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Creative placemaking and the cultural projectariat: artistic work in the wake of Hull City of Culture 2017

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Table 1

Informant	Role
Sector Support 1	Director of national arts sector support organisation.
Council 1	Official at Hull City Council
Theatre 1	Leader of Hull-based theatre organisation
Theatre 2	Leader of Hull-based theatre organisation*
Theatre 3	Leader of Hull-based theatre organisation*
Theatre 4	Leader of Hull-based theatre organisation*
ArtsOrg 1	Hull-based multimedia artist*
ArtsOrg 2	Hull-based visual artist*
ArtsOrg 3	Leader of Hull-based arts organization
ArtsOrg 4	Hull-based multimedia artist*
ArtsOrg 5	Hull-based multimedia artist ^{1*}
Funder 1	Official at regional funding organisation
Funder 2	Official at regional funding organisation
Employer 1	Director of national-level cultural sector employer organisation
Employer 2	Regional representative for cultural sector employer organisation; concurrently leader at regional theatre organization*
Union 1	Regional representative for cultural sector trade union
Delivery 1	Former worker at delivery organisation; concurrently leader of Hull-based music organization*
Delivery 2	Former worker at delivery organisation
Delivery 3	Senior staff at delivery/legacy organisation
Delivery partner 1	Senior administrator at major delivery partner

¹ Artists 4 and 5 were interviewed jointly

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Abstract

Cultural work attracts much sociological interest and is often seen as typifying “precarity”. However, this scholarship rarely examines how “placemaking” policy interventions affect the concrete conditions of cultural work. We study a major recent public/private policy intervention in the United Kingdom: Hull City of Culture 2017. This intervention embodied a multifaceted set of policy logics; combining the desire to boost arts participation, with a market-facing imperative to bolster the city’s “brand”. We examine what happened to the city’s “cultural projectariat” (meaning those workers whose career depends on assembling sequences of discrete, time-limited funded cultural projects) during this event. The influx of funds created opportunities for good quality work, but specific sources of insecurity persisted and in certain respects intensified: including the need for significant unpaid work, and permanent competition for resources. City of Culture’s nature as a market-oriented “placemaking” intervention limits its capacity to ameliorate the conditions of cultural work, which has to be conceived as a policy end in itself if conditions of the cultural projectariat are to be improved.

Introduction

Cultural work is often precarious (Celik and Erkuz Ozturk, 2016; Oakley, 2014; Ross, 2008; Shorthose and Graham, 2004; Teipen, 2008; Umney and Kretsos, 2015). More specifically, many cultural workers can be seen as part of a “projectariat” (Greer et al, 2019). In other words, their employment is contingent on recurrently obtaining funding in order to assemble sequences of time-limited projects, access to which may be highly competitive- as in a “portfolio career” (Gill, 2002; Shorthose and Graham, 2004). By now it is commonplace for researchers to comment on the precariousness of cultural work. However, it is much more unusual to find scholarship situating this problem in a policy context, and examining how particular interventions may lead to variations in the organizational landscape facing the “cultural projectariat”. That is the purpose of this article.

The cultural projectariat, while often insecure and poorly-remunerated, is important to many regions’ developmental strategies. Cities compete for visitors and investment, and may centralise the vibrancy of their cultural scenes as a means of achieving this (Baum, 2018; Hewison, 2014; Nicodemus, 2013). The UK “City of Culture” (CoC) scheme is a highly developed expression of this strategy. Cities compete to be awarded CoC status, which unlocks public and private funding with the brief of staging a year-long programme of cultural events. The most recent UK CoC is Hull 2017; a deprived city and historically a cultural “cold spot”, but which has explicitly integrated culture into its developmental strategy. Only a small number of recent studies have recognised the importance of examining the relationship between policy attempts to stimulate “creative cities” and concrete outcomes for workers, which otherwise remains largely unexamined (e.g. Baum, 2018).

The UK CoC scheme (or its EU-wide “Capital of Culture” inspiration) is an important example of a policy initiative designed to bolster local urban creative economies. CoC has often been critiqued as a market-focused “rebranding” initiative with limited benefit for local cultural workers (Mooney, 2004; Wharton et al, 2010). In studying Hull 2017, we ask whether the influx of CoC resources mitigated the precariousness of cultural project work. We address this question through key informant interviews with funding and policy actors, arts organisations, and other relevant parties. Hull 2017 did create

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3 significant new opportunities for good-quality project work. It enabled certain cultural workers to gain
4 new career security, and evidently stimulated greater “confidence” to participate in arts and cultural
5 activity among many of the city’s residents. However, two specific sources of insecurity, acting
6 especially on what we will identify as a “middle layer” of cultural project workers, persisted and in
7 certain respects exacerbated: the intensity of competition for project resources, and the need for
8 extensive and risk-laden unpaid labour. The competing pressures acting on CoC as an intervention,
9 most notably but not exclusively its market-facing impetus (i.e. the need to “rebrand” Hull as a
10 destination for visitors and investors) present obstacles to addressing these problems.
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13 We begin by reviewing literature on the sociology of cultural work, setting it alongside policy-focused
14 analyses of “placemaking” interventions like CoC. We argue there have been insufficient links drawn
15 between these literatures- particularly regarding the causal relationships between policy initiatives
16 and cultural working conditions. After explaining our research methods, our empirical evidence is
17 presented. We examine the processes through which Hull 2017 funding was disbursed, and consider
18 how these processes were experienced by arts organisations. In contrast to preceding studies of
19 cultural work, we place great emphasis on examining the evolution of this organisational fabric as a
20 prerequisite for understanding working conditions. Then, we reflect on the opportunities and
21 challenges they presented for the cultural projectariat in Hull, considering our findings’ implications
22 for future scholarship.
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26 *The cultural projectariat*

