

## Cultural policy, governance and urban diversity

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# CULTURAL POLICY, GOVERNANCE AND URBAN DIVERSITY: RESIDENT PERSPECTIVES FROM BIRMINGHAM, UK

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## ABSTRACT

Within a paradigm of culture-led urban competition, discourse and debate has focused on attracting the mobile creative class, diverting attention on cultural resources for lesser privileged groups, both established and new. Policy agendas behind culture and the arts at the neighbourhood level are quietly shifting however, with increasing emphasis on social cohesion and integration. This paper investigates for the first time how co-producing cultural activities can be used to stimulate more distributed and discursive strategies of decision-making at the neighbourhood-level. Bringing together debates on cultural policy, urban governance, and diversity this paper makes two key points: (i) geographical discourse on cultural and arts needs to reflect more upon gender, faith, ethnicity and race; (ii) dialogue enabled by focus groups can generate new participatory strategies for pluralising cultural governance in multi-cultural and disinvested neighbourhoods.

**Key words:** multi-culturalism, austerity, culture, neighbourhood, diversity, community

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## INTRODUCTION

Cities have increasingly sought to advance their competitive position by investment in cultural planning and development. Since the early 2000s, culture-led urban policy ideas have typically been equated with attracting elite labour and capital investment (Florida 2002), and, in turn, the social, cultural and economic inequalities boosterist approaches can accelerate (Peck 2005). Accordingly, the privileging of middle-class consumption and 'enclaves of exclusivity' in urban policy strategies has led to the displacement of local populations deemed less talented and less skilled (Bayliss 2007). In cities within North America and Western Europe economic-led arguments for cultural

work overshadow social arguments of state responsibility, where growth is emphasised above issues of access and inclusion. This is despite commentators long mooted the value of neighbourhood-based cultural activities where cultural participation is positioned as a means to 'strengthen social cohesion, increase personal confidence and improve life skills, improve people's mental and physical well-being, strengthen people's ability to act as democratic citizens and develop new training and employment routes' (Landry 2000; Graves 2010; Warren & Jones 2015a). The thrust of attention by urban planners and the academy towards 'global' creative cities and policy transfer (Kong 2012; Kong & O'Connor 2009) can thus be argued to have stymied debate and

discourse on the wider social value of cultural resourcing in less visible spaces of our cities and towns. In response we call for rebalancing discourse and practice by attending to the significance of cultural policy at the local level, and in residential places where people live. We propose that more participatory cultural governance at the micro-level can forge deeper connections between the arts and culture with everyday urban life.

The comparative paucity of research on local cultural policy and new forms of urban governance is somewhat surprising given increased interest in community co-production in public services from European governments. Facing fiscal pressures since 2008, many European governments have used the strengths of citizen knowledge and skills in the delivery of services, including strategies of co-commissioning for participatory policy-making and participatory budgeting (Bovaird *et al.* 2015). In the UK a policy turn towards localism (with the Localism Act of 2011) has taken place within a context of austerity that has disproportionately impacted city councils and the public services they deliver. As a result residential communities have been afforded greater power and autonomy, while resourcing is tightened. This tension is particularly acute where cultural and arts activities are expected to perform more functions than ever before. For instance, in a number of UK inter-government department initiatives, cultural and arts activities have been enrolled to deliver upon agendas around social cohesion and integration, particularly in multi-cultural and religious communities as we discuss later. It is necessary, therefore, to move away from often 'abstract' and 'placeless' approaches in fast cultural policy (Prince 2014; Peck 2005) that have typically focused on growth in the city core. Instead cultural policy and urban governance debates require a fuller engagement with issues of representation in situated contexts of diversity; an imperative that is most evident in neighbourhoods with scant resources. Co-commissioning is thereby revealed as critically important to wider questions of urban diversity and governance.

The wider context for this research is that over 35 years a wide range of countries have adopted policies that have been orientated

towards fostering tolerance and respect for ethnic minority identities, including immigrants (such as England, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Canada; Vertovec 2010). Under the umbrella term 'multiculturalism', measures within these policies have supported community associations and their activities, diversity strategies within the workplace, and adapting public services in order to accommodate cultural differences such as language and values (Vertovec 2010). A backlash in Europe around multicultural policy has ensued with critics arguing it is leading to social stratification and ethnic tensions, including radicalisation and terrorism (Vertovec 2010; Hall 2001). In Western Europe, this transition is apparent in local and national integration policy focused on cities with large migrant populations, such as Rotterdam, Malmö, and Berlin (Dekker *et al.* 2015). Universalist approaches that avoid institutionalising majority or minority cultures, and that are 'colour-blind' in emphasising socio-cultural and economic participation of *all* citizens into society are now more widely adopted (Dekker *et al.* 2015). But alongside this concern for social cohesion evident in policy and public discourse, there is also a continued lack of consensus on how, and to what extent, diversity should be managed.

