

Years of Culture
Knowledge Exchange and Learning Project



Years of **Culture** Primer

July 2026

Capturing key learning from West Yorkshire's Years of Culture

Foreword

This Primer brings together a significant body of learning from across West Yorkshire's Years of Culture programmes, shaped by the experiences and reflections of those directly involved in their delivery. Formal evaluation of each Year of Culture has or is taking place and this Primer is not intended to supersede these; rather, it reflects the collective insight of local authority teams, cultural partners, freelancers and contributors who have shared their time and perspectives generously.

What stands out throughout is the openness with which both achievements and challenges have been explored. Delivering large-scale, place-based cultural programmes within complex public sector contexts inevitably involves difficult choices, competing priorities and ongoing adaptation. This document captures that reality in a way that is both honest and constructive.

We see this Primer as a practical resource to support future thinking and discussion, rather than a prescriptive guide. Its themes, top tips and provocations are intended to help teams reflect, plan and navigate similar work in their own contexts.

Within the Combined Authority, this learning will help inform how we continue to support cultural development across the region, working in partnership and with a focus on long-term impact. More widely, we hope it contributes to a growing body of shared knowledge that strengthens cultural practice locally, regionally and beyond.

Jim Hinks

Head of Culture, Heritage & Sport Policy, West Yorkshire Combined Authority



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Introduction

This Primer brings together the wealth of learning that emerged from the various large-scale Years of Culture programmes that took place across West Yorkshire.

The purpose of this work is to make this learning widely available – both for those already involved in West Yorkshire’s cultural programmes and for those developing similar work, locally, regionally, and nationally.

The findings presented here are drawn from a wide range of activity across 2024–2026:

- **Workshops with local authority culture teams**
- **Conversations with Years of Culture delivery groups**
- **Open space events in Leeds and Bradford**
- **One-to-one discussions with senior cultural leaders, and**
- **Cross-district action learning sets**

Across these sessions, more than a hundred people – local authority officers, freelance practitioners, cultural partners and creatives – have engaged with this work and contributed to the learning. We thank them for their generosity and collaborative spirit.





Our intention is to distil the insights that emerged specifically from the Years of Culture programmes and from working within local authority structures in West Yorkshire. These include:

→ **Highlighting opportunities and challenges**

The learning captured highlights the particular challenges, constraints, adaptations and opportunities that arise when delivering large-scale cultural activity in publicly governed environments.

→ **Sharing context-driven learning**

By focusing on what is distinctive about the Year of Culture context, we aim to complement the wealth of sector guidance already available – ensuring that future programmes can benefit from targeted, context-driven reflections.

→ **Helping navigate complexity**

We want to help teams navigate complexity, maintain accountability, and ensure essential elements of programme design and delivery are considered. Framed this way, this shared knowledge is intended to offer a pragmatic primer to implementation across diverse contexts.

→ **Providing a practical framework**

Presented as learning themes with related top tips, the document distils the learning from the Years of Culture activity into a concise, practical framework to support planning and delivery.

The guidance shared in this document does not replace the need for more in-depth training, sector development, or long-term capacity building. Rather, it can act as a shared reference point to inform future workforce development, support programmes, and region-wide strategies.

Throughout this document we use ‘Year of Culture’ as a shorthand for these types of events and activities, as this was the name of the events across West Yorkshire.

However, **the learning is as applicable for any medium to large place-based events which run over a period of time** – for example, Towns of Culture, Cities of Culture or celebration years.

Learning themes

Discussions flagged the value and importance people placed on sharing and learning around conceptual concerns as well as practical ones.

These tended to cluster either around

- **Big questions** addressing overarching issues and which are of interest to all readers (e.g. legacy, equity, youth engagement)
- **Practical issues** which are more specific and of interest to specialists (e.g. contract templates, financial systems)

Therefore, the themes are split into these two groups:

Big questions

- 1.** Starting well
- 2.** Ensuring access and inclusion
- 3.** Investing in a creative future
- 4.** Delivering through partnership

Practical issues

- 5.** Creative programming for artistic freedom
- 6.** Getting the sponsorship and fundraising right
- 7.** Telling the right story
- 8.** Managing successful events
- 9.** Monitoring and evaluating impact

Following on from these, we discuss the wider learning around commissioning and supporting Years of Culture and similar events at regional and national levels.

Due to the nature of the findings and the overarching framework of Years of Culture, some of these points could fit under multiple headings. We've made an effort to place them under the most logical categories, but it's important to note that these concepts don't exist in isolation. They need to be considered holistically, as they are interconnected and influence one another across different areas of learning.

How to use this Primer

The Primer is useful for anyone involved in the development or delivery of medium or large-scale cultural programmes designed to enhance culture across a town or district.

To help you get the most from it, we've organised the learning into different themes.

In each theme, you'll find:

- ➔ **Top tips:** A good starting point, these help you get things right and in the right order
- ➔ **Provocations:** Key questions to open up thinking and decision-making at the planning stage
- ➔ **Pen portraits:** Real life insights from people who made the programmes happen

If you're pushed for time, you may want to head to the theme that's directly relevant to your role.

If you need a strategic overview or want to understand some other things your colleagues might be grappling with, you'll hopefully find valuable insights across the whole Primer.

Whether you dip in and out of it or read it cover to cover, we hope that it proves a useful tool.

Table 1: Local Authorities and Years of Culture involved in the consultation ¹

Local Authority	Years of Culture	Budget	Website
Bradford	Bradford, UK City of Culture 2025	£52m	bradford2025.co.uk
Calderdale	CultureDale (2024)	£2.4m	www.culturedale.co.uk
Kirklees	Year of Music 2023	£4.1m	www.musicinkirklees.co.uk
Leeds	LEEDS 2023	£23.8m	data.leeds2023.co.uk
Wakefield	Our Year – Wakefield District 2024	£4.2m	experiencewakefield.co.uk

¹ See page 54 for further details

1. Starting well

Build solid foundations for long term success.

Getting things right at the start is crucial to ensuring that the cultural impacts of Years of Culture initiatives are both sustainable and meaningful.

This involves creating a strong foundation before the start of a programme – including ensuring long lead in times, having the necessary resources in place, having at minimum started legacy planning, and building in enough time for growth.

This involves thinking about all aspects of a Year of Culture. So, this section covers a lot of ground but is useful for anyone regardless of specialisation. Some of these learnings are explored in more detail in the other sections.



1. Starting Well

Top tips

Think blue skies and practicals

Ensure you have a strong vision

We all love stories. Powerfully communicating a compelling vision is key to getting the political buy-in you need.

Build a credible budget

Numbers tell stories too. A budget that stands up to scrutiny – balancing ambition and risk – is also key to getting that buy-in.

Establish capacity

Can you really do everything you want to? Give careful thought to the scale of your ambition, and what you'll need to realise it.

Embed legacy planning now

Identify long term legacy goals

To catalyse lasting change, plan now for the impact you want to unlock ten years down the line.

Plan to measure long term impact

Identify frameworks that will capture your work's lasting impact to help make the case for what comes later.

Invest in people and infrastructure

Work with partners to develop sustainable models

Teaming up with partners 'in it for the long haul' helps build the sustainable models to realise full potential.

Invest now in staff and systems

Develop key infrastructure now, putting back-office systems, staffing and delivery structures in place.

Implement a clear handover process

Ownership is all. Properly hand over the strategy and outline plan to delivery teams to ensure clarity of purpose and that 'form follows function'.

Define and communicate governance models

Whether a local authority or a standalone delivery body leads, getting your house in order is key. Define roles, specify decision-making authority and clarify accountability structures now.

Ensure community sits at the centre

This is about place, now and in the long term. Build capacity across the community, equipping partners to deliver.

