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Travel to culture: cultural participation and the 20 min neighbourhood

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ABSTRACT

This piece establishes a dialogue between policy on the 20-minute neighbourhood and policy on cultural participation. The *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* report by the Town and Country Planning Association sets out aims and guidance for interweaving essential features for everyday life (e.g. homes; food; jobs; community) with the strategies, policies and plans designed to shape and coordinate everyday life. More specifically, how can people access what they need for their everyday lives by walking, cycling and public transport? Evaluating the concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood, this piece raises questions concerning the presence/absence of culture. Engaging with the *Cornerstones of Culture* report by the Local Government Association, this piece highlights issues of cultural participation, geographical inequalities and the importance of access to culture within a local neighbourhood. Following this, a proposal is made for evaluating and developing opportunities for cultural participation with reference to accessible and sustainable travel methods – 'travel to culture'.

This policy perspectives piece establishes a dialogue between policy on the 20-minute neighbourhood (Town and Country Planning Association, 2021) and policy on cultural participation (Local Government Association, 2022). In doing so, it proposes the 20-minute neighbourhood as a new conceptual and methodological lens for planning and evaluating opportunities for cultural participation.

Firstly, the 20-minute neighbourhood concept is situated and evaluated. In doing, the absence of culture becomes apparent. Secondly, this absence is explored with reference to policy on cultural participation and issues of policy alignment and (dis)-connection. Thirdly, a proposal is made for evaluating and developing opportunities for cultural participation with reference to accessible and sustainable travel methods – "travel to culture".

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20-minute Neighbourhoods

In *20-Minute Neighbourhoods*, the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA, 2021, p. 16) address "the benefits of creating places that include most of the things that most people need for their everyday lives within a short and pleasant walk or cycle ride". TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* presents eight features of the 20-minute neighbourhood:

- diverse and affordable homes
- well-connected paths, streets and spaces
- schools at the heart of communities
- good green spaces in the right places
- local food production
- keeping jobs and money local
- community health and wellbeing facilities
- place for all ages (TCPA, 2021, p. 16)

Each feature is examined in turn with the remainder of the guide turning to principles for success, different planning scenarios, and policy contexts and case studies. The annexes then provide extensive cross-referencing. Annex 1 outlines national strategies, policies, and plans in terms of government department and ministries (as structured at the time of publication), including: Transport; Housing, Communities and Local Government; Health and Social Care; Education; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. This approach connects and aligns the 20-minute neighbourhood concept to a broad range of priorities and areas of life. Annex 2 maintains this integrated approach through a checklist which cross-references each feature in relation to UN Sustainable Development Goals, the National Health Service (NHS) *Putting Health into Place* publications, and a range of planning guides.

The aim of and detailed steps within TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* is to interweave the eight features that are essential for everyday life with the strategies, policies and plans designed to shape and coordinate everyday life. As such, it is necessary to critically review what those features and policy and planning alignments are. As Buckingham (2007, p. 29) suggests, "policy is both productive and coercive: it constrains the kinds of activity that can be carried out, but it also brings new practices into being".

The 20-minute neighbourhood and the x-minute city

The 20-minute neighbourhood approach resonates with the "15-minute city" and the focus on "amour des lieux" or "attachment to place" (Moreno, 2021 cited in Sisson, 2023). Whilst this piece focuses on TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods*, the term "x-minute city" (see Lu & Diab, 2023) is employed where appropriate to reference and link to the constellation of concepts around access and time within a geographical setting.

A recent issue of the *Journal of Urban Mobility* edited by Büttner et al. (2024) explored the "15-minute city" concept as "accessibility by proximity". In the article introducing the special issue, Büttner et al. (2024) considered some of the challenges around definition (e.g. the amenities that are included; the age and ability of those accessing) and application (e.g. planning traditions; infrastructure development; social equity).

The "15-minute city" framing has generated significant interest and attention in global policy discussions. For example, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) references this as way as to reimagine life in cities with the aim of reaching the Paris Agreement targets (UNFCC, 2021). As Lu and Diab (2023, p. 2) summarise in their review of x-minute policies, this "emerging vision not only aims to reduce emissions, but also to achieve a wide array of social goals such as improving people's quality of life and community social cohesion". Both the UNFCC piece and Lu and Diab (2023) connect the 15-minute city to Covid-19 – an approach which can be found much more widely (see Abdelfattah, Deponte and Fossa's 2022 study for a summary).

