



Cornerstones of culture:
Commission on Culture
and Local Government
summary report



Yamin's story

Yamin is an award-winning theatre practitioner, producer and director who is joint CEO and Artistic Director of Hackney Empire. Yamin's lived experience and journey into theatre have made access the cornerstone of his practice.

Under his leadership Hackney Empire went from engaging 50 young people a year to 5,000. The programme is supported by Hackney Council and free to young people.

“There are so many people from Hackney Council who were integral to this success. In addition to those in arts and culture their colleagues in planning, town centre regeneration and road management have enabled us to do weird, wonderful and amazing things in Hackney.”



Foreword

Baroness Lola Young of Hornsey **Chair of the Commission on Culture and Local Government**

This Commission was set up in early 2022 to investigate the role of local publicly funded culture in supporting our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The context in which we are publishing is very different, and with so many serious challenges facing communities, it might be easy to ask why we are focused on culture. But in my view this has never been more important.

2023 marks the 75th anniversary of local authority spending on the arts¹. It is right that we celebrate the role councils play in binding together culture, communities and place – and discuss what publicly funded culture needs in the next 75 years. Our report sets out the issues and also our ambitions for more resilient, diverse, inclusive and place-led approaches to culture.

The pandemic was a powerful reminder that people reach for culture in times of crisis, as well of those of joy and celebration. Access to culture and creativity provides hope and inspiration and enriches people's lives. That access must be fair for all.

The Commission heard about the many and varied ways local culture contributes to places. A vibrant cultural ecosystem creates jobs, supports health and wellbeing, enhances learning and opens up opportunities for young people. It draws people to the high street, underpins the visitor and night-time economies, supports the growing creative industries and helps to make places unique.

I'd like to thank all the commissioners who gave up their time and considerable expertise to make this project so rewarding, as well as all those who gave evidence and appeared before the Commission. The publication of this report is not the end of the story. I hope our findings and recommendations will help councils, regional bodies, cultural arms-length bodies and national government to work together with cultural organisations and communities to weather this storm and secure the future of this vital community infrastructure.



Introduction

Culture, heritage and creativity are essential to our future national prosperity and wellbeing.

During the pandemic, people turned to culture for solace and connection. Local cultural services such as libraries, museums, theatres, and arts centres reached out to communities in lockdown to address isolation, support mental wellbeing and provide educational opportunities.

As we move towards recovery, we face a new set of challenges: a growing cost of living crisis and the prospect of recession; pressure on public services; rising inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic; climate change, and global instability. Under these circumstances it would be tempting to dismiss investment in cultural services as a luxury we can't afford.

But for the same reasons, these services have never been more important. Cultural services, organisations and practitioners bring people together at times of crisis and celebration, they provide support and social connection, create jobs, develop new adaptive skills, and underpin empathy and critical thinking.

We need people and communities who can respond with creativity and innovation to the social, economic, and environmental challenges and opportunities facing us. We need places that are able to draw on their unique local heritage to develop resilient and inclusive futures. We need new diverse voices to bring fresh thinking to the table.

Councils have an important role to play in supporting a thriving local cultural ecosystem, but they are under increasing financial strain with the Local Government Association (LGA) highlighting the significant issues facing council services as a result of inflation and other pressures.² Local authority funding for culture reduced by around 40 per cent in the 10 years leading up to the pandemic.³ This Commission provided an opportunity to explore the immediate challenges facing the sector and some important questions about its future.

- **What is the role of local publicly funded culture in place?**
- **How can it support locally led recovery from the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis?**
- **What is the role of the council in supporting this?**
- **What more can be done to encourage thriving local cultural ecosystems?**





The Commission on Culture and Local Government

The Commission on Culture and Local Government was established to explore the important contribution local culture can make to what is currently described as ‘levelling up’ and its role in responding to the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

Its aim was to bring national, regional and local actors engaged in local publicly funded culture together to communicate the unique role of council funded and supported culture and to set out a vision for its future in the context of place.

