

Evaluation of the 'Our Place'
Projects in Blackburn and
Taunton

Final Report
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1. INTRODUCTION

Aims of the Evaluation

- 1.1 In March 2010 DC Research were commissioned by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) to carry out an evaluation of the 'Our Place' empty shops project that had been running in both Blackburn and Taunton between February and March 2010.
- 1.2 The main objectives of evaluation are to examine:
- If the project met its objectives?
 - Partnership development and MLA's engagement with local and regional partners as part of Living Places partnership.
 - Whether there was positive impact of the Our Place projects in local economy, if community and local businesses welcomed this initiative.
 - The positive impact of informal learning activities in places undertaking regeneration.
 - The contribution to community cohesion and community engagement.
 - Any Lessons Learned.

Structure of the Report

- 1.3 Each of the evaluation objectives are addressed in the relevant section(s) of the report, and the report, which is the Final Report for the Our Place Evaluation, and is structured as follows.
- **Section 2** provides a brief summary of the approach and **Methodology** adopted for the evaluation and reports on progress so far with the method, and notes any outstanding tasks still to be completed.
 - **Section 3** focuses on the **Aims of the Project** and considers the overall objectives of the project, the rationale for the implementation of the project in Blackburn and Taunton, and the local context within which the project was delivered in each location.
 - **Section 4** focuses on **Delivery of the Project** and looks at the selection of the empty shops themselves, the programme of activities offered, the partners involved and the extent of the partnership working that underpinned the project, as well as the marketing and promotion of the projects.
 - **Section 5** considers the **Achievements and Impacts** of the project to date, assessing the intended impacts of the project, the achievements thus far (focusing on the level of participation (and the types of participants)), as well as the emerging impacts – especially the community impacts, informal learning impacts, and the business/economy impacts.
 - Finally, **Section 6** considers the lessons that can be learned from this project, and assesses the key lessons from the Blackburn and Taunton Empty Shops, looks at the legacy from this empty shops project in Blackburn and Taunton.
 - There are two **Annexes** to this report: Annex 1 presents the case study for the Blackburn empty shop, Annex 2 presents the case study for the Taunton empty shop, and Annex 3 provides a list of stakeholders that have been consulted.

2. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Section 2

- 2.1 This section of the report summarises the approach and method adopted for this Evaluation Study. The method is effectively a five stage approach, covering early inception and scoping work; desk based research tasks; stakeholder and delivery consultations (and project visits), beneficiary consultations, through to reporting and case study development. Progress with each of the stages is summarised below.

Approach to Evaluation

- 2.2 **Stage 1 (Inception)** involved a telephone based **'inception' meeting** between MLA Council (Theodora Spanou) and DC Research (Stephen Connolly). The meeting agreed exact terms of reference for the study, finalised the methodology (including agreeing consultees and consultation techniques) and a work plan for the evaluation. Thereafter, contact was maintained via telephone/e-mail updates, leading to the submission of the report and case studies.
- 2.3 **Stage 2 (Desk Based Research Tasks)** involved a range of desk based research tasks, including reviewing relevant documentation about the project (in general), and the specific delivery in both Blackburn and Taunton. This included reviewing funding application forms relating to the project, documents outlining agreed objectives, outputs, and outcomes for the project as well as collecting and reviewing any general information about the projects (e.g. from media – including any information and data available from the project web-sites, blogs and social media outlets). In addition, this stage collated and analysed data available from each of the locations (number of events held, number of people attending events, profile of attendees, perception/subjective feedback from attendees, web hits, etc.).
- 2.4 **Stage 3 (Stakeholder and Delivery Consultations)** involved carrying out one-to-one consultations, either face-to-face or via telephone discussions with a range of key individuals from each project (i.e. including the local project managers for each project, key partner delivery organisations and key stakeholders). A list of those consulted during this Stage is included in Annex 3 to this report. The consultations covered a range of aspects of the evaluation, ensuring that all the evaluation questions, evaluation objectives, and project objectives were addressed.
- 2.5 **Stage 4 (Beneficiary Consultations)** was planned to involve gathering views, perceptions and feedback from a range of participants from the projects about their involvement in the project, and what they got out of it (i.e. the impacts and outcomes of the project). This was developed to be carried out as an incentivised web-based survey, with a deadline for the submission of responses set as 19th April. Planning the survey involved working alongside representatives from the projects, to ensure appropriate publicity and promotion about the survey to participants, including direct emails to participants, as well as promotion on the relevant project websites. This time and effort from project staff is much appreciated.
- 2.6 Unfortunately, and primarily due to the very tight timescale within which the survey was implemented, the response rate achieved for the survey was very poor. As such, it has not been possible to include any results from the survey in this report.

- 2.7 **Stage 5 (Reporting)** included the production of both a Draft and this Final Report which addresses all aspects of the evaluation (as outlined in the evaluation questions, evaluation objectives and project objectives).
- 0.8 **Stage 6 (Case Studies)** involved the development of two Cases Studies – one for each location (Blackburn and Taunton). These case studies, which are structured in the standard Living Places/MLA Council case study format, are included in the Annexes to this Report.

3. PROJECT AIMS, RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

Introduction to Section 3

3.1 This section of the report focuses on the aims of the Project and considers the overall objectives of the project, the rationale for the implementation of the project in Blackburn and Taunton, and the local context within which the project was delivered in each location.

Aims of the Our Place Project

3.2 The overall aim of the Our Place project was to provide creative and learning centres in empty shops in Blackburn and Taunton, with a focus on presenting a learning offer that will support people to start engaging more actively with the changes in their community.

3.3 It was underpinned by the vision that to be successful and sustainable, regeneration programmes need communities of confident, curious, critical and creative people to engage with and help direct the regeneration process.

3.4 The specific objectives for each of the projects were:

- To place learning and creativity at the heart of regeneration.
- To encourage a greater understanding about the history of Blackburn/Taunton and the importance of this for today's community.
- To create an accessible venue to provide informal and creative learning opportunities.
- To give local people opportunity to be involved in plans for the town.
- To signpost other local opportunities provided by Living Places Partners.

3.5 The original aim was for the project to focus on adults, enabling them to explore and access learning opportunities, with a target upon adults not currently engaged (or accessing learning opportunities) due to perceived and actual barriers.

3.6 It was also noted (in the original application form) that both locations selected (Blackburn and Taunton) suffer from high levels of unemployment and that that informal learning would be the first step for many such adults to access training and routes into employment.

3.7 The project aimed to provide accessible, informal learning venues – located in town centres as a means of providing an innovative approach to engaging communities in informal learning activities.

3.8 The venues themselves were developed in empty town centre shops in Taunton and Blackburn – this approach was a response to local need and opportunities, with previous research having demonstrated a lack of easily accessible informal learning environments in these town centres, resulting in many adults not able or motivated to access learning.

3.9 The venues were to be seen as welcoming and non-threatening, being embedded in a familiar environment and have flexible opening times, with a range of drop-in and sustained activities to suit the interests of different learners.

- 3.10 The project had target outcomes relating to learners, products, national resource, and outcomes for the delivery partners. These can be summarised as:

Learners

- At least 5 new volunteers.
- 340 people attending core sessions.
- 1800 people dropping in for information or to explore what is on offer.
- At least 20 learners continuing learning beyond the project, including via online and distance learning.
- At least 5 learners reporting increased vocational skills.

Products

- Two community archives shared and preserved through the Peoples Record platform, and linked to the collections in the Taunton and Blackburn museums.
- Two creative productions developed by the learners (e.g. drama, music, mural, exhibition) to share the “stories” of each town which have been explored and developed through the core sessions.

National resource

- A “how-to” guide and supporting online resources will be developed at the end of the project to support the development of similar initiatives in other town centres. The resources will be hosted on the Living Places website (to make use of existing resource) and MLA will explore partnerships and networks through which the resource can be disseminated.

Outcome for delivery partners

- Museum of Somerset – increased profile and improved connection with community as it prepares to move to refurbished Castle. New perspectives to understanding the town’s heritage. New volunteers recruited and retained.
- Blackburn Museum – New perspectives to understanding the town’s heritage, and increased connection with the various communities who feel their perspectives are understood and reflected by the museum’s work.
- Project Taunton and Blackburn Town Centre Team – Community that is more confident, curious, critical and creative in the way it actively engages with the regeneration process.
- Blackburn Town Centre Team - greater integration between the diverse communities in Blackburn.

- 3.11 In terms of funding, a total of just less than £100,000 (£99,975) was allocated to the projects – split equally between them. At the time of this report, Blackburn had spent its full allocation of £50,000, with Taunton having a slight underspend (in the region of £1,500). The project’s funding came from a grant awarded to MLA from The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Skills Learning Revolution Transformation Fund.

Transformation Fund

- 3.12 The Transformation Fund delivers on commitments made in The Learning Revolution White Paper, which announced a new approach to improving people’s lives and prosperity through learning for pleasure.

