

# AHRC Creative Communities: Co-Lab Policy Network Awards 2026 Applicant Guide

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## About the Co-Lab Policy Network Awards

The 2026 Co-Lab Policy Network Awards will create new capacity for cross-sector collaborative exchange of policy ideas relating to **culture and devolution** (regional and national) in the context of the [UK Government Missions](#).

Building on the AHRC Creative Communities [Policy Labs](#) and [Policy Sprints](#), the AHRC Creative Communities Co-Lab Policy Network Awards offer **seed funds for new cross-sector cultural policy networks in devolved nations and regions** of the UK. Award activity should take place from January to December 2026.

A **rapid response application process** and assessment format aims to **build capacity and catalyse confidence in policy making** for cross-sector partners working with HEIs and IROs to deliver culture in a context of devolution.

Co-Lab Policy Network proposals should address culture and R&D in the context of nationally and regionally devolved policy making. Proposals should focus on one or more of the **UK Government Missions**:

- **Belonging**
- **Equalising Opportunity**
- **Growth**
- **Regional Inequality**

**Funding of up to £20k will be awarded at 100% for each Co-Lab Policy Network.**

Four Co-Lab Policy Networks will be funded: **one in each nation of the UK**. The applicant HEI/IRO must be based in a devolved nation (Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) or a [devolved Mayoral region](#) of England.

Co-Lab Policy Networks can operate **digitally, in person and/or hybrid** and must demonstrate reach and inclusive engagement across the devolved nation or region in membership and activities.

Co-Lab Policy Network teams should bring together **at least four partner organisations**: one HEI/IRO and at least three non-academic partners. The range of partners should clearly demonstrate the devolved national or regional reach of the network.

Co-Lab Policy Networks should commit to hosting **at least four network events** across the 12-month duration of the award. Each event must facilitate engagement with and between cross-sector non-academic partners.

## Who Can Apply:

Each Co-Lab Policy Network application must have a named Project Lead (PL). The Project Lead is the individual responsible for the intellectual leadership and overall management of the Co-Lab Policy Network Award. They will be the main point of contact throughout the application and project.

To be eligible to apply for this funding, the PL of the Co-Lab Policy Network must be an employee at a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) or Independent Research Organisation (IRO).

**The applicant HEI/ IRO must be based in a devolved nation (Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) or a [devolved Mayoral region](#) of England, that has both a Mayor and devolution agreement in place from May 2025.**

The Administrative Lead for the project is the individual responsible for overseeing the onboarding of the Co-Lab Policy Network Award at the host HEI or IRO. They should ensure the application is complete and accurate before submission, and manage the project's financial and logistical aspects if it is successful.

**Applications must** name specific non-HEI or non-IRO partners/ partner organisations in the application.

Full consent of all named partners must be evidenced in the application.

## How To Apply:

Applications must be submitted through an online application portal hosted by Gecko forms, accessible via the [AHRC Creative Communities](#) website.

Applicants must submit a **written application** consisting of three written responses to three questions (max total 1000 words).

Please refer to the Co-Lab Policy Network Awards Applicant Guide for full details of the application process and assessment criteria.

## About AHRC Creative Communities

The [AHRC Creative Communities programme](#) explores the transformative power of cross-sector collaboration for culture and inclusive innovation in the policy contexts of the three devolved nations and devolved Mayoral regions of the UK. Hosted by Northumbria University, the programme is developing a new evidence base on how and why culture can address **growth, regional inequality**, enhance **belonging** and **equalise opportunity** using culture-led R&D.

### Project Budget

**Funding of up to £20k will be awarded** by Northumbria University to the successful HEI/IRO.

Applications must contain an indicative budget outlining planned spend on events and activities, workshops or seminars only.

Applications should be specific about the details of the proposed activities. You are encouraged to request and justify costs for activities that best meet the aims of your project. We will fund costs which are in line with AHRC policies.

