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The Human Right to Take Part in Cultural Life

A Local Government Briefing



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Executive Summary

Already recognised in [Scotland's cultural strategy](#), 'everyone has the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'. As a general principle, the message is clear. Culture is not and cannot be a luxury. It is a fundamental human right that lies at the heart of securing human dignity and fostering positive social cohesion within Scotland's diverse and multicultural communities. The right to take part in cultural life, enshrined in Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), covers far more than the arts. It encompasses the ways people live, the languages they speak, the traditions and rituals they practise, and the communities they build. As a recent Scottish Parliament report, [Culture in Communities](#), has recognised, a place based approach to culture is essential to realising these rights in practice. This empowers people to have a greater say in shaping the cultural life of their local communities and creating the conditions for collaborative partnerships between local government, cultural organisations and communities to thrive. This is reinforced by the Public Sector Equality Duty, which requires local authorities to foster good relations between diverse communities and advance equality of opportunity, obligations to which culturally inclusive, place based approaches are directly relevant. When considered fully, it is a right that touches almost everything local government does.

The right to take part in cultural life is understood as having three core components:

- **Participation:** the right to freely choose one's cultural identity, engage in one's own cultural practices, and take part in creative activity.
- **Activity:** The right to know and understand one's own culture and that of others, benefit from cultural heritage, and use cultural goods and resources.
- **Contribution:** The right to be involved in creating the cultural expressions of one's community and in shaping the policies that affect cultural rights.

Delivering these components requires public bodies to meet three corresponding obligations:

- **to respect** cultural freedoms by not interfering with them;
- **to protect** against interference by third parties; and
- **to fulfil** the right through positive action that enables and promotes cultural participation.

Scotland's local authorities own and manage libraries, museums, galleries, theatres, community halls, and public spaces. They fund cultural organisations, support local languages, deliver cultural education, and shape the built environment through planning decisions. In short, local authorities are the primary vehicle through which

people in Scotland exercise their cultural rights. Yet cultural participation is not equal. Research consistently shows that adults with no qualifications, those living in the most deprived areas, people with disabilities, and those on low incomes are significantly less likely to engage with cultural life. At the same time, cultural budgets face growing pressure, with libraries reducing opening hours and venues under threat of closure.

With Scotland having already incorporated the right to cultural life for children and young people via the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 (particularly through Articles 29, 30 and 31), and seeking to further the right to culture's statutory footing, via the proposed [Human Rights Bill](#), this briefing sets out what the right to cultural life means in practice for Scottish local authorities, and the steps councils can take now to respect, protect and fulfil this fundamental human right for all. Drawing on international frameworks, Scottish Government data, and the [United Cities and Local Governments Culture 21 Plus framework](#), this briefing provides practical guidance and outlines ten key areas for local authority action, from adopting an explicit cultural rights policy and mapping the local cultural ecosystem, to connecting culture with health and wellbeing, protecting heritage, and building participatory governance.

Further resources on the right to culture and cultural strategies are available at the end of this briefing.

Understanding the International Framework

The Right to Take Part in Cultural Life

The right to take part in cultural life is not a new idea. It has been recognised in international human rights law since the adoption of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) in 1948 and is most fully articulated in [Article 15 of the ICESCR](#) (ratified by the UK in 1976). The right is also reflected across a range of other international instruments, including the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), and the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (full list of relevant instruments is provided in the Further Resources section).

But what does this actually mean? The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides the most comprehensive interpretation of this right through its [General Comment No. 21](#). Crucially, it defines culture broadly. This means it is not simply capturing the arts but encompasses ‘all manifestations of human existence.’ This includes ways of life, language, beliefs, traditions, and technology, as well as creative and artistic expression. Culture is understood as a living process, historical, dynamic and evolving, with a past, a present, and a future.

This breadth matters. It means the right to cultural life is not confined to theatres and galleries. It applies to the languages communities speak, the traditions they practise, the spaces they gather in, and the stories they tell about themselves. For local authorities, this framing is significant because it means cultural rights are relevant across almost every service area, from libraries and education to planning and community development. Rather than viewing culture as a series of isolated compartments, this approach views it as an interactive process. [General Comment No. 21](#) identifies five conditions that must be in place for the right to be fully realised. These conditions can provide a helpful framing for local authorities seeking to further understand and embed the right to culture through their strategies, policies, and services.

