

# People, culture, place

The role of culture in placemaking



Case studies

**Cover photo:** A new mural at One NK featuring members of the community

Credit: North Kesteven District Council

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# Forewords

“It is good people who make good places.”

– **Anna Sewell, Black Beauty**

I am delighted to introduce this joint publication with °CLOA on how councils are using culture to create a sense of shared identity and purpose in their areas, and to tackle their big issues of the day.

Our councils are founded in our communities, and our communities are founded on their heritage, traditions and industries. At times, this connection with our cultural and historic past may have faltered, but more and more we are realising the need to retain these links as we develop new economies, new relationships with our surroundings, and as our communities evolve.

The world around us is changing, and councils are central to helping our communities adapt and move forward to be even stronger, healthier and more diverse. We are shifting away from our former role as providers of cultural services and thinking more fundamentally about how our communities operate, interact and develop. In short, we are placemaking.

Against a backdrop of reduced funding, this is not easy and requires locally developed approaches, rather than a centrally led initiative. The landmark Culture White Paper 2016 puts councils at the heart of leading local action, but the truth is that many of us are already on that journey.

This publication contains 10 case studies where officer and political leadership has combined to develop innovative practice by using cultural activities to bring about positive changes to their places. Whether that is economic renewal in Margate, tackling homelessness in Oxford or revitalising civic pride in Blackpool and Barnsley, these examples reveal how each community can draw on its cultural and historic strengths to tackle modern issues.

The principles in these case studies can be applied anywhere, and I hope they will inspire you to explore new possibilities with your own communities.

**Councillor Ian Stephens**

Chairman, LGA Culture,  
Tourism and Sport Board

In a recent radio interview, the chef Rick Stein talked about the beguiling nature of places off the beaten track and meeting the people who live there. He said: “When anyone loves a place that they are from, it makes you look at it differently.”

Great placemaking makes people feel a renewed love, passion and pride for their ‘place’. It draws on the combined assets of heritage, people, buildings and landscape to create places for people to fall in love with. Culture holds up a mirror to our tired streets, squares, buildings and civic spaces and asks us to look again at what makes them special. It gives people the opportunity to connect their individual stories with collective narratives, helping to make their place feel like home. Culture provides people with ways to explore, celebrate and create shared experiences. It brings depth and meaning to people’s experience of a place, highlighting the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Councils are uniquely placed to facilitate and drive placemaking activity. They can bring a broad range of different partners together, from the smallest community group or an

individual artist to the largest employers and the public at large. Drawing on the collective knowledge of their own staff and that of their partners, councils can oversee this vision, planning and delivery. They can create the conditions for innovation by providing leadership, direction and a platform for new voices and ideas. They can influence almost every aspect of how a place works, making sure that projects happen and partnerships bear fruit.

As different places jostle in an increasingly competitive marketplace for new investment, visitor spend and prospective employers, councils are becoming ever more imaginative in how they make local areas that people want to live in, work in, do business in and visit.

