

Meta-evaluation of Arts Council England-funded place-based programmes: Great Place final evaluation report

This short report is a postscript to our *Meta-evaluation of Arts Council England-funded place-based programmes published in October 2021*. That meta-evaluation considered published evidence from six Arts Council England-funded place-based programmes. However, the final evaluation report from one of those programmes, Great Place, was not available in time for inclusion in our study having been delayed due to the pandemic.

This report looks at the findings of that final evaluation report from the Great Place programme, published in March 2022. Great Place was launched in 2016 by Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund as co-funders. It supported 16 projects with grants totalling £20mn, and with a stated aim to “pilot new approaches that enable cultural and community groups to work more closely together and to place heritage at the heart of communities.” To add value to our main meta-evaluation and to avoid duplicating previous observations we have looked in particular at:

- where findings in the Great Place final evaluation differ or contrast with findings in our main meta-evaluation.
- what the Great Place final evaluation says about the impact of COVID-19 (of interest because the timing of the Great Place evaluation meant it was written further into the pandemic than other evaluations of place-based programmes).
- what the final evaluation says about the effectiveness of Great Place in stimulating collaboration between heritage and culture, and other sectors (of interest because this was a key feature of the Great Place programme aims).

Where findings differ from those in our main meta-evaluation

The benefits of creating new organisations - for innovation and for system change

While many of the programme evaluations considered by our meta-evaluation involved the creation of new partnerships or new organisations, the Great Place final report singles out the ‘newness’ of institutional arrangements as a success factor: “the ‘newness’ of the institutional arrangements of most of the projects delivering the Great Place programme was probably one of the contributory factors to its success”. This was not limited to ‘new’ heritage or culture organisations, and the report cites the newly created Tees Valley Combined Authority as a ‘new’ organisation which took a lead role in Great Place but which has a much wider remit. The report suggests this was a success factor due to new organisations or partnerships not being burdened by existing ways of working and instead having freedom to be more flexible and more innovative. The report also views the scale of new ways of working (from entirely new organisations being created, to established organisations working in new or different ways), as amounting to systemic change in the web of local organisations which in turn helped embed heritage and culture. This differs

from the narrative in other evaluations which focus more on improving the quality of partnerships rather than changing local systems.

Evidence of increased diversity of audiences not just scale of audiences

With the exception of the evaluation of Creative People and Places, evidence of impacts on audiences has tended to focus on increasing the *scale* of audiences (or participation) and less on the *diversity* of audiences. The Great Place final report however contains some of the most specific statements about audience diversity of any of the studies covered by our meta-evaluation: “Projects have been especially successful at engaging audiences from low income areas – with a fifth of participants coming from the 10% most deprived areas – and audiences from Black, Asian and ethnically diverse groups, accounting for a fifth of all audiences in year 3”. The report points to the importance of this evidence in relation to delivering ‘levelling up’ policies and for quantifying the role of heritage and culture in reducing inequality. The reports suggest this increase in audience diversity may have been because “local partners have had opportunities to deliver new, engaging work, that might not otherwise have been realised”.

Innovation at the national/funder level

The Great Place final report is unique in identifying a place-based funding programme as a catalyst for closer collaboration between *national* bodies (in this case Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund) rather than just at the local level. Although framed as part of a wider shift towards better strategic coordination between DCMS arms-length bodies, the national collaboration resulting specifically from Great Place is seen as a foundation for more joined-up approaches to place-based investment in the future, across DCMS funded bodies and potentially across government.

Business to business not business to consumer

“...the most important element of Great Place was the relationships and partnerships that were forged by the projects locally with other actors, both inside and outside the cultural sector”. The Great Place final report recommends that future place-based programmes for heritage and culture recognise that strategic programmes like this are principally business to business programmes. Even though the end goals may be to increase cultural participation or individual well-being, the programme logic model is not about supporting individuals directly but strengthening local organisations and the relationships between organisations. This message is implicit in some of the other evaluations but not expressed as clearly as it is here.

Impact of COVID-19

The Great Place final report finds the pandemic had a profound effect on the delivery of the 16 projects resulting in project extensions, scheduling changes, and a shift to digital operations and digital delivery. Many projects joined local efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on their communities taking both strategic and practical roles.

Responses to a COVID-19 impact survey completed by 14 out of the 16 projects, interestingly, suggested the pandemic had strengthened projects rather than weakened

them both in terms of their relationships and influence with partners, and in terms of their offer to audiences.