1. Starting Well

Think digital across the board

Embed a 'think digital' approach

Strategic 'digital too'/'digital first' thinking will extend your reach and impact. Recruit 'digital natives' for whom this is second nature.

Develop digital archiving systems

Where will your work live on? Build an effective archiving system to record and share your work and impact.

Consider how digital tools might support sustained engagement

Think about your programme's digital 'shelf life'. Embedding a focus on digital legacy now will extend engagement and increase impact.

Learn from others

Draw on learning from similar projects

Review formal evaluations and reach out informally to people involved in delivering other similar initiatives.

Embed sharing knowledge and learning into your project

Ensure those coming after you benefit from your experience. Embed a focus on sharing knowledge and learning.

Do your risk planning

Embed risk management now

Things change. Anticipate staff churn, political cycles and funding gaps, and build a robust risk management plan.

Test systems with pilots

Try before you buy(-in). Use smaller projects to stress-test your governance, delivery, and evaluation models before scaling.

Support team resilience

This stuff is hard, so provide mentoring, coaching, and wellbeing support from the start for staff in high-pressure roles.

Plan what you'll leave behind

Create a clear handover process

Equip local teams and/or communities with training, tools and contacts to move your work forward.

Decide what needs preserving

What stories, learning and culture do you want to pass on, and how to do that? Consult with communities to decide this.

1. Starting Well

Provocations

Vision

- ➔ How do we make the case for our work to politicians from across the political spectrum? What language do we use to translate our vision into a compelling idea that key political leaders can get behind?
- ➔ As local authorities, what role should we play and in what circumstances? Convener, funder, facilitator, or all three?
- ➔ How could we stress-test our readiness plans and partnership models without creating reputational risk or discouraging innovation?

Embedding legacy

- ➔ What does having a focus on legacy across the project period look like in terms of human and financial resources?
- ➔ As funders and delivery organisations, how might we shift to an approach that's more long-term, sustainable and integrated?
- ➔ Taking a 'think digital' approach, can we ensure our digital content and archives are preserved after the programme finishes? Who is best placed to be responsible for their long-term stewardship?
- ➔ Where does evaluation and monitoring sit within this? What measurables can we put in place around our legacy planning? How can we best ensure that our initial work and impact gets recognised beyond the end of the programme period?

People and infrastructure

- ➔ What governance models will work best for us, in terms of balancing independence, accountability, flexibility, and the realities of cross-sector collaboration?
- ➔ Thinking about a minimum viable proposition, what infrastructure and people or roles are absolutely essential for us? What are our non-negotiables? What could be delivered, scaled or improved via partnership working?

Sharing learning

- ➔ How can we embed sharing learning into our work processes and delivery plan in a way that's manageable for us and has maximum impact for our peers in the wider creative community?
- ➔ How can our legacy be living, dynamic knowledge networks rather than a more static handover of reports and toolkits, and in what circumstances is this the appropriate approach?



1. Starting Well

Jenny Rogers

Our Year Wakefield District 2024 was a year-long celebration of culture, creativity, movement and heritage.

The 366-day programme was delivered with funding from West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Arts Council England by Wakefield Council, in collaboration with communities, cultural organisations and local residents. As Programme and Partnerships Manager I led an inclusive, coordinated and ambitious year that created opportunity for everyone, everywhere.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

How crucial it is to pace yourself! Working at scale over such considerable timescales is a marathon not a sprint, and it can feel an overwhelming journey ahead.

Collaborate with partners and colleagues to ensure you can plan around pinch points and block in time to plan and reflect as you'll need to adapt all year to get to the finish line.

And don't forget your finish is well after delivery ends, with evaluation, funder reports and more to handle.

What didn't you anticipate?

The incredible volume of response from places, groups and organisations across Wakefield district – the programme proved what we know,

that creativity thrives in our district and that Wakey folk are dead proud.

It was amazing to see the diversity of culture and heritage come forward – from communities just starting to settle in our place celebrating with new neighbours, mining villages exploring their rugby league heritage, and international artists bringing their work to our high streets.

What key tip would you pass on?

Make time to enjoy it along the way – go to the gala, pop into the lunchtime concert, visit the youth programme, join in with the walk.

You will be pouring energy into the making a lot of amazing things happen so be sure to look after your wellbeing and take part.

2. Ensuring access & inclusion

An inclusive cultural landscape demands commitment.

Creating a truly inclusive cultural landscape requires more than open doors – it demands intentionality, equity, and sustained commitment. This work is not always easy or efficient, and it often requires additional resources.

This happens when programmes address barriers to participation for all community members, including physical, financial, and social access, and ensure equitable opportunities, fair treatment, and support for artists, freelancers, and creative practitioners.

Local authorities and cultural organisations must embed initiatives within the fabric of communities, build trust with underrepresented groups, and put inclusive governance and decision-making at the heart of delivery. By prioritising both participation and the people who make culture happen, programmes can create meaningful, lasting impact beyond individual events.

This section explores the governance structures, community leadership and practical steps needed to create accessible, inclusive cultural experiences that leave no one behind.



2. Ensuring access & inclusion

Top tips

Ensure good governance

Redistribute influence

Build delivery and governance models that move underrepresented groups from the margins to the centre.

Think about legacy

Embed good governance into legacy plans. Consider a Cultural Compact or similar mechanisms to reduce the impact of political change.

Embed clarity and accountability

If everyone is included everyone wins. Build trust through clear direction, open communication, and visible accountability.

Prioritise community co-design and shared ownership

Embed co-design from the outset

Involve community leaders, grassroots organisations and people with lived experience in shaping priorities, delivery approaches and definitions of success – not just in consultation, but in decision-making.

Treat communities as partners

Decide on priorities, and co-design programmes, with communities rather than for them, recognising the value of local knowledge and lived experience.

Reduce barriers to participation

Address obstacles to involvement in decision-making, such as time, language, access needs, payment, and confidence.

Invest in relationships and trust

Prioritise long-term relationship-building, active listening and reflection to sustain partnerships beyond individual events or funding cycles.

2. Ensuring access & inclusion

Build inclusivity into strategy and delivery

Embed inclusivity throughout

Develop strategies to embed inclusivity at all levels from consultation to event design, marketing, and leadership. Ring-fence access costs in your budgets.

Mind the gaps

Look at what's missing and how that came to be. Audit cultural assets to identify gaps.

Redefine who holds the power

Make decision making more equitable. Develop partnerships across different scales and actively redistribute influence to grassroots organisations.

Build meaningful partnerships

Avoid short termism or 'parachuting' into communities and then disappearing.

Work hard to earn trust

Trust is built through consistent, small acts of commitment. Build reflection, active listening, respect and shared decision making into working practices.

Diversify leadership

Accessing leadership roles within the sector remains challenging for people from the global majority, disabled people, and LGBTQ+ people (including intersectionalities). Make active and visible efforts to decrease these barriers.

Build your human capital

Train your teams and partners in collaborative working, power-sharing, and inclusive engagement.

Choose the right physical spaces

Create inclusive cultural environments

'Fear of the threshold' is a thing. Design and use spaces that reflect the experiences and needs of all local people, affirm diverse identities and foster belonging.

Remove physical barriers

When possible, use accessible spaces. In other spaces, provide practical mitigations (e.g. ramps, accessible seating, signage, transport).

Ensure money isn't a barrier

Include a mix of free and paid events

Ensure you offer a range of affordable opportunities to all local people, and that paid events include affordable/ free tickets.

Make everything else affordable too

Ensure other items of secondary spend (e.g. refreshments, merchandise, travel) are also affordable.

