

Research and Analysis by  
Disconnected Bodies

# UK Local Authority Cultural Strategy Review 2026

A national diagnostic framework

# Preface

This report is an independent review by Disconnected Bodies of UK local authority cultural strategy documents and related place-policy frameworks.

The analysis is based on a consolidated dataset of one hundred and twenty three published council documents, assessed to understand how local authorities currently position culture within economic development, community wellbeing, placemaking, tourism, youth opportunity and civic identity.

The source archive spans approximately 2015-26, enabling comparison between pre-pandemic strategies, recovery-era frameworks and more recent updates.

## Independent position

This report has been produced independently as an objective market-wide commentary on the state of UK council cultural strategies in 2026. Where criticism is made, it is intended constructively and in the context of helping councils strengthen future practice.

## Limitations

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- Some councils may also operate internal strategies or unpublished frameworks not visible in the public domain at the time of review.

## A note from Pablo Colella

### Founder, Disconnected Bodies

“This review was developed to better understand where the UK’s cultural landscape is succeeding, where audiences and communities may still feel underserved, and how the country’s extraordinary arts, culture and heritage can remain accessible, meaningful and sustainable in the future.

The UK contains a wonderful range of cultural activity, but also faces growing pressures around inequality, affordability, regeneration and public participation. The intention behind this review was to explore how local authorities are responding to those pressures and how cultural policy can better support long-term civic life.”



# Inside

Executive Summary	1
Five pillars of cultural strategy	2
Culture as a strategic asset	3
Outdated strategies	9
National trends	13
Audience	19
Measurement	23
Finance	27
Delivery	31
Digital	35
Youth	37
Climate and sustainability	41
A three-tier national landscape	45
Political shift	49
Final verdict	53
Appendix A: List of authorities reviewed	55
Appendix B: Strategic maturity index	57
Appendix C: Coding framework and classification criteria	59
Disconnected Bodies	61

# Executive Summary

---

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

**Scope and method:** Analysis of one hundred and twenty three available local authority cultural strategies and related frameworks across the UK (2015-2026).

**Core finding:** Culture is now routinely positioned within growth, wellbeing, placemaking, tourism, skills and identity agendas, but strategic capability is uneven and often lags the rhetoric.

**Coverage gap:** Around 21% of the UK's 382 principal councils appear to have a clear, current public cultural strategy or equivalent framework; many remain strategically under-positioned.

**Operational weaknesses:** Audience intelligence is the most significant gap; 87% reference demographics, yet under 8% evidence behavioural segmentation, journey mapping or repeat-engagement analysis. Measurement is uneven, commercial models are underdeveloped, and refresh cycles vary widely.

**Risk and trajectory:** Without modernisation, a divide will widen between adaptive councils investing in live strategy, data capability and delivery architecture, and legacy operators reliant on static, ceremonial documents.

**Implication:** Civic value (identity, belonging, pride, quality of life) must be paired with managerial competence, audience systems, evidence, commercial resilience, digital infrastructure and regular refresh, to convert ambition into measurable outcomes over the next five years.

# Five pillars of cultural strategy

It is our hypothesis that the strongest future-facing councils increasingly organise cultural strategy around five practical pillars. Where all five are present, culture becomes a place-performance asset.



01

# Culture as a strategic asset



*The question is no longer whether culture has value, but what culture is expected to achieve, how it supports wider local priorities, and whether strategy is strong enough to convert aspiration into measurable results; moving culture to a functional place-performance tool.*

Across the UK, local authorities increasingly use cultural language within discussions of growth, well being, regeneration, tourism, youth skills, civic identity.

This reflects a wider shift in how places compete and how residents judge public leadership, with councils now assessed on both statutory delivery, and on whether their towns and cities feel confident, attractive, active and forward-looking.

In this context, culture shapes lived experience; influencing:

- Whether high streets feel active or empty
- Whether residents feel pride or decline
- Whether young people see opportunity locally
- Whether visitors stay longer and spend more
- Whether communities feel connected to place

Stronger councils position culture within mainstream strategy rather than treating it as a standalone service.

Further to this, in stronger strategies, culture plays a practical role in wellbeing, shared experiences, volunteering, creativity, libraries, parks, heritage and community events; all supporting connection, confidence and mental wellbeing when designed intentionally.

### **Case study: Newport**

Newport explicitly positions culture as part of public health and wellbeing policy. Its strategy states that participation in culture should improve resident wellbeing and reduce loneliness. This is backed by specific programmes such as the Living Levels Partnership (over £4m invested since 2014), which delivered 240+ events, public art commissions, oral history projects, and the noteworthy Tin Shed Theatre Co. production of Moby Dick at Newport Transporter Bridge. Newport commits to embedding cultural delivery into health inequality work through partnerships with health professionals and community services; also referencing Big Skies, a three-year landscape and community engagement programme.

It's worth noting that large rural or semi-rural authorities often face different challenges when attempting to deliver a robust cultural strategy: transport barriers, uneven access, ageing populations and weaker town-centre gravity. In these places, libraries, mobile provision, festivals, local heritage and digital access can become essential infrastructure for participation and community reach.

### **Case study: North Yorkshire**

North Yorkshire reflects this broader county-scale logic by explicitly positioning culture as part of access, connectivity and rural inclusion. Its strategy recognises that cultural participation in a large rural geography is shaped not only by programming, but by transport, digital access and geographic reach. Specific delivery priorities include strengthening the county's library network, supporting mobile library provision, expanding digital inclusion programmes, and using local cultural hubs to reduce isolation in more dispersed communities. The strategy also connects cultural access to wider themes of community resilience, learning and social connection; recognising that in a county of this scale, libraries, heritage sites, festivals and local venues often act as civic infrastructure as much as cultural assets. This approach is reflected through support for assets such as North Yorkshire Moors Railway and cultural destinations including The Georgian Theatre Royal, which together help extend cultural participation across a geographically dispersed population.

In visitor-dependent places, culture often serves a different but equally important function. Across coastal towns, heritage destinations and leisure economies, cultural activity can help differentiate place in an in a competitive visitor market. Festivals, local stories, heritage assets and year-round programming can extend dwell time, strengthen destination reputation, support local spend and create repeat reasons to visit. In many of these locations, culture contributes not only to visitor appeal, but to wider economic resilience and place confidence.

