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## **Big ideas for a small town: the Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative**

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Whilst much of the attention of those concerned with culture and regeneration has rightly focused upon the core cities and regional capitals, it would be a mistake to assume that smaller towns and cities do not also have a role to play. Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, is one of a number of towns clustered around the Pennines which grew, and for a hundred years prospered from, the textile trade but which, by the 1980s, were in serious economic decline. This article examines how culture has contributed to the regeneration of the town and the wider local authority district. and more latterly the creative industries have contributed to the regeneration of the town and wider local authority district<sup>1</sup>. It reviews the developing role of the creative industries within the district and in particular the role of the local Council as a key catalyst for many of the institutional and policy shifts that have contributed to this development. The paper is very much intended as a reflection on a particular case study. It is certainly not offered as a blueprint but as an opportunity to contribute to the developing knowledge base concerned with the role of the cultural and creative industries in urban development.

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Huddersfield is a former woollen mill town in the West Yorkshire foothills of the Pennines. The population of the town is 121,620, although it is also the administrative centre of the Metropolitan Borough of Kirklees, with a population of 389,500 (ONS, 2002), which also includes the towns of Dewsbury, Batley, Cleckheaton and Holmfirth.

In 1986, battered by a series of scandals, mill closures and by-election defeats the Labour group of Kirklees Council realised it needed a fresh approach. The Council was widely perceived

as parochial, faction-ridden, narrow-minded, defensive and riddled with self-doubt - memorably described at the time as an institutional basket case. The Institute for Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) came to study Kirklees and concluded that it had never come to terms with being formed as an unpopular amalgam of 11 small towns and districts. With a population of 380,000 it ought to have been a big hitter in the urban league. However, its resources were turned inward and for largely negative ends. It was, they said, one of the most problematic local authorities they had ever encountered<sup>2</sup>.

### *A Vision for Kirklees*

With the election of John Harman as leader of the Labour group and the appointment of Robert Hughes as Chief Executive, a new vision was launched for the Council. Its premise, shocking to many at the time, was the announcement that the only way it was going to be fulfilled was if the isolated and arrogant Council swallowed its pride and went into partnership with others. Harman is credited as taking the bull by the horns and forged the first partnership with two other local organisations perceived as equally isolated and arrogant- the football and rugby clubs. There was widespread scepticism that it would all end in tears. Instead, the partnership produced the £35 million McAlpine Stadium<sup>3</sup> which was awarded the prize for Best Building of the Year by the Royal Institute of British Architects on its opening.

The new Leadership first announced its Vision for Kirklees in 1988 and set itself targets for Economic, Environmental and Community Regeneration and announced that it was inviting partners to come forward with whom it could work. Many observers in the private and voluntary sectors at the time looked at the Council's track record and politely declined the invitation. However, a group of local arts workers, perhaps because they felt they had very little to lose, did take up the invitation. Armed with a handful of statistics on the then

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<sup>1</sup> The authors have played various roles in the promotion of culture as a facet of regeneration policy in Kirklees. The views expressed in this article are their own. The economic data used in the article is drawn from the Annual Business Inquiry. The geographic unit of analysis used is the local authority district.

<sup>2</sup> Leach, S & Game, C, 1988, *Review of the Council's Committee Structures and Processes, Interim Report*. (Birmingham: INLOGOV).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mcalpinestadium.com>

fashionable topic of the economic importance of the arts, they lobbied the new Engine for Growth partnership formed by the Council, Chamber of Commerce, Huddersfield University and local employers. The arts workers explained that the new culture of openness and innovation into which the leadership was trying to haul a reluctant Council was something which came naturally to them and, if given the chance, they would prove it.

### *Culture moving centre-stage*

The chance was offered and the group of arts workers, now operating under the collective name of Cultural Industries in Kirklees, were funded to produce an extensive 80-page study into the potential social, economic and cultural benefits of promoting the cultural industries in Kirklees'. The report entitled *A Chance to Participate: the potential of cultural industries and community arts in the social and economic regeneration of Kirklees*<sup>4</sup> and its 50 recommendations were well received and adopted as a strand of the Council's regeneration strategy. A joint Council/independent sector Cultural Industries Task Force was founded to turn the report into a strategy, to identify the organisations that could drive it and to assemble the funding that would be needed. Fortunately for Kirklees, its process of re-engineering was effectively positioned to take advantage of the Conservative government's introduction of the new forms of 'challenge funding' for local development including City Challenge and later the Single Regeneration Budget. It meant the Council was quickly acquiring the kind of lean local polity needed to flourish in the new competitive environment. Kirklees garnered millions of pounds of new money for regeneration whilst many other boroughs languished, and for a few years it became the hotspot of British municipal innovation, pioneering local strategic partnerships, scrutiny commissions and Local Agenda 21 (with Harman receiving a knighthood for his services to local government).

