National Cultural Data Observatory

Transforming the Cultural & Heritage Sector's Data Infrastructure

A pilot study to establish a National Cultural Data Observatory

Bradford's Ramadan Pavilion © Clare Daněk

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Authors: Ben Walmsley, Clare Daněk, Martin Zebracki, Anna Kime (University of Leeds); Patrick Towell, Sophia Woodley, Stephen Miller (The Audience Agency); Sarah Thelwall, David Kane (MyCake); Trevor MacFarlane (Culture Commons); Susan Oman (University of Sheffield); Steven Hadley (De Montfort University).

the audience agency MY CAKE CENTRE FOR CULTURAL VALUE Culture Commons UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS University of Sheffield DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER

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Executive summary

Data in and about the UK's arts, cultural and heritage (ACH) sectors are fragmented, incomplete, inconsistent and insufficiently granular. This data and evidence deficit means that the sector is often unable to evaluate and communicate its social and economic impact in ways that are compelling to policymakers, leaving it vulnerable to cuts in public funding. In addition, ACH data are currently collected, collated, managed and evaluated in a way that can separate policymaking from the people, places and local cultural ecosystems that should be at the heart of it.

To address these issues, a team led by the Centre for Cultural Value, The Audience Agency, MyCake and Culture Commons has developed a blueprint for a National Cultural Data Observatory. This R&D project was supported by ESRC and Research England funding intended "to scope and demonstrate where a significant opportunity or gap lies in the data infrastructure landscape".

Requirements for the Observatory were informed by research and policy engagement with nearly 500 sector stakeholders, as well as a deep-dive case study of how cultural engagement can be captured at scale at the city-region level, centred on Bradford UK City of Culture 2025. The project identified and evaluated the quality and feasibility of available datasets for a national Observatory, then piloted the resulting data framework in a live regional demonstrator for Bradford district.

This research has highlighted the need for an independent, federated, mixed-methods, people-centred approach to managing cultural data on a national scale. An Observatory would need a data framework to make it easier to connect and compare datasets, and a data exchange hub where users could compare and share curated data products with managed permissions, secure access and data owner protections. To make data accessible, an Observatory would also need to support users through published research, live analytical tools, and sector capacity building.

A national Observatory for the ACH sectors could provide a definitive, defensible and trusted evidence base – at unprecedented scale and granularity – both for the sector and for public policy more broadly. A people-centred approach to gathering and re-using cultural data would give local communities, cultural audiences and cultural partners a genuine voice in data generation and analysis.

Such an Observatory could offer deeper, richer and more ethical – as well as more rigorous and defensible – insights into ACH activities and their impacts. This would generate major efficiencies and transform analysis and decision-making, supporting better policy development, sector strategies and cultural management.

Going forward, our next step is to build on its foundation through new funding, partnerships, and data contributions to scale the Observatory nationally. We have met our objective of building a broad national consortium and will draw on the expertise and influence of this group to actively explore future opportunities.

Foreword

Culture is often described as difficult to measure. Its value is experienced in the shared life of communities – in creativity and expression, and in the ways participation in culture strengthens wellbeing, belonging and civic pride. Yet if culture is to be fully recognised and valued within public policy, it must also be supported by evidence that allows its contribution to people and places to be understood clearly.

Yet the evidence base that supports cultural policy remains incomplete. Data about the UK's arts, culture and heritage sectors are widely dispersed across institutions, datasets and disciplines. Valuable information exists within government departments, arm's-length bodies, local authorities, research organisations and cultural institutions, but it is rarely connected in ways that allow us to see the whole picture. The result is a fragmented evidence landscape that makes it difficult to track participation, compare places or communicate the wider social and economic contribution of culture with confidence.

This matters because cultural policy increasingly intersects with wider national priorities – from place-based growth and economic renewal to health, wellbeing and community cohesion. Policymakers and practitioners need consistent, comparable and accessible evidence that can support better decisions over time and across places.

The National Cultural Data Observatory (NCDO) project was established to explore how such an evidence infrastructure might be created. Supported by UKRI and delivered through a partnership of universities, research agencies and sector organisations, the project set out to explore how cultural datasets might be brought together to provide clearer insight into the impact of culture on people and better evidence for planning and investment.

As Chair of the Advisory Board, I have had the privilege of working with a remarkable consortium of partners and a wide community of researchers, policymakers and cultural practitioners. From the outset, the project recognised that the challenge is not simply collecting more data. In many areas significant information already exists. The task is to connect, structure and interpret that information so that it becomes meaningful for policy, practice and public understanding.

A major achievement of the project has been the development of a blueprint for a National Cultural Data Observatory and a working demonstrator that shows how this approach might operate in practice. By bringing together datasets from different sources and presenting them through accessible analytical tools, the demonstrator illustrates how cultural evidence can become more useful to those shaping policy, strategy and investment.

The Bradford case study, developed in partnership with Bradford UK City of Culture 2025, has been an especially valuable test of this approach. Bradford provided an opportunity to explore how cultural data can be assembled at city-region scale to inform cultural strategy and place-based policy.

The Bradford demonstrator shows how quantitative datasets – such as population indicators, participation data and economic measures – can be combined with qualitative insight drawn from communities and cultural organisations. This mixed-methods approach allows data to be interpreted through the lived experience of place, offering a richer understanding of how culture is created, shared and valued.

Equally important is the role that consistent data frameworks can play in supporting learning over time. When indicators are shared and comparable, it becomes possible to track change, evaluate interventions and build a stronger evidence base about what works. In this way, cultural data become not simply a record of activity but a tool for collective learning and better policymaking.

The work presented in this report marks an important step towards building a stronger evidence infrastructure for culture in the UK. Establishing a fully operational National Cultural Data Observatory will require continued collaboration between government, research institutions and the cultural sector. What this project demonstrates, however, is that the foundations for that ambition are now firmly in place.

If culture helps communities imagine their futures, then good data help us understand how to support those futures. A National Cultural Data Observatory has the potential to ensure that the stories culture tells about our places are matched by the evidence needed to sustain them.

Professor Jonothan Neelands
University of Warwick

Introduction

Context, ethos and project rationale

Currently, data in and about the UK's arts, cultural & heritage (ACH) sectors are fragmented, incomplete, inconsistent, impersonal and insufficiently granular. This reflects the anomalous characteristics of sectors funded and financed in a hybrid way, divided into specialised sub-sectors, and predominantly comprising SMEs and a substantial freelance workforce. The fluid and multi-agency character of these sectors currently inhibits a holistic data view. This is exacerbated by limited data capability in the sectors and by significant data gaps and incomparability that prevent cross-analysis with other sectors such as education and health.

The resulting data and evidence deficit also means that ACH sectors are often unable to evaluate and communicate their social and economic impact in ways that are compelling to policymakers and the public, which leaves them vulnerable to public funding cuts. Current ACH datasets lack comparability and are often poorly aligned to local, regional and national policy priorities. This means that policy decisions are often made without access to robust, context-sensitive evidence, limiting their connection to the people and places they seek to support and to the practitioners and organisations responsible for delivery on the ground.

Building on the Making Data Work project, led by the same core partners, this scoping project aimed to address the fractured data infrastructure of the ACH ecosystem by creating an ambitious blueprint for a National Cultural Data Observatory (NCDO). This project stems from the project partners' shared thesis that ACH data are currently collected, collated, managed and evaluated in a way that separates policymaking from the people, places and local cultural ecosystems that should be at the very heart of it. Our ethos is therefore a people-centred one, giving local communities, cultural audiences and cultural partners a genuine voice in data generation and analysis.[1]

Cross-party commitments to deeper devolution will bring decision-making closer to local people and combined authorities than ever before. Research and policy programmes led by Culture Commons suggest that ongoing devolution is increasingly likely to have a direct impact on the ACH ecosystem (MacFarlane, 2024). The National Alliance for Cultural Services is active in helping to secure consensus on the new configuration of responsibilities across different levels of government and public sector for policy and evidence through the development of a National Cultural Framework (LGA, 2025).

[1] See our Manifesto at https://ncdo.org.uk/manifesto

This shift will have significant implications for research: if policy moves closer to people and communities, our hypothesis is that scholars and other professional researchers will need to rethink established, top-down approaches to data collection and analysis. With the imminent publication of the Cultural and Heritage Capital Framework (DCMS 2021-2025) by DCMS/AHRC this shift can also help the sector and policymakers move beyond the narrow economic framings and valuation methods required by the current HM Treasury's Green Book (HM Treasury and Government Finance Function 2026), which fail to capture people's lived experiences of arts, culture and heritage.

Project aims and research questions

The specific **aims** for the project were to:

I. Scope a scalable regional cultural data observatory to demonstrate the social and economic impact of culture and heritage.
II. Identify and evaluate the quality and feasibility of datasets to represent the key elements of the ACH ecosystem in a national observatory.
III. Pilot the resulting data framework within a regional data observatory for Bradford UK City of Culture 2025.

Our **research questions** (RQs) were as follows:

1. How can the socio-economic impact of England's arts, culture and heritage sectors be captured and enhanced using data services which combine at scale multiple datasets and analyse them over time?
2. Which challenges and opportunities arise in bringing diverse cultural datasets together and how can these be mitigated, resolved and/or exploited?
3. Which human and technological resources are required to use the available datasets to deliver the data services necessary for key stakeholders' use cases?
4. Where there are gaps in availability of suitable data of sufficient quality, what actions would be required and by whom to fill them?
5. How can a cultural data observatory best respond to the HM Treasury preference for the cost benefit analysis model of policymaking and evaluation at national and regional levels?

