Local Government Association

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CHIEF CULTURAL & LEISURE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR CULTURAL SERVICES

National Cultural Framework

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Report

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The case for change – A nationally coherent, locally differentiated approach

This government has rightly renewed its commitment to culture, recognising its role in growth, wellbeing and opportunity. Yet the system that supports culture has evolved in ways that no longer serve people or place as well as it should. Funding is fragmented, responsibilities are unclear, and accountability is diffuse. At a moment of devolution, local government reorganisation, and renewed investment, there is a risk that these weaknesses become further embedded. This is not a question of simply spending more, but of ensuring that public investment works harder, reaches further, and is shaped by the places and communities it exists to serve. In short, a system that is nationally consistent but locally differentiated.

1. The problem

- England does not have a functioning cultural system; it has a collection of funding routes, bodies and strategies with weak alignment.
- Local government is the largest public funder and deliverer of culture, but lacks strategic power, stable funding and clarity of role.
- Accountability for outcomes is diffuse, particularly as devolution and LGR accelerate.

2. Why this matters to government

- Inefficient public investment (short termism, repeat bidding, capital without revenue).
- Cultural inequality between places is reinforced, not reduced.
- Culture's contribution to growth, health and place is under realised.
- Devolution risks exacerbating fragmentation unless system roles are reset.

3. Why now

- Single / integrated settlements are emerging.
- DCMS has renewed capital investment (2025–2030).
- Local government reorganisation and the emergence of Strategic Authorities are redefining tiers and competencies.
- Without intervention, the system will harden in the wrong shape.

4. What must change

- Roles across national, regional and local tiers must be clarified.
- Funding must shift from fragmented competition to place based settlements.
- Accountability must follow funding and decision making.
- Data must support learning and impact maximisation, not compliance.

5. What this framework does

- Sets a shared system logic and clarifies who is responsible for what.
- Aligns funding, strategy and accountability.
- Provides the foundation for a future National Cultural Strategy.

The Hodge review of Arts Council England (ACE) set the groundwork for reform of ACE, but change here is not sufficient on its own to improve the system. The Review rightly identified the need for communities to have more say in culture but proposed a top-down approach to setting up new regional boards divorced from other changes taking place to governance at a neighbourhood level. Instead, we must create a system where funding decisions are driven by place-led priorities building on the work of local cultural strategies and cultural compacts. Applications to ACE and other DCMS bodies must ask if projects are contributing to locally agreed objectives so that funding supports the needs and aspirations of communities, without creating a new bureaucratic system.

We must take the opportunity offered by Strategic Authorities – not to create new funding silos or yet another deliverer of services – but in their ability to scan across a region for opportunities, clusters of activity, and the data and insight that can help them to grow through the use of their wider competencies. Increasingly, Strategic Authorities are being approached as the default point of contact to understand place and deliver funding – that's easy for policy-makers – but misunderstands their potential to be strategic leaders rather than intermediaries.

Finally, local government reorganisation gives us the opportunity to rethink how the biggest public funders of culture can use their unique combination of convening power and service delivery to drive a cultural renaissance and the ambitions set out in the Local Government Association's (LGA) Cornerstones of Culture report. This framework provides a practical route to that future - one that builds on what already exists, avoids unnecessary bureaucracy, and helps deliver the ambition that culture should belong to everyone, everywhere.

Introduction – Toward System Renewal

> "Arts and culture must be for everyone, everywhere. No matter your background or the place you live, we should all be able to experience the joys that dance, theatre, music, museums, even borrowing a book from a library brings"
>
> (Lisa Nandy, Arts Everywhere Fund announcement, 2025).

In the UK, the current system or model for culture is in need of renewal. In fact, to call it a system or model is to over-state the level of coordination, alignment and convergence across a complex and fast-changing landscape. Unlike other comparable European nations, the UK cultural system is not one underpinned by a unifying cultural strategy where each partner has a clear role and through which stakeholders such as cultural organisations can follow navigable pathways which support their development and maximise their impact. In a context of local government reorganisation (LGR) and devolution, there is a real risk that the lack of a coherent system will result in severe disruption and widespread loss of cultural capacity and infrastructure. Some counties will disappear altogether, while in many places, new larger authorities will take over cultural development and delivery without the guidance of a national framework. Currently, the reality of the UK cultural system is as follows:

- Roles and responsibilities for key partner agencies are unclear and lack coherent structure. Most complex are strategic relations between different tiers of government. Notably, the largest direct funders of culture, local authorities, have limited strategic influence on how agendas for culture are set and how partnerships are subsequently choreographed.
- Key partners do not have access to a shared terms of reference which set out their respective roles and responsibilities within the cultural system. This results in a case-by-case approach to cultural development and often only drives partnership alignment after a decision has been made or programme launched, rather than working through co-design and system-thinking.

- There is a consequent lack of shared accountability across the cultural partnership landscape. This is of particular concern in a context of Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution for many places and widespread public service reform for all places. Moreover, with persistent fiscal pressure on public spending, it is paramount that decisions are based on systemic coordination and with utmost efficiency if they are to create the greatest possible public impact.

For effective place-based cultural investment and development, it is necessary to renew the current system and to create for the first time a coherent, robust cultural system which heightens accountability, facilitates effective exchange, and provides the enabling environment for smart decision-making. One that delivers national coherency and local differentiation.

Introducing the framework

The National Cultural Framework presented in this document is commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) on behalf of the National Alliance for Cultural Services.

This framework is not a request for additional funding, but a proposal to change how existing investment is designed, aligned and used, so it delivers more consistently for communities and places. It sets out a proposition for an integrated system of place based cultural development, providing the foundation for a future National Cultural Strategy co designed by the partners that fund it. It is also intended to provide an accessible guide to the cultural partnership landscape at a time of significant change.

For the purposes of this framework, culture is understood broadly: not only as formal arts, heritage, museums and performance, but also as the everyday cultural infrastructure, activities and spaces through which people participate in civic and community life. This includes libraries, grassroots venues, festivals, creative activity, heritage assets, community cultural provision and local cultural networks. Places will define this differently according to local identity and need.

The framework describes how national, regional and local tiers of government can be better aligned to deliver a sustainable and resilient cultural ecosystem focused on people and place. It seeks to ensure greater national coherence, while responding to the imperative of local differentiation, reflecting local circumstances, cultural identities and the voices of local people.

At its heart is a simple question: how do we create a system that is nationally coherent – taking account of the role of culture in our national identity, our national reputation and our national economy, and enabling more people in more places to reap the personal, social and economic benefits of the arts – but responsive to the distinctiveness, needs and priorities of local places and communities.

In answering this question, the framework needs to make clear that culture is not limited to formal arts provision. It includes the everyday cultural assets, activities and participation that shape local identity and civic life, while recognising that not every leisure, sport or hospitality activity will fall within scope.

There are **six guiding principles** covering the fundamental aspects of cultural investment and development: governance, accountability, investment, strategy, delivery and data.

The National Cultural Framework is founded on a desk-based evidence review which synthesises existing research, policy positions, funding data and place-based learning into a digestible policy scan and landscape review, highlighting emerging considerations, tensions and opportunities within the current system. The review aims to create a common reference point for stakeholders across a currently fragmented cultural policy and delivery landscape.

Figure 1: National Culture Framework interlocking components

The current cultural policy and support landscape in England does not operate in an efficient system. It has been created over decades of changing national policy and strategy, processes of local government and public services reform, concomitant with largely negative fiscal pressures. Across all tiers and parts of the system the lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities and the gaps this creates leads to a mismatch between needs and priorities, funding cycles, place-based delivery and decision making, strategic responsibility and capacity.

Local government remains the major investor in and deliverer of public cultural services, yet its capacity, funding and strategic responsibility do not match the role it is asked to or could perform. Indeed, in the absence of a National Cultural Strategy and with cultural services largely non-statutory in nature, place-based cultural development operates from a position of fragility with a lack of clear pathways for cultural development sector sustainability, talent progression and growth. Innovative models and impactful investment are often the preserve of local authorities which are able to choose to prioritise culture, for its role is foundational to so many other priorities. With the lack of a clear system of cultural governance, partnership and investment, culture can 'fall through the cracks' between differing strategic priorities, and partnership models for culture are often piecemeal, short term or project based.

Local government reorganisation and devolution, with new structures and competencies, offer the chance to establish clear subsidiarity – with regional planning for culture factored into economic development, the visitor economy, planning, transport and health. The large-scale reorganisation of local government into unitary authorities, and the convergence of local authorities into strategic authorities, raises the stakes, with an urgent need for effective strategic planning for culture. However, such reforms also risk the further erosion of cultural capacity at a local level, where culture connects most directly to people and place.

Local government reorganisation will also impact on Town and Parish councils even though they are not structurally affected. As reorganisation consolidates services, town councils become vital to preserving local civic identity and representation. Furthermore, through a process often called "double devolution," town councils may take on additional responsibilities and assets - such as library or open spaces management.

The system is in a state of flux. There is a clear need for renewal and positive change. As witnessed in other countries which a) prioritise culture as a foundation for sustainable development and inclusive growth; and b) champion subsidiarity and systems-solutions for cultural governance, partnership and investment; the opportunity here is to align approaches to culture which enable place-based innovation and development.

Opportunities for a refresh

Reframing cultural funding: Nationally coherent, locally differentiated

The landscape for public cultural services in England is entering a period of transition. Under previous governments over the past decade, investment has been delivered through a patchwork of national programmes – including the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Levelling Up Fund and Towns Fund – alongside sector-specific capital schemes and lottery distribution. While these programmes have enabled significant place-based investment, many are now reaching the end of their funding cycles or were designed as time-limited interventions rather than long-term system architecture.