2. Ensuring access & inclusion

Provocations

Governance, partnership working and decision-making

- ➔ How can we ensure inclusive practice sits at the heart of our strategic planning and delivery? What resource will this require, and who can help us?
- ➔ What structures build trust and share power with underrepresented communities? Are they already in place, or do they need building?
- ➔ How could regional collaboration enhance the relevance of our programme to all local communities? Which partnerships could be key?
- ➔ What mechanisms ensure that community engagement doesn't end with an event, but continues to flourish? When and where is this a priority?

Inclusivity, representation and access

- ➔ What structural barriers to participation exist for different potential stakeholders, and how can we best address these? Who should we work with to make sure we get it right?
- ➔ How can we properly embed a focus on ensuring representation across our leadership, programming and promotion?





2. Ensuring access & inclusion

Natasha Joseph

I'm a multidisciplinary artist and creative producer based in Leeds, born in Bangalore. During Bradford 2025, I worked as a creative practitioner on Our Patch. I am also Founder and Director of We Belong Here CIC, creating inclusive opportunities through collaborative arts projects across West Yorkshire.

Our Patch was a significant programme of socially engaged creative practice delivered across the Bradford District over 2025. Delivered by a team of 70+ freelance creative practitioners and producers, Our Patch projects actively engaged 37,000+ people.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

How much relationship-building takes time and patience to develop real depth. You can finally start to feel settled into a space, just as the Year of Culture is coming to an end. The creative outcomes matter, but trust and showing up regularly are what make people feel part of something. Patience doesn't always feel productive but it really is essential to the work.

I realised that a successful project is not only measured by the transformational outcomes but by the sustainability and support surrounding the creative and the delivery process itself.

What didn't you anticipate?

The depth of the social dynamics and histories within communities, some of which stretched back decades and would suddenly surface at creative sessions.

These relationships could shape projects in unexpected ways, sometimes creating hidden tensions and emotional pressure that needed careful navigation.

I was reminded how emotionally significant small creative moments could become for people, whether through sharing a story, joining a workshop, or simply looking forward to a weekly cuppa together. These moments meant a lot to me, but I didn't fully anticipate how deeply they resonated with the community.

What key tip would you pass on?

Leave space for flexibility and allow communities to truly shape the process.

Some of the strongest ideas come from really listening and responding to people rather than sticking too rigidly to a plan. As a creative practitioner, and especially as a female global majority artist, I've learnt how important it is to maintain a balance between being a creative and a community activator.

While the work can be joyful and fulfilling, it can also be emotionally demanding, so making time to reflect, nurture your own practice, and sustain artistic ambition is just as valuable as delivering projects. That balance ultimately feeds the depth and impact of both the work and your wider creative practice.

3. Investing in a creative future

The importance of supporting local talent and emerging leaders.

Strong, inclusive leadership is essential to the success and sustainability of place-based cultural programmes. Effective leadership goes beyond event delivery – it must be strategic, collaborative, and rooted in local communities. Years of Culture work when they actively support and develop local talent at every level, from emerging creatives and grassroots leaders to established arts organisations, ensuring opportunities, mentoring, and networks are accessible to underrepresented groups.

Distributed, community-centred leadership models and participatory governance enable power to be shared, voices to be amplified, and decision-making to reflect lived experience. Investing in local skills, supporting sustainable organisational models, and providing meaningful roles for young people ensures that cultural programmes leave a lasting impact, building a resilient ecosystem capable of thriving well beyond individual projects.

This section explores practical approaches to inclusive leadership development, talent investment, and youth engagement, alongside provocations to guide reflection and planning.



3. Investing in a creative future

Top tips

Take an inclusive approach to leadership

Commit to long-term leadership models

Build for the future. Prioritise leadership approaches focused on sustainable outcomes rather than short-term visibility or event delivery.

Diversify leadership pipelines

Inclusive leadership is not a destination, it's a journey. Create opportunities for emerging leaders and potential long-term cultural stewards (e.g. local residents, creative practitioners, activists) to access mentoring, networks, and influence.

Give power to the people

Work with leaders from across the community to explore new forms of participatory governance, community-led programming and locally rooted decision-making.

Invest in local talent and capacity

Map and leverage local assets

Identify people, organisations, spaces, networks, and informal cultural activity, and make use of existing expertise in large-scale programme delivery.

Develop and retain talent

Create strategies to nurture local creatives, build skills and entrepreneurialism, prevent brain drain, and maximise sustainability and community impact.

Invest in skills and professional development

Provide training, mentoring, and secondments to strengthen regional capacity across the cultural ecosystem.

Support sustainable organisations

Help partners build resilient structures, secure funding and retain staff.

Encourage best practice employment

Fair pay for a fair day's work. Mandate paying artists and others fairly, and promote good employment practices, to help counter widely seen sector-wide burnout.

Engage and empower young people

Embed skills-building opportunities and position young people as co-designers and decision-makers, ensuring their perspectives shape cultural strategy and delivery.

3. Investing in a creative future

Provocations

Mapping local ecosystems

- ➔ How can we most effectively map local cultural assets and identify community leaders?
- ➔ How might informal, or community, leadership already be shaping cultural life?

Inclusive leadership

- ➔ How could leadership structures better reflect the diversity of our community? What role can we play in this? Where does this sit within legacy planning?
- ➔ How equipped are local authorities to support leadership that is facilitative rather than directive? What new capacities or mindsets might be needed?
- ➔ How can we best embed community leadership into our programme, and where does this kind of leadership sit within our legacy planning?
- ➔ What would it take to genuinely share power and decision-making with community partners? How ready are we to go on that journey?
- ➔ How can we ensure lived experience and community knowledge are recognised as legitimate expertise?

- ➔ What new capacity or mindsets might be needed to equip local authorities to support facilitative rather than directive leadership?

Supporting local talent

- ➔ What role should we play in retaining talent and skills within the local creative community? How does this fit within our broader legacy planning?
- ➔ What do we need to do to create a healthy working culture and environment, with structures that are resilient rather than dependent on a few individuals?

Supporting young people

- ➔ In what ways can we best support young people to move from being participants to taking on decision-making roles in cultural life?
- ➔ What does success look like for youth engagement in culture: personal growth, professional pathways, social impact and/or something else?



3. Investing in a creative future

Richard Smith

I'm Richard Smith, Creative Development Manager at Kirklees Council and I was Lead Officer for Kirklees Year of Music 2023.

The Year of Music programme was designed to be more than just a celebratory year: it aimed to strengthen Kirklees' music ecology, including supporting talent development and the music industry, working with young people and schools, improving health and wellbeing, and creating greater visibility for Kirklees and its music. I was fortunate that my leadership role allowed me to connect with all areas of the programme and the fantastic team, partners and community that made the Year possible.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

I joined the team part way through 2022, so I had missed several years of development and the relationships that come with long range planning and thinking.

There were moments where it felt longer engagement with the district prior to the year would have been beneficial – although, on reflection, it is likely that not having the weight of the previous years will have helped on occasion as well!

What didn't you anticipate?

After two years of Covid 19 restrictions, we were all very aware that national and global factors can have an impact on a cultural programme.

However, we couldn't anticipate the cost of living crisis that was taking place as Kirklees Year of Music started – it was particularly challenging and affected every household. This shaped our communication with audiences and the sector at the start of the year; we wanted to be sensitive to the difficult context the programme started in.

We focused on the programme's aims to be mutually beneficial, its desire to support the existing music community and the aspiration to grow through the year together.

What key tip would you pass on?

Promote ownership and a shared narrative – and if appropriate for the design and values of your cultural programme, allow for organic growth. We were mindful of our outcomes, but it was a thrill to see the collaboration, inventiveness and ambition of the Year of Music delivery partners, participants and team. They acted on opportunities and grew the programme in ways that made it far richer as a consequence.

