

Culture Next

Role, Impact and the Future of European Capital of Culture.



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Executive Summary

This short report provides headlines from a research and consultation exercise with member cities of the Culture Next Network. Established in 2017, Culture Next is dedicated to European Capital of Culture (ECoC) candidates, current or former, awarded or not. It is co-funded by the European Union. It is the direct legacy of the ECoC bid book of Cluj-Napoca, a Romanian candidate city for 2023 .

Culture Next works towards achieving wider European acknowledgement and recognition of culture as sustainable development and towards extending the existing European cultural cooperation frameworks.

Working with most of the 34 member cities of Culture Next, the research explored the following:

- **Considerations on and recommendations for an enhanced European Capital of Culture Programme which can deliver step-change and sustainable legacy for all cities involved in the programme – including candidate cities, ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.** This is in view of a refreshed European Capital of Culture post-2030.
- **How Culture Next is valued by member and associate cities which have participated in Culture Next activities.** This includes perceptions of the role and impact of Culture Next for different types of cities across Europe.
- **Aspirations for and recommendations on how Culture Next can be more impactful and of value to participating cities.** This includes reflections on how it can further enhance the process of European Capital of Culture bid development, collaboration and exchange to support the European Dimension of bids, and the delivery of legacy.

The research methodology involved a programme of in-depth interviews with a sample of cities and a survey for all Culture Next members. A total of 19 cities (over 50% of members) completed the survey. Consulted cities included:

- * European Capital of Culture Candidate Cities – now and in the past, including both successful bidders and ‘losing’ cities (which were not selected as European Capital of Culture)
- * European Capitals of Culture – now, in the past and confirmed for the future.

The research was undertaken by TFCC Europe – a leading agency in cultural and creative sector insights, strategy and policy. It was commissioned by Culture Next to kickstart a new phase of knowledge development and exchange.

This report presents headline analysis of the survey and interview programme. It provides key findings regarding the ways Culture Next is valued, and its role in a refreshed ECoC post-2030.

The value of Culture Next to Member Cities

Of critical importance, the findings of the research assert the importance of Culture Next in securing a legacy for candidate cities in terms of:

- **Confidence:** being part of the network helps cities to understand the approach to ECoC bid development and more confidently establish a more sustainable legacy model – win or lose.
- **Knowledge exchange:** building the tools and approaches which secure more effective cultural strategies, evaluations, programmes and associated outcomes.
- **Mobility and international cultural relations:** facilitating exchange, mentoring and community building for cultural professionals across Europe.
- **Strategic influence:** helping to position culture as a foundation for sustainable and inclusive city-making and urban development across Europe.
- **European dimension:** catalysing exchange and building an ecosystem which enables European values to flourish.

A strengthened and enhanced Culture Next

Headline recommendations for enhancing Culture Next – to maximise its impact for all cities – include:

- ✓ **Extending and embedding mobility activities across the network** - supporting cities to develop exchange and strengthen their approach to international cultural relations.

- ✓ **Further unlocking the knowledge and expertise of Culture Next members** - to establish a legacy framework for all EcoC candidate cities, enabling long-term cultural strategy and investment, whether or not the city wins the EcoC title.
- ✓ **Strengthening the approach to mentoring, capacity-building and training** – to build strategic knowledge exchange and build the tools necessary for culture to play a long-term foundational role in urban development across Europe.
- ✓ **Boosting Culture Next's role as an advocate and champion for sustainable cultural strategy across Europe**, focused on major challenges and opportunities for cities, from tackling climate crisis to embracing cultural diversity.

Optimising European Capital of Culture to drive cultural impact across Europe

“Legacy starts from the bid process”

Consultee – previous ECoC winning city.

Consultation with Culture Next members has helped shape a set of ambitious priorities for the future of European Capital of Culture. The Culture Next network has the knowledge, experience and innovative capacity to support the European Commission to elevate EcoC so it delivers cultural impact and transformation across Europe.

Ten priority areas – as championed by Culture Next – are as follows:

One. Provide supporting framework for ‘losing’ cities with clear guidance on how to deliver legacy as part of a wider EcoC family.

Two. Provide a terms of reference for a **National Capital of Culture** – so that, where there is an appetite, national Governments can support the roll-out of a national competition.

