

COTN 2025: Place and Culture Discussion Paper

This policy paper is intended to support discussion at Convention of the North 2025, which is taking place in Preston on the 27th and 28th of February. It is one of six policy papers; the full set includes Transport, Trade and Investment, Net Zero, Place and Culture, Innovation, and the cross-cutting theme of Skills and Healthy Work.

Proposals included within these drafts have been collectively developed by working groups consisting of local and combined authority officials and key Northern partners. **They represent a draft programme only; they will be taken in draft form for co-development and iteration at the Convention policy sessions, and confirmed by Northern leaders following the Convention.**

The North is already demonstrating visible policy leadership across diverse areas, from trade and investment collaboration to bus re-regulation, and pan-Northern programmes to grow the creative industries. In the run-up to the 2025 Convention of the North, it's clear that the region has a twin-track opportunity to help the new UK Government deliver against its objectives, based on the North's specific opportunities and challenges.

- The North can **deliver growth at scale** to support the national mission of increasing living standards across all regions of the UK.
- The North faces serious, long running challenges to unlocking the potential of its people, held back by poverty, inequality, and health challenges. By **investing in the North's people**, we can underpin and strengthen the activities of growth and improve the lives and lived experience of our residents.

To make the most of this opportunity, Northern leaders and mayors have agreed to prioritise resources and capacity in the areas where there is the greatest opportunity to add value to the ongoing work of Northern places, communities and businesses:

The North's draft delivery programme

| Twin-track opportunity | Pan-Northern Delivery Priorities | | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------|----------|-------------------|------------|
| The North meeting the national Growth Mission | Trade and Investment | Transport | Net Zero | Culture and Place | Innovation |
| Meeting the inclusion challenge in the North | Skills and Healthy Work | | | | |

1. Our gamechanger proposition

Building on the Manifesto for the North, this paper sets out a draft work programme for Northern collaboration, case-making and partnership delivery. This is intended to form the basis of pan-Northern collaboration into the medium-term, continuing the priorities of each subsequent Convention of the North in the interim between each event with an active programme of policy development, collaboration and implementation.

This ongoing collaboration is the focus of the discussions at the Convention policy sessions: to address what the priorities for the North to deliver together.

Additionally, a small number of gamechanger propositions have emerged through a structured policy development process that reflects the North's long-term strategic ambitions. They build upon the foundations set by the Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review and the 2024 Manifesto for the North, aligning with the evolving institutional and policy landscape. These gamechangers have been shaped through collaboration between Northern leaders, local and combined authorities, and key stakeholders.

While the gamechangers for the 2025 Convention intersect with multiple policy themes, one with particular relevance for the Place and Culture theme is the North's Place, Cultural, and Natural assets gamechanger:



Investing in the North's Place, Cultural and Natural assets, by co-investment in the Place and Culture North Initiative, delivering the Investing in Nature for the North proposition, and supporting the jewel-in-the-crown One Creative North initiative.

The North's cultural, creative, and natural assets are fundamental to its economic and social renewal, shaping both its local distinctiveness and international competitiveness. Through Place and Culture North 2025-2030 and Investing in Nature for the North, we have a game-changing opportunity to unlock the full potential of these assets. Supporting One Creative North will drive investment in the region's world-class creative industries, ensuring access to finance, skills, and connectivity that can propel the sector to new heights. In parallel, the Investing in Nature for the North programme will harness the power of the region's vast natural capital, accelerating landscape-scale nature recovery and securing long-term environmental and economic resilience.

These initiatives, developed through collaboration across Northern local and combined authorities and sector partnerships, demonstrate the North's readiness to lead on place-based investment. With the right co-investment from Government, they will not only build on the sector's existing £16.6 billion contribution to the Northern economy but also create a more sustainable, inclusive, and thriving future for communities across the region.

