

# Seasons of Culture: Combined Workshop Summary

July 2025

## Introduction

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**The Seasons of Culture (2026–2030) is a proposed programme by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) to retain, develop and spotlight place-based cultural activity across the region following the Years of Culture.**

Four stakeholder workshops were held in July 2025 to shape the programme’s structure, themes, governance, and delivery mechanisms.

An initial briefing document on Seasons of Culture can be found at <https://rmresearch.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Seasons-Of-Culture-Briefing-Note.pdf> (Please note, this remains a working document.)

The four workshops took place 9–10 July 2025 and focused on deepening shared learning around:

- Session 1: Sponsorship and Fundraising
- Session 2: Infrastructure and Readiness
- Session 3: Marketing and Communications
- Session 4: Event Management

The last hour of each session specifically focused on Seasons of Culture.

Participants included cultural leads, LA officers, producers, venue representatives, freelancers, and sector strategists.

Below are the key findings – at the end are a set of suggested immediate actions.

# Key Findings

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We have identified nine key findings from the workshops:

1. Define The Purpose and Positioning
2. Enable Flexible, Thematic, Multi-Scale Programming
3. Use 2026 for Groundwork and R&D
4. Design a Modular and Sustainable Delivery System
5. Invest in Sector Skills and Career Pathways
6. Build Regional Visibility and Coordination Through Shared Platforms
7. Establish Strong Governance and Coordination
8. Embed Evaluation and Peer Learning from the Start
9. Capture Sector Aspirations to Shape Future Themes

## 1. Define The Purpose and Positioning

*A strategic, modular platform to maintain momentum and showcase local distinctiveness; not a 'City of Culture-lite'.*

- o Seasons of Culture is seen as a valuable “holding strategy” between high-profile years of Culture and longer-term place-based cultural plans.
- o Avoid recreating “City of Culture-lite” – instead, focus on a modular, adaptive framework that supports distinct local responses, not a uniform model.
- o Aims to retain sector capacity, showcase local identity, and maintain public momentum for culture in a challenging funding landscape.

**"It's a holding space. It keeps culture alive at the centre of people's lives and civic agendas."**

Workshop 3 participant

**"Don't just create another label. Give us something that builds on what's already working."**

Workshop 2 participant

## 2. Enable Flexible, Thematic, Multi-Scale Programming

*Support local authority-led delivery of activity at different scales, with broad, interpretable themes and a mix of new, existing, and touring work.*

- o Strong consensus that each local authority should retain agency to opt in/out and scale participation annually.
- o Themes (e.g. Green, Sculpture and Outdoor Art) should be broad and open, allowing hyper-local or cross-district interpretations.
- o Clear appetite for a mix of delivery modes:
  - Micro-commissions and artist development.
  - Medium-scale events aligned with LA strategies.
  - Shared or touring commissions across local authority.

**"You could badge existing work, rather than fund from scratch."**

Workshop 3 participant

**"If you set themes early, we can plan around them and not chase pots."**

Workshop 1 participant

**"Allow interpretation. Green could be climate, wellbeing, food, or protest."**

Workshop 4 participant

## 3. Use 2026 for Groundwork and R&D

*Frame the pilot year as a soft launch focused on sector readiness, idea development, and preparatory commissioning.*

- o 2026 should be a pilot year, focused on:
  - Sector readiness and skills development.
  - Artist and partner R&D.
  - Potential to test small-scale public-facing activity or cross-district commissions (e.g. light works).
- o Consider splitting the 2026 budget to invest early in 2027 delivery planning.

**"We need a ramp, not a cliff edge. Let us prepare."**

Workshop 2 participant

**"Don't rush to deliver big in 2026. Use it to seed, support and learn."**

Workshop 4 participant

## 4. Design a Modular and Sustainable Delivery System

*Invest in micro-commissions, event uplift, and co-commissioning to maximise impact, reduce duplication, and support sustainability.*

- Co-commissioning suggested as a way to:
  - Maximise budget value.
  - Reduce carbon-heavy travel by bringing work to communities.
  - Build a shared regional identity.
- Strong interest in:
  - Micro-grants for freelancers and community groups.
  - Uplift funding for existing events and festivals.
  - Tourable work that has potential to cycle through West Yorkshire over time.

