

# Knowledge Exchange #2

The role of cultural strategies in  
local cultural 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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**Keywords:** cultural strategy; citizen engagement; local voice; consultation; co-design

## 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 25 partners made up of local governments, the creative and cultural sectors, arm’s length bodies, grant giving bodies and leading research institutions.

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

At time of publication, the programme partners were:



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

## 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)



## 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 being transparent.

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# Introduction

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This Insight Paper summarises a panel and roundtable discussion that took place as part of a Knowledge Exchange session between high-level representatives on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2024. This session formed part of an open policy development programme exploring 'the future local cultural decision making' led by Culture Commons and a coalition of over 25 UK-wide partners.

## Knowledge Exchange sessions

The Knowledge Exchange sessions are short interactions between programme 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 the partnership is taking. This Insight Paper will be formally reviewed as part of a growing evidence base that will inform the policymaking phase of the programme.

## Knowledge Exchange #2

In this second Knowledge Exchange session, we examined the role of cultural strategies as vehicles for supporting the development of local creative, cultural and heritage ecosystems and, in particular, as tools for enabling local cultural decision making.

This Knowledge Exchange session was chaired by **Dan Ashton**, Professor of Cultural and Creative Industries in the Department of Art and Media Technology at Winchester School of Art at the University of Southampton. Dan recently published a comprehensive report on cultural strategies across the UK.

We invited speakers from three internal partners alongside their respective external collaborators to contribute to the opening panel:

- **Georgina Roby** (Culture & Events Service Manager, Wigan Council) and **AL and AL** (Independent Artists and authors of *The Fire Within* - Wigan's Cultural Strategy)
- **Erika Clark and Christine Osborne** (Creative Programme Manager and Partnership Officer, Belfast City Council)
- **Kate Brindley** (Cultural Development Consultant, Sheffield City Council) and **Tom Agar** (Associate, Fourth Street)

Each contributor was asked to make 15 minutes of introductory remarks, covering:

- **Approaches to setting and delivering local cultural strategies and the evidence that is used to inform this.**
- **How local teams are monitoring and evaluating the impact of their cultural strategies over time.**
- **The stakeholders that are (or are not) included in the development of cultural strategies and how 'Local Voice', including the public, is factored in.**
- **The governance structures that facilitate the development of local cultural strategies and 'Local Voice'.**

By the end of the session, we set ourselves the goal to have understood:

- **The role of cultural strategies both as vehicles for sector support and as enablers of local cultural decision making.**
- **The key benefits and challenges of including 'Local Voice' in the development of cultural strategies.**
- **How evaluation approaches are being used to build evidence for the impact of cultural strategies.**
- **Some of the more innovative ways that cultural strategies are being developed and deployed.**

# Insights

The role of cultural strategies in local cultural decision making

<b>The Fire Within: Wigan's Cultural Strategy</b> Georgina Roby, Culture and Events Manager, Wigan Council AL and AL, Independent Artists	
<b>Bios</b>	<p>Georgina Roby is Culture and Events Service Manager at Wigan Council.</p> <p>Al Holmes and Al Taylor, also known as 'AL and AL', are a British duo of visual artists. They have worked together under this name since 2001 in several high-profile international contexts. Currently, they are Creative Directors of the Haigh Hall project, a £45m transformation of a historic Hall into a National Cultural Visitor destination.</p> <p>Wigan Council commissioned AL and AL to produce <i>The Fire Within</i> - a cultural strategy and manifesto for Wigan.</p>
<b>Focus</b>	<p>Georgina Roby introduced the context in which the creation of a new cultural strategy for Wigan emerged, while AL and AL outlined the five stages of a five-year plan (research, engagement, launch, delivery and evaluation), alongside sharing reflections on the strategy's impact as it moves into the evaluation stage.</p>
<b>Place</b>	<p>Wigan is a Metropolitan Borough within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) in North West of England and has a population of 330,000. Research carried out by Nesta in 2016 identified Wigan and neighbouring Warrington as home to one of England's 47 identified creative clusters. A 'Levelling Up' Priority Place, Wigan is currently home to four Arts Council England Investment Portfolio organisations. Wigan secured £20 million as part of the Government's 'Levelling Up' Fund and has had financial support from Heritage Lottery Fund for the restoration of Haigh Hall and park which will provide visitors the opportunity to learn about the borough's rich heritage and history.</p>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>Background and Ambitions</b>



- In 2017, the [Active Lives Survey](#) (2015-17) conducted by Arts Council England (ACE) identified Wigan as the seventh lowest place for “arts engagement” in the UK, with a rate of 57.3%.
- In 2018 Wigan Council, supported by ACE, funded the development of an ambitious Cultural Strategy for Wigan. This strategy was articulated through a five-year plan, aimed to deliver transformational change to the cultural landscape across the borough. Aligning with other wider local strategies such as [The Deal for the Future Strategy](#), it set out the vision to make Wigan a place where people would want to work, live, visit and invest.

