

HOPEFUL TOWNS: 'WHAT WORKS?' (2)

BUILDING A STRONG PLACE IDENTITY

A positive sense of place is intertwined with how confident, welcoming and optimistic a town is. This often feeds directly into cohesion and community resilience, and into residents' attitudes to change and difference.

Our previous research has found this – that towns with fewer heritage assets, or a foggier historical identity, tend to be less resilient communities. Telling a clear story about where a town has come from and where it is going, rooted in its existing assets and environment while also forward-looking and inclusive, is crucial to combatting the sense of alienation and decline that the far right use to get a foothold in our communities.

So how do you create inclusive narratives? And how do you take this beyond branding and image, so that place identity carries genuine meaning and is robust in the face of those promoting division?

This learning note summarises the key lessons from the second event in our Hopeful Towns 'What Works' series. Each webinar looks at a different aspect of local policy, to try and understand what works when it comes to building resilience in towns across England and Wales.

KEY THEMES

1. CREATING THE STORY

Creating a narrative for resilience starts with inclusive, hopeful storytelling that is rooted in place and community. Much of the narrative building we discussed in the session focused on an existing physical asset – a high street,

an anchor institution, a cultural area. Shared parts of local landscapes, like libraries or green spaces, can form focal points for proud local identities that reach all parts of a community.

Reflecting on Carnegie UK's Talk of the Town project, Pippa Coutts stressed four key ingredients for a strong local narrative:

- **Trust:** transparency and good relationships with different communities
- **Time:** good storytelling is a long-term, iterative process
- **Treasure:** identifying potential funding or existing expertise
- **Thought:** ensuring a diversity of thought and an intergenerational approach to identity – so that the story does not live in the past, nor is entirely owned by the present

SPEAKERS

- **CLLR JOY ALLEN**, Mayor of Bishop Auckland and Cabinet Member for Transformation, Culture and Tourism at Durham County Council
- **PIPPA COUTTS**, Policy and Development Manager, Carnegie UK Trust
- **GURVINDER SANDHER**, CEO of Kent Equality Cohesion Council and Artistic Director at Cohesion Plus
- **KAYLEIGH ROUSELL**, Founder and Spokesperson, Sheppey is Ours!
- **ELLEN KIELY**, Our Liverpool, Liverpool City Council

2. USING THE PAST TO INFORM THE FUTURE

Bishop Auckland defines itself as a town in transition – one where “the past is our future”. The town’s rich history in coal mining and railways could be painted as a story of economic decline – and therefore identity – but is instead being leveraged into a new understanding of the town and its contribution to British life. The town is also looking further back, to a wealth of Roman artifacts that have given it a reputation as ‘the undiscovered Pompei of the North’. The town’s renewed story began with a successful defence of a collection of paintings, called the Zurbarán Paintings, that were due to be sold off. A symbolic retention of a cultural asset, the paintings were placed in a Trust and mark the start of a renewed cultural story in Bishop Auckland.

A similar tension between past and future is occurring on the the Isle of Sheppey. Like many seaside towns, Sheppey’s recent history has been marked by unemployment and economic decline. However, there’s a huge appetite for change, and Sheppey’s past as a significant part of British seafaring and aviation could be reflected in new, grassroots campaigns around sustainability and a Green New Deal.

3. SMALL STEPS, BIG LEAPS

While not the end point of any identity work, standalone events and material projects go a long way to creating a shared vision and set of priorities in a community. Gravesend, for example, has held hugely successful inclusive St George’s day events, pairing brass bands and Morris dancing with a local African and Asian drumming collective. All of this is supported by the connection of faith groups and with the support of projects that shape Gravesend’s local identity.

Liverpool have kept their cohesion work vibrant by leveraging local assets to reach new migrants – including football projects and Scouse classes.

4. A FOCUS ON WELLBEING

Several speakers talked about the need to meet people where their priorities were – ensuring that wellbeing is a core part of any identity-forming work and understanding community wellbeing as an extension of personal wellbeing. The environments we form our identities in – how healthy, kind and accessible they are – define large parts of those identities.

Carnegie UK highlighted the importance of focusing on anchor institutions – hubs of activity that organise people. In creating positive local identities, towns need to create healthy local spaces in public libraries, parks and community centres. Bishop Auckland, for example, is investing in a new Railway into the Yorkshire Dales as part of a project to re-establish itself as a tourist destination and expand the town’s relationship with the green spaces around it.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Local trust and community buy-in is vital in forming strong local identities. Communities coming together to invest time in a shared cause can play a huge role in promoting a sense of local identity and belonging.

Community engagement is also useful in combatting cynicism or ‘glass half empty’ responses. Bishop Auckland, for example, have established teams of voluntary Town Ambassadors – people celebrating local cultures, promoting independent local businesses and responding to negativity (particularly on social media) with a narrative of community and pride.

Sheppey is Ours! is a more direct example. An action network designed to get people involved in Sheppey’s future, politics and culture, Sheppey is Ours! works to create a sense of local empowerment and accountability. One of the most important lessons from the session was that local communities don’t need governmental permission or prompting to do it – get enough people together and we can define our communities ourselves.

NEXT SESSION

The next webinar in the WHAT WORKS series will be on **March 18th, 2021, between 11am and 12.30pm**. Entitled ‘Using the public realm to address narratives of loss’, it will expand on some of the discussion of decline and material hope-building touched on in this session.

In the meantime please encourage others who might be interested in the topics discussed to join our Towns Leadership Network:

<https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/network>