



The role of culture in the region's post-recession recovery

Produced by the West Midlands Cultural Observatory in association with Advantage West Midlands (Tourism) and the Cultural Research & Intelligence Group (CRAIG)

1 Introduction

1. During times of recession, various research implies that culture becomes more (not less) important to people and communities for several of reasons.

2 Boosting morale

2. In the short-term, there is evidence to suggest that culture can and is providing West Midlands residents with welcome relief from the recession, helping to boost morale and therefore social cohesion.
3. Past research has shown that people turn to culture for comfort. BMG Research (2009) found that the two core reasons why people engage in cultural pursuits in the West Midlands are the need to enjoy some respite or escapism from work or everyday life, and a need to spend quality time with friends and family - motivations which inevitably become more pressing the more busy and stressed people become. For example, one respondent from Birmingham spoke of how weekend trips to the cinema provide a focus for his busy friends to come together, and a respondent from Stoke-on-Trent spoke of how culture helped him to *“unwind from a stressful year at work”*¹.

¹ BMG Research (2009) Cultural demand in the West Midlands, for Culture West Midlands, section 5.3

4. Evidence suggests that West Midlands residents may be turning to culture as an antidote to the downturn. According to the 'England Attractions Monitor', visitor numbers for West Midlands' visitor attractions have exceeded the national average for three consecutive quarters (since Oct-Dec 2008)². Local cultural venues that took part in our own survey saw an average increase in visitor numbers of around 6% (compared to the same period of the previous year) during the Jul-Sept 2009 quarter³. The shorter average drive time radius of visitors to West Midlands Safari Park⁴ suggests that it is local people who are behind this increase, as people increasingly enjoy leisure pursuits closer to home rather than taking (relatively expensive) trips abroad⁵.

3 **Readying people for employment**

5. In addition to its morale boosting properties, culture has a role to play in readying local people for employment (who may have lost jobs).
6. Past projects have demonstrated how culture can be used as a tool to boost the employability of local people. 'Pathways to Employment through Sport' project used sport as a means of engaging 'hard to reach' groups in learning. The project, which ran from 2002 to 2008, targeted residents living within the boundaries of the South Black Country & West Birmingham (SBCWB) Regeneration Zone, and aimed to tackle social exclusion issues through encouraging employment in sport and leisure activities. Evidence suggests that the project made significant progress in tackling the social exclusion of residents in the Zone, helping to equip nearly 2,000 beneficiaries with qualifications and over 100 with jobs. Moreover, 55% of those who were unemployed at the beginning of the project had successfully got jobs by the end⁶.

² VisitEngland (2008/09) England Attractions Monitor (Oct-Dec 2008 - Apr-Jun 2009).

³ West Midlands Cultural Observatory (2009) West Midlands Cultural Sector Economic Snapshot (Jul-Sept 2009)

⁴ Advantage West Midlands (Tourism), April 2009

⁵ ONS International Passenger Survey, Oct-Dec 2008 / CAA Aviation Trends, Oct-Dec 2008

⁶ Sandwell MBC & Sport Structures Ltd (2008) Sport Pathways to Employment: End of AWM Programme Report, p2, p8, p9

7. Similarly, Birmingham City Council's 'Gallery 37' programme uses arts training to engage disadvantaged young people in learning. Working alongside professional artists, 16-25 year olds, who may have faced challenges such as a learning difficulty or exclusion, become 'apprentice artists' and are given the chance to learn new skills and gain qualifications in a supportive environment⁷. Testimony to the success of the programme, the model has now been replicated in other UK cities such as Edinburgh and Oldham. As noted by Lutz et al (2005), the programme is successful in helping the young people 'discover their talents and prepare for the world of work', contributing to social inclusion. The artists and young people alike have spoken of how the programme has increased their confidence in their own capabilities⁸.
8. Additionally, the role that volunteering can play in keeping unemployed people close to the labour market and 'job ready' during the recession has been the subject of recent comment⁹. The role of the cultural sector in this respect is clear given that it provides hundreds of thousands of opportunities to volunteer across the region. In 2008/09, for example, around 5% of the West Midlands adult population (204,600) participated in volunteering to support sport¹⁰. Furthermore, new cultural volunteering opportunities (within a 50 mile radius of Birmingham) advertised through the 'do-it' national database of volunteers constituted a third (33%) of all advertised opportunities in November 2009¹¹.

4 Festivals and events

9. Tourism has been identified as having the potential to help the economy through the recession¹², and as a key driver in the visitor economy, the cultural sector plays an important role in positioning the region as an attractive place to visit.
10. In particular, anecdotal accounts from people close to the region's cultural sector suggest that there is widespread interest in using cultural events in particular to draw in visitors and boost local economies.

⁷ See: <http://www.gallery37.org.uk/index.aspx>

⁸ Jane Lutz et al (2005) Arts and regeneration: case studies from the West Midlands, for ACE, p21-26

⁹ Institute for Volunteering Research (2009) Volunteering and employment: What is the link for unemployed volunteers?