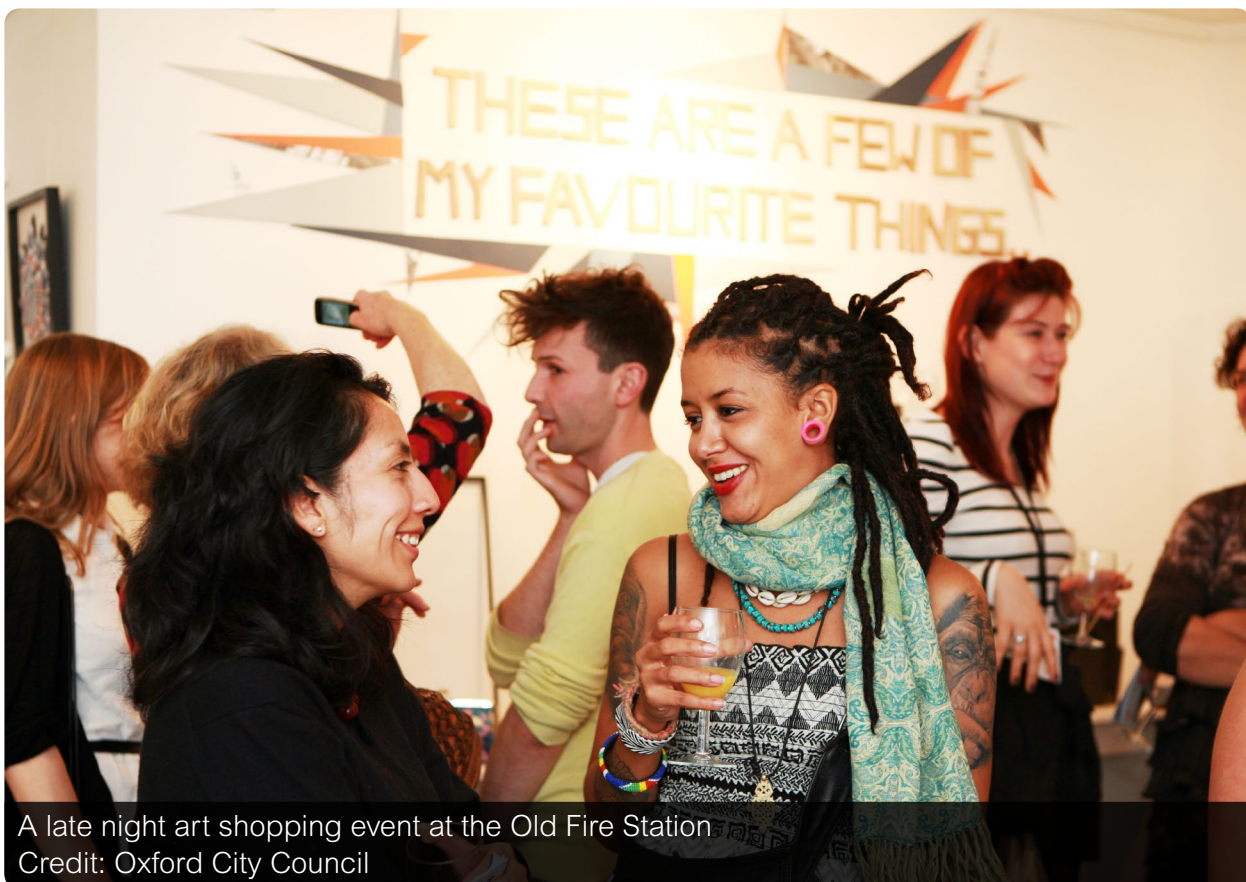
### **Polly Hamilton**

Vice-chair, the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA)

# Culture and placemaking

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of cultural activity in the lives of people, communities and places. There is now a clear acknowledgement of the social and economic value of the cultural sector, alongside the intrinsic value of cultural activity as an enriching experience. The Culture White Paper<sup>1</sup>, published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2016, acknowledged the role played by cultural activity in an individual's physical and mental health, education and life chances, as well as in driving local economic growth and community cohesion.

'Placemaking' in the context of this report relates to the role of arts, culture and heritage in helping to shape the places where we live. Every community has its own cultural identity – a shared history, infrastructure and traditions. As the white paper said: "What is local and unique has a special value and should be supported and encouraged." Cultural identity is strongly tied in with a person's sense of engagement, belonging, understanding and appreciation of their 'place'. Placemaking capitalises on a community's unique assets, inspiration and potential with the intention of creating public spaces, places, events and activities that promote people's health, happiness and wellbeing.



A late night art shopping event at the Old Fire Station  
Credit: Oxford City Council

<sup>1</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-white-paper](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-white-paper)

# Councils and placemaking

The public sector, voluntary and community sector and businesses all play an important part in placemaking. Local government remains the largest funder of culture and is most attuned to local needs. Councils are well placed to lead local action to achieve outcomes around culture and placemaking – helping people to identify with, understand, appreciate, engage with and feel a sense of ‘belonging’ to their place.

Major change is underway as councils seek to transform the provision of cultural activity, working closely with their communities and partners. Against a backdrop of reduced funding, councils are taking a strong lead on activities that reach beyond their traditional role as cultural service providers. The Culture White Paper called for “more local leaders to grasp the potential of culture to achieve their vision for their community, and to put culture at the forefront of their strategies.” Councils are rising to this challenge by leading placemaking efforts and finding innovative ways that use cultural activity to deliver key outcomes around:

- tackling disadvantage and social isolation
- raising levels of aspiration and educational attainment
- local economic growth, job creation and training
- creating stronger, more cohesive communities
- improving people’s health and wellbeing.

The Local Government Association (LGA), the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (°CLOA) and Arts Council England are working together to capture some of this good practice. This publication brings together 10 case studies demonstrating innovation and success in placemaking activities. Together, they show how the arts and culture can be used to improve a wide range of measurable outcomes, from education and wellbeing to economic growth and community cohesion.

The aim of this publication is to share best practice and help decision-makers (officers and councillors with an interest in, or responsibility for, cultural services) better understand their role in championing the placemaking agenda. With the Culture White Paper putting such a strong focus on placemaking, and with national initiatives such as the Great Place Scheme being launched to embed arts, culture and heritage in local plans and decision-making, there has never been a better time for councils to lead local action that builds on the contribution of the arts, culture and heritage in creating prosperous, healthier, stronger and happier communities.

# Case study themes and summary

The case studies featured here highlight just a fraction of the work going on across England to embed the role of culture in placemaking. They reflect a range of different types of council, location and themes. During the course of 2017, further case studies will be added to the LGA website: [www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk). The case studies featured in this publication can be broadly categorised as follows:

- learning, engagement and belonging
- economic growth and regeneration
- stronger communities
- cultural planning, strategy and infrastructure
- local talent development.

## **Learning, engagement and belonging**

Many places are using cultural activity to help people learn more about their local area. This can enhance people's sense of pride, belonging and engagement and address symptoms such as disadvantage, social isolation, low aspirations and poor community cohesion. **Barnsley** Council created a new museum and archives discovery centre within its town hall. In a city with historically low levels of cultural engagement, this award-winning project has achieved high levels of interest and engagement from the local community.

In **Staffordshire**, a five-year programme of events is taking place to mark the First World War centennial. As well as taking a lead in the commemorations, Staffordshire County Council has been supporting other organisations and community groups to deliver projects and events, with the aim of reaching as many local communities as possible. Staffordshire is using digital platforms to share stories across the county through a dedicated website.

## **Economic growth and regeneration**

**Margate** provides a good example of urban regeneration which is sympathetic to the history of a place while creating a better future for its people. Historic England, Thanet District Council and others have been working to ensure that the rich heritage of Margate's historic town centre plays a significant role in its restoration. Improvements to shops, public spaces and buildings have created a more attractive and vibrant area for people to live in, work in and visit and strengthened the local economy.

