

THINKS INSIGHT & STRATEGY AND CULTURE COMMONS

What do the public think about the future of local cultural decision making?

RESEARCH PAPER

Thinks
— Insight & Strategy —

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local cultural
decision making**

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led by Culture Commons and Partners



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Executive Summary

Introduction to the research

Culture Commons is convening partners from across all four nations and regions of the UK to explore how commitments to 'devolution' and 'increased local decision making' will affect the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem across the UK.

A core focus of this programme is 'Local Voice', aiming to better understand how local mechanisms might meaningfully involve the public in cultural decision making. Culture Commons have therefore commissioned Thinks Insight and Strategy (Thinks) to conduct qualitative research with the public as a part of their open policy development programme 'the future of local cultural decision making'.

This report explores the public's perceptions of culture, creativity and heritage in their local area; their understanding of local cultural decision-making; their current level of involvement; and their vision for future engagement.

Objectives

The overall objectives of this research are to:

1. Hear about how the public view culture, creativity, and heritage in their local area.
2. Explore the public's understanding of local decision making and its relationship to culture, creativity, and heritage.
3. Understand and explore what the public understand as good decision making more generally.

Methodology

In May 2024, Thinks heard from 47 participants in 6x 90-minute online focus groups across the UK - Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, North-West England, North-East England and South-East England.

Participants were recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population on key demographics including gender, with set quotas for sexuality, ethnicity, and people who self-classify as disabled or with a long-term health condition.

Whilst the wider programme covers the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem, the scope of this project was to collect views from the general public. Therefore, individuals with high levels of involvement in the cultural offers of their local area (e.g. jobs in the cultural sector) were screened out to allow for a more general viewpoint, and to hear the voices of underserved groups who are often not included in decision making processes associated with these sectors. As a result, there is an increased focus on the "everyday" cultural and heritage aspects within participants' lives.

Key findings

- 1. The public views having a role in local decision-making as having a say in setting the cultural programme in their local area, rather than participating in governance.** There is a clear disconnect between public knowledge of governance and the local programme, with people often conflating these

concepts. In consequence, the public interpretation of the topics discussed have centred around their local cultural offer.

- 2. Local cultural decision-making is understood to be the process by which local authorities (local councils or parish councils) allocate funding and organise cultural activities, ideally consulting with constituents to reflect diverse needs.** While some people acknowledge the importance of economic viability, others believe local culture should always prioritise community desires. In the public's view, effective decision-making involves community engagement and transparency, offering a diverse range of events that cater to different interest and demographics while balancing economic viability and cultural values.
- 3. The public generally thinks local councils, and in more rural areas, parish councils, are the primary decision-makers and ought to remain so in the future.** There is uncertainty about the specifics of the decision-making process at devolved levels and who is responsible for these decisions. Local organisations, businesses, civil society groups and individuals are seen as being influential in shaping the cultural landscape. But despite recognition of various contributors, there is a call for clearer information and greater transparency about the roles and responsibilities in local cultural decision-making, with a general agreement that decision-making ought to remain at the local council level due to concerns about the distance of senior elected leaders.
- 4. Cultural events are felt to have convening power, via bringing people together, and showcasing local heritage.** The public feel passionately about hyper-local events such as food festivals, sports teams, and historical landmarks, which they often feel best represent their area. These events are seen as important for community cohesion, celebrating shared traditions, and feel more accessible than cultural programmes or traditional cultural institutions like art galleries and museums.
- 5. There is limited association of creativity with culture.** As the public generally associate culture with heritage and traditions, they are less likely to make the link between creativity and culture. Only those engaged in creative hobbies, such as painting or dancing, see creativity as part of the cultural landscape. Even those engaged with creative hobbies do not associate them with decision making in or around creative and cultural institutions. Many view creative organisations as prioritising profit over the needs and wants of the local people, and therefore feel excluded from their decision-making processes. This perception is especially prevalent in rural areas, where art galleries and creative clubs appear to be less recognised as integral to local culture.
- 6. Local people would like to see cultural offerings be more accessible and more diverse.** People want cultural offerings that they are already interested in to be more accessible, and those who feel the local culture does not reflect their identity want more diverse offerings. Most do not seek new cultural experiences unless they are easily accessible or within their current interests. There is a tendency for

people to attend only familiar events, driven by limited awareness, financial barriers, transport issues, and inadequate accommodations for individuals with special educational needs or disabilities. The decline in free or low-cost community events and the closure of local cultural centres due to funding cuts and staff shortages exacerbate these issues.

- 7. Public involvement in local cultural decision-making is limited, caused by a low understanding of how the public can get involved.** Although some volunteer or attend events, few are involved in organising them. Barriers to greater involvement include bureaucratic and financial obstacles, time and economic constraints, poor communication, and a perceived lack of influence. This suggests a need for increased engagement and transparency from local authorities to ensure community voices are heard and to encourage broader participation in cultural activities.
- 8. Opinions vary on the role the public could or should play in local cultural decision-making, with some advocating for public involvement, while others find this impractical.** Ideally, local cultural decision-making is felt to be a collaborative partnership between local authorities, local organisations, businesses, civil society groups, individuals with a passion, and individuals who want to give their time. Local councils could adopt a more supportive role, fostering community engagement by collaborating with these groups.
- 9. The public want decision makers to be proactive and engage with them, but people don't want to have the responsibility.** Although many people express a desire to be involved in local cultural decision-making, their willingness to take on responsibility or commit time is limited. The public's primary interest is ensuring that their cultural preferences are reflected and that public funds are spent beneficially. The most realistic level for public involvement is seen at the local council or parish council level, where engagement feels more accessible and immediate.
- 10. The public respect the role of 'experts' in relation to local cultural decision-making.** When considering 'experts', the public view local volunteers or business owners as valuable resources. Although the public cannot clearly identify the exact role these experts play, they respect and recognise their importance in the decision-making process. The public does not wish to replace experts or assume their responsibilities; instead, they would prefer to collaborate in decision-making.

