

Place and Resources Overview Committee

26 March 2026

Cultural Strategy 2026-2031

For Recommendation to Cabinet

Cabinet Member:

Cllr R Hope, Customer, Culture and Community Engagement

Local Councillor(s):

All Councillors

Senior Leadership Team:

J Britton, Executive Director for Place Services

Report author and job title: Paul Rutter - Service Manager for Leisure, Arts and Cultural Services

Email: paul.rutter@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public

1.0 Executive summary

- 1.1 Culture has always played a role in enhancing people's lives and the places in which they live. Dorset has an incredibly high level of engagement with 93% of adults engaging in cultural activity every year.
- 1.2 Over the last five years, and despite considerable headwinds, Dorset's cultural life has continued to thrive. Museums are seeing increased visitor numbers, arts organisations are developing new business models and creatives are making and bringing inventive work to Dorset's towns and villages.
- 1.3 The new Cultural Strategy will help to support and sustain Dorset's cultural infrastructure, drive lasting social and economic benefits and leverage internal and external funding. Although the strategy will not be directly owned by Dorset Council, it has been developed to align to the Dorset Council Plan priorities and enable communities to come together; breaking down social isolation and helping build happy, empowered, and connected communities. The priorities of the strategy have also been aligned to national cultural and heritage policies.

- 1.4 As a significant local funder, it is imperative that the strategy is closely aligned to the Dorset Council Plan, so that funding criteria can help support the delivery of the priorities.
- 1.5 This strategy will rely on strong partnership working, both internally and externally. It will enhance the existing strong relationships with national funders, particularly Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which collectively support Dorset's cultural sector with over £5m a year.
- 1.6 For the next five years, the priorities of Dorset's Cultural sector are:
- Vibrant Places
 - Healthy Communities
 - Economic Development
 - Environmental Action
- 1.7 This strategy covers the Dorset Council area and has been developed in a collaborative way; one that has given stakeholders the opportunity to influence its development and shape the ambitions and priorities.
- 1.8 The full strategy at Appendix 1 provides a level of ambition and depth of detail that would be expected by external funding bodies such as The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council. It will also provide the strategic context on which local cultural organisations and Town and Parish Councils can develop their own plans and strategies and improve their chances of achieving successful funding bids.
- 1.9 Whilst the full strategy will be readily available, the 'easy read' version set out in Appendix 9 will be the public facing strategy document.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 That Cabinet be asked to adopt the Dorset Cultural Strategy 2026- 2031.

3.0 Reason for the recommendation(s)

A Cultural Strategy helps to increase the opportunities of securing new investment into Dorset and maximise the leverage value of the council's own investment in arts, heritage and culture. This Cultural Strategy will be the foundation on which Dorset Council will set its own funding criteria, ensuring that all grant recipients are contributing to its priorities and ambitions.

The strategy will not only inform how Dorset Council will support the sector in the future, but it will set out a united direction for culture for other stakeholders, funders, cross sector partners, Parish and Town Councils, organisations and individuals. A

collaborative approach to cultural provision will directly benefit our communities, visitors, and the local economy.

4.0 Culture Strategy

- 4.1 Culture has always played a role in enhancing people's lives and the places in which they live. This strategy is the third iteration of a Dorset Cultural Strategy and the second since the formation of Dorset Council in 2019.
- 4.2 The previous strategy (2021-26) was broad and ambitious, showing how culture engages and intersects with a wider network of partners and stakeholders. This strategy has adopted a similar approach, building on the web of connections that make up and contribute to Dorset's cultural sector.
- 4.3 The new strategy will however be more focused and take a more targeted approach. For the next five years, the priorities of Dorset's Cultural sector are: Vibrant Places - Healthy Communities - Economic Development - Environmental Action.
- 4.4 The main strategy report is set out in Appendix 1, with additional appendices detailing the level of consultation and engagement in developing the strategy, local and national insight, governance arrangements and a delivery plan setting out the ambitions and actions.
- 4.5 Whilst Dorset Council will play a key role in the development and delivery of this strategy, it will be owned by the sector. It should be recognised that the cultural sector of Dorset is broad and diverse and partnership working and collaboration will be a key foundation of any future success. Dorset Council will align its funding criteria to support the delivery of the strategy and the wider Council Plan.
- 4.6 Appendix 5 highlights the wide level of consultation and engagement undertaken and shows how partners, organisations and the wider community have been involved in shaping this strategy. Many of these organisations are involved in cultural education, operate museums and cultural venues and are deliverers of performances, events, festivals and exhibitions to name just a few. Their contribution in the development of this strategy and their subsequent commitment to deliver on the ambitions and priorities will be vital moving forward.
- 4.7 The governance model detailed in Appendix 3 provides further clarity on how the wider cultural eco system will contribute to its delivery. Dorset Council will ensure that all its funding is closely aligned to the ambitions and targets of the strategy and will play a key advocacy role in encouraging, nurturing and supporting collaboration.