### **Governance**

- A new Culture, Arts & Heritage Team was formed to work alongside existing cultural, arts and community organisations to enable and facilitate delivery of the Manifesto.

### **Research**

- The initial stage of development involved consultation with artists, communities, arts organisations and representatives of Wigan Council, through a series of workshops and discussions.
- Led by a consultancy organisation, the research process culminated in the creation of a cultural strategy for Wigan centred around five curatorial themes agreed with artists, cultural organisations and community groups. The themes were:
  1. Wigan’s Future Artists
  2. Digital Wigan
  3. Health and Happiness
  4. Every Community Needs a Stage
  5. A New Heritage
- This in-depth process led to the development of [The Fire Within Manifesto](#), a visually compelling document curated by AL and AL, published in 2019.

### **Engagement Process**

- The engagement process served as a platform to generate connection between different parts of the cultural community in Wigan: it stimulated new dialogues, collaborations and friendships. This approach was



maintained throughout the creation of the manifesto document with AL and AL involving the local cultural community in its production.

- In this sense, the document served a double function: allowing local communities to rediscover their own heritage and stories, while celebrating new talent emerging in the area. This ensured that the cultural community felt actively involved in the process as an integral part of the manifesto's creation.

### **Launch**

- With the support of the local authority, a disused shopping centre, *The Galleries*, had its first floor entirely repurposed for the manifesto's launch. The space was transformed to accommodate a showcase, five exhibition spaces and a newly built performance space.
- Although initially intended as a temporary event, *The Galleries* continued to serve as a social space for culture in the heart of Wigan until 2022.
- *The Fire Within* social space, as it became known, developed quickly to include 7 artists' studios, with 2 bands in residence, both of which wrote number 1 albums whilst in residency.
- [Plans for a £135 million town centre redevelopment](#) have led to the demolition of the shopping centre, but the success of the meanwhile use of the space spoke to the need for a cultural destination.

### **Delivery**

- The exhibitions hosted in *The Galleries* featured commissions from both international artists and artists within the borough, including contemporary art and heritage artefacts.
- The location of the building in the town centre allowed it to reach communities who might otherwise be excluded by formal cultural engagement, by turning easily accessible everyday physical infrastructure into a new cultural hub.

### **Evaluation and Impact**

- Overall, success stories from community members involved in creating and delivering the cultural strategy indicate increased personal and professional confidence in attending cultural events, accessing job

opportunities and seeking professional training in the creative and cultural sectors, but also a renewed pride in the town's cultural contribution to the nation.

- Every event underwent a full evaluation process.

### **Funding**

- Funding support for the creative, cultural and heritage sectors has increased in Wigan each year since the publication of the strategy, building on the success of the launch and the programming at *The Galleries*.
- The sector has brought in over £35 million external funding since launch.
- The successful delivery of the programming at *The Galleries* is, in itself, believed to have contributed to Wigan being included in Arts Council England's [Levelling Up Priority Places for 2021-2024](#).

### **Legacy**

- Plans for the [Haigh Hall project](#), a £45 million cultural destination to attract visitors from the UK and abroad, is part of the project's legacy. AL and AL will act as Creative Directors on the project.
- Several NPOs have since been established in the borough.
- As the five-year plan approaches its end, the next step for Wigan involves refreshing its cultural strategy and continuing to pursue its ambitions of nurturing a vibrant cultural scene for local communities and becoming a key cultural destination.

