CULTURAL COMPACTS

A report into the development
of Cultural Compacts in England

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

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INTRODUCTION

"Strong and sustained collaboration between strategic city partners can support collective, coordinated action to grow a city's cultural ecosystem, to drive lasting social and economic benefits. Cities with a clear vision for culture supported by business, city authorities, education and the cultural sector can align activity and funding and leverage new resources." [1]

[1] Cultural Cities Enquiry, 2019, p.10

Born out of the 2019 Cultural Cities Enquiry, Cultural Compacts are strategic place-based initiatives supported by the Arts Council and DCMS. They aim to foster and grow culture across England. This report into Cultural Compacts in England aims to summarise the origins of Compacts, their current state and proposes possible future opportunities and challenges.

Compact geographies range in scale from parish councils right up to combined authorities and their boards comprise local leaders in sectors such as the arts, local government, higher education, business, the NHS. They adopt a variety of governance structures and approaches to developing culture in their regions. They also have diverse trajectories. The flexibility of the Compact concept is one of its strengths, enabling it to be adapted to suit local needs. However, despite their diversity, there are several common themes and experiences highlighted in this report that are useful for peer learning and future policy development.

The report is structured in three parts. The first outlines the origins of Compacts and the purpose of this report in more detail, the second is based on themes relating to Compacts and their characteristics, and the third proposes recommendations to support the future development of Compacts.

1.1 BACKGROUND

Cultural Compacts were one of the key recommendations of the independent Cultural Cities Enquiry in 2019. This proposed a new model of strategic place-based leadership to drive inclusive growth in cities through investment in culture.

It defined culture as encompassing 'arts institutions, museums, libraries, the historic environment and cultural festivals, popular and grassroots culture' while also recognising that 'culture is a social expression that will take many different forms, and is ever evolving.'[2] The report made the case for Cultural Compacts through drawing on the example of City of Culture projects that illustrate the benefits achieved through citywide support of culture. These initiatives, which bring together key city stakeholders, were considered to raise ambition and focus investment and resources on a shared vision that aligned with the needs of local communities. The report recommended that strong cross-sector cultural leadership should be provided through a Cultural City Compact, defined as 'a strategic partnership bringing together city authorities, business, education, cultural and community leaders, to co-design and deliver a vision for culture in the city' and proposed that 'Effective Compacts will set out business plans to deliver measurable progress against local priorities.'[3] Alongside this leadership, the report also recommended new forms of investment, diversifying talent at all scales and a focus on place and cultural property.

Twenty places were successful in gaining Cultural Compact funding from ACE and DCMS in the first round of Compacts, launched in 2019. It is important to note that while the Cultural Cities Enquiry was focused on English cities, the places funded to found Compacts were more diverse in terms of scale, ranging from towns to cities to a combined authority.

In January 2020, ACE launched their 10-year strategy Let's Create. This set out the ambition that by 2030 England will be 'a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences.'[4] This strategy also committed to forging and encouraging stronger cross-sector partnerships, for example between cultural organisations, local government, the NHS, businesses, the voluntary and charitable sectors and education. Thus, it reinforced the Cultural Compact model proposed by the Cultural Cities Enquiry.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, a review of the Cultural Cities Enquiry examined how investment in culture could contribute to the recovery of the cultural sector, local communities and businesses. It reiterated its support for Cultural Compacts and recommended that 'Compacts are embedded in national policy and programmes, and that additional funding is provided to extend the network of Compacts.'[5]

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[2] Cultural Cities Enquiry, 2019, p. 6
[3] Cultural Cities Enquiry, 2019, p.11
[4] Arts Council England, 2020 Let's Create, p. 26
[5] Cultural Cities Recovery, 2020, p. 1

An early review of the Cultural Compacts Initiative was commissioned by ACE in 2020.[6] This found that, despite the difficulty in evaluating the programme owing to the disruption caused by Covid-19, Compacts had made a strong start in raising the profile of culture in their local areas. It found that many Compacts had been successful in identifying and connecting strategic partners and developing a shared vision following consultation. This made them well placed to broaden their funding opportunities. It proposed that the recommendations of the Cultural Cities Enquiry needed to be better articulated for Compacts to ensure they were acted upon, that Compacts needed support with identifying and recruiting a strong chair and appropriate membership to their boards, and that sharing knowledge and experience between Compacts should be facilitated. Subsequently, ACE provided further funding for new and existing Compacts. It also launched the Place Based Peer Learning Programme, aimed at providing opportunities for partnerships such as Compacts to build networks, collaborate and exchange knowledge and best practice to support communities to engage with arts and culture.[7]

Compacts funded by ACE and DCMS have received between £20,000-£50,000 to facilitate their set up, with a percentage of match funding provided by local partners. The ambition was that after an initial period of up to three years, Compacts would be self-funding. There are now between 30 and 40 Compacts across England. There are several reasons why it is difficult to pin down an exact number. A small number of Compacts have ceased to exist or are in abeyance, some Compacts are funded locally and are not part of ACE and DCMS scheme and are therefore more difficult to identify, and some have grown out of Local Cultural Educational Partnerships, with some blurring of the boundaries between the two. The relative flexibility and low-cost nature of the Compact concept has influenced these developments.

[6] BOP Consulting, 2020, Review of the Cultural Compacts Initiative
[7] https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/communities-and-engagement

1.2   WHO IS THE REPORT FOR?

This report will be of interest to a wide range of audiences. Existing Compacts will find it useful to support their further development.

Places interested in developing Compacts, including local authorities and other stakeholders in and beyond the cultural sector, will benefit from the range of experience and varied structures, practices and trajectories outlined here. Funders, investors and other organisations interested in supporting place-based cultural development and ways of working will find it useful to gain a broader understanding of the varied roles cultural Compacts can play. The aim is also to support the development of future policy; therefore the report's findings and recommendations should be of interest to ACE, local and national government.

