

# Knowledge Exchange #1

## What do we mean by local decision making?

**Insight Paper**

By Culture Commons

Part of 'the future of local cultural decision making'  
*An open policy development programme*

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Produced as part of

**the future of  
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An open policy development programme  
led by Culture Commons and Partners



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**Keywords:** devolution, decision making, governance structures, cultural geography

## About Culture Commons

Culture Commons bring the creative and cultural sectors, research community and policymakers together to co-design new policy and influence decision making at the local, regional and national levels.



You can find out more about us at [www.culturecommons.uk](http://www.culturecommons.uk)

## About the programme

[‘the future of local cultural decision making’](#) is a major open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of over 20 partners made up of local governments, the creative and cultural sectors, arm’s length bodies and leading research institutions.

Together the partners are exploring how further ‘devolution’ and increased local decision making might impact on the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in all nations and regions of the UK.

At time of publication the programme partners contributing financially and in-kind to the programme are:



More information about the programme can be found on the dedicated [digital hub](#).

## Open Policymaking

‘The future of local cultural decision making’ is an **open** policy development programme based on a not-for-profit and collaborative partnership model.

‘Open Policymaking’ was described by UK Government in 2014 as a process that opens up the formation of public policy to a wider variety of stakeholders.

Culture Commons have adopted some of the key principles sitting behind this approach and elaborated on them when designing this programme, particularly the commitment to be transparent in the partnerships working.

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# Introduction

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This Insight Paper summarises a panel and roundtable discussion held between high-level representatives on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2024 as part of an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and partners.

## Knowledge Exchange sessions

The Knowledge Exchange sessions are an opportunity for internal partners and external experts to come together, build links, share insights and broaden perspectives on a range of subjects of particular relevance to the programme's four core research themes.

We will publish an Insight Paper after each Knowledge Exchange session, in-keeping with the open and transparent approach we wish to take with the wider policy development. These Insight Paper will then be formally reviewed as part of a growing evidence base that will inform the policymaking phase of the programme.

## Knowledge Exchange #1

As the first in our series of Knowledge Exchange sessions, we wanted to bring all the partners together to explore some of the key concepts associated with 'devolution' and increased local decision making through a four UK nations lens.

We invited two external speakers to contribute to the opening panel:

- **Dr Jack Newman**  
Research Fellow  
University of Bristol
- **Jane Richardson**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Museums Wales

We also invited two internal partner speakers to share their thoughts:

- **Christine Osbourne**  
Culture Officer  
Belfast City Council
- **Alanna Reid**  
Policy and Programmes Manager  
Culture Commons.

We gave each speaker 15 minutes to set out some introductory remarks, covering:

- What do 'devolution' and 'increased local decision making' actually mean, how have they evolved and how do they apply in a UK context today?
- Why have policymakers turned their sights to 'increased local decision making' as a potential solution to local, regional and national policy priorities?
- How have the creative, cultural and heritage sectors factored into mainstream discourse around 'devolution' and 'increased local decision making' so far?

We set ourselves the goal to have, by the end of the session:

- A better understanding of some of the nuances behind the key social/economic/political drivers sitting behind 'devolution' and 'increased local decision making' across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- Begun to develop a shared understanding of how we might appropriately position the idea of 'increased local decision making' within our policy development programme focussed on the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem.

# Insights

What do we mean by local cultural decision making?

## Dr Jack Newman

Research Fellow  
The School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol



<b>Bio</b>	Jack's research considers how the reform of political institutions can lead to more effective public policy. In recent years, this has been focused on decentralisation and spatial policy in England, asking how the UK's changing multi-level politics might enable more integrated, strategic, democratic, and preventative policymaking. Underpinning this analysis is a critical realist theorisation of the social processes and power asymmetries that affect institutional change.
<b>Focus</b>	Dr Newman introduced set out a brief history of 'devolution' and increased local decision making in the UK, followed by a description of the national context specific to England.
<b>Notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>□ Culture is not talked about enough in the English devolution debate. Hopefully this programme can change that!</li></ul> <p>Key Concepts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>□ There is debate in the literature on whether devolution actually exists in England. It may be helpful to think of 'devolution' in a broader sense as 'the downward transfer of power' which is more easily applied to both England and the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).</li><li>□ Federalism is often defined as the '<a href="#">separation of sovereignty between national level of governance and sub-national level</a>', which is usually enshrined in a written constitution. Without a written constitution in the UK, it is difficult to argue that we have a federal system.</li><li>□ There is a problem with terminology for institutions that sit 'below' the Westminster level in the UK. For example, it is not appropriate to use the term 'sub-national' when talking about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as they are nations in their own right. 'Local' can also be too broad a concept or, conversely, too narrow a description as synonymous</li></ul>

with 'local authorities'. 'Regional' can mean different things too: for example, for combined authorities in England, but also the 'nine regions' used for statistical purposes (e.g., by ONS).

