

AHRC Creative Communities

Devolution Policy Provocation Paper *Environment*



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 twelve Mayoral Authorities in England.

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

Its solution suggestions focus on ways that the Welsh Government can use their devolved culture and environment policy powers to unlock inclusive innovation, equalise opportunity for access to culture and research and enhance belonging through cross-sector delivery.

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



Policy Mission: Environment

Environment and Climate Change

Net Zero | **Recycling and Waste** | **Flooding** | **Pollution**
Energy | **Water** | **Sustainability** | **Climate Justice**
Protecting Environmental Futures

Opportunities

Power of Story | **Community Solutions** | **Renewables**
Inclusivity | **Community and University Partnerships**
Young Changemakers | **National Identity** | **Collaboration**
Well-being of Future Generations Act | **Creative Engagements**
History and Culture | **Belonging** | **Welsh Language**
Small Nation, High Speed | **Digital Democratisation**

Challenges

Short-Term Decisions | **Undervaluing Culture** | **Greenwashing**
Lack of Systemic Thinking | **Policy Making Diversity Need**
Patchwork Funding | **Lack of Community Meeting Places**
Evidence Doesn't Speak for Itself | **Competing Priorities**
Hierarchical Structures | **Siloes** | **Measuring Value and Impact**
Disconnect from Local Stories | **Private Businesses**
Engagement in Policy Making Process | **Short-Term ROI**

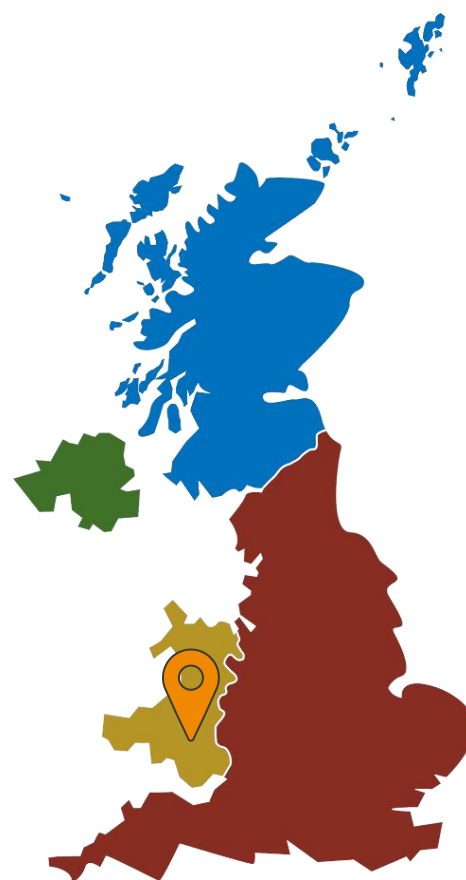
Policy Context: Environment

Since [declaring a climate emergency in 2019](#), Wales has legislated to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2050. [Net Zero Wales](#) sets an ambition for the Welsh public sector to collectively reach net zero by 2030. The [Climate Adaptation Strategy for Wales](#) (2024) addresses climate adaptation and resilience in Wales, with all parts of Government working together: from protecting vulnerable transport networks from extreme weather conditions to working with the UK Government to improve food security. As part of its net zero commitments, Welsh Government published the [Heat Strategy for Wales](#) (2024) on achieving net zero heat in Wales by 2050 across all sectors. Publicly owned renewable energy developer for Wales, [Trydan Gwyrdd Cymru](#) has been established to accelerate the development of renewable energy projects, particularly onshore wind.

The [Environment \(Wales\) Act](#) (2016) requires that public authorities must seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity and, in so doing, promote the resilience of ecosystems to ensure that the benefits they provide for social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing are available now and for future generations. The [Planning \(Wales\) Act](#) (2015) makes provision for sustainable development in the exercise of functions relating to development planning and applications for planning permission.

[The Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act](#) (2015) requires public bodies to think about the long-term impact of their decisions: to work with people, communities and each other and to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. One of the central goals of the Act is to create “A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language”, and to “encourage people to participate in the arts and sport and recreation.”