1.3   METHODOLOGY

This review of the Cultural Compacts programme was launched in May 2024 and is led by the Arts Council's Peer Based Learning Network.

The purpose of the review was to explore the state of development of Cultural Compacts across England, to abstract elements of good practice from this assessment and to synthesise these observations into a potential road map for the contribution of Cultural Compacts to the delivery of 'Let's Create'.

Between May and September 2024, existing data on Compacts in England was compiled and semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 24 people who are involved in 19 Compacts across England, plus one person from an authority that does not currently have a Compact and is considering the benefits of developing one. The Compacts were selected to be representative of the wide range of sizes, geographies and governance present in Cultural Compacts in England. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the themes developed through the analysis form the basis of this report. This was accompanied by a review of policy, research and documentation and online resources relating to the Compacts.[8] The report does not aim to evaluate the outcomes of Cultural Compacts but presents a snapshot of the situation with a representative group of Compacts and their boards at a specific time. This being shortly before and after a change in national government and at a time when future plans for further devolution were uncertain. In addition, the views represented in the report are those of only a proportion of Compact boards. The intention is not to draw a definitive picture of Compact board perspectives but to draw out key themes, parallels and differences across the Compact landscape in this period. These insights are invaluable in considering the development of Compacts to date and to consider the usefulness of these mechanisms going forwards.

[8] Please see Appendix A for a list of compacts interviewed and Appendix B for the interview guide

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COMPACTS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

An intended aim and defining feature of Cultural Compacts is that they respond to the places that they are embedded in.

This means that they each have their own distinct identity, reflecting the character and needs of their localities, while also sharing some common characteristics. This diversity of approaches has already been noted, and this section expands on some of the points of alignment and divergence between Compacts to build a picture of current practice and outcomes, drawing primarily on the findings from the interviews with Compact leaders. It outlines the local origins and nature of Compacts, identifying some of the main similarities and differences between them. It then discusses some of these characteristics in relation to place, people and governance, activities, outcomes and trajectories. These are illustrated with examples from current practice to showcase success stories that could be useful for Compacts or places considering developing a Compact. Finally, it summarises views on the future of Compacts.

2.1 CULTURAL COMPACTS IN PLACE

In setting out the aspirations for the Compacts programme, the Cultural Cities Enquiry proposed a relatively broad list of ideas about what a Compact should be and what it should do.

The steer on Compact composition and governance included:

1. Compacts will be initiated by local councils and independently chaired by a local leader from business, education or cultural sector
2. This might be a case of enhancing existing structures rather than creating a new forum
3. Compacts must have a business plan with clear and measurable aims and publish a report on progress annually

The aims and objectives for Compacts included:

4. A co-ordinated approach from key city stakeholders to raise ambition and align investment and resource towards common goals
5. Enhance the creative ecosystem of a city and ensure that its cultural offering is in tune with local communities
6. Create a clear vision and plan to unlock additional local resources for strategic cultural projects and increase success in attracting additional external resources
7. Ensure greater alignment to cultural priorities across planning, licensing and business rates
8. Influence cultural component of local industrial strategies, health and wellbeing strategies, spatial and economic plans
9. Go-to body for discussion with national governments

Intentionally, there was no guidance on the scale of place appropriate for the Compact. The table below presents existing Compacts and their corresponding local authorities (figure 1).

Table 1 Cultural Compacts in England 2024

Compact name	Town/City/Region	Local government structure
Birmingham Cultural Compact	Birmingham City Council	Metropolitan District
BCP Cultural Collective	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council	Unitary Authority
Coventry Cultural Compact	Coventry City Council	Metropolitan District
Culture Derby	Derby City Council	Unitary Authority
Dudley Cultural Compact	Dudley Borough Council	Metropolitan District
Exeter Culture	Exeter City Council	District
Herefordshire Cultural Partnership	Herefordshire Council	Unitary Authority
HEY Creative	Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council	Unitary Authorities
Liverpool City Region Cultural Partnership	Liverpool City Region	Combined Authority
Mansfield and Ashfield Cultural Compact	Mansfield Distrct Council / Ashfield District Council	District
Creative Medway	Medway Council	Unitary Authority
Morecambe Bay Cultural Compact	Westmorland and Furness Council	Unitary Authority
Newcastle Creates	Newcastle City Council	Metropolitan District
North East Worcestershire Cultural Compact	Bromsgrove District Council / Redditch Borough Council	District
Northampton Cultural Compact	Northampton Borough Council	Parish Council
Norwich Creative City Compact	Norwich City Council	District
Nottingham Culture Board	Nottingham City Council	Unitary Authority
Rochdale Creates	Rochdale Borough Council	Metropolitan District
Rushmoor Cultural Compact	Rushmoor Borough Council	District
Salford Culture and Place Partnership	Salford City Council	Metropolitan District
Sandwell Cultural Compact	Sandwell Borough Council	Metropolitan District
Sheffield Culture Collective	Sheffield City Council	Metropolitan District
Slough Cultural Compact	Slough Borough Council	Unitary Authority
Stoke Creates	Stoke-on-Trent City Council	Unitary Authority
Sunderland Cultural Compact	Sunderland City Council	Metropolitan District
Creative Tunbridge Wells	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	District
Tyller A Nerth	Truro City Council	Parish Council
Creative Wakefield	Wakefield City Council	Metropolitan District
Walsall Cultural Compact	Walsall Borough Council	Metropolitan District
Warwick District Creative Compact	Warwick District Council	District

[9] This list is based on ACE's most recent review of Compacts. It is not a definitive list – there may be further Compacts in an early stage of development that are not featured here and some of those listed here may not be currently active.

