

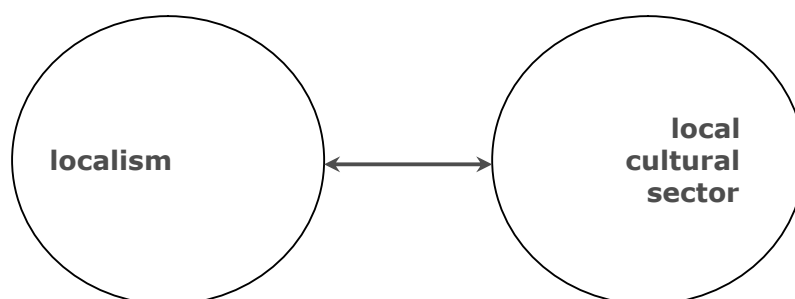
# **Localism, governance and the public realm: issues for the local cultural sector**

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for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council,  
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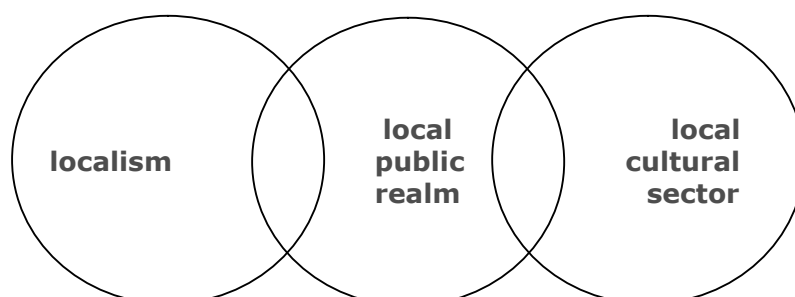
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## Introduction

This paper is primarily concerned with the 'local cultural sector,' specifically public museums, libraries and archives services operating at local level. It explores both the potential contribution of the sector to the 'new localism' agenda (in particular neighbourhood governance); and the potential impact of that agenda on the sector.



It's important not to see localism simply in terms of service delivery. I argue that the 2006 local government white paper suggests a significant evolution of democracy, towards what I call 'engaged democracy.' This brings fresh emphasis to the engagement of citizens in civic life at local level, which in turn suggests a redefinition of the local public realm. It follows that there will be new challenges, new pressures, and new opportunities for museums, libraries and archives (the MLA sector). This paper therefore seeks to open up a debate around the contribution of the sector to a revitalised local public realm.



I begin by tracing these issues from the recent policy history of civil renewal, through an assessment of the associated theme of community cohesion, and a discussion of localism as reflected in the white paper. This helps give us a meaningful context in which to describe this agenda in terms of democracy and a revitalised public

realm. The key question that arises concerning local cultural services and their role in democratic citizenship is this:

- In what ways can the sector contribute to stronger local democracy, more engaged citizenship and greater community cohesion?

I argue that museums, libraries and archives have enormous potential to contribute to this agenda, and many are already doing so; but that roles need to be developed from a stable model reflecting 'democracy as stability' to a more dynamic model reflecting a less passive form of democracy.

## **Author's note**

The starting point for this paper was a number of interviews with practitioners, to explore issues to do with changing governance structures at local authority level. Interviews were deliberately loosely structured and were intended to stimulate thinking and ideas on the place and role of the local cultural sector in the changing context of governance and community engagement. I am very grateful to those interviewed for giving up their time and reflecting generously on the issues from their perspective. It was agreed that they will remain anonymous.

The issues were also discussed with policy analysts contributing to the thinking about localism, in advance of the local government white paper which was published in October 2006: I would particularly like to thank Ed Cox of the Local Government Information Unit; Paul Hilder of the Young Foundation; and Gabriel Chanan of the Department for Communities and Local Government. In addition I am grateful to Paul Bristow at the Museums Libraries and Archives Council for his support and numerous helpful suggestions.

Finally I wish to thank Catherine Herman who carried out several of the interviews and whose thoughtful positive criticism and insights have been invaluable in helping to clarify the issues arising from the field, and the models for the sector which I present in section 4. Any remaining confusion or errors are entirely my responsibility.

Kevin Harris, Local Level, January 2007

## 1. The policy context

This paper is concerned with understanding a new policy context for local cultural services. Sections 1 and 2 explore the way in which policy and experience are pointing to a different kind of democracy and a revitalised public realm.

As far as policy is concerned, this understanding comes from a consideration of three themes:

**Civil renewal**, which is about how people relate to one another and to government in the public realm;

**Community cohesion**, which is about promoting and monitoring the extent to which people get on well together; and

**Localism and governance**, which is about people taking responsibility for and having influence over what happens in their localities.

These themes overlap, particularly in their emphasis on community engagement; in combination, they describe a rich new environment for the development of local cultural services.

### 1.1 Civil renewal

Civil renewal is a process of social change involving government and citizens working together. In 2003 former Home Secretary David Blunkett (2003a; 2003b) published two papers promoting the values of civil renewal in terms of interdependence, mutuality, solidarity and respect. He identified basic social order, 'decent behaviour,' and the socialisation of the young into 'community norms,' as crucial missing ingredients in many disadvantaged areas. The wide sweep of his policy attention took in community involvement, social entrepreneurship, citizenship, community ownership of assets, renewal of the public realm, police reform, and reform of the criminal justice system.

According to the Civil Renewal Unit, civil renewal

'involves more people being able to influence decisions about their communities, and more people taking responsibility for tackling local problems, rather than expecting others to.'<sup>1</sup>

This definition indicates a direct link to the subsequent localism and governance agenda, which I describe below, and we can hardly

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1502436>

miss the repeated emphasis on 'more people'. It exemplifies an important feature of contemporary social policy which we can expect to see continued in the foreseeable future: governments will seek to do less and will invest in persuading citizens to do more.

