



AHRC Creative Communities

Devolution Policy Provocation Paper

Belonging



Introduction

This paper is part of a series of four Policy Provocation Papers produced by the [AHRC Creative Communities](#) programme.

It is informed by our [Policy Labs](#) – a series of creatively facilitated policy shops with governments, policy makers, cross-sector participants, communities and young people that took place across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Mayoral Authorities in England.

This paper presents policy solutions co-created with participants from our [North East Policy Lab](#) in Newcastle.

Its solution suggestions focus on ways that [Mayoral Authorities](#) can use their newly devolved culture budgets and powers to unlock inclusive innovation, equalise opportunity for access to culture and research and enhance belonging.

Helping to deliver the [Missions of the UK Government](#) and [opening up opportunity to all](#), the following recommendations present actionable propositions for devolved and central UK governments, Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) and cross-sector stakeholders.



Policy Mission: Belonging

Belonging

Societal Resilience | Community Relations | Cohesion
Civic Identity | Pride in Place

Opportunities

Social Mobility | Co-Creation | Placemaking
Equity | Diversity and Inclusion | Accessibility
Sport and Participation

Challenges

Socioeconomic Inclusion | Social Barriers
Funding | Geography of Devolution
Centralisation | Long-Term Engagement
Capacity

Policy Context: Belonging

[Equality of opportunity](#) and belonging in communities are central to the [Milestones for Labour's Mission-Led Government](#), while the Labour manifesto pledges equal [access to the arts and music](#) and recognises that culture is essential for children and young people to develop creativity and find their voice. The Culture Secretary has emphasised the [social and economic potential of DCMS sectors](#) for national renewal, announcing a £270 million [Arts Everywhere Fund](#) for arts venues, museums, libraries and the heritage sector to boost growth, create opportunities for young people to learn creative skills and help to grow people's sense of pride in where they live.

The [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government](#) is committed to devolution and restoring power to local communities and to tackling economic insecurity at work, at home, in communities and in access to public services. Through the [Plan for Neighbourhoods](#), a £1.5 billion programme will invest in seventy-five communities over the next ten years to revitalise local areas through the three goals of thriving places, stronger communities and taking back control.

The [English Devolution White Paper](#) sets out the Government's plans to widen and deepen devolution across England, providing Mayors with a range of new powers across strategic planning, housing, transport and skills. It outlines how the Government will rebuild and reform local government as the foundation for devolution and give communities stronger tools to shape the future of their local areas. The [English Devolution Bill](#), expected in 2026, will deliver these changes to the law to make the devolution framework a reality.

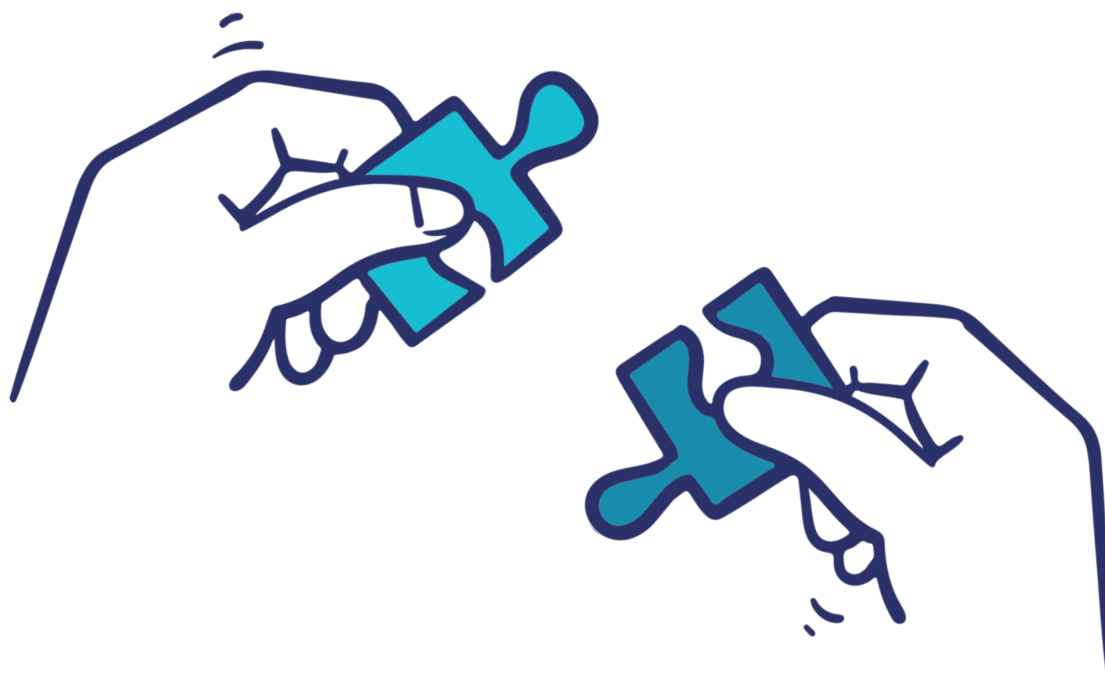
The Government plans to deliver growth through integrated settlements for Mayoral Authorities, with the [Autumn Budget 2024](#) implementing settlements for West Midlands and Greater Manchester from 2025-26, for North East, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and Liverpool City Region from 2026-27, and a commitment to explore this for Greater London Authority from 2026-27. Devolution has afforded the North East greater control over key drivers of local growth, including regeneration and affordable housing, local transport system and skills and employment support.



