at all times for anyone who is under 24. That is not a programme, that is our core offer.

One of the interesting things is that often film is seen at the end of the value chain, so it is seen as a product, something to show people, but we see film as the cultural artform that sparks people's creativity, that introduces them to a cultural and creative life and possibility. Again, being more fluid with how we understand our value chains as well as our artform silos might help in a way that is probably more useful than thinking about high and low culture, which doesn't ever really resonate with us.

Q75 **Kevin Brennan:** A final question to ask all of your views on is in policy making—

Sanaz Amidi: Sorry, can I add something to what you just said?

Kevin Brennan: Let me ask my question first, then add it. On the issue of economic returns on investment in culture and the arts, to what extent is that a positive or a negative part of the picture when you are undertaking your work in your communities? Clare, you described, for example, how the area where you are based has changed over a period. You might point to that as an economic benefit of the work that you have done or you might say, "That is just coincidental to the work that we have done but we were there first and it has happened". To what extent is that a beneficial thing, or a positive or negative implication for



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organisations like yours? How do you make the case that culture and cultural activities of this kind are inherently beneficial, so that they are not only seen in that economic context? Sanaz, since you wanted to chip in on the last question, do you want to kick off on that?

Sanaz Amidi: On your point about it being high end and about culture, we talk about artforms but we have to remember that culture incorporates things like cooking and the fabrics that we see in the markets. I think in the traditional art sense, we have not been necessarily good at recognising the spectrum of arts and culture that is coming from the community. We did not necessarily recognise ourselves as a community organisation. We started off using the banner of education to provide culturally relevant activities but we are very much a community organisation. I think that perception of things being for the elite and for the few does very much still exist, particularly in the visual arts. Do you want me to—

Kevin Brennan: Yes, just on the economic question.

Sanaz Amidi: Ten-plus years ago, the creative and cultural sector was not necessarily seen as an economic driver, and I think we need to be careful about how we apply it. I described Rosette Arts as improving wellbeing and making artists sustainable. We are absolutely acknowledging the fact that the arts and culture have all these benefits for mental health, wellbeing, social exclusion, isolation, making people meet their intrinsic needs to be able to be more productive, to be more supportive, to be able to contribute to their neighbourhoods, their families and their everyday lives. Equally, in making artists sustainable, we are thinking about how we make ourselves accountable for the earnings of artists.

We have a target of £1 million of income that we raise for artists because we recognise that if we want people from under-represented backgrounds contributing to the sector, if we want them to contribute to the creative economy, they need the skills and the experiences and the support to do that.

However, we have to always remember that artists march to a different drum and they are fundamentally driven by their creativity. It starts from their idea; it starts from their creativity first, before they then turn that into a business. If you look at every business across all the various sectors, we put the creative and cultural sector as one sector but we have to look horizontally across the contribution it makes in all the different sectors. I think that is where it gets tricky to put a number to the contribution it makes and reduce it to that.

Q76 **Kevin Brennan:** Keith, can we have your view on that?

Keith Merrin: We do try to put a number against what we do. Across the Newcastle, Gateshead cultural venues I mentioned before—which is 10 building-based organisations—in the last pre-pandemic year we delivered



£94 million of gross value added into the local economy. That is just under £5 for every £1 of public subsidy. The interesting thing for my organisation is that that does not necessarily translate into money for us. We run three sites associated with Hadrian's Wall, as I think I mentioned earlier. One of the really interesting things is that we can drive huge numbers of tourists into the north-east to walk along Hadrian's Wall—which we do and I have walked Hadrian's Wall and you bump into Italians, Americans and people from all over the world—but we don't have a way to monetise that.

There is an interesting thing between us as generators of wealth for the region but also not having the money necessarily to sustain what we do on a day-to-day level. We have been making that argument for a long time, so I suppose my rhetorical question is: is making the economic benefit argument actually translating into investment in arts and culture? There is a question mark in my mind about that.

The other thing is that pretty much all of the other issues that our communities face have the economy at their root. We have the highest levels of child poverty in the country, outside of London, in the north-east. We have high levels of health inequalities. We have the life expectancy and children and young people not achieving as well at school as in other parts of the country. The root cause of many of those things can be traced back to the economy: the low incomes and the numbers of people out of work that we have.

Although it is reductive to say it is all about the economy, I think by addressing many of those other problems, getting people back into the workforce, getting people engaged in school, we are benefiting the economy as well in ways that perhaps are not as easy to measure.

Q77 Kevin Brennan: Finally, Clare. Bear in mind that we are going to produce a report about this at the end, so if you have any ideas that—

Clare Reddington: Yes, we have ideas. We like to think ecologically about impact across the city. We are working with players on different sides and contributing different values. We have collaborated with the University of the West of England for over 10 years to design business development schemes for cultural and creativity industries, which are context-specific and are optimised for cultural businesses. In our sector we quite often steal schemes that have been made for other sectors for business growth, and they don't quite work. We often get asked to tick boxes and provide KPIs that don't quite work either.

We are working with 150 companies through our creative scale-up programme. They have added £9.3 million of turnover during the pandemic, but working with the University of the West of England we have looked at a work-generated model rather than a jobs-created model. When you are working with small and micro companies, which make up the majority of the ecology in Bristol, there is a huge economic impact but individually they don't register on the widgets and the IP



models that there are. We think that new models will help us understand economic impact but also perhaps to get away from the tyranny of acquisition model that we have, where success equals: "Grow high-growth business and sell it".

The creative businesses are in business for social, cultural and economic value. They don't necessarily want to get out, and they are also better for their local communities if they stay over long periods. Companies like Aardman Animations in Bristol have contributed hugely to the local creative ecology. They stay and they are committed parts of talent development and economic development. We want to challenge fast-growth business support schemes and look at slow and sustainable creative support.

Kevin Brennan: Thanks very much.

Q78 Chair: You have touched on the economics of your organisations and you are clearly three very different organisations, but how have long-term and short-term financial challenges impacted your organisations and, more importantly, their ability to ensure a sustainable and viable future?

Sanaz Amidi: Yes, we are very different. We are a visual arts organisation with a broader response to artforms. We also sit on the Contemporary Visual Arts Network, which is nine regions of England and we sit on the London one. I think that I can reflect some of the challenges from the various organisations that we work with.

Going back to Clare's point about this fast-growth view around how organisations should operate, it is a slow burn. Often we find lots of great initiatives have been set up across the country and the funding stops and the whole thing collapses. All the good stuff that has happened ends because the funding is not sustainable. There is a view that organisations should not rely on grant aid and should be commercial enterprises. No, they should not. They should have a mixed economy model, but they do have to rely on grant aid because the incentives and motivations of organisations like ours should be aligned around the social and community impact that it makes.

It should not be motivated by making money because the contribution is far bigger and, as Keith said, you are making all these contributions in your local communities and it is not validated through commercial income. You are not earning from it but the wider ecology is. Thinking about our role in the ecosystem is incredibly important to overcome the short-term view for organisations to be earning from their creativity and sweating all of their intellectual assets. We are more than that, I think, is what I am trying to say.

I think that moving away from grant aid for organisations like ours—London is often thought of as a wealthy capital. We work in Newham, which is one of the poorest boroughs in the country. We have more children and young people in displaced housing than the whole of the



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north of England. The average life expectancy is 10 years younger than the rest of London. We have high health inequalities, lots of issues around social exclusion, isolation, drugs use, low level education, and yet we are banded with this, "You're a London organisation and, therefore, the resource that you should have access to is now going to be reduced". You cannot compare apples with oranges.

We are working very deeply in a borough with communities who need a lot of help and support and to do anything meaningful and profound takes time. It needs to be well resourced. We need to be motivated with that. We cannot be distracted with trying to earn from beer money and coffees and this, that and the other. That has its place, but we need to be able to do what we do best. We are the smallest organisation here by far. We are not turning over millions, but small operations often give an experience and quality that cannot be treated any other way.

Q79 Chair: Going back to my question, you have outlined the issues in the area you work in, which is all very useful, but what are the particular challenges your type of organisation faces financially? Is it planning? Is it knowing where the next pound is coming from? What are the challenges?

Sanaz Amidi: Yes, absolutely. We are often highly reliant on project funding. We are a National Portfolio Organisation, funded from the Arts Council. We did that funding six years ago and we have grown threefold and yet the contribution that it is making is 11% to our core costs, so we are having to work really hard to try to make up our basic core costs so that we can operate.

Most of our funding is project funding. I would say that 90% of our clients are different from our beneficiaries, which is absolutely right. We are getting funding from local government, central Government, private sector funding, commercial, which is very small, and donations, but we are still very much reliant on grant aid.

We are opening a second venue on the east side of Newham, which is the furthest east that an NPO would have gone in the borough. We are describing this space as a creative wellbeing space. The amount of fundraising we have to do is phenomenal for such a small organisation like ours, which does not have the benefits of multiyear funding that is secured.

We are having to work hard to sustain an asset in the borough where what we really want to do is enable even the micro and smaller organisations to benefit from it because they need access to a building, they need training and skills and capacity building. We are very protective of those smaller groups because they are doing exceptional work in the community that cannot be replicated.

Going back to your point, the challenge for us is the kind of perception around, first, London, and we are suffering from that greatly when the work that we are doing—we do work regionally but there are very



deprived communities in Newham and in London. It is the perception around grant aid. It is also blanket policies at local authority level.

For example, we are negotiating our lease for this space with the local authority. I don't understand why we are not getting 100% rent relief for our social value. We are offering a community venue and when they work out the rents, they work it out on a retail space. We are not a retail space. Okay, fine, retail has suffered during the pandemic. "What have you compared us to that you have recently rented out?" "A local bookies." "What? The local bookies suck the life and soul of the community and you are comparing us and giving us a rent rate based on retail that is gambling."