- **Availability:** Cultural goods and services such as libraries, museums, open spaces, natural heritage, languages, and traditions must be present and open to all.
- **Accessibility:** Opportunities to enjoy culture must be within physical and financial reach, without discrimination, and available in the language of one’s choice.
- **Acceptability:** Laws, policies, and programmes must be developed and delivered in ways that are acceptable to the people and communities involved, requiring genuine consultation.

- **Adaptability:** Policies must be flexible, relevant, and respectful of cultural diversity.
- **Appropriateness:** The realisation of the right must be suitable to a given cultural context, respecting the rights and cultures of all, including minorities.

Where barriers exist to the availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, and appropriateness of taking part in culture, it is expected under international law that duty-bearers in Scotland (public bodies) will take actions to respect, protect and fulfil the right.

- **Respect:** Refrain from interfering with people's enjoyment of cultural life. This includes protecting freedom of expression, respecting cultural identity, and ensuring minorities have access to their own culture and heritage.
- **Protect:** Take measures to prevent third parties from interfering with cultural rights. This includes protecting cultural heritage and enforcing non-discrimination.
- **Fulfil:** Take active steps to enable cultural participation. This means facilitating cultural diversity, supporting cultural institutions, promoting public awareness, and ensuring access to cultural venues and services for all, including those most marginalised and at risk of exclusion.

Further information and research on [the right to cultural life in Scotland](#) and the international framework has been developed by [Art.27 Scotland](#) and the [Human Rights Consortium Scotland](#), which sets out clearly the international framework for the right to culture and its relevance to all of our everyday lives. A further [briefing](#) is also available on the implications of incorporation of the right to culture in Scotland.

Why is this Relevant to Local Authorities?

Local authorities are central to ensuring that people from all across Scotland are empowered to participate in enjoying the culture of our shared past, accessing the culture of our present, and shaping the culture of our shared future. They do this through managing libraries, museums, galleries, theatres, community halls, and open spaces through which people exercise this right every day. They fund cultural organisations, support Scotland's languages, deliver education, shape communities through planning decisions, and run the community development programmes that bring people together. The right to cultural life is, in practice, largely delivered at a local level.

The scale of this responsibility is significant. Scotland has approximately 450 museums and galleries, and in 2023/24, its public libraries welcomed [over 15 million visitors](#). Further, the Scottish Household Survey 2023 found that 88% of adults had attended a cultural event or place, or participated in a cultural activity, in the previous 12 months. Cultural services are not only valuable in their own right. They are often the most effective way of reaching and engaging communities, particularly those who are marginalised or disadvantaged. When people feel welcome and connected through cultural activity, [the benefits extend well beyond the cultural sphere](#), bringing improved mental and physical health, stronger community relationships, greater engagement with employability and literacy services, and reduced social isolation. Community learning and development services play a particularly important role here, delivering [ESOL classes](#), supporting [New Scots](#) to share their culture and heritage with their new communities, and bringing generations together through shared skills and activities. For local authorities seeking to improve outcomes across a range of policy areas, cultural services can act as a powerful lever for change.

Scotland's culture and cultural practices have long been recognised around the world, and it has long been understood that this culture belongs to everyone. From the Enlightenment ideal that knowledge and ideas should be freely exchanged, to Scotland's Festivals, the living traditions of Gaelic song, Scots language, tartan and dress, and its literary heritage that stretches from Robert Burns to contemporary voices celebrated across the globe. The international human rights framework for cultural life does not ask Scotland to do something foreign to its values. It simply asks Scotland's duty bearers to protect and promote them. More importantly still, recognising culture as not just a 'nice to have' but as a fundamental human right to be respected, protected, and fulfilled, builds in accountability for any actions taken.

For examples from around the world of specific actions that can be taken at the local level to embed culture as a human right, the Agenda 21 for Culture has accumulated 15 years of best practices and specific experiences in furthering culture and sustainable development. These [case studies](#) highlight specific actions being taken locally to begin embedding and furthering access to culture for all.

Identified Issues in the Scottish Context

Understanding the barriers that prevent people from fully enjoying their cultural rights is essential if local authorities are to address them effectively. [Research](#) has identified several recurring challenges in the Scottish context. Taken together, they make a compelling case for why embedding cultural rights into local governance is not a bureaucratic exercise but a practical necessity.