## **Stronger communities**

Culture can be used to create stronger and more cohesive communities, either by bringing different people together with a shared mission or through work to engage specific groups in the community. **Stoke-on-Trent** City Council worked with the local ceramics industry on a series of events based around sharing food and making clay objects. This brought residents together in an area of urban renewal, creating opportunities for conversations about the needs of this changing community and the future of their place.

## **Cultural planning, strategy and infrastructure**

A good example of placemaking through cultural planning comes from **Leeds**, where the city council has used a co-production model to develop its new cultural strategy. The strategy places culture at the heart of all policy-making for Leeds, from highways to planning and community cohesion, with the aim of creating more prosperous, healthier, stronger and happier communities.



**Cambridge** City Council adopted a new arts plan in 2015 which set out a more strategic and enabling role for the council. The first partnership developed under this plan has a focus on children and young people and aims to ensure that every child and young person can confidently construct their own cultural life, drawing on and feeling connected to the whole of their city, whatever their background.

### **Cultural infrastructure**

Cultural infrastructure includes all the elements which together enable delivery of culture: people, technology, cultural collections and buildings. A new visitor attraction is being built in Suffolk, a partnership between **Suffolk** County Council's Record Office and the University of Suffolk, to house the county's archives collection. While it is being built, a programme of public activity and engagement will use historic maps as a tool for exploring local heritage with community groups and schools.

**North Kesteven** District Council put community engagement through art at the heart of its work to refurbish two leisure centres. The results celebrate the area's

distinct local heritage and have helped to root the centres' place in their local communities. The designs include bespoke mosaics made by local people and murals featuring images of real leisure centre users.

### **Local talent development**

Some of the projects directly involve creative professionals within their own communities. **Blackpool** Borough Council brought 128 local residents together with seven local artists to create a resource of pop-up museums which are now used in community locations. As well as making the borough's historic collections more accessible, the participants discovered a renewed pride in their town and have become champions for local history.

In **Oxford**, an innovative social enterprise provides training for homeless people within a popular public arts venue. 'Arts at the Old Fire Station' provides professional development of local artists through advice, subsidy, networks and promotion. Within the same venue, homeless people can take part in work experience and training and receive free tickets to performances.



Visitors enjoying Experience Barnsley  
Credit: Barnsley Council

# Success factors

Effective placemaking cannot be done by councils alone, and strong partnership working is a feature of all the case studies featured here. Councils are working successfully with the wider public sector, voluntary and community sector and businesses. Their role includes leading local action, galvanising the partners to work together, supporting efforts to attract external funding and assessing the needs of communities.

This report showcases a range of different approaches to placemaking. However, they all share a number of 'success factors'. These include:

- effective community engagement at every stage, including reaching out to groups of people seen as disengaged from mainstream cultural activity
- strong partnership – public, private and community organisations working together, combining their resources, knowledge and expertise
- a project steering group which includes representatives from key organisations and target audiences; co-production models used where possible
- engendering pride and interest in a place in order to raise the confidence and aspirations of its people
- attracting investment into the cultural sector to achieve outcomes related to health (physical and mental), the local economy (jobs and training) or quality of life
- bringing people together for cultural experiences as a way of achieving other outcomes, such as community cohesion or education
- ensuring that there are champions for a project within the local council (councillors/ senior managers) and in partner organisations
- using success to unlock further funding opportunities and form new partnerships.

# Case studies

## Barnsley

### Effective community engagement has been key to the success of a new museum which celebrates Barnsley's past, present and future.

'Experience Barnsley' is a museum and archives discovery centre designed to share the stories of Barnsley and its people and create a sense of belonging through local history. Barnsley's communities worked with councillors, officers and other partners for eight years to create the museum, which is located in the historic town hall. A new town square has also been created.

Barnsley has faced major challenges over recent decades – in particular the demise of coalmining, which had sustained the borough for generations. Barnsley Council's regeneration consultation revealed a clear demand for a local museum. There was strong political support, which was key during the negotiations with funders in terms of building relationships at the right level.

The project aimed to:

- inspire and motivate future generations
- have a positive impact on the lives of communities
- provide a place for all generations to spend time together
- create a facility that would act as a showcase for Barnsley.

The total cost was £4.4 million, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (£2.6 million), European Regional Development Fund (£1.5 million) and Barnsley Council (£300,000). Support from other partners and the community was also critical.

#### Impact of the project

Barnsley's communities have historically had low engagement with cultural activity but there were high levels of interest, engagement and direct contribution to this project. More than 15,000 people took part in events and roadshows. A genuine sense of having been 'created' by the people of Barnsley emerged well before the museum opened. In 2014, Barnsley Council won the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) award for community involvement.

Sue Thiedeman, Head of Culture and Visitor Economy, said: "Local people really wanted this and were passionate about it. There was strong political support to do something which would clearly be a great source of local pride. The learning from the project, building key relationships and creating confidence has been pivotal in Barnsley's improvement journey."

Footfall has exceeded expectations, with 150,000 visitors in the first year and around 75,000 a year since, compared to a projection of 50,000. Evaluation and surveys have demonstrated success in delivering on the initial aims. Many visitors say the museum has made them proud of their town or inspired by its stories; 96 per cent of those surveyed said they would return and 67 per cent were planning to visit other cultural venues.