- 3.13 The £20 million Transformation Fund supports informal adult learning (learning for pleasure, self-development and community development) and has awarded funding to a wide range of projects - all with the objective of seeing creative learning flourish across the country.
- 3.14 The projects supported aim to introduce a range of innovative adult learning initiatives for the benefit of a wide range of communities and individuals.
- 3.15 The Transformation Fund encourages new partnerships between public, private and community organisations to create informal learning activities which:
- encourage more and different people into informal learning, particularly people from disadvantaged groups;
 - open up access to learning in new places, in new ways and at more flexible times;
 - support people to set up self-organised groups and learning clubs;
 - widen choice, by developing and sharing innovative content;
 - build partnerships and strengthen the capacity of informal adult learning organisations;
 - improve connections and progression between different kinds of learning; and
 - make better use of broadcasting and technology to stimulate and support learning.
- 3.16 The Our Place projects in Blackburn and Taunton can be regarded as contributing towards the aim and the purpose of the Transformation Fund, in the focus on informal adult learning, but also through the partnerships that have been created in the design and delivery of both of the projects.

Rationale for the Our Place Project in Blackburn and Taunton

- 3.17 The selection of Blackburn and Taunton as the delivery locations for the Our Place project is underpinned by the Living Places Programme, and by the local context of both of the towns.

Living Places

- 3.18 Living Places is an alliance of partners (Arts Council England, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), English Heritage, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, Sport England, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG)) that emphasises the use of culture and sport to support local distinctiveness and quality of place. It promotes the advantage of cultural bodies working together to support local services for communities and individuals, particularly in areas that are experiencing housing led growth and regeneration. The aim is to ensure all communities can benefit from cultural and sporting opportunities – including informal learning.
- 3.19 Living Places has three overarching objectives:
- To provide those people who are shaping communities with information, advice and support on the use of culture to create better places.
 - To align investment from the sporting and cultural sector with sustainable communities funding across organisational boundaries, so it works harder for people.

- To empower communities to make cultural and sporting activity and infrastructure a part of their lives.

3.20 The current aims of Living Places (Year 2) are:

- **Supporting infrastructure development:** supporting the development of culture and sport infrastructure through the dissemination of the Culture and Sport Planning Toolkit to the built environment and cultural sectors.
- **Priority Places:** focussing on five specific Priority Places to demonstrate and develop delivery models and disseminate best practice for embedding culture and sport in housing led growth and regeneration.
- **Shaping policy:** influencing national, regional and local policy to ensure that culture and sport are built into housing led growth and regeneration.
- **Building the case:** identifying and profiling the contribution that culture and sport to place shaping.

3.21 Given the above overarching objectives and aims it can be seen that the Our Place project clearly contributes towards Living Places – in particular, both locations (Blackburn and Taunton) are located within Priority Places (Pennine Lancashire and South West respectively) as well as helping to ‘build the case’.

Local Context

3.22 As noted above, both towns are undergoing extensive regeneration, as well as suffering from high levels of unemployment. Both of these factors are relevant to the delivery of the Our Place Project.

3.23 Within the context of unemployment and worklessness, informal learning could be the first step for many to access training and routes into employment. Whilst in the context of the extensive regeneration in both towns, the Our Place project objective of giving local people opportunity to be involved in plans for the town is important and can play a role in ensuring community involvement in plans for the town.

3.24 In addition to which, there is a lack of easily accessible informal learning environments in the town centres. Taunton has no town centre learning institution, and local research has demonstrated that travel distance, time and cost are barriers. Whilst Blackburn does have informal and formal learning resources in the town centre, these are not perceived as accessible by all in the community. The project provided an opportunity to create a neutral, secular and informal environment in the town.

4. DELIVERY OF PROJECTS

Introduction to Section 4

- 4.1 This section of the report focuses on delivery of the project and looks at the selection of the empty shops themselves, the programme of activities offered, the partners involved and the extent of the partnership working that underpinned the project, as well as the marketing and promotion of the projects.

Overall Project Planning

- 4.2 Before reporting on the delivery of each of the Our Place projects in Blackburn and Taunton, this sub-section reflects on the project and planning and particularly the timescale for the project.
- 4.3 The concept for the project originated from the Living Places Manager in 2009, and involved other MLA staff at the time as well. Both locations were approached by MLA (via/through Living Places) as they were located in Living Place Priority Place areas to be pilots for the Our Place project. In Blackburn's case it is also thought that previous local experience of delivering arts/cultural activity in empty shops helped to show the potential for the Our Place project.
- 4.4 The MLA project manager for the Our Place project was not in place until December 2009. Those involved in the early stages of the project feel that, especially due to the time and effort the project required, having a dedicated person in place earlier on in the project would have been helpful. This issue was felt to be more pronounced due to the level of work involved in the project (with it running in two locations) which requires a dedicated project manager role.
- 4.5 In addition, the issues around timescale (and the knock on effect of not having the overall project manager in place until December) are felt to have affected other aspects of planning for the project. For example, there is an acknowledgement that some aspects of the project (such as this evaluation, the development of the 'how to' guide etc.) could have been planned earlier in the project. However the focus from the time when the project manager came into post was very much on planning and delivering the project in both locations, with the resultant impact that the timescale at the end has been tight to get all the wider project activities completed.
- 4.6 Finally, at the overall project level, because MLA was not directly involved in the delivery of the project, there is additional planning time required from MLA to appropriately support and manage the delivery on the ground in two locations via liaison with the local project managers.
- 4.7 At the local level (i.e. in both Blackburn and Taunton) both projects have noted that the planning involved in the project was a significant activity that took time, and that the timescale involved was a key challenge. As such, having a longer timescale within which to plan the projects would have been beneficial. This timescale issue was not helped by other factors (such as the planning taking place over Christmas, the bad weather in January, etc.).
- 4.8 An aspect of project planning that worked well was that the development of the project allowed for local delivery to be sufficiently flexible to suit the localities (i.e. the towns) in which the project was being delivered.

- 4.9 In summary, the key lesson around planning for any future similar empty shops projects is that the lead in time for planning both at the overall project level but especially in terms of the on the ground delivery, (covering a range of aspects that are outlined in more detail) must be sufficient.

The 'Our Place' Locations

- 4.10 This part of the report considers the locations (i.e. the premises) where the Our Place project was delivered in both Blackburn and Taunton.
- 4.11 In **Taunton**, the premises were a former shoe shop, owned by a local private landlord, and in terms of location, it is described as being on the fringe of the busier areas of the town. In Blackburn the premises, a unit owned by the local authority, was previously an interior design shop, and is (similar to Taunton) in an area outside of the main thoroughfare of the town.
- 4.12 The task of finding the correct (i.e. the most appropriate) shop location and then engaging and completing the process of negotiating with the landlord and finalising the lease is an important task and, based particularly on Taunton's experience, can take a significant amount of time (and more than first anticipated).
- 4.13 Taunton found it very difficult to find a suitable shop. A range of factors contributed towards this. First, Taunton did not start the process of looking for a shop until November 2009, which resulted in them only having about six weeks to find a shop. Whilst the town has lots of empty shops, it was difficult to find an appropriate location. Some potential shops were empty, but in some cases, due to the fact that the previous tenant was in administration, the unit itself was not available for rent. Also, the general process (and time) of having to deal with agents, alongside what seemed to be a lack of interest especially from national agents (when they realised what the lease was for and the length of the lease being sought) did not help. Perhaps understandably, Taunton followed one lead at a time in terms of potential premises, but given the timescales, this may have slowed the process down slightly. The eventual location was identified via local networks, and was leased from a local landlord.
- 4.14 The shop location is on the edge of the pedestrianised High Street of the town, outside the main shopping areas. Therefore, the location was on the edge in terms of location. However, factors such as the location of a car park at the end of the street are thought to have helped to provide a passing flow of people.
- 4.15 In general, the final location is thought by project staff to have worked well (evidenced by the level of terms of participation achieved) given that cost, identifying shops that were truly available, and time all impacted on the choice of shops available.
- 4.16 In **Blackburn** the shop is owned by the local authority, and has been used for similar purposes (i.e. empty shops projects or arts related provision) in the past. When suitable premises were being sought there were a small number of potential shops identified, with the unit used being agreed and finalised just before Christmas 2009. The location was the preferred choice for the project (the space and layout of the premises can make it difficult to use for businesses purposes, but it fitted well with the arts focused theme of the project). Given the layout (very open with lots of glass) it works very well as a gallery, however, it can be intimidating for the general public to use.