Over the past nine months, the Commission has seen:

- **eighteen organisations give oral evidence over four roundtable sessions**
- **more than 80 organisations involved in wider focus groups and interviews**
- **over 50 case studies received as written evidence**
- **sixteen commissioners contribute to the delivery of the report.**

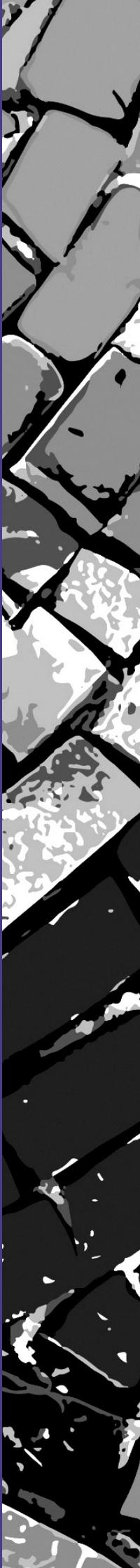
The Commission’s definition of local culture was broad and included the following areas of work:

Local museums	Library services	Archives	Theatres
Heritage sites	Arts centres and arts development	Heritage or arts projects/activity	Creative clusters
Local festivals and events	Public art	Parks and open spaces	Music venues
The historic environment	The creative industries	Visitor attractions	Community hubs for culture

The Commission heard that a healthy local cultural ecosystem can also deliver against many wider challenges we face as a society. It can help to:

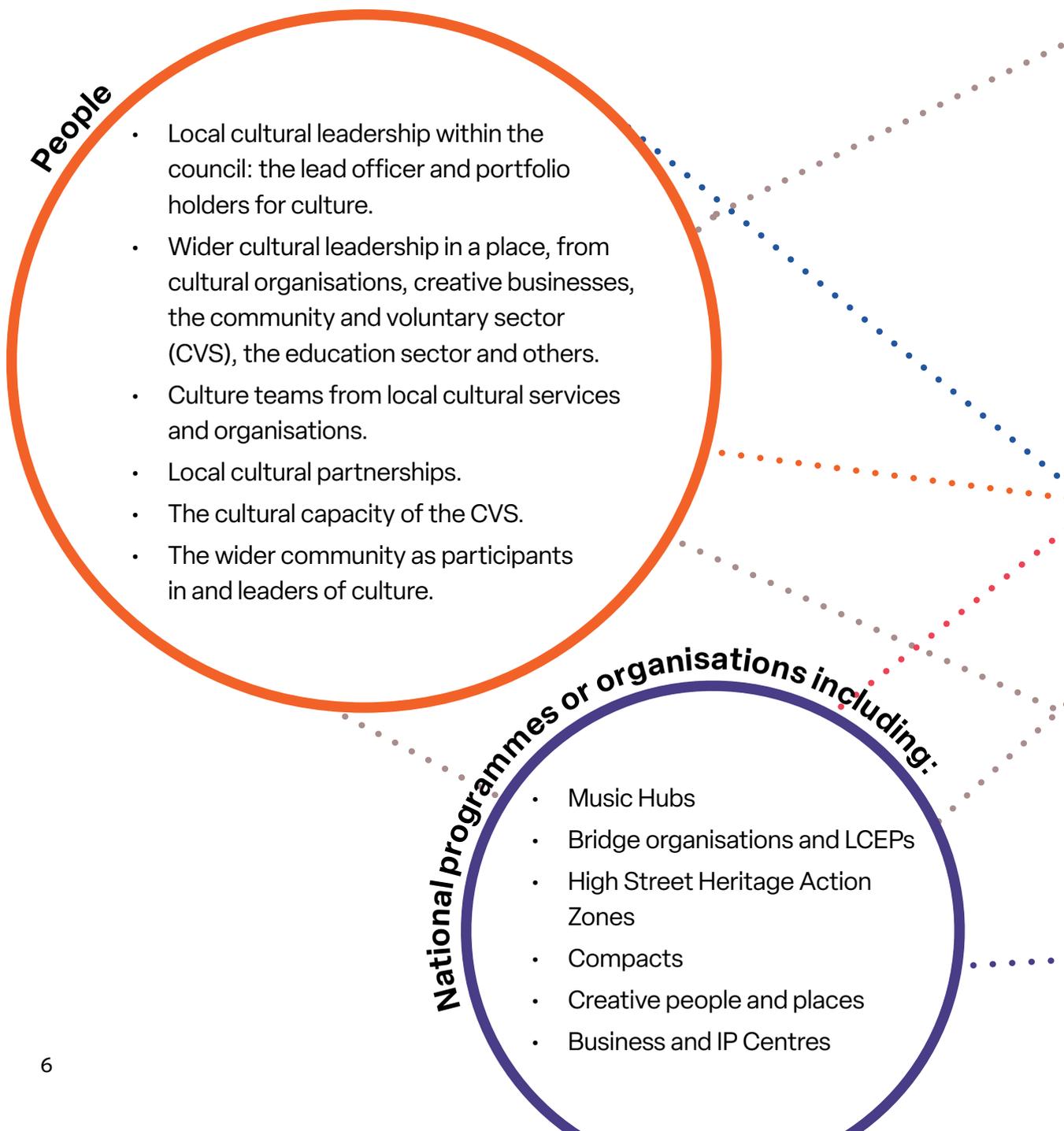
- Build resilient, adaptive, networked communities in place, supporting civic pride and revitalising town centres.
- Promote local economic growth, supporting levelling up through the development of creative clusters, an experiential offer on high streets and providing a foundation for the wider visitor and night-time economies.
- Develop creative thinking, build cultural capital and provide local economies with high quality jobs that are resistant to automation.
- Promote better health and wellbeing, particularly addressing challenges of loneliness, isolation and mental ill health arising from the pandemic.

