









FROM ENGAGEMENT TO LEADERSHIP: WHAT DOES LOCAL CULTURAL LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE?

A research collaboration between
The Leap and the Institute for Social Justice.
Funded by Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership.

Matthew Reason & Clare Daněk

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THE LEAP

City of BRADFORD METROPOLITAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

YPIP YORKSHIRE POLICY INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP

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Institute for Social Justice York St John University

LOCAL CULTURAL LEADERSHIP AS CULTURAL DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Cultural democracy is a grassroots vision for what arts and culture should be. It views people as creators, rather than passive consumers of arts. It values local, community, heritage, amateur, craft and participatory culture as equally important as professional artistic expression. It aims for decision making to be bottom-up, involving community members as local cultural leaders in their own right.

This is not a new dream for art and culture, but we are not there yet.

Various reports and research over the last five years have revealed how opportunities and leadership roles in the arts and culture and the creative industries continues to exclude large sections of the population. The Sutton Trust in 2024 reported stark class inequalities in access to the creative industries and enrolment in creative subjects in universities. Creative UK in 2025 revealed that lack of diverse leadership in the creative and cultural sector, including women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people from working class backgrounds.

The examples and evidence accumulate, illustrating a division between who leads and shapes the creative industries sector in the United Kingdom and the wider community and society in the country. Our culture – by definition – must reflect, represent and embody us as a people, yet as a cultural industry or formalised cultural sector this is far from the case. As the Bradford Producing Hub assert in their 2023 report, Bradford is consistently reported as having low cultural participation metrics, yet the lived, seen and felt experience is that cultural engagement in the city is vibrant and highly valued.

This report proposes a different way of viewing the challenge, asking not just who our cultural leaders are but more fundamentally what we want cultural leadership to be. In this research we sought to understand how communities themselves value and understand cultural leadership. Our conclusions include that leadership must be closer to communities, be more accessible and more immediate, be both more diverse and more dispersed. In other words, cultural leadership should align with the ethos of cultural democracy.

The work therefore should not just be to grow cultural engagement, but to be more ambitious and think about how we might grow, transform and democratise cultural leadership.

Matthew Reason
Director, Institute for Social Justice, York St John University

Bradford Producing Hub (2023). Bradford Data Review

Creative UK (2025). Leadership Diversity in the Creative and Cultural Industries.

Sutton Trust (2024). A Class Act: Social mobility and the creative industries.

FROM ENGAGEMENT TO LEADERSHIP:

WHAT DOES LOCAL CULTURAL LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE?

The identification of place-based interventions that support belonging, participation, cohesion and quality of life has been identified as a priority by the DCMS. This is reflected in Bradford's 'Culture is our plan' ten-year strategy, which seeks to increase engagement in art and culture in the most deprived wards, in order to support community cohesion and belonging.

We argue that these valuable objectives require a key additional perceptual shift in order to be successful and sustainable. They need to go beyond ideas of local engagement and participation in culture and support local cultural leadership.

Our research has done three things:

1. Identified how communities value and define local cultural leadership.
2. Identified the conditions that enable local cultural leadership to flourish.
3. Identified the characteristics of a local cultural leader.

Who we are and what we did

This research was a collaboration between The Leap and the Institute for Social Justice. It was funded through the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership. We worked with Clare Daněk, an independent researcher, to conduct a year-long period of participatory research, including employment of community-based peer researchers, interviews with local cultural leaders, and three people's assemblies.

1. How communities value and define local cultural leadership

Our research suggests that cultural leadership should reflect a community, should incorporate different perspectives, and that the leader should be able to exert influence within their community more easily than those outside the community.

"Cultural leadership is understanding people, their cultures and their lived experiences"

Communities do not believe leadership should sit with one person or one organisation, but should be distributed.

"Power shouldn't sit with one person – it should be collective"

Communities want cultural leadership to be within their control and have the power to shape it..

"If we don't have those seats around those tables, we need to create our own tables and get the right voices around them."