The extra cash and the pervading 'can do' atmosphere enabled much of *A Chance to Participate* to be implemented, culminating in 1994/5 in the opening of the Kirklees Media

Centre, a managed workspace for creative businesses based in a former warehouse, and the Lawrence Batley Theatre based in a converted chapel. In recognition of its achievements in culture-led regeneration, Kirklees was awarded the Arts Council Working for Cities prize. This was against a backdrop of a generally very lively and progressive cultural milieu in Kirklees in the mid-1990s. This included the internationally acclaimed Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, a strong poetry scene (which led to the slightly tongue in cheek designation of Huddersfield as the 'poetry capital of England'); a large annual Caribbean Carnival and Asian Mela, and Huddersfield's hosting of the UK Year of Photography and the Electronic Image.

Over this period, Kirklees had been working with Charles Landry and Franco Bianchini on a new cultural policy for the borough, *Made in Kirklees*<sup>5</sup>. Inspired by Landry and Bianchini's book *The Creative City*<sup>6</sup>, one element of this policy was to make Huddersfield a place that could welcome creative talent and transform it into wealth. An opportunity to explore this came in 1995 when the European Commission invited competitive bids from cities to be awarded Urban Pilot Project status under its Article 10 (Innovative Actions) programme. Against a field of over 500, Huddersfield was chosen and awarded 3 million Euros towards a 10 million Euro scheme to implement its *Creative Town Initiative*<sup>7</sup>. The task was to initiate a wide range of diverse projects designed to find, stimulate, nurture, attract, harness, exploit, recycle, embed and keep creative and entrepreneurial talent, in order to rebuild the prosperity of the town, whilst establishing an exemplary model capable of dissemination throughout the European Union.

### *The Cycle of Urban Creativity*

Building on the existing work to promote the role of culture in urban regeneration, the Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative took the argument a step further by developing a comprehensive view of the potential role of creativity. This was expressed as a model to give

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<sup>4</sup> Alsop D, Bond G, Cross B, Gordziejko T, Lister J, 1989, *A Chance to Participate: the potential of cultural industries and community arts in the social and economic regeneration of Kirklees*, (Kirklees: Kirklees Metropolitan Council).

<sup>5</sup> Kirklees Metropolitan Council, 1994, *Made in Kirklees*. (Kirklees: Kirklees Metropolitan Council).

<sup>6</sup> Landry, C & Bianchini, F, 1995, *The Creative City* (London: Demos).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.huddersfieldpride.com/archive/cti/ctimain.htm>

both internal structure to the initiative and to enable outsiders to understand its purpose. With Charles Landry as external advisor, the model was refined as the Cycle of Urban Creativity.

The Cycle of Urban Creativity was proposed as both a theoretical concept and a dynamic tool that attempts to create a form of renewable urban energy capable of driving the development of a town or city. It began from the standpoint that creativity could be harnessed and exploited for the development of a place. Equally, it argued that creativity could also be wasted if not managed in a strategic and intelligent way. It accepted that creativity could emerge in many different forms, by different means and at different stages in a developmental process and that it may express itself in diverse ways through a variety of actors.

The cyclical model underpinning the initiative comprised five interlocking stages:

- **Enhancing the ideas-generating capacity of the town**

How do new ideas and insights, innovative business models, artistic creations, inventions, and new services come about? Are there enough people thinking new thoughts in the town and is anyone taking notice of them? Are there ways of stimulating more people to have more ideas more frequently?

The main aim was to raise the level of debate in the town and to widen the circle of people participating in it. A widespread programme of events, exhibitions, debates, and lectures was staged and opportunities were arranged for local people to visit other places throughout the European Union that might also stimulate ideas. A local theatre company *Proper Job* took hundreds of local people through a developmental process of training call The Lab<sup>8</sup>, creating a large cohort of active participants in the creative process. The initiative also ran a Millennium Challenge, in which the townspeople were invited to propose 2000 new ideas and urban innovations by the end of the year 2000<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.properjob.org.uk/lab.htm>

<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.huddersfieldpride.com/archive/millenniumchallenge/millennium\\_challenge.htm](http://www.huddersfieldpride.com/archive/millenniumchallenge/millennium_challenge.htm)

- **Turning ideas into reality**

How could the initiative ensure that more people have the opportunity to test their ideas and to put them into practice as new businesses, products or services? What kind of support and encouragement would they need in the form of money, advice, and equipment? And what would happen if they failed and needed to try again?