## Looking to the future

Creating the museum within the town hall has led to a closer relationship between the council and community. The project has highlighted the value and impact of culture in changing people's lives and driving economic improvement. As a result, the culture and visitor economy service is now valued more highly within the council, both through investment and encouragement to develop new ways of working. Visitor economy partners across the borough are working more closely together and taking forward a joint approach to developing the visitor offer.

The challenge of delivering the museum service with reduced resources remains, but a strong programme of engagement activities and exhibitions is maintaining interest. There is also greater engagement with the archive service: Barnsley's archives are now the busiest in South Yorkshire with over 25,000 visitors each year.

## Key learning points

- Getting the right people around the table is critical, backed by strong leadership and political support to make things happen.
- Effective community engagement should be in place from the start, and this includes reaching out to communities seen as disengaged from cultural activity.
- Activities that engender pride and interest in a place can help to raise the confidence and aspirations of its people.

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Visitors enjoying Experience Barnsley  
Credit: Barnsley Council

# Blackpool

## In Blackpool, 128 local residents worked with professional artists to create the Blackpool Treasure Trove, a heritage resource of seven pop-up museums.

This two-year project was created by Blackpool Council and the Blackpool Volunteer Centre and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which provided £65,000. It brought together local people, historical artefacts and artists with two main aims: to engender a greater sense of pride in Blackpool and its place as the world's first mass seaside resort, and to make the borough's historic collections more accessible.

The idea came about through conversations at the Community Heritage Steering Group, which includes representatives from the council, Volunteer Centre and the community. The project built on the basic principles of the council's community heritage programme: to get more people involved in heritage and increase knowledge about Blackpool's history.

Many local residents know little about Blackpool's major role in the development of the traditional seaside holiday, and this project provided a way to challenge negative perceptions and enable people to discover something to be proud about in their town. Councillor Gillian Campbell, Blackpool Council's Deputy Leader, said: "Blackpool's low level of educational attainment has had a direct impact on the feeling of self-worth of many residents, leading to lack of aspiration and ambition. Projects like this, which highlight the positive aspects of Blackpool and combine learning and fun, are really important."

The project was publicised in the community and a taster event was held. People who decided to get involved were divided into seven groups, each with a mix of ages and backgrounds. They visited the local history

centre and museums, had back-room tours, met curators and saw conservators at work. Each group then worked with an artist to design and create a pop-up museum based on one aspect of Blackpool's history, supported by the local history librarian.

### Impact of the project

The biggest impact is that the project helped to influence the development of a permanent Museum for Blackpool, which is now underway. It also made a huge difference to the way the participants felt about their town. At the publicity events they talked avidly and knowledgeably about Blackpool with a new passion and pride. In turn, they have encouraged others to learn about and appreciate their local history. Participants contributed 3,055 hours to the project (509 days). Twenty heritage volunteers got involved in the project, contributing a further 1,122 hours.

The council now has a resource of seven pop-up museums which have given a focus to community heritage events and are used in venues such as schools, shopping centres, day care centres, community groups and at heritage open days. By late 2016, more than 12,000 people had seen at least one pop-up museum. Other outcomes have included:

- increased participation in heritage activities
- the participants learnt new skills and had fun while learning
- new volunteers joined the community heritage programme
- existing volunteers developed new skills.

### Looking to the future

The council is now working towards a permanent Museum for Blackpool, a £26 million project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. This will build on learning from the Blackpool Treasure Trove and will be designed as a dynamic and celebratory space filled with artefacts, film, music and performance.

### Key learning points

- Pop-up museums can engage new audiences with local heritage; areas with a permanent museum site can use pop-ups to provide outreach opportunities.
- It can take time to build relationships and trust with community groups.
- When working with creative artists it is important to assess their ability to work with different groups of people as well as the quality of their work.

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Local children interacting with the pop-up museums which together make up the Blackpool Treasure Trove.  
Credit: Blackpool Council

# Cambridge

**‘My Cambridge’ aims to ensure that every young person growing up in and around Cambridge can benefit from its world-class cultural assets.**

Cambridge is famous for its rich cultural assets and is seen as a highly successful place. However, for some young people growing up in parts of the city, this is not recognised as part of ‘their’ Cambridge. The latest social mobility index demonstrated that locations such as Cambridge, despite having very good overall outcomes for children and young people, can be challenging places for those in low-income households.

‘My Cambridge’ is a cultural educational partnership aiming to ensure that every young person benefits from these cultural assets. It brings together Cambridge City Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, cultural providers, schools and other partners. The high-level outcome is to ensure that every child and young person can confidently construct their own cultural life, drawing on and feeling connected to the whole of their city.

## **Impact of the project**

Cambridge City Council adopted a new Arts Plan in 2015, which set out a more strategic and enabling role for the council. Partnership is a key delivery mechanism in the new plan, and a partnership for children and young people was identified as a priority. This led to the ‘My Cambridge’ partnership, which had an initial focus on gathering evidence to understand the problem and the partners’ shared territory. Delivery has now begun with some simple interventions identified through that process. For example, University of Cambridge Museums are working with four schools to embed Arts Award delivery and increase its take-up across the city.

In another initiative, primary school pupils are exploring local history through guided walks. These walking trips are followed up with opportunities for their families to visit the city centre and share the artistic outcomes of the project at a central church. There are promising early signs that this relatively simple intervention is building a greater sense of connection to place and enabling children to take a lead and learn about the available cultural offer.