Recent announcements signal a shift in direction. The new Government's £1.5 billion cultural investment package (2025-2030), alongside targeted support for local museums and renewed capital investment in cultural infrastructure. Plus, the Pride in Place strategy reflects a recognition that the sector requires sustained, strategic funding rather than episodic intervention.

Table 1 below sets out Cultural Funding Programmes since 2019:

Fund / Programme	Total Investment	Timeframe	Place Focus	Notes
Towns Fund Incl. Future High Streets Fund	**£3.6 billion** £830m	**2019-2026** 2020-2024	**Local** Local	**Regeneration** Town centre regeneration
Levelling Up Fund (LUF)	**£4.8bn**	**2021-2024 (delivery ongoing)**	**Local / Regional**	**Capital-heavy regeneration incl. culture**
Community Ownership Fund	**£150m+**	**2021-2025**	**Local**	**Community assets incl. culture**

UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)	**~£2.6bn**	**2022-2025 (+ 2025/26 extension)**	**Local**	**Flexible place-based fund incl. culture**
Arts Everywhere Fund	**£270m**	**Announced 2025**	**National to local institutions**	**Infrastructure and resilience**
UK City of Culture (e.g. Bradford 2025)	**~£15m+ per city (public funding)**	**Ongoing (4-year cycle)**	**Place-based cultural designation**	**Drives regeneration and identity**
UK Town of Culture 2028	£3.5 million	Bidding ongoing	Place-based cultural designation	Drives regeneration + identity
NEW: DCMS Cultural Investment Package	**£1.5bn**	**2025-2030**	**National and Local**	**Major reset of cultural capital funding**
Incl. Museums (total)	£760m	2025-2030	National and local	Includes infrastructure and estates
Incl. Local museum support (MEND and transformation)	£160m and £100m+ targeted support	2025-2030	Local	Explicit “rescue and sustainability” funding
Incl. Creative Foundations Fund	£425m	2025-2030	Place-based	Arts venues capital investment
Incl. Heritage funds	£230m	2025-2030	Place-based	Heritage and civic assets

However, the underlying structure of funding remains fragmented. Investment is still distributed across multiple funding streams, each subject to distinct (and nationally determined) criteria, timelines and delivery mechanisms. This creates several systemic challenges:

- **Short-termism and instability:** Time-limited funds inhibit long-term planning and workforce stability.
- **Capital vs revenue imbalance:** Significant investment in buildings is not matched by sustainable operational funding; activities within deteriorating or new assets cannot be sustained.
- **Competitive inefficiency:** Repeated bidding processes divert capacity away from delivery, particularly in lower-capacity places; they require match funding and staff time where investment in culture is already constrained and individual schemes do not add up to a reliable method of resourcing robust local cultural strategies.
- **Misalignment with local need:** National funding criteria do not reflect local cultural ecologies or priorities.
- **Diffuse accountability:** Multiple funding routes obscure responsibility for outcomes and impact.

As a result, funding flows do not consistently align with the way culture is actually produced, experienced and sustained at place level, including by creative businesses, freelancers, grassroots organisations and cultural institutions operating across mixed markets. The Government has just delivered the first multi-year funding settlement for local government in a decade, but the emerging devolution landscape presents an opportunity to address these structural issues. A more coherent approach would move towards a **multi-level funding settlement**, where:

- **National government** (not just DCMS) sets long-term investment frameworks, ensures equity between places, and aligns culture with wider missions (growth, health, skills and place).
- **Strategic authorities** receive integrated, multi-year settlements that integrate culture into infrastructure planning at a functional geography.
- **Local government** is resourced to lead place-based cultural strategy and sustain partnerships and strategy, to manage local cultural assets and cultural delivery, rather than relying on project-by-project funding.
- **Communities and cultural organisations** access funding that is lower burden, more flexible and better aligned with lived experience.
- **Arm's-length bodies (ALBs):** Translate national priorities into sector-specific specialist strategies and standard/accreditation frameworks within a clarified role that balances strategy, funding and delivery.

Critically, this is not simply a question of increasing funding, but of **redesigning funding flows** to match the realities of a devolved system. To respond to these challenges, this Framework sets out a practical route towards a more coherent, place-based funding system, anchored in a shared set of **12 priority outcomes** that define what cultural investment should achieve for people and places. These outcomes are supported by **six design principles** – governance, strategy, investment, delivery, data and accountability – which together provide a structured approach to aligning roles, funding flows and decision-making across all levels of the system. By connecting long-term outcomes with clear system design, the framework moves beyond fragmented programmes towards a model where cultural investment is coordinated, locally responsive and capable of delivering sustained economic, social and civic value within a shared vision of the intended outcomes.

This includes:

- **Governance:** Shift from fragmented, competitive funding pots to clearer, allocated settlements with defined roles and responsibilities across national, regional and local tiers.
- **Strategy:** Embed culture within integrated, place-based investment frameworks, aligning funding with regional priorities across growth, health, skills and regeneration.
- **Investment:** Balance capital investment with sustainable, long-term revenue funding to support both infrastructure and ongoing cultural activity.
- **Delivery:** Enable local authorities and partners to move from bidding for funds to planning and delivering against stable, multi-year allocations linked to evidence-based locally agreed plans for culture.
- **Data:** Develop tiered data systems that support consistent evaluation nationally while reflecting local context and outcomes.
- **Accountability:** Strengthen accountability through clearer funding flows and shared outcome frameworks, enabling transparent tracking of long-term impact across places.

Figure 2: 6 Design Principles for a National Cultural Framework

	Governance	Clear roles and settlements	From competitive pots - allocated funding
	Strategy	Place-based alignment	Culture embedded in local growth framework with a whole place approach
	Investment	Sustainable funding mix	Capital + long-term revenue balance
	Delivery	Stable delivery	From bidding - multi-year planning
	Data	Tiered, aggregated intelligence	National-endorsed, industry-led standards + local insights
	Accountability	Transparent outcomes	Funding tied to shared outcomes

Place-based cultural governance – Current state of play

Place-based cultural governance in England operates within a fragmented and crowded landscape, where councils are required to coordinate multiple national programmes, partnerships and funding streams with differing geographies, objectives, timeframes and accountability. As highlighted by the LGA's Cultural Governance Jigsaw (2024), this complexity often weakens the usefulness of place-based cultural strategies and their influence on decision-making, with strategies at risk of becoming symbolic rather than directive, practical plans. In this context, the effectiveness of a cultural strategy depends less on its existence and more on its maturity, alignment with wider place priorities, clarity of governance, and evidence of influence on funding, planning and partnership decisions.

Local Government Association

The Cultural Governance Jigsaw: local government picking up the pieces

Key

1 Business Improvement Districts
(Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities)
Numerous, small area level

2 Create Growth partnerships
(Department for Culture, Media and Sport / Innovate UK)
Twelve, some at regional and others at council level

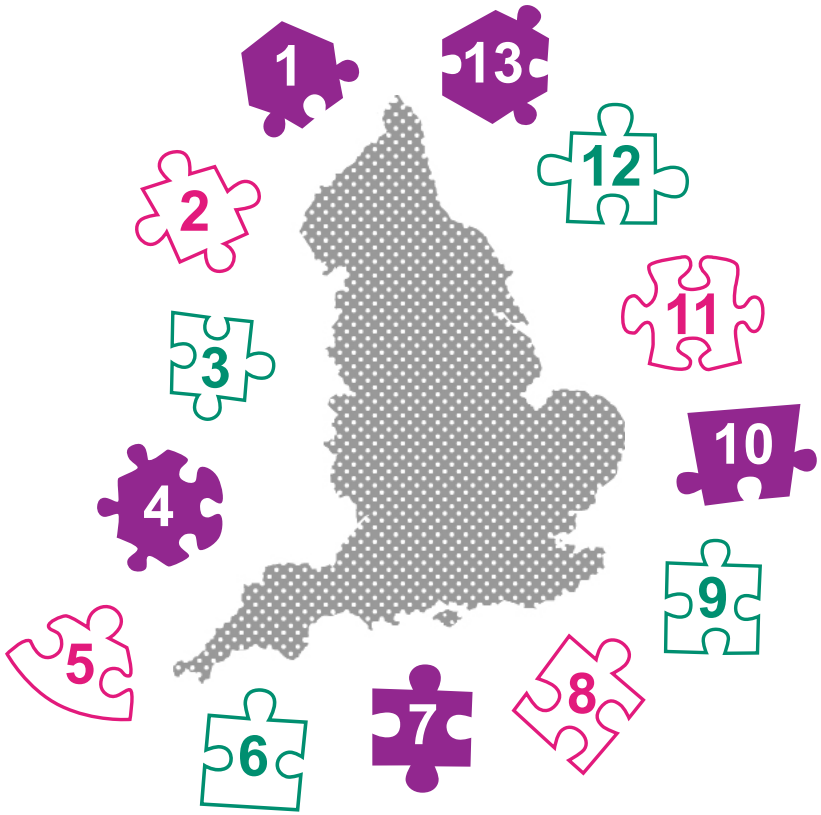
3 Creative Clusters
(Arts and Humanities Research Council and Uk Research and Innovation)
Nine, some local, some regional or national focus

4 Local Cultural Education Partnerships
(Arts Council England)
140, mostly at council level

5 High Street Heritage Action Zones
(Historic England)
67, neighbourhood level

6 Cultural consortia
(diverse)
Many, varying geographies and origins

7 Towns Fund
(Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities).
101 Town Deals, 170 Future High Streets, small urban councils