Reducing public sector budgets

The most immediate pressure facing cultural services across Scotland is financial. As budgets get tighter, it becomes more challenging to fulfil statutory obligations and maintain the breadth of provision communities rely on, with vital funds being withdrawn, high inflation, and rising operational costs. Many services, such as libraries and museums, have reduced opening hours as a result. Culture is too often treated as a “nice to have” rather than as an essential public service, meaning it can be disproportionately exposed when difficult budgetary decisions are made. When making such decisions, it is important to take into account how delivering cultural services has measurable returns across health, education, social cohesion, and economic participation.

A narrow understanding of what culture means

There is a persistent tendency to define culture too narrowly, equating it with the creative arts sector while overlooking sport, languages, traditions, community practices, and everyday ways of life. This matters because a narrow definition leads to a narrow policy response. When cultural rights are understood in their full breadth, as General Comment No. 21 sets out, it becomes clear that they are relevant to almost everything local government does. Building awareness of this broader understanding among elected members, officers, and the public is an important first step for any local authority seeking to take cultural rights seriously.

Power and gatekeeping

Culture is too often defined and controlled by dominant groups, with gatekeeping activities shaping which cultural expressions receive recognition, funding, and space. This can create hierarchies within communities, generating what researchers have described as “minorities within minorities,” where some voices and traditions are consistently marginalised even within already underrepresented groups. Local authorities need to be aware of these dynamics when making decisions about cultural funding, programming, and the use of public spaces, and should actively seek out and support the cultural expressions of those whose voices are least likely to be heard.

Access barriers beyond cost

While financial barriers to cultural participation are well documented, they are not the only obstacle people face. Research on cultural engagement in Scotland identifies cost, accessibility, and infrastructure as three major challenges, but social and psychological barriers are equally significant. People may not feel that cultural spaces and institutions are designed with them in mind, or that their cultural expressions are valued and welcomed. Removing admission fees is a necessary but insufficient response. Genuinely inclusive cultural participation requires changes in how services are designed, who is involved in designing them, and how welcoming cultural spaces feel in practice.

Geographic disparities

Access to cultural provision is not evenly distributed across Scotland. People in rural and remote areas can face a lack of local facilities, and the costs of travel and accommodation can make accessing cultural opportunities in larger towns and cities prohibitive. Local authorities covering rural areas face particular challenges in ensuring equitable provision, and national frameworks need to be sensitive to the very different contexts in which local authorities operate.

Marginalised communities facing specific barriers

Certain groups face compounding challenges in accessing and participating in cultural life. Refugees and asylum seekers, disabled people, and linguistic minority communities all encounter specific structural and practical barriers that go beyond those faced by the general population. For local authorities, this underlines the importance of taking an intersectional approach to cultural access, recognising that the same person may face multiple overlapping barriers and that solutions need to be tailored accordingly.

Principles for Practice

Encouragingly, this work is already underway across Scotland. The City of Edinburgh Council's [Citywide Culture Strategy 2023 to 2030](#) explicitly grounds its approach in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirming that everyone has the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community. Its first aim, that all Edinburgh residents can easily access meaningful cultural experiences in their local area and have the opportunity to shape local cultural provision, directly reflects a rights based and place based understanding of culture. This commitment has been given practical expression through the [Creative Community Hubs project](#), a network of eight locally rooted hubs across the city, providing safe and accessible spaces where residents can participate in, shape, and benefit from cultural activity in their own communities.

At a national level, the Culture Collective programme, funded by the Scottish Government through Creative Scotland, brought together participatory arts projects across Scotland, from Shetland to the Borders, each designed and driven by the community in which it was rooted. Creative Scotland described it as a strong example of how to address unmet need through place based and people centred processes, with outcomes determined by communities themselves rather than imposed from above. Initiatives like Art27 Scotland, which takes its name directly from Article 27 and focuses on arts for dignity, justice and peace, further demonstrate how cultural rights can be embedded in grassroots practice.

These examples show that the foundations for a rights based, place based approach to culture are being laid. However, much more needs to be done to ensure that this work is sustained, adequately resourced, and extended to all communities across Scotland, particularly those facing the greatest barriers to cultural participation.

The barriers to cultural participation identified in the previous section are real, and for many communities across Scotland, they are significant. Budgets are shrinking, services are under threat, and too many people still find that cultural life is not as accessible or welcoming to them as it should be. These challenges will not be resolved overnight. But adopting a rights-based approach to culture changes the conversation. When cultural participation is understood as a basic human right rather than a discretionary service, it becomes clearer what local authorities are responsible for delivering, who is being left behind, and what actions are needed to address that. A rights-based approach does not create new burdens out of nowhere. It provides a framework for making sense of work that many local authorities are already doing, connecting it to a clearer purpose and a stronger evidence base.

