AHRC Creative Communities: Co-Lab Policy Network Awards 2026

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 Mayoral 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 for each Co-Lab Policy Network Award.

Four Co-Lab Policy Network Awards 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).

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.

Applications must name specific non-HEI or non-IRO partners and their respective sectors in the application.

Full consent of all named partners must be evidenced in the application.
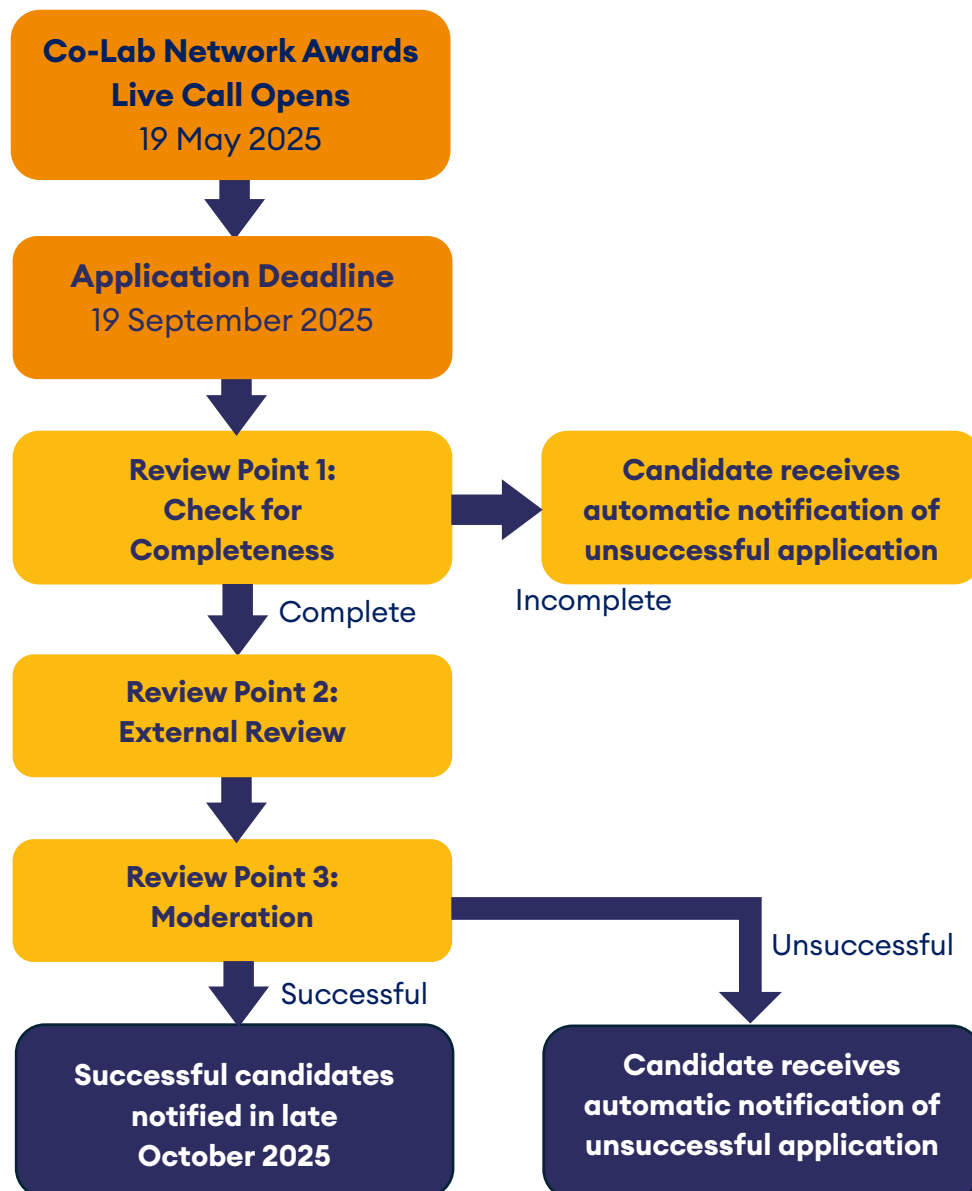
How To Apply:

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.

