

# Community Empowerment and Living Heritage in 2026

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# COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND LIVING HERITAGE IN 2026: COMMUNITY- OWNED CULTURE AND HERITAGE IN LOCAL GROWTH PLANS

LOCAL POLICY INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP HUB

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November 2025

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By Liam Smyth

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## Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	2
BACKGROUND CONTEXT .....	3
WHAT EACH INSTRUMENT ACTUALLY DOES .....	3
COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT BILL – DIRECTION OF TRAVEL .....	3
THE ICH CONVENTION – DUTIES THE UK MUST NOW IMPLEMENT .....	4
HOW THEY COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER .....	5
WHERE FRICTIONS OR RISKS COULD ARISE .....	8
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL POLICY, PUBLIC BODIES AND PLACE-BASED CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT .....	10
FOR STRATEGIC AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES (ESPECIALLY MAYORAL): .....	10
FOR CULTURE SECTOR ALBs AND FUNDERS: .....	12
FOR CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS: .....	14
CONCLUSION .....	16
REFERENCES:.....	18

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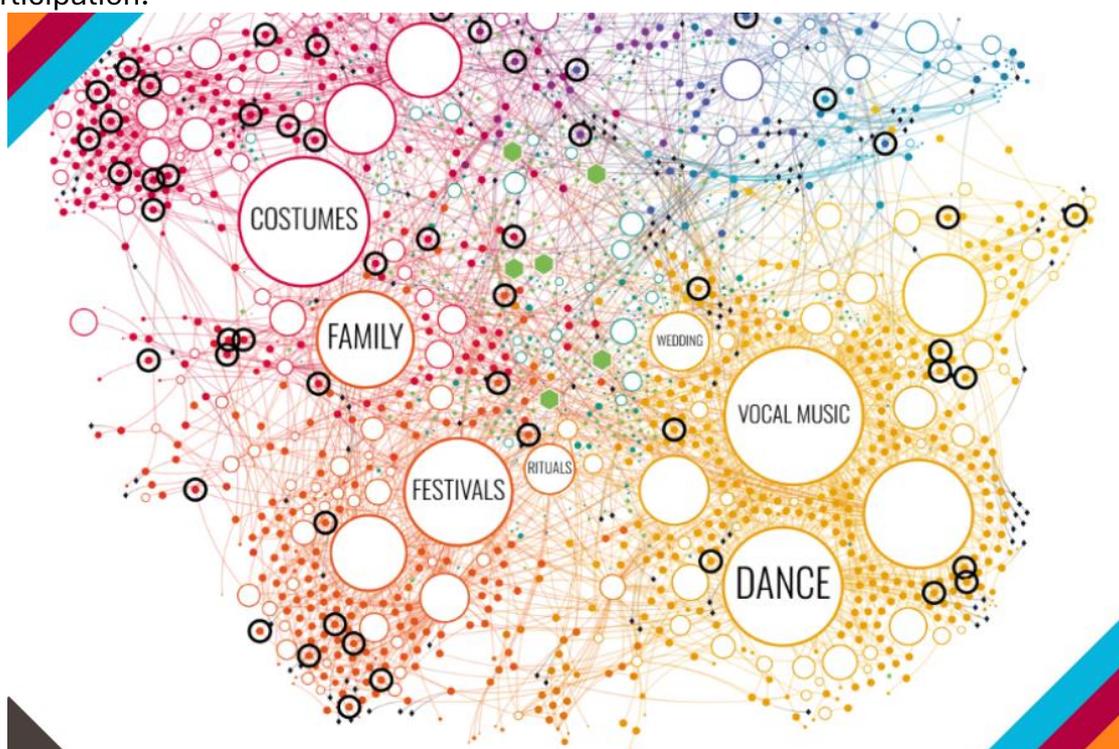
## Executive Summary

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill have the power to shift governance and decision-making powers to give communities and individuals greater control over local cultural matters.

ICH is different to tangible culture and heritage. It is alive, constantly evolving, and for communities to bear in perpetuity. By this virtue, the participation in, promotion and safeguarding of ICH can be a powerful narrative-building device for structuring community life and for strengthening our individual and collective understandings of belonging, empathy, shared values, continuity, and change. The ICH Convention pushes the UK to value, document, teach and safeguard living cultural practices with community leadership.