- 4.17 Whilst the premises have been used for similar purposes before, it has never been as successful (in terms of participation) as it has been with the Our Place project. This is thought to be partly due to having sufficient funds to run the project, and also the range of activities that were offered.
- 4.18 Whilst it was the preferred choice for the project, there were some issues with the premises chosen. The location of the shop is beside a public space in the town where a lot of young people congregate and there were concerns that this may put potential participants off visiting the shop. Also, it is located directly across from the development of a new shopping mall in Blackburn – and the ongoing building work on the mall did not help. In addition, the street (Church Street) that the shop is located on is not a natural thoroughfare, which means that there is not a lot of people passing the location.
- 4.19 These factors made the location challenging, so there was a realisation that a lot of publicity, promotion and marketing may be needed to help address these issues.
- 4.20 Other (more practical factors) that were challenges with the shop included a lack of heating (there was no heating in the shop for the first two weeks of the project), issues with lighting, cleaning etc.. In addition, another issue for Blackburn was the business rates issue, an issue that has not really been resolved. The lesson from this is for other empty shops projects to clarify the business rates issue early on in the project.
- 4.21 The use of the three artists from Artichoke Studios to help co ordinate and deliver the project (see the 'Partners and Partnership' Section below) is thought to have helped as it allowed the project to be confident that the shop would be able to meet the opening hours (as project staff were always there) as well as helping with the management of the unit.
- 4.22 Blackburn partners also note that using local authority owned premises did ease some of the potential issues around arranging premises, making some aspects around this element of the project more straightforward.
- 4.23 Finally, both projects also noted that being located in a pedestrianised area of their respective towns was helpful – as it allowed the shops to spill out onto the street to engage people wandering past.

The Programme of Activities

- 4.24 In terms of the development of the programmes of activities to be offered by each of the projects, an important factor noted by both Blackburn and Taunton is that they were given autonomy to develop their own programmes of activities, albeit that MLA did 'approve' the programme in each location.
- 4.25 There were some aspects that were required to be included in the programme (e.g. links to community archives/the People's Record and the 2012 Cultural Olympiad), but beyond this, it is strongly felt by local partners that the flexibility/local autonomy allowed the projects to ensure that the programme fitted the local context of their respective towns.
- 4.26 Both locations feel that this flexibility on the programme of activities has been a key success factor to the projects. Allowing the local projects to start with a 'skeleton' framework and ensure that the programme developed fits the local area is regarded as a good mechanism and an important factor.

- 4.27 Both projects provided six weeks of activity in their shops, with Blackburn running from 1st February until 13th March 2010, and Taunton running from 8th February to 20th March 2010.
- 4.28 The project in Blackburn was called **POP: Project Our Place – Arts in the heart of Blackburn** and was an arts focused programme, co-ordinated by local artists to celebrate Blackburn and its community. The programme included arts related workshops and events – covering a range of topics including drawing, painting, performance, poetry, music and dancing. The programme also involved workshops about regeneration, the environment, a museums roadshow – which was part of the community archives element and people were asked to bring in old artefacts. There were also links to the Something Beautiful project around the celebration event.
- 4.29 The structure of the programme was designed to fit the anticipated/potential audiences – e.g. the programme on Saturdays and for the half term week in February was targeted at families. Part of the rationale behind this was to use family engagement in the activities as a route to engage the parents/adult carers in learning opportunities. The use of family activities as a route to engage adults not involved in learning is thought to be an effective approach to reaching the harder to engage groups.
- 4.30 The project in Taunton was called **Our Place, Your Place: Taunton** and was a heritage focused project that aimed to bring the local residents together to share memories, thoughts and pictures of the town as well as learn about how Taunton is changing. The focus of the programme was built around Taunton’s past, present and future. The first three weeks focused on the past (led by Heritage Services), with the second three focusing on the present and future of Taunton (led by Project Taunton).
- 4.31 Taunton’s theme linked very well to the current developments in the town. The museum is currently closed for renovation, and a new heritage centre is in development. Therefore the ‘heritage’ past, present and future theme, worked well and provided an opportunity for local people to engage in heritage whilst the museum is closed.
- 4.32 Taunton did plan to staff the shop with volunteers (from the Friends of the Museum), but ended up using a local staffing agency and training three casual staff instead. Upon reflection, partners in Taunton believe that having someone who was involved in the programme design on site in the shop is desirable – but they were not able to achieve this primarily due to staff capacity issues.
- 4.33 In terms of **opening hours**, Taunton opened between 10.30am and 4pm (Monday to Saturday) – which worked well. The only issue raised around opening hours was that opening earlier may have been more suitable for some of the older people attending (who may have been in the town/passing the shop before 10.30am).
- 4.34 Blackburn opened from 12noon to 4pm (Monday to Saturday). The project felt it was very important to have fixed opening times - a lesson from previous similar projects. Feedback from previous projects suggested that potential participants like to know for definite when the project is open so that they know they can visit, and therefore having fixed opening times was very important.
- 4.35 The only issue (noted in Blackburn but applicable to both projects) is around the opening times not being appropriate in terms of trying to attract people who are currently employed to attend the events.

- 4.36 Both projects offered a combination of planned sessions (workshops, activities etc.) and less formal drop-in sessions.
- 4.37 In total Blackburn ran 24 formal sessions, although the original plan was only to run between 8 and 10 such sessions. It is felt that the setting up of the workshops (partly due to the number of workshops delivered) was one of the biggest tasks for the project.
- 4.38 Linked to the opening times, the workshops did work well, although it is thought that some activities may have been less well attended because they took place during the working day rather than in the evening.
- 4.39 Overall, partners in Blackburn feel the project achieved good success in terms of attendance at the planned sessions – due to the promotion and the effort that was put into them. It is also felt that a good range/mix of art types were offered in the workshops, and that this was achieved due, in part, to the networks of the artists from Artichoke Studios, which enabled them to offer a good mix of art forms in the workshops.
- 4.40 The target participants for the formal sessions varied depending on the workshop topic, with some aimed specifically at family audiences, others at adults (e.g. the tattoo design), some for younger people, and some at students (e.g. artists' response). More generally, the target for the project of focusing on hard to reach groups (i.e. those that do not normally engage in learning) also influenced the type of workshops offered. For example, workshops on street dance, tattoo, and music/school of rock were aimed at such harder to engage groups.
- 4.41 An important aspect to the planning and delivery of the workshops was ensuring quality and that they were developed with a learning outcome/experience underpinning it. This was helped by the commitment and professionalism of the tutors and also the systems and processes that were in place. Each workshop tutor was issued with a brief for the workshops (outlining the purpose of the project, focus on learning, format and timing of the workshop, requirements of the workshop) and was also required to complete a workshop outline (covering title/description, tutor's practice/experience, workshop plan, resources required and how the workshop would contribute to the celebration event.)
- 4.42 Taunton also ran sessions (albeit that they seemed to offer fewer formal workshop type sessions than Blackburn) but had more of a focus on the drop in sessions. Some of the organised events at Taunton achieved poor attendances, audiences varying between 2 people and 15 people on occasion. Partners in Taunton also noted that it seemed easier to engage local people in the events and activities around the past and difficult to engage them in the events and activities around the future of Taunton.
- 4.43 Taunton offered a range of sessions, with these sessions reflecting the overall theme of past, present and future. Examples of topics covered in sessions included local history, climate change, sculpture, writing, art, local walks, talks on local projects and developments, current regeneration plans for the town.
- 4.44 Taunton's best attended sessions were thought to be those on regeneration, which shows there is interest in this topic. This may also have been helped by the specific marketing of these sessions via Project Taunton's e-bulletin to help promote the sessions.

- 4.45 In general, both projects achieved a good mix of sessions (covering heritage, arts, learning, regeneration, environment, and other topics), with Blackburn running more formal sessions and Taunton relying more on the drop in sessions.
- 4.46 One lesson (from Blackburn) related to some workshop events where they generated lots of interest, received lots of bookings for the event, but ended up with few attendees (e.g. the tattoo design).
- 4.47 This is thought to be a result of the fact that the events were free, meaning that people could book and then choose not to attend at no cost to themselves. Some possible solutions around this for future projects that are being contemplated include overbooking the sessions (on the assumption that every session will have some level of non-attendees) with another possibility being the introduction of a small charge for the events.

Partners and Partnership

- 4.48 Collaborative working between the key partners involved has underpinned the planning and delivery of the project, both in Blackburn and Taunton.
- 4.49 The key partners involved in Blackburn were: the Arts Service within Department of Culture, Leisure and Sport at Blackburn with Darwen Council, the Town Centre Regeneration Team at Blackburn with Darwen Council and Artichoke Studios.
- 4.50 All partners feel that the partnership working within Blackburn was very effective for this project. A key factor in this is felt to be the previous joint working and partnership working that these partners have been involved in with each other. A number of the key people knew each other already from previous projects and collaboration and this helped the project. Additionally, the local project manager in Blackburn is a local authority employee and is based in the town (and in close proximity to the project location) and this is also noted by partners as a positive factor to the effective joint working.
- 4.51 Partners also noted that alongside the previous experience of working together, that the partnership working for this project was also helped by key partners having the same goals for the project.
- 4.52 Whilst Regeneration Services and Arts Services within Blackburn with Darwen Council had worked together before, it is felt that the timeliness of the recent creation of the Cultural Planner post (which has been responsible for the local management of the Our Place project in Blackburn) has provided a 'physical link' between the departments and further enhanced the joint working.
- 4.53 The partnership working between both services within the local authority (Arts and Regeneration) and the artists from Artichoke Studios also worked very well. The artists were in place to facilitate, coordinate and deliver aspects of the programme, and their role also had them involved in finding the empty shop, furnishing it and helping to design the programme of activities. The enthusiasm, creativity and gregariousness of the artists is noted by partner as having a strong positive impact on all aspects of the project in Blackburn.
- 4.54 Importantly from the artists' perspectives, the local project manager for Blackburn is regarded as having been very effective, especially in getting things moving, dealing with any 'red tape' or bureaucracy etc. in order to ensure that the artists could focus on the delivery of the activities. The artists feel that they would not have achieved a lot of what has been achieved without this support.