2. Conditions that enable local cultural leadership to flourish

Enabling local cultural leadership requires recognition of the local cultural leader's unique qualities and position – in particular, their social capital, local knowledge and intrinsic motivations..

It also requires acknowledgement of what is needed to support this: trust, transparency and respect.

To enable this, we make the following pragmatic proposals:

As a dispersed and community-based role, local cultural leadership is not always easily visible, particularly from outside a community. We need to recognise that leadership occurs in many guises and at many levels. To facilitate the identification of local cultural leadership, funding processes should be:

- As close as possible to communities.
- As accessible as possible to communities.
- Accountable to communities.
- Involve community decision making.

Local cultural leaders within our research called for:

- Assigning a key contact for community organisations so that the community organisation can develop a relationship with a single person, rather than passing between departments.
- Simplifying application and reporting mechanisms for funding, particularly for small pots.
- Greater understanding at local government level of the role of key players within communities and neighbourhoods.

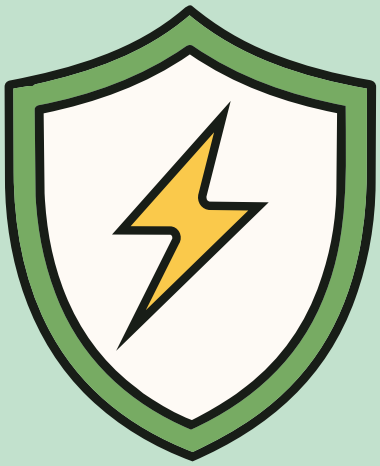
3. The characteristics of a local cultural leader

Finally, we describe the characteristics of a local cultural leader. Our aim is to make an often invisible role more visible, and to better understand their role in relation to community belonging, participation, cohesion and quality of life.



SENSE OF PURPOSE– the local cultural leader working within a particular community is often inspired by their own lived experience, or a change they want to see happen within their community.

"That one opportunity at a youth club changed my entire life."



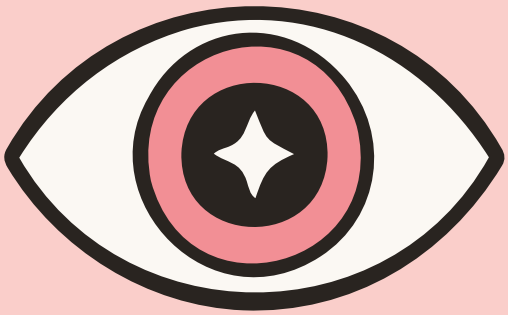
RESILIENCE– as local cultural leadership is often undertaken in a voluntary or 'extra' capacity, the risk of burnout can be high, so rest must be factored in as part of a well-rounded role.

"You have to protect your identity while driving innovation and social change."



MAKES IT HAPPEN–if the cultural leader doesn't bring the energy, the event/activity doesn't happen and the community misses out.

"If we don't have those seats around those tables, we need to create our own tables and get the right voices around them."



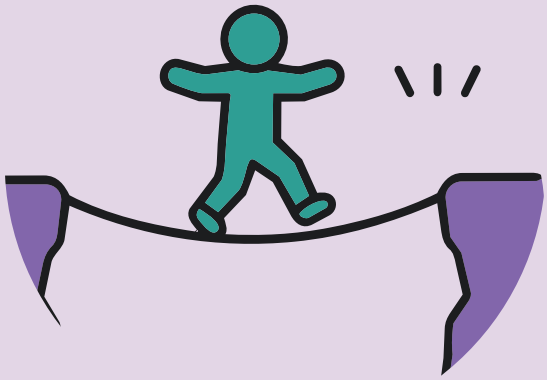
SPOTS OPPORTUNITY– the cultural leadership journey can begin by being in the right place at the right time.

"We don't get support, but we tap into lots of people in the local community."