8 Cultural Compacts
(Arts Council England)
20, mostly on the scale of one city or county

9 Local Visitor Economy Partnership
(Visit Britain and Visit England)
30, partnerships of 1-3 councils

10 Holiday Activities and Food Programme
(Department for Education)
153, upper tier councils

11 Music Education Hubs
(Arts Council England)
43, each covering one or more upper-tier councils

12 Integrated Care Systems
(NHS)
42, covering the whole of England

13 Combined Authorities
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
11, varied areas across multiple councils

Issues

The governance landscape is confused

Governance for different national funding schemes create duplication or overlap

Governance structures do not always connect with local strategies

access/opportunity not evenly spread

Figures correct at April 2024. Links
1. Business Improvement Districts https://www.gov.uk/guidance/business-improvement-districts
2. Create Growth Partnerships https://iuk.ktn-uk.org/programme/create-growth/
3. Creative Clusters https://creativeindustriesclusters.com/
4. Local Cultural Education Partnerships https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/children-and-young-people/local-cultural-education-partnerships-lceps
5. High Street Heritage Action Zones https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/heritage-action-zones/regenerating-historic-high-streets/
6. Cultural Consortia https://www.google.com/search?q=%22cultural+consortium%22+UK
7. Towns Fund https://townsfund.org.uk/
8. Cultural Compacts https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/review-cultural-compacts-initiative
9. Local Visitor Economy Partnership https://www.visitbritain.org/resources-destination-partners/local-visitor-economy-partnership-lvep-programme
10. Holiday Activities and Food Programme https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme
11. Music Education Hubs https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/u50cw/9/?_cldee=msVCQI18ErNui8GisV50VjGQZA_rjHaSiYg5KIG_TFH7GhdwKlp8MXGp9KhECBGC&recipientid=contact-b70f963d124bed11bba20022484256b8-16cf1721f20945df8ebdc7b6511c3a04&esid=8979914e-b903-ee11-8f6e-6045bd0e6bfe
12. Integrated Care Systems https://www.england.nhs.uk/integratedcare/integrated-care-in-your-area/
13. Combined Authorities https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combined_authorities_and_combined_county_authorities

RedQuadrant has made every reasonable effort to ensure the information contained herein is accurate and referenced to reputable sources. This is an indicative survey of the subject and does not claim to be complete or comprehensive.

RedQuadrant

Figure 3: The Cultural Governance Jigsaw (2024)

Cultural governance in transition: Challenges and opportunities

A fragmented system under pressure is evolving into a multi-level governance model – where clearer roles, stronger coordination and place-based investment can reposition culture as core civic infrastructure, foundational to sustainable, inclusive places we can all be proud of. Figure four below provides an introduction to headline opportunities for culture, in terms of system development and coherence. It also reminds us of the challenges which continue to hold back renewal.

Figure 4: Challenges and opportunities in a new reality

System in transition (Opportunities through Devolution and LGR)

Governance and system design

Clarify roles and embed subsidiarity
Align functions to the most appropriate level – local, regional and national.

Tiered data and evidence systems
Nationally consistent frameworks with local specificity to support better decisions.

Culture as a core public service
Integrate culture into transport, planning, skills, health and growth agendas within devolved frameworks.

Stronger system coordination
Define clearer roles for ALBs/NDPBs and strengthen cross-sector partnerships.

Empowered local places
Greater freedom for communities to define cultural priorities and direct investment.

Investment and funding

Shift to long-term, place-based funding
Move towards multi-year settlements and locally aligned investment models.

Diversify funding sources
Expand visitor levies, philanthropy, social investment and community ownership models.

Align investment with outcomes
Connect cultural funding to growth, wellbeing, regeneration and inclusion.

System under pressure (Challenges)

Fragmented funding system
Short-term, competitive funding dominates; weak alignment to local need and imbalance between capital and revenue.

Rising sector fragility
Economic, social and environmental pressures are increasing risk across organisations and places. Skills gaps, freelance precarity and technological disruption (eg. AI) impact the sector but sit outside core policy levers.

Displacement through reorganisation
Local government reorganisation shifts funding and capacity pressures rather than resolving them.

Unclear roles and weak subsidiarity
Inconsistent responsibilities across national, regional and local tiers; culture lacks statutory clarity and connectivity.

Underdefined National Bodies (ALBs/ NDPBs)
Duplication and blurred lines between strategy, funding and delivery reduce system efficiency. National resources of flagship portfolio are not strategically deployed.

Eroding local capacity
Councils' reduced funding and workforce constraints weaken place-based cultural leadership.

Adapting the system to new reality and opportunities

A system that has evolved in a piecemeal, centralised and unstructured way is no longer fit for purpose in a new context defined by devolution, LGR, public services reform and ongoing fiscal constraint. As powers, funding and responsibilities shift across tiers, strategy, delivery and investment needs to become more coordinated, place-responsive and strategically aligned.

Governance – Reconsidering roles and subsidiarity

> "We cannot afford to be divided – only by working together as a sector to ensure our shared investment and resources go as far possible will we be able to protect our vital cultural infrastructure. National, regional and local government and funding bodies will need to work together will their communities in establishing a sustainable future for local culture. This is why I'm delighted to be launching a new series of think pieces on the future of local, publicly-funded cultural services here today."
>
> Councillor Liz Green, Former Chair, LGA Culture Tourism and Sport Board

Developing a framework in which roles and responsibilities are more clearly defined by national, regional and local tiers will support a system that is less duplicative and more responsive to place-based need and opportunity. In doing this, it will be important to ensure that subsidiarity adds value and does not risk new fragmentation. It also means developing a realistic split between strategy, investment and delivery across all administrative levels.

In looking at the split between strategy, investment and delivery between the three levels of local government, a set of principles can be applied to the roles and responsibility of each tier:

- **Subsidiarity and proximity:** Cultural delivery and engagement are most effective closest to communities (local councils, trusts, grassroots organisations) where decisions affect daily participation and are integrated with related services.
- **Strategic scale:** Strategic authorities can add value where cross-boundary planning, larger investment flows and multi-sector alignment are needed.
- **Macro coherence:** National bodies set frameworks, minimum standards and the long-term funding horizon to ensure an equitable baseline across regions and localities.

- **Collaboration and partnership:** Effective governance builds bridges – integrating national policy, regional strategy and local delivery into place-led plans that lock in coherence at national, regional and local geographies.

Table 2 below sets out how a new framework could balance Strategy, Investment and Delivery across the different tiers that currently support publicly funded culture:

System element	Strategy	Investment	Delivery
DCMS and other Government Departments	National 'missions' Outcomes/goals	To support missions/outcomes	Through place-based agreements) Through ALBs (sector specific)
Local Government	Place based strategy based on local need and communities, links to national and regional goals and outcomes	In local organisations, artists and partnerships which position culture as foundational to strategic priorities	Through its own infrastructure, partners, VCSEs, Parish Councils, organisations, individuals and enterprises. Many place-based cultural partnerships are cross-sector and public/private
Strategic Authorities	Regional overview, core competencies, connected themes	Via related strategic plans	Own activity, partner activity
Trusts and Foundations	Individual mission	Through grants and funds to orgs, councils	Through awardees and co-investment in development programmes

Table 2: New National Cultural Framework – Strategy, Investment and Delivery

Figure 5 below sets out three shared principles for a coordinated approach to devising and assigning roles and responsibilities within a renewed cultural system:

Figure 5: Principles for assigning roles

Subsidiarity and proximity	Cultural delivery and engagement are most effective closest to communities (local councils, trusts, place-based partnerships) where decisions affect daily participation.
Strategic scale	Strategic Authorities can add value where cross-boundary planning, larger investment flows and multi-sector alignment are needed.
Macro coherence	National bodies set frameworks, minimum standards and long-term funding horizons to ensure equitable baseline across regions.

Collaboration and partnership

Effective cultural governance builds bridges – integrating into place-led plans that lock in coherence at national, regional and local geographies.

Delivery – Rethinking strategy in place

If the framework can be applied consistently across different cultural challenges, then it provides a practical tool rather than a purely conceptual model.

- Where does the framework struggle to allocate responsibility, risk or leadership?

To function practically the National cultural framework has to be a practical rather a purely conceptual model. It has to balance the needs to be nationally coherent while locally differentiated – meaning a system that delivers. To do this it needs to understand where responsibility, risk and leadership should sit, particularly when it comes to delivery. As most delivery will occur locally, in distinctive places with local needs and priorities, this means building in an understanding of the dynamics of place-based strategy.

Place-based cultural strategy sits at the intersection of cultural governance, local decision-making and funding pressure. Local councils remain the largest public funder of culture in England, yet sustained reductions in core funding, increasing statutory service demands and a fragmented national funding landscape have made long-term cultural planning more difficult to sustain. There are also further tensions for local government whose primary funding is derived not from the DCMS but the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), Department of Health and Department for Education (DfE) whose remits increasingly connect with culture. At the same time, public service reform (including the growth of integrated settlements), devolution and LGR have increased expectations that culture should play a clearer role in economic growth, wellbeing and place-making. National policy missions too, such as Pride In Place, are dependent on cultural vibrancy. Key to delivering effective cultural support in place is the development of effective cultural strategies that shape local priorities and investment decisions, and which fit with national and regional priorities.

The governance models encouraged for cultural planning and delivery in local places (including Cultural Compacts) reflect that outcomes for culture require stakeholders to work in partnership to plan, resource and deliver them, and are predicated on local partnership working to develop cultural strategies with wide ownership. In addition, the Local Outcomes Framework has been amended to reflect local outcomes are not the sole responsibility of local government (Local Outcomes Framework - GOV.UK). However, the Hodge Review of Arts Council England, whose recommendations were accepted by DCMS, included a proposal for cultural strategy to be a statutory responsibility of local Councils, and was silent as to how the resourcing of such a new statutory duty would be achieved or monitored.

