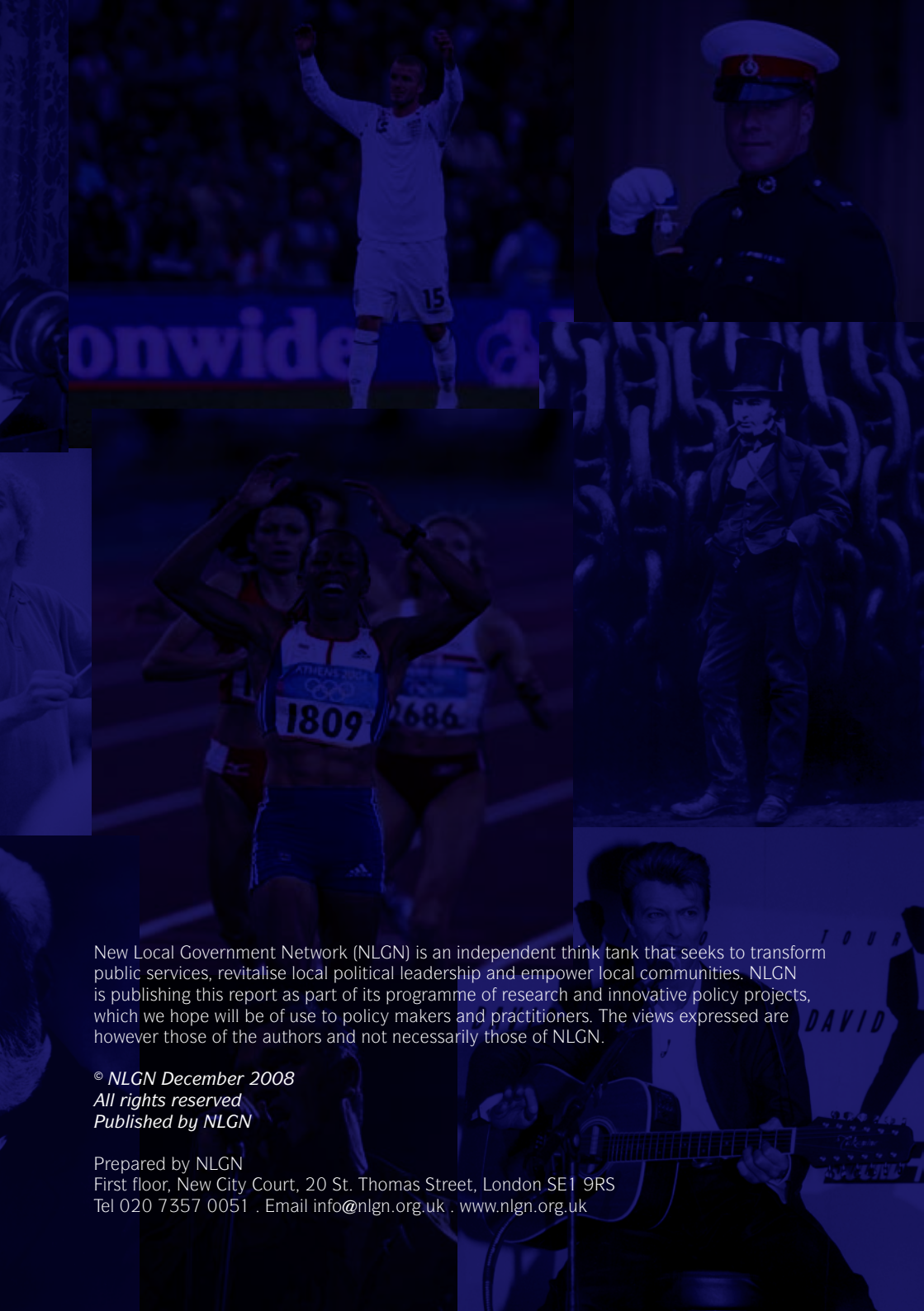




What's in a name?

