

Proposed Expression of Interest submission by Malmesbury Town Team for UK Town of Culture 2028. Prepared by David Drake, Chair of Malmesbury Town Team CIC, February 2026

Summary

UK Town of Culture is a brand new Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) competition. For the first time, DCMS is inviting towns across the UK to enter the competition to showcase original storytelling, and empowering, accessible culture. The competition is targeted at all towns, whether small, medium or large. The winning town will be awarded £3 million to deliver a cultural programme in 2028 of around six months. Additionally, the two finalists from their category will receive £250,000 each to deliver elements of their bid.

It is a UK-wide programme, developed in collaboration with the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Inspired by the success of the flagship UK City of Culture, which is a proven model for cultural placemaking, this competition aims to spotlight the cultural contribution of towns to our national story. The briefing on the scheme is appended to this document.

As a formally constituted accountable organisation with a broad basis of membership including business, cultural and local authority representatives, Malmesbury Town Team CIC is in an ideal position to act as Lead Applicant during the competition process. As the Expression of Interest Form has to be completed and submitted by 31 March 2026, there is an urgency in pulling together the strongest possible case in what is expected to be a highly competitive process. Towns in the South West region such as Tetbury, Amesbury, Banbury, Thornbury, Ledbury, Redruth, Helston have already announced their intention to bid, and that trend is mirrored across the UK.

I believe that Malmesbury has a particularly *‘strong, compelling local story that uses culture to bring people together, reflecting place, pride, and contribution to the national story’*. As a small market town, we already *‘punch well above our weight’* in terms of our cultural offer, and our capacity to engage our communities and build on local strengths while addressing specific local priorities. We could certainly devise and deliver *‘a high-quality, bold programme drawing on arts, heritage, and creative industries, demonstrating excellence, creativity, innovation, and use of technology to widen access’*. Moreover, our case would align with and provide impetus to wider local and regional plans for enhancing the cultural infrastructure, creating new opportunities for participation for people of all ages, not just for existing residents and visitors, but for the benefit of future generations.

Through its experience of leading and enabling Athelstan 1100, the two Pride of Place festivals in 2023 and 2025 and its other year-round projects, Malmesbury Town Team has demonstrated its *‘commitment to work collaboratively with a range of community and cross-sector partners’* including local businesses, industry and civic leaders, cultural activists, voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. As Malmesbury Town Council has three local councillor representatives on the Town Team Management Group (one who is also a company director), and there is a formal relationship through the annual grant funding, we can already demonstrate that the local authority has a dedicated role in the bid partnership.

If we are shortlisted, more work will be undertaken to determine the best structure for delivery and the scope of the programme. If the bid is successful, in my view Malmesbury Town Council would be the most appropriate 'Accountable Body' and have overall responsibility and ownership for the programme. This includes 'taking responsibility for any grant funding associated with a UK Town of Culture programme, for which the Accountable Body is the recipient organisation'.

The Town Team, in an enhanced form, would be a suitable 'Delivery Body' responsible for planning, procuring, commissioning and delivery of the UK Town of Culture programme.

I therefore request that the Town Council:

- 1) Agrees to be cited as a key partner in the initial bid led by the Town Team as will be stated in the Expression of Interest form**
- 2) Agrees that MTC is prepared to act as the Accountable Body in the event of the bid being successful**

Appendix: UK Government Guidance

Introduction

This guidance has been produced by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to assist towns that wish to bid for the title of UK Town of Culture 2028. This guidance outlines the aims of the competition and details the requirements for the initial Expression of Interest (EOI) stage. This guidance also sets out the bidding and selection process for the later stages of the competition to support planning.

Places wishing to apply for the UK Town of Culture 2028 competition are advised to read the guidance in full.

Aims

The UK Town of Culture competition aims to celebrate the significant contributions of towns to our national story. The competition focuses on building a more socially cohesive country where communities feel proud of their place and empowered to celebrate it. The UK Town of Culture is an opportunity for places and communities to use culture and creativity to tell their story and why they are proud of their community.

