

Culture as Care

Participation, Health and
Collective Well-Being in
European Cities

A Culture Next Advocacy Theme
Report on Culture for the People

Culture as Care. Participation, Health and Collective Well-Being in European Cities

A Culture Next Advocacy Theme Report on Culture for the People

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Authors

Author: András FARKAS

Co-authors: Sjoerd BOOTSMA, Immie JONKMAN, Kathryn KORPS, Angeliki LAMPIRI, Darius MÎNDROC, Edyta RUTA, Rafał SAKOWSKI, Ștefan TEIȘANU, Rarița ZBRANCA

Reviewed by members of the Culture Next Policy and Advocacy Taskforce: Tom FLEMMING, Beatriz GARCIA, Carlos MARTINS, Jak SPENCER, Marilyn VAUGHAN-REDDAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European cities are facing a convergence of challenges that affect democratic life, social cohesion and people's quality of life: declining participation in public and cultural life, rising mental health pressures, growing social isolation and persistent inequalities in access to cultural resources. In this context, culture is increasingly called upon to respond to complex societal needs. Yet its role is often framed narrowly—either as a matter of access and audience development, or as a supporting tool for other policy fields.

Culture as Care: Participation, Health and Collective Well-Being in European Cities is a Culture Next Advocacy Theme Report that examines how culture can contribute to care in contemporary cities through **two distinct but complementary perspectives**: youth participation and well-being. Rather than merging these perspectives into a single policy objective, the report uses them as **analytical lenses** to explore different ways in which cultural participation generates value for individuals, communities and urban societies.

The report is grounded in the work of the Culture Next network of European Capital of Culture (ECoC) candidate and legacy cities and draws in particular on the outcomes of two Culture Next conferences organised in 2025: the 14th Culture Next Conference on cultural participation and youth in Leeuwarden (The Netherlands), and the 15th Culture Next Conference on culture, health and well-being in Bielsko-Biała (Poland).

The first lens, **youth participation**, focuses on questions of relevance, agency and democratic inclusion. Despite being active cultural creators, particularly in informal, community-based and digital contexts, young people remain underrepresented in formal cultural institutions and decision-making structures. The Leeuwarden conference showed that this gap is often not primarily a matter of access, but of power, trust and recognition. Cities shared experiences demonstrating that when young people are enabled to participate as co-creators, curators and decision-makers, cultural initiatives

become more relevant, resilient and socially grounded. From this perspective, culture functions as care by supporting agency, voice and belonging through reciprocal, participatory and interdependent cultural practices.

The second lens, **culture, health and collective well-being**, addresses culture's role in supporting mental, physical and social health. The Bielsko-Biała conference explored how everyday cultural practices, shared experiences and cultural spaces can contribute to prevention, connection, recovery and resilience. Discussions highlighted culture's capacity to reduce loneliness, strengthen social bonds and create spaces of safety and recognition, particularly when embedded in everyday settings such as neighbourhoods, schools, libraries and public spaces. From this perspective, culture functions as care by sustaining relational and collective forms of well-being.

Taken together, these two lenses reveal **different but complementary dimensions of culture as care**. Youth participation highlights care as empowerment and agency; well-being highlights care as connection, prevention and a path towards flourishing. Both perspectives point to the importance of participation, but they do so from different starting points and with different policy implications.

Across both conferences, cities emerged as key actors in translating these perspectives into practice. As the level of governance closest to citizens, cities are uniquely positioned to experiment with participatory governance, reimagine cultural spaces, and build cross-sector alliances between culture, health, education and social services. Culture Next's network format amplifies this role by enabling translocal learning, mobility and collective advocacy.

The report synthesises these insights into key takeaways and recommendations addressed to European institutions, national governments, cities, cultural networks, cultural operators and Culture Next itself. While aligned with existing European and international policy frameworks, it also challenges approaches that reduce participation to access, well-being to individual outcomes, or culture to an instrumental policy tool.