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28 We use “projectariat” as a more specific relative to “precarity” and “the precariat”, which are
29 problematically broad (Alberti et al, 2018; Manolchev et al, 2018). By it, we mean workers who are
30 “precarious” insofar as their careers are contingent upon successfully accruing sequences of discrete,
31 time-limited funded projects for which they have to continually compete (Greer et al, 2019). This
32 means their working lives are highly fluid, and dependent on assembling “portfolios” of disparate jobs
33 in a context characterised by general “mass underemployment” (Shorthose and Graham, 2004). While
34 authors, particularly in *Capital and Class*, have considered how the pressures of this context may
35 disrupt or override the communitarian and self-determined creative activity often found in locally
36 embedded arts “scenes” (e.g. Miles, 2004; Shorthose, 2004), the focus here is slightly shifted, towards
37 the conditions of cultural work as a form of paid activity. What dynamics shape the material
38 experience of trying to make a living in the “cultural projectariat”, in the context of a local “creative
39 ecology” (Shorthose and Graham, 2004) which is being radically remoulded by a high-profile
40 developmental policy intervention?
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44 Projectariat careers are endemic in arts and culture- i.e. the fields of theatre, music, literature, dance,
45 and visual arts. Holden (2016) divides this sector into publicly-funded culture (non-profits delivering
46 ostensibly more “challenging” or community-oriented work funded by public money); commercial
47 culture (market-oriented productions relying on paying audiences); and home-made culture (“the
48 post-modern garage punk band and the YouTube upload” [Holden, 2016:449]).
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51 There is a projectariat in public and commercial culture insofar as work in both depends on accessing
52 project-specific funds. It is the gatekeeper that varies: for instance, disbursers of public funds, such as
53 Arts Council England (ACE), versus a for-profit investor supporting a commercial show. This emphasis
54 on the project means a culture of short-termism with regard to working conditions that pervades
55 public and commercial domains across various “creative” sectors including the performing arts
56 (Nordicity and Smith, 2017) and video games design (Teipen, 2008).
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3 Approaching cultural work as a form of project work raises new questions. In general terms, the
4 “precariousness” of cultural work is well established. There are widely-observed problems of low or
5 unpaid work (Baum, 2018; Greer et al, 2018; Nordicity and Smith, 2017; Umney, 2016) exacerbated
6 by labour oversupply (Shortose and Graham, 2004); risk-laden and unpredictable portfolio careers
7 (Gill, 2002; Murray and Gollmitzer, 2012; Teipen, 2008); and reliance on insider contact networks
8 (Blair, 2001; Umney and Kretsos, 2015). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a general
9 overview of this literature. Important to note, however, that there continues to be a gap in our
10 understanding of how cultural working conditions are moulded by policy context. Some limited
11 literature examines how different welfare state regimes affect the experience of being a cultural
12 worker (Greer et al, 2018; Murray and Gollmitzer, 2012; Umney, 2016). Others consider the impact of
13 collective bargaining institutions in a context of competition for investment (Choko and Connor, 2017;
14 Coles, 2016). These disparate studies notwithstanding, numerous authors have commented on an
15 enduring analytical gap between cultural policy and cultural work (e.g. Banks and Hesmondhalgh,
16 2009; Baum, 2018; Murray and Gollmitzer, 2012).

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21 By focusing on cultural work as project work, we can shed new light on this gap, because project work
22 raises problems the extent of which, we will show, is sensitive to targeted policy interventions such as
23 Hull 2017. In particular, there are two concerns about cultural project work which are explored in our
24 data. One specific source of insecurity in project-based work is the dynamics of competition.
25 Competition is not simply to get a foot on the career ladder, but becomes a permanent feature
26 because new projects are continually needed to ensure continuity of income (Gill, 2002; Greer et al,
27 2019). A second is the well-documented question of unpaid work, which also assumes particular forms
28 for project workers. As we demonstrate, the process of continually applying for new funding
29 necessitates recurrent periods of unremunerated labour. Moreover, rather than a “labour of love”,
30 much of this unpaid work is particularly troublesome and “high-risk” because it is geared towards
31 meeting funder-imposed requirements and is often in vain if a bid is rejected.

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35 What can extant research on project-based organization tell us about precariousness in cultural work?
36 Importantly, recent comparative research in social services (Greer et al, 2019; Schulte et al, 2018)
37 indicates the problems with viewing the projectariat as inevitably and inherently precarious. Instead,
38 they show the wide variability of the insecurity of project-based work. Organizational literature
39 identifies various reasons why certain forms of project organization may be more “precarious” than
40 others. Variables which have been influentially suggested include the nature of the task (some being
41 inherently more “risky” than others) (e.g. Grabher, 2004; Whitley, 2006); designated timeframes
42 (Bakker et al, 2016; Karmowska et al, 2017); and institutional context (Christopherson, 2002). In the
43 latter case, there is some evidence that specifically “creative” work may always assume a flexible
44 model that transcends variations in national institutional configurations (Teipen, 2008). However,
45 Greer et al (2019) show how the precariousness of project work can vary widely even when these
46 factors are held relatively constant.