2.2 CHARACTERISTICS

The Compact characteristics described in this section are common to many but not to all. The aim is to examine the key underpinning principles and approaches in different places and at different times and to discuss how these differ across the Compact spectrum.

2.2.1 FOCUS ON PLACE (THE 'WHY')

All Compacts state an ambition to create a shared agenda to promote and support culture in their locality. This collective focus is aimed at developing plans and networks to drive positive social and economic change through culture. In each place, the actors engaged in Compacts, the local needs and contexts they respond to and the government structures they operate within all shape the work of the Compacts in different ways. Furthermore, this is shaped by a national agenda with some places being prioritised for national funding.

Image courtesy of: Billie Charity

People and place

The focus on cross-sector partnerships and the aim to broaden the reach and relevance of culture has meant that Compacts have been initiated and championed by actors from a range of sectors. This was strongly connected to place. Local government has often been a driving force in instigating the development of a Compact, with both council members and officers engaged in this to varying degrees in different places. However, the actors who have promoted them also differed depending on local needs and the priorities and capacities of different places. This includes actors from local government; the cultural sector, such as local National Portfolio Organisations (NPO), other cultural organisations or cultural forums; the business sector, such as property developers; the voluntary sector, with the CVS and YMCA playing key roles in at least two instances; and higher education.

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While one sector might be predominantly responsible for driving a Compact forward in some places, in others there are two or more sectors collaborating on this. The next section will examine the actors engaged in Compacts in more detail.

Compacts' priorities in each place are based on ideas about local needs and reflect the scale of a place. Some places, especially cities, have extensive cultural infrastructure and face challenges around funding and strategic priorities. Many of these already had existing partnerships that the Compacts sought to connect and collaborate with. Others, such as smaller towns, are often starting from a lower base in terms of established NPOs, freelance capacity and existing partnerships. In these places, building capacity was often seen as one of the main priorities of the Compact.

The issue of people and place also combined to affect Compacts. Larger urban areas tend to support more larger business, health and third sector organisations and one challenge noted by several smaller places was a lack of cultural and other leaders who could support the Compact. Conversely, in one instance the Compact existed in an already rich environment

Demographic and economic contexts

Compacts also sought to respond to their specific economic and demographic contexts, responding to Local Authority priorities and those of the partners involved. Many expressed the importance of ensuring cultural opportunities were available to economically, culturally and racially marginalised communities. Regeneration was also a dominant theme, with a range of places at every scale perceiving the need to connect culture and regeneration efforts in relation to issues such as workspaces, high streets and housing. Using culture to attract visitors and employees was also a common aim. Relatedly, investment was a strong theme, with some perceiving the Compacts as a vehicle to increase much needed investment following over a decade of government austerity policies. Connected to this, many Compacts had previously or proposed to bid for a City of Culture award, with two places having been successful in this. Others saw the Compact as a way of harnessing the positive effects of the City of Culture programme without the formal status and funding of a City of Culture. Conversely, in former Cities of Culture, Compacts were instigated as legacy vehicles, directed at establishing continued support for culture into the future. Other reasons given for founding Cultural Compacts were as follows: to increase pride of place through increasing cultural opportunities; to promote creative living to improve health and wellbeing; to develop skills and spaces to create a more sustainable cultural sector; and to increase physical and digital cultural infrastructure.

Local and regional government

The local and regional government context also shaped Compact membership and priorities. As mentioned in the introduction to this report, Compact geographies ranged from small towns to major cities. The largest geographies were two combined authorities, Liverpool City Region and West of England. Many Compacts covered the whole of a metropolitan district or unitary authority. However, in some places, there were several layers of governance, with, for example, a Compact based on the geography of a parish council being situated within a larger unitary authority area. In another example, two district councils had come together to form a Compact, both sitting beneath a county council. There are no Compacts in London, with Southwark having been the only London borough to be awarded funding for a Compact and subsequently dissolving it. This may reflect the circumstances of London's more comprehensive devolution deal, a greater concentration of NPOs and London's status as a capital city.

The changing landscape of local government also had a significant impact on Compacts. Where district councils had been merged to form unitary authorities, Compacts had to re-adjust their focus and make the case for their relevance to a new governing body. It was noted in some interviews that this could cause difficulties in maintaining the focus and support of Compact members and meant additional work to build new relationships with the incoming authority. Where new combined authorities had been formed, Compacts were pivoting in response to this, with several noting both the opportunities and uncertainty presented by this new layer of government. Devolution was a recurring theme in the interviews with Compact members. While some considered that there should be flexibility with the scale of Compacts so that they could respond to local needs and affordances, others considered that Compacts would be better targeted at the combined authority level where budgets for culture were likely to be held. While most expressed strong support for devolution and saw opportunities for their locales, it was also noted that time was often lost waiting for devolution deals and changes in governance in general were highlighted as disruptive.

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National agendas and policies

The choice to develop a Compact was also influenced by national agendas and policies. The 2019 Cultural Cities Enquiry had initially promoted the Cultural Compact concept and seed funding provided by ACE and DCMS had encouraged the founding of the first tranche of 20 Compacts. Many interviewees noted the role of regional and national ACE staff in supporting and encouraging them to apply for Compact status. They described how ACE staff continued to act as invaluable sounding boards and advisors throughout the setting up and delivery periods and in some cases would attend Compact board meetings as observers. ACE's ten-year strategy Let's Create also shaped Compacts priorities and plans. Interviewees in two places stated that it had helped them build funding bids that prioritised and responded to local needs, in one place by building on work that was already happening. However, some interviewees expressed frustration that ACE funding was not devolved to combined authorities, with suggestions that ACE staff could also be seconded to these authorities to better respond to local needs, something that is already beginning to happen. The context for this being the fast-changing local government landscape in England at this time, with much debate about the extent to which new and existing combined authorities should have greater powers and funding devolved to them.

