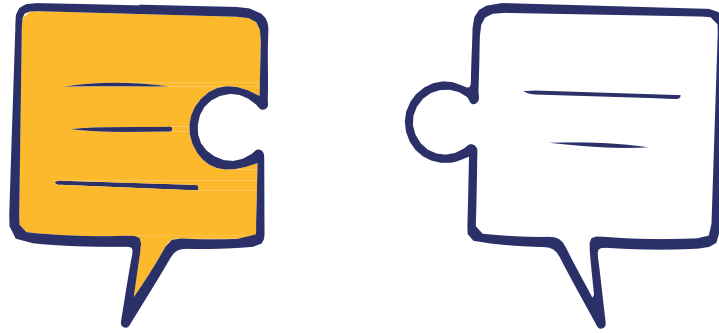




Culture Labs: Place-Based Cultural Development and Delivery

Dr Claire Tymon, University of Huddersfield

Community Innovation Practitioner Case Study

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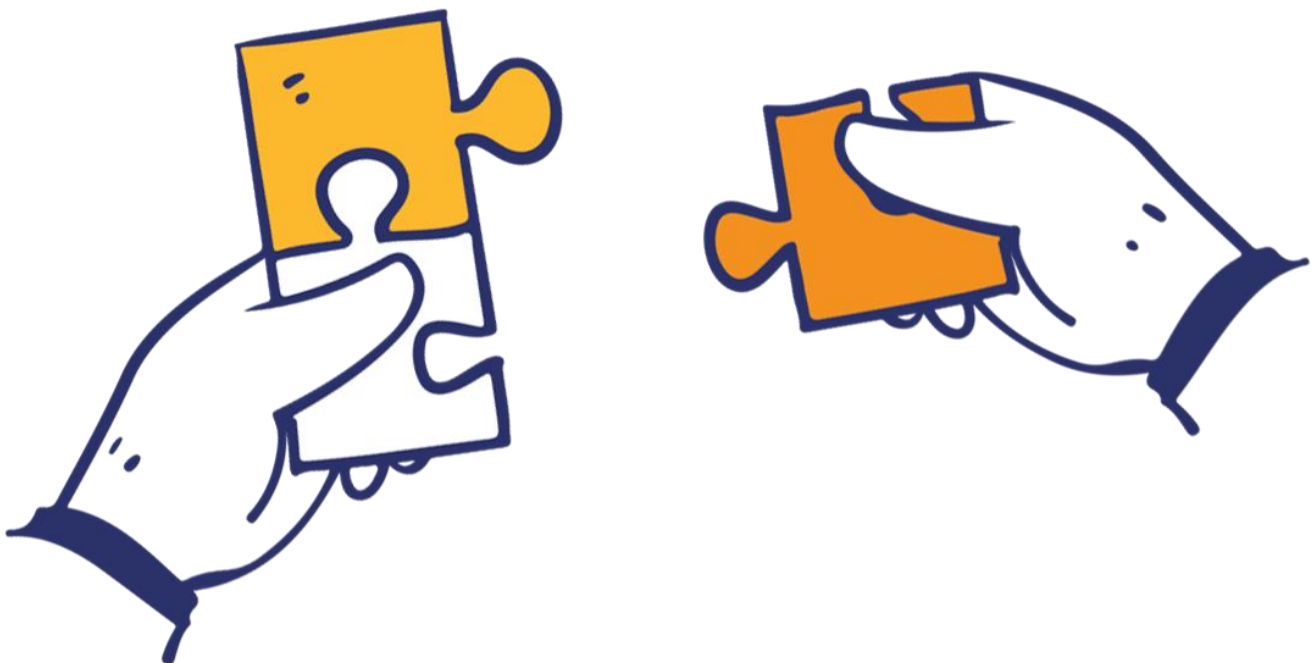
Summary

As an AHRC Creative Communities [Community Innovation Practitioner](#), I worked with the [University of Huddersfield](#), [Kirklees Council](#) and local cultural partners to develop and test Culture Labs as a place-based approach to neighbourhood cultural development.

