

UK Town of Culture explained

UK Town of Culture is a brand new DCMS competition. For the first time, DCMS is inviting towns across the UK to enter the competition to showcase original storytelling, and empowering, accessible culture. The competition is targeted at all towns. Inspired by the success of the flagship UK City of Culture, which is a proven model for cultural placemaking, this competition aims to spotlight the cultural contribution of towns to our national story. In order to ensure we are able to showcase towns of different sizes, we will be introducing small, medium and large-size category winners and from these three designations, an overall UK Town of Culture winner will be selected.

The winning town will be awarded £3 million to deliver a cultural programme in 2028 of around six months. Additionally, the two finalists from their category will receive £250,000 each to deliver elements of their bid.

It is a UK-wide programme, developed in collaboration with the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Benefits of winning

In addition to the £3 million main prize and £250,000 finalist prizes, we anticipate that winning will lead to significant, demonstrable outcomes, including a boost in civic pride, greater participation in cultural activities, and the formation of enduring community partnerships. These partnerships will help build a strong sense of place and champion grassroots arts and culture, mirroring the proven impact of the UK City of Culture programme. Research has shown that for the UK City of Culture programme more than 70% of attendees to UK City of Culture events feel a greater sense of pride. We also know that the benefits for places extend well beyond their title period, leading to a lasting legacy of social and cultural change. We expect to see similar benefits for the UK Town of Culture.

Benefits of bidding

Competing for the title, irrespective of whether or not a place wins, can have a hugely positive impact on the local community. It fosters a sense of local pride and strengthens collaboration among local partners. Previous bidders for the UK City of Culture report that the process brought the community together to develop strategic and cohesive cultural leadership. In turn, this enabled them to showcase – and open up access to – local heritage, art, and culture.

Funding

We recognise that there are costs associated with developing and submitting a bid and we want places to feel able to bid and to benefit from the bidding process. There is a simple EOI phase and has been designed to keep costs to a minimum at the outset. DCMS will award bid development grants of £60,000 to each of the shortlisted places which are invited to submit a full application.

You need to outline in your EOI how you would spend this £60,000 grant. It is a flexible source of funding to strengthen your full application and help to develop a scalable plan, for example on:

- Research & Development
- Consultation
- Human resources
- Data gathering
- Commercial expertise for capital plans

Competition criteria

The UK Town of Culture 2028 criteria sets out the strategic objectives of the programme and should be used by bidding places to inform their bids. They will be used by the Expert Advisory Panel to assess bids at all stages of the competition.

To be successful, EOIs must demonstrate how they meet the criteria and show potential to make a significant contribution to the aims of the UK Town of Culture programme.

Please note: If a large number of applications are received, an initial sift will take place on the first criterion, 'Your Story' only.

UK Town of Culture 2028 competition aims and criteria

Aim: 1. Your story: tell us about the unique story and culture of your town.

1. Vision: A strong, compelling local story that uses culture to bring people together, reflecting place, pride, and contribution to the national story.
2. Local Need: How your programme builds on local strengths while addressing specific local priorities.
3. Empower: Commitment to involving communities, grassroots artists, creatives, and local leaders in shaping the bid, programme, and legacy, devolving decision-making where possible.

Aim: 2. Culture for Everyone: how you will design a cultural programme that provides visible, accessible culture and boosts your town's profile.

4. Quality and Innovation: A high-quality, bold programme drawing on arts, heritage, and creative industries, demonstrating excellence, creativity, innovation, and use of technology to widen access.
5. Opportunity: Expanding opportunities for those who currently do not access cultural infrastructure, especially young people, while creating new opportunities for existing participants.
6. Accessibility: Ensuring the programme is accessible to all ages and underserved communities, providing a safe, supportive, non-discriminatory environment.
7. Communication: A well-resourced communications plan that reaches multiple audiences and shines a spotlight on the town's contribution to national life.

Aim: 3. Making it happen: how you will deliver a successful programme.

