



# Inquiry into Culture, Place & Liveability

March 2026

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## 1 Foreword by the APPG Chair

As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the West Midlands, I am pleased to present this report following months of detailed evidence gathering and engagement. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the Inquiry, whether through written submissions via our dedicated portal or by providing oral evidence at our in-person hearings in February. The breadth and quality of contributions were exceptional. It was a privilege to hear directly from organisations and leaders working at the heart of cultural provision across our region; their testimony was both powerful and inspiring.

Since becoming Chair of the APPG in October, my priority has been clear: to work across party lines with colleagues to ensure the West Midlands takes its rightful place on the national and international stage. Our region powered the Industrial Revolution and helped shape modern Britain. That legacy of innovation, industry and creativity remains embedded in our communities today. The task before us is not simply to celebrate that history, but to build upon it and harness our cultural strengths to improve lives and unlock opportunity across every part of the West Midlands.

This Inquiry sits squarely within that ambition. It provides a timely and necessary assessment of the cultural landscape across our region, identifying both areas of strength and where strategic intervention is required. Culture is not a peripheral issue; it is fundamental to liveability, economic growth, skills development, social cohesion and pride of place. Through this review, we have sought to develop practical, evidence-based recommendations that strengthen culture's role in building vibrant, equitable and prosperous communities.

The evidence we received demonstrated clearly how transformative progress could be. Cultural activity is deeply embedded in everyday life across the West Midlands. Seventy per cent of people in our region consider themselves creative, and more than half want

greater opportunities to express that creativity. That represents approximately three million people seeking more cultural and creative engagement — a powerful mandate for action.

The findings of this report underscore the far-reaching societal impact of culture, from classrooms to community centres, from high streets to global stages. The West Midlands has the talent, ambition and infrastructure to lead. What is now required is strategic coordination, sustained investment and a policy framework that recognises culture as a driver of growth and wellbeing.

As Chair, I warmly welcome the conclusions of this Inquiry and look forward to working with our Vice-Chairs, APPG Members and Advisory Board to advance its recommendations. Together, we will make a compelling case to Government for the reforms needed to unlock the full potential of culture, place and liveability in the West Midlands.



Dave Robertson  
MP for Lichfield, Burntwood and the Villages  
*Chair, APPG for the West Midlands*

## 2 Forewords by the Chair of the Expert Advisory Board & Chair of our workstream

It has been a pleasure to witness the progress of this inquiry over the past few months, and to see what it has already achieved by engaging hundreds of organisations and individuals from across the region. I am proud of how representative and inclusive this process has been from start to finish, and of how strongly it reflects the diversity of the West Midlands.



Professor Ken Sloan,  
*Chair of the Advisory Board to the West Midlands APPG*

Serving on the panel for our in person oral evidence hearings was a particular privilege. It was inspiring to hear directly from so many impressive local organisations and to learn from their insight, experience, and ambition.

This report is intended as a practical tool. It is designed to support local leaders in aligning planning, transport, and the night-time economy with cultural strategy; to guide education and skills partners in developing sustainable, paid pathways into the creative economy; and to assist funders in directing capital and revenue investment towards the areas where it can deliver the greatest long term social and economic value.

Ultimately, our aim is to help shape a shared regional vision for culture, creativity, and liveability.

### Foreword by the Chair of our Workstream on Culture, Place & Livability

As Chair of the Culture, Place and Liveability Workstream, I am proud to introduce this Inquiry and the collective effort behind it. The West Midlands is rich in cultural energy, from world leading institutions to grassroots community practice, yet culture's full value is not consistently reflected in the policies that shape daily life. This Inquiry seeks to change that, positioning culture not as optional enrichment, but as a driver of identity, wellbeing, prosperity and growth.

Local engagement has been central throughout. Through written submissions, oral evidence and in person sessions, we have heard directly from those delivering cultural opportunities across the region. Their insight has shaped the recommendations we present to MPs.

The evidence highlights both urgency and opportunity. Cultural organisations face financial precarity, while the decline in creative education threatens future talent pipelines. These challenges have real consequences for access, participation and long-term regional growth.

I am grateful to all who have contributed their expertise and time. Together, we have the opportunity to place culture at the heart of how we imagine and invest in the future of the West Midlands.

Erica Love,  
*Vice Chair of the Advisory Board & Chief Executive of Culture Central*



## 3 Executive Summary

The West Midlands cultural ecosystem stands at a pivotal moment. Evidence from this inquiry reveals a fragile skills pipeline, stark inequalities in cultural access across place and income, and a significant funding and infrastructure gap that threatens to limit both the region's growth and its quality of life. Yet the West Midlands also possesses distinctive assets with the potential to redefine its cultural future – from world leading institutions and pioneering creative health practice to powerful place based partnerships poised for scale. With the right strategic investment and coordination, the region can transform these strengths into a globally recognised cultural engine.