2. Why Place and Culture?

Place and Culture is a new theme for the 2025 Convention, building on the People and Place work of previous years. The theme aims to highlight the unique cultural and heritage assets of the North, emphasising their importance in economic growth, social inclusivity, and environmental sustainability:

- **Cultural and heritage significance:** The North holds a unique place in the UK's identity with rich cultural assets of national and international importance, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites, National Parks, and UNESCO Creative Cities. These assets foster deep civic pride and a sense of belonging among residents.
- **Inclusive growth in and across the North:** With a diverse population of 15.4 million, the North's cultural assets are vital for attracting talent, fostering community pride, and addressing regional disparities. The commercial Creative Industries accounts for £4.5 billion of economic output in the North of England with an estimated 103,800 creative businesses in the North. Of these, approximately 18% are expected to grow 20% or more in the next year. Investments in these businesses are key to advancing the inclusive economies across Northern cities, towns, rural and coastal communities and across other priority sectors, such as manufacturing and digital.
- **Economic and environmental impact:** The cultural and heritage sectors contribute £5.8 billion directly to the economy, with an additional £10.4 billion in related economic activities. The North's green spaces and natural habitats also play a crucial role in sustainability, contributing to Net Zero goals through initiatives like the Northern Forest and peatland restoration in the Great North Bog.

As a priority policy theme, Place and Culture provides rich common ground for connected investment and impact. The question is not whether we should support the cultural, creative and place-focused industries – conservation construction, visitor and experience economy, green and nature-focused sectors – as cultural assets or economic drivers. The answer lies in recognising that the two are fundamentally inseparable. The long-term success of the UK economy depends on nurturing culture, creativity and placemaking – not as luxuries – but as foundations for sustainable growth.

The North's opportunities in place and culture

The North's unique assets in place and culture offer significant economic and social value, with creative, cultural, and heritage sectors generating billions in direct and indirect economic contributions, supporting over 170,000 jobs, and attracting billions in domestic and international tourism spending.

Beyond economic impact, the region's natural, cultural, and heritage wealth provides wider benefits, enriching education, inclusivity, health, and community pride. Collaboration across sectors, steered by established partnerships like the Northern Place and Culture Partnership, Screen Alliance North, Nature North, and the Northern Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) network aim to harness these strengths, fostering a cohesive approach to growth.

Recognising its diversity and 15.4 million residents as a core strength, the North's cultural assets and creative potential are essential for regional and national economic recovery and growth, supporting vibrant, distinct communities across cities, towns, and villages. As the English region with the highest level of devolution, Northern mayors and leaders have demonstrated a steadfast belief in – and commitment to – place and culture as fundamental tools for generating inclusive growth and people-focused renewal in their areas.

The North's challenges in place and culture

The North's creative sector faces challenges including limited access to resources, investment, and talent retention, which restricts its growth compared to the Greater South East. In 2020, 67.8% of the UK Creative Industries were concentrated in London and the South East. Despite 'Levelling Up' and regional interventions, this London-centric concentration rose from levels in 2010.

Many children in the region grow up in challenging circumstances, with higher rates of poverty, poorer early developmental outcomes, and increased exposure to neglect, abuse, and social care. Health Equity North's research shows that growing up disadvantaged increases the likelihood of lower educational attainment. These outcomes directly influence the region's ability to cultivate a skilled, confident, and creative workforce – an essential ingredient for driving the growth of the North's creative sector and raising its profile on a global stage. Furthermore, cultural, environmental, and planning services have been cut by 50% over the last decade. In England, the most deprived areas have seen the highest cuts, with a disproportionate impact on the North.

While 2023 research by the Creative Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) highlighted the breadth and growth of creative clusters across the North of England, the difference in access to finance and innovation investment – across both public and private sectors – was significant and a key barrier to catalysing economic growth for the benefit of Northern regions and the UK economy as a whole.

In the visitor economy, despite unrivalled physical and natural assets, the North struggles with a low profile in tourism due to fragmentation and a lack of unified brand, hindering its ability to achieve its full potential for international business, leisure and experience-driven visits.

3. Delivering policy change in the North

With a new parliament, the national policy landscape is rapidly evolving, while Northern places are already leading delivery, policy innovation and investment. This will have substantial implications for pan-Northern delivery. Some of the most relevant examples are highlighted below.