Principles for Good Practice

The ten steps set out in this briefing are most effective when they are underpinned by a shared set of principles. These principles, drawn from the [Culture 21 Plus framework](#), have been adapted here to reflect the Scottish context and the realities facing local authorities today.

Innovation

Scotland's cultural challenges will not be solved by doing the same things in the same ways. A rights-based approach to culture invites local authorities to think differently, moving beyond conventional service delivery models to consider new ways of reaching communities, supporting cultural expression, and making the investment case. Innovation does not mean spending more. It means being open to different approaches, learning from what works elsewhere, and being willing to question assumptions about how cultural services should be designed and delivered.

Participation

Genuine participation means more than consulting communities after decisions have already been made. It means involving people from the very beginning, treating those who use and benefit from cultural services as active partners in shaping them rather than passive recipients. In Scotland, where community empowerment legislation, including community planning partnerships and participatory budgeting, already provides structures for meaningful engagement local authorities have real opportunities to put this principle into practice. The cultural expressions and priorities that matter most to communities should come from communities themselves.

Sustainability

At a time when cultural budgets are under significant pressure, sustainability is about more than financial resilience. It means designing cultural policies and services with the long term in mind, thinking across short, medium, and long term horizons, and building the kind of cross-sector partnerships and community ownership that can sustain cultural provision even when public funding is constrained. Scotland's growing tradition of community asset ownership and third sector involvement in cultural delivery offers a strong foundation for this approach.

Efficiency

In a public sector context where every pound needs to be justified, the efficiency of cultural investment must be clearly demonstrated. This means setting clear objectives at the outset, measuring outcomes rather than just outputs, and making the connections between cultural provision and wider outcomes in health, education, and social cohesion explicit and visible. The evidence is already there. Libraries saving the NHS money, museums improving wellbeing, and community cultural programmes reducing isolation. The task is to capture and communicate

this evidence consistently so that the case for cultural investment can be made with confidence.

Cross Cutting

Cultural rights do not sit neatly within a single service area or department. They touch housing, health, education, planning, community development, and more. Realising the right to cultural life in practice therefore requires local authorities to work across departmental boundaries, bringing together different teams, different expertise, and different parts of the community around shared goals. In Scotland, community planning partnerships and integrated joint boards already provide some of the architecture for this kind of joined-up working. The challenge is to make culture a genuine priority within these structures rather than an add-on.

Reproducible

Good practice in cultural rights should be shared, adapted, and built upon. What works in one Scottish local authority may not transfer perfectly to another, given the very different geographic, demographic, and cultural contexts across the country. But the principles and approaches that underpin good practice can travel, and local authorities should both look outward to learn from others and document their own experiences clearly enough that others can learn from them.

Taking Action

Drawing on the Culture 21 Plus framework developed by United Cities and Local Governments, and applying it to the Scottish context, the following principles and ten steps set out a practical route for local authorities to begin embedding cultural rights into how they work. No local authority needs to do everything at once. The intention and value of setting out this framework is that it allows authorities to identify where they already have strong foundations and where the greatest gaps lie, and to build from there in a way that is realistic about the pressures they face.

1. Adopting an Explicit Cultural Rights Policy or Embedding Cultural Rights into Existing Strategies

The most important first step is to make cultural rights visible in local decision-making. Too often, culture is treated as a discretionary service rather than a rights-based obligation. Adopting a policy document that explicitly places cultural rights at the centre of local cultural provision sends a clear signal to officers, elected members, and communities that this is a priority, not an afterthought. This means recognising the full breadth of what culture encompasses, moving beyond a narrow focus on the arts to include languages, traditions, sport, community practices, and everyday ways of life. It means including cultural rights among the priorities of all relevant local public organisations and community planning partnerships and integrating them into Local Outcome Improvement Plans. It also means identifying at the outset which individuals and groups are most at risk of exclusion and building their needs into policy from the start rather than treating them as an afterthought. Practical actions could include:

- adopting a formal policy document on cultural rights,
- integrating cultural rights language into strategic plans and budgets,
- including the protection and promotion of cultural diversity as a stated principle,
- and establishing capacity building initiatives on cultural rights for staff across all relevant service areas.