Bringing together cultural governance and urban diversity this paper focuses on a case study of Birmingham; a city often used as a testing ground for research and new urban policy strategies around living with difference (Phillimore 2013; Wilson 2015). Birmingham is a post-industrial city of a little over 1 million residents with a large and growing non-white population, including ethnic and religious minority migrants from increasingly diffuse countries of origin. It is a city with a number of gateway neighbourhoods – within Sparkbrook in the south, and Lozells and East Handsworth in the north – that have attracted recent migrants over time due to affordable housing and extant levels of diversity (Robinson *et al.* 2007; Wilson 2015). In these areas a series of new urban policy strategies have been trialled. Examples include the central government-funded Housing Market Renewal Area Pathfinders (HMRA) programme, targeted to areas measured as

deprived and at risk of community fragmentation. Neighbourhood planning and neighbourhood budgeting aims to enable greater participation in local urban planning processes, while *Near Neighbours* encourages inter-ethnic and inter-faith community relations. Meanwhile in local cultural policy, Birmingham City Council's 'Culture on our doorstep' scheme encourages community-driven cultural activities (Birmingham Cultural Strategy 2015–19; Warren & Jones 2015b). Working within this urban context, we discuss how the tools and resource of a university project can support alternative strategies for engaging diverse kinds of cultural knowledges and communities in mechanisms of governance and commissioning. In particular there is the need for more reflection on what diversity means, and how issues relating to diversity impacts upon community engagement in participatory forms of cultural policy and urban governance.

Guiding our interpretation of governance is Jessop's (1998) conceptual framework, which distinguishes between institutions and agencies of governing (government) with modes and delivery of governing (governance), involving the co-ordination of different institutions, systems and their actors. With a focus on museums, Bennett (2002) has shown that particular kinds of cultural knowledges are employed in the mechanisms of institutions and their programming that privilege certain actors, cultural forms and ways of working. Notably, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) representation in the workforce in key urban areas does not reflect the diversity of the populace (Nesta 2016). The need to increase diversity in the creative workforce is increasingly prioritised in the language of policy framework strategies for its perceived intrinsic, social and economic values (DCMS 2016). As a term, however, diversity has often been applied undifferentiated across multiple and distinct social variables, such as gender, ethnicity, gender, and income. Further there are significant spatialised inequalities in the benefits of the cultural and creative industries with employment clustered in the south-east primarily and also in metropolitan city centres with educational, and social

barriers to entry (Creative Skillset Employment Census 2012; Nesta 2016).<sup>1</sup>

To address inequalities that are marked socially and spatially, we argue that increasing local ownership of cultural projects can stimulate transformation in the distribution of public resources and, potentially, pathways into the cultural and creative economy starting from the neighbourhood-level. In advancing this argument the paper makes two key contributions to geographical knowledge. First, social dimensions of urban governance and cultural policy debates are moved on from elitist notions of the creative class to engage more critically with interstices of gender, faith, ethnicity and race. This is particularly needed in a context of increasing complexity around diversity in many late capitalist countries, including the UK. Second, consideration is given to the social and economic benefits of localising cultural governance through empirical discussion of using focus groups in cultural programming in a neighbourhood that is socially fragmented along racial, ethnic, gendered and religious lines of difference. In addressing these areas, we seek to advance knowledge and understanding on the importance of cultural governance and its social diversification.

Part of a wider four-year university project on the cultural and creative economy and disadvantaged groups (Warren & Jones 2015a, 2015b; Jones & Warren 2016; Perry *et al.* 2016), this research considers the process leading to the co-commissioning of cultural projects by communities from areas of multiple social deprivation in Birmingham and Manchester. We introduce the context of urban policy and cultural governance, before moving discussion to the politics of cultural programming in relation to social inclusion discourse and practices. A discursive integrative form of critical dialogue is proposed for future cultural governance in the city that gives greater recognition to the role co-commissioning activities can perform in addressing social, economic and political difference. As such, we call for more careful reflection on the relationship between culture and governance to address perceptions of inequity experienced at the neighbourhood level with serious implications for changing

normative political-economic decision-making processes over time.

