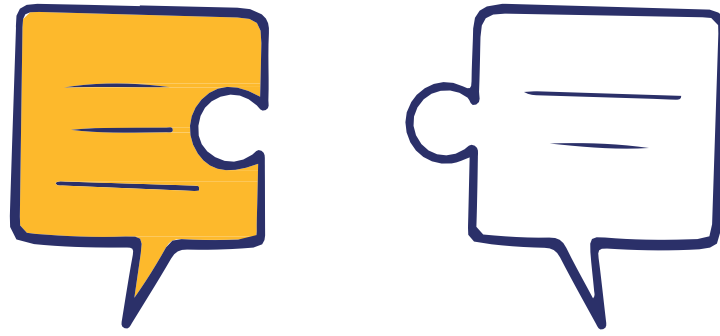




Creative Futures in Regeneration: Culture, Governance and Inclusive Growth in Digbeth

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Community Innovation Practitioner Case Study

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Summary

As Digbeth enters a period of rapid regeneration, a central question is whether the cultural communities that shaped the area will be able to remain, be heard and influence its future. [Creative Futures in Regeneration](#) examined how culture, community and creative heritage can contribute to more inclusive regeneration in Digbeth, Birmingham.

As an AHRC Community Innovation Practitioner (CIP) and Research Fellow at City-REDI, University of Birmingham, I convened organisations holding different forms of influence over Digbeth's future: cultural and community organisations, the [BBC](#), [Birmingham City Council](#), [the West Midlands Combined Authority](#), [Homes England](#), [Grand Union](#) and [St Basil's](#). The aim was to examine different responsibilities and interests before positions became fixed.

Through stakeholder interviews and walking conversations, partner meetings, workshops, ecosystem mapping and podcasting, the research examined how regeneration and public realm change are experienced, and what they mean for cultural organisations, social and cultural infrastructure and belonging. It found that Digbeth's value lies not only in new investment and creative-media growth, but also in its cultural ecology, affordable spaces, informal networks, social infrastructure and pride in place. These assets are recognised in policy narratives, but they are not yet consistently translated into regeneration metrics, governance arrangements or mechanisms that secure space. The findings informed a policy brief on governance, affordable space, anchor institutions and the social evaluation of cultural investment.

Introduction

Digbeth is Birmingham's historic industrial quarter, on the south-eastern edge of the city centre. For more than thirty years it has been a major home for artists, makers, music venues and independent creative businesses, many housed in former factories and warehouses; it is now home to around 500 creative firms. It also sits within one of the largest regeneration programmes in the country.

The devolved context matters because decisions about planning, housing, skills, culture, brownfield investment and public land are distributed across Birmingham City Council, the West Midlands Combined Authority, the emerging Birmingham East Mayoral Development Corporation, Homes England and major private landowners. Digbeth therefore provides an important test of whether regional institutions can connect economic growth with cultural continuity, social infrastructure and belonging. My role as a Community Innovation Practitioner was to work between research, policy and practice, using co-creation to understand how cultural communities can shape regeneration rather than only respond to it.



By the canal in Digbeth where nature meets industry, graffiti and a living ecosystem.
Image credit: Dr Sara Hassan.

Research Context

Digbeth's identity did not come from a single institution or a planned intervention. It grew from a layered mix of artists, makers, music venues, visual-arts organisations, street art, nightlife, studios, festivals and informal networks, shaped over decades by the River Rea, canals, manufacturing, markets and migration. Over the last decade it has moved to the centre of Birmingham's growth agenda, positioned across the [Big City Plan](#), the [Smithfield Masterplan](#) and [Our Future City: Central Birmingham Framework 2045](#) as a major area for housing, jobs, connectivity and public-realm change.

The official [Digbeth Prospectus](#) sets out the scale: more than £11 billion of investment and 6,652 new homes are planned across ten sites over the coming decade. Digbeth now sits between [HS2 Curzon Street](#), the Smithfield redevelopment, the Metro extension and an expanding media cluster around the [BBC's move to Typhoo Wharf](#) (the former Typhoo tea factory being converted into BBC's new Birmingham base), alongside the relocated MasterChef studios and close to Grand Union at Minerva Works. Homes England published [Warwick Bar prospectus](#) with significant housing and commercial growth in October 2025.



