

BURNLEY HERITAGE ACTION ZONE EVALUATION SUMMARY, MARCH 2022

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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 October 2021, HAZ's main staff member had left and the position re-recruited. 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.

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, the Culture Festival and consultation with local businesses.
- **£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 s around this mill town 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-21 Festivals review so Culture Festival blends existing and new festival ideas holistically
Public realm work begins
Footfall counters installed at 5 points on lower St James Street
- Apr-21 Two public artworks shortlisted; final work commissioned celebrates area's natural / cultural diversity
- May-21 Asbestos removal work completed at Empire Theatre (additional funding secured)
Public realm (street furniture, pavement widening, seating area) completed + reopened
- Jun-21 Shop improvements to The Country House Gallery
Filming of heritage signage installation
Roof repairs at Empire Theatre
- Aug-21 Work to identify properties for creative hub begins
- Sep-21 Tender for architect for Creative Hub feasibility studies is issued
Negotiations with potential Creative Hub property owners begin
- Oct-21 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-21 Saturday Girl arts project event 2: 40 participants
- Dec-21 Scaffolding banners completed and installed on Empire Theatre
New structural survey appointed for Empire Theatre
HAZ merchandise (pens, bags, sketchbooks) shared via lower St James Street businesses / at events.
Recruitment of new HAZ Officer
Tender for Creative Hub development partner advertised
HAZ Evaluation consultant appointed
- Jan-22 UCLAN Research project begins to explore cultural opportunities for increasing footfall
HAZ newsletter circulated with highlights of programme so far
- Feb-22 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
Creative Hub development organisation identified.
2 properties shortlisted for hub venue and property acquisition process starts
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-22 Pop-up shop opens for workshops, exhibitions, and events
Next phase of surveys commences at Empire Theatre
Fundraising training for Culture Consortium partners
3 more enquiries from local owners about grant opportunities
New HAZ Officer appointed

LEARNING

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

1. Communications. The project received criticism for not being well marketed from the start. Social media, newsletters, hoardings, merchandise, and partner promotions have all started to reverse this. After a period of inactivity between the first HAZ Officer and the building owners, businesses and agents working on the scheme, communications needed reestablishing by the second co-ordinator, thus losing some of the valuable momentum and commitment originally harnessed. Continuous relationships need to be maintained no matter what the staff changes in order to ensure the maximum success of the scheme. Early signs suggest this is now improving again.

2. Budgeting. Costs of most consumables / materials have increased in the past 18 months due to Brexit and lockdown. This has made managing the expectations and contributions of property owners more difficult. Whilst this is now being managed more smoothly as it becomes the new normal, it will continue to effect the scale of what can be achieved compared to original projections.

3. 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.

4. 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 of the Cultural Consortium. The consortium needed the support and scaffolding of the HAZ Officer to build momentum while finding its feet. The group now needs to move more to an arm's length relationship with less reliance 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 long term ownership needs to be held by the partners who will continue to make a difference after the HAZ ends. This will succeed more with a cultural consortium that is strong on its own terms, not solely as a vehicle to deliver the HAZ. Over the next 12 months the Cultural Consortium should become more independent and the HAZ Officer's involvement should be to monitor the HAZ investment and as an arm's length conduit to council support, rather than running the machinations of the consortium.

2. Clearer shared vision and agreements for the Cultural Consortium. As a continuation of the observation above, operational delays 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 and independently, knowing everyone's individual leadership and decision making supports the ambitions of each other and the long term benefit of the town. To be clear this does not a lowest common denominator, but a shared philosophy where each partner plays to their strengths towards the common goal(s). It may help the group to create a theory of change outlining the intended impacts for different audiences and how different delivery strands will work towards them.