Three. Develop clear and transparent metrics for the assessment of EcoC bid books.

Four. Select ‘star’ projects from losing bid books to ensure great ideas underpinned by genuine pan-European collaboration are not lost.

Five. Revamp the brand. The brand and the title which underpins it are in need of a refresh

Six. Boost collaboration between EcoCs and ‘losing’ cities. .

Seven. Embrace equality, diversity and inclusion as a building block for a future EcoC programme.

Eight. Review the balance and mix of cities selected each year.

Nine. Align ECoCs and bidding cities to next generation innovation in cultural practice, programming, partnership and evidence capture.

Ten. Establish Culture Next as the Knowledge Partner to the EcoC Programme.

This report shows that Culture Next has the expertise and connections to attribute expertise to the processes of bid development, evaluations, cultural strategies, programme models, mobility actions, and of course approaches to legacy. Culture Next is developing a Policy Taskforce and catalysing fresh knowledge through its thematic working groups. These activities can greatly enhance innovation and knowledge exchange across the ECOC Programme.

1. Introducing Culture Next¹

“Cluj-Napoca is an exemplar in how ECoC legacy doesn't always land with the title. They have become a hub for innovation and knowledge exchange for culture in cities, with the Cluj Cultural Centre a driving force in delivering ECoC legacy across Europe”.

Consultee – from another ‘losing’ city.

Established in 2017, Culture Next is dedicated to European Capital of Culture candidates, current or former, awarded or not. It is co-funded by the European Union. It is the direct legacy of the ECoC bid book of Cluj-Napoca, a Romanian candidate city for 2023².

“Our mission is to contribute to having more European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programmes implemented in European cities and regions and to define a long-term European vision on local development through culture and creativity”.

Culture Next works towards achieving wider European acknowledgement and recognition of culture as sustainable development and towards extending the existing European cultural cooperation frameworks. By bringing together different cities from across Europe which have been or still are candidate cities for ECoC, the network directly contributes to the ECoC programme legacy, by facilitating the implementation of extensive ECoC programmes in Europe.

¹ <https://culturenext.eu/>

² The ECoC year was postponed from 2021 to 2023 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Timisoara was awarded the title for 2023.

The network focuses on capacity building, organising conferences and annual meetings, and on developing a platform for promoting member cities, as well as facilitating collaborations among them. The network also aims to become a voice in shaping European cultural policies.

There are currently 34 cities in the Culture Next network. There is also a growing network of associate cities, including existing and previous ECoC candidate cities. To give an indication of the scale and reach of the Network, at its 13th Conference in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, representatives (including Mayors) of over 50 European cities were in attendance, alongside key European organisations which support cultural mobility, knowledge exchange and sustainable development through culture. It was a major event for knowledge exchange, networking and delivering legacy impact for cities associated with ECoC.



13th Culture Next Conference Group Photo, Cluj-Napoca, October 2024.

Culture Next Conferences are held twice a year. They sit as part of a wider programme of networking, knowledge

exchange, cultural mobility and deep-dive exploration of key issues for member and associated cities.

2. Culture Next in a Refreshed ECoC

In this research exercise, part of the response from cities focuses on the areas of Culture Next activity they would like to see developed further – so that Culture Next plays a more proactive, visible and impactful role to the heart of the ECoC programme. These are areas where Culture Next can help secure long-term and sustainable legacy for bidding cities, whatever the result of the bid. This includes:

- Extending and embedding mobility activities across the network - supporting cities to develop exchange and strengthen their approach to international cultural relations. Mobility activities are relatively new to Culture Next and have mostly focused on individual mobility rather than facilitating exchange across teams / organisations. With an expanding network of cities across Europe, Culture Next is an optimal vector for cultural mobility. The network has developed strong relations with key mobility agencies, which sets in train opportunities to expand mobility and exchange activities in the future.

- Convert mobility activities into shared programming – for ‘losing’ as well as winning cities. 44% of survey respondents stressed the importance of shared programming and collaborative projects to foster stronger connections among cities. This can be incentivised as part of legacy frameworks

and plans (see below) for Culture Next members. One interviewee stated:

“Stronger partnerships can significantly amplify our cultural initiatives.”