Ultimately, *Culture as Care* proposes a strategic reframing of cultural policy in European cities: one that recognises **multiple pathways through which culture contributes to care**, and that values participation, agency, connection and collective well-being as central to the future of urban cultural ecosystems.

Context and Rationale

Culture Next is a European network supporting European Capital of Culture (ECoC) candidate and ECoC cities, awarded or not, to implement culture-led local development programmes and policies, building on the partnerships, processes, and capacities mobilised through the ECoC journey.

Culture as Care focuses on cultural participation as both (a) a democratic cornerstone and (b) a driver of well-being and social cohesion. The theme responds to a persistent gap: while cultural participation contributes to civic engagement, belonging and resilience, many people - especially young people - face structural barriers (socioeconomic inequality, geographic exclusion, underrepresentation in decision-making), alongside a major “soft barrier”: relevance. Cultural programming and infrastructure often reflect traditional definitions of culture that do not resonate with young people’s evolving identities, practices and lived realities; as a result, culture is frequently perceived as “not for me” or “irrelevant”. This limits participation and weakens culture’s potential to empower, connect, and include. A shift is therefore needed—from designing participation for young people to enabling participation by young people, recognising youth not only as audiences but also as co-creators, curators and decision-makers.

At the same time, European cities are facing a multidimensional well-being challenge, with rising mental health pressures, social fragmentation and inequalities. Culture has a distinct role in addressing these challenges: arts engagement supports resilience and connectedness, reduces isolation and strengthens intergenerational solidarity. For cities, the challenge is to move beyond isolated projects and embed culture systematically into strategies for

collective care and well-being, through awareness-building, cross-sector partnerships (culture, health, education, social), and evidence frameworks that help communicate impact.

While this report and policy paper focuses on youth participation and well-being, Culture Next recognises that culture for the people also encompasses other pressing societal challenges that were not the primary focus of the two conferences. These include demographic ageing, the inclusion of vulnerable and forcibly displaced communities, the need to counter polarisation and manipulation in public discourse, the protection of freedom of expression, and the role of culture in trauma recovery and peacebuilding. These dimensions remain integral to Culture Next's broader policy agenda.

Cities are uniquely positioned as laboratories for policy innovation: they can pilot participatory governance, cultural mapping, and co-creation methods that respond flexibly to local needs. Culture Next's network format strengthens this by enabling translocal experimentation, knowledge exchange, mobility and collective advocacy.

Culture Next's position

Culture Next understands culture as a fundamental public good and a core component of social infrastructure, essential to democratic participation, collective well-being and social cohesion in European cities. In a context marked by rising mental health challenges, social fragmentation, inequalities in access, and declining trust in institutions, culture must be recognised not only for its intrinsic value, but also for its capacity to create conditions of care, belonging and agency.

From the perspective of Culture Next, **participation is the central mechanism through which culture becomes care.** Cultural participation, when meaningfully designed and equitably supported, enables people to connect with others, express themselves, feel recognised, and exercise agency in shaping their environments. Participation is therefore not an auxiliary dimension of cultural policy, but a structural condition for culture's contribution to health, well-being and democratic life.

Culture Next's position is informed by the lived experience of European cities engaged in European Capital of Culture processes, both awarded and non-awarded. These cities demonstrate that culture-led development is most impactful when it moves beyond consumption-based models and embraces co-creation, shared ownership and participatory governance.

In this sense, Culture Next advocates for a shift that has practical implications for cultural planning, delivery and evaluation across ECoC processes and beyond:

- from culture for people to culture with people,
- from audiences and visitors to participants, co-creators and contributors,
- from isolated cultural projects to embedded cultural ecosystems of care.

This shift requires greater conceptual clarity and consistency in how cultural roles—such as audience, participant, volunteer or co-creator—are defined, applied and evaluated in cultural strategies, programmes and bid commitments.