This report has been prepared by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the West Midlands and draws on written and oral evidence from over 50 contributors. Altogether, this evidence provides a grounded picture of both systemic challenges and practical solutions already working on the ground.

We structured our findings around three core priorities identified at the outset of the inquiry: engaging young people and strengthening skills pathways, broadening access and participation, and unlocking more effective and equitable investment. Across all three, the evidence is clear that the West Midlands does not lack innovation or ambition. Rather, it faces structural barriers that limit the scale and sustainability of cultural impact.

First, the region needs a stronger and more connected skills ecosystem. While early engagement in culture remains strong in many areas, too few young people can see clear routes into sustainable careers. Short term projects are not consistently translating into paid roles, and workforce pressures are emerging in technical, production and community facing roles. More coordinated regional approaches to skills, apprenticeships and progression pathways will be essential if the West Midlands is to retain talent and support the next generation of cultural workers.

Second, access to culture remains uneven. Geography, income and confidence continue to shape who participates and who benefits. Rural and semi-urban areas face structural barriers, while some communities remain

underserved by mainstream provision. At the same time, the evidence shows that co-produced and community led models can significantly widen participation when properly supported. Culture is increasingly understood as social infrastructure, contributing to cohesion, identity and wellbeing, but access to these benefits is not yet equitable.

Third, the current funding and infrastructure landscape is not delivering consistently across the region. Contributors described short funding cycles, uneven distribution of investment and growing pressure on cultural venues and grassroots organisations. Smaller and flexible funding streams were repeatedly highlighted as highly effective, yet often difficult to sustain. There is also a need to better align cultural investment with wider economic and health priorities, including the growth potential of creative industries and the role of culture in preventative health.

The evidence points to a clear conclusion. The West Midlands does not need a wholesale reinvention of cultural policy. It needs more coordinated, place sensitive and long-term action that builds on what already works. This report therefore sets out a focused set of recommendations designed to strengthen delivery across the three priority areas.

We call for a more coordinated regional approach to creative skills and workforce development, including stronger progression pathways and fairer employment standards. We highlight the need for investment models that recognise place-based need and support both cultural infrastructure and grassroots activity. We also set out opportunities to scale creative health, strengthen transport and access, and improve the regional evidence base through better data and mapping.

These recommendations are practical and deliverable. Many build directly on existing partnerships and proven models within the West Midlands. With sustained collaboration between Government, mayoral authorities, local partners and the cultural sector, the region is well placed to translate cultural strength into inclusive growth, stronger communities, and long-term social value.

## 4 Introduction

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for the West Midlands was formally established in 2024 to provide a cross-party forum for championing the region at Westminster. The Group was founded under the leadership of Shaun Davies MP, with the support of Leigh Ingham MP, Laurence Turner MP and Sir Andrew Mitchell MP, and with Lord Spellar serving as Honorary President. At its inaugural meeting, CalComms was appointed to act as Secretariat to the APPG.

The APPG aims to promote the West Midlands as an economic and academic powerhouse, focusing on life sciences, renewable energy, creative industries, and advanced manufacturing. It will raise awareness of the region's importance in the UK economy and national identity, ensuring equal representation for all areas, including those inside and outside the Combined Authority.

To support its work, the APPG established a dedicated Advisory Board comprising senior stakeholders from across the West Midlands with expertise in research, policy and delivery. The Board brings together leaders from across sectors to provide strategic insight, regional perspective and practical support to the Group. In addition to offering guidance, Advisory Board members contribute to the operational running of the APPG.

Following engagement with regional stakeholders and internal discussions among Members, the APPG agreed a formal work programme at a parliamentary meeting in December 2025. As part of this programme, the Group resolved to launch an Inquiry into Culture, Place and Liveability, supported by the Advisory Board.

**Purpose and scope:** The APPG has undertaken a review of how culture, place and liveability interact across the West Midlands, and how current policy and investment can be aligned to deliver inclusive growth and healthier, more vibrant communities. The inquiry was designed to move beyond abstract debate and instead examine how cultural provision is experienced in practice by young people, workers, audiences and communities, and how policy frameworks either enable or constrain participation and growth.

**Process:** The inquiry drew on written submissions, oral evidence sessions and supplementary desk research by the Secretariat. More than 50 contributors participated, including major cultural institutions, local authorities, universities and colleges, health partners, trade unions, foundations and community organisations. This breadth of evidence provides a grounded picture of both systemic pressures and practical solutions already emerging across the region.