Investment in culture is a key priority across the North East, with the [North East Local Growth Plan](#) highlighting the strength and growth potential of the sector. [Mayor Kim McGuinness](#) and members of North East Combined Authority (North East CA) have given the go-ahead to [£25 million investment in the region's screen industry](#) and have committed to develop a new Centre for Writing and Publishing in Newcastle with North East CA, Newcastle City Council and Northumbria University; to grow the region's music industry; and to fund culture, events and infrastructure.

In the post-riots context, it is crucial to consider [loss of civic pride](#) experienced by some communities, linked to high street decline and the loss of traditional industries, and the value of [culture and heritage to community identity](#). The creation of spaces for communities, building meaningful relationships, prioritising accessible devolved funding, and integration of local authorities, Mayoral Authorities and national Government, must be considered in relation to rebuilding societal cohesion and belonging.

The [AHRC Creative Communities North East Policy Lab](#) identified opportunities for belonging, community cohesion and societal resilience in the North East.



Devolution Context: North East

The North East of England has two devolved areas: the [North East Combined Authority](#) (formerly the [North of Tyne Combined Authority](#), 2019-2024) and [Tees Valley Combined Authority](#).

The [North East Combined Authority](#) (North East CA) aims to connect communities, give people the skills to succeed and improve wellbeing for all - so that the North East is recognised as an outstanding place to live, work, visit and invest. The North East [Deeper Devolution Deal](#) 2024 provides North East CA with greater control over the key drivers of local growth, including regeneration and affordable housing, the local transport system, and skills and employment support. As part of these plans, North East CA will establish a Culture and Creative Sector Catalyst to attract investment and support growth in the cultural and creative sectors.

The [Tees Valley Combined Authority](#) (TVCA) [Devolution Deal](#) provides for the transfer of significant powers for employment and skills, transport, planning and investment from central Government to the Tees Valley. It enables TVCA to create an Investment Fund, through a 30-year initial allocation of funding for capital financing of at least £15 million a year. The [Tees Valley Combined Authority Strategic Economic Plan](#) identified “Digital and Creative” and “Culture and Leisure” as two of seven key sectors which are vital in boosting the regional economy and growing the range and number of jobs. To support these sectors, they have established a £20.5 million Growth Programme for the Creative and Visitor Economies. They also work as part of [The North East Screen Industries Partnership with North East CA](#) focused on enhancing the television and film industries offer following a £25 million commitment to the North East by the BBC.



Policy Solution Suggestions

* Invest in Infrastructure

Invest devolved spend in social and community infrastructure through brokering new cross-sector partnerships and investment instruments

▶ Key Takeaway

Incentivise cross-sectors stakeholders to catalyse and animate social and community infrastructure – the organisations, places and spaces that facilitate a shared community life – to bring people together and contribute to community-led devolution.

Many local communities have nowhere to meet and need shared spaces to thrive and connect. Cultural spaces such as theatres, galleries, libraries, community halls and sports centres can play an important function in the social infrastructure by building a network of spaces that bring people together.