Invest 2035: Industrial Strategy Green Paper

The creative industries were included as one of the eight key growth-driving sectors in the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, as well as a 'foundational sector' for inclusive growth. This builds on the 2023 Creative Industries Sector Vision, which holds policy pillars around cluster development, connected research and innovation and deeper connectivity with pride of place and social outcomes. In addition to the commercial creative industries, wider sectors associated with Place and Culture also have an opportunity to take advantage of this renewed focus on the importance of their economic contributions and for the North to further develop its strong base. A new ministerial position co-funded by DCMS and DSIT is leading the Government's new approach and, with the creative and cultural sectors featuring as priority sectors in each of the North's established Strategic Authorities, the North is well positioned to lead collaborative models for inclusive growth.

Autumn 2024 Budget

In the Autumn budget, the Government showed its commitment to the UK Creative Industries in an array of initiatives, including £15 billion in tax relief over the next ten years, an additional £3 million for the Creative Careers Programme and committed investments in new assets for growth, including Crown Works Studios in London and Eden Morecambe in Lancashire.

Development and place-based policy

Across the Government's missions, high street regeneration is a key aspect with economic and social renewal and youth engagement as central drivers. The focus on housebuilding requires new models for viability, green planning, placemaking and social/educational infrastructure. Nature recovery and access to nature is cited as integral for people and place developments, driving the expansion of green planning policy and provision.

Devolution and people-focused policy

As the vision for English devolution crystalises, underpinned by the approach outlined in the English Devolution White Paper, the North is leading the way in trailblazing policies and programmes that connect place, culture, inclusive growth and social renewal. Northern Combined Authorities are piloting initiatives that target health, skills and work in single interventions, supporting collaborative systems cross-departmental collaboration, action, impact and evaluation. Work across green social prescribing and creative health share the Government's emphasis on reducing health inequalities and prevention, supporting both quality of life and aspirations for the future across the North's diverse communities.

4. Alignment with other pan-Northern policy themes

We can't see policy priorities in isolation, and there are strong links and inter-dependencies between each theme. There are opportunities to explore connections and crossovers that enhance outcomes across multiple agendas. Recognising these links ensures a more comprehensive approach to addressing the North's challenges and opportunities:

Place and Culture and Transport:

Enhancing transport connectivity across the North supports economic integration and broadens access to the region's cultural and natural assets by creating more seamless connections between population centres and regional destinations. Improved infrastructure reduces geographical barriers, enabling more fluid movement of people, skills, and visitors, which strengthens regional economic potential.

Place and Culture and Net Zero:

Likewise, investment in natural capital, such as the Northern Forest and the Great North Bog, contributes to the North's sustainability targets and communities' wellbeing but also positions the region as a destination for regenerative tourism and a stronger visitor economy. Place and Culture sector-specific initiatives around sustainability, nature recovery and clean energy support Net Zero targets while addressing carbon-intensive issues with heritage buildings, touring and impact-led business development.

Place and Culture and Trade and Investment:

Establishing a strong Northern brand is essential for attracting investment, talent, and visitors, reinforcing the region's distinctive economic and cultural strengths. Leveraging the North's world-class creative industries, heritage assets, and culture will enhance the international appeal of the North, drive inward investment, and support the growth of key sectors such as screen, digital, and the visitor economy.

Place and Culture and Skills and Healthy Work

In addition to the five key themes for the 2025 Convention, Skills and Healthy Work has been incorporated as a cross-cutting and enabling theme across all policy areas. This reflects the importance of fostering Northern cooperation on skills, health, and social policy to support sustainable and inclusive economic growth. By embedding these considerations into each policy area, the Convention aims to create a holistic framework for driving transformative change in the North.