Additionally, 22% of survey respondents noted that joint projects lead to more effective cultural outcomes and better resource utilisation. Culture Next can play a role as coordinator for shared post-ECoC bid programming activities.

27% of respondents suggested developing funding opportunities which allow all cities to implement aspects of their cultural proposals from bid books. One interviewee emphasised:

“Funding for projects proposed in the bid books should be accessible to all cities to ensure that valuable cultural initiatives are not lost.”

This aligns with the sentiment expressed by 31% of respondents who believe that better financial support as part of a wider ‘legacy framework and programme’ can enhance the ECoC experience for all.

- Unlock the knowledge and expertise of Culture Next members to establish a legacy framework for all ECoC candidate cities – not just winners. Ideally with a development budget, this Framework can support bidding cities to transition from their ECoC bid to delivering their ‘Plan B’: a long-term strategy for culture. Currently ‘losing’ cities are

left on their own. Those which join Culture Next have access to an empathetic community and opportunities for knowledge exchange, peer review and specific activities such as cultural mobility. But for all losing cities there is a need for a framework which provides guidance on how to unlock their legacy potential and stick to a long-term commitment to culture.

36% of survey respondents called for an inclusive framework that recognises contributions from all candidate cities, not just the winners. One participant stated:

“Every city that engages in the process should feel valued and supported.”

This sentiment was echoed by 50% of survey respondents who indicate that all cities should have access to resources and support, regardless of their bidding status. A legacy framework co-designed with Culture Next would be a good start in terms of legacy support for all bidding cities.

- Mentorship and Knowledge Sharing: 50% of survey respondents advocate for establishing mentorship programmes connecting winning cities with non-winning candidates, allowing for knowledge exchange and collaborative development. One respondent highlighted:

“Strong connections among cities can lead to innovative cultural exchanges that benefit everyone involved.”

33% of survey respondents suggest creating formalised platforms for ongoing mentorship and support to facilitate these connections.

Some cities point to the need to pair similar cities where there is much in common in terms of the strategic approach to culture, available resources and levels of professional capacity in the cultural sector. While other cities recommend a ‘mix and match’ approach where different types of cities coalesce around shared themes and agendas to drive innovation through knowledge exchange:

“We gain more networking with smaller cities, or cities in different regions. It is great for cultural exchange, for seeing the role of culture in different ways, and I guess for the European Dimension”. (Interviewee).

A future Culture Next can play a structured brokerage role to connect cities across the network, facilitating activities which help seed legacy. This can play an important role in extending the legacy impact of EcoC to cities across Europe – beyond the title winners.

- Ongoing training and capacity building are necessary for success. 44% of survey respondents express the need for continuous training opportunities to empower cities in effectively implementing their cultural strategies and thus their EcoC ‘legacy’. Culture Next can provide the tools, mentoring and framework – as described above. It can also, through a policy development programme, provide direct support to

cities to build their capacity and support legacy delivery. One consultee notes:

“We need ongoing training to adapt to changing cultural landscapes and community needs.”

This need is reflected in the call from 50% of survey respondents for more workshops focused on practical skills for cultural management. Culture Next is viewed as containing the expertise to deliver such activities.

- **Leveraging Digital Tools for Collaboration:** As an international network, consultees noted the importance of using digital tools to facilitate knowledge exchange and partnership. This is to both enhance the workings of the existing Culture Next network and to broaden its reach and influence – e.g. to cultural policy-makers, city planners and cultural professionals. This includes the use of AI to build an accessible knowledge base on EcoC bid books and more broadly on culture for cities – as is currently being tested by Culture Next.

22% of survey respondents emphasise how technology could facilitate better collaboration and outreach. One consultee stated:

“Digital platforms can help us reach wider audiences and keep communities engaged beyond the ECoC year. They can also extend the reach and influence of Culture Next as a hub of good practice.”

Additionally, 50% of survey respondents emphasised the need for platforms that facilitate knowledge exchange and partnerships among cities. A respondent concluded, *“Working together can amplify our cultural initiatives and lead to richer experiences for our communities.”* This sentiment was echoed by 44% of participants who believe that collaborative projects yield greater cultural impact.