In Huddersfield 'hothouse' and 'incubator' schemes were implemented to put together people with ideas, people with experience, and people with resources<sup>10</sup>. Small grants and loans were available to prototype ideas (and the emphasis was on 'small' as too much money can be as undermining as too little), as well as free office space for new-start businesses. There was an 'advisory scheme for inventors' so that people could learn how to how to manage and protect their intellectual property, and a 'business angels' scheme in which experienced entrepreneurs acted as mentors to new businesses. An entrepreneurship programme for schools was initiated, providing students with the opportunity to learn how to manage a company.

- **Networking and circulating ideas**

The town may have lots of people turning ideas into reality but does this necessarily make it a creative community? Even greater value can be created when people begin to collaborate and to share their creativity, resources and their secrets, the whole becoming greater than the sum of the parts. The initiative looked to devise mechanisms that could help people and organisations to network their creative ideas.

The aim in Huddersfield was not simply to be creative, but to build a creative community. The first point that was quickly realised was that 'knowledge is power' – you have to know who is doing what, and in what quantity. An audit of the 'creative

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.hudbg.info/>

economy' and an annual survey were initiated, which revealed how many enterprises were engaged in creative activity, how many people they employed, how much revenue they were generating, who they were trading with and what they needed to grow their business. The simple techniques developed for gathering this intelligence have subsequently been developed on a region-wide basis. The initiative also held regular networking events at which creative entrepreneurs could meet and it published a very high quality glossy magazine in which artists and companies could showcase their work.

- **Providing platforms for delivery**

At a certain point, creative people and organisations need places in which they can make the products, services or art forms that express their creativity. They need physical and virtual infrastructure including business centres, production facilities, studios, galleries or websites, available to the right specification at the right price.

At the beginning of the initiative, few people in the town believed that Huddersfield possessed the kind of creative economy that it described, but the initiative extended the Kirklees Media Centre in order to meet excess demand for space. Since it opened, the Centre has never been less than 95% full and now operates at a profit without any revenue subsidy, providing a potent symbol of the economic impact of creativity<sup>11</sup>. To build the community the town also needed to increase the number of creative people living in the town centre. The initiative worked with a major housing association to convert the neighbouring disused Mechanics Institute into the Creative Lofts – combined live/work spaces or ateliers in which 20 individuals or enterprises are now housed.

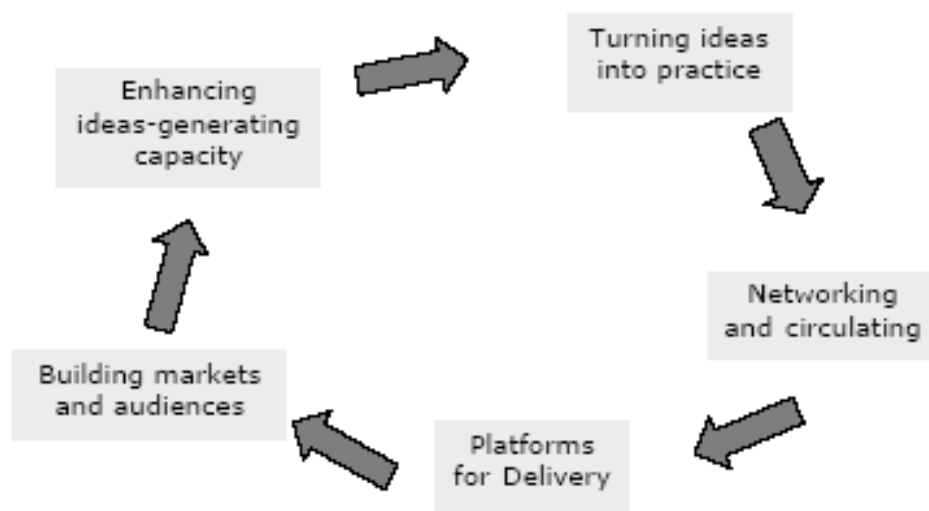
- **Building audiences and markets**

Finally, ideas, products, experiences and services are of no value unless someone somewhere wants to use them or wants to buy them. Does the town have the capacity to present its ideas and products in a form that is both accessible and attractive to



others? Does it then have the capacity to deliver to the audience or market to an acceptable standard?