Blunkett's outline also points to the notion of civil renewal as a process in which the relationships between strangers as well as familiar co-residents are re-established on a civil, moral basis – i.e. a basis of tolerance, respect, common values, acceptable behaviours and so forth, all in turn based on increased levels of citizen participation in civil and civic life.

The Civil Renewal Unit suggests that there are three key ingredients: active citizens, strengthened communities, and partnership with public bodies.<sup>2</sup> Essential to the civil renewal agenda then, though mostly understated, is the necessity for *civic* renewal: without a restored recognition of the public realm, the promotion of the commonalities of citizenship could be a vain policy effort.

## 1.2 Community cohesion and equalities

The notion of community cohesion recognises that residents in a locality often have quite different backgrounds, and that in themselves these differences should not be a cause of conflict and tension. As diversity in western societies is set to continue to increase, the need to promote strong and positive relationships between people of different backgrounds is likely to remain a core concern of social policy for the foreseeable future.

The key policy initiatives in this field can be traced back to the Cattle report which was published in 2001 following an independent review into disturbances in several towns in northern England.<sup>3</sup> This led among other things to the establishment of a Home Office department (now at the Department for Communities and Local Government), government guidance and a government strategy.<sup>4</sup> A review of community cohesion in relation to public libraries was published by the MLA in 2005. (Harris and Dudley 2005). Policy in this area has most recently been boosted by the weight given to it in the 2006 local government white paper, and through the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Community cohesion: a report of the Independent Review Team*, [http://www.communities.gov.uk/embedded\\_object.asp?id=1502709](http://www.communities.gov.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=1502709)

<sup>4</sup> *Improving opportunity, strengthening society*, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1502614>

establishment of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion,<sup>5</sup> which is due to report in July 2007.

It is important to recognise the strong association of the cohesion and equalities agendas. This can be noted most directly from the established definition of a cohesive community, which includes among its four criteria that 'those from different backgrounds have *similar life opportunities*.'<sup>6</sup>

Chris Holmes has recently offered the following vision of what an inclusive local community would be like:

*Inclusive* communities value diversity, where people of all ages and types of household live together. They do not achieve stability by the homogeneity of all their residents, but find ways of integrating different groups. They respond to the activities of disruptive residents by positive ways of resolving conflict, such as mediation and restorative actions, where perpetrators and victims meet together. Newcomers are welcomed whether they are young people who have just bought their first home, or offenders being released from prison, or refugees fleeing from violence in their home country. Vulnerable people are able to live in small hostels or supported housing in ordinary neighbourhoods. Frail older people can live in a residential care home in the community, or receive the care which enables them to stay in their own home. The support and care is provided in ways which are sensitive to racial and cultural differences. (Holmes 2006: 108)

The recent policy focus on differences associated with faith expressed through headgear and other symbolic costume exemplifies the cultural dimension of cohesion. The project of understanding and sometimes challenging cultural norms that are taken for granted is ongoing and still urgent. Cultural services have a central role in helping us to understand the various meanings of 'difference' (eg as experience, as social relations, as identity, etc [Brah 1992]), because culture can be both an encoding of, and a tool for decoding, the oppression of people on the grounds of difference.

The local cultural sector has traditionally contributed to the cohesion agenda in multiple creative ways – through multicultural exhibitions, the development and exploitation of archives, developing diverse literature collections, the provision of meeting

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501520>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503031>, emphasis added.

spaces and so on. The challenge now may be to make this offer more overt, more proactive, by generating a public realm in which conversations about difference can more readily take place.

### **1.3 Localism and governance: the local government white paper**

In January 2005, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published two papers sketching out ideas about neighbourhood governance, community leadership and the role of councillors in England. (ODPM 2005a,b)

The following eighteen months saw extensive policy debate and research on the needs and justification for changes that would enhance the **influence** of local citizens over their service provision. This agenda has reasserted the importance of **democracy, community engagement and responsiveness**, as component values reflecting and reflected in local public service.

In terms of service provision at local level, several broad implications have become clear:

1. The need for thorough **knowledge and understanding of the distinctive communities and neighbourhoods** served;
2. Having arrangements in place to **enable local people to be more actively engaged in shaping their collective future** – giving them **influence** over local services and action, and **helping them to develop the capacity to tackle local issues for themselves**.
3. Ensuring that mechanisms are in place to **allow local people and groups to shape services and hold their providers to account**.<sup>7</sup>

The local government white paper was published in October 2006. (DCLG 2006) It offers new powers to residents at local level, including community calls to action, support for community assets, and a new duty to ensure appropriate public participation. It also explains that the ways in which these changes will be brought about should be decided locally: there will be no one-size-fits-all provision. This opens up opportunities for more creative and locally suitable approaches, and means that the ways in which power and influence are shared and practised in our towns, villages and neighbourhoods will look different in different places.

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from LGA (2006).



Public satisfaction and involvement are becoming increasingly important measures of local service success. Hence service providers and their partners need to identify areas where they might go further to engage citizens, make their services more responsive, or devolve power and influence.

The white paper seeks to incentivise the creative involvement of citizens and communities in locally appropriate ways, from planning and priority-setting to delivery and street-level action, as well as more joined-up local public services. This will put a high premium on the ability to make connections with local people and groups, and between services.

The following are among the key reforms proposed in the white paper:

- A new **Best Value duty to ensure participation** of local citizens in authorities' decision-making, planning and other activities as appropriate.
- Local Area Agreements will be overhauled with a stress on greater co-ordination of local services and plans, and on citizen and community involvement. It is also intended that councils and their partners should create **comprehensive community engagement strategies** in an approach that assesses the quality and effectiveness of community involvement.
- A new power of **community governance review**, enabling local authorities to consider a variety of community governance models, including consultative meetings, and recognised neighbourhood bodies such as partnerships or forums.
- **Local charters or agreements**, which may cover such issues as rights to information; service standards, outcomes or targets; priority actions for service providers and community bodies; and options to take on wider responsibility. They may exist authority-wide, in a particular neighbourhood, or both.
- Increased **community management and ownership of assets** such as a community centre, a redundant school building, swimming pool or green space.<sup>8</sup>
- Strengthening the **involvement of the community sector**.