"Many also discussed how cuts to NPO funding meant that their focus was often on their own organisations and that, additionally, they sometimes lacked the capacity to devote time to their Compacts."

The previous government's austerity policies and Levelling Up agenda had also had a significant impact on Compacts, the former affecting every compact and latter often resulting in polarised outcomes. Those places prioritised in ACE and government funding call outs felt most able to capitalise on the increased capacity provided by the Compact. The two primary funds available being the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Place Partnership funding through ACE National Lottery Project Grants. Those Compacts that did not have Priority Place status, for example, felt some frustration that there was no clear funding path for Compacts. Some were able to harness funding through drawing on local business support and several places were looking into tourist taxes. Overall, there was not felt to be a straightforward path for Compacts in a very fragmented funding landscape.

Attracting such private investment was a key aim of the Compacts as outlined in the Cultural Cities Enquiry. However, the degree to which such opportunities were available varied widely, leaving some Compacts struggling to know where to turn for funding. Austerity was argued as having had a wide-ranging impact on the ability of places to capitalise on the development of Compacts. Local government cuts were widely acknowledged as resulting in reduced capacity and funds for culture. Many also discussed how cuts to NPO funding meant that their focus was often on their own organisations and that, additionally, they sometimes lacked the capacity to devote time to their Compacts. Cuts to Higher Education, the NHS and the impact of Covid-19 on local businesses were also suggested as having reduced the overall capacity of places to devote time to culture and the Compact. Nevertheless, others argued that this meant that Compacts had an even more pressing and vital role to play in making the best use of available resources. Some highlighted the role of the Compact in navigating changes to the funding landscape as a consequence of Brexit and following changes in government policy.

2.2.2 COMPOSITION, GOVERNANCE AND RELATIONSHIPS (THE 'WHO')

Compacts are small and financially light, and their structures are often evolving rather than being fixed entities. Membership of Compact boards is predominantly voluntary and is generally reliant on the passion, energy and expertise of a few people. This section examines the composition and governance of Compacts to explore the value and challenges of their different structures and relationships.

Compact structures

Compacts have a range of different structures. In most of the Compacts represented in the interviews, there was a board comprising a small group of people representing different organisations and sectors. In some places the Compact was solely comprised of this small group of people. However, in others, this was complemented by an open forum to represent grass roots cultural interests, and some places had pre-existing forums and cultural partnerships that fulfilled this role. In one instance, the forum and the board were one and the same, with a larger open meeting forming the basis of the Compact. For some, this was still not felt to be adequate if culture was to meet the needs of the wider community and two places were actively exploring the possibility of establishing citizens' assemblies. The tension between broadening the representation of interests in the Compact and the necessity of a small group to drive strategies and projects forwards was referenced by many. The issue of representation will be explored further later in this section. However, it is worth acknowledging here that most Compacts adopted a reflexive approach and were keen to evolve, adapt and innovate.

Leadership

Securing the right person for the role of chair of a Compact board was perceived as critical to its success. The Cultural Cities Enquiry had proposed that an independent chair be appointed. This would mean that the local authority and cultural sector would be equal partners alongside other interests. Interviewees considered this important in creating a shared agenda and promoting good relationships within and outside the Compact board. However, in some cases the chair was a leader of an NPO, something that even these individuals themselves viewed as less than ideal and generally as a temporary measure until someone else could be identified.

Strong leadership skills and experience in managing boards were also considered vital. The voluntary nature of board membership and the lack of a shared language relating to culture and place, both of which could be a barrier to good working relationships, were identified as two aspects that a good chair could help overcome. Also important was the ability of the chair to steer Compacts through their different stages of development, understanding how and when to move to the next stage, expand their functions or change course while bringing people along with them. A chair's pre-existing relationships with external individuals and organisations was also flagged as helpful in forming and promoting the Compact.

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Representation

As referenced above, the organisations and interests represented on Compact boards had some commonalities. These broadly reflected those set out in the Cultural Cities Enquiry, namely: local authority members and officers; cultural sector organisations and forums, businesses (sometimes individual businesses, sometimes business associations and sometimes Business Improvement Districts); NHS representatives; voluntary sector representatives; and the higher education sector.

However, the composition of Compact boards was also influenced by local politics. Sometimes both local authority members and officers sat on boards, sometimes only officers, with members being kept informed of progress. Where local authority officers were the primary Compact champions, they were often very conscious of the need for balanced representation. However, they also had to respond to local political priorities.

When forming boards, local resource was also a major consideration. Some noted the lack of NPOs as a problem in their area, leaving a gap in cultural leadership. However, others suggested that where there were several NPOs in a place, it was important that they did not dominate the compact. In other places the lack of higher education providers or large businesses to draw on was identified as problematic. These differences were very place-specific, in contrast, the organisation stated as most difficult to engage with across the board was the NHS. This was widely considered a significant problem, given the widespread focus of policy and funding on connecting culture to health and wellbeing. It was generally considered that due to the organisational structure and priorities of the NHS, 'social prescribing', as proposed in ACE's Let's Create strategy and the Cultural Cities Enquiry, or 'Creative Health' as it is now more widely known, was challenging to operationalise.