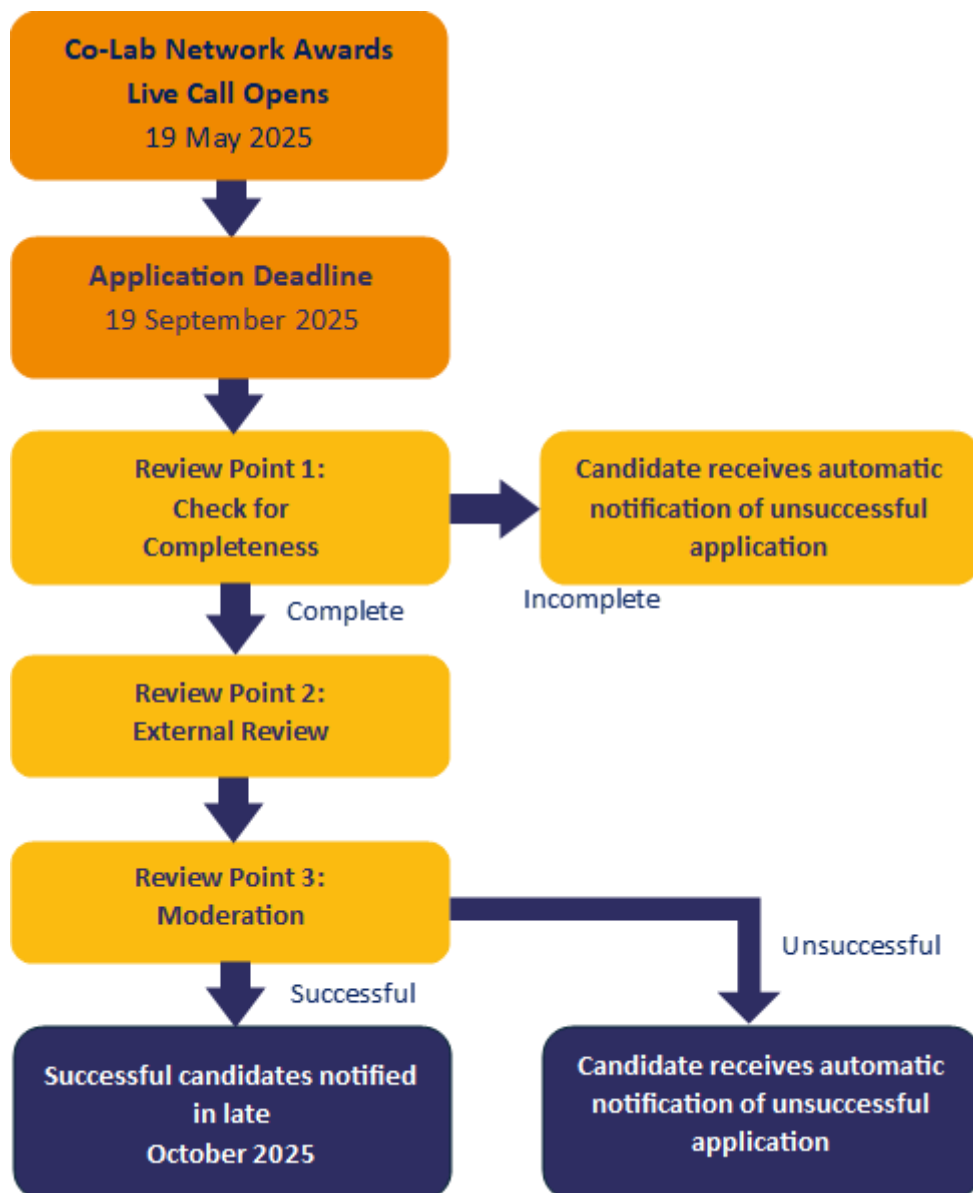
**HEI/IRO staff costs are not eligible for funding.**

### Application Process

To apply for this funding opportunity, you must submit a **full written** application consisting of three written responses to three questions (max total 1000-words).

### Key Dates

19 May 2025	Live Call published for Co-Lab Policy Network Awards
19 September 2025	Application deadline
October 2025	Award notifications
January – December 2026	UK Co-Lab Policy Networks four nation network events
December 2026	UK Co-Lab Policy Networks four nation showcase
March 2027	UK Co-Lab Policy Networks four nation Policy Priority Papers Launch



## Introduction

### AHRC Creative Communities Programme

The [AHRC Creative Communities programme](#) explores the transformative power of cross-sector collaboration for culture and inclusive innovation in the policy contexts in of the three devolved nations and fourteen Mayoral regions in England. Hosted by Northumbria University, the programme is developing a new evidence base on how and why culture can address **growth, regional inequality**, enhance **belonging** and **equalise opportunity** using culture-led R&D.