## URBAN POLICY AND CULTURAL GOVERNANCE IN THE UK

The emergence of UK cultural policy came from early formations of state-led urban policy in the 1960s, when the first social schemes were established for economically deprived areas. Community based action in resistance towards local and central government were developed during the 1970s with emphasis on social empowerment of the marginalised (Marinetti 2003). Especial attention was given to well-being and alternative forms of economy including through culture and the arts (Marinetti 2003). However, following the election of a New Labour government led by Tony Blair in 1997, instrumental arguments for the benefits of the creative industries to GDP and job creation were codified for the first time in new mapping exercises in 1998 and 2000. New Labour's 'third way' approach to cultural policy – addressing poverty and driving growth – was conceptualised to offer 'a mechanism for social integration' along with attempts to aid a civic culture marred 'by growing social marginalisation and impoverishment' (Griffiths 1995, p. 256). By developing a neoliberal model of cultural policy implementation, then, the cultural and creative sector was given an added responsibility to create active economic agents where 'disadvantaged people and places' were drawn into 'socially included and normalised roles, behaviours, and spaces' (Hall 2013, p. 244). This is especially evident in the Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS 2011) assessment that arts, sport and cultural and recreational activity could positively support regeneration at the neighbourhood level by improving health, crime, employment and education indicators in deprived communities, allowing citizens to become more economically productive.

Through localism UK government is actively promoting cultural activities within neighbourhoods and yet, at the same time, these measures are undermined by low

public spending due to austerity (Richardson & Durose 2013). The Localism Act 2011 was claimed by Greg Clark MP, then Minister for State for Decentralisation, as measures that could promote 'the sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives' (DCLG 2011, p. 1). A community rights programme was launched, with the £1million Community Economic Development programme to support 54 local communities to develop the economy in their neighbourhoods – including through culture and the arts – recalling the interventions of the Labour Party's 'Red' Ken Livingstone's General London Council. But this support can be considered piecemeal in comparison to wider austerity cuts to central and local government most acutely experienced in already under-resourced areas. Austerity measures to reduce public expenditure were taken across the European Union in response to the financial crash of 2008 (see Warren & Jones 2015b). By 2016, in the UK this had resulted in a total reduction to public funding of culture and the arts by 37% (ACE 2016).

Social inclusion is a significant strand of urban policy and cultural governance linkages since the 1970s; the integration of different groups into mainstream civic practices. Scale is instrumentalised in social inclusion drivers, with the neighbourhood the level at which communities are engaged, consulted and activated as participants and future leaders. Indeed, 'the local' is championed as where active citizenship takes place. Deployment of the concepts of the 'Big Society', 'decentralisation', and 'localism' have been part of Conservative party policy banners on devolving state power to local communities (see Bailey & Pill 2011; Warren & Jones 2015b). Yet the 'Big Society' proved highly divisive: on the one hand celebrating the good work of volunteers in everyday spaces of civic care, while on the other hand using evidence of the willingness to undertake unpaid labour as leverage for more economic cuts.

Raco and Imrie (2000) term this the 'art of government'; a framework for understanding the transitioning relationship of urban policy and central government where the

'rights and responsibilities' of citizens are at the core of governance. At a time of anxiety over increased social fragmentation, the governmental strategies of establishing relations between government and civic life with citizens taking on enhanced roles and responsibilities in the governance of society is significant (Kearns 1995; Raco & Imrie 2000). For Raco and Imrie (2000, p. 2188), active citizens are defined 'not through consumerist power, or primarily as passive electors in representative democratic elections, but as democratic agents, empowering themselves through their challenges to the activities of institutions and organisations which shape their everyday lives'. But devolving governance to citizens means that the duties of the state and entitlement of citizens become blurred (Osbourne & Rose 1999).

Writing in 1996, Rose outlined how 'Government through community' offered a useful framework for understanding the ways in which government deploy community groups as a part of its shrinking role in local urban policy. Some thinkers, however, have identified the retreat of government in the present time as clearing the ground for transforming political space. In research on housing that also has important implications for culture and the arts, Bradley (2014), frames localism as a form of performativity that can transgress socio-spatial positionings and borders. Bradley argues that a reordering of political space can be seen through community localism which constructs the local as democratic and the model of participatory governance by which governmental processes can be challenged (Bradley 2014). Equally pertinent is how community localism is rationalised as a political and spatial agency in multiple economies of care, including environmental, educational and recreational economies of care. In thinking through how agency at the micro- and meso-level can challenge the status quo, of particular insight to this work is 'the performance of governance as a process of neighbourly exchange' (Bradley 2014). It gives recognition to the new publics that can be formed in localism where place is performed through 'nearness' and decision-making at the neighbourhood level with

significant resonances for reworking cultural governance in very diverse areas.

Bradley's work envisages new lines of cooperation at the micro-level. We would like to take forward the understanding suggested by the latter that transformation can take place in everyday local governance if there are mutual concerns, mechanisms for change and adequate resourcing. The art of government – where the rights and responsibilities of citizens are core to governance – is simultaneously one of opportunity and ambivalence. Not everyone wants to take more responsibility for neighbourhood planning and development (Richardson & Durose 2013). Localising governance may suggest, therefore, a migration of responsibility and ownership for societal organisation that may be open, but only to those who are able, or willing, to participate in the processes of governance. This is subject to historic and social imbalances of power across and between settled, new and emergent groups along intersectional lines of social difference. The significant social and spatial dynamics of co-producing cultural commissions in a diverse and fast-changing neighbourhood is discussed further next.