A key dimension of this position concerns youth participation. Young people across Europe face disproportionate barriers to cultural participation, driven by economic precarity, spatial inequality, and persistent underrepresentation in cultural decision-making. At the same time, young people are active cultural creators in informal, community-based and digital contexts. Culture Next argues that cultural policy must recognise youth not primarily as future audiences, but as present cultural agents, whose perspectives are essential to relevance, innovation and long-term sustainability. Enabling youth agency in culture is not only a matter of inclusion, but a prerequisite for resilient cultural ecosystems.

Culture Next positions culture as **a form of preventive and relational care**, understood not as one-directional support or dependency, but as a reciprocal and interdependent process. Engagement in arts and cultural practices contributes to physical, mental and social well-being by creating spaces of mutual recognition, shared experience and collective responsibility.

This understanding of care is particularly relevant in intergenerational contexts, where cultural participation enables exchange, solidarity and co-presence across age groups, rather than separating care into provider–recipient roles. These effects are particularly visible when cultural participation is embedded in everyday life (schools, neighbourhoods, public spaces, workplaces) and when cultural spaces are reimagined as infrastructures of care, accessible, welcoming and responsive to diverse needs.

Crucially, **Culture Next rejects the framing of culture as a substitute for social or health policy. Instead, it promotes cross-sector collaboration**, where culture works alongside health, education and social services in integrated approaches to well-being. This requires new governance models, shared investment frameworks and evaluation tools that can articulate culture’s contribution without reducing it to instrumental metrics.

Finally, Culture Next asserts that cities are pivotal actors in advancing this agenda. As the level of governance closest to citizens, cities are uniquely positioned to experiment with participatory models, build cross-sector alliances and translate local practice into policy innovation. Through its network, Culture Next facilitates translocal learning, mobility and advocacy, ensuring that local experiences inform European policy debates and contribute to a shared vision of culture as care.

Culture Next also acknowledges that culture for the people should not be conceived in an exclusively anthropocentric way. Cultural practices and policies increasingly intersect with environmental awareness, biodiversity and the health of the biosphere, shaping how communities relate to non-human life and shared ecosystems. From this perspective, care extends beyond human well-being to include the conditions that sustain life and interdependence more broadly.

In this sense, **Culture as Care is not a thematic niche, but a strategic orientation for cultural policy**: one that places participation, health and collective well-being at the heart of how culture is planned, governed and valued in European cities.

Culture Next Action

The 14th Culture Next Conference. Cultural Participation: Focus on Youth

Leeuwarden & Friesland, The Netherlands | 8–10 July 2025

1.1 Context and objectives

The 14th Culture Next Conference took place in Leeuwarden and the Friesland region, bringing together representatives of around 50 European cities, cultural practitioners, policymakers, and a dedicated group of young participants aged 18–27. The conference was organised under the thematic umbrella “**Cultural Participation > Focus on Youth**” and responded to a shared concern across European cities: despite being prolific cultural creators and users of informal and digital culture, young people remain among the most underrepresented groups in formal cultural participation and cultural decision-making structures.

The conference pursued three interconnected objectives:

1. To analyse structural and symbolic barriers limiting youth participation in cultural life.
2. To explore policy and practice models that move beyond youth as passive audiences toward **youth agency, co-creation and shared governance**.
3. To position cities as laboratories for cultural policy innovation, capable of translating local practice into European-level learning and advocacy.

The choice of Leeuwarden as host city was significant. As a former European Capital of Culture (2018), Leeuwarden offered a living example of long-term legacy work through initiatives such as *Arcadia* and the *mienskip* approach—emphasising community ownership, co-creation and shared responsibility.

1.2 Programme logic and working formats

The conference programme was deliberately designed to reflect its thematic focus on participation. Rather than relying solely on plenary presentations, the organisers employed **participatory and peer-learning formats** that mirrored the values being advocated.