Celebrating local achievement through public spaces

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New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this report as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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Contents

1	What's in a name?	4
2	Bringing out Britishness	8
3	Avoiding the pitfalls	10
4	Avoiding the Hollywood route	12
5	Conclusion	13

1 *What's in a name?*

The names attributed to local public places give our communities a sense of identity and belonging and allow us an opportunity to celebrate local and national achievements and commemorations. Through our street names, public buildings, parks and squares, history is commemorated and images evoked.

Consider the symbolism conjured up by roads such as “Fleet Street”, “Abbey Road” or “Coronation Street”, or buildings such as the “Free Trade Hall”, “Albert Hall” or “St James’s Park”.

Are we aware, though, of how and why places such as these were named and what significance they might have?

In this paper we argue that Britain should strike up a new tradition – as the French and Americans have for years - of celebrating local achievement by naming street names, public areas and public buildings after notable citizens who have brought considerable accomplishment to the nation or the local area.

We encourage councils and building developers to reject dull and uninspiring names such as Sycamore Close or Fairview Street in favour of locally specific or unique names which quintessentially sum up their area. We urge council leaders to follow the example of the elected mayor of Mansfield, Tony Eggington, who this year named a new road in the area after Rebecca Adlington, a 19-year old local swimmer who had won two Olympic gold medals in Beijing, as well as renaming the local swimming centre: “The Rebecca Adlington Centre”.

Some of our finest monuments have been monikered in this fashion, such as Big Ben in London, which is widely thought to have been named after Sir Benjamin Hall. Similarly, walking through Shakespeare Way or Nelson Road offers a window into local and British history. Chamberlain Square in Birmingham reminds the city’s inhabitants of its finest civic leader, while the residents of Stoke-on-Trent remember their greatest ever sportsman on Sir Stanley Matthews Way.

In Hull and Bristol, public buildings named after anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce commemorate and remember the impact, and perhaps

the cities' guilt, of the slave trade. This forms a link to the cities' past, ensuring that future generations are reminded of their historic past.

Streets names are also used to celebrate the civic service of local public servants and politicians, for example Liverpool's Bold Street commemorates its former Mayor, Jonas Bold. In the United States, celebrating the achievements of politicians is more widely accepted; roads names after former Presidents John. F Kennedy and Ronald Reagan are commonplace. Why not follow the example in the UK? Over a decade, the current leader of Manchester City Council, Sir Richard Leese has probably done more than any post-war politician in the city to drive forward regeneration and give Manchester a new sense of identity and vigor. Although he would shy away from the idea in all modesty, shouldn't the City look to celebrate these achievements by naming a new road or building in honour of Sir Richard?

We should also use the opportunity to celebrate local culture and the Arts. The author J.K. Rowling has become one of the foremost children's authors of modern times and inspired millions of children to read, whilst also creating huge successes for then British publishing and tourism industries. What could be more fitting than to re-name the public library of her home city of Edinburgh in her name?

Other cities would surely follow suit. Liverpool, the current European Capital of Culture, has already named its airport after one of its favourite sons, John Lennon. Why not however also celebrate its rich writing heritage by naming areas after Alan Bleasdale or Jimmy McGovern, or Roger McGough? Moreover, astoundingly for a city renowned all over the world for its two football teams, there are no public areas named after such legends as Bill Shankley, Kenny Dalglish or Dixie Dean.

Manchester could also mine its rich history of culture and celebrate it through public places. Manchester City Council has already named a road in tribute to the local impresario and businessman, Tony Wilson, who did so much to regenerate the city and promote its image, wouldn't a Gallagher Road or Morrissey Street commemorate musicians who have inspired artists all over the world and made Manchester one of the leading cities for popular culture? A park named after David Beckham (an adopted Mancunian who was born in east London) would reflect his status as one of the world's premier

footballers. Or Cockcroft Close in recognition of the Nobel Prize won by Sir John Douglas Cockcroft in 1951. Given that the city also produced one of the world's most gifted architects in Sir Norman Foster, might the city wish to name a suitably impressive building after him?