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<sup>8</sup> In theory, this might extend to some of the buildings of the MLA sector, but this is not covered in the white paper.

By way of emphasising the intent of the policy and confirming the lineage we have traced above, in a speech following the publication of the white paper, DCLG minister Yvette Cooper said:

'We will have succeeded if there is a renewal of local democracy, with local people playing a fuller part in civic life.'<sup>9</sup>

## 1.4 The policy context: summary

The themes summarised above have been highlighted because in combination they indicate a clear policy direction which offers challenges and opportunities for the local cultural sector.

**Civil renewal** refers to how people relate to one another in the public realm. The arguments of Blunkett (2003a,b) point forward in this respect, emphasising civility and mutuality; those of Jowell (2005) link back, emphasising public-ness and culture, and illustrating the continuity.

The **community cohesion and equalities** agenda refers to the need to promote and monitor the extent to which people of different backgrounds get on well and have comparable life opportunities. Work on this theme requires concerted efforts to ensure that cultural differences between groups (particularly between age groups and between ethnic groups) do not become accentuated to the point of being critical.

The **localism** agenda is about citizens having influence over and taking some responsibility for what happens in their localities. It requires authorities to engage more extensively with residents to improve their quality of life. It implies a rejuvenation of democratic participation which in turn suggests the need for broader social investment in community engagement.

Each agenda has resonance for the day to day role of local museums, libraries and archives services. In the next section I suggest that these intertwining themes point to a significant revision of 'the way we do democracy' and the level of attention given to the public realm.

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<sup>9</sup> Speech to NLGN conference, 20 November 2006, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1504696>

## 2 Engaged democracy and the public realm

### 2.1 Democracy's make-over

*We're creating people who are democrats.*  
Michael Cooke, MLA West Midlands

Democracy is about relationships. If too many are dysfunctional, it won't work. The local government white paper links democracy and community engagement together, bridging some of the previously familiar divisions between the personal, the public and the state; and illustrating the argument, as Tessa Jowell put it, that 'the quality of the interpersonal is the key success factor in public services.' (Jowell 2005)

The white paper is likely to change our understanding of local democracy profoundly, through the implicit acknowledgement that democracy is no longer predominantly about formal processes, universally accepted procedures, stable forums using replicable formats and congregational spaces. From now on it will be more about local variations, positions negotiated within accepted frameworks, different options for accountability, relationships and dialogue, networks and conversations. It will depend heavily on how those involved engage with one another. Thus Tom Bentley, in his pamphlet *Everyday democracy*, considers that one of the keys to generating sustainable and legitimate democratic self-governance at local level involves making '*co-production by citizens* as important as professional knowledge and performance management currently are.' (Bentley 2005: 55, emphasis added)

The kind of democracy on which current structures are still based embodied a notion of 'the public' as something coherent, in some views malleable, and to a large extent predictable. It reflected a model of alternating communication: government spoke, people responded; government spoke, people voted.

But the established model of democracy no longer commands sufficient trust, and its associated procedures have fallen out of favour. We have widely-voiced concerns over the increasing centralisation of power (locally as well as nationally); the proliferation of non-elected bodies; voter apathy; a confusing public service economy of pooled budgets and mixed responsibilities; and a limited number of exhausted community activists trying to keep up with a bewildering array of local strategies and policies. A spate

of papers from think-tanks in recent years draws attention to the fact that democracy is being prodded, goaded and shamed out of its armchair and could be frog-marched to the gym if it doesn't go of its own accord. The way in which democracy's make-over is conducted - the extent to which it is a public endeavour - will be a key indicator of its potential recovery.<sup>10</sup>

It's crucial not to see this examination of democracy in mechanistic terms. As researchers from the Young Foundation have pointed out in some detailed preparatory material before the white paper:

The long-term vision of a new, localised future should not be imagined as a proliferation of new governance structures, but as a new relationship between citizens and the state, built on widespread participation, partnership and collaboration, and supported by an enabling and legitimate framework. (Hilder, James and Bacon 2006: 84)

Certainly it seems important to try to ensure that neighbourhood governance does not simply replicate local government structures. The objective should be to bring local people's experience into the governance process, rather than bringing more command-oriented and silo-constrained management difficulties closer to people's homes.

We need also to be ready to distinguish between a historical notion of 'civic pride' based on common values but expressing a hierarchical relationship of citizen to local state; and the genuine participation and influence of a significant proportion of people in whatever happens in their locality. This point has been well-made by Black and Muddiman in their study of community librarianship: the civicness of early public library provision should not be mistaken for the type of close relationship between library and public which modern community librarianship infers. (Black and Muddiman 1997: 18).

In contrast to the tradition of civic pride, the rhetoric of localism is suffused with ideals of responsibility and influence on the part of the citizen. This suggests the emergence of a culture of *engaged democracy* that is more participative than in the past, involving more local people creatively and positively in their own governance.

Further, the importance of a universal model of democracy is reflected in the current policy emphasis on community cohesion

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<sup>10</sup> We should note here that diagnostic assessments of contemporary democracy and the public realm seem to have come predominantly from the 'intelligentsia' of think tanks, academics, journalists and politicians, with little input from the recognised cultural sector itself.

and, to a lesser extent, respect. These issues function as a kind of barometer or health indicator: if as a society we can't be reassured that 'people from different backgrounds get on well together' then we should indeed be concerned about our democracy, not least because diversity is projected to continue increasing.

