

DORSET CULTURAL STRATEGY

2026-2031

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Foreword

Dorset is a place rich in culture. Throughout our towns, villages and natural landscape, that cultural life is evident. From civic museums to community arts centres, national festivals to public libraries, culture is never far away, and yet there's an opportunity to do even more. That's where the Dorset Cultural Strategy comes in.

Created through wide engagement with the sector, community and external partners, the strategy positions culture to play an even greater role for those who live in and visit Dorset.

Dorset Council plays a key role in supporting culture. It core funds 28 organisations, alongside its project funding. Its cultural officers and funded services provide advice, guidance and development for hundreds of smaller organisations, creatives and producers every year. It is a champion of the benefits of culture in improving people's lives and fostering greater community cohesion.

This strategy will create places that are more vibrant, whether in our market and seaside towns, historic villages or rural landscape. It will enable culture to strengthen our communities and improve the health of those who live here. It will champion inclusive economic development as the cultural sector plays its part in the wider growth of Dorset, and it will support environmental action, communicating and demonstrating ways of changing behaviour in response to the climate and ecological emergency.

This is an ambitious strategy but it is achievable. It will be realised through partnership and collaboration. It requires Town and Parish Councils, strategic health bodies and environmental partners to work alongside the cultural sector. It requires cultural organisations to work collectively to create things that are greater than the sum of their parts. Critically it requires Dorset Council to play the role of enabler and facilitator, connecting the cultural sector to the wider strategic priorities that benefit society as a whole.

The Dorset Cultural Strategy sets the direction for change. Together, we can realise that change.

Cllr Ryan Hope

Dorset Council Portfolio Holder for Customer, Culture and Community Engagement

Executive Summary

This is an ambitious but realistic strategy that builds on the brilliance of Dorset's cultural sector to create a shared purpose for the next five years.

In 2021, the newly formed Dorset Council adopted its first Cultural Strategy, setting a shared direction for the sector. 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.

The 2021-26 Cultural Strategy set a broad range of targets. Amongst these were creating an accessible and open cultural offer and valuing the innate creativity of communities. In response, Dorset pioneered a Town of Culture initiative, celebrating the cultural offer of Dorset's towns and increasing engagement with culture.

Another achievement has been the deepening of relationships with external partners, particularly those in the health sector, leading to the first Creative Health Strategy for Dorset. This will see culture and creativity used more widely to improve the physical and mental health of residents across the county.

Underpinning all this has been a committed and supportive local authority. Dorset Council continues to invest in culture, supporting 28 organisations with core funding and awarding project funding to around 20-30 projects a year. Both are delivered through an open process, allowing Dorset Council to support both essential cultural institutions as well as new organisations and ideas. In 2023-24, over 500,000 people visited Dorset's core-funded cultural organisations and every pound of funding from Dorset Council leveraged £15 in additional income.

But culture isn't just about attending shows, festivals or exhibitions. It's also about taking part – singing, reading and creating. Here, Dorset has an incredibly high level of engagement: 93% of adults in Dorset engage in cultural activity every year.

This new strategy, covering the period from 2026 to 2031, recognises this rich cultural life and seeks to build on the strengths of the sector to make significant change.

It has been developed through hundreds of conversations, with engagement from over 250 people. It considers opportunities for cross-sector partnership and focuses consistently on the difference culture makes to the residents of Dorset.

The new Dorset Cultural Strategy takes a bold approach. It sets out just four outcomes – things that will be measurably different at the end of five years. To achieve these, there will be a series of outputs – three for each outcome – which will be reviewed and reset on an annual basis.

The strategy coalesces around four themes – Vibrant Places, Healthy Communities, Economic Development and Environmental Action. Each theme places the cultural sector alongside others, exploring how a shared approach can have the biggest impact.

Consequently, this strategy relies on strong partnership working, both internally and externally. It benefits from 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.

It has the best chance of success when collaboration is encouraged, and organisations and individuals are able to look beyond their own work to seize greater opportunities.

Through this strategy, Dorset will be more an even more dynamic, distinctive and rewarding place in which to live, work and visit.

Process

This strategy is the third iteration of a Dorset Cultural Strategy and the second since the formation of Dorset Council in 2019.

The previous strategy (2021-26) was a broad and ambitious document, showing how culture engages and intersects with a wider network of partners and stakeholders.

This document has adopted a similar approach, building on the web of connections that make up and contribute to Dorset's cultural sector.

Following feedback from the sector and partners, this strategy is also more focused. It takes a more targeted approach. Consequently, the strategy has four priority areas and four measurable outcomes.

It was created through an iterative process beginning in April 2025. As the principal stakeholder, Dorset Council was involved in setting the initial scope for the strategy.

Engagement has taken place across the county, across the sector and with key stakeholders and partners. In total, over 250 people have directly fed into this strategy. Details of those consulted can be found in Appendix 4.

This document takes into consideration local and national strategies from the cultural and other sectors. This strategy seeks to align with these. Relevant strategies can be found in Appendix 5.

The strategy is also informed by local and national evidence and data. All data sources can be found in Appendix 6.

It considers neighbouring places and opportunities for collaboration across geography, particularly with neighbouring Councils in Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP).

A Shared Vision

Dorset is where culture and creativity pioneer ambitious change.

In a fast-moving world, Dorset embraces the new and diverse. Culture is a force for positive development, creating radical improvements in health and the environment. It supports sustainable economic development, attracting new income to Dorset. Throughout its towns, villages and rural areas, cultural activity takes place all year-round, providing life-enriching experiences for residents and visitors.

To achieve this, individual cultural expression will be celebrated, the cultural sector will be supported to enable sustainability, collaboration will be encouraged, and innovation and ambition will be championed.

What Do We Mean By Culture?

UNESCO defines culture as “the distinct spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features characterising a society. It encompasses arts, lifestyle, human rights, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. Culture shapes individuals and societies, fostering unity through shared values and traditions”.

For this strategy, we’ve divided culture roughly into two parts: arts and heritage.

Heritage includes museums, archives, historical sites, reenactments and heritage customs.

Arts includes music, theatre, dance, literature, film, gaming, visual art, circus and craft.