Culture Labs are welcoming, creative spaces where residents, artists, community organisations, cultural practitioners, businesses and service providers explore what culture means in everyday life, identify local assets and challenges and begin shaping practical local cultural action.

The research responded to a live challenge: how might participatory practice create more meaningful ways for people to shape the cultural life of the places where they live? Working across four local neighbourhoods - Marsden, Dewsbury, Cleckheaton and Ashbrow – in the [West Yorkshire Mayoral Authority](#) area, the research employed participatory filmmaking, creative facilitation and co-creation to connect regional cultural strategy with lived experience.

The research demonstrates how the Culture Labs model can support devolved neighbourhood cultural policy making by recognising different local cultural ecologies and by creating stronger relationships between communities, strategy formation and long-term stewardship in devolved settings.



Introduction

My research as a Community Innovation Practitioner explored how the participatory model of Culture Labs can support neighbourhood cultural policy making by enabling more democratic approaches to cultural decision-making.

The research was informed by my professional background in cultural democracy, place-based strategy and creative civic engagement, as well as my practice through [Local](#), and the [University of Huddersfield's Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture](#). It was also shaped by the devolved landscape of the [West Yorkshire MA](#) in which increasing regional responsibility for culture presents new opportunities to connect neighbourhood knowledge with wider cultural policy and investment.

Originally commissioned by [Kirklees Council](#) to support the development of its [Cultural Strategy](#), Culture Labs have been tested through funding from the AHRC Creative Communities programme as a form of action research. Rather than just consulting communities about culture, the research scaled the model to create the conditions for people to shape the cultural life of the places where they live, informing both local action and devolved cultural policy and strategy.



Lockwood Viaduct, Kirklees

Community Innovation

This research is situated within a long history of creative civic engagement, place-based cultural development and community-led cultural planning in West Yorkshire and the wider post-industrial North of England. It was also undertaken during a rapidly changing policy landscape, as devolution has given the West Yorkshire MA increasing responsibility for cultural investment, strategic leadership and regional decision-making. This shift presents an opportunity to explore how neighbourhood knowledge can play a more significant role in shaping devolved cultural policy.

It builds on my practice-based PhD, *A Framework for Creative Civic Engagement*, which drew on my career working with neighbourhoods, towns, cultural organisations and local authorities to explore how creative practice can support more inclusive forms of civic participation. The framework positioned communities not simply as audiences or consultees, but as active makers of place, policy and cultural life.

The Culture Labs model builds on an early research and development phase in Batley and Holmfirth, initiated as part of engagement around *Kirklees Council's draft Cultural Strategy*. These first prototype Labs tested how creative, place-based workshops could support local communities to contribute to strategic cultural priorities. They helped identify the need for a specific strategic focus on local cultural democracy, while also revealing the limits of one-off consultation. The learning from this phase showed that communities need opportunities to share views, as well as routes into action, ownership and longer-term cultural infrastructure.



Cleckheaton Culture Lab at Cleckheaton Library.
Image credit: Dr Laura Mateescu.

The Culture Labs were designed to complement existing community-led and place-based practice in Kirklees. Kirklees Council's Active Citizens Team has used the [Place Standard Tool](#) across towns and neighbourhoods to support local conversations about place, wellbeing and priorities. Cultural programmes such as [WOVEN in Kirklees](#) have also created strong foundations for community-led research, local storytelling and place-based cultural development.

At the [University of Huddersfield, the Cultures of_ research programme](#) has developed five years of place-based cultural development work in Kirklees, building relationships, evidence and public programmes across themes including place, sound, creative health, climate and film. The current Culture Labs build on this foundation, particularly the [Stories in Motion](#) exhibition, which demonstrated how film can surface local voices, cultural memory and everyday practices as part of a living archive of place.

The work I have tested as a Community Innovation Practitioner brings these strands together into a live action research model. Culture Labs are being developed not only as engagement workshops, but as neighbourhood cultural infrastructure: connecting local knowledge with strategy, participatory filmmaking with evidence, and neighbourhood-level action with district-wide and regional cultural governance.