Community engagement and cohesion are thus crucial ingredients in the localism agenda. There are numerous strong indications in policy (for example in the Audit Commission's key lines of enquiry<sup>11</sup> as well as in the white paper itself) of the increasing normalisation and centrality of these themes. To the extent that the local cultural sector is about 'creating democrats,' what does it bring to the party?

## 2.2 Community engagement

Engaged democracy won't be realised without sustained community engagement, for at least two reasons: the need to stimulate high levels of citizen participation from what is sometimes a low base; and the continuing need to overcome inequalities and maintain cohesion.

Where community engagement takes place it is a signal that local people are *participating in civic life*, in some way, however detached from official recognition or policy that action may be. One problem posed by the white paper, in its proposals for neighbourhood governance, is whether the existing pool of active citizens nationwide is adequate to take on these new roles and pressures. At present, it's fair to say that there simply aren't enough people actively participating in civic life for localism to be sustained: there is an engagement shortfall.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, commitment to neighbourhood governance means anticipating a possible crisis of community participation. As not enough of us are ready to commit for a high number of weekly hours of involvement over time, we will need to see more people committing to *time-limited collective tasks*, such as 'participatory scrutinies' or 'task forces' to fix some local problem or develop an initiative in which they have an interest.

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<sup>11</sup> See Audit Commission (2006: 27).

<sup>12</sup> We may recall here the Civil Renewal Unit's stress on 'more people' in its definition mentioned above (section 1.1).

This is the key argument for community engagement interventions in the new policy context, because community activity seldom just happens by chance or goodwill on its own: often it requires persistent, long term and skilled interaction to nurture relationships, to explore mutuality and bring people to a position of positive understanding. In terms of an authority's responsibility for the quality of life of citizens in a given locality, this means having officers whose job it is to bring people together, sometimes across tensions and differences, to co-create their own future. The cultural sector has incomparable resources (both local, such as local history materials, for example; and national, as in the national library network) to contribute to such processes: but the processes need appropriate expertise which the sector has to develop and/or has to attract through partnership.

To some extent, community development workers have traditionally tried to do this, working principally with groups on a *project* basis, typically in areas of disadvantage. The implications of the new policy context are that such expertise will have to be established on a more consistent, perhaps universal basis. So community engagement could become mainstreamed on what we might call a 'population' basis – working *consistently* across localities with interest groups or communities of need, and within all kinds of neighbourhood, supporting councillors and 'recognised' (or 'accredited') neighbourhood bodies.<sup>13</sup>

This argument is re-enforced by the introduction of the 'indicators of community,' under the local area agreements. These indicators will each require a baseline statistic and targets – for example, of the percentage of residents who feel that people from different backgrounds get on well together in the area. The indicators will also require *actions* to ensure that the targets are reached – in other words, some form of community engagement role. That role will need to be consistent across time, and not simply subject to a project-based approach.

It's also worth noting that in the white paper the government indicates an intention to establish *comprehensive engagement strategies*, to be drawn up by local authorities and their partners.<sup>14</sup> Where the local cultural sector is not ready with its contribution, a historic opportunity could be missed.

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<sup>13</sup> These terms were used in some of the pre-white paper discussion about the role of neighbourhood groups or organisations in local governance. See for example *Neighbourhoods, devolution and communities*, via <http://www.ideaknowledge.gov.uk/idk/>; and Hilder (2006).

<sup>14</sup> DCLG (2006), vol 2, para E20.

## 2.3 The public realm

'In a healthy and open society that promotes social cohesion rather than fragmentation, it is clear that public services – local schools, health services, parks and libraries – all serve as part of a shared public realm.' (Jowell 2005: 1)

The fact that public libraries now need to advertise on boards outside, the fact that they are free to use, is a sure indicator of the fragility of the public realm, which has been damaged by the increasing privatisation of social life. Speaking generally, we might date most of this erosion to the second half of the last century. Various social 'certainties' – of religion, gender, class, attitudes to authority and to locality, and so on – have weakened or dissolved. People communicate and receive their educational and leisure information through very diverse sources, so that the reference points we share with those around us have become harder to identify. The extent to which this information consumption is now privatised (often in the home or car rather than in a public venue such as a cinema, a public park or a dance hall) is reflected in the 'evident imbalance between private affluence and public poverty.' (Mulgan 2005: 11)

A modern tradition of individualism has meant a reluctance to invest in the public realm as long as the immediate demands for private well-being seemed to be answered. Of course, notions of private well-being that exclude the civic and the public are over-simplified, and as this has become apparent, policy and practice have had to begin to address the frailty of the physical public realm. This new policy intent is demonstrated for example by CABE's *Manifesto for better public spaces* (2004)<sup>15</sup> and the investments associated with the Big Lottery Fund.<sup>16</sup> Public space is the most obvious component in the public realm, and there is a lot of energy going into its revitalisation. One example comes from an arts-led community consultation exercise in Bolton, considering options for demolishing and rebuilding a public library.

Through the consultation Bolton Libraries has been given an insight into what non-users want from the library service and has allowed them to build this into their plans for the new library. The service is aware that they need to create flexible space that can appeal to different people at different times in

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.cabe.org.uk/AssetLibrary/2319.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> The Big Lottery Fund has already recognised the connection between past under-investment and the frailty of the public realm, in the establishment of its £80 million Community Libraries programme. It offers 'capital funding for libraries to improve their buildings in order to offer a broader range of activities to local people.' MLA press release, 9 October 2006.

their life. The consultation has also reinforced some of the council's strategy about engaging with hard to reach groups and social inclusion.<sup>17</sup>

The local cultural sector needs to be ready to exploit this kind of momentum and the impetus of localism, with a vision that describes its future role.