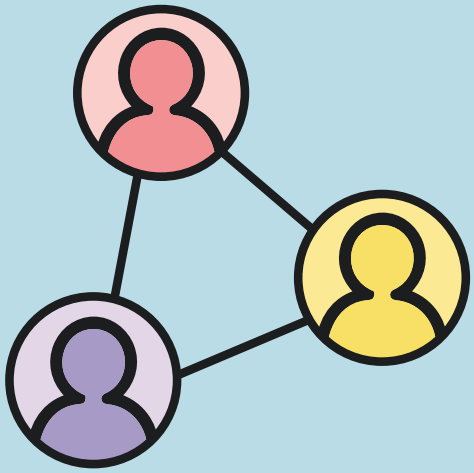
BUILDS TRUST – the leader must both inspire and be trusted by the community to effect change.

"I think it's a sort of a 'lead by example'."



TAKES RISK– the local cultural leader must be prepared to raise their head above a parapet in order to drive change.

"I can test and try new ideas and I can share those then with institutions...less risk for institutions."



COLLABORATIVE – leadership should reflect a community, and the local community leader must work collaboratively across the community and within local structures.

"If you don't work together, you will never reach the impact you want."

CASE STUDIES

local cultural leadership in action

A local cultural leader makes themselves known through action and what they do. Here we provide four short case studies from Bradford District of how cultural leaders live the change they want to see in the world.



LEEDS ROAD FESTIVAL

Yaseen Mohammed and Saleem Akhtar

Leeds Road Festival demonstrates how cultural leadership can emerge from within communities rather than traditional cultural institutions. Founded by local business and community leaders Yaseen Mohammed and Saleem Akhtar, the festival was created to celebrate the unique identity of Leeds Road, one of the UK's most significant South Asian commercial and business districts in Bradford

Celebrating the area's rich mix of food, fashion, retail and community, the festival showcases the entrepreneurial spirit, cultural diversity and local pride that define Leeds Road. By highlighting local businesses alongside community activities and cultural experiences, the festival has created a vibrant platform that brings together residents, visitors and organisations from across Bradford and beyond.

The festival's rapid growth demonstrates the strength of this vision. Attendance increased from 25,000 visitors in 2025 to 65,000 visitors in 2026, establishing Leeds Road Festival as one of Bradford's largest community-led cultural events. This success reflects the founders' ability to create an event that resonates with local communities while attracting visitors from across the region.

Importantly, Leeds Road Festival has quickly become a bridge between businesses, public sector organisations and communities. It provides a shared space where different sectors can collaborate, build relationships and develop a common vision for the future of the area. In doing so, the festival has strengthened connections, raised the profile of Leeds Road and demonstrated the value of community-led cultural activity as a driver of economic and social impact.

For policymakers, the festival offers a powerful example of cultural leadership rooted in place. The work of Yaseen Mohammed and Saleem Akhtar demonstrates how local leaders can harness the strengths of their communities to create opportunities, build partnerships and foster civic pride. Their leadership shows that culture is not only about artistic activity but can also be a powerful tool for connecting people, supporting local economies and shaping the future of a place.

HERITAGE CONNECTIONS CIC

Vicky Clifton

Bradford Heritage Connection CIC reflects the experience and values developed through Vicky Clifton's long career in museums, education and community engagement. Over more than two decades, Vicky has worked across formal and informal learning, including seven years as Head of Learning at the National Science and Media Museum and later in senior learning and outreach roles at Bradford Museums & Galleries. Throughout this work, she focused on making cultural organisations more relevant and accessible to the communities around them, building partnerships with schools, families, local groups and cultural organisations.

Her career increasingly centred on a simple but important question: how can heritage institutions work with communities rather than simply for them? Through museum learning programmes, co-produced projects, cultural partnerships and major public events, Vicky saw both the resources held by established institutions and the rich knowledge, memories and stories held within Bradford's neighbourhoods. This experience led her to create Bradford Heritage Connection CIC in 2024, providing a more flexible platform for connecting these two worlds.

