International approaches to local cultural decision making

INSIGHT PAPER

With leaders from the creative, cultural and heritage sectors around the world

Oct 2024

Contents

This Insight Paper explores policy implications arising from a roundtable discussion that took place on 20th June 2024 exploring **international approaches to local cultural decision making.**

The roundtable formed part of an Insight Gathering session associated with **'the future local cultural decision making',** an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of UK-wide partners.

As part of the evidence gathering phase of the programme, Insight Gathering sessions were organised by Culture Commons to explore key questions related to the programme's research themes with diverse stakeholders across the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem.

In-keeping with an open and transparent approach of the programme, Culture Commons is committed to publishing an Insight Paper after each Knowledge Exchange session that reviews how the issues discussed may inform the overall policy process.

This Insight Paper will be formally reviewed as part of the growing evidence base that will inform the policymaking phase of the programme.

At the time of publication

'the future of local cultural decision making' open
policy development programme partners were:

LOCAL AUTHORITY PARTNERS

Local Government Association | Belfast City Council | Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority | Cardiff Caerdydd

Durham County Council | GMCA Greater Manchester Combined Authority | Harlow Council — Working together for Harlow | South Yorkshire SYMCA Mayoral Combined Authority | Wigan Council

SECTOR PARTNERS

ALVA Association of Leading Visitor Attractions | Amgueddfa Cymru | Art Fund_ | British Council

Creative Industries Council (CiC) | Culture Collective | Culture Counts | Creative Estuary

Historic England | Libraries Connected | RSA | Arts Council England — Lottery Funded, Supported using public funding by

RESEARCH & POLICY PARTNERS

Centre for Cultural Value | Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre — Led by Newcastle University with RSA | Culture Commons | University of Dundee

University of Leeds | University of Liverpool | University of Kent | Warwick — The University of Warwick

FUNDING PARTNERS

phf Paul Hamlyn Foundation | Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch

Culture Commons

Culture Commons bring the creative, cultural and heritage sectors together with the research community and policymakers to co-design new policy and influence decision making at the local, regional and national levels. We are leading **'the future of local cultural decision making'** on behalf of a consortium of UK-wide partners.

You can find out more about us at www.culturecommons.uk

The Programme

['the future of local cultural decision making'](#) is an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of partners made up of local governments, sector representatives, arm's length bodies, grant giving bodies and leading research institutions.

Together, we are exploring how further 'devolution' and/or increased local decision making might impact on the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in different nations and regions of the UK.

More information about the programme can be found on the dedicated [digital hub](#).

Open Policymaking

Open Policymaking was described by UK Government in 2014 as a process that 'opens up the formation of public policy to a wider variety of stakeholders'.

Culture Commons have adopted some of the key principles sitting behind this approach and elaborated on them when designing this programme, particularly the commitment to transparency.

Disclaimer

The views and interpretations expressed in this publication lie solely with the authors and may not be shared by Culture Commons or 'the future of local cultural decision making' open policy development programme partners and associates unless expressly stated.

If you have any questions or comments about anything in this publication, we welcome your views: please email us contact@culturecommons.uk

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Background

As one of the most centralised countries in the OECD, there is now a broad-based consensus in the UK that powers and responsibilities must move from the national level to local places to address inequalities both between and within regions and nations of the UK.

In recent years, the UK Government and each of the devolved nations (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) have made commitments to give wider and deeper decision-making powers to local government authorities and citizens (see our [Extended Briefing on 'Cultural Devolution'](#)).

We know that empowering local government and citizens to take charge of their own creativity, culture and heritage is a shared agenda in some parts of the world and that organisations and networks are already leading the way with innovative models and approaches that we can learn from here in the UK.

Inspired by the work of 'the future of local cultural decision making', the partners were keen to co-convene a roundtable discussion with international leaders within the creative, cultural and heritage sectors to learn from their own experiences of locally-led cultural decision making activities, and explore innovative partnerships, decision making structures and tools that might help enabled this.

