

**Research and Analysis by  
Disconnected Bodies**

# **London Borough Cultural Strategy Review 2026**

A regional diagnostic framework

# Preface

This report is an independent review by Disconnected Bodies of London borough authorities' cultural strategies, creative economy frameworks, place-based cultural plans and associated delivery documents, intended as a companion piece to our UK Local Authority Cultural Strategy Review 2026.

The analysis examines how London authorities currently position culture within regeneration, economic development, inclusion, placemaking, audience development, youth opportunity and civic identity, with particular focus on strategic framing and operational evidence.

The review draws on a consolidated archive of standalone cultural strategies, Borough of Culture legacy frameworks, arts and creative economy plans, regeneration-linked cultural strategies and associated implementation documents.

In total, thirty eight strategy and delivery documents from twenty five London borough authorities were assessed.

Compared with the wider UK picture identified in the UK Local Authority Cultural Strategy Review 2026, London's boroughs operate within a more concentrated, competitive and institutionally connected cultural environment, creating strategic pressures around audience loyalty, identity, public value, place competitiveness and cultural differentiation.

Given the scale and strategic importance of climate transition and environmental sustainability within London's cultural ecosystem, climate policy will form the basis of a separate review.

## **Independent position**

This report has been produced independently as an objective review of London borough cultural strategy in 2026. Its purpose is to identify emerging patterns, strengths, challenges and opportunities across the sector. Where areas for improvement are highlighted, they are intended constructively and in the context of supporting stronger future cultural planning and delivery.

## **Limitations**

- Publication dates were not always clearly presented, and in some cases documents appeared updated online without revised title pages.
- Some authorities may also operate internal strategies or unpublished frameworks not visible in the public domain at the time of review.

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# Executive Summary

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## **Strategic ambition has evolved faster than operational capability.**

**Scope and method.** Analysis of 38 publicly accessible cultural strategy and delivery documents spanning 25 London borough authorities, including cultural strategies, Borough of Culture legacy frameworks, regeneration-linked cultural plans and associated implementation documents.

**Core finding.** London's cultural strategy landscape appears more current, more strategically integrated and more operationally ambitious than the wider UK picture. However, strategic ambition is evolving faster than operational capability.

**Strategic context.** Culture is increasingly positioned as part of regeneration, economic confidence, public realm activation, participation, youth opportunity, civic identity and place competitiveness. Boroughs operate within a highly mobile, institutionally dense and intensely competitive cultural environment where audience attention, relevance and participation cannot be assumed.

**Operational weaknesses.** Participation ambition often appears more developed than audience intelligence. Consultation frequently exceeds behavioural insight, measurement remains weighted towards outputs, digital capability is commonly treated as communications infrastructure, and progression pathways into creative employment remain comparatively underdeveloped.

**Emerging risk.** Creative production infrastructure, including studios, rehearsal space, grassroots venues and meanwhile-use cultural sites, appears increasingly vulnerable to redevelopment pressure, rising land values and affordability constraints. Temporary cultural activation and long-term creative sustainability do not always appear strategically aligned.

**Strategic trajectory.** The review suggests an emerging three-tier cultural landscape consisting of strategic leaders, transitional boroughs and legacy operating models. The boroughs most likely to shape London's next cultural decade may be not those expressing the strongest ambitions rhetorically, but those most capable of embedding culture within durable systems of governance, participation, delivery and long-term urban management.

# Five pillars of modern cultural strategy

It is our hypothesis that the strongest future-facing councils increasingly organise cultural strategy around five practical pillars.

Where one pillar is missing, performance weakens, and where all five are present, culture becomes a place-performance asset.

## 1. Audience intelligence

Understanding who participates, who does not, why behaviour varies and what drives repeat engagement; going beyond demographics into motivations, barriers, habits and psycho-segmented audience profiling.

## 2. Commercial resilience

Building sustainable mixed-income models through sponsorship, memberships, pricing strategy, premium offers, venue income, partnerships and stronger visitor yield.

## 3. Measurement systems

Moving beyond attendance counts toward live KPIs such as repeat participation, spend impact, sentiment, youth progression, diversity reach and return on investment.

## 4. Cross-council integration

Embedding culture into regeneration, planning, tourism, wellbeing, economic development, climate and skills agendas rather than treating it as a standalone service silo.

Around 34% of strategies explicitly position culture within cross-council agendas such as economic development, planning, tourism, health or climate, rather than as a standalone cultural service.

## 5. Live strategy refresh cycles

Replacing static strategies with annual reviews, dashboards, adaptive planning and responsive governance models.

Only around 19% of strategies reviewed provide explicit evidence of annual review cycles, rolling action plans, formal refresh mechanisms or live performance reporting.



01

# London's cultural landscape



London's borough cultural strategy landscape appears more visible, current and operationally ambitious than the wider UK picture identified in the national review.

Unlike many parts of the wider UK, London boroughs operate within a more competitive and institutionally dense environment shaped by higher resident expectations, sharper competition for funding, greater demographic complexity and significantly more public scrutiny; particularly within inner-London regeneration corridors and high-intensity visitor-economy environments where culture increasingly intersects with growth, tourism, public realm and long-term place competitiveness.

Based on the archive reviewed, 25 of London's 32 local authorities (78%) currently show a clearly identifiable public-facing cultural strategy, cultural framework or equivalent place-based cultural planning document. Whilst this does not suggest that the remaining boroughs lack cultural activity, it does indicate that strategic visibility remains uneven across the capital.

One of the more encouraging patterns emerging from the London archive is that strategy age appears less problematic than in the wider UK picture identified in the national review. Only around 11% of reviewed borough strategies visibly pre-date 2020, whilst approximately 44% have been published or substantially refreshed since 2023.

