

## BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY IN THE ARTS

### ABSTRACT

The importance of place based funding and local policy initiatives is evident in literature internationally with concepts of creative cities and cultural regeneration building in prominence since 1990s. Such literature argues that investment in arts and culture brings broader social and economic benefits at a local level, but in practice investment and research has prioritised a small number of metropolitan arts venues and mega events over a larger rural or community based infrastructure. This paper in contrast explores two case studies of cultural planning in small towns. It analyses the relationship between policy and practice in these specific community contexts and considers the role of participatory decision making in developing a local arts infrastructure. The findings suggest that locally based initiatives can build capacity and engagement with the arts. But it further argues that this requires long term commitment and investment, to facilitate shared decision making between professionals and public.

**Keywords** (up to 5) cultural policy, participation, community, place based funding, capacity building

### FULL ARTICLE

The importance of place based funding is evident in policy literature internationally, with concepts of creative cities and cultural regeneration building in prominence since 1990s (Landry and Bianchini, 1995, Florida, 2002). Such literature makes the case that investment in arts and culture will bring broader social and economic benefits at a local level, by creating strong place identities, which may contribute to both greater social cohesion and inward investment. A cultural planning field has since developed, which uses an integrated approach to urban development, bringing the fields of cultural policy into alignment with broader policy agendas (Gray, 2007). But much of the focus of this work, both in theory and practice has been on large scale infrastructure projects and the growth of an events industry which attracts audiences through tourism or gentrification. Professional cultural practices have been prioritised over amateur creativity, and cultural spaces prioritised over diverse practices. A focus on urban policy has also been accused of detracting from the regional and rural agendas (Evans, 2001). Some argue that this has led to a form of “civic boosterism” (Boyle, 1997) that may bring economic benefits for a few but does little to improve social conditions and may in fact reinforce them, exacerbating different levels of participation in these state sanctioned cultural practices.

In England, which is the focus of this paper, there remain significant differences in levels of engagement in leisure and cultural activities in different parts of the country (Sport England, n.d.). To address this some argue for more investment in participatory activities rather than professional practice (Matarasso, 1997). Others claim this is the result of unequal distribution of funding between different locations (Brook, 2013). But while there has been policy rhetoric about greater regionalization of funding for over fifty years (Lee, 1965) in reality the trend has been in the opposite direction. It has been claimed that England has the most centralised arts funding mechanisms in Europe with the capital receiving over 50% of national arts funding (Stark et al., 2013). Outside of London similar inequalities also exist with the wealthiest local authorities receiving over five times the amount per head in Arts Council subsidy, compared with the poorest (Stark et al., 2014).

This research examines cultural planning at a small town, rather than metropolitan level. It asks whether engagement processes that involve the public in the process can build local capacity and asks questions about the role of investment in such practices. It is worth noting that the concept of capacity building is commonly associated with the idea of developing the social and cultural capital of individuals (Putnam, 2000, Bourdieu, 1984), but the concept of “capital” is itself contested. If as some suggest capital is something that every citizen can increase through taking part in civic or cultural activities (Putnam, 2000), failure to participate may imply a deficit not in the service provided but in the individual participant. In contrast if as others argue capital is kept in finite supply by valuing some practices over others (Bourdieu, 1984) defining participation in relation to professional artistic practice rather than a broader definition of the everyday practices people engage in may reinforce social divisions, which may be reduced by allowing communities to define their own cultural offer

In other public policy arenas the “choice and voice agenda” has seen initiatives engaging communities in dialogue about the services they want delivered. But while some claim that this creates more equitable public services (Bevir

and Rhodes, 2010 pg 210) other argue that it is part of an international shift towards reduced state control (Goss, 2001). Community choice has also been criticised for ignoring the power relationships within decision making groups, where the expert may always outweigh other and particularly newer voices in the group (Lukes, 2005). However Elinor Ostrom (1996) argues that the process of engagement determines the outcomes and where both professionals and public contribute equally there are opportunities for change. Such theory has influenced public policy internationally “gaining endorsement from both left and right of the political spectrum with its appeal to self-help and efficiency gains, as well as active citizenship and community participation” (Durose et al., 2014 pg 2). This paper therefore examines two very different manifestations of policy in practice within the UK in order to consider the implications of involving local communities in decisions on the way the arts and culture are invested in and delivered at a local level. While the context is England, the theories underpinning policy development are international and it is hoped that the findings therefore have broader relevance.