## A City Imagining - Belfast's Cultural Strategy

Erika Clark, Creative Programme Manager, Belfast City Council  
Christine Osborne, Partnership Officer, Belfast City Council



<p><b>Bios</b></p>	<p>Erika Clark is Creative Programme Manager at Belfast City Council. She is an experienced creative producer and project manager within the cultural sector and with Belfast City Council on cultural project delivery, as well as development of the cultural strategy and their successful UNESCO City of Music bid. She is currently leading on the delivery of Belfast 2024.</p> <p>Christine Osborne is Partnership Officer at Belfast City Council. Christine has extensive experience within local government culture and tourism, developing and delivering cultural strategy, investment and support programmes and partnership and governance models.</p>
<p><b>Focus</b></p>	<p>Erika Clark and Christine Osborne provided an overview of the journey of Belfast's cultural strategy, starting from its inception in 2017 as a bid for European Capital of Culture to the ongoing at the time of publication delivery of Belfast 2024.</p>
<p><b>Place</b></p>	<p>The population of Belfast was 345,418 at the time of the 2021 Census, which made it the largest Local Government District in Northern Ireland. The £5.9 million <i>Belfast 2024</i> programme builds upon the Council's existing support for culture and arts, and invites citizens to get creative, through a mix of new cultural commissions and programmes between March and November. £25.2million is being invested through the <i>Belfast Region City Deal</i> in Studio Ulster, a cutting-edge virtual production studio at Giant's Park. . The landscapes in and around Belfast means it has become a prime location for film and television production in recent years. Centred around the <i>Titanic Quarter</i> and Giant's Park, the city is home to major TV and film productions including HBO's <i>Game of Thrones</i>, Warner Horizon's <i>Krypton</i> and Paramount Pictures' <i>Dungeons &amp; Dragons</i>. The city is now home to a fast-growing creative cluster. <i>Future Screens NI</i> comprises the two higher education institutions (Ulster University and Queens University Belfast) and a number of key industrial partners central to the creative economy in the region.</p>
<p><b>Notes</b></p>	<p><b>Background and Ambitions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2017, Belfast took the decision to enter a bidding process for the designation of <i>European Capital of Culture</i>. In October of the same year,</li> </ul>

the European Commission halted the process due to the UK's Brexit referendum.

- Despite the setback, Belfast City Council remained committed to prioritising culture, as referenced in its main Community Plan the *Belfast Agenda*.
- The Council made a significant budget increase to support the creation and subsequent delivery of a new ten-year cultural strategy for the city, featuring Belfast's year of culture scheduled for 2023 (which later became *Belfast 2024* as timelines changed).
- At the same time as all this, Belfast City Council developed a complementary *Tourism Plan* to explore how cultural development could support the economic outcomes of the city.

### **Governance**

- To implement the new cultural strategy, Belfast City Council created a new staff structure, integrating the culture, tourism and events teams. The teams are now encouraged to work more collaboratively and complement each other's remits.
- This collaborative approach has produced new governance and commissioning models for culture and creativity. For example, by working alongside the Procurement Department, Belfast City Council has been able to fund individual artists for the first time and ensure fairer commissioning practices.
- The *Belfast 2024* team also work in close collaboration with the Department for Communities, which is under the Central Government Office, as well as Arts Council NI (ALB).
- The team are also now connected with local and international networks, connecting Belfast's work on the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem with national level policy actors.

### **Research and Engagement**

- The bidding process for the *European Capital of Culture* involved the largest public consultation in Northern Ireland. Creative activities such as music events, storytelling events and creative workshops helped to engage people through creativity and let them inform the strategic vision for their application.

- A three-month takeover of a shop in the city centre facilitated discussions among citizens on the future of Belfast.
- The consultation process yielded four key themes which became the pillars of the cultural strategy.
  - 'A City Belonging' aims to foster an environment where people feel empowered to culturally express themselves.
  - 'A City Challenging' seeks to promote inclusivity by embracing diverse lifestyles and ensuring cultural production represents the city's diversity.
  - 'A City Creating' is about allowing creativity to push boundaries and place artists at the heart of Belfast's identity.
  - 'A City Exploring' focuses on shaping the image of Belfast that is projected to the rest of the world.