4. Delivering through partnership

Delivering place-based cultural programmes requires clear decisions about how power, responsibility, and resources are shared.

Whatever the delivery model, local authorities remain the central conveners and advocates for culture locally. To maximise impact, local authorities should take an active and intentional approach to delivery – working across departments, championing culture internally and politically, and maintaining strategic oversight throughout the programme lifecycle. This helps ensure that Years of Culture and similar programmes are not experienced as one-off events, but as catalysts for long-term cultural development.

The West Yorkshire Years of Culture used different models in response to local context, capacity, and ambition: delivering activity directly, working in partnership and commissioning external organisations, or setting up independent delivery organisations.

This flexibility proved valuable, but learning showed that early decisions about delivery models have long-term consequences. These decisions shape the strength of partnerships, the effectiveness of cross-departmental working, and the extent to which communities are meaningfully involved. They also influence how learning, skills, audiences, and cultural profile are sustained beyond the Year of Culture itself. Whatever the model, when delivery frameworks are clearly defined, partnerships are properly resourced and communities are meaningfully involved, cultural programmes are better positioned to create lasting local impact.

The guidance below sets out practical actions to support effective delivery, regardless of the model chosen.



4. Delivering through partnership

Top tips

Identify effective delivery models

Which delivery model

Think carefully about which delivery model works for your situation, capacity and time. However, bear in mind any model needs to still allow key principles to be met. Don't abandon embedding learning, shared ownership or avoiding staff burnout due to the model chosen.

Be explicit about your delivery model from the outset

Clarify who holds decision-making power, who delivers activity, and who is accountable. Revisit this regularly as the programme evolves, particularly as partnerships grow or delivery capacity changes.

Ring-fence time and resources for partnership building

Allocate budget, staff time, and clear expectations for relationship development. Plan at the outset for how partnerships might continue beyond individual projects or funding periods. Community partnerships may require more time and resources to get them up to speed.

Embed cross-departmental working as standard practice

Set up regular internal local authority cross-departmental working groups and ensure culture and the activities are explicitly connected to wider local authority priorities such as health, regeneration, education and community development.

Map existing relationships and build from what already exists

Identify current partnerships between culture and other public services. Strengthen these before creating new structures, avoiding duplication and unnecessary complexity.

Put communities and grassroots organisations at the centre

Design consultation, planning and delivery approaches that share power with community-led and underrepresented organisations. Build relationships based on trust, shared values and mutual benefit rather than short-term transactions.

Create the right conditions for learning and legacy

Build in moments for reflection, documentation and knowledge-sharing throughout delivery. Ensure learning is captured in ways that support future programmes and staff transitions.

4. Delivering through partnership

Strengthen cross-sector and regional collaboration

Actively nurture cross-sector relationships

Bring together partners from local government, health, education, business and the voluntary sector to support joined-up planning and delivery. Build on existing links and promote new ones – curiosity and openness across sectors are key enablers of innovation.

Ring-fence funds for partnership building

Not everything will happen overnight. Protect resources to allow time for relationship development, and allocate funding and set targets for sustaining partnerships beyond short-term projects.

Connect local delivery to regional and national networks

Use regional and national networks to share learning, reduce isolation and create opportunities for local work to gain wider visibility and support.

Put community at the heart of this: People make places

Creating partnerships that include grassroots, community-led and underrepresented organisations, and that are based on shared values, trust and mutual benefit, will only increase the lasting impact of the programme.

Provocations

- ➔ What do we need to put in place to enable relevant partnerships to continue beyond the end of our involvement/support, especially during periods of political or organisational change? On a practical level, how can we do that and build that into budgets and financial/partnership agreements?
- ➔ In what ways can we empower local partners to not only succeed in the short term but build enduring capacity for the future? To what extent is that our role, and how do we do this in the context of potentially limited time and budgets?





4. Delivering through partnership

Ruth Cooke

Hello, I am Ruth Cooke, Executive Director and Joint CEO of Northern Broadsides, a touring theatre company based in Halifax. I am passionate about theatre and ensuring that its power to inspire and entertain is open to all.

Northern Broadsides make and tour productions of classic plays in a Northern voice across the UK, and run a youth theatre, playwriting courses and various creative engagement projects throughout Calderdale. My leadership role includes financial and project management, fundraising, governance, business strategy, contracting and HR. In previous jobs, including at Hull Truck Theatre and Stephen Joseph Theatre Scarborough, I have specialised in communications, audience development and community engagement.

I have been part of an action learning set before, although many years ago, so I knew something of the process and benefits. I was keen to be part of the West Yorkshire Cultural Action Learning as an opportunity to meet, learn from and build connections with peers from other cultural organisations. I was also looking for a network where I could share professional challenges, work through potential solutions and gain perspectives beyond those of my organisation. Given these motivations, I think it helped that members of the set were all at a similar point in their career, or held comparable seniority of position or role responsibility.

Julia did a brilliant job of managing the sessions, which were all held online. It was important that we quickly established confidence in confidentiality and an ethos of support and care. Members of the set shared a wide range of challenges, some of which required giving context of their organisation, colleagues or career aspirations – for this to work, people needed to trust that the conversation would remain solely within the session. I was lucky to be part of a warm and generous group of people who were willing to share personal information, and this helped me to be open about my own vulnerabilities when my turn came to present.

What key tips would you pass on?

It's worth making the commitment to attend all the sessions from the outset – this is crucial as a way to build trusted relationships with others in the group. The structure works on fairness as each person gets their moment to present whilst the rest of the participants help to workshop the challenge. We saw individuals reach brilliant moments of clarity as well as experience changes over time, both of which were inspirational, and for others it was enough to have a safe space in which to give voice to a niggle and be heard.

5. Creative programming for artistic freedom

Creativity flourishes when artists and cultural organisations take risks and innovate.

Experience from the West Yorkshire Years of Culture highlighted the essential role that bold, experimental and risk-taking work plays in a healthy cultural ecosystem and how events like these can promote this.

Creativity flourishes when artists and cultural organisations have the freedom to innovate, challenge norms and work outside of commercial expectations. This requires strong artistic leadership prepared to take risks to support this. However, it is clear that funding models, commissioning structures and public accountability pressures can often discourage risk-taking or favour 'safe' projects.



5. Creative programming for artistic freedom

Top tips

Be bold and experiment

Champion artistic freedom in policy

Integrate artistic freedom into cultural policy by supporting diverse, experimental practices and resisting pressure for strictly outcome-based funding.

Create supportive environments for experimentation

Foster 'safe' spaces where artists can take risks without fear of failure, such as through residencies, scratch nights or experimental commissions.

Provide low-stakes testing grounds

Establish informal platforms like pop-up residencies or pilot schemes where artists can test new ideas with minimal pressure for formal deliverables.

Manage the risks

Develop risk-tolerant funding models

Structure funding to embrace creative risk, offering support for projects that may not yield immediate or conventional results.

Advocate for flexible policy frameworks

Negotiate with funders and policymakers to create open-ended funding criteria that explicitly allow for creative failure and experimentation.

Ensure access and equity for artists and creatives

Ensure fair pay and contracting

Compensate artists, freelancers and community practitioners fairly for all work, including preparation, delivery and follow-up.

Open up opportunities

Consider all potential barriers to ensure that commissioning, programming and participation are accessible to underrepresented artists, including those with disabilities, caring responsibilities or other barriers.

Provide practical support

Offer transport, rehearsal/production spaces, accessible communication and/or mentoring to enable meaningful participation.

Create inclusive working environments

Ensure accessibility, wellbeing and inclusive practices are embedded in all interactions with artists and creative teams.