At the same time, public sector organisations are not known for absorbing lessons from the community sector, but Paul Skidmore and John Craig have pointed us in precisely that direction. They set out to explore the notion of a public realm in which our institutions appreciate citizen participation as deeply as it is understood within community organisations:

The most successful community organisations start with the people with whom they work. They revitalise the public realm not by walling it off or opening it up, but by bringing it to life: helping to connect it to people's lives, to make it meaningful to them, and in the process empowering them to reshape it for themselves. They function as *civic intermediaries* not by working to a set of predefined purposes but by contributing to communities of participation, in which citizens have the knowledge, capacity, confidence and motivation to act in whichever public or semi-public spaces and in whatever ways have most meaning for them – whether that means a neighbourhood, a school, a primary care trust, their home or the local supermarket. (Skidmore and Craig 2005: 22)

Skidmore and Craig call for public institutions to adopt the role of civic intermediaries, and some attention will have to be paid to the importance of trust. We know that trust between citizen and service provider needs rebuilding.<sup>18</sup> It is far more important than has been allowed for in mechanistic approaches. Trust is fundamental to democracy and can only be re-established by investing in relationships.

These indicators of change in social relationships are echoed by Stephen Coleman, who notes that:

the old terms of exchange, while never satisfactory, have become increasingly unacceptable. As people have become less deferential, as society has become more diverse, and as

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<sup>17</sup> The art of community consultation, Bolton MBC, <http://www.bolton.gov.uk/pls/portal92/docs/20617.HTM>

<sup>18</sup> By comparison with other public services, the MLA sector does not have a particular problem in this respect. The issue for museums, libraries and archives is rather the contrast between the high levels of public trust and low levels of use. (Usherwood et al, 2005).



new means of two-way communication have developed, so citizens are coming to demand a less distant, more direct, conversational form of representation. (Coleman 2005: 9)

Similarly, Geoff Mulgan, writing about 'democracy as conversation,' stresses the need to bring an everyday approach into democratic processes:

Most of the day to day business of contemporary government is closer to monologue... The challenge for democracies is whether they can bring more of that vernacular conversation into their deliberations. (Mulgan 2006: 235-236)

The call has been echoed by Samuel Jones in a recent pamphlet. Stressing the link between conversation, the public realm and the quality of democracy, Jones is also alert to the need for diversity in public debate:

People *like* being involved; people *like* to talk and have their say. The challenge for policy-makers and others is to provide a framework in which that involvement can result in the free and more integrational discussion that invites, allows and encourages us to do this and so brings together our very different points of view. (Jones 2006: 106-107)

The renaissance of democracy depends on relationships, and so the practical message is: we need to get involved in conversations, we need to look for opportunities to make things happen collaboratively, we need constantly to be making and supporting connections between different actors on the local scene.

There is gathering momentum to bring the informal and the everyday closer to governance, social practice, and service delivery. For example, there is increasing attention being paid to the under-appreciated value of local social networks.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that locally specific policies (such as those relating to the design of streets or local facilities and amenities) should be risk-assessed for the extent to which they might promote or damage informal social networks. (Harris 2006: 118)

One example of the new flexible approach to democratic processes is the Cabinet Office's citizen's forums, established in January 2007. The government will put 'important and tough questions about the future of public services and the relationship between the citizen and state' to the forums, which will involve a representative group of 100 members of the general population. The approach, which it

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<sup>19</sup> A 2005 Treasury paper notes that as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review the government will explore 'how it can best support the development of community networks and local engagement.' (Treasury 2005: 38)

might be argued implicitly acknowledges a gap between ordinary everyday experience and the political process, aims to go beyond 'opinion polling' and use deliberative techniques 'to get to real engagement and insight on the issues.'<sup>20</sup>

This then is the context of changing democracy, a context in which closer connection to citizens is regarded as imperative and in which the stifled public realm may emerge recognised as indispensable. How do practitioners in the local cultural sector perceive this context and what role can be envisioned for the services?

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<sup>20</sup> *Citizen Forums will ask tough questions about the role of Citizen and State.* Cabinet Office press release, 15 January 2007, [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news\\_releases/2007/070115\\_policy.asp](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2007/070115_policy.asp)

### 3. Issues arising from the field

A number of interviews were used to prompt the thinking for this paper.<sup>21</sup> They included discussions with a number of practitioners in the MLA sector at local, regional and national level. These conversations were used to explore the implications of localism, the ways in which local cultural services might develop especially with regard to governance and community engagement, and the kinds of change that people felt were necessary.

Most of the issues that arose can be reported under two main themes. First, there are concerns about the governance **structures** - getting them right, particularly in terms of demographic and administrative scale, and understanding responsibilities within them; as well as ensuring that value results from the effort put into partnerships. Secondly, a number of points were made about the connections that practitioners have or might have with **residents and groups**. These cover the need for and the practice of community engagement.

In addition, insights were offered about what the local cultural sector is trying to achieve and the value of what is already offered. At the end of this section I attempt to relate these thoughts and suggestions back to the notion of a new kind of public realm which presents opportunities for the sector.

#### 3.1 Structures and partnerships

When we spoke to practitioners in areas where some form of local governance had been tried, it was clear that getting the right 'fit' for cultural services, especially libraries, is critical. For libraries, integrated services bring economies of scale not just in terms of stock but also in terms of management, support, training and particular areas of expertise. Where the availability of shared expertise – for instance in library services to housebound readers, say, or services to children - is not thought-through in a time of profound change, it risks being lost, putting additional pressure on the staff who remain.

Some respondents were at pains to point out that localism is not new, it has a tradition (albeit not a glorious one); and that agencies

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<sup>21</sup> It should be stressed that these interviews were not intended to provide a systematic or comprehensive set of data on the theme of localism and the cultural sector, but were an inexpensive practical device for surfacing the issues.

like libraries could be seen in some ways as appropriate trailblazers in terms of structural governance because of their largely positive image and active connections in localities.