This session was co-convened by Culture Commons and British Council alongside our programme partners at Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch).

The meeting was chaired by Trevor MacFarlane FRSA, Director of Culture Commons.

Learning Outcomes

We set the following areas for consideration ahead of the session:

- How creative, cultural and heritage sector organisations (private and public) engage with local decision makers including through local, municipal, regional and national government structures and state-sponsored bodies
- How cultural decision makers are engaging with communities they serve to facilitate citizen engagement specifically in local cultural decision-making processes
- What the opportunities and barriers for more local decision making in different national contexts are
- What specific tools and structures best support local stakeholders within the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in different parts of the world to engage collectively in local decision-making processes

o How we might facilitate more policy conversations between the UK and international organisations on developing approaches to effective local decision making

Agenda for the session

Time	Item	Contributors
14:00	**Welcome**	**Trevor MacFarlane FRSA** Director Culture Commons **David Thompson** Director of UK and External Affairs British Council **Luís de Melo Jerónimo** Director of Equity Programme Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
14:10	**Introductions**	**Laia Gasch** Director World Cities Culture Forum **Lyara Oliveira** President/CEO SPCine Sao Paulo, Brazil **Adama Sanneh** Co-Founder and CEO Moleskine Foundation, Gloabal **Jelle Burggraaff** Head of Mobility & Advice / Creative Europe Desk NL, DutchCulture Netherlands **Paula Garcia** Coordinator Evora European Capital of Culture 2027, Portugal **Ben Macintosh** Manager Cultural Partnership City of Toronto, Canada
14:30	**Focused discussion**	**1.** How does your organisation engage in local decision making processes and structures to agree priorities for local creative, cultural and heritage? **2.** How does your organisation engage with local communities to support citizen involvement in local

		cultural decision making? What are the opportunities and barriers to this work? **3.** In your experience, what structures and/or tools (i.e fora, partnerships or digital approaches) best support local decision making on culture, creativity and heritage? **4.** To what extent do national level policy priorities direct local cultural policy and/or local cultural decision making in your area or region? Are there examples of where local cultural policy have impacted national policy making?
15:50	**Discussion & Next Steps**	**5.** What more can we do to facilitate global conversations on local cultural decision making?
16:30	**Close**	

Implications for Policy

Our Knowledge Exchange and Insight Gathering activities are conducted under Chatham House rules. The insights herein reflect those of Culture Commons and do not necessarily those of the speakers or the wider programme partners. The observations made by contributors have therefore been quoted and indicated in **"bold"** but have not been attributed to individuals.

A timely discussion

"There is very much an active conversation about what do the different levels of government do with respect to cultural policies"

A perhaps anticipated yet nonetheless important finding from the session is that while the term "devolution" may not be universally used across the contributors, several countries across the world are thinking carefully about how to bring local communities into more decision making associated with the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem.

There was clearly an appetite from those we spoke for establishing an international forum to facilitate ongoing learning. As one contributor noted:

"Each country has specific needs, but there are some common trends and common challenges here. We need to be humble enough to actually learn from the others"

Another shared:

"...one of the reasons why this conversation is so important is that cultural devolution hadn't happened to the same extent as other policy areas in the [country]"

Reaching Up & Reaching Down: Governance Scalars

Contributors from Canada, Brazil, the Netherlands and Portugal all spoke about the infrastructures that enable or hinder collaboration across tiers of government in their contexts, and how this impacts local cultural decision-making.

The contributors explained how different tiers of government – national, regional and local – have distinct responsibilities when it comes to cultural policy. In this regard, multi-tier cultural governance seems to be better established in some comparable nations.

However, there was a consensus amongst the contributors that better coordination and collaboration across tiers is needed to ensure effective local cultural decision making. This perhaps underscores how and why other nations across the world could benefit from further knowledge exchange in this space.

