

CULTURE COMMONS

# Combined and Local Authorities: Working together to support local cultural decision making

INSIGHT PAPER

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local cultural  
decision making**

An open policy development programme  
led by Culture Commons and Partners



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## About Culture Commons

Culture Commons bring the creative and cultural sectors, research community and policymakers together to co-design new policy and influence decision making at the local, regional and national levels.

You can find out more about us at [www.culturecommons.uk](http://www.culturecommons.uk)

## About the programme

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

Together, the partners 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.

At the time of publication, the programme partners were:



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

## Knowledge Exchange sessions

*Knowledge Exchange* sessions are organised by Culture Commons to bring the programme partners and external experts to come together, build links, share insights and broaden perspectives on a range of subjects of particular relevance to the programme’s research themes.

Culture Commons will publish an *Insight Paper* after each *Knowledge Exchange* session, in-keeping with the open and transparent approach the the partners are taking.

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

## Open Policymaking

'the future of local cultural decision making' is an open policy development programme operating a collaborative partnership model.

*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.

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If you have any questions or comments about anything in this *Insight Paper*, we welcome your views: please email [contact@culturecommons.uk](mailto:contact@culturecommons.uk)

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# Introduction

This *Insight Paper* summarises a panel and roundtable discussion that took place as part of a *Knowledge Exchange* session between high-level representatives on 18th March 2024. The session formed part of 'the future local cultural decision making', an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of UK-wide partners.

## Knowledge Exchange #4

As the devolution agenda in England continues to 'extend and deepen', we want to better understand how local government structures are currently working together to support the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem locally and regionally, as well as how this might change over time.

Culture (broadly interpreted) does feature in some devolution deals, for example in the first round of 'trailblazer' devolution deals in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands; we explore these examples in more detail in an [Extended Briefing](#). However, many established and emergent combined authorities are beginning to think carefully about what their role might in this new policy landscape might be, and what value they can add to the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystems in their respective areas.

On the other hand, local authorities - the largest investors in the creative and cultural life of all the UK - remain the predominant governing body with responsibilities for creative, cultural and heritage policy. Local authorities are therefore proactively exploring how their locally embedded work can both support, and be supported by, the new regional governance structures they are part of.

As part of this programme's partnership, we are lucky enough to be working alongside combined and local authority partners at different stages of their devolution journey. This enables us to take a look at the working realities of multi-tier governance of culture in a live context.

For our **fourth Knowledge Exchange session**, we held a moderated panel and roundtable discussion between three combined and local authority area pairings. This was a unique opportunity to have a frank discussion about the 'in and outs' of working together across the tiers of local government to support strategies, delivery and evaluation.

We set out six questions in advance of the session for senior local government officers to explore:

1. (Question for CAs) How would you describe your current/emerging role in supporting the development of the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in your region? How might this change in the future?
2. (Question for LAs) How has the establishment of a CA layer of governance impacted local cultural decision making in your particular area?
3. In an ideal world, how would you like to see responsibilities for the creative, cultural and heritage decision making in your area distributed between the local and combined authority levels?
4. What tools or structures have supported partnership working between the local and combined authority (i.e. governance mechanisms, strategic documents, other) in your area?
5. Can you reflect on current/potential future challenges to delivering your own organisational agendas for the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem because of multi-tier governance?
6. What more could a UK Government do to support multi-tier governance of creative, cultural and heritage services and associated activities in your area?

By the end of the session, we hoped to have a better collective understanding of our partner's perspectives on:

- Roles and responsibilities for their 'tier of governance' and how this compares in different areas.
- The benefits and challenges of working together in a combined authority area.
- The structures and tools that are supporting joined up working and partnerships in place between tiers of government.
- The possible future local or central government policy interventions that could ameliorate/further support multi-tier governance.

Given the ongoing and evolving contexts of devolution deals, this session was held under [Chatham House rules](#), and therefore (unlike our other *Insight Papers*) we have not provided an overview of the conversation per se, or attributed comments to specific organisations. Instead, we have highlighted key findings and synthesised these with other findings emerging from the wider programme so far, to draw out recurrent themes.

While the conversation focused on the relationships and journeys between devolved authority structures in England, the questions put to our speakers were intended to explore the *principles* and *impacts* of working between local and regional strategies and decision making structures. We therefore believe that some of these findings here will be equally useful for colleagues in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to consider, particularly as policymakers there are considering similar regional governance structures

# Background

It has been hard to miss the debate around 'devolution deals' in England that has been ramping up in recent years. However, it is worth remembering that devolution in the UK started in earnest back in 1998 under a Labour Party administration, with the establishment of the devolved national governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, their respective Arts Council's over time, and the Greater London Assembly.