5. Creative programming for artistic freedom

Build a programme that resonates with all local people

Think local first

Explicitly consider how to recruit locally into programming roles and within commissioning even if this involves taking risks on new talent – it can pay off in commitment and resonance.

Think global, act local

Maximise the value of nationally and internationally based collaborators and commissions spending time on co-design and delivery with the local sector or communities.

Incorporate inclusive interactive digital engagement

Digital empowerment can give people a voice and access they may not have experienced before. Offer a range of interactive digital opportunities (e.g. virtual tours, Q&As, workshops, collaborative digital storytelling and live streams) to maximise your reach and remove geographic, financial and physical barriers to access.



5. Creative programming for artistic freedom

Provocations

Programming for artistic freedom

- ➔ How can local authorities protect and promote artistic freedom while balancing the need for accountability and measurable outcomes?
- ➔ What role can risk-tolerant funding models play in fostering long-term cultural growth, and how can these models be sustained?
- ➔ Discuss models that might create an environment where failure is seen as an integral part of the creative process rather than a setback, and mean that artists have access to spaces where they can safely experiment, fail, and refine their ideas.
- ➔ How can we structure commissioning processes to make space for bold and experimental work, especially when public and private funders may be inclined towards safe, predictable outcomes?

Curating an accessible artistic programme

- ➔ How can we ensure that parts of our programme are truly co-created with marginalised communities, and not just offered to them? Who can we work with to make this the case?
- ➔ How might we reframe culture to be more inclusive of young people's everyday creative practices? What can we learn from our peers or other sectors, and who can help us do this?
- ➔ Can digital platforms truly democratise cultural access, or do they risk deepening digital divides?





5. Creative programming for artistic freedom

Kully Thiarai

I was Creative Director and CEO for LEEDS 2023. My role was to deliver a Year of Culture in 2023 despite the city being thwarted in its plans to be European Capital of Culture due to Brexit.

Our vision was to deliver a transformational year of creative experiences that connected and benefitted people, showcased Leeds, broadened participation in culture, and strengthened the city's creative economy.

I was responsible for all aspects of the business from advocacy and fundraising through to artistic and operational delivery, working closely with the Board, Leeds City Council, and a wide range of partners locally, nationally, and internationally.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

That it was going to be a marathon with lots of sprints and little or no time to take stock, review, or rest. We were a relatively small team with big ambitions and not enough resources.

We were building a plane as we were flying it, to a yet not quite worked out destination. In our case there were a lot of head winds and turbulence that we weren't expecting that were beyond our control and challenging to manage because they created so much uncertainty (Brexit, Covid 19, the cost of living crisis).

What didn't you anticipate?

I started in my role ten weeks before the first lockdown in March 2020 because of Covid 19. It changed everything and continued to have a huge impact right the way through the project.

It was extraordinarily difficult to build an organisation from scratch, build partnership, raise the money needed within the time frames we were working to and create confidence in a sector that had been devastated.

What key tip would you pass on?

Don't let fear thwart your ambitions. Be bold – great ideas will find support.

6. Getting the sponsorship and fundraising right

Strategic investment, not last-minute add-ons.

The majority of the income will most probably come from public sources. Sponsorship and fundraising beyond public sources are often treated as add-ons to cultural programmes, yet learning from the Years of Culture highlights how central they are to long-term success and legacy. Effective fundraising/sponsorship requires early planning, sustained relationship-building, a clear plan for post-year relationship retention and a strategic understanding of what different partners can offer and what they need in return. This is not simply about securing additional income, but about building partnerships that align with shared values, place-based impact, and longer-term ambitions for culture.

Across the Years of Culture, the most successful approaches started early, invested in dedicated capacity, and remained flexible in recognising the varied motivations of funders and sponsors. This included being open to non-cash contributions, tailoring offers to different types of organisations and framing cultural investment in terms that resonate beyond economic return – such as wellbeing, inclusion, pride of place and legacy. Where sponsorship was approached as a partnership rather than a transaction, it was more likely to contribute to sustainable cultural outcomes beyond the programme period.



6. Getting the sponsorship & fundraising right

Top tips

Set the foundations for investment

Start early and plan strategically

Give yourself at least 18–24 months to build relationships and secure sponsorships; last-minute asks rarely succeed.

Work regionally, not just locally

Collaborate across authorities and cultural organisations to attract larger regional/national sponsors.

Invest in relationship management

Recognise the skills needed and assign dedicated, experienced staff to steward sponsors – recognition, reporting, and ongoing dialogue matter.

Be flexible

Segment your offer

Tailor approaches for corporates, trusts, local businesses and high-net-worth individuals – one size doesn't fit all.

Create layered opportunities

Offer tiered packages (headline, supporting, in-kind) so businesses of all sizes can contribute.

Leverage in-kind support

Hospitality, venues, staff time or equipment can be as valuable as cash contributions.

Treat sponsors as partners

Focus on values alignment

Sponsors increasingly want to see social impact, inclusion and sustainability, not just logo placement.

Tell compelling stories

Frame any asks around community benefit, pride of place and legacy rather than transactional sponsorship.

Involve funders and investors in this legacy planning

They love stories and want to make a lasting difference too. Articulating the longer-term legacy their support will unlock can be key to making the case for funding or investment longer term.

Track and evidence impact

Provide clear evaluation to demonstrate return on investment for funders and sponsors, whether social, cultural or economic.

6. Getting the sponsorship & fundraising right

Provocations

- ➔ What new narratives beyond economic growth can attract sponsors (e.g. health, education, inclusion)?
- ➔ How can grassroots organisations be supported to access sponsorship opportunities usually only open to bigger players?
- ➔ How might the investment opportunity of a Year of Culture or similar event unlock more ambitious partnerships than individual organisations can attract?
- ➔ How do we make in-kind contributions (venues, staff, marketing) visible and valued alongside cash support?
- ➔ What metrics beyond brand visibility can be used to demonstrate to sponsors the impact of their investment?
- ➔ How do we design fundraising strategies that don't just serve big flagship events but also grassroots cultural life?
- ➔ What role can public sector bodies play in brokering relationships between culture and business?
- ➔ Which business model(s) best enable us to maximise legacy? Who are our key stakeholders within these, how and when should we engage with them, and how can we best make the case to them for this legacy focus?
- ➔ What business models will enable grassroots networks to operate in a sustainable manner beyond the programme period? Where can we/they find models of best practice?





6. Getting the sponsorship & fundraising right

Kitty Wright

I've worked in arts, culture and heritage in Australia and the UK. In West Yorkshire I was a Director of the Arts Council 1999–2010 and I've worked in heritage and fundraising in Bradford for five years. I provided strategic fundraising advice to the Bradford bid team for UK City Culture 2025 ahead of the in-house team being established, negotiating with corporate sponsorship prospects, and overseeing the fundraising strategy for the bid period. After Bradford was awarded the designation by UK Government, I worked with the Bradford Culture Company team on successful bids to Spirit of 2012 for the volunteer programme and The National Heritage Lottery Fund to support delivery of the heritage programme.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

When I began work on the programme we knew who the big sponsors in Bradford were, and the corporates who had won large contracts to work in Bradford who may be ready to put something back. We also knew who the local smaller businesses were who would support a programme at lower or more hyper local level. But we couldn't be sure for some time who the competing cities for the title were, and who they might be targeting. Many national and international corporates working in Bradford and other places were inclined to get involved with a City of Culture programme but couldn't commit to any one of them until they knew which city would win the designation. That made targeting companies and forecasting budgets extra tricky!

What didn't you anticipate?