## The UK policy context

Under the New Labour government (1997-2010) the choice and voice agenda had some prominence through a “duty to involve” (DCLG, 2008), which required all public bodies to engage people not only through consultation but in decision making. Influenced by the Brazilian model of participatory budgeting it suggests that community participants should set the local agenda. In Brazil it also contains political objectives to change the status quo in public funding, rather than just to legitimise or reduce it (Community Pride Initiative, 2003).

Under the UK’s Conservative-Liberal coalition government (2010-2015) there were claims of increasing public involvement further through the Localism Bill (DCLG, 2011) but significantly this describes a return to consultation rather than decision making. Delivery agents and government retain power over both the agenda and the outcomes. Community asset transfers, which started under New Labour (Quirk, 2007), also significantly increased. These are built on nineteenth century models of “civil society” where the public and not the state organised and financed local institutions.

One difference between the two government approaches therefore was that while New Labour argued that investment from the state was still needed under the coalition the aim was reducing state investment. This paper analyses two case studies of practice, responding to these two specific policy initiatives. It explores the process and ethos underpinning each case study and the extent to which these affect outcomes.

## Methodology

The research was conducted between 2008-2013. Two towns were chosen as case studies, Castleford and Hebden Bridge. Both are ex-industrial towns in the North of England, who suffered economic decline when the mills of Hebden Bridge and the mines of Castleford closed in the 1970s. Both previously had local town councils, which became absorbed into a larger metropolitan authority around the same time.

The Castleford Project was developed in response to a perceived lack of trust between the local town and the metropolitan borough, and was directly informed by New Labour’s engagement agenda. The Hebden Bridge asset transfers in contrast responded to the coalition’s localism agenda. Both initiatives have received government and media attention and been cited as “models of good practice” in meeting these different agendas (Bibby, n.d., Hebden Bridge Community Association, n.d.-b, Young Foundation, 2009). While the findings are not generalizable to all projects developed in relation to the stated policy aims, the analysis explores some of the issues that may be inherent within the policy formations.

In each case study archival literature provided by the project teams is analysed alongside interviews with policy makers, arts professionals and members of the public engaged in the projects described. By triangulating the findings from different data sources each project is examined in greater detail. The following table provides brief background detail on each place along with a list of the data examined in each case.

	The Castleford Project (2004-2008)	Hebden Bridge community asset transfers (2006-2012)
Local authority	Wakefield MDC regeneration team	Calderdale MDC stronger and safer communities team
Population size and profile	40,000 multiple deprivation indices	5,000 prosperous commuter belt

Archivalliterature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• business case for the project (ABROS, 2003)</li> <li>• council regeneration strategy (Wakefield Metropolitan District Council et al., 2005)</li> <li>• 2 evaluation of the project (Lewis, 2009, Young Foundation, 2009);</li> <li>• council engagement strategy (Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, 2010)</li> <li>• 4 part television documentary (Channel 4, 2009).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 asset transfer applications (Hebden Royd Town Council and Hebden Bridge Community Association, 2011, Bibby, n.d.)</li> <li>• approval minutes from Calderdale Council (Calderdale Council, 2012).</li> <li>• 2 town action plans (Hebden Royd Partnership, 2005, Hebden Bridge Partnership, 2013)</li> <li>• 2 community association policy documents (Hebden Bridge Community Association, n.d.-a, Hebden Bridge Community Association, n.d.-b)</li> </ul>
Interview subjects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 local authority officers</li> <li>1 Arts Council representative</li> <li>2 artists/architects who worked on project</li> <li>3 who did not</li> <li>7 local people involved in project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 leader of Calderdale Council</li> <li>1 local authority officer</li> <li>1 town council clerk</li> <li>1 chair of community association</li> <li>6 local people from online forum about future of the town's assets</li> <li>2 consultants advising on asset transfers</li> <li>1 observation at public meeting</li> </ul>

*The Castleford Project* was delivered by a local authority while New Labour was in power locally as well as nationally. It involved community commissioning of public artworks for the town, with the aim of using “inspirational design to bring out the aspiration of the local people” (local authority officer) as part of a broader plan to regenerate the town. As such it provides an example of culture being used as a vehicle to deliver broader social agendas. Although started before the introduction of the “duty to involve” (DCLG, 2008), in the interviews with local authority staff, it was stated that, like the “duty”, the aim was to increase participatory decision making in both planning and delivery of the project. As a result of the high profile that the scheme received, through being documented for a four part television programme (Channel 4, 2009), it also informed the development of national policy. It may therefore be seen as an example of New Labour policy in action.

*Hebden Bridge Town Hall and Picture House* was an initiative led by a community association who took control of two cultural assets from the local authority. The process started in 2006 while New Labour was in office nationally, but not locally. When it was completed in 2012 both the local council and national government were run by a coalition. The community association defined their aim as “safeguarding cultural assets” within a context where governments were reducing their commitments to local initiatives and as such this case study may be seen as an example of a retrenchment from state control.

