

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner 2025-26

Policy Paper

Culture Labs: Place-Based Cultural Development and Delivery

**West Yorkshire
Mayoral Authority**

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Devolved Policy Context

West Yorkshire's devolved governance provides a distinctive environment in which neighbourhood cultural development can be connected to regional decision making. With responsibilities spanning culture, regeneration, skills, health and economic development, the Mayoral Authority is well placed to support more joined-up approaches than would typically be possible through nationally designed programmes.

Culture Labs demonstrates how neighbourhood participation can generate locally grounded knowledge that informs decision making beyond the local level. Rather than creating additional layers of governance, the approach strengthens the relationship between communities, local authorities, the Mayoral Authority and national policy by creating more direct routes for learning, evidence and lived experience to shape investment and intervention.

The Kirklees research illustrates how devolution can enable place-based experimentation, shared learning and collaboration while respecting the distinct identity of individual neighbourhoods. In this way, devolution becomes more than a transfer of powers: it becomes a means of connecting neighbourhood priorities with regional ambition and creating more responsive, participatory cultural policy.

Across the UK, devolved cultural policy making increasingly emphasises participation, inclusion and co-design. Yet communities often have limited opportunities to influence cultural priorities, shape investment or translate strategic ambitions into local action. While engagement activity is common, it is frequently short-term, project-based or consultative rather than embedded within ongoing decision-making.

This challenge is particularly significant in devolved contexts such as [West Yorkshire Mayoral Authority area](#), where greater responsibility for culture, regeneration, skills and health sits at regional and local levels. Although devolution creates opportunities for more locally responsive policymaking, there remains a need for approaches that connect neighbourhood knowledge with strategic decision-making across systems.

Culture Labs were developed in response to this gap. Rather than relying on one-off consultation, they provide an ongoing participatory approach that enables residents, artists, organisations and public sector partners to identify local priorities, build relationships and contribute to the long-term development of cultural policy and practice.

Recommendations

Our research demonstrates that place-based cultural development can strengthen participation, improve collaboration between communities and institutions, and generate locally grounded evidence to inform policy and investment. Rather than creating new structures, the research recommendations below propose ways to build on existing strategies, partnerships and governance arrangements across West Yorkshire Mayoral Authority (MA) and its constituent local authorities, including Kirklees.

1. Align Culture Labs with West Yorkshire's regional priorities

Lead: [West Yorkshire MA](#) with its [constituent Local Authorities](#)

Culture Labs should be recognised as a practical neighbourhood engagement and learning approach that supports the delivery of existing regional priorities rather than as a new standalone programme. The methodology aligns closely with the ambitions of the West Yorkshire MA [Region of Learning and Creativity](#), the [Culture, Heritage and Sport Framework](#), the [Creative Industries Cluster Action Plan](#) and the [Seasons of Culture programme](#) by connecting regional priorities with neighbourhood knowledge, lived experience and local partnerships.

As West Yorkshire MA's devolved powers continue to develop, Culture Labs offer a practical mechanism for translating regional ambition into locally owned

action. By creating structured opportunities for communities, artists, organisations and local authorities to collaborate, the approach can strengthen cultural participation, support inclusive growth and generate shared learning across the region while respecting the autonomy of individual places. It can also support the role of the MA as a strategic convenor by creating more direct lines of communication between communities, local authorities, regional decision makers and national policy, ensuring that local knowledge and lived experience more effectively inform future investment, policy development and intervention.

2. Embed Culture Labs within community decision making

Lead: [Kirklees Council](#) and the [Kirklees Cultural Partnership](#)

Culture Labs should become part of how neighbourhood cultural development is supported in Local Authority areas like Kirklees, providing a hyperlocal approach to participation, collaboration and shared decision making. This will inform delivery of the [Kirklees Cultural Strategy](#) while supporting wider WY MA priorities across heritage, health, regeneration, the visitor economy and community development, helping connect devolved regional strategic ambitions with local knowledge and lived experience.

3. Enable Local Cultural Action Planning

Lead: [Kirklees Council](#) with local cross-sector neighbourhood partners

Council neighbourhoods should be supported to develop and steward their own Local Cultural Action Plan. These plans should tessellate with devolved regional plans and provide practical tools for identifying local priorities, building partnerships and co-ordinating collective action, strengthening links between neighbourhood aspirations and borough-wide investment and decision making.

4. Develop a Shared Neighbourhood Cultural Evidence Platform

Lead: [Local Creative Lab CIC](#), [Kirklees Council](#) and the [Kirklees Cultural Partnership](#)

A shared neighbourhood cultural evidence platform should bring together Local Cultural Action Plans, cultural mapping, creative documentation, stories, film, participation data and evaluation, creating an evolving evidence base through which neighbourhood knowledge can inform local and devolved cultural policy and investment. Operating on open and ethical principles, it should support local decision-making while complementing wider local, regional and national evidence and observatory initiatives.

5. Establish a Culture Labs Community of Practice

Lead: [Local Creative Lab CIC](#) with universities and cultural partners

A Culture Labs Community of Practice should support peer learning, mentoring and the continued development of the methodology. By sharing learning, tools and evaluation across different places and sectors, it can strengthen capacity, encourage innovation and build a wider network of neighbourhood cultural practice.

6. Embed Culture Labs within Civic University Agreements

Lead: Regional Universities, West Yorkshire MA, Local Authorities and regional cultural partners

Universities should embed participatory approaches such as Culture Labs within Civic University Agreements and place-based partnerships. This would strengthen collaboration between research, teaching, communities and public partners, ensuring that academic expertise and community knowledge work together to address local challenges and inform cultural policy.

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit www.creativecommunities.uk

Contact the CIP

Dr Claire Tymon, Director of Local Creative Project

claire@wearelocal.org.uk

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