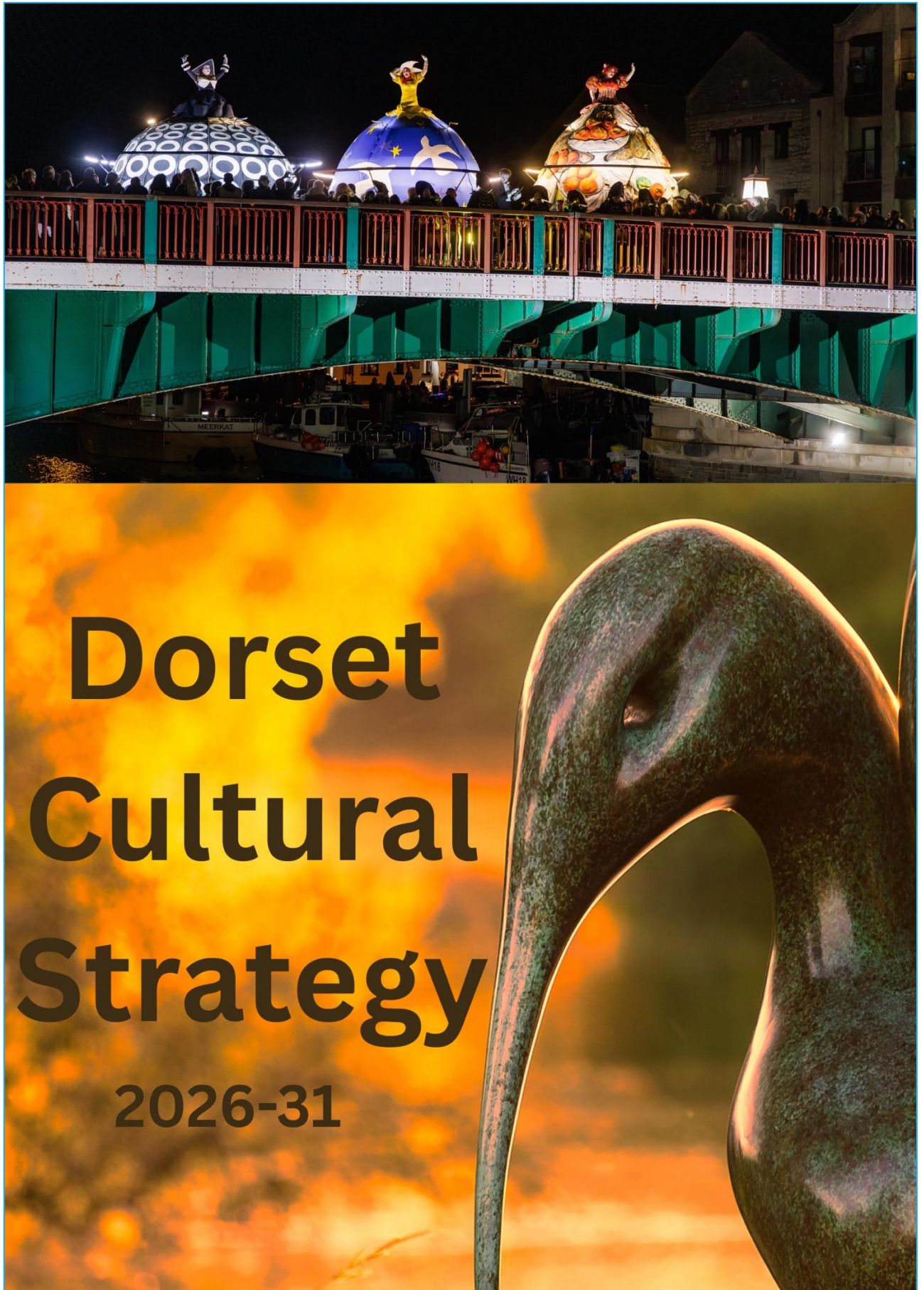




Dorset Cultural Strategy

2026-31

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.

It 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



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?

For this strategy, culture roughly divides into two parts: arts and heritage.



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.

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.