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50 Instead, Greer et al (2019) direct attention towards the network of qualitative relationships between
51 funder and fundee that shape the landscape of project-based work at local level. They present these
52 relationships as a determining factor on the extent of “projectarian” insecurity in a given case. For
53 instance, do funders seek to stimulate competition for project funding and facilitate the entry of new
54 actors, or do they prioritise existing networks? (see also Jantz et al [2015]). Do they impose criteria on
55 which to evaluate funding awards, or allow project workers to design their own tasks? These questions
56 shape the *de facto* precariousness of project work even where the nature of tasks and formal
57 timeframes are similar. Moreover, decisions made in dispersing resources, and the networks used in
58 doing so, can determine “winners” and “losers” in funding ecologies. The former, for instance, are
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3 those whose established relationships with funders enable them to regularly receive funds, and thus,
4 in turn, become sources upon whom others rely for work. Hence, managerial actors at regularly-
5 funded organisations, while themselves dependent on that funding's continuation, may gain the
6 power to allocate opportunities between other contingent workers on a short-term basis (Samaluk,
7 2017).
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10 We argue here that this is a particularly useful frame to apply to analysing the relationship between
11 "creative cities"-oriented policy interventions (Baum, 2018) and cultural work. This is because cultural
12 policy interventions are so often characterised by particularly large gaps between the "official"
13 objectives that policymakers themselves try to "engineer", and established practices within those
14 scenes themselves; a point well-examined in this journal several years ago (e.g. Miles, 2004;
15 Shorthose, 2004) which is now in need of revisiting. As shown in the next section, CoC schemes have
16 indeed been repeatedly subjected to these accusations. To understand whether and how these
17 interventions can make a difference to the cultural projectariat, case studies are needed which look
18 in detail at the way public and private funders, fundees, and a range of different intermediaries,
19 interact in concrete local situations.
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22 To this end, we examine a specific intervention- Hull 2017- which channelled both public and private
23 funding. Workers and organisations habituated to both contexts were hoping to access its resources
24 and in this sense it transcended Holden's (2016) typology. Note that Holden's "home-made culture"
25 is also relevant to this study insofar as its creators were occasionally also able to receive CoC funds.
26 There is currently little scholarship examining the causal links between policy context and the
27 conditions of project-based cultural work. The latter is, justifiably, assumed to be precarious, but the
28 mitigation or exacerbation of precariousness by particular policy interventions is rarely investigated.
29 Looking at a UK local government context is likely to provide a stimulating case study. Macroeconomic
30 policy decisions (i.e. austerity), which are particularly fierce at local level, have intensified the
31 insecurity of arts workers (Fanthome, 2018), as they have workers in general (Umney et al, 2018). In
32 the UK, arts organisations are being pushed by government to diversify their income streams (DCMS,
33 2017), and in this sense have to conceive themselves in more risk-embracing and "entrepreneurial"
34 ways (Lorey, 2006; Oakley, 2014); local governments have increasingly been required to encourage
35 their regional arts organizations in this direction. Hence there are good reasons to believe that what
36 local policymakers do has an impact on local cultural organizational infrastructures, and by extension
37 on the relative insecurity of cultural work. However, there are very few case studies detailing this
38 articulation with reference to specific local interventions.
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44 In Hull, CoC has meant that, against a national backdrop of austerity, there has been a sudden influx
45 of funding concentrated mainly (but not exclusively) on a programme delivered throughout the
46 calendar year 2017. Hull had to rapidly develop an infrastructure for dispersing these resources, and
47 formulate a strategy for the investment's "legacy". This rapidly and significantly reshaped
48 relationships between local funding organisations and the city's cultural projectariat. While some
49 insecurity is inherent in cultural project-work, we ask whether this new infrastructure created
50 opportunities for good quality work which mitigated the problems of perpetual competition and high-
51 risk unpaid labour. In the next section we discuss in more depth the nature of CoC as an intervention.
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54 *Policy and placemaking*

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56 Shorthose and Graham (2004; see also Miles, 2004) identified tensions in cultural policy interventions,
57 contrasting attempts to engineer cultural development from above in a manner subordinated to the
58 goals of capital, with the self-determined and communitarian activity which permeates existing
59 networks of artistic workers. Certainly, the goals of CoC may conflict with the priorities of those "on
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3 the ground”, as will be shown below. However, even on its own terms, CoC is a fusion of various policy
4 logics. Social and artistic goals are explicitly stated: certainly in Hull, the desire to expand community
5 engagement in culture, and to establish the city as a venue for elite exhibitions and performances,
6 feature prominently (University of Hull, 2018). However, these goals sit alongside a more market-
7 oriented agenda which can be termed “placemaking”. This phenomena is weakly understood among
8 sociologists of work but provides critical context for analysing precarious cultural project work.
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11 Placemaking is used in urban and cultural policy literature to denote the idea of “putting a city on the
12 map”. It assigns arts and culture a central role in generating “instrumental value to non-arts
13 stakeholders”, particularly by fostering a sense of “vibrancy” that bolsters wider economic activity and
14 investment (Nicodemus, 2013:214). Artists are thus expected to embed themselves in an overarching
15 project of city renovation and “rebranding” (Garcia, 2005; Scott, 2006). Hence placemaking strategies
16 epitomise the longer-running “instrumentalisation” of arts and culture as tools for advancing
17 economic development strategy (Hewison, 2014; Belfiore, 2012; Miles, 2004) which in the UK has also
18 reoriented national actors like the Arts Councils (Brighton, 2006). They reflect the wider need for post-
19 industrial cities to compete against each other for highly mobile capital and, supposedly, the favour
20 of a cosmopolitan and wealth-generating “creative class” (Florida, 2005). This policy outlook has been
21 critiqued as relatively superficial, gentrifying certain districts while exacerbating existing structural
22 inequalities (Baum, 2018; Scott, 2006). While this urban planning debate is beyond the scope of this
23 paper, the market-oriented component of placemaking schemes, we will argue, also limits the extent
24 to which they can improve the conditions of cultural work itself.
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28 Placemaking initiatives take various forms, including public art commissions (Hewison, 2014), flagship
29 infrastructural projects (Miles, 2005), or more nebulous concepts like the designation of “cultural
30 quarters” and “creative clusters” (Gu and O’Connor, 2010; Miles, 2004; Montgomery, 2004). CoC is a
31 particularly developed expression of placemaking. The UK CoC programme was announced in 2009 to
32 emulate the European-wide Capital of Culture initiative, whose British recipients had included
33 Glasgow (1990) and Liverpool (2008). The first UK CoC was Derry in 2013, with Hull 2017 the second.
34 Cities compete to be named CoC, which unlocks investment from a range of sources including local
35 and central government, the Arts Councils and Lottery, and potentially large volumes of corporate
36 sponsorship and philanthropic contributions. These funds are used to stage a year-long programme
37 of cultural activities.
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41 Scholarship on placemaking interventions has often emphasised the distance between policy
42 intention and concrete experience “on the ground” (Jayne, 2004; McCann, 2002); what Shorthose
43 (2004) alludes to by distinguishing between the “engineered” versus “the vernacular”. Scott (2006:15),
44 for instance, critiques the desire to “import” a thriving creative scene through policy schemes without
45 first fostering “a wider concern for conviviality and camaraderie” in a city.
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48 This theme is also pronounced in studies of CoC interventions, of which there are numerous in cultural
49 and urban policy research but significantly fewer among sociologists of cultural work. Mooney’s (2004)
50 study of Glasgow 1990 argued that CoC could do little but put a market-friendly gloss on the city’s
51 structural problems, in the naïve hope that rehabilitating the city’s image would be enough. This view
52 has been influential: indeed O’Brien and Miles (2010) see it as predominating in critical academic
53 literature on the subject. Wharton et al (2010) view the European CoC process as driven mainly by
54 business interests. Campbell’s (2011) study of Liverpool 2008 finds general warm feeling about the
55 city’s improved image, but little sense that work prospects for the city’s cultural projectariat had been
56 substantially improved. Below we offer a view which is more guardedly optimistic and which highlights
57 ways in which “engineered” interventions can give voice to autonomous activity within an arts
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3 community. However, when viewed from the perspective of working conditions, we still need to
4 situate CoC's impact within important limits.
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6 Hull's CoC status was announced in 2013. Hull is a comparatively small coastal city of around 250000
7 people. It has historically had strong shipping, fishing and ports industries but in a context of post-
8 industrial decline has become one of the country's most deprived local authorities (University of Hull,
9 2018). Its poverty levels and relative geographical isolation mean it has often been negatively
10 stereotyped in public perception (Corcoran, 2017). While all participants testified to the city's
11 innovative arts scene, it has generally been considered a cultural "cold spot" in comparison to larger
12 and wealthier Northern cities like Leeds and Manchester. However, CoC was the culmination of the
13 City Council's decision, in 2013, that a core development priority should be using its cultural sector to
14 revitalise the city's image as a place to live and work.
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18 At time of writing Hull 2017 has only recently ended, so our study cannot offer a verdict on its socio-
19 economic legacy. To date, the *Cultural Transformations* report (University of Hull, 2018) is the main
20 evaluation output. The report highlights various positive findings around metrics like audience
21 engagement: for instance spikes in cultural ticket sales, and widespread (90%) "engagement with
22 cultural activities" in a survey of Hull residents. It reveals more ambivalent data relating to arts
23 workers' and organisations' experiences: in some cases they reported intensified competition for
24 scarce resources, and expressed reservations over the delivery organisation's role as gatekeeper to
25 funds. Given the recentness of the intervention, we explore these issues through an in-depth
26 qualitative study of the work involved in delivering Hull 2017, while events are still fresh in the minds
27 of key participants: how did the CoC intervention affect the work landscape for Hull's cultural
28 projectariat?
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31 *Methods*