Nonetheless, the close association of the localism agenda with cost-saving and 'modernisation' have generated a lot of cynicism which needs to be acknowledged:

'you get the feeling that localism now is about saving money.'

The culture of performance measures and management innovations constantly implies the need for step improvements in service provision – improvements that are measured by criteria which have seldom been agreed with the practitioners themselves, and over which they may have a confused sense of non-ownership which conflicts with their sense of professionalism. Associated with this are views expressed about the experience and efforts of professional staff not being valued or respected during time of intense change. Across the public sector generally in recent years it's been common to hear commitment to professional standards interpreted as entrenched resistance to change: in discussion about local government modernisation, allusions to babies and bathwater are common. Thus one practitioner spoke of 'actions taken so that extremely ambitious people can show that they have brought about change'. Another said plainly:

'The bureaucratic culture of the MLA sector itself has to change in order to be able to contribute to this agenda.'

The point here is that the broader purposes of the local cultural sector are not served by smothering this disquiet.

It is apparent that if devolution is not properly managed and resourced, it could, as one respondent said, 'become an additional burden' and may fail. In which case the fear is that the principle of localism will be regarded as flawed, and abandoned, whereas the fault may well lie in its implementation.

Various comments were also made about the fracturing of influence and control that can happen when a service becomes partially decentralised, resulting in one case in 'incredible tension' between the centre and the districts. If managers at the centre have only partial influence over how services are run on a day-to-day basis, it can be problematic because they still have to report on overall performance. As one manager put it:

'We have to negotiate with ten different districts if we want to do something city-wide.'

If such issues are not addressed and processes developed, so that co-operative responsibilities are negotiated, there are likely to be

serious concerns over planning and longer term development of the service.

Two respondents helped us understand the significance of partnership issues by discussing contrasting practice in adjacent counties. Where one county has:

‘an integrated, cross county approach and is joined up at the strategic level in the local authority which helps to lever in funding’;

the other has:

‘fragmented governance of museums and has limited influence on policy and therefore starts at a low baseline in terms of developing a more integrated approach to services... There is little ‘buy in’ from the local authorities.’

Respondents clearly felt that the active involvement of representatives of the local cultural sector in committees, area forums and neighbourhood partnerships working with different parts of local government and other agencies, brings enormous value in terms of connections. Perhaps significantly, this applied to independent initiatives as well as to ‘official’ partnership boards and similar:

‘The importance of outreach, of going to small meetings outside.’

‘To have meaningful projects you have to have those meetings. You have to be connected to the local groups.’

‘You can often piggy-back on initiatives that are not archival.’

We were told of encouraging developments in museums, especially of successful initiatives run by volunteers:

‘Increasingly the focus is moving beyond asking people to say if the service is OK, to more engagement of people in the structures of the organisation.’

One respondent stressed that local partnership boards are not the place for professionals to bring their own agenda: they have to leave that at the door and learn to be part of a community-focussed partnership – ‘how can we help you?’ not ‘how can you help us?’ Another told us that in their case, partnership barriers are felt not so much in terms of relations between officers from different agencies, but between the tiers of local government. The question arises, will neighbourhood governance relieve or exacerbate that? If it is perceived as another structure, it could well exacerbate it: if it is recognised as a change of focus, in which services are more

clearly oriented to the long term concerns of residents, it could be liberating.

Neighbourhood governance does not imply a new tier of government, but nonetheless for people who are struggling with a lack of resources and a confusing array of strategies to which they have to adhere, it is likely to be perceived as threatening. One interviewee was despondent about the gap between local people's experience and the strategic structural changes going on across their city:

'On a cultural level there is a struggle to enable people to feel a part of what's going on here. For the next two decades we're going to have to undo that damage.'

A key message seems to be that while it is wholly valid to overhaul the structures, strategies and frameworks within which staff operate and services deliver responsively, *it takes people to make it work*. And that means it takes 'people-people' to make it work – i.e. staff who are able to engage with local residents and community groups, and who are fully supported in doing so.

### **3.2 Connections with residents and groups**

Respondents also spoke in various ways about how their services related to local people and community groups, and how such connections could be developed.

'It's the sense of ownership which the documentation of local history gives. It's empowerment as well as the documentation; it's identity and also a validation of the history.'

Another respondent made the point that staff in the archives sector do not expect to be drawn into community engagement:

'There are some jobs where you are probably better recruiting a community worker than expecting an archivist to go out and do it.'

Nonetheless it was felt that any policy interest in community engagement in archives work is to be welcomed:

'It should be a function of the archives sector... in order to demonstrate our role and potential.'

While quick hits are possible, generally this sort of thing is long-term work – generating interest, co-designing a project with a core community group or groups, establishing activities, co-creating content and analysing existing content, co-producing resources,

developing skills, and recycling the learning. And for archives in particular, as one respondent put it, 'we're talking about a service whose focus is long-term.' This point detaches the work abruptly from the political preoccupations of the modernisation agenda; and in order for the archives service to fulfil its potential in the context of engaged democracy it is perhaps fortunate to have the new imperatives of data protection and freedom of information, which bulwark the service's statutory role.

The Birmingham based **Connecting Histories** project exemplifies the potential role of the local cultural sector in community engagement. The project is working with a number of groups across the city which are undertaking their own local history or archives projects. Part of the intention in the overall project has been the need to rediscover the stories that make up people's cultural history, stories which remain largely hidden in archive collections.