As already noted, the diverse skills, experience and priorities of board members was considered to influence their ability to engage with the aims and objectives of the Compacts. While there were some exceptions to this, in general, the more distant from the cultural sector representatives on boards were, the less interest they often had and the less time they were willing to commit. Conversely, it was considered by most (although not all) interviewees, that having a large proportion of cultural sector representatives on a board jeopardised the breadth of opportunities and impact afforded by having a broader group of people drawn from outside the cultural sector. Some welcomed the leadership and commitment to culture provided by businesses in some places and others aspired to cultivate this. One interviewee felt that having businesses advocating for culture was very helpful in persuading the local authority of its importance, in a political landscape where the cultural sector often struggled to be heard or taken seriously. However, others considered that business should not have a privileged place in driving cultural programmes forwards because of the risks of gentrification where culture was used in place marketing. The breadth of different sectors was therefore not without its challenges.

Additionally, developing shared goals and a shared language was identified as vital to build a solid Compact board. This shared language also had to sit alongside a shared vision of how culture could be mobilised to improve the lives of local people. The most successful Compacts, who had moved beyond developing boards and strategies to facilitate or deliver programmes, had a solid core of people drawn from a range of organisations and had spent time developing this shared language. Some described how they had held or planned to hold events to examine in greater depth the opportunities for collaboration with different sectors, such as health and business. This was considered a way to both develop shared goals and new relationships.

Another key point, made by many, was the necessity to enlist board members who were at an appropriate level in their organisations. While the most senior could better leverage their influence and connections, they were often not close enough to what was happening on the ground and often did not have the necessary time to devote to the Compact. Too junior, and board members were argued as not having the necessary capability to influence external partners although they were often considered to have more time and expertise to devote to developing projects and bids. Perhaps more important than individual's seniority, however, was their commitment to the Compact. In thriving Compacts, there was generally a smaller subsection of board members who gave up significant amounts of time to driving things forward. These people all referenced their commitment to the places the Compacts represented. This was framed in terms of people, place and economy. They generally expressed one or more of the following ambitions: to improve people's lives through culture, often with a focus on children and young people; to boost the image of a place, the economy of a place and the experience of living there; and to build a vibrant cultural infrastructure through supporting all types of culture from grass roots to larger cultural venues.

A major concern across the board was the ability of Compacts to represent the places they were based in. This manifested differently in different locations, with class, age and race intersecting in a multitude of ways. The necessary level of seniority for board membership meant that there was an inherent class and racial bias, with most board members being white and also mostly middle class and highly educated. The voluntary nature of boards and their forums also privileged those with the means to dedicate their time.

While a wider audience was consulted in the development of strategies, as will be discussed below, it was acknowledged that this did not compensate for structural bias in the development of strategies and projects by the board. One interviewee stated that the risk in only 'the usual suspects' sitting round the table was that the Compact could easily become an echo chamber. Different places had sought to tackle this in different ways. In some places there were active attempts to broaden representation on boards. In others, the associated forum or proposed citizen's assembly was suggested as a way of addressing this issue. Several people drew attention to the lack of guidance for Compacts when setting up and managing boards. It was felt that guidance on governance, for example setting term limits, would assist with ensuring that Compact boards were regularly reevaluated and refreshed.

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Constitution and governance

Compacts have a range of corporate structures. These are related both to the stage of development and long-term visions of the Compacts. Typically, Compacts start life as a very small group of people. Often, but not always, this is convened by the local authority. There generally follows an exploratory period where board members are identified and approached and, leading on from this, a cultural strategy is often developed. As this stage unfolds, many described how there had been lengthy discussions about how the constitution, governance and operation of the compact might develop. A key factor in determining what happened next was whether the Compact saw itself as solely a strategic group, having a future role in delivery, or whether it would also fundraise to deliver projects. In the early days of a Compact's life, the small seed fund budgets provided by ACE and DCMS were usually held by either the local authority or one of the larger Compact members, for example a higher education institution, the CVS or an NPO. When budgets were held by a local authority there was often difficulty in accessing them for the purposes deemed necessary to support the Compact. When there was no external body willing to hold the budget and who would also put some resource into its management and the management of the Compact, this could create difficulties and delay the development of the Compact.

Once Compacts became more established, some constituted themselves as a Community Interest Company (CIC). The budget was transferred to these organisations that generally employed one or more people, usually part-time to administer the Compact and support the development of projects. Some discussed the possibility that, depending on how their Compact evolved, constituting as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) may be a future possible option. One place that had explored whether creating a CIO was possible at the outset had found this very difficult to get off the ground. Others felt that having such an organisation would make the Compact unwieldy more vulnerable to economic shocks. Many expressed the view that Compacts should exist to support, connect and add value to existing cultural infrastructure, not to create another body that required funding to maintain it. It was felt that the latter risked detracting from the work of existing NPOs and grass roots cultural provision.

Operations and administration

Whether a Compact was light-footed or a constituted CIC, some element of administration was described as vital if it was to function well and be successful. At the most basic level, this might mean someone to organise and minute meetings. At the other extreme, it might mean one or more people to manage the development of strategies, bids and other projects. Better resourced Compacts were able to achieve significantly more than those with little resource.

The seed funding provided by ACE and DMCS was described as fundamentally important in helping Compacts get off the ground and develop themselves. Where this support was not available, either through a funded post or through the voluntary efforts of board members, Compacts struggled to get off the ground. Political instability at a local level and local government cuts exacerbated this. When these three elements combined, a Compact could not fulfil the ambition of the Cultural Cities Enquiry to help fill local gaps in resource.

Where funding was available for administrative support, such positions were hosted either in the local authority, in one of the other organisations on the board, by the Compact itself (if a CIC) or were held as freelance roles. The greater the resource, the more the Compact was able to achieve in terms of developing the board and associated forums, building local networks and political support and developing bids and projects.

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Key relationships and status

Compact board members reported a wide range of relationships with local and regional government. Some were embedded in and driven by the local authority. These generally had strong officer support, relying on one or more individuals who were keen to capitalise on the opportunities to connect with a wide range of stakeholders and secure investment afforded by the Compact model. Others had very strong relationships with local government, with officers and/or members on the board, but had greater independence. Others had weak relations with local government, either struggling to be heard or included in discussions and plans. Sometimes the Compact itself sought to keep local government at arm's length to maintain its independence.