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33 We offer a qualitative examination of the way funds were dispersed during Hull 2017 and how this
34 altered the city's arts infrastructure. In doing so, we can better understand the context facing Hull's
35 cultural projectariat: how their prospects were affected by the influx of funds, and the limits to this
36 impact. This requires a focus on detail, and responsiveness to the complex changes that continued
37 throughout data gathering (January-October 2018), as the programme transitioned from delivery to
38 "legacy". Hence rather than canvassing a sample of views from one particular type of actor, we sought
39 to gather the testimony of well-placed actors occupying key nodes in the local arts and cultural
40 environment. This meant a key informant approach to sampling, prioritising specialised knowledge
41 provided by people with unique practitioner insight into a highly specific situation.
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45 We gathered interviews with 21 respondents, each of whom was well-placed to provide detailed
46 insights into what is happening in Hull. This included interviewees from within the delivery
47 organisation, local government, actors from employer/worker representative organisations, alongside
48 respondents from arts organisations. In the last-mentioned case, interviewees usually had multi-
49 faceted roles. Since many arts organisations (particularly in Hull) are small, with people often taking
50 on both administrative and creative functions out of necessity, our respondents tended to have insight
51 into the bureaucratic mechanics of Hull 2017 delivery as well as its impact on the experience of cultural
52 workers. These organisational-level respondents were often part of the "projectariat", insofar as they
53 were all dependent on winning project-based funding to continue their careers even where they also
54 had managerial roles in their companies. As we will show, the *de facto* level of insecurity they
55 experienced varied widely. Participants marked with an asterisk in table one are those who fell into
56 this category. Participants without an asterisk were those who, because they were managerial or
57 administrative cadres in other types of organisation (such as public funding bodies or permanent
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3 sectoral support structures), could not themselves be considered part of the projectariat. Instead, they
4 employed, represented, or directed funds towards, project-based cultural workers. Hence while ten
5 participants were able to speak directly of their own experience in the projectariat, the main focus of
6 the research was understanding the organisational mechanics influencing cultural work rather than
7 canvassing people in this situation as widely as possible.
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10 Table one is deliberately broad in describing participants, refraining from specifying length of service,
11 specific roles, or any specific description of their organisations. We also use generic words like “leader”
12 to account for varied and complex roles (which, as noted, typically combine administrative and
13 creative functions). In all cases respondents were either the sole, or one of the key individuals,
14 responsible for obtaining funds and overseeing projects. This lack of specificity is because of the
15 smallness of Hull’s cultural scene. Even slight clues, such as length of time in the city, or more specific
16 organisational description, would enable deduction of identities by someone who knows the Hull arts
17 scene well. At certain points we use anonymous citations: this is because the specific nature of the
18 data reported, combined with even a generic participant code, would risk revealing identities. This
19 matters because we will relate conflicting views about Hull 2017, and it is imperative to us not to
20 jeopardise our participants’ relationships with those around them.
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23 INSERT TABLE ONE

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25 We conceived our interview strategy as tracing a causal trail across three stages: firstly, deciphering
26 the specific interventions through which funds were dispersed during Hull 2017, and the key priorities
27 driving them. Secondly, examining how organisations experienced and responded to these
28 interventions. Thirdly, considering how these changes directly affected project-based work. To what
29 extent did the new funding infrastructure create a context in which the problems of perpetual
30 competition and risk-laden unpaid work could be improved? Questions were adapted as our
31 understanding of the context developed, and in response to different interviewee roles. They included
32 both ice-breaking general queries (e.g. “Describe your role in the CoC programme”; “How do you feel
33 participation in CoC affected your career?”) to highly specific ones (e.g. “what kind of guideline pay
34 rates were imposed as a condition of your project funding?”; “what measures did you take to
35 encourage a wider applicant pool to your funding schemes?”).
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39 Sampling used desk research followed by cold contact. Through a preliminary reading of available
40 documentation (strategy documents, news reports, programme details) we identified the
41 organisations and individuals involved in the delivery of the programme. We approached them over
42 phone, post, or email. In some cases existing interviewees directly introduced us to other key
43 informants who had been difficult to access. We used our knowledge as industrial relations
44 researchers to identify relevant unions and employers’ associations. Most interviews lasted
45 approximately an hour. The shortest is 30 minutes and the longest is two hours.
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49 Analysis used thematic coding of full interview transcriptions. By the final interviews, no new codes
50 were emerging and instead we were corroborating and reinforcing existing themes. We took this to
51 indicate data saturation. Next, we present this data in three stages: an overview of the general CoC
52 delivery infrastructure in Hull; examining how arts organisations interacted with this infrastructure;
53 and reflecting on how these developments affected cultural projectariat work.
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55 *Hull 2017*