*Connecting Histories* aims to release the potential of these collections so that connections can be made between the past and the present and thereby encourage debate about our shared identities, our common sense of belonging and our multiple heritages.<sup>22</sup>

In projects like this (whether under the aegis of archives, museums, libraries or some combination), one of the outcomes for which we need to be on the lookout, and which the sector may want to measure, is the development and strengthening of the community groups involved:

'There is a process of semi-formal institutionalising of a community group as their material gathers gravity and identity.'

'People learn to take ownership themselves. They start to learn about how structures work here. They feel that they have a different relationship to the library now.'

Where a group of local people comes together around material of common interest to them, the appropriate involvement of professionals can lend significant weight to their experience:

'Having value placed by an authority on something that ordinary people have.'

Involvement with such groups is obviously crucial but cannot just be effected when a funding opportunity comes along or a policy suddenly demands it. Echoing our comments about conversations in

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<sup>22</sup> Connecting Histories, <http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/project.asp>

section 2 above, several respondents spoke of the need for ongoing connections with the local community sector:

'You need people with two hats and multiple connections.'

'Just getting people talking.'

'Get out of the buildings and get in touch with the people who do not come through your doors.'

'Part of the emphasis of the project is to connect people up in some way.'

While community archives work tends to focus on local material, all kinds of content can be used if the setting is appropriate and the facilitation skilled. One example of community engagement in museums is offered by a recent Tate Britain initiative, Visual Dialogues, where peer-led groups of young people had the opportunity to interpret collections and to play a part in the creation of exhibitions. The intention here was to establish dialogues between participants and the artworks, between the participants and the museum, and between participants in their own groups. While this was not a neighbourhood-based initiative, it does seem to have exemplified the possibilities for collaborative involvement of citizen-groups in galleries and museums.

Referring to public libraries, another respondent noted the need for staff to develop 'neighbourhood skills.'

'The ones that do this and take on the neighbourhoods agenda will be successful.'

This respondent's view was that, to be involved in the localism agenda, the MLA sector needs to:

- focus on changes that matter to local people
- work at a very local level
- tackle people's lack of hope and aspiration
- go beyond what they currently offer
- learn new skills and behaviours.

Working with local groups implies becoming immersed in 'community politics' and hence potentially in situations of conflict. We were reminded that archivists are not trained to deal with conflict, but:

'archives can surface tensions. The key is to provide a democratic platform. Archives can provoke the expression of ethnic tensions and grievances, and that can be a good thing provided it's managed properly.'



### 3.3 The practice of pluralism

It's natural that the majority of issues arising in this paper have in common the fact that they are about the practicalities of pluralism. They raise questions about how we connect most effectively the rights, needs and interests of citizens on the one hand, with the richness of our resources and the skills of our practitioners on the other; and how we gear those multiple and dynamic connections towards a vibrant engaged democracy in which diversity is valued, respect is a given, creativity is nurtured and shared learning is ongoing.

'It's all about making sure that around the table we've always got several groups. Several groups listening to each others' stories.'

Nonetheless, and unsurprisingly, few interviewees at the time of our interviews (summer 2006) were ready to think in terms of what I have called the 'engagement shortfall' and the potential contribution of the sector in addressing it.

Much policy effort has gone into initiatives to stimulate volunteering in order to raise levels of community engagement, and it's clear that the MLA sector continues to provide opportunities for people to get involved locally on a voluntary basis. But this is not the same as people being involved as activists on local issues of their own concern, and taking ownership of the ways in which those issues are addressed with or without the support of official agencies. The potential here is enormous. By increasing the opportunities for community activity we would expect to increase the numbers of people who have at least some experience of participating in some kind of collective endeavour. With the significant impetus coming from national policy, the cultural sector needs to display its potential for providing various causes that catalyse citizen involvement in this way and stimulate more connections between people around local and interest identities. (CSV 2006)

The public realm does not only require collective engagement among local residents; it also calls for physical and virtual spaces in which encounters are possible among those who cannot be expected to know one another but have in common the need for relations in public space to be *civil*. Almost ten years ago Craig Calhoun wrote:

Community strength and local involvement, though powerful bases for mobilization, do not constitute adequate bases for democracy. Democracy must depend also on the kind of public life which historically has flourished in cities, not as the

direct extension of communal bonds, but as the outgrowth of social practices which continually brought different sorts of people into contact with each other and which gave them adequate bases for understanding each other and managing boundary-crossing relations. (Calhoun 1998: 391)

The public role of museums, libraries and archives in providing 'adequate bases for understanding each other' is not new; but it's something that needs reasserting in the context of engaged democracy. The plural appeal of museums, libraries and archives will be a vital asset in the unfolding debate.

## 4 The stable and dynamic models of the local cultural sector

In this paper I have presented the growing emphasis on local governance more as a feature of a new kind of democracy than as a particular policy calling for the modification of services. Of course, there are implications for services, but these have to be based on a full appreciation of the evolving context. Furthermore, that context is itself very much subject to the initiative of the local cultural sector. By developing a vision of the revitalised public realm, the sector can and should help to shape it.<sup>23</sup>

The policy message is that we are developing a less passive form of democracy. This is taking place at a time when people's neighbourhoods are the focus of a great deal of social policy. This is partly the domain of the MLA sector: what could be more cultural, in the broadest sense, than the local public realm?

But how do people develop the skills to contribute? What will motivate them? Where will they hear echoes of collective experience, where will they see a representation of civic-ness which resonates for them? How will they get opportunities to experience what it means to participate?

This paper has begun the process of clarifying and contextualising such questions. This section presents a possible framework for developing the thinking (see figure 1). It begins with a model of *existing* local cultural services, characterised under the headings Place, Resources, Expertise and Symbol. The framework suggests that services hitherto have evolved to reflect a 'stable' model of democracy and the understanding of the civic. We should recognise and celebrate the contribution of museums, libraries and archives to this resilient civic structure.