You can see the sort of challenges around policy and perception for small organisations like ours. We are small and nimble and agile, but we do a breadth of work across the borough.

Q80 Chair: Keith, what are the long-term and short-term financial challenges for your organisation?

Keith Merrin: We are the opposite in a sense, in that we are building-based, predominantly big, old buildings. Right now we have a massive problem with our utility costs, which are crippling us. As Sanaz said, our Arts Council funding remains the same, our local authority funding—which I will come back to—this year remains the same, but our electricity and gas bills have doubled, so something has to give.

I sit on the Northern Culture Network, which is a cultural consortium across the north. We did a little bit of work about what are the common issues affecting culture in the north at the moment and four things came through that. One was about the fact that in the north particularly—and I am sure this applies in other parts of the country—cultural organisations are very reliant on local authority funding, so not just Arts Council, local authority much more than Arts Council. Of course, local authority funding has been under stress for many years now, for the last 10 years certainly, and post pandemic our expectation is that that will be even more so, and obviously that is a big concern.

The solution to that was to align ourselves, as my organisation has done very successfully. We work very closely with Newcastle University and Northumbria University, so higher education funding is becoming increasingly significant in what we do, but again that is under stress at the moment and is likely to be even more so post pandemic. We don't have the same levels of philanthropy, the same access to business sponsorship as other parts of the country and the bigger organisations in London have access to.

Where that comes into focus, just to give a quick example, is that we are bringing the Lindisfarne Gospels to the north-east this year, which will be brilliant and loads of people are enjoying them and they resonant very much with people in the north-east because they were made in the north-



east and we are very grateful to the British Library for loaning them to us, but that does not come with any money. We have to then go out and find significant amounts of money in the north-east, which is the hardest bit of the country to raise money in, to then put on that exhibition. There is something not just about our business model generally being under stress but it is much harder to raise money more generally and, as we talked about before, we don't necessarily see the direct economic impact of what we do.

Coming back to other things happening, our communities have been disproportionately impacted by Covid and the cost of living crisis and, therefore, their ability to buy tickets for things. I think that this has severely impacted. Our business models are already under stress as a result of the last two years. We are hugely grateful to the Government for the cultural recovery fund but now the real problems start this year onwards.

We have a huge reliance on freelance workforce and, again, many people have left freelance working during this period in our sector and, therefore, costs go up and it is more difficult to find them. There are multiple issues. Obviously I am talking about it from a northern perspective but hearing the noises from my colleagues here it sounds like—

Sanaz Amidi: Yes, the talent drain is phenomenal.

Keith Merrin: It is more about the wider issue. Right now, this year, we are coping even with increased utility costs.

Q81 **Chair:** You have mentioned Covid, and clearly there has been a massive impact on everybody in the last couple of years, but moving forward, do you think that there will be any long-term effects on the finances of your organisations?

Keith Merrin: We are doing quite a big piece of research at the moment with our communities, looking at their propensity to come back and to buy tickets for things. We have our Lindisfarne Gospels tickets on sale at the moment and they seem to be selling okay. I think the relationship with communities has changed a little bit during that period and I think also the range of services and the expectations that we will now offer.

We do a massive amount of schools work in person in our museums. During the pandemic we started doing it online and now there is a demand for both online and in person, so we are doing twice as much work to reach those communities, but again with no increase in income to do that. I think that there are some longer-term trends but it is hard to do that.

The really important thing that I wanted to say, as I have said about the economic impact, is that we all know—I am guessing all of you know as well, which is why you are here—we can have a really positive impact on



the levelling-up agenda but only if we have a sustainable cultural infrastructure in the first place. It is the expectation that you just chuck some money and build something new and it will all be great. It is fine and there is absolutely room for new investment—don't get me wrong, I have several ideas—but there is also the issue of the long-term sustainability of our existing infrastructure, which is world class and reaches so many of our communities. Somehow we need to address that at the same time as investing more into new things.

Q82 Chair: Clare, is there anything you want to add to what has been said?

Clare Reddington: Yes, just to agree, not to trigger myself too much but to remind myself we were thriving before lockdown. We were a sustainable, thriving, prospering business and lockdown took out about 48% of our income. We are looking at targets of 80% of our audiences back in the next year, but those are really tough and challenging targets to meet.

They are tough and challenging when you are also thinking about hybrid services, about not just leaving behind all of the people that you reach with digital provision who cannot access cultural provision. Quite a lot of people have turned off that tap. We are committed to continuing access for people who cannot come to our venue. Digital transformation is costing a lot of money. The cost of everything has gone up: recycling, marketing, freelance; everything has gone up by about 25% I think. Our public funding is all on standstill or cuts and we cannot put ticket prices up because we will just, therefore, not be inclusive.

I think that there is a short to medium-term issue. I see our future as being a thriving, prospering cultural centre again that brings people together to think about imagination and possibility, but it will be tricky in the short term. There is a notion that we are returning to business as usual from our funders that is not true and it is not helpful.

Q83 Clive Efford: Thanks for coming in to give evidence to us. We really appreciate it. Local authorities have been forced to make significant cuts over the last 10 or 12 years and they are the biggest source of funding for cultural and heritage projects. The LGA tells us that between 2010 and 2017-18, £1.8 billion was cut from expenditure on heritage and culture. That is down roughly about 40 pence for every £1 that was spent in 2010. During that time, what have you done to try to cope with that level of cuts?

Sanaz Amidi: At Rosetta Arts we work and have been working with across six or seven different departments in the local authorities, everything from adult social care, community neighbourhoods, regeneration, children and young people services and others. Newham have published the "Towards a Better Newham" strategy, which is a post-Covid strategy and the development of the borough because of the effects of pandemic. We have responded to that strategy and pledged ourselves against three out of the eight pillars in the recovery of the



borough. When local authorities work well and are well resourced, they are able to contribute effectively to creative and cultural organisations, community arts organisations. Also, the relationship has to be two ways. We think about what problems can we solve, what things can we do to help the local authority in what it is trying to do and try to speak in that language.

Q84 Clive Efford: However, local authorities have to fund social care, look after children who are at risk, the core priorities of local authorities. You must be in competition for the resources.

Sanaz Amidi: Yes, absolutely, but we are in constant conversation across all the various departments. We sit on the anti-poverty alliance, the loneliness in Newham alliance. We work with public health and we think about where the issues are and how we can help the local authority in meeting those needs. We have been very successful—

Q85 Clive Efford: How does that make you sustainable?

Sanaz Amidi: We get commissioned to do that work, and our largest source of funding is through commissions from local government. During the pandemic we didn't have access to our venue for two years. We have always delivered work in various outdoor festivals and events, but we have never been producers of outdoor festivals, so we went on a very steep learning curve to be producers of outdoor festivals.

We benefit from a borough that has a community wealth building strategy. It prioritises organisations within its borough to fund them and to be able to meet their needs, but we are very much meeting their needs. The value proposition is there. We are not saying, "Just fund us because we are the arts". We are saying, "What is your need so that the arts help you to do what you need to do?"

Clive Efford: You have had to adapt.

Sanaz Amidi: We have massively had to adapt. I was traumatised by the steep learning curve that we had to go through last summer to be producers of festivals, but we managed to deliver this festival. We had thousands of people come in and we delivered in a massive market called Queen's Market in Green Street. The feedback that we got from the local businesses and the stallholders was, "We have had higher sales. This is amazing. This is exactly what we need. Can we have this all the time?" "Well, no, I don't want to go through this every week, but there are things that we can do to make your place and space and your proposition better."

Q86 Clive Efford: Thank you. Keith, how have you adapted over the last 10 years?

Keith Merrin: A lot of our funding was coming from local authorities, say 10 years ago or more, and that funding has been reduced by about half. That has had a massive impact on things like opening hours. We have



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had to change our opening hours, reduce them, reduce our staffing levels. Some of those things have been easier than others to manage but it has had a big impact. We have had to diversify our income. We have a trading company that generates a lot of money through shops, cafés, venue hire, all of which, of course, have now been impacted on by Covid, particularly depending on our business. We have shrunk in size but then grown again through project funding.

I am a huge fan of our local authorities that we work with, as you would expect. They all really care about culture and see the value of culture and have, as I mentioned, maintained their levels over the last couple of years, have fought hard to maintain their investment. Exactly as Sanaz said, we have refocused our mission and our business model to deliver on all of those challenges that local authorities are dealing with because they are the challenges that our communities are dealing with. We are completely aligned with those. I was going to say something else but I have completely lost it so I will let it go.

Clare Reddington: Watershed has changed its business model over the last 10 years by becoming much more of a support organisation itself for the local ecology. We partner with BFI to be the film hub for the south-west, so we are funding the people who are working on new film-making projects or cultural cinemas and we support artists through the Pervasive Media Studio. City council funding does not make up a huge proportion of our income.

Public funding is only about 16% of our core anyway, but it is an important percentage and we are only able to do the work that we do if our ecology is healthy. The individual artists, the young film-makers, are supported through city council funds where it makes up a huge and substantial part of their early income and we will see us become impoverished if that shrinks.

Keith Merrin: I just wanted to come back because I forgot what I was going to say. The other thing I meant to say—and I mentioned this before—is I am really grateful that we have a lot of support because of our links with higher education. We work closely with Newcastle University and Northumbria University in particular, and we deliver lots of benefits back to them in student opportunities, research, and their ability to access research funding benefits us.