But local culture is more than the sum of the outcomes it helps to support. The Commission also found that **local culture is essential to the identity and aspiration of a place** and its people.



The cultural ecosystem

Local **cultural infrastructure** is highly complex and differs greatly from one place to another. This diagram highlights some of the organisations and factors that contribute to the cultural ecology of a place.



Physical assets

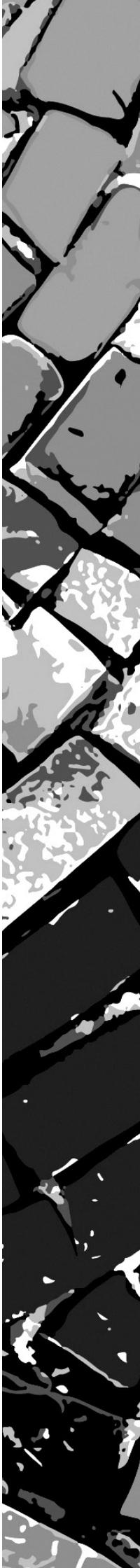
- Specific cultural assets: libraries, museums, archives, theatres, arts centres, galleries, music venues, parks and heritage sites.
- The wider public environment, including: the historic environment; connectivity to green space and nature; market squares and high streets.
- Clusters of commercial creative industries.

Funders, including:

- The council
- Arms-length bodies such as Arts Council England, National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England
- Trusts and Foundations
- Philanthropy
- Government departments
- UKRI's research councils, eg the Arts and Humanities Research Council through local universities

Other players outside the cultural sector, eg:

- Educational organisations: schools and further and higher education institutions.
- Research institutions: universities and Independent Research Organisations.
- The NHS
- Business-led organisations and networks: the Local Enterprise Partnership, Chambers of Commerce and Business Improvement Districts.
- The intangible heritage of an area and its communities.





How does culture work in place?

Councils sit at the heart of this ecosystem. They run a nationwide network of local cultural organisations, which in England includes 3,000 libraries, 350 museums, 116 theatres and numerous historic buildings, parks and heritage sites. This core funding keeps the civic infrastructure of culture running within places.

For councils, cultural spend is a small part of what they do, but they remain the biggest public funders of culture nationally, spending £2.4 billion a year in England alone on culture and related services.

Councils also have other roles to play in shaping the cultural offer within a place.

“The work of council cultural officers requires: a strong working relationship with councillors; a good grasp of related policy areas; an extended network of contacts inside and outside the council; solid technical knowledge; an understanding of local communities’ assets and needs; and, above all, a highly developed belief in the power of culture to improve lives.”

Val Birchall, Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association



Leadership of place: setting the context for a culturally thriving area by publicly championing culture.



Strategy setting: coordinating the development of a place-led strategy for culture, which sets out how local assets and resources will be mobilised to meet local needs.



Advocacy: working with partners inside and outside the council to ensure culture is reflected in the work of health, education and economic development teams.



Convening: bringing together partners to develop a shared approach to supporting local culture.



Community voice: understanding and working with different communities and ensuring that a diverse range of voices are heard when decisions are being made.



Planning: ensuring culture is integrated in their Local Plan so the historic environment is protected and enhanced, and prioritising cultural spend as part of contributions from developers.



Licensing: setting the context in which cultural venues and creative businesses operate through licensing system.



Equalities duties: meeting their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 including the Public Sector Equality Duties (PSED), with implications for how they approach cultural service delivery and their wider strategy for cultural place shaping.



Evidence gathering: on the local economic, social and cultural contribution of their services and interventions in the local area.



Why invest in culture?

The Commission sought evidence from cultural services and organisations up and down the country to test the following statements:

Resilient places: local publicly funded culture can promote civic pride and change perceptions about a place, contributing to improvements in wider social and economic outcomes.