This suggests an increasingly responsive strategic environment, with newer frameworks often placing stronger emphasis on co-creation, representation, wellbeing and place identity. Frameworks demonstrating clearer strategic refresh cycles also appeared more likely to demonstrate stronger delivery coordination and governance visibility.

In several stronger frameworks, refreshed strategies were accompanied by rolling action plans, named delivery structures or annual review mechanisms, whilst weaker examples often retained broad strategic ambition without clearly visible implementation sequencing or governance ownership.

However, newer strategies do not automatically indicate stronger operational systems as evidence of governance ownership, review mechanisms and delivery structures remained limited. In practice, legacy thinking often appears through ambitious language unsupported by clear accountability, long-term evaluation or audience-retention measures.

In London's highly competitive cultural environment, these weaknesses can become strategically significant far faster than in lower-density local authority contexts.

02

# Trends



London boroughs operate within one of the world's most culturally diverse and economically uneven urban environments, shaped by rapid demographic change, rising living costs, housing pressure, shifting local identities and increasing competition for public funding and attention.

Within this context, culture is increasingly positioned not simply as programming, but as a mechanism through which boroughs attempt to strengthen social cohesion, civic confidence, local identity and long-term urban resilience.

## Participation, inclusion and representation

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Approximately 88% of borough strategies reference inclusion, participation, representation, access or reducing barriers to engagement. Boroughs regularly speak about widening participation, reaching underrepresented communities, improving access to cultural opportunity and ensuring that local cultural life better reflects London's demographic reality.

This reflects London's demographic complexity, political expectations and civic accountability. However, whilst participation ambition appears consistently across much of the archive, comparatively fewer frameworks show evidence of behaviour-led engagement planning.

### **Case study: Lewisham**

Lewisham's cultural framework places significant emphasis on representation, community participation and ensuring that cultural activity reflects the diversity of local residents. Programmes connected to The Albany, Deptford Lounge and a wider network of community organisations position culture as a tool for strengthening local identity, visibility and participation amongst historically underrepresented communities. The framework places particular emphasis on co-creation, local voice and neighbourhood-level cultural activity, reflecting a broader pattern across London whereby boroughs increasingly view cultural participation as part of civic inclusion and social equity rather than simply arts attendance alone.

# Identity, belonging and civic narrative

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Many boroughs increasingly use culture to strengthen local identity, civic visibility and neighbourhood belonging, particularly in areas experiencing regeneration pressure, demographic change or shifting perceptions of place.

Unlike many UK authorities, borough identity in London often competes with wider metropolitan identity, particularly within highly mobile inner-London boroughs where residents may live, work and engage culturally across multiple parts of the city with limited long-term attachment to any single local authority area. As a result, several borough frameworks position culture as part of a wider attempt to strengthen local relevance, civic visibility and neighbourhood distinctiveness within increasingly fluid urban environments.

In London particularly, cultural identity increasingly functions as part of wider borough competitiveness, shaping how places attract residents, visitors, investment and long-term civic attachment.

## **Case study: Barking and Dagenham**

Barking and Dagenham provides a strong example of culture being used to strengthen civic identity and neighbourhood belonging. The borough's cultural framework positions culture as part of a wider effort to reshape perceptions of place, build local confidence and establish a distinctive identity during a period of significant regeneration and population change. Initiatives connected to The Broadway, Valence House Museum and the emerging cultural activity surrounding Barking Riverside are framed not simply as cultural provision, but as mechanisms for strengthening local visibility, community pride and long-term attachment to place.

# Regeneration and economic confidence

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A growing share of London borough strategies now connect culture directly with regeneration, high street vitality and wider economic confidence; reflecting one of the clearest strategic shifts visible across the archive.

Cultural districts, meanwhile spaces, live events, public programming and creative workspace are increasingly integrated into regeneration strategy as tools for activating development areas, supporting evening economies and establishing place identity before long-term redevelopment is complete.

This trend is likely to intensify as boroughs continue to face pressure around vacant retail space, high street recovery, visitor economy performance and competition for investment across London.

## **Case study: Hammersmith and Fulham**

Hammersmith & Fulham provides a particularly clear example through regeneration plans associated with Olympia London and the wider transformation of the Earl's Court and West Kensington area. Here, culture, events, creative workspace and public programming are positioned as integral components of place-making, helping to establish identity, animate development areas and support wider economic activity. This reflects a growing tendency across London to treat culture as part of regeneration infrastructure, contributing to footfall, visibility and long-term place competitiveness alongside physical redevelopment.

# Young people, skills and creative opportunity

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Youth opportunity appears consistently across the reviewed archive, reflecting wider concerns around inequality, aspiration and long-term workforce retention across London. Boroughs frequently reference:

- schools
- creative learning
- libraries
- youth participation
- talent development
- creative confidence

Whilst participation ambitions are widespread, clearer progression pathways remain less common. Many borough frameworks position young people primarily as attendees, learners or participants, whilst fewer explain how cultural engagement connects to employment, leadership development, enterprise or longer-term creative-sector careers.

## **Case study: Haringey**

Haringey provides a useful example of this wider trend. The borough's cultural framework places significant emphasis on youth engagement through schools, creative learning, libraries and community-based cultural activity, recognising culture as a tool for confidence-building, aspiration and social mobility. Organisations and assets including Bruce Castle Museum, Jacksons Lane and the wider cultural ecosystem surrounding Tottenham are positioned as important spaces for participation, learning and creative development. At the same time, the strategy begins to acknowledge the need for stronger pathways connecting participation with skills development, enterprise and creative-sector opportunity.

# Wellbeing, community resilience and social cohesion

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Post-pandemic wellbeing language appears consistently as boroughs position culture as supporting social connection, local belonging, community confidence and intergenerational engagement, particularly in areas experiencing inequality, isolation or demographic change.