The University of Southampton (Ashton and Bell, 2023) following detailed analysis of over 300 local cultural strategies have developed a set of 12 recommendations for maximising effectiveness and fit with regional and national priorities. These are:

- **Models and approaches:** Effective cultural strategies clearly set out governance and delivery models, particularly the roles of local authorities and arm's-length culture trusts, and how these approaches align or differ in practice.
- **Findable and sharable:** Cultural strategies should be easy to locate and compare. A shared, accessible database would support learning, benchmarking and continuous improvement across places.
- **Access and context:** Strategies should meet accessibility standards and clearly state authorship, publication details and content attribution to strengthen transparency and usability.
- **Structure and language:** Clear and consistent terminology improves effectiveness. Existing LGA and Arts Council England guidance would benefit from clearer definitions of commonly used strategic terms such as vision, aims and outcomes.

- **Methods and consultation:** Strategies should clearly explain their evidence base, including data sources used, rationale for selection, and the approach to consultation and engagement.
- **Themes and priorities:** Engaging with cultural strategies across different places and time periods helps identify enduring priorities, emerging themes and shifts in focus.
- **Policy and position:** Cultural strategies should clearly situate themselves within the wider policy landscape, using simple tables to show policy alignment, timeframes and dependencies.
- **Geographies and boundaries:** Strategies should respond to changing governance geographies, identifying opportunities for alignment and collaboration across neighbouring areas and devolved structures.
- **Living and responsive:** Treating cultural strategies as living documents, supported by digital platforms, enables regular updates, feedback and ongoing engagement.
- **Continuity and evaluation:** New strategies should reflect on previous plans and include clear arrangements for monitoring progress and reviewing outcomes over time.
- **Success and failure:** Evaluation should promote learning by openly reflecting on what has worked, what has not, and how approaches can improve.
- **Network and share:** A cultural strategies network could support peer learning, shared insight and collaboration across places.

Place-based cultural partnerships

As well as cultural strategies, **place-based partnerships** are vital to effective to delivery. How can they be drawn on in in ways that fits with the Framework and ensure that unnecessary new structures and parallel processes are not created? There are several models to explore.

Cultural Compacts have become a key partnership model aimed at improving coordination, strategic capacity and cross-sector outcomes in place-based cultural development., Compacts bring together local authorities, cultural organisations, business, education and community leaders across England to co-design shared visions for culture that align with wider place priorities and leverage new resources.

Evidence from the ACE Cultural Compacts review shows that Compacts have demonstrably improved shared leadership, coordination and outcomes by creating a single forum where local authorities, cultural organisations, business, education, and community partners align vision, activity and funding. In many places this has raised the profile of culture within wider place agendas (recovery, regeneration, wellbeing), enabled more coherent planning, and strengthened the ability to leverage additional resources.

Alongside Compacts, a wide variety of other cultural partnership models exist. The most resilient and impactful models often have distributed leadership (not owned by a single institution), formal links to power and resources (investment, planning, devolution), and the ability to adapt through reorganisation, political change or funding shocks. Those embedded in wider place governance (while retaining independence) are better able to survive transitions such as LGR, mayoral change or funding reform.

When designed as governance mechanisms (not just collaboration spaces), Cultural Compacts and mature place-based partnerships are widely recognised for their ability to improve coordination and better deliver outcomes.

Table 3 below sets out some of the key place-based cultural partnership models and how they strengthen the system:

Partnership model	Typical form and examples	Coordination and outcomes	Resilience and sustainability indicators
Cultural Compact (Cross-Sector, Place-Based)	ACE/DCMS Compacts; Culture East Sussex; Norfolk & Suffolk Culture Board	• Strong alignment across sectors • Shared vision • Often resulting in improved leverage and profile for culture	• Independent chair • Senior civic and business buy-in • Clear remit • Links to funding and strategy • Enabling participation
Local Culture Board / Partnership	LA-convened boards with cultural, VCSE, education partners	• Good coordination within the cultural ecosystem • Variable influence beyond culture	• Stability of LA support • Regular decision-makers at the table • Integration with corporate priorities

Strategic Authority / Mayoral Cultural Frameworks	GMCA, South Yorkshire MCA Creative and Cultural Investment Framework, WMCA	• High strategic reach • Ability to align culture with growth, skills, health	• Statutory powers • Devolved funding • Mayoral sponsorship • Often backed by multi-year strategies
Delivery-Led Cultural Trusts / Arm's-length Bodies	Venue or asset-focused trusts	• Effective delivery and operational efficiency • Limited system-wide coordination	• Robust business models • Diversified income • Clearer client relationship with the authority
Project-Based Consortia	Time-limited partnerships for bids/ programmes	• Short-term coordination • More for governance / partnership innovation and experimentation	• Low resilience • Dependent on continued funding • Limited legacy without formalisation
Informal Networks / Alliances	Officer or sector-led networks	• Knowledge sharing • Early collaboration	• Low durability • Vulnerable to staff turnover • Minimal decision-making power

Table 3:Place-based cultural partnership models

If cultural investment is aligned to defined local and regional competencies, then funding can move away from fragmented, short term competition towards more sustainable place based approach. This raises the following questions:

- Does the idea of single or integrated settlements work for culture in practice?
- What would need to be protected to avoid loss of national or sector specific priorities?

Table 4 below sets out an aerial view of types of investment and reflects on their role in a wider system:

Funding type	Examples of Investment Stream	Characteristics
Core layer: Local Government	Locally retained business rates Council tax Other council income	Largest single source of public cultural investment Local Authority core cultural funding for libraries, museums and heritage assets, arts and cultural services, local cultural programmes. Highly place-responsive Under sustained pressure from statutory obligations Eroded in real terms over the past decade
National Funders (DCMS) and ALBs	Arts Council England (portfolio & project funding) National Lottery Heritage Fund Historic England	Grant-in-aid and lottery funding Increasing focus on place-based approaches Often requires match funding Competitive application processes
Place-responsive Investment (e.g. cross-government and devolution funds)	Priority Place Town of Culture City of Culture Towns / Regeneration Funds	Place-targeted but competitive Often time-limited Aligned to growth, skills, infrastructure Most effective when linked to local cultural strategies
Emerging Fiscal Tools (e.g. visitor economy and local levies)	Overnight visitor levies Arena / ticket levies	Locally retained, place-controlled income Reinvested into cultural infrastructure and experiences New revenue layer – opportunity for long-term resilience Lack common decision-making structures

Cultural data and place

Currently the lack of data itself is not an impediment to an effective cultural system. In fact, there is a plethora of data, and new data-related research and projects in development continually. Rather, it is the lack of coordination, codification and targeting, together with limited local analytical and collection capacity which limits access, use and relevance of data to specific places. If cultural data is standardised at national level but defined and used locally in conjunction with other locally-available data for health, economy and demography, then it can support strategic planning, priority-setting, investment decisions, accountability and learning without imposing a disproportionate burden. This raises three main strategic questions:

- Are the proposed tiered data roles workable given local capacity?
- How can data better inform local and regional cultural priorities, including decisions about investment, provision and need?
- Where would this meaningfully improve decision making – and where would it not?

This includes decisions about where investment should be targeted, which communities or sectors are underserved, how culture aligns with wider place priorities, and what forms of cultural infrastructure are most needed locally.

Using cultural data to inform strategy, priorities and performance as well as aligning transversal elements such as cultural sectors or audience profiles to local geographies, is fundamentally complex and fragmented. Existing data frameworks relate variously to the business needs of individual organisations, the democratic scrutiny of local government performance, growth objectives of strategic authorities and national missions of central government and its ALBs. To be useful, data needs both to inform, and be informed by, strategic priorities, investment choices and long-term service planning at the different tiers of the framework, whilst removing unnecessary duplication of effort.

Unlike health or education, culture has no national data standards, no agreed taxonomy, and no consistent unit of measurement across funders, subsectors or geographies. The data framework needs to enable some key outcomes and indicators to be compared across geographies for national missions and priorities, while also supporting local authorities and strategic authorities to identify needs, gaps, opportunities and investment priorities within their own cultural ecosystems.

Some common roadblocks in setting up a national cultural data framework include:

- Capacity, skills and priorities of those commissioning or delivering cultural activity or developing cultural policy locally to collect data.
- Lack of visibility or awareness of existing datasets and existing administration data which could be harnessed.

- Reliance on manual data entry, resulting in inconsistent or patchy data.
- Difficulties in defining and capturing social and intangible outcomes.
- Undercounting of informal cultural participation.
- Major gaps in freelancer, workforce and diversity data.
- Difficulty in sharing data across organisational systems.
- Creation of multiple taxonomies to meet funding requirements.
- Limited use of cultural data within wider spatial planning, regeneration and public service decision-making.

The overarching issues that need attention are around coordination and standardisation, resource and capacity, and creating strong narratives and interpretation. A shared initiative between the Centre for Cultural Value, Audience Agency, Culture Commons and My Cake addresses many of these in the National Cultural Data Observatory (NCDO). The NCDO proposes sourcing and analysing available data sets and automating this data collection to reduce the burden at the lowest levels of the system and promoting the standardisation of core data metrics and taxonomies to enable consistent measurement and benchmarking.

Harnessing administration data can help to set up a data framework – eg annual accounts data or data supplied by LA's to MHCLG on cultural spend by local government. This data can be aggregated and made available for multiple uses and users as a first step, before setting new metrics and attempting to collect further data on a mass scale. AI and machine learning can also be employed to gather additional data from websites and public sources.

In the context of devolution, place-based insights are needed not only to track the effectiveness of new systems, competencies and investment, but also to shape local priorities, target resources and support integrated planning across growth, health, skills and regeneration. Any practical data approach needs to reduce burden while supporting variation between cultures and places. A set of key data principles to sit alongside the Framework include:

- **Reduce duplication in data and evaluation:** this aims to support both the cultural sector limited capacity and improve comparability of data.
- **Clarify coordinating bodies and standards around cultural data:** A limited number of standard, quality assured, metrics at national level, alongside optional, standardised, regional and locally determined measures would provide clarity. Local authorities, including councils, strategic authorities, NHS and other partners have access to professional data insight. Where should the responsibility for designing and maintaining a system of measurement that aligns with the new framework sit?