A subsequent Conservative Party administration went on to roll out a bespoke 'devolution deal' approach that has underpinned increased local decision making in the past decade, including the establishment of the first combined authority in England, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority - one of our programme partners.

Simply described, combined authorities are groups of 'lower tier' local authorities (including District, Metropolitan, County, Unitary and London Boroughs) that work together in a geographically coherent way. A directly elected Mayor usually (but not always) covers the region with some executive powers. Most combined authorities' powers are exercised through combined authority boards made up of the elected leaders of constituent local authorities, acting much like a cabinet.

As of May 2024, we now have 11 combined authorities across the UK. You can find out more about how Dr Jack Newman described the increasingly complex patchwork of overlapping constituencies and jurisdictions of local government boundaries, including combined authorities, in our *Insight Paper* exploring ['what do we mean by local cultural decision making.'](#)

## The levels of devolution

In 2022, Prime Minister Boris Johnson launched the [Levelling Up White Paper](#) which set out different 'Levels' of devolution:

- **Level 3** - A single institution or County Council with a directly elected mayor
- **Level 2** - A single institution or County Council without a directly elected mayor
- **Level 1** - Local authorities working together through a joint committee

In a budget announced by the then Chancellor in 2023, the UK Government introduced new [Level 4 'trailblazer deal' tier](#), with a range of further powers being made available to the Greater Manchester and West Midlands Combined Authorities. We explore how the creative, cultural and heritage sectors featured in these deals in this [Briefing](#).

A year later, the UK Government announced an extension of deeper Level 4 deals for South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Liverpool City Region and the newly formed North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA).

As of March 2024, [22 devolution deals](#) have been implemented or agreed in principle in England.

## Programme Partners

Overview of our Combined Authorities areas



Within the programme partnership, we are fortunate to have **four combined authorities**, each on a different stage in their devolution journey. These include:

### Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA)

[Current devolution deal](#)

**Current Level:** 3

**Originally established:** 2017

**Local authorities:**

- Cambridge City Council
- Cambridgeshire County Council
- East Cambridgeshire District Council
- Fenland District Council
- Huntingdonshire District Council
- Peterborough City Council
- South Cambridgeshire District Council

**Headline commitments relating to Culture**

- The current Mayor has made a firm commitment to culture as part of his election manifesto pledge (including signing the [Creative Workforce Pledge](#) - a campaign led by Culture Commons, Excluded UK and trade unions ahead of the May 2019 mayoral elections)
- CPCA are currently developing plans to develop a region-wide strategy for culture, as well as new cultural data indicators as part of the data observatory work, but this work is still in early stages

### Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)



## [Background note](#)

### [Current devolution deal](#)

**Current Level:** 4 'Trailblazer'

**Originally established:** 2014

**Local authorities:**

- Bolton Council
- Bury Council
- Manchester City Council
- Oldham Council, Rochdale Borough Council
- Salford City Council
- Stockport Council
- Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council
- Trafford Council
- Wigan Council (*programme partner*)

**Examples of commitments relating to Culture**

- Commitment to investment in culture between £5 million and £15 million of its *UK Shared Prosperity Fund*
- Establishment of *Greater Manchester Strategic Cultural Partnership* to develop a [five-year culture strategy](#) (due for a refresh in June 2024) and increase funding alignment
- *Local Visitor Economy Partnership* led by Visit England and Marketing Manchester, on behalf of GMCA

## **South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA)**

### [Background](#)

### [Current devolution deal](#)

**Current Level:** 4

**Originally established:** Deal agreed in 2015 (Mayor elected 2018)

**Local authorities:**

- Barnsley Council

- City of Doncaster Council
- Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
- Sheffield City Council (*Sheffield Culture Collective are a programme partner*)

### **Examples of commitments relating to culture**

- Current mayor centred culture as a pillar of their manifesto offer (and also signed up to the Creative Workforce Pledge)
- Members of Sheffield Cultural Compact (SCC) *Sheffield Culture Collective*
- Early discussions taking place about the development of a regional cultural strategy, building on the work of Sheffield City Council's own strategy, which we explored in more detail in [Knowledge Exchange #2.](#))

## **North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA)**

### [Background](#)

### [Current devolution deal](#)

**Current Level:** Level 4

**Originally established:** Newly established, May 2024

### **Local authorities:**

- Durham County Council (*programme partner*)
- Gateshead Council
- Newcastle City Council
- North Tyneside Council
- Northumberland County Council
- South Tyneside Council
- Sunderland City Council

### **Examples of commitments relating to culture**

- Establishment of *Culture and Creative Sector Catalyst* to attract investment and support culture and creative sector growth, innovation and R&D, and new investment at scale.
- Development of *North East Culture, Creative, Tourism, Sport and Heritage (CCTSH) Blueprint*, regional agreement for co-commissioning and investment alignment
- Development of skills strategies for screen production

# Implications for Policy

During the session, we discussed each of the questions outlined earlier with three local and combined authority pairing (i.e. a combined authority and a local authority *within* the combined authority area) to better understand the dynamics in play.