### **Launch**

- The new strategy '[A City Imagining](#)' was developed in 2019 and launched in April 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. This not only held the strategy delivery plans back, but also affected the creative, cultural and heritage sectors.
- The wider cultural strategy informed the *Music Strategy* and the combination of these two pieces of work helped to secure *UNESCO City of Music* status and develop the *Make Yourself at Home Tourism Strategy*. Both reflect the priorities and themes within the cultural strategy, and together contribute to shaping the wider cultural ecology of Belfast.
- While the initial theme for *Belfast Year of Culture* in 2023 was 'At Home', the entire theme was pivoted to 'Our People, Our Place and Our Planet'; this responded to the pandemic and people's desire to be outside and get creative together again, but also addressed growing concerns around the climate crisis amongst citizens

### **Delivery**

- What had previously been planned as *Belfast Year of Culture* in 2023 was later rebranded as '*Belfast 2024*', and is now a key outcome associated with the '[A City Imagining](#)' strategy.
- *Belfast 2024* is now a year-long celebration of culture and Belfast, which delivers on all the three strategies mentioned above associated with culture, music and tourism. Further, it delivers on [Vacant to Vibrant](#), the

city regeneration strategy bringing empty shop units in the city centre into use for art and creativity; on [Good Relations](#), the city's diversity strategy; and [Resilience Ambitions](#), Belfast's first climate plan.

- *Belfast 2024* includes [Creative Me](#), a programme dedicated to citizens building on a co-design approach to creativity, and including a participatory budget scheme, ['Bank of Ideas'](#).

### **Funding**

- Funding for the cultural strategy and its new investment programme represents more than double the previous allocation towards the cultural sector and was secured through a slight increase in the council tax rate and reallocation of internal funds.
- *Belfast 2024* cultural programme now has a £6 million investment which represents the largest in a cultural programme ever made by any Council in Northern Ireland.
- Investment at this level by a local authority challenges the historically low cultural investment for culture in Northern Ireland when compared to the UK, Ireland or Europe.

### **Legacy**

- A key element of *Belfast 2024* is that the project seeks to get city stakeholders, the cultural sector and citizens to work together better to ensure a longer legacy for culture.
- A complex and major cultural programme like *Belfast 2024* requires extensive partnerships and effective evaluation. Strategic partnerships are perceived to be a potential long-term benefit to the city as part of the legacy of *Belfast 2024*. So far, the programme has involved more than thirty direct delivery and commissioning partners, including local organisations, funders and selected international experts.

## Sheffield's Cultural Strategy

Kate Brindley, Cultural Development Consultant, Sheffield City Co  
Tom Agar, Fourth Street



<b>Bios</b>	<p>Kate Brindley is Cultural Development Consultant at Sheffield City Council and senior responsible officer for the city's cultural strategy. Prior to this role, Kate worked in the arts and cultural sector for nearly three decades, with a specialism in museums and visual arts, including as CEO/Director of four major arts organisations.</p> <p>Tom Agar is Associate at Fourth Street Place Consultants and works across the UK and beyond on projects across regeneration, heritage, and the cultural and creative industries. He is especially interested in the intersection of economic, social, and environmental value, and how projects can balance and support growth in each of these simultaneously.</p>
<b>Focus</b>	<p>Kate Brindley explained the background conditions for the development of Sheffield's cultural strategy, while Tom Agar described the pre-engagement and citizen engagement processes that will inform the rest of the strategy development process.</p>
<b>Place</b>	<p>Sheffield is a city in the North of England. With a population of over half a million, Sheffield is the largest city within the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined authority (SMYCA). With a post-industrial, heritage, the city has developed a thriving creative and cultural grassroots scene over the last decade. It is now known as a 'Music City', the host of Europe's largest documentary festival <i>DocFest</i>, and the greenest city in the UK. There are nine Arts Council England Investment Portfolio organisations. Sheffield City Council was successful in the bid for Government Levelling Up Funding in late 2021; this brought together three projects in for a 'Castlegate Regeneration' to restore the remains of the city's historic castle site while developing a new regional music academy 'Harmony Works'.</p>
<b>Notes</b>	<p><b>Background and Ambitions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sheffield has not had a cultural strategy for nearly a decade. However, in the absence of a council-led strategy, sector-driven approaches to leadership have filled the gap. For example, the Culture Consortium have existed since 2011 (as a result of Sheffield's unsuccessful UK City of Culture bid), and includes representatives from arts organisations of</li></ul>

different sizes. In 2019, Sheffield established a Cultural Compact in the city. (Compacts were created in towns and cities throughout the UK in response to the Core Cities' Cultural Cities Enquiry of 2019 and seek to establish city-wide plans to bring in higher levels of investment, make best use of cultural property assets and attract a full range of diverse talent.) The Culture Collective launched their own cultural strategy in 2021 which was adopted by the council while it develops its own (see below).