- **Humanise data to make it relatable and intelligible:** With better standardisation, reduced burden and better access to data, can more storytelling around data be created to advocate for its wide impacts? This can drive better insights around qualitative data.
- **Roles in any data framework should be proportionate to size and capacity:** it should not create new burdens on organisations unless it is producing information that is useful to them in their planning and monitoring.

Although national and local bodies invest in culture, there is no strong central government driver for a unified cultural data system. Without coordination, devolution and LGR could contribute to the proliferation of fragmented, incompatible and poorly measured approaches – and continued limitations on demonstrating the contribution of culture to wider outcomes.

A simpler cultural data set which requires collection only of the necessary data to inform strategic planning, identify priorities and measure progress against agreed national and local outcomes would be beneficial, especially now that local government boundaries are changing, with implications for comparability. Working together on development will be essential to ensuring fitness for purpose for the different roles set out in the framework.

To deliver a framework that is nationally coherent but locally differentiated requires long term longitudinal research that demonstrates the impact of investment in culture; as well as a data that is useful locally to shape future cultural provision, identify emerging needs and opportunities, and support evidence-based investment and policy decisions. Sport England's Moving Communities platform is a good example of how this is done by one of DCMS' other funding bodies.

> "Culture already functions as growth infrastructure: it anchors local identity, drives productivity, reduces demand on health and welfare systems and attracts investment." – Creative UK, Culture as Growth Infrastructure: Embedding Cultural Value in the UK's Economic Strategy.

Accountability considerations

If accountability mechanisms for the delivery of cultural impact are strengthened across the system, then decision-making becomes more transparent, legitimate and responsive to both local priorities and regional and national strategy. Strategic Authorities are the (relatively) new tier in this system and raise three main questions:

- How should strategic authorities be held to account –by central government, constituent councils, and local residents?
- Is current scrutiny (e.g. overview and scrutiny committees) sufficient for cultural decision-making and investment?
- What role could participatory models (eg citizens' assemblies, juries) play in strengthening democratic accountability for culture?

Accountability within strategic authorities is an evolving area of policy and practice, shaped by the dual need to balance regional strategic leadership with local democratic legitimacy. Current arrangements typically operate across two layers: formal oversight through Government and statutory scrutiny structures, and accountability to constituent councils and residents, through a combination of democratic scrutiny, transparency and emerging place based mechanisms.

While overview and scrutiny committees provide an established mechanism, there is ongoing debate about whether these are sufficiently resourced, visible or empowered – particularly in relation to cross-cutting areas like culture, where decision-making is often embedded within wider economic or regeneration portfolios.

- In response, there is growing interest in participatory and deliberative models to complement formal governance. Cultural policy has been an early testing ground for these approaches. For example, the West of England Combined Authority integrated public engagement into its cultural strategy development, including deliberative workshops and stakeholder forums to shape priorities through a Citizen's Assembly approach.
- Similarly, Birmingham Museums Trust has explored inclusive governance and public voice in shaping institutional direction, including consultation and co-creation approaches linked to its long-term sustainability.
- Deliberative models such as citizens' assemblies and juries – used in places like West Midlands and Newcastle (eg cultural funding and city strategy discussions) – demonstrate how structured public dialogue can inform complex investment and policy decisions. These approaches can strengthen legitimacy, particularly where trade-offs are required, but they also raise practical questions around representativeness, scalability and how outcomes influence formal decision-making.

Overall, the direction of travel suggests that future accountability models for culture in devolved systems will need to combine statutory scrutiny with more participatory, place-based forms of engagement, ensuring that cultural investment reflects both strategic priorities and responds to lived experience.

Case studies

This short section illustrates the range of approaches undertaken in different types of local authorities, each seeking to support culture as a foundation for a better place. We have used these to develop the Framework and test its implications on places of different scale and level of cultural investment and delivery.

Bristol

As a core city with over 500,000 residents, Bristol has a diverse and dynamic prospectus of cultural infrastructure, creative enterprises and cultural organisations. It is also a city made and re-made through its incredible array of artistic talent, with much of the cultural workforce made up of freelancers. A UNESCO City of Film and world-renowned centre for contemporary music and street art, Bristol is a city of culture by any measurement. Bristol City Council has implemented a committee system in which 70 councillors share decision-making collectively, guided by eight policy committees. Bristol sits at the Western edge of the West of England Combined Authority and is the largest city in the South West.

The system at work

Layer/Actor	Characteristic
ALBs	Bristol receives above average levels of cultural funding yet is not an ACE Priority Place.
Strategic Authority	The West of England Combined Authority has an established cultural compact and has convened the first regional citizens' assembly dedicated to creativity and culture, producing a Regional Cultural Plan.
Local Government	Bristol is implementing a "One City" approach to strategy and policy and convenes a One City Culture Board with external stakeholders, along with a cross-party cultural working group developing its cultural strategy.
Sector	Bristol has a rich & dynamic cultural ecosystem including larger organisations, an active grassroots sector (further detail in next table). Cultural leaders and individual activists provide energy and structure for the sector. Sector networks include Bristol Culture Network, Bristol Festivals, and the Diverse Artists Network.
Local residents	Bristol's cultural scenes contribute strongly to neighbourhood identity, but residents' ability to participate varies across the city, as demonstrated in Bristol's Quality of Life Survey up to 2024/25.

Framework assessment

	Working well	Development opportunity
Strategy	Intention to move away from siloed policy-making and investment (eg through a 'One City' approach).	WECA's Regional Culture Plan and Bristol's forthcoming cultural strategy show strong mutual engagement but needs refinement to understand how they will support each other, particularly with devolution.
Investment	Retained Cultural Investment Programme for a further three years.	Development and rising property values presents a challenge and an opportunity. Budget pressures threaten the long-term funding of culture.
Delivery	Culture West is a Combined Authority Place Partnership and Investment Programme which has coordinated a programme of capacity-building and network-making cultural activities across the city and as part of a wider geography. Several anchors creating long-term stability in the city, eg. the Beacon, Bristol Museum, Trinity Arts, Black South West Network, Bricks, Art Space Life Space, Watershed, Spike Island, Arnolfini. Together these help to provide accessible space for creatives, act as sector convenors, and help to promote equity within the sector.	Unequal access to culture in the city. Anchor institutions could be expanded and further embedded in strategy (eg universities, Business Improvement Districts).
Data	Recent Cultural Impact Survey (2023/24) widely used to advocate for culture.	Strategic interest in better data capture but some scepticism from the sector about its value.

Accountability	Recent structures and initiatives aiming to empower and give voice to different parts of the sector: • One City Culture Board • Culture West - building an equitable ecosystem • Citizens for Culture – WECA citizens' assembly • Bristol Music Fund working groups and community benefit society proposal	Increase accountability to freelancers and individual creatives.

Transferable lessons from Bristol

- Working in partnership is essential to make change happen and find dynamic ways of delivering to multiple goals for the city. Focused on place-based change through partnerships in 25/26, the arts development team unlocked an additional £587k in delivery funding for culturally-led projects, working with partners internally and externally.
- Bristol City Council has worked directly with artists and cultural organisations to develop strategy and speak to citizens less likely to engage to find out what people want from city culture.
- Ensure that cultural sector representation includes a through-line between major local and regional structures (eg Citizens for Culture and One City Culture Board).
- A strong cultural sector can advocate for sustained investment and culture's role in the city.
- Freelancers are often left out of policy but are an important part of the ecosystem – freelancer champions and convenors can help amplify their voice.
- There is no real replacement for local authority cultural investment – good quality data (in this case an impact report) can help advocate for culture's wide and fundamental benefits.
- Use the power of the local authority and its officers to expand sources of cultural support, as seen in the development of the Bristol Music Fund from additional ticketing charges.

Stoke-On-Trent

Stoke-On-Trent is a highly polycentric city made up of six historic towns and 173 small villages, with a strong industrial identity shaped by its world-renowned ceramics heritage and a growing Createch sector. As a unitary authority without a regional strategic authority structure, Stoke's cultural system relies heavily on collaboration between local government, national funders and local networks to translate investment into long-term cultural and community impact.

The system at work

Layer/Actor	Characteristic
Government	Stoke benefits from uncommon levels of recent investment: it falls in the top 10 places for UKSPF investment over 2022-2025 per capita and significant Levelling Up support (often linked to "Pride in Place" for Stoke).
ALBs	Stoke is an ACE Priority Place, has secured Place Partnership investment, and awarded two Historic England Heritage Action Zones.
Strategic Authority	No current regional/unitary authority. Current proposals would likely split the combined Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire areas in 2-3 districts.
Trusts & Foundations	Made in Stoke, a place-based philanthropic network, matches donors (cash and in-kind) with cultural and community projects.
Local Government	Stoke's cultural and visitor strategies are almost 5 years old, with a new culture and heritage strategy forthcoming and a community cohesion strategy recently produced. There is also a push to gain further investment from the "Silicon Stoke" prospectus for digital/creative sectors – this was backed by TechUK, the trade association for digital technology.
Sector	Stoke Creates Cultural Compact was formed to coordinate the cultural sector around strategy and funding bids. Major assets in town centres (Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Gladstone Pottery Museum, six libraries, several theatres/performance halls).

Local residents	Residents cite festivals, industrial and ceramics heritage, creative participation and sporting culture as creating shared pride locally. Access and availability of cultural and social provision in local neighbourhoods is a focus issue for Stoke. (City of Stoke-on-Trent, Draft Community Cohesion Strategy 2025.)