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57 We begin with a relatively detailed overview of the organizational infrastructure in the Hull arts
58 ecology, and how it was reshaped during CoC 2017. This, we argue, provides vital context for
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3 understanding the concrete changes to the relative (in)security of the city's cultural projectariat
4 described below.
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6 CoC is awarded to cities where the Council is perceived to be serious about centralising arts and
7 culture-led development, but where there is not yet a sufficiently-developed cultural infrastructure to
8 realise this (Funder 1). Hull made this commitment in its 2013 strategic plan. It is unusual, compared
9 to most UK councils, in maintaining a dedicated arts office with four staff and an annual spending pot
10 of £40000 (Council 1, Funder 2). It is also relatively distinctive in retaining direct Council control over
11 some key institutions including several museums and the flagship New Theatre (Council 1). However,
12 the city has also been a cultural "cold spot" in terms of audience size and depth of provision. One
13 participant (ArtsOrg 3) describes culture in Hull as innovative but unstable:
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16 "Hull... [has] places which have often opened and closed, things have collapsed, people have
17 lost their jobs, but I would argue created a slightly more dynamic scene but also a more fragile
18 scene. So amazing things have happened and then people have left elsewhere, because
19 there's no sustaining."
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22 Hull is a comparatively poor city, and spending pressures have led to several independent local cultural
23 organisations being closed over the last twenty years (ArtsOrg, 3; Council 1). Consequently, despite its
24 recent strategic profile, the arts infrastructure has deteriorated, particularly in dance, literature and
25 visual arts (Council 1). Even during 2017, major cuts to Hull City College closed full-time degree courses
26 in visual arts and dance (Council 1, ArtsOrg 2). However, theatre remains a comparative advantage.
27 Hull is home to nationally-regarded theatre institutions including Hull Truck, New Theatre and Middle
28 Child.
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31 An austere national context, combined with Hull's "cold spot" status, has counterintuitively made Hull
32 attractive to some cultural project workers. The low cost of living and working, combined with the
33 emergent CoC buzz, had inspired some respondents to move there (Theatre 4; ArtsOrg 4; ArtsOrg 5).
34 Others had arrived long before CoC, specifically to find a lower-competition environment in which
35 experienced arts workers would stand more chance of winning project funding. "I came back
36 deliberately because there was only one theatre company... [Hull] flashed like a beacon", as
37 somewhere to partner with national funders looking to direct resources to under-served areas
38 (Theatre 3).
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41 Hull's first CoC bid was rejected for featuring insufficient input from its independent/non-profit sector,
42 instead vaunting its Council-run assets (Council 1). It centralised independent and community
43 engagement throughout its second, successful bid. The delivery organisation itself was established as
44 an independent actor destined to function as an entirely new Hull cultural institution (Delivery 3).
45 After being awarded CoC status, Hull raised £32m from various sources; core funds from the City
46 Council and Arts Council England (ACE), which was leveraged to encourage private donations. This
47 sum exceeded the initial £18m target, and coincided with additional central government grants to
48 refurbish New Theatre and the city's major art gallery, the Ferens.
49

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51 The new delivery organisation therefore had to develop an infrastructure to absorb a sudden spike in
52 funding, stage a major year-long festival, while also paying attention to "legacy". It pursued a mixed
53 economy model using various tools (Delivery 3). The need to stage a dense events programme which
54 could stand out in terms of quality led to a focus on direct commissioning. Major flagship commissions
55 mostly went to organisations outside Hull with a national profile, for example to well-established
56 studios with elite producers (Council 1), to deliver large-scale projects that were beyond local
57 organisations' capacity (Employer 2; Delivery partner 1).
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3 The delivery organisation also commissioned, or launched co-commissions with, key local
4 organisations such as Hull Truck and the producing house Middle Child (Delivery 3). Where this
5 happened, organisations were able to unlock significant additional resources due to their association
6 with CoC and expand the scope of their work (Theatre 1; Delivery 3). One such company was able to
7 enter ACE's national portfolio (i.e. receive a four-year structural funding settlement) following Hull
8 2017. These partnerships were particularly significant in theatre, capitalising on Hull's existing
9 comparative advantages. This, alongside elite national-level commissions, reflects the demands of
10 rapidly assembling a dense programme of major cultural events for exhibition on the "national stage".
11

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13 These processes- focused on external commissions and existing local strengths- are in keeping with
14 CoC's placemaking impetus: the need to quickly "rebrand" Hull as a venue for cultural innovation and
15 excellence. However, this logic was intertwined with other social policy objectives. In Hull's case this
16 included an emphasis on increasing local communities' arts participation. The main instrument for this
17 was the Creative Communities (CC) scheme. This was a funding pot of £600000 making smaller awards
18 (up to £10000) open to any applicants on a competitive basis. Applicants needed to demonstrate plans
19 for community engagement, and were encouraged to partner with community groups in Hull (Council
20 1, Delivery 2; ArtsOrg 2).
21

22
23 Initial plans to amalgamate the Council arts unit's own budget with the delivery organisation's were
24 shelved (Council 1). Hence the Council arts team retained its own long-running brief: to strategically
25 support projects which could enhance the depth of quality of the Hull arts scene. Council funds are
26 small-scale and discretionary, often concentrated on areas of strategic weakness, and its formalised
27 procurement apparatus has been stripped away in recent years (Council 1). Its focus on addressing
28 weaknesses contrasts with the delivery organisation's placemaking focus on comparative advantage;
29 a tension we examine below.
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31
32 CoC status enabled Hull to buck the national austerity-driven trend of dismantling local arts and
33 cultural infrastructure. However, the Hull 2017 situation is exceptional and, importantly, temporary.
34 2017 saw large, time-limited spikes in public funding and private sponsorship, in a context where the
35 former is being drastically squeezed and the latter is usually "pie in the sky" outside London (Council
36 1; Theatre 3). Does Hull 2017 therefore amount to a temporary feast amid inevitable famine for
37 cultural workers? Some respondents asked whether expectations had been raised to unsustainable
38 levels (ArtsOrg 3; Theatre 1). We reflect on these questions in the following sections.
39