Public understanding of "good" decision-making

In response to the public's views on the current state of local cultural decision-making, five indicators of "good" decision-making have emerged to guide the design of policy measures associated with the open policy development programme. These principles are shaped by what we heard from the public:

- 1. Community engagement and inclusivity.** Ensure that decision making processes actively involve community members who wish to participate. This can be effectively achieved through local councils and parish councils, which are perceived as more accessible and immediate. Create platforms, both physical and online, where community members can easily express their desires and needs. Furthermore, foster inclusivity by considering the diverse backgrounds, interests, and needs of different ethnic and social groups within the community. Support organic, community-driven initiatives rather than top-down approaches and facilitate wider public engagement through public meetings or suggestion boxes.
- 2. Transparency and accountability.** All decisions should be transparent with budget allocation and decision-making processes. Clearly communicate how and why decisions are made, ensuring that the community understands the criteria and rationale behind funding for the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem and organising cultural events. Regularly update constituents on the progress and outcomes of cultural initiatives to build trust and accountability - utilising both online and offline methods.
- 3. Diverse leadership and collaboration.** Local decisions should be a collaboration between local authorities, local businesses, community groups and civil society organisations to ensure a diverse range of cultural offerings. A “good” decision will be made by a leadership that reflects the community’s composition and includes representatives with a genuine interest and understanding of local culture.
- 4. Accessible cultural offerings.** Address the current barriers to participation such as physical accessibility, financial constraints, and transport issues (particularly in rural areas). Cultural events and activities must be accessible to all community members including those with disabilities and low-income families. This could include subsidising ticket prices and providing adequate transport options to enhance participation.
- 5. Support hyper-local events.** Identify and support the cultural offerings that resonate deeply with the community, such as food festivals, sports teams, and historical landmarks. Recognise their value in bringing people together and ensure that decisions are directed towards funding and support for these grassroots initiatives.

Background and methodology

Project background

Culture Commons is convening partners from across all four nations and regions of the UK to explore how commitments to 'devolution' and 'increased local decision making' will affect the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem across the UK.

A core focus of this programme is 'Local Voice', aiming to better understand how local mechanisms might meaningfully involve the public in cultural decision making. Culture Commons have therefore commissioned Thinks Insight and Strategy (Thinks) to conduct qualitative research with the public as a part of their open policy development programme 'the future of local cultural decision making'.

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Project objectives

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Approach and sample

In **May 2024**, Thinks heard from **47 participants** in **6x 90-minute online focus** groups across the UK - Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, North-West England, North-East England and South-East England. Thinks chose these locations to include participants from the specific place partner areas associated with Culture Commons to capture perspectives that might better inform regional cultural decision-making.

Participants were recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population on key demographics including gender, with set quotas for sexuality, ethnicity, and people who self-classify as disabled or living with a long-term health condition.

Whilst the wider programme covers the creative, cultural, and heritage ecosystem, the scope of this project was to collect views from the general public. Therefore, individuals with high levels of involvement in the cultural offers of their local area (e.g. jobs in the cultural sector) were screened out to allow for a more general viewpoint, and to hear the voices of underserved groups who are often not included in decision making processes associated with these sectors. As a result, there is an increased focus on the "everyday" cultural and heritage aspects within participants lives.

Table 1 below shows the breakdown of participants across location, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability.

Table 1: Breakdown of participant cohort

	Northern Ireland	Wales	Scotland	South-East England	North-West England	North-East England
Gender	3 Male 4 Female	4 Male 4 Female	4 Male 4 Female	4 Male 4 Female	4 Male 3 Female	5 Male 4 Female
Ethnic minority	1	2	2	2	2	2
LGBTQ+	0	1	1	2	2	1
Disabled or living with a long-term health condition	2	0	2	1	1	2
TOTAL	7	8	8	8	7	9

Table 2: Location breakdown for each focus group

	Location	Urban	Rural
Northern Ireland	Ballycalre – 2 Belfast – 1 Carrickfergus – 1 Cookstown – 1 Royal Hillsborough – 1 Seaforde – 1	3	4
Wales	Abergavenny – 1 Cardiff – 3 LLandrindod Wells – 1 Newport – 1 Port Talbot – 1 Usk – 1	4	4
Scotland	Dundee – 2 Falkirk – 1 Fife – 1 Lanark – 1 Midlothian – 1 North Lanarkshire – 1 West Lothian – 1	4	4
South-East England	Cambridgeshire – 2 Essex – 1 Greater London 2 Harlow – 1 Peterborough 2	6	2
North-West England	Greater Manchester – 3 Sheffield – 2 South Yorkshire – 2	5	2
North-East England	Durham – 2 Newcastle – 1 Northumberland – 1 Tyne and Wear - 4	7	2
		29	18

such as food festivals, sports teams and historical landmarks come to mind, and while places of traditional cultural activity like art galleries or museums are mentioned, the connection with these places is often not as prominent.

“And we have the Abergavenny Food Festival, which happens once a year, which is quite a really, really large event... and I think it's important, like that sense of community brings people together.” Wales, Rural, Female, 49-years-old

Heritage vs. Creativity

Participants are much more likely to associate culture with heritage and traditions, than with creativity. Although the definition of culture that was given to participants included *“art, sport, crafting, music, dance, computer gaming, literature, festivals, film, cuisine and celebrations”*, participants did not link personal acts of creativity with those that take place in cultural institutions. Individuals struggled to conceptualise that engaging in these activities individually connected them with their local cultural offer or meant they could be involved in any local cultural decision making.

Only those who personally engage in creative hobbies in a group or class setting such as painting groups or dancing lessons associate creativity with the cultural sector. For many, especially those in rural areas, a perceived lack of creativity in their local area means cultural institutions are not immediately top of mind. This is particularly pronounced in rural Northern Ireland, where transport links make the cultural offering of Belfast feel difficult to reach, and in Scotland where challenges with cost-of-living make its cultural offer feel too expensive to participate in.

“If I wanted to see any artwork, I have to be honest, I usually go to a shop that sells art. So that would be the only bit of artwork around us.”
Northern Ireland, Rural, Female, 46-years-old

“I've been to the theatre once. But that was because it was bought as a gift. I've been to see the tattoo once, because the tickets were bought as a gift. Because we didn't have the money.” Scotland, Rural, Female, 70-years-old

Regional differences

In the Northern England, heritage is often associated with industrial history and specific clubs, pubs and venues that have been integral to the community for a long time, as well as sport - particularly football.

“I was from a place, it was a huge mining and shipyard area, everyone had the same hobbies...but when the industry closed, the culture changed. Sometimes for the better...but it does mean some traditional things have died away.” North-East England, Urban, Male, 63-years-old

Conversely, in Southern England, heritage is more associated with historical buildings such as cathedrals, stately homes and museums.