Key formats included:

- **City pitches**, where member cities presented concrete initiatives related to youth participation, highlighting both successes and unresolved challenges.
- **Thematic workshops**, allowing in-depth discussion on specific dimensions of youth participation, including governance, relevance, access, and trust.
- **“Therapy sessions” for cities**, an innovative peer-support format in which cities at different stages of the ECoC process (bidding, title year, legacy, or non-awarded) could openly discuss difficulties and receive feedback from peers.
- **A parallel youth representatives track**, designed not as a symbolic add-on but as a substantive contribution to discussions, feeding into the broader Culture Next work on a future European Youth Programme.
- **Matchmaking sessions** connected to the Culture Next Mobility Programme, enabling direct exchange between cities interested in hosting or sending cultural professionals and young practitioners.

This diversity of formats reinforced a key message of the conference: **participation is not only a topic, but a method.**

1.3 Key thematic discussions

Youth participation as relevance and agency

A central theme throughout the conference was the notion of **relevance**. Participants repeatedly emphasised that low youth participation is not simply a question of access or communication, but of whether cultural offers resonate with young people's lived realities, identities and modes of expression. Traditional cultural institutions and programmes often continue to reflect established hierarchies and formats that young people perceive as distant or exclusionary.

Discussions highlighted the need for a paradigm shift:

- from *designing participation for youth*
- to *enabling participation by youth*.

This implies recognising young people not merely as beneficiaries or audiences, but as **co-creators, curators, organisers and decision-makers** within cultural ecosystems. Several cities shared experiences where youth-led programming resulted in higher engagement, stronger ownership and longer-term sustainability, even when initial outcomes were less predictable.

Structural barriers and inequalities

Alongside relevance, the conference addressed structural barriers that disproportionately affect young people's access to cultural participation. These included:

- economic precarity and unpaid cultural labour,
- limited transport and infrastructure in rural or peri-urban areas,
- lack of representation in cultural governance structures,
- and insufficient recognition of informal, digital or hybrid cultural practices.

Participants stressed that addressing these barriers requires **policy-level intervention**, not only project-based solutions. Cultural participation was repeatedly framed as a **human right**, anchored in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and as a precondition for democratic resilience.

Cities as policy laboratories

Another recurring theme was the unique role of cities in advancing cultural participation. Urban governments are close enough to communities to experiment with participatory governance models, while also possessing the institutional capacity to embed successful practices into policy frameworks.

Examples presented during the conference illustrated how cities can:

- pilot youth councils or youth advisory boards with real decision-making power,
- integrate youth perspectives into cultural strategies and funding schemes,
- support informal cultural spaces and temporary uses of public space,
- and build bridges between cultural policy and education, social services or employment pathways.

Culture Next was repeatedly identified as a crucial **translocal platform** that allows such experiments to be shared, compared and refined across European contexts.

1.4 Key tensions and open questions

The conference did not shy away from unresolved tensions. Among the most frequently discussed were:

- the reluctance of some institutions to relinquish control or accept uncertainty inherent in youth-led processes,
- the risk of instrumentalising youth participation without providing real power or resources,

- and the challenge of scaling successful local initiatives without losing their authenticity.

These discussions underscored that youth participation is not a technical fix, but a **cultural and institutional transformation** requiring long-term commitment.

1.5 Contribution to the Culture for the People agenda

The Leeuwarden conference firmly positioned **youth cultural participation** as a cornerstone of Culture Next's Culture for the People agenda. It demonstrated that participation, agency and relevance are inseparable from broader questions of democracy, well-being and social cohesion.

The conference's outcomes fed directly into the Culture Next's approach on culture for the people and especially youth participation through:

- articulating participation as a matter of rights and governance,
- providing concrete city-level practices that can inform policy recommendations,
- and reinforcing the need for youth agency as a quality criterion in cultural policy design.

The 15th Culture Next Conference: Culture and Well-Being: Arts, Health and Collective Care

Bielsko-Biała, Poland | 15–17 October 2025

2.1 Context and objectives

The 15th Culture Next Conference, hosted by the city of Bielsko-Biała, focused on the theme "**Culture and Well-Being: Arts, Health and Collective Care.**" The conference responded to a growing recognition across Europe

that well-being challenges—particularly mental health pressures, social isolation and fragmentation—require holistic and preventive approaches that extend beyond the health sector alone.