The Community Empowerment Bill gives English localities new governance, planning and property tools—neighbourhood participation duties, responsibility for developing strategic Growth Plans, stronger community powers over spaces, and clearer opportunities for community and cultural organisations to influence change. Fostering inclusive cultural narratives could lead to greater civic engagement and economic participation - shifting focus to local communities and identities while addressing regional inequalities.

Used together—and safeguarded against top-down, purely economic interpretations—they are mutually reinforcing: the Convention supplies the purpose and standards; the Bill supplies the levers to embed living heritage in local growth, planning, property, and participation.



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Screenshot from UNESCO’s interactive constellation of living heritage. Accessible here: <https://ich.unesco.org/dive/constellation/>

## Background context

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH was ratified by the UK Government in April 2024, while the Community Empowerment Bill went to second reading in the House of Commons on 2 September 2025. Both the Convention and the Bill will likely come into full effect at a similar time in late 2025, and early 2026 respectively.

Taken together, these seemingly unrelated policy frameworks could present a turning point for a richer, more pluralist understanding of hyperlocal culture and heritage in England.

This briefing paper provides an initial provocation as to whether 2026 could provide the strongest mandate yet for valuing community culture and heritage as a necessary precondition for local growth agendas in England.

## What each instrument actually does

### Community Empowerment Bill – direction of travel

The Local Government Association (2025) have given a comprehensive overview of their response to the Bill, including recommendations for culture and heritage to be better integrated. Summarised here are the areas of the Bill that hold the most relevance to the ICH Convention. The Community Empowerment Bill:

- Creates and standardises strategic authorities with mayors and places duties on them (Bill: Part. 6, Schedule. 1) - notably a statutory Local Growth Plan that sets long-term, locally led priorities that central government bodies must “have regard to” when agreed with the Secretary of State (Bill: Part. 6, Schedule. 19). This becomes the new strategic anchor for regional investment and planning.
- Requires effective neighbourhood governance in every local authority (Bill: Part. 3, Art. 58) - moving decisions closer to residents and empowering ward councillors.
- Replaces “right to bid” in the Localism Act (2011) with a stronger community “right to buy” (Bill: Part. 6, Schedule. 27), giving community groups right of first refusal on listed Assets of Community Value (ACVs), with more statutory guidance and doubling the amount of time for local groups to raise the money to make a

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purchase (from six months to 12).

- Strategic Authorities have responsibility for the encouragement of visitors and promotion of visitors (Bill: Part. 2, Art. 40).
- The role of strategic authorities will be to perform functions across the following areas of competence (Bill: Part. 1, Art. 2):
  - transport and local infrastructure
  - skills and employment support
  - housing and strategic planning
  - economic development and regeneration
  - environment and net zero
  - health, wellbeing and public service reform
  - public safety
- The Bill references a duty of regard to certain heritage assets in granting permission for planning (Bill, Schedule. 13) or determining whether a building or other land furthers cultural interests and thus could be defined as an ACV (Bill: Schedule. 27).
- Introduces a new Local Audit Office (Bill: Schedule 28) and tackles local governance issues; also prohibits certain rent review terms in business tenancies (relevant to cultural/creative SMEs and venues) (Bill: Schedule. 7A).

## The ICH Convention – duties the UK must now implement

The UK is a late adopter of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, becoming the 183rd nation to ratify the convention in April 2024 (House of Lords, 2024). In doing so, the UK became the first of the ‘core anglosphere’ nations (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and USA) to ratify the convention.

The convention defines Intangible cultural heritage as:

*“the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”*  
(Convention: Art 2.1)

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Ratifying the convention will require the UK to take the necessary measures to ensure the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage (Convention: Art. 11). “Safeguarding” means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage (Convention: Art. 2.3). Each state party that ratifies the convention agree to:

- Adopt policies that promote the function of ICH in society, and integrate the safeguarding of such heritage into planning programmes (Convention: Art. 13.a).
- Identify and define elements of ICH with the participation of communities (Convention: Art. 11.b) and establish and maintain inventories (Convention: Art. 12). Although UNESCO maintains a global list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, DCMS (2025) have set out a “lift not list” approach – refraining from nominating items from the UK to the global list for the first few years and instead focusing on the creation of a national database.
- Designate or establish one or more competent bodies for documenting, promoting and safeguarding ICH (Convention: Art. 13.b).
- Adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures to foster and strengthen institutions that support the transmission of ICH through forums and spaces and training in ICH safeguarding (Convention: Art. 13.d).
- Calls for education/access/awareness building, and for the widest possible participation of the communities who create and transmit ICH (Convention: Art. 14; 15).