In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the connections between heritage and culture are even more complex. Each geographical location has a different relationship between culture and heritage, focusing heavily on their history as devolved nations. In Northern Ireland, conversations about culture were closely tied with identity. Cultural events provide an opportunity to unite different groups in the post-conflict era, but there are also concerns that any local cultural decision-making can still be overshadowed by historical divisions.

"I think it's important that people feel safe to express their identity. I think for years and years, a way of kind of avoiding any kind of instability after the conflict that people were taught not to show their identity...because you've been led to feel like you cannot show that there is a difference... it's definitely improved. But I still think that there's years of work to do." Northern Ireland, Rural, Female, 39-years-old

The importance of culture

Cultural events are seen to have convening power for local people and there is appetite for them to take place to do this. Individuals highlight the importance of bringing the community together, especially as societal changes have increased social isolation. Additionally, many stress the importance of culture in reaching diverse ethnic groups in an area, serving as a common link to bring different groups together within a community.

"I think culture is very important. It establishes who you are and who your community is...People do mix up quite well...I think it's important that they come together in something else, new, where they can share that culture." Northern Ireland, Urban, Male, 66-years-old

"I think it's important. I just live in a small village and there isn't much going on here. But there's a big festival coming up this weekend, where it brings everybody together from all over the place... I suppose that's the culture of this weekend for us in this village, it's to go there." Wales, Rural, Female, 66-years-old

Culture and cultural events are also seen as an opportunity for community members to learn about social or religious groups within their community. There is a perceived power of culture and cultural events to act as spaces of integration whilst remaining safe and authentic for minority groups. This is particularly relevant for the younger generation who wish to learn about diverse cultures, as well as for parents looking to educate their children.

For example, participants in the North-East offered support to a participant interested in celebrating a Hindu festival, expressing a desire to attend and experience the event.

Similarly, a participant from the North-West welcomed Pride celebrations as an opportunity for their niece to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community.

"They [community centre] are also doing a Pride event in a couple of weeks which is really good because my niece is 13 and starting to explore things and she's desperate to go to the Pride event. So that's important to me, because it's going to get her involved and teach her something that she's a bit unsure about." North-West England, Rural, Female, 43-years-old

Regional differences

In **urban** environments, participants seek events that have a broad appeal and promote diversity, viewing them as opportunities to experience different cultures. Conversely, in **rural** areas, people often want to reduce isolation and see these community events as fostering a sense of community that can link people into the support network of the community.

What is missing?

Across the UK, participants report four areas for improvement in their local cultural offering.

- 1. Lack of diversity, especially in rural areas.** Often when people do engage with cultural activity, they will attend events that they are already interested in or have a personal connection to. This tendency is often due to a lack of awareness about cultural offerings beyond their immediate social circle.

"I think there might be more culture than I think there is, but I wouldn't know where to go looking for it, it would be nice to have a set location in Dundee where I could find that information." Scotland, Urban, Male, 24-years-old

"Trying to bring trying to bring different organisations together like, you could have different things, they should have a fair ground and, a dog show or classic car show, you know, all in one day so that, everybody's going to want to converge and it's going to be massive community feeling." North-East England, Urban, Male, 63-years-old

- 2. Limited accessible events.** Families with children who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) struggle to find suitable cultural events. Many also mention the affordability of events as an increasing barrier, with the cost of tickets often being prohibitive. More rural participants mention transport as a barrier they face.

"Inclusivity for disabled people. Going back to my son - I really want to get him swimming lessons, but I can't because there aren't any available for him. There doesn't seem to be anywhere to cater to his needs." South-East England, Urban, Female, 41-years-old

"There was a music festival in Falkirk...and the tickets are so expensive, for the space in a park that we can all go to every day...So instead of spending 1000s of pounds getting relatively okay bands, I don't see why they don't just break that up into five different small festivals or community markets." Scotland, Rural, Female, 28 years old

- 3. Minimal promotion of local events and groups,** with people often only discovering them through work connections or personal invitations. Social media sites like Facebook are often considered the most reliable source of information for discovering local cultural events and people are aware that large sections of the community may be missing out on the information.

"We have lots of local group things. And maybe the advertising for some of them needs to improve. Because sometimes I only hear about it through word of mouth from someone else." Northern Ireland, Rural, Female, 43-years-old

"I'm finding out more and more... and I think that's a lot to do with since I've opened my shop I've connected with other small businesses in the area. It's surprising how I've found out about lots of stuff around the arts and things that I just didn't know about." Wales, Rural, Female, 49-years-old, Ethnic minority

- 4. A perceived lack of investment in both events and infrastructure.** Often when reflecting on the cultural offer of an area, people are disappointed about the things they have previously enjoyed that have now closed or no longer happen due to a decrease in local funding. When speaking about finances there is a lack of enthusiasm for cultural engagement as people believe these projects must compete with local services for funding or must be financially 'successful' to survive.

"And I don't think we've got any landmarks in Falkirk anymore, because they're either not kept, or there's just no one to man, and there's no staff." Scotland, Rural, Female, 28-years-old

"I used to work in an art venue. But it was really, really sort of difficult. There's no funding for it. It was really hard. So eventually, we had to shut it down...and one of the other local theatres is shutting down." North-West England, Urban, Male, 38-years-old

What has changed?

Participants who have lived in their areas for long periods of time feel the cultural offer has **changed over time**. Free events have become less extravagant or have become ticketed events put out to private contract. These events have traditionally focused on cultural traditions (e.g. St Patrick's Day, Chinese New Year), hyper-local events (e.g. food markets) or on showcasing local artists in more urban areas, and participants are disappointed to see these decrease and change.

"We used to have quite a good festival called Tramlines in Sheffield. And it used to be sort of a local offer and used to be free around the city. And

then now it's been bought out by a big festival company and it's the same lineups you see everywhere." North-West England, Urban, Male, 38-years-old

Participants also note that smaller low or no cost community groups are disappearing, leaving a notable gap in the cultural offer, particularly for young and senior members of the community. Some note that decreases in cultural activity is a result of staff shortages and feel that the lack of use of local cultural places is a waste.