It is also with the Covid-19 connection that controversies around the 15-minute city become most pronounced. Recent coverage in the UK has explored how "15-minute city" has become a "toxic phrase" (Horton, 2024). Marquet et al. (2025) developed a four-tier categorisation of "15-minute city" critiques that is organised along a spectrum from "unfounded accusations to unsubstantiated claims". Marquet et al. (2025, p. 118) identify how Covid-19 related concerns focus on personal liberties and "climate change lockdown". They reference Fainstein and Novy's (2025) analysis of how right-wing conspiracy theories link "local planning issues to broader national or global narratives' and the "rejection of scientific expertise" (Marquet et al., 2025, p. 118) Navigating through these different concerns, Marquet et al. (2025, p. 122) "advocate for a blend of empirical science-based insights and locally grounded, engaged planning and design methods to accurately identify pressing issues and "participatory and co-produced planning process".

For the purposes of this discussion, the point is to recognise the x-minute city vision for achieving social goals, the diversity of associated concerns and challenges, and the efforts in response to develop "analytical and discursive tools" (Marquet et al., 2025, p. 123).

Cultural participation as essential activity?

The *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* highlights,

> walkable environments in which people of all ages and levels of fitness are happy to travel actively for short distances from home to the destinations that they visit and the services they need to use day to day – shopping, school, community and healthcare facilities, places of work, green spaces, and more. (TCPA, 2021, p. 7)

TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* brings together a broad vision for creating positive futures and eight specific features of the 20-minute neighbourhood.

However, the aim of this policy perspectives piece is to question how culture and cultural participation fit into the "and more" part of the above account in *20-Minute Neighbourhoods*. With the description of a 20-minute neighbourhood as "complete, compact and connected" places (TCPA, 2021, p. 3), there is a powerful prompt for cultural and creative sector researchers, practitioners and policymakers to investigate how and where culture and cultural participation are included as features of the 20-minute neighbourhood.

Being literal and precise with wording, "culture" does not explicitly appear in the eight features. TCPA have been very active in creating and commissioning resources, reports and toolkits which do focus on culture, including cultural planning (2016, 2025) and civic art (2020). Also, the lack of explicit reference to culture and cultural participation

is not distinctive to TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* but rather something identifiable across academic studies and urban planning policies and plans on x minute cities.

Focusing on the TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods*, a possible interpretation and approach is to identify the significance of culture with reference to the already existing 8 features. The approach taken throughout the *20-Minute Neighbourhoods*, and very precisely with the annexes, is to emphasis cross-referencing and connections between the eight features. This interpretation enables speculation, exploration and discussion of cultural participation as *part of* this vision. For example, this aligns with the context-specific approach suggested by Silva et al. (2023). Silva et al. (2023, p. 9) note that "while parks, playgrounds, and grocery shopping should be within close proximity, jobs, higher education facilities, and hospitals need not be as accessible". This context-specific strategy for urban planning helps to navigate around the lack of explicit reference to culture.

When looking to debates around cultural value (Hadley et al., 2025; Kaszynska, 2025) and cultural infrastructure (O'Connor, 2024), this interpretation of culture being an implicit part of the vision seems to fall short. The context-specific approach might position culture somewhere in the mix, but a more pressing question follows on whether access to opportunities for cultural participation are determined to be "essential activities" within the 20-minute neighbourho0d.

Within the UK context, the "absence" of culture is notable for two reasons which might steer away from the interpretation which reconciles the absence of culture via implicit integration and instead points to the need and urgency for it being explicit.

Firstly, *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* is intricately and carefully connected to range of strategies, policies and plans. Focusing specifically on the connections made in annex one to the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport there are two references – *A Connected Society* (2018a) and *Civil Society Strategy* (2018b). Neither of these foreground culture and cultural participation in the prominent way that other Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) policies do that were published before 2021 (when *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* was published). Notable examples include *The Culture White Paper* (DCMS, 2016), *Culture is Digital* (2018) and *Changing Lives: the social impact of participation in culture and sport* (2019):

- The *Culture White Paper* (DCMS, 2016, p. 15) emphasises that, "cultural participation can contribute to social relationships, community cohesion, and/or make communities feel safer and stronger".
- *Culture is Digital* (DCMS, 2018, p. 9) identifies continued issues around access inequalities and a "participation gap" and explores how digital experiences are "driving new forms of cultural participation and practice".
- *Changing Lives* (DCMS, 2019) explores the connection between cultural participation, education and opportunity.