In analysing the different data sets consideration was given to the key issues identified in the literature in relation to the role of funding or investment in developing

- strategies to build local capacity, skills development and participatory decision making
- how the processes of engagement affects the diversity of those who participate
- the role of community cultural infrastructure

The following examines the case studies individually before drawing conclusions for this paper.

## The Castleford Project

At the start of the project Castleford was home to some of the highest levels of deprivation in England, with above average poor health among residents; lack of educational qualifications and similar discrepancies in terms of affluence, skills and employment (ABROS, 2003). It has been described in the media as having no cultural assets (Channel 4, 2009) and quantitative surveys suggest it has low rates of arts participation (Sport England, n.d.). Despite this community activism and participation in local amateur arts activities was argued by locals to still be strong with a wealth of choirs, brass bands and art groups active but under invested in (Lewis, 2009). There was therefore said to be an enthusiasm for more local investment, but also more public involvement in deciding how this should be spent

before the project started.

However two different approaches to regeneration were explored by the council at the same time. On the one hand a business case was made for retail led regeneration to transform Castleford to commuter belt for Leeds (ABROS, 2003). This document makes no reference to community engagement, but rather focusses on attracting newcomers to the district. In contrast the five town strategy prioritises engagement with the current constituents (and voters) and distanced itself from plans to attract incomers (Wakefield Metropolitan District Council et al., 2005). This difference between a regeneration strategy focused on attracting “the creative class” (Florida, 2002), and one based on improvements for residents demonstrates a key tension in cultural planning strategies that focus on economic regeneration and those focused on social development.

It was clear to everyone interviewed that although the five town’s strategy was developed with residents it would have been “a document on a shelf and no more” (resident) without the combination of national policy on participatory decision making, council commitment, community activism, and the involvement of Channel 4 television company. Residents commented that the changes proposed had been talked about “for donkey’s years” (resident) without any signs of progress. The progress that was made between 2004-2008 included eleven public art commissions, where in many cases the public were involved in the selection of the artists, and in some cases worked alongside them from design to delivery. The project cost over £9million, which was provided by 21 funding streams, representing considerably more investment than the town had seen since the closure of the coal mines (Lewis, 2009). The following section therefore considers the strategies employed to deliver this.

## **Strategies to build local capacity, skills development and participatory decision making**

In both the documentation and interviews the principle of involving residents in agenda setting was seen as key to ensure that the process of engagement did not just legitimise what the council wanted to do anyway. But the strength of community opinion was said to have surprised the council and at time “railroaded” them into new working practices (architect). The cameras were also said to have engaged a wider range of voices than a council initiative might have achieved on its own by ensuring that “local people knew something special was happening” (Young Foundation, 2009 pg 4). But the council also took a proactive approach, creating a steering group of “all interested parties” (local authority) for the project, which for the first time in Wakefield included community representatives rather than just professional interests. They also created a pool of community champions to act as “a clear point of contact and a clear point of reference to get feedback from” (architect) and held public meetings throughout the process to discuss and vote on priorities. While it was acknowledged that this meant that decisions took longer to arrive at, the process was seen to be important and worthwhile. This was demonstrated in relation to the local buy in and wider attention given to the projects developed. #

The commission unanimously cited as the most successful, *The Footbridge* was selected by a vote at a public meeting. Once selected the London based architect Renato Benedetti ([www.mcdowellbenedetti.com](http://www.mcdowellbenedetti.com)), worked with two community champions from design concept to delivery. Residents said he was chosen, not for his ideas, but for his willingness to listen and learn and the artistic vision for the bridge was said to have come “from the community..they identified that the river is the theme, not the bridge [and] they wanted a ‘destination’” (resident). But mutual respect was noticeable from people’s comments. The residents were happy to credit the expertise and skill of the architect; “if we hadn’t had Renato do you think we would have had that beautiful bridge? No we wouldn’t” (resident). But the architect also believed that the community’s enthusiasm “didn’t just help it..it absolutely fundamentally made the project” (architect). It has since become an iconic landmark attracting visitors and won international recognition for its design quality and innovation(<http://ribastirlingprize.architecture.com/>). This may demonstrate that creating something through community engagement can have both social impacts and deliver the council’s other aim of attracting newcomers into town.