*Note: The views expressed in this section are those of Culture Commons, and do not necessarily reflect those of the speakers or the wider programme partners. These findings will be drawn together with findings in other Insight Papers and considered in the round as part of the policymaking phase of the programme.*

## Local relationships are critical

*'There are some relationships between the individual localities within a place that should be held at a local authority level.'*

It was clear from this session that, as 'upper tier' institutions, our combined authority partners truly respect and value the relationships that already exist between local authorities and the hyper-local sector organisations on the ground in their areas.

All speakers agreed that local authorities are best placed to understand the individual nuances of communities, individuals and firms within their own area and indeed the unique strengths of their creative, cultural and heritage ecosystems.

There was no suggestion in any part of the conversation that combined

authorities felt they could replicate the close local relationships that local authorities are able to foster.

Interestingly, one of our combined authority partners spoke in favour of local authorities within their regional jurisdiction continuing to have direct relationships with arm's length bodies (ALBs), even suggesting that this direct relationship should be maintained even if 'deeper devolution' may come:

*'We're not looking for devolution of cultural investment...We think that that there should be a...protecting of integrity of certain things.'*

An officer within a combined authority at the beginning of their devolution journey also reflected that the local authorities in their area were much further ahead in terms of setting priorities and identifying development needs associated with the creative, cultural and heritage sectors on their patch.

Local authority speakers felt much the same way, recognising their role as strong advocates for the needs of their local sectors and wanting to maintain the relationships they have with ALBs, particularly in areas where these have improved in recent years (for example through programmes such as Arts Council England's *Priority Places* scheme).

## Cooperation over competition

Local authorities highlighted several benefits of being part of a wider combined authority level network.

The convening power of combined authorities, and how this is able to facilitate coordinated approaches between local authority areas across the region, was highlighted on several occasions.

*'...we now also have relationships with those other districts...it's about capitalising regionally on how we can support each other in delivering those ambitions going forward...placing ourselves where we can support each other and not compete with each other... I just think that's quite interesting in terms of how we're working going forward and that how 'devo' might support some of that.'*

Of course, this kind of partnership working doesn't necessarily need an advanced level devolution deal in place to happen; indeed, there are examples of bespoke local government officer networks and collaboration between local authorities in early Level 1 areas emerging that also benefit from joined up working. Nonetheless, when pressed on this point, the local officer concluded that it was the 'formalising' nature of these relationships under a combined authority structure, with all the legitimacy and political backing that comes with it, that made it feel more substantial.

Speakers shared that, in the context of severe financial pressures faced by local authorities, bespoke networking and collaboration efforts with their combined authority have understandably become more difficult to achieve. It was clear from

the discussion that regional structures can only provide officers with the capacity and institutional backing they need to get pan-regional creative, cultural and heritage sector programmes off the ground, if they are sufficiently resourced to do so.

This issue of regional governance structures being 'appropriately funded' is a recurrent theme in the programme so far - including in our [Knowledge Exchange #1](#), where expert panellists raised the lack of appropriate funding for [Corporate Joint Committees \(CJC\)](#) (pan-regional structures incorporating multiple local authorities in Wales) having significantly impeded their capacity for delivery and effectiveness.

We're picking up that collaboration between teams covering creative and cultural strategies at the local and combined levels is relatively underexplored in all four nations of the UK. Nonetheless, we did hear from officers in both tiers that they are increasingly aware of, and responding to, strategies sitting within the other - and that upper tier officers in particular are trying to weave constituent borough cultural strategies into their macro level plans. Local authorities are also seemingly increasingly aware of using combined authority strategies as an anchor to situate their own more localised plans within a clear regional context, creating a mutually reinforcing feedback loop.

Clearly, governance mechanisms and strategic plans developed at the combined authority level (including regional cultural strategies), or those developed by broader pan-regional

structures dedicated to cultural policy (e.g. 'corridor' models such as those being managed/developed by programme partners, [Creative Estuary](#) and [PEC and RSA](#) that we will explore in a future *Insight Paper*) have the potential to provide important frameworks that can build complementarity, rather than competition, across a region - particularly for cultural strategies (which we explore in relation to the wider role of local cultural decision making in [Knowledge Exchange #3](#))

## The 'value add'

While all our contributors seemed to agree with the principle that the work of a combined authority should 'respect the identity and ambitions' of each local area in their region, our local authority colleagues indicated that certain policy areas were best suited for the combined authority to negotiate and deliver on, including regional tourism, inward investment, strategic transport decisions or overall sectoral growth.