Bielsko-Biała was chosen as host city due to its established track record in integrating cultural policy with health and social initiatives, positioning culture as a bridge between communities, generations and sectors. As a medium-sized city with a history of industrial transformation, Bielsko-Biała offered a compelling example of how culture-led approaches can support resilience and care in non-metropolitan contexts.

The conference pursued four main objectives:

1. To explore how cultural participation contributes to individual and collective well-being.
2. To examine cultural spaces as potential **infrastructures of care**.
3. To strengthen cross-sector alliances between culture, health, education and social policy.
4. To advance the policy case for embedding culture within well-being strategies at local, national and European levels.

2.2 Programme logic and experiential dimension

The programme combined **conceptual reflection and embodied experience**, reflecting the conference's core argument that well-being is lived and relational, not only theoretical.

Key elements included:

- **Keynote contributions and panel discussions** with international experts, city representatives and practitioners working at the intersection of culture and health.
- **City case presentations**, highlighting initiatives that link arts participation to mental health, social inclusion and community resilience.

- **Networking roundtables with local stakeholders**, bringing together cultural organisations, health professionals, educators and municipal representatives.
- **Well-being experience sessions**, such as forest bathing, breath and movement practices, and singing for health, designed to offer participants first-hand insight into how cultural and embodied practices can support care and connection.

This blended approach reinforced a core message of the conference: **culture's contribution to well-being is not only measurable in outcomes, but also experiential and relational.**

2.3 Key thematic discussions

Culture as preventive care

A central theme was the idea of culture as **preventive care**, rather than merely a response to crisis. Participants discussed how everyday cultural engagement—music, dance, storytelling, creative rituals in public space—can help maintain mental health, reduce loneliness and strengthen social bonds before problems escalate.

This perspective challenges dominant policy logics that prioritise short-term interventions over long-term investment in social and cultural infrastructures. Cities shared examples where embedding cultural activities into schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces contributed to sustained well-being benefits.

Cultural spaces as infrastructures of care

Another major discussion focused on reimagining cultural venues—libraries, theatres, museums, cultural centres—not simply as sites of consumption, but as **everyday spaces of care and belonging**. Participants explored models where cultural institutions host therapy sessions, community storytelling, intergenerational programmes or collaborations with social and health services.

Such approaches require new competencies, governance models and evaluation frameworks, but were widely seen as essential for building inclusive and resilient cultural ecosystems.

Cross-sector alliances and governance

The conference repeatedly returned to the necessity of **cross-sector alliances**. Culture alone cannot address well-being challenges; sustainable impact depends on collaboration with health systems, education, NGOs and local administrations.

Discussions highlighted practical tools for collaboration, including:

- joint funding schemes,
- shared indicators and evaluation frameworks,
- interdepartmental strategies within municipalities,
- and co-governance models that distribute responsibility across sectors.

2.4 Measuring impact and policy relevance

A persistent challenge identified during the conference was the difficulty of measuring and communicating the impact of culture on well-being in ways that resonate with policymakers. Participants stressed the importance of developing shared indicators and narratives that can link local cultural practice to broader policy goals, including public health, social inclusion and quality of life.

The Culture Next SDG Tool and related methodologies were referenced as promising frameworks for translating cultural outcomes into policy-relevant evidence, without reducing culture to purely instrumental metrics.

2.5 Contribution to the Culture for the People agenda

The Bielsko-Biała conference expanded the Culture for the People agenda by framing culture as **core social infrastructure for collective care**. It

reinforced the argument that cultural participation is inseparable from well-being, belonging and resilience, and that cities play a decisive role in embedding this understanding into policy.