‘My Cambridge’ is seen as a vital part of placemaking for Cambridge: by actively working to engage every young person with the city in which they live, the council intends to reduce the gap between success/growth and disadvantage/isolation. Councillor Richard Johnson, Executive Councillor for Communities, said: “Partnership working is a powerful tool for bringing the collective resources of a place to bear on big issues. Our role is very much as a catalyst and I would recommend this approach to any local authority, even if you do not have specialist cultural staff in-house.”

## **Looking to the future**

The team is now working on tools for in-depth qualitative studies and large-scale evidence gathering – not only to improve practice, but to put in place the quality of evidence required to show whether cultural engagement does have a positive impact on outcomes. They are also looking at how to develop the existing library card into a card that supports wider cultural engagement, enabling card holders to track their cultural activity, collect points and receive incentives. This will give providers a clearer picture of who is, and is not, engaging with their activities and will help policymakers to link a detailed picture of cultural engagement to specific objectives.

### Key learning points

- The process of building trust and confidence across organisations cannot be underestimated: moving too quickly, or not checking that everyone is on board and being listened to, risks the integrity of the partnership.
- Every step must make sense to all the partners and this starts with developing a proper understanding of their shared territory, rather than jumping straight to delivery.

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Primary students building a 3D model of Great St Mary's in situ  
Credit: Historyworks



# Leeds

## Leeds City Council's new culture strategy was developed through a co-production model, involving extensive consultation with the cultural sector and local communities.

It places culture at the heart of all policy-making for Leeds – from highways to planning and community cohesion, with the aim of creating more prosperous, healthier, stronger and happier communities. It will act as a framework for policy change, enabling a more innovative, vibrant, cost-effective and collaborative approach to place making.

The co-production process began with more than 200 interviews with cultural sector representatives over six months. This was followed by a year of meetings, focus groups, presentations and workshops in the community, along with online and social media activity. This included migrant groups, people with learning disabilities, LGBT forums, ethnic minority communities, business clubs, health and wellbeing service providers, city council teams, faith leaders and the voluntary sector. More than 2,000 people took part.

### Impact of the project

The new culture strategy will begin with a series of pilots from April 2017. Early work will include ensuring that neighbourhood plans have a stronger focus on cultural activity, and creating a new cultural infrastructure plan encompassing community-based venues (allotments, leisure facilities, community centres or parks) along with traditional venues.

As an example of how the strategy will work, Leeds has a target to create 70,000 new homes. Currently there is no local planning guidance to suggest that the existing culture of a place should be considered in new housing development. The culture strategy will

ask all new developments to have a cultural statement detailing the existing culture of a place and how this will be reflected in the new development, before planning permission is granted.

The strategy has been backed by strong political and managerial support across Leeds City Council. Councillor Judith Blake, Leader and Executive Member for Economy and Culture, said: "Culture contributes to the economy, health and wellbeing, community cohesion and to service delivery across adult social care, children's services and public health, yet until now it has not been recognised in policy across these areas."

### Looking to the future

Over the next 13 years a rolling programme of projects will bring together a range of council departments and other partners, pooling resources and working with communities to deliver new solutions to the city's challenges. By starting with the culture of a place and building health, housing, the economy and education around it, the strategy will ensure that the unique character of each local area is maintained and celebrated.

Leeds has been approached by other areas interested in this model. Leanne Buchan, Principal Officer for Culture and Sport, said: "Councils should be prepared for some resistance to the idea, which is essentially about inspiring a change. It takes time to gather support from large cultural sector organisations which are used to a different style of culture strategy, and from scrutiny groups and colleagues who may struggle to picture what it could look like or want to pre-empt the direction. Moving towards a co-produced model means letting go of old systems, processes and decision-making mechanisms, which takes time."

### Key learning points

- Invest time and effort into the initial conversations: this will pay dividends in ensuring the strategy has a broad ownership.

- It can be difficult to find the right people to access community groups. If groups include vulnerable people it may take three or four meetings to build trust before you can talk about the strategy.
- Ensure there are champions for the project at all levels of the council, including councillors and officers.

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# Margate

## Historic environment and character can play an integral role in the success of a place, and this has been the focus of work by Historic England and its partners in Margate.

As one of England's earliest and foremost seaside resorts, Margate was popular with day-trippers and holidaymakers during the 19th and for much of the 20th century. However, by the 1970s, its fortunes began to change as people deserted the English seaside in favour of low-cost holidays abroad and the promise of guaranteed sun. By the end of the 20th century, Margate, like many other resorts, had declined significantly. Lack of investment, poor quality accommodation and outdated facilities had all contributed to this decline.

In 1999, an action plan for Margate's historic town centre was developed to address some of these issues. Since then, Thanet District Council, Historic England and other partners have been working to make sure Margate's rich and impressive heritage plays a significant role in its regeneration. The Margate Old Town Heritage Initiative, which attracted funding of £1.2 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund, has helped to transform some previously neglected buildings within Margate's Old Town area into attractive, desirable properties.

### Impact of the project

At the turn of the millennium this area was in freefall with two-thirds of its shops lying empty. Today it is a characterful place of narrow streets and historic buildings with very high occupancy rates. Many of the shop fronts have been renewed to historic patterns and the public realm improved. This has made a significant difference to the local economy, attracting new shops, restaurants and businesses, and has made the Old Town a more vibrant and appealing place for people live in, work in and visit.