The organisation now brings together heritage groups, community organisations and established institutions across the district, supporting collaboration, shared learning and greater visibility for Bradford's diverse histories. Through initiatives including the Bradford Heritage Hub and Bradford Heritage Festival, it has helped create opportunities for local organisations and residents to share stories, develop projects and participate more actively in shaping how the district's heritage is understood and celebrated.



For policymakers, Vicky's journey highlights the value of place-based cultural leadership. Bradford Heritage Connection shows how museum and cultural-sector expertise can be redirected to strengthen community heritage. Acting as a connector between grassroots knowledge and professional networks, resources and opportunities, it helps create a more inclusive and collaborative heritage landscape. It also demonstrates how heritage can foster belonging, civic pride and stronger relationships across a place.

KHIDMAT CENTRES
Sofia Buncy



Sofia Buncy's work offers a powerful example
Sofia Buncy's work offers a powerful example
of cultural leadership rooted in social justice, lived experience and community-led creativity. Through her film and media campaigns, her advocacy for marginalised groups, and her leadership at the Khidmat Centres, she has shown how culture can be used not simply to entertain, but to challenge injustice, amplify unheard voices and strengthen communities. Sofia has led several influential film and media-based campaigns that bring visibility to social issues often overlooked in mainstream narratives. Her award-winning project Young in Covid captured the emotional realities of young people during the pandemic, highlighting inequality, resilience and the pressures of lockdown. By placing young voices at the centre, the campaign created a platform for youth-led storytelling at a time when their experiences were frequently overshadowed by adult-focused policy debates.

Her work on Women in Prison has been equally groundbreaking. Through research, documentary storytelling, interviews and community-led media, Sofia has shed light on the experiences of Muslim women in the criminal justice system, a group rarely represented in public discourse. The campaign has influenced national conversations, informed policy discussions and strengthened support networks for women affected by imprisonment. These projects demonstrate how film and media can serve as tools for advocacy, evidence and social change.

Alongside her media work, Sofia's leadership at the Khidmat Centres has been central to her impact. As a senior leader, she has overseen outreach programmes, grant making for the arts that enable local creativity to flourish. Her work ensures that communities facing social and economic disadvantages have access to resources, safe spaces and opportunities to express themselves through culture. Under her guidance, the Khidmat Centres have become a hub for community-based creativity supporting local artists, youth groups, women's organisations and grassroots projects. Across all her work, Sofia acts as a bridge between communities, cultural organisations and public-sector institutions. Her film campaigns connect lived experience with national conversations. Her outreach work links families, young people and women with services and support. Her leadership at the Khidmat Centres brings together creativity, social action and community development. This bridging role has strengthened relationships, increased visibility for under-represented voices and demonstrated how culture can be used to address complex social issues. Sofia's work shows that cultural leadership is not only about artistic production, it is about using creativity to challenge injustice, elevate unheard voices and build stronger, more connected communities who believe their voices are important and that there are vehicles for meaningful change.

Through all of this, Sofia demonstrates that culture is not separate from social issues or activism. It is a powerful way of addressing them. Her work shows how film, storytelling and community-led creativity can help build stronger relationships between institutions and the communities they serve, support vulnerable groups, and create platforms for voices that are too often excluded.

OUTLOUD CIC
Lauren Battye



Lauren Battye is a Bradford-based cultural and community leader whose work spans the arts, education, community development and social justice sectors. As founder of OutLoud CIC she has spent more than two decades using creativity as a tool for social change, particularly with young people, communities experiencing disadvantage and those affected by trauma. Her leadership is characterised by a commitment to participation, co-production and community empowerment, positioning culture not as an add-on to public policy but as a means of improving wellbeing, strengthening civic engagement and reducing inequalities.