I wanted to mention a couple of practical things as well. One is that museums and galleries tax relief—that is specific to my organisation—has been really helpful but could do more, and particularly that online exhibitions and activities, for example, are not covered and that does not seem very sensible in the current environment. Also education work, learning work, which we do masses of, is excluded from that, so there are opportunities to expand that to get those tax reliefs back in. The other thing is that we in particular suffer badly through the business rates regime and are currently in dispute with the Valuation Office over



business rates and the money that is being spent on them arguing their case and us arguing our case is absolute madness, when what we are delivering is museums that people enjoy and use and deliver huge benefit to the communities. There are things that can be done at a policy level that could make our lives easier.

Q87 Clive Efford: Before you come in, I will throw in my next point. You have all talked about specific projects with in and out money that comes in for a specific project and you spend it on that project. How much of your resources are taken up with that? Core funding is crucial for not-for-profit organisations. Can the competition regime be changed to be more accommodating and less costly?

Sanaz Amidi: I want to add that I slightly gave the wrong idea about the local authority, in that we work across all these but there is definitely an area that has suffered and that is education. The levelling-up agenda talks about the creative and cultural sector being a driver for growth and yet at the same time the creative arts education is being devalued.

We have not been able to deliver our educational offer for two years, but for the last 10 years it has become harder and harder to do because for what qualifies as a funded arts course, the portfolio has become smaller and smaller. For us, that has been a very important way of giving people the experiences, the skills that they need to be an active player in the sector and to be able to contribute effectively. Going back to your other point, I will let someone else go first.

Keith Merrin: The question was about competitive bidding. A couple of things on that, and I worked very closely with Julie when we were bidding for Sunderland to be the UK City of Culture a few years back. That was a hugely energising process for the city and for the people of the city, so I think that there is a role for that sort of competitive bidding perhaps on those kinds of City of Culture-type roles as long as it is then backed up with support for the cities that get involved and do that, not just the winning city, if you see what I mean—that there is a sense of carrying forward that momentum.

Sanaz Amidi: Often the winning city doesn't then get sustained afterwards either. That is the problem.

Keith Merrin: I know this is not an inquiry into cities of culture, but in Sunderland we felt in the later stages that the amount of money that was going to be spent in one year as opposed to if you invested the same amount of money over 10 years, the difference that that could make, taking my point.

On bidding generally for funding and particularly for the levelling-up funding—sorry to keep dropping you into it, Julie—I gave evidence to the Northern Culture All-Party Parliamentary Group, who produced a report recently. One of the things it talked about was the shift away from bidding towards devolved funding, and I really support that idea. It



comes back to my answer to the very first question about local communities and I suppose linking back to local authorities knowing what is best for specific areas.

Rather than constantly pitching against each other, if we can just go to the areas and see what are the real needs and devolve that funding down as close as possible to local level, whether that is at a combined authority level or through LEPs or whatever structures the Government think is the best route for that, rather than a constant battle for funds. That, by its very nature, favours bigger organisations like mine where we have fundraising teams and people who can work on that and maybe works against smaller organisations, particularly I would have thought community-led organisations. I know we heard this on the APPG discussion from small organisations who don't have those skills and are not necessarily equipped to join in that bidding process.

Clare Reddington: We set up Pervasive Media Studio in Watershed 14 years ago because of project funding. We worked with big tech companies like Hewlett Packard or universities. We brought artists in to look at the future of technology and as soon as the project funding ended all that wisdom and the skills and the benefit would dissipate quickly. We set the studio up as a permanent space to gift workspace and we have seen the benefit of that in our film-making communities and our creative tech communities.

I think that there are interesting models that people like the Lottery have been looking at for 10-year funding for cultural infrastructure. Our funding from Arts Council and BFI is a very important part of what allows us to take risks, that kind of support over three or four years.

If we can find inclusive ways where we are held to fairly rigorous measures for making sure we are not too cliquey or too inward looking, but long-term funding that allows us to properly co-produce with communities, local placemaking, that would be amazing. It would cut down a serious amount of administration as a lot of the culture sector are reapplying for their Arts Council funding at the moment and many days of work goes into that.

Q88 Clive Efford: You mentioned cultural infrastructure. Beyond the financial challenges, what are the biggest challenges for your organisations? We have had evidence to us about connectivity, transport, all sorts of issues.

Sanaz Amidi: I chair an alliance called the Creative Newham alliance and it represents over 80 organisations in Newham who want to improve their cultural mobility because of that very reason. Many of the neighbourhoods are described as kaleidoscope audiences, which are audiences that will only do things on their doorstep, literally in their postcode—over 80%.

The challenge that we have is sometimes the lack of infrastructure across the borough. It is about building the confidence of people to move within



the borough. Many of the communities that we work with have not even travelled into central London, have not visited the big institutes. We do lots of work, a lot of hand-holding, to take people literally physically on that journey. Those institutes are important. They are pinnacles of talent; they inspire us; they give us another alternative; they show the journey; they demonstrate the journey; and so, they have a place in our ecosystem.

One of the biggest challenges for us is the inclusion of workforce and audiences. Everything we do is about people, whether they are delivering the work for us or benefiting from the work that we do. We have spoken about the talent drain in London. It started from Brexit, the pandemic also, the cost of living. The effect for us has been phenomenal.

During the Newham Unlocked Festival, I was calling everyone to find the talent that we required to do the work behind the scenes. We showcased over 300 artists, 91% of which were from Newham, during the festival but the people behind the scenes, the ones who get those big juicy contracts to deliver the work, were not there and they certainly were not from Newham.

The investment that we have to make in taking people on the journey to build the skills and the capacity to do that work is a big investment. It takes many, many years. When they drop off, the effect on us is phenomenal because we want people to be representative of the communities that we want to reach. If they cannot survive in the sector let alone thrive, we really are at a disadvantage to be able to do our work effectively and meaningfully in the community.

Q89 Clive Efford: In addition to the other things I mentioned, is climate change an issue for you with some of your sites?

Keith Merrin: I was going to mention that. Other challenges we are dealing with are reliable, cheap public transport. We have some good public transport in the north-east but in our more rural communities there is a real need for reliable, cheap public transport.

As Sanaz has talked about, we have a real problem with the talent pipeline, with recruitment generally. I know that lots of sectors are struggling with it at the moment, but also a lack of investment in cultural education. We are concerned about that in the next generations of creative people. Those are big issues and climate change, absolutely.

As I mentioned, we run a lot of big old buildings and there are lots of issues around that. Having said that, we feel that we have a huge role to play in helping communities understand climate change and understand their impact on the climate so we do a huge amount of work in that. In many ways, we see that as an opportunity for us as an organisation and I think across the wider north it is something that we talk about a lot because—sorry, I am doing my selling bit again—we have an incredible natural environment.



We have built up a lot of skills and knowledge over the years about net zero and how to manage our impact on the environment. We have, as we all do, incredible engagement with our local communities and, therefore, a real role to play in helping people understand about climate change and how they can have an impact on it. It is a challenge but we feel it is also one of the big opportunity areas.

Clare Reddington: Yes, definitely climate justice and understanding climate change's relationship to inclusion, especially for capital buildings. The most sustainable building is the one that already exists, so how do we retrofit our leaky Victorian buildings to be fit for purpose? I think that it is digital transformation in the sector, equipping people to understand the needs, the workflows, but also to ask the ethical questions about some of the technology solutions that we are being given or pointed towards that might not be fit for purpose, that might need more nuanced understanding before we offload them on our audiences and customers.

Q90 **Clive Efford:** Do you get any support for this from any organisations, Arts Council?

Clare Reddington: We are the support. For climate justice we have an action researcher who is creating toolkits for other creative businesses to be able to understand their carbon impact. A lot of people when faced with thinking about climate change sort of seize up. It is such a big topic they don't really know, especially if you are in a small or micro business, how to change. On inclusion as well, we are doing lots of work about understanding how people's lived experience affects their experience of our cultural provision, again developing toolkits, sharing that, open sourcing our methodologies so that our communities can benefit from that.

Q91 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I have what looks like quite a broad question. If you think of when the Department of National Heritage, or whatever it was, changed its name to have "culture" in it, these things do change. The question I have is: what trends have you noticed in cultural participation over time? That is a big one. You can go as far as what the pandemic did for your audiences, but just generally. You all look quite young so I don't know how long you have been in the sector.

Keith Merrin: It is very nice of you say.

Clare Reddington: I think in an exciting way our audiences expect more from us in beliefs and values, opportunities to come together and use culture to engage with the things that are important to them for their city. In Bristol, that is thinking about the impact of the slave trade, thinking about climate justice. There is a summoning power of the creative industries that is expected by young audiences particularly, which is really exciting.

I think that co-development and co-production is a change. They don't expect us to just design something in an ivory tower and then give them



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a programme. People want to be involved. People with lived experience want to be involved in the programmes that touch and affect them and they want to design them. We become much more facilitators than simply curators, and that is exciting, but again, if you are going to build trust with communities, that needs quite long-term funding because you cannot parachute in and out, and that creates more of a mess.

The main things for us are the notion of having a voice and culture engaging with the tricky interlocking crises that we are all facing at the moment and people being involved in how that culture is delivered to them.

Q92 **Dr Rupa Huq:** You said the word “tricky”. I am just reminded that Bristol had Tricky, didn’t it, and Massive Attack?

Clare Reddington: Bristol very much.

Dr Rupa Huq: Are they still going, just out of curiosity?

Clare Reddington: Tricky doesn’t live in Bristol but Massive Attack certainly does and I think very much—

Dr Rupa Huq: They were all from that neck of the woods, weren’t they?

Clare Reddington: They were and the Bristol sound is very much still at the heart of many of the creative industries. There is an amazing street art scene in Bristol that comes from that. Also, things like CARGO Classroom, which is looking at decolonising classroom curriculum in Bristol and Massive Attack are a part of that as well. There is the legacy of that brilliant Bristol sound still going.

Dr Rupa Huq: That is reassuring.

