

Economy, Culture and Tourism Scrutiny Panel

DATE	08/10/2026
REPORT OF	Damien Jaines-White, Assistant Director Regeneration
SUBJECT	UK Town of Culture
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

An application to the UK Town of Culture programme contributes to many of the Council's Outcomes. It will contribute to a stronger economy and stronger communities, supporting business growth, nurturing skills of all generations including building the futures for children and young people and enhancing community interaction. Creativity and telling our story of culture and heritage will form a core part of transforming our town centres into attractive and vibrant places, promote social cohesion, and where residents and businesses are proud of where they live and work, promoting pride in place and contribute to a healthier North East Lincolnshire.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK Town of Culture programme was launched in late 2025 with a deadline of 31st March 2026 to submit an expression of interest. Grimsby was shortlisted as one of 15 towns to be the first UK Town of Culture in July 2026. Grimsby is in the large town category alongside Basildon, Birkenhead and Rotherham. Following a selection process three towns will be shortlisted for the title with a winner being selected to host UK Town of Culture in 2028. The full application from Grimsby will build upon the momentum generated over the last five years and provide an opportunity to showcase ambitious plans to place creativity at the heart of place making plans for Grimsby.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

To note the success of the expression of interest process for shortlisting of Grimsby and to support the submission of the full application to the UK Town of Culture 2028 competition.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

1.1 Liverpool won the European Capital of Culture title in 2008. This was a Europe-wide competition to highlight one city based on its cultural offer. This proved such a huge success for the city and the region that a UK-specific City of Culture initiative was launched in 2013 to give more cities in the UK a chance to hold a title that draws attention to their cultural offering and brings economic and cultural benefits into the winning city. Every four years, a new UK City of Culture is chosen, with the most recent being Bradford in 2025. The 2029 City of Culture shortlist is expected to be announced in late September 2026.

1.2 Further expanding this model, the first UK Town of Culture programme was launched on 30th October 2025 by The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The winning town will receive £3 million to deliver a cultural programme in 2028 (two runners up will receive £250,000). All 15 shortlisted towns have received £60,000 to help deliver their full bids for the competition. The UK Town of Culture competition is targeted at small, medium and large towns, enabling them to tell their unique story and shining a spotlight on the important role that towns play in our national life.

Applications for the competition will be judged on three main criteria:

- Your story - the unique story and culture of your town
- Culture for everyone - how your town will design a cultural programme for all and boosts your town's profile
- Making it happen - how you will deliver a successful programme

Applications will need to demonstrate how culture will address any local needs and transform a place economically, socially and reputationally over the long term through:

- Authentic place story that brings people together
- Celebratory and accessible delivery
- Bold and ambitious cultural programme
- Community empowerment and participation
- Collaborative partnerships and meaningful connections
- Building a sense of belonging and inspiring local pride

Source: [UK Town of Culture 2028 Full application: Guidance for bidders - GOV.UK](#)

Application process

Milestone	Deadline
Full application period	July 2026 – 30 th November 2026 at 5pm
Information Sharing Day – DCMS and UK Town of Culture panel members	14 th September 2026
Online session regarding evaluation, monitoring and review	30 th September 2026
Visit by Panel Chair, Sir Phil Redmond	By Christmas 2026
Presentations (online)	After 30 th November 2026, likely January/February 2027
Panel visits to winner in each category	Early 2027
Overall winner announced	By 31 st March 2027
Preparation period	April 2027 to 2028
Delivery Period (6 months)	2028

Development Activities

In addition to the £60,000 grant from DCMS to support bid development, the Council has committed up to £100,000 of additional funding to maximise our opportunity for success.

To support the development of an ambitious and innovative full application, four temporary freelance roles have been recruited covering brand identity, community lead facilitator, young people's lead facilitator and creative lead.

At the time of writing this report our full application communications and engagement campaign will commence in late September 2026 and run through to November 2026. Alongside many pop-up activities and meeting residents in their spaces arranged by the lead roles, we will have an open public event in October to promote our bid to become the UK's first Town of Culture and share how people can get involved in the campaign. Creative and heritage sector engagement will also take place in October as well as business and partner briefing sessions.

The drafting of the bid will be overseen by a subgroup of the Greater Grimsby Board with co-opted members from the Creativity Board, alongside expertise in public health and children and young peoples' engagement.

2. RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES AND EQUALITY ISSUES

2.1 A successful Town of Culture bid would likely lead to the following, linked to the 'stronger economy and stronger communities' ethos of the North East Lincolnshire Council Plan:

- National acclaim and coverage.
- Greater chance of securing further investment into arts, culture and heritage investment, alongside other industries.
- Provide the platform to develop new national and international partnerships
- Create further opportunities for our creative and heritage sectors, developing their skills as well as other businesses buying into the title.
- Compliment the breadth of capital regeneration taking place across our towns, including preservation of our heritage.
- Boost the reputation of North East Lincolnshire and the Council, as an engaging and effective place.
- Enhance health and wellbeing of North East Lincolnshire residents and sense of pride in place, by telling our story.
- Boost visitor numbers, town centre footfall and trade, further enhancing attractive and vibrant town centres.

2.2 From a strategic perspective NEL's status as a Heritage Place (Heritage Fund), a Priority Place (Arts Council England) and a priority for Historic England provides the opportunity to work closely with these funders and others to increase investment into UK Town of Culture. There is also the opportunity to utilise the status as UK Town of Culture to generate further funding support from philanthropic sources, corporate sponsorship and trusts and foundations.

2.3 Competition for the UK Town of Culture continues to be extremely competitive with a shortlist of 15 towns, however, the opportunity to be a large town winner is a one in four possibility with the chance of being awarded £250,000 as a finalist. Therefore, it is important to utilise the full application process to continue to increase the visibility of heritage and culture in North East Lincolnshire to help establish long term ambitious plans that support attractive & vibrant town centres, boost visitor happiness and satisfaction, preserve our heritage, nurturing our children and building their future, telling our story of culture and heritage.

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

A clear message that Grimsby is making an application to UK Town of Culture highlights shows to residents and visitors that creativity is for all and builds upon progress made in recent years. An application aligns with the Council Plan, Creativity Strategy, Grimsby Masterplan, Our Children, Our Strategy, Marmot Place principles, Pride in Place ambitions and Community Plans.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The activity planned for the coming months is fully funded through existing Council budgets and the £60,000 grant awarded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The development and submission of the full application represent a significant opportunity to secure up to £3 million of investment to support the delivery of a cultural programme in 2028, with runner-up places each attracting funding of £250,000. In addition to the direct funding opportunity, UK Town of Culture status would provide a strong platform to attract further external investment from philanthropic organisations, corporate sponsors, trusts and foundations. The profile and national recognition associated with the designation are also expected to support future funding bids and partnership opportunities, helping to maximise investment into North East Lincolnshire and enhance the long-term sustainability of the programme.

Consideration will be given to the potential use of Council match funding as part of the final application, where this would strengthen the bid and improve its prospects of success. Any such commitment would be subject to approval through the Council's established governance arrangements, including reporting to Scrutiny and other appropriate decision-making bodies where required.

Any future financial commitments arising from a successful application will be subject to detailed business planning, identification of funding sources and approval through the Council's established governance processes.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

The full application focusses on children and young people. Many of the activities could be delivered by UK Town of Culture will have a benefit to children and young people by enhancing creativity in a range of settings. This is likely to include supporting creative and heritage organisations engaging with children and young people within newer settings including the Horizon Onside Youth Zone, Our Big Picture, Unseen Arts and What if We Create alongside working with the NEL Music Hub, schools, Grimsby Institute and Franklin College. Children's Services also play a critical role in reaching children and young people through the virtual school, youth voice and participation and alternative provision such as home education.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURE RECOVERY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

The detailed creative programme for UK Town of Culture will be developed by the creative lead in conjunction with the local creative sector, community groups and organisations and young people. It is anticipated that the creative programme will highlight Grimsby's unique natural assets and economic opportunities including our relationship with the sea and environment opportunities. It is anticipated that events and activities would take place in parks and green spaces bringing local people and visitors into contact with nature. In addition, consideration will be given to ensure the carbon footprint of activities is minimised by encouraging the use of sustainable transport and reducing the use of single use plastics and encouraging recycling contributing to environmentally sustainable practices.

7. PUBLIC HEALTH, HEALTH INEQUALITIES AND MARMOT IMPLICATIONS

A successful application to be UK Town of Culture will improve public health and reduce health inequalities by creating pride of place and supporting initiatives that promote physical and mental wellbeing. This includes widening access to a diverse range of creative activities and events, and creating safe, welcoming spaces where people can connect and participate, key factors in improving mental health and social cohesion. The Marmot Review highlights that opportunities for social participation and strong community networks are vital for improving health and reducing inequalities, contributing to longer and healthier lives.

8. MONITORING COMMENTS

In the opinion of the author, this report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

9. WARD IMPLICATIONS

This report covers activities across all wards in Grimsby and the impact of UK Town of Culture would be beneficial to residents across North East Lincolnshire .

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

11. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

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