- 4.8 The Delivery Plan in Appendix 2 provides insight into the approach to meeting these ambitions, who will be involved in delivery and how success will be measured. The plan focusses on the first year and will be reviewed and updated with new priorities throughout the life of the strategy.

5 Alternative options considered

- 5.1 The importance and value of a Cultural Strategy in shaping policy making is clearly demonstrated. The consultation and engagement sessions were designed to consider and debate on what the key priorities should be. The proposed priorities will best serve the cultural sector and also align with the priorities of the Dorset Council Plan.

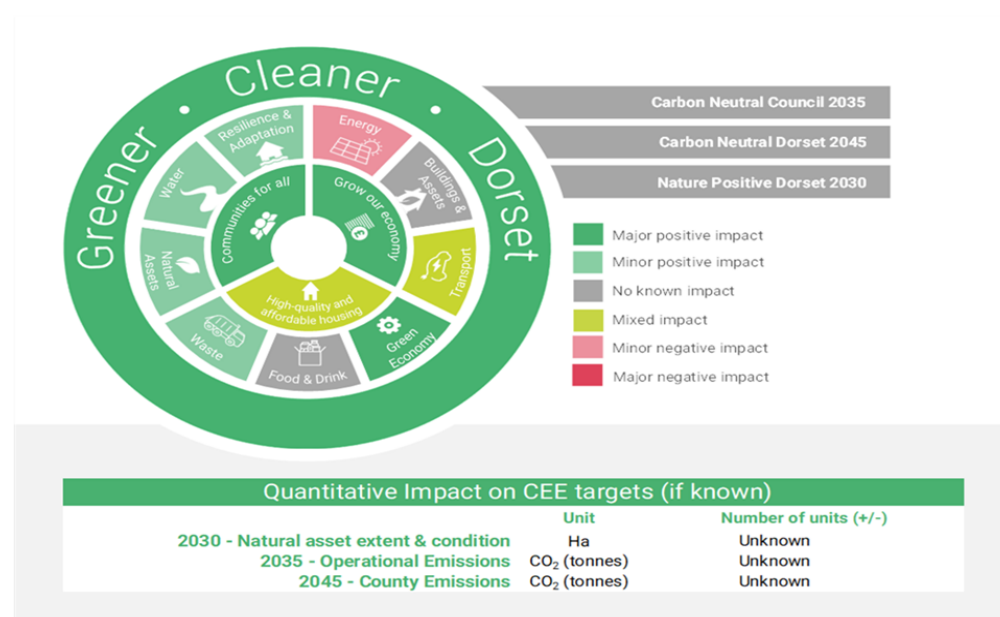
6 Legal considerations

- 6.1 There is no legal requirement to have a Cultural Strategy although it is very much considered as best practice with external funders. The EQiA considers the legal factors around equalities and inclusivity.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1 Dorset Council provides annual revenue funding of around £485,000 to 28 arts, culture and heritage/museum organisations and awards additional funding to around 30 projects a year.
- 7.2 This plays a pivotal role in leveraging external funding, with Arts Council England having provided Dorset with £4m in the last year through regular funding, project grants and strategic funds. Similarly, The National Lottery Heritage Fund awarded £1.2m towards 9 projects in Dorset in the same period. that the strategy remains subject to the ongoing commitment to funding. The strategy remains subject to the ongoing commitment to funding.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications



- 8.1 The assessment identifies no significant impacts, with further details set out in Appendix 10.

9. Well-being and health implications

- 9.1 Arts, heritage and culture, provide a vital role in improving health and wellbeing within our communities. It can bring communities together; breaking down social isolation and helping build happy, empowered, and connected communities. The strategy will focus on those living with poor mental health, people aged 65 and over, young people and those living with dementia. It will promote the delivery of initiatives, events and programmes in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and aim to engage with those impacted by rural isolation.

10. Other implications

- 10.1 None

11. Risk implications

- 11.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

12. Equalities

- 12.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (Appendix 8) has been carried out to inform the development of the strategy. Priority groups have been identified within the assessment and will form part of any developing action plans. This is currently being reviewed by Equalities Officers.

13. Appendices

- 13.1 Appendix 1 Dorset Cultural Strategy
- Appendix 2 Delivery Plan
- Appendix 3 A Framework for Governance
- Appendix 4 Viability of Dorset's Cultural Sector in 2026
- Appendix 5 Engagement and consultation
- Appendix 8 Equality Impact Assessment.
- Appendix 9 Dorset Cultural Strategy – easy read
- Appendix 10 Natural environment, climate & ecology impacts

14. Background papers

14.1 Appendix 6 - Links to other strategies

14.2 Appendix 7 - Sources

15 Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer) the Corporate Director for Finance and Commercial (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s).