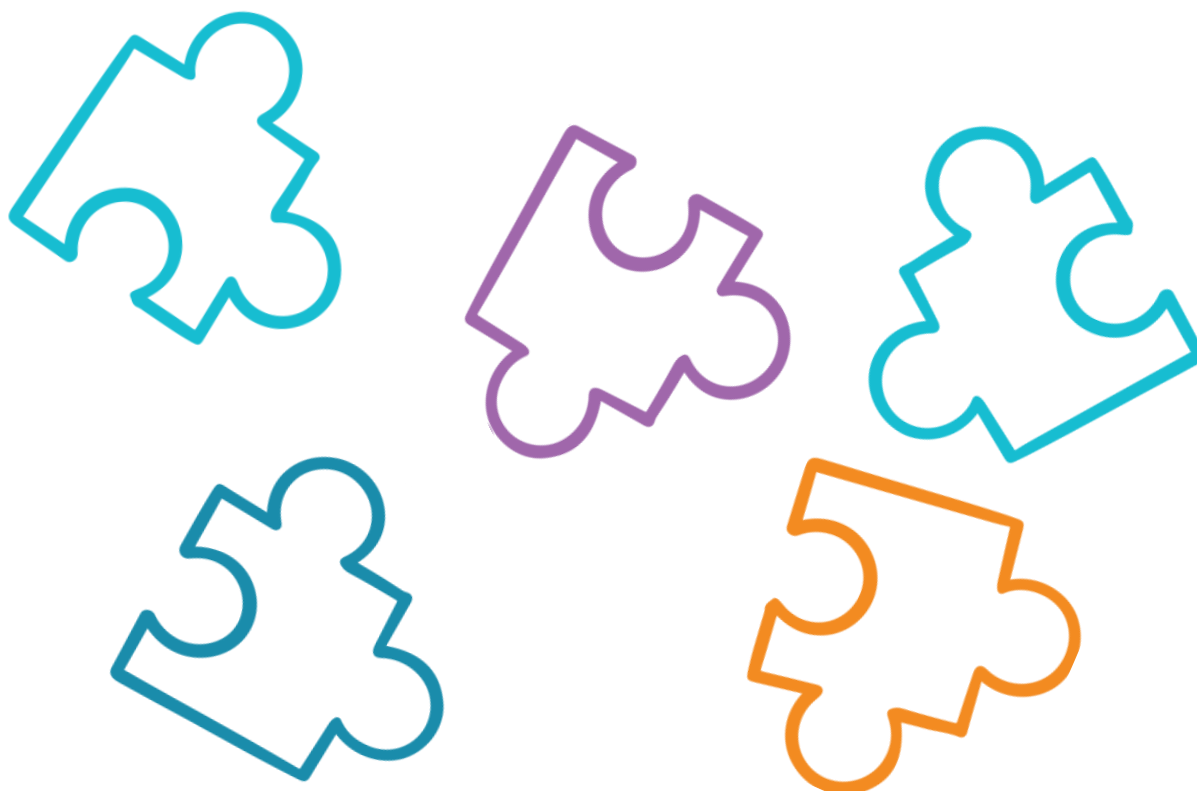
The Programme for Government commits to developing a new [culture strategy for Wales](#), guided by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. [Consultation](#) took place in 2024 on [Priorities for Culture in Wales](#) (2024 – 2030), with headline priorities being: Culture brings us together; A nation of culture; Culture is resilient and sustainable. The outcome of the Arts Council of Wales [Strategic Plan](#) is the arts



having a positive impact on the wellbeing of people in Wales. It is closely informed by the [Well-being of Future Generations Act](#) and the principles of the [Welsh Government's Cultural Contract](#) programme for Government. Its principles are designed to reflect aspects of the sector that need positive change, action and evolution. These are: Creativity, Widening Engagement, Welsh Language, Climate Justice, Nurturing Talent, and Transformation. Arts Council of Wales have developed a [Plan for Climate Justice and the Arts](#), that sets out how they will work with the arts sector to use arts and culture to engage with climate justice.