**Terms of Reference:** The evidence gathering was guided by three core themes:

- (1) the impact of financial precarity on cultural life and sector capacity,
- (2) the role of culture in fostering pride of place, wellbeing and cohesion, and
- (3) the impact of reductions in cultural education on workforce pathways.

These themes reflect the growing recognition that culture operates within a wider ecosystem shaped by education, transport, health and local growth systems. They are operationalised through three outputs used to structure this report, focusing on skills and pathways, access and participation, and investment and infrastructure.

This report therefore approaches culture not as a standalone sector but as part of a wider regional

system. It examines how structural conditions, including funding models, spatial inequality and workforce dynamics, shape outcomes across different places and communities. At the same time, it highlights the distinctive strengths of the West Midlands, including its creative clusters, place based partnerships and track record of innovation in areas such as creative health and cultural regeneration.

The sections that follow synthesise consistent patterns across the evidence while foregrounding practical models already delivering impact. By identifying both the barriers and the foundations for progress, this report aims to support policymakers, civic leaders and sector partners in translating cultural strength into long term public value. Its purpose is ultimately practical: to inform coordinated action that enables culture to play a fuller role in shaping a more inclusive, confident and liveable West Midlands.



## 5 Summary of Findings

The Inquiry received extensive written and oral submissions and held in person evidence sessions across the West Midlands. The combined material reveals a region with world class cultural assets and strong public demand, yet constrained by fragmented pathways, unequal access, workforce precarity and under powered, stop-start investment. The sections below synthesise consistent patterns across places, institutions and communities and integrate the Inquiry's submitted evidence in depth.

### A) ENGAGE YOUTH & BUILD SKILLS — EDUCATION & SKILLS

#### A1. Early Years & Primary: High Curiosity, Strong Appetite

Primary settings continue to show lively participation, with teachers and cultural partners reporting strong appetite for making, performing and experimenting. Cultural organisations have stepped in to support schools e.g., the Birmingham Hippodrome's HEN network and HEN Connect filling gaps created by cuts and curriculum pressure; however, the capacity of organisations to keep substituting for the education system is falling as their own funding tightens.

#### A2. KS3-KS5 Contraction: Narrowing Subject Offer

From lower secondary onwards, options in drama, dance, music, textiles and art are increasingly merged or cut, with the non statutory status of many arts subjects making them highly exposed to budget pressures. Schools describe creative subjects as "nice to have", even as employers and HE emphasise the arts' role in collaboration, communication, problem solving and confidence. The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) cited research showing arts rich curricula can reduce inequalities and help children thrive; yet GCSE arts uptake is lowest in areas with the highest disadvantage, including parts of the West Midlands, directly constraining progression into creative careers.

#### A3. Geography, Transport & Class: Compounding Barriers

Access to specialist learning, auditions and masterclasses depends on transport and proximity. In rural and semi urban areas of Shropshire, Herefordshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire, distances and costs make sustained participation difficult, producing a gradual drift away from the arts between ages 12-16 for reasons unrelated to motivation. Evidence from Stoke Creates underscores that city centre ecosystems provide clearer ladders to paid work than post industrial towns; where ladders are invisible, participation often collapses at key transition points.

#### A4. FE/HE Pipeline: Fragility at the Moment of Expected Growth

University of Staffordshire's core arts enrolments fell by roughly 1,500 over three years (c. 11,800 to c. 10,200), alongside an academic workforce contraction in arts/humanities across Staffordshire and Keele. Local HE changes also align with emerging gaps in securely employed musicians and journalists. These trends signal fragility in the talent pipeline precisely as national policy expects the creative industries to grow.

#### A5. Supported Routes for Neurodivergent & SEMH Learners

Submissions consistently highlighted the lack of stable, supported Level 1 and re entry options for neurodivergent learners and those with social, emotional and mental health needs. Oversubscribed courses, limited adjustments, and reliance on short term projects in alternative provision result in systemic exclusion of the very learners who could benefit most from expressive, practical education and confidence building pathways.

#### A6. Entry to Work: The "Volunteer Trap" and Pay

Small and medium organisations lack predictable income and HR capacity to run **paid** placements, making unpaid volunteering the de facto route to experience thereby excluding young people without financial buffers and depressing diversity. Ikon and the TUC describe pervasive casualisation, unpaid work expectations and zero hours arrangements that externalise costs to workers and weaken long term skills ecosystems. RSC, Ikon and Birmingham Hippodrome all stressed that pipelines must be **paid** to be equitable and effective.



