

BURNLEY HERITAGE ACTION ZONE 2020-2024

INTERIM EVALUATION REPORT ONE. MARCH 2022

SALLY FORT

www.sallyfort.com



ABOUT BURNLEY HERITAGE ACTION ZONE

Burnley High Street Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) received £1.2m funding in 2020 from Historic England, combined with investment from Burnley Borough Council and the private sector. The HAZ aims to contribute to Burnley's larger conservation area and town centre strategy plans by kick-starting the reversal of the at-risk heritage conservation status of the lower St James Street section of the town centre. It's three-pronged approach provides:

- Physical interventions including capital works on historic buildings
- A cultural programme led by Burnley arts and culture partners to celebrate the identity of the local high street and contribute to the wider cultural agenda
- Community engagement to involve local people in local heritage and cultural activity and training

Six key components form the backbone of the HAZ which are:

- Building on existing assets especially local creative people, businesses, and heritage, to develop and enhance the cultural offer
- The restoration and improvement of historic buildings and the public realm, upgrading the street itself, and historic properties through grants to local property / business owners
- Bringing an empty heritage building back to life as a hub for local artists and creatives to work, exhibit and grow
- Helping the Empire Theatre Trust achieve its long term vision to bring an abandoned space back to life by supporting specific improvements and meanwhile uses in the shorter term
- Community engagement and activity encouraging local people to take more interest in the heritage of the area through events and training
- Supporting an independent cultural consortium to build a creative programme celebrating the identity of the area and contribute to the wider cultural agenda

HAZ's funding was announced just as Britain went into the first Covid lockdown in March 2020. As a result, activity was delayed as organisations of every scale and structure stopped; at first through furlough which meant a complete halt to almost everything, and then later to work out how to continue, adapt, reprioritise, and streamline.

None the less, throughout the first year:

- consultation and development led to the establishment of the cultural consortia
- early plans for a flagship arts programme of public art across disused spaces was developed
- local consultations about and delivery of improvements to the public realm were realised, especially street furniture and the widening of pavements to make the space more pedestrian friendly and reduce traffic

By the summer of 2021, HAZ's main staff member had left and the position re-recruited. Nearly 18 months into the planned scheme, activity and documentation only just started taking off. However the pace of development and delivery picked up quickly for the remainder of the 2021-22 financial year to build momentum and achieve some quick wins in terms of engagement, visibility, and changes to heritage buildings such as shops and the Empire Theatre.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Independent consultant Sally Fort was commissioned in autumn 2021 to evaluate the Heritage Action Zone. The following plan was agreed across the Burnley Council team and project steering group.

2021-22

- Meeting to agree priorities / purpose / scope of evaluation with the partnership group
- Audit existing baseline and evaluations collected to date.
- Identify gaps in current data collection and evaluation process (e.g. currently there are clear gaps/barriers in qualitative data collection re community engagement/public perception).
- Identify internal capacity / resources at Burnley Council or other key partners to support evaluation.
- Create evaluation action plan outline for the subsequent years.
- Review existing data and provide a succinct headline report for 21-22.

2022-23

- Provide monitoring and qualitative data collection toolkit for data collection by partners / internal council colleagues.
- Provide Year 2 interim report.

2023-24

- Review project learning and next steps with key stakeholders
- Create concise evaluation report with key statistics, brief summary of activities, and findings.

This report is the succinct headline report for 21-22, extended to track back from the starts of the project since no previous interim reports had been produced.

Data Available: For this report the following data was analysed:

- Evaluation scoping workshop with steering group
- Steering group meeting minutes
- Cultural group meeting minutes
- Observation of one cultural group meeting
- HAZ Facebook page comments and analytics
- HAZ Blog posts
- Facebook posts and comments: Empire Theatre, Mid Pennine Arts, Burnley Creative Arts, Culture Counts
- Review of Casey Orr (Saturday Girl artist) blog posts and Facebook posts / comments
- HAZ newsletter
- Three information sharing meetings with the HAZ Development Officer
- Footfall monitoring data across 5 measurements points in Lower St James Street
- Vox pops feedback of Burnley public opinions on the streetside improvements
- Feedback surveys from heritage skills workshops
- Project reports: Raise the Curtain, Burnley College – Mural project
- Empire Theatre capital update report
- Baseline documents: vacant buildings mapping; Historic England assessments

Data Limitations: No systematic data collection was in place prior to summer 2021 other than footfall counts and meeting minutes, due to covid and staff changes. Therefore this report summarises the headlines based on what was available opportunistically. A more systematic framework is now in place relying on input from Burnley Council (Economic Development / Planning); Steering Group partners; Cultural Consortia partners, the forthcoming Creative Hub; and the Empire Theatre.