However, whilst wellbeing ambition is widespread, fewer frameworks clearly define how impact will be measured longitudinally or connected to specific behavioural or social outcomes.

## **Case study: Brent**

Brent provides a clear example of culture being positioned as a contributor to wellbeing, belonging and community resilience. Building on the borough's London Borough of Culture legacy, the framework connects cultural participation with social connection, neighbourhood pride and stronger relationships between communities across one of London's most diverse boroughs. Assets and organisations including Wembley Park, Brent Museum and Archives and the borough's library network are positioned as spaces supporting community participation, cultural exchange and intergenerational engagement. The strategy reflects a wider trend across London whereby culture is increasingly viewed as supporting wellbeing and social cohesion. However, as with many frameworks reviewed, the mechanisms through which these outcomes will be measured longitudinally or linked to specific behavioural and social indicators remain less clearly defined than the ambition itself.

# 03

# Audience

*Approximately 88% of borough frameworks reference inclusion, access, participation, representation or reducing barriers to engagement.*

This reflects London's demographic complexity and the reality that cultural provision in the capital increasingly serves communities with different identities, incomes, languages and levels of cultural confidence.

However, comparatively fewer frameworks demonstrate equally developed approaches to behaviour-led audience planning as engagement strategies remain more heavily informed by demographic profiling and consultation activity than psycho-segmentation or long-term engagement analysis.

## Quick stats

 **88%**

of borough frameworks reference inclusion, access, participation

 **< 24%**

of boroughs demonstrate audience planning beyond demographic profiling

Whilst demographic data can help boroughs understand who lives locally, these census-based sources remain less effective at explaining:

- why some residents engage repeatedly whilst others never attend
- how audiences discover cultural activity
- what drives loyalty
- why awareness fails to convert into participation

The reviewed archive increasingly suggests that participation may be shaped as much by relevance, visibility, convenience and emotional connection as by geography alone. As a result, London boroughs increasingly compete not only for participation, but also for attention, repeat engagement, cultural relevance, discretionary time and audience loyalty.

In this context, audience intelligence increasingly becomes a strategic capability rather than a research function. Whilst many boroughs demonstrate strong survey models and community engagement approaches, consultation and audience intelligence are not always the same thing; a distinction that will become increasingly important across London's cultural landscape over the next decade.

Without stronger audience intelligence, boroughs may face increased risk of:

- overestimating demand
- mistaking awareness for conversion
- mistaking attendance for loyalty
- treating underrepresentation as a communications issue rather than a behavioural issue
- investing in programming that attracts goodwill but not repeat participation
- struggling to convert civic ambition into sustainable engagement

*N.B Audience intelligence is explored in greater operational detail in our 'Psycho-Segmentation in Place-based Cultural Strategy' report.*



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*Newham responds to the realities of audience diversity within one of London's youngest and most diverse populations.*

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Newham responds to the realities of audience diversity within one of London's youngest and most internationally diverse populations. The borough's cultural framework places significant emphasis on participation, representation and ensuring that cultural opportunities reflect the experiences of local communities. Partnerships involving organisations such as Stratford East, the cultural institutions of East Bank and community-led activity across neighbourhoods are positioned as mechanisms for widening engagement and strengthening cultural visibility.

More importantly, these ambitions are supported through delivery scoring frameworks, visitor metrics and economic indicators rather than aspiration alone.

Newham also illustrates a wider challenge visible across much of the archive. Demographic complexity alone does not automatically explain participation behaviour.



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*The challenge concerns how local residents, workers and visitors discover, navigate a highly fragmented cultural landscape.*

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As home to some of the UK's most visited cultural institutions, including Trafalgar Square, West End and Somerset House, the borough operates within an environment characterised by exceptionally high levels of visitor activity, competition and cultural choice. Within this context, audience development extends beyond simply increasing access or awareness.

The challenge concerns how local residents, workers and visitors discover, navigate and repeatedly engage with cultural opportunities across a highly fragmented cultural landscape.

Westminster's framework therefore reflects a growing recognition that participation is influenced not only by provision, but by visibility, convenience, relevance and the wider audience journeys through which people encounter culture.

# 04

# Measurement

*Approximately 76% of reviewed borough frameworks reference evaluation, outcomes, evidence, monitoring or impact in some form, indicating broad recognition that cultural investment must increasingly justify its contribution beyond participation activity alone.*

However, whilst evaluation language is widespread, operational measurement systems remain significantly less developed. Approximately 65% of reviewed borough strategies appear comparatively light on clearly defined baselines, named KPIs, annual review cycles or structured performance frameworks.

In many cases, strategic ambition is articulated more confidently than long-term impact is measured.

## Quick stats

 **76%**

of borough frameworks reference evaluation or impact in some form

 **65%**

of borough strategies appear comparatively light on named KPIs and annual review cycles

This does not necessarily indicate weak delivery. However, it does suggest that in many boroughs, measurement systems may still be developing more slowly than the wider expectations now placed upon cultural policy in London.

Increasingly, boroughs are expected not simply to demonstrate that cultural activity occurred, but to evidence how investment contributed toward wider public priorities including:

- town-centre vitality
- participation equity
- local economic confidence
- youth opportunity
- community wellbeing
- and long-term civic value

This pressure is reinforced by wider funding and accountability systems connected to Arts Council England, National Lottery Heritage Fund investment, regeneration funding and public-value reporting frameworks, all of which increasingly prioritise evidence, governance and measurable impact. As a result, evaluation increasingly functions as part of organisational credibility and long-term funding resilience.

Cultural measurement still focuses heavily on familiar output metrics such as:

- attendance totals
- event numbers
- participation counts
- workshop delivery
- grants distributed
- volunteer numbers
- organisations engaged

These measures remain useful for understanding activity levels and programme reach.