## How they complement each other

### 1. Bottom-up participation gets a statutory home.

The Convention’s participation requirement (Convention: Arts. 11, 15) finds practical vehicles in the Bill’s neighbourhood governance duty (Bill: Part 3, Art. 58) and its expectation that decisions are taken closer to residents. This gives local authorities a lawful basis to embed community-owned culture and heritage into formal neighbourhood arrangements e.g. through mapping, co-design, or transmission spaces.

The Pride in Place strategy (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025) offers long-term investment for the nation’s most in-need neighbourhoods. It will hand decision-making power to neighbourhood review board in places selected for the programme (up to 250 places in receipt of £20m over 10 years) or the Impact Fund (up to 95 places in receipt of £1.5 million over two years) to invest in rebuilding and transforming

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their neighbourhoods. If coordinated effectively, the strategy provides a potential pathways to interweave the Bill and the Convention.

## 2. Strategic alignment and resourcing levers.

Local Growth Plans (Bill: Part. 6, Schedule. 19) provide a new, durable strategic document into which ICH safeguarding (Convention: Art. 2.3) can be written as an explicit growth and inclusion asset (contributing to key areas of competency like: skills, tourism, health/wellbeing, and social cohesion). Because specified central bodies must have regard to shared priorities, there's a route to align funding and programmes that offer the legal, technical, administrative and financial measures required to support ICH (Convention: Art. 13.d).

For instance, Strategic Authorities' requirement to deliver adult education provision (Schedule 10) could be leveraged by cross examining Heritage Crafts' (2025) 'Endangered skills register' to identify place-specific artisanal skills that require safeguarding. Although small scale, tailoring skills development to certain subregions could be important to place identity, local economies, environment, housing and tourism (e.g. diamond cutting in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter or Cornish Hedging, which contributes to the distinctive biodiversity and field-pattern landscape of Cornwall).



“Cornish Hedge” Image credit: Romfordian

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cornish\\_Hedge.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cornish_Hedge.jpg)

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Additionally, the extension of responsibility for Strategic Authorities to promote visitors (Bill: Part. 2, Art. 40), means that a unique regional identity, and a diversity of cultural expression, will create clearer competence for culture-led place propositions tied to living heritage (festivals, markets, craft districts). This is consistent with the Convention's aims to integrate safeguarding into planning and promote recognition (Convention: Art. 13.a). Meaningful exchanges between visitors and practitioners of intangible cultural heritage can offer authentic cultural experiences connected to place.

The Local Government Association (2025) has made a call for a statutory power to be given to strategic authorities to impose a levy on overnight stays in accommodation within their area, to be known as a “local tourism levy”. On 25 November 2025, parliament announced plans for Mayors in England to be given the power to raise revenue locally through a new overnight visitor levy and are consulting on whether to also grant this power to leaders of Foundation Strategic Authorities. Such measures could provide further sources of revenue to support ICH safeguarding and sustainable development of the local visitor economy.

### **3. Hardwiring space protection.**

The community right to buy (Bill: Part. 6, Schedule. 27) can help secure sites crucial for ICH transmission—workshops, rehearsal rooms, social clubs, community kitchens, studios—by giving local groups a genuine purchase window and support. This is exactly the sort of “forums and spaces” (Convention: Art. 13.d.i) the Convention urges States to create and strengthen.

The Bill's action on rent review terms in business tenancies (Bill: Schedule. 7A) should reduce some lease-related risks for micro-cultural enterprises and venues, dovetailing with ICH goals to keep practitioners and spaces viable locally.

### **4. Enhanced cultural devolution**

Although strategic authorities are currently not required to deliver a culture and heritage function, six out of 15 existing mayoral strategic authorities have adopted a standalone culture and heritage strategy or guiding framework and/or appointed a sector-specific head of department or director. A further seven have referenced culture and heritage in their growth or corporate strategy and have taken steps to establish a strong evidence base for the sector. From 2026-27 five mayoral strategic authorities will receive Integrated Settlements, giving nearly 40% of England greater freedom in choosing how best to spend money for their areas. This could enable culture-led place strategies and resource planning. Culture Commons (2024) have published recommendations for strategic authorities to take on more decision-making powers and responsibilities for the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in their areas.