### ASSEMBLING DIVERSE ACTORS IN CULTURAL GOVERNANCE

In the following sections we focus on diversity as a way of thinking through how cultural co-commissioning processes can lead to power destabilisation and societal change actioned 'from below'. Initial stages of the wider research project on social in/exclusion in the cultural and creative economy interrogated 'expert'-led cultural delivery. Empirical data collection was undertaken on the motivations and experiences of policy-makers and cultural and creative professionals, including artists working in community settings (Warren & Jones 2015b; Perry *et al.* 2015; Jones & Warren 2016). The stage of the research under discussion in this paper represents the pivotal transition from researcher-led to participant-led delivery. Ultimately the research involved co-commissioning of cultural activities by

residents. Local intermediaries – community representatives interviewed in earlier stages – were asked to convene focus groups of other residents and workers in the area with the single stipulation of interest in participatory forms of programming in their neighbourhood. Convenors used a snowballing technique drawing on their experience and networks to assemble participants. Instead of commissioning on behalf of others – still the status quo in cultural policy and programming – the discursive, open-ended process of the focus group enabled participants to talk directly about themselves, the barriers they faced in all aspects of civic participation, and their vision for cultural provision in the area in which they lived. These dialogues raised broader structural and social issues about social cohesion and living with social difference. Diversity strategies have often been evaluated as an ‘empty shell’ (Hoque & Noon 2004, p. 481), where policy does not lead to an effective shift in practice. Following two years of embedded ethnographic research, the co-commissioning aimed to foster new potentialities that align shared governance and creativity with marginalised spaces and actors within the city.

Three focus groups were convened in the ward of Sparkbrook, south Birmingham. Sparkbrook has been associated with new migration to the city since the first Yemeni groups arrived in the 1940s. Subsequent migration has included Kashmiri Pakistani and Syhlet Bengali groups from the mid-1950s with a broader and more fragmented cross-section of new residents in recent years including from Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen. Sparkbrook is the most populated ward in Birmingham and has some of the highest levels of multiple deprivation within the city, and wider UK (ONS 2011). While poverty in the area is high, including among the British Pakistani population, Sparkbrook is often represented with reference to its prominence of Asian-run businesses. Popularly termed ‘the Balti triangle’ the area offers a rich density of South Asian restaurants and takeaways, clothes emporiums, fruit and vegetable shops and places of worship and religious study, including

mosques, madrassas, and a gurudwara. The ward of Sparkbrook has been at the centre of public debate on whether segregation is increasing, and to what social and political effect. The most high profile of which focused on education in the so-called Trojan Horse ‘scandal’ – where a letter that was subsequently published alleged a fundamentalist plot to take over a network of schools in March 2014 – leading to government Ofsted inspections, including institutions within Sparkbrook (BBC News, July 2015). Often negative media representations of Sparkbrook can be understood, then, in a broader context where concerns over ‘pandering to immigrants and ethnic minorities’ espoused since the 1960s, became more entrenched in the late 1990s-early 2000s in the UK, Germany and elsewhere in Europe amid anxieties over ethnic and religious segregation (Vertovec 2010).

The three focus groups took place in a community trust with an established civic reputation in the area developed over 40 years. Each was organised by a resident from the area with two researchers present taking notes. Participants were informed of resources for cultural and arts projects enabled by the research council funding the praxis – research and practice – and that our findings would be shared in an attempt to impact local cultural policy and decision-making processes. Different key themes emerged from each of the focus groups which are detailed in turn in the sub-sections that follow, with some common points of concern addressed in the discussion with implications for other major cities with large migrant populations. In none of the focus group dialogues was cultural commissioning considered to offer the sole answer to the multiple social, economic, educational and environmental issues people in the area faced. But all attended and contributed to the focus groups that represented the first stage of the co-commissioning process with the vital belief that the process of cultural commissioning, and its outcomes, could offer valuable place-based opportunities. By trialing new co-commissioning strategies, financial and organisational, individuals and groups could have a space in which to mobilise ideas for

alternative ways of performing cultural governance.

### DIVERSIFYING VOICES IN CULTURAL GOVERNANCE

**Focus group (1): austerity and social cohesion** – Bridging social, cultural and religious differences was the chief concern in a focus group comprised of volunteers at the community trust, organised and chaired by a senior manager. The discussion of the value of co-commissioned cultural and arts activities were inter-connected to issues of austerity and social cohesion. The participants sat together around the table were of mixed background in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and age, from teenagers to the elderly. Participants welcomed the opportunity to co-commission activities whom viewed culture as socially constitutive in the area. For instance, a representative from the Balsall Heath History Society described how theatre had been used as a way of animating the heritage of the area for residents, established and new. Sustained involvement and commitment in the generative role of arts in community building were characteristic of the participants. Notably, one participant, a teacher, had supported the local Balsall Heath carnival for over twenty years by enlisting her primary school and its pupils in the annual parade.