Graffiti in Digbeth. Image credit: Dr Sara Hassan.

These investments bring jobs, visibility and better connections, but they also raise questions about affordability, displacement and influence at a time when the cultural funding base is contracting. [West Midlands cultural investment](#) stood at £155 million in 2024, roughly a third below its inflation-adjusted 2016 level; English councils' spending on cultural services has fallen by close to half in real terms since 2010. Digbeth's pressures are local, but they sit inside a national and regional squeeze.

Counted, and uncounted

The official plans for Digbeth measure the economy. They do not measure who gets to stay.

What the official plans count	What they do not measure
£11bn+ investment over the decade	Whether people and organisations can afford to stay
6,552 new homes	Whether residents and artists feel like they belong
£282m additional GVA from the BBC move	Whether affordable creative and community space survives
3,300 direct cultural-sector jobs	Whether displacement is happening, and to whom

Left-hand figures: Digbeth Prospectus (Birmingham City Council, 2025).

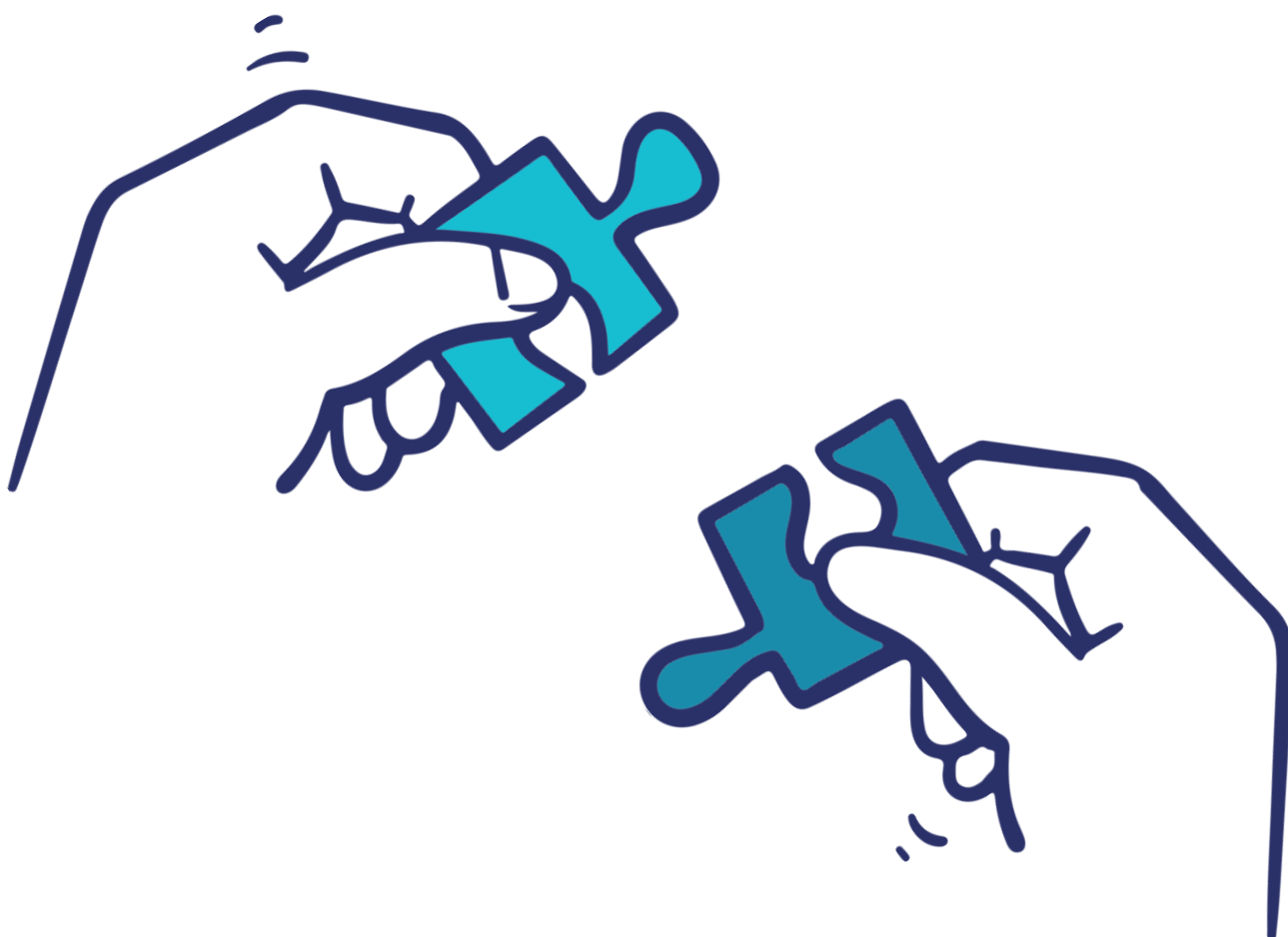
Right-hand column: what this research set out to surface.