As has already been noted, local government reorganisation and devolution had impacted Compacts positively and negatively. In addition, changing politics within local government also affected the efficacy of Compacts. The greatest challenge was the time it took to build new relationships in this environment.

Some were conscious of their privileged position on Compact boards. They were aware that while they could represent the interests of an organisation, industry or group of people, beyond this they were not democratically elected to make decisions that affected the places they were embedded in. However, others argued that the strong partnerships engendered by the Compact benefited everyone. Some highlighted the necessity to collaborate in an environment where everyone was financially stretched and there were limited sources of funding.

Another key relationship, as noted above, was with regional and national ACE staff. Many reported ACE's ongoing support and advice, acting as a 'critical friend' as being crucial to the development and work of the Compact. This manifested in several ways, through providing advice on setting up a Compact, advising on funding and with connecting people in different compacts either directly or through knowledge-sharing events. Almost all the interviewees described how useful the conference organised in Coventry in 2023 had been, allowing them to meet other Compact board members, share experiences (positive and negative) and learn about different approaches.

Finally, Compacts being aware of their strategic responsibilities, some referenced the importance of relationships with other boards in their localities. In one instance the Compact had a close relationship with a local authority board overseeing regeneration efforts in the city. Others highlighted the importance of close relationships with local cultural partnership boards and forums, where these were not integrated into the Compact. However, these were not without their challenges, with some describing the difficulty in one person being able to genuinely represent another forum or board and the need to ensure that good relations with the wider group were maintained.

"Many reported ACE's ongoing support and advice, acting as a 'critical friend' as being crucial to the development and work of the Compact."

2.2.3   ACTIVITIES (THE 'WHAT')

Across the country, Compacts have adopted a wide range of roles and are delivering a diverse range of activities. This includes facilitating the development of projects and bids, overseeing programmes, supporting the development of skills and acting as convenors to develop strategies and strengthen cross-sector relationships.

Compacts described three strands to this work: an inward-facing place-based role in developing an evidence base and strategy and assessing gaps in local skills and knowledge; an outward facing role in acting as a coherent champion for culture in a place; and a role in leveraging investment in culture. This section expands further on these three strands of work.

In relation to the first of these three strands, Compacts acted as a point of alignment for the cultural sector and place-based priorities, aiming to build strong cross-sector working relationships to agree shared local ambitions. To this end, following or sometimes alongside the development of a board, many Compacts had developed cultural strategies. These were created with the input of the Compact either by Compact employees, freelancers or consultancies. Some suggested that the use of consultancies had resulted in some strategies having only a tenuous relationship with the places they were developed for, while others had valued the wider experience of other places that consultants brought. Nevertheless, the most innovative approaches to engaging with the public and other partners and developing strategies were all in places where someone was employed locally to carry out this work. Sometimes these strategies were developed with or adopted by the local authority, in other instances they operated in parallel with local authority cultural strategies. Both the Compact board and strategy were also described as having a role in protecting against institutional memory loss both as actors in and the shape of local government changed.

Delivery of these strategies was at different stages in the Compacts interviewed here. Some had struggled to move to the next step, primarily owing to a lack of resource, organisational or political support. Others had begun to develop strands of the strategy and deliver projects. Strategies were considered helpful in creating a strong narrative about the direction and priorities for culture in a place and some stated that they regularly returned to the strategy when struggling with next steps. The resulting projects developed by Compacts were diverse and multi-scalar as might be expected given the diverse nature of the places they represent. Some connected local artists with regeneration projects, others developed and strengthened the cultural identity for a place through heritage-based projects. Several aimed to increase cultural opportunities for children and young people. Cross-sector partnerships fostered through the board, such as with businesses, the higher education sector and the NHS, strengthened the development of projects, lent support to bids for funding and in some instances resulted in direct investment by the business community in local makers and artists.

"Through widening those engaged in culture through the creation of cross-sector boards, Compacts broadened their access to national networks and platforms to advocate for their places."

Compacts have also sought to identify local cultural sector development needs. This ranged from identifying vacant buildings for use by cultural organisations and freelancers to supporting the development of skills such as bid writing in an area predominantly comprising small organisations and freelancers. In some places, Compacts also bring freelancers and small organisations together in the absence of other cultural forums to build networks and find out what support and skills development is required.

In relation to the second strand concerning their external-facing role, Compacts sought to act as advocates and advisers for culture for a place. Through widening those engaged in culture through the creation of cross-sector boards, Compacts broadened their access to national networks and platforms to advocate for their places. Interviewees discussed how they had been able to take advantage of the extensive contacts of some board members to promote their work. Compacts also provided a single point of access for those coming into a place who wanted to understand the local cultural landscape. Finally, many Compacts were connected with other Compacts in their region and nationwide and discussed how important this was in reassuring them that they were on the right lines with developing their Compact. The innovative and novel nature of Compacts meant that many felt reassurance and connecting with others doing similar work was essential.

Fundamental to the purpose of the Compact, the final strand of work centred on leveraging investment. Again, there were several ways in which different Compacts accomplished this. The first was by developing funding bids. Government funds, ACE and Lottery funds were all sought to varying degrees, depending on the eligibility of a place. Success here was often dependent on place, with some Compacts being in a better position to apply for government funding if they were places prioritised by funding policies. As discussed above, there were also some Compacts who sought to develop funding streams locally, through local business contributions or tourist taxes. Finally, Compacts could direct how funding coming into local authorities, such as Levelling Up funding, was allocated by making the case for cultural investment alongside other developments.