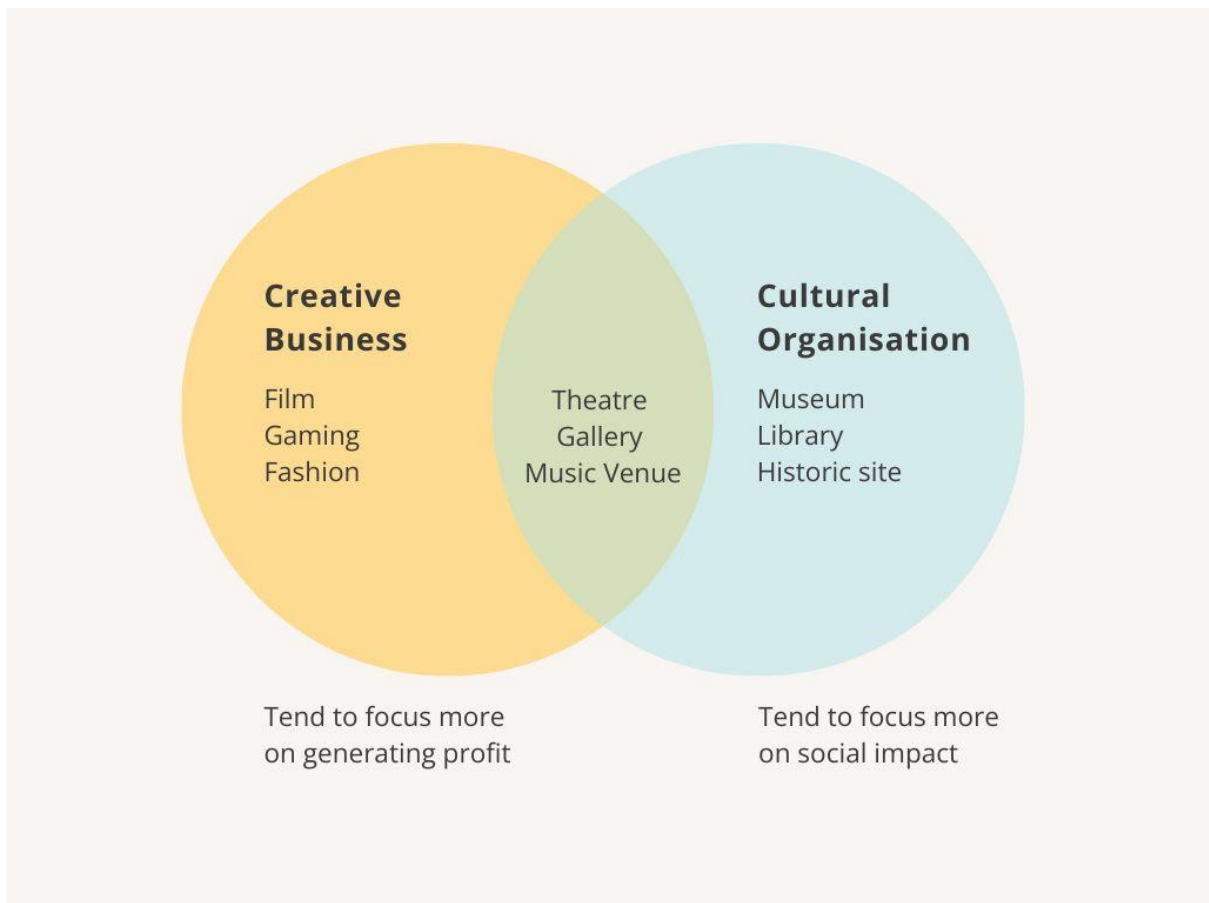
Culture sometimes takes place in dedicated cultural spaces – such as arts centres, theatres, museums. Sometimes culture takes place in spaces that have other functions, like pubs, community centres and town squares and sometimes culture takes place in private, at home reading a book, listening to music or watching a drama on TV.

Culture is often created by professionals who are paid to create work and who are usually trained to some degree. But culture is created by everyone, sometimes at

home, sometimes in public, through whistling a song, dancing on a night out or passing on traditions and customs.

Culture has historically been supported by the state going back to ancient times, by philanthropists and, most recently, by the public paying to experience cultural activity.

There is a subtle distinction between cultural organisations and creative businesses. The former tends to focus on social impact whereas the latter tends to focus on profit. That said, many organisations straddle these worlds and others defy the trend.



In this strategy, the word “culture” covers all aspects of the sector, embracing creative businesses and cultural organisations. It also recognises that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t take into consideration the variety and diversity of the cultural sector, from start-ups to cultural institutions, community groups to statutory services, one-off projects to historic collections.

Inevitably a strategy that looks to embrace and unify the entirety of culture can tend towards generalisation. To adopt a more specific approach, however, can lead to exclusion, making it less relevant to certain parts of the cultural sector. To be inclusive, this strategy leans more on the general than the specific. It aims to set a clear strategic direction that benefits as many individuals, organisations and partners as possible.

The Value of Culture

Culture has always played a role in enhancing people's lives and the places in which they live. Some of this value is tangible. It can be clearly counted and measured. Other value is intangible. Whilst harder to quantify, it is equally meaningful.

Tangible value

There is a wealth of research nationally and globally on the tangible value and impact of culture, both socially and economically. The following links provide a good overview of some of this research:

- Arts Council England, [The Value of Arts & Culture to People and Society](#)
- Historic England, [Understanding the Social Value of Heritage](#)
- The Resurgence Trust, [Nature and Culture](#)
- UK Government, [Creative Industries Sector Plan](#)
- OECD, [Economic and social impact of cultural and creative sectors](#)

Social

Culture helps bring society together, creating communities of place and communities of interest. It fosters greater belonging. It can make places more attractive to live in or visit, and combat antisocial behaviour. It can enable people to lead happier and healthier lives, increase our capacity to learn and empower us to be more active and responsible citizens. Culture can enhance our connection to place, making us more considered custodians of both the natural and human-made world.

Economic

Culture plays a role in driving economic development. Directly, it creates products for consumption and employment for those who create or enable this production. Indirectly, culture brings people to places who tend to spend on activities related to their cultural experience. Culture can teach new skills and raise aspiration. When culture is made locally, it can create a more inclusive economic ecosystem with wealth benefitting citizens in places where culture is made rather than generating profits that leave the community.

Intangible value

The cultural sector also creates value that is harder to measure but that which is recognised as being beneficial to us both individually and collectively. The following links give a taste of some recent thinking in this area:

- UKRI/AHRC, [Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture](#)
- Hasan Bakhshi, Alan Freeman and Graham Hitchen, [Measuring Intrinsic Value](#)
- UNESCO, [Intangible Cultural Heritage](#)

Soulful

Culture makes life worth living, creating joyful experiences that enrich our lives. It connects us to ourselves, often through showing us the experience of others and developing empathy. It helps us to better understand who we are and what we value. At its most profound, culture helps us to make sense of our place in the world or in the universe. It can help deepen our sense of self and renew our sense of purpose.

Historic

Often culture is about the present, experiences that happen in a moment within our lives. But culture is also about carrying and preserving things through generations of human existence and even pre-existence. There's a purpose in caring for things not just of value to our own times, but for all time. This collective memory, whether through objects, stories or traditions, deepens our connection to human society through the ages and to the world in which we've always lived.

