Strategic Framework 2026

Excellence.
For Everybody.
Everywhere.

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What we're **here** to do

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. We champion freedom of artistic expression and work to **foster a future in which creativity and culture sit at the heart of society, shaping our country and the lives of its people – whoever they are and wherever they live – for the better**.

We are here to **help England's exceptional artists, arts organisations, libraries and museums to flourish, innovate and deliver excellent work**, and to **support everybody across the country to access that work, as well as to develop their own creativity**. We do this through direct investment, developmental support and advocacy. We use our expertise to provide the best possible support to those who work with us, **underpinned by the values of diversity, inclusion and equality of opportunity**.

Our aim, as we move further into the 21st century, **is to ensure that the unique worth and broad benefits of culture and creativity are seen and celebrated**. We will continue to make the case that public funding, which has been a cornerstone of government policy since the Second World War, is not just retained, but reinforced.

The **purpose** of this Framework

We believe we need to be clear about our objectives, so those we partner with can work with us easily, and those we invest in can understand how and why we make the choices we make. For these reasons, we're putting in place this **simple Strategic Framework**, which replaces our current strategy, *Let's Create*. It draws on the aims and values that underpinned *Let's Create*, as well as the recommendations of the government's recent Independent Review of the Arts Council. But it is not, itself, a new strategy. It is a stepping stone.

The purpose of this Framework is to set out **how we will prioritise our work, design our services and make our investment decisions** while we consult on and develop a new strategy. At a time when our resources are finite, it is intended to help us make good, impactful funding decisions. And it marks the first step in a new approach: one that's simpler and less prescriptive, so those we invest in are free to focus on their work, not our paperwork.

Our **Objectives**

We believe that our investment, in its totality, must do three things:

1

It must support **excellence**

2

It must deliver for **everybody**

3

It must reach **everywhere**

Objective 1: **Excellence**

We believe our investment should support an **exceptional creative and cultural sector**: one that is ambitious, innovative, outward-looking and world-leading.

We know that excellence looks different in different contexts: there is no single definition that covers all artforms, disciplines, and scales, or all ways of experiencing and making creative and cultural work. But we believe that at its heart is the imagination, expertise and experience of the artists, craftspeople, curators, and librarians who deliver it.

A commitment to excellence will sit at the centre of every service we design and every investment decision we make. We will back individuals and organisations who are dedicated to producing outstanding work, in terms of output, practice, or engagement. We will look to support both tried-and-tested work and work that looks to the future; both those already at the top of their game, and those at the start of their careers with the potential to excel.

Our cultural sector can only ever be as strong as the talent on which it is built – but many artists and freelancers, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle to develop and sustain financially viable careers. As part of our delivery of this Objective, therefore, we will work within our existing budgets to change the way we support individuals. We will start working immediately with freelancers and individual artists to develop a **new Service for Individuals**, with a national funding programme at its heart, which will also direct them to a range of relevant training and skills development opportunities.

Objective 2: **For everybody**

We believe our investment should **reflect the diversity of our country**, both for the individuals and organisations we invest in, and for the public experiencing it. Everybody, regardless of background, should be able to see themselves in the work of those we support. We've made progress towards this goal in recent years, but our data makes it clear that there is further to go and more to do.

We will continue to invest to grow opportunities for Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse people, Disabled people, and people from working class backgrounds, and will continue to expect those who receive regular investment from us to ensure that their governance, leadership, workforce and programming reflect the make-up of the country we live in. We also recognise that people's experiences are shaped by the interaction of different aspects of their identity, including race, sex, gender, sexuality, disability, socio-economic background, religion and belief – and we will explore how taking a more intersectional approach can help us better understand and respond to barriers to access and progression.

Securing the creative and cultural lives of all our children and young people is critical. We will continue to focus our investment on delivering on our ambition that **every child and young person has the chance to develop their creative interests and experience culture as part of everyday life**. By working with artists, educators, schools and partners across sectors, we will support a richer, more equitable cultural offer for younger generations and help to nurture the full range of talent that will shape the future of England's cultural life for years to come.

Objective 3: **Everywhere**

We believe our investment should support **everybody in every community, village, town and city to connect with excellent art and culture**. It should help **more people, especially children and young people, to develop and express their own creativity**.

We know that, historically, funding for arts and culture has been unevenly distributed, leaving too many places with a limited cultural offer and too many people without the chance to encounter life-changing work, or develop their creative potential. We will seek to balance investment and activity across the country to help redress this.

We have already taken steps to meet this challenge, through our last NPO round, our Creative People & Places programme, and our network of Priority Places. We will work with DCMS to build on these foundations, using data to develop an expanded set of Priority Places, and looking for opportunities across all our services to increase investment in them. Given our limited resources, we recognise that this will involve difficult trade-offs as we seek to increase investment in some parts of the country.

We believe that a healthy touring ecology is vital in ensuring that communities everywhere have access to high quality work. In 2026/27 we will begin a roll-out of **a new Touring Service** to help recharge our touring sector, so that it is better able to innovate, take risks and strengthen its offer to audiences.