IMPACT

Though the programme is still in its infancy, some meaningful developments are already being seen.

- **Footfall in the lower St James Street area increased** by an average 100,000 people a month since the Culture Festival. Having checked covid restrictions, football crowds and school holiday footfall patterns, there are no major factors contributing to this other than the festival itself.
- **Lower St James Street is more accessible for people with disabilities.** Public commented on wider pavements and tactile crossing areas, especially for the visually impaired and guide dogs.
- **3000+ local people have been engaged in the programme** through workshops, participatory projects, art events, heritage training, and the Culture Festival.
- **£500,000 additional income has been secured** as a result of the initial commitment to the programme; to be used on arts activity, improvement of local properties, and upgrades to the Empire Theatre.
- **9 high street buildings have been / are being improved** through grants to improve the structure and heritage features inside and outside the properties. This includes roofing, structural improvements, shop frontage, bay windows, signage, painting, electrics, lighting, and railings.
- **The Empire Theatre has been downgraded on the Theatres at Risk register** meaning it is becoming more stable, thanks to HAZ supported asbestos removal and roof repairs among other changes supported by other funding streams. In turn these gave access to areas unseen for 20 years, and enabled the Empire Theatre Trust move into a new phase of structural appraisals.
- **Young people have been engaged** in the area through targeted arts and cultural activity. Projects with college students, the Saturday Girl arts project, and the Culture Festival have been particularly important to this achievement.
- **Local people are being engaged.** Facebook data shows that 70% of those engaging with the HAZ page are from Burnley. (Most of the rest are from Pendle and other parts of Lancashire).
- **Local people have a greater respect for heritage** through the heritage skills workshops. 17% were previously unlikely to notice heritage features, 56% had undertaken no heritage training before. Practical skills improved from 2/10 to 7/10. Over 90% will definitely or probably use the skills in future. The signwriting will factor into future artworks; construction skills will be used around people's homes. The HAZ Facebook page was especially successful in reaching these new audiences, with posts about the training workshops having by far the greatest reach and highest numbers of shares.
- **Awareness of HAZ is growing.** HAZ's Facebook reach has exceeded 15,000 to the end of February 2022; and has increased from an average of 864 likes per month in June-October (up to the Culture Festival) to 2751 / month since the Culture Festival.

FEEDBACK

Public Realm Improvements

“When we're training the guide dog puppies, it's a lot better, isn't it? In terms of people with disabilities, the tactile pavement, it's essential so the person knows when they're at the beginning of the crossing. It feels wider, and it feels a lot roomier area and a better space really.”

“I come to St James Street every single day. It's a change for the best. With the flowers and sitting outside with your coffee when it's nice weather.”

“It's very nice. It's flat - cos the last paving had dipped. So nobody can trip up on it. It's even. It's very good.”

“It looks a lot better. Wider and easier for walking about.”

Members of the public

Heritage Training

“Great Introduction to new skills”

“Please do more”

“am really pleased with how my skills developed through the day”

“will use for moulding repairs”

“I'll use the skills for plastering at home”

Heritage workshop trainees

Empire Theatre

“The Empire is a significant part of the Heritage Action Zone Scheme on Lower St James's Street and through these works we have achieved a huge amount of progress towards stabilising the heritage asset which has inevitably contributed towards moving down the Theatres At Risk Register.”

Sophie Gibson, Chair, Burnley Empire Trust
[Source <https://www.facebook.com/BurnleyEmpire>]

Saturday Girl

“Burnley November 27th and Storm Arwen has been blasting the North with gale force winds, icy below freezing temperatures and SNOW SNOW SNOW. The Team are off to Burnley for our second photoshoot on Lower St James Street. The coffee machine is on at the cafe 160 where we'll set up the portrait studio today. It is all coats and hats, coffee and mince pies.

The cafe warms up and some folks come in and off we go. Ruby and Szilvia, art students, come in and we chat about how they feel about the lockdowns, growing up and finding their tribes in creative communities. Ruby is wearing her grandmother's coat, black velvet with sleeves dripping in lace. It is the sharing, the passing down of bodily language, the playful wearing, made material. I wonder about the coat which looks like 1960s fashion, wild and hip, something bought from Manchester maybe. But her grandmother could be from the punk era. This coat could be worn as an expression of Goth and New Romantic; those responses to the 1970s and 80s, to repressive Thatcher politics. The language of the coat is spoken through generational lens, through culture and circumstance.

Are the hills themselves speaking through the coat? Yes I think so.