Local context

People

Dorset is home to 385,000 people in 170,000 households. It has one of the oldest demographics in the UK – 30% are over 65 (19% nationally) and the average age is 51 (40 nationally). Dorset has an old age dependency ratio of 537 (vs. 297 nationally), meaning there are 537 people aged 65+ for every 1,000 working-age adults.

94% of people in Dorset are White British (74% nationally). In line with national averages, 17.5% live with a disability. 80% of working age people are in employment (75% nationally). 15% of working age people are self-employed (13% nationally).

There are six Lower-layer Super Output Areas in lowest (most deprived) decile of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. This represents 11,500 people (3% of the population). Five of these are in Weymouth, one in Portland.

Dorset welcomes almost 13 million visitors to Dorset every year, with total visitor spend of £924 million. Tourism is highly seasonal with 51% of visits taking place between June-September.

Geography

Dorset is predominantly rural. There are 152 persons per square mile (a fifth of national average). 53% of Dorset is an accredited National Landscape. It is home to England's only natural UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Jurassic Coast. Dorset has 17 towns and over 300 villages. The largest town, Weymouth, is home to 53,000 people whilst the smaller, Beaminster, has just over 3,000.

As with other rural areas, Dorset is comparatively less well-served by public transport than urban areas, particularly in the north. Two train lines connect to London but connectivity within Dorset is a challenge with people reliant on cars.

Governance

Dorset Council is a unitary authority formed in 2019 from a merging of five Districts and the County Council. There are 17 Town Councils and 278 Parish Councils. Dorset is part of the proposed Wessex devolution partnership with Somerset, Wiltshire, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Councils.

Dorset's Cultural Sector

There's a high level of engagement with culture in Dorset. 93% of residents engage with the arts, 78% visit a heritage site, 45% visit a museum or gallery and 26% visit a public library. 79% of people use a car to travel to cultural experiences.

There are 660 arts, entertainment and recreation businesses in Dorset. The cultural sector employs 4,200 people (2,900 in creative, arts and entertainment; 1,300 in libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities). Nationally, 28% of people working in creative industries are freelance – it is likely to be higher in Dorset due to the size of cultural organisations.

There are 32 museums in Dorset, 24 of which have Arts Council England accreditation. There are 22 National Trust and 12 English Heritage sites. Most towns in Dorset have a theatre, arts centres or public building that hosts live performance. There are over 25 public and private exhibition spaces across Dorset, including galleries in museums and arts centres. Dorset Art Weeks features 250 studios and galleries.

Dorset also celebrates performance in non-culture-specific spaces. There are 115 village halls with a mixed community and professional programme. Dorset has 385 pubs, many of which hold cultural events. Performances and public art also take place in temporary spaces – in town squares, village greens, gardens and large-scale festival sites. Each summer, Dorset welcomes over 100,000 visitors for music festivals. The community sector is strong, with radio stations, amateur dramatics and community choirs.

Dorset is a location for national and international film production with the Dorset Film Office managing licences for filming on the Dorset Council land and liaising with film companies.

Some elements of the cultural sector are supported directly with public funding. Dorset Council provides revenue funding totalling £486,000 to 28 organisations and awards additional funding to around 20-30 projects a year. Arts Council England is the largest single funder of culture in Dorset providing £4m in 2024-25 in regular funding (to six National Portfolio Organisations), project grants and strategic funds. The National Lottery Heritage Fund is the second largest single funder of culture, awarding £1.2m in 2024-25 to 9 projects. Most Town Councils and some Parish Councils provide funding for culture through a combination of project and regular funding.

There are 31 libraries in Dorset, of which 23 are run directly by Dorset Council with the remaining 8 run by the community. Libraries are community cultural hubs that play a

key role in supporting children and young people's cultural engagement supporting Dorset Council's Best Start in Life strategy, Creative Health – including social prescribing – and digital inclusion.

Dorset's archives are managed by Dorset History Centre and contain 1,000 years of historical records. Dorset's archaeology is the most significant in the region. As the depository for the county, Dorset Museum and Art Gallery holds over 3 million objects, making up 70% of its collection.

Dorset's cultural sector provides opportunities for volunteering. The 28 revenue-funded organisations in Dorset alone work with 1,377 volunteers who contributed a combined 84,288 hours a year.

Despite being a distinct local authority area, many artists and organisations based in the Dorset Council area work in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) and vice versa. Creatives benefit from opportunities on both sides of the border. Audiences also travel from one to the other. BCP is home to larger venues such as Poole Lighthouse which includes a 1500-capacity Concert Hall and the Bournemouth International Centre which can host up to 10,000 people.

Similarly, creatives and producers at the edge of the Dorset Council area often work beyond the borders, with Southampton, Salisbury, Yeovil and Exeter, in particular, providing cultural opportunities.

The cultural sector overlaps with many other parts of society, particularly health and education. Across Dorset and BCP, a joint Creative Health strategy has been developed with partners in health to increase the use and impact of cultural activity that improves health and wellbeing. Culture plays a key role in the development of young people. Many of Dorset's schools and colleges have excellent cultural facilities, some of which are used by professionals and community groups as well as students. Further education institution Coastland College specialises in courses for the cultural and creative industries, whilst Arts University Bournemouth (based in BCP) has a global reputation for its creative courses.

The cultural sector is supported by various regional and national sector-specific bodies covering museums, libraries, visual art, live music, outdoor arts and theatre. In Dorset, the museums are supported by South West Museum Development with a dedicated officer for the county of Dorset. Arts Development Company provides support to the rest of the sector, providing bespoke advice and training.

