

Greater Manchester Culture and Social Impact Fund Committee

Date: 27 January 2026

Subject: New Culture Investment Approach 2026-29

Report of: Councillor Neil Emmott, Chair of the Culture and Social Impact Fund Committee

Purpose of Report

To inform the Culture and Social Impact Fund Committee about the new culture investment approach 2026-29.

Recommendation:

Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

Contact Officer:

Marie-Claire Daly, GMCA

marie-claire.daly@greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 In September 2025, GMCA agreed a new investment approach and process for cultural investment 2026-29.
- 1.2 The approach more explicitly links cultural activity and cultural investment with the new Greater Manchester Strategy, published in July 2025.
- 1.3 This paper outlines agreed changes to GM Cultural Investment as well as setting out process and timeline.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Culture plays a vital and increasingly strategic role in the new Greater Manchester Strategy (2025–2035), underpinning the region's ambition to be a thriving city region where everyone can live a good life.

The strategy recognises culture not only as a driver of economic growth and innovation, but also as a powerful tool for improving wellbeing, strengthening communities, and celebrating the distinct identities of Greater Manchester's towns and cities. From creative education and inclusive cultural participation to heritage-led regeneration and the visitor economy, culture is embedded across multiple priorities, and will contribute directly to growing our economy, making sure our people can live well and fixing the foundations of life and creating a greener, more equal future.

- 2.2 GMCA investment in culture delivers the following GMS workstreams and pledges:
 - Healthy homes for all
 - Safe and strong communities
 - A clear line of sight to high-quality jobs
 - Everyday support in every neighbourhood
 - A great place to do business

Pledge 1 We will put equality goals at the heart of our plans, embedding inclusive practices across all public services.

Pledge 10 All children and young people in Greater Manchester will thrive

Pledge 11 By 2030 everyone will get the support they need, in their neighbourhood, to live well.

Pledge 14 Our voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector will be recognised for their foundational role in people's day-to-day lives, with funding of those social, civic, faith and community organisations as part of our collective commitment to enabling everyone to live well.

Pledge 16 We will continue to create the conditions for people and businesses to succeed, unlocking a new form of economic growth.

- 2.3 In July, 2024, GMCA published its second strategy for Culture, Heritage and Creativity, CreateGM, which sets out Greater Manchester's five-year vision for culture across the city region, building on significant consultation around culture, heritage and creativity undertaken by all ten districts.
- 2.4 The Strategy includes vision and mission statements that articulate the importance of culture, heritage and the creative industries to Greater Manchester and the actions required to protect and develop our cultural infrastructure, workers, places, and practices.

VISION Greater Manchester: A place of rich history, innovation, and compassion, where the creativity of our people and the distinctiveness of our places can delight, inspire, provoke, and change our world for the better.

MISSION Greater Manchester will care for and invest in our artists, audiences, heritage assets and cultural organisations, creating the conditions for creative businesses and communities to thrive and for people to enjoy, create, learn, understand, and express themselves.

Beneath the vision and mission statements are CreateGM priorities, split into two distinct areas; Foundational Priorities and Thematic Priorities, which

explore how and where GMCA will prioritise resources. The CreateGM Foundational Priorities are Insight, Representation, Care and Ethics. The CreateGM Thematic Priorities are Wellbeing (health, wellbeing and ageing), Prosperity (economy, education, skills and talent), Environment (place and environmental sustainability) and Reputation (visitor economy, trade and vibrancy).

- 2.4 GMCA's new Culture Investment approach, and organisations funded through the new approach, will explicitly deliver GMS and CreateGM priorities and pledges, ensuring the role of the cultural sector, in delivering Greater Manchester ambitions, is understood, recognised and properly supported.

3. NEW CULTURAL INVESTMENT APPROACH 2026-29

- 3.1 Given the success and impact of GMCA Culture Investment approach 2023-26, it is proposed that a similar approach is taken 2026-2029, with some changes to better align with the new Greater Manchester strategy and the GM Culture strategy and to better reflect the needs of the sector.
- 3.2 Arts Council England has extended its 2023-26 National Portfolio of funded organisations through to 2028, in light of changing political landscape and recommendations included in the Hodge Review, published in December 2025. Arts Council currently invests £25m p/a into Greater Manchester organisations.
- 3.3 While the surety of continued investment is welcome, there is still a significant level of uncertainty around the longer term future of cultural investment in Greater Manchester, both for those in receipt of regular funding and for those not currently members of the National Portfolio, who have effectively been 'locked out' of applying for NPO funding for an additional two years.
- 3.4 To give some surety to organisations at a local level, it was agreed that the new GMCA Culture funding period will run between 2026 and 2029.