Through cross-sector collaboration and a range of investment instruments to incentivise and protect culture investment in these venues – and by supporting community stewardship to make them more accessible – cultural spaces can become sites in which communities gather and talk to decision makers about delivering community-led devolution. Effective promotion to ensure engagement will support a greater sense of belonging in civil society and the development of new skills. It will also help to break down siloes between sectors, improve data sharing and lead to improved outcomes across local economies, health and democracy.

This solution suggestion should involve all levels of government – local, regional and national – as well as the voluntary sector, community organisations and cultural spaces, by working together in new policy units to ensure a co-ordinated and connected strategic response.



* Co-Created Culture Policy

Build community co-creation into devolved policy making: community-led devolution should be articulated through and enabled by an improved framework for civic engagement in devolved settings

► Key Takeaway

By harnessing culture and civic identity as levers to achieve slower, better relationship building across diverse groups in shared spaces we can grow outcome-led programmes that gather co-creation data to inform future devolved policy making.

It is essential to empower communities to find new ways to connect. Co-creation offers an inclusive approach that ensures parity of experience and allows voices to be heard that are usually missing from conversations.

There needs to be space for flexibility in approach, communication and support from Mayoral Authorities, central Government and other funders to taking different approaches to relationship-building with, and between, communities in devolved settings. Strategic delivery by local authorities, Mayoral Authorities and funders should prioritise the embedding of diverse leadership and representation on boards and panels.

A robust framework for cultural devolution would ensure new strategic working, creation of capacity and that learnings and best practice are shared across Mayoral Authorities and ALBs to overcome the risk of siloed thinking. This should include the creation of a Cultural Devolution Commission reporting to Mayors; a Head of Devolution at Arts Council England and named devolution leads within each culture ALB; and strategic working between Mayoral Authorities and ALBs to co-ordinate the piloting of devolved ALB responsibilities and budgets.

Devolved culture programmes should be outcome-led and co-created with local communities. Mayoral Authorities must evolve methods of gathering, sharing and using culture data, and ensure metrics and evaluation measures are in place, to remove barriers to inclusion and inform evidence-based policy making for devolved culture spend.



* Integrated Settlements Enhance Resilience

Innovative uses of Mayoral Authority integrated settlements and devolved funding can enable longer-term investment

► Key Takeaway

Mayoral Authorities should use funding from central Government to embed a next-step change to make long-term equitable, accessible and sustainable impacts on the multiplicity of outcomes that culture can deliver.

Integrated settlements support Mayoral Authorities to deliver growth. Delivery into culture and communities as part of this would strengthen local growth and place by supporting jobs, attracting private investment and enhancing the image of areas as places to live and work, to rebuild social cohesion and belonging. This should be a key part of each Mayoral Authority integrated settlement agreement.

Through integrated settlements and devolved funding, Mayoral Authorities are in a unique position to trailblaze new solutions to the recognised challenges of short-term, artificially competitive, one-size-fits-all funding opportunities that limit the development of culture. West Midlands and Greater Manchester can model best practice to this approach with the first integrated settlements. Through fully funded initiatives, full cost recovery, innovative smaller funding pots, seed funding, and more devolved R&D funding powers, new faces would be encouraged to engage – and it would rebalance which creative communities can access funding.

Mayoral Authorities without integrated settlements should consider innovative ways to use existing devolved funding to support culture and communities – demonstrating commitment to local growth and place and strengthening track record for future integrated settlement eligibility.

Mayoral Authorities could also use this devolved funding to help leverage private sector investment for culture, unlocking further opportunities for creative communities to realise their potential.

Barriers to diverse communities applying for funding would be lessened by simplifying funding processes, introducing funding flexibility (including removing deadlines on spending grants) and lottery funding approaches, simpler reporting requirements, accessible language, ensuring reach to small community groups, community representation on decision-making panels, and community consultation. These actions would result in a more inclusive, equitable and impactful funding landscape and greater sense of community belonging.



* Flipped Policy Powers

Knowledge-sharing pathways from community and cultural sectors to Mayoral Authorities can ensure local community needs are addressed in regional and central government policy making

► Key Takeaway

Mayoral Authorities should harness local knowledge as part of devolved policy making. Central Government should resource project teams to work across Mayoral Authorities and central Government, to create knowledge sharing that can feed into national policy.