Benefits of winning

In addition to the £3 million main prize and £250,000 finalist prizes, we anticipate that winning will lead to significant, demonstrable outcomes, including a boost in civic pride, greater participation in cultural activities, and the formation of enduring community partnerships. These partnerships will help build a strong sense of place and champion grassroots arts and culture, mirroring the proven impact of the UK City of Culture programme. Research has shown that for the UK City of Culture programme more than 70% of attendees to UK City of Culture events feel a greater sense of pride. We also know that the benefits for places extend well beyond their title period, leading to a lasting legacy of social and cultural change. We expect to see similar benefits for the UK Town of Culture.

Benefits of bidding

Competing for the title, irrespective of whether or not a place wins, can have a hugely positive impact on the local community. It fosters a sense of local pride and strengthens collaboration among local partners. Previous bidders for the UK City of Culture report that the process brought the community together to develop strategic and cohesive cultural leadership. In turn, this enabled them to showcase – and open up access to – local heritage, art, and culture.

We want as many places as possible from across the UK to have the opportunity to draw on the benefits of bidding. We have designed the competition with this in mind: with an initial EOI stage and funding to support bidders in the later stage of the competition.

Funding

We are pleased to announce a guaranteed £3.5 million prize fund for the UK Town of Culture competition. The panel will select the best small, medium and large towns from the full applications we receive. One of these will be named UK Town of Culture 2028 and receive £3 million, while the other two finalists will each receive £250,000 to ensure they are able to take forward key parts of their bids. We recognise that commitment of funding up front can provide places with the confidence and security to engage with the competition and launch ambitious bids.

We also recognise that there are costs associated with developing and submitting a bid and we want places to feel able to bid and to benefit from the bidding process. There is a simple EOI phase and has been designed to keep costs to a minimum at the outset. DCMS will award bid development grants of £60,000 to each of the shortlisted places which are invited to submit a full application.

You need to outline in your EOI how you would spend this £60,000 grant. It is a flexible source of funding to strengthen your full application and help to develop a scalable plan, for example on:

- Research & Development
- Consultation
- Human resources
- Data gathering
- Commercial expertise for capital plans

Aims

Criteria

1. Your story: tell us about the unique story and culture of your town.

1. Vision: A strong, compelling local story that uses culture to bring people together, reflecting place, pride, and contribution to the national story.

2. Local Need: How your programme builds on local strengths while addressing specific local priorities.

3. Empower: Commitment to involving communities, grassroots artists, creatives, and local leaders in shaping the bid, programme, and legacy, devolving decision-making where possible.

2. Culture for Everyone: how you will design a cultural programme that

5. Quality and Innovation: A high-quality, bold programme drawing on arts, heritage, and creative industries,

Aims

Criteria

provides visible, accessible culture and boosts your town's profile.

demonstrating excellence, creativity, innovation, and use of technology to widen access.

6. Opportunity: Expanding opportunities for those who currently do not access cultural infrastructure, especially young people, while creating new opportunities for existing participants.

7. Accessibility: Ensuring the programme is accessible to all ages and underserved communities, providing a safe, supportive, non-discriminatory environment.

8. Communication: A well-resourced communications plan that reaches multiple audiences and shines a spotlight on the town's contribution to national life.

3. Making it happen: how you will deliver a successful programme.

9. Partnerships: Strong, collaborative leadership with clear commitment from local authorities, community organisations, and cultural/heritage partners, including pursuit of new opportunities and lasting connections.

10. Programme Management: Evidence of capacity, capability, and effective processes to deliver the programme successfully.

11. Financial Management: A realistic, viable budget representing value for money, with clear monitoring processes and plans to attract appropriate funding.

12. Monitoring, Evaluation & Legacy: A clear plan for evaluating impact (including environmental sustainability), sharing insights, and strengthening or rejuvenating cultural and heritage infrastructure with realistic expectations.

Competition criteria

The UK Town of Culture 2028 criteria sets out the strategic objectives of the programme and should be used by bidding places to inform their bids. They will be used by the Expert Advisory Panel to assess bids at all stages of the competition.

To be successful, EOIs must demonstrate how they meet the criteria and show potential to make a significant contribution to the aims of the UK Town of Culture programme.

Please note: If a large number of applications are received, an initial sift will take place on the first criterion, 'Your Story' only.

Table 1: UK Town of Culture 2028 competition aims and criteria

Who can bid?

We welcome bids from places across the UK. To be eligible, bidding places must demonstrate the 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. For the largest towns, the UK City of Culture competition may be more suitable and these towns should consider applying to [UK City of Culture 2029](#).