"We've got a local dance centre, and I did dance from a very young age. And now the funding has been cut, so we don't have the centre anymore. And that was used for not only dance, but for exercise groups for the elderly, and singing groups and everything." Wales, Rural, Female, 25-years-old

Where people feel more culture is being offered, it comes with an increased cost, and although these new cultural offers are generally welcomed, there is disappointment at the loss of low or no cost options. In the context of the cost-of-living crisis, many participants feel priced out of cultural activities on their doorstep.

Regional differences

In **North-West and North-East England**, people spontaneously mention multiculturalism as an element of local culture, and cultural activities like football, music, and 'drinking culture' are the most common activities when prompted. Family and community activities such as craft markets and community centres also feature in conversation, with these groups only touching on tradition and history lightly.

"We'll have like, Culture Days where, you know, we'll come in and say, like, you know, people bring in like food from different areas of the world and stuff and celebrate it. So, I think it's, I think it's about embracing the fact that, you know, people from different places."
Northwest England, Urban, Male, 37-years-old

In **South-East England**, traditional cultural activity came up more spontaneously, for example an art trail, Peterborough cathedral and Roman history. These initial conversations surfaced the desire for more variety as well as cost as a barrier to participating more in cultural activity.

"We've got a famous sculpture artist named Henry Moore; he's got some artworks scattered around the Harlow area which is nice." South-East England, Urban, Male, 53-years-old

In **Northern Ireland**, a limited number of local institutions such as the local Church or local football clubs dominate perceptions of culture. Although heritage is mentioned as an element of culture, traditional cultural activity is very rarely mentioned. Multiple participants mention events occurring in Belfast, but access is a significant barrier.

"It seems to be a lot of sport that connects people really...it's mainly for fellas that are a bit older, maybe struggle with mental health." Northern Ireland, Rural, Male, 43-years-old

In the **Scotland and Wales groups**, the urban and rural divide was the most apparent, with those living closer to Cardiff, Swansea, and Edinburgh referencing cultural activities in institutions such as theatres and museums. Those in smaller market towns or rural areas had a greater focus on events like food festivals or community groups.

"It's all about walking and connecting with other people, there isn't really a lot going on. If I'm going to an art group, it will be in Edinburgh." Scotland, Rural, Female, 52-years-old

Current actors in local cultural decision making

What is 'local cultural decision making'?

Local cultural decision-making is primarily understood by the public to be the process by which local authorities allocate funding for and organise cultural activities and events.

Local councils and parish councils are the local authorities front of mind, with 'local councils' being a term used by the public to encompass local councils, community councils and town councils. The role of these local authorities is understood to include making decisions on what to fund and how much to spend, ideally consulting with constituents to understand what they want more or less of and reflecting a diverse range of wants and needs.

While some acknowledge the importance of economic viability and government policies in decision making, others feel that local culture should prioritise the wants and needs of the local people. There is consensus that good decision-making means actively involving the community and offering a diverse range of events that cater to different interests and demographics. In consequence, there is appetite for greater transparency and community engagement in the current decision-making process.

"Isn't it [local cultural decision-making] about what they choose to fund? If you're talking about local authorities and community councils, how much spending they've got and what they decide to spend it on? And hopefully, they would consult with their constituents about that." Wales, Rural, Female, 49-years-old, Ethnic minority

"I think it should mean that everybody from that area sort of has the opportunity to put what they think and what they want for us." Wales, Urban, Male, 21-years-old, Ethnic minority

Perceptions of current decision-making responsibility

The public's view of cultural offerings in their local area is limited, leading them to assume that **local councils** are the primary decision-makers regarding local cultural activities and events. However, there is uncertainty about the local decision-making process. Some participants think that there is a **cultural government department** or a **cultural member of Parliament** setting cultural policy, which indicates a need for clearer information about who is responsible for cultural decisions at the national, regional, and local level.

In more rural areas, **parish councils, local organisations and local businesses**, are viewed as playing a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape.

Additionally, some members of the public are aware of certain **individuals** in the community playing a role in the cultural offerings at a hyper-local level. For example, the friend who organises a comedy night at the local pub, or the neighbour who runs a crochet class in the community centre.

Elected Leaders - Local Councils and Parish Councils

There is a widespread assumption among the public that the **local council plays a key role** in making cultural decisions. For most people, this is assumed rather than based on fact – as a result of councils typically having the authority and responsibility to distribute funds for public services, making them likely primary decision-makers for cultural initiatives.

The public often feel they lack direct power in these decisions, assuming instead that local authorities, being the closest level of government to the community, hold this responsibility. Many people view the council as holding the purse strings for large, organised events. However, opinions on the council's influence varies among some individuals, particularly those in more rural areas, who see local organisations, businesses and community groups as more impactful on their immediate cultural environment.

"I think the Council has most of the say, as well as individual businesses. They can definitely influence the culture of a town." South-East England, Urban, Male, 35-years-old

"I know the council fund different events and stuff... I know you have to apply to them for parades etc." Northern Ireland, Rural, Female, 39-years-old

Regional differences

In more rural areas, **parish councils** are recognised as having a role in local decision-making. The public speaks more positively of the role they think the parish councils play, generally feeling they are more connected to the local community.

Local organisations, businesses and civil society groups

People are aware of the role **local businesses** can play in shaping the culture of their local area through sponsoring events, providing venues, and partnering with councils. Theatres, restaurants and sports clubs are among the local businesses and organisations mentioned spontaneously as contributing to or supporting local culture.

Civil society groups such as youth clubs, rotary clubs, and parent groups are highlighted as examples of grassroots organisations that can wield influence on local culture. These groups frequently organise events, such as sports matches and after-school clubs, contributing to the cultural fabric of the community.

"I think there's a lot of churches and youth clubs around that do football and after school clubs, on weeknights and on the weekend." Northern Ireland, Rural, Female, 18-years-old

"There's something on in Newcastle, where it was called the late shows where the Hancock, the Discovery Museum and the town theatre all got together and were trying to do different kinds of events over a couple of days." North-East England, Urban, Male, 38-years-old

Regional differences

Regional differences in cultural offerings are apparent, with universities being influential in large university towns and cities, rugby taking precedence in Wales, football dominating Northern England and the Church holding considerable sway over the cultural landscape in Northern Ireland. Despite these variations, hyper-local entities remain prevalent across the UK and are seen to contribute to cultural experiences.