## **Case study: North Norfolk**

North Norfolk offers an excellent visitor-economy strategy that positions culture as part of wider place resilience and destination sustainability. Its framework links cultural activity, heritage assets, events and local distinctiveness with the ambition to strengthen year-round visitor appeal and reduce seasonal dependency. Specific priorities include promoting arts festivals, heritage attractions, coastal and market-town cultural programming, and strengthening the visitor offer through locally distinctive experiences that encourage longer stays and higher visitor spend. This includes cultural and heritage assets such as Cromer Pier, Felbrigg Hall and a wider network of museums, festivals and coastal destinations that contribute to the district's visitor economy. Rather than treating tourism simply as volume, the strategy positions culture as a way to improve destination quality, support local businesses and strengthen the district's economic resilience outside peak summer demand.

In more cases that is ideal, cultural strategy still appears heavily weighted toward programme scheduling rather than longer-term strategic design. Publishing an events calendar, funding isolated projects or promoting venues that does not in itself amount to strategic cultural leadership. Instead answering which audiences matter most? What local problems can culture help solve? Which assets underperform? What partnerships unlock scale? How will success be measured? can prevent a strategy from remaining 'busy-work' and directionless.

Until councils define the specific civic problems culture is expected to help solve, many strategies risk remaining aspirational rather than actionable. With mounting financial pressure and competing demands across adult social care, housing, regeneration, public health and local growth, cultural strategies need to demonstrate how they contribute to wider place priorities. Goodwill alone is unlikely to protect culture in the years ahead. Economic contribution will matter, but so will belonging, identity, confidence, creativity and quality of life. The strongest councils will be those that stop treating these as competing priorities and instead build cultural models that combine civic purpose with operational discipline.

“

*[Culture] is positioned as an international branding asset that enhances Exeter’s national and global profile.*

---

Exeter demonstrates a cultural strategy that is embedded within wider ambitions around city growth, place identity, and economic competitiveness. Rather than presenting culture as a standalone arts agenda, Exeter explicitly aligns cultural investment with the city’s economic and spatial development priorities. The strategy links culture to the city’s positioning as a knowledge-based regional centre, referencing partnerships with the University of Exeter, Exeter College, and the city’s innovation economy.

It also identifies culture as central to creating an attractive place to live, work, study and invest in; supporting talent retention, inward investment, and city-centre vitality.

Specific initiatives include the Cultural Harbour development vision, which uses cultural infrastructure and public realm investment to strengthen Exeter’s distinct identity, and the UNESCO City of Literature designation, which is positioned as an international branding asset that enhances Exeter’s national and global profile.



“

*Culture is explicitly positioned as part of town-centre footfall, visitor spend and daytime/evening economy development.*

---

Darlington links cultural ambition directly to regeneration and town-centre confidence through several named programmes. Its 2022-26 strategy ties culture to the 2025 Stockton & Darlington Railway Bicentenary programme, a major place-branding initiative designed to attract visitors and generate regional economic activity. This sits alongside the Rail Heritage Quarter capital programme, supported by the Towns Fund, and the Enjoy Darlington/Enjoy Tees Valley campaigns, which explicitly position culture as part of town-centre footfall, visitor spend and daytime/evening economy development.

Darlington also references social programmes such as In2 (led by Darlington Hippodrome) and work with Theatre Hullabaloo, linking cultural participation to youth development and health outcomes.

02

# Outdated strategies



*One of the strongest patterns emerging from this review is that a significant share of UK council cultural strategy appears older than the operating environment in which it now sits.*

Many publicly visible frameworks were written for different political, financial and behavioural conditions, with 40% pre-dating the 2020 pandemic; before the acceleration of digital expectations, inflationary pressure, high-street disruption or sharper competition between places. In several cases, strategies remain publicly available but show limited visible evidence of refresh, replacement or live review cycles.

Not discounting older strategies, many still contain sound principles around participation, partnership, heritage and civic pride. The challenge is not always the quality of the original thinking, but its continued relevance; with outdated strategies within the review concealing years of strategic drift. Language has aged far more slowly than the conditions it was designed to address.

Many councils appear conscious that existing frameworks are dated, but lack capacity, funding or political space to reset them, with cultural strategy often reviewed after more urgent statutory pressures have been addressed.

While stronger authorities are often recognised for publishing ambitious strategies, what differentiates them is operational design; a live management tool rather than a token publication.

Whereas, by contrast, ageing strategies are beginning to reveal themselves through:

- Priorities become generic
- Metrics disappear or lose relevance
- Delivery ownership becomes unclear
- Action plans lapse
- Partnerships change without formal reset
- New political leadership inherits old documents without strong attachment to them

Our assessment of the reviewed documents suggests:

**31% require a light refresh:** updated data, revised priorities, clearer ownership and current delivery plans. These are often published between 2018-22 with ageing assumptions, partial KPIs, or weak refresh evidence. Often still useful, but operationally stale.

**44% need a strategic reframe:** retaining useful assets while repositioning culture around new realities such as town-centre recovery, youth pathways, audience development or visitor yield. These documents usually understand participation/inclusion language, but haven't fully integrated culture into growth, commercial resilience, digital or behavioural audience models.

**25% require full replacement:** where frameworks are obsolete, ownership is unclear or current strategy has little operational relevance. These are typically pre-2020 frameworks, often activity-led, attendance-led, and with weak governance or refresh evidence.

A significant portion of the sector requires fundamental strategic recalibration rather than minor document refreshes, with the next five years likely to widen the competitive drift between councils with live frameworks that can move faster on funding bids, partnerships, regeneration opportunities and cross-departmental alignment, and those operating through legacy documents.