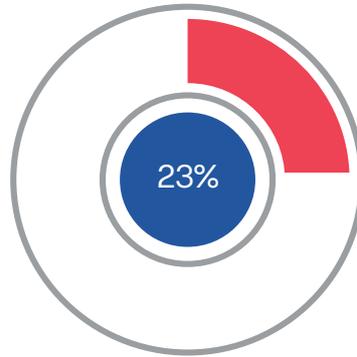
Inclusive economic recovery: local publicly funded culture is essential to our national economic recovery, particularly in relation to the growth of the wider commercial creative economy and in levelling-up economic inequalities between regions.

Social mobility: local publicly funded culture can help to address educational and skills inequalities and challenges around social mobility.

Health inequalities: local publicly funded culture can challenge health inequalities and the impact of loneliness exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

£1.1 billion

The amount local government invests directly in cultural services each year in England⁴



The additional turnover supported in the wider economy for every £1 of turnover in arts and culture⁵

£1.23

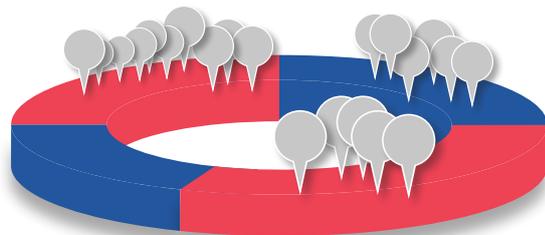
£115.9 billion

Contribution of the creative industries to the UK in 2019⁶



700

The number of creative industry micro clusters across the country⁷





Resilient places

The Commission heard evidence which explored **connection to place** and **'civic pride'** and **place, collaboration** and **funding**.

Connection to place and 'civic pride'

What evidence is there that people's satisfaction in place and quality of life is shaped by the availability of access to cultural activities and engagement? How can investment in culture create more networked, resilient places?

Place, collaboration and funding

How can we move towards a more strategic, long-term and collaborative approach to funding culture at a place-based level? What models already exist and how can we build on them?

Case study examples

In the Great Place programme⁸, Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund worked together to 'enable cultural and community groups to work more closely together and to place heritage at the heart of communities' – an example of this being in **Tees Valley**, where along with growing economic outputs a key outcome was to grow the shared sense of place and identity.

In **Bradford** the pride in place that has erupted around the City of Culture has been phenomenal. The Commission heard that the UK City of Culture had supported a new narrative for the city, led by local people, which will provide a long-lasting legacy for Bradford.

Public funding of culture and heritage underpins a much wider creative ecosystem in a place, including everyday creative activity, a thriving civil society and growth in the commercial creative industries.

Collaboration is key. Local strategic partnerships like Cultural Compacts⁹ can provide a basis on which to build a shared understanding of culture and place between the council, community, voluntary and community sector, business partners and wider public sector.

Civic infrastructure plays an important role in engaging and empowering people and connecting them to others. Well networked communities are an important first step in enabling better community involvement in local decision making.

Local cultural infrastructure outside urban centres supports access to cultural participation for young people and others who experience barriers to travelling long distances to access cultural venues and activities.

Culture-led regeneration initiatives are most effective when they draw on the **unique culture and heritage of a place and its communities.**

As leaders of place, **councils can convene cultural partnerships**, embed culture in their economic development, regeneration, planning and licensing strategies, engage with partners to ensure culture is recognised in wider approaches to community wellbeing.

The Commission heard that **councils play an important role in 'democratising culture'** and in ensuring greater involvement of communities in the planning, decision-making and delivery that affects them. Co-creation and co-production, though recognised for many years, need greater emphasis: 'doing things with, not to, people'.



Inclusive economic recovery

The Commission took evidence on the following questions:

High streets

How can local publicly funded cultural services and organisations bring life back to high streets and town centres, where an existing decline in retail has been aggravated by the pandemic and a change of working patterns has affected office occupancy and footfall in town centres?

Public funding and the creative industries

In the context of the new sector vision for the creative industries, what role does publicly funded culture play in supporting growth in the wider creative industries, particularly in areas identified as priorities for levelling up?

Cultural regeneration

What evidence is there that investment in cultural regeneration programmes can change perceptions about place and contribute to sustainable and inclusive economic growth?

To build a truly inclusive approach to recovery, it is essential to address issues of low levels of diversity in the audience, workforce and leadership of cultural services and organisations. The Commission heard that the representation of a greater diversity of voices in establishing local plans for recovery would help to generate strategies that were more authentic to a local area.