There appears to be a correlation between the maturity of the mayoralty and likelihood to have adopted a standalone culture and heritage strategy (75% uptake from the first eight strategic authorities from 2000-2017). As devolution is rolled out further, and outside of major city-regions, it will be interesting to monitor these trends.

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## Where frictions or risks could arise

### 1. Statutory growth duties vs. community agency.

If applied narrowly as an economic tool, ICH (which stresses community-defined value, not just visitor footfall) risks being instrumentalised or side-lined. The convention encourages states to adopt the appropriate financial measures to strengthen their institutions in delivering participation, promotion and safeguarding of ICH, while the Bill decentralises statutory growth duty, with the Secretary of State retaining influence over Local Growth Plans.

### 2. Inventory ethics and access.

The Convention expects regularly updated inventories with due respect for customary practices and restricted access. Local open-data instincts or promotional pushes (encouragement of visitors) must be balanced with community consent and safeguarding of sensitive knowledge.

### 3. Capacity and audit pressures.

The Bill's local audit arrangements and performance scrutiny might incentivise short-term, countable outputs in favour of long-term ICH safeguarding (apprenticeship-style transmission, language revitalisation). Strategic authorities will need credible metrics for ICH outcomes that satisfy audit while respecting cultural processes.

### 4. Responsibility for the economic sustainability of ICH dimensions

DCMS (2025) were quick to point out that “ratifying does not automatically place any additional burden, duty, or obligation on any policy-maker or funder”. However, the House of Lords (2024) challenged this as “a misreading of the Convention” and pointed to Articles 13 – 15 in the convention, which call on each member state to adopt the appropriate financial measures aimed at strengthening institutions for training in the management of ICH, ensuring access and established documentation. Ratification of the ICH convention would seemingly strengthen calls for either new or reappropriated funding streams to be made available but it is as yet unclear where responsibility lies.

### 5. Fundraising vs. Over-commercialisation

While the ratification of ICH will likely encourage new fundraising endeavours to secure the necessary financial measures for sustainable practice, enterprising efforts could conflict with international standard setting instruments.

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The most recent intergovernmental committee for the safeguarding of ICH examined reports from state parties on the current status of ICH elements in need of urgent safeguarding (UNESCO, 2024). Of the 18 draft decisions by the committee, 13 contained explicit encouragement of state parties to either continue their fundraising efforts or develop synergies among various funding sources to sustain their ICH practice. However, three of these decisions were caveated with concerns that entrepreneurial practices could damage ICH elements. For example, Mongolia's 'Coaxing ritual for camels' were instructed to take care that local economic development strategies such as tourism-related performances do not risk over-commercialisation and prevent bearers and communities benefiting from their heritage.

While there should be expectations that ICH can draw new investment, fundraisers in the UK will need to strike a careful balance to ensure entrepreneurial activities do not risk decontextualising ICH practices.

## **6. Absence of a Culture and Heritage key competency**

The Bill outlines several key areas of competency for the alignment of Strategic Authority Growth Plans. However, The Local Government Association (2025) are seeking an amendment to see culture and heritage be recognised as an additional key competency that drives local economy, place-based development and wellbeing. If adopted, this amendment will see culture and heritage on an equal footing with the current key areas of competence.

Although the Bill does not include any explicit duties for culture and heritage, it extends strategic authorities' powers for encouraging tourism and promoting the culture and heritage sectors, aligning regional powers with those of principal councils.

## **7. Nature Recovery Strategies**

The English Devolution White Paper had promised to empower regional and local authorities to lead on Local Nature Recovery Strategies. However, concerns have been raised that the Community Empowerment Bill does not transfer statutory functions (Wildlife and Countryside Link, 2025).

Intangible Cultural Heritage is said to contribute to balanced ecosystems and foodways that support "diverse crops, plants and animals as well as fine-grained knowledge of their land and natural environment" (p. 3, UNESCO, 2015). In a UK context, reviving traditional ecological knowledge such as fishing practices, foraging, and preservation techniques could support local food identity, agrobiodiversity and sustainable livelihoods. Strengthening ecological landscapes through coppicing, wassailing and hedge-laying further promote habitat restoration, carbon storage and seasonal awareness.

Should future amendments to the Bill deepen devolution in protecting the natural environment, there is further crossover with the ICH convention to be explored. One of the three categories of ecosystem services that Dasgupta (2022) recognises in The Independent Review on the Economics of Biodiversity, commissioned by HM Treasury, is "Cultural Services": including artistic inspiration, protected areas and ICH activities.