In the UK context specifically, "local" can have different meanings depending on the operational scale of the organisation. For example:

"For us, local really looks like national in terms of the four nations of the UK"

We explore some of the specific and nuanced understandings of what

constitutes "local" in the UK in our very first Insight Paper from the programme, ['What do we mean by local decision making'](#).

For some larger organisations with national reach, working locally meant operating at the level of a devolved administration, or at the regional/federal level, and perhaps only reaching the city level through a network of intermediaries who hold direct connections with cultural professionals and communities on the ground.

The group discussed how connections and collaborations between different tiers of governance are essential for a **"healthy cultural ecosystem"**, yet the infrastructure to facilitate them are not always in place. This was discussed in terms of **awareness** and **preparedness** by one of the contributors:

"As a national body, I don't think we're yet fully equipped, partly because the level of understanding about what devolution in those spaces means is pretty low within the organisation and across similar organisations."

It is therefore particularly important for the UK to understand how other comparator nations build regional infrastructures to facilitate devolution so that we can translate those that are applicable to our operations.

In particular, the Goethe Institute was cited on several occasions as an example of good practice with regard to the mechanisms of collaboration between national and federal levels, enabling a

closer relationship between the different tiers to flourish.[1]

Local Consultation as Embedded Principle

One contributor explained that in their city local public input is essential whenever the local authority culture team plans to implement new policies. Unless the policy team can evidence "sufficient local engagement and consultation", policies will not be considered for implementation.

"It really is a principle for us that if we're going out and developing new cultural policies or programmes, we need to be consulting with local communities to inform what those programmes look like and what the priorities need to be for our strategies".

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Several contributors stressed the importance of representation and inclusion within decision making processes; they felt this should involve not only proactively reaching out to communities that do not typically engage with culture and decision-making processes, but also create entry points that make it easy for communities to be involved if they wish to be so.

Collaboration between smaller towns and national bodies, or even international agencies was raised as an ongoing challenge. Disparities seem to exist between localities in terms of their ability to attract funding or pique the

[1] https://www.goethe.de/en/uun/org/gre.html

interest of larger organisations with national reach.[2]

"Those that are more equipped to actually be able to stretch out and make the right contacts with the right national institutions, comparators in the same country or overseas... there's a marked difference between cities and regions that are empowered to do that, both financially, but also in terms of the governance structures around them."

One example was shared of where a small-scale participatory project had aided the development of a local theatre as part of a much wider cultural programme. Engagement with local residents was said to have fed into national policy discourses through a national network the theatre in question was part of. In this way, the cultural organisation had acted as something of an intermediary between local residents and national bodies and policymakers.

"The big success of this theatre was the connection between artists and residents and how residents have a voice in it... not just the way the theatre programmes, but in the way that they feel that the citizens have a voice about culture in the city. This participation has a role for confidence, trust between the team and the city, and this was very important for local policies and national policies".

One contributor reported a growing trend towards localities engaging with national government via **"advocacy from cities towards the federal government"**.

Over time, this locally-initiated advocacy prompted the national funding body to make more systematic efforts to collaborate directly with (larger) cities, for example on projects to support the development of creative spaces.

Similarly, another contributor provided examples of where larger cities such as London and Buenos Aires had supported, and in some cases facilitated, cultural projects at the neighbourhood level.

On the other hand, smaller towns and cities were recognised for their unique ability to provide a window into national dynamics – what one contributor described as **"lucidity"**. As they put it:

"In these little cities, we can see the country better".

Contributors agreed that the 'local' level is crucial when thinking about the implementation of cultural policy and delivery of programmes.

"We find in practice that so much of the actual infrastructure and support for culture happens at the local level, so the role of the cities in culture, in delivering culture policy, really is outsized compared to the tools available to them. So much of culture happens locally. When the federal or provincial governments are setting policy, sometimes it feels like they're doing it from like 10,000 feet up and

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[2] See for example, the annual European Week of Regions and Cities https://regions-and-cities.europa.eu/

not necessarily connected to what's happening on the ground."

