

Civic and Place: framing the role of cultural development in Art and Design

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Introduction

The vitality of a high street, the resonance of a heritage site, or the presence of a local arts initiative can all profoundly influence how people feel about where they live and about themselves.

The Council for Higher Education in Art and Design (CHEAD) event **Civic and Place: Exploring the Role of the Civic in Art and Design**, held on 29 April 2025, brought together researchers, educators, practitioners and community stakeholders to examine how art and design can shape, sustain, and animate civic life. At a time when towns and cities across the UK are navigating economic, social, and cultural pressures, the role of arts and culture in our daily lives feels more urgent than ever. Places are not simply physical environments, they are lived, relational and symbolic spaces where people negotiate identity, belonging and community.

The event focused on three interlinking themes that are central to shaping vibrant, place-based cultural ecologies: **lifelong learning on the high street, creative health**, and **inclusivity in heritage settings**. These themes highlight the transformative potential of creativity when it is rooted in place, while also underscoring the importance of collaboration between universities, local authorities, cultural organisations and creative communities. When civic engagement is genuinely co-created, cultural practice becomes more than enrichment; it becomes a place-based infrastructure for social resilience, wellbeing and equity.

Civic in this context refers to collective engagement in public life, the creation and stewardship of shared spaces and the development of systems that benefit communities (see [NCIA's Theory of Civic Change](#)). The event invited participants to reflect on critical questions: How can lifelong learning transform high streets into vibrant hubs of creativity and skills-sharing? What role does creative health play in fostering wellbeing, community agency and connection? And how can heritage practice advance inclusivity, amplifying marginalised voices and supporting collective ownership of cultural narratives?

Through keynote talks, interactive discussions and collaborative visioning exercises, participants explored how partnerships between councils, cultural organisations, creative practitioners, and communities can generate sustainable, inclusive models of place-making. The session offered an opportunity to reimagine the potential of art and design in shaping high streets, health interventions and heritage sites.

Co-organised by Rowan Bailey, Director of the [Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture](#) at the **University of Huddersfield** and the [Council for Higher Education in Art and Design](#), and with keynote contributions from Evelyn Wilson, [National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange](#), Rhiannon Jones, [CivicLab](#), a flagship research centre, part of [CivicHUB](#) from the **University of Derby**, Steve Millington, [Institute of Place Management](#), **Manchester Metropolitan University**, Adam Leach, [National Civic Impact Accelerator](#), **Sheffield Hallam University** the event aimed to share insights and experiences across the CHEAD network and stimulate discussion, collaboration and future action in civic, place-based cultural practices.

Summary: Lifelong Learning, Creative Health and Inclusive Heritage

1. Lifelong Learning on the High Street

Context:

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), launching in 2026, provides adults under 60 with education loan entitlement for short courses, modules, or full qualifications. While it increases access to learning, concerns were raised about its market-driven framework and exclusion of older learners.

Key Insights:

- Lifelong learning is perceived as **relational, joyful, and intergenerational**, not just a credential or economic tool:
 - *"Supporting love of learning experiences"*
 - *"Something best done together, not alone"*
- Critiques of institutional framing:
 - *"I don't like the term—it feels like it needs to be visited from above. Isn't lifelong learning just a given?"*
 - *"Older people's worlds are offline—they are still learning, but this policy doesn't include them."*
- High streets and pop-up spaces can serve as civic learning environments:
 - *"High streets are familiar, civic spaces. People feel confident using them. They're spaces where communities can be a focus."*

Recommendations:

1. Increase visibility of informal and creative learning through participatory, civic interventions.
2. Activate vacant or underused high street spaces for learning and creative practice.
3. Integrate creative health into lifelong learning initiatives.
4. Create a programme of pop-ups on the high street, aimed at demonstrating how underused spaces can be repurposed.

2. Creative Health: Civic and Place-Based Approaches

Overview:

Creative Health uses arts, culture and creative practice to improve wellbeing, social cohesion and civic engagement. Universities play a critical role in supporting creative health to thrive in places.

Key Insights:

- Civic practice connects **practice, place, and community**:
 - *“By the way in which we think about practice, place, and community as connecting, enabling, and innovating, we improve health and wellbeing.”*
- Community expertise is central: *“Acknowledging the public as experts in their own lives—design civic projects responsive to their insights and needs.”*

Challenges:

- Civic engagement often treated as peripheral (“civic washing”).
- Short-term, reactive funding limits long-term impact on creative health in people’s lives.
- Cross-sector collaboration requires facilitation, time and shared understanding.

Recommendations:

1. Invest in long-term, place-based Creative Health initiatives.
2. Embed Creative Health in NHS and local authority commissioning.
3. Develop a creative health infrastructure that will support community readiness and co-creation.
4. Establish a shared language of creative health capabilities and evidence metrics across sectors.
5. Sustain legacy projects alongside creative health innovation.