The *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* aims to intricately connect and align with "relevant national strategies, plans and policies" through annex one but does not do this with culture. As such, the interpretation considered above that culture and cultural participation is implicitly *part of* this vision through connections with the stated eight features

(e.g. communities; jobs; health) is undermined by a lack of explicit references to policy on culture and cultural participation.

Secondly the absence of culture from *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* and x-minute city conversations is a concern because cultural participation is central to wider conversations around positive futures. Here we move from the DCMS with its specific remit for culture to the Local Government Association (LGA), which has a wider purpose to "strengthen local communities so communities thrive" (LGA, 2025). The LGA (2025) engages with culture alongside: employment and skills; climate, environment and waste; finance and business rates; fire and rescue; severe weather, and transport. The way in which the LGA connects culture to this range of areas further emphasises the absence of culture from visions for the x-minute. Of note is the LGA's *Cornerstones of Culture* report which states:

> Evidence presented to the Commission highlighted the importance of access to culture within a local neighbourhood and the current levels of inequality embedded in geographical and social structures.

> Cultural infrastructure is often concentrated in urban centres, with those in areas with weaker cultural capacity (often rural and coastal areas and smaller towns) travelling long distances to participate in cultural activity.

> This raises issues about both accessibility of public transport and the need to invest in cultural infrastructure outside major cities

Here we find the essential meeting point. As multiple portfolios/departments within local authorities (e.g. tourism; economy) work towards the "20-minute neighbourhood" vision for their communities *and* address opportunities for cultural participation, there is an express need to make connections.

The remainder of this policy perspective piece is a proposal and intervention articulating the case for evaluating and developing opportunities for cultural participation in terms of the "20-minute neighbourhood" (and related x-minute city concepts) and their priority for accessible and sustainable travel methods.

Cultural participation and the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city

The importance of connecting culture and place is firmly established within UK policy (DCMS, 2022), cultural sectors (Bianchini, 2024) and higher education research (Madgin & Robson, 2023). Research on cultural participation and place that are most relevant here are those exploring mapping (Duxbury et al., 2015), everyday participation (Miles & Gibson, 2016), situated practices (Durrer et al., 2023), culture and place-based decision-making (Ashton & Bell, 2023) and new municipalism (Banks & Oakley, 2025). The concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city is a way to further frame and examine the accessibility of opportunities for cultural participation. Who are opportunities for cultural participation accessible to and how?

In the recent volume on *Cultural Policy is Local* (Durrer et al., 2023), Bell and Orozco (2023, p. 63) suggest that the neighbourhood "is a particularly important scale when it comes to exploring cultural policy's geographies" (see also Owen et al., 2023 whose exploration of qualitative data and place-based decision-making focuses on the neighbourhood). Bell and Orozco's (2023) suggestion closely connects with Chapple and Jackson's (2010, p. 483) analysis of community arts and audience engagement:

> When the neighborhood is our unit of analysis, rather than the audience, we have a way of understanding what art means in daily lived experience, rather than as a special event occurring in a designated place … This approach unsettles our current methods of calculating and mapping impact from the venue out, rather than the audience in

This is where the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city concepts come in as a useful lens to explicitly address the practicalities of travel (via walking, cycling and public transport). Crucially, Chapple and Jackson's (2010) comments emphasise the lived experiences of *where* cultural participation exists. Whilst working outwards from a venue might indicate the *potential* for opportunities for cultural engagement, the *actual* and lived experience of undertaking that journey to a venue might be very different. Returning to the LGA's (2022) *Cornerstones of Culture*, this is an issue of "access to culture within a local neighbourhood" and a continued recognition "of inequality embedded in geographical and social structures".

In proposing the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city as lens for considering cultural participation, care is need in recognising matters of preferences, availability and barriers. Following Miles and Gibson (2016), a vital reminder comes to not reduce cultural participation to a "limited set of cultural forms, activities and associated cultural institutions" which can obscure "the significance of other forms of cultural participation which are situated locally in the everyday realm". In other words, not claiming to address the opportunity for cultural participation by pointing to *any/every* opportunity within a 20-minute neighbourhood.

With these cautionary notes on everyday cultural participation and lived experience in place, what is to be gained from bringing together TCPA's (2021) *20-minute neighbourhood* and LGA's (2022) *Cornerstones of Culture*?