Mayoral Authorities should work closely with both their communities and culture sector to better understand local needs and opportunities. Co-designing new knowledge-sharing pathways from communities to Mayoral Authorities will lever relationships with national policy makers to encourage tailored investment in belonging and culture for communities across the devolved geography.

This requires long-term funding and strategic planning at all levels of Government, in an approach spearheaded and resourced by central Government to ensure uptake, deliverability and scalability. This would enable meaningful engagement between local authorities and local communities and integrated project teams across Mayoral Authorities and central Government.

It should include two-way information sharing and impact measurement. It should embed secondment from the civil service into Mayoral Authorities to capture local knowledge mechanisms to change institutionalised ways of thinking and ensure provision tailored to the needs of local communities.



* New Stories of Place

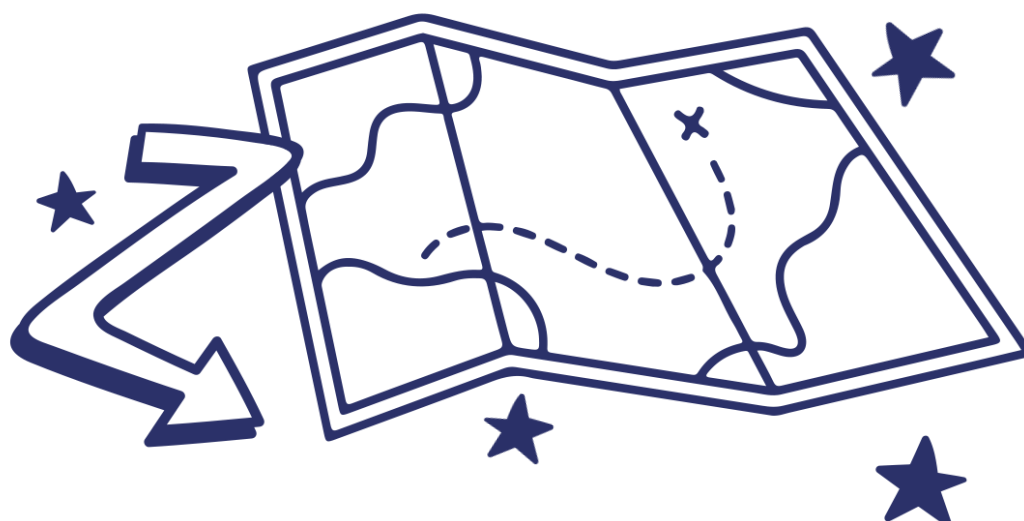
New participatory research approaches between culture organisations, creative practitioners, industry, communities and universities to tell new stories about devolved places

► Key Takeaway

Co-created approaches to culture and R&D funded through devolved culture investment would support Mayoral Authorities to enhance belonging, encourage community cohesion and strengthen social resilience, through new narratives of place and cultural identity.

Culture organisations and cultural and creative practitioners have key roles to play in communities, R&D and innovation through co-creating local narratives of cultural identity, belonging, and place. To enable new networks of creative practice to flourish in communities and R&D, culture organisations must consider redefining their approach to culture and support cultural and creative practitioner pathways. The development of new partnerships and ways of working between culture organisations, creative practitioners, creative industries, communities and universities would enable more inclusive and participatory research approaches and outputs – including story narratives through film.

Mayoral Authorities should unlock culture funding to develop these partnerships, with longer-term funding strategies in place to ensure sustainability, ongoing investment and engagement. This would encourage new and more inclusive mixed-media narratives of culture, with diverse voices included in storytelling about place, to empower communities to be involved from the ground up. This supports their mission to strengthen social resilience and belonging.





AHRC Creative Communities

[Creative Communities](#) is a major research programme funded by the [AHRC](#) and hosted by [Northumbria University](#), exploring how co-created culture can enhance belonging, address regional inequality, deliver devolution, and break down barriers to opportunity with communities in devolved settings across all four nations of the UK.

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Creative Communities is supported by a programme board at AHRC and an external Advisory Board. We are grateful for their generosity of time and ongoing feedback.

The team extends thanks to colleagues at the Darlington Economic Campus and to the diverse range of cross-sector participants at our North East Policy Lab, who made time to share their experiences, insights and knowledge. All freelancers who took part were offered compensation for their time. Their work has been invaluable in generating findings and recommendations.

Creative Communities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant Agreement No AH/X001555/1) and hosted at Northumbria University, Newcastle.