Keith Merrin: I was going to say some of the same things about participation and co-production. People are less interested in a passive experience and much more in an active engagement in what we do and also in co-designing and co-producing the content of what we do. That is a big change.

Pretty much any exhibition or project starts with talking to the communities that it impacts. That can be from talking to the exhibition builders before we put on an exhibition, and understanding and telling stories from their perspectives. Or it can be working with communities from all over the world who now live in Newcastle or in the north-east when we start to look at some of the issues around how we display our World Cultures collections, for example.

I suppose that again—as Clare mentioned—a sense of that expectation from our audiences around how we address issues around social justice has definitely increased. Again, for us as a museum, that is a serious thing that we need to address. In one of our museums at the moment we present a World Cultures gallery. The way that that material is presented



is not necessarily the way that communities would expect to engage with it. If you are talking about the heritage of a particular community, displaying it out of context is not that helpful, if it is your heritage that you are exploring. There is a definite expectation that we do more of that, which of course is a very expensive business if you are talking about changing physical exhibitions. At the moment a lot of that is addressed through projects and through engagement activities.

As I mentioned before, that pressure to deliver physically and digitally at the same time, as hybrid deliveries, has increased over the last couple of years. What has not changed from my sector, in particular, is that deep engagement that people have with their history and heritage. Whether that is the history and heritage going back hundreds of years in that place or the history and heritage of communities that have come into the north-east and reflecting that; that real sense of people having engagement with their own personal history, with the history of the community of the north-east, whatever that looks like, and often with the places that represent that, for what we do, is helpful.

As I mentioned at the start, people love what we do and love those stories and histories but are always looking for different ways of looking at that and that is where it keeps us on our toes, in a sense, wanting to develop. Maybe that change is the pace of change, the fast-moving nature of it, that one time you build a museum and 20 years later you maybe redid it, whereas now it is almost constant change, constant rethinking how we present the material.

Q93 Dr Rupa Huq: Are visitor numbers up again after Covid or are people still reluctant?

Keith Merrin: Our visitor numbers were brilliant before Covid. We get around 2 million visitors a year across the nine venues but since the pandemic they have dropped back to around 50% of normal. I do not know what is happening over the Easter holidays. February half-term was pretty good, about 60%, 70% of normal, so they are gradually coming back.

What we are finding is that people will come if there is a specific event or activity, and maybe it is that background dropping in and visiting. If you talk to some of the retailers in Newcastle, they will tell you during the week the shops are all very quiet because obviously not all people are back in offices. I am not suggesting that everybody used to dive out in their lunch hour and come to our museums, but maybe they did.

That background popping into the museum for a quick look around seems to have dropped off. Whereas, if we put on a big event—which again of course is expensive and requires a lot of effort—people will come and engage with that and buy tickets for it. It is a complicated picture in that sense.

Q94 Dr Rupa Huq: Sanaz, sort of opposite end of London from me, but I get



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everything you are saying about how just because we are London we should not be out of all this levelling up stuff. What would you say?

Sanaz Amidi: For us, with cultural participation, there would be three key points. First, due to Covid the engagement with technology and digital services, we never stopped delivering at Rosetta so we delivered online, outdoor and blended services. We started to send out art kits back in March 2020 to people's homes and we upskilled our artist educators in the use of technology and we took those families. We sent out art kits to families in Newham so that they could continue the various educational programmes that we offered, and we took them on a journey.

Certainly seeing intergenerationally how people are interacting with technology, engaging and participating in culture through technology has changed dramatically, particularly with older audiences, building their confidence. The digital offer has very much remained as part of our portfolio of work at Rosetta. Newham has a higher percentage of disabled people, so the number of people that are shielding is also higher.

The retention and uptake of the vaccines is quite low, particularly in the second and the booster, so we have a high proportion of communities that are shielding, so definitely the digital offer and how we offer blended services has increased dramatically, so they are going on a learning journey with us.

Secondly, it is about arts education. We have had almost near enough close to zero uptake in our arts education offer. I think arts education is a social justice issue because if people do not have disposable income they are not going to pay £400 to do an arts education course. It is a luxury so we need to find ways of reducing those barriers for people to benefit from what arts education can bring, and value and investing in arts education is a way to build the artistic infrastructure of the future.

As I mentioned before, we are an Ofsted inspected training provider. We deliver a whole range of different accredited courses with various examination boards but the portfolio for us to access funding to then reduce those barriers for people to access arts education for free or highly subsidised has become smaller and smaller. That is incredibly concerning for us.

It has been happening over the last decade but we are seeing the effects now because people do not have the disposable income, even the smallest amounts, to be able to benefit from what the arts education can bring. Then that affects our talent pipeline because they need to build the skills in order to be able to actively participate in the creative and cultural sector. Then we are not seeing people from under-represented backgrounds who can then contribute to the work that we are doing.

There is the arts education, there is digital, and we have definitely seen a big uptake for how we use the arts to express ourselves, particularly to



improve our mental health and wellbeing. To help us to connect with people, even if it is by a Zoom call during the lockdowns, but certainly I think the value of arts in improving mental health has increased and therefore we can see a stronger response from a whole range of different agencies and audiences in engaging with the arts to improve their mental health.

From a Rosetta point of view, we are always trying to think about how we can reflect that local practice in what we offer so that we are meeting at the hyperlocal needs and interests of the communities that we are trying to reach.

Q95 Dr Rupa Huq: I will start with you for the next one because it kind of overlaps with what you are saying. I am particularly interested in youth culture. That is what I used to research before I came in here. Do you think that the sector is able to appeal to different groups of you? I remember I think it was in the new Labour years there were music action zones where there were state inventions for doing hip hop projects and things. I imagine those have dried up a bit but then some people did not want to do the state-sponsored hip hop and they would rather spray a can of graffiti on a thing that is not allowed to be sprayed on.

Are there tensions between different groups of youth? Again, it is a bit of a cliché that people assume that if you are putting on Shakespeare, you do hip hop Shakespeare. Are there competing groups of youth and how do you cater to unofficial youth/official youth with projects like yours? I want to go all three. There is an argument old people feel left out as well. As someone who has had a significant birthday with a zero recently, it feels the cultural industry—

Sanaz Amidi: I think we all benefit.

Chair: Can I intervene here because we are running over? Can we just make the answers slightly shorter please? You have already said a lot.

Sanaz Amidi: I would say that the biggest concern for us around youth culture is the access to the training and the experiences that they need in order to be active players. For example, in Newham we have the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, the east bank cultural quarter, all this industry. The creative industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the country. It has some of the highest paid jobs. It has all these opportunities and yet we are not seeing our young people take them up, so we need that investment.

Organisations like Rosetta work with mosques and churches and all different people who are gatekeepers of young people with diverse backgrounds and diverse visions, and who can contribute very effectively to the industry that is coming in. Recognising the role that organisations like ours play in taking those families and those young people on that journey and recognising that to access those young people we need to build a lot of confidence with their families, with their faith leaders, with all the various people that are present in their lives.



For us, the biggest concern is that. Many of the programmes that we offer recognise that people need to earn while they are doing that training, because then they cannot afford to be doing that training to then be able to take up the work. That is very quickly.

Q96 Dr Rupa Huq: What about square people then who are involved in youth culture projects?

Clare Reddington: From the young people we work with, so we run a digital youth platform to try to give young people a voice when they do not have it in the media and in other places. What we find is that the young people are saying that the tricky middle bit of their careers is the thing that they need help with at the moment.

There is a lot of emerging art form support and once they get over the initial, "I want to be an artist, I want to be creative" how do they get access to the producers and the professional services they need to set up their businesses and get that tricky second and third album out and to stabilise their work, particularly because the pandemic has been so hard on young people?

The other real opportunity we see with young people is around global citizenship. We have just finished a project with Art Centre Nabi in Korea. We worked with young people around climate sustainability and 100% of them said that they felt like global citizens after working with contemporaries in another country. We see that that is part of a levelling-up agenda, it is part of an opportunity to get young people to feel globally connected, which is important.

Keith Merrin: I mentioned our City of Dreams programme earlier, which works with young people, and some of the barriers that young people were flagging up there.

It kind of relates to the question about local authorities. One of the things we have seen over the last 10 years is a massive reduction in young people's services, youth clubs, as they used to be called back in the day. Young people are not classic museum visitors—school-age kids, young families with children—so that requires a lot more effort and specific engagement. There is a huge gaming industry in the north-east, which is great. That is computer games, and we work closely with them on exhibitions and events and ways of engaging with young people, but it is much harder because the youth work sector is so fragmented now and patchy.

Q97 Dr Rupa Huq: For anyone who wants it: do you think the cultural sector is succeeding in its overall aim to attract a diverse and inclusive workforce?

Keith Merrin: I would say no. I think that we are getting there now and working harder. Again, coming back to the question, our workforce size has reduced massively. I mentioned there is a skills shortage in certain places, particularly around catering jobs and things like that, but for the



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sort of well-paid jobs or the better-paid jobs, I should say, there is massive competition. Perhaps some of our more disadvantaged communities or people from diverse backgrounds are not applying for those jobs; are not able to compete necessarily.

Speaking personally from my organisation, we can do lots more and we are doing lots more to try to diversify our workforce. I think we probably have a good diverse workforce in terms of socioeconomic background, but perhaps not so much in terms of ethnic background and perhaps other protected characteristics. I think across the sector as a whole there is loads more we could be doing.

Dr Rupa Huq: Maybe your region is less diverse than—I don't know, somewhere like—

Keith Merrin: It is but it is changing rapidly. We need to change with it. It comes back to all the points about long-term sustainable funding. About if our focus is on paying the gas bill it should be on how we diversify our workforce. By having a diverse workforce, we know that we will reach many more members of our community that we are currently not reaching that are currently not being reflected in the stories that we tell in our museums. Again, I talked about that fast pace that we are now trying to change that.