- **Knowledge leadership on key issues for culture and city-making.** Consultees across the Culture Next network are keen for more emphasis to be placed on topics such as environmental sustainability, intercultural dialogue, digital innovation, culture and health, and culture for sustainable development. 38% of survey respondents asserted the need to integrate environmental sustainability into cultural dialogue and ECC legacy models:

“Sustainability must be at the heart of our cultural initiatives moving forward. Culture Next can play an advocacy and brokerage role to support this”. (Interviewee).

Furthermore, 31% of respondents emphasised that cultural projects should address not only local heritage but also environmental impacts, reinforcing the connection between culture and sustainability. Culture Next can build understanding and share good practice in such fields.

- **Enhanced Advocacy and Cultural Leadership:** 38% of survey respondents stressed the importance of a unified voice

in advocating for cultural policies at municipal, regional, national and EU levels. As one interviewee put it:

“Advocacy for culture should not stop at winning the title; it must continue to influence policy and funding.”

Additionally, 27% of respondents pointed out that strong advocacy could help secure more funding and resources for cultural initiatives at a local level. One option is for Culture Next to set out an annual position paper or ‘**Culture Next Manifesto**’ which articulates a strategic priority for culture in Europe where network members can play a leadership role and in doing so enhance their legacy impact. There is further scope for Culture Next to involve Mayors and other decision-makers in conferences and meetings. This can help build a different type of European cultural governance programme.

Such advocacy can extend to setting out ideas and recommendations for the future of the EcoC Programme. This is the focus of the concluding section of this report.



Culture Next SDG Lab, Cluj-Napoca, 2024

2.2 Culture Next Recommendations on an Enhanced and Refreshed ECoC

Consultations for this research have focused on the role, value and impact of Culture Next and how Culture Next can be further developed and enhanced so it delivers more for participating cities and for EcoC legacy – from ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ cities. In addition, because Culture Next plays such a vital role in supporting EcoC cities to stay connected and boost opportunities for sustainable legacy, the network also has a role to play in advising on how the EcoC Programme can be enhanced and re-freshed post-2030.

This is not to describe unworkable recommendations which would require substantive deviation from the European Commission’s existing legal model for EcoC. Rather, it is to work as partners to and critical friends with the European Commission to ensure ECoC plays a positive, indeed transformational, role for culture in cities across Europe.

As one consultee puts it:

“We need Culture Next to reboot the legacy model for EcoC”.

Below are the top ten Culture Next ideas for an enhanced and refreshed EcoC:

One. Provide supporting framework for ‘losing’ cities with clear guidance on how to deliver legacy as part of a wider EcoC family.

Culture Next can help co-design such a Framework, which can include key building blocks to ensure bid books pivot into cultural strategies. Additional incentives – such as project and mobility funding – would help keep cities focused on legacy and safeguard a wider impact of EcoC beyond cities which gain the title.

Two. Provide a terms of reference for a National Capital of Culture – so that, where there is an appetite, national Governments can support the roll-out of a national competition. This will incentivise the delivery of legacy and reduce the risk of ‘ECoC failure’. Learning can be taken from Portugal and Italy (and soon Poland), plus from the UK model post-Brexit.

Three. Develop clear and transparent metrics for the assessment of EcoC bid books. This can include expertise which sits outside the current expert panel – e.g. feasibility for large-scale cultural projects, digital innovation, culture for sustainable development, and more. Technical advisors can support the expert panel to ensure proper due diligence is undertaken in decision-making. In addition, this can enhance the feedback and advice given to ‘losing’ cities.

Four. Select ‘star’ projects from losing bid books to ensure great ideas underpinned by genuine pan-European collaboration are not lost. The EcoC bid development process unlocks brilliant and innovative ideas, many of which are co-developed with partner cities and institutions across Europe. These can be developed as part of a coordinated

legacy programme for ‘losing’ cities. Such activities can also add value to winning cities as they seek to deliver on the European dimension.

Five. Revamp the brand. The brand and the title which underpins it are in need of a refresh. The brand can have more traction and appeal for citizens and for decision-makers. It also needs a stronger strategic narrative which sets out more clearly what it is for, why the European dimension is paramount, and how it can make a difference to ‘your city’. By widening the legacy model to include other ‘losing’ cities, the programme will have greater bandwidth and brand association, gaining prestige and impact.