3. Inclusive Engagement in Heritage Settings

Overview:

Heritage sites present opportunities to amplify marginalised voices, reclaim histories and foster civic learning, but institutional, funding and equity challenges persist.

Key Insights:

- Universities often face structural misalignment with agile, community-led projects.
- Community engagement is undervalued in academic metrics, limiting long-term partnership building.
- *“Perpetual funding crises”* undermine trust and continuity.
- Art and design can facilitate interpretation, storytelling and intergenerational learning: *“The community, not the university, defined what mattered.”*

Recommendations:

1. Lower institutional barriers and simplify access to university spaces.
2. Embed heritage engagement and civic literacy into curricula and research.
3. Allocate funding equitably to community partners and co-created projects.
4. Build authentic partnerships with formal agreements (MoUs, [Civic University Agreements](#)).
5. Support art and design-led initiatives to enable community storytelling and participation.

Cross-Cutting Themes

- **Place and civic space:** High streets, heritage sites and universities are hubs for learning and act as place-based anchors.
- **Informal, intergenerational learning:** Recognize learning outside formal structures.
- **Creative practice as civic intervention:** Art and design improve wellbeing, social cohesion and civic literacy.
- **Institutional alignment:** Universities must adapt processes to support community needs and avoid extractive practices.
- **Visibility and relevance:** Learning should be visible, meaningful and inclusive to engage wider communities.

Overall vision: Lifelong learning, creative health and heritage engagement thrive when rooted in lived experience, collaboratively shaped and resourced to sustain community expertise.

Lifelong Learning, Creative Health and Inclusive Heritage: Full Working Paper

1. Lifelong Learning on the High Street

Contributors: Rowan Bailey and Evelyn Wilson

1.1 Context: The Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)

The [Lifelong Learning Entitlement \(LLE\)](#), set to launch in England in 2026, promises adults up to the age of 60 access to a loan entitlement equivalent to four years of post-18 education. This funding can be applied flexibly to short courses, modules, or full qualifications, offering significant opportunities for reskilling and upskilling.

Participants in the CHEAD discussion welcomed the principle of greater access to learning provision but expressed concern about its market-driven orientation and the age cutoff, which they argued overlooks the fact that people continue learning well beyond 60. One participant captured this tension: *“There’s an irony here, because the LLE is meant to be for lifelong learning, but it cuts off at age 60. That’s a big omission.”* Another observed: *“Older people’s worlds are offline—they are still learning, but this policy doesn’t include them.”*

The discussion highlighted a broader concern: lifelong learning is increasingly framed as a product or system to be delivered, rather than an organic, relational practice embedded in everyday life.

1.2 Perspectives on Lifelong Learning

When prompted with, *“When you hear the phrase lifelong learning, what comes to mind?”*, participants described a rich tapestry of associations. Lifelong learning was framed as joyful, relational, and intergenerational—a practice that extends beyond formal education and employment. Participants described it as: *“Supporting love of learning experiences”* and *“something best done together, not alone.”*

Learning was seen as a source of personal enrichment and social connection rather than a commodity to be purchased or measured by credentials. However, optimism was tempered by a sense of ambivalence toward institutional framing. One participant noted: *“I don’t like the term—it feels like it needs to be visited from above. Isn’t lifelong learning just a given?”*

1.3 High Streets as Civic Learning Hubs

The discussion highlighted the potential of high streets as **everyday civic learning environments**. Participants observed that young people often lack structured activities, yet high streets are familiar spaces where people feel confident and communities can convene: *“People feel confident using them. They’re spaces where communities can be a focus.”*

Pop-up shops, vacant buildings, and urban rooms were cited as flexible, visible spaces for hosting learning, creative practice, and intergenerational engagement. Examples included [Temporary Contemporary](#) and [Creative Piazza](#), in Huddersfield, both of which repurpose underused high street spaces to offer workshops, residencies, and participatory cultural programming. Participants reflected that these micro-interventions could embed learning into the everyday fabric of towns and cities while countering the alienation often associated with formal institutions.

The conversation also emphasised that **community and creative organisations are already driving lifelong learning**. As one participant observed: *“Community and creative organisations are pillars, bodies that deliver these opportunities, including skills exchange. They negotiate these power relations. It’s more human to human.”* Nevertheless, participants noted the persistent scarcity of physical spaces and structural support, warning that the opportunity to make lifelong learning a visible, inclusive feature of high streets risks being missed.

