

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 27th March 2026
Subject: Greater Manchester Cultural Investment 2026-2029
Report of: Councillor Neil Emmott, Portfolio Lead for Culture

Purpose of Report

Culture plays a vital and increasingly strategic role in the new Greater Manchester Strategy (2025–2035), underpinning the region’s ambition to be a place where everyone can thrive.

This paper seeks GMCA approval on the GM Culture Investment approach 2026-29, including organisations to be funded under the Spirit and Sustain strands of investment. Further details are included as a more detailed report, considered in the confidential part of the agenda due to the information relating to the potential investments by GMCA subject to GMCA approval.

Recommendations:

GMCA is requested to agree the approach outlined below:

1. Agree a three-year budget of £5.05m p/a from April 2026 (subject to annual review) to support the new GMCA Cultural Investment Approach. Annual budget to be made up of £3.3m District Contributions and £1.75m Retained Business Rates.

2. Agree that, between April 2026 and March 2029 this budget will be spent in the following ways:
 - Inspire (£120,000 p/a);
 - Spirit & Sustain (£4,141,840.95)
 - Structural (£100,000 p/a)
 - Strategic (£140,000 p/a)
 - Programme Management (£88,000p/a)
 - Ongoing Social Impact Commitment (£460,000 p/a)

3. Agree the list of Spirit & Sustain organisations detailed within the Part B item of this report be supported using GM Cultural investment and the report made public within one month of this meeting.

4. Delegate to the Group Chief Finance Officer, in consultation with the Portfolio Lead Chief Executive and Portfolio Leader for Culture, to enter into grant funding agreements with the organisations, and for the amounts, listed in Part B of this report.

Contact Officers

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Recommendation - Key points for decision-makers

Insert text

Impacts Questionnaire

Impact Indicator	Result	Justification/Mitigation
Equality and Inclusion	G	
Health	G	
Resilience and Adaptation	G	
Housing		
Economy	G	
Mobility and Connectivity		
Carbon, Nature and Environment		
Consumption and Production		
Contribution to achieving the GM Carbon Neutral 2038 target		Greater Manchester's cultural investment will actively support carbon neutrality by funding organisations and projects that embed sustainability into their operations and programming. This includes promoting low-carbon practices, supporting environmentally themed cultural work, and enabling creative engagement that drives climate awareness and behaviour change. Through strategic partnerships and initiatives like GMACT, GMCA
Further Assessment(s):	Equalities Impact Assessment	
G Positive impacts overall, whether long or short term.	A Mix of positive and negative impacts. Trade-offs to consider.	R Mostly negative, with at least one positive aspect. Trade-offs to consider.
		RR Negative impacts overall.

Risk Management

The proposed Culture Fund programme carries manageable delivery, operational and portfolio-level risks, primarily relating to organisational stability, variation in capacity across funded organisations, and the pace of transition to the new investment approach. These risks are mitigated through a structured assessment process, clear scoring and balancing criteria, and annual monitoring arrangements that track delivery, governance, financial sustainability and alignment with Greater Manchester Strategy objectives.

Portfolio-level risks, including geographic gaps, organisational fragility and changes in the external funding environment, are addressed through a balanced portfolio model, annual review points, and the ability to adjust delivery expectations in response to local need. The appraisal process, undertaken independently of the Culture Team, ensures objectivity, while due diligence, conflict of interest processes and performance monitoring provide assurance that public funding is allocated and managed responsibly.

Legal Considerations

All activity set out in the Culture Fund papers will be delivered in line with relevant legal and regulatory duties, including subsidy control, procurement requirements, contract law and equalities legislation. Funding agreements will clearly set out the terms of investment, monitoring requirements and responsibilities of funded organisations, with delegated authority enabling timely approval of allocations and contract variations where required.

Robust governance and legal documentation will underpin all grant awards, including conditions relating to safeguarding, data protection, equality duties and value-for-money expectations. Where organisations face change or restructuring, GMCA will work with local authorities and partners to ensure legal compliance and continuity of service while protecting GMCA's interests and maintaining transparent, lawful deployment of public funds.

Financial Consequences - Revenue

Revenue funding for the Culture Fund will support annual grant awards to Spirit and Sustain organisations, new entrants to the portfolio, and associated monitoring, evaluation and programme management. Revenue allocations also enable targeted support in boroughs with lower levels of cultural engagement, investment in organisational stability where needed, and activity that contributes to priorities across the Greater Manchester Strategy.

All revenue commitments are contained within the approved Culture Fund budget for the three-year period and include the 5% uplift applied to existing funded organisations in recognition of rising costs. The revenue programme is designed to maximise impact at population level, stimulate wider investment, and maintain a stable, diverse and high-performing cultural ecosystem across all ten boroughs.

Financial Consequences – Capital

N/A

1 – Impact Of Cultural Investment Report

Comments/recommendations from Overview & Scrutiny Committee

N/A

Tracking/ Process

Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution

Yes

Exemption from call in

Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency?