Framework assessment

	Working well	Development opportunity
Strategy	National investment programmes designate Stoke for priority support (e.g., Levelling Up Partnership, Education Investment Area, Community Recovery Fund). Initial cultural and visitor strategies laid groundwork for development.	Culture is secondary in the city's Economic Development Strategy and referenced primarily as creative industries and the visitor economy; culture can be advocated for across wider outcomes. A new cultural champion is planned to be designated from local councillors.
Investment	Innovative philanthropic giving model with national attention. 2022 increase in ACE NPOs in Stoke from 3 to 8.	No dedicated council investment in culture – Stoke relies on external sources. Unstable (short-term) funding for Made in Stoke; difficult in general to fund structural/ support organisations.
Delivery	Recent Centenary celebrations delivered successfully on minimal resources. A growing partnership in Stoke Creates (including businesses and universities). Made in Stoke activates alumni and diaspora network to build cultural development partnerships.	Limited sector capacity to drive large-scale cultural development projects; room for greater council collaboration and support. The Cultural Strategy calls for stronger community decision-making, community-led activity and asset ownership, highlighting uneven cultural provision across a challenging, dispersed geography.

Data	Recently completed joint cultural needs assessment.	Opportunity to establish a data framework aligned to national standards with forthcoming cultural strategy.
Accountability		Greater clarity for how accountability is managed between Stoke Creates, Made in Stoke and the city council, and across the many communities of Stoke.

Transferrable lessons from Stoke

- Cultural coordination needs both the sector and council to work together equally and needs resourcing to be effective.
- The Made in Stoke network is a successful example (widely referenced) of activating local and diaspora networks of people who want to remain connected to Stoke. The ask of donors in the network is not pre-defined and creates connections to local communities.
- Residents, individuals and networks can be a rich source of support and cultural development. A wide definition of culture can help to create community connections.
- Strategic networks need sustainable resource and investment to provide long-term stability for the sector.
- Significant Arts Council England support and prioritisation can have a transformative effect – resulting in new collaborations and five new NPOs.

East Lindsey

East Lindsey is a predominantly rural and coastal district in east and southeast Lincolnshire. It is a large district by size, with a relatively dispersed population. The social and cultural make-up of the District varies significantly from the relatively affluent inland, which includes the Lincolnshire Wolds and market towns such as Louth; to the low-lying coastal areas which includes towns such as Skegness and Mablethorpe, both of which face considerable levels of deprivation.

East Lindsey is today part of the South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership (SELCP) – an amalgam of three local authorities which are working together to share efficiencies and support coordinated development, in part as preparation for LGR. The cultural landscape of East Lindsey is made-up of relatively small organisations and a high proportion of freelancers and micro-enterprises. The District has prioritised culture to anchor regeneration in its coast, including large-scale capital developments and the establishment of a new ACE NPO – Storytellers – to coordinate programming and capacity-building across an extensive geographical area with poor transport links.

The system at work

Layer/Actor	Characteristic
government	As a large district council in the geographical area, with marked differences between inland and coast, East Lindsey District Council has sought to make connections through cultural networking and touring programmes, and to anchor cultural infrastructure in specific places as a way of building local capacity.
ALBs	East Lindsey is a priority place for both DCMS and Arts Council England. In recent years, the District has successfully unlocked over £10m in cultural investment, including a new cultural hub in Sutton-on-Sea (The Colonnade) and a re-imagined Culture House at the Embassy Theatre in Skegness (via Culture Development Funding). The new NPO, Storytellers, works across the District and at the level of SELCP to support grassroots culture at a whole place level. It is run by the local authority. The Magna Vitae Trust for Leisure and Culture plays a role as the development agency for culture across the SELCP area, coordinating activities and unlocking investment. It also oversees the work of the SO Festival NPO – an innovative outdoor arts programme.
Regional authority	Cultural development is overseen at the level of the SELCP. A new Cultural Compact has been set up to coordinate place-based cultural partnership. It is in its infancy. The County Council oversees libraries and supports some place-based activities.
Local government	Cultural investment across East Lindsey has been unlocked through the development of a cultural audit and framework in 2021. This provided a place-based model for partnership and coordination. A wider cultural framework for the SELCP has subsequently been developed.
Sector	A very emergent and fragile cultural ecosystem with limited capacity and the challenge of connectivity in such a dispersed rural area. The Embassy as a Culture House will catalyse sector development, bringing scale and supporting connectivity across the Coast.

Local residents	Levels of engagement remain relatively low, although significant progress has been made through the work of Magna Vitae – which aligns approaches to leisure, culture and wellbeing to ensure everyday culture is championed and supported.

Framework assessment

	Working well	Development opportunity
Strategy	The SELCP has collectively prioritised culture through its Cultural Framework and is supporting a range of cultural infrastructure programmes – in East Lindsey and neighbouring areas such as Boston and South Holland. Culture is now positioned as a foundation to regeneration, health and wellbeing, and to diversifying the visitor economy.	Coordination across the whole place and with neighbouring local authorities – to develop a shared 'Midlands Coast' cultural ecosystem. Plus, citizen engagement is required to build trust and confidence and to unlock the potential of new investment.
Investment	Significant capital and revenue investment – eg SELCP under-writing the new Culture House at the Embassy Theatre, and investment in organisational development and capacity-building – eg Storytellers NPO.	Grant funding and project development for local producers and artists – addressing precarity and building a marketplace for cultural development.

Delivery	Magna Vitae is a genuine innovator of national significance: it has stepped up to take a leadership role for culture in a way which aligns with the ways culture is understood and valued by local people. It has brought together partners from the local to international and shaped fresh approaches to governance and partnership.	Limited capacity across the voluntary and enterprise sectors – to actively support partnership activities. For example, the Culture Compact is yet to unlock participation from across the 'whole place'.
Data	Excellent local data – developed through the cultural audit.	More systemic data tracking and analysis could strengthen the case for cultural support, particularly with wider impacts – eg to health or talent retention.
Accountability	Responsibility for cultural development sits between key partners. Magna Vitae is becoming a sector lead and is supporting the local authority and ALBs to deliver their cultural goals.	There is a need to build citizen capacity and confidence – so local people can play a stronger role in decision-making.

Transferrable lessons from East Lindsey

- Cultural Frameworks and Strategies can power partnership and investment if there is shared commitment and where there are shovel-ready cultural solutions. From a position of cultural deficit, East Lindsey is fast catching up as a pioneer for coastal culture-led regeneration.
- Cultural leadership comes through trusted partnerships – eg Magna Vitae has pivoted from being primarily a leisure operator to a cultural development agency. It has transferred competencies in infrastructure management (which are key to cultural buildings) and developed a convening and connecting role for cultural partners, effectively aligning local authority priorities in place-making to cultural solutions.

- Networks and coordination of programming are key across such a dispersed geography – it is important to avoid duplication while at the same time supporting locally-sourced approaches to culture. Models such as rural (and urban) touring, coordinated programming, and transversal activities in creative skills and health, help to join the dots and share efficiencies.

Tendring

Tendring is a district within Essex, largely rural with a number of hamlets and villages interspersed throughout and larger settlements along the coast. This creates pockets of cultural activity and a different sense of place and provision between the various towns and villages.

The system at work

Layer/Actor	Characteristic
government	As a coastal region experiencing higher levels of deprivation, Tendring meets several government criteria for place-based support – Clacton benefitted from the Levelling Up Fund in 2023, the Pride in Place fund for towns, and Community Regeneration Partnership funding (along with neighbouring Jaywick).
ALBs	Tendring is an ACE Priority Place and has just been awarded Creative People and Places (CPP) investment in 2026. Historic England supported the Martello Tower in Clacton in 2020, as well as the Dovercourt Leading Lighthouse and Causeway (along with NLHF – 2023-2025).
Regional authority	Essex County Council convenes cultural network meetings and also participates in the Tendring Cultural Education Partnership.
Local government	Previous cultural strategy 2019-2024, currently refreshing their cultural strategy which will help guide CPP investment. Since 2019, has appointed a Creative and Cultural Lead and an Economic Growth Officer for culture, along with dedicated portfolio holder for culture and heritage. Heritage Strategy was adopted 2020. Events team produces the Clacton Air Show.
Sector	High concentration of freelancers and voluntary groups, working with emerging anchor institutions and partnering with neighbouring cultural organisations in Colchester or national organisations like the Royal Opera House.

Local residents	Local residents feel strongly connected to their town and village centres. The presence of a strong voluntary sector in Tendring is in part response to local challenges around physical and mental health and improving school attendance. (Creative Lives, Mapping Creative Health in Tendring, May 2025)

Framework assessment

	Working well	Development opportunity
Strategy	TDC is starting to make the case for wider cultural benefits locally with growing profile within council systems and a dedicated Portfolio Holder for arts, culture and heritage alongside cultural officers. This is acknowledged in the Tendring Economic Strategy 2020-24.	District and county councils could be more strongly linked to strengthen the case for culture locally.
Investment	An open call to the sector to create the successful CPP bid shows a collaborative approach to attracting investment.	No dedicated cultural investment from the council currently outside cultural officer funding. The council aspires to establish a local NPO.
Delivery	An active voluntary and freelancing sector will be further supported by the new CPP body Creative Tendring to increase capacity. Because Tendring is a Priority Place it also attracts national organisations to deliver cultural engagement locally.	
Data		More systemic data tracking and analysis could strengthen the case for cultural support, particularly with wider impacts – to health or talent retention.

Accountability	Responsibility for cultural development sits both within and outside the council, through Creative Tendring and the Tendring Cultural Education Partnership. Council acts as a sector supporter.	

Transferable lessons from Tendring

- In places with less cultural funding, available resources can be used to convene the sector to collaborate on cultural development projects, starting slowly and small scale.
- In areas with a concentration of freelancers, systems need to accommodate unpaid time that would normally be covered by employment or organisational resources – any governance structures need to respond to this reality.
- Prevention narratives can show the social and economic impact of culture in places with high levels of deprivation but can also be difficult to track and evidence.
- Tendring is already working across a dispersed geography, with the newly announced North-East Essex Council, they will be concerned about continuing to support village and town culture in an even wider area with larger urban centres.