2. Building A Case for Cultural Investment

Given the financial pressures facing local authorities, cultural services will continue to be vulnerable unless a compelling, evidence-based case is made for their value. This is not simply about defending existing provisions. It is about reframing culture as an essential public service that delivers measurable returns across health, education, social cohesion, and economic participation. Through framing access to culture as not just a 'nice to have' local authorities should document and communicate the breadth of what their cultural services deliver, aiming to make explicit the links between cultural provision and outcomes in other policy areas.

Practical actions include:

- developing a local evidence base on the social and economic value of cultural services,
- integrating cultural rights considerations into budget processes and procurement decisions,
- making explicit links between cultural provision and outcomes in health, education, and social care,
- and ensuring elected members understand their role in protecting and promoting access to culture as a basic, fundamental human right.

3. Mapping and Supporting the Local Cultural Ecosystem

Many local authorities have limited visibility of the full range of cultural activity taking place in their area, particularly community-led and informal cultural expression that sits outside funded institutions. Without this picture, it is impossible to identify gaps in provision, target support effectively, or ensure that the cultural ecosystem is healthy and diverse. Understanding what is happening culturally locally helps local authorities understand who the cultural actors in their area are, what they do, who they reach, and where the gaps lie. It is also a tool for addressing the gatekeeping dynamics identified earlier in this briefing by making visible the cultural expressions and organisations that are least likely to come forward through conventional funding channels. Practical actions could include:

- creating a local map of cultural and creative actors across communities and neighbourhoods,
- developing accessible and transparent funding mechanisms that do not favour established organisations over emerging or community-led ones,
- supporting the emergence of new cultural projects through creative hubs or community-led spaces,
- and regularly reviewing the health of the local cultural sector with input from communities themselves.

4. Ensuring Public Cultural Services Are Accessible to All

Libraries, museums, community centres, and other cultural facilities are only useful if people can actually get to and use them. Geographic disparities in provision, physical inaccessibility, reduced opening hours, and the closure of local facilities all undermine the right to cultural life in practice, regardless of what any policy document says. Local authorities should treat cultural facilities not simply as buildings to be managed but as drivers of social, cultural, and community change, and ensure that services are available across all parts of the authority area,

including rural and deprived communities. Service standards should be specific and measurable, and decisions about opening hours, locations, and closures should be made with full awareness of their human rights implications. Practical actions include:

- mapping community needs regarding public cultural services across the whole authority area,
- designing facilities and activities based on the characteristics and needs of different communities,
- establishing clear and measurable service standards for cultural provision, promoting co-management and co-development mechanisms involving communities and civil society organisations,
- and supporting third sector organisations and community groups to take the lead on cultural activity where appropriate.

5. Strengthening Community Cultural Expression and Tackling Exclusion

Addressing the gatekeeping dynamics and access barriers identified in this briefing requires more than opening doors to existing cultural institutions. It requires actively supporting communities to express, share, and develop their own culture, and ensuring that the most marginalised voices are not simply invited to participate in cultural life as others have defined it, but are empowered to shape it themselves. This is particularly important for communities whose cultural expressions have historically been undervalued or overlooked, including minority ethnic communities, Gypsy and Traveller communities, linguistic minorities, LGBTQI communities, and communities living in poverty. It also means recognising and supporting the cultural contributions of New Scots and creating spaces where different communities can share their cultures. Practical actions include:

- mapping, recognising, and actively supporting community and neighbourhood cultural practices,
- encouraging and resourcing amateur and community-led cultural activity,
- adopting measures for the protection and promotion of local languages, including Gaelic, Scots, and BSL, identifying and protecting community cultural spaces,
- implementing cultural programmes that facilitate intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding,
- and periodically analysing factors determining vulnerability with an intersectional perspective.

6. Removing Barriers to Participation for Specific Groups

Beyond general inclusion measures, local authorities should take targeted action to address the specific barriers faced by groups at greatest risk of exclusion from cultural life. These include women, children and young people, older people, disabled people and Deaf communities, minorities, migrants and New Scots, and people experiencing poverty. The international framework is clear that equal treatment is not sufficient where structural inequalities exist. Proactive measures are required. This means explicitly integrating social objectives into cultural policies, developing partnerships between cultural actors and community organisations, and ensuring that programmes are designed with rather than for the groups they aim to serve. It also means recognising intersectionality, understanding that the same person may face multiple overlapping barriers and that a one-size-fits-all approach will not reach those who need support most. Practical actions include:

- explicitly integrating equalities and social objectives into cultural policies and programmes,
- developing partnerships between cultural actors and social and community development organisations,
- promoting access and active participation for people experiencing poverty, disabled people, migrants, refugees, all age groups, and LGBTQI people, linking with local community groups and third sector organisations,
- and building in regular analysis of who is and is not being reached by cultural provision.