Literature review

Current data protocols make it challenging to map the output, geography and infrastructure of the arts, cultural and heritage sectors and therefore to provide a meaningful and accurate evaluation of their value and impact to society (Walmsley et al. 2022). Although government and public bodies generate and hold a significant amount of 'administration data' about the sector, this is often not joined up or accessible to themselves, each other or the wider cultural sectors (Thelwall and Towell 2022).

Local and regional 'place-based' policymaking, which needs to integrate evidence from across multiple sectors and policy areas, is severely limited by the paucity, quality and 'unlinkability' of data available (Ashton and Bell 2024), despite the fact that local authorities are exhorted to use evidence to drive their local creative and cultural strategies (Local Government Association and The Audience Agency 2020). However, this does not necessarily mean that we need *more* data: as Guyan and Eikhof (2026) argued in their recent paper on diversity data in the UK's television industry, "We need better data, not more data" (p.45).

Data observatories are ideally placed to address these sectoral and policy issues, providing a strategic and holistic overview of data issues, needs and protocols, but we encountered a range of definitions of data observatories in the literature, including a repository, a research hub, and a portal for datasets and sample visualisations. There was consensus, however, that data observatories are culturally and politically specific and that key risks for observatories include inconsistent data, weak ethical standards and poor accessibility.

Users of data have different levels of experience and diverse needs, so complex platforms and data illiteracy are both issues that can present barriers for users (Owen et al. 2023). It is therefore important to consider data and digital literacy as issues of confidence and competence (Oman 2024) and to prioritise modes of data presentation and forms of data interaction that users feel comfortable with, that preserve the richness of qualitative data and the integrity of quantitative data (Oman 2021), including data visualisation-based solutions (Marsh et al. 2024).

Large-scale data initiatives such as observatories often subordinate qualitative insights to quantitative data, which are widely deemed to constitute the only reliable 'evidence' to measure the policy impact (or cost benefit) of arts and cultural activity (Walmsley 2019: 93). As Guyan and Eikhof (2026) note: "Statistical evidence can demonstrate problems of scale, which carry greater currency in industry and policy conversations and are less easy to dismiss than the isolated experiences of individuals" (p.36).

Regarding the selection and hierarchy of data within an observatory, there is a danger that cultural evaluation can be used to support narratives of 'boosterism', especially in mega events such as cities or capitals of culture (West 2022), where promotional and civic pride narratives can exclude different or 'dissenting' voices, and can overshadow complex local

dynamics. More broadly, cultural data and evaluation have been accused of being manipulated to serve pre-determined policy objectives and claims (Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004; Evans 2005; Howcroft 2023). Crone and Ganga (2023) also note the risks around 'policy-led evidence' rather than 'evidence-led policy', while Oman (2021) demonstrates the limits to rigour on analyses driven by both sector and policy priorities.

Observatories can offer dedicated spaces for qualitative voices. For instance, environmental observatories offer learning opportunities through categories such as 'hard/official' and 'soft/citizen' that provide dynamic connections between sources; and existing studies demonstrate how observatories can foster cross-sector collaboration and promote shared values, enable meaningful user engagement and showcase best practice (Capurro et al. 2024; Poirier & Costelloe-Kuehn 2019). There is also rich potential in crowd-sourced citizen qualitative data and co-produced community data (Marsh et al. 2024). However, although participatory methods offer opportunities for communities to engage more fully with – and retain ownership of – data, it is important to consider participants' agency in defining questions, evaluation and interpretation, and protocols for navigating community-generated content must be clearly established and carefully navigated (ibid.).

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods not only supports the reporting of outcomes; it can also help to reveal decision-making processes and stories behind the data collection and analysis (Fulton et al. 2023). Qualitative methods can be used to probe further into the latter, exposing lived experiences of research participants and the power relations at play (Crone and Ganga 2023). Crone and Ganga (2023) reiterate the value of mixed-methods approaches, critiquing methodological designs that perpetuate the quantitative-focused desire for 'killer stats' (Gilmore 2014) and valuation techniques (Oman 2021). Creative methods, including visual data and participatory research, could better reflect the making, lived experience and situated meanings beyond self-reports in interviews. Without these methods, knowledge and experience can remained invisible (Fulton et al. 2023).

Our approach

Our research design comprised three complementary workstrands that aimed to link data generation, context and policymaking more synergistically and robustly. Throughout, we collaborated with stakeholders as agentic co-researchers who we expected to provide privileged, 'insider' access to tacit cultural knowledge.

Workstrand 1 (Pilot Data Observatory) explored how the way ACH data is collected, collated, managed, analysed and evaluated might be improved. We then experimented with a subset of the data acquired to demonstrate the potential of such analysis and highlight operational and infrastructural challenges to scalability.

Workstrand 2 (Research & Policy Engagement) engaged directly with sector bodies, policymakers, funders, academics and other professional advisors and researchers working in this area at local, regional and national levels to foster a more interconnected and people/place-centred approach to (cultural) policy development. Via individual meetings and interviews, policymaker roundtables, a sector engagement event and a webinar with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), we consulted with over 470 stakeholders to guide and challenge our evolving pilot for a cultural data observatory and to develop our Bradford case study.

Workstrand 3 (Case Study) produced a revelatory case study of Bradford district with a deep dive into Bradford UK City of Culture 2025. Its aim was to outline how cultural engagement can be captured at scale at the city-region level in a robust and ethical way and cross-analysed. Findings are based on ethnographic analysis of the Evaluation of team at Bradford 2025 and 21 sector interviews across Bradford Metropolitan District.

This report will now outline our methodological approach before summarising the key findings and insights produced by the project team. It will conclude with a series of reflections regarding the challenges faced and those yet to overcome and analysing the future opportunities and associated next steps.

Methodology

Research design

The complementary workstrands were designed to uncover the interrelationships between the development of public policy (by policymakers and public funders) and sector strategy (by 'umbrella' sector bodies and individual cultural organisations); the use of different kinds of data evidence to inform and support these; and the collection, analysis and interpretation of such data and the contexts in which these processes happen. Our aim was to make these processes more open, synergistic and robust. The project took a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative with quantitative data and acknowledging the constructive tensions between them.

Requirements and use case identification

Interviews included, but reached well beyond, the 'usual suspects' including central and local government and ALBs, whose interests and needs were represented on the Advisory Board and were already well known to the project team through prior work. Effort was also made to reach beyond the major artforms to include, for example, festivals and 'everyday creativity' (self-directed activities by the public away from the professional cultural sector). 'Umbrella' sector bodies were engaged to represent the views of a significant proportion of the sector: these bodies often undertake unique research, hold valuable datasets, and are key actors in policy development alongside policymakers.

This generated:

- A mapping of different kinds of 'user' for the Observatory – from those designing policy and making funding decisions to people commissioning research and supporting specific parts of the sectors;
- A catalogue of their 'use cases' to drive specific functionality and data requirements (e.g. "I am this kind of person attempting to undertake this task within this context for this purpose");
- Models of the policymaking processes that the Observatory is designed to inform;
- Broader common requirements for the Observatory;
- A collective view on the major data gaps to be addressed by the Observatory.

The use cases were organised and grouped within a two-tier taxonomy according to the broader requirements they fulfilled, and the kind of data and analysis required (see Appendix 5). The first tier includes activities such as advocacy and strategic positioning, policy design and targeting, impact modelling and forecasting, evaluation and learning, insight into public engagement and operational decision-making. The second tier captured more detailed analytical or operational needs within each domain (e.g. regional policy design, longitudinal monitoring and community impact assessment).

The team iteratively developed and consulted on models describing the ACH ecosystem and value chain, the interactions between international, national, regional and local

policymaking, and the types of evidence required and generated at each of these levels. This work also encompassed modelling the lifecycles of policymaking itself – from *ex ante* to *ex post* evaluation, from policy review and root-cause analysis through supervision and monitoring, and onwards to horizon scanning and scenario development.

Broader requirements – including ethical considerations – centred on the need to return value to those who supply data, to ensure a clear focus on place, to recognise the importance of qualitative as well as quantitative evidence, to establish agreed standards for data collection and use, and to build the capacity within the sector to meet those standards.

This user mapping, use case definition, policymaking modelling and broader requirements capture all fed into the Blueprint and Demonstrator design.

Policy engagement

Key stakeholders were engaged throughout the project to build awareness and interest in the ambitions to develop a National Cultural Data Observatory and to gain insight into 'translatability', helping us maintain direct relevance to stakeholder needs and agendas. Ongoing engagement and consultation ensured the team could ascertain how effectively we were able to communicate a complex, multi-faceted project to a variety of pertinent audiences.

Making targeted use of the limited timeframe, we prioritised policymakers with the clearest need for, and interest in, the case for an observatory. This was complemented by pursuing opportunities for more in-depth discussions in Bradford to support our localised focus there as part of the UK City of Culture.

Internationally, we have presented our work to the Ministry of Culture, Innovation and Higher Education in Iceland, the Minister of Culture for Latvia, and to academics and cultural leaders at an international conference and seminars in Denmark and Peru. There is growing excitement and momentum internationally about the opportunities for other nations to establish a national cultural data observatory based on our project findings and on our flexible Blueprint and Demonstrator.