Wales has four [UNESCO World Heritage Sites](#) which recognise its human history, industrial heritage and beautiful landscapes. This title is reserved for the planet's most significant landmarks as places of outstanding value to be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy. The [Historic Environment \(Wales\) Act \(2023\)](#) brings together already-existing legislation on the protection of monuments, buildings and conservation areas to ensure that the historic environment can continue to contribute to the wellbeing of Wales and its people. The [Placemaking Wales Charter](#) has been developed by Welsh Government and the Design Commission for Wales in collaboration with the Placemaking Wales Partnership to strengthen the focus on placemaking in policy and practice in Wales.

The [AHRC Creative Communities Wales Policy Lab 2024](#) identified opportunities for culture to create a stronger, fairer economy and society through delivering cross-sector into environment and net zero targets in Wales.



Devolution Context: Wales

Some matters in Wales are governed by the UK Government and the [Milestones for Mission-Led Government](#) are central to this. As such, there are [32 Members](#) of the UK Parliament elected from all constituencies in Wales. Wales also has its own devolved government with [60 Members](#) of the Senedd.

The devolved [Welsh Government](#) is responsible for key areas of public life including education, health, local government, transport, planning, economic development, social services, culture, Welsh language, environment and agriculture and rural affairs.

Many political, social, and economic factors are involved in the protection and care of the environment. Devolved policy making plays a key role in unlocking the potential of arts, culture, and the creative industries to address opportunities and challenges arising from environmental contexts in Wales.



Policy Solution Suggestions

* Welsh Net Zero Investment Vehicle

A dedicated investment vehicle to fund new cultural interventions that will promote climate awareness in organisational practice and co-create a Net Zero future for Wales

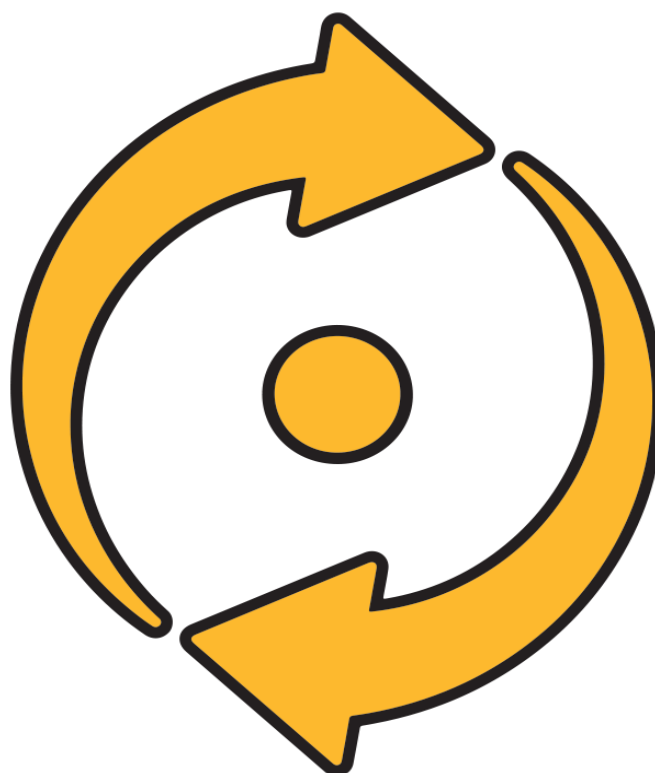
▶ Key Takeaway

Create an investment vehicle to fund new environmental projects in the culture sector in Wales.

The investment vehicle would use devolved evidence and practice-based learning to ensure robust future return on investment for new interventions.

Such a vehicle could ensure diverse evidence bases and lived experience of communities factored into decision making. The investment vehicle would be supported by membership of multi-level actors including local authorities and councils, local authority leaders and mayors, devolved Welsh Government, funders, voluntary sector and NGOs to resolve challenges in co-operation.

Public consultation could be usefully employed to shape the role, remit and core purpose and to ensure feasibility and accountability.