3.5 The three-year funding period should retain what has worked between 2023 and 2026, with some changes to maximise impact of investment and alignment with the Greater Manchester Strategy and broader GM initiatives.

3.6 It was agreed that the GM Culture Investment Approach 2026-29 should; •

- Retain investment in freelance and small creative businesses through the Inspire fund
- Amend Spirit and Sustain criteria to better align with new GMS (new criteria below)
- In recognition of better alignment between Spirit and Sustain strands and GMS, and based on feedback from the sector, change the Collaborate strand to a new Structural strand, designed specifically to support the sustainability of the sector.
- Continue Strategic Investment, aligned with priorities within GM Culture Strategy, including continued investment in Town of Culture and improved strategic approach to heritage across the city region.

3.7 **Inspire**

To date, Inspire has funded 132 projects and individuals, investing more than £200,000 in artists, makers and creative projects across GM. Demand for the fund continues to be high, with more 1,200 applications submitted. It has been agreed that this fund will continue for another three years.

3.8 **Spirit & Sustain**

These funds will run as in previous round, as three-year core investment into organisations.

- o Spirit: Supporting locally loved and important organisations, this grant programme will award between £20,000 and £200,000 per year. Spirit does not require organisations to deliver across all of Greater Manchester, but they will be of strategic importance to the “cultural ecosystem” of the city region. The “cultural ecosystem” is the whole of

Greater Manchester's cultural offer, all the people who work in it and all the people who take part in it in some way.

o Sustain: This strand will provide support for organisations who require £200,000 or more per year to deliver Greater Manchester-wide activity and support for artists and grassroots organisations in every one of the 10 districts.

Spirit and Sustain criteria will be updated to better align with the new Greater Manchester Strategy, see proposed amended criteria below.

1. Growing Our Economy

Projects must demonstrate how they contribute to inclusive economic growth and skills development in Greater Manchester's cultural sector by:

- Creating good jobs across the cultural ecosystem, with a focus on fair pay, progression, and inclusive employment practices.
- Developing clear pathways into cultural work, aligned with Greater Manchester's MBacc and technical education reforms.
- Supporting lifelong learning and reskilling, particularly for freelancers and mid-career professionals.
- Providing high-quality training, apprenticeships, and work placements that respond to local labour market needs.
- Investing in innovation and new forms of cultural engagement.

2. Making Sure Our People Can Live Well

Projects must show how they support Greater Manchester residents to Live Well through engagement with culture and creativity by

- Contributing to the priorities set out in the GM Creative Health Strategy with a focus on addressing health inequalities
- Providing opportunities for our young people including programmes that build confidence, nurture creativity, and support personal

development through inclusive, community-rooted cultural engagement.

- Engaging underrepresented and underserved communities and removing barriers to cultural participation including through co-design
- Contributing to the delivery of Live Well with an offer that supports physical or mental health through cultural engagement, including social prescribing.
- Contributing to the development of Live Well places and spaces in one or more locality.
- Offering culturally competent and inclusive training, support, and career development opportunities for practitioners.
- Building community resilience and agency through cultural activity that fosters connection, hope, and belonging.

3. Safe and Strong Communities

Projects must contribute to community cohesion, safety, and pride by:

- Promoting Greater Manchester's cultural identities and shared values.
- Creating inclusive, welcoming, and safe cultural spaces and events.
- Encouraging collaboration across boroughs, sectors, and communities.
- Partnering with the VCFSE sector to deliver community-rooted cultural initiatives that strengthen social fabric.

4. High-Quality Cultural Creation with Global Reach

Projects must demonstrate artistic ambition and contribute to Greater Manchester's global cultural reputation by:

- Creating work of high artistic quality with national or international touring, distribution, or exhibition potential.
- Enhancing Greater Manchester's visibility on global platforms and networks.
- Strengthening the visitor economy through cultural tourism, festivals, and events.