### **Case study: Aberdeen**

Aberdeen provides one of the clearest examples of operational maturity in the archive. Its cultural strategy was developed through extensive public and stakeholder engagement, including city-wide consultation with residents, cultural organisations, education partners and business stakeholders. More importantly, the strategy is not structured as a one-off publication. Delivery is organised through a named cultural partnership body, Aberdeen Performing Arts and wider city cultural partners, supported by rolling three-year action plans, formal annual progress reviews, and external peer evaluation mechanisms designed to test delivery against changing local conditions. The strategy also identifies named thematic priorities around participation, creative industries, talent development and city identity, with progress expected to be reviewed and refreshed rather than left static. This creates a live management model in which culture is treated as an ongoing city system rather than a ceremonial policy document.



“

*The refreshed framework introduced clearer ambitions around retaining momentum from major cultural investment.*

---

Coventry offers an important model. Following its year as UK City of Culture 2021, rather than closing the programme and moving on, the city formally refreshed its cultural framework through updated consultation with residents, partners and delivery organisations, using the City of Culture period as evidence for what should continue, adapt or scale. The refreshed framework introduced updated action planning, stronger emphasis on environmental sustainability, legacy governance, inclusion and skills pathways,

alongside clearer ambitions around retaining momentum from major cultural investment.

Rather than treating the original programme as a finished event, Coventry uses it as a platform for long-term place development; showing how large-scale cultural interventions can feed directly into refreshed strategic planning and legacy-focused delivery.

03

# National trends



Across the strategies reviewed, a consistent set of priorities appear repeatedly. Although language varies by place, most councils cluster around a recognisable group of themes: participation, heritage, wellbeing, partnerships, regeneration, youth opportunity and visitor growth.

These themes are politically safe, publicly defensible and strategically common but often insufficiently developed. Whilst their recurrence is understandable, aligning with public expectations, funding narratives and broad civic goals, repeated inclusion does not indicate strategic depth. In many cases, themes are named more confidently than they are operationalised.

## Participation and inclusion

---

Participation remains the most common priority with councils (93%), frequently expressing ambitions to widen access, increase engagement and reach underrepresented communities, reflecting a positive and necessary commitment to fairness, representation and cultural opportunity.

However, a recurring weakness is the assumption that supply creates engagement. Venues open, programmes launch, yet participation often remains uneven. Cultural behaviour is influenced less by availability and more by whether people feel the offer fits their identity, habits, budget and daily reality. Where that understanding is absent, access can be improved without participation materially changing.

### Case study: Luton

Luton provides a stronger example of targeted participation strategy by explicitly recognising that some communities remain underrepresented in local cultural participation despite the town's exceptional diversity. The strategy points toward increasing engagement among residents from Black, Asian and other ethnically diverse communities, lower-income neighbourhoods, young people facing opportunity barriers, disabled residents, and communities with historically lower engagement in formal arts and heritage activity. Delivery is supported through partnerships with organisations including Hat Factory Arts Centre and Stockwood Discovery Centre, alongside community-based cultural activity across the town. It also acknowledges that underrepresentation is not only demographic, but behavioural; shaped by confidence, cultural relevance, affordability, awareness and trust in institutions.

## Heritage and identity

---

Heritage is also a dominant national theme (within 74% of strategies) with historic buildings, museums, civic stories, landscapes and local identity featuring prominently across many strategies. This is unsurprising as heritage often provides councils with visible assets, established narratives and place distinctiveness; providing authorities with the opportunity to combine heritage with future-facing language such as celebrating the past while embracing innovation. This is often the strongest version of heritage strategy: using history as a platform.

Heritage can support tourism, education, volunteering, events, licensing, brand identity and town-centre renewal. 74% of councils control heritage assets with genuine economic potential, yet fewer than one in five (16%) appear to set out a clear income-generation or commercial utilisation model for those assets.

## Regeneration and economic development

---

A growing share (58%) of strategies now connect culture with town-centre renewal, regeneration or economic confidence. This marks one of the most important shifts in the sector, as culture is increasingly being used to animate the public realm, strengthen footfall, reposition centres and improve perception. This trend is likely to accelerate as councils seek cost-effective tools to improve place attractiveness and centre vitality.

### **Case studies: Darlington and Exeter**

Darlington provides a clearer example of culture being used as a regeneration tool. Investment in the Darlington Hippodrome, alongside town-centre activation around Darlington Market Hall and wider public realm programming, positions cultural infrastructure as part of rebuilding footfall, evening economy confidence and civic perception in the town centre. Meanwhile, Exeter reflects a broader economic model in which culture supports city growth and competitiveness. Through structures such as the Exeter Cultural Partnership, cultural activity is aligned with wider ambitions around talent retention, visitor economy performance and place attractiveness, while programming around assets such as the Exeter Custom House and the Quayside helps reinforce city-centre vitality and destination appeal.

## Partnerships and collaboration

---

While 81% reference partnerships or collaboration; cross-sector, education, business, health, community, or destination partnerships, only around 18% define partner responsibilities, reporting expectations or shared delivery accountability.

### **Case studies: Babergh and Mid Suffolk**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk reflect a more joined-up model in which culture is embedded within wider community recovery and resilience. Their framework links cultural participation with healthier communities, volunteering, local pride and town-centre vitality, supported through district-wide partnership structures including the Community Partnerships Team, local libraries, leisure infrastructure and heritage partners such as Suffolk Archives. Activity in market towns such as Sudbury and Stowmarket is positioned less as programming and more as part of rebuilding social confidence, strengthening local identity and improving long-term community resilience across dispersed rural communities.

## Wellbeing and community connection

---

Wellbeing language has become increasingly common since the 2020 pandemic, with 65% of current cultural strategies including a wellbeing element. Councils now regularly position culture as supporting mental health, social connection, confidence and belonging; reflecting a broader policy shift toward preventative public services and place-based wellbeing.

However, while broad wellbeing language became more common during and immediately after the 2020 pandemic, future credibility is likely to require more evidence. As financial pressure increases, councils will need to demonstrate how cultural activity contributes to wellbeing in practical terms: which groups benefit, through what interventions, over what period, and with what measurable outcomes.

### **Case study: Newport**

Newport provides a clear example of this trend, with its cultural and wellbeing framework explicitly linking participation in libraries, arts activity, heritage engagement and community programmes with the council's wider Well-being of Future Generations duties. This includes activity connected to Newport Museum and Art Gallery and The Riverfront.