Creative Communities aims to explore **how and why engaging cross-sector partners in research, and communities as research partners, can enhance the quality, resilience, and sustainability of our research ecosystem.**

The programme is shifting research funding and power back into devolved nations and regions by harnessing devolved culture policy and trailblazer deals to help cross-sector communities take back control of their own culture and innovation story.

It takes an integrated approach to contextualise and catalyse the co-creation of R&D with communities, government, and the third and private sector using a new evidence base to identify capacity, reach, best practice, and potential for scale up.

### What is a Creative Community?

A Creative Community describes collaborative cross-sector R&D that brings together diverse partners from community, government, education, arm's length, third and private sector organisations in a place-based collaboration that delivers new culture, creates value and generates economic, social and cultural spill overs both for the partners and wider society. As a delivery mechanism for R&D, Creative Communities are characterised by the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders and sectors.

Together they work to build a cooperation network for skills exchange, spreading models of partnership working into other professional environments. Creative Communities can involve a combination of:

- Community groups/Citizen Researchers
- HEIs and IROs with academic experts and funded research e.g. UKRI
- Central Government (especially DCMS/DLUHC/BEIS/DfE) and Local Authorities and Combined Authorities and arm's length bodies (e.g. ACE)
- Third Sector (Trusts/Foundations/Charities)
- Private Sector

By placing communities at the heart of the design, implementation and evaluation of culture, the Creative Community model facilitates an adaptive and flexible framework within which public, private and civil society organisations can participate together.

This formula frames an indicative example of partners in a creative community, but the specific types of activity within these formulas are diverse and fluid in practice. The delivery model focuses on the ways in which engaging communities and third and private sector partners in the entirety of the research cycle can bring new skills, experience, knowledge and networks to R&D and maximise our resource by working more closely together around shared challenges.

### Research So Far

Since 2022 the AHRC Creative Communities programme has generated evidence, shared learning and enabled new collaborations across sectors and with communities to create new cultural R&D in all four nations of the UK. In May 2023 we delivered '[By All, For All: The Power of Partnerships](#)', a deep dive report drawing on more than a decade of AHRC-funded community and cross-sector collaborative R&D to explore how we can unlock the potential of engaging communities and partners as researchers.

This was followed by the [Community Innovation Practitioner \(CIP\) Pilot 2023/2024](#), awarding £290k funding to five CIPs from across the four nations of the UK to capture co-creation processes in collaborative cross-sector research. AHRC Creative Communities also hosted a series [Policy Labs](#) across the UK, using experimental creative facilitation methodologies to harness co-creation processes to unite a diverse range of cross-sector stakeholders around a series of key challenge areas in RD&I with the aim of generating new policy solution suggestions. The Policy Labs culminated in a UK-wide series of [Policy Sprints](#) presenting policy recommendations to UK and devolved governments.

### Programme Aims

From the territorial grounding of its initial deep dive report (2023) to the innovation communities identified by its second phase case studies, through to the policy and strategy recommendations for making choices on future investment, the programme aims to identify priorities, growth potential and resources available to examine how and why Creative Communities build new knowledge systems using culture in the twenty-first century.

By focusing on collaborative R&D, the programme puts people in devolved contexts at the centre of the innovation system, identifying the needs of the community, empowering stakeholders to get involved, and building skills, capacity, and consensus. This method reflects the conceptualisation of Creative Communities as a change-making mechanism and provides space to establish a knowledge base, an opportunity to think, discuss and collaborate and then to share learning and network policy formation across the very different policy landscapes that comprise the devolved nations and regions of the UK today.