Two projects with contrasting outcomes were said to be *Cutsyke Playforest* and *Wilson Street Project*. Cutsyke is a large council estate, where a community group wanted a play area for local children. Wilson Street is an owner occupied area where the community wanted to create an aesthetic sense of place. Architects were again commissioned by public vote and in these cases both selected came from Yorkshire; Estell Warren Landscape Architects, ([www.estellwarren.co.uk](http://www.estellwarren.co.uk)) and Alen Tod ([www.allentod.co.uk](http://www.allentod.co.uk)). In Cutsyke the architect and community champion took groups of young people “on day trips to see different play areas” (resident). This was seen as a model for building the relationship and knowledge base for both the designer and the community. *The Wilson Street Project*, in



contrast, saw a breakdown in trust between the architect, who accused residents of being resistant to creative ideas, and the community, who accused the architect of not listening to their views.

Significantly two projects where the community did not select the artists were fiercely criticised. Deborah Saunt ([www.dsdha.co.uk](http://www.dsdha.co.uk)) was commissioned to transform *The Ticklecock Underpass* into a destination rather than a threatening tunnel, by installing lighting and benches. The local authority officer accused the artist of putting her vision over practicalities of design. It was claimed that although it looked good while the cameras were on, it fell apart shortly after and cost heavily in maintenance bills.

Similarly for *Fryston Village Green* Martha Schwartz ([www.marthaschwartz.com](http://www.marthaschwartz.com)) was selected without consultation. On camera she says her community were not the residents already living there, but an imagined community who would be attracted from elsewhere (Channel 4, 2009). As a result the design was described as “dropped in and looking like it’s been dropped in” (local authority) and it was named locally as “the finger” because that “monument is sticking a finger up at the community” (resident). Despite its artistic merits being defended by the Arts Council officer interviewed it was said to have remained unpopular and unused and had not attracted the new developments which it was intended to. This demonstrates the risk of policy aimed at attracting inward investment, rather than investing in what is already there. But it further questions how the public are defined in participatory processes.

Some local councillors questioned the whole processes of participatory decision making as they “didn’t believe in [local people] having a say because they’re not elected” (resident). But others believed such projects “only deliver for the community and for the work if there is an on-going dialogue” with individuals who the work directly affects (Arts Council England senior manager). The following section therefore considers who engaged in Castleford.

## **How process of engagement and affects the diversity of those who participate**

The Castleford Project was launched at an event which attracted over 3000 people. Attendees were asked “to put their names down and state what they were interested in” (local authority). After this regular meetings were advertised to this list and through local press, regularly attracting two hundred people. By the end of the project 12% of the residents became involved in meetings and 86% were aware of it and believed that participatory decision making had influenced outcomes (Young Foundation, 2009).

This level of engagement was believed to be related to the fact that the community saw real decisions taking place at meetings as this was where artists pitched ideas and were voted on, but some voiced concern that they were voting on a pre-existing shortlist of artists. The Arts Council defended this on the grounds expertise was required to identify artists, but the process of getting people to research and create a shortlist was cited as a key success factor in *Cutsyke*. One council officer also commented that although the designers needed to be of a quality to be aspirational, they doubted whether the “so called experts” who shortlisted had either the knowledge or interest in doing a trawl locally. As a result no local artists made it onto the list and many felt that this limited the diversity of the projects, or the ability for local people to truly define their local cultural offer. This may be seen to support arguments in the literature that such processes may retain a power imbalance in participatory processes.

There was also concern that the process of involving community champions only involved about 20 people. But the council said that those who came forward were not already known to them. As such they were not the “usual suspects” who were said to get involved in district wide decision making. All the champions interviewed had been born in Castleford, and came from working class families who remembered when the town had been more prosperous. They believed this to be important in having a vision for the town and leaving a legacy from the project. Although this research did not interview members of the community who may have been excluded, or felt excluded, from these processes it does suggest that for those who took part the process was new and empowering. But balancing the need to work with a small number of activists, at the same time as maintaining a role for a larger number to engage through open meetings, was also seen as crucial.

Residents and council staff credited the project as having significantly increased community and arts activities within Castleford, not only during but beyond the life of the project. There was said to be an increase in the number of active community groups since the project started, an increase in numbers attending existing groups and better connections between these groups. The capacity of individuals and the wider community were both said to have developed as a result. The evaluation further claims that there was an impact on artistic practice as “many of the designers

involved...became ‘hooked’ on the process” (Young Foundation, 2009 pg 3). The next section therefore considers how much the project influenced practices across the district.