- Across the [public consultation process on the City Goals](#) and the report produced by the Race Equality Commission, "culture" emerged as a key priority associated with Sheffield's identity.
- Culture was moved into a different directorate at the Council, gaining more prominence. A new Director of Culture and Place has now been created. Recent changes in political decision making in the city have also meant that culture has gained more solid cross-party support.
- At the same time, South Yorkshire Combined Authority (the Combined Authority Sheffield sits within) have invested in an Art, Culture and Heritage Project Director.
- The Council have since appointed Fourth Street in December 2023 to begin a wider strategy design; this is currently ongoing and expected to conclude in May 2024.
- It was the concerted alignment of agendas for tourism, economy, heritage and major events contributed to the momentum for the creation and implementation of a new cultural strategy for Sheffield.

### **Governance**

- The strategy development process brings together commissioners and funders (Sheffield City Council, Sheffield University and Arts Council England), a project team including placemaking agency Fourth Street, engagement and Sheffield-based social enterprise Opus Independence, as well as three experienced creative practitioners.
- A Task and Finish Group has been appointed as a nominal steering group that meets every month, monitors progress and supports the strategy dissemination acting as network accelerator.

### **Research**



- The themes of the cultural strategy build on the city's strengths and core identity: there is a focus on inclusive growth, neighbourhood-based planning, sports and outdoors, manufacturing and creative health.
- The strategy adopts a broad definition of culture which is inclusive of all cultural and creative sectors, as well as the adjacent sectors that use culture in their activities. This was reflected in the partnerships that were brokered with community organisations.
- However, objectives and priorities are constantly renegotiated through an iterative approach to strategy development and emerge from ongoing conversations with the city and within the research team.
- An initial stage of the strategy development has been characterised by in-depth desk-based research and fieldwork about the current state of the sector in the city and its priorities.

### **Citizen Engagement**

- The engagement process has begun with the launch of a digital platform on the city council's digital engagement website '[Have Your Say](#)'. This new platform will host information, allow citizens to ask questions and advertise events linked to the culture strategy development.
- The cultural programme will include large-group workshops with sector representatives, focused engagement groups, alongside meetings with local political representatives, universities, community groups, and young people.
- The design of the engagement process has been informed by a pre-engagement phase to gather input from the sector on how to ensure representation from a wide spectrum of residents, including those typically excluded. The team allocated a budget to enable participation, ensuring that individuals who needed support could be compensated for their time.
- Similarly, each event has been curated to include a variety of voices, that cuts across different stakeholders, including the cultural and creative sectors, community members and institutional perspectives.
- Neighbourhood approaches to planning and strategy informed the engagement process.

## Implications for Policy

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

*These findings will be drawn together with findings in other Insight Papers and considered in the round as part of the policymaking phase of the programme.*

### **Cultural Strategies as catalysts for change**

All three of the places we heard from reported that the process of developing and delivering on a cultural strategy acted as a catalyst for change for their area.

Whether moving from sector-led governance structures into more partnership-based work, repurposing public engagement after unsuccessful city bids, or as Wigan attest - "opening the doors for place-based approaches and funding" - it's clear that in each of the areas we heard from the *process* of planning and developing a strategy has, in of itself, been the start of transition.

While the outcomes of this change require more evaluation (see below), we think it's nonetheless important to acknowledge that in our examples, local cultural strategies appear to be useful tools or 'focal points', that if designed purposefully and carefully, can generate a positive change in how culture is viewed, supported or delivered locally.

### **Self-reported impact narratives**

Sheffield, Wigan and Belfast each openly attribute subsequent successes associated with the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in their area back to their cultural strategy.

Self-reported indicators of success vary from place to place, but broadly include increases in the number of publicly funded cultural institutions; uplifts in financial investment coming from national governments or arm's length bodies; and the number of creative activities taking place in the area. *Awareness* amongst citizens about the development of the strategy appears to have been an important indicator of success.

Narrowing the gap between self-reported outcomes and robustly evaluated impacts, and indexing these against stated objectives, could be a valuable area for consideration for places exploring cultural strategies. We will explore evaluation of cultural strategies further in a dedicate research paper with partners at the Centre for Cultural Value.