Stories in Motion Exhibition.
Image credit: Dr Laura Mateescu.

Against this backdrop, the research asks: **How might participatory practice create more meaningful ways for people to shape the cultural life of the places where they live?**

As a CIP, I worked with cross-sector partners in our place-based setting to scale and develop the Culture Labs model not only as a series of engagement workshops, but as a form of local cultural infrastructure building: connecting local knowledge with strategy, participatory filmmaking with evidence, and local action with region-wide devolved cultural decision making.

CIP Activities

My role as Community Innovation Practitioner was to develop, test and refine Culture Labs as a participatory model for neighbourhood cultural development. Using an action research approach, the methodology evolved through practice, reflection and collaboration, with each stage informing the next and adapting in response to participants, partners and emerging learning.

The work was undertaken in partnership with the [University of Huddersfield's Cultures of](#) research team, [Kirklees Council](#), the [Culture Collective](#), local cultural organisations, community groups, and creative practitioners. Co-creation was not treated as a single engagement activity but as an ongoing process of shared design, testing and reflection.

Between September and December 2025, four **initial co-design workshops** brought together cultural organisations, community groups, council services, artists and university researchers. Together we explored how communities might contribute to the emerging cultural strategy through four themes: Place, Creative Health, Heritage and Lifelong Learning.

Alongside the workshop programme, participatory filmmaking was an important research method. A **Stories of Change** workshop explored how film could enable people to share experiences of place, identity and belonging in ways that differed from conventional consultation. This work informed the co-production of the **Stories in Motion** exhibition, where community films became both creative outputs and prompts for a wider public conversation.

Rather than treating film as documentation alone, the research positioned creative media as a means of eliciting lived experience, encouraging dialogue and creating a lasting record of neighbourhood voices. Exhibited in Kirklees from January to May 2026, **Stories in Motion films** provided an opportunity to test emerging engagement techniques with wider audiences. Visitors reflected on culture, identity and belonging through the films, archive material and facilitated activities.

I also joined monthly meetings of the Kirklees Cultural Strategy Steering Group, creating an important bridge between local engagement and strategic policy making. Positioning the research within live strategic discussions enabled the methodology to evolve alongside regional policy development. This relationship became increasingly significant within West Yorkshire's devolved governance context, creating opportunities for neighbourhood evidence to inform devolved regional conversations about cultural policy.

To widen participation and help people engage with the research in different ways, I developed a series of online Culture Labs onboarding sessions alongside the [Conversations About Culture toolkit](#), comprising a short film, facilitation guide and Padlet feedback platform. These resources introduced the purpose and values of Culture Labs, enabled people to explore the approach before attending and provided an accessible

way for participants, partners and communities to share reflections that informed the continuing development of the model.

The principal research intervention comprised **eight Culture Labs** delivered across four neighbourhoods: Marsden, Cleckheaton, Dewsbury and Ashbrow. These locations were deliberately selected to represent different parts of Kirklees and to showcase a full range of geographical, demographic and cultural contexts. Together, they reflect the diversity of the area, enabling the model to be tested across contrasting cultural ecologies.

In each neighbourhood we worked with different community hosts, creative practitioners and filmmakers, recognising that trusted local relationships were essential to co-creation and effective participation. The **Marsden Culture Lab** was delivered in partnership with [Marsden Mechanics](#) and filmmaker [Alistair Macdonald](#). The **Dewsbury Culture Lab** was co-hosted with [Dewsbury Arcade CIC](#) and filmmaking group, [Mens Talk Digital](#). The **Cleckheaton Culture Lab** partnered with the local library, [Windy Bank Community Centre](#) and filmmaker [Chris Chinnock](#), while the **Ashbrow Culture Lab** was co-hosted with [Kirklees Local TV \(KLTV\)](#), supporting community facilitation and participatory filmmaking. These collaborators worked as co-facilitators, helping shape workshop design, recruit participants, interpret local contexts and create welcoming spaces for engagement.



Cleckheaton Culture Lab at Windy Bank Community Centre.
Image credit Dr Laura Mateescu.