In **urban areas**, the public recognise the role of creative cultural institutions such as theatres, museums or galleries. Those more familiar with these creative organisations view them as primarily financially driven, possessing the power to shape cultural landscape but often overlooking the needs and wants of residents. As a result, people often assume they have minimal influence over these institutions' activities.

"I would never have thought I should get involved in deciding what comes up in the theatre." Scotland, Urban, Female, 52-years-old, Ethnic minority

Individuals

While there is a clear sentiment among the public that **individuals** have limited influence over the cultural landscape of their local area, there is also acknowledgement that citizens can make their mark through **"unofficial" cultural offers** that don't require authorisation from local authorities, such as open-mic or comedy nights at the local pub. However, the opportunities to get involved are not equal, as they often depend on having the necessary equipment, contacts, communication skills, confidence, and the ability to work without initial compensation.

Additionally, when it comes to larger and more established events, people emphasise that the funding and ultimate decision of yes or no lies in the hands of local authorities.

"My friend just started his own. He said there was nowhere for stand-up comedy so he just went to a pub one day and asked if he could start on a Wednesday night for free, and he's been doing stand-up comedy there since." Scotland, Urban, Male, 28-years-old, Ethnic minority

Elected Leaders - MPs / Mayors

Most of the public don't associate **MPs** or **Mayors** with cultural decision-making, focusing instead on local authorities. Some assume that MPs set cultural policy and mayors implement it. However, even among those who are more aware of the cultural responsibilities of these senior elected leaders, there is a common perception that they are not involved in the day-to-day decisions. Instead, the public views cultural decision-making as the domain of local councils, businesses, organisations civil society groups. This disconnect highlights a need for clearer communication about the roles and responsibilities of various leaders in shaping the cultural landscape.

"I think the government come up with some kind of policy and say this is the aim, this is what we want to do with the culture in this region and then they pass on whatever resources are available to those who are more involved in making it happen." North-East England, Urban, Male, 31-years-old

Current public involvement in making decisions

People do not feel that they currently have a role in making decisions about their local cultural offer, with most individuals participating passively rather than taking on leadership roles in organising events or influencing decision-making. While some volunteer or attend events and local groups that interest them, few are involved in organising these activities.

Across the UK, the public fall into three categories when it comes to cultural decision-making in their local community:

1. Those who are involved in a limited capacity
2. Those who are not currently involved but express a desire to be involved
3. Those who are not currently involved and do not want to be involved

Those who are involved in a limited capacity



Retired



Parent



Business
Owner



Minorities

For those who see themselves as **active in their local community**, these activities usually include sports teams, neighbourhood watch, religious groups, historical societies, family hubs and community centres. For most, getting involved and having a say includes attending meetings, joining groups like walking or parent groups, or utilising existing community channels such as Facebook pages.

Different demographics participate in cultural decision-making for various reasons: parents who want to influence their children's experiences, marginalised individuals seeking cultural activities that reflect their interests and beliefs, and businesses owners who recognise the economic benefits of community engagement. Despite these varied motivations, all these groups share identifiable enablers that drive their involvement.

These individuals already have an interest in contributing to their local community's culture. However, **a perceived lack of influence and impact** hinders further and deeper participation. While some recognise that they have some influence through volunteer roles, they feel it's insufficient to enact substantial changes. Others are willing to contribute but doubt their efforts will lead to tangible outcomes. Additionally, people refrain from further involvement due to a fear of criticism, worrying that their efforts and opinions will be dismissed or negatively received, thus limiting community engagement and communication.

This group are looking for more engagement with local authorities to ensure their voices are heard.

"I'm attending a woman group in my area. I come from a Chinese background, so we talk about the culture, we used to have Chinese New Year celebrations. We did try and bring it up this year because everywhere else had it. We were like, how come there's nothing, and they (Local Council) just said funding. So, yes, in a way I have a bit of influence but it's not enough to make any changes." Northern Ireland, Rural, Female, 24-years-old, Ethnic minority

Pen Portrait



Name: Jasmine

Location: Abergavenny

Area: Rural

Gender: Female

Age: 36

Ethnicity: Asian British

Jasmine has always actively participated in local cultural activities and enjoys taking her young children to the weekly markets and yearly food festival.

Since opening her **small business**, Jasmine's engagement with other business owners has strengthened her appreciation for the community's cultural offerings and provided her with the opportunity to share her thoughts and plans with like-minded individuals.

As an **ethnic-minority** living in a predominantly white town in **South Wales**, Jasmine advocates for more inclusive decision-making but is unsure about processes in place to achieve this.

Those who are not currently involved but express a desire to be involved



Parent



Minorities



Time poor

A proportion of the public express a desire to be more involved in the cultural offer of their local area but encounter numerous obstacles that prevent them from doing so. These key challenges include financial and bureaucratic barriers, economic constraints and poor communication and advertising.

- 1. Bureaucratic and financial barriers** present administrative obstacles and financial constraints which hinder participation. Experience with excessive council “red tape”, such as the need for extensive paperwork and insurance, exemplifies this issue. Additionally, some report that knowing someone on the local council is necessary to have any influence on decisions.

“The Council prevented it. They wanted me to fill in loads of forms, just so we could build something as a community. And they wanted me to do a full risk assessment and get insurance and everything just wasn't worth it... the Local Council red tape was too much.” North-East England, Urban, Male, 38-years-old, Ethnic minority

- 2. Economic constraints** such as the high cost of attending events and socialising limits participation. The expense of activities like going to pubs, theatres, or sporting events restricts people’s ability to engage in community life – often forcing people to prioritise certain events over others. Additionally, joining established groups often now require fees that people, especially the younger generation, cannot afford.

“Places like pubs, for example, where now it's really expensive just to go and have a few pints. You're talking about 20/30 quid just to go and sit somewhere and meet people.” North-East England, Urban, Male, 31-years-old

“I know for young farmers, at the start of the year, to join up you have to pay a certain amount of money.” Northern Ireland, Rural, Female, 18-years-old

- 3. Inadequate communication and advertising** leave many people unaware of local events and opportunities, significantly limiting community engagement. Poor advertising leads to low turnout, as people often discover events too late. People want a centralised platform, both physical and digital, to publicise these events as currently they struggle to find accessible information about where and how to participate.