The initiative realised that if Huddersfield could not distribute and sell its ideas and products to others, then everything in the Creative Town would simply be an abstract exercise. There was substantial investment in dissemination through websites and publications, exhibitions and lectures. The initiative strongly believed that the best way to succeed is not to keep ideas secret but to share and spread them as widely as possible. It invested in training in marketing and sales skills, and attended trade-fairs and export missions. Ultimately, this activity attracted new people with these skills and in time led to the birth of a new organisation, the Creative Industries Development Agency, which has now become highly successful in its own right providing services not only for Huddersfield but on a regional and national level too<sup>12</sup>.



Thus far, the model describes five points on a continuum, but this does not in itself represent a cycle. To close the circle the initiative argued that by reaching and satisfying an audience or

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<sup>11</sup> For more information go to [www.the-media-centre.co.uk](http://www.the-media-centre.co.uk)

<sup>12</sup> See [www.cida.org](http://www.cida.org)

market with ideas and products, generates a dynamic which not only rewards the creative process that has been undergone in the earlier stages, but it also ignites further ideas-generating capacity. Particularly in towns that have had little tradition of creativity, where there is economic uncertainty or fear of future change, many people will be reluctant to participate in these kinds of creative activities until they have seen others do it first. As such, creativity begets further creativity driving more and more cycles and drawing in more and more people and resources that had previously been locked up and unavailable to the town.

In practice, towns and cities are very good in one or two or these things, but will be weak in, or may even completely ignore, some of the other stages. Often, for example, cities invest a great deal in 'platforms for delivery' such as business centres, studios, and other cultural facilities. These are highly visible, often prestigious and present the outward impression that something is happening. City politicians, of course, are particularly fond of these. But if the town is not encouraging a milieu in which people feel comfortable about thinking new thoughts and sharing their ideas with others, the platforms for delivery will be under-utilised or concerned largely with old or outmoded activity. Equally, a town may be full of exciting bars and cafes and well-resourced research facilities where people are having lots of new ideas, but if the town can't convert these into things it can market and sell, the place will never be able to reward its creative people – and they may choose to move elsewhere.

The Cycle of Creativity has proved a very useful model for Huddersfield and the wider borough. It should enable other similar towns and cities to reflect upon their positions too. They should be able to ask themselves 'is there a Cycle of Creativity in our town at the moment?' 'At which stages of the Cycle are we succeeding and where are we weak?' 'Is our concentration on one aspect of the creative process leading us to overlook others?' The outcome of this exercise can be a collection of ideas both old and new, but more importantly the beginnings of an organising framework around which a range of partners are able to collaborate in a creative and

sustainable process. Importantly it enabled a wide variety of partners and stakeholders to both see the big picture and to understand their particular place and role within it.

### *Reflections and Evaluations*

The Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative was an intentionally time limited pilot project and closed down in 2001. It fulfilled the requirements of the European Commission by establishing a trans-national exemplary model that still arouses much international interest, but the real proof of the pudding would surely be its long-term influence on Huddersfield and the borough. A conscious decision was taken not to create an all-encompassing successor body but rather to encourage a series of organisations to find their particular contribution to the development of the town and borough as a creative milieu. Principal amongst these were the Media Centre (managed workspace, property development and digital art), CIDA (creative enterprise and business support), Beaumont Street Studio (BSS) (digital production and training) and the Huddersfield Business Generator (incubation). Each have now established a strong niche and have expanded both the size and the scope of their activities.

The Media Centre Network now manages 99 work units in 112,000 square feet of managed workspace in Huddersfield; has won the contract to run the prestige 30,000 sq foot Round Foundry<sup>13</sup> in Leeds and has long term ambitions to be the largest manager of creative workspace in the UK. CIDA grew rapidly to become a leading provider of creative business support across the North of England with over 1,000 clients across the breadth of the creative sector. BSS starting out as a small Afro-Caribbean recording studio now runs large music and digital production and training programmes throughout the region<sup>14</sup>. Huddersfield Business Generator now supports 65 new start creative businesses with a combination of premises, business advice and support with investment.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.roundfoundry.net/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.beaumontstreet.co.uk>

Although the public and not-for-profit sectors have been the key change agents in the development of the creative economy, the private sector has also got in on the act. Attik, one of the UK's leading design houses with offices in San Francisco, Sydney and London was actually founded – and is still headquartered - in Huddersfield <sup>15</sup>. Encouraged by the level of activity in the town, the company has launched its own MA in Creative Imaging in partnership with Huddersfield University, which will attract budding industry talent from across the globe.