Lauren's work has become particularly influential in Bradford because it bridges the worlds of culture, research and public services. Through OutLoud, she has developed creative and trauma-informed approaches that enable communities to articulate their experiences, shape local priorities and participate in decision-making. Her role within major local initiatives, including community engagement for the ActEarly Holme Wood programme, demonstrates how cultural leaders can act as trusted intermediaries between residents, policymakers and researchers. A notable example is OutLoud's work in Holme Wood, one of Bradford's most deprived neighbourhoods. The organisation was commissioned to lead community engagement for the ActEarly programme after concerns that previous regeneration and service interventions had often been experienced as "top down" and disconnected from local realities. Using creative engagement methods, relationship-building and participatory research, Lauren and her team ensured that residents' lived experiences informed discussions on health inequalities, mental health, crime, aspirations and community wellbeing. This approach helped create a stronger evidence base for policy decisions while rebuilding trust between local people and public institutions.

Beyond the immediate outcomes of individual projects, the significance of Lauren's approach lies in her role as a cultural leader who demonstrates how creative practice can strengthen democratic participation and community resilience. Her work shows that culture can be a mechanism for listening, relationship-building and system change, particularly in communities where trust in institutions is low.

Lauren's experience highlights three lessons for policymakers. First, cultural leaders can play a critical role in connecting institutions with communities and ensuring policy is grounded in lived experience. Second, creative and trauma-informed engagement methods can reach people who are often excluded from traditional consultation processes. Third, long-term investment in trusted community organisations can generate insights, relationships and leadership capacity that improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of public policy. OutLoud's work demonstrates that culture is not simply a sectoral concern but an important component of place-based development and social change.

LOCAL CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN BRADFORD: PLACARDS, POSTCARDS AND RANTS

In Spring 2026, The Leap hosted a series of People's Assemblies with community and cultural leaders in Bradford. These were designed to explore the barriers and motivations behind individuals taking on leadership roles and to help us better understand what cultural leadership looks like.

In the last People's Assembly we invited participants to write a postcard or create a placard communicating what they wanted to say to the world, to local or national government, or simply to their neighbours about their role as cultural leaders. These are some of the results.



It says, 'have fun and get shit done'. Because I think in life it's really important to do things, but also have fun as well. So, you know, have fun and do things.

Zahabia is an allotment-keeper and TikToker.



'Amplify, raise awareness, connect'. Involving a few things that are raising the profile of different sorts of creatives, mainly to do with the music industry and connecting with other industries as well, like getting into video games.

Andi works in the games industry.



I've always been an advocate of men's mental health. There is a need for attention to be paid to men having safe space for themselves to discuss things and talk about try helping each other. Strong men also cry.

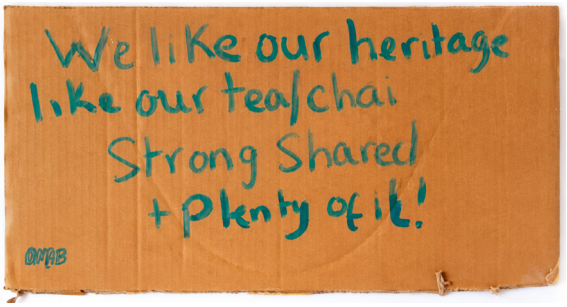
Joachim is an artist, performer and mental health advocate.



We're advocates for people with special educational needs and disabilities. We have our own CIC that we run and want to be the change that we want to see.

I think it all just came back to that there's not a place for everyone to go to. And that's why I said just having a safe space where people can go, especially children and young people who are trying to navigate the world, who are in a school system that isn't built for them. Them having a safe space where they can go and their needs are met and they're just treated like a human and they get what they need.

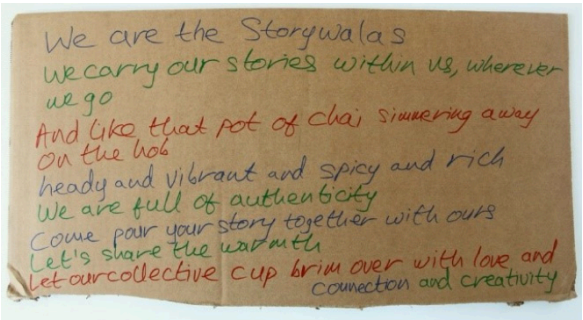
Amber and Tili-Etta run a CIC working with neurodivergent young people.