#### Devolved Nations

- The establishment of the devolved nations in the late 1990s created a debate in British politics and academic literature about what this means for the rest of the UK. In effect, the UK level of government remains largely unchanged, but its territorial remit has 'shrunk' over time.
- There is a continuing debate around the core constitutional concept of parliamentary sovereignty across all four UK nations. Is all decision-making power in the UK 'lent' or 'given' to devolved nations from Westminster? Many challenge this assumption and suggest that the parliaments in the devolved nations either do or should have a degree of sovereignty.
- [Some argue](#) that the traditional Westminster model has persisted as a 'governing myth'. Many see the UK as a quasi-federal state and those at the centre still view the UK Parliament as the ultimate decision-making body.

#### England

- A referendum in London established the Greater London Authority (GLA) and London Mayor in 1998. The London Mayor has considerable powers. The London Assembly acts as more of a scrutiny and oversight committee.
- New Labour's plan at the time was to spread this model across the country and went on to establish the [Regional Development Agencies \(RDAs\)](#) as pre-cursors to more devolved institutions.
- In 2004, a referendum in the Northeast of England voted against an assembly of its own. This moment is still considered evidence that not all parts of England want to see devolution at the same pace.
- In the 2010s, things started to ramp up again. Amidst the 'austerity' policies of a Coalition Government, cutbacks in spending at the local authority level came at the same time as the [Localism Act 2011](#) gave local authorities more freedoms in a variety of areas (a general power of competence for councils, the introduction of directly elected mayors and the abolition of the Standards Board). [More 'freedoms'](#)



[and responsibilities alongside severe financial pressures is one of the main drivers behind the current crisis in local authority spending.](#)

- From 2012, throughout the Conservative administration, several local and regional placed based initiatives emerged including: [Local Enterprise Partnerships \(LEPs\)](#), [City Deals](#), and the [Northern Powerhouse](#).
- The emergence of combined authorities began in [2014 with Greater Manchester](#), and then spread across the county as new combined authorities were established through deals giving more powers and funding.
- The [‘Levelling Up’](#) agenda adopted by the Conservative UK Government in the last few years has spurred the devolution debate on, but the picture is still far from complete.

#### Combined Authorities

- Simply, combined authorities are groups of local authorities working together in England, usually in a geographically coherent way. A directly elected Mayor usually covers the whole geography with some executive powers, however most combined authorities’ powers are exercised through combined authority board acting much like a cabinet.
- There are very few substantial powers for places [without a devolution deal or a funding settlement](#) from UK Government, so it’s only when local authorities come together into a mayoral combined authority that a transfer of power takes place and we have a ‘devolved’ mode of governance.
- [Mark Sandford \(2003\)](#) has set out a range of powers held by each combined authority in England.

#### What’s driving English Devolution Forward (*Based on work conducted with Sam Warner, Dave Richards & Patrick Diamond*)

- While several factors are important, it is the economic concern that has been driving forward the devolution agenda in England. This has structured how devolution has developed and the forms that it has evolved into. There is broad concern about productivity and growth in the UK and spatial inequalities are at the root off this. England’s ‘second cities’ (such as Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool) are a long way behind London and the Southeast of England when

compared with the second cities of other comparable countries. A proposed way to address this is to focus on place based local economic development in the other cities across England.

What could greater local devolution achieve?

- Working together across policy silos is more possible at the regional and local level than the national.
- Strategic placed-based development, which would be about looking at the place and population locally and considering what will really help people and the economy in that specific area.
- Learning and thinking, innovating across geographical areas with regions acting like 'policy labs'. On this, Jack points to this [case study](#) which highlights how such approaches to cross-sector policymaking offer a great deal of potential for cultural policy, by embedding considerations about culture across all policy areas allowing local and devolved institutions to support a much healthier cultural sector

But what are the Potential barriers?

- England is still [one of the most centralised counties](#) in the OECD and Europe.
- Significant spatial 'policy churn', the creation of new spatial agendas and circular solutions without learning the lessons from the past.
- Incoherence: multiple maps of local government and administration in England, with little alignment between [them](#). While they don't all want to align, they are currently completely incoherent.
- Democratic accountability deficit: Turn out in local elections is a long way behind comparable countries. Although Mayoral election turnouts are increasing over time, it's still well below 50%. People aren't taking part in the democratic process. This is coupled with a decline in local media.
- [The way people vote in local elections](#) is often not being converted into representation within combined authorities.