While youth participation foregrounds agency and democracy, culture and well-being foreground care and prevention. Both converge in a shared vision of culture as a public good designed with and for people.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Key takeaways

Culture as Care in European Cities

The following key takeaways synthesise the main insights emerging from the Culture Next conferences on youth participation and on culture, health and well-being, as well as from the deliberations of the Policy and Advocacy Task Force, outlining how culture can function as a form of care through participation, agency and collective practice in European cities.

- 1. Cultural participation is a condition for well-being, not a supplementary benefit.** Cultural participation contributes to mental and social well-being by fostering connection, expression, belonging and agency. These effects are most evident when participation is regular, accessible and embedded in everyday life. Culture should therefore be recognised as a **preventive and enabling factor** for well-being, rather than as a marginal or symbolic complement to health and social policies.
- 2. Participation must be meaningful to generate care.** Access alone does not guarantee participation. Participation generates well-being only when people perceive cultural offers as relevant to their lives and identities. This requires a shift from audience-centred models toward **co-creation, shared ownership and participatory governance**, particularly in relation to young people.

3. **Youth are cultural agents, not future beneficiaries.** Young people are already shaping cultural life through informal, community-based and digital practices, yet remain underrepresented in formal cultural institutions and decision-making. Enabling youth agency in culture—through paid roles, co-curation, and shared governance—is essential for relevance, equity and long-term sustainability of cultural ecosystems.
4. **Cultural spaces can function as infrastructures of care.** Libraries, museums, theatres and cultural centres can operate as **everyday spaces of care**, offering safety, belonging, cross-generational interaction and opportunities for expression. When designed inclusively and in collaboration with other sectors, cultural spaces can support social cohesion and mental well-being beyond their artistic functions.
5. **Culture’s contribution to well-being is relational and collective.** Well-being effects emerge not only from individual cultural experiences, but from **collective processes**: shared rituals, group participation, community storytelling and intergenerational exchange. Cultural policy should therefore prioritise relational and community-based formats alongside individual access.
6. **Cross-sector collaboration is essential, but culture must retain autonomy.** Sustainable culture-and-well-being strategies require collaboration between culture, health, education and social sectors. However, culture should not be reduced to a delivery mechanism for health outcomes. Its value lies precisely in its openness, symbolic power and capacity to generate meaning beyond instrumental goals.
7. **Cities are strategic actors in embedding culture as care.** Cities are uniquely positioned to test, scale and institutionalise participatory and cross-sector approaches to culture and well-being. Through local governance, proximity to communities and policy experimentation, cities act as laboratories for integrating culture into broader strategies of care and inclusion.
8. **Evidence and narratives must evolve together.** While evidence frameworks are essential for policy legitimacy, culture’s impact on well-being cannot be captured by metrics alone. Quantitative

indicators must be complemented by **qualitative narratives**, lived experiences and local knowledge that communicate why culture matters for people's lives.

Alignment with European and International Policy Frameworks

Culture Next's position on culture as care builds on and reinforces existing European and international policy frameworks related to cultural participation, health, social cohesion and urban development, while translating these strategic orientations into concrete, city-level practice.

1. **Where Culture Next reinforces existing directions.** Culture Next's position aligns strongly with several European and international policy orientations, while grounding them in city-level practice.
2. **Culture and mental health as a preventive approach.** Culture Next reinforces the growing consensus—reflected in EU Council conclusions, OMC processes and WHO guidance—that participation in cultural activities strengthens protective factors for mental health, reduces loneliness and supports resilience. Culture Next contributes concrete city-based evidence showing how cultural participation can operate as **preventive care**, especially when embedded in everyday settings.
3. **Cross-sector collaboration between culture and health.** Culture Next aligns with calls to strengthen collaboration between cultural and health sectors by demonstrating practical governance models at city level: joint programmes, partnerships with social services, and cultural spaces working alongside health and education actors. The network's contribution lies in showing **how** such collaboration can be implemented locally, not only why it is desirable.
4. **Access, inclusion and social cohesion.** Culture Next supports the emphasis placed by European institutions on access to culture as a driver of social inclusion and cohesion. It reinforces the understanding of culture as a means to combat isolation, exclusion and inequality, particularly in relation to young people and other underrepresented groups.