7. Connecting Culture with Health, Well-being, and Education

Cultural participation is one of the most effective tools available to local authorities for improving health and wellbeing outcomes, yet cultural services and health services too often operate in isolation from each other. Similarly, the links between cultural provision and educational outcomes are well evidenced but underutilised in practice. Local authorities should take deliberate steps to connect these policy areas, establishing joint working between culture, health, and education departments, and ensuring that the value of cultural services is reflected in health and wellbeing strategies, community planning processes, and educational programmes. This is also a powerful argument for protecting cultural budgets, since cuts to cultural provision have real and measurable consequences for health and educational outcomes. Practical actions include:

- developing formal partnerships between cultural actors and health services, implementing programmes aimed at improving physical and mental health through cultural participation,
- recognising and promoting traditional practices and knowledge related to wellbeing, establishing coordination mechanisms between culture and

education departments, including culture and heritage in school curricula and supporting artistic residencies and cultural visits,

- and promoting appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity across the education system.

8. Addressing Barriers and Promoting Equality for All Groups

Genuinely equal access to cultural life requires local authorities to look critically at their own institutions and practices, not just at the barriers faced by communities. This means examining who makes decisions about cultural provision, whose cultural expressions receive funding and recognition, and whether the policies and procedures of cultural institutions reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. It also means taking specific action to promote gender equality in cultural life, ensuring that women have equal access to and participation in cultural provision, that female leadership in cultural decision-making is actively promoted, and that the cultural contributions of women throughout history are recognised and celebrated. Practical actions include:

- identifying constraints and barriers faced by specific groups, including women, implementing programmes promoting gender equality and tackling discrimination, promoting female leadership in cultural decision-making and management,
- embedding equality and anti-discrimination commitments in cultural policies and service delivery,
- enforcing non-discrimination in hiring and public procurement,
- and collecting and using disaggregated data to identify inequality and track progress.

9. Integrating Culture into Planning

The planning system shapes the physical landscape within which cultural life takes place. Decisions about land use, development, and the built environment can support or undermine cultural participation, and local authorities should ensure that cultural considerations are embedded in planning processes from the outset rather than treated as an afterthought. This is also where the protection of Scotland's tangible and intangible cultural heritage becomes a planning responsibility. Historic buildings, cultural landscapes, local traditions, languages, and community practices are all part of the cultural heritage that local authorities have a responsibility to safeguard, and communities should be actively involved in identifying and protecting what matters most to them. Practical actions include:

- approving planning strategies that map and recognise tangible and intangible cultural assets,
- considering geographic equality in planning cultural interventions,

- promoting active community participation in planning and urban design,
- assessing the cultural impact of urban and development interventions,
- adopting comprehensive heritage management plans,
- ensuring cultural diversity is considered when mapping and interpreting heritage,
- conducting participatory heritage mapping with specific consideration of minority groups,
- and promoting fair and affordable access to heritage for everyone.

10. Monitoring, Evaluating, and Reporting

None of the steps set out in this briefing will be effective without robust systems for measuring progress, identifying gaps, and reporting publicly on outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation are not bureaucratic requirements. They are the mechanism through which local authorities demonstrate accountability to the communities whose cultural rights they are responsible for delivering, and through which good practice can be identified and shared. Building a monitoring framework for cultural rights does not need to start from scratch. Many local authorities already collect relevant data on library visits, museum attendance, participation in cultural programmes, and satisfaction with cultural services. The task is to connect this data to a cultural rights framework, ensure it is disaggregated to show outcomes for different groups, and use it to drive continuous improvement. Practical actions include:

- developing qualitative and quantitative systems to monitor cultural policies and programmes,
- collecting disaggregated data for different social groups,
- establishing mechanisms for transparent public accountability and evaluation,
- using cultural rights as a benchmark for evaluation rather than simply measuring outputs, establishing research and observation systems involving communities, universities, and civil society, and engaging with national and international human rights monitoring mechanisms where relevant.