As the UK's Second City, Birmingham has produced some of our greatest writers and statesmen such as Arthur Conan Doyle, JR Tolkien, Thomas Attwood and WH Auden, but does not commemorate these achievements within its public spaces. Couldn't Stirling Road, where the Tolkien brothers lived, be named as Tolkien Road, particularly as it would seem that **John Ronald's** only monument in the city is the Tolkien Restaurant on Hagley Road? Moreover, wouldn't the prosaic sounding Birmingham Central Library sound better as "The Conan Doyle Library" or "The Auden Library"? More poignantly, perhaps the city should commemorate Birmingham born Lance Corporal Matthew Croucher, who this year became the first Royal Marine since 1945 to win the Victoria Cross after he heroically saved his colleagues from attack in Afghanistan by jumping on an exploding grenade.

Local areas need not also restrict themselves to people who were born or lived in the area, but also people who have made a major impact on their evolution. Although born in Portsmouth, Isambard Kingdom Brunel built the magnificent Clifton Suspension Bridge that dominates Bristol's skyline. Despite this, Brunel, who was recently being named by BBC viewers as the second greatest Briton of all time, is not celebrated in Bristol by any public monument, although the city does have a Brunel Raj Indian Restaurant. Surely such a great man deserves more than a curry house in his name? Could the council not re-name the Town Hall: "The Brunel Hall"?

London's beguiling history is explored through its street names and the people who created them. Probably its most famous location, No.10 Downing Street, was named after Sir George Downing, the then Secretary to the Treasury, whilst Shaftesbury Avenue was named after the Earl of Shaftesbury. Similarly, Hogarth's House remembers William Hogarth.

What, however, of its contemporary heroes? Former Prime Minister Clement Attlee gave the nation the National Health Service, an accomplishment that surely should be recognised in his home borough of Poplar. The musician and actor David Bowie has become one of the defining artists of modern

era, yet is it too much to ask that Lambeth Council honour the fact that he is from their borough? What of Twiggy, the model who epitomised Chelsea's King's Road and helped to frame London's reputation as a "swinging city", a reputation still famous today? Or Sir Nicholas Serota, whose work developing the Tate Modern has made it London's and arguably the world's most successful art gallery?

Given the extensive building being undertaken as part of London's hosting of the 2012 Olympics, shouldn't Mayor Boris Johnson consider naming some of the new street names and buildings after past and future athletes? Could an incentive for Britain's promising athletes be that anyone who wins more than two gold medals at 2012 automatically has a street in the Olympic Village named after them? Furthermore, couldn't Mayor Johnson thinking of an imaginative way to name the Olympic stadium after former Olympic heroes such as Daley Thompson, Dame Kelly Holmes or even Sebastian Coe?

2 *Bringing out Britishness*

The changes would also counter a peculiarly British obsession in recent times with not wanting to celebrate our historical achievements. This paper does not wish to enter the debate over contemporary British nationalism, but it should be noted that whenever debates over our national identity are discussed, whether they be on whether we should have a 'British day' to whether the country can stage a major tournament like the Olympic Games, large douses of cynicism are liberally splashed around. Even the Mayor of Mansfield has reported that Rebecca Adlington's home-coming parade was questioned by some opposition councillors on cost grounds (despite it being privately sponsored).

This particular British - most often English - instinct towards modesty (or cynicism depending on which view you take) has a fundamental impact on the way we perceive ourselves. Some councils have been criticised in the past for failing to celebrate their national identity, whether it be by restricting the rights of residents to fly a national flag to not publically celebrating St George's Day (despite celebrating other national days such as St Patrick's Day), but allowing their residents to name public spaces would offer a clear indication of how proud they are of their local and national culture.

Furthermore, these celebrations could help to form and solidify social and cultural cohesion and bring together disparate parts of the local community to share a common identity. One of the most striking and edifying aspects of the last football World Cup in 2006 was the sight of multi-racial communities all coming together to support the England team and dressing themselves in England shirts, flags and face paint. The scenes were evidence that the English multicultural society can come together under a common theme and identity. Wouldn't it be a tremendous antidote to the myth-making and historical inaccuracies peddled by far-right parties such as the BNP, if multi-ethnic communities were shown to come together to celebrate their local achievements both past and present through the naming of public places?