A good example of this is the "Ibero-American Program of Cultural and Creative Industries", which was launched in August 2024 by the Ibero-American Vice-Ministers of Culture "to enhance culture as a strategy for sustainable development in its different areas, including the generation of cultural data and indicators, studies to evaluate and disseminate good practices in public policies of the sector"[2]. We therefore commissioned a rapid review of national and regional cultural observatories in Latin America[3]. These

[2] https://oei.int/oficinas/brasil/noticias/oei-lanca-programa-ibero-americano-de-industrias-culturais-e-criativas-para-impulsionar-a-economia-da-regiao-a-partir-de-seu-potencial-cultural/

[3] From Daniele Dantas of Axia Cultural https://www.axiacultural.com/home

were not specifically data observatories although some do undertake quantitative research. They tend to be hosted by universities although some are hosted by foundations who fund culture or within cultural ministries. Their remits centre on informing public policies and sector strategies – some with an economic focus, some with a more social focus. They maintain links to their national ministries of culture, regional cultural and research bodies, to international bodies (such as UNESCO), to policy bodies in other countries, to other universities and to other observatories.[4]

[4] Such as the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en

Blueprint design

Building on prior dataset mapping for National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Lottery Community Fund, we created a catalogue of datasets. Datasets were mapped to what they represent: from societal or economic needs and priorities to potential or actual impacts. They were qualified in terms of their robustness, coverage, granularity, accessibility and availability.

RQ4 was addressed by combining specific challenges to the feasibility of accessing, combining or analysing data – identified through the data mapping with consensus on the significant data gaps identified through stakeholder engagement.

Case study methodology

The case study was designed to gain a broader understanding of the experience on the ground of collecting, analysing, interpreting and applying data within the management and delivery of cultural activities and public engagement with them – and to identify issues of particular significance to stakeholders. It aimed to evaluate the opportunities and challenges relating to cultural data within the Bradford area, and to consider how qualitative and quantitative data can work together at scale to inform cultural policy.

A University of Leeds postdoctoral researcher spent seven months 'deep hanging out' (Walmsley 2018) with the Evaluation team of Bradford 2025 and interviewed representatives of nine cultural organisations within Bradford district. Data analysed included quantitative and qualitative data, including Household Survey data, Mosaic data, audience data, focus groups, social media analysis, interview data and data captured via creative methods such as artistic outputs from cultural participants and artists.

The Demonstrator

The Demonstrator was designed by taking existing, appropriately qualified, datasets, and combining, analysing and presenting them in ways that demonstrably addressed specific use cases whilst also incorporating more general requirements and principles. Its purpose is to show how additional meaning and value can be generated for users from innovative use and presentation of data and illustrate how this differs from existing data services, such as portals provided by individual ALBs, or sub-national datasets from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The Demonstrator was developed and delivered in two phases. Phase 1 took the form of a micro-site that showcased the project's aims and early outputs, supporting dissemination and advocacy for the next stage of development. This phase included a manifesto[5] and regular newsletter that allowed stakeholders to sign up for updates, building a network of interested participants and potential contributors. Phase 2 was the Demonstrator itself, accessed via a username and password (freely available for anyone to sign up to through

[5] See https://ncdo.org.uk/manifesto

the microsite). This secure access allowed us to trial functionality and gather feedback, while maintaining oversight of how the Demonstrator was being used.

Phase 2 also involved extensive work by the design team to ensure the Demonstrator was accessible and intelligible to a variety of different user groups. The emphasis was on answering questions that matter to stakeholders' use cases, rather than simply displaying metrics or figures. Interfaces were designed to guide users toward exploration of themes such as need, opportunity, and community wellbeing, rather than overwhelming them with raw data tables. Behind the scenes, a significant amount of technical design was devoted to ensuring the Demonstrator would be scalable in future phases. This included testing the feasibility of adding new cultural datasets, including new insights and understanding limitations.

By assembling and presenting multiple datasets in this way, the Demonstrator created a platform for comparing Bradford's cultural and social context with that of neighbouring local authorities and the wider West Yorkshire region. It also provided a proof-of-concept for how qualitative narratives, such as those of Bradford 2025 volunteers, can be combined with statistical indicators to produce richer, more human accounts of cultural need and opportunity.

Findings & insights

Key project findings

Our literature review and extensive stakeholder engagement has led us to refine our notion of what a data observatory is and whom it should be for. Our hypothesis that an observatory is more than a data centre or service has been confirmed. Our findings suggested that an effective, sustainable and fully functioning cultural data observatory needs:

- subject matter and data experts to analyse, interpret, quality assure and govern;
- principles, standards, and terms and conditions to which users, data re-users, data contributors and the Observatory adhere;
- to provide granular analysis by sub-sector, different population segments and different communities at national, regional, local and hyper-local geographies;
- to support further bespoke analysis by customisation of the analysis and presentation of data within the platform – for example, in relation to specific indices and indicators;
- to join datasets from heterogenous sets of data contributors and technical data sources and platforms;
- to enable others to reuse data it holds or links to within their own data services and analyses, enabling them to combine with other datasets and develop innovative new analysis, presentation and interpretation methods;
- to horizon scan and future-gaze so that it can offer intelligence on data and policy trends and support scenario development in policymaking and sector strategy development.
- to place qualitative data in constructive dialogue with quantitative data to humanise its interpretations and to qualify and calibrate the descriptive data produced by depersonalised stats and figures.[6]

Use Case Findings and Requirements

The use-case development helped transform what stakeholders said they needed into clear, practical requirements for how an observatory should operate. From more than a hundred examples gathered through interviews, we identified strong patterns in how cultural data is used and reused across different levels of policymaking and delivery.

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[6] This challenge formed the basis of our presentation at the Royal Geographical Society conference in Birmingham in August 2025, which is captured in Figure 1 below.

National use cases focused on identifying and diagnosing need, mapping the health of the sector and shaping programme design. Regional use cases were mostly concerned with tracking progress, reporting and monitoring activity. Local use cases focused on evaluating impact, learning what works, and planning for legacy. Appendix 5 illustrates how these uses of data sit along a timeline – before, during and after an intervention – and across scales from national to local.

Figure 1: Graphic illustration of the Royal Geographical Society conference discussion

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Although the purposes varied, all potential users relied on the same kinds of data: information on participation, funding, infrastructure, place and population. This reinforced the need for a shared structure and standards so that evidence can be compared and combined across levels and over time.

From analysing the use cases, several key requirements emerged. Users need to:

1. benchmark local results against regional and national trends.
2. Link cultural data with other domains such as health, education and the economy.
3. track change over the medium- to long-term to show impact.
4. access up-to-date, machine-readable data they can bring into their own systems.
5. combine numbers with qualitative evidence and local context.

These findings directly informed the Blueprint for the Observatory, ensuring that its technical design, governance and data model meet the real needs of people who create, use and interpret cultural evidence.

The Blueprint

In response to RQ1, NCDO is conceived as a national platform to transform how administrative, sectoral, civic, and socio-economic data are brought together, validated, and used for consensus-building, decision-making and analysis.

To address RQ2, our vision is ambitious: a UK-wide observatory structured on the DIKW (Data, Information, Knowledge, Wisdom) model, with the ability to move seamlessly from national (macro) to regional and combined authority level[7] (meso) to hyper-local[8] (micro) perspectives (MacFarlane, 2022). At its heart is a translational layer based on a star schema architecture that enables complex, multi-source datasets to be compared, aggregated, and translated into actionable insight for policymakers, funders, researchers, and communities. Previous work (Thelwall & Towell, 2022) has shown that, given the political and organisational will, it is technically feasible to aggregate and integrate datasets from across government, cultural ALBs and other bodies that hold administration data about organisations, enabling greater cross-analysis and longitudinal studies.

The Blueprint sets out two main components of the Observatory: services and the enabling infrastructure.

1. Services

The Observatory will support a range of users, from national and local policymakers to sector bodies, cultural organisations and researchers, through five types of provision:

I) **Published research**: Regular state of the nation and insight reports with higher-level analysis and commentary including data from the Observatory.
II) **Live intelligence**: Interactive analytical tools that make sector trends and audience information accessible and actionable.
III) **Data feeds and data sharing**: Secure, machine-readable access to aggregated and approved datasets for partners and technical teams.
IV) **Data exchange hub**: A catalogue of quality-assured data products for researchers and analysts, enabling discovery and reuse of cultural data.
V) **Sector capacity building**: A coordinated programme of training and collaborative activity to strengthen data literacy and analytical skills across the sector.

[7] With sub-national statistics at a regional level become more of a priority as regional disparities are explicitly addressed through policy and devolution agendas are pursued https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2025.2464102#abstract

[8] Whether from an entirely qualitative perspective https://andtowns.co.uk/news/neighbouring-data-three-reports-on-the-data-observatory/ to technologically enabled smart city solutions https://datasmart.hks.harvard.edu/framework-citizen-driven-data-sharing-urban-policy-making

Together these form a shared evidence base that supports decision-making, policy development and evaluation from the national to the local level.

2. Enabling infrastructure

To deliver these services, the Observatory will maintain an intelligent, ethical and sustainable data repository, linking to datasets held by contributing partners. It will store data at its most useful level of detail and apply consistent standards for security, privacy, metadata, and interoperability. Governance and partnerships are central: the Observatory will operate through a small core team coordinating research commissioning, standards development, and collaborative governance with HEIs, cultural bodies and funders. The NCDO is not a single platform or dashboard, but an ecosystem of connected datasets, tools and people: its purpose is to make high-quality evidence easier to find, combine and use – enabling the ACH sectors to demonstrate their social, economic and civic impact more effectively and convincingly.