#### A7. Skills Shortages: Technical, Craft & Heritage

Acute shortages were reported in backstage theatre (lighting, sound, rigging, wardrobe), gallery technical roles (art handling, installation), and craft based skills (textiles, scenic construction, instrument repair, ceramics). National Lottery Heritage Fund evidence adds a severe heritage skills crisis: **285 heritage craft skills** are on the Red List, while achieving Net Zero requires ~**205,000** workers annually for retrofitting historic buildings which is about double current capacity. Without deliberate workforce renewal, the region's ability to deliver high quality production and to meet climate adaptation is at risk.

#### A8. Sector Strengths & Clusters: Ceramics, Games, Film & Performing Arts

The West Midlands combines globally significant heritage and contemporary strengths. Stoke on Trent is a **World Craft City** with a distinctive opportunity to integrate ceramics, advanced materials, STEAM education and digital design into a place specific career pathway, including post 16 apprenticeships bridging fine art ceramics and 'createch'. Staffordshire's internationally recognised games pipeline in design, animation, VFX and esports is deeply interdependent with the wider arts ecosystem. RSC evidence emphasises performing arts as a nationally recognised growth sector, with the West Midlands one of only three UK areas explicitly identified for growth potential alongside London and Edinburgh.

#### A9. What Works: Proven, Scalable Models

Submissions converged on consistent solutions:

- **Shared apprenticeship/traineeship hubs** coordinated by Cultural Compacts; pooled levy and rotating placements to reduce SME burden and widen access.
- **Long term school partnerships** (not one offs) to normalise creative learning from KS3 onwards; explicit "see it to be it" exposure to excellence.
- **Paid early career routes** (gallery tech, digital comms, curatorial, education) run in consortium across galleries/museums to fill shortages.
- **Supported entry routes** for neurodivergent/SEMH learners with wrap around support and genuine re entry options.

#### A10. System Alignment & Policy Levers

The underlying issue is a disconnect between education and industry. Evidence supports: (i) regional cultural skills strategies co designed with employers; (ii) mayoral convening of HE/FE/industry for curriculum influence and placement consistency; (iii) lobbying for more Standards and End Point Assessors to unlock

apprenticeships; and (iv) transport support for school groups so pupils can access culture during the school day. RSC proposed piloting an **Arts Premium** and sharing unused apprenticeship levy to build infrastructure for smaller organisations - practical steps with immediate regional relevance.



## B) BROADEN ACCESS & PARTICIPATION – SOCIAL VALUE, ACCESS & EQUITY

### B1. High Demand, Unequal Access

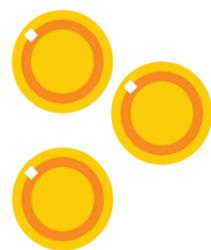
Across Birmingham, the Black Country, Coventry & Warwickshire, Stoke on Trent and rural counties, desire to participate is strong. Non attendance is not explained by motivation but by **infrastructure frictions** - transport, proximity, affordability and safety perceptions outweighing price or programme content.

### B2. Transport, Safety & the “Last Mile”

The single biggest barrier is transport. Families and young people cannot reliably get to or from evening performances; some leave shows early to catch the last service; and multi leg journeys with an expensive taxi “last mile” make attendance unviable. Ikon’s partners report that children and young people are **not travelling across the region** to take up cultural offers, partly due to cost and partly due to perceptions of city centre safety, suggesting a strong case for subsidised group travel and coordinated late return services.

### B3. Affordability, Low Pay & Inclusive Growth

Affordability pressures persist: **18%** of West Midlands jobs pay below the Real Living Wage, above the UK average (15.7%). In the creative and cultural industries, **9.4–13.4%** of roles are estimated to be below the Living Wage; often in essential enabling jobs like cleaning, catering, box office and front of house, disproportionately affecting women, disabled people and racially



minoritised workers. The Living Wage Foundation (LWF) sets out a clear inclusion case: embedding Living Wage conditions in grants, procurement and investment can improve recruitment, retention and sector diversity while delivering measurable local economic benefit.

### B4. Digital Access & Double Exclusion

Rural/semi urban broadband and mobile coverage gaps compound physical barriers by restricting streaming, online booking and digital participation. Stoke Creates evidence indicates a **higher proportion of internet non users**, reinforcing the need for local, low threshold provision.



### B5. Dispersed Deprivation & Smarter Targeting

Areas that look “affluent” at aggregate level may contain isolation and unmet need missed by broad metrics. North East Worcestershire Cultural Compact’s long form community engagement (Tell Me What You Want) surfaced four recurring barriers - **space, connections, participation and voice**, and showed how “easy to ignore” communities fall outside conventional targeting. Birmingham Hippodrome’s **Hyperlocal Creative Public Health Scale** shows promise for ward level targeting and could be extended region wide.