The need to think both long term and short term – to help the bid team prepare for a successful outcome, and have fundraising objectives, strategies, targets and tools ready for an incoming programme delivery team to use, while working on the immediate imperative to raise funds to support the bid process. The need to keep the bid sponsors and donors warm and committed to supporting a programme at a specified level if and when we won the bid and there was in fact a programme to deliver, while ensuring we were acknowledging them properly and looking after them as bid sponsors, in case that was where the relationship had to end.

What key tip would you pass on?

Know your local business profile, and make sure you have the skills, contacts, credibility and background to match it. It's difficult in small, lean organisations where we all do a bit of everything, but try to make sure each person is performing the role they are best placed to, given that fundraising is a mix of relationship management and strategic planning.

7. Telling the right story

Communicating about Years of Culture shouldn't ever be an afterthought.

Successfully communication about a Year of Culture requires holistic thinking – it's about a programme, not just a series of events. You need to think about multiple internal and external stakeholders, such as potential and existing delivery partners, investors and funders and a range of potential target audiences.

Embed a clear and shared brand within the team, and make sure everything that goes out is inclusive and will work in the longer term to save money and ensure legacy.



7. Telling the right story

Top tips

Take care with your branding

Start branding early

Don't miss the launch window. Have the visible identity and messaging ready before the first event.

Brand for locals as much as visitors

Consider local phrases and loved places; don't ditch a loved identity/brand for the sake of newness.

Think about legacy branding

Avoid short-lived names and year-specific identities if long-term use is a goal – build flexible, evergreen brands where possible.

Get the channels right

Separate but connected channels

Use non-council branded social channels to avoid posts/comments about potholes, but maintain links to tourism platforms for reach.

Leverage community voices

Train and empower ambassadors, influencers and community groups to tell the story authentically.

Balance push and pull

Avoid one-way 'push' comms. Invite user-generated content and local perspectives, creating traction and engagement.

Mix digital and print

Accessible print (brochures, calendars, posters) helps reach broader audiences and builds visibility in everyday places.

Don't forget the internal comms

Embed internally as well as externally

Use lanyards, hoodies, staff packs and frontline involvement to create internal buy-in and consistency.

Coordinate messaging across departments

Align with leisure, libraries, tourism and other teams so everyone 'sings from the same hymn sheet'.

Be accessible

Reframe the language you use

Words hold immense power. Use inclusive terminology that aligns with the lived experiences and creative practices of typically underrepresented communities.

Use accessible communication channels

Great communication begins with connection. Work with partners to promote your programme through networks that will help you reach typically marginalised groups.

Remove sensory barriers

Ensure all communication and marketing materials are accessible for people with disabilities.

7. Telling the right story

Provocations

- ➔ How do we balance storytelling (the 'why') with event promotion (the 'what')?
- ➔ What strategies make branding authentic rather than imposed?
- ➔ How can community groups become true communications partners, not just amplification channels?
- ➔ How do we design campaigns that reach those not already engaged with culture?
- ➔ How can we better align legacy marketing with existing tourism and council channels?
- ➔ What are the risks and benefits of separating cultural branding from council identities?
- ➔ How do we maintain audience trust and enthusiasm when the Year of Culture brand expires?
- ➔ How do internal comms and frontline staff engagement influence external success?
- ➔ Beyond social media stats, what tools or metrics meaningfully measure comms success?





7. Telling the right story

Philip Stephenson

I am a Cultural Programme Manager at Calderdale Council with a strong focus on events and community-led culture.

I played a key role in CultureDale, Calderdale's year-long cultural programme celebrating creativity, people and place.

Within CultureDale, I helped shape the programme's direction, supported artists and partners, and led on the planning and delivery of public events.

My role ensured projects were accessible, well coordinated and rooted in local communities, while contributing to the programme's wider legacy and ambitions for Calderdale's cultural sector.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

Coming from Calderdale originally, I knew there were lots of cultural opportunities in the area, but I just didn't know how many fantastic people and organisations we have here in Calderdale.

What didn't you anticipate?

The level of pride, ownership and willingness from artists, communities and partners to step forward and contribute went far beyond what I expected, and it fundamentally strengthened the programme's impact and legacy.

What key tip would you pass on?

Build in space to listen, adapt and reflect as you go – flexibility and trust are just as important as planning.

8. Managing successful events

Delivering large-scale cultural programmes requires careful planning, collaboration and attention to both people and processes.

Success depends on balancing ambition with capacity, understanding local contexts and ensuring that staff at all levels are engaged and supported. Early strategic thinking, clear responsibilities and structured cross-departmental working help prevent bottlenecks, confusion and staff burnout, while capturing and sharing knowledge safeguards institutional memory.

Equally important is respecting existing users and community activities, enabling external collaboration, and creating transparent processes that allow freelancers and partners to contribute effectively. The following tips provide practical guidance for councils and cultural teams to navigate complex delivery, build internal goodwill, and leave a lasting legacy beyond individual events.



8. Managing successful events

Top tips

Be strategic

Start early and map the landscape

Allow time to understand local contexts, existing activity and potential sensitivities before major events are announced.

Balance ambition with capacity

Align event scale with realistic staffing and resourcing, avoiding over-promise and under-delivery and the risk of delivery team burnout.

Capture and share knowledge

Develop and share manuals, flowcharts or contact directories to support knowledge transfer, especially where institutional memory sits with long-serving staff.

Get internal buy in

Build goodwill with frontline staff

Invest in relationships with frontline staff, such as caretakers, cleaners and street teams; small gestures can secure vital cooperation.

Secure buy-in at every level

Don't just rely on senior endorsement – ensure all relevant teams, from cleansing to switchboard, are briefed and involved from the outset.

Create clear responsibility lists

Assign named contacts in each department (both managers and administrators) to avoid confusion and ensure smooth coordination.

Establish cross-department working groups

Bring together highways, cleansing, parks, parking and comms in regular meetings to anticipate issues early.

Clarify internal charging policies

Agree protocols in advance to avoid delays or conflicts over cross-departmental fees.

Play nicely

Complement what's already there

Plan events that add value without alienating existing community activities and services.

Enable external collaboration

Make processes transparent so freelancers and external producers can navigate your systems without barriers.

8. Managing successful events

Provocations

- ➔ How can councils avoid major cultural programmes overburdening stretched departments and causing staff burnout?
- ➔ What mechanisms best ensure buy-in beyond senior leadership, so that every level of staff feels ownership of delivery?
- ➔ Should there be region-wide templates or manuals for event management within local authorities?
- ➔ How can we balance 'big-ticket' cultural events with the needs of everyday users and community groups who sustain local spaces year-round?
- ➔ What is the right role for Strategic Mayoral Authorities (or similar bodies) in facilitating inter-council knowledge sharing and consistency in event management?
- ➔ How can budget-setting better reflect the real costs of delivery, including hidden staffing and cross-departmental support?
- ➔ How can external freelancers and producers be used effectively as 'buffers' to navigate difficult systems, without masking deeper organisational issues?
- ➔ What is lost when long-serving staff retire, and how do we systematise knowledge transfer before that happens?
- ➔ Could cultural events planning become a catalyst for more collaborative 'One Council' working cultures beyond the cultural sector?





8. Managing successful events

Charlie Wells

I am a West Yorkshire based freelance composer and creative producer who participated in two years of culture – Kirklees Year of Music (KYOM) 2023 and Wakefield's Our Year 2024.

Most significantly, from October 2022–July 2024 I worked as Programme Manager for Dewsbury Taking the Lead. alongside supporting Festival of Conversations and Woven Festival for KYOM 2023.

Taking the Lead was a successful programme of events and activities designed to encourage participation, celebrate the area and build a strong creative community.