Good governance

Governance is embedded in the Blueprint design: a federated stewardship model means data owners retain rights and responsibilities, while the Observatory ensures interoperability, comparability, privacy and confidentiality, preserving access through common standards.

Intellectual property and personal data rights will be respected through clear licensing and contributor agreements, ensuring organisations receive reciprocal value when sharing data. Provision will be made for organisations and associated datasets that have a hybrid, freemium – part-funded, part charged for – business model to remain sustainable. As with other significant sector research functions – such as the BFI's Research and Statistics Unit – where there is no alternative, commercially licensed datasets can be integrated, with the intention of reducing barriers to using such data.

The Observatory should be independent of local, regional and national government and of national arts councils so that it can support cultural policy and management while simultaneously assisting others to hold them to account.

Reducing data costs and burdens

Efficiencies will be achieved by centralising and automating repetitive tasks: dataset profiling, schema mapping, anonymisation, and disclosure control. This will reduce considerable cost across the ACH ecosystem, as individual organisations and strategic authorities would no longer need to reinvent data collection processes and 'pipelines' for each project or funding requirement. Instead, the Observatory will provide a reusable, flexible technical backbone, enabling more resources to be directed toward analysis, interpretation, and policy impact. In turn, these efficiencies would allow a greater share of investment to reach the frontline – supporting the cultural programmes, practitioners and communities the system ultimately exists to serve.

Data Gaps

To address RQ4, the project team comprehensively mapped 200+ datasets, alongside a review of 77 data observatories and portals[9], to reveal both the breadth of sources available to the sector and a series of persistent, structural gaps that still impede a truly joined-up view of the UK's cultural ecosystem.

While existing observatories and datasets cover a wide range of topics and geographies, most rely on a core of administrative and survey-based data and tend to focus on formal venues, funded programmes, and ticketed activity. Major gaps remain in relation to the granularity of cultural and workforce data (especially by artform, contract type, and region), the lack of a definitive register of cultural assets and infrastructure, and the ongoing invisibility of everyday creativity and informal cultural participation.

Financial data is also fragmented, making it difficult to follow funding flows or reliably link investment to outcomes, particularly at the local level. Furthermore, inconsistencies in geographic coding and limited longitude coverage restrict the sector's ability to analyse change over time or compare places on a consistent basis.[10]

Taken together, these gaps highlight the need for further development of core data infrastructure, new approaches to data commissioning, and greater consistency in the way that data is collected and shared.[11]

Our desk research and interviews revealed some significant data issues and gaps that we will have to address before delivering the Blueprint.

- There is little continuously available, granular data on the cultural workforce. It is impossible to drill down into patterns and trends in smaller sub-sectors/artforms and regions – for example, if we wanted to understand what is happening to dance organisations in the South-West of England or festivals in Scotland. With notable exceptions (e.g. freelancers in TV), little diversity data is available in aggregate. There is no longitudinal tracking of talent and professional career development leaving those designing or evaluating interventions to support this with only ad

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[9] Including sub-national statistics from ONS, LGA's LG Inform https://lginform.local.gov.uk/ and data portals provided by individual ALBs such as the ACE Culture and Place Data Explorer https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/your-area/culture-and-place-data-explorer

[10] Whilst the political boundaries of wards are a focus in local policy and strategy development, for policy research and evidence purposes Lower- and Middle-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs and MSOAs) are more commonly used as they do not change as voting boundaries change and more data sets are available by these geographical divisions. See https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/statisticalgeographies for more explanation.

[11] Please see Appendix 4 for further information and a breakdown of the analysis.

hoc surveys as a data collection method, duplicated over multiple programmes on an already over-surveyed sector.

- Decision makers have little consistent, defensible evidence about the size and structure of the sectors they support – not even basic, up-to-date data on the arts, cultural and heritage organisations, their assets, finances, staffing, volunteering and other infrastructure on which cultural activities depend, such as the public realm, natural heritage and community assets. This lack of data is most acute where these are owned and/or managed beyond the ACH sectors, by local authorities, universities, faith groups, etc. and extant data is biased/skewed towards those (usually larger and more established) organisations that currently receive public funding.
- Cultural participation data is also partial and skewed. There is no data at scale on everyday creativity or for non-ticketed events, venues and other locations without ticketing or membership.
- One of the core drivers for a new national observatory for cultural data is to enable cross-analysis with other sectors and key policy areas such as health, education and skills. But data across these domains, especially in creative health, is patchy, to say the least.
- There is currently no formal way to capture data regarding art and creativity in schools that might help us understand the value of a culturally rich education – not just in broader engagement with culture but also in the impact these activities have on students both within and beyond the curriculum – for example, in developing their creative talent and employability.

In respect of everyday creativity, some gaps are partly addressed by the DCMS Participation survey, but this is too irregular and insufficiently granular to provide rich insights into how the population really spends its creative energy behind closed doors in domestic settings, non-sector spaces and amateur activities. The lack of box office data available for many heritage, outdoor and community events mean that we currently only systematically capture activities that are commercial or publicly funded and take place in formal cultural venues. This provides a very skewed vision of who engages with arts, culture and heritage, and how, where and when they engage. Our extensive case study of Bradford demonstrates how some of these issues can be resolved at scale, drawing on creative and participatory methods, technologies not yet applied at scale to cultural participation (e.g. drones, video, mobile/WiFi data) and bringing in a wider variety of datasets (including those collected through commercial activities or maintained by commercial organisations).

Regarding RQ5, our analysis suggests that a national cultural data observatory would improve the quantity and quality of data currently used in cost-benefit analysis (CBA) for the ACH sectors, whilst also offering potentially new resources for CBA, broadening the data available to valuation techniques while also offering a more holistic and representative evidence base for of the impact of culture. As such, the Observatory would

be an essential pillar of any implementation of a Cultural & Heritage Capital approach (Sagger & Bezzano 2024).

Bradford case study

Through witnessing data collection and use in major cultural events and across place-based cultural networks, the Bradford case study fulfilled three functions within this research:

- Informing requirements for regional and local views on datasets within the Observatory.
- Identifying how qualitative methods and data can be scaled and integrated with quantitative data.
- Modelling the context for the Demonstrator based around Bradford.

Each City of Culture requires new solutions to new or repeated problems and expectations of the Bradford 2025 Evaluation Team were significant in volume and ambition. While a small team has the advantage of focus and autonomy, it must also serve many masters: the wider team, partner organisations, funders, local, regional and national government. Responsibility for an extensive programme of evaluation requires working with multiple partners, which offers both opportunities and challenges: relationships are formed and strengthened, but risks increase through dependence on data collection and sharing from a wider network of partners.

There was significant focus within Bradford 2025 on the quantitative aspect of evaluation activity – during programme delivery, the eyes of the senior management team were predominantly on the numbers, both to reconcile to the ambitions set out in the project bid and because big numbers make for positive PR. This offered both challenge and opportunity: challenge through the expectations placed on a small team, and opportunity in that the challenge provokes innovation, particularly in working with data partners. However, there is a hunger for more qualitative data among Bradford's cultural organisations: people want to share people-centred stories and to draw out narratives that explain and enrich their quantitative data. But the lack of a shared data infrastructure makes data sharing difficult: for example, there are currently no established mechanisms for sharing audience insights between organisations across Bradford, and this limits strategic opportunities for planning collaborative programming.

Cultural organisations struggle with people and infrastructure limitations: many organisations have inefficient tools or ways of managing, understanding and using their data. Cultural managers know that data is both useful and important for their organisational decision-making, but they lack the resources to fully seize the opportunities it can present. More work is needed to improve data literacy to ensure greater data confidence and understanding; organisations may not currently be able to fully exploit the potential in the data they gather or may not clearly identify the questions they want to answer in the first place.

The case study revealed that more data is generated than is used and confirmed that while data required for reporting to funders is relatively standard, the small but significant differences between funder requirements duplicates effort, and lengthy audience surveys place demands on both organisations and participants. Organisations reported having insufficient time to address the potentially rich insights hidden within mountains of qualitative data. For example, audience questionnaires are generally created to fulfil monitoring and reporting requirements rather address organisations' own questions, which hinders the production of bespoke insights, and little of the significant data gathered is actually used.

A data observatory for Bradford

The Demonstrator was developed as a key part of the Bradford case study. It provides a limited-functionality version of the Observatory's external facing digital platform and illustrates the feasibility of integrating datasets, the challenges of scaling such work, and the value of making insights accessible beyond research specialists.

The development of the Demonstrator was rooted in close collaboration with the Bradford 2025 Evaluation team and cultural organisations across the district. This partnership ensured that local perspectives and lived experience informed the model, revealing needs and priorities that mirrored those observed nationally, but expressed at a different scale. For example, while workforce inequalities and gaps in cultural participation appear across England, the Bradford work showed how these patterns manifest differently in highly diverse local communities. It also highlighted how the vibrancy of local cultural life may not be recognised in regional or national statistics, with gaps in data collection leading to under-representation of grassroots activity, community-led creativity, and informal participation.