* Cultural Data Observatory

Welsh cultural data observatory to better connect culture and environment data

► Key Takeaway

Stakeholders face persistent difficulties in producing and finding data on the value of culture and cultural interventions about the environment.

Welsh Government and Arts Council of Wales (ACW) should invest in a new open access data observatory platform, in line with commitment to sustainability and long-term approach to culture research in [Priorities for Culture in Wales 2024-30](#) and the climate justice principle of the ACW [Strategic Plan 2024-34](#).

A new open access data observatory platform for community-focused programmes would build connections between existing groups, networks and evidence bases, and map networks, investments and data to address current need. This would help build a sustainable evidence base for devolved policy making that is created locally with global accessibility.

Mobilising existing culture and community groups and networks to share data and learning through the platform would grow the evidence base, co-creating an inclusive and collaborative data observatory space.

Learnings from contemporary data observatory projects, such as [Culture Connect Data Observatory](#) in North East England, could support the development of the new data observatory.



* Environmental Assembly Network

People's Assembly Network to enshrine community engagement and enable community agency in environmental policy making

► Key Takeaway

Top-down policy development, where place-based ideas go out to consultation, can produce limited community engagement. Communities should be resourced to engage constructively in environmental policy making through grassroots long-term engagement that counters short-term initiatives and patchwork funding.

A People's Assembly Network resourced by Welsh Government and local authorities would provide resource to enable long-term independent community engagement in policy making. This should be structured to enable community recommendations to be fed back to and actioned by Welsh Government culture and environment divisions.

Accessibility and equality should be at the heart of a people's assembly network on the environment, with the inclusion of young people, diverse groups and geographically broad voices. Privilege and lack of ability to commit to voluntary roles might have historically disadvantaged some communities from taking part, so frameworks must be built into the new network to explicitly enable participation.

Building on the ethos of the [Well-Being of Future Generations Act](#) and applying its [Sustainable Development Principle](#) ways of working, this bottom-up strategic approach to policy making should be explored as a model of best practice. It would also build on the Arts Council of Wales [Plan for Climate Justice and the Arts](#), which creates opportunities for artists and communities to take part in conversations about climate justice issues.



* Catalyse Community Ownership

Communities should be empowered to take control of empty buildings for community cultural projects with environmental focus

► Key Takeaway

Communities have a lack of available places and spaces to meet. Communities should be empowered to take control of vacant spaces so they can be mobilised for cultural engagement activities with environmental focus, using vacant buildings for public good.

The [Institute of Welsh Affairs](#) notes that in Wales there are “few limited mechanisms for community control” beyond those provided by Community Asset Transfers. There is also “no statutory right for communities in Wales to buy land or assets as in Scotland, and no right to bid, challenge, or build as in England”. The Welsh Government supports [communities taking control of assets](#) and accepts in principle 15 of the 16 recommendations made by the 2022 [Local Government and Housing Committee Report on Community Assets](#).

Welsh Government should catalyse the establishment of the commission to stimulate innovative thinking on community ownership of land and assets in Wales and the power of communities to take ownership of anchor buildings in their local environment.



* New Stories About Nature

Communications campaign on Welsh environmental policy challenges and opportunities told through the cultural assets of the country

► Key Takeaway

A focused communication campaign strategy by Welsh Government – that aims to capture key environmental policy issues and their value to communities across the country – would target public awareness and tourism.

Building on the [Climate Adaptation Strategy for Wales](#) and [Climate Action Wales Public Engagement Strategy](#), a strategic communications campaign would support policy announcements on environment and climate change, better represent lived experience and hyperlocal community issues and demonstrate how the environment can affect people's day-to-day lives, health, cultural experiences and jobs.

This new narrative should be co-developed with communities to ensure cross-sector investment and co-authorship and aim to (re)present environmental matters as everyone's challenge, and everyone's opportunity.





**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



**Arts and
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.

Authors: Helen Apsey, Policy Lead | Email: helen.apsey@northumbria.ac.uk
Prof Katy Shaw, Director | Email: katy3.shaw@northumbria.ac.uk

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 the diverse range of cross-sector participants at our Wales 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.