

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner 2025-26

Policy Paper

Unity and Strength: Banner Making as a Tool to Enhance Belonging and Community Cohesion

**Greater Manchester
Mayoral Authority**

October 2026



Devolved Policy Context

As the UK Government seeks to [move devolution further and faster](#), Greater Manchester has an opportunity to extend devolution beyond institutions and into neighbourhoods and communities. Building on existing work, this creates space to strengthen devolution's ability to listen to diverse voices and enable communities to play a greater role in shaping local decision making over culture.

[Greater Manchester's devolved model](#) allows local partners to make decisions closer to the communities they serve. In Rochdale, this community, asset-based approach has demonstrated that collaborative, place-based and community-based arts and heritage activity can function as social infrastructure, creating the relationships, skills and networks that support belonging and [good growth](#).

For devolution to move 'further and faster', diverse communities need long-term devolved investment that builds the resilience of community-led work. By strengthening connections between communities, universities and policymakers, GM Mayoral Authority can better support the development of a long-term vision for its next phase of devolution, providing clear direction for policy, investment and partnership working while embedding neighbourhoods and communities at the heart of devolved decision making.

In [Rochdale, Greater Manchester](#), culture has become an increasingly important component of place-based growth and regeneration. [Manchester is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse cities in the UK](#), and Rochdale has 26% of residents from ethnic minority backgrounds. In 2026, the area still faces high levels of inequality, with some neighbourhoods being among the [most deprived in England](#).

Devolved strategies such as [Together we are Greater Manchester | Our Strategy](#) and [The Greater Manchester Strategy for Culture, Heritage and Creativity](#) aim to expand access to arts, heritage and culture as a driver of community participation and civic pride. But this cultural policy development can feel fragmented, especially in a fast-moving context of devolution. [Together we are Greater Manchester](#) recognises that “*Power and decision making is unbalanced and unrepresentative of our diverse people and communities*”.

Cultural policy alignment is becoming increasingly fragmented as [English devolution evolves at pace](#). While both central and devolved policies seek to address deprivation, there is less emphasis on approaches that centre community pride, shared identity and belonging. Culture is understood in this context as a living and evolving expression of people's cultural identities, histories, creativity and relationships to place. It includes embroidery and heritage crafts, as well as the everyday practices, traditions and community networks through which people connect, participate and contribute to civic life.

Our research demonstrates that community-led heritage craft practices provide a practical mechanism for achieving these policy ambitions through an asset-based, place-based approach. The research suggests how we can better enable and embed

perspectives and the lived experiences of a diverse cross-section of women living in Rochdale into policy making that directly impact their lives. This research highlights the importance of recognising that cultural devolution is not only a transfer of decision-making powers, but also a shift in who is able to influence cultural priorities, investment and place-based strategies.

For English devolution to achieve its ambitions, Mayoral Authorities (MAs) must unlock opportunities for communities to shape devolved cultural policies and programmes.



The final banner with symbols representing each person's heritage and democratically chosen words representing how participants would like to see arts and culture evolve in Rochdale and Greater Manchester. Image credit: Ruth Flanagan.

Recommendations

Rochdale is the [birthplace of the Co-operative movement](#), and [Touchstones Rochdale](#) holds the only surviving original protest banner from the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. Banners have long been used to amplify community voices in public spaces in the devolved region of Greater Manchester Mayoral Authority (GM MA). The banner created by this research articulates four key policy positions: Home, Diversity, Unity & Strength, and Co-operation.

Home

[GM MA](#), [Rochdale Borough Council](#), [Arts Council England](#), [National Lottery Heritage](#) and [Community funds](#) and other national funders should recognise the value of investing in [social infrastructure](#) that enables residents to share, celebrate and shape their own heritage and cultural identities. As this research demonstrates, creating spaces for communities to come together, access cultural assets and co-produce cultural activity can strengthen skills and confidence, whilst ensuring that cultural planning and place-based regeneration better reflect communities' needs.

Diversity

Representative participation should be mandated in devolved research, consultation, policymaking and cultural programming. MA-funded projects should be expected to demonstrate meaningful engagement with underrepresented

communities, and position community members with expertise, leadership and decision-making power.

Unity & Strength

MAAs should harness creative methodologies when working with communities as a tool for social cohesion, bringing people from different backgrounds together around shared experiences and local priorities. In practice, this means supporting creative projects that build trust, shared understanding and dialogue between communities and institutions. It also means making policy information more accessible and creative, so people can engage with it on their own terms.

Co-operation

This way of working requires sustained, devolved, multi-year funding and support for community-led partnerships, co-research and collaborative decision-making, rather than short-term projects. GM MA, Rochdale Borough Council, local and national funders must invest in long-term relationships, skills development and shared governance models that place communities at the centre of devolved cultural and policy development. Across these recommendations, devolved policy processes should value lived experience, involve community participants as co-researchers and avoid extractive models of community and cross-sector engagement.

Further Information:

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

Contact the CIP

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Creative Communities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (Grant Agreement No AH/X001555/1) and hosted at Northumbria University, Newcastle.