Counted, and uncounted. Source: Dr Sara Hassan.

The area's creative community has already named these risks. The community-led [Digbeth Cultural Plan](#), Companion Culture: Four Actions for Digbeth, was developed by [Grand Union](#) and [Eastside Projects](#) with more than 300 people. Its four actions are to be good neighbours, secure cultural space, be a lighthouse and be inclusive. Birmingham City Council funded the development of the Four Action plans, and its emphasis on securing cultural space is reflected in the emerging [Birmingham Local Plan proposal](#) covering not-for-profit floorspace in relevant Digbeth developments. The project therefore built on an existing community agenda rather than creating a new one, while examining how that agenda could gain greater influence over regeneration and delivery decisions.

Everything is at stake: years of community-building now sit alongside significant precarity.

Cheryl Jones, Director and one of the founding members at Grand Union.





Left: St Basil's is a place of sanctuary for homeless young people.
 Right: Arts organisation Grand Union display a moving sign, showing the immediate precarity.
 Image credit: Dr Sara Hassan.

Grand Union, an arts organisation and key anchor in Digbeth, saw its rents rise sharply as redevelopment plans intensified, illustrating how speculation can erase the assets that drew investment in the first place. The wider literature consistently identifies meaningful **participation**, **long-term relationship-building** and **local influence** as important conditions for more inclusive culture-led regeneration. It also shows that grassroots groups often lack the resources, land ownership and institutional power needed to shape development outcomes. Rather than producing another spatial vision for Digbeth, this research examined how existing regeneration plans are experienced, negotiated and valued, and how cultural and community organisations might move from being recognised as local assets to having greater influence over decisions.

Who was at the table, and who was not

Digbeth regeneration ecosystem, from the Creative Futures corpus.

Solid = engaged in the research; dashed grey = underheard or largely absent.



Legend:



Digbeth cultural and regeneration ecosystem. Source: Dr Sara Hassan.

Community Innovation

The research created a new cross-sector policy space in which organisations shaping Digbeth's future could meet, listen and reflect together. It brought community and cultural knowledge into direct conversation with organisations responsible for planning, regional strategy, public land, skills, investment and major institutional development.

Co-creation meant building the research through conversation, testing interpretations as they emerged and allowing different forms of expertise to shape the findings. Walking conversations enabled participants to discuss the buildings, canals, streets and public spaces that defined their experience of Digbeth, surfacing issues that could be missed in a formal meeting. [Cross-sector workshops](#) enabled participants to compare how regeneration was being experienced and to identify shared concerns, points of disagreement and missing voices.



Workshop and convening space, with people sat around a table watching the presenter.
Image credit: Dr Sara Hassan.

One workshop used [Most Significant Change](#), a structured method in which participants use storytelling to identify and compare the changes they consider most important rather than reporting only against predetermined indicators. This allowed participants to surface loss and risk alongside opportunity. Running through the research was ecosystem mapping: building actor, relationship, spatial and influence maps of who is in Digbeth, who is connected to whom, who holds power and who is missing. Mapping exposed relationships, gaps and dependencies hidden by an organisational list.