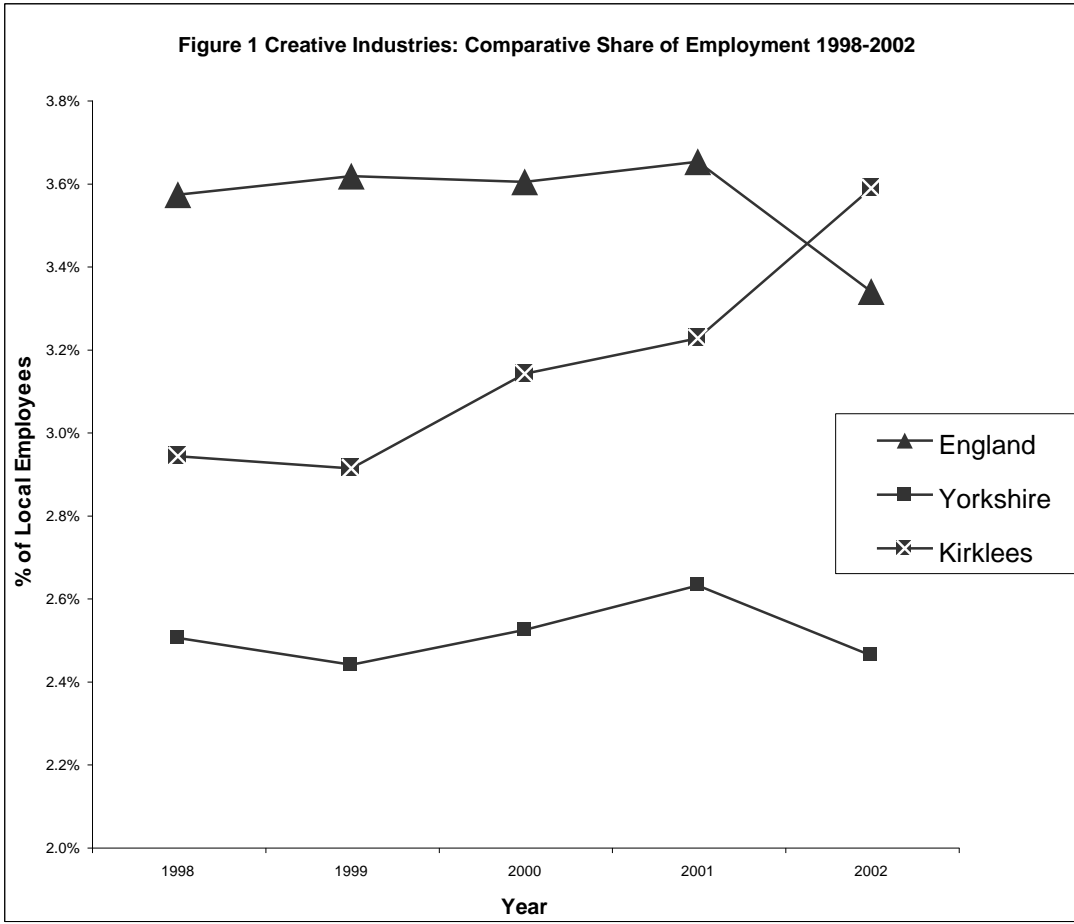
What has been the cumulative effect of the work undertaken in the early 1990s, culminating in the current role of creativity in the town and borough? The continuous thread running throughout this period has been the contribution of creativity to the health and vitality of the local economy. For supporters and local decision-makers this has meant a need to concentrate on bottom-line indicators. For a town and borough that underwent severe economic decline and re-structuring, the success or failure of interventionist initiatives is counted in terms of employment, business and economic growth.

A growing creative industries sector<sup>16</sup> is a useful indicator of the strength of a local area's ability to support the development of creativity. Figure 1 contrasts the share of local employment attributable to the creative industries sector compared with the corresponding shares for the region of Yorkshire and the Humber and England. Throughout the last five years, the share of local employment attributable to the creative industries has grown steadily compared with static (and possibly declining) shares at the regional and national levels.