Despite committed community volunteers, cultural participation in the area was widely perceived to be in decline. The diminishing scale of the carnival represented the deleterious impact of austerity measures on cultural participation in the area experienced through shrinking resources (see Warren & Jones 2015b). In the focus group, austerity was held as working in opposition to multicultural policies advancing the need for enhancing integration. Anxieties were voiced on the de-valuing of culture in education and the community more widely:

Carole: What probably concerns me more than anything is we've had to fight really hard to maintain this. And because of lack of funding and everything like that, it is really difficult. And when it comes to events

like Carnival, there are very few schools that support it now. For various reasons.

Nick: It gets harder and harder all the time.

Carole: It's harder and harder because of lack of money, lack of funding. It depends what your focus is for a school and everything like that. And we've had to fight hard to maintain that creative focus and we do. But it's difficult. A lot of schools have just opted out, haven't they? ... It's sort of just taking the easier option.

Continued emphasis on arts despite national curriculum changes de-valuing the subject as non-compulsory at Key Stage 4 (GCSE level exams taken at 16 years) are indicative of longer-term learning on its local and social importance by actors within third sector and educational institutions.

A rich community arts tradition (Hall 2013; Rose 1997) in the neighbourhood are combined with a creative cities-inflected economic boosterism. The logic of the market in community organising was firmly embedded in animated discussion. Place-marketing in celebration of cultural diversity to boost tourism to the area was a unifying theme. To develop the branding and encourage touristic visitation of the area a range of commissions were mooted: a regular market selling food and clothes; a pop-up bandstand featuring local acts; a community radio show. Games of street chess and table tennis were championed to improve the street life and appearance of the area. Understanding the value of cultural activity that fosters encounters in urban life was overlaid with a commercial acumen to try to raise capital to address socio-economic and spatialised inequalities. For Stuart Hall (2001, p. 3), 'Commercial multiculturalism exploits and consumes difference in the spectacle of the exotic "other"'. Developing this further, the mixed background residents advocate mutual consumption of their differences in spaces of togetherness. These initiatives suggest a shared need for more opportunities, investment and representation at the local level.

Concern for social relations informed why participants were engaging in new forms of cultural governance in the neighbourhood.



The power of cultural activities were framed as creating spaces for inter-culturalism and social mixing: ‘we need to do this for everybody’ (Romana, workshop participant, 11/14). Contextualised by a decline in inter-cultural participation, further austerity cuts from local government were diminishing resources for social cohesion. A lack of inter-cultural spaces, in venue-based and more ephemeral event culture, was perceived as resultant from spatialised power inequalities creating cleavages between city centre and residential neighbourhoods.

**Focus group (2): gender and Faith** – The second focus group dialogue detailed in the paper highlights a strong belief in the need for targeted resourcing addressing social variables of gender and faith. It was organised and chaired by a representative from a local women’s only adult education college that specialised in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications along familial and collegial relationship lines. The women’s only college was facing closure due to amalgamation with a mixed-sex college in the city centre. The women present were all Muslim, variously wearing their hair uncovered or dressed in coloured, embroidered and alternatively tied hijabs, indicating a wide breadth of cultural and faith-based identities. Male relatives accompanying them sat opposite. Spatialised changes in cultural and educational provision in the area due to the closure of the women’s only college were contested along intersectional gender and belief-based issues. Part of the ‘values’ ascribed to the area, as argued by one of the teachers, was gender separation:

Like I said, if you want to meet the needs of the Balsall Heath [sub-ward within Sparkbrook] community, the ladies are set in that environment where it’s women-only because that’s how it is. That’s always how it’s been and it’s better for them and the family because the family know they’re safe and it’s all okay. (Aisha, workshop participant, 11/14)

The students present were deemed by their teacher to be ‘more confident’ than the majority of their peers, as shown by

attendance at the meeting, and assurances that gender ‘mixing’ was fine in this research context. The wider argument advanced, however, was that most the women in the college would be less likely to attend adult education classes in a mixed environment:

That’s the reason, maybe, because a lot of ladies, they come to this [school]. You’ve got this just for women and they feel confident and they feel relaxed and maybe the parents or the husbands say, ‘We are not happy that you study with the men’. That’s why they stop the study. (Aisha, workshop participant, 11/14)

Alongside social and faith-based pressures experienced by some of the women were issues of time in travelling beyond the neighbourhood for participation in activities. As Baraa, a student, responded when asked whether she would still attend college if classes were moved to the city centre:

Baraa: How can I, teacher? Because I don’t drive. My husband can give me a lift sometimes, but he works.