The only areas precluded from bidding are any parts of Greater London, but we would encourage these areas or London-based organisations being partners in a bid for an area outside London.

We want to ensure that towns of all different sizes are showcased when applying for the competition, therefore, we have introduced three prize categories. We will be introducing small, medium and large-size category winners and from these three finalists, an overall UK Town of Culture winner will be selected. We will be using the Office of National Statistics definitions for [towns/urban areas based on population size](#) to determine categories and you will not be expected to apply to a specific category.

Category

Population Size

Small Town

Under 20,000 people

Medium Town

20,000 - 75,000

Large Town

Over 75,000

Which organisations can bid?

We expect bids to be from a partnership for your bidding place and include the relevant local authorities. This partnership may be well-established, but it does not need to be and we welcome bids from newly formed place partnerships. Bids will need to specify a single organisation to be 'Lead applicant' for information and communication purposes during the competition process. The Lead applicant must be a formally constituted accountable organisation; they do 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 partnership should demonstrate commitment to work collaboratively and could include a range of community and cross-sector partners such as: local businesses, industry and civic leaders, cultural bodies, local library services, voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. It should also demonstrate commitment to actively including local communities in decision-making and supporting them to directly shape what happens in their area. This commitment to community collaboration should be demonstrated at all stages of the competition.

Accountability for the programme

If successful, the winning places will be required to specify a chosen 'Accountable Body' and 'Delivery Body' for their programme (which may be the same organisation but does not need to be). You will need to set out your plan for this at the EOI stage, in reference to the below definitions.

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 the organisation of a UK Town of Culture programme, including leading on the necessary coordination between relevant partners;
- Taking responsibility for any grant funding associated with a UK Town of Culture programme, for which the Accountable Body is the recipient organisation; and
- 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.

What do we mean by culture?

Culture means different things to different places and communities, and we want local stories and the unique character of places to shine through in bids. We expect bidders to showcase the strengths of the cultural offer in the area, acknowledge its weaknesses, and its ambition and potential to improve. It will be up to you to make the case for which activities are included in your proposed cultural programme and articulate the step change you aim to achieve. We expect programmes to be able to

appeal to a wide range of audiences and to increase participation in cultural activities, especially amongst young people, as well as contributing to community cohesion and wellbeing.

Applicants are encouraged to include activities encompassing a broad definition of culture and its creative industries and how it relates to the town's history, story and community. This includes but is not limited to: visual arts; literature; music; theatre; dance; combined arts; architecture; crafts; design; heritage and the historic and natural environment; museums and galleries; libraries and archives; film; broadcasting and media; video games; animation; visual and special effects; photography; and publishing.

Alignment with UK government missions & priorities

The UK Town of Culture, along with the UK City of Culture competition complements other UK government initiatives to support culture to thrive, such as the £270 million Arts Everywhere Fund, which will ensure that everyone, everywhere has the opportunity to experience great culture and access to high quality institutions in the places they call home.

Local government is foundational to the sharing of cultural opportunity across the UK, and to the successful delivery of UK Town of Culture. Local authorities should work with local people to ensure that their bid and creative vision is reflective of their communities. In this way, the UK Town of Culture competition embodies the principles set out in the English Devolution White Paper, the biggest transfer of power out of Westminster to England's regions this century.

It further complements other UK government place-based initiatives, notably the Pride in Place Strategy which sets out a plan to create safer, healthier neighbourhoods where communities can thrive. The Pride in Place Programme represents one of the largest investments in deprived neighbourhoods for a generation - up to £5 billion over 10 years to support up to 250 places.

We encourage bidders to think about how their bid aligns with, builds on or prepares for other funds and initiatives as well as how it is integrated in wider local and regional inclusive growth plans. This will be assessed in a light touch way at this EOI stage and bidders will be expected to demonstrate this in more detail at the full application stage.

Bids should actively complement, rather than duplicate or compete with funding already delivering or set to deliver in their areas. Areas should not consider the UK Town of Culture competition as an opportunity to plug any gap in funding not realised by other government funds. Nor should places that did or do not receive support through other funds feel that they are at a disadvantage in applying to the UK Town of Culture competition. We want to support all bidders to realise culture's contribution to transformational step change