Sanaz Amidi: Even though we are in one of the most diverse boroughs in the country we still also have that challenge. We have two specific programmes, one is called Artist Accelerator, which is for diverse artists who use socially engaged practices in the centre of their work. They are on a one-year programme with mentoring, support, studio space, a bursary and then after that year they are still very much on a journey with us. It takes that kind of investment.

The other is a cultural producers programme, which we have just launched this year in response to the talent drain and the drop-off that we are seeing from people of all backgrounds. This particular programme will fund young adults who are from diverse backgrounds to train as cultural producers because we are not seeing them in our sector.

Clare Reddington: I think the Arts Council and BFI are both asking useful and rigorous questions about our workforces. Perhaps the data that we need to get serious about is: how does people's lived experience affect their experience of working in the culture sector? It is about having access to leadership at all levels. It is also feeling like you belong. That you can make decisions, that you are not always picking up the administration tasks, so having an intersectional understanding of how people's backgrounds affect their opportunities and their actual experiences.

Dr Rupa Huq: Therefore, the Arts Council is doing the right stuff. What about Historic England?

Sanaz Amidi: I cannot comment on that.

Keith Merrin: We don't work that closely with Historic England.

Clare Reddington: I do not know them either.

Chair: Finally in this session, Jane Stevenson.

Q98 **Jane Stevenson:** Thank you to our panel. I want to turn towards public spaces and part of our Committee's work. We are looking at how to reanimate public spaces, including disused high streets suffering from a lack of footfall. We know that the high street needs to adapt to new shopping practices and move away from retail. There are lots of suggestions from many corners of politicians' brains on how to achieve this. Where do you see culture in that shift for regeneration in high streets?

Clare Reddington: We have been working on a project called Playable City for the last 10 years, which reappropriates smart city technologies for play. We found that if you create playful interventions, citizens will talk more honestly and more openly about what they want from their cities. They will gather together. Our current Playable City projects are looking at equity: who feels comfortable in city centres? Who feels like they have the privilege to play? We run those projects in Bristol but we also tour the work. We have a longstanding relationship with property developers in Tokyo, and we are increasingly working in Lagos and Durban.

There is a real role for artists who gather people in ways to engage with their local high streets, to reanimate their local high streets in ways that feel appropriate to them. However, I guess that they are not going to tell you how if you go out with a clipboard and a focus group. It is about creating imaginative ways to think about participation, and again that foresight question: what do you want for the future and how do we collectively imagine that? Art and creativity is a good way to do that.

Jane Stevenson: Can I ask for an example of what someone would experience in a Playable City?

Clare Reddington: A Playable City: the first project we funded was called "Hello Lamppost" and it allowed you to essentially text street furniture, so you could text a lamppost, a post box, a bus shelter. They all had personalities. What we found was that people would have a text conversation in a playful way with a bus shelter about how they felt about transport, in a way they would never tell the local council. That has been translated into multiple languages and gone all around the world.

Keith Merrin: In the interests of brevity, I would point to the fact that most town and city centres look very similar to each other now in terms of their retail offer. What art, culture and heritage can bring is distinctiveness. As obviously we physically have venues in town and city centres that are distinctly unique to that place but also street furniture, the historic environment buildings can all add to that sense of distinctiveness and, of course, the animation of it through artist



interventions. Arts, culture and heritage has a very specific role to play around creating more distinctive places.

Sanaz Amidi: I would say that generally there needs to be this move away from very isolated pop-up and random “meanwhile” projects to a new way of influencing the narrative of new places, so that there is a more purposeful and meaningful approach to how people interact with their communities and their spaces and places that they occupy, and the way that they interact with their public realm across architecture and infrastructure.

We have worked for many years with a whole range of different developers. We have so many good and bad examples of the way that they have worked and the way they have chosen to work. We are starting to see now more developers that we are working with who are much more conscious around how they are designing public realm, co-producing, co-designing with the community. They often need a lot of hand-holding. It is quite surprising when you are working with these great big developers that for them these are new ways of working. We currently are doing a commission for Berkeley Homes for the Stephenson Street development, and it is a 10-year development so they are going to be there building for the next decade.

We have been working with them very closely, so that the artist that is designing the public realm is representative of the community and that is taking the community on the journey with them. Certainly, seeing that shift from bigger players, when the fabric of a new town is being built, makes a huge difference then to the creativity and the culture of that community being reflected in those public spaces.

Q99 **Jane Stevenson:** I was reading a couple of days ago about the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. That is going to suggest that if shops have been empty for six months, there might be a way to force landlords to put them out so that community groups can compete to occupy them. I am interested in your thoughts on whether you think that will make a big difference and what role perhaps arts education and cultural education can play to fill those spaces. What I hear from my retail and service businesses is that footfall is absolutely key. Do you think culture can help the whole ecosystem of our high streets?

Chair: Can I just ask for incredibly brief answers please?

Clare Reddington: There is some good research on the use of “meanwhile” spaces in retail environments in Bristol that shows a huge economic benefit to retailers and to the culture sector.

Sanaz Amidi: The Creative Land Trust has also published quite a lot of think pieces around this and particularly also using those spaces as “meanwhile” studio spaces for artists, particularly in London where the prices of renting is very high. During the pandemic, based on the paper from CVAN, only 13% managed to retain their studio spaces.



Jane Stevenson: I think both you and Keith mentioned rents and rates.

Keith Merrin: Just the other thing I would say is “meanwhile” raises an expectation that retail is going to return. I am not convinced about that although I am sure there are people who know much more about it than I do. I would advocate a shift to long-term cultural infrastructure being placed within towns or in the middle of city centres, shopping centres, rather than pushed to the outskirts. Because often new galleries or cultural things are often pushed into places that need regeneration as opposed to where the need for regeneration might be slap bang in the middle of the city centre now.

Jane Stevenson: Thank you very much. Chair, I know you are anxious.

Chair: It is okay. Thank you very much to the panel. Your answers have been very full but very interesting so I am sorry I was hurrying things along at the end but we have limited time. Thank you very much for coming today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Abi Brown and Tim Joel.

Chair: Can I welcome everyone to the second session of the second meeting of the Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling-up agenda inquiry? I welcome Councillor Abi Brown, who is the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, who is here in person today, and Tim Joel, who is head of culture of Preston City Council, who is online today. Welcome to you both. I am sorry you have had to wait a little while because the previous session ran on a little bit.

Q100 **Kevin Brennan:** Welcome to both our witnesses today. We do appreciate you coming to give evidence to our inquiry. I have a question about high streets, which have been in decline in a lot of our communities for various reasons over many years. What has been the knock-on impact of what is happening on our high streets for local cultural infrastructure and policy making because of this? Could replacing retail and other high street businesses with cultural activities regenerate local public spaces and economies in the longer term? Can I ask Councillor Brown first that question?

Councillor Brown: It is a bit of a big one. If I said yes, but then unpack that a little bit. A bit of context: Stoke-on-Trent is a medium-sized city—255,000 people—but we are a polycentric city. We have a city centre and then we have five other towns as well. It is very much viewed in that context as opposed to being a very well-developed city centre, and then five small towns. They are roughly six towns of a relatively similar size in one way or another.

While the answer is yes, the challenge for me as local authority leader is how you then replace what has been retail with experience when you are having to do it with a degree of equality. While we recognise as a city council that we need to have a strong city centre, equally, because of the



nature of the city, there is a need to have investment into those other areas. Ensuring that we are doing that in a way that means everybody is able to have access to experience and equally replace those units that have been lost by retail, which again in a city where you have in effect six centres, is quite challenging.

Q101 Kevin Brennan: Can I ask Mr Joel, who is joining us down the line, the same question about high streets and retail and culture?

Tim Joel: Absolutely, I think culture can play a real key role in reimagining what our future high streets are. In Preston, compared to Stoke, we have one central high street area and the council have been investing significantly in programmes of festivals and events that drive footfall into the city centre.

In research that we had undertaken pre-Covid to understand what the motivations for our visitors coming into the city centre were, a significant proportion were citing those cultural activities as the main reason for coming in. The secondary activities that they were undertaking were food, drink and shopping. There is a real relationship between cultural programming and activity and what high streets are.

That needs to be done in a sustained way. Following on from some of the conversations in the first session, pop-up activity is great and can achieve some of that but it needs to be sustained in a long-term way that can start to make an impact on the high street.

Q102 Kevin Brennan: On that point about pop-up activity, do you think that when that sort of activity happens they ought to be charged business rates or business rates should be able to be waived? Secondly, there are a lot of calls from the cultural sector for reform of business rates, what is your view about that as someone working in the local authority area?

Tim Joel: I am no business rates expert but my personal view is that cultural activities should be exempt from that because it can be a real driver to bring people back into the city centre to provide a real purpose for the city centre. I welcome my colleague's view on this because obviously business rates provide a significant level of income into local authorities, and that is important.

If we are looking at addressing real decline in the high street, Preston—not dissimilar to other places—has lost significant stores; Debenhams, Top Shop. Double-height stores in the heart of the high street are very difficult to now relet as commercial retail units.

We have to take bold and innovative steps and fresh approaches to how we fill those. I think experience-led, community-led and cultural activity has to be the way forward there. However, that has to have a relationship with those retail business partners and I think that is equally a shift in thinking for national retailers. We still think that they can open the door and the tills will ring, so there has to be a real relationship and



engagement with activity and provision that is cultural and those retail businesses.

Q103 **Kevin Brennan:** Councillor Brown, do you have any particular views about business rates and the impact of them on cultural activities and the sorts of high streets we are talking about?

