

AHRC Creative Communities

Devolution Policy Provocation Paper

Belonging and Community Resilience



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 with the Mayoral Authorities in England.

This paper presents policy solutions co-created with participants from our [Northern Ireland Policy Lab](#) in Belfast.

Its solution suggestions focus on ways that the [Northern Ireland Executive](#) can use their devolved culture powers and budgets to unlock inclusive innovation, equalise opportunity for access to culture and research and enhance belonging and community resilience.

The following recommendations aim to help deliver the [Programme for Government](#) in Northern Ireland and present actionable propositions for the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government in [Northern Ireland](#), Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) and cross-sector stakeholders.



Policy Mission: Belonging and Community Resilience

Belonging and Community Resilience

Societal Resilience | Civic Identity | **Collaboration**

Engagement and Participation | **Community Capacity**

Community Enrichment | **Pride in Place** | **Community Building**

Connected Communities | **Social Capital**

Opportunities

Reconciliation | **Connection** | **Challenging Power** | **Creative Economy**

Sense of Place | **History** | **Community Participation** | **Rootedness**

Resilience | **Inclusive Environment** | **Learning Through Creativity**

New Networks | **Breaking Down Barriers** | **DIY Culture** | **Identity**

Cultural Traditions | **Unexpected Art** | **Intergenerational Approach**

Embracing the New | **Encouraging Activism** | **Pushing Boundaries**

Challenges

Rural Access | **Preconceptions** | **Defining Art and Culture**

Structural Inequality | **Financial Barriers** | **Lack of Diversity**

Perceived "Value" of Culture | **Paying Creative Practitioners**

Marginalised Communities

Policy Context: Belonging and Community Resilience

In February 2025 the [Northern Ireland Executive](#) agreed a [Programme for Government 2024-2027](#). It outlines a set of priorities that aim to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has the best possible opportunities and to enable people to live with dignity in safe communities. The programme spans a range of commitments: from transforming public services that strengthen communities, to creating opportunities for businesses, entrepreneurs, communities, and innovators and improving infrastructure that connects communities, promotes inclusive economic growth and supports greater energy efficiency and affordability. Its three core missions are People, Planet and Prosperity, with a cross-cutting commitment to Peace.

Through social inclusion strategies, the [People Mission](#) aims to enable everyone in Northern Ireland to live a long, healthy and happy life, in a fair and inclusive society where no one is left behind - and in which everyone is made to feel welcome. Along with ongoing support for the [PEACE PLUS](#) programme and [Safer Communities](#), the Northern Ireland Executive has committed to refreshing the [Good Relations Programme](#), [Communities in Transition](#), [Together: Building a United Community](#), [Urban Villages](#), and [Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime](#) and the introduction of a strategic approach to [racial equality](#).

The Northern Ireland Minister for Communities has argued that [heritage and the arts contribute to quality of life](#). They are crucial cornerstones for communities in place-making and peace-building and function as key drivers for building belonging, community resilience and civic identity. The Northern Ireland Executive has announced a [Heritage, Culture and Creativity programme](#) to deliver a comprehensive collection of culture-related policies in Northern Ireland. This will address actions to conserve, protect and promote cultural heritage and historic environment and to encourage, support and develop the curiosity, active



engagement and creativity it helps to inspire. The programme builds on initial work by the Northern Ireland [Culture, Arts and Heritage Taskforce](#) and expands its focus to include policies on public libraries and museums through a new action-planning model.

The Northern Ireland Department for Communities' [Building Inclusive Communities Strategy 2020-2025](#) sets out a vision of “working together for a fair and inclusive society by transforming support for people, communities and places to improve lives and deliver generational change”. The strategy has core objectives of Supporting People, Building Communities, and Shaping Places – with cross-cutting themes on Anti-Poverty, Wellbeing and Inclusion, Sustainability and Inclusive Growth, and Agility and Innovation. Central to the strategy is the inclusion of people and communities, with the principles of co-production and co-design embedded from inception.