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## Practical implications for local policy, public bodies and place-based cultural development

Strategic and local authorities, Arms-length bodies and funders, as well as cultural and community organisations, have a clear role to leverage these policies to mandate a deep understanding of the unique character of local communities and inform an evidence-based strategy for prosperity and inclusivity that has culture at its heart.

Arts Council England's (2024) Everyday Creativity report offered similar recommendations to policymakers, local government, groups and organisations to support people's creative lives. I have built on these recommendations to meet this moment of legislative change.

### For strategic and local authorities (especially mayoral):

Strategic Authorities are not obliged to take on responsibility for culture and heritage matters. However, for those that do, the UK's ratification of the ICH convention presents an opportunity for establishing a 'place identity'. Here are eight actions that strategic and local authorities can take:

#### **1. Embed explicit ICH safeguarding indicators in Local Growth Plans and neighbourhood charters.**

Include a Living Heritage chapter: (i) local ICH inventory commitments and methods; (ii) investment pipeline for safeguarding (spaces, training, apprenticeships, events); (iii) links to health, skills, visitor economy, and high streets.

#### **2. Consider establishing an ICH “competent body” function.**

The Convention anticipates one or more competent bodies compose small cross-cutting units (culture–education–economic development) to run inventories, ethics protocols, and practitioner support, and to service neighbourhood-level participation (Convention: Art.13.b). There is potential for this responsibility to be devolved to strategic authorities or even neighbourhood review boards.

#### **3. Design neighbourhood governance to co-produce ICH inventories.**

Use neighbourhood review boards to identify, validate and steward ICH elements (with community custodians), including safeguarding plans per dimension. Ensure consent pathways for sensitive practices.

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#### **4. Deploy the new Community Right to Buy as a cultural space tool.**

Pre-identify “at-risk” ICH transmission spaces (e.g., green or blue corridors, textile studios, social clubs, allotment kitchens, places of oral tradition) for ACV listing; prepare readiness funds and a standing vehicle (Community Interest Companies / Community Land Trusts) to exercise right of first refusal quickly.

#### **5. Use extended CA powers for visitor economy carefully.**

Under the key competency “Economic development and regeneration”, Strategic authorities are included in the LGA 1972 as having powers to encourage and promote visitors and provide facilities and entertainment (Part. 2, Art. 40).

Co-design visitor offers with communities to avoid extractive “spectacles.” Build consent-based programming, fair pay for practitioners, and interpretation that stresses living practice - not just performance – and encourages sustainable and authentic tourism.

#### **6. Procurement, grants, and leases.**

Align small-grant schemes, meanwhile-use policies, and Strategic / Local Authority property leases with ICH safeguarding aims; the business-tenancy reforms can be reflected in model lease terms for cultural occupiers.

#### **7. Education and capacity-building.**

Under the key competency “Skills and employment support”, Strategic authorities must secure the appropriate provision of education and training for those aged 19 or over (Bill: Schedule. 10).

Partner with Further / Higher Education, cultural organisations and communities on training pipelines (e.g., master-apprentice models; safeguarding of endangered craft/process knowledge), and include schools/youth provision.

#### **8. Monitoring that satisfies both audit and the Convention.**

Combine quantitative indicators (participation, space retention, apprentices trained, festival continuity) with community-validated qualitative outcomes; publish in Growth Plan progress reports and ICH periodic reporting.



“Cricket bat-making demonstration” Image credit: John Sutton  
<https://www.geograph.org.uk/profile/38492>

## For culture sector ALBs and funders:

The original English Devolution White Paper (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024) suggests that to deliver devolution effectively, government will lean on DCMS’ culture and heritage ALBs and “funding bodies like the Arts Council England, will be asked to reconfigure how they work so that the national and the local work seamlessly to benefit the public.” Concurrently, the Bill states that “relevant non-departmental public bodies must have regard to a shared local growth priority when... exercising, at the request of the authority, a function which could reasonably be expected to have an effect on that priority; preparing a bid for public funding for an activity the objectives of which align with that priority; preparing a statutory plan or strategy which relates to that priority.” (Art. 107M, 2).

ALBs and funders such as Arts Council England, Historic England, National Lottery Community Fund and National Lottery Heritage Fund have potential roles to play in the Bill and the Convention in the following ways:

### 1. Define and Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

Identify which arms-length bodies will act as or support the “competent bodies” for ICH.

