

Report to: Cabinet Meeting - 24 February 2026

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Rowan Cozens, Heritage, Culture and the Arts
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Report Summary	
Type of Report	Open Report / Key Decision
Report Title	UK Town of Culture – Newark and Sherwood Applications
Purpose of Report	<p>To update members about the UK Town of Culture competition and to make members aware of two potential bids being prepared by towns in Newark and Sherwood, and the process to be undertaken.</p> <p>To identify the role NSDC can take to support those bids and ensure an equitable approach across the district.</p>
Recommendations	<p>That Cabinet:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) note the two bids being developed by towns within the district; b) approve a net expenditure budget of up to £10,000 (up to £5,000 per town) to be added in 2025/26 to support and facilitate towns in Newark and Sherwood in the development of their Expressions of Interest. Allocation of funding to be subject to a lead organisation being formally identified through a partnership and subject to proof of expenditure; c) subject to either or both bids being shortlisted, NSDC to be the accountable body if required as a partner organisation in any bid developed within the district for the 2028 UK Town of Culture; and d) subject to c above, the net Expenditure Budget and Income Budget of up to £120,000 be added in the

	respective Financial Year, should either or both towns from within Newark and Sherwood be shortlisted at the Expression of Interest Stage for the £60,000 grant.
Alternative Options Considered	A 'do nothing' option could be considered in light of the timescale, staff capacity and timing of LGR and this funding. However, given the guidance as described within this report, that would preclude any bids coming from Newark and Sherwood. As such, this option was discounted.
Reason for Recommendations	The funding would represent a step change in our ability to promote, maximise and celebrate the diversity of Newark and Sherwood's heritage, culture and community spirit. The recommendation identifies a role for NSDC which is achievable given current workloads, the context of LGR and supports bids from within the district.

1.0 **Background**

1.1 Newark and Sherwood has a thriving cultural scene, from NSDC's directly managed services including the Palace Theatre Newark, the National Civil War Centre – Newark Museum, Newark Castle and the Arts Council England funded Open Doors programme, to a wide range of external community and professional venues, activities and events, for example Newark Creates, Southwell Minster, Southwell Music Festival, the Robin Hood Festival, Newark Book Festival, and Newark Town Council's programme of events including The Beach, Newark Festival and the Christmas Lights Switch On. The recent 'Alive with Music' project has identified more than 140 groups meeting regularly across the district. Towns Fund and Local Regeneration Fund monies have also positively contributed to a vibrant and dynamic town centre event offer through a variety of interventions and programmes.

1.2 In November 2025, DCMS launched UK City of Culture 2029. Included within the information is a new strand of funding – UK Town of Culture 2028, stating that 'this new competition will see multiple towns competing to win the title and the winning town delivering a cultural programme in 2028. We expect UK Town of Culture to deliver similar impacts to UK City of Culture with the competition helping to remind us of the unique, proud and outstanding contribution made by communities across the UK, shining a spotlight on multiple towns and enabling them to tell their unique story.'

The successful town will receive £3million to deliver a cultural programme during the Summer of 2028, two further finalists will each receive £250,000 to deliver elements of their bid.

1.3 The DCMS guidance was published on 14th January, and the expressions of interest stage was launched on the same day, with a deadline of 31st March. For the EOI stage the application must include:

1. Your Story – the unique story and culture of the town

Key criteria:

- Vision
- Local Need
- Empower

2. Culture for Everyone – how the programme will provide visible, accessible culture and boost the town's profile

Key criteria:

- Quality and Innovation
- Opportunity
- Accessibility
- Communication

3. Making It Happen – how the programme will be delivered

Key criteria:

- Partnerships
- Programme Management
- Financial Management
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Legacy

To be eligible, bidding places must demonstrate their capability to successfully manage, fund, and deliver a programme that clearly meets the established criteria. Bidders will be required to show their confidence in, and readiness for, programme delivery both in the EOI application and, in greater detail, during the full application stage.