Councillor Brown: The comment is more a wider one. Obviously, we are waiting for the funding review to come forward. We have been waiting for that for some time because I suspect that many sectors that we would speak to would say there is an issue with business rates potentially.

Maybe something that I would flag that could be an issue is around treatment across different areas, so particularly over the last couple of years where we have received business rates relief, and obviously at the moment we have a scheme in place. Certainly, as a local authority we would be keen to see that continue but the reality is that in certain parts of the country, one local authority may treat an organisation with multiple—I am going to say “outlets”, but this applies as much for culture as it does, I guess, for retail.

If you are a cultural organisation with multiple outlets across the country, you may be treated differently in one local authority area than you might be in another. I guess that does not necessarily have to be from a big geographic area. It might be just as much within a smaller area. Although we are Stoke-on-Trent City Council, we have neighbouring districts around us, and our cultural infrastructure very much crosses across the north Staffordshire area. While clearly we might talk to our neighbours around it, on that wider piece there could be some disparity there around that.

Q104 **Steve Brine:** Thanks very much for coming down to speak to us today. What is needed with regards for local authorities to put culture as one of their core delivery tasks because, obviously, you have your statutory duties and then you have everything else. I know from talking to local authority leaders in the area that I represent in Hampshire, that they are always telling me, “These are things we have to do. These are the things we would like to do”. What is needed to make that into your core tasks? In the general power of competence you are rightly free to do what you see is fit and then answer to your electorate for that. What is needed to make it absolutely central?

Councillor Brown: Probably at a very fundamental level it is that understanding of the importance to you, whether it is to your place or whether it is wider to the economy of your place. As someone from Stoke-on-Trent, if we had cups here I would have turned it over when I came in to see whether it was made in Stoke-on-Trent. I know most of the ceramics in the Palace of Westminster does come from the small but mighty city of Stoke-on-Trent.

Steve Brine: It does.



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Councillor Brown: That links to the culture of my place. We are incredibly proud to be known as the Potteries. That is a real golden thread that runs through where I live, whether it is the things that we like to eat that is linked to our ceramics trade or equally the heritage that we still have a lot of in our city.

That is very specific to me and will be to a great many other places in terms of that culture and heritage of where you live. I think the next step on to that is: how do you see the linkage there between that and your economy? That could be very discrete within a tourism perspective, so pre-Covid we were welcoming 5.5 million people to Stoke-on-Trent and culture and tourism represented roughly 4% of our workforce.

Equally it is the wider piece. If you came to visit Stoke-on-Trent and you came to see me as a local authority leader, the chances are I would probably take you to see one of our cultural heritage outlets, not because you would come for a tourist trip but because it is the essence of the place that I live and I represent.

We are lucky as a city to have £56 million from a levelling-up fund at the end of last year and out of those three bids that we were successful with, two of them are linked to culture and heritage because we recognise the linkage then between what already exists and how we can tie that into our future economy. People are proud to come from Stoke-on-Trent. They are proud of the heritage buildings around there and they want to see them come back into use and they recognise the cultural linkages as well that are there.

I recognise that that is a journey often that places have to go on to. Pre-2015 that was not a journey we were on as a place but it is now, and I think it goes beyond just recognition that you have heritage buildings or that you have a particular culture, you have to make that leap between how you continue to invest in that alongside the economy of the place that you clearly want to see succeed.

Q105 **Steve Brine:** I have been here 12 years and I have never heard so many mentions of Stoke. Your three MPs are constantly mentioning Stoke in the House of Commons. You are a single-tier authority though, right?

Councillor Brown: We are a unitary.

Q106 **Steve Brine:** In many areas of course of England, Hampshire—where I represent—those two-tier local authority district and county, does that unity of approach between different tiers of local government impact on how effective you can be? Presumably you have other authorities in your wider area that you have to work with.

Councillor Brown: Yes and no. We are a unitary so there is nobody else I have to work with. I do not have any parishes or towns, we do not have an MCAI, so it is literally us. Yes, from that point of view, it does make it much easier. We still choose to work with other local authorities. We bid to be City of Culture in 2021 and we work very closely with our



surrounding county and districts because we recognise that while people, like me, perhaps very much strongly, recognise with Stoke-on-Trent, I also recognise very much the wider north Staffordshire geography too and the ties across the area. In fact, even wider across Staffordshire. It does make it easier being a unitary because you only have one set of decisions to make.

Q107 Steve Brine: What would be your nugget of advice for us and the work that we are doing and the report that we are trying to write about the best practice in local cultural policy? What would be the best piece of advice from your experience?

Councillor Brown: It has to be recognition that people from the place know their place best. I am proud that we have quite strong relationships now with a number of national organisations, including Arts Council England, Historic England, Heritage Lottery, Canal and Rivers Trust and we work closely with them. However, at all points on that journey—prior to where I would say we are today—there has been a difficult tension between them wanting to tell us what to do versus us not necessarily understanding what we want to do versus us then undertaking what we want to do and where their agenda is.

You have to go on a journey as a local authority to understand what it is that is important to you and how that fits in, but equally national and regional organisations have to also understand that you will know your place better than they do and you may have a slightly different view, which you can get into that space where you all agree on what is important to you as the person from that place and what is important to them as the national organisation. That is where the magic happens.

Q108 Steve Brine: Is working closely with your three MPs important to you because, increasingly, Treasury and central Government will involve MPs in bids without support of MPs, and I think that is right because we represent big numbers of people? Is the link with your MPs important?

Councillor Brown: Yes. I know certainly that national organisations like Arts Council England take real pride in ensuring that they have good relationships with MPs. I think it also adds a different dynamic as well, which is helpful. I cannot know everybody. I cannot know every organisation within my city and I cannot always pick up on new organisations coming forward. Often they will go to MPs or equally vice versa. At the moment, and hopefully forever, I will have three Conservative MPs, but previously we had three Labour MPs and we had good relationships with them too. I think that is important to the dynamic around this.

Certainly one of the things I would point to and say is that in 2020 we came up with a Stoke-on-Trent prospectus where we outlined the things that were important to us, and that was a joint piece of work; local authority with MPs and with the wider city as well. If you can do that on different levels—clearly we chose to do it on a very high strategic level—



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but we have similarly come forward with similar pieces of work at a lower level too. That really helps because you can then say, "I have one shared vision". And let's be honest, it is not a huge amount of politics often, in terms of wanting your place just to be great.

Steve Brine: Not if you are smart.

Q109 **Chair:** Can I just come back on something you said earlier about you bidding for the City of Culture for 2021, as did my city? I would be interested to know how or if the plans that you had in place, if you had won that, have been moved forward or have they not been moved forward? What has happened with that?

Councillor Brown: It was interesting to hear the previous panel, in particular I think it was Keith from Sunderland, because Sunderland were a finalist at the same time as us, and I think our experience will be similar. Some of the things we were able to move forward but the reality is that if you win you get the cash but you only get cash for four years, and if you lose you get a very small amount of cash and it is a one-off and it does not go a huge distance. I think, from memory, the amount that we received was just over £100,000, which does not go very far at all when you think that you have designed a programme that was, to be honest, a multimillion-pound programme.

The value—and I would always say this—in bidding is the experience, certainly for us moving forward as a local authority on that cultural journey. In terms of being able to deliver what was in our programme, I suspect if I got a copy of the bid out, very little of it. Some of the nuggets of things have come forward, and part of that of course is then linked to the improvement in the cultural infrastructure.

When we first went to bid for City of Culture we had no National Portfolio Organisations. We had one just outside the area. Today we have two within the city and we have still one just outside. I know in the latest round of NPO applications we will have a lot more come forward. Again, I would point back to City of Culture as being a key point of that.

Clearly, we are seeing the projects come forward but in terms of did we go on to deliver our City of Culture programme; no, not really.

Q110 **Jane Stevenson:** I would like to look at how local authorities engage with creatives, and we have heard that there are some difficulties around in communication, whether resources or geography. Perhaps I will start with Tim. How do you think that that communication with local creatives can be improved?

Tim Joel: In Preston we established a cultural framework board several years ago—probably ahead of the course that is the cultural compact model that was contained in the report—that brought together at its inception key institutions: university colleges, the two councils. We are county and district level here. That was great but it did not have any representation from the independent sector on there.



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That was introduced about three or four years ago in the role of cultural governor, so similar to a school governor, you are not representing the views of all of your colleagues in the sector, which is important because often the tensions are there. You will be able to provide a perspective from a practising artist in the city. Recently we have increased the provision from two to four on that.

That has been a positive step forward in being able to join up a strategic conversation. I would say there are still challenges there because of an understanding in the level of knowledge and skill to be able to have a strategic conversation and engaging even beyond, "I want something from my organisation, my projects". There is some learning and intention there. That is a positive step forward to doing that.

Compared to Stoke, I would think in Preston we have a lot of independent individual artists rather than big key organisations, whereas if you did have, you would be engaging regularly with key NPO organisations.

As to the cultural, I deal with the key organisations that we do have. That broader network of independents is wrapped up through an independent sector-led organisation called The Brewtime Collective, and we have regular connection with them to find out: what are the key issues that come from the sector? How can we, as a local authority, support the sector? Often there is sort of horse trading there of the ones that are able to deliver. Certainly that dialogue is important.

Councillor Brown: I am going to go back to 2015 when we decided to bid to be City of Culture, and we were missing that key communication with our cultural sector. We established a cultural forum, which basically was an open invitation for anybody involved with culture to come together and talk about what mattered. Hopefully I have given you a bit of a flavour that, although we are a creative city, we did not have any infrastructure, so as a local authority we had to show leadership. We would not have been able to bid for City of Culture if we had not said, "We are going to have to lead this as a local authority. We are going to be prepared to step up to do that".