People on a walking conversation tour watching the newly published Four Actions for Digbeth. Image credit: Dr Sara Hassan.

I chose careful convening over a more directive form of co-creation. Digbeth already has several organisations acting as anchors, including the BBC, Grand Union, St Basil's, Culture Central and City-REDI, but no shared framework coordinates their roles. The binding constraint was not a shortage of ideas, but limited trust and the absence of a sufficiently independent space in which competing interests could be tested before positions hardened. A directive method would have imposed a structure on partners who did not yet agree on the problem and could have required the least powerful actors to commit first. A slower process, with procedures intended to reduce rather than erase power imbalances, suited the stage Digbeth was at. Interviews and workshop discussions captured frustration about being consulted after decisions had advanced, reluctance to challenge more powerful institutions and concern that some community voices remained outside the process.

In practice, care involved specific choices. The university through Culture Forward and City-REDI acted as an independent intermediary and was perceived by participants as providing a comparatively neutral space for discussion. Rebecca Riley, Co-director of City-REDI and Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Regional Engagement, described this as giving “*a more equal weight to the voices that are in the room*”. Workshops were designed to surface tension safely. A first session mapped the high-level narrative; a second asked small groups to identify what was missing, which voices were absent and the single risk or tension they considered most important. When a thirty-minute partner slot proved too short for everyone to speak, an asynchronous board was added so quieter contributors could share their thinking afterwards.

A young vulnerable participant was anonymised. Quotes from the BBC's local team were checked before use, recognising that a relatively junior contributor could not speak for a large institution. Slowing the conversation created more opportunities for less institutionally powerful and quieter participants, while changing who was present changed what could be said.

That care widened what counted as public realm. Jean Templeton, then Chief Executive of St Basil's, which has supported young homeless people in Digbeth since the 1960s, described the area as a place of '*psychological safety*' and '*neutrality*', where organisations can '*wrap around the person*' rather than sending them across disconnected services. A young person connected to St Basil's described Digbeth as somewhere she felt '*safe to be as flamboyant*' or '*as confident*' as she wanted to be. Public realm, on this account, is not only streets and buildings. It is also safety, care, confidence and belonging.

Results & Change

The activities did not remove the pressures facing Digbeth. They changed how those pressures were discussed and gathered evidence about power that regeneration processes rarely capture: who owns land, controls the narrative and is able to remain.

Participants named a recurring tension between culture's economic and social value. Dr Anthony Ruck, Chief Strategy Officer and Deputy CEO at Culture Central, observed in one workshop that people can feel they "have to take sides"; the convening reframed this as a tension to navigate rather than win. Claire Starmer, Cultural Service Manager at Birmingham City Council, described the workshops as "*very open, safe environments*" where participants could raise concerns they would not express elsewhere. This was an important process outcome, although openness should not be confused with influence over subsequent decisions.

The process also exposed its limitations. Landlords, developers, the Canal and River Trust, smaller creative organisations, freelancers, residents and unaffiliated community members were insufficiently represented or absent. Participation was purposive rather than representative, institutional voices were more prominent, and the research did not follow decisions through the full planning and delivery process which have longer timelines.

The convening nevertheless changed how partners heard one another. Homes England considered how cultural and community-based evidence could inform assumptions about demand for housing, studios and creative uses. The BBC explored how it might act as a "good neighbour", listen to tensions and make its new site available to cultural organisations. Translating situated knowledge into forms that delivery bodies can use was itself an outcome.

The research also surfaced forms of public value often omitted from regeneration. A workshop discussion about rubbish, street life and visible vulnerability asked who or what is "cleaned away" when a place is made investment ready. This sharpened the distinction between treating cultural organisations as attractive adjacencies and recognising them as infrastructure requiring protection.

Partners reported early signs of progress. Birmingham City Council's cultural team is being involved earlier in some planning conversations; the findings were presented to the Digbeth Culture and Community Forum; and new working relationships formed among organisations that had not previously met in this configuration.