Teacher: The college would provide a [free] bus pass.]. But would you still go?

Baraa: Sometimes, sometimes but it’s too hard for us because you have to manage time and [a] bus pass.

The context underpinning these comments were concerns around childcare responsibilities that impacted all of the women present. As has been explored in depth elsewhere (Mohammad 2013; Warren 2016), women in Islam are regarded as the bearers of *Izzat* (honour) for their family. *Izzat* strengthens a sense of responsibility within the nucleus family and extended kin networks. Any cultural and work-based activity for women with children needed to take place in the daytime – avoiding the evening – to align with formal school hours. As Baraa notes, ‘All [my] children went to school. Then 9 am to 3 pm I’m free, that’s all I have to do something myself’ (workshop participant, 11/14). In addition to cultural provision taking place only in the daytime, it was suggested that accredited classes would be useful for the women present, such as hair and beauty classes, that require a broadening of

traditional typologies of cultural and arts towards more everyday and ordinary activities that add texture and richness to lives (see Griffiths 1993).

Observed by Vertovec (2010, p. 85), fear of segregation is growing within cities where migrants or ethnic minorities are viewed as 'living parallel lives marked by residential segregation, effectively separate schools, different places of worship, divergent community associations, discrete social networks and disparate places of leisure'. Far from an unwillingness to integrate, however, the Muslim women participants had all enrolled on language courses to develop competency in English, the official language of the UK, or were second generation migrants who teach on these ESOL courses enabling greater financial independence and socio-economic mobility. Co-commissioning activities such as hair and beauty classes can therefore be viewed as a desire for training opportunities and skills-building that are recognised in wider society – 'we need a "certificated" course, please' (Faheema, workshop participant, 11/14).

Cultural co-commissioning was pertinently viewed by participants as an opportunity to perform a useful role in British society. This was necessitated by alignment of the role with minority needs such as providing a 'safe space' for those women present to engage. Participating in co-commissioning means along with emphasis on conformity and integration, the Muslim women exercised their right to self-segregation within the space of the project. The practices of co-commissioning thereby required that the values of diversity within cultural governance processes be integrated, even if this was within a degree of tension with dominant cultural norms on cohesion. As Wilson (2014, p. 854; see also Nagel & Hopkins 2010) observes, 'Accusations of a degeneration into cultural relativism and the "tolerance of reprehensible cultural and religious practices and minority self-segregation" are especially apparent in the UK and have laid the ground for a new emphasis on integration and cohesion'. Cultural co-commissioning at the neighbourhood level thus elucidates upon the tensions in multicultural policies and debate that attempt to bridge a 'strong common

identity and values' with 'the recognition of cultural differences (alongside differences based on gender, sexuality, age and disability)' (Vertovec 2010, p. 91). Those participants assembled were concerned that Muslims were marginalised by their minority faith in available cultural and arts public funding in the city, impacting Muslim women in particular.

### **Focus group (3): racism and ethnic conflict –**

The final focus group under discussion included past residents and workers of Sparkbrook since dispersed across the city. It was convened by an arts administrator of an inter-faith urban arts organisation. Members of this group were drawn predominantly from those with a Caribbean heritage. Two female participants of Pakistani heritage were further invited to the same focus group. Inter-ethnic conflict, historic systemic racism and educational and exclusion formed the primary threads of discussion.

Public debate since the 1960s emphasised the daily realities of racial conflict and discrimination most notably on whether a 'colour bar' was operational in housing, education and employment (Solomos & Back 1994). Overlaid upon debates on immigration and lack of resources, in the 1980s and 1990s racial and ethnic conflict between Black Caribbean and Kashmiri Pakistani communities became charged over alleged inequities in political representation and resources for the building of religious places of worship and community centres (Solomos & Back 1994). A history of inter-ethnic conflict, breaking out into race riots in 1985, 1991, and 2005, was addressed by one participant who called for change through redistribution, arguing:

I used to live here 25 years ago, I've still got family and so forth [here] ... What I've done is seen the changes in Balsall Heath, and one of the reasons is culturally it's become so hardened by the larger cultures, and for Balsall Heath to remain rich as a spot in British society, you need a balance with the other cultures to sort of catch up. (Derrick, workshop participant, 11/14)

Due to Sparkbrook recording high levels of population density and multiple deprivation,

concerns voiced towards the majority minority Pakistani Muslim population in the ward are within a socio-spatial context of anxiety over limited resources. Enhancing visibility and representation of the Caribbean heritage population in the area was held as necessary to creating 'a balance': 'Hindus, Muslims [all] with places of worship. We need a debating society to represent the Caribbean population' (Derrick, workshop participant, 11/14). The debating society as a means to represent lost Caribbean culture was vigorously supported by a large contingent of the group:

So we need to be able to talk and say, 'Right, we're West Indian from Bajan, we're West Indian from Jamaica, we're West Indian from Kittitian and so forth'. We have to put those differences aside and say, 'Right, we, as a black West Indian group, Afro-Caribbean, whatever. We can come together, and the only way we're going to do it is to thrash out our differences and set up a proper debate society'. (Aldane, workshop participant, 11/14)

While a debating society within the Caribbean population that once lived and worked in Balsall Heath was petitioned for, there was caution articulated on investment more generally in the area, particularly spectres of failure around previous cultural initiatives. These spectres left material traces on the urban landscape as capital building investments were closed.<sup>2</sup> Perceptions of past investment delivered with a lack of transparency meant greater social distrust and damage:

It's like after the riots [2005], now, the answer was probably to give a few criminals in the community a lot of money to set up a dance hall, or a community centre, but that didn't function as anything positive in the area. As you see, we've got a lot of young people growing up now who are just disillusioned. (Stephen, workshop participant, 11/14)

Despite inter-generational distrust of government, police and authority more broadly, cultural commissioning and activity in the area was framed as positive at the community

level. As one noted, 'a picture speaks a thousand words' (Nathan, workshop participant, 11/14). The transformative politics of culture and arts is here related to its power to create bonds that cut across social divisions and, furthermore, to provide accessible avenues for active citizenship in the UK: 'Because we are looking at people, not just Asian, Muslim, but as people. And we're saying we have a part to play in British society' (Stephen, workshop participant, 11/14). Importantly performing this role in society through participating in cultural governance is offered as a starting point for moving beyond narrow racial and ethnic stereotyping:

Right. But I don't want it to be a singing and dancing kind of thing, I want something visual, visually powerful. I mean, I'm talking about having, maybe the difference between seeing somebody just dancing on a picture, and seeing a picture of George Washington Carver [American botanist and inventor] in his laboratory, mixing chemicals. That's going to be a lot more different in terms of impact than it would be to see Puff Daddy dressed up in his leather jacket, or whatever. (Nathan, workshop participant, 11/14)

Initially less confident and familiar with the rituals of the focus group scenario than the other groups assembled, with social memories of structural racism and exclusion, the participants were in the end clearest on their ambitions within the project: 'That's going to have more impact, you know' (Derrick, workshop participant, 11/14). Sometimes heated discussion, where at one point a participant banged the table to punctuate his point, was reflected on by that person as: 'really productive ... we needed to talk it out' (Derrick, workshop participant, 11/14)

**Discussion: towards participatory cultural governance?** – By providing a testing space away from mainstream urban and cultural policy-making and formal networks, these focus groups act as a discursive space for alternative visions for cultural activities and ownership in very diverse neighbourhoods. The messy space of the focus group convened a wide range of people who had never

been altogether in a room before despite residing or working within the neighbourhood for the majority of their lives. While universalist approaches suggest the need for shared space where unifying national identities and values can be experienced, important differences must be recognised. That is, the varying identities, values, and practices of individuals and groups, and distinctive experiences of inequality and exclusion over time. For example, differences in norms around observing cultural-religious boundaries, such as, gender segregation. The irreducibility of interethnic spatial encounters – such as banging on tables to punctuate points – were simultaneously productive for some and divisive for others, underpinned by a longer history of marked inter-ethnic, racial and religious distrust.

In all three focus groups the participants shared a sense of alienation and disconnection from extant strategies of policy and governance that impacted upon their daily lives. Relatedly, they shared a common questioning of roles and responsibilities within society. First, due to feeling marginalised and disadvantaged because of ethnic and racial, religious and gendered markers of social difference. Second, a belief in the need to fight for local community cohesion in the face of government-imposed austerity cuts, resulting in greater tensions over a strain on resources at the micro-level. It is the case that localising cultural governance according to more participatory democratic forms of co-commissioning relies upon those who can take on the role of governing themselves and others in society (Warren & Jones 2015b). It comes with social and political responsibilities that are prohibitive for many (Raco & Imrie 2000), especially given macro-level structural changes on the labour market that can impact upon people's availability to contribute to cultural and community life (Faist 2009). Still the opportunities to take part were viewed by participants as potentially transformative: strengthening minority representation; building confidence and skills; and redistributing power and resource as an alternative to (white and middle-class) dominated cultural and political institutions. Participating step-by-step in local cultural co-

commissioning through the focus groups was one way to start to renegotiate future relationships with institutional and political authority. This point was encapsulated by the reflection: 'It's not about what happened, it's about what we can change' (Nathan, workshop participant, 11/14).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has advanced the need for greater attention in geography towards cultural governance, situating the concept within wider academic and policy discourse around urban governance, cultural policy and diversity. It has sought to highlight two points of enquiry in the geographies of cultural governance: (i) how policy decision-making and delivery needs to consider more carefully social variables of ethnicity, race, gender and faith; (ii) how engaging participatory methods, such as focus groups, enables the creation of spaces where pluralistic approaches to cultural programming in a multi-cultural neighbourhood are represented, recognised and can co-exist without reduction or assimilation into a singular vision.