“There needs to be a variety of platforms in which you can engage with people to get everybody's views.” Wales, Rural, Female, 49-years-old, Ethnic minority

Regional differences

The cost-of-living crisis seems to have impacted **urban and rural** residents equally, but in different ways. Those who live in cities find events and social gatherings such as the theatre, concerts and going to the pub too expensive. People living in rural areas who want to be more involved in cultural offerings are hindered by the cost of transport and limited infrastructure.

Pen Portrait

A finance manager and father to two young children, **Akshay leads a busy life** with limited free time in **North-East England**. Despite this, his Indian heritage and Hindu beliefs are central to his identity, and he takes pride in sharing them with his children and his community.

Akshay **attempted to establish a Holika Dahan celebration** to educate the local community on Hindu traditions but was hindered by bureaucratic "red tape", requiring extensive insurance and risk assessments – tasks for which he lacked time and money.

He believes accessing community resources should be straightforward and finds the current process overly complicated. As a result, his involvement in the local community is minimal.



Name: Akshay

Location: Newcastle

Area: Urban

Gender: Male

Age: 42

Ethnicity: Indian

Those who are not currently involved and do not want to be involved



Content



Time poor



Male



**White British /
Northern Irish**

Those who feel content with the status quo do not feel the need to influence or contribute to cultural decisions. This group prefer to enjoy the cultural offerings without participating in their organisation or development. Their interests often align with their surroundings, but if not, they often feel disillusioned and apathetic about having a say. This group also feel that taking on more than a participating role is too time-consuming.

- 1. People often find that their interests align with their surroundings.** For instance, residents of Cambridge, with its rich history and museums, are likely drawn to historical and educational pursuits. Those in Sheffield, known for its vibrant music culture, often have a strong interest in music and the arts. Similarly,

individuals living in rural areas tend to appreciate nature and outdoor activities. Hearing from the public, it is apparent that residents, particularly those who have grown up in these areas, become accustomed to, and develop a preference for the experiences their local area offers. If they have interests that diverge from what is on their doorstep, it is accepted that this will require travel to other cities or more urban areas.

"I'm quite lucky to live in Cambridgeshire because everything I'm interested in is here. I love walking, I love the National Trust sites. We're so lucky that we have these local things. I don't have to go far for new things because there's so many things in the county. I've never had to think about creating a new thing because I'm happy with what's on offer." South-East England, Rural, Female, 24-years-old

2. A lack of consultation from authorities in recent years contributes to a sense of **disillusion and apathy** among the public. Voicing concerns to local councils regarding non-cultural issues often go ignored, leaving people to feel their opinions are no longer prioritised. This leads to decreased involvement, as communities feel they have not been listened to for too long and no longer have a desire to try.

"We used to get things through the post, asking our opinion and what we'd like to see. At the library we'd get leaflets asking about so-and-so. They don't do that anymore. I just think they no longer ask or prioritise our opinion." South-East England, Urban, Female, 33-years-old, Ethnic minority

3. Many individuals find themselves disengaged from their local area due to the **significant time commitment** required. Balancing work, family, and personal responsibilities leave little room for participation in community events or forums, no matter how appealing or beneficial they may be.

"I feel like I've just not got the time to fully commit, maybe in the future. But I feel now I'm just more career focused." Scotland, Urban, Male, 24-years-old

"I suppose right now in my life, I work full time, I've got a son, he's autistic, life's really full on for me, I haven't got the time. He was a huge factor. So, it's not that I'm I don't want to [be involved], it just wouldn't work for me right now." Wales, Urban, Female, 35-years-old

Regional differences

Residents of **large urban areas** face time constraints having moved to the area for work. Conversely, **individuals who did not grow up in the area** where they currently reside may feel less connected to their local community. This disconnection results in a decreased interest to initiate changes to their immediate surroundings. They accept the need to travel to areas with established cultural offerings rather than investing time to develop their hyper-local area.

Pen Portrait



Name: Peter

Location: Harlow

Area: Urban

Gender: Male

Age: 70

Ethnicity: White British

Peter is a grandfather from **Harlow**, a town known for its vibrant artwork scene. He enjoys the theatre, traditional events like the D-Day celebration and the annual poppy display and supporting the football team where his grandson plays.

Peter is **satisfied with the cultural activities** and feels no need to be involved in decision-making for new events. He believes the current offerings reflect his interests and trusts that new events will be organised by others, viewing extensive public consultation as unnecessary except for significant expenditures.

He is aware that as a White British man, the cultural offerings in South-East England are more tailored to his interests and not everyone is represented in the community.

the future of local cultural decision making

Future decision making responsibility

The public holds **varied views** on the extent to which decisions about culture, creativity, and heritage should be made by devolved powers.

Their sentiments emphasise the importance of inclusive, transparent, and community-driven decision-making processes, with a general agreement that decision-making **ought to remain at the local council level** due to concerns about the distance of senior elected leaders.

However, local councils are also seen to be disconnected from the wants of their constituents, prompting a call for local councils to adopt a more supportive role in fostering community engagement by **working in partnership with local organisations, local businesses and civil society groups**.

While it's acknowledged as unrealistic to involve every community member, there is a demand for accessible platforms, both physical and online, where the public can express their desires and needs.

Local organisations, businesses and civil society groups

The public emphasise the significance of local organisations, including businesses, civil society groups, clubs, sports teams, and community centres, in fostering community involvement and cohesion. These groups play a crucial role in representing diverse community interests and needs.

This is especially the case for engaging the younger generation. These groups provide opportunities for youth, fostering inclusivity and providing constructive outlets that keep young people engaged and off the streets.

The positive influence on local culture leads people to believe local organisations, businesses and civil society groups should have a greater role in decision-making.

"[Civil society groups] would make more sense because they would understand the region a lot better and understand what people would actually enjoy". North-East England, Urban, Male, 38-years-old, Ethnic minority

Regional differences

In more **rural areas** where the cultural offer is limited, **civil society groups** are seen to be the cornerstone of the community and serve as essential hubs for social interaction and support, especially for those more likely to be isolated (e.g. the elderly).

Individuals with passion or expertise

There's hesitancy to advocate for universal participation in shaping the cultural landscape, as the public acknowledge that too many voices can hinder progress.

However, **individuals with genuine passion or expertise** should have the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process, with decision-makers prioritising the input of those who have a genuine connection to and understanding of the local culture and heritage.