The Demonstrator therefore set out to show how cultural data can be understood at a local level, while still providing comparisons that policymakers and funders require. Given that much national data is not yet available in a clean, consistent or sufficiently granular format, the Demonstrator focused on exploring Bradford within the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and the local authorities within it. This meso-level framing provided a realistic basis for testing how cultural evidence can support devolved policymaking and strategy, while demonstrating the need for investment in data quality and integration at national scale.

The Demonstrator brought together a diverse set of datasets, including:

- **Population and demographics**: Census 2021 data, Population Profile Reports, and ONS indicators provided baseline demographic and socio-economic statistics. These enabled ward-level comparisons and benchmarking against West Yorkshire.
- **Cultural participation and engagement**: The Audience Agency's Audience

Spectrum segmentation data was included, alongside local qualitative material. Bradford 2025's volunteer evaluation data, including personal accounts and creative outputs, provided a way of calibrating statistics with lived experience.

- **Footfall and mobility**: Data from Huq supplied geolocated footfall and spend information, offering a proxy measure of audience behaviour and local economic activity around cultural assets.
- **Funding and finance**: Financial data included grants and investment flows from MyCake. Analysis of cultural organisations' financial resilience was incorporated, linking to broader economic trends.
- **Events and infrastructure**: Listings and venue data were ingested from DataThistle, providing information on formal cultural events and organisations. This was complemented by ACE National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) data, creating a picture of funded cultural infrastructure.
- **Education and skills**: Education data, including attainment and school-level indicators, were aligned where available. This was essential for exploring the relationship between cultural engagement, talent pipelines, and local skills development. By assembling these diverse inputs, the Demonstrator illustrates how the observatory can move beyond a static list of indicators towards a dynamic evidence base that blends quantitative and qualitative perspectives.
- **Commercial datasets** were supported by the Leeds Institute for Data Analytics (LIDA), to understand the potential infrastructure to store, link and analyse them alongside public, open datasets, under appropriate governance and security.

Reflections and next steps

There is a pressing need for better data and data infrastructure: civic health and social wellbeing depend on a flourishing cultural and informational ecosystem (Putnam 2000) but ACH data is often incoherent, lacking interoperability and longitudinal reach.

To the extent that the non-profit cultural sector is a market (or at least quasi-market) and the commercial creative industries form part of our cultural lives, the efficient and beneficial operation of both the market and non-market components of the ecosystem – to our economy and society more widely – is severely hampered by a lack of coherent data (Maoli et al. 2021). Despite its best endeavours, there is only so far the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre can go in granular analysis without the creation of significant new datasets and research infrastructure (McAndrew et al. 2024).

There is duplication at all levels across the data that government and public bodies collect and hold and across the research they commission. There is also duplication of effort and spend on research: sector bodies often have overlapping remits and operate at different geographic scales, with those commissioned to undertake research repeatedly undertaking ad hoc and incomparable studies. The NCDO could enable project-by-project *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluation to reuse data and model the cumulative and combined impacts of multiple projects over time – to ACH 'capitals' and infrastructure – across local and regional cultural ecosystems. ACH organisations and workers – often freelancers – unnecessarily spend time either collecting, managing and analysing data or responding to data collection by others.

This means that cultural policies – and wider public policy that impacts on the ACH sectors – are often designed, implemented and evaluated in a data vacuum filled, by default, with out-of-date evidence, assumptions and bias towards repeating the status quo. This limits not only public investment but also investment by the third and private sectors in cognate policy areas such as creative health and education as well as in the ACH sectors themselves. It risks prioritisation of scarce public funds to be aligned with areas – geographical, sectoral or in terms of population segment – of greatest need or potential social or economic return. It limits the extent to which policies by different bodies are coherent nationally, regionally or across sectors – with the potential for devolution to make this worse and giving rise to calls for a National Cultural Framework (Birchall/CLOA, 2025). In other words, the status quo comes at a significant cost to the Government, taxpayers and the ACH sectors alike.

The Blueprint represents a feasible and viable solution driven by stakeholder needs

Although there are varying definitions of what cultural observatories or data observatories can be, our research has highlighted the need for an independent, federated, mixed-methods, people-centred model that has the potential to offer deeper, richer and more ethical, as well as more rigorous and curated, insights into the impacts of cultural engagement across the country. By driving the design of the Blueprint through the use cases articulated by policymakers, funders and sector leaders alike, a future Observatory

could avoid the risks of collecting, analysing or presenting data without there being clear benefits to doing so.

There are significant implications and advantages here for arts, cultural and heritage management, including the benefits for a variety of organisations across the ACH ecosystem of drawing on timely, relevant, robust data in a more accessible way to inform their fundraising, marketing, strategy and financial planning. Moreover, the use of the same datasets being used by ACH organisations and their sector bodies, as well as policymakers, public and other investors, could help to align public policies with the strategies adopted by the ACH sectors themselves.

Challenges and opportunities

This was an incredibly ambitious project, not just because of the inherent methodological complexity but also due to the politics involved in exploring ways of evidencing cultural impact. This political challenge is exacerbated by the rapidly shifting policy landscape, including: potentially seismic change including the rise of populism; ongoing reviews of the UK's national arts councils; deepening devolution with new and enhanced powers for metro mayors; and a new Creative Industries Sector Plan. One of our key challenges as a new consortium of scholars, consultants and policy experts is to navigate these choppy waters and seek significant infrastructural funding in a highly competitive funding landscape for both culture and academic research.

The opportunities, however, are significant: we have a time-limited opportunity to now implement our Blueprint to actually establish a National Cultural Data Observatory. Almost everyone we spoke to felt this would transform analysis and decision-making across the ACH sectors, supporting better and more ethical policy development, sector strategies and cultural management.

Next steps

Mindful of these challenges and opportunities, we are drafting a memorandum of understanding between the core partners to take this work forwards. We have met our objective of building a broad national consortium and we will draw on the expertise and influence of this group to actively seek future funding opportunities and to internationalise our work.

We will maintain our extra dissemination and engagement activities, in particular with the key ALBs and strategic authorities, through a programme of planned events that have been designed to gather additional insights. We will continue to engage with international audiences and policymakers and actively seek out opportunities to collaborate globally to disseminate our findings and Observatory Blueprint.

Our Advisory Group members have committed to continuing in their vital role as expert critical friends to guide us though our next steps (see Appendix 6 for membership) and we will seek to expand this group as necessary to deliver against our objectives.

Above all, the core partners are keen to pursue discussions with ESRC and AHRC about future UKRI funding, in particular UKRI's Digital Research Infrastructure Fund.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: References

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Appendix 2: Blueprint components

The blueprint consists of:

- **Services** to be provided by the observatory
- **Enabling infrastructure** for those services.

Services

These are the services which would be provided to different users, ranging from government and public bodies through sector bodies and organisations to professional researchers. Details of the users and their use cases are set out in Annex 6 – Requirements and use cases.

- **Published research** and **live intelligence and insights** which are ready to use by those with subject matter knowledge but without specific research or technical skills.
- **Data feeds** and **data sharing** are for technical teams to access and contribute data to the **data repository**.
- The **data exchange** is for researchers to discover and access datasets.
- **Data capacity building** is for the sector itself to use data better.

Each of the services is described in more detail below.

Published research

A suite of regular insight reports, developed in partnership with the sector and policymakers, will analyse and interpret and draw together analysis by the Observatory and others based on data held by the observatory. They will link through to live intelligence through regular primary research with audiences and cultural professionals.

Live intelligence & insights

Interactive information tools will be provided to enable sector professionals and policymakers – and researchers working with them – to interrogate and explore intelligence and insights drawn from datasets held or linked to by the observatory. Beyond static published reports, the Blueprint outlines a suite of interactive analytics tools—the dashboards and thematic views, allowing users to filter, map, and chart data in real time across national, regional, and hyper-local scales. These are designed to support specific policymaker and sector use cases (see **Appendix 5** requirements and use cases).

Data feeds

The Observatory will build, provide and manage live, machine-readable data feeds, enabling technical teams to pull updated metrics and analysis directly into their own systems. These feeds will adhere to industry technical standards tracking provenance and versions. Automated monitoring tools will flag feed-failures and notify stewards, ensuring high availability for downstream applications.

Data sharing

Holding and integrating and/or aggregating datasets from different sources. And providing secure, assured mechanisms for granting access to them – or analysis derived from them – to approved third parties.

A secure, role-based access 'layer' will govern bilateral and multilateral data exchange among cultural organisations, local authorities, research partners etc. Fine-grained permissions (e.g. 'Data Contributor', 'Steward', 'Research Partner' etc.) will control who can upload, approve, or download datasets, while automated workflows will manage requests for restricted data via Trusted Research Environments (TREs). All exchanges will generate audit logs to support compliance and auditing.

Data exchange hub

This will enable researchers of all kinds (academic, commercial, public sector, cultural sector) to discover and gain access to ready-to-use data 'products' from a catalogue, quality assured to agreed **data and information standards** (see below). For each data product, the catalogue will comprise:

- Version history, contact details and usage metrics
- Peer ratings and reviews
- Mechanics to enable access
- Embedded consent forms and ethical agreements

Metrics or indices generated from multiple datasets will note their dependencies on those datasets.

Sector data capacity building

In partnership with HEIs, ALBs and sector bodies, the Observatory team will deliver a formalised programme of workshops and online courses, enabling the sector to capture, analyse and use data – to maximise the benefits to the sector of the Observatory in particular, and their own and others' research and data more generally.