The programme reached over 25,000 people in Dewsbury across 18 months of workshops, talks, performances, events and exhibitions.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

When Taking the Lead began, I wish I understood more about the structures surrounding local authorities and project hierarchy, which affected lead times for projects. As a freelance producer, I am used to turning projects around quickly, as most things I do require few layers of decision making, so timelines can be easily truncated. This is not usually the case when working with structures such as a local authority as many different departments deal with many different areas of a project, and sometimes there are not clear lines of communication between them.

What didn't you anticipate?

I didn't anticipate how tricky it could be working with so many different organisations and people with different working styles, and facilitating working relationships within formal structures that I was not familiar with. However, this also yielded an interesting and rewarding engagement landscape with a wide variety of rich connections which have created future collaborations, activities and supported project legacy.

What key tip would you pass on?

Use local knowledge – be that producers or participants, artists or project workers. It is great and often essential to be able to bring in external knowledge and expertise to enable great things to happen. However, without an authentic buy-in from the local community, or the ability and desire to reach people and places that differ from the obvious, you can miss out on 'great' becoming 'life-affirming' or on a one off becoming legacy for local communities.

9. Monitoring and evaluating impact

Meaningful evaluation is essential to demonstrate the value of culture.

Often evaluation is an afterthought or seen simply as a matter of reporting for accountability. Taking a holistic approach means designing evaluation in from the beginning, alongside a thorough and embedded monitoring system, ensuring learning comes back to the delivery team as fast as possible. This helps teams to learn from failure as well as success.

Developing clear, shared evaluation frameworks and data collection approaches also allows the full value arising to be reflected, particularly when it comes to long-term or intangible outcomes such as personal development, community cohesion or cultural confidence.



9. Monitoring and evaluating impact

Top tips

It's all in the planning

Incorporate evaluation from the start

Design iterative evaluation processes into projects from the outset, enabling continuous reflection and adaptation.

Think carefully about which evaluation model to use

Mixing internal and external delivery can be best to ensure continuous learning alongside critique and validation.

Develop a clear, easy to use monitoring approach

Ensure buy-in and training so the delivery team can both input to this and draw learning to adapt programming iteratively.

Develop holistic evaluation frameworks

Combine qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the full range of cultural impact, from economic metrics to social measures such as shifts in wellbeing and community pride.

Plan for the long term

Include a focus on long-term and intangible outcomes

Capture less direct, long-term impacts, such as personal development and social cohesion, alongside traditional metrics.

Build research partnerships for long term impact

Work with legacy organisations, from universities and local evaluation networks, so longer term impacts are measured beyond the life of the programme.

Make sure you'll be able to tell a good story

A shared language for evaluation

Using some of the array of existing tools and frameworks allows cultural organisations and local authorities to understand and communicate impact clearly and consistently to all stakeholders.

Use storytelling alongside data

Balance hard data with personal stories and lived experiences to present a more comprehensive, engaging picture of impact.

Don't forget the bigger picture

Advocate for the value of culture

Ensure that evaluation outcomes are framed in a way that resonates with a diverse range of stakeholders, from community members to policymakers and funders.

Strengthen evaluation practices

Develop frameworks that measure cultural impact through social, civic, and health outcomes – not just economic indicators.

Evaluate and evolve collaboration

Ensure you develop methods for also assessing the health, equity, and long-term resilience of partnerships themselves.

9. Monitoring and evaluating impact

Provocations

- ➔ How can we ensure that intangible impacts, such as shifts in identity or community cohesion, are valued equally alongside more measurable outcomes like economic impact?
- ➔ Develop frameworks to measure impact through social, civic and health outcomes, not just economic indicators.
- ➔ Ensure you develop methods for also assessing the health, equity, and long-term resilience of partnerships themselves.
- ➔ How can cultural organisations integrate evaluation into the design of projects without it feeling like an afterthought or burden?
- ➔ In what ways can storytelling and data work together to create a fuller, richer picture of cultural impact?
- ➔ How can the evaluation of cultural impact help drive continuous improvement in cultural practice?
- ➔ Which metrics – beyond GDP – most meaningfully capture the value of cultural investment in your community, and how might these be measured?
- ➔ How is success defined beyond attendance numbers – e.g. in terms of trust built, relevance achieved and participation expanded?





9. Monitoring and evaluating impact

Gail Smith

I'm Gail Smith, Evaluation Manager for Bradford Culture Company, the charity who delivered Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture.

I am part of the small in-house evaluation team that pulled together the evaluation strategy and Story of Change used across the whole of the 2025 delivery and then undertook and oversaw a wide range of monitoring and evaluation activities, from counting audiences at events through to gathering the experiences of those attending and taking part, and all sorts in between.

We are now busy undertaking our analysis and reporting and are looking forward to sharing our outputs in December 2026.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

The sheer size, breadth and scale of the programme.

What didn't you anticipate?

The speed we would be having to work at and short timeframes we would have to share evaluation and learning to enable this to be incorporated into future programme delivery.

What key tip would you pass on?

It's not always possible to do everything, so keep your key evaluation questions at the forefront of your mind at all times to help keep you focused.

10. The wider learning: Regional and national considerations

Connecting cultural policy to the wider policy landscape

These programmes produced a huge amount of learning that is highly useful to combined / strategic authorities and other regional and national bodies. As their understanding of culture's social and economic impact continues to evolve, and with devolution and LGR in train, they are increasingly realising the need to integrate cultural policy into wider policymaking.

Culture can act as a powerful connector, enhancing wellbeing and civic engagement, and building more resilient communities and economies. These Years of Culture showed this, enabling the articulation of a bold vision where culture is not siloed; instead it is the connective tissue linking education, health, growth, environmental stewardship and civic life.

We emphasise the importance of policies and action plans that support the design of cultural ecosystems that need to be integrated, inclusive and sustainable, able to nurture creativity, economic resilience and wellbeing. This holistic perspective provides a framework for long-term investment and aligns with national policy and investment.

In this section we explore strategic and practical measures local and combined / strategic authorities could take to maximise the potential of such programmes and make this vision a reality.



10. The wider learning: Regional and national considerations

Top tips

Focus on the bigger picture

Integrate cultural policy within broader policymaking

Avoid silos. Join up cultural policymaking with health, education, economic development and placemaking – and embed long-term cultural investment within broader local development frameworks and strategies.

Rethink how you measure and advocate for the impact of culture

Culture is a superpower. Measure success through social impact – identity, health, civic engagement – as well as economic or attendance metrics.

Recognise and invest in the social value of cultural venues

Our venues are engine houses of social impact. Invest in the role they play in placemaking, health and education, and as community hubs.

Embed creativity across the school curriculum

Embedding creativity into primary and secondary education will unlock learning, innovation and a cultural ‘habit’ at a generational level.

Connect local to national and international

Use touring models, regional partnerships and policy to link locally-based work with national platforms and networks – and map shared global heritage through partnerships with international organisations.

Explore sustainable, equitable funding models

Move beyond event-driven funding

Develop long-term, inclusive investment strategies that blend public, private and philanthropic funding – aligned with national grant criteria to leverage additional support and extend lasting impact.

Champion risk-tolerant, experimentation-friendly funding

Create space for artistic freedom by supporting diverse practices and less predictable outcomes. Develop grants, commissions and residencies where artists can trial ideas, fail, and try again – without the pressure of solely outcome-based funding.

10. The wider learning: Regional and national considerations

Embed partnership working and cross-sector collaboration

Establish long-term, community-centred partnerships

Develop Cultural Compacts and cross-sector frameworks that move from transactional to strategic collaboration – doing with, not to. Include grassroots and underrepresented organisations, grounded in shared values, trust and mutual benefit.