Dalby Square in Cliftonville is another area that has benefitted from investment. Built in the 1870s as hotels and private schools, and largely unchanged externally, Thanet District Council designated the square as a conservation area in 2010. A grant scheme was set up (funded 75 per cent/25 per cent by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the council), resulting in this area of fine late Victorian townscape undergoing a thorough facelift. Repairs have been carried out to windows, doors and rendered facades, and lost architectural features reinstated, transforming a very rundown area. Empty properties have been brought back into use, including a new multi-generational house. With strong public support for this conservation area, the district council has since designated other areas in Cliftonville.

Research by Historic England into Margate's heritage has helped to identify a number of places that are worth celebrating and protecting through listing, such as the seawater baths at the Cliftonville Lido and the Nayland Rock seaside shelter. This would preserve important historic buildings of value to the community and visitors. Others, such as the Scenic Railway and Dreamland Cinema, have had their listings upgraded to Grade II\*.

The cultural outcomes achieved by this and other partnership work in Margate include:

- major local attractions opening or re-opening
- a 32 per cent growth in the number of businesses working in arts, culture and the creative industries across Thanet (2008-2013)
- a 71 per cent increase in the number of artists' studios.

### Key learning points

- Improving the historic environment and character of a place can raise the quality of life for people who live there and attract new businesses.
- Success should be publicised: a clear shift in national and local media coverage

of Margate has been noted, which now focuses more on regeneration and vibrancy than on decline and loss.

- Research and the designation of conservation areas and listed structures can lead to local heritage being better understood and managed by all partners, including the community.

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Margate's beach, the Turner Contemporary gallery and shops.  
Credit: Historic England Archive, James Davies

## North Kesteven

### Community engagement through art and celebrating local heritage have been critical to the success of a £7 million leisure refurbishment programme in North Kesteven.

Two leisure centres in North Kesteven's largest towns were each in need of modernisation and improvement in order to meet customer expectations, boost participation and improve operational efficiency. From the outset of the project there was a strong focus on engaging the community through arts and culture. North Kesteven has an established programme of cultural engagement through the successful ArtsNK programme of outreach, local expression and artistic legacy (funded by partners including North Kesteven District Council and Arts Council England). The district council places a strong focus on leading placemaking through art and local history, recognising its role in rooting people in their communities, strengthening pride, fostering a shared identity and celebrating local distinctiveness.

#### Impact of the project

Following its refurbishment, Sleaford Leisure Centre now includes a bespoke mosaic reflecting a 142-year history of swimming at the site. This, together with a new children's splash zone celebrating the riverside location and adjacent nature reserve, has helped to root the leisure centre's place in the community. New landscaping has made the most of its location, incorporating and celebrating the river and making it a much more welcoming place to visit.

The refurbishment plans for the North Kesteven Sports Centre in North Hykeham (which re-opened as 'One NK') also had arts and culture at their core. The results draw on the area's history – for example, Lincoln's Magna Carta is the theme of the 'splash zone'; local aviation links and the iconic Vulcan Bomber, which was based nearby,

are celebrated in the designs; and photographic murals feature local people who use the centre.

More than 300 people were involved in making the Sleaford mosaic, and a group was established which continues to contribute locally-inspired mosaics for the community's enjoyment. In North Hykeham, scores of leisure centre users had their images used in the new murals. In both projects, local people helped to shape the outcome through extensive public consultation: for example, young people chose the name and themes for the V-Flume water slide, which draws extensively on the Vulcan Bomber, archive photography and local history.

Hundreds of people are now part of the leisure centres' stories and futures, and this has created a sense of pride in their involvement. The centres are now much more vibrant, attractive and inviting, fit for purpose and distinct destinations in their own right. Active participation has increased dramatically, steady from an initial 162 per cent uplift in Sleaford (283,000 users in the first year post-refurbishment) to a consistent annual increase of 12.5 per cent over the past four years. At North Hykeham, swimming visits are up 68 per cent.

#### Looking to the future

North Kesteven District Council has adopted a fresh way of thinking in order to respond to challenging situations by seeking alternative solutions that still deliver excellence. The original plan for the leisure centres was a £6 million demolition and re-build. When it became clear that this was financially unattainable, the council revised its plans, working with what it had to achieve an equivalent end result for half the price. It is now applying this 'fresh-thinking' approach across other ageing facilities. At the same time, using the arts as a vehicle for community engagement and placemaking is now recognised as an essential, rather than a desirable, component.

### Key learning points

- Early, thorough and responsive community engagement has the potential to reap greater rewards than simple statistical or instructional feedback.
- In a challenging financial situation, creative solutions and different ways of thinking can be used to reach the required outcomes.

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Sleaford Leisure Centre after its refurbishment  
Credit: North Kesteven District Council

## Oxford

### Oxford's Old Fire Station is the base for an innovative social enterprise providing training for homeless people within a popular public arts venue.

The centre opened in 2011 as a café, theatre, art shop, exhibition space and dance class venue. It provides training and volunteering opportunities for homeless people in collaboration with the charity Crisis, with the aim of building their confidence and skills. The idea was generated jointly by Crisis and Oxford City Council. The council invested £4 million to redevelop the building and it set up a charity, Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS), to run the venue. The council provides around £32,000 a year from its culture budget along with rent subsidy.

The project has strong political support. AOFS survived its first two years thanks to a social investment loan from the Charities Aid Foundation, underwritten by the council, and rigorous business development. Since then, it has attracted investment from Arts Council England and a range of trusts and foundations.

Its mission is to provide:

- great art for the public which takes a risk, asks questions and entertains
- professional development of local artists through advice, subsidy, networks and promotion
- building the confidence and skills of homeless people
- a new kind of shared public space which helps to break down barriers in the community.