However, they reveal comparatively little about whether cultural investment changed behaviour, strengthened long-term participation or generated wider civic impact.

Across several frameworks, attendance and participation totals were presented without corresponding evidence of audience retention, repeat engagement, behavioural change or longer-term outcome tracking.

Attendance figures alone rarely explain:

- whether audiences returned
- whether participation patterns changed over time
- whether new communities remained engaged
- whether perception of place improved
- whether local businesses benefited
- whether young people progressed into employment pathways
- whether residents developed stronger civic attachment
- or whether public funding generated genuinely additional participation rather than activity likely to occur regardless

The challenge emerging across the archive is therefore not whether cultural activity can be counted, but whether boroughs can demonstrate how cultural investment changes behaviour, participation patterns and long-term civic engagement over time.



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*Culture is expected to reinforce Greenwich's identity as one of London's most significant cultural and heritage destinations.*

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Greenwich's cultural framework connects cultural activity with regeneration, participation, economic development and community outcomes, whilst also placing greater emphasis on delivery planning and ongoing evaluation. Assets including Royal Museums Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College and the wider cultural ecosystem surrounding Greenwich Peninsula sit within a borough context where culture is expected to support tourism, attract visitors and investment, strengthen local spending, animate public spaces and reinforce

Greenwich's identity as one of London's most significant cultural and heritage destinations.

Rather than relying solely on attendance totals or event counts, the framework demonstrates a stronger awareness of the need to monitor delivery progress, participation outcomes and the broader contribution cultural investment makes to place development.



# 05

## Financial resilience

*Approximately 82% of reviewed borough strategies reference growth, regeneration, visitor economy activity or wider place competitiveness.*

However, far fewer provide visible detail around sponsorship strategy, revenue diversification, pricing models, asset monetisation or structured mixed-income delivery systems. One of the clearest pressures shaping London's cultural landscape is the growing fragility of affordable cultural infrastructure.

Unlike many parts of the wider UK, London operates within an exceptionally high-cost property environment where rising land values, redevelopment pressure and commercial rents increasingly affect the long-term viability of creative production itself.

### Quick stats

 **82%**

of borough strategies reference visitor economy activity or wider place competitiveness.

 **< 18%**

of borough strategies show evidence of sponsorship architecture, pricing strategy or structured mixed-income planning

Across several boroughs, artist studios, rehearsal space, grassroots venues, meanwhile-use sites and independent cultural workspaces operate within economically fragile conditions shaped by short-term tenancy arrangements and ongoing redevelopment pressure.

This tension is particularly visible in boroughs with historically strong creative economies such as Camden and Hackney, where independent creative production, nightlife ecosystems and cultural visibility increasingly intersect with affordability pressure and changing commercial land values. In these environments, sustaining creative activity becomes not simply a cultural issue, but an economic and spatial one.

Meanwhile, cultural use has become an important component of London regeneration strategy, particularly where temporary programming is used to animate development sites, attract footfall and establish early place identity before permanent redevelopment is complete. However, temporary activation and long-term cultural sustainability are not always aligned.

A tension visible across the archive is that culture can help increase visibility, strengthen development confidence and improve perception whilst simultaneously contributing toward the affordability pressures that later displace the very creative communities involved.

Several of the stronger regeneration-linked frameworks acknowledge this tension more directly by connecting culture with creative workspace, adaptive reuse and longer-term place stewardship rather than short-term activation alone. As development pressure continues across the capital, affordable cultural infrastructure may increasingly become one of the defining factors shaping whether boroughs can sustain diverse creative ecosystems over time.

Alongside these spatial pressures, the archive also reveals comparatively weak commercial maturity across many borough frameworks.

Historically, cultural strategy often operated primarily through public subsidy and project funding models. Whilst public investment remains essential, London's boroughs increasingly operate within environments where cultural activity is also expected to support visitor economy performance, commercial vitality, inward confidence and wider local economic activity.

However, based on the commercial maturity criteria outlined in the methodology, approximately 82% of reviewed borough strategies show limited evidence of sponsorship architecture, membership models, pricing strategy, venue monetisation or structured mixed-income planning.

This does not necessarily mean these mechanisms are absent operationally. However, where they remain absent from strategy frameworks, long-term financial resilience becomes harder to evaluate, defend or scale.

Several recurring gaps appear consistently across the archive:

- limited sponsorship strategy
- weak pricing logic
- minimal discussion of memberships or loyalty systems
- limited use of behavioural data to improve repeat attendance
- underdeveloped visitor-yield strategy
- weak articulation of how cultural assets contribute financially to wider borough economies

In London, these gaps carry greater strategic significance than in many other parts of the UK. The capital operates within an intensely competitive leisure economy where cultural participation competes directly against hospitality, retail, live entertainment, streaming platforms and global destination brands.

As affordability pressure intensifies across the capital, the long-term challenge for boroughs may increasingly concern not simply how culture is activated temporarily, but whether the economic conditions allowing creative production to remain locally embedded can be sustained over time.



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*The borough exemplifies many of the tensions identified throughout the archive: rising land values, redevelopment pressure and increasing operating costs.*

Camden provides a particularly clear example of the financial and spatial pressures shaping cultural resilience across London. The borough's framework recognises culture not only as a source of civic value, but as a significant contributor to economic activity, visitor attraction and place competitiveness. Assets including Camden Market, Roundhouse, Jazz Cafe and the wider cultural ecosystem surrounding Camden Town contribute to a distinctive local economy built around music, nightlife, creative production and tourism.

At the same time, the borough illustrates many of the tensions identified throughout the archive. Rising land values, redevelopment pressure and increasing operating costs create ongoing challenges for grassroots venues, creative workspaces and independent cultural activity.