Bradford heritage is not a footnote, it's not secondary, it's not something we preserve quietly in the background. It's a story of who we all are and the foundation of who we'll all become.

The injustice we've got at the moment is a system where small organisations struggle to survive, let alone thrive, and a narrative where heritage is too often absent or marginalised in our cultural strategy, so actually putting it to the forefront.

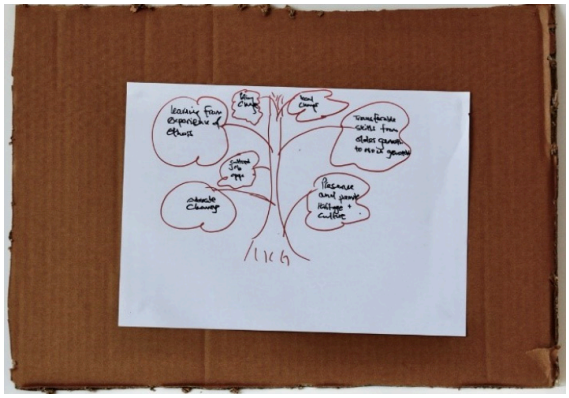
Vicky is a Bradford-based heritage freelancer.



The words that stood out to me were stories, voices, connection, really important for all of us. Heritage, giving back and sharing. Injustice, creativity and immigration, which I think it ties in with all of the work that we do.

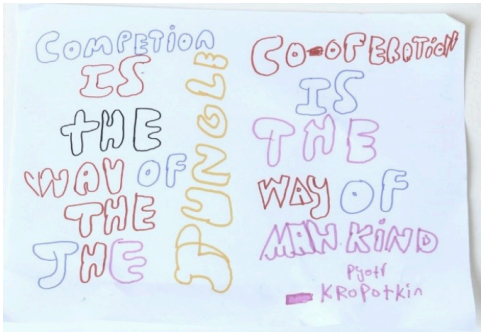
When I said brimming over, I was thinking of Asha Bohsle who died a few days ago, who was the inspiration for the song Brimful of Asha [by Cornershop]. She was all about bringing cultures together and that song was of a time when things felt better and we were more comfortable with each other's differences.

Aisha is a journalist and festival director.



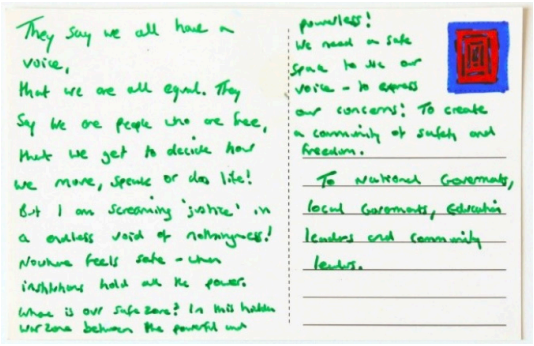
I always believe in a strong foundation to start with, so I've grown a tree with roots going really deep down. And one of the key branches of that is to advocate change in society, in politics, in your own house, wherever you want to advocate. So to start from your own house probably is the best start. I'm always an advocate of change. You don't necessarily have to stick to the same rules, because with time, with the environment, you need to change. Otherwise, you'll be fifty years behind.

Sadar works for a Bradford-based housing association.