Although each Culture Lab shared a common structure, no two workshops were identical. Activities included creative asset identification, capabilities mapping, neighbourhood storytelling, participatory filmmaking, facilitated discussion, action planning and visual notes by artist [Ruth Dyer](#). Methods were adapted in response to local priorities, relationships and emerging learning. Following each session, structured debriefs informed refinements to activities, facilitation and subsequent Culture Labs. In this way, the model itself became a live subject of enquiry, evolving alongside the research.



Workshop activity, Cleckheaton Culture Lab.
Image credit: Dr Laura Mateescu.

Documentation was integral to the research methodology. Evidence included participant photography, community filmmaking, audio recordings, workshop notes, facilitator observations, reflective field notes, structured team debriefs, follow-up conversations and participant correspondence. Together these sources enabled findings to be triangulated across neighbourhoods and strengthened the final research analysis.

The timing of the interventions also created unexpected opportunities. During the delivery of the Culture Labs, [Kirklees' draft Cultural Strategy](#) entered public consultation. Rather than treating consultation as a separate exercise, participants were introduced to the Strategy's emerging priorities during the Culture Labs and invited to explore what these themes meant within their own neighbourhoods. Conversations moved beyond just commenting on policy, towards interpreting it through lived experience, enabling residents to question priorities, identify local opportunities and consider their own role as active cultural citizens, advocates and partners in delivering future cultural change.

Across the intervention, co-creation produced shared authorship as participants shaped conversations, creative practitioners refined methods, partners influenced strategy and researchers adapted the process iteratively in response to evolving contexts and evidence.

Rather than treating participation as an outcome, Culture Labs positioned it as the foundation for neighbourhood cultural development, recognising that investment in local relationships, capability and shared stewardship can enable longer-term cultural change in devolved settings.

Results & Change

One of the most significant findings from the Culture Labs was that different neighbourhoods were all starting with different capacities, priorities and patterns of participation. **Marsden** had a well-developed network of cultural organisations, volunteers and community activity, alongside concerns about succession and volunteer capacity. **Cleckheaton** focused on building confidence, visibility and collaboration. **Dewsbury** revealed significant cultural richness alongside fragmented networks and questions around representation and belonging. **Ashbrow** highlighted the importance of trusted local intermediaries and recognising existing community strengths that are often overlooked within formal cultural planning. Rather than requiring the same interventions, each place appeared to be on a different cultural journey.

These findings informed the development of a framework organised around three broad stages:



Growing

Building confidence, relationships, participation and local cultural infrastructure.



Connecting

Building stronger relationships, collaboration and shared direction across existing cultural activity.



Stewarding

Sustaining mature cultural ecologies through succession planning, renewal and shared leadership.

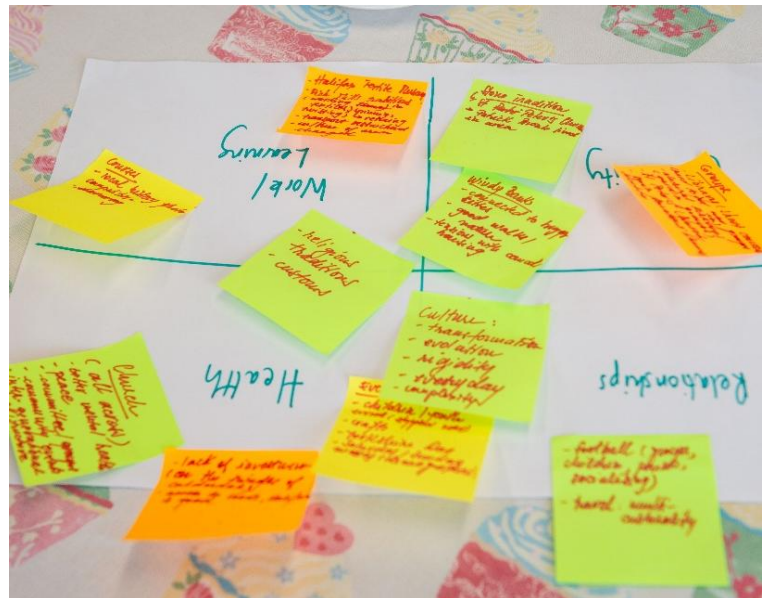


The framework is not intended to label places permanently. Neighbourhoods may move between stages over time or display characteristics of more than one stage. Instead, it offers a practical way of recognising that effective neighbourhood cultural development requires different forms of support in different places.

