

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner 2025-26

Policy Paper

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

**West Midlands
Mayoral Authority**

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Devolved Policy Context

Central government cannot easily respond to Digbeth's mix of cultural history, land pressure, creative-media investment and public-realm change. The WMCA can. It can connect regional investment with local knowledge and help major institutions strengthen rather than displace the existing ecosystem.

Its devolved adult skills funding, Skills Bootcamps and sector-based routes can move local residents, including those furthest from work, into creative jobs. Its single settlement, housing and brownfield funding let it attach cultural and social-value conditions that national programmes apply too bluntly. Its convening power with the BBC, Create Central and the Council lets it broker the good-neighbour pledge in Recommendation 3. The West Midlands Mayor can align regional expectations with the WMCA's strategic investment, including the Creative Places Growth Fund, making Digbeth the testbed for a devolved model of inclusive creative growth and a bid for national cultural-place status for Birmingham.

Digbeth is a key regeneration zone in the West Midlands, and it's entering a decisive phase of change. The [BBC's move to Typhoo Wharf](#), MasterChef at Banana Warehouse, Digbeth Loc. Studios, HS2 and [Smithfield](#) are bringing new visibility, jobs and confidence, and a growing film and television production cluster and supply chain that could draw further companies in. They are also driving up land values and rents. The problem is straightforward: the cultural, creative and social organisations that gave Digbeth its value and attracts investment are the least able to absorb those rising costs, and the current planning and investment system does not protect them.

The [Digbeth Cultural Plan](#) set out a strong local agenda, but recognition has not yet translated into governance, secured space or binding commitments, so the pressure continues unchecked. Birmingham's creative industries sustain around 22,610 jobs and £2.04bn in GVA, [having grown 44% between 2018 and 2023](#). The BBC relocation alone should add over £282m in GVA, so how that value connects locally matters. The [WMCA's 2026 State of the Region report](#) makes the same warning: the region risks a cycle where growth continues but too many residents cannot benefit. Without action the outcome is not a missed opportunity but an active loss: venues close as leases lapse, the organisations that anchor young people lose their footing, and Digbeth keeps the brand of a creative quarter while emptying of the people who earned it.

Recommendations

1. Embed cultural and community voices in regeneration governance and decision making

Cultural and community partners know which spaces matter and what would be lost through development. The Digbeth Culture and Community Forum already shapes emerging guidance: it fed into the [Digbeth Prospectus](#), and Birmingham City Council funded its work on the Four Actions plan which sits behind the 2% not-for-profit floorspace policy now in the emerging Birmingham Local Plan. What it does not yet do is feed named decisions on investment, public realm and development sites, as advisory input rather than a consent stage or a veto. Handled well, that early engagement gives investors more certainty, surfacing concerns before they become objection or delay, and speeding decisions rather than slowing them. The immediate opportunity sits with Birmingham City Council. Within six months, before the next wave of sites comes forward, it should give the Forum that role, with a reporting line into the regeneration board and a working relationship with the Digbeth Board. A further opportunity is opening, with the Mayoral Development Corporation now established, the Council and WMCA should build a standing role for cultural and community partners into its governance from the outset, so the voices closest to the ground help shape and improve decisions.

2. Invest in affordable creative and community space as essential infrastructure for good growth

The low-cost studios, venues, maker spaces and social enterprises that first made Digbeth attractive to investors are not a ‘nice to have’: they are the first thing rising rents remove. Birmingham City Council, as the local planning authority for now, with planning powers due to pass to the new Birmingham East Mayoral Development Corporation this autumn 2026, should use the planning and lease tools that already exist to protect that space: change-of-use controls, long-term and meanwhile-use leases, affordable and managed commercial floorspace of the kind planned at Upper Trinity Street, Section 106 and community-benefit clauses, clear social-infrastructure requirements, and a community land trust for key cultural buildings to protect not-for-profit uses and floorspace. What a scheme can carry depends on viability, so tools are matched to each site; together they reinforce the Growth Zone policy as it is reworked for Digbeth. The council’s forthcoming Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) policy and Section 106 funds could also steer needs toward the social and cultural infrastructure that keeps community-anchored organisations in place. Responsibility cannot rest with the council, which owns little land here. Some landowners already act: Homes England’s Warwick Bar Phase 1 disposal requires a social value method statement covering skills for growth, including the creative sectors. Extending that across its sites and to landowners such as the Gooch Estate, secured through planning obligations or disposal criteria, would achieve more than

any single tool. The WMCA's Creative Places Growth Fund could also benefit Digbeth communities. The first step is a rapid map of the spaces most at risk from rising rents or insecure tenure. Given the urgency, the Council should commission it with the WMCA, with cultural partners feeding in, to capture the evidence base and risk assessment.

3. Incentivise anchor institutions to enhance devolved cultural capacity

The BBC's arrival brings jobs, visibility and confidence, but that value will only reach the wider area if incoming institutions act as neighbours rather than occupants. Being a good neighbour is already one of the Four Actions for Digbeth, the locally authored framework led by Grand Union and Eastside Projects, funded by the city council's culture team, and held by the Digbeth Culture and Community Forum. The quickest route is to build on it rather than around it. The BBC should publish a concrete pledge in response to the good-neighbour action, setting out shared venue access, local procurement targets and skills pathways that move local residents, including those furthest from work, into the creative jobs the cluster is bringing. The WMCA is well placed to take this forward with the institutions it already works with, beginning with the BBC while goodwill is highest, with a first draft of that pledge within six months.

4. Evaluate impact of cultural investment socially as well as economically

GVA, jobs and footfall show that Digbeth is growing, but not whether people can stay, belong or keep their space. An active WMCA and City-REDI research partnership already exists. The WMCA's own [State of the Region report](#) tracks belonging across the region, and Creative West Midlands maps the sector, but neither yet sees a neighbourhood like Digbeth in detail. The recommendation is to extend that work on Digbeth, so it tracks belonging, access, cultural continuity, affordable workspace, displacement risk and public-realm use at neighbourhood level and sets Digbeth up as a national case study in inclusive creative-led growth. Working with the Council, Culture Central, Grand Union, Eastside Projects and St Basil's, the evidence should test whether growth reaches those most at risk of exclusion, from the young people at St Basil's with lived experience of homelessness to freelancers outside any institution, so inclusion becomes a tested outcome rather than an assumed one.

Further Information:

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

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