The National Cultural Framework

The National Cultural Framework will support stronger local differentiation and local decision-making within a coherent national approach, fulfilling the purpose of devolution for the cultural sector while ensuring the national ecosystem continues to be functional. If government and partners adopt this framework then inefficiencies and duplications in the system then disparities between local needs, local priorities and funding can be tackled in a way that brings national coherence and local differentiation.

This means creating more defined roles and responsibilities across all parts of the cultural support and funding landscape so they can operate more effectively and efficiently to support a thriving and sustainable cultural system across England.

The Framework has six guiding principles:

- **Governance** – Through true subsidiarity, and a clear road map describing, roles, shared responsibilities and alignment through the various tiers of government and across the landscape of ALBs, support organisations, funders and other types of partner.
- **Accountability** – With a strong focus on local leadership and democracy, engaging citizens and communities at every level, alongside greater transparency and scrutiny.
- **Strategy** – That connects national missions and regional planning with local priorities. Led by places, and integrated into with wider policy areas including growth, economic development, the visitor economy, innovation, health and wellbeing and the environment.
- **Investment** – Culture, arts and heritage as part of a single settlement approach with an emphasis on longer-term, sustainable, investment that reflects the mixed economy of the sector and prioritises a thriving ecosystem of organisations, individuals and communities.
- **Delivery** – Greater recognition of the collaborative and partnership nature of delivery across places, with resources aligning more closely to needs expressed by a more engaged, inclusive model to local decision making.

- **Data** – A new national framework for data that is coherent, consistent, easy to collect, based on need/use cases, and thus which enables comparison and supports evidence-based decision making.

National Cultural Framework guiding principles

The Figure below sets out the principles for a National Cultural Framework which puts local accountability at the heart of the decision-making and investment programme recognising the contribution of the sum of the parts to national policy directions. If culture is foundational to place, then a reorganised local government sector, including the new tier of Strategic authorities, is at the core of a new system which drives cultural renewal.

Figure 6: Guiding principles for a National Cultural Framework

What needs to change?

If this framework is adopted, culture will be planned and funded as a central part of how places work - not as an add-on. National, regional and local partners will be clearer about who does what, money will be used more deliberately, and places will have more say over the culture that is built into the everyday life. This is how we keep the doors open in our museums, galleries and theatres, reach more people in more ways, deliver spillover effects including strengthened health and wellbeing, attract inward investment and make public investment count as part of increased local decision-making.

Table 5 below sets out the priority outcomes delivered by a new National Cultural Framework.

Priority outcome	Cultural Framework Ambition Statement	Primary System theme
Coherent Multi-Level Cultural Governance	Clear roles across national, regional and local government cut duplication and support coordinated cultural leadership.	Governance
Culture Supporting Health, Wellbeing and Quality of Life	Culture improves health, wellbeing, prevention and overall quality of life for individuals and communities by being embedded in public services.	Governance
Equity and Inclusion in Cultural Opportunity	Reduction in structural inequalities in cultural access, participation, education and employment, with fair representation, voice and opportunity.	Accountability
Transparent, Participatory and Trusted Accountability	Transparent and accountable cultural decision-making with strong public voice and trust built through meaningful participation and scrutiny.	Accountability
Place-Based Cultural Vitality and Civic Pride	Civic pride, belonging and inclusive regeneration. Is driven in every place as they harnesses their unique cultural identity, assets and communities.	Strategy
Culture as a Driver of Inclusive Growth and Global Influence	Strengthened UK soft power, sustained economic growth, inward investment and tourism are driven by culture and creative industries.	Strategy

Cultural Access, Participation and Creation	Regardless of background, income or geography, everyone, in every locality, can access, experience, create and shape culture as part of everyday life,	Delivery
Responsive and Community-Led Cultural Delivery	Local needs and local communities drive sustainable cultural services and programmes.	Delivery
Creative Education, Skills and Workforce Resilience	Strong creative education, skills pathways and support for the cultural and creative workforce delivers a diverse, skilled and sustainable pipeline of talent.	Investment
Sustainable Cultural Infrastructure and Heritage	The essential civic and economic infrastructure of cultural and heritage - including libraries, museums, grassroots venues and historic assets and collections - is protected, renewed and recognised.	Investment
Sustainable and Place-Based Investment Model	Local priorities support long-term, place-based and mixed investment models that reduce fragmentation in the cultural infrastructure	Investment
Shared Evidence and Insight for Culture	Better decision-making, evaluation and learning is driven by a coherent, tiered data system enabling consistent national insight while reflecting local context	Data

Table 5: National Cultural Framework Priority Outcomes

Fresh roles and responsibilities for system renewal

Delivering this framework as a basis for the renewal of our cultural system will require a bold period of strategic alignment based on open dialogue between partners. Key will be a parallel process of strategic review, including perhaps the development of a new National Cultural Strategy.

Tables below provide a basic overview of the role and remit of key partners. It is not intended as comprehensive, but as a prompt for further dialogue and consideration.

Governance

DCMS (and wider National Government)	• Define clear roles across tiers (incl. expectations of Strategic Authorities regarding culture). • Enable subsidiarity within a National Framework. • Avoid over-standardisation
ALBs	• Clarify role (strategy vs funding vs delivery). • Reduce duplication across bodies. • Align with devolved structures
Strategic Authority	• Provide regional coordination for culture within regional planning for skills, transport, health and economy. • Convene cross-boundary partners.
Local Government	• Enabler of delivery and convenor of local partnerships. • Embed culture across own services. • Maintain local accountability. • Train teams on cross-cutting impact of cultural activity.
Citizens / Civil Society (incl. Higher Educations Institutes (HEIs)	• Participate in governance (assemblies, boards and new types of partnership). • Represent diverse local voices. • Co-produce priorities.

Strategy for cultural development – Culture as the foundation

DCMS (and wider National Government)	• Set long-term national vision and priorities. • Recognise sub-sector differences. • Embed culture in growth, health, skills agendas
ALBs	• Translate national priorities into sector-specific specialist strategies and standard/accreditation frameworks. • Advise on place-based strategic plans.
Strategic Authority	• Integrate cultural infrastructure planning with transport, skills, economy and health. • Develop regional cultural frameworks where spatial connectivity is crucial.
Local Government	• Lead place-based cultural strategies. • Community need and identity shapes strategy.
Citizens / Civil Society (incl. HEIs)	• Lived experience and personality of place shapes strategy. • Universities and enterprises support research, innovation and skills pipelines.

Investment

DCMS (and wider National Government)	• Enable long-term, place-based settlements. • Address revenue funding shortfall. • Address capital needs to maintain declining asset base. • Support new funding tools (levies, philanthropy).
ALBs	• Simplify the funding landscape. • Provide multi-year, flexible funding against agreed local plans. • Support major national and regional flagships
Strategic Authority	• Coordinate regional investment to offer scale and networked place-based solutions. • Leverage devolved and private funding. • Convene regional players.
Local Government	• Invest in local infrastructure (innovative cultural organisations, libraries, hubs). • Support low-burden grassroots funding. • Align spend with local priorities.
Citizens / Civil Society (incl. HEIs)	• Access low-barrier funding. • Blend commercial & cultural models. • Initiate new models for place-based cultural funding, including endowments, planning gain models. • Contribute to local investment (time, assets, knowledge).

Delivery

DCMS (and wider National Government)	• Commission national institutions, including establishing clear remit for national presence.
ALBs	• Enable sector specialist research and development experimentation and innovation.
Strategic Authority	Major infrastructure schemes.
Local Government	• Deliver services and infrastructure (e.g. libraries, hubs). • Support local operators and talent pipelines. • Co-ordinate with connected services (public health, education, business support).
Citizens / Civil Society (incl. HEIs)	• Lead grassroots and informal activity. • Operate spaces, programmes, networks.

Data

DCMS (and wider National Government)	• Support piloting of data standarisation projects. • Enable tiered data systems
ALBs	• Collaborate on data frameworks and tools. • Support evaluation and learning.
Strategic Authority	• Aggregate regional data. • Link cultural data to growth, health, skills.
Local Government	• Collect and use local data (often via partners). • Reflect local context and need, using wider local data and insight.
Citizens / Civil Society (incl. HEIs)	• Generate and use community-level insight. • HEIs support analysis and evidence