# Youth opportunity and skills

---

Youth opportunity appears in 72% of strategies reviewed, making it one of the most consistently recurring themes across the archive. Councils frequently reference schools, creative learning, access, participation and widening opportunity for children and young people. This reflects a broad recognition that cultural engagement can support confidence, aspiration and stronger attachment to place.

What remains less common, however, is the transition from participation into progression, with few strategies (11%) outlining how that engagement leads toward employability, enterprise, leadership or long-term career pathways within the creative and visitor economies.

## **Case study: Coventry**

Coventry, through the legacy of UK City of Culture 2021, connects youth participation with wider skills and progression outcomes. The city's framework positions cultural engagement as part of a broader talent-development pipeline, linking Creative Learning programmes, school and college partnerships, youth volunteering and skills development with opportunities to progress into employment, leadership and creative-sector careers. This approach is reflected through the work of organisations such as Belgrade Theatre and Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, which played significant roles within the City of Culture programme and continue to provide work experience, internships and residency opportunities. Rather than viewing young people solely as audiences or participants, the framework positions them as future creators, producers, cultural leaders and employees within Coventry's wider cultural ecosystem.

# Visitor economy and destination positioning

---

Coastal, rural and heritage-led authorities frequently position culture as part of wider tourism strategy, using festivals, heritage assets, arts programming and public events to strengthen destination appeal, increase dwell time and support local economic resilience. Culture is being used to differentiate them in an increasingly competitive visitor market.

The strongest visitor strategies also distinguish clearly between resident demand and visitor demand. Local audiences often prioritise routine, affordability and social connection, while visitors may be more motivated by novelty, identity and premium experience. Authorities that understand this distinction are generally better positioned to grow both participation and economic return.

## **Case study: Arun**

Arun provides a useful example of this approach as its cultural and place strategy connects creative activity with wider destination growth through partnerships with Visit Arun, local town-centre stakeholders and coastal visitor infrastructure. The authority highlights assets such as Littlehampton Seafront, the Littlehampton Long Bench, and programming connected to Littlehampton Cultural Connections as part of a broader strategy to strengthen place identity, increase year-round footfall and improve visitor perception. Rather than treating culture as seasonal programming alone, Arun positions cultural assets as part of its wider attractiveness to residents, visitors and inward investment.

# 04

# Audience

*The most significant structural weakness identified across the reviewed strategies is the limited maturity of audience intelligence. For a period, broad participation language was often sufficient, but that period is ending.*

It would be fair to suggest that many councils demonstrate a genuine commitment to participation, but often lack the audience insight, systems or delivery mechanisms needed to grow it consistently.

Over time, limited audience intelligence may reduce an authority's ability to target participation, defend investment, or optimise cultural spend. Authorities that treat audience understanding as core strategic infrastructure appear better positioned to lead over the next five years.

## Quick stats

 **87%**

of strategies reference demographic communities or population groups

 **< 8%**

show visible evidence of behavioural audience segmentation

Across the reviewed archive, approximately 87% of strategies reference demographic communities or population groups, while fewer than 8% show visible evidence of behavioural audience segmentation such as motivations, barriers, habits, preferences and drivers of repeat participation.

Many authorities design programmes around available venues, historic calendars, officer capacity or funding opportunities, then hope audiences follow. Sometimes they do, often they don't at the scale expected. The evidence suggests many authorities continue to plan around available assets, historic calendars or funding cycles, with less visible evidence of audience-led demand planning.

### **The limitations of generic segmentation**

Broad segmentation informed by census data can be a useful starting point, but a weak decision-making tool on its own; slowing participation growth.

The strategies reviewed rarely revealed:

- what motivates attendance
- what prevents attendance
- willingness to pay
- frequency potential
- preferred channels
- cultural confidence level
- appetite for new experiences
- loyalty potential
- likelihood of advocacy

Where audience intelligence is underdeveloped, several common blind spots emerge.

**Overestimating demand.** A programme may be publicly welcomed but poorly attended, with positive sentiment not being the same as attendance.

**Misreading non-participation.** Absence is often assumed to be caused by awareness alone, when barriers may instead include pricing, confidence, transport, social norms or relevance.

**Treating all residents equally valuable at all times.** In reality, some audiences drive repeat engagement, some occasional value, some future growth and some social-priority outcomes. Stronger strategy recognises these differences.

**Confusing access with inclusion.** Opening doors matters, but sustained participation usually requires more than availability.

A more advanced model is emerging in parts of the culture sector, with stronger councils asking:

- who currently engages and why?
- who does not engage and why?
- where demand leaks elsewhere?
- which audiences can grow fastest?
- what creates repeat behaviour?
- what pricing models widen participation?
- which channels actually convert interest into attendance?

Psycho-segmentation can reveal audiences seeking belonging, status, learning, escapism, family bonding, civic pride, affordability or convenience; often predicting behaviour more accurately than age or postcode alone.

In turn, understanding on this level improves core public outcomes, helping councils:

- increase participation more efficiently
- target underrepresented groups more accurately
- improve marketing return
- strengthen pricing strategy
- grow repeat attendance
- reduce wasted programming
- support venue sustainability
- justify investment with clearer evidence

Even modest gains in audience understanding can produce disproportionate returns.

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



“

*Rather than treating audiences as a single public, the strategy acknowledges varying needs, barriers and motivations across the city.*

---

Manchester City Council demonstrates a more audience-aware approach through the way its cultural strategy connects participation with neighbourhood identity, inclusion and civic engagement across a highly diverse urban population. The framework recognises that different communities engage with culture through different routes and in different settings, spanning major institutions such as Manchester Art Gallery, HOME and The Lowry, alongside libraries, community venues, festivals and locally embedded cultural organisations.

Rather than treating audiences as a single public, the strategy acknowledges differing barriers, motivations and levels of cultural confidence across Manchester's neighbourhoods.

This reflects a more developed understanding of participation than is visible across much of the reviewed archive and illustrates how audience insight can begin to inform wider cultural planning, partnership development and long-term engagement strategies.