The cultural sector in one image

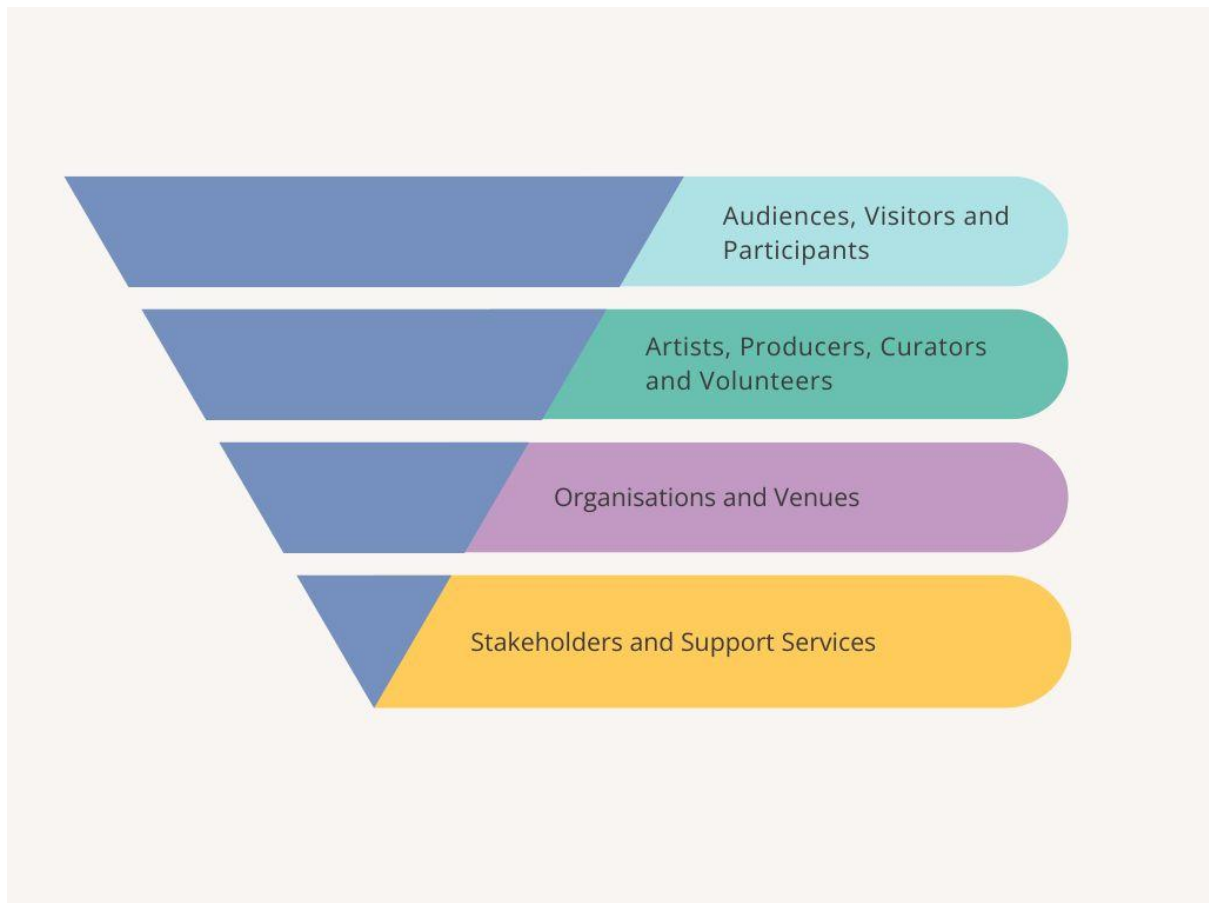
The purpose of the cultural sector is to serve audiences, visitors and participants.

The principal enablers of this are artists, producers and curators – those who make, curate or produce the work that people consume or take part in.

Enabling the work of artists, producers and curators are organisations and venues – creating programmes, attracting funding and providing space.

Beyond that are stakeholders and support services, developing the work of the sector and linking it to other parts of society.

For a healthy cultural sector, each parts of the system needs to be well-resourced, well-connected, and working collaboratively and strategically.



Cultural priorities

Priorities

For the next five years, the priorities of Dorset's Cultural sector are:

- Vibrant Places
- Healthy Communities
- Economic Development
- Environmental Action

These align with Dorset Council's Plan (2024-29) as follows:

- Vibrant Places – Housing Development
 - *With new houses being built, there needs to be cultural activity for the increased population*
- Healthy Communities – Communities for All
 - *Dorset's culture needs to reach everyone in society*
- Economic Development – Economy
 - *Culture is a key part of enabling economic growth that benefits all citizens*
- Environmental Action – Climate Crisis
 - *The cultural sector is uniquely placed to communicate to the public, changing behaviour in relation to climate crisis*

Outcomes

Each priority has an overarching ambition developed through wide consultation.

From this, a **single measurable outcome** has been selected for each priority. This is the key area of focus for each priority.

This outcome is set for the full five years of the strategy.

Measures

The outcomes will be **measured in three ways**. The intention is to both have a collective way of understanding impact and to reduce the reporting burden on cultural organisations.

The first measure is to use broad national or cross-sector data. This is data that is already being monitored by other organisations and which will be used to understand large-scale change.

The second measure will collect information from Dorset's cultural organisations. Whilst this will be mandatory for those in receipt of funding from Dorset Council, it is hoped that other organisations will provide this information to create a bigger picture of impact.

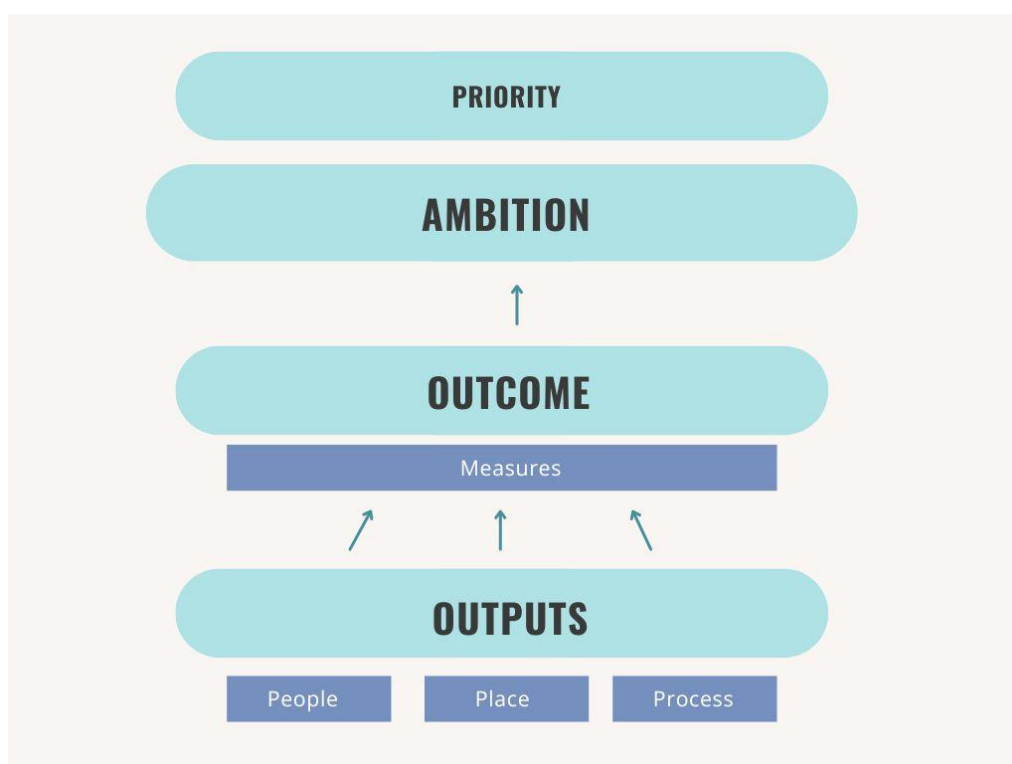
Both the first and second measure will be collected and analysed annually to assess trends.