Six. Boost collaboration between EcoCs and ‘losing’ cities. There are few examples of genuine deep-set collaboration between winning cities, with activities often more symbolic than transformational. With guidance to extend and diversify inter-city collaboration, better matches can be found for genuinely meaningful collaboration. Culture Next provides the blend of formal and informal relations which can foster stronger collaborations between cities as part of the legacy of bidding for the title.

“We are still learning how to deliver a large-scale cultural programme. This is years since we were EcoC. Culture Next enables us to continually learn and to share what we know”.
Previous European Capital of Culture title holder.

Seven. Embrace equality, diversity and inclusion as a building block for a future EcoC programme. The current model does not embrace or support the full diversity of Europe – geographically, culturally, by ethnicity, gender,

disability and more. For example, the expert panel, while it can't be fully representative, lacks ethnic and generational diversity. This is also often the case for bid development teams and legacy models. There is much good practice across the European and international cultural sector which needs to feed into the EcoC model so it can become a pioneer of EDI in the European cultural sector.

Eight. Review the balance and mix of cities selected each year. Over 40 years, the EcoC candidate and winning cities are getting smaller. Some nations do not have larger cities, which means quite small cities are being tasked with delivering a major cultural programme of European significance. This presents a capacity and expertise risk. In addition, as cities from Neighbourhood countries are invited to the EcoC programme, they bring with them a specific set of development needs which may vary from cities in established European Union nations. Some consultees have pointed to options such as having more than 2-3 EcoCs per year, to boost collective capacity and reduce the risk of exposing smaller cities to such a major responsibility. Others have recommended pairing smaller cities with larger cities to facilitate exchange and ensure innovation fostered in Europe's big cities can be tested in its smaller ones. In addition, some consultees have called for partnerships with Capitals of Culture in other global regions – to boost mutuality through international cultural relations.

Nine. Align ECoCs and bidding cities to next generation innovation in cultural practice, programming, partnership and evidence capture. Culture Next has initiated some first

steps in this direction – e.g. exploring how AI can bunch together fresh knowledge on how to develop bid books and legacy models for ECoC. But there is much more to be done if ECoC is to operate to the heart of Europe's cultural innovation system. This can involve stronger connections (e.g. joint research projects) with key networks, research hubs and programmes, including the EIT on Culture and Creative Industries³. Currently, the ECoC model is a little isolated from innovation and next practice in the European cultural sector. It is a large challenge for bidding cities to become knowledge and innovation leaders. Culture Next, working with other networks and hubs, can provide the connecting tissue between ECoC and cultural innovators across Europe.

Ten. Establish Culture Next as the Knowledge Partner to the EcoC Programme. It has the expertise and connections to attribute expertise to the processes of bid development, evaluations, cultural strategies, programme models, mobility actions, and of course approaches to legacy. It can deliver tailored research as well as provide development tools and guidance to support evidence-based and partnership-driven decision-making across the EcoC programme. This includes operating as a resource and community for past, future and prospective EcoCs. Culture Next is developing a Policy Taskforce and developing fresh knowledge through its thematic working groups. These activities can greatly enhance innovation and knowledge exchange across the ECoC Programme.

³ <https://eit-culture-creativity.eu/>

3. The Role and Value of Culture Next – Members’ Perceptions

The following presents headline results from the Survey to Culture Next Members. 56% of Culture Next Members completed the survey. This survey sought to understand city’s reasons for joining, their experience of the network, what they value in the network, and how the network can shape a refreshed ECoC in the future.

a. City Representation

- i. **Current Engagement:** 36% of respondents identified as current candidate cities, while 22% were from previous ECoC winners. This diverse representation underscores the broad interest in cultural exchange and collaboration across different stages of the ECoC journey.