Case study examples

In **Thanet** the Turner Contemporary and Dreamland have boosted the visitor economy – visitors up 19 per cent between 2013 and 2015 and an extra £47 million into the local economy, helped by leadership and investment from Thanet District Council and Kent County Council¹⁰.

Portsmouth City Council has invested in heritage attractions¹¹ to bring more visitors to the city, linked to enhanced leisure and retail.

What we heard

The Commissioners heard that:

Culture has an important role to play in reviving town centres.

According to the Arts Council England's research¹², 50 per cent of adults would like to see more cultural experiences on their high streets.

Local cultural infrastructure is essential in supporting a **healthy visitor economy**. Culture, and particularly heritage, is the main driver of inbound visits and the basis of Britain's reputation overseas.

The creative industries contributed **£115.9 billion to the UK in 2019**¹³. In the year from October 2019 to September 2022 the Creative Industries accounted for **2.2 million jobs**¹⁴. They grew at four times the rate of the rest of the economy prior to the pandemic and are geographically dispersed in more than **700 micro clusters**¹⁵ across the country. As such they are an important driver of our national economic recovery and levelling up.

But the **long-term sustainability of the creative industries cannot be delivered without public funding of culture**, which underpins the development of the wider creative sector. There is 'symbiosis' between publicly funded arts and the creative industries, for example between the performing arts and the film and TV industries or the commercial stage.

The pandemic and cost of living crisis have exacerbated existing economic inequalities in our society. **We have an opportunity to pursue an inclusive economic recovery to reduce inequalities and grow shared prosperity, cultural democracy aspiration and social capital.**



Social mobility

The Commission heard evidence responding to the following questions:

Education

What role do local cultural organisations have to play in supporting better educational outcomes in school age children following the pandemic?

Skills

How does access to culture and the development of creative skills open opportunities in training and employment, specifically to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds? What models can we learn from following the pandemic?

Employment

Can targeted investment in culture and creativity contribute to addressing regional inequalities in relation to employment in culture and the creative industries? Can investment in creative skills contribute to growth in employment in other sectors?

“Access to the arts is access to our national life, and it is a social justice issue.”

The Arts for Every Child, Culture and Learning Alliance¹⁶

Case study examples

The **British Library’s Business and IP Centres (BIPCs)** are a tried and tested way of supporting diverse entrepreneurs through our public libraries network. Of those starting a new business through BIPCs, 55 per cent were women, 31 per cent were black, Asian or minority ethnic and 17 per cent were disabled¹⁷.

Derby Museums and Derby City Council’s Museum of Making celebrates the rich local history of innovation in Derby. The museum was designed and made by the people and industries of Derby, supporting local skills development through over 36,000 hours of in-kind support. The museum now houses an Institute of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths and delivers education programmes to improve young people’s skills and inspire future local innovators.

What we heard

The commissioners heard that:

Cultural participation has an important relationship to social mobility, but **access to opportunity and aspiration in creative occupations is not equally distributed**¹⁸. Both in terms of its narrow economic function in opening pathways to geographically distributed jobs in the burgeoning creative industry sector – and its wider role in the development of fair access to cultural education, capital and opportunity.

Councils have a key role to play in supporting the growth of the creative industries and opening up access to jobs and skills to a diverse range of people currently under-represented in the sector. Public investment in cultural programmes can help to address low levels of participation in culture among those who are currently least likely to engage.

The benefits of creative education and access to cultural participation on social mobility go beyond providing pathways to jobs in cultural organisations and the creative industries. There is a wealth of research¹⁹ illustrating the negative impact a lack of access to cultural participation can have on educational and employment life chances. A narrow focus on skills for work fails to account for the wider benefits of community provision in leading people towards further educational opportunity and employment.

Local Cultural Education Partnerships²⁰, where appropriately resourced and supported, can play a key role in exposing children from different social backgrounds to cultural experiences and learning.

There is a need for greater alignment between education and cultural policy in supporting culture and creativity in the curriculum and beyond. The upcoming **Cultural Education Plan** represents an opportunity to develop an ambitious approach to delivering cultural education as well as creative skills in schools.



Health inequalities

The Commission explored the following questions:

Mental health

How can locally funded cultural activity support greater social connection and engagement and help to address rising levels of mental ill health exacerbated by the pandemic?

Health and wellbeing in children and young people

How can locally funded cultural services and organisations specifically support children whose mental wellbeing has been affected by the pandemic?

Isolation

How can locally funded cultural services and organisations help to reconnect those who have suffered from isolation during the pandemic, particularly in relation to the clinically vulnerable?