Bids must be from a partnership and include the relevant local authorities, along with a range of community and cross-sector partners. Bids will need to specify a single organisation to be 'lead applicant' for information and communication purposes during the competition process. The lead applicant does not need to be a local authority, but the relevant local authority will need to be in a dedicated role in the bid partnership. The lead applicant must be a formally constituted accountable organisation.

If successful, winning places will be required to specify an 'Accountable Body' and 'Delivery Body' for their programme:

Accountable Body: A place's chosen party, who are the recognised Accountable Body in relation to a planned UK Town of Culture programme e.g. the relevant local or regional public authority. If successful, the Accountable Body will have overall responsibility and ownership for the programme. The responsibilities of the Accountable Body may include, but are not limited to:

- Ensuring the safe and successful delivery of a UK Town of Culture programme
- Managing the financial and legal requirements associated with the delivery of a UK Town of Culture programme

- Taking responsibility for any grant funding associated with a UK Town of Culture programme, for which the Accountable Body is the recipient organisation
- Monitoring delivery of a UK Town of Culture programme and undertaking relevant reporting as may be required by DCMS.

Delivery Body: A place's chosen party who will be responsible for the planning, procuring, commissioning and delivery of a planned UK Town of Culture programme.

1.4 The following is the timetable for the application process:

Table 2: Key competition milestones

Milestone	Dates
Expressions of Interest (EOI)	Opens: 14 Jan 2026 Deadline: 31 March 2026
Information event for bidders	21 January 2026
Shortlisted places announced	Spring 2026
Full application period	Spring 2026 – Autumn 2026
Panel visits	Autumn 2026
Finalists and winner announced	Early 2027
Delivery Period	2028

Shortlisted towns will receive £60,000 to progress the full bid. DCMS intend to publish detailed full application guidance in Spring 2026, including expectations for data submission. Applicants will have up to five months to complete the full application.

The full application will ask questions in more depth and will expect a detailed plan for how towns will deliver their vision, including a programme plan and narrative, partnerships and budget. They will require information about local context, priority needs and challenges and how UK Town of Culture will address them.

Applicants may be required to undertake research, present data relating to expected impact, as well as delivery, fundraising and governance plans, as well as considering how they will deliver digital content for wider public engagement through the competition.

2.0 Proposal/Options Considered

2.1 There are several towns in Newark and Sherwood that could consider applying.

A partnership within Newark is being formed to develop a bid. The town can demonstrate its ability to deliver major projects and programmes through strategic partnerships and collaboration and has multiple cultural sites which are already well

established for delivering events, including the market square, St Mary Magdalene Church and the Castle gardens.

However, it should be acknowledged that Newark is already in receipt of significant levels of government funding, including the Towns Fund and Local Regeneration Fund, which may make a bid less attractive.

UK Town of Culture has been designed for towns with populations under 75,000. Other towns within the district could be equally eligible but would need to identify their scope and ability to scale up in terms of infrastructure, partnerships and capacity. Southwell is therefore also well placed, with several key venues and a thriving cultural offer through the Minster, Festivals and links to the National Trust. A Southwell partnership is being formed, consisting of key cultural organisations that could include the National Trust, Southwell Town Council, Southwell Minster and local businesses and traders, to develop a bid.

- 2.2 The guidance is clear that any bid must include the relevant local authority, and it suggests that local authorities should be the accountable body, and it is therefore proposed that NSDC can provide this function for any partnership application that emerges from within the district.

However, with LGR meaning that NSDC will be heavily involved in cross-council workstreams for service consolidation alongside delivery of a number of major capital schemes, there is limited capacity for NSDC to act as the delivery partner. This is further complicated by LGR itself and the creation of the new unitary authority which will be operational as of April 2028. The Expression of Interest requires applicants to consider how the programme will be managed through the year, including leadership structure and delivery model, which NSDC cannot commit to as it will be replaced by the unitary authority mid-programme. It is therefore proposed that NSDC cannot act as the delivery partner, and another organisation will need to be identified to take on that role.

