

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Placemaking and the levelling up agenda

Evidence of Institute of Historic Building Conservation

The Institute of Historic Building Conservation

The Institute of Historic Building Conservation is the professional body of the United Kingdom representing conservation specialists and historic environment practitioners in the public and private sectors. The Institute exists to establish the highest standards of conservation practice, to support the effective protection and enhancement of the historic environment, and to promote heritage-led regeneration and access to the historic environment for all.

How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?

An attractive and thriving historic realm strongly supports many of the Government's levelling up ambitions by helping to improve people's wellbeing (Mission 8), increasing their life expectancy (Mission 7), and promoting their pride in place (Mission 9). The Levelling up agenda is correct to have a strong focus on support for town centre and high street regeneration. But the role heritage can play in Levelling Up is still underplayed in both the White Paper and this Inquiry. Historic buildings and other heritage assets are often cited as examples but the direct emphasis is more on arts and culture as catalysts than on heritage as the physical focus for change.

Substantial positive change has taken place in many town and city centres in recent decades as a result of regenerative investment in the historic environment, the individual buildings, the space around them and the much wider historic areas. Investment in quality public realm can enhance the viability of the buildings within it and provide space for successful organised events and informal activities.

The success over many years of heritage led regeneration schemes to empower communities through transforming and regenerating their built environment, culminating recently in High Streets Heritage Action Zones and Transforming Places through Heritage, has provided high quality successful shopping streets and public spaces. The continuation of schemes of this type in underperforming areas will significantly reanimate these areas. Increasing the level of investment in the conservation and regeneration of historic areas outside London and the south east of England would assist in the 'levelling up' of lagging regional economies.

Changing patterns of retail due to e-commerce and particularly Covid have led to the closure of many town and city centre shops. While "meanwhile" uses have brought temporary life to some spaces, there is now great potential for community, creative and educational spaces (e.g. repair cafes) to be created in on a more permanent basis.

The restoration of redundant historic buildings can be a catalyst for heritage-led 'levelling up', unlocking disused sites for use as new community spaces, commercial uses, creative spaces or visitor attractions.

Rural towns frequently serve a very wide hinterland providing the same functions and services as larger towns. The geographical priorities of the government's allocation of funding for levelling-up favours non-metropolitan urban areas but rural areas with similar levels of need are excluded.

How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?

Culture and creative industries should be integrated into wider strategies as important catalysts for change and enablers of change.

Creatives are ideally placed for a role in urban regeneration by setting up new creative uses in vacant buildings or low market areas, providing a catalyst for regeneration and other investment and like-minded enterprises, and helping to engage communities in new visions for their area.

Place-shaping, conservation and changing places is in itself a creative activity. The built environment, both urban and rural, is a focus for our cultural heritage and those who shape its future are carrying out a creative activity as valid as other arts or culture.

How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?

Investment in affordable property to develop affordable and flexible floorspace for creatives in peripheral or declining, often historic areas, leads to the development of cultural and creative hubs within an area. But as the popularity of the area develops the creative uses can be forced out by rising costs. Government measures to help creative uses acquire property whilst costs are low could retain creative and cultural uses in the area once prices rise. There may be potential for safeguarding creative uses through restricting subsequent changes of use.

How might changes to the UK's broadcasting landscape affect investment in cultural production outside the capital, and what could the consequences be for artists and communities?

How should Government build on existing schemes, such as the UK City of Culture, to level up funding for arts and culture?