The third measure is to gather bespoke and long-term evaluation from partners working in a particular area. Here, the approach will be to be flexible and proportionate to the scale of the organisation and the work taking place. This measure will give more flavour and depth to understanding impact than raw numbers.

Outputs

Three outputs have also been selected for each priority: one for **people**, one for **place**, one for **process**.

These will be reviewed annually and will change and grow as the strategy becomes embedded. These will be set through the central governance hub (see Appendix 2).



Universal Themes

Alongside the four priorities there are several universal themes that cut across all priority areas. These universal themes inform the outputs of each priority area.

Children and Young People

From early years engagement to professional training, Dorset will value cultural experience for children and young people. Opportunities for youth-focused and intergenerational activity will be encouraged. Culture will support Dorset Council's Best Start in Life strategy. Culture will be better embedded in education – through schools, informal learning, and community-based opportunities. Schools will be better connected to cultural providers, including promoting careers in the sector. Voices of young people will be heard and inform place-based cultural development.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Building on strong foundations, Dorset will champion equity, diversity and inclusion. Cultural organisations will work with people in deprived communities and those with protected characteristics. Cultural activity will be programmed to appeal to a wide range of people. Physical access to venues will be improved. The sector will communicate its offer to include diverse audiences and visitors. The sector will be trained to understand how best to work with marginalised people and communities. Those working in the sector will be paid appropriately including for time developing projects.

Quality and Ambition

Whilst subjective, aspiration for excellence is a characteristic of the cultural sector. The sector will strive for a high level of artistic ambition, with venues and festivals programming work of quality and skill. Whilst celebrating everyday cultural activity, the sector will also recognise the value of training in professional practice. Organisations will develop projects and initiatives on a scale that reaches people beyond those who traditionally engage. Work developed in Dorset will be shared nationally and internationally.

Collaboration

The sector will be encouraged to work together and with partners in other sectors to deliver projects. Joint training opportunities will be celebrated. Dorset's cultural activity will be jointly communicated and cross-promotion welcomed. Organisations will look to share resources where appropriate, to have the greatest impact for audiences and visitors. Formal and informal opportunities for networking will be developed and sustained. A central cultural hub will support the sector, enable and broker relationships with broader strategies in Dorset and create the conditions for ongoing partnership and collaboration.

Priority: Vibrant Places

Why

A rural area, Dorset is made up of small towns, villages and hamlets. Culture is an important part of the identity of these places. People engage in a cultural offer on their doorstep. It is a vital part of civic life.

Some towns and villages have strong cultural offers, others less so. For some the cultural offer is prominent and established; in others, it's beneath the surface, emerging and searching for a platform or an audience.

There's a need to sustain the existing offer in some places and an opportunity to grow the offer in others. In doing this, more people will have access to a cultural offer that is strong, varied and profound.

Spaces for cultural activity need developing and maintaining. Hundreds of dedicated cultural venues are vital to Dorset's cultural sector. These need care and attention to continue to provide a quality welcome for visitors and audiences. Similarly, Dorset's strong festival offer provides activity for many Dorset residents. This needs to be supported and maintained.

With a growth in population in Dorset, some places would benefit from new cultural venues to meet demand. New housing developments provide an opportunity for increased cultural provision.

Collaboration in place is strong in Dorset. Initiatives like Dorset's Towns of Culture have given focus to partnership working across cultural, civic, community and business sectors.

Where We Are Now

Dorset's cultural landscape is rooted in its distinct local identities — from rural trades and dialects to traditional games, crafts, and community heritage. Culture acts as a powerful connector to place, with artist residencies, festivals and public art.

There are 660 arts, entertainment and recreation businesses in Dorset. Over 100,000 people attend music festivals in Dorset and 536,000 people attend Dorset Council's core funded cultural organisations.

However, access remains uneven. Rural isolation, limited transport, and fragmented marketing restrict participation, particularly in North Dorset. Many venues and community spaces are underused or inaccessible, and while there is great pride in Dorset's natural and cultural assets, opportunities to celebrate and share them remain inconsistent.

Ambition

Dorset will be recognised as a place where culture thrives in every community — locally rooted, accessible, and sustainable. A county that makes more of what it has, using existing venues, landscapes, and stories to create authentic, high-quality cultural experiences. Local distinctiveness will be celebrated, recognising that no two places are alike.

Due to the relative size of organisations, Dorset’s cultural sector has a long history of collaboration. There is potential to build on this with increased working on joined-up marketing and coordinated programming – and for cross-sector collaboration, particularly with businesses, civic and community groups.

Empty buildings can be repurposed as creative hubs, flagship festivals expanded with local relevance, and every child having access to cultural experiences. Existing cultural infrastructure will be protected and enhanced, ensuring they’re fit for the future.

By embedding culture in everyday places — pubs, schools, youth clubs, and village halls — Dorset will balance cultural ambition with inclusivity, celebrating its dreamy places while ensuring they remain vibrant, connected, and meaningful for everyone.

Outcome: More people taking part in cultural activity

Measures

1. Engagement in culture, Participation Survey, Department of Culture, Media and Sport
2. Number of people attending cultural organisations, annual reporting of cultural organisations
3. Evaluations of activity in specific places, working with Dorset’s Town Councils and place-based cultural organisations

Outputs (26-27)

People: More events in targeted places

Supporting and enabling cultural activity with a focus on towns with fewer events per person

Place: Place-based partnerships

Encouraging joint working between cultural, community, civic, business and educational organisations to increase ambition and reach more people

Process: Councils have plans for culture

In order to achieve this, Town Councils will be supported to recognise the economic and social benefits of referring to ambitions for culture in their wider plans or in a specific cultural plan or strategy

Case Study

b-side are a locally loved and internationally recognised arts organisation based on the Isle of Portland.

They deliver the annual b-side Festival: a four-day September festival of new art created in collaboration between artists and communities and installed across public spaces all over the island. From projections onto lighthouses, to sound works in quarries, to parades along high streets, their work sits at the meeting point of people and place — creating vibrant places and happy, healthy communities.

Their festival home is BnB-side, a bed-and-breakfast on Portland. It hosts artists, researchers, curators, producers, and visitors who all want to contribute to a positive future for the island. From BnB-side they also run a year-round, community-driven programme — from Community Cafés and LGBT+side meet-ups, to print workshops and open creative sessions. Everyone is welcome.

In 2025, b-side coordinated Portland and Weymouth Towns of Culture 2025, supporting a major step-change in cultural participation and collaboration across the area.