They stand fast as the wind sweeps down and through the streets on this Saturday, these hills embodied in the people here, in the language and culture of this town.”

Casey Orr, Photographer, Girl About Town Project
[source: <http://www.caseyorr.com>]

TIMELINE

- 2020 Historic England funding confirmed for four year programme (Apr 2020-Mar 2024)
Lockdown, furlough and restructures delay 2020 plans
Cultural Programme is created
- Mar 2021 Review of festival offer so that Culture Festival ties existing and new festival ideas together holistically
- Apr 2021 Two public art designs discussed; final work is commissioned celebrating area's natural and cultural diversity
- May 2021 Asbestos removal work completed at Empire Theatre (additional funding secured)
Public realm improvements (incl. street furniture, pavement widening and seating area) completed + reopened on lower St James Street
- Jun 2021 Shop improvements to The Country House Gallery
Filming of heritage signage installation
Roof repairs at Empire Theatre
- Oct 2021 First Burnley Cultural Festival over 3 days: 3000+ visitors
Saturday Girl arts project event 1: 25 participants
Culture Consortia research visit to Townscape Heritage project in Blackburn
HAZ research visit to North Light Studios
Feasibility plans underway to identify Creative Hub building
- Nov 2021 Saturday Girl arts project event 2: 40 participants
- Dec 2021 Scaffolding banners completed and installed on Empire Theatre
New structural survey appointed for Empire Theatre
HAZ merchandise distributed to lower St James Street businesses and to share at events: pens, sketchbooks, and tote bags.
Recruitment of new HAZ Officer (due to maternity leave)
HAZ Evaluation consultant appointed
- Jan 2022 UCLAN Research project begins to explore cultural opportunities for increasing footfall
HAZ newsletter circulated detailing highlights of programme so far, especially cultural / creative / engagement
- Feb 2022 UCLAN research project heritage tour with Roger Frost
Empire Theatre plasterwork mould taken to enable future restoration / conservation work
Heritage training events: lime plastering, decorative plastering, lime pointing, sign-writing: 5 courses and 45+ participants
Creative Hub development organisation identified. 2 properties shortlisted for hub venue
Exterior and interior work carried out on 1 high street property
Roofing and structural work underway on 2 properties
Planning applications in process on 6 properties
Hoarding cover installed over Windmill Models facade
- Mar 2022 Pop-up shop opens for workshops, exhibitions, and events
Next phase of surveys commences at Empire Theatre
Fundraising training for Culture Consortium partners

LEARNING

No formal reflection process has taken place as yet but some early aspects include:

1. Culture Festival Road Closures. Road closures are an important factor in what the Culture Festival is able to deliver. This limited the locations the festival could take over in its first year, meaning visitors were expected to congregate in a small space, and the potential for reaching more of lower St James Street could not be realised. The process of exploring the issue of road closures made operational arrangements difficult, causing delays and ultimately a very short time in which to pull the Festival together. That said, the success of the Festival in changing the footfall of lower St James Street and increased awareness of the HAZ has been phenomenal and bodes extremely well for the potential of the next festival with appropriate lead-in time and support.

2. Arts & Culture Commissioning. Lessons were learned about the commissioning process of the public art mural after changes were made to its location, and some complications arose around the proposed content of the work and the decision making process. As a result the Culture Consortium agreed that clearer briefs need to be given to artists being commissioned going forward.

OBSERVATIONS GOING FORWARD

Having spent a little time with the Culture Consortium and reviewing the Partnership Board minutes and other reports, there are some developments to aim for over the next year.

1. Increased independence. The consortium needed the support and scaffolding of the HAZ Officer to build momentum while it finds its feet as a group. Going forward, the group needs to be more independent - less reliant on the administration and regular involvement of the HAZ Officer. The HAZ exists to kick-start improvements to this part of the town centre, though the longer term ownership needs to be held by the other partners who will continue to make a difference after the HAZ ends. This will be much more likely to succeed if a cultural consortium is strong before the end of the HAZ. To do this it needs to operate without too much reliance on the HAZ co-ordinator, who's involvement should be to monitor the HAZ investment and as an arm's length conduit to council support.

2. Vision and leadership for clearer decision making. Operational delays seem to arise when the decision making processes are unclear - either in terms of systems used (e.g. commissioning public art) or where leadership lies (e.g. making progress with the Culture Festival). Perhaps this arises from a lack of clearly agreed and shared vision among the group? So discussions take up more time. With a clear shared vision in place partners will have stronger mutual trust to make decisions more quickly, knowing everyone's individual leadership and decision making supports the ambitions of each other and the long term benefit of the town.