The programme phases are:

1. **Create 2022:** determining the position of, and understanding what brings creative communities together;
2. **Act 2023:** consulting and creating new knowledge through a process of shared ownership and dialogue with researchers, communities, and partners;
3. **Share 2024:** co-producing policy, communicating and consulting actions, interventions, solutions, and benefits with all stakeholders, regionally and nationally;
4. **Scale 2025-7:** grow and stretch the reach and impact of programme interventions through actioning the learning generated from the evidence base and generate new opportunities to connect cross-sector communities in devolved contexts.

## Co-Lab Policy Network Awards 2026

### Context

In 2024, AHRC Creative Communities ran a series of four-nation [Policy Labs](#) with cross-sector participants through creative facilitation, to identify opportunities and challenges and co-create policy solution suggestions, using culture as a lever to unlock the potential of devolution. The Policy Labs culminated in a UK-wide series of [Policy Sprints](#) presenting policy recommendations to UK and devolved governments.

The four nations AHRC Creative Communities Policy Labs and Policy Sprints made visible the value of culture and R&D to central and devolved governments, Local Authorities (LAs) and Mayoral Authorities (MAs), and the third and private sector. They created an agile, resilient and sustainable ecosystem of R&D through strategic development, and a new knowledge base for devolved policy making at regional and national levels.

The Co-Lab Policy Network Awards will build on the platform created, and provocation papers produced, by the Policy Labs and Policy Sprints, developing learning and building a new evidence base for policy makers in UK devolution. The Co-Lab Policy Network Awards will grow the reach and impact of programme interventions through actioning learnings generated from this evidence base. They will generate new opportunities to connect cross-sector communities in devolved contexts and develop learning and relationships with policy makers across the four nations.

### Missions

The Government's overarching [Missions](#) - on [growing the economy](#), [an NHS fit for the future](#), [safer streets](#), [opportunity for all](#), and [making Britain a clean energy superpower](#) - aim to support a decade of national renewal, build on the foundations of a stable economy, secure borders and national security. They focus on stretch goals that will make the biggest difference to people's lives. R&D is critical in responding to these Missions, by producing new knowledge and finding innovative solutions that enable

Government to meet its objectives and harness the powers of devolution.

The Co-Lab Policy Networks will catalyse cross-sector communities in devolved contexts, developing learning and relationships with policy makers across the four nations into a UK-wide Co-Lab Policy Network of self-facilitating cross-sector collaborative cultural policy making.

Each Co-Lab Policy Network will mobilise cross-sector collaboration to better grow new culture and R&D and delivering to key UK Government Missions of **growth, regional inequality, belonging, and equalising opportunity, within a context of national and regional devolution.**

The programme will engage in sustained listening to identify opportunities for growth and scalable models of co-creation and community partnership working in R&D, as well as challenges and barriers.

### Policy Impact

The learning from the Co-Lab Policy Networks and resultant 2027 Policy Priority Papers will inform programme policy recommendations to regional local and combined authorities and to national governments and funders.

### Required Outputs

#### Policy Priority Paper

Each Co-Lab Policy Network will produce a Policy Priority Paper in January 2027 (publication in March 2027) that will share policy outcomes, learnings and impacts from the Co-Lab Policy Network process and make policy recommendations to relevant policymakers and governing bodies, as well as other key stakeholders within the area of research interest.

The four nation Policy Priority Papers will be published by AHRC Creative Communities in March 2027.

#### Co-Lab Policy Network Event

All four Co-Lab Policy Networks will come together to share learnings at a virtual network event in December 2026. This final event will enable network leads and partners to present the policy outcomes, learnings and impacts of each network.

The outputs will be created with regular consultation and feedback from the Creative Communities team, so there should be ample time included in the proposed project timeline for regular contact (detailed below), as well as the sharing of drafts to enable comments and feedback to be incorporated.

The Policy Priority Paper should be no more than 2,000 words (excluding references/appendices).

Creative Communities welcomes proposals that include **innovative ideas for delivery** of networks and ways of **adding value to devolved cultural policy making**.

### Monitoring Evaluation & Learning (MEL)

AHRC Creative Communities and AHRC will work with the funded projects from the outset to co-create a light-touch monitoring and evaluation framework, underpinned by the existing standardised reporting activities for Creative Communities. Aligning with AHRC's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Strategy, we will agree objectives, establish priority benefits, and identify the most suitable qualitative and quantitative measures to capture progress towards projected benefits and impacts.