The research then moved from dialogue to policy translation. A policy brief was tested with WMCA partners across Culture, Skills and Employment, and Housing; Birmingham City Council partners in Planning and Culture; and Homes England. Their input clarified council land constraints, the potential of Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106, [Homes England's disposal and social-value mechanisms](#), and links to regional skills, housing, brownfield and creative-sector funding.

These are process, relationship and policy-engagement outcomes, not evidence that recommendations have been adopted or affordable space secured. Delivery still depends on powers and decisions distributed across Birmingham City Council, WMCA, the emerging Mayoral Development Corporation, Homes England, landowners, developers and anchor institutions. For City-REDI, the work demonstrates how arts and humanities research can support place-based policy and strengthen the university's role as a trusted intermediary.



BBC building, Digbeth

Recommendations

The policy brief sets out specific actions for Digbeth. The broader lessons from the CIP intervention concern how inclusive regeneration should be researched and organised in complex, devolved settings.

1. Begin with the ecosystem, not a predetermined solution

Place-based programmes should map organisations, relationships, assets and power before defining solutions. In Digbeth, ecosystem, spatial and influence mapping showed who controlled land, resources and narratives, which actors connected otherwise separate groups, and whose voices were absent. Repeated over time, this can identify weak relationships, emerging risks and points for intervention.

2. Treat convening as an intervention

Co-creation should not be reduced to a consultation workshop. Where participants hold unequal authority and resources, participation requires time, trust and different routes into discussion. Interviews, walking conversations, workshops, asynchronous contributions and Most Significant Change enabled experiences to emerge that formal consultation might miss. Public bodies and researchers should resource convening as sustained relational work, while recognising that it cannot eliminate power differences or guarantee consensus.

3. Treat cultural and community knowledge as decision-relevant evidence

Investment, viability and jobs data do not show whether people can remain, cultural networks survive or social infrastructure is strengthened. CIP methods revealed belonging, psychological safety, informal support, cultural continuity and displacement risk. Such evidence should shape how problems are defined, options developed and outcomes assessed, rather than being added after decisions are fixed.

4. Use independent intermediaries to connect institutions

Regeneration brings together organisations with different mandates, timescales and languages. The CIP role connected community knowledge with statutory powers, funding and delivery responsibilities, translating evidence between research, policy and practice without replacing partners' responsibilities. Universities can perform this role when they combine analytical independence, long-term relationships and commitment to place, while acknowledging missing voices and avoiding unqualified claims of neutrality.

5. Design research for devolution

Responsibility for planning, housing, skills, culture, transport, public land and investment is distributed across local government, WMCA, Homes England, mayoral development arrangements, landowners and anchor institutions. This can obstruct delivery, but devolution also allows policy areas to be joined around local circumstances. Place-based CIP research can provide the neighbourhood intelligence needed to show how powers interact, where responsibility is unclear and how coordinated action could be achieved.

Mapping, convening, widening the evidence base and connecting local knowledge to devolved decision-making are not preliminary activities. They are part of the infrastructure of inclusive place-based change.

Looking Ahead

Digbeth's future will not be secured by investment alone. The central challenge is whether regeneration can grow the area without erasing the cultural organisations, social networks and forms of belonging that made it valuable in the first place.

The work shows that Community Innovation Practitioner research can intervene where conventional regeneration processes often fall short: by exposing hidden power, connecting institutions that do not routinely work together, and turning community knowledge into evidence that can shape policy and give people voice. Ecosystem mapping, careful convening and qualitative inquiry were not supporting activities; they were the means through which a fragmented system became more visible and more open to challenge.

Devolution creates a real opportunity to act differently. Powers over planning, skills, housing, investment and culture now sit closer to the places they affect, but proximity alone does not produce inclusion. The test is whether those powers are coordinated around local knowledge and whether communities influence decisions before outcomes are fixed.

The next step is therefore not more recognition, but implementation. Digbeth should be judged not only by what is built, but by who remains, who benefits and who has the power to shape what comes next.

Further Information:

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

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