### 2. Adapt Grant Programmes to Support ICH

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Ensure grants explicitly allow for intangible heritage practices (oral traditions, crafts, festivals, rituals) that might have less commercial/mass audience yield.

Adjust criteria to reward co-production and community agency, not only large scale or “high art” outputs.

Include support for community-led infrastructure and small-scale training / apprenticeship models.

Prepare to respond to the Bill’s Community Right to Buy / ACV by offering matching or bridging grants for communities acquiring heritage- or creativity-spaces. Encourage flexible use/leasing of premises owned by funders or partners for everyday heritage and creativity purposes.

### **3. Invest in Capacity Building and Inclusive Participation**

Fund training for local communities in documenting ICH, in safeguarding sensitive or sacred practices, and in negotiating space/use/asset control.

Support “connectors” or cultural brokers whose role is to link grassroots groups with funders, authorities, and technical support.

### **4. Embed ICH in Strategic Investment and Planning**

Ensure that funding strategies are aligned with Local Growth Plans once in place, so that funders coordinate with Strategic Authorities, Local Authorities, and neighbourhood governance structures.

Use ICH and everyday creativity as criteria in heritage, capital, regeneration, and cultural investment decisions.

### **5. Monitoring, Reporting and Accountability**

Require grant applicants to show how they will meet safeguarding and community consent obligations under the Convention.

### **6. Financial Sustainability and Long-Term Planning**

Recognise that ICH safeguarding is often long-term, incremental, with low commercial returns - funders should consider multi-year funding commitments.

Provide resources for maintenance of practices over time (not only “launch” or “festival” phases), including costs of practitioners, materials, spaces.

### **7. Policy Alignment and Advocacy**

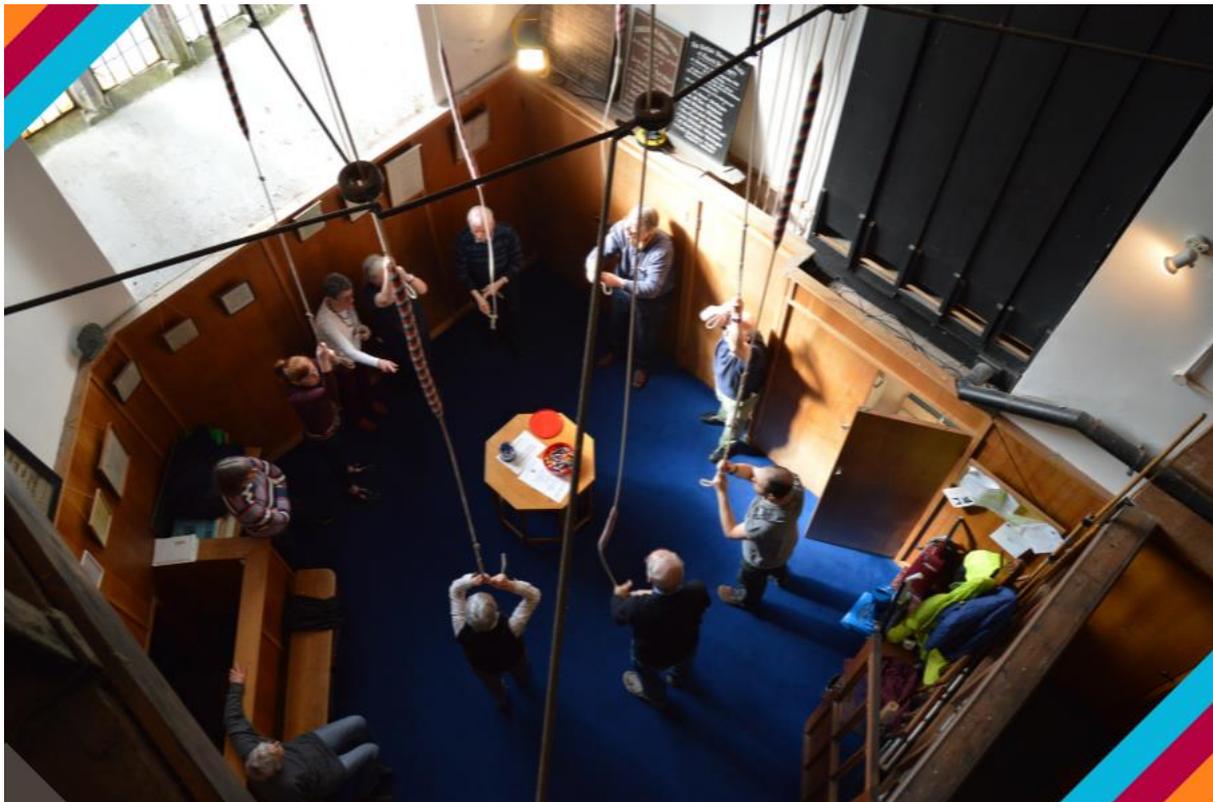
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Use their convening power to encourage Strategic and Local Authorities to include ICH in their Local Growth and neighbourhood governance frameworks.