- 4.55 Looking forward, the lessons from the project and the enhanced, more effective partnership working from the project are being taken forward – for example, there is now better collaboration around planning the summer events programme for Blackburn, and Regeneration and Arts Services now work more closely together.
- 4.56 The Taunton project was also underpinned by partnership working – the key partners were Project Taunton and Somerset Heritage Services, with support provided from Taunton Deane Borough Council. Associate partners included Thrive (a celebratory arts organisation for Somerset), Somerset Waterways Development Trust and Transition Town Taunton.
- 4.57 Project Taunton, who were approached by Living Places about the Our Place project, realised early on that they did not have the capacity to deliver the project on their own, so they approached Heritage Services at Somerset County Council (Learning Services specifically) to collaborate. This approach was built upon the fact that there had been previous partnership working between the partners, and also the fact that Project Taunton saw the opportunity the Our Place project would provide Heritage Services with to have a showcase whilst the museum was being renovated.
- 4.58 In contrast to Blackburn, where the local project manager is a locally based council employee, Taunton employed a consultant to help deliver the project. This was an important approach as it clearly helped to increase capacity to deliver the project, with both key partners having insufficient capacity to deliver it on their own. However, the fact that the consultant was not based locally was noted by some partners as being a factor that may have contributed to the length of time it took to get some aspects of the project sorted.
- 4.59 Generally speaking, the lesson from this links back to the limited time for project planning discussed in a previous section above. If an external person (e.g. a consultant) is involved, partners acknowledge that more planning time (both delivery planning but also strategic planning and linkages) is needed, and given the tight timescale for the project anyway, this was not possible. However, the use of external partners such as consultant also has some clear benefits (e.g. as well as helping to increase capacity, they can offer an external/fresh perspective on the planning and delivery of the project). In brief, there are pros and cons to the use of external capacity in this way, and these need to be considered carefully for future projects.
- 4.60 From an MLA perspective, Taunton took longer to get various aspects sorted out, and were slower to respond. This may have been partly due to factors beyond local control (staff absence, restructure in services, issues with weather etc.) – however, it may also be due to the use of external (i.e. consultant and not local authority based) delivery capacity.
- 4.61 In terms of other partners, Taunton tried to engage with the local college, but this proved to be difficult for a couple of reasons. First, it was difficult to identify a general contact at the college that could provide the support/linkage required. Second, it is thought that the time of year (in the middle of an academic year) and the tight timescale for the development and delivery of the project did not help. This is regarded as a missed opportunity by partners in Taunton, given the links the college could have provided to learning opportunities. Had there been additional time, partners in Taunton would have done things differently to engage the college. Taunton did receive support from both Taunton Deane Borough Council and Transition Taunton – both of these partners were helpful.

- 4.62 Both projects also worked with MLA before and during the delivery of the project, and this support was appreciated as the MLA coordinating role provided the projects with extra capacity and capability.
- 4.63 It was also intended that the two projects would learn from each other, exchanging ideas etc.. MLA supported and encouraged this type of engagement and partnership between the two locations.
- 4.64 Unfortunately, such engagement was limited, and only happened towards the end of the project when the artists from Blackburn visited the Taunton project to share experiences.
- 4.65 Given that the projects are clearly different (in terms of: topic – heritage in Taunton compared to arts in Blackburn; delivery – workshops focus in Blackburn compared to a drop in focus on Taunton; and that they both were about their own local communities and therefore place specific in terms of content) this lack of exchange is not too surprising. In addition, the strong focus on delivery given timescales and the limited capacity may also have played a part in making such cross location engagement more difficult. Finally, simple geography (i.e. that the projects are quite a distance apart) may have played a part in the lack of interaction.
- 4.66 However, such engagement (cross-fertilisation of ideas about all aspects of the project – design, delivery, promotion etc.) at an earlier stage would probably have been helpful.
- 4.67 Finally, but very importantly, both projects benefitted from the level of commitment from key staff who made sure that the projects delivered. The level of commitment was important as it required significant planning and delivery time from key staff to make sure the projects ran well.

Marketing and Promotion

- 4.68 Both projects carried out a range of activities around promotion and marketing of the shop in general and of specific workshops and activities. This was an important aspect of both projects given that, in slightly different ways, they needed to compensate for location limitations by maximising the publicity, promotion and marketing of the project.
- 4.69 First, both projects used the web as a means of promotion, with Blackburn developing a new website (www.popblackburn.co.uk) as well as a blog (<http://popblackburn.blogspot.com>). Blackburn report that the number of visits to the website until 13th March 2010 (the day of the celebration event was 2,261).
- 4.70 Taunton used the existing Project Taunton website (<http://www.projecttaunton.co.uk/taunton-now/our-place-your-place.html>) rather than creating a new website specifically for the project.
- 4.71 In addition to the websites, a wide variety of other marketing and promotion routes were used. Examples of the approaches taken are summarised below:
- Blackburn managed to get good promotion and publicity when Radio Lancashire broadcast from the Blackburn shop in late February – this provided good coverage of the project.
 - The artists in Blackburn also went out into the street and wandered round the town centre promoting the project to get people interested in the project and

publicise what was going on. A leaflet was produced and distributed to key locations (such as Sure Start centres, libraries, and the museum) and was also handed out in the town centre when the artists were wandering round promoting the project.

- In Blackburn the artists also went out into the street to engage the young people that congregate in Church Street, an approach that took some time to become effective, but which is felt to have been successful by the end of the project.
- A key promotion route for Blackburn was The Shuttle (the local council newspaper). Although there was a cost in terms of resources, it is thought that it positively (and significantly) impacted on the numbers of people visiting the shop. In addition, the whole Our Place programme of events for Blackburn was included in the local monthly 'What's On' guide.
- Blackburn also took the time to chat to each person that walked through the door at the shop, talking them through the programme/diary of events to see what else they may be interested in. This helped to increase attendance at events linking people to other learning opportunities.
- From Taunton's perspective, an important element in terms of promotion was the TV screen in the shop window. This allowed the project to provide information 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This was a key publicity mechanism, and it also resulted in many of the people passing by the shop stopping and dropping in to see what the project was about.
- Taunton managed to achieve good publicity by being featured on the regional ITV news and the project also featured in a variety of other local media (e.g. project partners/staff carried out a range of radio interviews). In addition, the project also appeared in the local weekly newspaper.
- In terms of wider profile BBC Radio broadcast from the Taunton shop as part of the BBC A History of the World project. All of this TV/press publicity is thought to have significantly helped raise the profile of the Taunton project.
- Taunton also produced a leaflet which achieved wide distribution across the town, and the project also engaged the PR Team at Project Taunton, who are well experienced and especially successful at community engagement.

4.72 Overall, Taunton partners feel that the marketing worked very well. The challenges that were faced related to the time available to set the programme (and thereafter get the promotional material about it produced) and also in getting some potential partners to commit to providing the workshop sessions.

4.73 In summary, specific successes in terms of marketing were quite location specific, (e.g. for Taunton partner perceptions identified the use of the 24 hour TV display in the shop window in Taunton, as well as word of mouth, and footfall from people passing as the most effective promotion mechanisms whilst Blackburn partners feel that the use of The Shuttle newspaper and the website/blog as well as the on street promotion were most effective.

4.74 In terms of lessons for future projects, partners noted that the effort and resources required to develop and implement effective marketing should not be underestimated.

4.75 The specific project marketing and promotion in Blackburn and Taunton were supported by general marketing for the overall project by MLA. For example, MLA (through their communications team) produced press releases – for the project in general and specifically for both Blackburn and Taunton. In addition, information was disseminated via the Living Places newsletter and the Living

Places website (www.living-places.org.uk), ensuring that wider interest in the project was stimulated which resulted in relevant magazines expressing interest in writing articles about the project (e.g. New Start).

5. IMPACT AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE 'OUR PLACE' PROJECT

Introduction to Section 5

5.1 This section of the report considers the achievements and impacts of the project to date, assessing the intended impacts of the project, the achievements thus far (focusing on the level of participation (and where possible the types of participants), as well as the emerging impacts – especially the community impacts, informal learning impacts, the business/economy impacts, and achievements of the project in giving local people opportunity to be involved in plans for the town.

Intended Impacts of Our Place Project

5.2 As outlined in Section 3, the project target outcomes regarding the key objective (i.e. learning) were:

- At least 5 new volunteers
- 340 people attending core sessions
- 1800 people dropping in for information or to explore what is on offer
- At least 20 learners continuing learning beyond the project, including via online and distance learning
- At least 5 learners reporting increased vocational skills.

Achievements

Participation

5.3 In terms of participation, data provided by the two projects is summarised below to show the weekly levels of participation achieved.

