

AGENDA 9, Enc vi) UK Town of Culture 2028 - Summary for Councillors

What is it?

A brand new DCMS competition inviting towns across the UK to showcase their unique story and culture. This is the first time towns (rather than cities) have been eligible for such a programme. The initiative builds on the success of UK City of Culture.

Prize Fund

- **Winner:** £3 million to deliver a cultural programme of approximately 6 months in 2028
- **Two finalists:** £250,000 each to deliver elements of their bid
- **Shortlisted places:** £60,000 development grant to prepare full applications

Size Categories

Towns will compete in categories based on population:

- Small: Under 20,000
- Medium: 20,000 - 75,000
- Large: Over 75,000

One winner will be selected from each category, with one of these three named as the overall UK Town of Culture.

Who Can Bid?

- Bids must be from a partnership including the relevant local authority
- A Lead Applicant organisation must be specified (doesn't have to be the council)
- Greater London is excluded
- Partnerships may be newly formed for this purpose

Key Dates

Milestone	Date
EOI opens	14 January 2026
Information event	21 January 2026
EOI deadline	31 March 2026
Shortlist announced	Spring 2026
Full applications	Spring - Autumn 2026
Winners announced	Early 2027
Delivery	2028

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What the EOI Requires

The Expression of Interest form has three sections:

1. **Your Story:** The unique story and culture of your town
2. **Culture for Everyone:** How you will design an accessible cultural programme
3. **Making it Happen:** How you will deliver a successful programme

Note: If there are many applications, initial sifting will be on "Your Story" only.

Criteria for Assessment

Applications will be judged on 12 criteria including:

- Vision and compelling local story
- Local need and priorities
- Community empowerment and involvement
- Quality and innovation
- Accessibility
- Partnership strength
- Programme and financial management
- Legacy and evaluation plans

Benefits of Bidding (Even Without Winning)

- Fosters local pride
- Strengthens collaboration among partners
- Brings community together around cultural leadership
- Opens up access to local heritage, art and culture

Considerations for Ashington

Potential strengths:

- Strong local identity and heritage story to tell
- Existing community partnerships
- Medium-sized town category (likely to face less competition than large towns)

Practical considerations:

- This would be a significant project requiring dedicated officer time to coordinate
- Need to identify/establish a bid partnership with community and cultural organisations
- EOI stage designed to be low-cost, but full application would require substantial work
- Council would need to consider its role: Lead Applicant, Accountable Body, or supporting partner?
- Timeline is tight - EOI deadline is 31 March 2026 (approximately 7 weeks)

Clerk's Note – UK Town of Culture 2028 (Expression of Interest)

Members are advised that progressing an Expression of Interest (EOI) for UK Town of Culture 2028 would require a significant investment of time, local knowledge, and partnership coordination within a relatively short timeframe. Preparation of a credible submission would rely heavily on insight into

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Ashington's heritage, cultural assets, community activity, and regeneration priorities, as well as the ability to evidence strong local partnerships and inclusive engagement.

At the EOI stage, the work involved would include:

- ❖ *Developing a clear and compelling narrative about Ashington's identity, heritage and cultural ambitions*
- ❖ *Engaging with cultural, community and voluntary sector partners to demonstrate collaboration and local support*
- ❖ *Identifying a suitable lead body and clarifying governance arrangements*
- ❖ *Assessing delivery capacity, resourcing implications and potential financial considerations*
- ❖ *Drafting responses that address accessibility, community involvement and long-term legacy*

Should Members wish to proceed, the Council would need to consider who is best placed to lead and coordinate this work, recognising existing officer capacity and current service priorities. A lead officer would need sufficient time and authority to convene partners, gather evidence and prepare the submission within the deadline.

While a bid would not guarantee success, potential benefits include strengthening local partnerships, building civic pride, articulating a shared cultural vision for the town, and raising Ashington's regional and national profile. Even at EOI stage, the process can help clarify future cultural priorities and support external funding opportunities.

Members should also note that the towns of Bishop Auckland, Berwick-upon-Tweed and North Shields have confirmed their intention to submit EOIs, with Hexham also expected to participate, indicating a competitive process within the region.