The Department for Communities is also developing an [Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy and Irish Language Strategy](#) that sets long-term goals for the languages in Northern Ireland over the next two decades. Expert panels have produced recommendation reports for what should be included in each language strategy. Co-Design Groups will consider these recommendations in the development of the draft strategies and facilitate focus groups to seek their views. The Cross-Departmental Working Group will consider the recommendations for the purposes of developing action plans for each draft strategy.



The Arts Council of Northern Ireland's [10-year Strategic Plan](#) provides the strategic direction for the development of the arts in Northern Ireland over the period 2024-34. It has the vision of “a society where all people can experience a thriving arts sector that is recognised as essential to creativity, well-being and social and economic prosperity”. The strategy has outcomes relating to belonging and community resilience, including that “more people from all backgrounds can enjoy arts experiences” and that access to arts experiences plays a crucial role in fostering creativity, personal development, and bringing communities together. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland views arts as a fundamental right and commits to breaking down barriers to ensure that the Northern Ireland arts sector is inclusive and fully reflects its society.

The creative industries are one of the fastest growing sectors in Northern Ireland and are worth [£1.2bn GVA](#). Responding to industry needs, [Future Screens Northern Ireland](#) – one of AHRC's [Creative Industries Clusters](#) – delivers expert technical skills, opportunity and growth across film and broadcast, animation, games and immersive technologies. It enables [industry and researchers to collaborate](#) to develop new products and experiences, delivering new jobs and boosting the local economy. Future Screens NI works with two higher education institutions in Northern Ireland – Ulster University and Queens University Belfast – as well as key industrial partners including NI Screen, BBC, Belfast City Council, Belfast Harbour, Causeway Enterprise Agency, Digital Catapult, Catalyst Inc., RTE, Games NI, Kainos, Invest NI, Techstart NI, Matrix and Tourism NI. The cluster has developed a working model for the creative industries in Northern Ireland that is focused on participation, cultural and economic growth and social and economic regeneration.

The Government of Ireland's [Shared Island initiative](#) aims to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding on the island. It engages with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future, working with the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government to address strategic challenges. The Shared Island Fund was announced in the 2021 Budget, with €500m in capital funding available between 2021-25 for investment in collaborative North/South projects.

In 2023, €7.4m from the Shared Island Fund was invested in [five new all-island arts investment projects](#). The Shared Island element of the Creative Ireland programme [Creative Communities on a Shared Island](#) aims to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding across the island of Ireland and engage with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future. It seeks to build on the experience and expertise of local authorities' existing strategic North-South and East-West (Ireland-Britain) ambitions and develop a collaborative network across the island of Ireland.

The [AHRC Creative Communities Northern Ireland Policy Lab](#) 2024 identified a series of co-created policy solution suggestions for addressing opportunities relating to belonging, community resilience and societal resilience in Northern Ireland.



Devolution Context: Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, some matters are still governed by the UK Government and the [Milestones for Mission-Led Government](#) are central to this. Northern Ireland is represented at the UK Parliament in Westminster by eighteen [Northern Ireland MPs](#). Northern Ireland also has its own devolved government with ninety [Members of the Legislative Assembly](#) (MLAs). There are five MLAs elected to each of the eighteen constituencies across Northern Ireland.

The [Northern Ireland Executive](#) has full [legislative powers](#) over a range of policy areas that are devolved from Westminster. These include culture, communities, enterprise, trade and investment, agriculture and rural development, education, health, policing and justice, environment and regional development.

Many socio-economic and place-based factors determine our experiences of belonging and civic identity. Devolved policy making can play a key role in unlocking the potential of arts, culture and the creative industries to address opportunities and challenges related to belonging and community resilience in Northern Ireland.



Policy Solution Suggestions

* Participatory Funding Models for Culture

Cross-sector, community-led decision making on devolved culture policy and spend to make priorities and parameters more representative

▶ Key Takeaway

There are significant barriers to community engagement with culture in Northern Ireland and in cultural policy making. Many creative practitioners also report feeling excluded from decision making processes about their sector.