¹⁰ Sport England (2009) Active People Survey 2: West Midlands Factsheet

¹¹ See: <http://www.do-it.org.uk/> (search performed on 17 November 2009)

¹² DCMS (2009) Lifting People Lifting Places, p24

11. The economic impact of events has been the subject of past research. In a regional example, the 2005 'V' Festival in Staffordshire attracted 81,000 visitors (57% from outside of the region) and generated a total of £9.3 million. Although some of the spending would have taken place at the event, there is evidence to suggest significant benefits for local businesses (the majority of which said that the festival had made a positive impact on the turnover of their business)¹³.
12. In this respect, events and festivals can be viewed as a relatively swift and cost-effective method of generating well-needed income for areas which may have been badly hit by the downturn.
13. Given the potential impact of events, the existing West Midlands event schedule for the next few years has possibly gained added importance in light of the current economic climate:
 - Cultural events and exhibitions held in the region over the next few years as part of the London 2012 Olympic Games, are predicted to attract a total audience of over half a million, engage over 200,000 people in cultural activities and engage 8,000 people in volunteering¹⁴.
 - The combined audience for Screen WM-supported 'Flicks in the Sticks' and 'Borderlines' film festivals was anticipated to be in the region of 36,000 during 2009¹⁵.
14. Beyond economic value, community events generate cohesion¹⁶ - something which is perhaps particularly valuable during times of upheaval. The cohesive effect of community events is suggested in statements made by residents as part of the BMG Research (2009) study into cultural demand; for example, one resident emphasised the importance of carnivals as a means of "*creating a community life*" and bringing people "*together more*"¹⁷.

¹³ Heart of England Tourism (2005) An Evaluation of the Economic Impact of the 'V' Festival 2005

¹⁴ Draft Business Plan - West Midlands Culture Programme for London 2012, March 2009

¹⁵ Correspondence with Screen West Midlands (July 2009)

¹⁶ CABE Space (2004) The Value of Public Space: How high quality parks and public spaces create economic, social and environmental value

¹⁷ BMG Research (2009) Cultural demand in the West Midlands, for Culture West Midlands, section 5.10.2

5 Graduate employment and retention

15. In the longer term, as a growing sector within the emerging 'knowledge economy', it can be said that the cultural sector plays an (increasingly) important role in regional graduate employment and retention - something which is perhaps particularly notable in a region where employer demand for higher level skills is below the national average¹⁸.

6 Creative industries

16. The creative industries have already been identified by government as 'key to economic recovery', by virtue of their significant economic output (in the West Midlands alone, creative industries turnover is around £7 billion¹⁹), and their role in creating a digital infrastructure described as 'fundamental' to the future competitiveness of British business²⁰.
17. Moreover, the creative industries have a key role to play in boosting the productivity of local businesses across all sectors. As is highlighted in the 2008 Regional Integrated Economic Assessment (RIEA) for the West Midlands, one of the five drivers of productivity (identified by the Treasury) is 'innovation' which includes businesses' use of design and marketing²¹ - activities rooted in the cultural sector.

7 A catalyst for inward investment

18. There is evidence to suggest that cultural developments can be effective in encouraging investment in areas, thereby providing an economic boost to local economies.
19. In a regional example, the development of The New Art Gallery in Walsall in 2000 is credited with spearheading investment in the area, including the subsequent Walsall waterfront development²².

¹⁸ West Midlands Regional Observatory (2008) Graduate retention, attraction and employment

¹⁹ ONS (2004 & 2007) Inter Departmental Business Register

²⁰ DCMS (2009) Lifting People Lifting Places, p24

²¹ WMRO (2008) 'West Midlands Regional Economic Assessment: Headline Regional Assessment', p13-14

²² University of Wolverhampton / West Midlands Centre for Constructing Excellence (2008) The Value Added by Urban Design to Development & Regeneration Conference

20. The significant level of leverage (+360%) generated by investment in regeneration of the historic environment, reported in English Heritage's 'Heritage Dividend 2002'²³ effectively demonstrates the catalytic effect of enhanced local distinctiveness in regenerating areas. As noted by WMRO (2005):

“The character of an area, through its attractiveness and distinctiveness, is a catalyst for attracting new inward investment, creating employment and contributing to the sustainability of local economies”²⁴

21. Similarly, BMG Research (2007) found that a sizeable proportion of business owners had opted to settle in the West Midlands because of 'local heritage and tradition' (7%)²⁵, suggesting the importance of the region's heritage sector in improving the economic viability of areas.

²³ English Heritage (2002) Heritage Dividend 2002, p2

²⁴ WMRO (2005) WM Economic Bulletin, Heritage Counts..!

²⁵ BMG Research (2007) Advantage West Midlands Regional Business Study, p15