## Jane Richardson

Chief Executive Officer  
Amgueddfa Cymru - Museums Wales



<b>Bio</b>	<p>Jane Richardson is the Chief Executive for Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales and was appointed in late 2023. In what is a new role for the organisation, Jane is responsible for providing inspiration, ambition, creativity and strategic direction for the organisation. The delivery of Strategy 2030 will be a focal point, ensuring that the family of seven National Museums and Collection Centre meet the changing and diverse needs of the communities of Wales as well as promoting Welsh history and culture to visitors and international audiences.</p> <p>Before joining Amgueddfa Cymru, Jane was Chair of Cadw, supporting Wales's national heritage organisation through the pandemic and with the post-Covid recovery process. Simultaneously, she was Director of Economy and Place at Conwy County Borough Council, leading on major infrastructure projects including the creation of a new culture centre within the historic town of Conwy.</p>
<b>Focus</b>	<p>Jane gave the group an insight into how devolution and local decision making is developing in Wales, taking us through the major shifts in policies and exploring the opportunities she foresees as a cultural leader.</p>
<b>Notes</b>	<p>Local Government in Wales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>□ There are 22 local 'principle' councils in Wales. However, what the most appropriate organisation of local government is in a 'post-devolution' Wales is an ongoing debate.</li><li>□ There has been a view within Welsh Government for some time that the number of Local Authorities in Wales needs to be reduced and that the current system is inefficient. Despite this, there isn't yet a sense that a particular alternative model would be more effective</li><li>□ Austerity, reductions in funding to local councils, demographic pressures and economic underperformance have produced a significant fiscal deficit in <a href="#">Wales</a>. Research from Cardiff University suggests that despite a 2024-25 settlement uplift, local authorities in Wales face a funding gap of <a href="#">£744 million</a>.</li></ul>

## Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

- [The Well-being of Future Generations Act](#) is a landmark piece of legislation passed in 2015. *The Act required public bodies in Wales to “think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change”.*
- *The Act established seven ‘well-being goals’ that public authorities must work towards (including [‘A Wales of Vibrant Culture’](#)) and five ways of working to achieve these: Long term, Integration, Involvement, Collaboration & Prevention.*
- It also worth noting that *The Act* established [Public Service Boards](#) (PSBS) in each area. The duties of the PSBSs include “Assessing the state of economic, social, environmental *and cultural* well-being in their areas, known as the *‘well-being assessment’* PSBSs are required to publish well-being plans every five years, setting out objectives to improve the ‘four dimensions’ of well-being in their area.

## At the regional level

- Cardiff became the first city in Wales to agree a *City Deal* with the UK Government in [2017](#). By 2019 three further deals were agreed: [Swansea Bay City Deal](#), [North Wales Growth Deal](#) and the [Mid Wales Growth Deal](#) with bespoke regional governance mechanisms formed to support the delivery.
- After a period of consultation on local government reform, Welsh Government passed the [Local Government Elections \(Wales\) Act 2021 to “reinvigorate local democracy in Wales](#). This introduced regional bodies called [Corporate Joint Committees \(CJC\)](#) intended to provide simplified mechanisms for regional working. Four were initially established off the back of the bespoke arrangements that had evolved to shepherd in the *City Deals*: [North Wales](#), [Mid Wales](#), [Southeast and South West Wales](#).
- CJs are led by the Leaders from each of the local authorities within its regional footprint and supported by a separate executive. They are responsible for strategic development, regional transport and promoting the economic well-being of their area. However, there are ongoing challenges to the CJC model in Wales, including unfunded additional responsibilities for already stretched local councils. There is also a perceived risk of a democratic deficit because only one elected member sits on the CJC for each County.

### The opportunities of devolving culture

- Given the complex bureaucratic geographies now in play in Wales, if culture policy is to be devolved locally, policymakers will need to think carefully about what level or mechanism of government to devolve it to. For example, in North Wales there are six local authorities, three PSBs and one CJC.
- The opportunity of devolving culture locally is that LAs are closer to their communities. Culture has an important role to play in wellbeing and LAs have a deep understanding of their communities' and citizens' needs.


