

Policy event – Creative Manchester.

Background of project:

We are going to talk about a cross-collaboration project with AHRC, Creative Manchester and Cartwheel Arts. With our project Unity and Strength, a Rochdale-based initiative that explored how heritage craft can support resilience, belonging and cultural engagement in diverse communities.

Rochdale is Greater Manchester's Town of Culture for 2025, so this is an important moment to think about how culture is defined, who gets to take part, and how local communities can shape the decisions that affect them.

Context:

The wider context is Greater Manchester's trailblazer devolution model, which creates opportunities to align regional funding and strategy more closely with local needs.

Rochdale is experiencing both the opportunities and challenges of this shift. It is a diverse borough shaped by industrial heritage and the co-operative movement. It has also seen significant recent investment in regeneration and culture, and is an Arts Council England Priority Place.

Policy:

There are numerous arts, culture, heritage and community cohesion policies across Greater Manchester and Rochdale. These include the Greater Manchester Strategy 2025–2035, the Rochdale Borough Plan, CreateGM, Building Stronger Communities Together, and Rochdale's Pioneering Creativity strategy.

But cultural policy can feel fragmented, especially in a fast-moving devolution context. It can also feel inaccessible to communities when presented mainly in long strategy documents and PDFs.

The Greater Manchester Strategy itself recognises that power and decision-making remain unbalanced and unrepresentative.

So, we saw this project in a devolution context as an opportunity to test how diverse voices can be included in more meaningful, creative and practical ways.

What did we do?

Working with Creative Manchester and Cartwheel Arts, we partnered with Maverick Lab, Kashmir Youth Project and Darnhill Café, engaging organisations with a multi-generational approach to collaboration. We recruited eight participants as co-researchers and, with two artists, a heritage craft practitioner and a translator, we delivered 14 workshops with a diverse, multi-generational group of women from Rochdale. Together, we co-created a banner.

We began at The Pioneers Museum in Rochdale, the birthplace of the co-operative movement, connecting people with a local history. We chose the co-creation of the banner, given that banners are part of this place's history: they are designed by communities for public places, and act as key counterparts to flags and public signage in our shared civic spaces.

We recruited artists whose skills in heritage crafts (embroidery, goldwork) aligned with the workshop participants' interests, and we worked with them to develop their skills in engaging with communities experiencing inequality, exclusion, or barriers to participation.

By making the banner, participants learnt goldwork embroidery, explored Rochdale's symbols, and created their own symbols to represent their cultural heritage, identity and belonging. The process gave people time to talk, reflect, and share stories.

We also opened up local cultural assets through a tour of Rochdale Town Hall with the Mayor and a visit to the banner archive at Touchstones Gallery. These visits helped connect personal and community histories with civic and cultural spaces.

To make policy development more accessible, we began with “shared values” rather than policy language. Building on co-operative and place-based values, the group added their own, voted democratically on which should appear on the banner, and used a citizens' jury to share recommendations with stakeholders.

What do we ask?

Policy Recommendations:

Touchstones Gallery holds the only surviving original protest banner from the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. Banners have long been political tools for amplifying community voices have long been used to amplify community voices. In that spirit, we created our banner as the face for our Policy Paper, setting out what participants want for arts and culture in Rochdale and Greater Manchester. The banner carries the core values: Home, Diversity, Unity, Strength and Co-operation.

Home

First, Home. The group asks policymakers to invest in community spaces and cultural programmes that enable residents to share, celebrate and define their own heritage and identities.

This means embedding community-led approaches within cultural planning and place-based regeneration, so that cultural spaces reflect the communities they serve.

Diversity

Second, Diversity. The group asks that representative participation becomes a requirement in research, consultation and cultural programming.

Funded projects should be expected to demonstrate meaningful engagement with underrepresented communities, as people with expertise, leadership and decision-making power, and to understand how creative methods enable such engagements.

Unity & Strength

Third, Unity and Strength. The group asks policymakers to use creativity as a tool for social cohesion, bringing people from different backgrounds together around shared experiences and local priorities.

That means supporting creative projects that build trust, shared understanding and dialogue between communities and institutions. It also means making policy information more accessible and creative, so people can engage with it on their own terms.

Co-operation

Finally, Co-operation. The group asks for sustained and devolved multi-year funding and support for community-led partnerships, co-research and collaborative decision-making, rather than short-term projects.

GMCA, Rochdale Council, funders and funding bodies should invest in long-term relationships, skills development and shared governance models that place communities at the centre of cultural and policy development.

Across all of these asks, the message is the same: policy processes should value lived experience, involve participants as co-researchers, and avoid extractive models of engagement. Engaged communities will sustain impactful, place-based investment.

Conclusion

To conclude, this project shows that place-based heritage craft can bring people together authentically and influence policy. In Rochdale, and within Greater Manchester's devolved context, there is real space to build on existing work and experiment with how devolution can better listen to diverse voices.

The group asks policymakers to recognise that long-term investment in collaborative, place-based creative work builds cohesion, belonging and civic pride. These are not simply arts activities; they are forms of building social infrastructure and social change.

I want to end with reflections from representatives of the group:

Sue *"We need more opportunities for diverse cultures to work together and understand each other, rather than division".*

Maureen: *"Community agency and control need to be enacted by communities, not 'delivered' to us."*

Donna: *"Culture belongs to us all, so we can all be responsible for it."*

Those statements capture the heart of the project. If devolution is to deepen democracy, then culture, heritage and creativity must be part of how we share power, skills and knowledge. Thank you.