# 05

# Measurement

*A persistent weakness across the archive is uneven measurement maturity. The next generation of stronger cultural strategies will treat evidence as management infrastructure, not reporting paperwork.*

Approximately 68% of strategies reviewed reference impact measurement, evaluation or evidence language, but 57% remain light on baselines, targets, review cycles or clear performance systems, with an even smaller subset (around 18%) demonstrating what could be considered genuinely mature measurement architecture (e.g. Warwickshire, Aberdeen, Coventry, West Berkshire).

Ambition is often stated more clearly than progress is measured, and many strategies would not meet minimum private-sector accountability standards.

## Quick stats

 **68%**

of strategies reviewed reference impact measurement

 **57%**

remain light on baselines, targets, review cycles or clear performance systems

This should not be read as criticism of public purpose, councils operate under different constraints and wider social goals than commercial organisations, however, when public money is under pressure, the ability to demonstrate value becomes increasingly important.

Across many strategies, measurement focuses on outputs such as:

- Attendance totals
- Number of events
- Projects delivered
- Grants distributed
- Workshops held
- Partners engaged

These metrics have some value, reporting on activity levels and delivery volume, but they do not necessarily show whether meaningful change occurred. Approximately 63% of strategies reviewed continue to use attendance, footfall or participation volumes as a primary visible proxy for cultural value.

The review suggests that where measurement systems remain underdeveloped, several recurring risks emerge.

**Budget vulnerability.** Unmeasured cultural expenditure is exposed during periods of fiscal pressure. If value cannot be evidenced clearly, competing services may appear easier to justify.

**Strategic drift.** Without baselines and review cycles, councils may continue funding activity that no longer matches priorities or audience demand.

**Missed learning.** Weak data makes it harder to know which programmes deserve expansion, redesign or closure.

**Weaker external credibility.** Funders, investors and delivery partners increasingly expect evidence rather than narrative.

This being said, emerging best practice across the archive suggests that measurement is beginning to evolve beyond attendance reporting alone. Some authorities are now using live operational KPIs more commonly associated with high-performing delivery organisations than traditional public cultural frameworks.



“

*[The strategy is] a more active performance-management model than many static strategies in the archive.*

---

Warwickshire provides one of the clearer examples of measurement moving beyond attendance reporting alone. Through the Warwickshire Cultural Strategy Action Plan, delivery is tracked against named performance areas including partnership development, external funding leverage, audience growth, inclusion targets and environmental commitments. Delivery is supported through coordination with the Warwickshire Cultural Partnership, local libraries, heritage services and commissioned cultural organisations.

The framework also links campaign delivery, sponsorship development and community participation to annual review mechanisms, suggesting a more active performance-management model than many static strategies in the archive.



“

*Cultural activity is connected to a broader set of KPIs spanning participation, inclusion, economic contribution place-making.*



Within Leeds’ cultural strategy and associated delivery frameworks, cultural activity is connected to a broader set of KPIs spanning participation, inclusion, economic contribution and place development.

Delivery is coordinated through partnerships involving Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds Playhouse, Leeds City Museum and the wider Leeds Culture Trust legacy infrastructure established through the Leeds 2023 programme.

The framework places emphasis on monitoring participation levels, community reach, partnership activity and wider civic outcomes, creating clearer links between cultural investment and broader city priorities.

Whilst not every indicator focuses on culture alone, the approach reflects a more mature understanding of measurement as an ongoing management tool capable of informing future investment, delivery decisions and strategic adaptation.

# 06

# Finance

*Approximately 78% of reviewed strategies reference growth, regeneration, visitor economy activity or wider place competitiveness. Yet comparatively few explain how cultural activity contributes financially to those ambitions.*

Across much of the archive, culture is frequently positioned as a driver of footfall, town-centre vitality, visitor attraction and economic confidence. However, publicly visible evidence of the mechanisms linking cultural activity to financial outcomes remains comparatively limited. Only around 16% of reviewed strategies outline identifiable revenue models, asset-utilisation approaches or structured mixed-income planning.

This reveals a wider strategic challenge. Many authorities appear confident in describing the economic outcomes culture can support, but less clear on how that value is generated, captured and sustained over time.

## Quick stats

 **78%**

of strategies reviewed reference growth, regeneration or place competitiveness.

 **< 16%**

outline identifiable revenue mechanisms, asset monetisation models or mixed-income approaches.

The strongest examples within the archive treat financial resilience not as a separate commercial exercise, but as part of cultural strategy itself. Rather than asking how culture can attract more funding, they ask how cultural assets, heritage, events, venues and partnerships can create enduring economic value that supports both cultural and wider civic objectives.

This reflects a shift from viewing culture primarily as a funded service towards understanding it as part of a wider local economic system. In the strongest examples, financial resilience is not treated as an outcome separate from cultural strategy, but as a condition that enables cultural ecosystems to survive, adapt and grow over time.

Stronger strategies in the review consider questions such as:

- how can assets generate sustainable income?
- which experiences justify premium pricing?
- where can sponsorship be secured?
- what partnerships create commercial upside?
- how can visitors be converted into repeat customers?
- which intellectual property can be licensed or extended?
- how can venues improve utilisation across the year?



“

*Ambitions are supported through delivery scoring frameworks, visitor metrics and economic indicators.*

---

West Berkshire offers a strong example of commercial maturity than many authorities in the archive. Its cultural and visitor-economy planning explicitly links heritage assets, festivals and destination programming with wider economic outcomes including visitor spend, business confidence and external investment. Delivery is supported through partnerships with Visit Newbury, local business networks, town-centre stakeholders and heritage venues such as Shaw House.

More importantly, these ambitions are supported through delivery scoring frameworks, visitor metrics and economic indicators rather than aspiration alone, suggesting a more commercially grounded approach than many comparable strategies.



“

*[The strategy suggests] a broader understanding of value creation beyond subsidy alone.*

Monmouthshire provides a strong example of culture being positioned as an economic asset. Through MonLife, the authority manages a portfolio spanning leisure, culture, tourism, events and heritage under a single operating model; creating clearer opportunities for cross-selling, visitor conversion and operational efficiency. Assets such as Chepstow Castle, Caldicot Castle, market towns such as Abergavenny, and destination events including the Abergavenny Food Festival are positioned not only as civic assets, but as drivers of

accommodation spend, hospitality income, seasonal footfall and regional profile.