Case study examples

South Kesteven District Council's mental health and wellbeing cross party working group worked to develop a Wellbeing Map to help reduce isolation and loneliness post COVID²¹.

Culture Liverpool's new community programme²² is designed to slowly re-introduce culture to clinically extremely vulnerable people, those who have experienced mental health challenges, bereavement, or financial hardship.

Manchester Camerata's Music in Mind programme²³ uses improvisation to help people living with dementia to express themselves and communicate with others.

Suffolk Libraries provide a dedicated wellbeing service²⁴, providing drop-ins, reading lists and links to other resources.

What we heard

The commissioners heard that:

Different groups experienced the pandemic differently²⁵. The disproportionate impact on people living in areas of high deprivation, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and their communities, on older people, those with a learning disability and others with protected characteristics highlights the urgent need to address health inequalities in our society²⁶.

The pandemic has also had a negative impact on the nation's mental health as outlined in this What Works Wellbeing briefing²⁷. One in eight adults (12.9 per cent) developed moderate to severe depressive symptoms during the pandemic.

There is a significant and growing literature on the relationship between health, wellbeing and culture, with the **Creative Health** report from the APPG on Culture, Health and Wellbeing²⁸ remaining highly relevant.

- Cultural programmes have been shown to have specific benefits in **clinical treatment** of conditions such as dementia and depression, as outlined in UK Music and Music for Dementia's report *The Power of Music*²⁹.
- Cultural programmes targeted towards at risk groups are also valuable in supporting a **preventative** approach to mental ill health and loneliness, for example Helix Arts³⁰ who ran the Better Connected Project in Tyneside, to improve the mental health of 350 carers through arts and cultural activities.
- More broadly, good cultural infrastructure and universal provision of cultural services at a population level has been shown to be beneficial to **community wellbeing**, promoting networked, resilient communities. Engagement in cultural activity can play an important role in addressing issues of loneliness, exacerbated by the pandemic³¹.

The pandemic fostered a greater appreciation of the wider environmental determinants of ill health and the role a strong cultural infrastructure can play in supporting healthy communities. The development of **Integrated Care Systems** may represent an opportunity to build culture and creativity into future plans for health and social care.



Barriers facing local publicly funded culture

The Commission heard that despite the significant value of local publicly funded culture in supporting thriving places and communities in the context of our national recovery, there are barriers which prevent it from achieving its potential.

1

Barriers to access within a place: financial, physical, geographical and digital barriers which, alongside barriers of perception which prevent universal access to cultural participation.

2

Local leadership and representation: low levels of diversity in leadership roles and workforce in some parts of the cultural and creative sectors.

3

Local structural capacity: regional inequalities in cultural capacity and infrastructure across the country, including capacity in council cultural teams to resource a more collaborative long-term and strategic place-based approach.

4

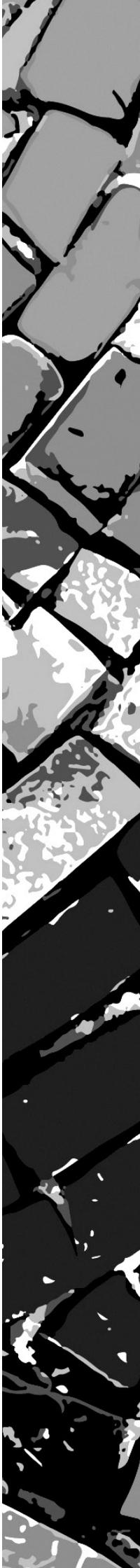
Funding within place: reductions in core funding to resource a local cultural strategy, the fragmentation and multiplication of national competitive funding pots, and an over-reliance on capital funding without wrap-around revenue funding.

5

Lack of policy alignment at a local and national level: specific policy challenges in relation to health, education and skills and economic development.

6

Data and evidence: challenges in collecting standard core data on cultural services; access to consistent methods of evaluating the impact of cultural activity on communities; and access to methods of measuring the impact of their own interventions for the purpose of better targeting their investment.





Our recommendations

Our work on the Commission has revealed four **areas of ambition** for culture, which all places should consider as they strive to deliver the best for their communities, and economies.

These areas are underpinned by four equally important **cornerstones of cultural placemaking**, which will allow these ambitions to be delivered.