- Collaborating with international partners and showcasing Greater Manchester’s creative talent abroad.
- Providing fairly paid opportunities for artists and makers

5. Culture and Vibrant Places

Projects must demonstrate how culture contributes to place-shaping, regeneration, and local vibrancy by:

- Supporting the regeneration and animation of town centres, high streets, and neighbourhoods.
- Aligning with Greater Manchester’s Integrated Growth Pipeline and spatial strategies.
- Delivering place-based cultural programming that reflects and enhances local identities.
- Driving footfall, economic activity, and civic pride through cultural events and infrastructure.

3.9 Structural:

In consultation with the sector, and when appraising bids to the Collaborate Fund, it became clear that while there are great ideas and great organisations doing great work, there is a real need for strategic investment in the sustainability of the sector, whether investing in artform or thematic networks or training or in leadership development and capacity building.

The structural strand will be co-developed by the sector and oversight for the development and delivery of the funds will come from the newly established GM Culture Strategic Partnership (see Governance section below).

Full development of the investment strand notwithstanding, it is envisaged that Structural investment will;

- Strengthen artform and thematic networks to foster collaboration and shared learning.

- Develop leadership and governance capacity across the sector.
- Enhance workforce skills through targeted training and professional development.
- Support organisational resilience and long-term sustainability.
- Foster and resource risk taking and innovation.

3.10 **Strategic:**

We will continue to invest in strategic activity, closely linked to delivery of GM Culture Strategy, CreateGM. This includes continuing programmes like GM Town of Culture as well as focussing investment on agreed priorities where there has not been significant resource or capacity to progress work. There is huge potential, for example, to better protect and promote Greater Manchester's significant heritage assets, but this has not been prioritised to date. Working with all ten local authorities, there is potential to improve our support for heritage assets and organisations in communities and to strengthen the narrative around the significant concentration of heritage assets across Greater Manchester.

4. CULTURAL GOVERNANCE

- 4.1 In 2018, GMCA established the Greater Manchester Culture and Heritage Steering Group, made up of local cultural leaders and local and national stakeholders including Marketing Manchester, Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. This group worked alongside the statutory Culture and Social Impact Monitoring Committee, made up of representatives from across GM.
- 4.2 Throughout COVID-19, engagement with and from the group reduced and during development of the GM Trailblazer Devolution Deal, it was agreed to disband the group to establish a Greater Manchester Strategic Cultural Partnership, which would include local representation alongside national

stakeholders, including DCMS, Arts Council England, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England and, where appropriate, Visit England and Sport England.

The deal states; 'To maximise the impact of this collective investment, and to explore new ways in which culture and heritage can deliver on wider levelling up outcomes like regeneration, skills, business support and health and wellbeing, GMCA and the government will establish a Greater Manchester Strategic Cultural Partnership. This will provide a clear, codified framework for collaboration between national and local partners. The establishment of this body was paused during the general election and until the subsequent Devolution White Paper had been published.

- 4.3 It is recommended that, now the Hodge Review into Arts Council England has concluded, development of this strategic group is revisited, linking in with changes to broader GMCA governance.
- 4.4 The Greater Manchester Strategic Cultural Partnership will provide strategic leadership for the continued development of the sector, working in alignment with emerging governance arrangements for the creative industries and Night Time Economy, as well as existing bodies including the Greater Manchester Music Commission, the Culture and Social Impact Monitoring Committee, and the GM Creative Health Place Partnership.
- 4.5 It will also serve as GMCA's principal interface with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and relevant Arms-Length Bodies. 4.6 It is recommended that this group be operational by April, 2026, when new funding arrangements are in place.

5. **Timeline**

The timeline for the new Culture Investment Approach is as follows

- September 2025 – GMCA approval of process
- October 2025 – Launch applications to Spirit and Sustain
- November / December 2025 – Appraisal of Spirit and Sustain
- January 2026 – Appraisal and balancing
- February 2026 – Budget setting and governance development
- March 2026 – Due diligence, contracting and announcement of Spirit and Sustain portfolio, procurement of management of Inspire
- April 2026 – Spirit and Sustain funding starts
- May 2026 – Round 6 Inspire launches
- June 2026 – Plan for structural funds developed