### B6. Community Led, Co Created Practice

The strongest gains come from familiar, welcoming spaces with regular activity and resident shaped programming. Stoke on Trent demonstrates national leadership in neighbourhood hubs (e.g., B Arts, Portland Inn Project, Urban Wilderness; clusters at Spode Works with British Ceramics Biennial, Claybody Theatre, and ACAVA studios), supported by the New Vic, Appetite and others, together forming a significant co creation cluster. These models reduce loneliness, strengthen belonging and support progression, yet rely on fragile mixes of trusts/charities funding, limited earned income and volunteer labour underscoring the need for predictable revenue to make change stick.



### B7. Creative Health & Measured Wellbeing

Ikon’s creative health programmes (including at the Library of Birmingham) and Stoke Creates’ cross sector commissioning show the preventative and therapeutic value of culture when aligned to NHS/ICS priorities. The **Brook Arts Hub** evaluation found an average **21%** increase in wellbeing scores (active, alert, enthusiasm, excitement, happy, inspired) across 16 workshops (120 participants), validated by qualitative findings describing “home like” safety, reciprocity, agency and restorative green/built environments. These results align with wider research literature and illustrate how cultural spaces function as low stigma routes to wellbeing.



### B8. Heritage & Liveability Infrastructure

Heritage is a powerful driver of pride and cohesion. The National Lottery Heritage Fund’s High Street Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) demonstrate that heritage led regeneration boosts pride in place, social connection and multi agency collaboration. Heritage Places designations in **Stoke on Trent** and **Dudley** signal long term strategic investment, with Stoke receiving £250k to establish a Heritage Collaboration Framework and £180k for a Centenary Heritage Festival. Evidence that heritage

and culture together act as the social infrastructure that underpins liveability.

### B9. Evidence, Mapping & Fit for Context Evaluation

Partners called for measurement that fits context: ethnographic and participatory methods for vulnerable groups, shared data standards for commissioners, and place wide cultural infrastructure maps that overlay health, transport and participation. This enables targeted outreach, reduces duplication and allows equity to be monitored over time while respecting ethics and safeguarding.

## C) UNLOCK & DIRECT INVESTMENT – FINANCIAL INNOVATIONS

### C1. Current Landscape: Fragile and Unsustainable

Local authority cuts including **100% arts cuts in Birmingham** and rising costs (energy, wages, inflation) have eroded the stabilising base for cultural activity. Many organisations face capital backlogs that restrict programming and risk closure. Ikon reports reduced opening hours, fewer exhibition slots, emergency sponsorships and year on year deficits as public funding stands still or falls in real terms - an unsustainable model

for a free entry charity. Freelancers struggle to access any security, and time is increasingly spent chasing short term, competitive grants with limited overhead recovery, creating **churn rather than change**.



The Midlands has the **LOWEST** total contributed income share in England, (7%)

## C2. Spatial Inequality & Thin Philanthropy

Per head public investment varies sharply between metropolitan boroughs and rural counties. The Midlands has the **lowest total contributed income share in England (7%)**, with London receiving ~42%; trusts and foundations give less frequently to the Midlands than to other regions. With lower philanthropic capacity outside cities and centralised corporate sponsorship decisions, without explicit rural and small city equity provisions, gaps will widen.

## C3. The Cost of “Projectism”

Short funding cycles, narrow outputs and “reach” metrics incentivise novelty over continuity, visibility over relationship building and fundraising over delivery. Community organisations describe the exhaustion of “starting again” annually; venues defer maintenance to keep doors open; programme leads report spending more time writing bids than working with communities. This cycle reduces workforce retention, hollows early career support and weakens institutional memory.

## C4. Planning & Fiscal Tools: Under Used Levers

Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) processes are opaque; ward level allocations are rarely published in usable formats; and substantial sums can sit unspent when routes to cultural infrastructure are unclear. Some submissions propose transparent publication of cultural S106/CIL allocations, explicit cultural policies in Local Plans, meanwhile use and affordable space conditions in major developments, and a **tourism levy ringfenced** for cultural infrastructure and public realm. Ikon specifically points to the need for clarity on S106/CIL allocation and supports a tourism levy administered transparently for infrastructure rather than for artistic delivery alone.

## C5. Anchor Infrastructure for Contemporary Practice

The region has opened few major new venues in decades; many auditoria were designed for pre digital formats and struggle with immersive, flexible or hybrid work. Evidence points to the case for:

- **a regional studio and sound stage ecosystem** linked to FE/HE and apprenticeships (building on screen growth),
- **affordable studios and maker spaces** embedded in regeneration schemes, and
- **ceramics/materials innovation hubs** that connect craft heritage with advanced manufacturing and design.

Anchor investments should be judged not just by visitor numbers but by pathway creation, distribution of opportunities and the extent to which they help SMEs, freelancers and community organisations to thrive.