Firstly, this policy meeting point highlights the potential and necessity for including culture as one of the eight features for the 20-minute neighbourhood. In doing so, culture is an **explicit** part of this vision (with all its support and opposition) for positive futures. Secondly, with culture and cultural participation included in "most of the things that most people need for their everyday lives", the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city concept enables a clear focus on the practicalities of access and travel.

Part of the focus of the 20-minute neighbourhood concept when connected to Garden City Principles is on a "wide range of local jobs […] within easy commuting distance of homes" (TCPA, 2021, p. 12). Planning in relation to home and work has been considered through the "travel to work" tool (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Travel to work refers to "self-contained areas in which most people both live and work" (Office for National Statistics, 2023). The following section closes in asking, what is the parallel "travel to culture" formulation in which someone can live and have access opportunities for cultural participation within a 20-minute neighbourhood?

Travel to culture

This final section introduces the "travel to work" tool and suggests how adopting this for "travel to culture" can directly and practically steer policymakers and planners to consider access to opportunities for cultural participation within a 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city.

The "travel to work" tool is well-established for understanding commuting to employment beyond administrative boundaries. This focus on lived experiences beyond administrative boundaries resonates with analysis relating to cultural participation. As Ashton and Bell's (2023) analysis of cultural strategies in England shows, where people identify and then travel for culture is not bounded by geographical constructs like local government boundaries. This connects with Clarke's (2013, p. 503) policy analysis of locality and localism and the failures to "recognise the translocal geographies of many lives, which continually move across borders" as well as "the radical plurality of many localities".

Where travel to work refers to "self-contained areas in which most people both live and work" (Office for National Statistics, 2023), the "travel to culture" formulation can be connected to the x-minute city concept and ongoing work by the TCPA on 20-minute neighbourhoods (e.g. Koksal et al., 2023) to identify, question and examine the issues raised by the LGA (2022) of "inequality embedded in geographical and social structures", "weaker cultural capacity" and "accessibility of public transport".

Future directions for cultural participation and the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city

Using the neighbourhood as a unit of analysis for understanding engagement with culture and the contours of cultural participation guides us to advocate for culture being a named and connected feature in policy on 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city. In turn, the concept of the x-minute city and the specifics of TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* guides our concerns towards the lived experiences and practical realities of access to opportunities for cultural participation. Taking care not to limit understandings of cultural participation (Miles & Gibson, 2016), questions then follow around if and how culture is positioned within the vision for a positive future in which "things most people need for their everyday lives [are] within a short and pleasant walk or cycle ride" (TCPA, 2021, p. 16).

Recalling Buckingham (2007), policy can bring new practices into being. A next step from this piece is dialogue to identify and make those specific policy contributions. Towards this, the following conclusions consider international significance and the contributions of cultural and creative sector researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

This discussion has had a UK focus. However, the broad proposal of "travel to culture" and connecting policies on 20-minute neighbourhood and cultural participation together has an international resonance. For example, the World Culture Cities Forum (2020) policy and practice series handbook on *Making Space for Culture*. Positioning culture as an "essential activity" within the concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city has potential benefit for cultural organisations and advocates in the ongoing international manoeuvres around cultural value (Hadley et al., 2025; Kaszynska, 2025) and cultural infrastructure (O'Connor, 2024).

Furthermore, methodologies and approaches which are well-developed by cultural practitioners have a role to play in the very conceptualisation of and visions for the 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city (for example, see Merx et al., 2023). Büttner et al. (2024, p. 3) offer recommendations that "enable bridging the gap between planning practices, accessibility measures and the x-minute concept". These include: "enhance public awareness and education; ensure inclusive urban design; and incorporate local community

input" (Büttner et al., 2024, p. 3). These points resonate with those from Marquet et al. (2025, p. 122) on "locally grounded, engaged planning and design methods" and "participatory and co-produced planning process". The references made in the x-minute city literature to these elements and recommendations (local, community, inclusivity, participatory and co-produced) will resonate massively with cultural and creative sector researchers, practitioners and policymakers (Alma Economics, 2023; LGA, 2022). Exploring the insights from cultural and creative research, practice and policy perspectives in conversation with urban design and town planning could be of significant value for how 20-minute neighbourhood/x-minute city concepts evolve and are engaged with.

Now is an important time to explore the policy and practice implications and possibilities that might follow from the meeting point in this piece between TCPA's (2021) *20-minute neighbourhood* and LGA's (2022) *Cornerstones of Culture*.

Disclosure statement

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