## **The role of community cultural infrastructure**

Despite the council’s claims that the Castleford Project had influenced wider council policy residents and local arts managers felt that money had since been from locally based projects. Since the project Wakefield’s theatre lost all their funding, the city centre gallery closed down and the project identified by residents in Castleford as their highest priority, *the Forum Library and Museum*, was never implemented. Wakefield MDC defended cuts on the grounds of a reduced funding climate, but this was challenged as “the money’s there, look how much [the council’s] spending on the Hepworth Gallery...the difference is elitism” (resident). The Hepworth Gallery, a multi-million pound development, was being built during the same period without participatory decision making. The council argued that it was harder to define a public for a district wide initiative but others felt this called into question their commitment to either devolving policy to a more local level or engaging the public in decision making.

The council also defended the gallery in line with more common cultural planning strategies (Evans, 2001), as a means of bringing economic benefits to the district. But residents and the economic evaluation of the Castleford Project (Young Foundation, 2009) questioned the relationship of district wide schemes and local economic development with reference to Xscape ([www.xscape.co.uk/yorkshire](http://www.xscape.co.uk/yorkshire)), a leisure complex on the edge of Castleford. Despite being the most visited paid for attraction after the Millennium wheel in London (Lewis, 2009) there is clear evidence that rather than bringing revenue to the town, Xscape has in fact damaged retail trade and taken people away from the town centre (Young Foundation, 2009). Some of the residents of Castleford strongly believed that “if we can’t attract [visitors] from [Xscape] a mile up the road, we’re not going to attract them from [the Hepworth] Wakefield” (resident).

There were concerns from all interviewed with raising the capacity and expectations of a community if there was not going to be ongoing investment and support for local community and cultural developments. Despite the perceived success of the Castleford Project cultural policy and planning policy more generally were accused of reverting to “business as usual” (resident). There were also concerns that publicly funded buildings, like the Hepworth, were increasingly being made into independent trusts rather than staying under council control. Many people felt that this made them less accountable to communities. The asset transfer model (Quirk, 2007) which encourages local community ownership of public buildings was also resisted in Castleford “because if you want something to happen and to grow and develop volunteer time doesn’t do it” (resident). The next case study therefore examines an example of a community asset transfer.

## **Hebden Bridge Asset Transfers**

When British manufacturing declined from 1960s and the once prosperous mills of Hebden Bridge closed (Spencer, 1999), the local town council attempted to “regenerate itself as a centre for tourism, small craft businesses and creative industries” (Hebden Royd Partnership, 2005 pg 3). This started the process of transformation to an affluent middle class commuter town which became associated with arts and culture (Hebden Bridge Partnership, 2013). But many of those interviewed voiced resentment that the regeneration begun in the 1960s did not continue when Calderdale District Council was formed in 1974. When Pitt Street community college was sold by the local authority in 2005 a community association formed to call for local control of the town’s assets (Hebden Royd Partnership, 2005). In 2012 this resulted in the community asset transfer of the Town Hall and Picture House, previously owned by Calderdale.

The plan for the transferred Town Hall was articulated as a creative quarter “because Hebden’s quite strong in that respect” (resident) but the concept of “public realm...what we as a community have together” (resident) was more important than whether this manifested itself through culture or something else. With the Picture House the aim was to maintain its tradition as an independent cinema with a mix of commercial and art house films, but there were no plans for its development. The community association also “discussed with Calderdale various other things including public toilets, the parks and allotments” (resident) but only the cultural asset transfers had gone through. The choice of buildings and focus on culture was therefore accidental. Despite cultural planning having been the process that had supported Hebden’s regenerations in 1960s therefore, it was a secondary consideration this time round. The approach responded to a perceived need to “safeguard public assets” which may be seen as pragmatic rather than aspirational, and based on a reduction of state involvement in public services rather than a development of them. The following section considers how this affected the opportunities to build local capacity.

## **Strategies to build local capacity, skills development and participatory decision making**

Asset transfers were a feature of New Labour policy, as well as the coalition, and the community association said the process in Hebden Bridge had only begun because they had been “given a boost by some government money” under New Labour (resident). This had allowed a group of community activists in the town to build their capacity to understand wider planning processes, as a necessary precursor to the implementation of asset transfer policy. These individuals, who mainly represented existing community groups, formed the Hebden Bridge Community Association to represent what they saw as the town’s interests. Significantly however as a membership association, wider consultation with residents was minimal. Although an open meeting was held at the start of both asset transfer processes, from observation at these meetings, it was clear that it was not a deliberative process, but one designed to provide information and build public support. At the meeting for the Picture House a series of speakers presented arguments in favour of the asset transfer to the audience. No one was invited to make the case against or vote on the decision. Many voices from the audience accused the organisers of using the meeting not to make decisions but to legitimise decisions already made as the application for transfer had already been written before the meeting took place.