### The risks of devolving culture

- Local authorities in Wales are so [under resourced](#) that they are struggling to deliver basic 'statutory services' (i.e. the services they must provide to citizens by law). Devolving culture to the local level could therefore come at heavy price.
- This situation is similar in the other three nations but potentially worse in Wales because there isn't the population, the scale or the prosperity to see cultural organisations develop commercial resilience. The population continues to grow and pressures on social services continue to increase so this doesn't seem set to improve anytime soon.

### Museum of Wales

- The National Museum is suffering its greatest funding cut in history, seeing 15% (£4.5 million) removed from its [budget](#). Given this Museum Wales has been reviewing its core purpose as captured in its Royal Charter. This purpose is focussed on the importance of collections, learning and enjoyment. These functions are more important than maintaining specific museum buildings.
- The Welsh Government have funded the creation of a [Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales](#). This initiative, delivered in partnership through Arts Council Wales, Museum of Wales and the National Library of Wales, is a dispersed model which is enabling more of the national collection to be displayed in [local museums and galleries across the country](#).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ A dispersed model, bringing together local and national, could be part of the answer to devolving culture from the national to the local.</li> </ul>
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<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div style="color: #00AEEF;"> <p><b>Alanna Reid</b> Policy and Programmes Manager Culture Commons</p> </div>  </div>	
<b>Bio</b>	<p>Alanna Reid is the Policy and Programmes Manager at Culture Commons, working on the organisations open policy development programmes and consultancy services.</p> <p>With a background in town planning and urban development, Alanna is a former policy advisor on housing and planning issues for central government, holding posts within the Department for Levelling Up, Cabinet Office and Department for Business &amp; Trade.</p> <p>In addition to policy roles, Alanna was also Private Secretary and Head of Office for two Ministers of State and ran the Deputy Leader’s office &amp; Labour Group for Edinburgh City Council.</p>
<b>Focus</b>	<p>Alanna described the policy landscape in Scotland, drawing out the key turning points and trajectory based on the current administrations stated policy objectives.</p>
<b>Notes</b>	<p>Background</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ The Scottish Government was re-established in 1999 and received its full law-making powers in relation to ‘devolved matter’ from Westminster. As in the Welsh and Northern Ireland context, culture is one of these policy areas.</li> <li>□ Unlike in the English context, the word ‘devolution’ means something very different in Scotland and still holds connotations associated with a complex relationship between Westminster’s ‘reserved functions’ (i.e. the powers that the UK Parliament still has powers over that impact on Scotland) and the powers that ‘Holyrood’ (the Scottish Parliament) exercises, as well as the political debate regarding independence.</li> </ul>

- When exploring trends across England that sees calls for more devolution of powers to combined authorities, we have had to ask whether this is a relevant conversation for Scotland? Through conversations with local authorities in Scotland, Culture Commons knows that whilst the term devolution means something different in the Scottish context, we nonetheless see trends towards 'a downward transfer of power' from national to local governance structures in Scotland (see below) for more localised decision making.

#### At the national level

- There are 73 [parliamentary constituencies & eight regions](#) (each represented by seven MPs) in Scotland. At Scottish Parliament elections, every voter has two votes: one for their constituency and one for their region.
- The First Minister and Cabinet leadership that took power in 2023 represents a moment of change for Scottish Government.
- The culture portfolio sits under the *Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture* who holds the responsibility for Scotland's national [Culture Strategy](#) (2020). This sets out an ambition to place culture at centre of considerations '[across all policy areas, including: health and wellbeing, economy, education, reducing inequality and realising a greener and more innovative future](#)'.
- [Creative Scotland](#), a Non-Departmental Body was set up by the [Public Reform Act in 2010](#).

#### Local authorities

- Scotland has 32 Unitary Authorities. Powers within them are divided between 'mandatory' and 'permissive' powers. Culture sits within the 'permissive category', which means it is not an obligatory service that local authorities must deliver.
- Local authorities in Scotland have a civic head. For Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Dundee and Glasgow this role is known as the Lord Provost. This is an important figurehead, who often plays a role in celebrating and promoting the culture and identity of their place.
- [The Local Government Scotland Act \(2003\)](#) established [Action Community Planning Partnerships \(CPP\)](#). There are now 32 CPPs in Scotland, which pull together heads of particular local services and wider stakeholders in a local authority area. CPPs are responsible for

*Local Outcomes Improvement Plans* and *Locality Plans* which cover smaller areas within the CPP and must include community consultation as part of their work.

- [Arm's Length External Organisations](#) (ALEOs) are established by local authorities to deliver specific services. Many of the services that fall under the cultural portfolio are often run by ALEOS in Scotland - examples include [Glasgow Life](#) & [Leisure and Culture Dundee](#).