**"A light festival commission could travel — audiences know it's their turn next."**

Workshop 4 participant

**"Let us develop our own partnerships, but make the system open and joined up."**

Workshop 1 participant

**"Our sustainability trial work could be shared before evaluation — don't wait to learn."**

Workshop 2 participant

## 5. Invest in Sector Skills and Career Pathways

*Support skills development, creative leadership, youth pipelines, artist residencies, and shared learning across the region*

- Sector wants investment in:
  - Skills development and upskilling, including creative tech and cultural leadership.
  - Artist residency programmes embedded in local contexts.
  - Workforce pipelines: schools, young people, freelancers.
- Strong interest in shared learning spaces, especially:
  - Cross-district producer networks.
  - Peer learning from Years of Culture (note this could start in 2025 before Bradford team disbands)
  - Sustainability in event design (e.g. power, transport, procurement).

**"Let's not do (public facing) closing events — let's do (sector) learning events."**

Workshop 2 participant

**"This is how we build careers and culture long term."**

Workshop 3 participant

**"Can we bring in education teams? The careers link is key."**

Workshop 4 participant

## **6. Build Regional Visibility and Coordination Through Shared Platforms**

*Develop a regional marketing and events infrastructure that supports both public-facing visibility and behind-the-scenes planning.*

- o A "badging" strategy that allows events to align with Seasons of Culture branding without losing their local identity.
- o A regional events platform or listings site to:
  - Promote dispersed activity across West Yorkshire.
  - Provide shared audience insight and analytics.
  - Support marketing and public engagement.
- o Participants also strongly recommended:
  - A festival audit across all areas to map recurring activity.
  - A clash diary system (inspired by Leeds Inspired) to:
    - Prevent scheduling conflicts.
    - Encourage co-promotion and uplift of existing events.
    - Inform commissioning windows and resource planning.
- o Integrate tech tools (e.g. API feeds) to avoid duplicate data entry and connect with existing platforms like Leeds Inspired or Culture Host.

**"Visitors don't know where to look — regional visibility matters."**

Workshop 2 participant

**"Don't make us upload to multiple websites — make the tech work for us."**

Workshop 2 participant

**"Is there already a diary of festivals across the five areas? We need that to plan."**

Workshop 4 participant

**"We supported BD Fest through uplift — it helped grow audiences and gave us consistency."**

Workshop 4 participant

**"Internal comms to leaders and councillors is just as crucial."**

Workshop 1 participant

## 7. Establish Strong Governance and Coordination

*Appoint a senior regional lead and cross-district working group to maintain political buy-in, steer delivery, and ensure equity.*

- Participants strongly recommend:
  - A senior lead officer or role to coordinate activity across the local authority areas, maintain political engagement, and secure long-term buy-in.
  - A working group of cultural leads from each area to guide development, align investment and ensure fair representation.

**"We need someone with convening power to keep this alive post-election."**

Workshop 2 participant

**"A named champion — inside the council and at the political level."**

Workshop 4 participant

## 8. Embed Evaluation and Peer Learning from the Start

*Prioritise continuous learning, shared data, and meaningful legacy-building over single-year metrics.*

- Don't wait until the end of 2025— build evaluation and peer learning into delivery.
- Consider shared data systems or case studies.
- Prioritise sustainability of outcomes over single-year outputs.

**"Build legacy from the start. Don't leave it to the last meeting."**

Workshop 3 participant

**"Tell the story of the sector — not just the events."**

Workshop 1 participant

## 9. Capture Sector Aspirations to Shape Future Themes

*Create a mechanism for cultural organisations to share forward plans and ambitions, informing theme development and funding windows.*

- This would allow:
  - Better coordination across local authority areas and sectors.
  - Informed theme design beyond 2027, based on sector momentum.
  - Identification of co-commissioning or uplift opportunities earlier in the cycle.

**"How do we share our ambitions for future work – even if it doesn't fit right now?"**

Workshop 1 participant

**"Let us show where we're heading — maybe the themes can follow that."**

Workshop 1 participant

**"A central signposting system could help reduce the scramble for funding."**

Workshop 1 participant

## Suggested Immediate Actions

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| Action                                                                                              | Timing      | Owner(s)                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| State core purpose + clearly express the "why" for the programme                                    | Summer 2025 | WYCA                            |
| Set Up and define role of Cross LA Working Group including exploring programme coordinator/champion | Autumn 2025 | WYCA + LA Leads                 |
| Confirm themes for 2026–2029/30                                                                     | Autumn 2025 | Cross LA Working Group          |
| Scope pilot and sector support grants for 2026                                                      | Autumn 2025 | WYCA + Cross LA Working Group   |
| Map existing festivals/events across Local Authority areas                                          | Summer 2025 | WYCA / LA Comms/ Marcomms leads |
| Commission regional event portal and/ or clash diary                                                | Autumn 2025 | WYCA                            |
| Initiate peer learning to include Bradford 2025 team                                                | Late 2025   | WYCA                            |