No

Bee Network Committee

N/A

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

N/A

1. Background

- 1.1. Culture is a key driver of the Greater Manchester Strategy (GMS) (2025–2035), supporting ambitions for a fair, thriving city region. It contributes to economic growth, wellbeing, stronger communities and the distinct identity of our places, while playing an active role in education, regeneration and the visitor economy. Cultural investment directly advances GMS priorities, including safe and strong communities, access to good jobs, neighbourhood-level support, and a vibrant business environment, and underpins key pledges on equality, children and young people, community strength, and inclusive economic growth.
- 1.2. Between April 2023 and March 2026, GMCA invested £4,425,000 p/a in a five-pillar investment approach that included investment in freelancers and independent creative organisations (Inspire), three-year core funding for strategically important cultural organisation based in Greater Manchester (Spirit and Sustain), investment in innovative collaborative approaches to delivery of GMS priorities (Collaborate) and investment in strategic projects like Greater Manchester Town of Culture (Strategic).
- 1.3. Greater Manchester's cultural investment generates impact far beyond local district boundaries, with audiences routinely travelling to events and venues across the city region. Cultural organisations also deliver outreach and engagement activity well outside their home boroughs, bringing creative opportunities directly into communities. This cross-boundary pattern of attendance and delivery shows how GMCA investment creates shared cultural value at a genuinely city-region scale.
- 1.4. In September, 2025, GMCA agreed a new cultural investment approach 2026-2029, based on independent evaluation of GMCA investment in culture to date, with clearer, more explicit links between cultural investment and GMS priorities. GMCA agreed to;
 - Retain investment in freelance and small creative businesses through the Inspire fund
 - Amend Spirit and Sustain criteria to better align with new GMS
 - 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.

1.4 In October 2025, GMCA opened applications to the Spirit (£20,000–£200,000) and Sustain (£200,000 or more) programmes. GMCA received 134 Spirit applications and eight Sustain applications. Following eligibility checks, three applications were deemed ineligible. 139 applications were taken forward for full appraisal by GMCA’s Economy, Innovation and Culture, Research and Skills teams, with scoring based on criteria published in applicant guidance (Current Work; Delivery of priorities; Proposed Work; Geography of Delivery; Impact; Management; Governance; Finance).

1.5 Scores were combined to produce a ranked list which was then balanced according to published balancing criteria – Diversity, Geography, Artform and Scale – to ensure a final portfolio representative of Greater Manchester’s cultural landscape. The proposed portfolio supports investment, as well as delivery, in all 10 GM districts, continuing the success of this approach by previous GMCA Culture Fund rounds.

1.6 The Part B report proposes a final balanced portfolio of high-scoring applications to the Spirit and Sustain strands of investment. The recommended portfolio

- Continues investment in all organisations currently in receipt of GMCA cultural investment, in recognition of strong delivery of the GM Culture portfolio 2022-26.
- Recommends a 5% increase to all current amounts, providing an above-inflation increase in investment to current funded organisations to mitigate impacts of rising costs, mirroring the investment approach for National Portfolio Organisations announced by Arts Council England in January 2026.
- Includes investment in nine ‘new’ high-scoring organisations not currently funded by GMCA. High-scoring organisations recommended to join the GM Culture Portfolio 2026-29 have been selected using published balancing criteria and are either based in areas of lower cultural engagement (Oldham, Rochdale and Wigan), as identified in an independent report into GMCA’s cultural investment to date, commissioned in 2025 (Appendix A), or will advance GMCA’s equalities ambitions, as set out in the Greater Manchester Strategy.

1.7 If investment in proposed portfolio is agreed, GMCA will undertake detailed due diligence on successful organisations in February before agreeing detailed programmes of work to be included in contracts signed in March ready for first payment to be released in April 2026.

2. Financial Summary

2.1 In recognition of the increasingly important role of culture in delivering priorities of the Greater Manchester Strategy, it is proposed that the annual culture budget 2026-2029 increases to £5.048m p/a from April 2026. The annual budget is to be made up of £3.3m District Contributions and £1.749m Retained Business rates.

Investment will be spent in the following way;

Expenditure - INSPIRE	£120,000.00
Expenditure - SPIRIT & SUSTAINABILITY	£4,141,840.95
Expenditure - STRUCTURAL	£100,000.00
Expenditure - STRATEGIC	£140,000.00
Expenditure - SOCIAL IMPACT	£460,000.00
Expenditure - MANAGEMENT	£88,000.00
	£5,049,840.95

2.2 This investment approach

- Increases investment in **Inspire** by £20,000 p/a. Inspire supports artists, creatives, and small creative and heritage organisations with small grants of between £500 and £2,000 for vital equipment, upgrades, instruments, training and more. To date, GMCA has awarded four of five rounds of Inspire funding, supporting more than 130 individuals and small creative businesses from across the city region. The fund, currently run by 10GM on GMCA's behalf, has been praised for its ease of access and the transformative impact relatively small amounts of investment can have on the careers of creatives across the city region.

- Increases investment in **Spirit and Sustain** strands by £616,292.95, a 17% increase in investment. Between 2023 and 2026 GMCA investment in Spirit and Sustain totalled £3,525,548. The proposed portfolio, which includes a 5% increase on existing awards in recognition of rising costs, and welcomes nine new high-scoring organisations into the GM Culture Portfolio, requires investment of £4,141,840.95p/a.
- Allocates investment of £100,000 p/a in a new **Structural** strand of investment (replacing Collaborate), designed to
 - Strengthen artform and thematic networks to foster collaboration and shared learning, prioritising cultural activity that delivers GMS priorities, including support for the cultural sector to better align activity with Live Well, Safer & Stronger Communities and Our Pass (younger and older people).
 - 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.

Full development of this investment strand will take place in Summer 2026.

- Reduces **Strategic** investment from £150,000 p/a to £140,000 p/a, investing in strategic activity, closely linked to delivery of GM Culture Strategy, CreateGM. This includes investment in existing initiatives like GM Town of Culture and Creative Improvement Districts.
- Maintains ongoing Social Impact commitment of £460,000 p/a at existing levels, to support organisations including Greater Manchester Moving, 10GM, The Water Adventure Centre and The Proud Trust.
- Increases Management fee from £70,000 p/a to £88,000 in recognition of increased complexity of scope of cultural investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The recommendations appear at the front of this report