Applicants are encouraged to consider approaches to capturing and reporting on learning within the project. Innovative and creative approaches to data capture and analysis could form an interesting component of the structure and approach to both MEL and the delivery of required outputs.

### Project Timeline

#### Phase 1: Project Set-up

- Introductory meeting between the AHRC Creative Communities Policy Lead, Co-Lab Network Project Lead and their project partners to agree an updated project timeline with key milestones, deliverables, and budgets
- Opening virtual meeting for all partners to connect and network

AHRC Creative Communities will arrange an introductory meeting with the Co-Lab PL. Together we will review and agree a detailed project timeline with key milestones, deliverables, and budgets. This will also include working together to develop a plan for the required outputs of a Policy Priority Paper and the Co-Lab Policy Network Event.

#### Phase 2: Project Activity & Research

AHRC Creative Communities will continue to work closely with Co-Lab teams. We will schedule:

- Bi-monthly 4:1s: optional virtual check-in meetings between the AHRC Creative Communities Policy Lead with the Co-Lab Project Lead and project partners, to share progress and knowledge from across the Co-Labs Policy Network cohort
- Open Policy Forum Pol.is platform hosted through the AHRC Creative Communities website
- Collaborating on communicating about the project throughout the project timeframe

#### Phase 3: Project Evaluation

AHRC Creative Communities will work together with each Co-Lab Project Lead to support the development of required outputs, including by providing feedback on Policy Priority Paper drafts (with a particular lens on maximising policy impact).

All projects funded by AHRC Creative Communities are required to produce, at a minimum, a Policy Priority Paper (max 2000 words). AHRC Creative Communities will seek to facilitate appropriate engagement between your project team and relevant policy support to maximise the impact of your project.

You will be required to participate in monitoring and evaluation activities undertaken by AHRC Creative Communities. As an AHRC-funded research project, some reporting will be required for projects funded through this programme (proportionate to award size). Details will be confirmed to successful applicants.

Activity	Deadline
<b>Project Activity</b>	
Project Start	January 2026
<b>Phase 1: Project Set-up</b>	
Confirm final project plan, methodologies, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), ethics in collaboration with the AHRC Creative Communities team	January 2026
Opening virtual meeting for all Co-Lab Policy Network Award partners to connect and network	January 2026
<b>Phase 2: Project Activity &amp; Research</b>	
Co-Lab Policy Network sessions 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 Multi-event formats, varied locations/cross-nation	January to November 2026
Bi-monthly 4:1s: optional virtual check-in meetings between the AHRC Creative Communities Policy Lead with the project lead, and other project leads and project partners	Every 8 weeks
Policy Priority Paper development (updates provided during 4-1 sessions)	June to December 2026
<b>Phase 3: Project Evaluation</b>	
Delivery of first full draft of Policy Priority Paper	November 2026
Co-Lab Policy Network Event sharing learnings a virtual network event, and	December 2026

present policy outcomes, learnings and impacts of each network	
Collaboration with AHRC Creative Communities to finalise Policy Priority Paper	December 2026
Submission of final Policy Priority Paper	January 2027
Completion of Co-Lab Policy Network	January 2027
Creative Communities launch of Co-Lab Policy Network Priority Papers	March 2027

### Budget - Eligible Costs

**Funding of up to £20k will be awarded** by Northumbria University to the successful HEI/IRO.

Applications **must contain an indicative budget** outlining planned spend on events and activities, workshops or seminars only. This funding includes but is not limited to the following activities and associated costs:

- Networking activities
- Series of workshops or seminars
- Outreach activities that encourage and enable project partners to involve individuals or organisations outside of academic research in the discussion and development of ideas
- Community-based engagement activity

Applications should be specific about the details of the proposed activities. You are encouraged to request and justify costs for activities that best meet the aims of your project. We will fund costs which are in line with AHRC policies.