# 06

## Delivery and borough capacity

*London's cultural ecosystem operates through unusually complex delivery structures. Cultural activity rarely sits entirely within a single borough team and instead depends on coordination between councils, cultural organisations, developers, universities, community networks, visitor-economy partners and externally funded programmes.*

As a result, cultural strategy in London depends on both cultural ambition and organisational coordination capacity.

This creates a widening divide between boroughs with embedded delivery systems and boroughs relying more heavily on fragmented partnerships, temporary funding or informal relationships to sustain implementation.

### Quick stats

 **76%**

of borough strategies reference partnership working, collaboration or cross-sector delivery

 **< 29%**

identify governance structures or delivery ownership

Approximately 76% of reviewed borough strategies reference partnership working, collaboration or cross-sector delivery, reflecting widespread recognition that culture cannot be delivered through isolated arts teams alone.

However, far fewer frameworks clearly define:

- who ultimately owns delivery
- how performance is reviewed
- where accountability sits
- how priorities are refreshed
- or how decision-making adapts when political, staffing or funding conditions change

A recurring pattern across weaker frameworks was the assumption that partnership activity alone would sustain delivery momentum. Where governance structures, reporting systems and operational ownership remain unclear, implementation can become heavily dependent on individual officers, temporary funding programmes or informal working relationships rather than embedded organisational systems.

In practice, weaker delivery architecture often reveals itself through:

- broad partnership references without named responsibility
- action plans lacking review cycles
- steering groups without operational authority
- unclear reporting structures
- limited evidence of cross-department coordination
- ambitions disconnected from staffing capacity
- or dependence on short-term funding and individual officers

These risks are not unique to London. However, within a city shaped by rapid economic change, political turnover and intense competition for funding and public attention, weak governance systems can produce strategic drift far more quickly than in lower-density local authority environments.

One of the clearest distinctions between stronger and weaker frameworks appears to be governance ownership and long-term delivery coordination: whether cultural strategy is supported by governance systems capable of sustaining delivery beyond individual projects, funding cycles or political administrations.

# 07

# Digital infrastructure

*Most borough strategies reference websites, communications, marketing, promotion and social media activity. However, digital capability is still frequently treated as a communications tool rather than as core participation infrastructure.*

London operates as one of Europe's most competitive attention economies, especially across boroughs containing concentrated visitor, hospitality and entertainment environments where cultural activity competes directly with commercial leisure, tourism, nightlife and platform-driven entertainment ecosystems.

Cultural participation is shaped not only by programming quality or physical proximity, but by discoverability, convenience, user experience and audience retention across fragmented digital environments.

## Quick stats



**82%**

of strategies reference digital communications, websites or promotion



**< 24%**

of boroughs demonstrate digital systems supporting audience retention or repeat engagement

In practice, digital systems increasingly influence whether cultural activity remains visible within London's fragmented attention economy.

Yet comparatively few borough strategies explain how digital infrastructure will support:

- audience retention
- repeat engagement
- integrated cultural discovery
- behavioural audience insight
- CRM systems
- cross-platform analytics
- or personalised participation pathways

Residents increasingly evaluate cultural experiences digitally before engaging physically. Audiences expect mobile-first discovery, frictionless booking journeys, integrated listings, timely information and personalised recommendations across platforms. Younger audiences, in particular, may form perceptions of borough cultural relevance long before attending a venue or event in person. Stronger frameworks recognise that digital systems can become part of how boroughs manage audience discovery, reduce participation friction and reconnect audiences across dispersed cultural ecosystems.

Where digital capability remains fragmented, boroughs may struggle to:

- convert awareness into attendance
- retain first-time audiences
- connect cultural assets into coherent borough-wide journeys
- capture meaningful behavioural data
- or sustain long-term audience loyalty within highly competitive leisure environments

# 08

# Youth

*Youth participation appears consistently across the reviewed archive. Approximately 71% of borough strategies reference creative learning, schools partnerships, youth engagement or widening access to cultural opportunity.*

This reflects broader recognition that cultural participation can support confidence, expression, wellbeing and civic belonging within a city shaped by significant inequality, rising living costs and uneven access to long-term opportunity.

However, whilst participation ambitions are widespread, clearer progression pathways remain materially less developed.

## Quick stats

 **71%**

of strategies express youth ambitions

 **< 24%**

of strategies reference pathways into creative employment

Young people are positioned primarily as attendees, learners or participants. Far fewer frameworks clearly explain how cultural participation connects to employment, enterprise, paid creative work, leadership development or long-term progression within London's wider creative economy.

This distinction matters within a city where the cultural sector depends heavily on freelance labour, informal networks and portfolio careers. Entry routes into creative industries often remain financially insecure, socially uneven and difficult to navigate without existing access, confidence or professional connections.

As a result, participation growth alone may not necessarily widen long-term access to creative careers or cultural leadership without stronger progression infrastructure linking engagement with employment, mentoring, skills development and affordable creative opportunity.

This challenge is intensified by wider affordability pressures across London. Rising housing costs, workspace insecurity and economic precarity shape who can realistically sustain long-term creative careers within the capital, particularly for younger residents without existing financial support or industry access.

At the same time, youth cultural participation is increasingly shaped through platform-driven and hybrid environments extending beyond traditional cultural institutions alone. Younger audiences frequently experience culture through social media, creator economies, digital communities, gaming environments, nightlife ecosystems and peer recommendation networks long before engaging with formal cultural venues physically.

In this context, cultural relevance is shaped by visibility, identity, relatability and social connection rather than institutional recognition alone.

Several borough frameworks acknowledge this shift indirectly through references to digital creativity, youth voice, co-creation and informal participation. However, fewer strategies demonstrate detailed understanding of how younger audiences navigate culture behaviourally across both digital and physical environments.