The strategy links heritage and culture with overnight economy value, local business spend and investor confidence, suggesting a broader understanding of value creation beyond subsidy alone.

# 07

# Delivery

*While 79% of strategies set out broad strategic ambitions, only around 22% provide clearly defined delivery architecture through named governance bodies, annual review mechanisms, delivery boards or assigned accountability structures.*

In weaker frameworks, delivery often relies on informal relationships, overstretched officers or broad partnership language without clear accountability.

Responsibility can become diffused across cultural teams, economic development, external partners, elected members and commissioned organisations, with no single mechanism responsible for maintaining momentum.

## Quick stats

 **79%**

of strategies set out broad strategic ambitions

 **< 22%**

provide clearly defined delivery architecture

In comparison stronger councils now treat strategy as an ongoing management system supported by live governance structures; including delivery boards, co-delivery networks, cross-sector steering groups, annual assemblies, stakeholder forums, thematic working groups and formal evidence review cycles.

These mechanisms provide continuity that can help ease transition between political leadership, when officers move roles, when budgets tighten, or when delivery conditions shift.

More importantly, clear delivery architecture assigns explicit responsibilities around evidence gathering, participation reporting, partnership development and programme evaluation, creating clearer accountability than many frameworks where delivery ownership remains implied rather than stated. This reflects a more mature operating model in which strategy is maintained through more than goodwill alone.



“

*Delivery is coordinated through structured stakeholder mapping, named delivery responsibilities and scheduled review points.*

---

A useful example of stronger delivery architecture appears in Derry City and Strabane, where cultural strategy is treated as an active governance system. Delivery is coordinated through Derry City and Strabane District Council alongside cross-sector cultural partners, with implementation supported through structured stakeholder mapping, named delivery responsibilities and scheduled review points.

The framework establishes annual strategic review meetings involving council officers,

elected members and external cultural stakeholders, enabling priorities to be refreshed against changing economic, social and funding conditions.

There are also references to cross-departmental delivery groups connecting culture with tourism, regeneration, community development and economic growth, reducing the risk of culture being managed in isolation.





“

*[The strategy is] being treated as a live management tool rather than a token publication.*

---

Westmorland and Furness provides one of the clearer examples of strategy being treated as a live management tool rather than a token publication by placing emphasis on annual business planning, service accountability and measurable progress against priority outcomes, signalling that strategy is expected to guide operational decision-making rather than sit dormant after publication. It is a less newsworthy model than some, but it, more importantly, reflects organisational discipline.

# 08

# Digital

*Digital capability has rapidly become a clear dividing line between stronger and weaker cultural strategies. With competition for attention intensifying, residents can choose from streaming platforms, private leisure, retail experiences, travel and home entertainment.*

Councils are no longer competing only with neighbouring authorities, they are competing within a much wider attention economy.

Whilst digital language is now visible across the archive, with approximately 56% of strategies referencing websites, promotion, listings or social media activity, only around 13% show evidence of digital being treated as operational infrastructure; suggesting that in most authorities digital remains positioned primarily as a communications function.

## Quick stats

 **56%**

of strategies referencing websites, promotion, listings or social media activity

 **13%**

show evidence of digital being treated as operational infrastructure

With audience behaviour changing faster than many public systems, residents increasingly expect frictionless discovery, mobile-first access, personalised recommendations, simple booking journeys and timely information.

Where digital systems remain weak, cultural participation can be lost before a programme even begins: visitors compare places digitally before they arrive and younger audiences often form impressions online long before engaging physically.

Where digital maturity is limited across the archive, several recurring issues appear when the authority's digital active was also reviewed:

- outdated or fragmented event listings
- poor mobile user experience
- weak customer data capture
- no CRM or audience relationship systems
- limited automation for reminders or re-engagement
- unclear user journeys from discovery to booking
- inconsistent branding across assets
- weak performance analysis
- limited integration between venues, events and tourism systems

These are often seen as technical issues, whereas in reality, they are strategic issues directly affecting participation, income and perception.

More advanced strategies are moving toward digital models that include:

- integrated cultural listings across the place
- searchable, mobile-first event discovery
- CRM systems capturing audience behaviour
- automated reminder and return journeys
- segmented marketing based on interests or habits
- shared data across venues or partners where appropriate
- dashboards linking campaigns to attendance or spend
- digital pathways connecting visitors to wider offers

# 09

# Youth

*Young people appear prominently across the archive with many councils expressing ambitions to increase participation, widen access, support creativity and ensure that children and young people can engage with local cultural life.*

This is encouraging and reflects a broad recognition that cultural opportunity can shape confidence, aspiration and long-term attachment to place.

However, employment pathways are materially less common. Across many strategies (81%), young people are positioned primarily as attendees, participants or beneficiaries rather than future creators, workers, entrepreneurs or leaders (17%). Furthermore, young people are often treated as one segment when in reality age alone is a weak planning tool.

## Quick stats

 **81%**

of strategies express youth ambitions

 **< 17%**

show evidence of employment pathways

Many authorities focus on:

- School engagement
- Workshops and holiday activity
- Discounted access
- Youth events
- Creative participation and programmes
- Volunteering opportunities

Forward thinking councils are likely to build youth pathways across several levels:

#### **Early access**

- school partnerships
- libraries and reading programmes
- affordable entry points
- inclusive first experiences

#### **Skills and confidence**

- technical training
- digital creation
- volunteering with responsibility
- mentoring and leadership opportunities

#### **Progression**

- apprenticeships and internships
- paid placements
- enterprise support
- routes into local creative and visitor economies

#### **Retention**

- reasons for young people to stay locally
- visible career ecosystems
- cultural scenes that attract younger adults



“

*Culture [is framed] as a contributor to confidence, communication and educational attainment.*

---

Brighton and Hove provides a stronger example of culture being linked to educational outcomes rather than solely leisure participation. Through partnerships between Brighton & Hove Libraries, local schools and literacy partners, the authority positions reading, storytelling and early cultural participation as part of wider life-chance improvement. Programmes such as the Children's Parade, delivered as part of Brighton Festival, actively involve thousands of school children in creative production, performance and public expression.