Establishing the cultural forum meant that we were crowd-sourcing a lot of the ideas from the people who are the ones who know how to do it, even if they had not the confidence at the time to do it.

We set up the cultural forum in 2016 and that, through the City of Culture process, continued and led to the formation of Stoke Creates, which is an independent group. We have a seat on it as a local authority but it has become a more formalised organisational strategic layer above that. Our universities are involved, our NPOs, but also smaller independent groups and ourselves as a local authority too.

Alongside that—because I think I already referenced our strong relationships with our national organisations—we created a creative city



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partnership, so that is us as a local authority, Arts Council England, Canal and Rivers Trust, Historic England, Heritage Lottery, but then also representatives from Stoke Creates. What it does is bring together the big funding bodies nationally who we know are interested and work in the city along with the representative sector of the creative sector within the city. That has been meeting now for probably about 18 months and means that we are able to pull together those agendas because they cross cut so much.

They also provide the opportunity for the creative sector within the city, whether it is individual practitioners or those right the way up to being NPOs, to be able to be involved with the discussion, to help I think nurture those relationships as well. Arts Council England often have good relationships with them but where you are cross cutting with Canal and Rivers Trust perhaps or Historic England, it is much more difficult for them to see. Why reinvent the wheel? Why not try to get people together? We feel that that has worked quite well.

We have also changed our approach in terms of how we supported organisations. We continue to give grants out, but where previously we had a dearth of organisations to be able to give them to, we have a number now, so we are about to move away from giving very large grants to a couple of small organisations. We are moving into a different environment where we want to feel that we are supporting those organisations who are coming up perhaps to be NPOs as opposed to just supporting our NPO.

It is going to be slightly more competitive. We accept that that means it makes it a bit more difficult sometimes for the larger organisations who may have come to rely on us to support them, but we have gone through that process of having a conversation with Arts Council England to explain to them what our thought process is.

It is hard as a local authority leader to justify the fact you are even spending on culture. I think we have got over that, but once you have got beyond that, it is then very hard to justify why you are giving your fairly limited funding for culture to just a couple of organisations who are already receiving cash from Arts Council England perhaps, when you have a number of other organisations who, to be blunt, sometimes receive nothing more than moral support from you. We are trying to move into that space where we are supporting a whole range of organisations and trying to get people to recognise the shared opportunities, but also the shared agenda that we have now as a city. That is very much reflected in Let's Create from the Arts Council as well, in terms of: what is the agenda of your place and how are you contributing to that as a cultural organisation?

Q111 Jane Stevenson: Thank you, that is interesting. As a local authority, how do you set the balance and what are your criteria for making sure that the cultural offering is a balance and is representing different



communities, different visions within the city. I know heritage in somewhere like Stoke is obviously a massive thing. How do you set those criteria?

Councillor Brown: We are working through the process at the moment. It is something that we are bringing in this year. A lot of it is based on our refresh of our cultural strategy, in terms of recognising the evolution of our story as a place, having started off in 2015 from—I am sure they say this about all places—"More culture in a pot of yoghurt" and those sort of things, along the journey that we have been on to where we are now, recognising equally that we have some strong cultural players who have developed quite a lot over recent years, versus others who are doing different things in different spheres. It is a process of having good conversations with the sector to understand where they are, along with parallel conversations with Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery as well, understanding what they are funding, what they are interested in funding, and equally where things cross cut.

We have been a "Creative People and Places" area for a number of years and have had some interesting projects that have cross cut through. Our CPP is called "Appetite" and they have done work with the Canal and Rivers Trust because we have a lot of canals that flow through Stoke-on-Trent, but we also have a lot of green flag parks as well, so we have had cross-cutting projects that have brought culture into green spaces.

Those sorts of conversations then help to devise the parameters and the framework around this, so you are not just investing into a very isolated project; you are looking at something that ticks multiple boxes and hopefully I have painted a picture that there are quite a lot of boxes in Stoke-on-Trent and that we have quite a wide framework of opportunities to do things.

Q112 **Jane Stevenson:** Tim, what are your criteria in Preston to make sure you get the balance of different types of culture that is going to appeal to everybody?

Tim Joel: Having a key strategy is important, and Preston has just refreshed its cultural strategy and published one for the next 12 years. Having a very clear plan that you are working towards and against is important.

It has to be guided by the knowledge that local leaders have—elected members and officers—of what is going on in particular places. I am particularly proud that Preston's programme is very diverse. We support and celebrate a lot of our diverse communities within the city in our programme. I think having that overview and long-term relationships with those organisations as well has been absolutely key. We have a south Asian mela. We have a Caribbean carnival, one of the longest standing in the country. Processions are big in the north-west and we have lots of those as well.



It is about having relationships with those organisations and individuals and you being able to upskill those and support them because it is not all about cash. Sometimes there is a relationship of funding but sometimes it is about access to equipment, skills and knowledge, and officers being able to support organisations in that way.

Seeing grant funding as giving a load of cash, "And here are some outcomes that we would like you to achieve" and then we all feel wonderful when that has happened is one way of doing things, but we can also view it as an investment, so there is a level of seed funding to draw in additional funding, as your colleague was saying there, with the Arts Council and other funders. If the local authority can be a lever to greater levels of funding coming into the city, over time that level of investment for the local authority may be tapered, so that you can support new initiatives and different events and new communities.

Q113 Jane Stevenson: Thank you very much. Finally on funding, that is often the biggest barrier to cultural placemaking and to various projects. We have heard submissions that competition funding can be less than ideal. I am wondering if you have any thoughts on how funding of cultural things could be made better?

Tim Joel: There is a need for national funders to be working more strategically together. We have started to see some of that in the response to the pandemic, where DCMS is funding and the Arts Council is delivering that; the Arts Council and Historic England working collectively on the Museum Estate and Development Fund, for example.

But far too often the funders are working in isolation—their agendas, their timescales, their reporting requirements. At the moment, I am delivering a £13.8 million capital project for the Harris Museum, Art Gallery and Library in Preston and we have, as you would imagine, a mix of funding there—Heritage fund, Museum Estate and Development Fund, Arts Council in there. It is a hugely administrative job to keep all of those funders happy, to meet all of their requirements, all of their funding requirements; it is almost a full-time job in itself.

Therefore, funders coming together and aligning their strategic visions, and some of that administrative housekeeping part, I think would be hugely helpful. I also think about the relationship between capital and revenue funding. Preston has been in receipt of Towns Fund funds, £20 million of Towns Fund funding, which is fantastic. Of that, £4.1 million has gone into the Harris Museum project.

Capital is great but there needs to be a revenue stream that can come alongside that, particularly with new initiatives, to support the business case to support that activity and the start-up of something. Far too often we get capital and not revenue and it becomes a battle to manage that. Again, looking at that relationship between national capital coming from central Government and national funders being able to come in with a supportive revenue fund, I think would be helpful.



Q114 **Jane Stevenson:** Thank you very much. You made some very interesting comments on efficiency, how much effort it is and how inefficient it seems to be at the moment.

Councillor Brown, your forum in Stoke does seem to address some of those issues but is there anything that you would like to add about funding models?

Councillor Brown: Yes. I would pretty much echo everything that has already been said. I am clearly not going to knock beauty pageants entirely because I think for us it was a good start but I also think, as has already been said, it is hugely draining to keep doing these things. We bid for City of Culture and, shortly after that, we bid to have a Channel 4 Creative Hub.

In a way, that helped us to become a serious player but equally, when the latest round of City of Culture applications went through, everybody was saying, "Are you going to bid again?" Well, no. In a way, for us, the initial bidding was the bit that was helpful. I would never say "never again" but it is hugely exhausting, particularly when, as we have already said, you get to the end of the process and perhaps the goodies on offer are nowhere near adequate to even be able to sustain what you would hope to do having not won let alone having come in at second prize in a way.

The issue of capital and revenue is interesting and important. As a local authority, we have stepped in to a degree to provide capital as well as the revenue that I have already talked about but the challenge around how you could support organisations within your city, particularly when you have not necessarily been seen as a cultural hotspot—reputationally maybe that is where that element of the beauty pageant is helpful. We were not regarded as a cultural hotspot before.

Lots of other people thought we were but we were not. We have changed that, I guess, together, but continually needing to bid for what are limited funds is difficult. However, having the strategic vision of the big players coming together that can give you a horizon to work towards is much more helpful and it is healthier. I also think it gives you the opportunity to move out of the particular box of being City of Culture or a creative hub to recognise what other opportunities, other avenues and indeed what other partners can offer. The idea of having a creative city partnership just came to me as I was sitting waiting to meet the chief executive of Historic England and thinking to myself, "Isn't it really strange how I suddenly keep having all these chief executives rock up? Wouldn't it be really great to get them all in a room together?" and that was so easy to do, but nobody had ever thought of that before. If I had not thought of it, we would not have done it, but just think if everybody could have access to it and have that relationship where you are not just talking to one person and then having the same conversations three or four times over, but are talking to all the bodies at the same time and they have so much in common.



Jane Stevenson: Efficiency; it will never catch on, but I appreciate your comments.

Q115 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I want to ask both of you about one particular aspect of local authority-provided culture that has statutory provision and that is libraries; they are protected by the Public Library and Museums Act 1964. Word has reached us that demand for library services has increased both from before and during the pandemic. Does that tally with your experience?

Councillor Brown: We have seen a reduction in library footfall since March 2020 but we have seen an increase in membership and also in digital usage. We have just gone out with our new library strategy and we are building a guess on that trend. We have six libraries across Stoke-on-Trent. We are just about to move one of them into a new building. We have restored one of our town halls.