### Impact of the project

The Old Fire Station is a popular and vibrant public space. In 2015 it hosted 230 different shows across diverse art forms, selling 9,378 tickets. Homeless people can work for AOFS over a 10-week period for two sessions per week, gaining experience in administration, technical theatre skills or customer services. Over the last three years, 31 people have taken part. One recent trainee went on to volunteer as assistant stage manager for a theatre production and is now applying for paid jobs at local theatres. Another is now employed as a shop assistant in the venue's shop.

AOFS also supports people to become front-of-house volunteers, enabling them to be part of a team and see shows for free. In 2015, 31 per cent of the volunteers were Crisis members and 173 complimentary theatre tickets were taken up.

AOFS relies on partnerships – primarily with Crisis and Oxford City Council but also with cultural organisations, universities, the voluntary sector and businesses. In the longer term, using a mainstream public setting rather than a segregated specialist setting could prove less expensive and more effective. As a small new venture dedicated to delivery, AOFS is building a case for more upstream funding to help vulnerable people engage in mainstream activity and reduce the need for specialist targeted services down the line.

## Looking to the future

The partners are seeing more people become homeless due to funding cuts and changes to the welfare system. Over the coming years AOFS will enhance its engagement of homeless people through a new participation coordinator (with Big Lottery funding). It will develop evaluation methodology using storytelling to evidence impact and will look for ways to share its learning.

Councillor Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council, said: “When considering developing services for homeless people and/or creating public space for culture or sport, other councils could look at how they can bring these seemingly unconnected activities together under one roof to support each other’s mission.”

## Key learning points

- The project’s strengths include its focus on commercial business development, its ability to attract partners with resources/ expertise and a strong, inclusive vision.
- The work is highly replicable, but cohabiting with an experienced homelessness charity gives AOFS a distinct advantage over most cultural organisations.

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The Old Fire Station in Oxford  
Credit: Oxford City Council



# Staffordshire

## Staffordshire's Great War commemorations are bringing the momentous events of this period to life through events, exhibitions and activities.

In 2012, Staffordshire County Council secured £80,000 from Arts Council England to scope plans, survey local people and develop a strategy for its First World War centennial commemorations. Work began with a strategy outlining the work streams and project legacy, and the council also set up a cross-party steering group to deliver the outcomes. The survey of local people showed particular interest in the Cannock Chase area, which has war cemeteries and hosted the Great War camps, training men for the trenches. People were also interested in learning about the impact of the war on their own communities. As well as taking a leading role in the commemorations, Staffordshire County Council has been supporting other organisations and community groups to deliver their own projects and events. A key challenge has been how to maximise opportunities for engagement, involvement and learning across the county.

### Impact of the project

A programme of events is running from 2014-19. By 2016, over 80 projects, events, exhibitions and activities had been delivered across Staffordshire. There has been a clear focus on seeking external funding, with more than £500,000 received, and on reaching as many local communities as possible. Just under 200,000 people were involved in the 67 events and projects delivered up to February 2016, including 26 different organisations and local groups. The Centennial Strategy has achieved its aims of getting more people involved in local history, as shown by

the number of attendees and also by how many organisations have produced a book, exhibition or event focused on the Great War and their local place.

Individual projects have included:

- Opening access to the records of Staffordshire's Great War Local Military and Appeal Tribunals: about 15,000 records will be accessible online.
- An exhibition of artworks reflecting on the Great War, touring Staffordshire's museums.
- An exhibition looking at how war changed the lives of people living at a local stately home, created by Staffordshire County Museum Service.
- 'Chase Through Time': working with Historic England and local volunteers, this £96,000 project will involve creating a 3D map and historic research at Cannock Chase, helping to tell its hidden story.

Among the project's success factors are:

- Getting up-front funding for the initial research, which informed the strategy and programme and was used to support other funding bids.
- The creation of a dedicated officer post to coordinate the council's activity and support local groups to develop their own events.
- Regular conferences across the county for local groups to showcase their work and learn about county initiatives and funding opportunities.
- Strong branding, a website and use of social media to promote the centennial has worked really well. There is a dedicated website: [www.staffordshiregreatwar.com](http://www.staffordshiregreatwar.com)

Councillor Gill Heath, Cabinet Member for Communities and the Environment at Staffordshire County Council, said: "The Great War Centennial has provided a real

opportunity for local communities to find out about how their place was affected by the war. They have used the council's collections, services and expertise to help them commemorate their own Great War experiences and have enthusiastically supported our own projects, so that a real partnership has emerged."

### Key learning points

- Bidding for a single larger and longer project could have offered more consistency over the centennial but may not have produced the same variety of events.

- There were challenges in getting coverage across the county so that certain areas did not dominate.
- Community groups need a lot of encouragement to bid for funding – many are put off by the application process.

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'Home Front' in Staffordshire during the First World War  
Credit: Staffordshire County Council

## Stoke-on-Trent

Stoke-on-Trent is world-famous for its pottery, and a creative project using clay has helped to build a cohesive community in a newly regenerated part of the city.

The 'Community Maker' project focused on the Portland Street area of Hanley, where 33 houses have been refurbished and sold for £1 each as part of a long-term process of social renewal and urban regeneration led by Stoke-on-Trent City Council. This housing intervention aimed to 'change the rhythm' of the area and support the development of a happier and healthier community.