b. Role and Impact of Culture Next

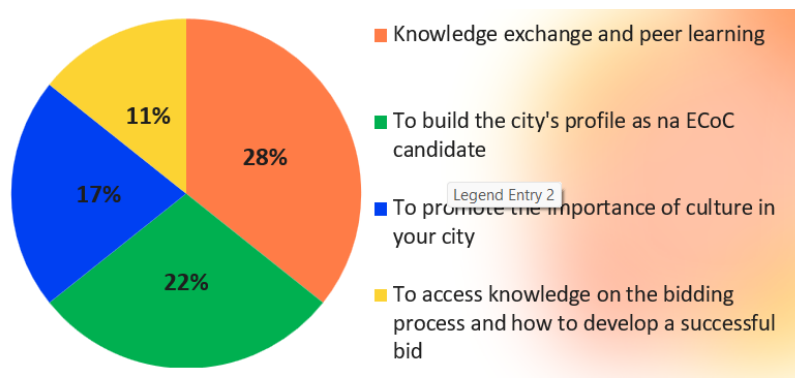


Figure 1. Main reasons for joining Culture Next

- i. **Knowledge Exchange and Networking:** 38% of participants joined Culture Next to engage in knowledge exchange and peer learning. One participant noted: *“Being part of this network allows us to connect with others who share our challenges and successes.”*
- ii. **Culture Next facilitates connections and collaboration among cities.** 50% of respondents highlighted its importance in fostering knowledge sharing and best practices. One participant stated, *“Culture Next helps us learn from the experiences of others, which is invaluable in our planning and execution.”* Additionally, 22% noted that engaging with other ECoC cities has directly influenced their cultural programming.
- iii. **Building City Profile:** 27% of respondents indicated that their involvement aimed to enhance their city’s profile as a candidate for the ECoC title. A respondent remarked, *“Joining Culture Next has helped us elevate our cultural initiatives on a European stage.”*
- iv. **Promoting Culture / influencing policy:** 22% of respondents highlighted the importance of promoting culture within their cities as a key reason for joining, reinforcing the network's role in advocating for cultural policies. 38% of respondents expressed a desire for the network to advocate for policy changes that support

cultural initiatives and sustainability. A participant stated, *“We need policies that encourage ongoing projects and community involvement, not just flashy events. Culture Next gives us the space to really think about policy”*

- v. **Collaboration and Partnership:** 44% of participants recognise that Culture Next fosters collaboration among cities, emphasizing the shared values of partnership and mutual support. A participant stated, *“The strength of this network lies in the collaborative spirit among its members.”*

- vi. **Enhancing Cultural Strategies:** 38% of respondents reported that their cities have improved cultural strategies due to insights gained from the network. One respondent city remarked, *“The guidance and feedback we receive have been invaluable in refining our cultural plans.”*

44% of survey participants indicate that support from Culture Next leads to improved cultural strategies. One respondent noted, *“The feedback we receive from Culture Next is crucial for our bid development and wider cultural strategy.”*

33% reported that insights gained from the network have been instrumental in navigating the complexities of the ECoC application process.

- vii. **Building Pride and Confidence:** Around 33% of respondents expressed that being part of Culture Next has

helped build pride and confidence in their city’s cultural identity. As one respondent noted, *“Culture Next has empowered us to showcase our unique cultural heritage.”*

Winning Cities	Losing Cities	Candidate Cities
Focus: Ensuring legacy impact and post-ECoC sustainability.	Focus: Maintaining momentum and visibility post-bid.	Focus: Preparing a competitive bid and gaining visibility.
Top Concerns: Political interference, lack of funding.	Top Concerns: Losing cultural focus without recognition.	Top Concerns: High complexity and demands of the bidding process.
Key Ask: Structured legacy planning support.	Key Ask: A National Capital of Culture framework for non-winning cities.	Key Ask: Simplification of the initial bid process.
Engagement Duration: Mixed (Joined from 2017–2023).	Engagement Duration: Generally engaged for a longer period (Joined 2018–2021).	Engagement Duration: Recently joined (2021–2023).

Figure 2. How different cities utilise and connect with Culture Next

Culture Next's primary value is the opportunity for cities to **connect, collaborate, and learn** from each other, building a strong cultural network across Europe. The informality and openness of the Network is credited as making cities feel included, comfortable and able to ask difficult questions. For many cities it offers a kind of ‘group therapy’.

The Network provides an **inclusive space** for cities of different sizes and scales to exchange ideas and identify opportunities for collaboration. It is viewed as particularly supportive in the ways it connects, in a neutral space, cities of different sizes, locations and stages in the EcoC journey.