Strategic international partnerships to raise local profiles

One of the most vivid discussions centred on the potential for more strategic partnerships between local and global actors, noting that balancing the benefits for both parties can sometimes be difficult.

One contributor shared the example of a pooled fund designed to bring together institutions and companies with international reach and reputation to support cultural and creative organisations that work with underserved communities in a particular area.

"We do it [increasing local decision making] by completely delocalising our network and conversations. So we come in as an external audience, as external stakeholders".

By using arts and culture as tools for social transformation at the local level, the fund aims to combine global resources with local expertise to drive impactful change.

"Our kind of unconventional strategy is...to build an international credibility, and we try to leverage the branding and international level that then they reuse at a local level, and interestingly enough, it seems that, in many cases, that has been a game changer for some of these organisations."

The main achievement of the funding programme was seen in raising the

visibility smaller cultural organisations on the ground.

"One of the things that... is helping these organisations is to increase their general credibility...by leveraging the international presence, by leveraging the organization that supports them, by leveraging the brands that then support their work".

Mechanisms for local cultural decision making in culture, creativity and heritage

Contributors acknowledged that facilitating local cultural decision making, ensuring appropriate levels of representation and facilitating genuine empowerment all present significant challenges to localities.

Contributors shared various mechanisms for local cultural decision making that they deploy; these ranged from commissioning artists to deliver public consultation to hosting citizen councils and assemblies, supporting everyday creativity at the hyperlocal level, and exploring ways to bring local voice into institutions.

In one example, the local council commissioned artists to conduct a programme of public consultation on the city's behalf to ensure it was accessible and enjoyable for local people. To this end, the council typically selected artists who were already familiar with the communities and gave them the freedom to design activities that were appropriate and engaging. The process was found to yield several benefits:

"First off, it's been more successful at building trust and reaching people who aren't otherwise engaged in city processes... They're going where the people are, rather than making them come to them. So they've been doing, for example, arts projects at shopping malls or existing community festivals and events... It's also just, frankly, more fun... that's been a really successful way of engaging people in government processes who may not otherwise have been part of the conversation."

Another contributor noted an increasing trend of **"culture on your doorstep"** being delivered in large cities, particularly post-Covid-19.[3] Moving beyond large, established institutions and supporting everyday forms of creativity in community centres was seen as vital to sustaining cultural expressions that exist on the margins and are considered at risk.

This shift towards decentralising culture involves strategies such as agile programming and funding, citizen assemblies, and participatory budgeting.[4] Initiatives like the London Borough of Culture[5] and Buenos Aires Barrios Creativos[6] were cited as examples of how these approaches can be effectively replicated in very different contexts.

The creation of spaces that bridge the public and private sectors, such as community trusts, were also mentioned as mechanisms to allow the public to have a say in how resources are invested. The Creative Land Trust in London was cited as a successful example of an "intermediary organisation" providing affordable space to artists and makers.

In one large-scale project, residents were given a voice within the administration through the creation of a **"Residents Council"**. This aimed to ensure that community perspectives were included in decision-making processes at all stages of programme delivery:

"We created an office with citizens, so that people – the citizens, the residents – can have a voice within the administration and direction of the [project]. So this is an office with 27 residents, people from civil society... instructors and professionals, and there are students, there are children ... they have a voice in this, and they work with us".