They worked with a steering group of twelve partners spanning the cultural, business, social, civic and heritage sectors. Together, they delivered two open calls across Portland and Weymouth, an emerging Producers programme, supported a youth-led Culture Passport, and a new online Culture Listings platform.

Across the year this activity supported the delivery of over 200 cultural events and activities, attended by more than 14,000 people, activating high streets, heritage sites, parks, gardens, beaches and community spaces — and reaching audiences who do not usually see themselves as “cultural makers or participants”.

“It’s made the park feel brighter, safer, and full of life.”

Participant

There has been a clear step-change locally.

Local authorities and businesses are increasingly recognising the role a vibrant cultural sector plays in place-making, wellbeing, pride and economic resilience. At the same time, there has been a growing appetite across the cultural sector to work collaboratively — particularly to create ambitious activity outside the summer season, and to build year-round cultural infrastructure that better supports artists, audiences and communities.

As a direct result of Towns of Culture 2025:

- A committed group of partners are now actively exploring opportunities to occupy or develop new cultural infrastructure in Weymouth.
- National partners, including Arts Council England, are engaged and paying attention to the work happening here.
- Hundreds of artists, community organisers and residents have been newly activated — ready to continue creating culture that tells the story of the towns in their own voices.

“This has given us the confidence to do something bigger — and to do it together.”

Participant

Priority: Healthy Communities

Why

Culture is fundamental to wellbeing and community cohesion, preventing ill health, aiding rehabilitation and contributing to a healthy society.

Dorset is a large rural area. It takes time to get from one side to the other. Consequently, the pace of life in Dorset is slower and this can tend towards people placing greater value in the things that make life worth living – of which culture is near the top of many people's lists.

Dorset also has an ageing population, with over a third of people being over 65 by 2033. With increasing age comes an increasing need for services to support living well. Cultural activity demonstrably reduces the risk of developing dementia as well as reducing anxiety, depression and apathy for those with the condition.

Creative Health activity also has an impact on mental health. Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are under significant pressure. There's an opportunity for culture to play a role in supporting mental health in young people. Meanwhile, loneliness can be exacerbated in rural areas due to limited public transport and size of communities.

Volunteering plays an important role in many people's lives, giving purpose, developing new skills and making friendships. The cultural sector has a long history of providing volunteering opportunities in venues and at events.

Community groups gather around culture. Community radio stations, choirs, art and book groups, drama clubs and history societies play a vital role in the lives of many people in Dorset.

Culture plays a role in creating a more cohesive society. Bringing people together, fostering connection and showing different lived experiences can combat some of the increasing polarisation seen in society since the prevalence of social media.

Where We Are Now

Dorset has a strong network of cultural opportunities that improve wellbeing. The universal offer – choirs, art groups, drama clubs, community radio – is particularly strong. Volunteering plays a key role, both for cultural organisations and the volunteers themselves making connections and contributing to their community.

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme provides cultural activities in school holidays for children eligible for free-school meals. In Dorset, this programme works with a large range of cultural organisations and individual practitioners to deliver activity. The Artz+ Spotz+ programme provides cultural activities for children aged 5-18 with a disability. These two programmes work closely together.

The targeted offer for those with diagnosed health conditions is strong in some places but not universally available. It is also short-term relying on project funding. Partnership with the health sector is now well-established with shared ambition through a joint Creative Health Strategy.

As with much of the country, there is a sense of an increasingly polarised society which can sometimes manifest as hostility to difference. Dorset's cultural sector has a rich history in providing welcoming spaces, celebrating diversity and bringing people together for shared experiences.

Ambition

Culture in Dorset will be embedded within everyday life, building healthier, more inclusive communities. There will be a broader definition of culture that embraces community-led activity and a stronger focus on participation.

The sector will share principles around accessibility, inclusivity, and equality delivering "warm welcome" practices and relaxed performances.

The sector will strengthen partnerships with health, particularly with social prescribers and Primary Care Networks. Creative Health will be a business-as-usual choice, universally available across Dorset. Consequently, care will be closer to home, echoing national ambitions.

Cultural organisations will be supported to deliver targeted activity to connect people and reduce isolation and anxiety, working towards reducing the gap in happy life expectancy. Those working in Creative Health will be able to receive specialist training, with those in health working to support the work of cultural organisations.

Children will have access to creative opportunities in and outside schools. Everyone will be able to take part in cultural activity, benefitting wellbeing and improving social outcomes.

The culture sector will champion inclusive practice, both in its creation and participation. More of the cultural activity in Dorset will be inclusive for audiences and visitors.

Outcome: Improvement in lives of people impacted by poor mental health and loneliness

Measures

1. Mental Health Needs Assessment, Public Health, Dorset Council; and NHS Dorset/NHS Wessex

2. Changes in health due to activity, annual survey of participants and volunteers in cultural organisations
3. Evaluation of Creative Health projects

Outputs (26-27)

People: Volunteer programme for cultural organisations

Joint recruitment and training for volunteers for cultural organisations including libraries, particularly focusing on marginalised people and supporting those with poor mental health

Place: Creative Health projects with targeted or marginalised communities

Working with Integrated Neighbourhood Teams to use culture to improve health outcomes – particularly focusing on the Core20Plus5 approach to reducing health inequalities – working with primary care, social prescribers and community partners

Process: Resource for strategic development of Creative Health

Positioning Dorset to secure long-term investment in development of Creative Health sector, including workforce development, research and public communications

Case Study

Babigloo is a non-verbal approach to music making for babies and their parents/carers. They create a multi-sensory environment which encourages listening, communication and playfulness between babies and their parents/carers using live and recorded music, sound, movement, gesture, visual and tactile materials, babies' vocalisations and non-verbal communication.

Babigloo music making sessions last around 45 minutes, balancing structured activities which build on babies' sensory perceptions, with spontaneous vocal and non-verbal interaction with the babies. Each session is led by two music leaders working together and some sessions also have a visiting musician to enhance families' experience of live music and instruments. Each Babigloo programme involves a series of weekly sessions for up to ten babies and their parents/carers. They develop families' enjoyment of music making and enhance parent-child communication, thereby contributing to families' wellbeing.

"The work you do is absolutely wonderful and having had the opportunity to watch your sessions I would recommend your sessions to all parents/carers and their babies".

Family Hub Manager

Having established a successful working model in East Dorset from 2018 and West Dorset and Purbeck from 2023, Babigloo expanded across the county from 2024 in collaboration with the newly created Family Hub Network.

From this, Babigloo delivered sessions at Shaftesbury Arts Centre (with funding from Youth Music) and at Shaftesbury Children's Centre/Family Hub and The Vale Parlour Family Hub Sturminster Newton (with funding from the Local Alliance Group).

In 2024-25, Babigloo expanded their reach by 300% from 94 to 380 families. In total, their targeted work engaged 375 children and 446 adults.