This will include 'train-the-trainer' modules on data literacy, hackathons for civic-tech innovation, and a research associateship scheme that places analysts within local authorities. Each activity is tied back to observatory datasets, ensuring that capacity-building feeds directly into platform adoption and co-creation.

Enabling infrastructure

Enabling infrastructure consists of the key pillars of underlying services and resources – not directly used by external users – that enable the above external services to be delivered. Although there are important technical components in this enabling infrastructure – conceptually data and information standards, and physically an intelligent data repository – as ever, it's the right people, professional culture, organisational structures, governance and partnerships that will underpin the success of the Observatory.

Staffing and governance

A core team will be required to:

- Commission and oversee the delivery of the services above
- Establish and run the underlying infrastructure, below
- Develop and manage partnerships and collaborations
- Manage operationally and financially
- Support the governance of the Observatory

Research partner and associate programme

HEIs and academic researchers, sector bodies, independent researchers/consultants, consultancies and research agencies will be supported to undertake research using the data repository, optionally in partnership with the Observatory itself.

Data commissioning

The Observatory team will commission a programme of research to fill the gaps in data availability that stakeholders have identified as missing but fundamental to research informing public policies and sector strategies. See **Appendix 4**.

Intelligent data repository

This new repository will import, clean, store and process data as well as linking to datasets held elsewhere:

- Supporting a federated approach to integrate and make available key datasets held by others and subject to a variety of governance and business models.
- With 'processing' including aggregating data of the same type from multiple sources, integrating different kinds of data and thereby joining up related information held in different sources (for example, relating to location, organisation, subsector, population/audience segment, funding etc).
- Storing data in a as granular and raw a form as possible to enable reuse and combination with new and different datasets.
- The repository will provide a secure (protecting confidential and personal data) and ethical environment for the storage and access to data and analysis.

Security and ethics policies and practices apply equally to access by individuals and organisations as well as, where permitted and appropriately overseen, the syndication of data to other systems and the application of AI, Machine Learning and other automated methods.

The ability to integrate and aggregate datasets and to join up information across them in a way that is robust and defensible requires data and information standards.

Data and information standards

The Observatory team will agree and, as necessary, develop consistent standards for data and data management across the sector in collaboration with key stakeholders. These will also support:

- a common language and set of key metrics by which the sector can be understood by different users – from central government to individual organisations;
- the way data is analysed and how this analysis is presented as meaningful, accurate and actionable intelligence and insights;
- different datasets to be linked and combined (interoperable) and compared (e.g. benchmarking, baselines);
- aligning data management approaches between organisations looking to share and combine data.

Appendix 3: Logic Model

INPUTS

Knowledge
- NCDO blueprint, architecture, demonstrator and manifesto
- Knowledge from ACH organisations and sector bodies

Data
- Data* from national, regional and local government and public bodies
- Data* aggregated from ACH organisations and sector bodies and their digital providers
- Data from other sectors and policy areas

Implementation resourcing
- Implementation and infrastructure funding from national and local government and UKRI
- Human, intellectual, institutional and reputational resources and relationships from NCDO core partners
- Existing governance structures over data and research outputs

ACTIVITIES

Standards development
- Development of data principles, protocols and standards
- Development of common indicators and other metrics

Data & analysis
- Cleaning, standardising, aggregation and integration of data from multiple sources, sectors and disciplines
- Analysis of qualitative insight from ACH sectors
- Cross analysis of data from other ley sectors (Health, Education, etc.)

Extending breadth & reach
- Identify data gaps
- Extrapolation and interpolation of to address data gaps
- Syndication of data feeds to national, regional and local policy/public and sector bodies and their digital providers
- Accessible information design (and standards for design) of dashboards

OUTPUTS

Data services
- Clear, consistent, comparable data on cultural ecosystem† widely available†† †††
- Data exchange of quality assured datasets/data services for reuse by others
- Compendia of data and analysis with interpretation and other commentary

Policy-relevant analysis & presentation
- Analysis of qualitative & quantitative data aligned with consistent indicators and other metrics with high consensus/adoption widely available†† across different localities, subsectors and population segments
- New indicators and other metrics
- Visually appealing, intuitive presentations of data and analysis which represent the cultural ecosystem†
- State of the nation sector reports

Capacity building
- Content, events and action research projects involving

OUTCOMES

Direct
- Enhanced discoverability of datasets for a range of researchers and other users
- Data and analysis modelling the cultural ecosystem more accurately than previously
- Reduced duplication and lower burdens from more co-ordinated collecting, managing and analysing cultural ecosystem data

Indirect – dependent on changed behaviours by research/digital sectors
- Greater innovation across academic, commercial research and digital sectors in finding patterns of cultural, social and economic significance in cultural ecosystem data

IMPACTS

Direct
- Greater breadth, depth, defensibility and specificity of evidence of public and commercial benefits of ACH and CIs
- Better (pre) appraisal and (post) evaluation of ROI of policy interventions
- Lower system-wide data collection, management, analysis and interpretation costs
- Better data literacy across ACH sectors

Indirect – dependent on changed by behaviours by policymakers, sector and others
- Greater collaboration between policymakers/public funders, impact and private sector investors, non-profit and for-profit ACH and CI sector organisations, sector bodies and regulators**
- UK ACH sector is able

* Data representing the cultural ecosystem from population/community and everyday creativity, public engagement with cultural sector 'offers', cultural sector organisations and workforce, funding (public, commercial, social), key impact metrics (e.g. wellbeing, social cohesion, pride of place etc) with a wrap-around of contexts and dependencies	and other interfaces Capacity building activities • Event organisation and promotion and action research and peer learning facilitation • Capacity building in ACH ecosystem in use of data and research • Management of partnerships with data providers and data intermediaries • Management of partnerships with academic and commercial research organisations	ACH organisations, sectors bodies, leaders and practitioners † including contexts, dependencies and impacts †† to policymakers, funders of all kinds, sector bodies and other leaders, civil society, and their digital providers and wider tech sector ††† with management of sensitive data and processes for control of access	Indirect – dependent on changed behaviours by policymakers and sector bodies • Policy interventions more targeted by locality/ subsector/ population group • Local and regional policy impacting on ACH and CIs is better aligned and more coherent • Regional and national policy impacting on ACH and CIs is better aligned and more coherent through better cross-communication Indirect – dependent on changed behaviours by cultural organisations • ACH organisations, sector bodies and private/social investors use data-driven decision-making to better adapt to change (SWOT)	to compete more effectively with other countries and sectors with better data • UK seen internationally as a leading in exploiting collaborative data* collection, data* sovereignty to public and commercial benefit ** e.g. Charities Commission, Companies House etc.

Appendix 4: Data gaps

National Cultural Data Observatory filling the big data gaps for the cultural sector

The National Cultural Data Observatory (NCDO) has undertaken a comprehensive mapping exercise, reviewing the landscape of data observatories, portals, and platforms across the UK and beyond, alongside a catalogue of 196 datasets and composite indicators. This exercise has been invaluable in highlighting both the significant strengths of the current data infrastructure and some enduring gaps that limit the sector's ability to develop a truly holistic understanding of the cultural ecosystem.

In reviewing the various observatories and portals, a striking feature is their diversity - not just in subject matter or geographical focus, but also in their underlying approach to data stewardship. Many observatories prioritise either access to raw data (for re-use and secondary analysis) or the provision of curated dashboards and indicators tailored for policy and practice. Others focus on enabling collaborative research or benchmarking, particularly where there are shared challenges across regions or sectors. The NCDO mapping found that existing observatories cluster around several key themes: community involvement, wellbeing, behavioural insights, and wider societal impact. However, it is clear that most observatories rely on a core of administrative and survey-based datasets, often repurposed across multiple platforms and use cases.

Reflections and findings

Our research to date has confirmed that there are a number of key data gaps. These are so significant that a holistic understanding of the cultural ecosystem (modelled below) would be difficult without them being addressed – regardless of whether an observatory exist or the form it takes.

These gaps can be used to set goals for the basic building blocks of the data commissioning strand of the observatory.

The lack of granularity in cultural workforce data is hindering policy and sector development. Sector leaders, policymakers and other investors cannot drill down into patterns or trends in specific artforms and regions – for example, to understand what is happening to dance organisations in the South-West of England. Neither can creatives' career progression, workforce diversity per artform or region nor the impact of education, training and development initiatives be fully captured. However, there are interesting innovation in certain sub-sectors which demonstrate that it is possible – where there is the collective will and appropriate data standards – to fill this gap.

Data on arts, culture and heritage assets, infrastructure, finances and funding is patchy and incomplete. These include venues, visitor attractions and other public spaces used for creative and cultural activities or forming an important part of our cultural heritage. They also include producers, promoters, services and facilities – and their connections to each

other and the workforce. Data gaps are most acute where the assets or infrastructure are controlled by organisations outside the cultural sector, such as local authorities, universities, faith groups or generic property companies. Until there is a more comprehensive list of sector organisations (or more effective use of SIC codes) neither policymakers nor the sector will be able to have a 'whole sector' view.

