



Arts and culture-led regeneration

Summary notes

Date: Tuesday 5th March

Time: 2pm – 3pm

Venue: Room B, 1 Parliament St

APPG members present: Paul Howell MP (co-chair), Kieran Mullan MP (vice chair), Paulette Hamilton MP (vice-chair), Lilian Greenwood MP, Baroness Lister of Burtersett CBE

In attendance: Tilly Steward, Natasha Meldrum, Nick Beall, Madeleine Jennings (Local Trust, APPG Secretariat); members' parliamentary staff

Speakers:

Anna Francis, Associate Professor of Fine Art and Social Practice at Staffordshire University and co-director of the Portland Inn Project, Stoke-on-Trent

Rebecca Blackman, Director for Engagement and Communities, Arts Council England

Nova Marshall, Participatory Artist and Creative Producer, Newington Big Local, Ramsgate

Background to the session

Access to arts and culture has been demonstrated to have a broad range of positive impacts on wellbeing – from improved life satisfaction, to better physical and mental health. These activities can contribute to a more active and engaged community by enhancing civic pride, building skills and knowledge, and providing enjoyment for residents.

Strengthening the social and cultural connections of people to the places where they live has also been an enduring feature of neighbourhood regeneration, playing a key role in rebuilding community spirit and positively changing perceptions of areas.

Analysis conducted by OCSI for the APPG has highlighted limited access to the benefits from arts and culture in 'left behind' neighbourhoods. While these areas are rich with ideas, passion and local heritage, they are often lacking in cultural investment, infrastructure and opportunities for participation.

The APPG heard from three speakers on how community-based arts and creativity can best be supported and harnessed to improve local outcomes and regenerate communities.

Creating opportunities for community leadership

Building relationships of trust among residents is essential for projects to genuinely reflect local interests and generate lasting change within communities. Arts and culture can help with this process by creating confidence and hope in areas that have historically missed out on investment or feel 'let down' and 'left behind'. Engaging in creative activities helps create an accessible space – particularly for marginalised groups – for people to open up and reflect on what they want and need from their community while taking a leading role in delivery.

The APPG heard from the Portland Inn Project (PIP) – a small community-based arts organisation in Stoke-on-Trent – which operates in a neighbourhood facing challenges from high unemployment and low educational attainment. This context has influenced PIP's practice: *"we need to build resilience into how we work – the impact of external forces (for example Covid, fuel poverty, the cost of living crisis) can be felt quickly and strongly for our community."*

Following a successful community asset transfer of the then-empty Portland Inn pub, the group now delivers activities for all ages – including sports and dance workshops for young people in the area – alongside providing opportunities to develop skills in the local community, such as social organising, cooking and gardening. PIP is shaped by community decision making and a separate youth panel, and has worked in collaboration with residents to challenge negative stigma and stereotypes about the area.

On the Newington Estate in Ramsgate, Newington's Chill Club is a youth-led, highly participatory initiative that empowers young people to make a positive contribution to their community through creative social action projects. This has not only led to a transformation in the local built environment through the creation of public art, but also a noticeable shift among those taking part in the activities – becoming increasingly confident and empowered after being given the agency to make decisions for themselves.

APPG members also heard how creative approaches with communities in St Helen's, as part of Arts Council England's Creative People and Places programme, enabled young people to create a children's charter for the town.

Meeting local need

An emphasis on culture and creativity can help support regeneration that is genuinely community-led and responsive to local needs and interests, rather than approaches which result in gentrification and the displacement of existing residents.

While the Portland Inn Project began as a community ceramics project, engagement with residents quickly led to a broader focus on skills development and creating a social space for local people to come together. Likewise in Newington, painting, pottery and other craft projects have created an environment where young people can express themselves and discuss the support they need.

APPG members also heard about the Arts Council funded 'Wash Your Words' project in Blackpool. The project emerged to address a need for easily accessible washing facilities for families, and developed into a community designed launderette that is also a library, workshop and performance space for local people.

Across all presentations, reflections from the speakers showed that listening and language are some of the most important parts of project development, alongside centring relationships and lived experience. Radically listening to what people need creates a space to learn what communities want from regeneration, instead of pre-determined solutions being prescribed or imposed. Working at a neighbourhood scale and involving residents in defining and then leading the change they want to see creates a more sustainable and impactful result over the long term, making a positive difference not only to the individuals involved but to the wider community.

Lessons for funders and future initiatives

Speakers shared their insights and experience of best practice in funding for arts and culture. Arts Council England's Creative People and Places programme was designed to target the most deprived communities least engaged in arts and culture, and has taken a community-led and asset-based approach. This means that projects build on what already exists within the community, starting with people and places and using all possible definitions of culture and creativity to create a people-focused initiative, rather than one focused on infrastructure alone. Evaluation of Creative People and Places has shown that taking an asset-based approach to place-based cultural activities has been more productive than filling perceived 'deficits' in areas.

Equally, speakers' experience of the Big Local and Creative Civic Change programmes reflected how giving a deprived community decision-making responsibility, alongside a budget and appropriate support to improve their neighbourhood can be transformational by rebuilding social capital, generating strong community spirit and civic pride. However, in order for these initiatives to make lasting, sustainable change, they require long-term funding to allow time to build trust and networks of relationships. These lengthier time horizons also allow for testing new approaches and give space for projects to evolve with the needs of the community.