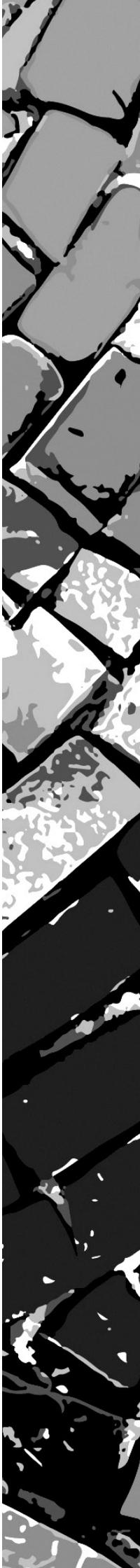
We are calling for local government, regional bodies, cultural arms-length bodies and national government to work together with cultural organisations and communities to take immediate action to safeguard the future of local cultural infrastructure in the context of rising costs, followed by a longer-term action plan to deliver the following outcomes:

- 1 Access and inclusion.** Locally accessible and inclusive cultural infrastructure for all, addressing the structural inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic.
- 2 Creative growth.** Removal of barriers to growth of creative industry clusters and micro-clusters to support the development of the creative sector as an engine of post-pandemic growth.
- 3 Cultural education and pathways to creative employment.** Access for all in all places to a high-quality cultural education and routes into the burgeoning creative industries from schools through to further and higher education and employment.
- 4 Health and wellbeing.** A strategic approach to health and wellbeing in place that recognises the preventative and health benefits of culture in supporting our national recovery.

To do this, local areas will need:

- 5 Capacity and resilience in place.** A levelling up of capacity for culture within place, targeting regional inequalities and enabling local authorities to develop and deliver meaningful place-led strategies for culture.
- 6 Leadership and power.** A power shift towards place-led approaches that enable a greater diversity of communities, cultural providers and practitioners to shape local decision making.
- 7 Funding.** A coherent and transparent approach to funding culture in a place that supports the delivery of place-led strategies and addresses the immediate financial fragility of the sector triggered by the pandemic and cost of living crisis.
- 8 Evidence.** A coordinated approach to developing an effective evidence base for culture and place in order to measure value and shape future investment.

The full report includes detailed recommendations, addressing the actions councils, arms-length bodies and national government can take to support each of the four ambitions and four cornerstones of cultural placemaking.





Conclusion

**Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson,
Chair of the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board**

When we started this Commission, there was no war in Ukraine, inflation was below two per cent, and both food and energy prices were quite low. Much has changed since then, and with an expected in-year deficit in council budgets of around £2.4 billion, we will have to make difficult choices about what and how we deliver in the future.

The findings of the Commission and the case studies alongside it show that councils have quietly been working with their cultural partners to deliver brilliant work against every outcome you can imagine – economic growth, boosting wellbeing, improving pride in place, and supporting the talent and skills of the next generation. This isn't exploratory work but a proven way of ensuring our country will thrive economically and be a great place to live in the future.

What will need to change, as shown in this report, is the way in which we collaborate to do it – no single organisation now has the funding, staff time or skills to do this alone. So councils, cultural organisations, and our partners in central government will need to keep working together to support each place to be the most vibrant, best place it can possibly be. That means pooled and aligned funding streams, open and transparent conversations with communities about what they need, and a shared vision that everyone works towards. We can do it!

And we have done it. In the years after World War II, in a time more difficult than now, the Government decided that then was the right time to invest in culture. They set up the Arts Council. What's more, they appointed an economist to run it – none other than John Maynard Keynes – reporting not to a cultural department but the Treasury itself. In a time of adversity, this investment showed faith that culture is a fundamental part of creating better times ahead.

I'd like to thank all the Commissioners for the incredible work that has gone into developing this report, and to everyone who has supported it with their expert insight, practical experiences, and enthusiasm. In particular, Baroness Lola Young for her brilliant chairing of the Commission, and Councillor Peter Golds, who ably represented the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board. The findings of this report will direct the LGA's work for years to come.



Abby's story

Abby, an Arts Council England Youth Advisory Board Member, is 19 and lives in Scunthorpe. She has a strong bond with the town, which her family have lived in for generations. Abby hopes to have a career as an artist and creative producer in her local area. She is now part of The Crosby Collective, a community makerspace funded by the Big Lottery Fund and Community Led Local Development (CLLD) Fund.

“Without public funding the gallery wouldn't be there, the museum wouldn't be there. Crosby Collective wouldn't be there and there would be no places to go. It would be a ghost town. There's still work here, but just having work and nothing else isn't a good quality of life.”