'Community Maker' formed part of the cultural sector's response to placemaking for the area, bringing long-term residents together with new arrivals to build an active and engaged community. It began when a local artist (and £1 home owner), Anna Francis, approached British Ceramics Biennial (BCB) with the idea. BCB's community engagement programme acts as a catalyst for positive social change through cultural activity in Stoke-on-Trent, a city with some of the lowest cultural participation rates in England at 34 per cent. The idea was to work with local

people to explore personal stories, cultural identities, ceramic heritage and relationship to place through the making and sharing of food and through designing and making ceramic objects together.

### Impact of the project

The project created a space for people to get together, eat, talk and make ceramic items – and, through these activities, to explore how the community could develop. The communal meals provided a neutral, relaxed space for conversations on issues such as what makes a strong community, what resources and support the community would need to develop, and what was already there to be celebrated.

'Community Maker' has contributed to the creation of an active community group of residents eager to play their part in its renaissance. Participants said it had a positive impact on their perception of the area, its heritage and people. In total, 256 residents took part in activities including walks, ceramic workshops and meals. Feedback from participants included: "It was wonderful to see so many people getting involved, as well as lots of young people who brought some great ideas," and "I enjoyed meeting useful people to help our growing community."



'Community Maker' project, making tiles to be installed in the Portland Inn community centre  
Credit: British Ceramics Biennial and Airspace Gallery / Stephanie Ruston

## Looking to the future

Participants expressed a need for a permanent community space, and in response Stoke-on-Trent City Council offered a disused pub to be used as a multi-use community centre. As a way of involving the community in the design and delivery of this asset, a public arts and cultural programme took place, the Portland Inn Project, with activities designed to bring people into the building and get them involved in the discussion about its future. The evidence gathered fed into a business plan which demonstrated the sustainability of a creative community centre with social enterprise, meeting the need for a community space and creating employment and training opportunities.

## Key learning points

- Using community meals and ‘make’ sessions to bring people together was a great way of creating space for productive, if at times difficult, conversations.
- Using an action research approach to involve local people in decision-making tells you if and how something will work and empowers people to take action and engage further in their community.

- The need for sustainable business models for community buildings is necessitating a more creative approach: new buildings need flexibility built into the plan so they can evolve and develop in relation to the needs, wants and resources of an area.
- Community asset mapping is an excellent way to involve people in identifying potential resources in their area and changing views of a place.

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Credit: British Ceramics Biennial and Airspace Gallery / Stephanie Ruston

## Suffolk

### ‘Mapping Suffolk’s Stories’ is a community engagement project helping people to explore their shared history through historic maps and records.

The project will take place while a new £20 million visitor attraction, The Hold, is built in Ipswich to house the bulk of Suffolk’s archives collection. The Hold will house almost nine miles of material, spanning nine centuries, in state-of-the-art facilities with a café, exhibition space and teaching spaces. This is a partnership between Suffolk County Council’s Record Office and the University of Suffolk, with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) providing initial support and a development grant of over £500,000 towards a full grant of £10.3 million.

While The Hold is being built, Suffolk Record Office will run a programme of activity highlighting the national and global relevance of its collections. ‘Mapping Suffolk’s Stories’ will use historic maps as a starting point for uncovering stories about people, places and events. Record Office staff, aided by the university, heritage organisations and teachers, will work with community groups and schools to explore local heritage. The idea of using historic maps came out of a series of workshops with the partners around developing an activity plan that would engage as many people as possible.

#### **Impact of the project**

‘Mapping Suffolk’s Stories’ will enable people to develop new skills, meet new people and make discoveries about their community’s history and identity. Groups will share their work through exhibitions, pop-ups, publications and online, and the project will culminate with an ‘Archives Fest’ for schools. It will act as the template for a new way of working for the Record Office, delivering engagement and education in communities rather than in-house.

Hard-to-reach groups will help to shape the project. Target audiences include black, Asian and ethnic minority groups, young people, people with a mental health diagnosis, rural communities and people with disabilities. As an example of this work, finding a contact for the Lithuanian community proved difficult. The activity plan officer networked with colleagues and made contact with a Lithuanian supplementary school in Ipswich. Work is now underway to establish suitable ways of involving this community group.

The ability of archive projects to contribute towards community identity has been evidenced by research during the project’s development. Amy Rushton, Suffolk’s Heritage Programme Manager, said: “The ambition is to encourage participation from groups across the county, with traditional archive user groups working alongside new audiences.” Several Suffolk councillors are championing the project. Councillor Richard Smith, Cabinet Member for Finance and Heritage, said: “Learning about the shared history of their locality, developing new skills and working towards a common goal will improve the health, happiness and wellbeing of participants – a concept which lies at the heart of placemaking.”

#### **Looking to the future**

The Hold is expected to attract 36,200 visitors when it opens in 2020, compared with 9,000 a year in the current location. It will increase the role of heritage in supporting education, training, leisure and lifelong learning and widen the reach of the archives service, for example through increased digitisation of material. Robyn Llewellyn, Head of HLF East of England, said: “Throughout the county people will be able to get involved in using historic maps to learn about their own local area. Thanks to National Lottery players we are delighted to offer our support to this partnership project.”

### Key learning points

- A project of this scale needs a good steering group which involves key representatives, including from the target audiences.
- Hard-to-reach groups will not always respond enthusiastically to 'traditional' local history themes – the key is finding something to hook their interest.

- Getting people who do not know each other together around a map of familiar places is a good way to start conversations and make new connections.

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'Mapping Suffolk's Stories' project.  
Credit: Suffolk County Council





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