Once the asset transfers were confirmed management committees were elected to run the buildings. While anyone from the town could register to vote the Town Hall required people to “fill an application form in, and they pay ten quid for a mug” to join the community association (local authority). This generated over five hundred members but only one hundred and fifty voted. Many people queried whether people knew they had voting rights, rather than just buying a mug as part of the Town Hall fundraising scheme. The Picture House gave a vote to all sixteen hundred people on their free mailing list. Although this did not require people to pay for membership it engaged cinema users, many not from the town, rather than reaching out to those not engaged. The process was challenged by several residents interviewed on the grounds that voting alone does not empower communities or build capacity but seeks to legitimise existing power structures. This was evidenced by the fact that many of the names on the shortlists for committee members were said to be the same people who already sat on all the voluntary boards across the town.

Significantly the success of the applications was also said by the local authority officers interviewed, to be influenced, less by the level of community engagement and more by the Council’s confidence in specific “high capacity individuals” who were named in the applications (local authority). Furthermore the expectation was that the buildings transferred “should remain fundamentally as it is” (community association) rather than being changed through the process. Other options for how the assets might be run were not considered. This is at odds with the principles of participatory decision making, outlined in the literature and demonstrated by one interviewee that the best solutions are when people “redefine their own solutions to their own issues” (resident). The pragmatic approach to asset transfers did not appear to encourage such decision making processes, nor build wider capacity in the town.

It is worth noting that most residents interviewed, including the chair of the community association, who wrote the applications, said “in an ideal world...it would be the local authority which could continue to hold buildings like this, because there is that formal element of democracy built in, through the ballot box” (resident). Rather than enthusiasm for participatory decision making, it was fear at the lack of statutory obligations for public services that initiated the transfers. Although the community association had formed in 2006 to start conversations with Calderdale Council about public services, it was only once the coalition government started actively promoting asset transfers that they had been able to get the council’s attention. The local authority officer interviewed acknowledged that they had agreed to the transfers not as part of a cultural or regeneration plan but to reduce their obligations. As a result some described the Town Hall and Picture House as “an asset transfer to a section of the community, an articulate middle class, professional, done well in education section of the community” (resident).

## **How the process of engagement affects the diversity of those who participate**

In Hebden Bridge there was little evidence of awareness among the people interviewed, beyond those who were members of the community association, of the process of consultation on the asset transfers,. However the organisers claimed the fact that “unusually for a big development in Hebden there were more people formally supporting the application than against [when it went to the planning committee]” (resident) was evidence of engagement. But some people interviewed felt that the lack of opportunity to work on ideas before the applications were submitted and then the invitation to vote once the transfers had gone through was a barrier to engagement. The open meetings that were

organised were also said to only attract those already active. One person argued that the only way to change this was through “face to face consultation...see[ing] people out on the streets [talking to] a random selection of the population” (resident), but this did not happen.

The Picture House did wider some consultation with audiences via a questionnaire about what they wanted from the new management. A series of closed questions asked people how happy they were with things as they were. Although nearly one and a half thousand responded, with 92% of respondents saying they were satisfied, it provided little opportunity for the organisation to learn and merely legitimised the process. Once the asset transfers were confirmed there is little evidence of continued consultation, let alone active recruitment of a more diverse range of people.

Most of those who did engage were said to be middle aged and university educated, who had moved to the town because of its artistic reputation or as a good place to raise children. Many saw it as inevitable that “what happens...in a small town like Hebden Bridge is that it’s the same people volunteering for everything” (resident) and that these tend to be the high capacity individuals. But the lack of effort in reaching out to those not already engaged may be a symptom of this attitude, rather than evidence that others did not wish to be involved. Far from increasing capacity in the town there were concerns expressed that competition between cultural organisations had increased as a result of the asset transfers. Different community groups were accused of chasing the same funding and same bookings, risking and this was not only damaging relationships between community groups but risking their sustainability.

## **The role of community cultural infrastructure**

The leader of Calderdale Council argued that as a democratically elected body they should maintain responsibility for overall cultural strategy to address such strategic issues. This was justified in terms of the fact that there was no consensus on what a cultural policy should prioritise among local residents. In interviews one person focused on the preservation of cultural heritage; one wanted more prestigious buildings; some wanted investment in new creative businesses that might be commercialized; some wanted support for activities that were less likely to ever be commercially viable. This demonstrates the different interests at play and the difficulty in funding consensus through participatory processes, but it also demonstrates the importance of hearing from a range of perspectives as the people involved in decision making may actively change outcomes. But many residents interviewed felt it was hard to see how the council could still be involved in this process once they had disposed of cultural assets. What most people interviewed said they saw, across the cultural and community sector, rather than greater local power was greater power in the hands of a few active and articulate individuals.