#### Regional structures


- There are six [City Deals](#) in Scotland, with the first agreed in Glasgow in 2014, and six additional [Regional Growth Deals](#) across Scotland.
- In 2017, Scottish Government committed to the development of [Regional Economic Partnerships \(REPs\)](#), which are collaborations between local government, private sector, education and skills providers and the third sector. There are eight REP areas in Scotland, each evolving differently - either out of the *City Deal* process - or from pre-existing local economic partnership working. Scottish Government's vision for REPS is to '[build inclusive growth through a clear understanding of the future of the regional economy, the key challenges, constraints and opportunities](#)'.
- *City Deals* and REPS focus on economic development, but culture also features as part of them. For example, the Stirling and Clackmannanshire deal included '[£15 million to support culture, tourism and heritage across the region](#)'.
- Scotland has four [Strategic Development Planning Authorities](#) that cover the four city regions (Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow) and set out clear strategic vision for the development and use of the wider regional area. Like local development plans, these play a role in supporting the development of specific sectors, including the creative industries, culture and heritage.

#### Local structures

- A local government review was launched jointly by Scottish Government and [The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities](#) (COSLA) in 2017. The *Democracy Matters* strand of this work explores how community level decision making could be further developed. Phase two of *Democracy Matters* was launched in 2023 and Scottish Government are currently carrying out conversations with the



	<p>population to review tools and forums for enabling <a href="#">better local decision making</a>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ <a href="#">The Verity House Agreement</a> was signed between Scottish Government and COSLA in 2023. It commits to a new way of working to collectively tackle three strategic priorities at the local and national level: poverty, a just transition to net zero and sustainable public services. <i>The Verity House Agreement</i> presents a shift in the transfer of power from central to local government in Scotland and includes commitments to review regularly '<i>powers and funding for local government</i>' as well as a '<i>default position</i>' of '<i>no ring-fencing or direction of funding</i>'.</li> <li>□ Finally, Scottish Government published a refreshed <a href="#">Cultural Strategy Action plan</a> in December 2023. This paves the way for further local and central partnership working on culture and includes the establishment of a <i>Local and National Delivery Group</i> and a joint working agreement for culture between COSLA and Scottish Government.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>Christine Osborne</b> Culture Officer Belfast City Council</p> 	
<p><b>Bio</b></p>	<p>Christine Osborne is Culture Officer at Belfast City Council. She has extensive strategic, design &amp; delivery experience, mostly in public sector at senior level.</p> <p>As Manager in Belfast City Council's Place &amp; Economy Department she led a team focused on a transformative new 10-year cultural strategy, <i>A City Imagining 2020-2030</i>, with an increase of more than double the previous investment.</p> <p>She is <i>Belfast 2024</i> Partnership Officer with responsibility for a new governance model for major cultural projects, strategic partnership development, and income generation.</p>
<p><b>Focus</b></p>	<p>Christine explained the complex political and policy landscape that characterises Northern Ireland and explained Belfast's role in acting as a cultural broker for other parts of the country.</p>

<p><b>Notes</b></p>	<p>National level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ <a href="#">The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement</a> was agreed in 1998 and resulted in power being devolved to the Stormont Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive.</li> <li>□ Since it was formed, the <a href="#">Stormont Assembly (the parliament) has been suspended on at least eight occasions</a>. Following a two-year hiatus brought about by a fundamental disagreement over post-Brexit trading rules, Stormont returned <a href="#">on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2023</a>.</li> <li>□ The absence of a power-sharing assembly left Northern Ireland’s 1.9 million people without a democratically elected administration to make key decisions, which has meant an increased pressure to respond to the needs of communities at the local level. It has also resulted in delays to policy, strategy and delivery with local authorities taking a ‘business as necessary’ approach.</li> <li>□ The Department for Communities holds the responsibility for culture within the Northern Ireland Executive.</li> <li>□ <a href="#">A Way Forward</a> was published by the Department for Communities in October 2022 setting out a co-design approach for the creation of a new strategy and convened a <i>Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy Taskforce</i> as a co-design group responsible for driving forward the development of it. Belfast City Council participated in these conversations, sharing insight from their own <a href="#">Cultural Strategy</a> co-creation approaches. A follow up has not yet been issued which could be due to the absence of a sitting Executive.</li> <li>□ <a href="#">Arts Council Northern Ireland</a> is the nations’ Arm’s Length Body (ALB) responsible for strategic cultural policy and funding. Arts Council Northern Ireland has seen its core budgets significantly reduced in real terms in the past decade.</li> <li>□ In the meantime, Arts Council Northern Ireland has drafted a 10-Year Strategic Plan, 2024-34 which has just closed public consultation. This is not directly linked to <i>A Way Forward</i>.</li> </ul> <p>Local level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ In 2015, the reform of local government in Northern Ireland resulted in the <a href="#">creation of 11 local authorities</a>. Each of the councils has an</li> </ul>

[elected mayor](#) who is chosen by the councillors themselves on an annual rotating basis, to avoid monopolies from different political parties. This can lead to short-term policymaking and avoidance of 'unpopular' strategic decisions.