40 41 42 *Successes and tensions at organisational level*

43
44 Hull 2017 enabled certain local organisations to escape- or substantially mitigate- the "short-termism"
45 (Employer 1) and precariousness of cultural project-based work. Importantly, this effect appeared
46 strongest in prioritised areas of comparative advantage, particularly theatre. One theatre company's
47 profile was raised to the extent that they gained ACE national portfolio status. This enabled four core
48 staff to be given permanent contracts for the first time. However, the performers and technicians
49 working on individual shows would remain contingent freelancers (anon). This status also greatly
50 reduces the risks inherent in applying for additional resources (Employer 2, Theatre 2). Without long-
51 term structural funds, cultural workers spend large quantities of unpaid time and effort creating bids
52 which are more often than not rejected (Theatre 4; ArtsOrg 1; ArtsOrg 3). Theatre-centred
53 infrastructural initiatives were also launched, including a "Made in Hull" Edinburgh Festival showcase,
54 and the Hull Independent Producers' Initiative (which commissioned a celebrated producer to mentor
55 young local companies). These developments suggest that, in particular cases, Hull 2017 created
56 conditions whereby certain cultural workers could develop their careers and profiles, and even escape
57 the cultural "projectariat" entirely (or for at least four years).
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3 These developments were not exclusive to theatre. Receiving a large CoC commission, for instance,
4 enabled one arts organisation to hire resident artists on a year-long contract rather than the typical
5 one-off events contracts. Upgrades to the Ferens and the creation of the new Humber Street Gallery
6 were also perceived as significant opportunities for Hull-based visual artists to develop their profile
7 and exhibit work (ArtsOrg 1; ArtsOrg 2). These, however, are prospects, rather than the more
8 demonstrable outcomes described in relation to key theatre institutions (described as “the usual
9 suspects” by one interviewee [anon]). In some cases even the smaller-scale CC scheme had a
10 transformative impact on cultural workers’ careers. One participant describes using a CC grant to lever
11 additional public and private match funding, leading to their CC project developing an international
12 profile: a “seismic” career boost (ArtsOrg 1) precipitating more frequent and better-paid jobs.
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16 These success stories often follow a familiar path. It is common for cultural workers to hope one
17 project’s success can produce a “break”; i.e. reduce insecurity by rendering them more in-demand. As
18 shown, this goal was realised for some of the Hull projectariat following CoC work. However, the limits
19 of these successes need to be understood in the context of some of the tensions that emerged through
20 the Hull 2017 process.
21

22 There is a tension between the temporal logic of CoC as a city rebranding initiative, necessitating a
23 spectacular and concentrated programme of events, and the long-term requirements of the Hull arts
24 infrastructure. One respondent (anon), whose organisation received a CoC commission, argued that
25 more benefits would have followed from receiving the same amount staggered over a longer period.
26 Some noted that the regularity is more important than the total sum, providing leeway to apply for
27 additional resources (ArtsOrg 3) and making it easier to offer work to people (Employer 2).
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30 The temporal question is also illustrated by divergences between the strategic priorities of the delivery
31 organisation and the Council. A Council agent had initially provided a list of ordered priorities for arts
32 development in Hull, placing areas of weakness at the top, hoping these could be corrected in the
33 interests of depth of quality (anon). In fact, these were inverted: the pressures of implementing the
34 2017 programme meant the greater focus was on areas of existing comparative advantage.
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37 Consequently, our Council interviewee argued that one area of reduced impact was a middle tier of
38 arts workers: those with professional skills adequate to realistically compete for project funding, but
39 who fell outside commissioning priorities and who were not sufficiently geared towards community
40 engagement to win CC applications. The Council was asked to support this tier but had very limited
41 funds with which to do so (Council 1). It was from this kind of actor that the most critical comments
42 on Hull 2017 emerged. Various respondents (while not always endorsing these views themselves)
43 reported encountering dissent from those who, being neither embedded in existing areas of strength,
44 nor within community networks, felt shut out by a new gatekeeper (ArtsOrg 1; ArtsOrg 2; Theatre 3).
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47 This critique illustrates the dialectical relationship between professionalism and participation in the
48 arts. Professional careers depend on an engaged audience, and *vice versa*, but when participation
49 increases so do the competitive pressures on professionals. This tension frames the recurrent
50 argument among interviewees that one of Hull 2017’s major achievements was increasing
51 “confidence” in the city. During the CC stream in particular, there was great emphasis on outreach
52 work to encourage applicants with no experience of funded arts projects, in some cases providing
53 detailed pre-submission advice (Delivery 2). The scheme’s organisers knew that many potential
54 participants would not be professional artists and would have varied “exit points”: many would not
55 be interested in working in culture long-term (Delivery 2). Consequently, there was scope for creators
56 of “home-made culture” (Holden, 2016) to access previously-unobtainable funds, if a community
57 engagement aspect could be demonstrated.
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3 The participation-competition tension also emerges in the *Cultural Transformations* data. The report
4 highlights a general sense that residents' pride in the city had increased, but also makes the more
5 specific point that artistically-engaged Hull residents are now putting in substantially more
6 applications for project funding (University of Hull, 2018). Its survey of arts workers also found that
7 70% had been involved in projects made possible by CoC, and 90% had been able to learn new skills
8 and try new ideas. However, it also revealed concerns over intensified competition for funding, access
9 to venues, and for audiences. We unpack this further in the next section.
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12 In 2018 the delivery organisation was renamed Absolutely Cultured and converted into a permanent
13 organisation with a brief to develop the Hull 2017 legacy. It has a reduced budget, and its agenda
14 concentrates on certain functions: staging 3-4 major public events annually; maintaining the highly-
15 visible volunteer corps that handles many crowd direction and stewarding functions at Hull cultural
16 events; and overseeing new strategic assets like Humber Street Gallery (Delivery 3). Its work will be
17 closely aligned with the Council's development strategy of expanding the "visitor economy".
18 Consequently, it will also provide branding functions, such as offering tours and travel tips to social
19 media "influencers" visiting the area (Delivery 3). Some participants expressed concern with the focus
20 on public events, since this could compete with existing events organisations (Council 1) and would
21 not provide an ongoing source of employment for the city's local cultural workforce (ArtsOrg 3).
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25 Our aim is not to critique specific decisions made during Hull 2017. Rather, it is to highlight tensions
26 inherent to the CoC project: between events delivery and strategic investment; between rebranding
27 and sustainability; between the participant and the professional. These tensions reflect the complex
28 logics embodied in CoC as an intervention: it is an attempt to improve a city's arts infrastructure, but
29 set in a context where market-oriented placemaking demands are a short-term imperative, and in
30 which social policy demands are also pressing. In the final section, we reflect on how these tensions
31 intensified certain sources of insecurity for the cultural projectariat.
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34 *The cultural projectariat during Hull 2017*