As research shows, cultural organisations are increasingly showing an appetite for expanding participation beyond their public programming into decision-making processes.[7] For instance, as noted by a contributor, including community representation on boards

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[3] See https://worldcitiescultureforum.com/publication/creative-recovery-the-role-of-cultural-policy-in-shaping-post-covid-urban-futures/

[4] See Jancovich et al. 2024 https://www.culturecommons.uk/publications/how-do-we-define-effective-public-involvement-in-cultural-decision-making

[5] https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/arts-and-culture/current-culture-projects/london-borough-culture
[6] https://buenosaires.gob.ar/cultura/promocion/pasa-y-conoce-los-ganadores-de-barrios-creativos
[7] Melissa Strauss, 2024, "Democracy at the top" https://www.cloreleadership.org/wp-content/uploads/files/democracy_at_the_top_mel_s_exec_sum._v3.pdf

could be one approach to fulfil this aspiration.[8]

Despite the general acceptance of the importance of involving residents in decision-making, the potential risks were also be considered. One contributor shared their concern on how resident involvement might impact the broader cultural sector: if resident committees are tasked with decisions about culture

"is there room for innovative culture? Is there room for cultural expressions that are very important but don't attract a lot of attention?"

The challenge remains to determine

"to what extent current infrastructure need to be disrupted to enable citizens to enter into it without destroying the livelihoods, the workforce and the precarious infrastructure that's already there".

What are the institutions of the future?

During the session, a provocative question was raised.

"What are the institutions that we need for the future? ... Do we have the institutions that are fit for purpose? That are agile, responsive...? Probably not. So what do they look like? And also, what are the capabilities of the people running those institutions?"

This prompted a discussion on the evolving needs of society, the demands

placed on cultural organisations and the resources made available to fulfil them.

Contributors discussed the need for existing governance and decision making bodies to become more interdisciplinary and entrepreneurial, to collaborate with other sectors.

"Sometimes civil servants need to be more entrepreneurial, and entrepreneurs need to be understanding more of 'the public good'".

The precarious nature of the creative workforce was also a key concern for the contributors. There is a growing need to support this workforce without overwhelming them with additional responsibilities.

"We're just going from project to project to project to project, but there's no systemic funding or infrastructural funding for culture... What are the next set of institutions and what are their capabilities, but bearing in mind that it needs to be hardwired as infrastructure"

One contributor spoke of **"creative leadership"** as a tool to harness creativity for social transformation.

The discussion underscored the importance of reimagining the role and structure of cultural institutions as intermediary organisations. There is a clear need for new institutional models that support the creative workforce

[8] See for example the work of L'Internationale, European confederation of museums, arts organizations and universities, founded in 2009, funded by the Creative

effectively while democratising decision-making processes.

Valuing culture and heritage in policy decisions

Some contributors noted that current monitoring and evaluation systems are overly focused on financial metrics and cost returns, often at the expense of qualitative outcomes.

"Usually all the monitoring and evaluation systems for [name of project] is often about costs and money and financial return."

But culture is about people.

"funding is very much based on certain criteria of evaluation"

"We need to change the mindset about how to evaluate culture."

About the Contributors

British Council, UK

Founded in 1934, British Council is a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body, working together with governments and our partners in the education, English language and cultural sectors, in the UK and globally, to make a bigger difference for millions of people all over the world.

2024 marks 90 years of the British Council. Over these years BC have created opportunities for millions of people and developed deep and long-lasting relationships. The council continues to adapt to meet the needs of a changing world, while remaining committed to the principles on which it was founded.

Working directly with individuals to help them gain the skills, confidence and connections to transform their lives and shape a better world in partnership with the UK, British Council supports them to build networks and explore creative ideas. This helps strengthen the UK's global reputation and influence, encouraging people from around the world to visit, study, trade and make alliances with the UK.

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch)

Since its establishment in 1956, the UK Branch has supported organisations to improve the quality of life for all, prioritising vulnerable and underserved communities in tackling complex global problems. Based in London, the UK Branch contributes to the Foundation's mission for a more equitable and sustainable society using their networks, experience and way of working. CGF works internationally with partners in the UK, Portugal and beyond. The UK Branch contributes to the Foundation's Access to Culture and Climate and Ocean grant-making programmes.

To maximise their impact, their focus resources and activities where there is the greatest need and where they are best able to make a difference. All of this is guided by the Foundation's overall strategic priorities of Equity and Sustainability.