- [Community Planning was introduced in 2015](#) and requires partners (including the council, statutory bodies, agencies, local communities and the voluntary sector) to produce a shared *Community Plan* every four years. Libraries Northern Ireland is a *Community Planning* statutory partner.
- In Belfast the *Community Planning Partnership* created the *Belfast Agenda* which is the city's first full *Community Plan*; this has been reviewed and consulted on through Belfast's online consultation portal *Your Say*, resulting in the updated [Belfast Agenda 2023-2027](#).
- As in Wales, Scotland and England, arts and cultural provision at the local authority level is not a mandatory service in Northern Ireland. Different local governments have different priorities when it comes to culture, which can therefore lead to extreme disparity in funding for cultural services across the country.
- A local government Arts Managers group made up of culture officers/portfolio holders from all 11 local authorities in Northern Ireland meets informally on a semi-regular basis.

## Implications for Policy

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The views expressed in this section are those of Culture Commons, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the speakers or the wider programme partners.

Findings outlined in this section will be drawn together with findings in other Insight Papers and considered in the round as part of the policymaking phase of the programme.

### **It's complicated**

It is abundantly clear from this first Knowledge Exchange session that the evolving relationship between UK Government, the devolved governments and local authorities is already complex. An overlapping tapestry of governance structures in different nations and regions of the UK, alongside the inherent complexity of the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem itself, could make policy designed to devolve powers in this policy area particularly challenging.

Whilst it may be a daunting finding for policymakers to hear, it will be important for all programme outputs to clearly communicate that it will be considerably harder to determine precisely how and where more localised decision making associated with the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem fits into this shifting landscape than current political rhetoric seems to acknowledge.

We should consider how any new policy we develop can lean into existing spatial governance mechanisms, initiatives or partnerships, some of which were

spotlighted during this Knowledge Exchange session. Where these are not deemed suitable, we may need to consider new integrated and holistic mechanisms that can be adapted differently in different places.

### **Policy churn is a major risk**

Reflecting on the number of changes and initiatives delivered at UK and devolved government levels over the past 20 years, we are reminded of the risks of perpetuating yet more policy churn as we lead up to a turbulent election period.

This must be a central consideration for our policymaking process to ensure that we do not simply replicate policy interventions that have not worked in the past. Equally, we may also need to think about how we create new structures, processes or working principles that will not be subject to the short-term thinking that can often characterise national-regional policy mechanisms and devolution processes.

As one of our partners said during the session, before we get to *what* policy we want to develop together, we may need to spend some time thinking about *how* we intend to identify issues and what forums might be best to do this in. We hope this programme will identify a few potential options to do just that.

### **Context matters**

We are already beginning to see that each of the devolved nations operates in its own unique context with very different

political and operational realities; this has a profound impact on how local government administration is developing but also how culture is positioned and understood locally, regionally and nationally.

This is an important point to draw attention to within the context of our programme, especially as we intend to open up discussions about adapting or re-setting UK-wide policy approaches and funding mechanisms that would likely impact these sectors differently in different parts of the UK. Having a four nations partnership could help us to sense-check how any policy positions we may wish to propose might land in these different contexts before publishing them.

As we consider our policy proposals, we will need to think about what mechanisms might best lend themselves to bringing hyper-local awareness to policy and decision-making processes associated with the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in a place. These mechanisms are likely to look different in different areas.

### **Local is everywhere**

The contributions from our speakers demonstrate that, in one way or another, all four UK nations are facilitating a 'downward transfer of power' from their respective central governments to local government structures and, in some cases, to the local community level. Whilst there is clearly more work to be done to understand the exact drivers behind this pivot to the local, it's clear that a combination of economic, social and political factors is encouraging

governments in all four nations to move decision making to the local level.

