

## 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
<b>EOI deadline</b>	<b>31 March 2026</b>
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.*