"We have absolutely loved Babigloo, it has truly been a treasured bonding time for the two of us, a space for calm, joy and such incredible learning – you can almost see their brains making new connections!"

Participating Parent

Priority: Economic Development

Why

Economic growth is a key government objective both locally and nationally. By increasing and distributing wealth, people will have greater opportunities and are able to lead more fulfilling lives. Low social mobility is particularly acute in South Dorset, leading to physical, mental and social challenges that can be lifelong.

Culture plays a role in generating economic growth. The sector creates paid opportunities, both for creatives and for those working to enable cultural activity. It is a great sector in which to start and grow a business. Since 2010, the Creative Industries nationally have grown by more than 50% (against a UK average of 21.5%). In the Great South West region, Creative Industries generate 2.7bn in Gross Value Added (GVA) annually.

Culture boosts tourism. Nationally, heritage-led tourism alone generates £16bn from domestic and £12.5bn from international tourists per year. In Dorset, tourism overall generates £945m for the local economy. Yet the offer is seasonal. Culture attracts people to Dorset in the darker months of the year, creating more year-round employment opportunities.

Culture-led economic regeneration has been effective across the UK. As well as providing jobs and opportunities for people to experience culture, capital projects and festivals can change perceptions of place. At their best, they raise aspiration and ambition, supporting development of new skills and creating new employment.

Artificial Intelligence is growing in value and use. Whilst recognising the tension with human creativity, there is an opportunity for the cultural sector to responsibly use new technology to increase access and reach of their work.

Where We Are Now

Dorset is home to 660 arts, entertainment and recreation businesses. Dorset's cultural sector provides employment for 4,200 people (19% higher per worker than UK average), from entry-level to leadership.

There are opportunities for economic regeneration in Dorset's market towns and Weymouth, Portland and Chickereil linked to Dorset Council's economic growth strategy.

Dorset has four Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Dorchester, Ferndown & Uddens, Weymouth and Wimborne. Dorset Chamber works pan-Dorset alongside local chambers in some Dorset towns.

Visit Dorset has Local Visitor Economy Partnership accreditation, leading the strategic development of tourism. Whilst there is good evidence of the impact of tourism overall

to Dorset and anecdotal evidence of the value of the cultural sector to this, there remains an opportunity to add evidence of the direct and indirect benefit of cultural tourism to the economy of Dorset, particularly outside the peak season.

Ambition

Culture drives economic development, innovation and opportunity across Dorset. The sector will be recognised by policy makers as a key contributor to economic growth with strong integration between sectors, linking Dorset's cultural assets, landscapes, and visitor economy to attract investment and promote sustainable local growth. Collaboration between business, culture and community will be enhanced.

The sector will work collaboratively to unlock new investment in activity and capital. National funders will contribute equitably to Dorset's cultural sector. Creative industries will be supported to grow and relocate to Dorset.

The film sector will be supported to grow both attracting more national and global companies to film in Dorset and enabling homegrown companies to start-up and expand. Festivals and small-scale creative enterprises will flourish, boosting economic growth across Dorset.

Working with tourism, culture will be used to attract more visitors to Dorset, particularly in the shoulder-months, creating more year-round employment opportunities.

Working with educational organisations such as Arts University Bournemouth and employment schemes through the Department for Work and Pensions, there will be an increase in employment opportunities with centralised schemes for apprenticeships, internships, and work experience to retain young talent.

Bespoke business development and training opportunities will be available for the smaller organisations and sole traders alongside networking. Barriers to work, such as low pay, insecure conditions and limited progression, will be reduced.

New technologies will be adopted by the sector in an ethical way, valuing artistic creativity whilst enabling cultural organisations to grow and culture to reach more people.

Outcome: Economic impact of cultural sector increased

Measures

1. Number and size of creative businesses, Companies House annual return
2. Economic Impact Calculator, Event Impacts, annual reporting of cultural organisations
3. Evaluation of organisations undergoing period of growth or development

Outputs (26-27)

People: Development programme for individuals and organisations

Using examples from across the cultural sector including inspiration from organisations within Dorset, support the diversification of income and commercialisation of cultural organisations and individuals, including investment opportunities for research and development of new products.

Place: Identify capital infrastructure needs for each town in Dorset

In some places, maintaining existing infrastructure, in others creating new places for cultural activity. This will usually be buildings but could be wider public realm. These will be aligned to wider economic development plans.

Process: Promotion of cultural tourism

With the tourism sector, position Dorset as a cultural destination attracting more visitors particularly in the off-season.

Case Study

The Tank Museum, based in Bovington, Dorset, is one of the world's leading military history museums, housing a remarkable collection of armoured vehicles that spans more than a century. As a registered charity, their mission is to preserve and share the history of tanks and the people who built and operated them, through exhibitions, public events, and education.

Like many cultural institutions, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 presented a significant challenge. Like all cultural institutions, physical closure meant immediate loss of ticket revenue and a risk to long-term sustainability. In response, they reacted rapidly to expand their digital presence, utilising social media as a new frontline for engagement, fundraising, and community building. The project was time-limited in its initial urgency, with the 2020 lockdown acting as a key driver for creativity and innovation.

Building on their early YouTube channel and social platforms, they focused on producing consistent, high-quality content—from “Tank Chats” to live streams and specialist features—designed to appeal to global audiences. This digital strategy was supported by diversified revenue streams including YouTube advertising, Patreon memberships, corporate sponsorships, and a revamped e-commerce arm.

The results were transformative. Digital engagement became a major contributor to income, with over £2 million generated from non-visitors in 2023, significantly enhancing financial resilience. Online visibility (now 1.3m YouTube subscribers) also bolstered physical visits; annual visitors increased by around 70,000, peaking at over 220,000 in 2023, a 17% rise linked to global awareness created by digital channels.

Staff growth mirrored this success, with the team expanding by 15–20 roles, particularly in digital production, marketing, and e-commerce but also enabling them to grow their museum function capabilities as well—creating new employment opportunities within Dorset’s cultural economy. Financial sustainability improved markedly through diversified income and strengthened annual turnover.

“Our online success has opened new avenues for engagement and income, securing our future and allowing us to bring the story of tanks to audiences worldwide while supporting sustainable cultural growth here in Dorset.”

Chris Price, CEO, The Tank Museum

Priority: Environmental Action

Why

Dorset's unique landscape is of great cultural significance. Its coastline, heathlands, chalk downs and rich biodiversity shape the county's identity and how people live, work and connect with places. But this natural abundance is under pressure. Dorset is already experiencing the impacts of climate change, rising sea levels, more frequent flooding and increasingly extreme weather, all of which threaten communities, habitats, infrastructure and the county's long-term resilience.