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36 Interviewees often reflected that, to understand the variegated impact of Hull 2017, one should
37 differentiate between cultural career stages. In other words, we may distinguish between different
38 "fractions" within the projectariat. One (Theatre 2) expressed this as a three-stage model: first, a stage
39 with negligible professional work but potentially with aspirations to progress beyond hobbyist status;
40 second, a middle stage where artists can construct a viable but precarious career aggregating one-off
41 project awards (i.e. the projectariat proper); third, where workers can be continually employed by an
42 arts organisation. The previous sections suggest some propositions. The comparative advantage-
43 focused commissioning strategy enabled a small number of workers, notably in theatre, to progress
44 from the second to the third stage. Greater community engagement accelerated participation at the
45 first stage and created expectations that new people could "graduate" to the second. This intensified
46 competitive pressures on people established at the second stage. This general picture is elaborated in
47 the rest of this section.
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51 CoC's time-specific nature inevitably limits what can be achieved. Many respondents were worried
52 about the post-CoC future. Even at major theatre institutions fixed term contracts were not being
53 renewed, and respondents worried that staff were likely to leave the city to pursue work elsewhere
54 (anon Theatre). The closure of local arts degree courses may jeopardise Hull's ability to grow its
55 cultural audience (ArtsOrg 3).
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58 We focus on two specific and closely-linked problems facing the cultural projectariat which could not
59 be significantly mitigated by Hull 2017, and in some respects have intensified. First, perpetual
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3 competition for new projects. Second, the amount of high-risk unpaid work required to sustain a
4 project-based career.
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6 First, enhanced confidence can mean intensified competition, not just for funding, but for audiences
7 and venue space. As noted, this was felt most intensely by those at the second “stage” identified
8 above. One such respondent reports:
9

10 “[It was] a bit unnerving because to begin with as one of the most respected companies in the
11 city, we felt a little bit like we were pitching... We produced less work ourselves last year than
12 any other year, which is weird, because obviously the market was saturated, there were no
13 venues available” (Theatre 3)
14
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16 This organisation had, therefore, become less secure during 2017. Access to resources decreased
17 necessitating pursuit of additional commercial funding: an unpredictable and risk-laden venture given
18 the time it requires set against limited chances of success (Sector support 1). This directly affected the
19 organisation’s capacity to provide work:
20

21 “So at the moment we’re trying to see how we can keep it rolling, whether we can keep it
22 rolling, how we can find the finances to do that. So it’s always a scary time, because you
23 literally never know. So it’s very difficult to put people on any kind of permanent basis...”
24 (Theatre 3)
25
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27 Others corroborated the sense of greater competitive pressure on established organisations, but
28 offered a different normative interpretation.
29

30 “I think some of the older guard would say that [it’s more competitive]... One of the reasons
31 [my organisation] started to struggle a few years ago was basically we used to get all the work.
32 And then there was more people around... But why should we have got all the work? It creates
33 complacency... if you just hand blank cheques... to the same people who do the same stuff,
34 for thirty years... So yeah, it is more competitive, but that means there’s more people engaged,
35 more people aware that they can get funds. Whereas a few of the older artists were used to
36 just ringing up the arts and development teams and saying ‘hi... I’ve got this idea for a project.
37 You know me, I know you’” (ArtsOrg 3)
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40 It is not our intention to evaluate these differing normative views. This is a problem that advocates of
41 bottom-up rather than top-down approaches to cultural policy need to wrestle with, since a more
42 “vernacular” approach (Shorthose, 2004) does not in itself resolve this tension. For our purposes, we
43 simply highlight this as evidence of the specific form taken by the participation-professional dialectic
44 during Hull 2017.
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47 This dialectic is also evident in responses to the CC scheme, which is where many potential funding
48 recipients were directed seemingly by default (Theatre 3). The community engagement requirement
49 shifted the attributes demanded by funders, meaning applicants had to quickly develop new ways of
50 framing their work, and build networks with new actors. “We certainly weren’t discouraging practicing
51 artists to apply for funding, but if they were it would be a case of where’s the community element in
52 this?” (Delivery 2). Developing these relationships can involve extensive unpaid effort with weak
53 chance of reward given the competitive nature of the CC pot (Theatre 4; Council 1; ArtsOrg 1; Delivery
54 2). Hence competition not only intensified but the terms on which it was conducted also shifted,
55 requiring new networks to be constructed, and new ways of framing one’s work had to be quickly
56 developed.
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3 The latter point overlaps with the second problem: high-risk unpaid labour. Note that, in project-based
4 cultural work, particularly in the publicly-funded domain, there is often a formal framework for
5 regulating pay. In response to concerns around unpaid internships, ACE now requires itemised
6 budgets, including labour, directing applicants towards guideline pay rates (Union 1; Funder 1; Funder
7 2; Employer 1). Some interviewees had previously had ACE bids knocked back for under-budgeting on
8 pay (Theatre 2). In sectors like theatre, there is relatively comprehensive collective bargaining
9 coverage over pay, and neither union nor employer respondents testified to major deterioration of,
10 or exit from, these arrangements under austerity (Union 1; Employer 1; Employer 2). There is a
11 consensus that adhering to agreed contractual pay rates is a signifier of professionalism (Theatre 4;
12 Council 1; Employer 1; Employer 2).

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16 However, these arrangements merely define nominal pay rates and cannot address the various ways
17 in which unpaid work seeps into cultural careers. Under austerity, volunteering is becoming more
18 important as a route into a career. This is now widely-evidenced in theatre (Nordicity and Smith, 2017;
19 Employer 1), and based on our informants' testimony is likely also true elsewhere in the arts (ArtsOrg
20 1; ArtsOrg 4; ArtsOrg 5). Moreover, guideline pay rates and collective bargaining are not well adapted
21 to recognising the multiple contingencies that arise during cultural projects (Theatre 2; Theatre 4;
22 ArtsOrg 2). One respondent describes an ACE project award made to enable them to contribute to
23 Hull 2017, and which features extensive guidance on pay rates:
24
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26 "But as individuals, you know, we're all doing far, far more, over and above what we're getting
27 paid. I don't know how you'd you get around that in the arts... If we really got paid for
28 everything we've done ... one of the things I've found is building up strong networks with other
29 arts organisations. So I've been going to meeting after meeting, none of which I'm getting paid
30 for" (ArtsOrg 2)
31
32