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List of Commissioners

Baroness Lola Young of Hornsey (Chair)

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Veda Harrison

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Samantha Richardson MBE

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Bobby Seagull

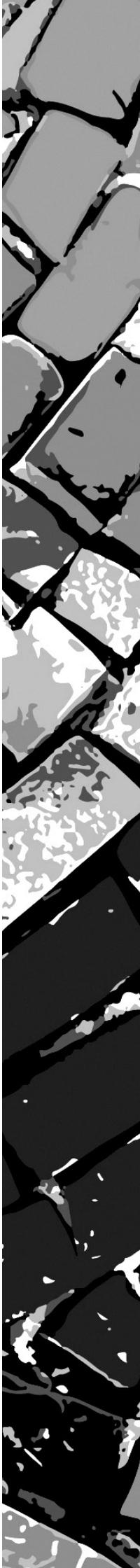
Sir Nicholas Serota

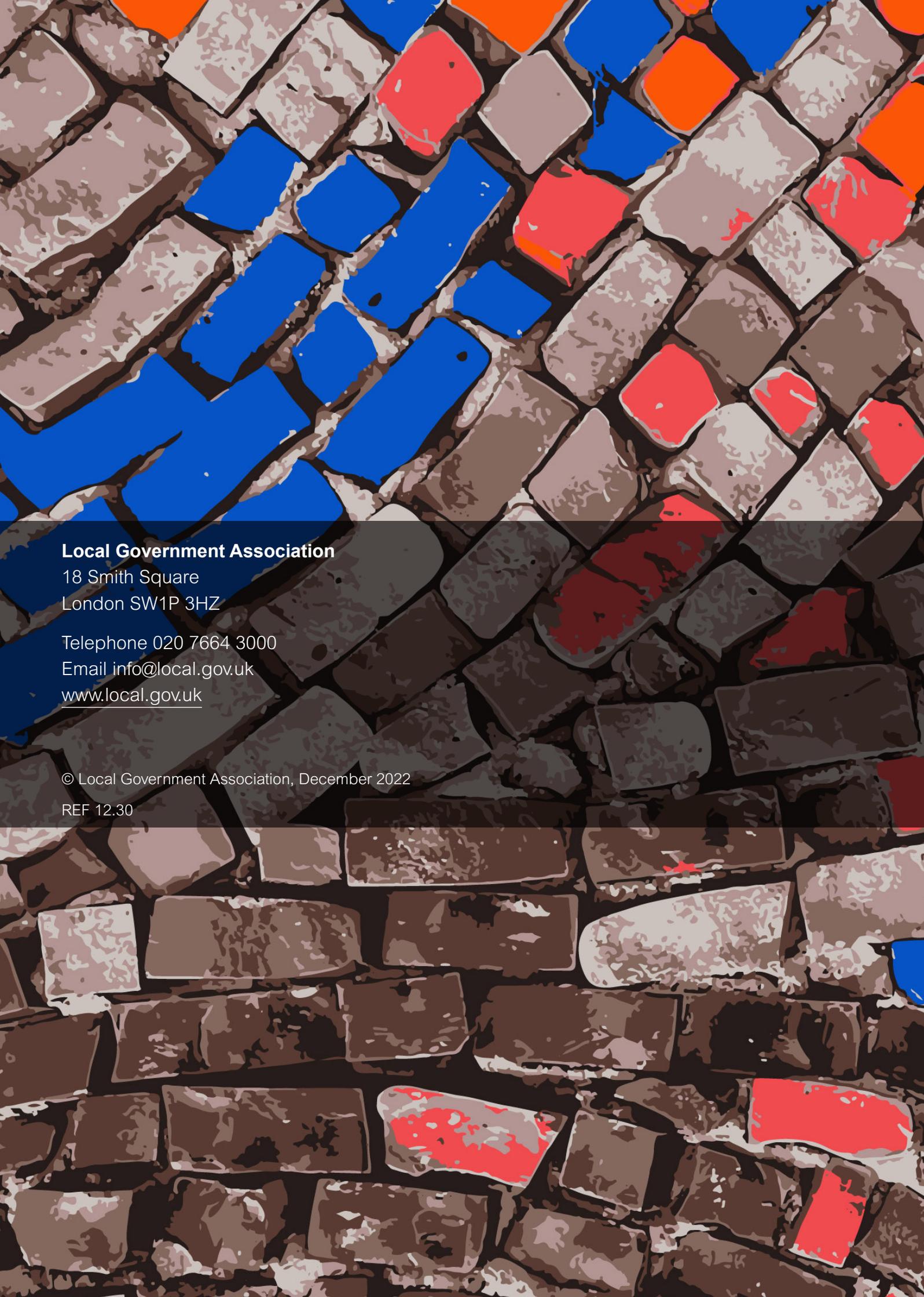
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