World Cities Culture Forum

The World Cities Culture Forum is a global network of civic leaders from over 40 creative cities. The network aims to build a world where culture is central to thriving cities, driving equity, prosperity, and sustainability. It shares ideas and solutions to address challenges like climate change, affordable workspace, cultural tourism, and diversity in public spaces. Founded in 2012, the forum is chaired by Justine Simons and patroned by Sadiq Khan. It champions practical solutions through global summits, partnerships, leadership programs,

and research. The forum's vision is a world where culture is at the heart of thriving cities, and their mission is to share best ideas and design culture policies that change lives.

SPCine Sao Paulo, Brazil

SPCine is the cinema and audiovisual company of the City of São Paulo with a focus on the development of the cinema, TV, games, and new media sectors. As part of their programming, they run a 'social participation' strand. This is convened through:

- Municipal conferences to discuss and decide on municipal public policies,
- Public Hearings to discuss decisions made by the municipality,
- Public Consultations to obtain the opinion of citizens or entities on a given subject,
- Social dialogues and activities aimed at the enhancing of citizenship practice.

Moleskine Foundation (particularly their Creative Pioneers Programme)

The Moleskine Foundation is a non-profit organization that aims to inspire a new generation of creative thinkers and doers to change themselves and their communities.

With the belief that Creativity and quality education is key to tangible social change, their mission is to inspire youth worldwide to make a difference in their communities.

The Moleskine Foundation offers unique and unconventional educational experiences to allow youth from underserved communities to have access to spaces and tools to unlock their creative potential and transform themselves. By doing so, the foundation supports spaces where criticality and imagination can occur, so that novel solutions can be discovered for today's challenges.

Creative Europe Desk NL, DutchCulture

DutchCulture is the network and knowledge organisation for international cultural cooperation. The organisation supports the Dutch cultural and creative sector, public authorities, and diplomatic posts in the pursuit of their international ambitions.

They provide information, advice, and training on international cultural cooperation. They connect cultural and creative professionals, organisations, public authorities, and networks with each other and international partners in international cultural cooperation. They identify developments and investigate themes and domains relevant to successful collaboration. Finally, they share knowledge and insights with the cultural and creative sectors.

Evora European Capital of Culture 2027, Portugal

In 2027, Évora, and the Alentejo, will be European Capital of Culture. Based on three thematic lines - Time, Space and Matter - the Évora 2027 cultural and artistic programme combines art and science, artists and audiences, local and global, to raise urgent questions about the future of humanity, based on the concept of VAGAR, described as 'the full awareness that we, as humans, are always one with the universe'. Évora 2027 aims to explore the solutions to contemporary European challenges by developing sustainable cultural collaborations on a regional, national, and international level, and by stimulating social, cultural, and economic development.

City of Toronto, Canada

Originally the ancestral home of Indigenous peoples, Toronto became a hub of commerce, industry, and culture in the 20th century. While influenced by colonial and European traditions, the city has also embraced diversity and embraced its role as a global centre for film, television, and digital media. However, the creative sector faces challenges like development pressures and rising costs. In response, the city is implementing policies to support creatives, make arts grants more equitable, and promote diversity in public art.

These priorities are also shaping Toronto's Public Art Strategy for the decade leading up to 2030. Already a leader in public art, Toronto aims to make public art commissioning more responsive to Indigenous people and racialized communities, broadening representation beyond Toronto's early European influences. This vision was a cornerstone of ArtworxTO: Toronto's Year of Public Art in 2021-22, serving as the public face and test bed for the broader strategy.

As the City navigates the post-pandemic era, its cultural policy focuses on equity and inclusion, affordable spaces, and nurturing talent and innovation. These priorities will enable culture to flourish, yielding significant benefits in economic vitality, quality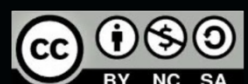 of life, and social inclusion.