- Most projects switched to online delivery which made it possible to increase audience reach and diversity, although projects also experienced the limitations of digital delivery particularly amongst older populations and people experiencing social, economic and health inequalities.
- Online working made it easier to engage businesses, and alongside emergency funding this helped projects build-on and sustain the relationships and credibility they had already developed.
- Many of the Great Places projects became involved in COVID-19 emergency response and recovery, which placed heritage and culture at the heart of local responses. Several projects took leading roles in co-ordinating strategic networks to deliver cultural interventions which helped to support the well-being of different target audiences.
- The speed and scale of reaction forced by the pandemic was seen by projects to have improved their agility to develop new activity quickly, for example support for freelancers.

Integrating heritage and culture in other domains

Repositioning heritage and culture

The Great Place final report finds the programme has been successful in positioning heritage and culture at the heart of communities:

“Great Place projects have worked with a wide variety of stakeholders and have embedded themselves into their local ecosystems by demonstrating the value they bring and the impact that they can achieve in ways that are understood by those outside of the cultural sector. This includes demonstrating economic and/or quantifiable impacts that have been achieved as a direct result of the Great Place programme and that would otherwise have been missed opportunities.”

Three of the main success factors for Great Place are the same as were already noted in our meta-evaluation: strong partnership relationships, sufficiently long timescales, and large-scale grant awards. The report also notes that the scale of the grant and support that came with Great Places was particularly important for credibility with senior decision-makers.

Besides these factors the report also points to two other success factors:

- unexpected consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic which besides being hugely disruptive, also created opportunities to reposition heritage and culture.
- the relationship between the creation of newly created and novel organisations (eg Sunderland Culture, Tees Valley Combined Authority) and the programme’s ability to have systemic influence – ie the ‘newness’ point.

Role of heritage and culture in local plans and strategies

The Great Place final report finds that collectively projects have embedded heritage and culture in: cultural strategies, health and wellbeing strategies, mental health strategies, children and young people strategies. Projects also reported explicit mentions of heritage

and culture in: culture and tourism strategies, strategic economic plans, COVID-19 recovery plans, local area plans, partnership strategies, health and wellbeing strategies. The report notes the *absence* of projects mentioning any influence on social care strategies.

Economic influence via supply chains

Alongside influence being achieved through partnerships, the Great Place final report also makes several mentions of *economic influence* via projects' own supply chains, ie paying local businesses and freelancers, and by influencing how other local partners spend money in their own supply chains for example local authority commissioning. In addition, although there is no quantitative data on the economic impact of Great Place, the final report implies that events and festivals enabled by the programme made a tangible contribution to visitor economies, which in turn may also have influenced local supply chains. This reinforces one of the actionable insights from our main meta-evaluation report which is that new and more sophisticated forms of measurement are needed to capture the economic contribution of place-based arts and cultural programmes.

Culture and health

The Great Place evaluation has had an ongoing line of inquiry into culture and health which is seen as a key sector in which to embed heritage and culture. However, projects have found health and social care more challenging than other areas when it comes to building partnerships and practical connections. This is borne out in the absence of any reported embedding of heritage and culture in social care strategies. The report notes that where progress has been made it has not been through 'quick wins' but through slower and more innovative approaches including shared outcomes frameworks and appreciative inquiry.

The report also identifies gaps in skills and knowledge relating to culture and wellbeing as a key barrier but also one which some projects have overcome. The report cites the Herefordshire Great Place project which identified this issue through local evaluation and then tackled it by focusing support on community groups working on the culture and wellbeing agenda, in the form of additional training and bursaries.

Role of heritage and culture in levelling up and devolution

As part of its recommendations the Great Place final report returns to the positive effect Great Place has had at the national level on the funders themselves. The report suggests the improved strategic co-ordination between the two funders, Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which it sees as a result of the programme, is particularly well suited to the next phase of devolution and levelling up (insomuch as levelling up continues beyond 2022). This is because devolution is also being delivered through new *local* structures, combined with *nationally* co-ordinated funding – mirroring the relationships established through Great Place.

Use of counterfactuals

One final aspect of the Great Place evaluation worth highlighting is the use of counterfactual case studies. These are qualitative studies of comparable areas which did not receive Great Place funding. In research design terms these have been both feasible to deliver and have

provided real value and additional insight to the findings. Where they help most is in demonstrating how and why funding (which is always assumed to be important) changed the dynamics of relationships with senior decision-makers. The counterfactuals illustrate how Great Place did more than simply pay to get things done, it also provided 'traction' (which we take to mean credibility and trust) with senior decision-makers which in turn led to heritage and culture being brought into mainstream decisions rather than remaining peripheral.

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