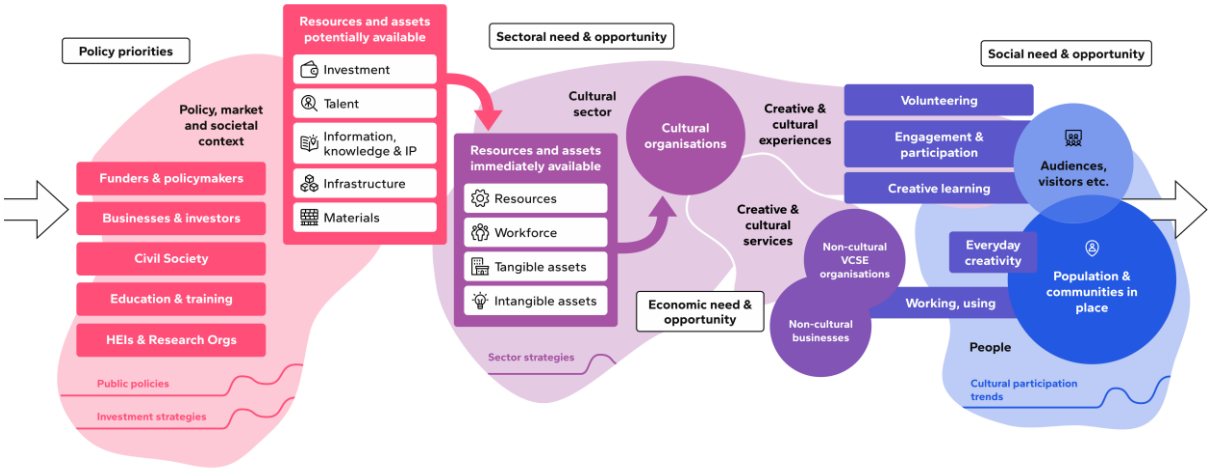

Figure 2: NCDO cultural ecosystem model updated in line with stakeholder feedback[12]

The lack of data on non-ticketed activities and everyday creativity[13] is another key data issue. The lack of box office data available for many heritage, outdoor and community events mean that we currently only systematically capture activities that are commercial or publicly funded and take place in formal cultural venues. Services like Illuminate and Audience Answers rely for much of their data collection on ticketing systems. Only a limited range of everyday creativity is covered by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's Participation Survey and reporting is not granular enough to provide rich insights into how the population really spends its creative energy behind closed doors in domestic

[12] The original model introduced at the start of the NCDO project has been updated in response to stakeholder feedback to represent: creative learning as a separate strand to cultural engagement and participation; everyday creativity undertaken independently of the cultural sector; services provided by the cultural sector to organisations outside the cultural sector; distinct areas of social and wider economic need separate to the needs of the sector; the feedback loop that results from people learning from and engaging in cultural and creative activities having roles within and thereby influencing the organisations appear as 'inputs' on the lefthand side of the model. For more detail see notes to

[13] Taken to be creative and cultural activities undertaken independently or within settings which are not predominantly creative or cultural

settings and non-sector spaces. This presents us with a very skewed vision of who engages with arts, culture and heritage as well as how, where and when they engage.

Different and inconsistent metrics are used to measure philanthropic giving and evidence of its impact. The largest data sets on the charitable sector and philanthropy sit with the Charity Regulators and HMRC but are not easily accessible for analysis by third parties such as philanthropists or donors or charities looking for information. Third party comprehensive data sets on both charities and givers do exist, such as 360Giving and Giving is Great, but no set represents a total comprehensive picture. There is a need for one agreed methodology for measuring a benchmark for the state of giving across the country. Given the existing resources, there is an opportunity to build on what exists, to provide a more complete picture of charities and their impact and the grant funding landscape and for private practices to coalesce around an agreed set of statistical norms. This could be placed alongside local data on poverty, deprivation and other indicators of need[14].

The data sources we are and plan to harness contain little to no information on the diversity – of organisations, of staff and board, of audiences and participants. Whilst there are pockets of data such as the NPO annual survey, information held in the 360Giving DEI data standard, or cohorts of grantees from specific programmes there is no national source of administrative information that we can harness in this area. There have been campaigns such as Operation Transparency which have been focussed on persuading the Charity Commission to start to gather this type of information, but not all experts agree that this is the best way forward. Ultimately it is not acceptable that we have no mechanism for assessing the level of inequality currently experienced across the sector and we urgently need to tackle this topic.

[14] p 61: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/CSJ-Supercharging_Philanthropy.pdf

Summary of research and analysis into datasets and data sources:

The following provides the overview of the research and analysis conducted:

Categories

Sectors covered	Count of sources*	% of sources**
Urban Planning & Policy	24	31%
Research & Academia	15	19%
Arts & Culture	16	21%
Public Policy & Social Impact	15	19%
Education & Knowledge Sharing	10	13%
Technology & Data Analytics	7	9%
Health & Wellbeing	9	12%
Events & Tourism	6	8%
Labour & Demographics	9	12%

**Some data sources have multiple classifications*
***Sum won't equal 100%*

Data sources

Overall, 77 data sources were identified and categorised, the full list can be found here. The following tables indicate the number of sources assigned to each category.

Type	Count of sources*	% of sources**
National Portals	18	23%
Local Portals	19	25%
Observatories	25	32%
Levels at which data is available to the user	**Count of sources***	**% of sources****
Sub-regional	25	32%
Regional	29	38%
National	19	25%
UK	15	19%
Other Nations	17	22%

**Some data sources have multiple classifications*
***Sum won't equal 100%*

Categories

Governance/Control/Ownership	Count of sources*	% of sources**
UK Government (National Public Body)	16	21%
Local Authority	21	27%
Private Company	6	8%
Nonprofit & International Organisations	9	12%
Academic Institutions	13	17%
Cultural & Creative Organisations	10	13%
Health & Wellbeing Organisations	3	4%

Operating Model	Count of sources*	% of sources**
Open Data Platform	39	51%
Subscription Based	11	14%
Collaborative	33	43%

**Some data sources have multiple classifications*
***Sum won't equal 100%*

Categories

Human-Centric Aspects	Count of sources*	% of sources**
Community Involvement	28	36%
Wellbeing	16	21%
Behavioural Insights	14	18%
Societal Impact	21	27%

- **Community Involvement:** Directly measuring how individuals interact with services, spaces, or each other.
- **Wellbeing:** Health, social inequality, or cultural participation, central to human well-being.
- **Behavioural Insights:** Examining human activity and participation trends.
- **Societal Impact:** Metrics like social value, deprivation indices, or mental health are designed to assess the broader impact on individuals and communities.

**Some data sources have multiple classifications*
***Sum won't equal 100%*

Appendix 5: Evidence for policy use cases

Top-level categories

Name	Description of use cases
Advocacy & Strategic Positioning	Building compelling, evidence-based narratives to promote the value of culture to decision-makers, funders, and the public. These support sector visibility, influence, and alignment with wider agendas (e.g. health, climate, levelling up).
Need/Opportunity Analysis	Supporting decisions about where to direct policy and sector attention with a view to designing potential interventions. Includes prioritisation of areas, segments of the population or subsectors based on need, opportunity and potential impact.
Sector Mapping & Health	Describing the size, composition, condition, and interconnections within the cultural sector. These help assess resilience, identify gaps, and understand dynamics across sub-sectors and geographies.
Policy Focus & Design	Informing, developing, or refining policy interventions. These ensure policies are situation- and context-aware, targeted to segments of the population, places, or parts of the sector and address causes rather than symptoms.
Impact Forecasting & Investment Case	Projecting potential cultural, social, economic or environmental impact. These help identify and estimate future benefits and risks to compare options and build an investment case.
Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning	Tracking delivery, measuring progress and capturing learning over time. They support accountability, continuous improvement, and impact reporting for policies, programmes and projects.
Participation & Engagement	Supporting understanding and improving who participates in cultural activities, how, and why – and giving them voice. Includes audience development and people-centred and participatory research.
Organisational Strategy & Ops	Supporting internal decision-making and performance at the organisational level. Includes organisational strategy and business planning, service and resource management, and operational improvement.
Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)	Generating or analysing data to build knowledge and inform decisions. These are foundational in that they often support other use case categories and include longitudinal analysis, landscape reviews, and hypothesis testing.

Data Infrastructure & Governance	Building and running technical infrastructure (APIs, TREs, catalogues) and the policies (security, licensing, ethics) that let others exploit the data safely and compliantly, at scale. Also foundational in that they underpin other use cases.