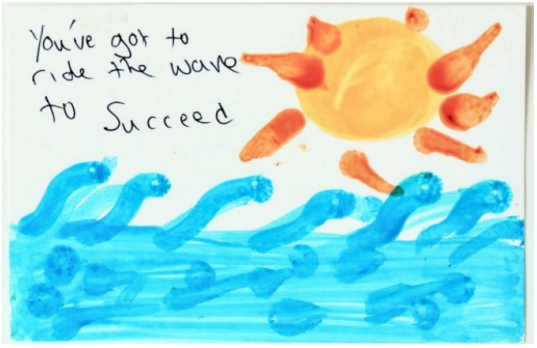
My piece says 'competition is the way of the jungle, cooperation is the way of mankind'. And I think now more than ever people need to be together and do good together. That's why I put that.

Daanyaal is a learning co-ordinator in a Bradford-based community organisation



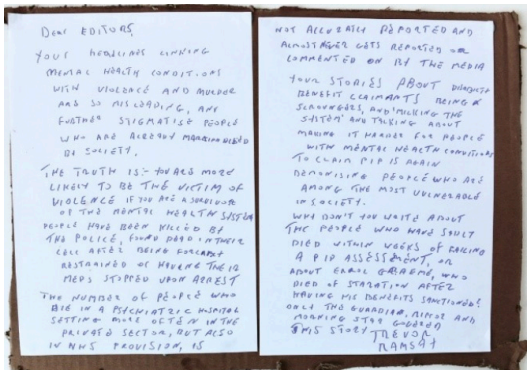
It's a bit too, I feel like it's a bit too strong but it's based on the current climate that we're living in. Even though my day job is as an English teacher, you can't remove what's going on in the world. One of the ways that we create change is through creativity and art and poetry and protesting. In this country, protesting is becoming more and more difficult. So I think that was the backdrop of what I've written. It's mainly to our national government but it goes to also to community leaders as well. A voice for all, because sometimes the loudest people get to speak in the room and those people who have real concerns, their voices are not heard.

Shamila is an English teacher in Bradford district.



I just did a pretty little postcard, which says something very simple. It just says 'you've got to ride the wave to succeed'. And that's it.

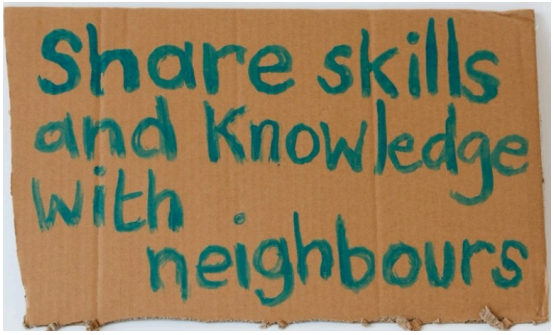
Osman works in leadership for a Bradford-based community organisation.



So there's a newspaper headline in The Sun, and it says, '1,200 people killed by mental patients', shock, 10 year, toll, exposes, care, misgivings. So I've written to the editors - because it's not just the Sun, it's the Mail and the Express. "Your headlines linking mental health conditions with violence and murder are so misleading and further stigmatise people who are already marginalised by society.

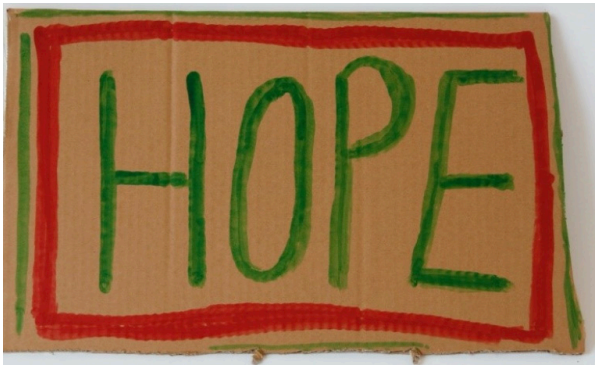
The truth is you are more likely to be a victim of violence if you are a survivor of the mental health system. [...] And then your stories about these benefit claimants being scorned as a muggers and scroungers of the system".

Trevor is a community advocate and radio presenter.