Scottish Government's *Democracy Matters* programme is an example of a concerted effort to engage a wider population on future policy proposals that aims to invite communities and citizens to come closer to decision making. Indeed, the *Community Planning Partnerships*, statutory models in both the Northern Ireland and Scottish contexts, are somewhat further ahead when it comes to involving local communities in decision making than England appears to be. We may wish to look at how statutory models of citizen inclusion in planning and cultural decision making could be established in more detail as part of our policy development work.

In Wales, the recent establishment of the *Corporate Joint Committees* after an ongoing period of local government reform is also strong evidence of the ways in which they are pushing towards greater local decision making while attempting to maintain a strategic approach. Parallels here can be drawn with the English combined authority model; it will be interesting to watch how Welsh Government develop the CJC model in the future and whether cultural policy plays a role in their strategic focus.

These examples of developing regional, sub-regional and hyper-local partnership approaches suggests that there is a shared problem that decisionmakers are keen to address. This underlines the importance of us taking a four nations approach with this programme: while local contexts are critical to understanding how policy will play out in

place, we can certainly learn from each other's approaches.

We were particularly struck by the '*commonalities*' that our speakers and attendees instinctively gravitated towards during the discussion. Perhaps a long-term forum that holds open a space to develop shared understandings of the challenges and opportunities that each of the four nations face in this policy area, as well as a space to explore new models and approaches to addressing them, could be useful for the ongoing development of the UK's creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem.

### **Solutions can flow 'upwards'**

Belfast's position as the capital city and the important role it plays in irrigating other local authorities across Northern Ireland, coupled with the innovative approach taken to developing its *Cultural Strategy*, has clearly influenced the approach that the Northern Ireland Executive has taken in developing its own national level plans for creative and cultural policy.

Larger combined authorities in England (such as those covering Greater Manchester and the West Midlands) and other devolved administrations should look to the innovation taking place on their own doorstep to support the development on regional and national policy.

As one of our panellists proposed, applying policies and principles that have originated and already been successful germinated in the devolved administrations could be more palatable starting point for developed UK

Government level policies to support devolution and increased local decision making, including those associated with the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem.

### **Culture needs to feature as part of the devolution story**

It was encouraging to hear Dr Jack Newman state that culture should be '*considered more as part of the wider English devolution debate*'. The publication of Scottish Government's *Cultural Action Plan*, which sets out a new *National and Local Delivery Group to 'identify and commit to working together towards shared culture outcomes across Scotland'*,<sup>i</sup> is a helpful example of how this kind of dialogue can take place between the national and local levels.

Calls for devolution in England are often primarily framed around economic arguments, with an emphasis on closing regional disparities in things like productivity and growth. Though there are occasions when devolution is explicitly linked to increased decision making for citizens and local communities, there are very few instances that we can see of the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem being included within those discourses. One of the primary objectives of this programme is to reposition these sectors within the devolution story.

In England, further powers over spend associated with the creative and cultural sectors has featured very little in the waves of devolution deals we've seen to date. As the only regional governance structure with a democratically elected leader, combined authorities could

represent the most obvious structure through which to trial further transfers of powers, particularly those in relation to creative and cultural services. We have explored this possibility in a recent extended briefing on 'Trailblazer' devolution deals [here](#). However, the degree to which combined authorities, and the local authorities within them, are prepared for these new powers, and the wider risks that this approach might throw up, need to be investigated in more detail; we will do some of this work as part of the programme. It is not yet clear, for example, where and how Metro Mayors might best be held accountable for the decisions they make as more powers are passed down to them.

Equally underexplored is the extent to which culture can be a key component of calls for further devolution itself; this was touched on briefly by Dr Newman in one of the four driving forces for devolution that he outlined. As we see in the preamble to the new [Hull and East Yorkshire devolution deal](#) (agreed in November 2023), it's clear that the cultural identity of the region is playing a central role in how the region is positioning itself as a political and economic territory within the UK. How cultural identities, so-called 'pride in place' and local decision making might all connect is something we'll need to explore in more detail as part of the programme.

### **Dispersed models could bring national institutions closer to communities**

The National Contemporary Art Gallery model that Jane Richardson shared with us appears to recalibrate understandings of what a national flagship cultural

institution might be, taking a much more 'whole nation' approach. We should explore this further and attempt to understand whether such models might provide opportunities for institutions based in other UK nations and regions.

### **Local can unlock integrated working**

When exploring the potential benefits that more localised decision making could bring, Dr Newman indicated the potential for place-based partnership working and interventions that '*consider what can help people and the economy in that place rather than thinking in policy silos*'.