Moreover, the names of public places can lift and inspire an area. As Max Davison argues in the Daily Telegraph:

"I remember driving around one of the old mining villages in County Durham and finding streets named after Shakespearian heroines. Portia Street, Ophelia Street, Rosalind Street. The pit-owners wanted to build communities with intimations of beauty amid the grime.

Every neighbourhood is rooted in its people, many long dead. At the back of my house, there is a plaque dedicated to "John - Poet and Great Man". Who was he? I have no idea. Something tells me his poetry was probably lousy. But I like the fact that someone thought him worth commemorating".

Celebrating the achievements of local people would give areas a unique identity and focus, especially at a time when there is concern over so called 'clone towns' of identikit high streets. It would also be a strong sign that local areas are proud of their heritage and be an opportunity to enlighten newcomers and tourists to their area of the many things achieved there.

Indeed, Edinburgh Council has recently announced a change in the way they name new streets, perhaps reflecting a new confident nation post-devolution which is keen and comfortable in celebrating their heritage and history. Local residents will be able to suggest names with a historical link to the area, which could involve immortalising famous former residents such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Adam Smith or Alexander Graham Bell.

We would also urge councils to work closely with local schools to link the naming of public places with history and citizenship lessons. By asking pupils to debate the merits and exploits of local figures, schools would be able to bring to life historical moments and offer a unique insight in their own history. Many councils already work with local schools to celebrate events such as Black History Month, but this relationship should be extended to also celebrate wider issues around local history.

3 *Avoiding the pitfalls*

Historically, debates over naming public works have often been rife with division, whether it is over memorials to Princess Diana or statues in the middle of London's Trafalgar Square.

This is by no means a straightforward and unemotional debate. The question must be asked of who decides that a person should be revered as a hero or celebrated for his or her achievements. The recent debate in Liverpool over the re-naming of some streets names after slave merchants, which would have included renaming the legendary Penny Lane, caused considerable debate and anger within the city, with many residents insisting that the city should keep the names in order to remember its history.

Moreover, when Prince Charles advocated in 2007 that he wished to name streets in his village of Poundbury, Dorset after local war heroes, the idea was decried (incorrectly in our view) by residents who did not want to “celebrate” the effects of war or wars they might not have disagreed with. A similar debate would surely be inevitable if a council were to propose naming a public street or area after a soldier participating in either the Iraq or Afghan wars, given the controversial nature of the conflicts.

The only remedy we can advocate is to allow local people to decide through simple local democracy. For instance, if a new road is opening, the local council could invite residents to submit suggestions through a town hall meeting or by writing or e-mailing in. Alternatively the council might wish to draw up a shortlist of suggested names and ask residents to vote on them. They could also enlist the help of local media to promote debate around suggest names.

Councils should of course beware any vote being high-jacked by pranksters. A lesson should be heeded from the experience of Manchester City Council, who invited residents to vote for a name for a stand at Manchester City FC's new football ground. The poll was high-jacked by rival football fans who voted in swathes for it to be named after the famous City player, Colin Bell; hence it would be known as the “Bell End”. Despite rigging the poll and ensuring that Bell received the highest number of votes the council instead decided to name it the less phallus “Mercer End”.

Urban myths abound on the use and abuse of inappropriate street names – including the tale attributed to Bolton council, who opposed a development of 365 luxury homes in their area so vociferously that when the building proceeded against their wishes they sought to seek some revenge by proposing the street names “Hitler Avenue, Belsen Crescent and Goering Drive”, as a means of deterring buyers. The truth has been lost in the mists of time, but the concept has a grain of authenticity to it!

There will also be debates over whether councils should honour living people or have an understanding that only those who have passed away will be considered. Again, such decisions should be left to local communities and councils to decide, although councils should perhaps draw up criteria for suggested nominations to ensure that those who are chosen truly merit selection.

Central Government could also play a greater role in promoting this debate. Presently a number of quangos exist to promote better standards in public buildings but have little to say about how their names can impact on their communities.