Being a polycentric city means we have a lot of things and we have seven town halls. I do not have time to tell you the story about why we have seven town halls, six towns, but anyway—not all in our care, which I am often grateful for—but we have brought one of them back into use. It had been mothballed for a number of years.

Now our library is going in there. We are also moving our library from the city centre into a slightly different location. I guess we are looking to change the way that we operate our libraries to recognise that we have seen a big uptake in digital usage but also perhaps moving the libraries away from a model where they were very much of their time and more about community engagement, more about places to bring culture into, meeting places—so extending, for example, the times that our city centre library operates and introducing more opportunities to do things. Our newest library that is coming to a town hall will be in the same location as our family hub. I am very proud that most of our workforce lives within Stoke-on-Trent and they feel as proud of the city as I do.

I am very keen that we utilise the people who work for us to direct people to other services. Perhaps a mum will come into the family hub and my ambition is that our staff would say, “Have you been to the library? We have Singing Bears”. Singing Bears is one of our services that is really popular. We put it online during Covid. Therefore, perhaps you join people up to the library who had not maybe thought to go and do that before.

The same town hall is a gateway into our marketplace, too; one of our markets. We are keen to ensure that we use other services that we might facilitate or deliver as a city council to direct people into libraries because they are a nice service that people do not feel frightened by, that they think of as being quite welcoming—I would hope that our libraries are welcoming—and, therefore, perhaps they are a useful gateway to engage with people who maybe have not been able to engage with other services or even have that friendly face to perhaps support people, whether it is



digital engagement, finding a job or equally just engaging with their children with books.

Q116 **Dr Rupa Huq:** You can pretty much get the whole catalogue as e-books and newspapers and the lot?

Councillor Brown: I think it is, yes, a lot of it.

Q117 **Dr Rupa Huq:** That is interesting. I remember having this conversation with a Rishi Sunak, who was the local government Minister when the axe was swinging over our libraries and he said, "Merge it with the tourist information; we have done that here"—although we don't have tourist information for the London borough of Ealing, as far as I know. But yes that is interesting. Are they still called libraries? I know in some boroughs they are called "Learning Resource Centres" or "idea store".

Councillor Brown: They are still libraries in Stoke-on-Trent. I am aware of models in other places where they have merged them with sports centres. I have a colleague elsewhere in the country where they put libraries into leisure centres.

Our challenge is a bit more tricky because we have that many assets, but I think bringing them into, for example, a town hall where our local centre will be, so you could go and pay your council tax bill. Our family hub will be in there and it is the entrance into our market as well. It is a similar kind of model but utilising the asset base slightly differently. However, yes, they are all still called libraries.

Q118 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I don't know what happened to that Rishi Sunak by the way; he could never become anything.

Anyway, Tim, what is the experience from Preston? Up or down demand with Covid?

Tim Joel: As a district authority we do not, as standard, run libraries but we have delegated, or the county council has delegated, the Harris service point library to a trust as a district council because the library forms part of our Harris Museum and Art Gallery. Through the pandemic, and now, numbers are not as they were pre the pandemic but we were very proud to be able to offer innovative library access during the pandemic—people being able to get "Six of the Best", where we were either doing a pick-and-mix or a six crime books or six thrillers that people could collect at the front door.

When we were able to open our IT centre to support people who did not have IT access at home, that was hugely popular, and often sessions were booked out, so I think demand is very high. As we have come out of the pandemic, because the Harris building is going through a capital project, it is now closed to the public, so we have a temporary library, literally across the road, in the arcade of our theatre complex, the Guild Hall, and numbers have remained consistent since we were able to re-open.



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We still have a high number of library users from all the libraries across Lancashire. I think demand is there. Interestingly, as my colleague was mentioning, we have Baby Bounce and Rhyme sessions every week where you can bring your baby and there is storytelling and singalongs and that sort of thing; they are hugely popular. We are seeing 30 to 40 people coming to those sessions regularly, and that is probably an increase from before the pandemic. If people are coming to something specific, they are being drawn to it.

Digital use is interesting. Access to the digital catalogue is interesting. We are pushing BorrowBox, where you can download virtual books. You can also download newspaper and magazine titles. The service has seen an acceleration in digital access over the last two years, and probably far more quickly than we would have done it as a local authority, and it has been very popular. We have seen an increase in memberships and the use of that service which pre pandemic was okay but was pretty medium, I would say. Now we are seeing an increase in digital access. Now the challenge is that we have to bring those people who have engaged with us digitally back in physically and make that relationship between the digital and the physical. That is our next challenge.

Q119 Dr Rupa Huq: It is exam season at the moment. I know this as a parent. Do people still study in the library—that is where, it is claimed, mine are going—as a study space not as a lending resource but somewhere to do their revision or vision, or vision, if they didn't do it the first time?

Tim Joel: Certainly that is a key part of the offer. With our pop-up library as it is now, we do not have the space for study, we have lost that, but certainly the IT centre provision for those who do not have IT access at home is very popular. We had bookable sessions to manage that as a result of the pandemic, and last month we revoked that, so it has been drop-in again and that has proved very popular for young people coming in and studying, people coming in to print train tickets; there are all sorts of things going on in there, but we do not have the study space at the moment. Pre pandemic, people were coming in for the afternoon, settling in with a laptop and working and doing research with the available lending and reference book stock.

Q120 Dr Rupa Huq: Both of you have preserved all your branches; they have all remained open.

If we were starting from scratch, would we create a library in this day and age, an old Passmore Edwards building with a load of books in it? We are sentimentally attached to them but are they a bit of a weird idea in this day and age, so they have to have a cyber-café and other things?

Councillor Brown: That is a difficult question to answer, isn't it? As somebody who went to look at their old university lately, I could not get my head around where all the lecture theatres were and all those sorts of things. I am not sure, because I think you very much hold on to, don't you, how things were when you were young? I think the public does have



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a huge sentimental attachment to libraries and I understand that. Our challenge as a local authority is to move to the model that you describe, in a way.

How do you better link up with other assets, particularly when you are working within a constrained financial envelope? Libraries are statutory but it is more around the provision of them being within certain levels of accessibility as opposed to being a physical building necessarily, fixed in its place. The challenge is how, when you have a financial challenge, to ensure that you can continue to provide that service in some way when sometimes having the physical asset of a library that is in one space is a challenge.

As local authorities over the last 10 years, we have had to make increasingly difficult choices and we have to make a choice over whether we invest in culture, invest in libraries, but as things get tighter and tighter, the options to do other things get smaller and smaller. It is about how you reimagine libraries, because we want to continue to provide them. They are important to us as a local authority and we want to maintain them being open, but how do we get a better bang for our buck out of a building, hence putting them into a heritage building that is otherwise empty but provides that join-up to a family hub or a market and giving me the opportunity to do something slightly different with the building that the library has vacated.

Dr Rupa Huq: Anything else, Tim?

Tim Joel: I agree. I would not advocate getting rid of libraries. Preston has four or five branch libraries. There was some petitioning under the county council to close them as budget savings but they were recently brought back in by the new administration. I think there needs to be a bold approach, an innovative approach. Do we need five or six public libraries? I would say not. There are great public transport links into the centre and you could have a central library, linking them to other assets.

Not being a county council librarian, I can probably say this: I think the universal offer that libraries are signed up to is holding them back. I think libraries should be tailored to the communities that they serve rather than being this universal set offer; I cannot quite get my head around that. Tailoring them to the local community and to what the community needs—in some places that might be lots of reference stock; in other places, you might not need that. You might need greater levels of access to IT than in others. I think our future approach to libraries should be tailoring the provision to the local need.

Q121 Chair: Can I come back on that, Tim? You said that you don't think there should be four or five branch libraries in Preston. Why do you think that? What evidence do you base that on?

Tim Joel: From the usage. I think the central library that I run—



Q122 **Chair:** Is that from usage before the pandemic or during the pandemic?

Tim Joel: Both. The central library has got a far greater use than the branch libraries. Pedalling back slightly, I think it needs to be looked at on a need basis. There are some areas where communities are highly deprived and I think having access to a library that is acting as a community hub and a place where—

Chair: Which tends to be what branch libraries do, in practice.

Tim Joel: Well they do, but I don't think that that universal view, "Let's have five branch libraries because we've historically had them", is the right approach. I think we should be looking at it on a case-by-case basis, at where the need is. In those deprived communities where getting on a bus to come into the centre and the cost of it is probably a challenge, access is a challenge, so having access to a community hub is good. In more affluent areas you could argue that people have greater levels of mobility and access to public transport and could more easily travel to a central provision.

Q123 **Chair:** Can I ask one final question? Are these four or five branch libraries that you don't think you need any more in deprived areas or affluent areas?

Tim Joel: There is a mix. You probably have two or three in affluent areas and quite close to each other and the rest are in places that we would class as deprived and I would suggest we retained those.

Q124 **Chair:** Has there been any research done on this by either of the local authorities covering the area or is that just your personal view?

Tim Joel: Yes, it is a personal view, based on access to the data that I have, running the central branch library, and being able to see the levels of uptake, the borrowing membership and footfall, which paint an interesting picture. The numbers from some branch libraries are suggesting that you might be getting two people in a day, whereas others are getting significant levels of footfall. It is not my budget issue but certainly colleagues and the leader of the council are having to look at where they direct costs.

Can you sustain a service because we have always had it and because the universal offer requires us to have a branch library in that location but it is getting one or two people through a day? There is a time to have an innovative and hard look at how we deliver the services. It has to be done in consultation with communities. You cannot just impose a decision, but is there a way of changing people's habits? Is there a way of supporting people to access other provisions within close proximity to those branch libraries?

Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes our questions for this session. Thank you very much for joining us in person, coming down to



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London, and also joining us online. We do appreciate it. Thank you very much.