8. Partnerships: Strong, collaborative leadership with clear commitment from local authorities, community organisations, and cultural/heritage partners, including pursuit of new opportunities and lasting connections.
9. Programme Management: Evidence of capacity, capability, and effective processes to deliver the programme successfully.
10. Financial Management: A realistic, viable budget representing value for money, with clear monitoring processes and plans to attract appropriate funding.
11. Monitoring, Evaluation & Legacy: A clear plan for evaluating impact (including environmental sustainability), sharing insights, and strengthening or rejuvenating cultural and heritage infrastructure with realistic expectations.

Who can bid?

We welcome bids from places across the UK. To be eligible, bidding places must demonstrate the capability to successfully manage, fund, and deliver a programme that clearly meets the established

criteria. Bidders will be required to show their confidence in, and readiness for, programme delivery both in the EOI application and, in greater detail, during the full application stage.

The only areas precluded from bidding are any parts of Greater London.

We want to ensure that towns of all different sizes are showcased when applying for the competition, therefore, we have introduced three prize categories. We will be introducing small, medium and large-size category winners and from these three finalists, an overall UK Town of Culture winner will be selected. We will be using the Office of National Statistics definitions for towns/urban areas based on population size to determine categories and you will not be expected to apply to a specific category.

Small Town Under 20,000 people

Medium Town 20,000 - 75,000

Large Town Over 75,000

Which organisations can bid?

We expect bids to be from a partnership for your bidding place and include the relevant local authorities. This partnership may be well-established, but it does not need to be and we welcome bids from newly formed place partnerships. Bids will need to specify a single organisation to be 'Lead applicant' for information and communication purposes during the competition process. The Lead applicant must be a formally constituted accountable organisation; they do not need to be a local authority, but the relevant local authority will need to be in a dedicated role in the bid partnership.

The partnership should demonstrate commitment to work collaboratively and could include a range of community and cross-sector partners such as: local businesses, industry and civic leaders, cultural bodies, local library services, voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. It should also demonstrate commitment to actively including local communities in decision-making and supporting them to directly shape what happens in their area. This commitment to community collaboration should be demonstrated at all stages of the competition.

Accountability for the programme

If successful, the winning places will be required to specify a chosen 'Accountable Body' and 'Delivery Body' for their programme (which may be the same organisation but does not need to be). You will need to set out your plan for this at the EOI stage.

What do we mean by culture?

Culture means different things to different places and communities, and we want local stories and the unique character of places to shine through in bids. We expect bidders to showcase the strengths of the cultural offer in the area, acknowledge its weaknesses, and its ambition and potential to improve. It will be up to you to make the case for which activities are included in your proposed cultural programme and articulate the step change you aim to achieve. We expect programmes to be able to appeal to a wide range of audiences and to increase participation in cultural activities, especially amongst young people, as well as contributing to community cohesion and wellbeing.

Applicants are encouraged to include activities encompassing a broad definition of culture and its creative industries and how it relates to the town's history, story and community. This includes but is not limited to: visual arts; literature; music; theatre; dance; combined arts; architecture; crafts; design; heritage and the historic and natural environment; museums and galleries; libraries and

archives; film; broadcasting and media; video games; animation; visual and special effects; photography; and publishing.

Key milestones and dates

Expressions of Interest (EOI)	Opens: 14 Jan 2026 DEADLINE: 31 MARCH 2026
Information event for bidders	21 Jan 2026
Shortlisted places announced	Spring 2026
Full application period	Spring 2026-Autumn 2026
Panel visits	Autumn 2026
Finalists and winner announced	Early 2027
Delivery Period	2028

This text has been shortened for brevity. For more information, please see the guidance for bidders: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-town-of-culture-2028-expression-of-interest/uk-town-of-culture-2028-expression-of-interest-guidance-for-bidders>

The EOI is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-town-of-culture-2028-expression-of-interest>