### **Connection with Mega Events**

The *European Capital of Culture* bid that was cut short in Belfast meant that the Council were already engaging with local citizens well before the design phase of the cultural strategy commenced. The process to develop the *European Capital of Culture* bid had seen the largest programme of public consultation in Northern Ireland and it was this preparatory work that enabled the team to build public interest and purposefully

pivot attention to the cultural strategy when the time came.

As seen in the development of the Culture Consortium in Sheffield (coming out of the unsuccessful bid for UK City of Culture) and Belfast's pivot to develop a strategy after European Capital of Culture, we can see evidence of a relationship between cultural strategy development and the role of so-called Mega Events.

We will be exploring the role of Capital of Culture / City of Culture and other Mega Events in supporting local cultural decision making with the support of University of Warwick as part of this programme.

## **Public engagement in development**

The teams working on these cultural strategies have either initiated new, or built on existing, platforms for dialogue between local communities, the local authority and the creative, cultural and heritage sectors. This seems to have been useful for the development of the cultural strategy itself, but also in building capacity for, and building on momentum from, future engagement.

From the discussions observed during our Knowledge Exchange, we can certainly see how cultural strategies can be vehicles for establishing and continuing dialogue with local communities on what culture means and how it feels and is expressed locally.

## **Getting closer to citizens**

Our examples also demonstrate that engagement with citizens can be

ambitious and creative. In Belfast, we see disused units in the city centre turned into engagement centres to bring the development process closer to the public. In Wigan, a disused shopping centre was used to launch aspects of the cultural strategy which went on to become an important and influential cultural hub in and of itself. The activation of physical space to encourage conversations amongst local communities in this way was a key recommendation coming out of the 2014 Farrell Review. Perhaps most importantly.

We will explore different approaches to citizen engagement further, including through digital means such as those we heard from in Sheffield, in an Insight Paper on 'Local Voice' later in the series.

## **Funding could beget funding**

Speakers reported that even small amounts of seed funding ringfenced for a cultural strategy seems to make a real difference to investment in subsequent years.

Places highlighted how a relatively inexpensive cultural strategy development process built up confidence amongst local stakeholders, allowing them to "*show the world what they're capable of*", enhance their city's reputation as a cultural destination and pave the way for more substantial investments down the line.

In Wigan, smaller local investments from the Council has been followed by increasingly large investments from arm's length bodies and UK Government - starting from £168,276 in their year 0 and leading to £2,403,429 by year 5

(combining Levelling Up Fund, Arts Council England grants, Great Manchester Combined Authority and National Portfolio Organisation funds).

Belfast's investment in culture through an increase in the district rate is another example local authorities committing to investments in the cultural ecosystem, "putting culture at the heart of various things throughout council." The investment in the city's *European Capital of Culture* bid, and the pivot to the cultural strategy, seem to have helped justify these investment decisions.

We would have to do more work with the grant giving bodies to understand to what degree the cultural strategy unlocked additional funding, but we nonetheless understand from the arm's length bodies and grant giving bodies in the programme that a clear strategy and plan can be an important factor in decision making. We will unpack this with a policy roundtable we have scheduled with arm's length bodies and grant giving bodies later in the year.

### **Sector-led chain reactions**

With lower levels of formal cultural engagement in Wigan, the Council initiated cultural strategy appears to have leaned into the creative, cultural and heritage sectors and associated workforce in the first instance.

Wigan's manifesto development was primarily developed in consultation with "cultural communities" in the vicinity, including artists, organisations and other associated organisations. This was neatly encapsulated by AL and AL's observation that, while the delivery of the strategy

had involved different parts of Wigan's population, its design had primarily "sector-led":

*"...[the manifesto] was very much about the sector and bringing that together and how are we going to do this together...we still have this debate about how much consultation we should be doing with the end user at this point in time? Or is this about the plan for the sector...?"*

As we see in Wigan, giving artists and creative practitioners leadership responsibilities over the development of a cultural strategy appears to have had a galvanising effect in terms of bringing a wider creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem of stakeholders to table. This leadership experience has also seen AL and AL go on head up the creative direction for major capital expenditure projects associated with these sectors in the city.