A senior local authority officer remarked that outcomes in these kinds of strategic policy areas also aided them to deliver against some of their own local ambitions, and that playing a part in a much broader set of strategic regional policy priorities alongside others could result in a net raising of outcomes for all constituent boroughs.

While this is a positive finding, regional We believe there is a need for more coordinated working across local authorities within combined authorities and deeper engagement with local citizens to ensure investments secured by

mayors are having the types of impacts that local people want to see - including in terms of the development of the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem. As one local authority officer put it:

*'We...are going to work to better improve representation within our decision making and within our [combined authority] structures. How do we better listen to what our residents [in the boroughs] want?'*

In [Knowledge Exchange #3](#), we shared thoughts from experts on how more participatory and deliberative processes could play a role in the governance of cultural policy across a region, including in partnerships between combined and local authority structures. We'll be delivering focus groups with members of the public in different parts of the UK to gauge levels of interest in different intensities of decision making. We'll publish our findings on the [programme hub](#).

We contest that, if more citizens are engaged in decision making locally and a better cascade of information from combined authorities is forthcoming, local people may be able to develop a better understanding of which tier of government is responsible for which policy areas, and who they can hold accountable for them. Level 3 + agreements with a directly elected mayor come into their own here - ensuring a clear point of accountability at the regional level. Mayors can clearly play a more prominent role of convening regional conversations about culture and want to explore what these bodies might look like. In West Yorkshire we already see the mayor convening a culture board

that could serve as an example to other areas.

## **Policy connectivity**

*'...it's the combined authority devolution deal kind of scenario which is actually making the connectivity across culture...and that kind of broader region piece.'*

All three of our combined authority partners shared their experiences of negotiating their 'core' (Level 3) and 'trailblazer' (Level 4) devolution deals; this process gave them an unparalleled opportunity to view place-based policy more 'holistically', introducing a decidedly regional dimension to the cultural policy thinking.

One of the combined authority partners who has just negotiated a new Level 4 devolution deal described how, in their view, it was comparatively easy to position the creative, cultural and heritage sectors within various packages and programmes negotiated as part of the wider region deal, particularly when packaged up as being part of supporting 'bigger' local development agendas or policy priorities.

An officer from one of the first 'trailblazer' areas, and therefore one of more mature devolved structures in England, agreed with this. They shared that, during meetings with arms' length bodies about their devolution deal, they were able to talk more strategically and make connections between mutually beneficial policy areas – including in health, skills and sport. They also reflected on how the discussions had had an impact internally too:

*'...the opportunity isn't just for a different way of working between places and arm's length bodies... It's also for us to look at what the opportunities are internally... how do we better work with our skills colleagues? How do we better work with our health partners? With transport...and how do we better connect the arm's length bodies with...[our] local partners.'*

The potential for devolution processes to instigate more holistic, regionally-sensitive policy approaches that can connect across traditional 'policy silos' was also raised by Dr Jack Newman in [Knowledge Exchange #1](#):

*'Strategic placed-based development, that could local at the place and population locally and considering what will really help people and the economy in that specific area.'*

Amidst the ongoing challenges of evidencing and communicating the full range of social and economic benefits that can accrue from investment in the creative, cultural and heritage sectors to national level stakeholders – working on communicating the efficacy of these sectors at the regional level seems like a fresh opportunity to make the case from the regions up.

## **Data flows**

All our combined authority partners described their current and developing ambitions for gathering more and better data locally, including developing specific indicators for the creative, cultural and heritage sectors.

We can see local approaches to gathering cross-sector data gaining momentum in pockets around England. Some places are already leveraging local stakeholders to do this, including local government and universities. Examples include the dashboards produced in the [West Midlands](#), Newcastle University Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC)'s datasets on [cultural engagement and workforce](#) distribution, the Southampton [Cultural Data Observatory](#).

More work is needed to standardise local data collection efforts appropriately. Fundamental questions remain about what data should be being collected, who decides this, and how it can be harmonised to be useful to the local authorities collecting it, but also for combined authorities when taking those more strategic policy interventions at the regional scale. Indeed, if combined authorities continue to be expected to produce data that fits with national level funders or future UK Government priorities, the degree to which that same data can be useful for address local policy priorities is unclear. We welcome the work of our programme partners at Centre for Cultural Value who are [exploring this in more detail](#).

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