The research also demonstrated the value of shifting conversations from needs towards capabilities. Mapping local assets alongside people's skills, knowledge and relationships generated more constructive discussions than deficit-based consultation alone. Participants consistently identified existing strengths and practical opportunities for collective action, reinforcing the principle that communities should be recognised as active contributors to cultural development rather than simply recipients of cultural provision.

The research also identified important challenges. Recruiting participants through open invitations alone was less effective than working through trusted local partners and community connectors. Sustaining momentum between the first and second Culture Labs also proved difficult, with participants consistently requesting opportunities for continued dialogue and local co-hosts identifying a need for further support to confidently lead future sessions. These findings reinforce that neighbourhood cultural development depends as much on sustained investment in local relationships and local capability as on the actual delivery of the interventions.

The research has expanded beyond testing Culture Labs to explore how neighbourhood cultural development can strengthen the relationship between communities and cultural decision-making within an evolving devolved system. It now provides a practical framework for participatory practice that can strengthen relationships between communities and devolved decision-makers.



Workshop activity, Cleckheaton Culture Lab.
Image credit: Dr Laura Mateescu.

Recommendations

Culture Labs demonstrate that neighbourhood cultural development requires more than effective engagement methods. It depends on long-term relationships, shared leadership and collaborative connections between communities and decision-making. The following recommendations are intended to support researchers, practitioners, cultural organisations and local government and devolved authorities seeking to develop new cultural policy.

1. Begin with relationships, not projects

Invest time in building local trust and understanding existing hyper-local networks and informal leadership before designing or funding new activity. Strong relationships are the foundation of participation and shared ownership. Lasting local cultural development depends on sustained investment in people, partnerships and local leadership. Projects can catalyse participation, but relationships, confidence and community capability enable lasting change beyond the funding period.

2. Recognise the distinct cultural ecology of neighbourhoods

Avoid applying identical engagement models everywhere. While common principles can provide consistency, methods should respond to each place's history, assets, relationships and aspirations.

3. Focus on capabilities as well as needs

Communities already possess significant cultural knowledge, creativity and leadership. Recognising these strengths alongside local challenges leads to more empowering conversations and more sustainable local action.

4. Connect creative practice to decision-making

Participation is most meaningful when people can see how their ideas influence strategy, investment and neighbourhood action. Build clear feedback loops between neighbourhood conversations, cultural policy and delivery.

5. Harness devolution as an opportunity to do it differently

Devolution creates opportunities to strengthen the relationship between neighbourhoods and regional cultural decision-making. Investing in long-term neighbourhood relationships and locally generated evidence can help devolved cultural policy become more responsive inclusive and rooted in the lived experience of a place, enabling communities to become active partners in shaping the opportunities that devolution affords.

Looking Ahead

The Culture Labs model demonstrates that participatory engagement can catalyse neighbourhood cultural strategy and policy making, but lasting change depends on sustained relationships, local capability and shared stewardship. While workshops can spark new relationships, local priorities and collective action, the greatest value emerged between and beyond the Labs, as trust deepened, confidence grew and participants increasingly saw themselves as active cultural citizens. The challenge now is whether public institutions are prepared to invest in the conditions that allow it to develop further.

For local authorities, MAs and national funders, this means shifting investment beyond short-term project delivery towards building long-term neighbourhood cultural infrastructure by supporting local leadership, maintaining local relationships, developing community capability and creating mechanisms through which neighbourhood knowledge can iteratively inform devolved cultural policy making.

In the increasingly devolved landscape of England, neighbourhoods must be recognised and embedded as active partners in shaping regional cultural strategy and Culture Labs provides a practical framework for catalysing this approach.

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit www.creativecommunities.uk

Contact the CIP

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