Week commencing	Workshop attendees	Drop ins	Total
1 st February	103	94	197
8 th February	52	226	278
15 th February (half term)	112	200	312
22 nd February	53	163	216
1 st March	108	154	262
8 th March	47	289	336
TOTAL	475	1126	1601

Source: Summary project information

Week commencing	Total Number of Participants
8 th February	822
15 th February (half term)	847
22 nd February	726
1 st March	657
8 th March	493
15 th March	603
TOTAL	4,148

Source: Summary project information

- 5.4 Taken in aggregate, and at first glance, the overall level of participation compares very favourably to the target. A total of 5,749 participants (1,601 from Blackburn and 4,148 from Taunton) compared to the total target of 2,140 (1,800 drop ins plus 340 attending core sessions) equates to 286% of the aggregate target.
- 5.5 Whilst the data for Taunton does not split out the participants at the core sessions, the data from Blackburn alone shows that the project has achieved (and exceeded) the target of 340 people attending core sessions, with Blackburn having a total of 475 such attendees – equating to 140% of target.
- 5.6 However, this overwhelming result needs to be treated with some caution, due to a lack of detail in some of the data.
- First, the numbers above are number of visits, not number of visitors. Both projects have noted that they did have a (high) number of repeat visitors, and therefore the numbers quoted in both the Tables above would reduce when this was taken into account to reflect that the target is number of people rather than number of visits.
 - Second, although, this reduction would also be counter-balanced by the fact that partners believe the systems used to count visits have under counted the total number of visits, so the actual number of visits may be higher.
- 5.7 On balance (and in the absence of visitor specific data), it is reasonable to assume that the targets for both people at core sessions and people at drop ins have reached their target.
- 5.8 Unfortunately, the other learning targets (i.e. number of volunteers, number of learners continuing beyond the project, number reporting increased vocational skills) cannot be assessed. Whilst this is partly due to the fact that data to enable projects to report on these targets does not seem to have been collected, it is also because at the current time (i.e. just two to three weeks after the projects have stopped delivering) these targets will not yet have been reached as they are longer term targets.
- 5.9 As well as the lack of data to report on these learning targets, there is also no data available on the demographic and other socio-economic and ethnic characteristics of people attending. Perspectives from some key partners have been collected and are summarised below. However, it should be noted that this is based on anecdotal evidence and subjective views. Before these are summarised, issues around collecting the data are considered.
- 5.10 Whilst the lack of data on demography and the other target learning outputs does make it difficult to assess some of the achievements of the project, the reasons behind this need to be appreciated.
- 5.11 Both locations have noted that, given the target/focus of informal learning for the project there is an inherent difficulty with collecting some of the data that would be required to show some of the learning achievements.
- 5.12 Given the focus of the project on informal learning with hard to reach groups, both locations have noted that informality for the project/activities was a key/critical success factor for both locations in engaging with target participants. It was felt by partners that having not having to collect information or get participants to complete paperwork for the project was important in achieving and maintaining their engagement. Partners do acknowledge that this makes it more difficult to measure the impact of some aspects of the project.

- 5.13 Therefore a balance between collecting the data required to show impact and the type of participants in the project and providing a level of informality to the projects that helps to ensure engagement needs to be reached.
- 5.14 Whilst this is a difficult balance to reach, it may be that collecting some of this information in a relaxed and informal way (perhaps through some type of participatory research format or through the use of technology – either via websites for the project, or via appropriate technology located on site at the projects) may allow the data to be collected without adversely affecting the informal format of the learning sessions. This should be considered for future projects.
- 5.15 Also, given the target outcomes around continuation of learning, there may be some merit in contemplating a level of post project monitoring (e.g. a 3 month follow up). However, this would be entirely contingent on addressing the issues noted above about collecting information and data on participants during the project delivery.
- 5.16 Looking back at the information on participation in the tables set out above, and based on feedback from partners, participation in **Taunton** started high and dropped steadily throughout the project until the celebration event week. Whilst it is difficult to identify why this was, partners feel that this may have been due to a change of theme (from the past towards the present/future for Taunton), or alternatively, that there was a peak of interest early on in the project and that this tailed off subsequently (a pattern that would be expected with a project like this).
- 5.17 No information has been provided about the core/formal session attendance in Taunton, but partner perception is that the planned sessions in Taunton faced some challenges.
- 5.18 Whilst demographic data is not available, partner feedback seems to suggest that the two projects attracted quite different audiences – e.g. Taunton attracting a greater number of older people (those aged 50+), with Blackburn participants having a younger profile. Taunton also noted that the demographic for participants changed on Saturdays with more 20-45 year olds attending. They did not get many younger people (i.e. under 25's).
- 5.19 The projects also noted that different activities attracted different groups – e.g. reminiscence type activities had an older audience, whilst half term activities (and weekend) resulted in more family attendees.
- 5.20 Feedback from partners in **Blackburn** suggests that the project attracted more children than expected and fewer adults than expected at the sessions. Beyond this partners feel that they achieved a good mix in terms of other demographic factors (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, and ability).
- 5.21 Blackburn also achieved good engagement with the young people that congregate on Church Street – this took some effort and a variety of attempts by the project staff, but eventually they managed to engage with the young people, including some who were very reticent at the start, but did eventually engage with the project.
- 5.22 A general lesson from the project, again linking back (to some extent) to the timing issue, is that evaluation for the overall project, and for each location specifically, was not fully embedded into the project from the outset. Given timescale, it is not surprising that the focus for all partners was on project design

and delivery, however, had evaluation been built into the project early on, this would have enabled a more consistent approach to measuring and demonstrating the impact of the project to be achieved.

- 5.23 It should also be noted that some of the intended impacts are longer term and will be difficult to measure at the current time. It is intended that the final report will include some case studies of individual participants to provide examples of project impact. For the moment, the information below is drawn on the stakeholder consultations and secondary information provided by the projects.
- 5.24 As well as the participation impacts discussed above, the project has also had a range of impacts – in terms of community, learning, economy, and involvement in regeneration plans, and other outcomes. Each of these is discussed in turn below. It should be noted that the findings below are drawn from stakeholder and partner consultations and not participant consultations or survey.

Community Impacts

- 5.25 Key community impacts relate to the delivery of the project contributing towards community cohesion – something which partners at both projects feel they have achieved.
- 5.26 Partners in both Blackburn and Taunton report that they have managed to bring different age groups of people together through both the activities/workshops delivered and the drop in sessions. In addition, the projects have helped to engage with families (especially with the half term week and weekend activities) and this has enabled them to bring families together in an informal learning environment.
- 5.27 Blackburn partners felt that the mix of attendees (i.e. the demographic and ethnic mix achieved) helped to support community cohesion. Furthermore, it was noted that for the weekend events that were aimed at children, younger children that attended were escorted by parents/adults, and therefore the project also brought different groups of adults together who would not otherwise be engaging in that type of environment.
- 5.28 Taunton partners noted that local people reported engaging more with their elderly neighbours as a result of the project – through the reminiscence activities and the heritage elements of the project. Engagement such as this is viewed as contributing to community cohesion.
- 5.29 As well as the community cohesion elements, it is also felt (by partners in Blackburn) that the project offered diversionary activities for young people (especially those that congregate in the Church Street area of the town) – an achievement that potentially has a number of community impacts.

Learning Impacts

- 5.30 As noted above, the key target for the project was to impact on informal learning. The key achievements of project have been around the informal learning as exemplified by numbers of participant noted in the section above.
- 5.31 Whilst the numbers, as noted above, relate to the number of visits rather than visitors/learners, the aggregate numbers for both drop-ins and formal sessions have, based on the data available, well exceeded the target numbers.

- 5.32 As discussed earlier in this section, the other learning targets cannot be assessed, due to a lack of relevant data and the timing of this evaluation (this is a lesson for such projects in the future in terms of project planning). Whilst it is challenging, developing a system that could allow the data to be collected without compromising the strength of informality of the delivery of the project should be considered.
- 5.33 Additionally, in terms of positive lessons learned for other projects, it is felt that the informality of the project has been important. Partners note that other (more formal) programmes of learning tend to push participants towards certain courses/activities – the flexibility that the project has had is regarded as an important positive success factor. The informality also enabled the project to design the programme of activities to the people attending rather than forcing them to do certain courses.
- 5.34 As well as directly providing the informal learning environment, the projects also signposted participants onto other (both formal and informal) learning activities. For example, Taunton promoted the courses of the Somerset Schools for Learning, whilst Blackburn provided informal signposting to Blackburn College.
- 5.35 In addition to signposting to learning opportunities, both projects signposted individuals into routes to volunteering, whilst Blackburn partners also note that the project served as a general information point.
- 5.36 Another form of learning impact, above and beyond the learning impacts on participants, is exemplified by the tutors for the Blackburn workshops, who are thought to have further developed and learned through the experience of delivering the workshops, resulting in learning impacts for the workshop tutors as well. Furthermore, upon reflection the artists in Blackburn also feel that they have benefitted – for example, linking what they have learned in the workshops to their own artistic output.
- 5.37 Both projects have examples of individuals who have been stimulated and encouraged to look at other routes to learning or volunteering as a result of the project – some of these are presented at the end of this report section.
- 5.38 Finally, both locations noted that (in different ways) the project has allowed people who would not normally engage in cultural activity (e.g. by visiting a museum, gallery etc.) to do so.