The Network is particularly valued when cities come together at the two annual conferences and through tailored meetings and knowledge exchange activities. The emphasis on members self-initiating agendas and contributing themes and priorities for discussion and development, is welcomed by participating cities. The parity of role – where new members are valued as much as existing members – contributes to a positive environment for peer learning and community-building.

Key words such as ‘community’, ‘trust’, ‘sympathetic’ and ‘open’ recurred through both the survey and the interviews.



Figure 3. Culture Next Word Cloud

Survey respondents were asked to identify the most rewarding experiences related to Culture Next. They pointed to the balance of fun, informal activities which helped break the ice and facilitate trust, alongside the more structured and formalised programmes of activities – including speakers and special sessions at the Conferences. For example, in most recent Culture Next Conference, deep dive sessions on the role of culture in sustainable development (linking to the Sustainable Development Goals), panels on topics linked to cultural mobility, artists’ rights and the future of EcoC, all contributed to an event which helped build knowledge, community and confidence.

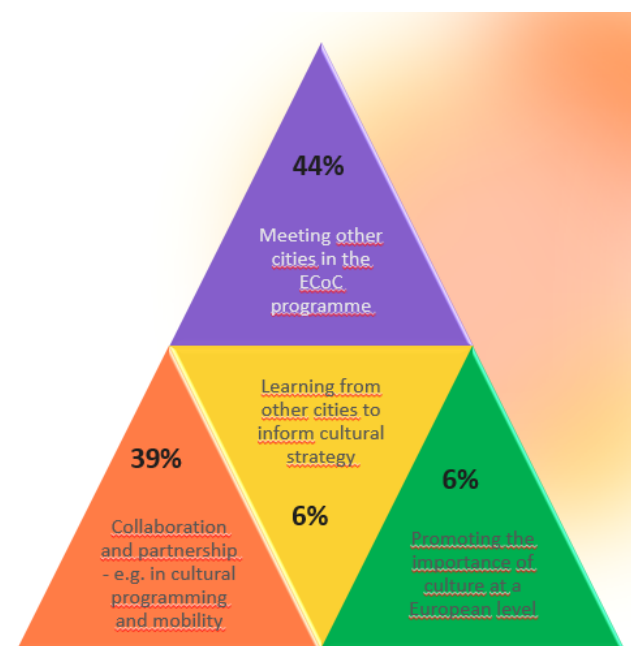


Figure 4. The Main Benefits of Culture Next for Participating Cities

c. Priorities for Enhancing Culture Next

Survey respondents were universally positive about the role and value of participating in Culture Next. In different ways, they each seek to tailor the role of the network to support the specific profile and development needs of their city. This relates to the stage of the EcoC journey of the city – e.g. as a new candidate city, as a soon-to-be Capital, as a ‘losing’ city, or as a previous capital. Respondents identified opportunities to enhance the role and impact of Culture Next, with the following core ideas:

- i. **The opportunity to build more dedicated training and resources to the network.** 44% of participants identified the need for dedicated training and resources to assist in developing long-term cultural strategies and effective EcoC evaluation Frameworks. A participant from a previous EcoC city remarked, *“Having access to expert advice through Culture Next has significantly improved our approach to cultural management.”*

This expert advice can be more effectively leveraged and built on through structured guidance and tools – e.g. step by step guide to Bid development; tools on evaluation methodologies; and a framework for how EcoCs deliver the Sustainable Development Goals. Culture Next can be a trusted repository of structured guidance for EcoC cities and support them to deliver legacy, whether they won the title or not. This will also enable cities to access

information and guidance without the need to contract expensive consultancy expertise. 27% of respondents prioritised “dedicated training and capacity-building for EcoC teams and key partners,” underscoring the need for effective capacity-building as part of Culture Next.

- ii. **The opportunity for a more structured agenda for Culture Next.** 45% of respondents mentioned that Culture Next could benefit from a more structured agenda and clearer objectives – e.g. directly tackling key development challenges for culture, and / or directly inputting to a refreshed EcoC. One respondent stated in the survey, *“The network needs a very clear agenda for the next two years. It’s had its probation period; now we need clear terms of reference for bidding cities.”* Other respondents asked for structured guidance or ‘milestones’ for cities so they could map and measure their progress through participation in Culture Next: *“Without clear goals, it’s challenging to gauge our progress and understand how to engage meaningfully.”*

One solution would be to identify key development stages for Culture Next cities, perhaps as modules which would add value to the more informal networking activities. A further solution would be for Culture Next to have an annual theme through which it commissions research and initiates guidance, advocacy and tools.