Local context of Dorset

Residents

- 385,000 people in 170,000 households
- 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)
- 94% of people in Dorset are White British (74% nationally)
- 17.5% live with a disability (in line with national average)
- 80% of working age people are in employment (75% nationally); 15% of working age people are self-employed (13% nationally)
- 11,500 people (3% of the population) live in the most deprived decile in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation

Visitors

- 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

- Predominantly rural – there are 152 persons per square mile (a fifth of national average).
- 53% of Dorset is an accredited National Landscape
- 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.



Dorset's Cultural Sector

93% of people engage with the arts, 78% visit a heritage site, 45% visit a museum or gallery and 26% visit a public library.

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).

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.

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 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**.

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, 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 change public behaviour*



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

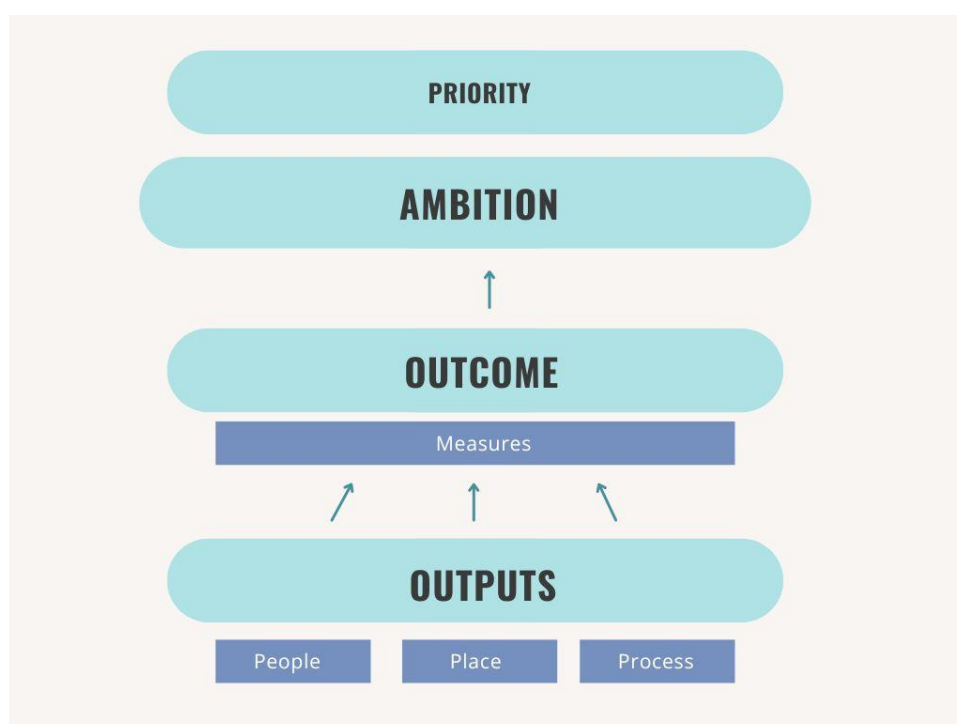
The outcomes will be **measured in three ways**:

1. National or cross-sector data
2. Information from Dorset's cultural organisations
3. Bespoke and long-term evaluation

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.



Universal Themes

Alongside the four priorities there are several universal themes that cut across all priority areas.

Children and Young People

From early years engagement to professional training, Dorset will value cultural experience for children and young people.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Building on strong foundations, Dorset will champion equity, diversity and inclusion.

Quality and Ambition

The sector will strive for a high level of artistic ambition, with venues and festivals programming work of quality and skill.

Collaboration

The sector will be encouraged to work together and with partners in other sectors to deliver projects.



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.

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.

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 culture in their wider plans or in a specific cultural plan or strategy

Case Study

b-side are a locally loved and internationally recognised organisation on the Isle of Portland. They deliver the annual b-side Festival: four-days new art created in collaboration between artists and communities, and installed across public spaces all over the island. From projections onto lighthouses, 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.

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 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 on ambitious activity outside the summer season, and to build year-round 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 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 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.

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.

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.

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

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.

Culture boosts tourism. 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.

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.

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.

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

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

Both maintaining existing infrastructure and creating new places for cultural activity. Usually buildings but also wider public realm; always 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.

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.

Where We Are Now

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.

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

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 agency 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.

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.