The integration of Skills and Healthy Work with Place and Culture manifests in several key ways across the North:

- The development of a strong talent pipeline, drawing from the wealth of creative graduates across the region, is essential to support the North's vibrant cultural sector, related-sector ecology and retain creative talent within the region.
- Creative and design-led education serves as a foundational enabler for regional development, with its integration into broader skills programmes creating natural bridges between cultural capital and inclusive economic growth.
- The sustainable growth of the North's creative economy relies on recognising and supporting its distinctive employment patterns - the interconnected ecosystem of freelancers, microbusinesses and portfolio careers requires specific enabling infrastructure and policy frameworks to thrive.
- A skilled, healthy workforce underpins both creative sector growth and broader societal wellbeing, with quality-of-life initiatives and pan-Northern frameworks enabling both economic and health benefits through green and creative approaches to health and wellbeing.

5. Developing a pan-Northern policy programme

The Place and Culture theme and its policy priorities directly build on the People and Place theme from the 2024 Convention. It reflects a refined focus on the North's unique cultural and heritage assets as critical levers for economic growth, community wellbeing, and sustainable development. This year's approach prioritises practical collaboration across creative industries, green jobs, and the visitor economy to address shared challenges and maximise the potential of these sectors. By linking these efforts with national priorities, the North aims to strengthen its position as a hub for inclusive and place-based growth.

Policy Priority 1: Fuelling Growth in Northern Creative and Place-focused sectors

The 2024 Convention proposed establishing a Northern Creative supercluster corridor, unlocking finance, attracting and retaining talent, and capturing national attention.

One Creative North is a pan-regional initiative that aims to unleash the potential of the Creative Industries in the North. It will address three barriers to growth: access to finance, skills, and connectivity. Jude Kelly CBE has been commissioned to develop the proposal into a report and investable proposition in May 2025.

Pan-Northern partnership work across combined authorities, sector bodies and universities is developing related variety 'Place Clusters' across Northern towns, rural and coastal communities.

One Creative North is a pan-regional approach to unleashing the potential of the creative industries with three central pillars with the potential to benefit the whole region:

- Access to finance, suited to subsector and business life cycles
- A coordinated approach to life-long skills training for the creative industries
- Greater connectivity, visibility and access to opportunity across the creative industries.

Jude Kelly CBE has been commissioned to undertake a six-month scoping exercise, hosted by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and supported by the BBC. In May 2025 the results of this work will be shared including:

- Proposed mechanism and partner(s) for access to finance and funder(s) identified
- Proposals for creative industries skills training initiatives, taking advantage of the increased flexibility anticipated with devolution, meeting the fast-changing needs of the creative industries sector and its workforce
- Proposals for growing the connectivity and visibility of the creative industries sector.
- Recommendation for the future management of One Creative North
- Proposed three-year work plan

One Creative North is the jewel in the crown in terms of pan-Northern efforts to 'link up, tool up and skill up' the North's Place Sectors. Alongside the targeted opportunity around the commercial creative industries, there is clear potential to connect sector support, workforce

and leadership development and investment-readiness support when working *across* sectors defined by place. These 'Place Sectors' include:

- Creative and cultural industries, focusing on content creation and presentation
- Heritage, including conservation construction and traditional heritage craft
- Green, landscape and nature jobs
- Visitor economy professions, including festivals and public events
- Artisan food and beverage production celebrating heritage and place

There are synergies and similar characteristics across these sectors. Drawing on the NP11's February 2024 'Innovation Clusters' report, the North presents opportunities to build and support related variety clusters and career development, offering a new paradigm for economic development and supporting Place Sector businesses across towns, rural and coastal communities across Northern England.

Convening, connecting and pursuing funding for collaborative work across these Northern Place sectors – supporting focused groups such as Nature North, Screen Alliance North, Museum Development North and the LVEP network – is a core focus for the Northern Place and Culture Partnership with an equal delivery focus on inclusive growth and tangible public benefit.

Proposal 1a: Universities and Sector Partnerships Research Programme

Co-develop and support pan-Northern research programmes with universities and sector partnerships to support creative and place cluster development in Northern towns, rural and coastal communities.

Proposal 1b: Northern Workforce Development

Co-develop and deliver a Northern workforce development programme, supporting innovation and growth in related variety 'place clusters'.