Recognising the absence of a dedicated cultural strategy, the team in Sheffield openly acknowledge that the city's creative and cultural community have been shouldering responsibilities for development and delivery for well over a decade. The city's Culture Compact, the Culture Collective (partners in this programme) played a significant role in creating a sector-led strategy which was subsequently adopted in full by the Council. This strategy has since served as a jumping off point for a fuller strategy that brings together external specialist consultants able to engage with the public. Here again we see evidence of sector-led work instigating action from local decision makers.

### **Striking the balance**

As we consider the role of increased public involvement in decision making – including around cultural strategies – we should pay attention to the balance between sector-led approaches that address the developmental need of the sector and the risk that such approaches could see citizens cast in the role of ‘recipients and beneficiaries’ rather than creators of their own cultural environments.

### **Diagonal Slice**

Sheffield’s stakeholder engagement model was referred to as a “*diagonal slice principle*”, whereby each consultation was curated to ensure representation from a range of voices within different stakeholder groups, including the creative, cultural and heritage sectors, community members and other institutional perspectives.

The development of the cultural strategy was described as a process of “*cross-pollination*” of ideas and a coming together of different parts of the ecosystem that make up the cultural identity of Sheffield. This approach echoes the design of ‘the future of local cultural decision making’, a UK-wide open policy development programme but at place-based level.

Place should continue to experiment with ecosystem approaches to cultural strategy building to bring as many relevant stakeholders to the table as possible.

### **Cross-departmental collaboration**

Each of the speakers referred to a successful integration of their respective cultural strategies across multiple internal departments through staffing changes. This includes overtly linking cultural strategies up with pre-existing strategies that speak to much broader policy areas.

It was not clear from the evidence we heard whether the staff or the strategy came first, but staffing changes were clearly made as result of the current or future cultural strategy. Local authorities wishing to bolster officer teams associated with these sectors could consider the role that a cultural strategy might play in this process.

### **Commissioning differently**

These new cross-departmental structures seem to have led to new commissioning models. For example, in Belfast:

*“...we're now funding 16 artists just to do their work within the city...it's a pretty ambitious and challenging structure that exists within local government, and to demonstrate that impact of trusting artists and the artistic process.”*

We will explore what local authorities are already doing, and what more they might do, to support the local creative, cultural and heritage sector workforce in a series of Creative Workforce Workshops as part of this programme.

Also of interest in the context of the future of local cultural decision making, but not fully explored in the session, was the new Local Area Committee in Sheffield. This is a neighbourhood-based model to promote the involvement of local people in the democratic process

and to bring decision making closer to local people. This could be the type of collective decision making body which might be adapted to incorporate culture.

### **Strategies fall in and out of currency**

In-keeping with observations we made in our Insight Paper on [‘What do we mean by local decision making?’](#), policy churn at different levels of governance poses a risk to long-term strategies for place-based culture. As Professor Dan Ashton put it, cultural strategies can be subject to falling *“in and out of currency with a lot of strategic contexts”*.

In the discussion following the panel, the partners explored how places can sometimes be at risk of developing cultural strategies that mobilise the language of nationally determined directives that may not be best suited to addressing the policy priorities of their own areas. We know from our other work with local authorities that places can simply “regurgitate back” nationally determined priorities to arm’s length bodies and UK Government to secure funding, without necessarily buying into to the logics that sit behind the policies that have hasped the funding mechanism itself. As one discussant put: *“We don’t want it to look like we’re just chasing the money!”* This balance between national and local decision making in determining policy priorities is one that is likely to shift as devolution and increased local decision making increases.

## 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:

- Arts Council England, *What Works - Cultural Strategy Content Checklist*  
[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/2.WhatWorks-StrategyContentChecklistV1%20BRANDED\\_0.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/2.WhatWorks-StrategyContentChecklistV1%20BRANDED_0.pdf) (Accessed 04/04/2024)
- Ashton, Daniel and Bell, Makanani (2023) *Cultural strategies and futures*, Public Policy at Southampton ([doi:10.5258/SOTON/P11118](https://doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/P11118)).
- *Cultural Strategies in England Database*, University of Southampton,  
<https://culturalstrategies.soton.ac.uk/#/> (Accessed 04/04/2024).
- Local Government Association (2020), *Cultural strategy in a box*,  
[https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/12.24%20Cultural%20strategy%20in%20a%20box\\_04.2\\_2.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/12.24%20Cultural%20strategy%20in%20a%20box_04.2_2.pdf) (Accessed 04/04/2024).

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