There are already strong examples of integrated partnership working at the local level across the UK. As we have touched on, the *Community Partnerships* model in Scotland and Northern Ireland seemingly offer examples of increased joined up thinking at the local authority level. Welsh Government's *Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015* is also a good example of a cross-cutting policy approach, and we are interested to explore further how it is being implemented, for example with practice via *Public Service Boards*.

Since the publication of their *Culture Strategy* in 2020, Scottish Government has committed to positioning culture as a central consideration '*across all policy areas, including: health and wellbeing, economy, education, reducing inequality and realising a greener and more innovative future*.' It will be interesting to understand whether this kind of cross-departmental approach is taking place at the local level in Scotland (or indeed other parts of the UK) and how models

like *Community Partnerships* might help to realise this.

We see some good examples of partnership working at the local and regional levels within the partnership itself, such as Culture Commons' work with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority who have developed the world's first 'Creative Health Strategy' at a regional level to bring stakeholders across health and wellbeing and the creative, cultural and heritage sectors together to deal with concerns related to population health. Sheffield's Culture Collective, a frontrunner in Art Council

England's *Culture Compact* programme, continues to demonstrate the collective power of an aligned partnership focused specifically on culture in a particular geographical area.

We also note the important work of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's *Creative Communities* programme which is proactively piloting new place-based research and development partnerships to support culture and creativity between civil society, the creative and cultural sectors, research institutions and policymakers. We will continue to review their outputs as part of this programme.



# Glossary

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## **City Deals**

City deals are bespoke packages of funding and decision-making powers negotiated between central government and local authorities and/or Local Enterprise Partnerships and other local bodies. Starting from 8 major English cities outside of London in 2012, 31 City Deals have been successfully negotiated to date across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## **Community Planning Partnerships (NI)**

The Community Planning Partnerships were established in 2015 following the Local Government Reform. This reform assigned the 11 newly formed councils the task of spearheading the community planning process in their respective districts. Found in each district, these partnerships consist of the council, statutory bodies, agencies, and the broader community, encompassing the community and voluntary sector.

## **Community Planning Partnerships (Scotland)**

A Community Planning Partnership (CPP) is the name given to all the services that come together to take part in community planning. Under Part 2 Community Planning, of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, CPPs are responsible for producing two types of plan to describe its local priorities, the improvements it plans for and by when: a Local Outcomes Improvement Plan and a Locality Plan.

## **Corporate Joint Committees**

Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) represent corporate bodies formed in accordance with the regulations outlined in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Their primary purpose is to foster regional collaboration, specifically among the South East Wales CJC, South West Wales CJC, North Wales CJC, and Mid Wales CJC.

## **Devolution**

Devolution is the process of decentralising power from central government with the aim of moving decision making closer to citizens. The term is derived from the Latin, meaning “to roll down”. While devolution can take many forms, in the United Kingdom, the term is often used to describe the process of transferring power from the centre (Westminster) to the nations and regions.

## **Federalism**

Federalism represents a form of political organization that brings together distinct states or polities within a comprehensive political system while preserving their individual integrity. First, the federal relationship must be established or confirmed through a perpetual covenant of union, usually embodied in a written constitution that outlines the terms by which power is divided or shared.

### **Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)**

Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) serve as non-statutory entities overseeing local economic development in England. These business-driven partnerships facilitate collaboration among the private sector, local authorities, and academic and voluntary institutions. LEPs are exclusive to England with 38 LEP in total, and are not established in Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland.

### **Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)**

Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were non-departmental public bodies, charged with driving economic development, business efficiency, investment and competitiveness, employment, skills and sustainable development in their regions. All Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) closed on 31 March 2012 and were abolished on 1 July 2012.

## Further Reading

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The Culture Commons research team have identified a series of materials that readers with an interest in the themes surfaced in this paper might want to engage with:

Ayres, S. Flinders, M. & Sandford, M. (2018) Territory, power and statecraft: understanding English devolution, *Regional Studies*, 52:6, 853-864, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2017.1360486

Newman, J. (2021), The Ambiguous Ideology of Levelling Up. *The Political Quarterly*, 92: 312-320. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13010>

Loughlin, J., Kincaid, J., & Swenden, W. (Eds.). (2013). Routledge Handbook of Regionalism & Federalism (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203395974>

Kenny, M and Newman, J. (2023) Devolving English Government *Bennett Institute for Public Policy and Institute for Government* <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Devolving-English-Government.pdf> (accessed 12.03.2024)

Durrer, V., Gilmore, A., Jancovich, L., Stevenson, D. (eds) (2023) Cultural Policy is Local. *New Directions in Cultural Policy Research*. Palgrave Macmillan

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