The Better Public Buildings campaign has a list of ten priorities for new buildings, none of which considers the importance of its name. This, despite arguing:

“Think about civic value - good design should lift people’s spirits. The civic buildings of the Victorians are still a source of pride and identity for many people; there is every reason why this should also be the case for the buildings we create today.”

It is regrettable that, whilst great thought has gone in to the manner in which new buildings are built, there is little debate on what they should signify for their communities. Central Government could also promote the concept further, perhaps by encouraging new schools and government funded buildings to be named after local luminaries.

Moreover, as an addition to the tradition New Year Honours List, the Government could consider putting forward a number of people who have made a special contribution to British life and recommend that their names should be considered as suitable options new Government buildings or public spaces.

4 *Avoiding the Hollywood route*

Critics of the idea might argue that this would merely represent a further descent into the 'celebritisation' of British culture, as areas would choose to honour low-list celebrities instead of those who have excelled in politics, sport, the arts or business. There is reason to believe that this could happen: celebrity books regularly top the bestseller lists and celebrity TV programmes are hugely popular. How then do we avoid the 'Hollywood problem', where many of its streets are named after light-entertainment performers?

If councils maintain an emphasis on rewarding and remembering local success and history, residents will hopefully recognise that this route will do more to improve the reputation of its area than choosing a national celebrity who has no links with the area. By linking local activity with local pride, areas can begin to examine their full history.

We should be clear as well that areas need not merely go for the most famous suggestion, but should use the process to reward local unsung heroes. Our communities are full of people who have gone beyond expectations to help their local citizens, whether it through serving through local public services, charities or businesses. Rightly, these people can be rewarded through the honours system, but naming a public space after them would also be a timely gesture. Some councils already use this mechanism to reward the service of local councillors, which is an understandable way of rewarding civic service, but perhaps councils should also consider honouring local teachers, policemen or nurses, or local as businessmen and women, who have contributed to their local area.

Some councils are already leading the way. Local people in the Bradley Stoke area of Bristol are being asked to name the town centre after something that reflects the local community, whilst Tunbridge Wells Borough Council recently set a competition to name a local community centre. An interesting point about both these cases is that the councils felt the need to offer cash prize incentives to enter the competition, when surely having an opportunity to commemorate the achievements of your locality should be reason enough. It is difficult to imagine French or American citizens requiring such incentives to engage in their communities.

5 *Conclusion*

Introducing this small but powerful change would by no means fundamentally alter the way in which local people view their area or make everyone feel more pride in their local and national achievements.

It would however be a symbolic move by local councils to display pride in their locality and perhaps spur local people on to strive to achieve some of the accomplishments of previous generations.

In 2003, the *Idler* magazine published a compendium entitled: *Crap Towns: The 50 Worst Places To Live In The UK*, which listed placed areas such as Hull, Morecambe, Winchester, Liverpool and Hackney in their top ten. Would anyone reading the book be aware that British heroes and legends such as Philip Larkin, Tom Courteney, Arthur Askey, Elvis Costello, William Gladstone, Sir Simon Rattle, Eric Morecambe, Jane Austen, John Keats; Florence Nightingale and Marc Bolan all hail or have strong roots in these areas? Perhaps the councils in these towns and cities might consider highlighting some of these figures' considerable achievements in public areas?

When visiting different towns and cities in the UK, the blue plaque scheme administered by English Heritage is a fantastic example of how we can celebrate great lives of the past. It would signify a new confidence in our local cultures if we build upon these cherished monuments by ensuring that local heroes and heroines were landmarked on public buildings, streets and areas.

We hope that councils will find some food for thought in our suggestions and perhaps look to at least run one competition a year to name a public space after a local hero or heroine. These small steps will hopefully ensure that we all have a greater understanding and celebration of the places we live in and that we don't forget the people who made the places what they are.

The names attributed to local public places give our communities a sense of identity and belonging and allow us an opportunity to celebrate local and national achievements and commemorations. Through our street names, public buildings, parks and squares, history is commemorated and images evoked.

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