Use your convening power

Soft power is still power. Act as a central hub coordinating cultural projects, ensuring alignment with regional and national agendas, and piloting projects that connect culture to wellbeing, health or placemaking outcomes.

Focus on and invest in sharing knowledge and resources

Build systems for knowledge sharing and continuous learning

Knowledge is power, so pass it on. Develop networks and resources that ensure learning benefits the wider community – not just those who delivered it – and encourage reflection and adaptive practice before, during and after the programme.

Sustain networks and build regional resource hubs

The future belongs to those who prepare for it today. Ensure strategies and partnerships are in place to maintain relationships and knowledge-sharing beyond the programme's end – and explore shared equipment, venues or staff across neighbouring areas to maximise impact where standalone infrastructure is limited.



10. The wider learning: Regional and national considerations

Provocations

- ➔ How can we best connect and align cultural programming (and policy) with wider policy and delivery, and create a truly integrated ecosystem? Who are our best allies, and what does their involvement look like? What internal resources are needed? Who has the power to make this happen, and how can we best influence this?
- ➔ How can cultural initiatives contribute to placemaking and regeneration in ways that are sustainable and inclusive? What do we need to change in order for this to happen?
- ➔ What practical mechanisms can help grassroots creativity gain traction on national or international stages? Who needs to pull the levers on this?
- ➔ In what ways can we shift our view of culture to it being a driver of economic growth, rather than an ancillary cost? What do we (all) need to do for this shift to happen?
- ➔ How can regional bodies transition from being perceived as temporary funders of specific events to integral players in long-term cultural development? What strategies and actions could ensure we are able to provide strategic direction, secure funding and support for sub-regional bodies beyond the life of individual projects?
- ➔ How can funding timelines and grant models evolve to support deeper relationship-building, experimentation, and long-term collaboration and cultural impact?
- ➔ How can we act as effective convenors of sustained, cross-sector collaboration over multiple years and political cycles?
- ➔ How do we measure the long-term impact of mayoral strategic authorities on large-scale cultural projects, and what metrics appropriately capture their sustained contribution to cultural initiatives?
- ➔ Who are our natural allies – local, national, and global – in sustaining cultural impact over time? How well-connected are we with them, and what work do we need to do to strengthen those connections?





10. The wider learning: Regional and national considerations

Meleri Roberts

We're fortunate in West Yorkshire that our Local Authority leaders, and Mayor Tracy Brabin, have recognised the importance of culture in driving growth, supporting the visitor economy, in 'place-making', regeneration, and enriching the lives of people in our region. To further these ambitions, we've supported the development and delivery of Years of Culture programmes across the region. These programmes are about far more than events – they're about creating space for communities, artists and places to share their stories. We've helped shape the conditions for ambitious, locally-led programmes to happen, working closely with local authorities and partners to balance creative vision with public investment, accountability and long-term impact across West Yorkshire. I'm currently working with Local Authority colleagues and partners to bring this vital learning to the Seasons of Culture programme.

What do you most wish you'd known at the beginning of your work on the programme?

Timescales – not just the programme year itself, but everything that comes before and after. Large-scale events can feel like celebratory moments, but from a funder perspective, you're in it for the long haul: supporting set-up, collaborating during delivery, and then staying with it through evaluation and legacy. It's important to have flexibility built into the strategic approach and to ensure political leaders are also part of, and influencing, the journey. On a practical note, keep a Lessons Learnt Log. It doesn't have to be detailed, but helps with professional reflection and future planning.

What didn't you anticipate?

'Don't put all your eggs in one basket'. In 2023, we developed a Culture, Heritage and Sport Framework to guide our investments, which has latterly helped to ensure we support programmes that deliver a wider range of outcomes across our four Framework themes of People, Place, Skills and Business. In practice, this has demonstrated how one strategic ambition, can indirectly influence another – for example, many activities and events have Creative Health overlaps.

What key tip would you pass on?

Across every Year of Culture we've supported, there's been this huge groundswell, from grassroots groups to major organisations wanting to play a part. It's brilliant, and what you hope for, but it can also involve managing expectations. You quickly realise that part of the role is helping to hold onto a sense of purpose and focus, while keeping that openness, flexibility and energy.

11. Concluding remarks

There is a lot to digest in this Primer and it represents a significant body of learning, drawn from the shared knowledge and experience of many colleagues working across the sector.

The details reflects three key principles:

- **Firstly, that embarking on such events is a substantial undertaking, and should therefore be integrated with as much of your wider work as possible.**
- **Secondly, this is not a solo mission, but a collective effort requiring a strong and diverse team.**
- **Thirdly, best practice requires a continuous checklist approach to ensure equality, legacy, sustainability and accessibility. These are not peripheral considerations – they sit at the core of the work itself.**

Some of the ideas and principles may feel difficult to achieve and, at times, may sit beyond your immediate sphere of influence, but we hope you can use this shared knowledge as a tool to open conversations and develop new models, drawing on others approaches and adapting them to your own context.

Ultimately, there is no perfect model. No single approach fits all, nor should it, as effective practice must be place specific.



Credits

We would like to thank everyone across West Yorkshire's cultural sector who has generously given their time and expertise to the creation of this Primer.

In particular, we thank the many people from across the region who took part in the workshops and online discussions. The insights, experiences and reflections that they shared have been invaluable.

However, special mention should go to Meleri Roberts and Jim Hinks from WYCA, who commissioned this piece of work and whose tireless efforts supported it becoming a reality.

About the Authors

Dr Ruth Melville is Director of RMR, an experienced social researcher and evaluator who has advised UK and international cultural organisations on best practice in evaluation.

She has expertise designing major cultural programme evaluations with a focus on embedding approaches that lead to internal and external change. Her experience includes Evaluation Advisor to Bradford 2025; running Impacts 08, the Liverpool European Capital of Culture (ECOC) evaluation; advisor to Hull 2017 City of Culture and Aarhus 2017 ECOC, and Critical Friend and Evaluator for a number of Arts Council England's Creative People and Places Programmes.

Julia Payne has a 20 + year track record of providing organisations across the cultural sector with support around strategic planning, programme development, income generation and evaluation. She has also developed numerous programmes supporting creative freelancers, including the award-winning Balance programme.

Clients/partners include bodies such as Arts Council England, BBC, British Council, Greater London Authority and Yorkshire Forward; funders and industry bodies, such as PRS Foundation and the Musicians' Union, and cultural organisations ranging from the National Theatre and Roundhouse to Jazz North and MOBO.

James Gough brings over 20 years of experience in the cultural sector. He specialises in strategic planning, cultural policy, organisational change and public engagement projects – delivering work at a regional and national level. He firmly believes that access to culture is a basic human right.

He has a wealth of consultancy experience in the subsidised arts, commercial business, and local authority sectors. His past roles include Executive Director of the Southampton Cultural Development Trust, deputy CEO at the Nuffield Theatre (Southampton) and Director of Audiences South.

Footnotes

Page 7: Table 1: Local Authorities and Years of Culture involved in the consultation

Bradford, UK City of Culture 2025 figure: Provisional total spend figure, to be confirmed December 2026 when evaluation published.

Kirklees Year of Music 2023 figure: Across 2021/22 to 2024/25 supported by a range of external funders, including: West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Arts Council England, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, the National Heritage Lottery Fund, Creative Minds and Youth Music.

Our Year – Wakefield District 2024 figure: Across 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 supported by a range of external funders, including: West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Arts Council England, the National Heritage Lottery Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Cultural Development Fund.

Image credits

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The Hatchling
JMA Events

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CultureDale

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Armley Horse
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Detail from *HERD*
Devised by Orlando Gough, produced by
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RISE, Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture
opening event
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