Business/Economy Impacts

- 5.39 As well as the participation, learning and community impacts outlined above, there are also economic benefits of empty shops projects such as Our Place. These can be achieved by bringing the shop back into commercial use, where the project shows potential occupants how the shop can be used, that the shop can attract customers and so on. Both Blackburn and Taunton have managed to achieve this.
- 5.40 First, the shop that was used for the Our Place project in Blackburn has been leased by a business and it will be occupied from July this year. It is felt that through the Our Place project, with the artists showing what can be done with the premises, the project contributed to the premises being taken up on a commercial basis. It is felt by partners in Blackburn that if the project had not happened, the shop would have remained empty – probably until Christmas 2010.

- 5.41 Second, partners in Taunton understand that the lease on the unit used for the Our Place project there has also been taken up, or will be taken up in the near future for commercial use. This impact is also believed to be at least partly due to the Our Place project.

Involvement in Plans

- 5.42 One of the other main objectives of the project (see Section 3) was: "To give local people opportunity to be involved in plans for the town." Taunton and Blackburn both achieved this through the workshops and events delivered as part of the programme of activities.
- 5.43 In Taunton, the elements of the programme that addressed the present and future included activities about Project Taunton, outlining the background, progress to date and future plans for the town. The project also included presentations and activities about other developments in the town (including the castle, the cricket ground, the Brewhouse etc.
- 5.44 Engagement of participants in this aspect of Our Place in Taunton is also shown by the sample of extracts from the comments book used by Taunton to collect participants' views about the town.
- 5.45 In Blackburn, some of the workshops had a regeneration theme – such as the public art workshop, in addition to which the Environmental Champions workshops allowed people to learn about practical ways to improve their community.
- 5.46 These events in both locations were well attended, with Taunton partners describing the events around about regeneration of the town as being the best attended.

Products, National Resource, Outcomes for Delivery Partners

- 5.47 In addition to the above impacts, the other target outcomes for the project related to products and national resources to be developed, and a range of outcomes for delivery partners.
- 5.48 The main products to be developed were two community archives – one for each location, and also two creative productions – again one for each location.
- 5.49 The plan for the **community archives** was for these to be developed through the Peoples Record, and support was provided to both locations via a community archives consultant to help enable this.
- 5.50 Feedback from partners seems to suggest that Taunton were more engaged in this aspect of the project – perhaps supported by the heritage focus of the programme of activities compared to Blackburn's more arts focused programme.
- 5.51 It was originally planned that Taunton's attempts at developing this aspect of the project would be supported by volunteers (Friends of the Museum) who would help with cataloguing and other activities required. However, it became apparent that there were issues around the volunteers' capacity and capability to engage in this side of the project. There was reluctance on the part of the volunteers to engage in what was a very new activity/skill, and something they had not been involved in previously.

- 5.52 Notwithstanding the above issues, activity did take place in both locations, and partners' expectations remain that both Taunton and Blackburn will eventually produce a community archive.
- 5.53 In terms of lessons from the Our Place project for other empty shops with regard to community archives, it should be noted that community archiving was one aspect of the 'top down' element of the project. Experience from elsewhere would suggest that there are not many (if any) examples of community archives being developed as part of other empty shop projects. This may be due to the fact that to develop proper community archives takes significant time, capacity, capability and skills etc. – and that the timescale and capacity (specifically for Our Place, but more generally for empty shops projects) may be too tight to achieve this. A potential consideration for any future projects could be the extent to which the inclusion of training for those to be involved in the community archiving elements of the project is included as part of project planning and design (allowing for sufficient timescale).
- 5.54 The development of '**creative productions**' from both projects is also being achieved. Taunton is producing a DVD of the project, whilst Blackburn is producing a commemorative book of their project – to celebrate what was achieved.
- 5.55 The national '**how to**' guide and other online resources is currently being developed and will be completed shortly and hosted on the Living Places website.
- 5.56 In terms of the **outcomes for delivery partners**, feedback from partners carried out during this evaluation suggests that many aspects of this have already been achieved. First, the Museum of Somerset feel that they have achieved both an increased profile and improved connection with community, whilst partners feel that Blackburn Museum has also increased its connectivity through the project. The only challenge on this aspect seems to have been the extent to which Taunton has managed to recruit and retain new volunteers. Second, regeneration in both town (via Project Taunton and Blackburn Town Centre Team) feel they have achieved improved involvement with communities (as outlined in the *Involvement in Plans* section above).
- 5.57 One aspect that was outlined in the original application that does not seem to have happened for either project is effective engagement with 2012 Cultural Olympiad activities – this was a particular frustration for Taunton who had planned for a session on this topic, which did not happen for reasons beyond the local team's control.

Feedback from Participants

- 5.58 Whilst the survey of participants being implemented as part of this evaluation is still ongoing, some feedback from participants is available at the moment – drawn from feedback drawn from consultations with the project staff in both Blackburn and Taunton and also from comments submitted to the projects – either via comments books, emails sent to the projects or second hand feedback.
- 5.59 The feedback summarised below shows that participants views' provide additional evidence of impact that support the findings presented above.

"It's a really welcoming, comfortable place to come relax, learn about local artists, get inspiration and do your own work 😊". (Blackburn College Student)

"All the young people enjoyed this and managed to sit quietly throughout the story. They really enjoyed the murder stories and talked about this with each other afterwards." (Comment from leader of group of young people that attended a session in Blackburn)

"It was very interesting learning some of the history of where we live and where a lot of us have been brought up." (Comment from leader of group of young people that attended a session in Blackburn)

"If anyone had suggested that our young people would be able to sit and listen for over 2 hours without losing interest I wouldn't have believed it. Now I know they can!!!!!" (Comment from leader of group of young people that attended a session in Blackburn)

"Very interesting. Could be repeated with more displays?" (Taunton comment book)

"It was nice to look around and see the many items around the project" (Taunton comment book)

"What a lovely idea – enjoyed by the children – 10, 11 and 13 years" (Taunton comment book)

"Fantastic! This is something we should have as a permanently! It would make people appreciate what they had and what they have got" (Taunton comment book)

"Very interesting exhibits, very well organised and friendly helpful staff. We shall tell our friends they should visit" (Taunton comment book)

"What a treat to see this project. The TV induction will catch your eye and you can't help to walk in" (Taunton comment book)

"Brilliant" (Taunton comment book)

"Very interesting indeed" (Taunton comment book)

"Most interesting to see things we knew as a child, showing Taunton how it was" (Taunton comment book)

"Fantastic study of Taunton past present and future. I will bring in some items and to display" (Taunton comment book)

"I think that this shop is amazing. Can't wait till the museum is open" (Taunton comment book)

"Wonderful trip down memory lane" (Taunton comment book)

"Excellent historical info. Can it be archived?" (Taunton comment book)

"So interesting – a very worthwhile project and should be repeated. Well done" (Taunton comment book)

"So nice to have you in such a visible space in the town not just tucked away in a dusty little office" (Taunton comment book)

"Should be permanent!" (Taunton comment book)

6. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE OUR PLACE PROJECT

Introduction to Section 6

- 6.1 This section of the report considers the lessons that can be learned from the Our Place project, and assesses the key lessons from the Blackburn and Taunton Our Place empty shops, and also looks at the legacy from this project in Blackburn and Taunton.

Key Lessons from the Blackburn and Taunton Our Place Project

- 6.2 There are a number of lessons from this project – drawn from the experience of partners in Blackburn and/or Taunton as well as MLA partners. The key lessons, that may be important for future similar activity in Blackburn and Taunton, as well as other empty shops projects elsewhere in the country are summarised below.

Timescale:

The timescale and lead in time for planning and delivery for this project is acknowledged by all partners involved as having been limited. The key lesson for any future similar empty shops projects is that the lead in time for planning at both the overall project level and especially in terms of the local delivery must be sufficient.

Premises:

Finding appropriate premises for each location of the project is very important. It needs to be noted that the task of finding the most appropriate shop location, engaging and completing the process of negotiating with the landlord and finalising the lease can take a significant amount of time.

Programme of Activities:

Having a varied programme of activities is regarded as important for a range of reasons. For example, it can help enable engagement with a wide variety of groups who may be interested in different topics. Also, factors that have contributed towards the high levels of participation include having an open door policy (and ensuring a good mix between the use of drop in sessions and more formal workshop sessions), and having consistent opening hours so that potential participants clearly know when they can visit.

Informality is regarded as a key factor in the success of the project, especially compared to other (more formal) programmes of learning that tend to push participants towards certain courses/activities – the flexibility of the project is an important factor.

A key aspect of project planning was developing the project to allow for local delivery to be sufficiently flexible to suit the localities (i.e. the towns) in which the project was being delivered. Both locations feel that this flexibility (by allowing the local projects to start with a 'skeleton' framework and ensure that the programme developed fits the local area) on the programme of activities has been a key success factor.