The long-term challenge for boroughs may therefore be less about widening initial participation and more about whether younger residents can realistically imagine themselves remaining within London's cultural economy over time.



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*Cultural opportunity is shaped not only by participation but by proximity to institutions and visibility of opportunity.*

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Southwark demonstrates the scale at which youth opportunity can be embedded within a borough-wide cultural ecosystem. The borough's framework connects schools engagement, creative learning and youth participation with a concentration of nationally significant cultural institutions including Tate Modern, Shakespeare's Globe, Southbank Centre and Borough Market, alongside a wider network of libraries, community organisations and local creative businesses.

Their strategy recognises that access to cultural opportunity is shaped not only by

participation itself, but by proximity to institutions, visibility of opportunity and sustained engagement over time. In a borough containing one of London's densest concentrations of cultural assets, young people are positioned within a wider environment where culture, education, public space and creative enterprise increasingly intersect. This creates opportunities for cultural learning and participation to occur across multiple settings, extending beyond traditional arts venues into neighbourhoods, public spaces and community-led activity throughout the borough.



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*[Ealing recognises] that opportunities for engagement is often distributed across multiple local settings rather than concentrated within a single cultural district.*

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Ealing provides a model of youth cultural development, rooted in a network of local institutions, community venues and neighbourhood-based participation. The borough's framework connects creative learning, libraries, festivals and cultural activity across a diverse suburban geography, recognising that opportunities for engagement are often distributed across multiple local settings rather than concentrated within a single cultural district.

Assets including Pitzhanger Manor & Gallery, Questors Theatre and the borough's library network form part of a wider ecosystem through which young people can access creative experiences, develop cultural confidence and engage with local cultural life. The strategy places particular emphasis on ensuring that cultural opportunity is embedded within everyday community infrastructure, helping young people encounter culture through schools, neighbourhood venues, public events and local organisations

09

# A three-tier capital



London boroughs now appear to operate at materially different levels of strategic maturity, operational integration and organisational readiness.

Whilst many frameworks articulate similar ambitions around participation, inclusion, regeneration and civic identity, the extent to which those ambitions are supported by governance systems, audience intelligence, delivery infrastructure and measurable implementation varies considerably across the capital.

Based on the coding framework used throughout this review, the archive broadly suggests three emerging categories:

- boroughs demonstrating stronger evidence of integrated and adaptive cultural systems
- boroughs moving through active strategic transition
- and boroughs where operational systems remain comparatively fragmented or lightly embedded within wider borough governance

These categories are not fixed rankings, nor judgments on the quality of local cultural activity itself. Many boroughs continue to contain strong organisations, committed officers and valuable cultural infrastructure regardless of overall strategic maturity.

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## **Tier one: Strategic Leaders**

This first group consists of boroughs demonstrating stronger operational integration, clearer delivery structures and more adaptive cultural planning systems. Approximately 24% of reviewed borough frameworks currently fall into this category.

These boroughs are more likely to demonstrate:

- Recently refreshed frameworks
- Clearer governance systems
- Cross-department coordination
- Evidence of audience intelligence
- Alignment with regeneration or economic planning
- Developed delivery infrastructure

In practice, stronger frameworks are more likely to integrate audience planning, governance visibility and delivery sequencing within a coherent strategic approach, whilst weaker frameworks often address these elements unevenly or in isolation. As a result, they appear better positioned to adapt to changing audience behaviour, funding conditions and wider borough priorities.

## **Tier two: Transitional Boroughs**

The second and largest group consists of boroughs that broadly understand the direction of travel but remain operationally uneven. Approximately 53% of reviewed borough frameworks appear to fall within this transitional category.

These boroughs frequently demonstrate:

- Strong inclusion language
- Meaningful participation ambition
- Active partnership ecosystems
- Awareness of representation and identity issues

However, they often remain less developed in:

- Audience intelligence
- Commercial resilience
- Measurement systems
- Digital infrastructure
- Governance clarity
- Structured review mechanisms

Many boroughs within this category appear strategically aware, but in a state of operational flux. In several cases, comparatively modest improvements around governance, delivery coordination and measurement systems could materially strengthen long-term strategic capability.

## Tier three: Legacy Operators

The third group consists of borough frameworks where strategic language appears comparatively static, operational systems remain unclear or cultural planning appears less visibly integrated into wider borough priorities. Approximately 23% of reviewed borough frameworks currently appear closer to this category.

This does not necessarily indicate weak cultural activity. Several boroughs within this category may still contain strong cultural organisations, valuable programmes and committed leadership teams.

However, publicly visible frameworks in this group more commonly show:

- Limited refresh cycles
- Weak delivery architecture
- Attendance-led measurement
- Limited behavioural audience insight
- Generic aspiration without operational specificity
- Weaker financial or digital systems
- Limited explanation of governance ownership

In practice, these frameworks often appear less equipped to adapt to changing audience behaviour, funding expectations and wider organisational pressure across London's increasingly competitive cultural environment.

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Importantly, these tiers are not permanent. Boroughs may move between categories relatively quickly depending on political leadership, officer capacity, external funding, governance reform or strategic refresh cycles.

The clearest distinctions between tiers increasingly emerge not through cultural ambition, but through operational capability: the ability to translate strategic language into measurable delivery, adaptive governance and long-term organisational continuity.

10

# Political shift



It's our observation that the political environment in which London borough councils operate is becoming more fragmented and less predictable. That shift is likely to shape local cultural strategy over the next five years as much as funding levels or organisational capacity, yet political awareness remains rare. Only around 6% of strategies explicitly acknowledge contested identity; community identities, contested heritage narratives, ideological diversity, intergenerational value differences, or politically differentiated participation behaviour.

Across the city, traditional party loyalties have weakened in many places. Support has become more fluid, with the growing prominence of fringe parties and locally organised independent groups. This creates councils governed by a wider range of political instincts, priorities and cultural assumptions than in previous decades.