Second-level categories

Name	**Description**	**First-level category**
Advocacy	Make the case for the social, economic, and environmental value of culture.	Advocacy & Strategic Positioning
Alignment	Align with broader public policy agendas (e.g. health, education, environment, growth).	Advocacy & Strategic Positioning
Investment Case Building	Build investment cases (public, philanthropic, commercial).	Need/Opportunity Analysis, Impact Forecasting & Investment Case
Funding Prioritisation	Prioritise funding or other interventions at national, regional, and local levels.	
Outcome Prediction	Predict outcomes of cultural policies and interventions.	Impact Forecasting & Investment Case
Comparative Analysis	Compare ACHC interventions with those in other sectors (e.g., health, transport).	Impact Forecasting & Investment Case
Performance Tracking	Track performance and long-term effects.	Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning
Impact Understanding	Understand legacy, audience change, or cultural system resilience.	Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning
Needs & Disparities Identification	Identify societal or sectoral needs and disparities and diagnose their causes.	Policy Focus & Design
Opportunity Identification	Identify potential opportunities.	Policy Focus & Design
Intervention Guidance	Guide the design of cultural, civic, or economic interventions.	Policy Focus & Design
Asset & Infrastructure	Asset, organisation, and	Sector Mapping & Health

Name	Description	First-level category
Mapping	infrastructure mapping.	
Workforce Insight	Workforce insight (e.g. freelancers, volunteers).	Sector Mapping & Health
Performance Benchmarking	Benchmark performance and resilience.	Sector Mapping & Health
Audience Segmentation & Profiling	Segment and profile audiences and population.	Participation & Engagement
Participation Mapping	Mapping participation & engagement.	Participation & Engagement
Demand & Engagement Analysis	Understand demand and under-engagement.	Participation & Engagement
Strategy & Development Guidance	Guide audience development, programming, and fundraising.	Organisational Strategy & Ops
Performance & Decision-making Improvement	Improve service performance and internal decision-making.	Organisational Strategy & Ops
Landscape Analysis	Understand the shape, scope, and distribution of cultural activity or assets across the UK.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Trend & Pattern Identification	Identify longitudinal trends or patterns across datasets to inform future planning.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Cross-sector Insight Generation	Use cultural data in conjunction with health, education, or economic data to generate insight.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Data Gap Identification	Diagnose where data is missing, inconsistent, or insufficient for decision-making.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Evidence Synthesis	Combine multiple data sources (quant, qual, admin, open) to develop comprehensive insights.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)

Name	Description	First-level category
Segmentation & Profiling	Analyse groups within the population based on cultural behaviour, demographics or needs.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII), Participation & Engagement
Predictive Analysis	Use historical and current data to forecast future behaviours, risks, or needs.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Causal & Correlational Analysis	Explore relationships between variables to understand cause-effect dynamics.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII), Impact Forecasting & Investment Case
Scenario Testing & Modelling	Test different scenarios or policy options based on data assumptions or system models.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Benchmarking & Comparative Insight	Compare performance or characteristics across time, geographies, or organisations.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Longitudinal & Linked-Data Analysis	Joining cultural data to other administrative panels over time to test causality and track cohorts.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Secure Micro-data Access & Linkage	Joining cultural data to other administrative panels over time to test causality and track cohorts.	Data Infrastructure & Governance
AI & Advanced Analytics Sandbox	High-volume compute or hosted notebooks for ML, computer-vision, LLM fine-tuning.	Research / Insights / Intelligence (RII)
Data Ethics & Equity Audit	Bias detection tools, audit logs, exclusion flags, community annotations	Data Infrastructure & Governance
Open Data & Explore Services	Public GraphQL/SPARQL endpoint, sample CSV packs, interactive explorer.	Data Infrastructure & Governance
Commercial API & Licensing Pathway	Tiered API keys, usage metering, innovation licenses, revenue model tests.	Data Infrastructure & Governance

Appendix 6: Advisory Board membership

We are grateful to the following people and organisations for helping to steer the project during this blueprint phase. Special thanks to Jonothan Neelands being the chair (and to Abigail Gilmore for stepping up to be the chair in his absence). We are also grateful to their ongoing commitment to continue to sit on the Advisory Board as we move into the implementation phase. And welcome the new members who have committed to coming on board as we move into implementation.

Chair

Jonothan Neelands, Warwick Business School

Abigail Gilmore, University of Manchester (pro tem)

Founding members

These organisations also wrote letters of support to the original bid.

Helen Bewsher, Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture

Ian Leete, Local Government Association

Andrew Mowlah, Arts Council England

Helen Pheby, West Yorkshire Combined Authority

Harman Sagger, DCMS

Blueprint phase members

Daniel Ashton, University of Southampton

James Bridge, UNESCO UK National Commission

Andy Brown, Historic England

Eliza Buckley, National Lottery Heritage Fund

Thorsten Dreyer, Cultural & Leisure Officers Association

Amy Finch, Spirit of 2012

Mark Mon-Williams, University of Leeds

Brian Tarran, British Film Institute

Additional members for implementation phase

Jacqui O'Hanlon, Cultural Learning Alliance

Ian Thomas, British Council

Jack Butterworth, The National Archives

Appendix 7: Research Participants

We are grateful to the following interviewees and consultees who informed this research:

Mark Adamson, Principal Sectoral Growth and Delivery, North East Combined Authority

Louise Anderson, Research Manager, BAFTA

Shabina Aslam, Artistic Director, Theatre in the Mill

Sally Bacon, Co-Chair, Cultural Learning Alliance

Rebecca Bailey, Programme Director, Towards a National Collection, Historic Environment Scotland

Ian Baxter, Professor of Historic Environment Management, Heriot-Watt University

Julia Bennett, Crafts Council

Sheila Bennett, Head of Libraries Strategy and Delivery, DCMS

Helen Bewsher, Director of Evaluation, Bradford 2025

Sarah Bird, Director, Outside Arts

Fozia Bora, Professor of Islamic History, University of Leeds

Susan Brandom, Sector Development Relationship Manager (Creative and Digital), York & North Yorkshire

Andy Brown, Analytics Director, Historic England

Luke Burton, Director Libraries, Arts Council England

Paul Carey Jones

Becky Clarke, Head of Operations, ICO

Vicky Clifton, Co-Chair, Bradford Cultural Voice Forum

Louis Coffait-Gunn, CEO, CILIP

Jon Collins, CEO, LIVE

Tom Crick, Chief Scientific Advisor,DCMS

August Crocker, Policy Advisor, DCMS

Alex Croft, CEO, Bradford Arts Centre

Elizabeth Crump, UK Strategic Lead, What Next?

Nicky Dewar, Director of Programmes, Crafts Council

Mary Dowson, Director, Bradford Community Broadcasting

Barbara Eifler, Chief Executive, Making Music

Cimeon Ellerton-Kay, Business Innovation Manager, Orchestras Live

James Evans, Data Governance Manager, Arts Council England

Phil Foxwood, Cultural Diplomacy Team, DCMS

Andy Gates, Director of Development, Collaboration & Culture, South Yorkshire Combined Authority

Lizzie Glithero-West, Chief Executive, The Heritage Alliance

Fiona Goh, CEO, British Arts Festivals Association

Liz Hall, Marketing, Press & Sales Manager, Bradford Theatres

Victoria Harding, Lead - Annual Museum Survey, South West Museum Development

Karen Harris, Research and Development Lead (strategy and engagement), DCMS

Eleanor van Heyningen, Director of Strategy and Innovation, National Lottery Heritage Fund

Rachel Hill, CEO, Association of Illustrators

Jim Hinks, Head of Culture, Heritage and Sport Policy, West Yorkshire Combined Authority

Jo Hunter, CEO, 64 Million Artists

Tim Hunter, Executive Director - Learning, Policy, Inclusion and Membership, BAFTA

Jennifer Huygen, Head of Policy and Strategic Partnerships, Community Leisure UK

Andrew Hurst, Chief Executive, One Dance

Jules Ient, Head of Policy, Insight & Performance, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority

Vicky Ireland, Vice-Chair, Action for Children's Arts

Sarah James, Head of Culture and Creative Economy, West of England Combined Authority

Ria Jones, Senior Places Manager, Arts Council England

Adala Leeson, Head of Social and Economic Research, Historic England

Lisa Mallaghan, Executive Director, Bradford Producing Hub

Siobhan Maguire, Sustainability Project Officer – Positive Impact Partners, University of Leeds

Russell Martin, Programme Manager, Artquest

Diarmuid McDonnell, Reader in Social Statistics, University of the West of Scotland

Rachel McLean, Chair of Creative Industries Cluster Board, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

Riaz Meer, Executive Director, Keighley Creative

Jemma Neville, Policy Director, Creative Lives

Marc Newall, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, Publishers Association

Jacqui O'Hanlon, Chair, Cultural Learning Alliance

Akinwale Ogundipe, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, The Leap

Lisa Ollerhead, CEO, Association of Independent Museums

Paula Orrell, Director, CVAN

Helen Palmer, CEO, Palmer Squared

Hayley Pepler, Head of Culture, Creative Industries and Digital Roadmap, West Midlands Combined Authority

Keir Powell-Lewis, Head of Environmental Sustainability, BFI

Matthew Rabagliati, Head of Policy, Research and Communications, UK National Commission for UNESCO

John Rostron, CEO, Association of Independent Festivals

Mark Scott, Research Fellow, Warwick Business School

Sho Shibata, Director, Outdoor Arts UK

Grace Simmonds, Principal: Insights and Analysis, South Yorkshire Combined Authority

Kathryn Simpson, Policy and Projects Manager, National Museum Directors' Council

Robin Simpson, Chief Executive, Creative Lives

Graeme Stevenson, Director Research Strategy, Arts Council Northern Ireland

Tom Stevenson, Principal Research Officer, Culture Division, Welsh Government

James Steward, Museums & Galleries Manager, Bradford Museums and Galleries

Louise Sutherland, Head of Engagement, England – North, National Lottery Heritage Fund

Leo Tarasov, Portfolio Programme Manager (R&D Science and Analysis Programme), DCMS

Brian Tarran, Senior Research and Statistics Editor, BFI

Clare Thurman, Dance and Cultural Learning Consultant

Eddie Tukasiewicz, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, National Churches Trust

James Urquhart, Interim Director Literature, Arts Council England

Anthony Waddington, CEO, Participate

Mike Waters, Chief Technology and Insight Manager, West Midlands Combined Authority

Rebecca Yorke, Director, The Brontë Society