AHRC Creative Communities are willing to fund costs which are in line with AHRC's policies. Please note the **following are not eligible costs for this award**:

- HEI/ IRO staff costs
- Activities that are not related to the delivery of your network and that do not meet the objectives of the programme
- Activity that takes place outside of the implementation phase timeline
- Activity that is already being funded by other income streams

Any costs for travel must be realistic under the current circumstances and we request that any activity involving travel has appropriate mitigations and alternatives suggested. You must book in line with your host institution's travel policies. The AHRC Creative Communities programme at Northumbria University cannot manage travel directly for any awardees or partners.

Given the nature of the project, we will not be awarding costs for equipment or capital infrastructure such as audio recording equipment or laptops.

AHRC Creative Communities will cover the costs for the design of the Priority Paper (in the AHRC Creative Communities programme branding), therefore design costs for reports are not eligible and will not be funded under this opportunity.

Dissemination activities will be led by AHRC Creative Communities in collaboration with the Co-Lab Policy Network PL. We expect the PL to set aside at time to attend the Co-Lab Policy Network Event at the conclusion of the project.

Funding approval is conditional upon satisfactory completion of final due diligence including financial and legal compliance, and completion of a funding Agreement. All the budget rules must be adhered to. If you are not sure if an item in your budget is eligible, email Samantha Peel ([samantha.peel@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:samantha.peel@northumbria.ac.uk)) to check first.

## Application Process

To apply for this funding opportunity, you must:

Submit a **written application** consisting of three written responses to three short questions (max total 1000-words).

### Submitting an Application

Applications must be submitted through an online application portal hosted by Gecko Forms. Please secure the consent of all individuals named in the application, including external partners, before you make your submission.

The form includes the questions below. Where word limits are specified, these are the maximum word limits. The form will cut you off at the word limit. **Please note there is no option to save and return to the form later.** It is recommended you prepare all answers ahead of time in a Word document (or similar) and copy and paste the answers into the form at application stage.

The application asks the following questions:

### Eligibility Questions

- Are you employed by an eligible UK higher education institution (HEI) or independent research organisation (IRO)?
- Is the eligible UK HEI or IRO you are based at located in either a devolved region of England, or a devolved nation of the UK?
- Please select the devolved Mayoral region or devolved nation in which your Project Lead organisation is based:

- Northern Ireland
- Scotland
- Wales
- England – Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
- England – East Midlands
- England – Greater Lincolnshire
- England – Greater London
- England – Greater Manchester
- England – Hull and East Yorkshire
- England – Liverpool City Region
- England – North East
- England – South Yorkshire
- England – Tees Valley
- England – West Midlands
- England – West of England
- England – West Yorkshire
- England – York and North Yorkshire

#### **Research Team Information:**

- Project Lead Name, HEI/IRO, Dept/Unit/Team, Email address
- Lead Administrative Contact Name, HEI/IRO, Dept/Unit/Team, Email address

#### **Partner Information:**

- Partner/ Partner Organisation 1
- Partner/ Partner Organisation 2
- Partner/ Partner Organisation 3
- Additional Partners/ Partner Organisations

#### **Project Details:**

- Project title
- Devolved cultural policy area being addressed: Belonging; Equalising Opportunity; Growth; Regional Inequality

#### **Assessment Questions:**

- Summarise your area of Co-Lab Policy Network **research interest** relating to culture and R&D in your devolved regional or national policy context (500 words)
- Describe your **rationale and delivery model** for the Co-Lab Policy Network – including details about in-person/hybrid - and how you will facilitate inclusion and participation of cross-sector partners (250 words)
- Explain how you will ensure that the Co-Lab Policy Network will create regional or **national impact, innovation and added value** in your devolved policy context (250 words)

### Project Budget:

- Upload an **indicative budget document** for the £20,000 award, including commitments to any match funding and/or in-kind contributions from partners. You may use any file format to support this.

### Deadline

The application submission deadline 19 September 2025 at 12pm UK time. You will not be able to apply after this time.

### Assessment Process

Applications will be subject to an internal review process where they will be assessed by the AHRC Creative Communities programme team for eligibility, completeness and fit to the opportunity. **Applicants should make sure language is clear and that any technical terms and acronyms are clearly explained.**

Should any applications be deemed ineligible or incomplete, the submission will be rejected.