33 This interviewee mentioned some comparatively "benign" forms of unpaid labour, such as expending
34 additional effort on a labour of love (NB: clearly reliance on volunteering can be problematized, but
35 this is beyond the scope of this article). However, we highlight forms of higher-risk unpaid work that
36 are specific to the cultural projectariat, and which are an inescapable part of Hull 2017. This is the
37 extensive unpaid work that goes into preparing funding bids, which many participants saw as time-
38 consuming and difficult (ArtsOrg 1; ArtsOrg 3; Theatre 4; Employer 2). This issue was intensified by
39 schemes like CC which pushed applicants to engage with community actors, requiring them to build
40 new networks often from scratch, and adapt to new ways of framing and reporting on their activities
41 (ArtsOrg 1; ArtsOrg 2; Theatre 3; Theatre 4).
42
43

44 Hull 2017 had a lighter touch approach to monitoring funding awards than ACE, arguing it wanted to
45 minimise reporting burdens. Interviews suggested there was a presumption fundees would follow ACE
46 guidelines around paying cultural workers. It does not appear that labour costs were addressed
47 systematically through competitive schemes such as CC. One recipient (anon ArtsOrg) received a CC
48 grant including a small artist's fee but which did not cover labour costs on the project (which required
49 significant manufacturing and maintenance); these costs were only met when this award was matched
50 by other funders. Elsewhere, organisations might receive commissions to curate their own stream
51 within the wider programme. In this sense they become intermediary dispersers of funds and this
52 could be quite informalised. One participant (anon. citation) had been engaged as a freelancer in this
53 manner and received a fee they saw as positive given their early career stage, but which certainly fell
54 significantly below recognised guidelines as signposted by ACE and relevant unions. The Council arts
55 unit itself makes awards based on assessments of strategic need. While they are conscious of the
56 problem of low pay, there is no formal or *de facto* commitment to maintaining established going rates.
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3 Arts workers are typically reluctant to police each other's pay practices (Employer 2; see also Umney
4 [2016]). This dovetails with the recurrent perception that, in purely aesthetic terms, regular funding
5 for cultural projectarians is a problem. One participant (anon) attributed the liveliness of Hull's arts
6 scene to its insecurity, arguing that organisations in wealthier cities with long-term funding guarantees
7 had become "fat... complacent and bland". Another (anon) described explicitly counselling another
8 organisation to avoid employing a resident artist on a permanent contract, viewing this as a threat to
9 the impermanence that inspires creative work. While Hull 2017 created numerous opportunities for
10 good quality project work, it did not challenge these dynamics in any significant way. Indeed, as we
11 have argued, the divergent logics embedded in CoC as a placemaking intervention created tensions
12 that crowded out the possibility of addressing them directly.
13
14

15 16 *Conclusion*

17
18 CoC 2017 was a major intervention, channelling an influx of funds into a relatively deprived city with
19 a fragile but active cultural scene. This influx created new mechanisms through which cultural workers
20 could access project work, and some of these projects enabled a sustainable boost to workers' careers.
21 In certain cases it enabled people to entirely escape 'projectariat' life, for instance by becoming
22 permanent employees of an arts organisation. However, we have also argued that the logics embodied
23 in CoC as an intervention- its placemaking impetus and wider social policy objectives- imposed limits
24 on the extent to which it could reduce the insecurity of projectariat work, particularly among what we
25 have called the professional "middle stage". In this sense we have sought to greatly flesh out previous
26 studies which have interrogated the tensions between "vernacular" arts scenes and attempts at
27 "engineering" developmental cultural interventions from above (Shorthose, 2004; see also Campbell,
28 2011; Wharton et al, 2010)
29

30
31 The paper offers two main contributions to existing literature. First, it helps sociologists of work,
32 specifically those interested in precarious work in cultural fields, pay closer attention to developments
33 at policy level. To date, this is relatively uncommon, and there are only scattered examples of serious
34 engagement between policy analysis and the sociology of work (e.g. Baum, 2018; Murray and
35 Gollmitzer, 2012). While we examine a highly specific intervention, some general arguments stand
36 out, with important implications. First, while problems like competition and unpaid work are well-
37 recognised, the project-based character of work means these take specific forms and causes. Second,
38 while cultural project work is usually "precarious" to some degree, the severity of these problems are
39 highly variable and directly influenced by the funding frameworks and policy interventions applied to
40 a given context. Third, if cultural project work is to be rendered less insecure this has to be identified
41 as an end in itself. Other logics, be they market-oriented (the placemaking impetus) or social
42 democratic (the emphasis on community participation), have tended to crowd out the goal of
43 providing good quality work for the existing cultural workforce, which did not figure prominently in
44 policy-level interviews.
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48 We also contribute to literature on cultural and urban policy, which has direct interest in CoC initiatives
49 (Garcia, 2005; Mooney, 2004; O'Brien and Miles, 2010; Wharton et al, 2010) but which has typically
50 remained distant from the sociology of work (Baum, 2018). The causal relationship between policy
51 and working conditions is an important gap (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009) which this article has
52 addressed through a detailed case study. We hope it provides a useful reference point in considering
53 how policy change interacts with the forms and determinants of insecurity. Finally, we contribute to
54 literature on project-based organization more generally. Following Greer et al (2019), we show how
55 the insecurity of project-based work is shaped by the qualitative relationships between distributors
56 and recipients of funding that are embedded in local case studies.
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3 A single case study has evident limits. We have not been able to provide an encompassing survey of
4 the views of cultural workers in Hull. Instead, we have illuminated the mechanics through which the
5 Hull infrastructure was changed during the process, and used this to identify likely consequences with
6 corroboration from well-connected informants. We have also been drawn on publicly available
7 quantitative evaluation data (University of Hull, 2018) to contextualise these insights. Despite the
8 specificity of the Hull case, we have identified propositions which we believe have general relevance
9 to the sociology of cultural work.
10
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12 Does our research prompt specific practical recommendations? Certain interviewee comments could,
13 potentially, be developed into policy ideas: notably the possibility of longer-term delivery periods and
14 greater prioritisation of areas of strategic and infrastructural weakness. However, we have also argued
15 that the nature of CoC as a market-oriented placemaking intervention militates against these kinds of
16 approaches. This, ultimately, reflects the national-level context, which emphasises the transformative
17 capacity of cultural investment in a market-oriented context without addressing the problems of
18 insecure work upon which the sector currently depends.
19
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