The climate and ecological crisis is global, but its effects are felt locally. Agriculture, transport, homes and commercial buildings are Dorset's main sources of carbon emissions, demanding coordinated action across communities, organisations and the business sector. Meanwhile, despite having the highest proportion of protected National Landscape in England, Dorset has still seen the declines in biodiversity reflected across the UK.

Culture has a unique role in this challenge. Artists, museums, festivals and creative organisations can translate data into stories, helping people understand what environmental change means for their lives and inspiring practical action. Cultural activity can bring people together to celebrate Dorset's landscapes, and influence behaviour in ways that reduce carbon emissions and support nature recovery.

Dorset Council's commitment to becoming carbon-neutral by 2050 creates a clear direction of travel. The cultural sector is already contributing, from greener festivals and energy-efficient upgrades to creative projects that champion biodiversity. However, many organisations still need support to adapt buildings, shift practices and respond confidently to the environmental challenges ahead.

There is an opportunity for culture to help shape a greener future for Dorset, modelling sustainable choices, using creativity to deepen local connection to nature, and working with environmental partners to drive meaningful, community-led change. The cultural sector is particularly well-placed to lead or support non-political campaigns that communicate stories of change to the public that enable and empower.

Where We Are Now

Low Carbon Dorset has invested £5 million in low-carbon measures across the county, supporting a wide range of organisations to reduce their environmental footprint, including museums, archives and Town Council venues.

Many cultural organisations have signed up to the national Culture Declares Emergency which began in 2019. Cultural organisations are also making changes; festivals are encouraging greener travel, productions are re-using and recycling materials, and museums are enhancing biodiversity by planting trees in their grounds.

Dorset National Landscape is recognised as a leader in working with the cultural sector to engage more people in the natural world.

Ambition

Dorset will be recognised as a national leader in community-driven climate and ecological action, with culture at the heart of how people understand, respond to and prepare for environmental change.

Environmental thinking will be embedded across all cultural programmes, from energy use to the stories told on stage, in exhibitions and through community projects. Artists and organisations will create work that is inspired by the local landscape, celebrates nature recovery and helps audiences shift behaviour in tangible ways.

Cultural organisations will connect with environmental partners, enabling collaborative projects, artist residencies and shared approaches to communication and public engagement.

Cultural venues will reduce carbon emissions within their own buildings and influence visitor behaviour, particularly around travel. Organisations will adopt environmentally responsible supply chains, ethical finance, and low-carbon digital solutions. The sector will work together to prepare for flooding, storms and heatwaves, strengthening Dorset's climate resilience.

Creative activity will support nature recovery by building people's connection to the landscapes around them, sharing biodiversity through storytelling, folklore, local species, and creative activity.

Communities will be supported to take small, visible actions that add up to meaningful change, from recycling and reuse networks for the arts to cultural initiatives aligned with Dorset's Nature Recovery Strategy.

Outcome: Biodiversity within Dorset increased

Measures

1. Increase in biodiversity, Nature Recovery Strategy, Dorset Council
2. Attendance and number of events promoting sustainability, annual reporting of cultural organisations
3. Evaluation of cultural environmental projects

Outputs (26-27)

People: Deliver training for cultural sector

Supporting cultural organisations to reduce carbon emissions, strengthen climate resilience across their venues and explore practical ways to increase biodiversity. The programme will also address how emerging technologies, including AI, contribute to the climate crisis and how the sector can use them responsibly.

Place: Coordinate cross-sector projects that change behaviour

Site specific partnerships between culture and environment that encourage sustainable behaviours and build local engagement with nature recovery.

Process: Align cultural initiatives with environmental sector objectives

Ensure cultural activity is aligned with countywide environmental priorities by improving data sharing and strengthening coordination between cultural and environmental partners

Case Study

Activate Performing Arts is a Dorset charity that has been producing transformational programmes for 35 years, celebrating Dorset and promoting our landscape and sense of place.

Their specialism in working in protected landscapes has developed through a partnership with Dorset National Landscape. They work with land stewards across England with the National Landscapes Association and in Europe with partners in France, Netherlands and Slovakia as part of their LAND project (Land Stewards and Artists).

At the heart of what Activate do is a belief that performing arts should be accessible for all – no matter what your experience or background. This passion is shared by Dorset National Landscape who recognise that not everyone is accessing our landscapes. They both believe that people are more likely to take environmental action if they care, and if they have urgency to take action.

Culminating in 2025, Activate led the national project, Nature Calling, with the National Landscapes Association. Its aim was to inspire and connect new and existing communities with National Landscapes across England, increasing people's access to nature, improve their wellbeing and inspire a sense of belonging in these special places. Six major arts projects across England were commissioned.

In Dorset, Activate worked with Dorset National Landscape who commissioned a new piece – *This Patch of Land*. They also produced the major artistic commission *Consequences* working with a range of community groups to create a new Giant in the landscape.

The artwork was unveiled in two locations across Dorset: Cerne Abbas and Corfe Castle. Over 200 people helped create the new Giant, it reached live audiences of over 27,000 and an online audience of 64,000 and has been featured in The Guardian and BBC News.

Case For Investment

To realise this strategy requires investment. The sector needs to both maintain existing sources of income and to secure new income.

Dorset Council is a funder both of core revenue for cultural organisations and of cultural projects. It also provides funding for services that support Dorset's cultural sector. By aligning with Dorset Council's wider strategic priorities, this strategy positions the sector to continue to receive valuable investment from the local authority.

Town and Parish Councils are increasingly supporting cultural activity in Dorset. The opportunity to make a difference to the lives of residents in Dorset's towns and villages is greatly enhanced by targeted cultural activity. By identifying capital needs in each town, this strategy helps to secure investment to enable new spaces for culture and improvements in existing venues, whether through national funding, Public Works Loans, developers' contributions or philanthropy.

This strategy also enables Dorset's cultural sector to work collaboratively to secure increased national funding for strategic initiatives. Be this in health, growth, place or environment, there is an opportunity to work collectively to make a long-term difference to the lives of people in Dorset.

Culture in Dorset creates great opportunities for businesses and philanthropists to provide resource. With a large number of high-net-worth-individuals and proudly local business community, the sector is in a strong position to deliver impactful and high-profile projects. Similarly, revenue from a future tourism levy would be well-targeted at a cultural sector that attracts visitors to Dorset in the shoulder months, growing Dorset's year-round economy.

By aligning with wider areas of society – particularly health and environment – the cultural sector is well-placed to work in collaboration on strategic projects that have impact for people and each sector. There's an opportunity to be ambitious in these areas, using culture to make a step-change in people's behaviours.

Finally, supporting the sector to grow will lead to increased earned income for cultural organisations, employing more people and contributing to the overall economic health of Dorset. Through this, it will enable positive social development, making Dorset a fantastic place in which to live, work, grow up and grow old.