## C6. Heritage Capital & Retrofit Skills

The National Lottery Heritage Fund’s submission emphasises long term sustainability for built and natural heritage and spotlight models such as **Heritage Enterprise**, which pairs restoration with productive use (e.g., Master’s House and St Michael’s Chapel;

affordable homes plus financial resilience for the Trust). The scale of retrofit and restoration will create sustained demand for specialist craftspeople; without targeted training and SME friendly apprenticeship models, the region risks missing a significant employment and conservation opportunity.

## C7. Fair Work, Union Agreements & Living Wage Conditionality



TUC evidence argues that casualisation, low/no pay entry routes and falling core funding accelerate out migration and depress regional GVA. It proposes making public funding conditional on Living Wage accreditation and union recognition to stabilise organisations and skills ecosystems. LWF outlines practical levers: embedding Living Wage in procurement and commissioning; becoming a Living Wage Funder; setting annual Living Wage accreditation targets; and public recognition for accredited employers. This package connects **investment to inclusive growth** and helps diversify the workforce.

## C8. Cultural Compacts, Coordination & Evidence Capacity

Submissions repeatedly identify Compacts as neutral convenors able to steward data, pool apprenticeships, manage devolved budgets and broker partnerships across culture, health, education and regeneration. Stoke Creates’ experience demonstrates the value of funded coordination and evidence capacity (e.g., Joint Cultural Needs Assessment). However, current funding tilts toward delivery over infrastructure, leaving too few bodies doing analysis, partnership building and impact capture, especially in towns on the edge. Multi year core support would unlock disproportionate system benefits.

## C9. Models Ready to Scale

The Inquiry received multiple proven approaches that deliver outsized value:

- **Micro grants & neighbourhood producer roles** to convert latent demand into regular participation.

- **Creative health commissioning** as cost effective prevention aligned to ICS/NHS priorities.
- **Core resource for Cultural Compacts** to convene, steward data and broker investment neutrally.
- **Place based philanthropy** incentives and diaspora engagement (e.g., Stoke) to build confidence in local giving.
- **Living Wage and Fair Work** conditions to stabilise entry level jobs and diversify pipelines.

## C10. The Investment Case

Cultural infrastructure is **essential** infrastructure for liveability, skills and growth. Where culture is embedded in planning, transport, health and regeneration (e.g., HAZ programmes; WMCA mapping initiatives), outcomes compound across agendas. Conversely, where funding is episodic and infrastructure is allowed to degrade, the region loses talent, production capacity and public value. The Inquiry’s evidence shows that with modest, well targeted, **multi-year** investment and transparent use of fiscal tools (S106/CIL/tourism levy), the West Midlands can turn proven models into durable systems.

## Overall Conclusion

The barrier to progress is **not** a lack of talent, appetite or ideas. It is the friction of unequal infrastructure, disconnected systems and unstable, project by project finance that narrows pathways, suppresses participation and weakens the workforce. The Inquiry’s evidence demonstrates practical, scalable solutions across education, transport, planning, health and fair work. With deliberate alignment and predictable investment, the West Midlands can convert cultural potential into **sustained skills, participation, wellbeing and inclusive growth**.



### Methodology

The recommendations in this report are informed by a comprehensive and evidence led engagement process. Evidence was gathered through three primary routes:

#### 1. Digital submissions via a dedicated web portal

A public-facing online portal was created to invite digital submissions from individuals, organisations, and sector stakeholders. This enabled a wide range of contributors to share insights, experiences, and proposals in a consistent and accessible format.

#### 2. In person oral evidence hearings across the region

A series of oral evidence sessions were held at multiple locations throughout the region. These in person hearings brought together local organisations, community representatives, cultural practitioners, and experts to discuss emerging themes, highlight challenges, and share examples of innovative practice.

#### 3. Full written representations and research papers

In addition to portal submissions and oral evidence, several organisations provided more substantial written representations, including detailed reports, studies, and research papers, which offered deeper contextual analysis and sector specific evidence.

All material collected through these channels was systematically reviewed to identify shared priorities, recurring barriers, areas of consensus, and opportunities for innovation. Findings were synthesised and triangulated across stakeholder groups to ensure that the resulting recommendations are well balanced, representative, and grounded in the diverse needs and ambitions expressed throughout the process.

### I. Hardwire Culture into Local Government Reorganisation

We must use current governance shifts as a one off opportunity to establish a statutory Place & Culture Board (Cultural Compact). This board will oversee a mandatory Joint Cultural Needs Analysis (JCNA) and Cultural Strategy, ensuring that culture, heritage reuse and liveability are not “add ons” but are baked into the DNA of new council structures.

