

Tracey Crouch MP and Hon Ed Vaizey MP
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
Fourth Floor
100 Parliament Street
London
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Dear Ms Crouch and Mr Vaizey,

Culture White Paper

I wanted to take this opportunity to share some thoughts on the forthcoming Culture White Paper in the light of the Spending Review.

It was encouraging the Government recognised the important economic and social benefits of our nation's cultural and heritage offer. The LGA has long argued that culture and heritage boosts growth, attracts visitors and can help to reduce and prevent costly health and social care expenditure. We also recognise the increased flexibilities the Government announced for local government funding. These will go some way towards addressing funding pressures, especially on adult social care.

As we know, there will also be a financial reduction in core funding for local government, which will have an impact upon valued frontline services, such as libraries and museums. The welcome settlement for national arts, tourism, archives and heritage funding will help to relieve some of the pressure on cultural organisations.

Local government remains the country's biggest public funder of culture and invested £2.6 billion in culture in 2014/15. Outside London, around 60 per cent of National Portfolio organisations are co-funded by councils, so we will need to work closely with Arts Council England (ACE) to ensure that the total public subsidy is spent as efficiently as possible and encourages new ways of working.

Whilst recognising the funding challenges, the first Culture White Paper in 50 years is a significant opportunity to set out how you will work with local government and others to support culture across the country, with all the intrinsic and wider economic and social benefits that brings.

Cultural assets and experiences are at the heart of places. Thriving and excellent culture attracts visitors and provides valuable opportunities to engage with the local community, and boost the economy. It is for these reasons that councils still play a major role in culture and have an important contribution to make to the four White Paper themes. I would especially like to highlight the following key issues and opportunities:

Devolution and reform

Whilst there are big financial challenges, wider public sector reform also offers opportunities for culture. For example, embedding culture in the overall vision for place (especially Local Plans), influencing and benefitting from innovation in other sectors, accessing new funding sources, co-locating culture with other public services, working with Local Enterprise Partnerships and being commissioned to deliver wider outcomes.

English governance is undergoing significant change with the current move towards devolution. A number of places, such as Liverpool and Cornwall, have included culture in their devolution proposals, and we expect this to increase now that councils have more flexibility over what to include in deals. Culture also stands to benefit hugely from devolution proposals to improve transport, infrastructure and skills. The move to 100 per cent business rates retention could open up new investment models in places where culture is a local growth priority. Devolution is also prompting conversations about identity. Shared cultural experiences help to strengthen community ties and feelings of belonging to a place.

We have been especially pleased to support the Arts Council England funded National Cultural Commissioning Programme, which has helped more cultural organisations to be 'commissioner ready'. It is important that we mainstream the valuable learning as the Programme reaches its formal end in June and we are delighted to be hosting the national learning event on 13 April.

Digital connectivity remains a shared priority which is vital for supporting the creative industries, new ways of working and new forms of cultural engagement. ACE's WiFi in Public Libraries Programme is an important step forward in making the most of the potential of libraries to widen their offer and reach through an enhanced digital offer. We hope, therefore, that the rollout of superfast broadband and closing the digital skills gap will underpin the Culture White Paper.

Culture adding value

From attracting visitors and businesses to revitalising places, creating jobs and developing future talent, we have worked together over the last few years to develop an evidence base that demonstrates the economic value of culture, heritage, and tourism. It was very encouraging that the Government recognised this link in the Spending Review. We are keen to build on this by developing a stronger narrative on how cultural services can help to reduce demand and prevent costly health and social care expenditure. LGA research on a range of local prevention schemes suggests that investment in prevention could yield a net return of 90 per cent.

The Leadership for Libraries Taskforce is a good example of central and local government working together and with partners to shift the narrative on public libraries away from closures and towards transformation and how libraries are adding value to other agendas. Libraries are anchor destinations with a footfall that other public services can only dream of and we look forward to the contribution of libraries to a place's wider cultural offer featuring in the White Paper.

We have recently highlighted how the viability and economic value of heritage assets (particularly World Heritage Sites) relies upon the landscapes in which they are situated. Within the context of planning reform, localism and devolution, we are keen to ensure councils are able to give appropriate protection to cultural heritage landscapes.

Supporting local political leadership and sector led improvement

Funded by Arts Council England (ACE), we have supported over 150 culture portfolio holders to lead transformational change through our very successful Culture Leadership Essentials Programme, library seminars and library peer reviews. We also work closely with Historic England to support heritage portfolio holders and are exploring similar opportunities with The National Archives and VisitEngland. It is essential that we continue to provide practical support, so that councils are supported to drive excellence and participation in culture through innovative solutions that are locally appropriate and driven by councils themselves.

Single cultural conversation

As I mentioned at Tracey's roundtable on heritage, it is important that the White Paper reflects local government's joined-up approach and encompasses a broad definition of culture. The LGA's 'practical statement of purpose' with ACE highlights how national collaboration through a "single cultural conversation" will support the local collaboration that already exists to unlock fully the benefits of closer working between libraries, museums, culture and the arts. We are looking forward to building upon this and updating our shared understanding to reflect the current landscape.

The LGA and councils enjoy positive partnerships with your department and agencies, including ACE, Historic England, VisitEngland and The National Archives. The White Paper is an opportunity to provide a framework for further developing those partnerships and in particular the importance of a place based approach.

With new developments in the culture industry, we will be looking to embrace new ways of working and forge new partnerships to support the sector. We encourage your department to champion culture across Government, to celebrate those who understand and appreciate culture, to ensure that national policy enables local activity and that councils and their partners have the necessary freedoms and flexibilities to maximise the potential of thriving and excellent culture for everyone.

I would be very pleased to discuss these points further with you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Stephens', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Councillor Ian Stephens
Chair LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board