Neighbouring authorities may now approach culture very differently. One council may emphasise environmental identity, inclusion and progressive civic narratives. Another may prioritise heritage, patriotism, local tradition or value-for-money service delivery. A third may focus mainly on regeneration and economic return. None of these approaches is inherently illegitimate, but the challenge is that divergence between places is widening.

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### **Why this matters in practice**

Culture is often assumed to be politically neutral. In practice, it rarely is. Choices about funding, events, heritage interpretation, public art, festivals, identity campaigns, community representation and civic symbolism all involve values, priorities and judgments. As politics becomes more polarised, those decisions can attract greater scrutiny.

Whilst this does not mean culture should become partisan, it does mean councils can no longer assume universal agreement about what cultural leadership looks like.

Furthermore, political complexity exists not only between councils, but within them, as a place led by one political group will still contain residents who voted for others. A Green-led authority may include Reform and Conservative voters who feel culturally unrepresented. A Conservative-led authority may include Labour and Green voters who feel excluded from local narratives. Urban centres may contain sharp divides between younger renters, older homeowners, graduates, commuters and long-term residents.

All this matters as a strategy aimed at “the community” can overlook how plural communities actually are and where cultural programmes appear ideologically narrow, socially coded or detached from local sentiment, participation may weaken among groups who feel the offer is not for them.

## **British and local identity**

A wider national debate also sits behind many local strategies: what does British identity now mean, and how does local identity relate to it?

Some places lean into heritage, monarchy, military history, industry or traditional civic narratives. Others emphasise diversity, migration, creativity, climate values or future-facing cosmopolitanism. Many residents hold a mixture of these instincts rather than choosing one over another.

Stronger councils are likely to recognise that identity is layered, not binary, and begin to use psycho-segmented strategies that don't force identity into simplistic narratives and risk alienating parts of the population unnecessarily.

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## **Risk**

Where political fragmentation is ignored, several risks increase:

- declining trust in cultural spending
- accusations of bias or irrelevance
- lower participation among disengaged groups
- culture-war style controversy overshadowing outcomes
- weaker public consensus for investment
- reputational distraction for leadership teams

These risks may be episodic in some places and structural in others.

**Culture is increasingly  
recognised as strategically  
important, but capability  
is uneven.**

London boroughs are strategically ahead of  
much of the UK, but operational capability  
is not keeping pace with ambition.



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# Final verdict



The reviewed archive suggests a clear shift in how London boroughs now position culture within public policy and urban development.

Across much of the capital, culture is no longer treated simply as an arts service or discretionary programme area. Borough frameworks increasingly connect cultural activity with regeneration, economic confidence, participation, youth opportunity, civic identity, public realm activation and wider place competitiveness.

Compared with the wider UK picture identified in the national review, London appears more current, more strategically integrated and more operationally ambitious. Several boroughs now position culture as part of how places manage growth, visibility, participation and long-term civic relevance within a city shaped by constant movement across borough boundaries.

At the same time, the review suggests that strategic ambition is evolving faster than operational capability. Boroughs demonstrating stronger governance visibility and delivery coordination also tended to demonstrate clearer audience planning, measurement systems and cross-department cultural integration.

Whilst the language of inclusion, participation and representation now appears consistently across much of the archive, the governance systems, audience intelligence, measurement structures and delivery infrastructure required to sustain long-term cultural resilience remain more unevenly developed across the capital.

In London, this distinction becomes particularly significant. Across much of the archive, cultural participation appears increasingly influenced by movement, competition and audience behaviour rather than geography alone. Residents, visitors, investment and attention move fluidly across borough boundaries, creating an environment in which cultural relevance must be continuously maintained rather than assumed.

As a result, the strongest frameworks reviewed increasingly treat culture as part of wider civic, economic and organisational infrastructure embedded within how boroughs manage regeneration, participation, public life and local identity over time.

The boroughs likely to shape London's culture offer over the next decade may therefore be not those expressing the strongest cultural ambitions rhetorically, but those most capable of embedding culture within durable systems of governance, participation and long-term urban management.

Appendix A

List of  
boroughs  
reviewed

- Barking and Dagenham
- Barnet
- Brent
- Camden
- Croydon
- Ealing
- Enfield
- Greenwich
- Hackney
- Hammersmith and Fulham
- Haringey
- Harrow
- Hillingdon
- Hounslow
- Islington
- Lambeth
- Lewisham
- Merton
- Newham
- Redbridge
- Southwark
- Tower Hamlets
- Waltham Forest
- Wandsworth
- Westminster

In total, 38 strategy and associated delivery documents were reviewed spanning 25 London borough authorities alongside several major cross-borough regeneration and cultural development frameworks.

The reviewed archive included:

- standalone cultural strategies
- Borough of Culture legacy frameworks
- regeneration-linked cultural plans
- creative economy and place-based frameworks
- implementation and delivery documents
- cultural infrastructure and public realm strategies

The review does not claim to represent the full extent of internal borough capability.

# Appendix B

# Methodology

This review focuses on cultural strategy frameworks and associated delivery documentation published by London borough authorities and related cultural partnerships.

The analysis assessed strategic positioning, governance visibility, delivery structures, audience intelligence, financial resilience, digital infrastructure and operational systems evidenced within publicly accessible documents.

The review does not claim to assess:

- unpublished internal operations
- confidential partnership arrangements
- officer capability
- political leadership quality
- artistic quality
- internal performance systems not reflected publicly
- the overall cultural value of individual boroughs

London boroughs may operate additional governance structures, audience systems, funding mechanisms, delivery arrangements or performance frameworks that are not visible within published strategies. Where operational indicators were absent from reviewed documents, no assumption was made regarding internal activity.