### II. Mandate “Portfolio Ready” Specialist Skills Pathways

The Department for Education (DfE), WMCA and Strategic Authorities should formalise a cultural skills strategy, working with existing “centres of excellence” (FE/HE/Specialist Organisations) and develop a Specialist Skills Programme. This must move beyond theory to co design curricula with employers (e.g. heritage retrofit, digital production) that specifically address: innovation in creativity, capacity building and business development, knowledge exchange and practice development.

### III. Statutory Alignment of Planning (S106) and Cultural Infrastructure

Local authorities must align planning policies to secure the future of the sector. This includes ringfencing Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) contributions specifically for new and innovative cultural infrastructure that drives growth and widens access, including affordable creative workspaces and the protection of “social anchors” like local artists, libraries and community hubs.

### IV. Strengthen New Investment Through Cross Sector Partnerships

Formalise cross sector partnerships such as Creative Health, Regeneration, Education and Tourism, and create mechanisms for blended finance models involving philanthropy, business and social investment.

### V. Implement Low Cost Access Pass for Youth and Rural Communities

To bridge the “geographic equity gap” (where investment drops to £2.31 per head in some areas), we must coordinate existing assets. Introduce a Culture Access Pass providing financial support for young people in deprived communities to experience cultural activities, and work with transport providers to develop low or no cost travel options for school visits and cultural engagement.

### VI. Adopt Region Wide Standards for Fair and Inclusive Work

Develop a Shared Charter for Pay Fairness and Equity, establishing a regional recognition scheme that improves working conditions across the creative workforce. WMCA should lead a coordination based approach. This voluntary “Recognition Scheme” will drive culture change and inclusion across the freelance economy and cultural workforce without requiring new financial incentives.

### VII. Develop a Long Term Cultural Investment and Data Framework

The region must move toward investment readiness by ensuring consistent principles for economic and social value assessment. By utilising a Shared Regional Data and Mapping Resource — using existing analytics tools rather than commissioning new ones — local authorities and partners can strengthen the evidence base needed to attract national and philanthropic investment.

## 7 Acknowledgements

The APPG thanks all organisations and individuals who submitted written evidence or spoke at hearings. Contributors included major cultural institutions, local authorities and combined authorities, cultural compacts and place partnerships, education providers, health partners, workforce representatives and community organisations from across the West Midlands.

We are especially grateful to those who shared lived experience and frontline perspectives that have shaped the findings and recommendations.

We would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for contributing towards the inquiry.

Advisory Board Members:

**Chair, Prof Ken Sloan**  
**Vice Chair, Erica Love**  
**Vice Chair, Wayne Gethings**  
**Vice Chair, Emily Verow**  
**Vice Chair, Bec Riley**  
**Elliot Nelson & Stephen Smith**  
**Ruth Ross**  
**Ben Mason**  
**Emma Gray**  
**Gino Martini**  
**Craig Hodgson**  
**Chris Plant**  
**Paul Butters**  
**Katie Fulcher**  
**Frances Lasok**  
**Amardeep Gill**  
**Matt Broad**  
**Delma Dwight**  
**Alexander Newport**  
**Lucy Seymour-Smith**  
**Stephen Goldstein**  
**Kate Tague**  
**Yoric Irving-Clarke**  
**Judith Stewart**

**Harper Adams University**  
**Culture Central**  
**Housing Plus Group**  
**Three Spires Trust**  
**University of Birmingham & City-REDI**  
**Cadent**  
**Shropshire Chamber of Commerce**  
**Aaron & Partners**  
**Midlands Air Ambulance**  
**PHTA**  
**NSCG**  
**Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce**  
**Midlands Connect**  
**HS2**  
**WMCA**  
**Trowers & Hamlins LLP**  
**Network Rail**  
**The Economic Intelligence Unit**  
**Bradford Estates**  
**Aston University**  
**Legacy Habitat Banks**  
**BOA Group**  
**Midland Heart**  
**HI West Midlands**

Organisations & individuals who participated in our in-person evidence hearings or submitted evidence:

**Royal Shakespeare Company**  
**Escape Arts**  
**Brooks Arts Hub**  
**Aunty Jen Productions**  
**Shipston Literary Society**  
**Stratford Literary Festival**  
**Shipston Proms**  
**Reimagine Redditch**  
**Black Country Multicultural Day**  
**Friends of The Leasowes**  
**Startime Variety**  
**Art Quarter**  
**Partners in Creative Learning CIC (PiCL)**  
**Leamington Studio Artist**  
**The Gatehouse Theatre**  
**Rising Brook Matters & Ground Force**  
**Stoke Creates**