I suggest however that this model will neither satisfy nor contribute adequately to the transformation to 'engaged democracy' and a public realm that is far more closely associated with its citizens.

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<sup>23</sup> In this respect, the establishment of a DCMS/DCLG joint agreement on 'culture and sustainable communities' (involving Arts Council England, CABE, English Heritage, the MLA and Sport England) is a timely government level partnership spanning the public realm.

**Fig 1 Stable and dynamic models of the MLA sector in a changing democratic context**

		<b>PLACE</b>	<b>RESOURCES</b>	<b>EXPERTISE</b>	<b>SYMBOL</b>
<b>Stable model:</b> museums, libraries and archives represent and underpin representative democracy. This model is stable, tried, tested, proven and respected.	Has mainly evolved over past 100 years, during which time tensions have grown between representative and participative democracy.	Libraries and museums as recognised and valued civic buildings belonging within localities, and providing associational and congregational space.	Collections are maintained for their potential contribution to knowledge, information, learning and entertainment.	Available skills to help citizens exploit resources on their own terms, according to their own needs.	Museums, libraries and archives representing the public realm and the principle of common ownership, providing a public good, and symbolising the relation of the citizen to the civic.
<b>Dynamic model:</b> museums, libraries and archives contribute to the new imperatives of <b>engaged democracy</b> , which focuses on diverse relationships and ongoing negotiation of interests. Democracy is now less passive and less dependent on formal processes.	Reflects an injection of agency, proactive engagement, fluid partnership working, stimulation of learning conversations etc.	<i>The above plus:</i> More co-location, and infiltration of engagement contexts – partnership forums, public space both physical and virtual, being present, and stimulating and nurturing ongoing public debate.	<i>The above plus:</i> Increasing the involvement of citizens in the establishment, validation and interpretation of resources.	<i>The above plus:</i> The integration of networking, partnership and community development skills and practises into MLA contexts; relating established MLA expertise to engagement contexts.	<i>The above plus:</i> Representing the values of an engaged democracy in proactive ways that acknowledge the fluidity of democracy being about relationships.

What then would a more dynamic model of the sector look like? The second part of figure 1 outlines what I regard as the key components in the sector's offer, under the same headings of Place, Resources, Expertise and Symbol. It's important to stress that this implies evolution, not revolution. The dynamic model builds on, and would not be possible without, the stable model.

We should note that a general model like this - and indeed much of my argument in this paper - implies a degree of coherence across the sector, suggesting commonality of purpose, language and understanding between museums, libraries and archives. As the recent research by Bob Usherwood and colleagues suggests, this perceived coherence is not necessarily widely held amongst the general public. (Usherwood et al 2005: 96)

## 5 Concluding remarks

'Community involvement' on the part of libraries, museums and archives is not new. The evolution that I anticipate in this paper belongs within a historical context that needs to be recognised. Black and Muddiman (1997) for example record varied responses to the culture of consumerism in public libraries in the 1990s in terms of 'compliance, innovation or decline.' They note that community librarianship, by the early 1980s,

represented a whole philosophy of public librarianship which was based on the essentially idealistic conviction that libraries could initiate and support social change and improvement in a shifting and diversifying society. It held that such improvement might be achieved through a balance of public provision, professional commitment and communal involvement. (Black and Muddiman 1997: 112)

They point out that this sense of purpose was challenged by managerialism and consumerism, marking a public policy transition from welfare to enterprise, so that it became dissipated and fragmented. My suggestion in this paper is that against this history we could be witnessing a genuine re-injection of policy concern about collective belonging and participation.

There are clearly concerns about localism where its principles may be poorly understood or spuriously endorsed; where practice is under-resourced; or where transition is not managed. One respondent felt flatly that:

'Localisation is now seen as a hijacked agenda and people are cynical about it.'

However, it is not a settled agenda but one to which the local cultural sector needs urgently to develop its contribution. Recognising the nature of the transformation is the first step. This is about both a renewal of concern for the civic, and a revision of the relationship between the civic and the citizen.

A paper published by the Local Government Information Unit before the white paper argues the case for 'building the civic capability to take up and use new powers.' (Cox 2006: 4) 'Building the civic capability' means strengthening the pool of people who participate in civic life – in numbers, resourcefulness, connectedness, confidence and effectiveness - so that the promise of engaged democracy can be fulfilled. That strengthening can take place through a whole range of measures which must include, but certainly needs to be far richer than, a programme of training for

volunteers. It can include more engagement of officials and practitioners in what community organisations are doing, information support for residents' committees, organising public debates, signposting blogs, better listening, more conversations. It can include projects between museums, libraries and archives on the one hand and neighbourhood groups, schools, prisons, estate action groups, leisure centres, community drama groups and so on, on the other.

The MLA sector still carries some unfortunate old stereotypes of *detachment* from the bustle and banter of everyday life, epitomised in notions of silence in the library and the imposing civic grandeur of some of our older buildings. Some would fight to retain the values implied – the sense of unhurried consensus, unquestioning respect for the remote civic, visible affirmation of the principle of public value. However, the social compliance and implicit trust of the citizen for civic institutions have been swept away, and in many ways we would not wish to revert to the conditions in which they flourished. The centrifugal force of the state is weakened, but more services are now making eye contact with the citizen and genuine empowering conversations are taking place. The new localism may offer the chance to reconstruct civic values with greater relevance. Can the local cultural sector assume a consistent everyday public role which makes the collective interest pertinent to lives that after all are more privatised and more personalised?

The moment is there for the sector to take a lead in developing a vision of the public realm in which people recognise the civic, contribute to it and value it; in which residents organise and participate in local events and associate around such events; where they have places over which they feel a sense of ownership and to which they can go. The case must be made for a public realm in which people feel informed, respected, able to influence the local processes that affect their lives, and supported in celebrating their sense of community.

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