“Networking is the highest value, but we could improve by working together in a more structured way.” (Survey respondent).

iii. Managing the churn of cities. 40% of respondents highlighted that cities often engage with the network only briefly during the bidding process. As one respondent noted: *“Bidding cities dominate the conversation and then leave when they don’t win. This creates an unsustainable dynamic in the network.”* Another respondent expressed concern, stating, *“When cities drop out, we lose valuable perspectives and experiences that could benefit the entire network.”*

One solution here is to increase the level of attention and resource to cities immediately after they ‘lose’ – locking them into a development process which will support their legacy and ensure they stay involved at a politically turbulent moment. In this context, Culture Next can provide security and guidance for cultural professionals working in cities where there is a fragile consensus for long-term cultural planning:

“Our cultural initiatives are frequently at the mercy of changing political landscapes, making it hard to maintain momentum.”
(Survey respondent)



Figure 5. Priorities for Enhancing the Role and Impact of Culture Next

iii. Underutilised ‘Legacy cities’. Legacy cities include previous EcoCs and ‘losing’ cities which have remained committed to delivering long-term cultural impact as a direct legacy of their candidacy. Such cities provide an incredible resource to the wider network – in terms of know how, connections and methodologies for ensuring culture stays on the political agenda post-bid. Such cities can play a more active role in contributing to networking and knowledge exchange activities as the Culture Next network continues to evolve. 30% of respondents indicate that they struggle to remain engaged or maintain visibility post-ECoC year. A participant noted in an interview:

“We need to balance the contributions of active and less active members, ensuring legacy cities continue to have a voice.”

Another legacy city representative shared in the survey:

“Our experiences can provide valuable lessons, but we often feel overlooked in favor of new candidates.”

Legacy cities did reflect on how Culture Next is often more rewarding and impactful than other networks, notably the network of EcoC winning cities which tends to be more ceremonial and does not reach out to wider agendas in cultural strategy and development.

However, as active participants, there is an appetite to maximise the impact of Culture Next so it continues to drive value for cities at different stages of the EcoC journey and for wider networks of cities which are prioritising culture.

- iv. **The European Dimension.** One of the most often cited values of Culture Next is the ways it brings together cities from different regions of Europe. In particular, the connections with cities in Eastern, Southern or – more broadly – ‘peripheral’ Europe are cited as impactful for community building and knowledge exchange. In some ways, this supports a ‘European Dimension’ legacy for Culture Next members. However, some member cities have

asked for a more dedicated focus on the European dimension and what it means – especially if from a ‘periphery’:

“Unlike some cities in northern and western Europe, we don’t have the European dimension embedded in our daily reality. It is relatively new to us and the cultural sector and politicians are unfamiliar with the concept. Culture Next can play a more dedicated role in building our understanding of the European dimension in the bidding and legacy process for cities like ours”.

(Interviewee – from a city in Southern Europe).



Culture Next Conveiro 2022

Appendix 1. List of Cities Interviewed

Bielsko-Biała
Bourges
Braga
České Budějovice
Chemnitz
Cluj-Napoca
Debrecen
Dublin
Elefsina
Larnaka
Leeuwarden
Leeds
Mészáros
Novi Sad
Oulu

Plus a range of cities engaged at the 13th Culture Next Conference, Cluj Napoca, 2024.

Appendix 2. List of Culture Next Member Cities – November 2024

Aveiro
Bastia
Belfast
Bielsko-Biała
Braga
Brno
Broumov
Burgos
České Budějovice
Chemnitz
Cluj-Napoca

Debrecen
Dublin
Elefsina
Faro
Galway
Gent
Gijon
Jerez de La Frontera
Katowice
Kortrijk
Kourion
Larnaka
Leeds
Leeuwarden
Leuven
Lublin
Matera
Molenbeek- Brussels
Novi Sad
Oeiras
Oulu
Plungė
Rouen
Saint Denni
Trenčín
Upsalla
Valmiera
Veszprem.