"Compacts could direct how funding coming into local authorities, such as Levelling Up funding, was allocated by making the case for cultural investment alongside other developments."

2.2.4   OUTCOMES

This research did not set out to provide an objective evaluation of Compact outcomes and the experimental and diverse nature of Compacts in this early stage of their development also makes it difficult to make comparisons between them. Compacts were also set up with no baselines, meaning that we are reliant on qualitative analysis to examine distance travelled. Furthermore, as agile organisations with light administration they do not generally gather large quantities of data. However, projects they support have their own monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. With sufficient time and resource, it would therefore be possible to start quantifying outcomes.

Interviewees themselves felt that further reporting requirements would be useful going forwards. Several Compact interviewees considered that it was understandable that to date there had been no rigid framework to follow, owing to the experimental nature of the Cultural Compact concept in its early days. Some also welcomed the flexible nature of the concept and recognised that this could make it difficult to quantify outcomes. However, as they had become more established, many stated that they would welcome a more rigorous reporting and evaluation regime with a stronger lead from ACE on this in future.

Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions on the success of Compacts in delivering on the main points of the Cultural Cities Enquiry. Namely, through attracting public and private investment, diversifying talent and boosting place and cultural property. There were numerous examples of successful initiatives and projects that related to these goals. Many of these were considered to have been unlikely to have been realised if the Compact had not existed.

Compact interviewees referenced new investment, including increased local authority investment in staff working in culture, successful bids for UKSPF, Levelling Up funding, Place Partnership Funding and increased private investment in culture, for example in regeneration projects. Many Compacts described how the stages of development a Compact generally went through allowed them to take their time to test out ideas, build relationships and gain confidence in aiming for bigger and better things. Small pots of money allowed them to develop projects and often led to more ambitious bids, some of which were successful. Many believed that forging strong connections between sectors helped with attracting such investment. They also highlighted their role in putting together larger bids that included smaller organisations as delivery partners. This benefited these organisations who would not have been able to tap into such funds on their own.

However, many Compact interviewees considered that, in general, there had been less success in attracting new forms of private investment. Only a small number of places had sought to develop new models of business investment, promoted local culture to those investing in art and regeneration projects or were investigating tourist taxes. In addition, very few places had been successful in tapping into health agendas and therefore the extent to which mutually beneficial outcomes for health and culture could be achieved was extremely limited. Compact interviewees also suggested that, in the absence of feedback from ACE on successful or unsuccessful funding bids, it was difficult to know whether efforts such as raising local match funding had contributed to success in funding bids.

Many Compacts were committed to increasing the skills and diversity of local talent. In those places that had developed forums to increase skills, knowledge and networks for freelancers, positive feedback on these initiatives were reported. However, most Compacts noted limited success in diversifying boards, something that could impact on their ability to represent their local communities.

Successes in raising the profile of culture and broadening its beneficiaries in a place were noted by many of the Compacts. Some described how the Compact had contributed or driven the successful raising of the profile of culture in a place. In one instance, influencing the award of UNESCO City of Literature status for the place they were based in. Some Compacts also highlighted their role in supporting investment in heritage buildings for new cultural uses. Meanwhile others described how the development of the Compact contributed to maintaining culture's profile in former City of Culture places and in raising aspiration in other places to develop bids for future City of Culture status. Owing to the partnerships and funding developed through the Compacts, several been able to commission projects focused on children and young people and some projects also focused on projects focusing on diverse communities.

Compact interviewees discussed these successes as interconnected and multi-scalar. For example, from getting people into the room to success in funding projects. But in addition to this, several interviewees noted the importance of a shared voice and ambition for culture in ensuring that culture was not left out of wider conversations about investment and development and in supporting a more strategic approach to investment. These intangible outcomes are more difficult to measure but were nonetheless considered important. Some Compacts had been asked by local authorities to lead on the development of strategies, bids and projects when the authority itself did not have capacity to do so and counted this among their successes. While this shows the positive impact a Compact can have, it also highlights the extremely financially challenging and constrained environment Compacts are functioning in. Consequently, where Compacts are not able to develop successfully, for financial reasons or the lack of local leadership, this could lead to inequitable outcomes for culture across the country.

2.2.5 TRAJECTORIES

There is no single Compact trajectory. Some develop in a linear fashion, starting with a scoping exercise and the identification of a suitable chair, then moving onto the development of a board and strategy and other related forums before developing bids for funding and seeking to broaden the sectors and communities they worked with.

However, the development of others was less linear and some faced temporary setbacks or even went into abeyance when they hit stumbling blocks, often in relation to local resource and leadership. For this reason, this report has focused on different aspects of their development and shared characteristics to show how they have developed in different places.

Experimentation and adaption are two key commonalities of Compacts that partly stem from the lack of a defined Compact model. Many interviewees felt that learnings from this experience could productively inform a more clearly defined future Compact model.

2.2.6 THE FUTURE OF COMPACTS – WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Cultural Compacts can be difficult things to pin down and many people interviewed for this report queried why the name 'Compact' had been chosen. The term Compact appears to have originated in the USA and has been used previously in England to describe partnership relationships between local government and the voluntary sector. A Cultural Compact differs from this because it is focused on a single issue – culture – and includes a wide range of cross-sector partners. This has resulted in some confusion about the meaning of the term and its usefulness.

Almost all interviewees considered the Compact name unhelpful. This was both for those invested in Compacts, in helping them understand their purpose, and when it came to explaining what a Compact was to others not directly involved in it. Some of this confusion was thought to also stem from ACE's approach to Compacts, which was to leave the concept relatively open so that they could be developed to suit the needs of the places they represented. Accordingly, in naming themselves, many Compacts used other terms such as 'creates', 'culture' or 'collective' in their titles. Most interviewees considered that a different name and further direction in terms of governance and accountability was essential if Compacts were to capitalise on promising beginnings.