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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 fourteen Mayoral Authorities 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.

Creative Communities aims to explore **how and why engaging cross-sector partners and communities in policy making can enhance the quality, resilience, and sustainability of our R&D 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.

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.

What is a Co-Lab Policy Network?

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 Co-Lab Policy Networks build on the provocation papers produced by the Policy Labs and Policy Sprints, developing learning and building a better base for policy makers in UK devolution.

The Co-Lab Policy Networks will catalyse these cross-sector communities in devolved contexts, developing learning and relationships with policy makers across the four nations into a UK-wide co-lab 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.**

Co-Lab Policy Networks will:

- Bring together cross-sector creative communities from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or Independent Research Organisations (IROs), policy, public, third, and private sectors, and community groups, with equitable ways of working amongst the partners within the network;
- Operate physically and/or virtually across each nation or region;
- Create and coordinate a network exploring culture and R&D in a context of national or regional devolution;
- Demonstrate clear impact plans and a commitment to monitoring and evaluation;
- Outline plans for at least four network events from Jan – December 2026;
- Co-author a Policy Priority Paper capturing key network learning by January 2026;
- Share learnings at a closing virtual network event in December 2026 with the other Co-Lab Policy Networks.

Outputs:

Policy Priority Paper

Each Co-Lab Policy Network will produce a Policy Priority Paper (publication date March 2027) that will share policy outcomes, learnings and impacts from the Co-Lab Policy Networks 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.

How Will It Work?

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.

Innovative delivery models are encouraged and applicants should outline how they plan to **add value within their devolved policy context** as part of the application.

Timeline:

19 May 2025	Live Call published for Co-Lab Policy Networks 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

How to Apply:

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

Please secure the consent of all partners named in the application before you make your submission.

The form includes the short questions below. Where word limits are specified, these are the maximum word limits. Please note that it is not possible to save your application and return to it later, therefore we recommend you prepare answers to all questions ahead of submission and copy and paste them into the application form.

Submitting your Application:

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

Applications must be submitted through an online application portal hosted by Gecko Forms accessible via the Creative Communities website. Please refer to the Co-Lab Policy Network Awards Applicant Guide for full details of the application process, including the structure of the application forms and questions and guidance for video applications.

Deadline:

The submission deadline for full applications is **19 September 2025 at 12pm** UK time. This is a rapid response application process with quick notification of outcome.

Application Questions:

Applicants must meet the criteria at the start of application form to progress.

Questions:

1. 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)

2. 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)

3. 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)

Written applications **must include an indicative budget** for the £20,000 award, including details of match funding and/or in-kind contributions from partners.

Application Assessment:

The awards aim to fund a portfolio of four Co-Lab Policy Networks that have:

- A breadth of themes
- Potential for real world impact and sustainability
- Commitment to meet the overall aims of the AHRC Creative Communities programme

An external assessment panel comprised of policy experts from each of the four nations and with experience of working cross-sector in a variety of creative communities will review applications.

Assessment Criteria:

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

Leadership & Capacity	Overview of the Co-Lab Policy Network delivery model and national impact, articulating effective and clear lines of management, responsibility, and accountability.
Co-Creation	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.
Cross-Sector Collaboration and Partnerships	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.
Geographical Spread	Reflect the programme objective of delivering place-based activities and outputs that are contextually relevant and addresses regional inequalities in collaborative R&D opportunities within devolved contexts. The highest scoring proposals from each nation of the UK will be automatically awarded (4 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.
Added Value and Strategic Delivery	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.

Northumbria University is responsible for administering the Awards. The funding will be subject to UKRI terms and conditions in addition to the requirements set out in this funding document.

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. The AHRC Creative Communities Policy Lead will work with each of the Award holders.

Questions relating to the funding can be sent to:
ad.ahrc.creative.communities@northumbria.ac.uk