We also recognise culture's power to drive economic growth, social cohesion and good health. We will work with investment partners, including other National Lottery distributors, local government, schools, further and higher education, health and care organisations, trusts and foundations, and businesses to maximise culture's impact in place. And we will give communities, including children and young people, a stronger voice in shaping their local cultural offer.

What these Objectives mean for **you**

Every service we offer and every funding decision we make will be designed to achieve our Objectives.

We will only invest in work that we believe is, or has the potential to be, excellent. Our funding decisions will be made on the basis of the quality of the creative or cultural work you are proposing. But we don't expect any single artist, arts organisation, museum or library to deliver for everybody, everywhere. Instead, it's our job to ensure that, cumulatively, our investment reaches into all parts of the country, reflects the diversity of our society, and enables everybody, regardless of background or circumstance, to connect with excellent work and to develop their creative potential.

Our resources are finite and competition for them is intense: we already receive more applications for excellent work than we are able to fund. This means we will need to make difficult judgments about how best to invest to meet our Objectives. We will produce specific guidance for each funding initiative we deliver, setting out the detail of how we will apply these Objectives, and make our decisions.

And we will draw on external expertise to help us understand the distinct needs and opportunities of the museums, libraries and artforms in which we invest, and to work with us in the design of our services.

How we work with **national** and **local** Government

Arts Council England is an independent charity and an arm's-length body of DCMS. We – and the Government – see independent decision making free of political interference as central to protecting artistic freedom. But we are required to respond to the **policy priorities of the Government of the day** through our services and our development work.

In practice, this means that we and DCMS – and other government departments as appropriate – are jointly responsible for the design of many of our services. For the services we deliver on behalf of Government (such as Acceptance in Lieu, the Cultural Gifts Scheme, the Government Indemnity Scheme, Export Licensing and the Global Talent visa programme), the Government is responsible for the policy which sets out their purpose and scope.

The Secretary of State's vision for *Arts Everywhere* is that everyone has the opportunity to engage with excellent arts and culture, from inspirational experiences, to creating their own art. As part of this vision, communities should be empowered to foster the arts and culture they want, including seeing their own experiences reflected. The Government's priorities (which, alongside our Objectives, will help shape the design of our services) are:

Expanding engagement: enabling excellent arts for everyone everywhere, ensuring that the benefits of funding are felt in towns and villages as well as major cities - especially for children and young people;

Giving agency: ensuring that Arts Council England takes full account of local voices and needs in its decision-making;

Fostering creative diversity: fostering and developing diverse creativity, upholding our cultural heritage in its full variety, protecting and promoting freedom of expression;

Fixing foundations: supporting the economic viability of the sector so that it thrives, and assisting organisations in caring for the cultural assets of our communities;

Rebuilding social fabric: helping reintegrate the arts into the social fabric of our communities up and down the country.

Our partnerships with Mayoral Combined Authorities, local authorities (still the largest investors in local creativity and culture) and other strategic authorities are central to how we work in place. As we design and deliver our work going forward, we will deepen our engagement with local government at all levels.

Finally, we will continue to advocate to local and national government and other partners for culture's contribution to their priorities (such as economic growth, international standing, education, social cohesion, environmental responsibility, and good health). We will champion increased and diversified investment. We will work with the sector to present practical proposals on how this can be secured.

How we work as a **development** agency

As the national development agency for culture and creativity, we have a responsibility to **support the sector's development** and to **advocate for the public value of artists, arts organisations, libraries and museums, and of creativity as part of everybody's lives**.

To ensure our **development** work meets our Objectives, we will:

- Collaborate with partners across national and local government, philanthropy, the private sector, education and local communities to unlock new resources, increase impact and enable local voices to shape how investment is used.

- Provide clearer, simpler research, data, and practical support (advice, skills development and targeted services) to help artists, freelancers, and organisations across the country, and to demonstrate the creative and cultural sector's impact and inform policy.

- Expand the range of finance available to the sector, for example by seeking to establish a new investment vehicle that will allow us to offer non-grant options (loans, repayable finance, social investment and equity) alongside grant funding, so public money goes further.

- Help the sector to grow and change by **establishing a single Innovation and Development Service**. This new service will support R&D, help organisations to strengthen their businesses, and respond to key challenges and opportunities such as the climate emergency, mental and physical health, international collaboration, AI, and IP protection.

How we are changing to better support our **Objectives**

Arts Council England is changing. In order to become easier to work with, we are now using a **service design approach** across all our work. In plain terms, this means designing our services to help people achieve their goals (whether these are applying for funding, finding information, receiving advice or accessing training and development) with ease.

Over the next year, those we work with will start to see real changes: simpler, more intuitive processes on more modern digital platforms; clearer communication; fewer requests for information; and services that adapt to individual circumstances. Government and sector partners will benefit from greater efficiency, better data, and a more transparent, accountable system.

What comes **next**?

Our previous strategy, *Let's Create*, was built on broad consultation with artists and cultural organisations, with the public, with local and national government, and with our partners in villages, towns and cities across England. The result was a document created by, with and for those we work with.

We believe our next strategy must also reflect the needs and ambitions of those we work with and invest in, and of the public we all serve. The work on developing that strategy will start in late 2026 – and in line with our service design approach, opportunities for people across the country to help shape what comes next will be at the heart of it.