Advocate for regulatory or policy changes that reduce barriers (e.g., planning, licensing, rates, business tenancy terms) for practitioners.

## 8. Ethical and Cultural Sensitivity

Ensure that funding mechanisms respect norms of confidentiality, consent, sacredness, proprietary culture, knowledge holders' rights.



“Bell ringing at Crosthwaite, Keswick” Image credit: [Dougsim](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bell_ringing_at_Crosthwaite,_Keswick.jpg)  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bell\\_ringing\\_at\\_Crosthwaite,\\_Keswick.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bell_ringing_at_Crosthwaite,_Keswick.jpg)

### For cultural and community organisations:

As LPIP Hub fellow Jessica Craig (2025) from Power to Change posits, Local Growth Plans should recognise the value of the social economy (community businesses, co-operatives, and social enterprises). Similarly, community and culture organisations will have a vital role to play in the participation, promotion and safeguarding of ICH.

#### 1. Get ACV-ready.

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Build or join a community vehicle that can receive assets; line up surveyors/valuers and bridging finance for the right-to-buy window.

## **2. Lead the inventory process.**

Prepare community-owned documentation, consent protocols, and safeguarding plans to plug directly into neighbourhood governance.

## **3. Propose Local Growth Plan projects.**

Pitch ICH-based skills, health, inclusion and tourism programmes as investable propositions aligned to the Plan's priorities.

## **4. Support outreach.**

Especially for communities often underrepresented in heritage funding or whose practices are less well known.

## **5. Ensure authenticity and community control.**

Avoid commodification or spectacle orientation that could distort practices.

## **6. Set up robust evaluation frameworks.**

Enable both quantitative measures (e.g., number of elements/dimensions recorded, number of practitioners supported, continuity of festivals), and qualitative measures (community satisfaction, intergenerational transmission, relevance and inclusivity).

## **7. Use this article and evidence base for fundraising and strategic programming.**

I will be pleased to be contacted if it helps to strengthen projects that embed community-owned culture and heritage in local growth plans.

For instance, support from the £5bn Pride in Place strategy explicitly references the ICH convention as a viable route for celebrating communities and heritage and could pave the way to trial many of the suggestions in this briefing paper (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025).



“Trade Union Banner at Burston Strike School Rally” Image credit: Leo Reynolds  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lwr/1304094555>

## Conclusion

Taken together, the ICH Convention and the Community Empowerment Bill create an unprecedented opportunity to place community-owned culture and heritage at the heart of England’s growth and governance model. The Bill introduces “Local Growth Plans”, and the Convention calls for state parties to “adopt a general policy aimed at promoting the function of the intangible cultural heritage in society, and at integrating the safeguarding of such heritage into planning programmes”. While each instrument carries risks of misinterpretation or dilution, their alignment offers a powerful framework for embedding local knowledge, skills, practices, and identities into the strategic levers of place-making, planning, and investment.

Devolution could of course go further, and lay out more duties and responsibilities that integrate culture and heritage in local policy contexts. However, if strategic and local authorities, ALBs and funders, and community and cultural organisations act with foresight, 2026 could mark the beginning of a more democratic, resilient, and pluralist approach to place based cultural development. To ensure communities themselves define value, safeguard, and generate prosperity from living heritage, the challenge remains to resist narrow, purely economic framings and further recognise ICH as an essential foundation for empathy, belonging, and everyday creativity.

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The decisions made in the first years of implementation will set the tone for decades and could have wide-reaching soft power implications. By embracing the cultural shift to community empowerment, policymakers and practitioners can ensure that living heritage thrives as both a driver and a measure of inclusive growth, wellbeing, and place identity in regions across England.

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