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.ideasfactory.com/training\\_courses/features/train\\_feature4.htm](http://www.ideasfactory.com/training_courses/features/train_feature4.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Defining the creative industries is a task fraught with methodological and semantic challenges. This article heroically side-steps these by adopting the definition currently being developed by the Department of Culture Media and Sport as part of the Regional Cultural Data Framework (See [www.culture.gov.uk](http://www.culture.gov.uk)). One of the most problematic sectors to deal with is that around creative software services. The definition currently excludes the Standard Industrial Classification 72.20 (Software Consultancy and Supply) due to the inherently difficult task of identifying what proportion of this code is attributable to the creative industries.



A comparison with the Core Cities programme is also revealing. Figure 2 compares the size of the creative industries sector measured by absolute employment numbers for Kirklees with the corresponding figures for the local authority districts incorporating each of the Core Cities. In absolute numbers terms Kirklees has grown to be on a par with the smaller Core Cities including Newcastle and so it would seem, Sheffield.

Figure 2 Numbers of Employees in the Creative Industries 1998-2002

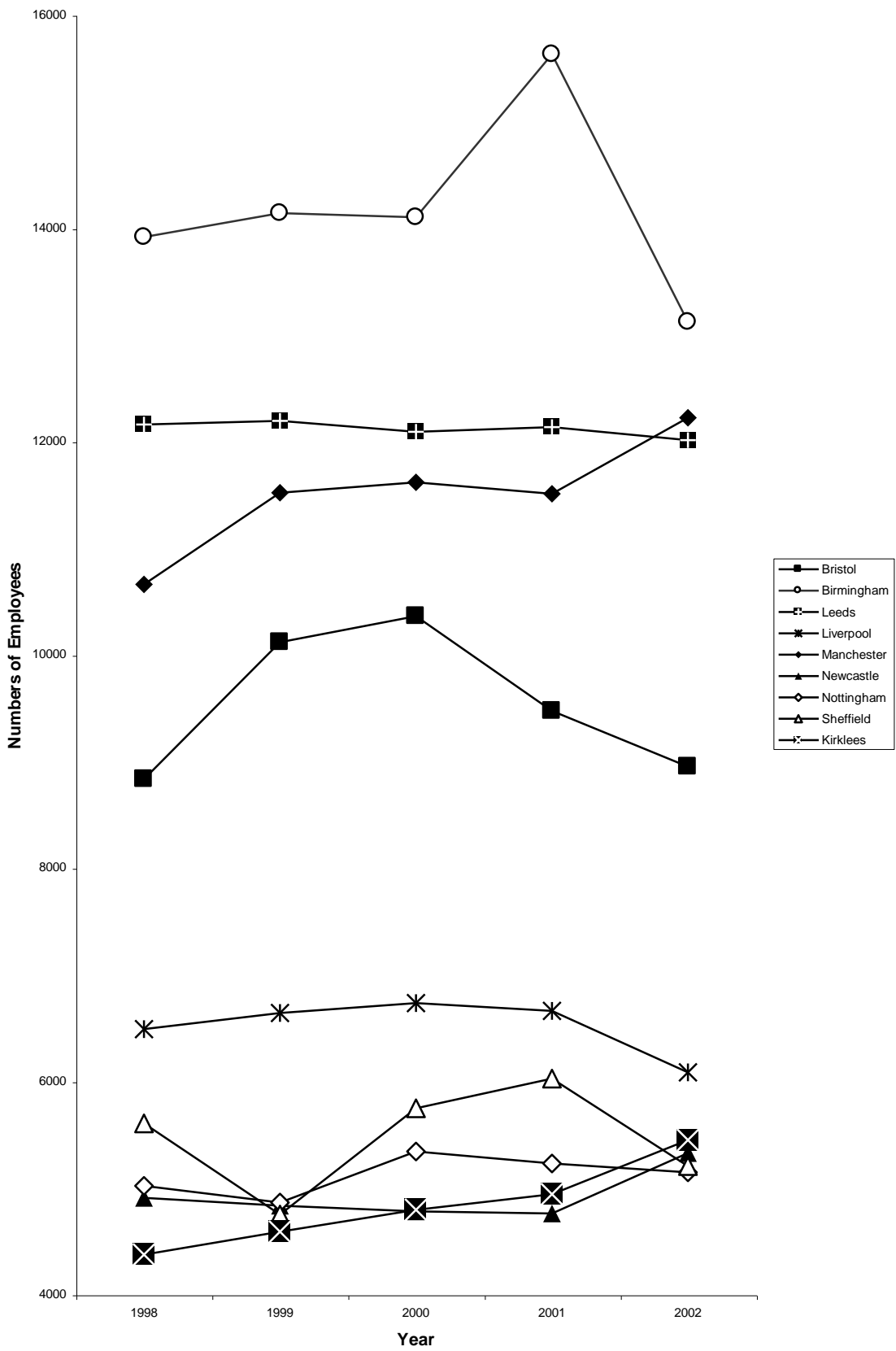


Figure 3 Core Cities Creative Industries Employment 1998-2002 (%)

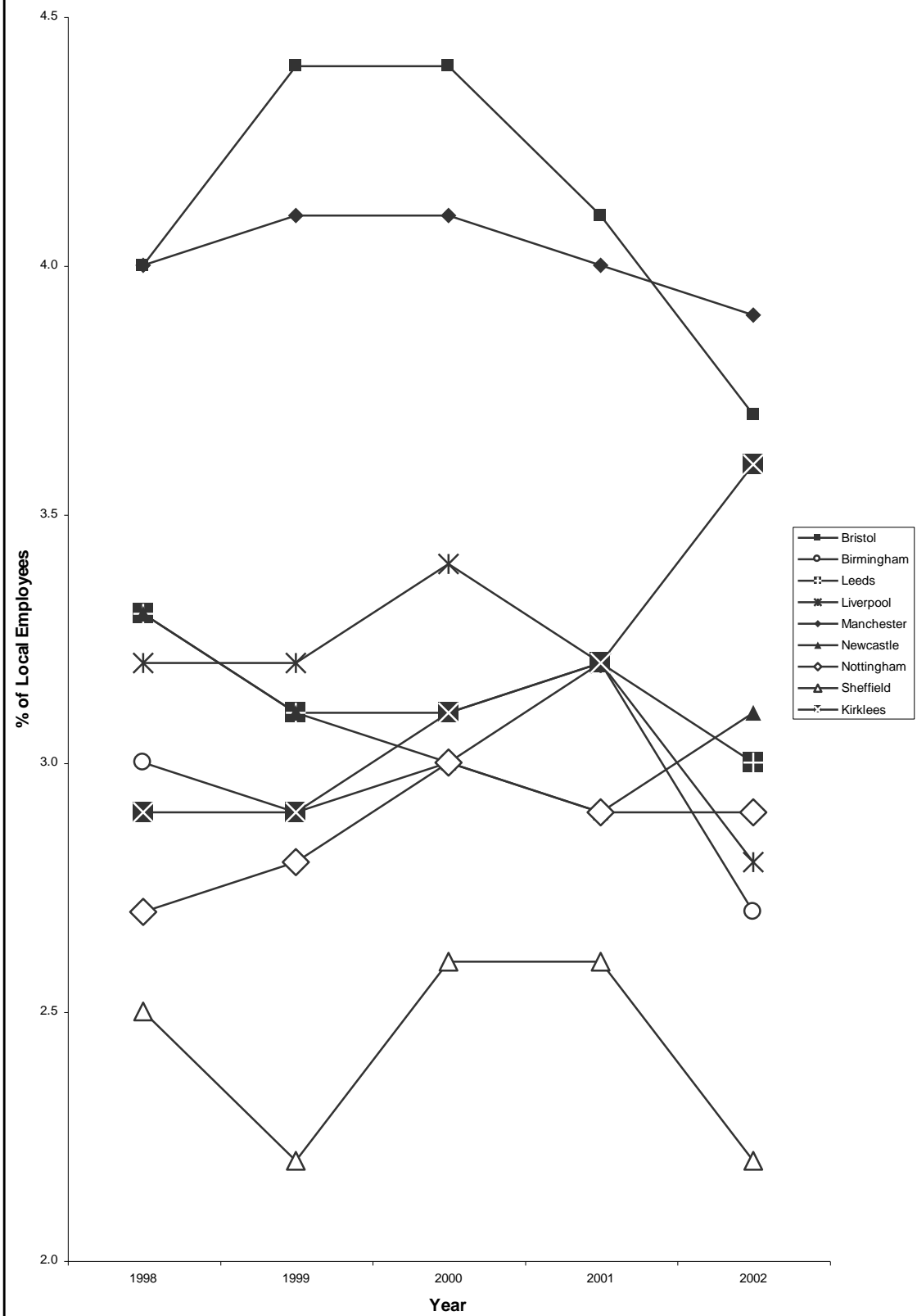


Figure 3 sets out the same data according to relative shares of local employment. The proportion of local employment attributable to the creative industries in Kirklees has steadily grown throughout the last five years overtaking most of the Core Cities.