Each application will be subject to a rapid review single-stage process where they will be assessed and considered by a panel comprising of academic and non-academic experts with appropriate policy making expertise. **Applicants should make sure language is clear and that any technical terms and acronyms are clearly explained.**

Each shortlisted application will be assessed by at least two external panel members and scores will be collated. The principal task of external reviewers is to recommend a ranked list of applications for AHRC to consider for funding, taking into consideration the intention to fund four Co-Lab Policy Networks which meet the core requirements of the opportunity based on the quality of the application.

The intention is to award funding to four proposals, with funding allocation as follows:

The highest scoring proposals from each nation of the UK will be automatically awarded (four awards).

In the case that one nation does not meet the threshold score for awarding, priority will be to allocate to the next devolved nation application with the highest score. Proposals that have received the same final score may be re-ranked to facilitate this. The final decision on portfolio coverage will be taken by UKRI.

### Assessment Criteria

All applications will be scored on their ability to demonstrate excellence across the following equally weighted categories:

<b>Leadership &amp; Capacity</b>	Overview of the Co-Lab Policy Network delivery model and national impact, articulating effective and clear lines of management, responsibility, and accountability.
<b>Co-Creation</b>	Articulate how the proposed Co-Lab Policy Network will benefit its partners and deliver outputs and outcomes that are relevant to Creative Communities core themes, as well as the research context, regional place and impact agendas, and wider stakeholders.
<b>Cross-Sector Collaboration and Partnerships</b>	Define what partners and collaborative relationships are in place, and the role of these partners in the delivery model. Where partnerships are yet to be secured, there must be detailed plans for expanding and strengthening partnerships, with information on the approach to be taken to welcome and include new partners and sectors through equitable partnership working.
<b>Geographical Spread</b>	<p>Reflect the programme objective of delivering place-based activities and outputs that are contextually relevant and addresses regional inequalities in collaborative R&amp;D opportunities within devolved contexts. The highest scoring proposals from each nation of the UK will be automatically awarded (four Awards).</p> <p>In the case that one nation does not meet the threshold score for awarding, priority will be to allocate to the next devolved nation application with the highest score.</p> <p>Proposals that have received the same final score may be re-ranked to facilitate this. The final decision on portfolio coverage will be taken by UKRI.</p>
<b>Added Value and Strategic Delivery</b>	Evidence that issues relating to equality, diversity, inclusion, risk, ethics and environmental sustainability have been considered throughout the proposal and in relation to each of the assessment criteria. Co-Lab Policy Networks must be in place January 2026 to December 2026. Applicant delivery models must present a clear plan that is adaptable to the needs of the context, with outcomes that are achievable and measurable within budget and timeframe and demonstrate planning for ethics and safeguarding for managing the health, safety and wellbeing of project partners.

## Data

The personal data you give us will be used to facilitate the AHRC Creative Communities Co-Lab Policy Network Awards through sharing applicant's contact details with the Programme Director and AHRC Creative Communities delivery team and the Project Leads of other successful Co-Lab Policy Network Awards for collaboration and communication purposes. Your personal data will be handled in line with UK data protection legislation and managed securely. Full details of how we will use the data submitted as part of the application process can be found in our Privacy Notice on the [AHRC Creative Communities website](#).

For the purpose of the AHRC Creative Communities Co-Lab Policy Network Awards, your data will be held by the AHRC Creative Communities programme delivery team based at Northumbria University, with some data shared with our funders the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), evaluation partners, and the Northumbria University Research Office. Your data will be reported and will always be processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018, the General Data Protection Act 2018 and also in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Applicants can withdraw or modify their consent to collection and processing of personal information at any time by contacting:  
[ad.ahrc.creative.communities@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:ad.ahrc.creative.communities@northumbria.ac.uk)

## Contact Details

The AHRC Creative Communities team is led by Professor Katy Shaw, supported by Senior Research Fellows Helen Apsey and Dr Rachel Connor, and Programme Co-ordinator Samantha Peel.

Questions relating to the opportunity can be sent to:  
[ad.ahrc.creative.communities@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:ad.ahrc.creative.communities@northumbria.ac.uk)