It's about us talking to each other and collaborating with each other to be in space together. Where I live we have a Library of Things where you can go and borrow equipment so you don't have to go and buy your own drill or whatever - you can go and borrow one. But one thing that doesn't seem to happen is people sharing skills and knowledge. Older people sharing stories, sharing knowledge, sharing their heritage. Younger people sharing things. It's not just about sharing material objects, it's about sharing experience and talking, it comes back to talking to one another.

Clare is a researcher.



One of the things that I wrote was hope, partly because I feel that we are living in a time where we need a bit of hope, and it was great to listen to people like Pope Leo over the last few days, who was speaking a lot of truth, being in a position of power. He was also speaking a lot of truth to power, I guess. How do we place hope? What does hope mean in the times that we're living in?

Waheeda is a social worker, advocate and facilitator.

AFTERWORD

This work makes a compelling case for cultural democracy: recognising and enabling every individual's creativity to flourish as a prerequisite for national prosperity. Culture and creativity is everywhere – in the individuals, families and communities of our nation. But the prominent cultural institutions and art forms which dominate public consciousness still struggle to adequately reflect the diversity and vibrancy of our peoples.

Many educational institutions have reduced and narrowed their cultural curriculum, and the number of arts and music teachers is in decline as is the number of those choosing to study an arts curriculum. Traditional surveys of participation in the arts have continuously reflected low levels of engagement in arts and cultural activity. These surveys define participation narrowly, viewing people mainly as consumers of particular cultural forms. Consequently, investment in arts participation is often based on a perceived lack of engagement with creativity and culture, with residents asked which creative activities they would like to experience. Although wider access to what is deemed to be 'high-quality' culture remains important, recognising and nurturing everyone's inherent creativity is equally vital.

But where does that leave the recognition of and support for the vibrant art forms and creativity that exist in every community – which create self-esteem, the bonds of identity, belonging and which can bring important opportunities to engage more widely with people of other backgrounds?



Developing new approaches to this has been one focus of the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership, as we have sought to build an inclusive and sustainable creative ecosystem. It was also an important thread of Bradford 2025, when as UK City of Culture there was an emphasis on what was initially billed as 'an artist on every street corner.' This was developed into 'Our Patch', a programme that gave people the space, time and support to come together and explore their creativity. Reflections on these acts of cultural democracy and cultural leadership within and between communities resonate very much with the findings of this collaboration between York St John University and The Leap.

As the new UK government administration rolls out its agenda for growth and opportunity in every postcode, deeper and broader devolution, the rebuilding of community infrastructure and community solidarity there is a real opportunity to systematically build the infrastructure and support for a cultural democracy. Let's move beyond targeted time limited interventions in 'areas of deprivation/ low participation' or reliance on struggling community groups continuously bidding for small competitive funding pots from philanthropic funds.

Kersten England CBE

Chair, Bradford Culture Company

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Credits

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John Slemensek	"What is a Local Cultural Leader?" Director, Studio Bokehgo
Gogo Anyanwu Jr	Peer Researcher
Ayesha Arif	Peer Researcher
Shamila Hussain	Peer Researcher
Kimia Modaressi Chahardehi	Peer Researcher
Asif Ahmed	Designer, The Leap Studio

The Leap invests in people, communities and local cultural leadership, supporting those with the motivation, ideas and local insight to make positive change happen. We back people with the resources, relationships and practical support they need to develop their ideas, build confidence and turn ambition into action. Our approach starts with the knowledge, energy and potential that already exist within communities, helping local cultural leaders start up, grow and strengthen their impact, connect with others and create lasting change for the people and places they know best.

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The Institute for Social Justice is based at **York St John University**. Our approach to social justice is through developing co-productive research to produce social impact and positive change. We do so by working with people, partners and communities in a manner that sees participation and community engagement as vital parts of our mission. www.yorksj.ac.uk/ISJ

Scan the QR Code to watch the accompanying film
"What is a Local Cultural Leader?" by John Slemensek
www.the-leap.org.uk/**what-is-a-local-cultural-leader**

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