The development of cultural policy, as briefly outlined in this paper, shows its historic interconnectedness with urban regeneration and social exclusion strategies, and the numerous tensions created by pervasive 'third way' approaches (see also Griffiths 1995). While creative city frameworks have privileged urban centres, government pilots and shared governance programmes tackling exclusion have typically focused on the micro-scale of the neighbourhood. A proxy for intervention in areas of multiple deprivation, 'neighbourhood', 'local', and 'community' projects have often informally targeted demographics with high levels of ethnic and religious minorities, such as Sparkbrook, Birmingham, in an attempt to mobilise both new and established residents as active citizens (Warren & Jones 2015b). But policy-makers cannot plan creative cities and cultural quarters from on high (Bayliss 2007), especially without relational implications for other spaces and residents. This research

advances the underexplored area of cultural spaces and networks outside the city core to gain insights into the importance of localising cultural governance for a sense of inclusion particularly in areas that are very diverse. The central contention of this paper is thus, that instead of planning on behalf of local actors, the emphasis should instead lie on enabling local actors in a pluralised cultural governance with distributed and discursive strategies of public decision-making for more effective policy-making.

Utilising focus groups in multi-cultural neighbourhoods can foster interaction and debate without attempts to separate out wider social and historical issues of socio-economic inequalities, inter and intra ethnic hostility and institutional racism (Askins & Pain 2011). By extension, empirical research 'from below' with minority groups in this particular neighbourhood reveals the ways in which cultural co-commissioning and delivery is regarded as an important arena in which relationships between different social groups and authority can be renewed. We argue that providing resourcing to enable a more democratically realised culture – avoiding polarising arts and everyday life (Griffiths 1993) – can serve as a conduit for enhancing a sense of belonging in society. In a context of austerity measures this has been undermined materially and symbolically by reductions in public funding. As such we suggest the need for localised and publically integrated cultural governance strategies that enhance minority and intercultural spaces and that give emphasis to issues of access and representation, rights and responsibilities, readdressing the social contract between active citizenship and the state. Implications of the research extend to other cities leveraging funds for cultural development that also have a very diverse population, especially those struggling with austerity or non-statutory arts funding. Further lessons can be gleaned by cities with gateway neighbourhoods welcoming recent migrants over time, but suffering from socio-economic and racial segregation (Durose & Lees 2012; Graves 2010). Pluralising cultural governance seeks to readdress an economic growth agenda in cultural policy

for so-called 'creative cities' concentrated spatially in urban centres that is negatively impacting upon arts ability to be more representative for marginal and emergent communities in the city. Qualitative research using focus groups reveals the need for a combination of minority and intercultural spaces to meet a commitment to pluralism, advancing principles of respect and non-discrimination in a city of diversity without expectation of consensus.

Importantly, the critical dialogues leading to co-commissioning enables a space where individuals across axes of difference become agents in decision-making processes that impact the areas in which they live. Building upon two years embedded ethnographic research and networks of local intermediaries, processes of participatory governance advanced in this paper challenge the notion of an 'apathetic or disinterested community' (Amin 2005). Across the ethnic and faith based groups, residents reinforced the individual, societal and place-based benefits of cultural engagement and representation. Cultural governance is thereby repositioned as a political and spatial agency in multiple economies of civic care (see Bradley 2014). In light of the empirical insights in this paper serious questions need to be raised over the social narrative communicated, especially to ethnic and religious minorities, in areas of multiple deprivation when the state appears to disinvest in any coherent way in the places in which they live. Within this wider context, a localised and pluralised cultural governance is highlighted for the first time as a potentially transformative arena in which personal and shared identities, and meaningful differences and tensions are brought into representation. Localising cultural governance therefore offers a new approach towards addressing enduring issues around social cohesion and integration from the neighbourhood.

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has been included in the Acknowledgement section in this current version]

### Notes

1. In fact representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people declined from 7.4% of the total UK workforce in 2006, to 6.7% in 2009, to 5.4% in 2012.
2. Southside Business Centre, 249 Ladypool Road, Birmingham, B12 8LF, was largely empty for two years however it is due to reopen as a new women's enterprise hub by iSE, a business support organisation based in Digbeth.

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