

# Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda

Submitted: 14 February 2022 by Sara Crofts, Chief Executive

## DCMS Committee Inquiry

*The role that culture might play in delivering a Government commitment to level up the country is the focus of a new inquiry: **Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda**. The DCMS Committee's inquiry will consider funding for cultural initiatives and how well the current model ensures that distribution goes to areas that might be missing out. MPs will also explore how harnessing local creative talent and businesses could help bring back footfall to high streets and town centres, enlivening commercial buildings and protecting them against closure.*

## What is cultural heritage conservation?

The conservation of objects and collections protects the things people value. It enables the care and safeguarding of our tangible cultural heritage, from cherished family heirlooms to national treasures. Conservators value and understand the physical artefacts that embody our shared history and culture; skilfully safeguarding it against decay and neglect to ensure that everyone's stories survive for the inspiration of present and future generations.

The practice of conservation encompasses artworks, architecture, archaeology as well as industrial, natural and social history collections whether they are held by museums, heritage organisations or other private or public collections.

## What is the role of Icon?

Icon (the Institute of Conservation) is the professional membership body for conservators, heritage scientists and related professions and a charity working to safeguard cultural heritage.

**Icon's vision** is to protect, preserve and promote our treasured cultural heritage through meticulous conservation, meaningful collaboration, and a commitment to engagement.

**Icon's mission** is to represent and support the practice and profession of conservation by promoting the value of caring for cultural heritage and upholding high standards in conservation practice. Icon also ensures that the guardians and owners of objects, buildings and collections are able to access knowledgeable and passionate professionals to help them to safeguard the tangible remains of our shared past for the future.

Our Charitable Objects are:

- To advance the education of the public by research into and the promotion of the conservation of items and collections of items of cultural, aesthetic, historic and scientific value; and
- To preserve and conserve items and collections of items of cultural, aesthetic, historic and scientific value.

## Icon's response to the DCMS Committee consultation

### 1. How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?

Conservation helps us understand ourselves and our future by preserving our past and ensuring that it is accessible for current and future generations to learn from and enjoy. However, much of this work is hidden from public view because it takes place in private workshops or conservation studios in museums. The impact of the important work carried out by conservation professionals is largely invisible unless attention is drawn to specific outcomes through interpretation and engagement.

We believe that there is an opportunity to build on our [Values of Conservation](#) project and to demonstrate and share the many ways in which conservation brings benefits to people and society by making it possible for people to witness and engage with the holistic care of objects, buildings and collections in their high streets.

We would like to explore the potential to create pop-up (or even more permanent) conservation studios on high streets and in town centres. The idea is inspired by the BBC's incredibly popular programme: *The Repair Shop*. *The Repair Shop* has generated an interest in object conservation amongst members of the public and builds on the long running success of *The Antiques Roadshow*, which celebrates the connections between people and their personal treasures, which are in turn a snapshot of the spectrum of our global cultural heritage.

We know that members of the public are fascinated by the work of conservators when they stumble across a conservation project in an historic house. Many of our larger heritage bodies have *Conservation in Action* programmes where the conservation work is carried out in full view of visitors:

- [National Trust for Scotland](#)
- [Royal Oak Foundation Conservation Studio](#)
- [Historic Royal Palaces](#)

There are also accessible conservation studios at some historic sites: the National Trust's [Royal Oak Foundation Conservation Studio](#) at Knole, supported by capital funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, is a notable example, and has offered an insight into the breadth of the conservation profession to many visitors to the stately home. The *People's History Museum* in Manchester also has a window in gallery two that allows visitors to see conservation in action.

But the weakness in all these examples is that they only engage those who have already chosen to visit the historic museum or stately home. This is why we believe that showcasing this important work on the high street would reach many more people. We particularly want to champion the creation of pop-up conservation studios in country towns and regional hubs outside of London and the southeast. A great deal of conservation activity is concentrated within the major museums and institutions in London and the southeast, so fostering conservation activity in other areas would help to redress this imbalance and "level up" cultural activity in line with the Government's levelling-up agenda.

Our proposal would also create additional activity on the high street, as the pop-up conservation studios would become an attraction in their own right, helping to increase the offer and drawing in visitors: *“The Repair Shop comes to the High Street.”*

Apart from encouraging an interest in material culture amongst a wider group of people we envisage an economic benefit too. Taking part in the scheme would create a way for small conservation businesses to promote themselves and their work. Many conservation studios are continuing to struggle in the aftermath of COVID, as cuts to budgets in the major institutions means that there has been a downturn in commissioning work from their local conservation businesses. There is a real possibility that some of these fragile businesses might close, with the consequential loss of sector skills and capacity.

We therefore believe that bringing conservation skills to our public spaces would have a range of benefits and make a lasting difference to local communities.

2. How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?

No comment.

3. How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?

No comment.

4. How might changes to the UK’s broadcasting landscape affect investment in cultural production outside the capital, and what could the consequences be for artists and communities?

No comment.

5. How should Government build on existing schemes, such as the UK City of Culture, to level up funding for arts and culture?

No comment.