When considering "**experts**", the public view local volunteers or business owners as valuable resources. Although the public cannot clearly identify the exact role these experts play, they respect and recognise their importance in the decision-making process. The public does not wish to replace experts or assume their responsibilities; instead, they would prefer to collaborate in decision-making. It is assumed that individuals within the community who possess vision and passion for cultural initiatives will organically find a way to be involved in the decision-making process. Therefore, the priority here is to ensure these people have a place to express their views.

"I think the best communities do this stuff organically. When we do an engagement event at work, it's because someone's really passionate... think it's got to come naturally, and it's got to be something that people really want and want to drive." North-East England, Urban, Male, 37-years-old

"I think some kind of happy medium should be struck. You know, obviously, I'm not qualified and knowledgeable enough. So, I'm happy to listen to somebody who knows what they're talking about with my decision making. But obviously trying to get that balance is not easy." Wales, Urban, Male, 56-years-old

Elected leaders - Local Councils and Parish Councils

People generally express understanding towards the role of elected officials in assuring sensible spending. Some appreciate recent investments made by **local and parish councils** in cultural initiatives and greenspace. However, the majority are critical about the effectiveness of elected local leaders in representing community interests. In consequence, when looking forward, the public place more emphasis on the role of local organisations, business, and the public.

Regional differences

In rural areas, parish councils are preferred over local councils with the general sentiment being that parish councils are more in tune with the wants and needs of the local area.

Elected leaders - MPs or Mayors

There is consensus among the public that senior elected leaders such as **MPs and Mayors** are too distant to be making local cultural decisions.

“When you ask who should be involved in decision-making, I think all bits of different groups need to be involved, not just politicians.” North-West England, Urban, Female, 52-years-old, Ethnic minority

Appetite for future involvement

Although many people express a desire to be involved in local cultural decision-making, they often **resist taking on responsibility or committing their time for free.**

Their primary interest is in ensuring that taxes are spent beneficially, and their cultural preferences are reflected, rather than actively participating in decision-making processes.

Many prefer to leave the leadership to those who already have an established interest, and simply attend events that appeal to them without engaging in the broader community input.

To further understand these differences, we have identified three core groups:

1. Interested in future involvement
2. Claimed interest in future involvement
3. Not interested in future involvement

Interested in future involvement



Retired



Female



Future parent



Minorities

The appetite for future involvement in local cultural decision-making varies across location and demographics. Those with a strong desire for future involvement are driven by a need for accountability, representation and community engagement. Key demographics include minorities who feel underrepresented, retirees with more free time, and parents who want to have a say in the future cultural life of their children in their local area.

Pen Portrait



Name: Jenny
Location: Dundee
Area: Rural
Gender: Female
Age: 66
Ethnicity: White British

Jenny is a retired PA and values the community spirit in her small village. However, she feels there is a lack of diversity in the cultural offer of her village and the surrounding areas.

Reflecting on her past, Jenny recalls being active in the local rugby club when her son was young, but her **community involvement waned** as he grew up. Now, with more time on her hands, Jenny reflects on her missed opportunities to stay connected and wishes to contribute more actively to her village.

She believes local councillors should offer more opportunities for residents to participate in organising events and emphasises the need for local leaders to engage proactively with residents looking to contribute to local decision-making.

Claimed interest in future involvement



Youth



Future retirees



Future parent



Financially driven

This group see themselves as **having more of a role in the future**, usually when they become a parent or have more free time in retirement. The priority is to see their cultural preferences reflected and to feel included, especially among future parents, young people, and minorities. Their motivations may be different but there is always an identifiable reason for wanting to be involved. Identifying their 'stake' could open avenues for those with an interest in future participation.

There are also those who claim interest in having a say, but primarily to advocate for their right to influence how their taxes are allocated. They believe the community should play a pivotal role in decision-making due to their financial contributions and direct benefits from local cultural offerings. However, despite these strong sentiments, many in this group

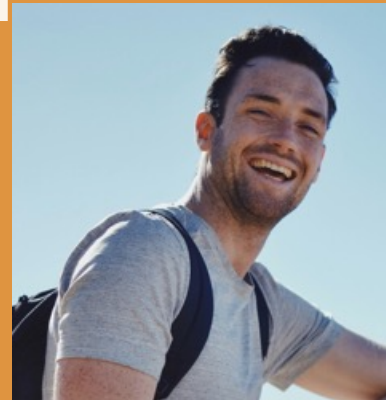
hesitate to actively participate or take on responsibilities. They prefer the idea of clear guidelines for those who want to be involved, rather than establishing further bureaucratic procedures that could be costly.

Pen Portrait

Having always lived in the same area, **Matt** recalls his childhood with neighbours frequently checking in on each other, a sense of unity that now seems to be fading. But regularly attending football matches at St James' Park, he can see the positive influence of local culture on community-building.

Looking forward, he hopes to increase his involvement in the community once he and his husband **start a family**.

However, he is **aware of flaws in the current decision-making process**. He believes local authorities should prioritise facilitating rather than dictating cultural activities. Although Matt has opinions on how to potentially improve the decision-making process, he is unsure of how to achieve this. Working full time, he feels unable to dedicate time to such endeavors.



Name: Matt

Location: Durham

Area: Rural

Gender: Male

Age: 30

Ethnicity: White British

Not interested in future involvement



Content



Male



**White British /
Northern Irish**

Some individuals are **content with their place in the status quo**, believing those that are passionate about having a say and creating cultural events will take the lead. They see little need for broad community input and believe that those passionate enough will develop new events organically and are happy to support them. This group is likely to be White British / Northern Irish men who feel they are already reflected in the local cultural offer and are therefore happy to 'sit back' and enjoy the offerings without getting involved in the decision-making process.

Pen Portrait



Name: Conor
Location: Belfast
Area: Rural
Gender: Male
Age: 50
Ethnicity: Northern Irish

Conor appreciates the unique culture of **rural life**, valuing its slow pace and predictability.

While Conor recognises there isn't much going on for everyone and is supportive of new activities, especially for the youth, he has no interest in organising events or attending those that don't reflect his interests.

He is also sympathetic to the desire of ethnic minorities to share their culture but prefers to "sit back and join in when somebody else makes the decisions". He would rather spend his time rambling in the Irish countryside rather than spending his money on transport and increasingly expensive entry to events he doesn't think will be well organised.