3
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 CONCLUSIONS

This report has evidenced how Cultural Compacts can be active and positive participants in the delivery of 'Let's Create'. Compacts have particular strengths in supporting the delivery of ACE strategies around cultural communities. Arm's length bodies, such as National Lottery distributors, could also benefit from their role in supporting the strategic development of culture and smaller cultural organisations. Their future-focused ways of working mean they can be powerful enablers, but for this to happen optimally necessitates a solid understanding of what is needed in a specific place.

While devolution offers opportunities and challenges, Compacts are well-placed to respond to this agenda. Compact principles and ways of working, in particular the importance of place-based cross-sector working and the potential to foreground inclusion and representation, make them ideally placed to make connections between local and national agendas. Where combined authorities have budgets for culture, it would make sense for Compacts to align with these authorities given that the scale of combined authorities allows opportunities for more strategic overview. However, given the likelihood of ongoing financial constraints on local authorities, they could also play an important ongoing role in offering more local and focused support. To maximise their potential in a place, Compacts need to better differentiate themselves from other organisations such as cultural partnerships to ensure that there is no duplication of functions. Instead, Compacts need to emphasise their cross-sector composition and role in supporting the cultural sector through making connections to other areas of policy.

One of the primary challenges for Compacts is in creating boards that better reflect the diversity of the places they represent to maximise their impact. Given that Compacts are moving beyond the experimental phase, with some now being well-established organisations, this is a good moment to take stock and consider what they need to achieve their full potential. Further reporting requirements and opportunities for peer learning were both highlighted as helpful in supporting the development of Compacts and their boards.

Compact success factors

Local government support	Strong leadership	The right board members	Administrative support	Funding opportunities
Support and stability in local government who are key actors in setting up and driving Compacts forwards	An experienced Chair who can bring people together to facilitate cross-sector discussions	A board with appropriate experience, seniority, from a broad range of sectors and representative of the place	A basic level of funding to support the continued development an administration of Compacts	Eligibility for nationally administered funding opportunities is a significant factor in Compact successes

Potential risks in Compact futures

Successful Compacts currently follow a middle-class participation model and this probably mitigates strongly against the diversity that Let's Create aims for	If there is further devolution, Compacts may fail to work at scale or to scale up as appropriate and places without combined authorities may be left behind	In relation to devolution Compacts want a role in regional government but there is no guarantee this will happen and therefore what their futures will be	Compacts have diverse expectations of devolution, with some seeing influence and others direct authority in view

3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

This report reflects the wide range of views of Compact board members in the interviews conducted for this research. Based on these findings, the recommendations below have been developed with the input of the project steering group. They highlight key areas that would benefit from further attention if Cultural Compacts were to be optimally developed.

Investment

While Compacts are financially light, it is vital that there is adequate investment to support the board in tasks such as administration and developing networks and funding bids.

Governance and evaluation

While some flexibility in how Compacts organise themselves could be beneficial, there should be more clarity on possible models that could be adopted, on how they should operate and, relatedly, greater accountability. ACE needs to clarify their position on Compacts and on the benefits of their presence in relation to funding bids.

Training and leadership

Leadership development, mentoring and opportunities to share knowledge and experiences are vital. Opportunities for peer learning are also essential and an annual conference where people could get together in person is recommended.

Diversity and inclusion

Compact boards need to better reflect the communities they serve. There needs to be more stringent guidance on board composition and membership, whilst retaining context-based flexibility. There should also be more guidance on how to identify people for boards and how to continue evaluating and developing boards.

Name

Compacts need a name that is widely understood. 'Collective' could be one alternative to 'compact', in signalling that this is a group working together towards shared goals.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF CULTURAL COMPACTS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS RESEARCH

Compact name	Town/City/Region	Number of board members interviewed
Birmingham Cultural Compact	Birmingham City Council	2
BCP Cultural Collective	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council	1
Coventry Cultural Compact	Coventry City Council	1
Culture Derby	Derby City Council	1
Dudley Cultural Compact	Dudley Borough Council	1
Exeter Culture	Exeter City Council	1
Herefordshire Cultural Partnership	Herefordshire Council	1
HEY Creative	Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council	1
Newcastle Creates	Newcastle City Council	2
North East Worcestershire Cultural Compact	Bromsgrove District Council / Redditch Borough Council	1
Northampton Cultural Compact	Northampton Borough Council	1
Rushmoor Cultural Compact	Rushmoor Borough Council	1
Sheffield Culture Collective	Sheffield City Council	3
Stoke Creates	Stoke-on-Trent City Council	2
Sunderland Cultural Compact	Sunderland City Council	1
Creative Tunbridge Wells	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	2
Tyller A Nerth	Truro City Council	1
West of England Cultural Compact	West of England	1

In addition, one person from Leeds City Council was interviewed to understand their perspective on the potential of Cultural Compacts for a place that does not currently have one.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. We want to understand the models and good practice around Cultural Compacts, and how they sit within the regional cultural economy
2. Can you tell me about your compact – structure, history, composition
3. How do you sit relative to local authorities, ACE, other organisations
4. What other stakeholders do you work with, e.g. NHS
5. What has been the impact, success, what are you most proud of
6. Any case studies you would highlight
7. What challenges do you face, what hasn't worked
8. How mature do you reckon your compact is – where might it develop next
9. What would your compact do if it were optimally developed and supported; How long would it take to get there; What kind of resource would this require
10. Anything further to add

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Rebecca Ball, CEO, Sunderland Culture
Nic Millington, Chair, Herefordshire Cultural Partnership
Sue Rigby, Chair, West of England Cultural Partnership