Other lessons around the programme of activities relate to the timescale of delivery (six weeks) and also the timing of delivery (February to March) – with some partners contemplating whether longer term delivery alongside delivery at other times of the year may be more appropriate.

Resources:

All of those involved have noted that Our Place has been a 'labour intensive' project that has required a significant amount of staff time and resource. This needs to be fully appreciated in any future such projects. Linked to this is that the partners believe that success of the project has been partly due to the level of resources available which has enabled key activities (such as marketing and promotion) to be sufficiently resourced.

Promotion:

A range of factors made both shop locations challenging, and therefore a significant amount of effort and resources were committed to publicity, promotion and marketing of the projects, which proved to be successful (as measured by participation level) – the requirement for such promotional activity needs to be recognised.

Both projects carried out a range of activities around promotion and marketing of the shops in general and of specific workshops and activities. Key routes used included radio (local and national); TV; local newspapers (including paying for advertisements); town centre outreach; leaflet distribution to specific venues/locations; 24 hour TV in shop window, and word of mouth.

Partnership

Both locations showed that partnership working is a key aspect of the planning and delivery of such projects, and that receiving the time commitment from partners is important. Previous experience of working together is a contributory factor to effective partnership working (as it will have allowed trust to develop between partners), as is having a shared vision/goal for the project.

In cases where there has not been previous experience of joint working, partnership working can take time to develop.

The use of external capability and capacity can be beneficial; however, more planning time may be needed to incorporate this. The use of external partners has clear benefits (as well as helping to increase capacity, it can offer an external/fresh perspective). In brief, there are costs and benefits to the use of external capacity, and these need to be considered carefully for future projects.

Sharing experiences and ideas between different locations seems to have been of limited use for some partners, partly due to the differences in approach taken by the projects. Attempts to achieve this in the future needs to recognise the focus will be on local planning and delivery, especially when timescales are tight.

Measuring Impact

There are lessons and considerations around measuring some of the planned impacts of the project. Achievements towards some of the learning targets have not been able to be assessed. This is partly due to the data not having been collected and also because some targets will not yet have been reached as they are longer term targets. In addition, there is limited data available on the demographic and other socio-economic and characteristics of participants.

Both locations have noted that, given the target/focus of informal learning for the project (and the importance of informality as a success factor for the project) there is an inherent difficulty with collecting some of the data that would be required to show some of the learning achievements, as it may compromise initial engagement and ongoing participation of some target groups.

A balance between collecting impact data and providing informality needs to be reached. Whilst this is a difficult balance to reach, it may be that collecting some of this information in a relaxed and informal way (perhaps through some type of participatory research format or the appropriate use of technology) may allow the

data to be collected without adversely affecting the informal format of the learning sessions. This should be considered for future projects.

Also, given the target outcomes around continuation of learning, there may be some merit in contemplating a level of post project monitoring (e.g. a 3 month follow up).

Community archives

Lessons from the Our Place project for community archives, should note that community archiving was one of the 'top down' elements of the project and experience from elsewhere suggests that there are not many examples of community archives being developed as part of other empty shop projects.

Developing community archives takes significant time, capacity, capability and skills and the timescale and capacity for Our Place may be too tight to achieve this. A consideration for future projects could be the extent to which the inclusion of community archive training is included as part of project planning/design rather than delivery stages (allowing for sufficient timescale).

Legacy of the Our Place Project for Blackburn and Taunton

- 6.3 In terms of the legacy of the project, there are a number of aspects of this worth mentioning.
- The use of empty shops is an activity that has been carried out in Blackburn previously (such projects are used to help to make the street look better, bring the shops back into use, help to ensure that there is activity on the street, and increase the cultural offer in the town). Based on the Our Place project, Blackburn partners note that the joint working has improved between the various partners – with one partner describing how they have moved to a scenario where people are now better focused and better understand the skills of each other, improving the partnership working.
 - Looking forward, Blackburn (along with other local authorities in the sub region) is in receipt of funding from central government for empty shops projects, and this is being matched with funds from the Arts Council to provide a range of empty shops projects across Pennine Lancashire that focus on artists/creative businesses. These projects will deliver empty shops projects and will also provide support to artists/creative businesses (who will deliver activity in the shops in 4 week blocks) to develop, grow and move towards sustainability.
 - Taunton partners are also considering the legacy of the Our Place project in their area, and meetings have been taking place to consider the various options in terms of sustaining the project into the future – either in another location, or via a more flexible approach that does not use a single location.
 - In addition to the future delivery of empty shops in both locations, the legacy of the project also includes many of the aspects noted earlier in this report – i.e. the achievements around participation, the learning outcomes, the community cohesion outcomes, the business impacts, as well as the creative productions (i.e. the book and DVD), the community archives, and the 'how to' guide.

APPENDIX 1: BLACKBURN CASE STUDY

Our Place - Blackburn

The Our Place project aimed to transform empty shops in both Blackburn and Taunton into accessible creative and learning centres. The overall aim of the Our Place project in Blackburn was to provide creative and learning centres in an empty shop, with a focus on presenting a learning offer that will support people to start engaging more actively with the changes in their community.

It was underpinned by the vision that to be successful and sustainable, regeneration programmes need communities of confident, curious, critical and creative people to engage with and help direct the regeneration process.

POP: Project Our Place – Arts in the heart of Blackburn was an arts focused programme, co-ordinated by local artists to celebrate Blackburn and its community. The project was run for the Arts Services and Town Centre Regeneration teams of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council by artists from Artichoke Studios.

<http://www.popblackburn.co.uk/>

What?

Blackburn suffers from high levels of unemployment and informal learning was viewed as the first step for many such adults to access training and routes into employment. Other local factors included extensive regeneration in the town centre, as well as a lack of easily accessible informal learning environments. The project provided an opportunity to create a neutral, secular and informal environment in the town.

The programme of activities included arts related workshops and events – covering a range of topics including drawing, painting, performance, poetry, music and dancing - as well as workshops about regeneration, the environment, and museums.

In total Blackburn ran 24 formal workshop sessions, and partners felt the project achieved good attendance – due to promotion and the effort that was put into the events themselves. Target participants for the formal sessions varied depending on the workshop topic, with some aimed specifically at family audiences, others at adults, younger people, or students. More generally, the target for the project of focusing on hard to reach groups (i.e. those that do not normally engage in learning) also influenced the type of workshops offered. For example, specific workshop themes were designed to appeal at harder to engage groups.

When?

POP provided six weeks of activity in the shop, running from 1st February until 13th March 2010.

How?

The project received funding totalling £50,000 from The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Skills Learning Revolution Transformation Fund.

Collaborative working between the key partners involved has underpinned the planning and delivery of the project, and all partners feel that the partnership working within Blackburn was very effective for this project. A key factor is the joint working that these partners have been involved in previously with each other. In addition, the enthusiasm,

creativity and gregariousness of the artists had a strong positive impact on all aspects of the project, as did the role of the local project manager (which is a joint post between Regeneration Services and Arts Services within Blackburn with Darwen Council)

Marketing and promotion was an important aspect of POP especially given the need to compensate for location limitations. Key routes that proved effective are thought to be the website and blog, local radio, directly approaching people in the town, distributing leaflets, and placing an advert in the local council newspaper. In terms of lessons for future projects, partners noted that the effort and resources required to develop and implement effective marketing should not be underestimated.

Summary: Impact and Outcome of the project

In terms of participation levels, POP received a total of 1,601 visits (well exceeding the target) which was a combination of 475 workshop attendees, and 1,126 drop in visits.

Further impacts from the project included:

- **Community Impacts:** In particular supporting community/social cohesion, which was achieved by bringing different age groups together through the workshops and drop in sessions, as well as engaging with families in an informal learning environment. POP also offered diversionary activities for young people (especially those that congregate in the town) – something that potentially has a number of community impacts.
- **Learning Impacts:** As well as directly providing the informal learning environment, the projects also signposted participants onto other (both formal and informal) learning activities – e.g. through the local colleges. Other learning impacts included the development of the workshop tutors themselves, individual participants that have been stimulated and encouraged to look at other routes to learning or volunteering as a result of the project, and also people who would not normally engage in cultural activity (e.g. by visiting a museum, gallery etc.) being able to do so.
- **Business/Economy Impacts:** There have also been business/economic benefits Our Place, in that the empty shop used is being brought back into commercial use in the near future, and it is thought that the Our Place project showing what can be done with the premises contributed to this.
- **Involvement in Plans:** The project also gave local people opportunity to be involved in plans for the town, with some workshops having a regeneration theme.
- **Products and resources:** POP is also producing a community archive, a commemorative book, and is contributing to the development of a national 'how to' guide.

Evaluation

An evaluation of POP was carried out and the key lessons for other empty shops projects related to:

- The importance of having a sufficient **timescale** to plan and deliver all aspects of the project.
- Finding **appropriate premises** is very important, and the task of finding and securing an appropriate shop location can take a **significant amount of time**.
- Offering a **varied programme** of activities (good mix between drop in and workshop sessions), maintaining an **open door** policy, and having consistent opening hours are important in helping enable engagement with a wide variety of groups.