“

*The Milton Keynes authority positions culture within narratives around technology, enterprise and creative employment.*

---

Milton Keynes reflects a different but equally important model, linking culture with innovation, skills and future workforce development. As one of the UK's fastest-growing urban economies, the authority positions culture within wider narratives around technology, enterprise and creative employment. Delivery is supported through organisations such as The Stables, Milton Keynes Arts Centre, and digital learning partnerships connected to the city's broader growth agenda.

Youth programming extends beyond attendance into music production, digital creation, technical skills and creative enterprise, helping connect cultural participation with employability, confidence and longer-term workforce pathways.



# 10

# Climate and sustainability

*Climate and sustainability now appear regularly across the UK local authority cultural strategy landscape. Net zero commitments, greener operations, sustainable travel, environmental responsibility and climate awareness are increasingly referenced across council frameworks, reflecting a broader shift in public policy, alongside rising expectations from residents, funders, investors and delivery partners.*

However, while environmental ambition is now common rhetorically, operational maturity remains uneven, with some strategies referencing climate positively (42%), but fewer (9%) explaining how cultural assets, venues, festivals, libraries or heritage estates will transition in practical terms.

In many cases, environmental language appears more developed at policy level than within day-to-day delivery systems. This capability gap becomes more visible as environmental expectations continue to rise.

## Quick stats

 **42%**

of strategies climate positively

 **< 9%**

lack evidence of operational maturity

Councils now face growing scrutiny around transport, waste, procurement and building performance, while funders increasingly expect evidence of credible sustainability planning. At the same time, residents, visitors and partners are becoming more conscious of environmental standards when deciding where to engage, invest or collaborate.

As expectations rise, limited climate capability may increasingly create financial and reputational risk.

---

Culture holds a strategic advantage in this space because its contribution extends beyond operational sustainability. Cultural venues, festivals, libraries, artists and heritage programmes can also help communities engage with climate issues in ways that feel tangible, local and personally relevant.

This gives cultural strategy a dual responsibility:

- reducing the environmental impact of its own operations
- helping communities engage with wider environmental transition



“

*[Bristol’s framework] embeds environmental standards into programming, operations and public engagement.*

---

Bristol remains one of the clearer examples of operational maturity in sustainability. Through the Bristol One City Office and the Bristol Cultural Partnership, the city explicitly connects culture with wider environmental leadership. Cultural organisations are encouraged to align with the One City Climate Strategy, including participation in the One City Climate Pledge, where organisations publicly commit to carbon reduction, sustainable procurement and operational change.

Bristol’s framework also references organisations holding formal Carbon Reduction Plans, participation in city-wide environmental reporting, and alignment between cultural delivery, climate objectives and wider civic leadership. Major institutions including Watershed, Bristol Old Vic and Arnolfini operate within this wider ecosystem, helping embed environmental standards into programming, operations and public engagement.



“

*The strategy recognises that environmental sustainability is not only an operational issue.*

---

Cornwall provides a useful example of culture being connected to wider environmental transition rather than treated as a separate policy agenda. The authority's cultural and place-based frameworks position culture, heritage and landscape as part of Cornwall's long-term response to climate and sustainability challenges. Delivery is supported through partnerships involving Creative Kernow, Kresen Kernow and the wider cultural ecosystem connected to Cornwall's museums, heritage sites and creative sector.

The strategy recognises that environmental sustainability is not only an operational issue for venues and organisations, but also a cultural one; influencing how communities understand place, stewardship and long-term resilience.

11

# A three-tier national landscape



The UK council cultural strategy landscape is not moving at a uniform pace. Using the Strategic Maturity Index outlined in Appendix B, authorities appear to fall into three broad groups: strategic leaders, transitional authorities and legacy frameworks. While these are not fixed labels, nor judgments on overall council quality, they are indicative categories describing strategic maturity, delivery readiness and the extent to which culture is being treated as a modern place-performance tool.

Without stronger refresh cycles and operating discipline, the current divide may widen over the next five years, with tiers increasingly separated by:

- Clarity of purpose
- Leadership focus
- Evidence maturity
- Audience understanding
- Delivery discipline
- Willingness to modernise

## **Tier one: Leaders**

This first group consists of councils (18%) demonstrating stronger strategic clarity, clearer delivery logic and wider organisational relevance. These authorities tend to integrate culture into mainstream agendas such as regeneration, planning, tourism, learning, economic development or climate strategy.

They are more likely to show:

- Clear outcomes
- Stronger governance
- Cross-departmental alignment
- Visible refresh cycles
- Practical delivery frameworks
- Confidence about why culture matters locally

Examples in the archive include Exeter, which links culture to wider city growth and competitiveness; Darlington, which connects culture with regeneration and town-centre confidence; Westmorland & Furness, which signals delivery discipline through operating-model language; and Torbay, which aligns culture with visitor economy confidence.

In each case, culture is positioned as a functional contributor to wider council priorities.

---

## **Tier two: Followers**

The second group consists of councils that broadly understand the direction of travel and use modern strategic language, but remain less developed operationally.

These authorities often reference:

- Inclusion
- Wellbeing
- Pride of place
- Partnerships
- Participation
- Growth ambitions

However, delivery systems, measurement frameworks, audience intelligence or commercial models may remain partial or inconsistent.

Many of these councils have the ingredients for stronger performance but have not yet translated intent into robust operating models. With clearer ownership, better data and sharper priorities, many could progress quickly. It's our assessment that (47%) of councils fall into this tier in the current landscape.

### **Tier three: Legacy Operators**

The third group consists of authorities (35%) that still rely on older frameworks, fragmented ownership structures or limited visible strategic positioning.

This may include councils with:

- Ageing pre-2020 documents
- Weak refresh cycles
- Limited public strategic visibility
- Attendance-led measurement only
- Siloed ownership of culture
- Generic aspiration without delivery architecture

Whilst legacy status does not imply failure, these authorities will face increasing uncertainty as stronger peers improve systems, risking stagnation and a weaker ability to defend investment.