NSDC acknowledges that several bids are being developed within the district and wishes to be equitable in the role it can undertake. The proposal is therefore to support partnerships and offer to be the accountable body for both bids, a function that is transferable to the unitary council. NSDC also acknowledges that, whilst partnership organisations and individuals are working voluntarily at this stage to develop their bids, there are nevertheless some costs involved. This might include the cost of organising and delivering community consultation, promotion and communications or specialist bid-writing support. It is proposed that NSDC allocate a budget of up to £5,000 per town, to be allocated to the lead organisation of established partnerships on proof of expenditure, to facilitate the timely and comprehensive development of their bid.

- 2.3 If shortlisted, a £60,000 grant from DCMS will be made available to develop the full bid. Partners will be expected to ensure that the programme meets the funding criteria and delivers outcomes for the town that might include:

- Economic investment and regeneration

- Community pride and identity building
- Access to arts and culture
- Legacy beyond 2028 through investment in programmes and interventions

The partnership for any shortlisted town, and the delivery partner organisation, will need to clearly identify their approach to developing the full bid.

- 2.4 This proposal links closely to the aims of the Community Plan as a unique opportunity to 'promote, maximise and celebrate the diversity of Newark and Sherwood's heritage, culture and community spirit'. Additionally, the cultural programme would support improved health and wellbeing and improve community feelings of safety by animating town centre spaces and improving pride in place.

3.0 **Implications**

In writing this report and in putting forward recommendations, officers have considered the following implications: Data Protection; Digital & Cyber Security; Equality & Diversity; Financial; Human Resources; Human Rights; Legal; Safeguarding & Sustainability and where appropriate they have made reference to these implications and added suitable expert comment where appropriate.

Implications Considered			
Yes – relevant and included / NA – not applicable			
Financial	Yes	Equality & Diversity	N/A
Human Resources	N/A	Human Rights	N/A
Legal	Yes	Data Protection	N/A
Digital & Cyber Security	N/A	Safeguarding	N/A
Sustainability	N/A	Crime & Disorder	N/A
LGR	Yes	Tenant Consultation	N/A

3.1 **Financial Implications FIN25-26/4480**

A provision of up to £10,000 is required within the 2025/26 revenue budget to support the development of Expressions of Interest from towns across Newark & Sherwood. This funding would be available as up to £5,000 per town, subject to a lead organisation being formally identified through an appropriate partnership arrangement; and evidence of eligible expenditure being submitted prior to the release of funds.

This provision of up to £10,000 would be a contribution from the Council towards this project and it is proposed that this be funded from the anticipated favourable variance within the Communities and Environment Directorate. This will not be recoverable from the expected grant.

If one or both bids from within Newark and Sherwood are successful at the expression of interest stage, an expenditure budget of up to £120,000 is to be created with the intention that this will be used to develop the full application; with an Income Budget of the same to offset, added in the respective year.

The creation of the said budget will have a net nil impact and therefore no change on the Council's General Fund Budget Requirement.

3.2 Local Government Re-organisation

Should a bid from within Newark and Sherwood be successful, the development of the cultural programme by the partnership group will take place during NSDC's service consolidation period in preparation for the new unitary authority, and the function of being the accountable body will need to transfer to the unitary council in April 2028.

3.3 Legal Implications - LEG2526/9850

The Localism Act 2011 under section 1 gives the Council the "power to do anything that individuals generally may do", and may do it "for, or otherwise than for, the benefit of the authority, its area or persons resident or present in its area". These powers give the Council the power to undertake the role of accountable body and facilitate the arrangements proposed within the body of this report.

The accountable body role means that NSDC will be the body required to ensure the financial due diligence and governance underpinning the proposal and as such NSDC would be the body through whom which any 'clawback' or recovery of funds would be sought. Accordingly, the Council should ensure that the Delivery Body – whoever that might be - has the appropriate operational transparency to not only ensure that anything which triggers clawback is avoided, but also to permit robust oversight and management of the proposals outlined within this report so that it can perform its accountable body duties and functions.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None