**TUC Midlands**  
**Ethnic Minority Council**  
**Helga Henry Ltd**  
**Writers in Residence**  
**Severn Arts**  
**Birmingham Hippodrome**  
**Vibrant Shropshire Cultural Compact (Shropshire Council)**  
**Soulton Hall**  
**No 11 Arts**  
**Worcester Mela**  
**Arts Alive**  
**Elizabeth Oldfield**  
**Mark Robbins (WLFF)**  
**Professor Roya Rahimi**  
**Denise McGowan**  
**Lianna Etkind**  
**Ikon Gallery**  
**North East Worcestershire**

**Cultural Compact**  
**John Moore**  
**Margaret Hutchings**  
**Compton Verney**  
**Jane Povey**  
**Nic Millington**  
**Lichfield Garrick**  
**Wolverhampton Arts Centre**  
**Tea Cup Pictures Ltd**  
**Woodings Yard Studios**  
**Kate Cox**  
**Hazel Sealeaf**  
**Zoe Silvester**  
**National Lottery Heritage Fund**

\*We also received several anonymous digital evidence submissions.

Thank you as well to all those who registered interest in the inquiry:

**Grand Palace Wolverhampton**  
**Shakespeare Birthplace Trust**  
**The Bear Pit theatre**  
**The Rother Street Arts House**  
**University of Wolverhampton**  
**Halesowen in Bloom**  
**Stephen Kearney Music**  
**Arts in the Yard**  
**Coombeswood Canal Trust**  
**ELOQUENT**  
**Partners in Creative Learning CIC (PiCL)**  
**Herefordshire Cultural Partnership**  
**Puzzles Productions**  
**Howard Littles**

**R Hinsa**  
**Roger Ganner**  
**Ginger & Spice Festival**  
**Talbot Wharf**  
**Shropshire Music Trust**  
**The Shrewsbury Morris Dancers**  
**Azfal Hussain**  
**Anjali Dance Company**  
**Ukrainian Community in Worcestershire**  
**University of Worcester**  
**Anne Nickson**  
**Alcester Heritage Trust (Roman Museum)**  
**Arty Group**  
**Caldecott UK**

**Telford and Wrekin Council**  
**Worcester Cathedral**  
**The Worcester Snoezelen CIO**  
**University of Worcester**  
**Worcester Civic Society**  
**Spin the Black Circle**  
**Wodys / Powick Players**  
**Worcester paint festival and/or freelance creative producer**  
**Play Worcester**  
**Stage Five Theatre**  
**Llanymynech Amateur Dramatic Society**  
**Loopfest**

Image credits.

- **Severn Arts – Local Voices, Creative Choices**  
**Place Partnership Programme:** Bridges of Light, Worcester  
Photo credit: Rachel Jones Photography
- **Severn Arts – Light Night Worcester**  
Photo credit: Rav Photography
- **The Jewel in Redditch’s Crown: The Edwardian Palace Theatre**  
ReNEW pilot project in partnership with Coventry-based Ludic Rooms, Heart of Worcestershire College, and Kingfisher Shopping Centre (featuring Sir Eduardo Paolozzi’s Mosaic Masterpieces in the Kingfisher Shopping Centre, Redditch), Bromsgrove District and Redditch Borough Councils, Cultural Compact for North East Worcestershire.
- **Paolozzi Mosaics, Auditorium et al**  
ReNEW pilot project in partnership with Coventry-based Ludic Rooms, Heart of Worcestershire College, and Kingfisher Shopping Centre (featuring Sir Eduardo Paolozzi’s Mosaic Masterpieces in the Kingfisher Shopping Centre, Redditch), Bromsgrove District and Redditch Borough Councils, Cultural Compact for North East Worcestershire.
- **Birmingham Hippodrome**
  - Festival photos and Mary Poppins at Botanical Gardens: Simon Hadley
  - No Such Thing As Wolves: Pamela Raith
  - The Jingleclaw: Richard Hubert Smith
- **Stoke Creates**
  - The British Ceramics Biennial
  - Stoke Creates’ “1 in 100” event
  - The Stoke 100 People’s Parade
  - The Poetry PartyPhoto credits: Jerome Whittingham and Jenny Harper  
Image of street puppet in Hanley: Tish Phipps
- **Stoke Exchange Forum**  
Photo credit: Andrew Billington
- **Aerial View of Birmingham’s Bullring Shopping Centre**  
Photo credit: Altaf Shah
- **Ikon Gallery 2025**  
Photo credit: Tod Jones



**The All-Party  
Parliamentary Group  
for the West Midlands**

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To contact the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the West Midlands, please get in touch with the Secretariat, CalComms at [james@calcomms.co.uk](mailto:james@calcomms.co.uk)

**CalComms**

30th Floor, Millbank  
21-24 Millbank  
Westminster  
SW1P 4QP UK