- **Informality** of learning offered is a key success factor, as is developing the project to allow for local delivery to be sufficiently flexible to suit the localities.
- Our Place is a 'labour intensive' project that **required a significant amount of staff time** and resource. This needs to be fully appreciated in any future such projects.
- A significant amount of effort and resources were committed to publicity, promotion and marketing, which proved to be successful (as measured by participation level) – the **requirement for promotional activity** needs to be recognised.
- **Partnership working** is a key aspect of the planning and delivery of such projects, and receiving time commitment from partners is important. Previous experience of working together is a contributory factor to effective partnership working (as it will have allowed trust to develop between partners), as is having a shared vision/goal for the project.
- **Measuring Impact:** A balance between collecting impact data and providing informality needs to be reached. Whilst this is a difficult, it may be that collecting some of this information in a relaxed and informal way may allow the data to be collected without adversely affecting the informal format of the learning sessions. This should be considered for future projects.

Future Developments

Empty shops projects have been used previously in Blackburn (such projects are typically used to help to make the street look better, bring the shops back into use, help to ensure that there is activity on the street, and increase the cultural offer in the town).

Blackburn (along with other local authorities in Pennine Lancashire) is in receipt of funding from central government for empty shops projects, and this is being matched with funds from the Arts Council to provide a range of empty shops projects across Pennine Lancashire that focus on artists/creative businesses. These projects will deliver empty shops projects and will also provide support to artists/creative businesses to develop, grow and move towards sustainability.

Contact details

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APPENDIX 2: TAUNTON CASE STUDY

Our Place - Taunton

The Our Place project aimed to transform empty shops in both Blackburn and Taunton into accessible creative and learning centres. The overall aim of the Our Place project in Taunton was to provide creative and learning centres in empty shop, with a focus on presenting a learning offer that will support people to start engaging more actively with the changes in their community.

It was underpinned by the vision that to be successful and sustainable, regeneration programmes need communities of confident, curious, critical and creative people to engage with and help direct the regeneration process.

Our Place, Your Place: Taunton was a heritage focused project that aimed to bring the local residents together to share memories, thoughts and pictures of the town as well as learn about how Taunton is changing. The focus of the programme was built around Taunton's past, present and future, with the first three weeks focusing on the past, and the second three focusing on the present and future of Taunton.

The two main partners were Project Taunton and Somerset Heritage Services, with support provided from Taunton Deane Borough Council. Associate partners included Thrive (a celebratory arts organisation for Somerset), Somerset Waterways Development Trust and Transition Town Taunton.

<http://www.projecttaunton.co.uk/taunton-now/our-place-your-place.html>

What?

Taunton suffers from high levels of unemployment and informal learning was viewed as the first step for many such adults to access training and routes into employment. Other local factors included regeneration in the town centre, as well as a lack of easily accessible informal learning environments. Taunton lacks a town centre based learning institution, and local research has shown that travel distance, time and cost are barriers to participation.

The project theme linked very well to the current developments in the town. The museum is currently closed for renovation, and a new heritage centre is in development. Therefore the 'heritage' past, present and future theme worked well, and provided an opportunity for local people to engage in heritage whilst the museum was closed.

Taunton ran workshop sessions with a focus on informal drop in sessions. Results suggest that there was successful engagement of local people in the events and activities around the past element of the heritage theme. Taunton offered a range of sessions, with these sessions reflecting the overall theme of past, present and future. Examples of topics covered in sessions included local history, climate change, sculpture, writing, art, local walks, talks on local projects and developments, current regeneration plans for the town.

When?

Our Place, Your Place: Taunton provided six weeks of activity running from 8th February to 20th March 2010.

How?

The project received funding totalling £50,000 from The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Skills Learning Revolution Transformation Fund.

The project was underpinned by partnership working – the key partners were Project Taunton and Somerset Heritage Services, with support provided from Taunton Deane Borough Council. The approach was built upon previous partnership working between the partners, and the opportunity the Our Place project would provide Heritage Services with to have a showcase whilst the museum was being renovated.

Taunton employed an external consultant to help deliver the project, and this was important as it clearly helped to increase capacity to deliver, with key partners having insufficient capacity to deliver it otherwise. Whilst the use of such external partners has some clear benefits (e.g. as well as helping to increase capacity, they can offer an external/fresh perspective on the planning and delivery of the project), more planning time (both delivery planning and strategic planning and linkages) is required in such circumstances, and this needs to be considered carefully for future projects.

Marketing and promotion was an important aspect of Our Place, Your Place: Taunton especially given the need to compensate for location limitations. Key routes that proved effective are thought to be the use of the 24 hour TV screen in the shop window, being featured on the regional ITV news, achieving (national) profile via a radio broadcast from the shop as part of the BBC A History of the World project, and a variety of other local media (radio interviews and local newspaper). Support from the PR Team at Project Taunton, who are well experienced at community engagement also helped with this. In terms of lessons for future projects, partners noted that the effort and resources required to develop and implement effective marketing should not be underestimated.

Summary: Impact and Outcome of the project

In terms of participation levels, Our Place, Your Place: Taunton received a total of 4,148 visits (massively exceeding the target) which was a combination of workshop attendees and drop in visits.

Further impacts from the project included:

- **Community Impacts:** In particular supporting community/social cohesion, which was achieved by bringing different age groups together through the workshops and drop in sessions. Taunton partners noted that local people reported engaging more with their elderly neighbours as a result of the project – through the reminiscence activities and the heritage elements, thereby supporting community cohesion.
- **Learning Impacts:** As well as directly providing the informal learning environment, the projects also signposted participants onto other (both formal and informal) learning activities – e.g. Taunton promoted the courses of the Somerset Schools for Learning. Other learning impacts included individual participants that have been stimulated and encouraged to look at other routes to learning or volunteering as a result of the project, and also people who would not normally engage in cultural activity (e.g. by visiting a museum, gallery etc.) being able to do so.
- **Business/Economy Impacts:** There have also been business/economic benefits from the project, in that the empty shop used is likely to be brought back into commercial use in the near future, and it is thought that the project showing what can be done with the premises is believed to have (at least partly) contributed to this.
- **Involvement in Plans:** Elements of the programme that addressed the present and future included activities about Project Taunton, outlining the background, progress

to date and future plans for the town. The project also included presentations and activities about other developments in the town (including the castle, the cricket ground, the Brewhouse etc).

- **Products and resources:** Our Place: Your Place: Taunton is also producing a community archive, a DVD, and is contributing to the development of a national 'how to' guide.

Evaluation

An evaluation of Our Place, Your Place: Taunton was carried out and the key lessons for other empty shops projects related to:

- The importance of having a sufficient **timescale** to plan and deliver all aspects of the project.
- Finding **appropriate premises** is very important, and the task of finding and securing an appropriate shop location can take a **significant amount of time**.
- Offering a **varied programme** of activities (good mix between drop in and workshop sessions), and maintaining an **open door** policy are important in helping enable engagement with a wide variety of groups.
- **Informality** of learning offered is a key success factor, as is developing the project to allow for local delivery to be sufficiently flexible to suit the localities.
- Our Place is a 'labour intensive' project that **required a significant amount of staff time** and resource. This needs to be fully appreciated in any future such projects.
- A significant amount of effort and resources were committed to publicity, promotion and marketing, which proved to be successful (as measured by participation level) – the **requirement for promotional activity** needs to be recognised.
- **Partnership working** is a key aspect of the planning and delivery of such projects, and receiving time commitment from partners is important. The time required to develop effective partnership working needs to be borne in mind, especially when external capacity is used in the delivery of the project.
- **Measuring Impact:** A balance between collecting impact data and providing informality needs to be reached. Whilst this is a difficult, it may be that collecting some of this information in a relaxed and informal way may allow the data to be collected without adversely affecting the informal format of the learning sessions. This should be considered for future projects.

Future Developments

Partners are considering the legacy of the Our Place project in Taunton, and meetings have been taking place to consider the various options in terms of sustaining the project into the future – either in another location, or via a more flexible outreach approach that does not use a single location.

Contact details

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APPENDIX 3: LIST OF CONSULTEES

Name	Role/Organisation	Project
Beverley Chapelhow	Artist, Artichoke Studios	Blackburn
Dora Spanou	Project Manager, MLA Council	Both
Helen Mansfield	Heritage Learning Manager, Somerset Heritage Service	Taunton
Isobel Siddons	Programme Manager 2012, MLA Council	Both
Jack Latimer	Consultant, Community Archives	Both
Jan Horrell	Project Lead/Consultant	Taunton
Julia Simpson	Project Development Manager - Regeneration and Environment, Blackburn with Darwen Council	Blackburn
Keith Parkinson	Artist, Artichoke Studios	Blackburn
Piotr Bienkowski	Cultural Planner, Blackburn with Darwen Council (project manager, Blackburn)	Blackburn
Rebecca Johnson	Head of Arts, Blackburn with Darwen Council	Blackburn
Robbie Lowes	Project Taunton (project lead, Taunton)	Taunton
Susan Farrow	Artist, Artichoke Studios	Blackburn