Proposal 1c: Deepen Collaboration Between Creative and Place Stakeholders

Deepen work with and between the Creative Policy and Evidence Centre, the N8, Yorkshire Universities, North East Universities, and the Key Cities Innovation Network to maximise creative and place sector research, knowledge exchange and innovation opportunities.

Policy Priority 2: Connecting the North's Place-Based Visitor Economy

The North of England is the UK's most advanced area for LVEP coverage in the UK. As the pilot organisation, the North East's Destination Development Partnership (DDP) is the only entity to draw funding to support their connective work.

Building on Visit England's new 2025 Strategy, pan-Northern collaboration will strive for pan-Northern roll-out of DDPs with a mandate around developing/delivering a regenerative tourism programme by 2027 and doubling international visits to the North by 2030.

Together, Northern LVEPs, DDPs, and combined authorities can transform the role and positive impact a connected Northern visitor economy can, and will, play within wider place strategy ambitions.

The success of the visitor economy in the North is intrinsically linked to the place sectors of arts, culture, heritage and nature, and this relationship is mutually reinforcing. Since the pandemic, the policy and partnership landscape supporting the visitor economy has significantly matured. In 2022, VisitEngland established a portfolio of nationally supported, strategic, and high-performing LVEPs. The North stands as the UK's most advanced region for Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) coverage. As VisitEngland prepares to launch its 2025-2030 strategy, the North is well-positioned to align with, enhance, and amplify this national vision across the region.

As the pilot organisation, the North East's Destination Development Pilot (DDP) is the only entity to draw funding to support their connective work. In 2024, they launched an ambitious Regenerative Tourism framework, which serves as a blueprint and roadmap for other LVEPs and pan-Northern ambitions.

Visit England is a member of the Northern Place and Culture Partnership and work across the place sectors since the 2024 Convention have borne out clear opportunities for pan-Northern collaboration and impact. Northern LVEPs are in regular dialogue and are collaborative on shared aspirations and initiatives. As strong Northern leaders, they are positioned to maximise inclusive growth and the North's international brand. Recent dialogue with Screen Alliance North sparked interest in a growing trend for 'set jetting', underlining the growing appetite for visitor experiences at filming locations for international film, television and music videos, encompassing both iconic and recent screen productions.

Proposal 2a: Regenerative Tourism

Support pan-Northern development of the North East's Regenerative Tourism framework with Nature North, driving an actionable framework for pan-Northern scale up.

Proposal 2b: Inward Investment in Screen and Music Tourism

Develop clear proposals for work between Northern LVEPs, Screen Alliance North and strategic pan-Northern music programmes to explore potential for both inward investment in Screen Sectors and a cohesive 'set jetting' offer for visitors.

Proposal 2c: DDP Coverage

Support Visit England and LVEP leads to co-develop proposals for full DDP coverage across Northern England, building on the North East DDP's learning and delivery.

Policy Priority 3: Cultivating Quality of Life Through Pride in Place-Led Growth and Green and Creative Care

Across population health, creative education, access to nature, community cohesion and pride in place, there are shared aims around the quality of life experienced by Northerners across age groups and geographic locales. Pan-Northern work to cultivate quality of life would include:

- Development and piloting of 'Pride in Place'-led models for regenerative and hyperlocal growth
- A Green and Creative Health pilot initiative in Northern secondary schools, embedding long-term research and co-creation to develop and scale good practice
- Co-develop, support and secure resource for a pan-Northern 'Pride in Place and Storytelling' programme.

Across policy interventions in population health, creative education, access to nature, community cohesion and pride in place, there are shared aims around the quality of life experienced by Northerners – across age groups and geographic locales. Quality of life shifts the focus back to people, but in ways that consider the genuine links between place, culture and the potential for these links to make 'life worth living'.

As a policy frame, quality of life also aligns with the policy shift to preventative measures and public health. Rather than aiming to not be sick, digging into initiatives that surround healing, pride, and celebration offer new focus points for collaborative, pan-Northern working. This asset-based approach also aligns with a series of the Government's new missions.