The council claimed they were using other methods of public engagement elsewhere in Calderdale to address infrastructural needs. These included “public question time” in council meetings, as an opportunity for residents to raise concerns but there was no evidence that this resulted in changes in policy. Surveys were also used to capture public opinion but one council officer acknowledged that they were “mainly used for information...it has directly influenced a decision once...the decision was...put on hold shall we say” (local authority). The case in point was the relocation of the public library in 2011. This was postponed, but not stopped, due to public opposition to the council plans. Residents interviewed questioned the survey as a tool for engagement as “you’re asking people ‘do you want to lose your cinema or do you want to lose your library?’ well what if you don’t want to lose either of them...there are questions that we’re not allowed to ask and not allowed to answer” (resident). There was consensus among residents, and agreed by the local authority officer therefore that Calderdale Council was not using engagement to develop the community cultural infrastructure, but rather a way of reducing its obligations.

## **Discussion of findings**

It is clear that while the history of the two towns was one of post-industrial decline their fortunes since 1980s have been very different, with Castleford suffering underinvestment and a lack of any real planning approach until the millennium, while Hebden Bridge had used culture as a mechanism to reinvent itself as a prosperous commuter town. But what residents in both towns shared was dissatisfaction with the increased centralisation of policy, and the loss of power for their local town councils. In both cases the absorption into district councils was seen to be negative and there was widespread support for the localism agenda which was becoming more prominent post millennium.



However it was also clear that the aims of the locally based strategies analysed in this paper were very different. While Wakefield MDC invested both time and money in Castleford, through the processes described here, in an attempt to kick start culture led regeneration and rebuild trust between residents and the district council, in Hebden Bridge it was fear at reduced investment and the lack of a planning approach from the local authority that led to the processes described. The following compares and contrasts the two case studies to consider the implications of the different approaches.

## **Strategies to build local capacity, skills development and participatory decision making**

Both initiatives demonstrate the importance of national policy interventions in making a change locally, with residents in both towns saying the ideas explored were not new, but it was only New Labour's participation agenda in the case of Wakefield and the coalition's promotion of asset transfers in Calderdale, that made the local authorities listen to residents. But the difference between the two also illustrates the difference in policies, described in the literature above, between an approach to localism based on investment in capacity building and one based on devolving responsibility for public services. In Castleford the desire to rebuild trust between the town and the district, saw increased investment going into town, and a focus on participatory decision making to build local capacity. In contrast in Hebden Bridge the process was a response to reduced investment and relied on existing capacity. This difference was seen as central to the processes that were developed.

In the Castleford Project an open informal process offered a range of ways for people to get involved. Proactive actions by the council encouraged different levels of engagement and offered different levels of capacity building and skills development for individuals. But this process not only relied on financial investment, equally important was the two way relationship between professionals (from the council and commissioned artists) and residents. Discussion of ideas, go and see trips to similar projects and an open agenda were all seen as crucial to the delivery of the participatory decision making processes. Where these were not in place the projects had more limited impact. In Hebden Bridge in contrast the formal management committees limited the numbers and types of people who got involved. As a result there is less evidence of increased local capacity and less engagement in the processes set up.

There were also clear differences in the decision making processes between the use of voting mechanisms and more deliberative processes. Both areas used voting, in Castleford to select artists and Hebden Bridge to select committee members and in both cases there were some complaints about how people made it onto the short list in the first place. Voting itself therefore, as identified in other research (Parkinson, 2006) may be seen as a vehicle used for legitimacy, producing more conservative outcomes than more deliberative methods, which were also used in Castleford. These provided opportunities for people to set the agenda and for both the committees and professionals to learn through the process. This supports findings from the literature that people should be involved throughout the whole process from agenda setting to delivery (DCLG, 2008).

## **How the process of engagement affects the diversity of those who participate**

There were clear differences in terms of levels of awareness of and engagement in the programmes in the two towns. While the council and the TV crews ensured that everyone knew about the Castleford project, and the process involved individuals in the community the focus on working with pre-existing community groups in Hebden meant that awareness was more limited.

However in both cases the shortlists of artists in Castleford and committee members in Hebden Bridge created some cynicism that the processes were not fully challenging power structures in decision making. There were examples in Castleford, where community members had the opportunity to develop their knowledge base about options that this did challenge assumed "expertise" but these were not sustained beyond the life of the project and in Hebden Bridge there was a stated aim to avoid disruption and change through the processes described, which some saw as narrowing the power base, not expanding it.