### *Conclusions*

From all of this it might easily be assumed that Huddersfield was a hotbed of innovation and expression with creativity bursting out of every door and window – a 'Paris of the North' even, as one press headline extravagantly dubbed it. Well not quite. Like a lot of former industrial towns, Huddersfield holds fast to a culture built upon a sceptical disdain for the blandishments of the intangible. It is a place ill at ease with its mantle of 'creative town'; a slogan that was hastily dropped as soon as the Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative was concluded. Despite our knowledge of what goes on in its cellars and lofts, a walk through the town would afford little indication that this was a place that saw its future at the creative cutting edge.

Nor is there much evidence these days of the Council as a visionary leader or strategic shaper, and some in the independent sector observe that Kirklees MC is no longer such a proactive partner as in the past. This may be true but, to be fair to the Council, perhaps it no longer needs to, nor even ought to, play this role. It may be that we now in a different era. Certainly the institutional landscape is rather different with a raft of nationally-imposed government guidelines, economic policy largely determined at regional level and development funding increasingly dispensed at the sub-regional level (i.e., the West Yorkshire Sub-regional Action Plan), there is very little discretion left for the kinds of dialogue described earlier. Possibly the much-vaunted 'new localism' of national government agendas may change this and one should be encouraged that independent local economic development agencies such as the Media Centre, BSS and CIDA now have the clout to negotiate independently with regional and national agencies, and that business models developed at the local level can be successfully disseminated more widely. Nevertheless, when reflecting on Huddersfield's recent success, one factor that constantly recurs is the strongly embedded and locally committed nature of the key



independent agencies and creative businesses – their tremendous loyalty to the town and in a spirit of competitive collaboration, to each other. Thus one is led to the question that if they are now expanding their scope of operation outside of Kirklees, whilst the local authority is contracting in its role as institutional playmaker, who is now holding together and nurturing the 'creative milieu' that has made Huddersfield an exciting place to be? The likelihood may well be that no-one now sees it as their responsibility. Indeed maybe no-one needs to. The concern is that if this is a problem, by the time anyone notices it may already be too late to do anything about it. Huddersfield is in a highly competitive environment and with many of its greatest assets being potentially highly mobile, it could very quickly lose many of its key organisations and individuals.

Turning to the employment trends outlined above, the re-assuring picture of steady employment growth in the creative industries sector is a measure of success of a kind. It is also quite possible that this growth would have happened without any of the initiatives described earlier because Huddersfield is well placed to take advantage of a number of external factors. Located conveniently between burgeoning Manchester and Leeds, on major road and rail corridors, with a growing university, it has a diverse and relatively cheap housing stock and abundant vacant industrial premises close to attractive 'Summer Wine Country'. This led in 2003 to a boom in mill conversions for business and residential use, as well as to some of the highest rates of housing price growth in the UK. There is a case to be made that Huddersfield was simply in the right place at the right time, although this does not explain why similarly-placed towns such as Halifax, Bradford, Oldham and Rochdale have not seen parallel growth in the creative industries. There is an implicit challenge here. If the growth in employment is attributable however indirectly to the various interventions that have been made over the years, a dialogue between the local authority and locally based creative entrepreneurs of both the private and not-for-profit sectors has in part, facilitated this.

In conclusion, the growth of the creative industries in Huddersfield/Kirklees is a useful economic development case study, supported by robust data, as well as a good story which continues to

inspire others in post-industrialising, medium-sized towns and cities around the world. It was less affected by the bursting of the dot-com bubble and is now growing out of the trough faster than most places. It has demonstrated that whilst public sector leadership can be decisive at key stages in the development process, there is also scope for an open and diverse form of network management. The challenge remains for places like Huddersfield to hold down and embed local forms of creativity in the face of global and regional competition and in this regard the denouement of the story is still to be written.

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