There is an additional shift, bringing established practice in creative health and green social prescribing into a collaborative model of green and creative care. This term builds useful bridges for health professionals who report that green care and creative health can feel like competing measures. It shifts the potential for creativity to encompass interventions in the arts, heritage, and everyday creativity.

The three policy propositions ideas below build on extensive good practice and trailblazing leadership across the North. They seek to bring something distinct, rather than duplicating emerging activity, partnerships or models.

Proposal 3a: Pride in Place Models for Regeneration and Growth

A number of place-based models are aiming to regenerate a place and spur economic growth. BIDs are the most established model, but there have been recent innovations focusing on culture/community/creative-led regeneration: Creative Improvement Districts (GMCA), Cultural and Creative Zones (in the former North of Tyne Combined Authority), Creative Enterprise Zones (GLA), Community Improvement Districts, among others. With a dual lens of green and creative care and quality of life, the aim would be to devise a 'white label model' to test with willing Northern place partners, 'skinned' with their own place branding but with a common skeleton of policy and development toolkits, datasets, and impact matrices. New models will draw from exemplar Creative People and Places Programmes, part of Arts Council England's long-standing strategic investment in place.



Proposal 3b: Green and Creative Health Pilot in Northern Secondary Schools

Building on the policy proposition for 2024 Convention for the North, we aim to build a 3-year pilot and 5-year wrap-around research programme to embed green and creative care with school counselling measures. The crises of resource-deficient schools, [urgent support for young people's mental health](#), and extreme resource shortage for SEN students has informed this workstream. The evidence base for green care and creative health is compelling. This pilot initiative, working with Northern universities, would explore how to embed into the secondary schools' structure in response to all three.

Proposal 3c: Storytelling and Pride in Place Initiative

Northern writers, literature festivals, writing agencies, major and indie publishers, Writing Centres, and world-leading writing schools have thrived in the North. This initiative would anchor the cultural and creative industries to existing infrastructure, fostering a wealth of place- and community-based co-created storytelling across various mediums, such as the written word, spoken word, film, radio, murals, zines, and online content. Parks, public green spaces, libraries, and heritage buildings would serve as the infrastructure for place-focused activities, placemaking, and the stories themselves. The pilot initiative would be developed in close collaboration with Directors of Public Health across the North and Health Equity North.

Annex: Draft Place and Culture Delivery Programme

As part of the focus on delivery for COTN 2025, the policy programme is designed to focus on activities that the North can deliver in partnership between places, with Government, and with the private sector, Northern institutions and our communities, as outlined below:

| Pan-Northern and Intra-Northern collaboration | Greater devolution to Northern Places | Business, investment and institutional activity |
|---|---|---|
| <p>1a: Co-develop a research programme to support creative and place cluster development in Northern towns, rural and coastal communities.</p> <p>2a: Support pan-Northern development of a regenerative tourism with Nature North</p> <p>2b: Develop clear proposals for work between Northern LVEPs and Screen Alliance North to explore inward investment in Screen Sectors</p> <p>3a: Work with MCA colleagues on a scalable 'Pride in Place' regeneration and growth model</p> <p>3b: Develop, secure resource for, and deliver aligned intervention and research programmes for a 'Green and Creative Health' pilot in Northern secondary schools.</p> <p>3c: Develop, secure resource and deliver a pan-Northern pride-in-place storytelling programme focusing on Northern strength in community assets, writing, film and music.</p> | <p>2c: Support Visit England and LVEP leads to co-develop proposals for full DDP coverage across Northern England</p> <p>3b: Work with the emerging Community Wealth Fund to align the Green and Creative Counselling pilot with wider rollout of a cohesive English social prescribing offer within Northern England</p> | <p>1b: Co-develop and deliver a Northern workforce development programme, supporting innovation and growth in related variety 'place clusters'</p> <p>1c: Deepen work with and between the Creative Policy and Evidence Centre, the N8, Yorkshire Universities, North East Universities, the Key Cities Innovation Network to maximise creative and place sector research, knowledge exchange and innovation opportunities.</p> |