12

# Political shift



**Stonehenge**  
A masterpiece of prehistoric engineering  
Built around 2500 BC

It's our observation that the political environment in which 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 UK, 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.

---

### **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.

---

## **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.

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

**Across much of the UK cultural strategy  
landscape, this is the defining challenge  
emerging from the review.**



13

# Final verdict



After reviewing local authority cultural strategies, regeneration frameworks, libraries plans, visitor economy documents and place-policy archives across the United Kingdom, the clearest conclusion is not that councils lack belief in culture.

If anything, across almost every region reviewed, culture is now spoken about with greater confidence than at any point in the last decade. It appears more frequently in conversations about regeneration, economic growth, youth opportunity, wellbeing, civic identity and place competitiveness. In policy language at least, culture has moved a long way from being treated as a discretionary service sitting quietly at the edge of local government.

Across much of the archive, strategic language appears to have evolved faster than the operating systems supporting delivery.

Across the archive, authorities talk confidently about transformation, participation, inclusion and local pride, yet often struggle to demonstrate the infrastructure required to deliver those ambitions with consistency. Audience intelligence remains shallow or overly demographic with measurement frameworks frequently default to attendance and activity counts rather than evidence of behavioural, economic or civic change. Commercial thinking often remains underdeveloped, digital capability is frequently treated as communications rather than operating infrastructure, strategy refresh cycles are inconsistent, and in many cases ownership becomes less clear the closer one looks at delivery.

Many councils remain unclear on what organisational conditions are required to translate their strategy into strong delivery, and this distinction will matter much more in the 2026-30 transition period.

Local government is now operating in an environment where discretionary spending faces greater scrutiny, funding decisions demand stronger evidence, residents judge place more visibly, and neighbouring authorities compete more aggressively for visitors, investment, talent and public confidence. In that environment, culture cannot rely indefinitely on being well-liked. It increasingly needs to prove that it is useful.

The strongest authorities in this review have already understood the sector has moved into a transitional period and worked to establish managerial clarity.

This review suggests that while funding pressures remain real, resource constraints alone no longer explain why some authorities embed culture successfully while others struggle. Leadership clarity, operational discipline, evidence capability and organisational alignment increasingly appear to be influential differentiators between stronger and weaker frameworks. Over the next five years, the acknowledgement of this is likely to become one of the defining competitive divides in local government.

Appendix A

List of  
authorities  
reviewed

**England**

Arun  
Ashford  
Babergh  
Mid Suffolk  
Boston  
Brighton and Hove  
Bristol  
Broxbourne  
Broxtowe  
Cambridge  
Central Bedfordshire  
Charnwood  
Chelmsford  
Cherwell  
Cheshire East  
Colchester  
Cornwall  
Coventry  
Croydon  
Dacorum  
Darlington  
Devon  
Dorset  
Dover  
East Devon  
East Hertfordshire  
East Lindsey  
Eastleigh  
Essex  
Exeter  
Fenland  
Gravesham  
Great Yarmouth  
Hampshire  
Hertfordshire  
Hertsmere  
Hinckley and Bosworth  
Ipswich  
Kent  
Liverpool  
Luton  
Milton Keynes  
Norfolk  
North Devon  
North Norfolk

North Somerset  
North Yorkshire  
Oxfordshire  
Preston  
Shropshire  
Solihull  
South Tyneside  
Spelthorne  
St Albans  
Suffolk  
Surrey  
Tendring  
Test Valley  
Torbay  
Torrige  
Walsall  
Warrington  
Warwick  
Warwickshire  
Watford  
West Berkshire  
West Lindsey  
Westmorland and Furness  
Winchester  
Wirral

**Wales**

Conwy  
Flintshire  
Monmouthshire  
Neath Port Talbot  
Newport

**Scotland**

Aberdeen  
Edinburgh  
Dumfries and Galloway  
Perth and Kinross

**Northern Ireland**

Ards and North Down  
Derry City and Strabane  
Fermanagh and Omagh

This report does not claim to know every internal constraint facing each authority. It does claim that when similar strategic patterns appear repeatedly across many councils, they are worth examining seriously.

Any market-wide report simplifies some local detail. This report recognises that councils operate under significant financial, political and statutory pressures that are not always visible in public documents. Its purpose is not to dismiss those realities, but to assess common strategic patterns visible across the market and identify opportunities for stronger future practice.

Appendix B

Strategic  
Maturity Index

To support comparative analysis across the reviewed archive, authorities were assessed against a simple Strategic Maturity Index (0-10). The model does not measure cultural quality, artistic reputation or budget size. Instead, it assesses the operational maturity of publicly visible cultural strategy.

Each authority was reviewed across five domains:

Domain	Score range	Assessment criteria
Audience intelligence	0-2	Evidence of behavioural insight, segmentation, participation analysis or audience development planning
Measurement systems	0-2	Presence of KPIs, baselines, targets, review cycles or outcome measurement
Delivery architecture	0-2	Named governance structures, delivery ownership, partner accountability or implementation mechanisms
Financial resilience	0-2	Revenue planning, sponsorship, monetisation, asset utilisation, mixed-income thinking
Refresh and governance	0-2	Evidence of strategy refresh, rolling action plans, annual reviews or live governance mechanisms

## Scoring interpretation

### 8-10 points: Strategic Leaders

Authorities demonstrating strong operational maturity, cross-council integration, measurable outcomes and visible refresh mechanisms.

### 5-7 points: Transitional Authorities

Authorities showing genuine ambition and useful strategic assets, but with partial or inconsistent operational systems.

### 0-4 points: Legacy Frameworks

Authorities relying on older frameworks, weaker accountability systems, limited refresh evidence or lower operational integration.

This index is based solely on evidence visible within available strategy documents and associated delivery frameworks. It does not claim to reflect internal capability, unpublished plans, officer performance or political commitment beyond the public record.

Appendix C

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.

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.

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.

---

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



# Disconnected Bodies

[www.disconnectedbodies.co](http://www.disconnectedbodies.co)  
020 3633 7617  
[office@disconnectedbodies.co](mailto:office@disconnectedbodies.co)