Accountability

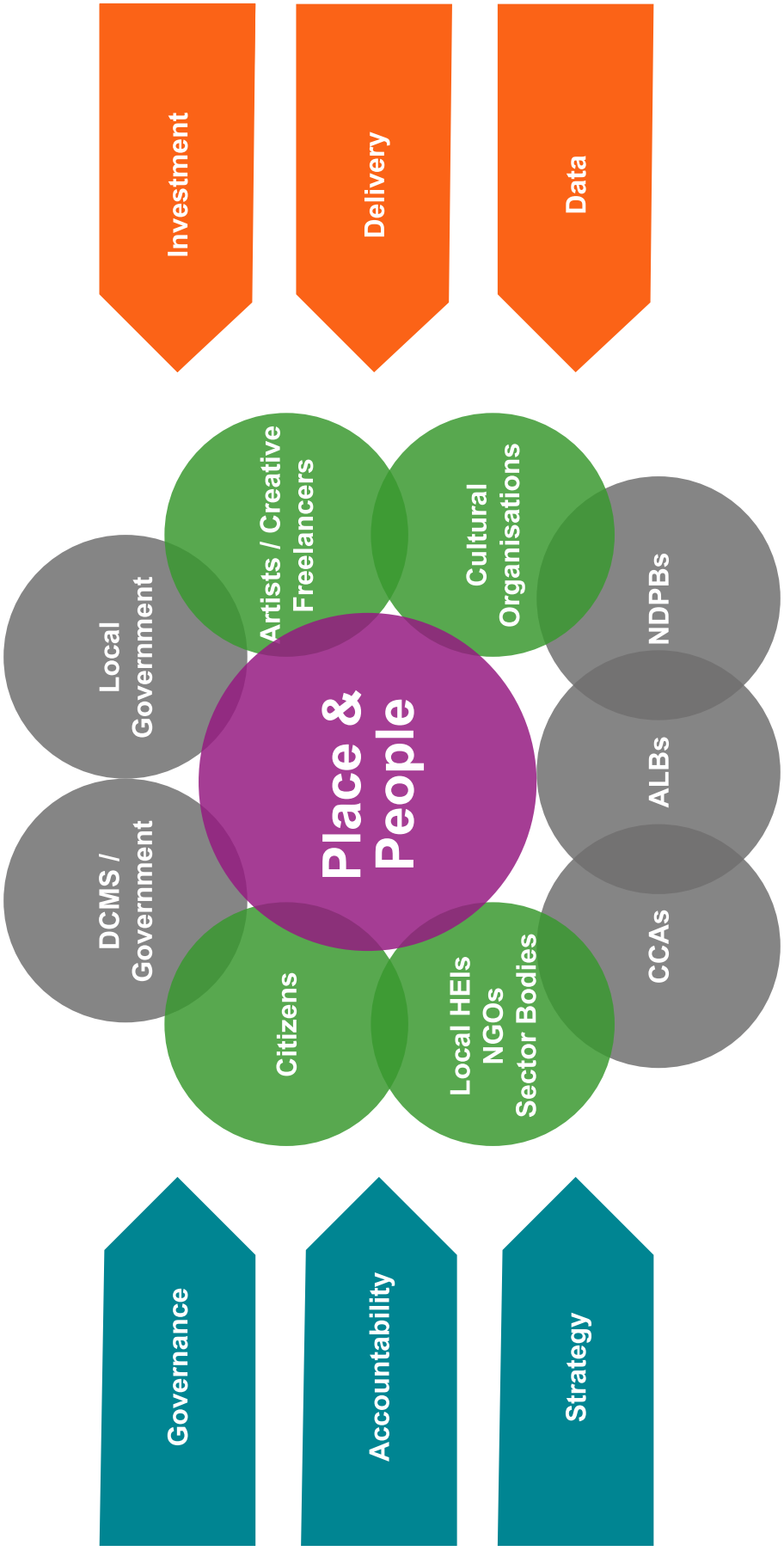
DCMS (and wider National Government)	Ensure enforceable policy frameworks. Oversee ALB and national institutions' performance.
ALBs	Transparent funding decisions, showing connection to national strategies and locally agreed plans. Clear reporting and outcomes.
Strategic Authority	Scrutiny by constituent councils and government. Engage residents in decision-making.
Local Government	Democratic mandate. Transparent local decision-making.
Citizens / Civil Society (incl. HEIs)	Participate in scrutiny (assemblies, juries). Hold institutions to account through engagement.

A new cultural framework – How it could work

A new cultural framework must provide the shared system logic for how culture is planned, funded and delivered. It requires partners to align around a clear structure, reach and remit, establishing an agreed basis for action from place to national level. This is essential in the absence of an overarching cultural system and is the only credible route to long term, coherent and sustainable approaches to culture.

Adopting the framework approach will help partners prioritise culture and invest in culture as a foundation for successful places. It will support a coordinated approach to decision-making and investment. It will unlock and make better use of investment. It will facilitate place-based solutions within a national system. It will elevate culture and support step change across key indicators.

Figure 7: The Ecosystem approach



Culture is foundational to successful places. This new national cultural framework sets out the steps to take toward establishing a cultural system based on coordinated partnership and delivery. The first requirement is to agree a vision and national strategy for culture, that is informed by the entirety of the system intended to resource and deliver it and which can cascade into strategic plans for specific sectors (eg libraries, museums, visual art, archives, music).

Adopting the framework is not a neutral act. It requires changes in how decisions are made, how funding is allocated, and how accountability operates across the system. The next section sets out what must change in practice – using existing powers, funding cycles and governance arrangements – if this framework is to move from intent to impact.

This reset will enable culture to be built with communities rather than for them, creating a lasting legacy of stronger places, shared identity and opportunity.

Delivering change: What government and partners need to do next

This report's argument is simple: ACE reform on its own won't fix a system that is fragmented, under coordinated and unclear about who does what. We need a practical reset that makes public investment work harder, shares power with places, and reduces duplication and waste, while still backing high quality independent cultural activity.

The actions set out below describe what must change in practice if this framework is adopted - how funding decisions are made, how roles are exercised, and how accountability works. They are intended to be applied from the next funding and settlement cycles, using existing levers, rather than deferred to a future programme of reform.

DCMS and its arm's length bodies: change how national funding and accountability work

1. **Make local alignment the default test in funding decisions**
   Ensure funding flows to meet communities' needs. From the next funding round, require applicants to show how activity supports locally agreed priorities developed with communities and partners (eg an adopted cultural strategy, compact or partnership plan), or explain clearly why the work should be supported as high quality independent activity (excellence, innovation, touring, R&D, or international-facing work). This keeps space for risk taking while ensuring funding reflects local voice and need.

2. **Devolve decision making to the lowest reasonable tier.**
   Where funding is clearly place based, shift decisions closer to the communities affected through place agreements, delegated models or shared decision making with local partners, rather than retaining unnecessary central control.

3. **Use existing democratic place structures, not new parallel systems.**
   Where regional or thematic coordination is needed, build on existing place partnerships and cultural compacts rather than creating new boards or structures divorced from neighbourhood level governance.

4. **Stop rewarding bid writing over delivery.**
   Reduce reliance on repeated competitive bidding from the next funding cycle, and shift towards longer term, place based arrangements that reduce churn and free up capacity locally. This supports places most in need, where bidding costs and capacity pressures are highest.

5. **Be place specific and explicit about who funding is for.**
   Reduce the number of short term, low value programmes and shift towards long term investment in places, building the capacity of councils and their partners to plan, deliver and sustain cultural activity. Funding should support whole systems (such as library services or cultural infrastructure), not token grants, and enable culture to connect meaningfully with priorities like health, wellbeing and regeneration.

6. **Clarify who is responsible for what – and publish it.**
   Set out, in plain English, the respective roles of DCMS, arm's length bodies, Strategic Authorities, and local government across strategy, investment and delivery. This should act as a default guide for policy design and programme delivery, helping officials identify which tier to engage first. Where policy or programmes need to depart from this model, the rationale should be explicit and justified. The new cultural competence for Strategic Authorities provides the first opportunity to establish this clarity in practice.

7. **Align cultural investment with wider missions and be bold where it counts.**
   When designing or renewing programmes, make it normal for culture to sit alongside growth, skills, health and place outcomes in funding and assurance processes, and be explicit about where cultural investment is expected to drive change for communities facing the greatest disadvantage. This draws on the Pride in Place approach.

8. **Fix the capital/revenue problem as a matter of policy.**
   When investing in buildings, require a credible, locally grounded plan for long term operation, skills and programming so capital investment strengthens places rather than storing up future risk.

9. **Make data support learning, not compliance.**
   Standardise a small core of measures nationally, while enabling places to develop additional evidence with research partners that reflects local priorities. Keep reporting proportionate and focused on improvement, building a credible evidence base that can unlock further investment nationally and locally.

Strategic authorities: Act as strategic leaders, not funding intermediaries

1. **Provide strategic leadership and system design at the scale that adds value.**
   Use SA powers to plan cultural infrastructure, sector development and investment and investment across functional geographies where cross boundary coordination, transport access, skills and regeneration align.
2. **Connect culture to core strategic authorities responsibilities.**
   Treat culture as part of the region's growth, skills, health and transport agenda - not as a stand alone programme - and be ambitious about the role it can play in tackling inequality between places, building talent pipelines and improving access to markets, finance, networks and export opportunities.
3. **Support local leadership rather than duplicating it.**
   Back locally led cultural strategies and partnerships, helping to align funding and priorities across a region without displacing council level accountability.
4. **Use regional insight to support place specific decisions.**
   Bring together economic, health, skills and cultural data at regional level and make it usable for local partners, targeting support where need and opportunity are greatest.
5. **Ensure visible accountability and public voice.**
   Where SAs shape cultural priorities or funding, make scrutiny arrangements clear and involve communities meaningfully in decision making.

Local government: lead culture in place

1. **Design culture into the foundations of new unitary councils.**
   New councils need to connect rapidly with their new residents and cultural services offer a universal and visible way of rapidly engaging and demonstrating a positive impact within the community.
2. **Co create and maintain a clear local cultural strategy.**
   Work with communities, cultural organisations and partners to set priorities that reflect local identity, need and ambition, and keep strategies live and usable, not symbolic.

3. **Convene strong place based partnerships.**
   Use cultural compacts or equivalent models to share leadership, align investment and bring together councils, communities, anchors and funders around a common plan.

4. **Protect everyday cultural infrastructure and access.**
   Prioritise libraries, museums, heritage and grassroots provision that underpin wellbeing, pride in place and participation, especially in communities with the least access.

5. **Use culture as a core tool of place shaping.**
   Embed culture in regeneration, prevention, skills and town centre strategies, making it part of how places work rather than an optional extra.

6. **Build and be honest about local capacity.**
   Recognise where cultural capacity has been eroded, and work with partners to rebuild leadership, skills and infrastructure.

7. **Use evidence that helps decisions locally.**
   Collect and use data that reflects local priorities and lived experience, supported by partnerships (including universities where helpful), without adding unnecessary burden.

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