Community and creative practitioner involvement is lacking in the current model of culture funding by the Northern Ireland Executive and culture funding institutions. This perpetuates inequality, creates contested questions about the value of culture and decimates diversity of voice and experience.

Experimenting with new cross-sector community-led participatory funding models would enable funding processes to become more transparent and relevant to citizens. Trialling a new model would give communities a voice in funding allocation, enable a more deliberative process for funding culture and create a place-informed portfolio for cultural delivery.

Through democratising funding decisions, this model could challenge perceptions of what cultural capital is, better inform areas of growth and opportunity for culture and support reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Resourcing and valuing grassroots creative practitioner involvement in this new process would create more equitable and resilient relationships between the creative sector and community culture.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland could trial this approach, working alongside local creative practitioners to identify funding priorities within a pilot location. This would create a more open culture funding landscape where decisions still align to Northern Ireland Executive priorities.



* Northern Ireland Culture Data Observatory

Invest in a new open access cultural policy evidence base to better inform the value of culture

▶ Key Takeaway

A Northern Ireland data observatory for culture would provide devolved policy makers with a vital new evidence base from Northern Ireland and for Northern Ireland that would better inform devolved decision making.

Evidence exists in different government departments and ALBs for culture and its impact on skills, health and wellbeing, civic identity and community resilience. Bringing national data together and connecting it with live cultural sector data through a pilot data observatory would create a sustainable, real-time tool for informing devolved cultural policy making.

The data observatory could accept, visualise and analyse data from a range of cultural sector stakeholders including universities, community organisations, tourism bodies, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, National Museums NI, and the Consumer Council.

The data observatory could usefully be developed in collaboration between DCMS, the Department of Communities and Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Department of Finance's [Innovation and Consultancy Services](#), using co-design methods to engage a range of cultural sector venues and organisations to benefit from its functions. Working with the Department for Communities on the new [Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme](#), the data observatory could catalyse the process of identifying what works and gaps in knowledge.



* Cultural Assembly Network

A People's Policy Assembly Network for (really) co-designing cultural policy

► Key Takeaway

Cultural policy making is a top-down system, that has recognised barriers to participation and inclusion. The mechanisms do not always exist for cross-sector communities or creative practitioners to feed into cultural policy decision making.

Inverting the current system and developing culture policy from the ground up, using co-design to involve local communities, would ensure long-term community engagement in cultural policy making. Strong solutions can be found from participatory approaches, by recognising that innovation comes from outside the system.

Arts Council of Northern Ireland could invest in sector-wide training in co-design, build new accountability structures around how decisions are made and facilitate physical spaces to host assemblies in local settings, in partnership with local councils. This would enable communities to come together to co-design cultural policy as part of a Northern Ireland Cultural Assembly Network.

This would amplify diverse voices and create a step-change in long-term community engagement in cultural policy making, promoting reconciliation, building good relations, and encouraging community resilience. Recommendations from this citizen engagement could then be fed back and actioned by ALBs as well as devolved and UK governments.



* Embed Creative Practice in Education

Prioritise creative practice in education and cultural policy making as a signature feature of Northern Ireland's approach to belonging and community resilience

▶ Key Takeaway

Creative practice in primary and secondary education and the role of creative practice within the culture sector and creative industries should be prioritised in devolved policy making.

This could be spearheaded by the Department of Education, working together with the Education Authority and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, to expand and grow the reach and impact of ACNI's [Creative Schools Programme](#).

Proposals for creative practice within education could be tested with groups of young people, as the voices of future creativity. Communities, which are integral to culture and heritage, should also be empowered – as cultural engagement is at risk of being lost due to challenges embedded in education systems and other barriers.

Centralising creative practice could promote arts and culture as relevant to everybody, including by measuring success, through providing adequate funding, reducing barriers to participation, raising awareness, creating opportunities in rural areas, creating accessible cultural places and spaces, engaging key stakeholders and tackling the potential lack of diversity of audiences.





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Humanities
Research Council**

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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