What future involvement could look like

In an ideal world, involvement in local decision-making would entail active participation despite time and economic constraints. It would involve transparency and community input in budget allocation and support for cultural initiatives like sports, arts and pride festivals. Ultimately, it's about fostering collaboration and grassroots efforts to address community needs and build positive changes while facilitating social connections.

People want to have a say in what happens in their local area, but they are generally reluctant to take on the responsibility of delivering services or making decisions. As a result, they feel that the final say will ultimately rest with the local or parish councils. The local council or parish council level is viewed as the most realistic channel for influencing cultural offerings because it feels the most accessible and immediate, with higher devolved powers (such as combined authorities) feeling too distant.

To encourage people to have a say in their local community, it is crucial to reach them where they already are, such as local Facebook groups or community centres. Engaging with residents through these familiar and accessible platforms could motivate participation. By starting small and collaborating with existing groups, more people can be involved in local decision-making processes and ensure their voices are heard.

Response to the idea of a cultural forum

The idea of a cultural forum was presented to half of the focus groups. The response to joining a local cultural forum to support local decision-making is **mixed**, with some participants leaning towards scepticism.

Those who support the idea of a cultural forum envision a hyper-local, community-driven forum aimed at fostering better relationships and understanding among members. These members would include members of the public who are interested in having a say, individuals with relevant expertise, such as local business owners, local community groups and businesses and local authorities.

However, sceptics express concerns about time constraints and the potential excessive bureaucracy and cost. They advocate for practical, offline alternatives such as leafleting or online voting. There's a belief that genuine community involvement will occur naturally if provided with the infrastructure, removing the need for formal structures.

How this collaboration could work in reality

People are aware that local elected leaders need to be involved in decision-making, but there is a preference for more local, smaller scale initiatives to engender collaboration between the local community and community leaders. Among these local leaders, there are suggestions for diverse leadership, including representatives with a genuine interest and understanding. There is a desire for organic, community-driven initiatives, rather than top-down approaches that people view as "tick box" events.

Suggestions from the public on how to achieve this collaboration include:

1. Establishing physical and online suggestion platforms for event ideas and to organise public meetings to ensure diverse voices are heard.
2. Introducing voting mechanisms, where local people can vote on the different cultural initiatives / events they would like to see in the local area.
3. Ensuring accessibility to participation in having a say regardless of circumstances like illness or childcare.
4. A more direct approach where community members can propose projects and receive funding based on clear guidelines.

Regional differences

In **rural areas**, people want a physical "hub" where the community can gather and have open conversations with local leaders. This could be an existing community space like the library or town hall. However, people are aware that this hyper-local decision-making is less realistic in densely populated urban areas.

In **urban areas**, online methods such as the council website, or social media groups, along with traditional communications such as leaflets, are suggested as ways to effectively engage a significant percentage of the local community.

"I think there might be more culture than I think there is, but I wouldn't know where to go looking for it, it would be nice to have a set location in

*Dundee where I could find that information.” Scotland, Urban, Male, 24-
years-old*

*“They [elected officials] could reach out to local organisations - charities,
churches, parish councils etc. and be like, this is what we're intending on
spending money on, having that sort of collaboration.” North-East
England, Urban, Male, 31-years-old*

Public understanding of 'good' decision-making

In response to the public's views on the current state of local cultural decision-making, we have identified **five principles of "good" decision-making** to guide the design of policy measures associated with "the future of local cultural decision making" programme. These principles are shaped by what we heard from the public:

- 1. Community engagement and inclusivity.** Ensure that decision-making processes actively involve the community, especially through local councils and parish councils, which are perceived as more accessible and immediate. Create or use existing platforms (physical and online) where community members can easily express their preferences, ideas and local cultural aspirations. Furthermore, foster inclusivity by considering the diverse backgrounds, interests, and needs of different ethnic and social groups within the community. Support organic, community-driven initiatives rather than top-down approaches and facilitate wider public engagement through public meetings or suggestion boxes.
- 2. Transparency and accountability.** Any decision should be transparent in terms of budget allocation and decision-making processes. Clearly communicate how and why decisions are made, ensuring that the community understands the criteria and rationale behind funding and organising cultural events. Regularly update constituents on the progress and outcomes of cultural initiatives to build trust and accountability - utilising both online and offline methods.
- 3. Diverse leadership and collaboration.** Local decisions should be a collaboration between local authorities, local businesses, community groups and civil society organisations to ensure a diverse range of cultural offerings. A "good" decision will be made by a leadership that reflects the community's compositions and includes representatives with a genuine interest and understanding of local culture.
- 4. Accessible cultural offerings.** Address the current barriers to participation such as physical accessibility, financial constraints, and transport issues - particularly in rural areas. Cultural events and activities must be accessible to all community members including disabled people, parents of children with SEND, and low-income families. This could include subsidising ticket prices and providing adequate transport options to enhance participation.
- 5. Support hyper-local events.** Identify and support the cultural offerings that resonate deeply with the community and feel most accessible to the broadest audience, such as food festivals, sports teams, and historical landmarks. Recognise their value in bringing people together and ensure that decisions are directed towards funding and support for these grassroots initiatives.

*"Good decision-making is made in partnership, not in isolation." Wales,
Rural, Female, 49-years-old*

Recommendations for future research

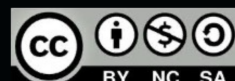
Initial thoughts for future research are outlined below:

- Quantitative benchmarking of UK adults, to explore:
 - Current involvement in cultural decision-making at a local level;
 - Perceptions of which actors are involved in cultural decision-making in their area;
 - Appetite to be involved in cultural decision-making, and in which capacity they would like to be involved.
- Co-creative research with either research participants who took part in the qualitative research for this initial stage, or with fresh participants, to work with Culture Commons and key organisations in the sector to map out the detail of how the public could get involved. This could entail a half-day facilitated workshop, including:
 - Re-cap of the key findings of this research;
 - Breakout groups mapping out the ideal process for decision-making, and the role of the public at different stages;
 - A 'stretch and build' exercise where each group rotates around the room, stress testing and adding to the previous group's ideas for public involvement, adding further layers of detail (e.g. including channels, key voices, touchpoints etc.)
 - Exploration of next steps.

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