In both places the use of different methods of engagement attempted to address a need to engage a broad range of people at the same time as work in depth with a smaller number of active citizens. This may be seen as both a necessity and a challenge in participatory processes. Deliberative processes, with a smaller number of people were shown to achieve more transformational outcomes but without the breadth of engagement from a large sector of the communities decisions may always be challenged as non-representative. In both towns people interviewed had a clear

sense of the types of people they expected to engage in such processes and their perceptions proved true in their own town. But significantly there was a marked difference between the two towns. In Castleford people believed that people got engaged because they had a long term relationship to the town. This was borne out in practise as most activists had been born there and many were retired working class. Those in Hebden Bridge in contrast were middle aged incomers, who believed it was the fact that they made a choice to move to the town which made them more active than long term residents. In both places the assumption that such processes would attract “people like me” therefore limited the diversity of those engaged.

## **The role of community cultural infrastructure**

While Wakefield and Calderdale MDC said that they recognised the value of participatory processes on a very local level both expressed concern that localism might advantage more affluent communities, where activism was already strong. Devolving power therefore may in fact reinforce power in the hands of a few, rather than share power more evenly. This was clearly demonstrated to be the case with Hebden Bridge, where high capacity individuals were needed to run the new community infrastructure. In fact Calderdale Council acknowledged that elsewhere in the borough community asset transfers were struggling after only two years into the initiative. But in Castleford this was not the case, where time and money were invested by the council to build local capacity the project did see an increase in local cultural participation. Many residents therefore argued that more funding should be devolved to communities groups, to determine the cultural offer in their own towns rather than reinforce inequalities by funding large regional or national arts institutions.

However there was no evidence in either town that district wide initiatives were being dealt with in the same way. The council officers were more sceptical about the use of participatory processes on district wide strategies, where it might be harder to define “the public”. As a result it is clear that neither local authority fully embedded either participatory decision making or localism across the district. Although in the case of Calderdale there were some consultation surveys these did not affect policy and residents interviewed were cynical about their purpose and concerned about the future of any cultural investment by the local authority. In Castleford lack of engagement in district wide decisions led to disappointment that the potential recognised from the project had not been followed through and that district wide Wakefield continued to prioritise prestigious buildings such as the national galleries, rather than local delivery. The projects were therefore seen in both places as experiments rather than a significant change in approach.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has considered local strategies that engage the community in the planning and delivery of their own cultural services. It has focused on the specifics of policy and practice developed in response to the participation and localism agendas which have been prevalent internationally since the millennium, so while the focus for the paper is the UK context it argues that the learning has wider resonance.

The research has examined two case studies of practice, based on different policy objectives in very different locations. While this paper does not claim that the case studies are generalizable to all manifestations of policy delivery they do illustrate the significant role that national government policy played in giving a voice to local and community needs in England during the period under investigation. It also suggests that the different ethos in policy and different processes in practice, in Castleford and Hebden Bridge, appear to have delivered very different outcomes.

Existing literature was examined which identifies a historic uneven distribution of funding between different locations and a focus on prestige projects aimed at inward investment rather than community based initiatives aimed at developing the local capacity and infrastructure. This paper suggests, based on evidence from the two case studies that investment is a crucial component both in building capacity locally and ensuring that a wide range of people inform decision making. Investment in Castleford saw an increase both in community activism and arts participation beyond the life of the project, while lack of investment in Hebden Bridge resulted in activism remaining with the same “high capacity” individuals that were also seen as active in town.

However the participatory processes used do also raise questions about how the public are defined within local initiatives and a concern about the legitimacy of community decision making. Both cases studies attempted to

addresses this by using a combination of open public meetings and committees of community activists to make things happen, but there is evidence, that it requires a real effort to engage those who do not normally engage. However involving people in setting the agenda, rather than voting on a predetermined number of options, both increased engagement and had more radical outcomes. Conversely processes that rely on volunteers taking responsibility for formal management structures may encourage more conservative outcomes than those which share decision making between professionals and public.

There was a strong sense in Castleford, supported by some evidence that prestige projects neither build local nor not produce the anticipated economic “trickle down” to the wider community. This paper therefore argues that there is the need for a localism agenda based on a redistribution of funds and shared responsibility between professionals and community, rather than devolved power from one to the other or a separation between prestige and community practice. But despite these findings it was clear in both case studies that long term commitment and investment of funds was not forthcoming. In Castleford the council was accused of raising expectations that were not met and in the case of Hebden Bridge, devolving responsibility to volunteers without the professional back up.

This may lead to programmes that are able to build, but not necessarily sustain local capacity. A shift from participatory decision making processes that require state involvement to build capacity and partnerships, towards a model that aims to reduce state involvement may therefore be seen to be equally likely to reinforce inequalities and reduce participation, rather than increase it.

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