



Steve Mannix
Chief Executive
Mercury Theatre
Balkerne Gate
Colchester
Essex
CO1 1PT

Friday 24th October 2025

Submission to Public Bills Committee: response to the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill 2025

Executive Summary

This written submission seeks to make the case for specific inclusion of arts and culture in the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. Supporting evidence is provided by data and case studies from the recent UK Theatre Award winning Mercury Theatre, Colchester, who play a key civic and economic role across Greater Essex and who are concerned about the impact of Devolution on priorities and funding, should culture not be a key provision of the Devolution Bill in which devolved authorities must make a statutory commitment to supporting this vital sector.

This would bring the Devolution Bill in line with the commitments of the Devolution White Paper, which stated that: *Strategic Authorities will also be key partners in boosting culture, heritage and the visitor economy, supported by close integration with arm's length bodies like Historic England.*

As stated in the Devolution Framework, this meant a commitment to: *partnership working with Department for Culture, Media and Sport Arm's Length Bodies to maximise culture, heritage, and sport spending in place.*

This written response seeks to make the case for why inclusion of this commitment within the Devolution Bill will be essential to the ongoing growth of the creative and cultural sector across the UK, and how it will support the central tenets of Devolution.

Implications for communities

Mercury Theatre, Colchester illustrates why culture is a vital part of a thriving local community:

- Annual Audience Reach: Over 130,000 people attend performances and events each year, making the Mercury one of the most significant cultural contributors in Essex.
- Community Participation: More than 30,000 people take part annually in creative learning, outreach, and participation projects.
- Youth & Skills: The Mercury runs dedicated training programmes, apprenticeships, and placements, with over 2,000 young people supported each year to develop skills and pathways into employment.
- Wellbeing & Inclusion: Projects tackling isolation and improving wellbeing reach more than 5,000 vulnerable or disadvantaged residents each year, including older people, young carers, and those from marginalised communities.

- **Civic Identity:** The Mercury's landmark building – redeveloped with £13.2m of local, national, and philanthropic investment – anchors Colchester's cultural quarter and stands as a visible symbol of Essex's ambition and identity.
- **Sector support and influence:** The Mercury Theatre is a beacon across Essex and beyond, providing leadership and collaborating with other arts and cultural organisations including Colchester Arts Centre, Firstsite, Colchester Museum's Service, Essex County Council's cultural programmes, and smaller local companies and festivals — strengthening the resilience and reach of the whole cultural sector.
- **National Theatre Sector:** The Mercury's own award-winning produced work is firmly part of the national theatre ecology touring across the UK to similar venues throughout the year.

Culture as a driver of economic growth and regeneration

The arts and culture are engines of local economies, magnets for visitors, and seedbeds for creative industries, which had a value of £124 billion to the UK last year and has been proven to be one of the most consistent and resilient sectors in our economy and its on our doorstep – all around us.

Arts and culture provision give regions distinctive voices and help children – particularly the most disadvantaged – discover new skills and life chances. They create cohesion in fractured times and put towns and cities on international maps.

To put this into context, Mercury Theatre, Colchester has a £5.4m annual turnover, it employs over 100 staff, engages over 170 freelancers, and generates an estimated £4m in local economic impact – a return of £4 for every £1 of public investment, supporting the local economy and employment across Colchester and Greater Essex.

Its Mercury Young Company provides year-round training for young people, while career programmes for playwrights, producers and directors retain creative talent in Essex. Its partnership with StageText, the national D/deaf access charity, makes Colchester a national leader in cultural inclusion. It is an engine of jobs, skills, wellbeing and civic pride.

The Mercury Theatre is a driver of outcomes that sit at the centre of government priorities: economic growth, skills, public health, and social cohesion.

The risk of omitting arts and culture in the Devolution Bill

If culture is not actively included in these early drafts, it risks being permanently marginalized, in favour of those areas specifically name checked in the Bill.

With competition for budgets increasingly challenged, and other priorities (transport, housing, adult education) specifically name-checked in the Devolution Bill, the risk of not referencing arts and culture provision means that it may be marginalised in the face of other statutory provision – without acknowledging the role arts and culture can play in these areas (education, health and wellbeing etc).

We need to look to others who have been through the process regardless of their colour, structure or geography and gain from their knowledge and experience. Today Greater Manchester has culture woven into the fabric of their city-wide offer. The West Midlands were able to place themselves on the international stage with their staging of the Commonwealth Games and West Yorkshire's support for

the film and TV industry. Their investment has paid back many times over, strengthening civic pride, creating skills pipelines, and driving the visitor economy.

Recommendation and proposed adjustment

Referencing the Devolution White Paper: *“the government will work with Mayors and Local Authorities to devolve the levers of growth in these sectors [culture, tourism]. The pipeline of skills is a brake on the growth of the creative industries. Our work to address skills challenges through the creative industries sector plan is an opportunity to reset this. We will work with Mayors and Local Authorities to ensure decisions about funding are made with them and, where possible, align with Local Growth Plans”*, we recommend that references to arts and culture are included under Section 38 and Schedule 19 – and made a statutory commitment as part of each authorities Local Growth Plan.

An example adjustment might be:

A local growth plan must—

- (a) include an overview of the economic conditions of the area (including the main economic characteristics which are likely to influence current and future economic growth)
- (b) identify priorities for the economic growth of the area that are agreed with the Secretary of State (“shared local growth priorities”)
- (c) identify key projects for achieving economic growth in the area through private or public investment, **with public investment provision secured for arts and culture organisations or projects**

Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Steve Mannix

Chief Executive

Steve.Mannix@mercurytheatre.co.uk

Colchester Mercury Theatre Limited

Balkerne Gate Colchester

Essex CO1 1PT

www.mercurytheatre.co.uk

info@mercurytheatre.co.uk

CEO: Steve Mannix

Telephone: (01206) 577006

Ticket Sales: (01206) 573948

Fax: (01206) 769607