Taking Action: A Checklist for Scottish Local Authorities

#	Area	Guiding Questions/Key Actions	Status/Notes
1	Cultural Rights Policy	- Has the council adopted a policy that explicitly places cultural rights at the centre of local cultural provision? - Are cultural rights integrated into Local Outcome Improvement Plans and community planning partnerships? - Does the policy reflect the full breadth of culture beyond the arts?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
2	Making the Case for Cultural Investment	- Does the council have an evidence base on the social and economic value of its cultural services? - Are cultural rights considerations integrated into budget processes? - Are elected members aware of the human rights implications of cuts to cultural provision?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
3	Mapping the Local Cultural Ecosystem	- Has the council mapped the full range of cultural actors and activities in its area, including informal and community-led provision? - Are funding mechanisms accessible and transparent? - Is the health of the local cultural sector regularly reviewed with input from communities?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
4	Accessible Public Cultural Services	- Are cultural services available across all parts of the authority area including rural and deprived communities? - Are there measurable service standards for cultural provision? - Are communities involved in co-managing and co-developing cultural services?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
5	Community Cultural Expression and Inclusion	- Does the council actively support community and neighbourhood cultural practices including those of minority and marginalised communities? - Are measures in place to protect and promote local languages including Gaelic, Scots, and BSL? - Are community cultural spaces identified and protected?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete

#	Area	Guiding Questions/Key Actions	Status/Notes
6	Removing Barriers for Specific Groups	• Are equalities and social objectives explicitly integrated into cultural policies? • Are programmes designed with rather than for the groups they aim to serve? • Does the council take an intersectional approach recognising that people may face multiple overlapping barriers? • Is disaggregated data collected to track who is and is not being reached?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
7	Culture, Health, Wellbeing and Education	• Are there formal partnerships between cultural services and health and education departments? • Is the value of cultural provision reflected in health and wellbeing strategies and community planning processes? • Are cultural activities integrated into schools including visits and artistic residencies?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
8	Equality and Non-Discrimination	• Are equality and anti-discrimination commitments embedded in cultural policies and service delivery? • Are specific measures in place to promote gender equality in cultural life and female leadership in cultural decision-making? • Is non-discrimination enforced in hiring and public procurement?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
9	Culture in Planning and Heritage Protection	• Are cultural considerations embedded in planning processes from the outset? • Does the council have a heritage management plan? • Are communities actively involved in identifying and protecting cultural heritage, including intangible heritage such as languages and traditions?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete
10	Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting	• Are there systems in place to monitor and publicly report on cultural rights outcomes? • Is data disaggregated to show outcomes for different groups? • Are communities, universities, and civil society involved in evaluation? • Is the council engaged with national and international human rights monitoring mechanisms?	☐ Not started ☐ In progress ☐ Complete

Conclusion

The barriers to cultural participation in Scotland are real. Budgets are under pressure, services are being reduced, and too many people still find that cultural life does not feel accessible or relevant to them. A rights-based approach will not solve these challenges overnight. But it does something important. It makes clear what local authorities are responsible for, who is being left behind, and what actions are needed. It shifts culture from being a nice to have to being a recognised and enforceable entitlement.

The proposed Human Rights Bill is a significant opportunity. When ICESCR is incorporated into Scots law, cultural participation will become a legal right rather than a discretionary service. Local authorities that start preparing now will be better placed to meet those new duties, to protect cultural services in difficult budget conversations, and to demonstrate what a rights-based approach looks like in practice.

Scotland has the values, the institutions, and the tradition to lead on this. The checklist above is a practical starting point. It is not a test to pass or fail but a tool to help councils have an honest conversation about where they are already strong and where the most important work still needs to be done.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this briefing or the actions it sets out, please contact felicia.szloboda@improvementservice.org.uk

Further Resources

The following resources are intended as a starting point for local authorities wishing to learn more about the right to cultural life and how to embed it in practice. They are organised thematically for ease of reference.

The International Framework

[Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\), Article 27](#)

[International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\), Article 15](#)

[UN General Comment No. 21: The Right to Take Part in Cultural Life](#)

[UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\), Article 31](#)

[Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\), Article 30](#)

[Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\), Article 13](#)

[UN Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights](#)

[UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: Education and Cultural Rights](#)

The Right to Culture in Scotland

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