1.4 Recommendations for Lifelong Learning

Key strategies identified by participants included:

1. **Increase visibility:** Civic interventions such as [National Saturday Clubs](#) demonstrate how cultural programming can expose young people to museums, galleries, and universities, making learning both tangible and accessible.
2. **Activate underused spaces:** Vacant buildings and urban rooms should host learning, creative practice, and civic exchange.
3. **Integrate creative health:** Embed wellbeing-focused approaches alongside skills development, including participatory arts and cultural engagement.
4. **Expand learning beyond classrooms through a programme of pop-ups on the high street:** Embrace informal, intergenerational, and experiential opportunities, connecting people across age and social groups.

By adopting these strategies, high streets can function as living cultural infrastructures, blending community learning, creativity, and civic engagement.

2. Creative Health: Civic and Place-Based Approaches

Authors: Dr Rhiannon Jones, University of Derby, and Sandra Booth, CHEAD

2.1 Overview

[Creative Health](#) refers to the use of arts, culture, and creativity to improve mental and physical wellbeing, strengthen social cohesion, and foster civic engagement. Operating at the intersection of culture, heritage, health, and education, it leverages **universities as facilitators, infrastructure providers, and brokers** for cross-sector collaboration.

Participants emphasised that **practice, place, and community are the drivers of change**, noting: *“By the way in which we think about practice, place, and community as connecting, enabling, and innovating, we improve health and wellbeing.”*

Creative Health also reframes civic responsibility, positioning art and design as tools for shaping public life and building inclusive communities. Participants stressed the importance of avoiding “civic washing”—initiatives that appear civic in intent but lack meaningful engagement—and advocated for approaches that are **community-led, responsive, and co-created**, ensuring interventions reflect real needs and lived experiences.

Notable examples highlighted included [CivicLab \(University of Derby\)](#), which facilitates participatory workshops connecting students, academics, and residents to explore wellbeing, civic engagement, and co-design. Similarly, the [Creative Health Hub](#) (University of Huddersfield) works in partnership with creative health providers, local authorities, VCSE and cultural organisations to support mental and physical health, intergenerational connection and place-based civic engagement.

2.2 Challenges in Creative Health

Participants identified several persistent challenges:

- **Embedding civic practice in higher education:** Often treated as an add-on rather than foundational, limiting integration across curricula and research.
- **Funding constraints:** Short-term, reactive funding cycles restrict long-term impact and continuity.
- **Institutional silos:** Interdisciplinary, community-led approaches are hindered by hierarchical structures.

- **Valuing community expertise:** Power imbalances can reinforce top-down approaches.
- **Societal and health pressures:** Rapidly evolving issues, such as health inequalities, require flexible, creative responses often beyond the capacity of traditional systems.

2.3 Recommendations for Creative Health

Participants proposed:

1. **Invest in long-term, place-based initiatives** that embed creative practice into everyday community life.
2. **Embed Creative Health in commissioning frameworks** within the NHS and local authorities.
3. **Provide infrastructure for community readiness and co-creation**, including access to university and cultural spaces.
4. **Establish shared language and metrics** to enable cross-sector collaboration without compromising nuance.
5. **Recognize and sustain legacy projects** alongside new innovations.

These strategies aim to position art and design as **catalysts for system change**, fostering wellbeing while supporting civic literacy and engagement.

3. Inclusive Engagement in Heritage Settings

3.1 Overview

Heritage sites offer unique opportunities to **amplify marginalised voices, reclaim neglected histories, and foster civic learning**. Yet engagement is frequently constrained by bureaucracy, funding pressures, and equity challenges. Universities hold underutilized resources—archives, galleries, and buildings—that could support co-created projects if administrative processes were more flexible.

Art and design disciplines were highlighted as central to facilitating storytelling, interpretation, and intergenerational learning. The [Embedding Community Voices in Local Heritage Strategies](#) project (University of Glasgow) exemplified this approach, allowing a women's group to define the focus of a Windrush anniversary exhibition: *"The community, not the university, defined what mattered."*

3.2 Challenges in Heritage Engagement

Participants identified several key barriers:

- **Institutional misalignment:** Community organisations are agile, while university systems are slower and more bureaucratic.
- **Valuing engagement:** Heritage-focused, arts-led projects often lack recognition in research assessment, disadvantaging early-career researchers.
- **Funding pressures:** Short-term grants undermine trust and long-term relationship building.
- **Equity in partnerships:** Power imbalances and unclear credit or resource allocation can make collaborations extractive rather than mutually beneficial.

Participants stressed that **sustainable engagement requires long-term commitment, flexibility, and recognition of community expertise**, while universities must operate within their capacity and avoid overreach.

3.3 Recommendations for Heritage Engagement

Participants proposed:

1. **Simplify institutional barriers** and improve access to university heritage spaces for community projects.
2. **Embed civic literacy and heritage engagement** into teaching and research, including credit-bearing modules and service-learning opportunities.