The review recognises that boroughs operate within significant financial, political and statutory constraints that may not always be fully reflected within published cultural strategies. These include local authority funding reductions, staffing limitations, regeneration pressures, rising infrastructure costs, affordability challenges and changing national funding environments.

The purpose of this review is therefore not to rank boroughs by cultural quality or organisational value, but to identify recurring strategic patterns, operational gaps and emerging trends visible across London's publicly accessible cultural strategy landscape.

To support comparative analysis, each framework was assessed against five operational dimensions selected because they represent capabilities increasingly associated with adaptive, delivery-focused cultural strategy.

**Audience Intelligence.** Evidence of audience segmentation beyond demographic profiling, including behavioural insight, participation barriers, audience retention analysis or structured audience development planning.

**Commercial Maturity.** Visible revenue logic beyond grant dependency, including sponsorship strategy, venue monetisation, pricing architecture, membership models, premium experiences or mixed-income planning.

**Delivery Architecture.** Named governance structures, delivery boards, steering groups, implementation reviews, partner accountability or structured reporting mechanisms.

**Digital Infrastructure.** Evidence of digital systems being treated as operational infrastructure rather than communications activity, including CRM systems, integrated booking journeys, audience data capture or cross-platform analytics.

**Live Governance.** Evidence of annual review cycles, rolling action plans, performance dashboards or formal strategy refresh mechanisms.

As with all comparative strategic reviews, some local complexity is inevitably simplified in order to identify broader system-wide patterns and recurring operational themes.

Percentages throughout this report refer to the proportion of reviewed borough frameworks in which a theme, system or operational characteristic was evidenced. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and should be interpreted as directional indicators of strategic visibility rather than precise measurements of organisational capability or performance.

Appendix C

Strategic  
Maturity  
Framework

To support comparative analysis across the reviewed archive, borough frameworks were assessed against a simple Strategic Maturity Framework. The framework does not measure cultural quality, artistic reputation, funding levels or the strength of local cultural activity. Instead, it considers the operational maturity of publicly visible cultural strategy.

Assessment was informed by evidence relating to governance visibility, audience intelligence, delivery architecture, financial resilience and live strategic management.

**Strategic Leaders.** Boroughs demonstrating stronger integration between culture, regeneration, economic development and wider council priorities, supported by visible governance systems, delivery structures, audience planning and ongoing review mechanisms.

**Transitional Boroughs.** Boroughs showing clear strategic ambition and evidence of cultural development, but where operational systems remain partially developed, unevenly evidenced or still evolving.

**Legacy Operators.** Boroughs relying on older frameworks, fragmented delivery structures, limited governance visibility or weaker evidence of ongoing strategy management and adaptation.

The framework is based solely on evidence visible within reviewed strategies and associated delivery documents. It does not claim to assess internal capability, unpublished plans, officer performance or political commitment beyond the public record.

Appendix D

Coding  
framework and  
classification  
criteria

To support comparative analysis across the one hundred and twenty three documents reviewed, each strategy was coded against a consistent set of operational indicators rather than narrative intent alone. Percentage findings throughout this report reflect the presence of identifiable evidence within published documents, not assumed internal practice.

For coding purposes:

**Behavioural audience intelligence** required evidence of audience segmentation beyond demographic profiling; including motivational segmentation, behavioural personas, participation barriers, customer journey mapping, audience retention analysis, or repeat-engagement tracking.

**Commercial maturity** required identifiable revenue logic beyond grant dependency; including asset monetisation, sponsorship strategy, pricing architecture, venue hire optimisation, membership models, premium experiences, licensing, merchandising, or mixed-income planning.

**Digital infrastructure** required evidence of digital systems being treated as operational infrastructure rather than communications activity; including CRM systems, integrated booking journeys, audience data capture, automated customer journeys, cross-platform analytics, or shared digital listings.

**Delivery architecture** required clearly assigned governance structures; including named delivery boards, steering groups, partner accountability, annual implementation reviews, delivery ownership, or structured reporting mechanisms.

**Live governance and refresh cycles** required explicit evidence of annual review, rolling action plans, formal strategy refresh mechanisms, dashboard reporting, or scheduled performance evaluation.

**Climate transition planning** required practical evidence of operational environmental delivery; including carbon reduction plans, estate transition plans, procurement standards, travel policy, energy efficiency targets, waste management systems, or measurable environmental reporting.

Where these indicators were absent from published documents, no assumption was made regarding internal activity not visible within the public record.

# Disconnected Bodies

We help local authorities use culture as strategic placemaking infrastructure, combining unmatched national insight with deep audience intelligence.

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We help UK local authorities embed culture as strategic placemaking infrastructure - turning it into a genuine driver of regeneration, stronger local identity, thriving town centres and resilient communities.

As authors of this landmark **UK Local Authority Cultural Strategy Review 2026 and London Borough Cultural Strategy Review 2026**, and developers of the **Sandbox Toolkit** - our proprietary psycho-segmentation and audience research toolkit - we offer a level of national insight and behavioural expertise no other organisation can match.

Our methodology is informed by **more than twenty years** of specialist audience research and the development of **over 3,000 psycho-segmented audience profiles**.

**In 2025** alone, we supported more than **140 Arts Council England funded organisations**, multiple National Lottery Heritage Fund projects, universities, cultural partnerships and local authorities across the **UK and internationally**.

We have also **contributed to the 2025 DCMS and Arts Council England reviews**, as well as National Lottery Heritage Fund evaluation guidelines, helping shape national thinking on cultural strategy, audience development and placemaking.

We support local authorities across the full strategy cycle:

- Independent strategy reviews and health checks
- Cultural strategy development and refresh
- Audience and community research and activation
- Public art and creative placemaking strategies
- Long-term strategic advisory partnerships



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