3. **Allocate research funding equitably** to community partners, supporting co-creation from project inception.
4. **Build authentic and equitable partnerships** with formal agreements, such as Civic University Agreements, to clarify aims, roles, and resources.
5. **Support art and design-led initiatives** that facilitate participatory heritage practices, storytelling, and public memory.

Projects such as [Cultures of](#) illustrate how high street cultural programming can merge heritage interpretation, creative practice and community learning, bridging informal engagement with formal cultural infrastructures.

Next steps identified include developing **roundtables, practical toolkits, advocacy for long-term funding, and translation of academic research into accessible outputs** (films, exhibitions, podcasts).

4. Cross-Cutting Themes and Vision

Across all three discussions, **place, participation, and community expertise** emerged as central. High streets, heritage sites, and universities can function as **learning and civic hubs**, enabling informal, intergenerational and creative practices that extend beyond formal credentials.

Visibility, relevance and accessibility were repeatedly emphasized: learning, creative health, and heritage activities are most impactful when **participatory, embedded in everyday spaces and co-created with communities**.

Overall vision: Lifelong learning, creative health and heritage engagement thrive when rooted in **lived experience**, collaboratively shaped and resourced to sustain community expertise. Cultural practice becomes an infrastructure for resilience, health and equity, creating **high streets, heritage sites, and institutions that are genuinely civic and inclusive**.

Authors



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Rowan is also Principal Lead of the [Creative Health Hub](#) at the University of Huddersfield, and has led several AHRC-funded projects, including research on post office cultures, creative health initiatives and community innovation. Her work spans high streets, heritage sites and public spaces, examining how arts and humanities research can foster civic engagement, resilience and wellbeing. For more details about the Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture, see: [Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture - University of Huddersfield](#) and Research Profile: [Rowan Bailey - University of Huddersfield Research Portal](#)



Dr Rhiannon Jones (FRSA) is Associate Professor (Civic Practice), Head of Civic and Communities at the University of Derby. She leads CivicLAB an Institution-wide centre on participatory culture, creative dialogue, and civic practice. She chairs the International Contemporary Working Art Group for Cumulus, the only Global Association in Art and Design. She is a member of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement and Trustee of New Art Exchange, a ground-breaking, Global Majority, NPO for Arts Council England and an award-winning and internationally recognised Gallery. She regularly works with Council for Higher Education in Art and Design, Royal Society of Arts, British Academy and Design Council UK. Her research into placemaking is a case study for the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange and presented at the All-Party Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group.

She is a published academic, most recently with Intellect Books (2024), Taylor and Francis (2024-5) and had work featured with Council for Higher Education in Art and Design on Women in Leadership (2024) and NCACE (2024) as example of best practice. She frequently provides keynotes Nationally and Internationally within the Civic, Creative and Cultural Industry Sector. She judged the UKNA artists in 2024 and judged the Derbyshire Community Business Awards for East Midlands Chamber of Commerce in 2022-23. She co-founded InDialogue, curating international conferences and residencies, supporting over 600 artists from over 15 countries since its inception. She founded Designing Dialogue CIC the first spin out from the University of Derby, that tours S.H.E.D; a public arts, touring and innovation space which has received several national honours and has engaged with 12 counties, 41 partners and 42,596 people directly, 700 creatives and commissioned 50 new works. She has received funding from partners such as Design Council, UK, CHEAD, Arts Council England, RSA and local trusts and councils. Accolades include: finalist for Universities Alliance Award (2022), Shed of the year finalist (2020), UK Green Gown Awards: Benefiting Community (2021). She has been selected as a social regenerative entrepreneur and is a Catalyst Grant holder from, the Royal Society of Arts (2023-4) and it is a UKRI ARC Accelerator funded project (2025).

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Steve Millington is a Professor of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University. He leads on the delivery of the Institute of Place Management's Vital and Viable Programme, supporting high street and town centre revitalisation. Between 2019-24 Steve was a High Streets Taskforce Expert, during which he designed and delivered a national programme of placemaking workshops with supporting action plans in 40 towns across England. He has published many papers and edited two books on place and placemaking.



Evelyn Wilson is co-Director of [National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange](#), where she develops initiatives designed to support, showcase and generate evidence on cultural knowledge exchange between Higher Education and the Arts and Culture sector. Prior to working with and in the university sector, her earlier career was in the culture sector where she headed up cultural programmes and organisations in different parts of the UK, working mainly in media arts contexts. She is on the advisory boards of [Centre for Creativity in Professional Practice](#) and [Artquest](#). [linkedin.com/in/evelyn-wilson-6b310219/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/evelyn-wilson-6b310219/)



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