5. **Cities as engines of policy innovation.** Culture Next's work strongly aligns with EU recognition of cities as key actors in policy experimentation and implementation. By connecting ECoC candidate and legacy cities, the network amplifies local innovation into transnational learning and European-level advocacy.

Where Culture Next Extends or Challenges Existing Approaches

At the same time, drawing on the practical experience of its member cities, Culture Next identifies key areas where prevailing policy approaches can be extended, nuanced or challenged in order to better reflect the realities of participation, agency and collective well-being on the ground. While aligned with many policy frameworks, Culture Next also **extends and challenges prevailing assumptions**, based on the lived experience of cities.

1. **From access to agency.** Many policy documents prioritise *access to culture*. Culture Next argues that access is a fundamental precondition for participation, while emphasising that access alone does not guarantee agency or inclusion.. Without agency, especially for young people, access risks reproducing existing hierarchies. Culture Next therefore challenges policymakers to move from access-based indicators toward **agency-based participation**, including co-decision and co-creation.
2. **Against over-instrumentalisation of culture.** Culture Next cautions against framing culture solely as a tool to achieve health or social outcomes. While recognising its contribution to well-being, the network challenges overly instrumental approaches that risk undermining artistic freedom, cultural diversity and intrinsic value. Culture's strength lies in its openness and ambiguity, which should be protected even within cross-sector strategies.
3. **Beyond individualised well-being.** Policy frameworks often focus on individual mental health outcomes. Culture Next extends this perspective by emphasising **collective and relational well-being**, rooted in shared experiences, community processes and social bonds.

This requires policies that value group participation and community-based cultural work, not only individual engagement.

4. **Rethinking measurement and impact.** Culture Next aligns with current policy recognition of the need for mixed evaluation approaches, while highlighting persistent gaps in their practical application. In many contexts, evaluation still relies predominantly on quantitative indicators. Culture Next calls for more systematic integration of qualitative evidence, narratives and local knowledge into impact assessment practices.
5. **Youth as present actors, not future audiences.** While many strategies refer to investing in youth for the future, Culture Next insists on recognising young people as **present cultural actors**. This challenges policies that delay youth participation to consultative or symbolic roles and calls instead for structural inclusion in governance, funding and programme design.
6. **Caring for cultural workers as a condition for culture as care.** Policy discussions on culture and care often overlook the working conditions of cultural workers themselves. Drawing on the experience of its member cities, Culture Next stresses that culture as care cannot be sustained without addressing the structural precarity of the cultural sector, including fair working conditions, adequate remuneration and access to social protection. In contexts where cultural workers collaborate closely with health, social care or conflict-related settings, greater attention must also be paid to their mental well-being, safety and access to support mechanisms.

Recommendations

Advancing Culture as Care in European Cities

The following recommendations translate the key takeaways of this policy paper into **actionable directions** for different stakeholder groups involved in shaping cultural participation, health and collective well-being. They reflect the shared responsibility of European institutions, national governments, cities, cultural networks, cultural operators and Culture Next itself in embedding culture as care through policy, governance and practice.

For European policy creators and decision makers

At European level, the priority is to create enabling frameworks that recognise cultural participation as a cross-cutting public good and support cities in integrating culture into well-being, youth and social cohesion agendas.

1. **Embed cultural participation within cross-sector EU strategies**, including mental health, youth, social inclusion and urban development, recognising culture as a preventive and enabling factor for well-being rather than a standalone cultural domain.
2. **Promote participatory and agency-based approaches** by encouraging funding criteria and policy guidance that value co-creation, shared governance and youth leadership in cultural initiatives.
3. **Support cities as policy laboratories** by strengthening EU instruments that facilitate peer learning, experimentation and transnational exchange between cities working on culture, health and participation.
4. **Advance integrated evidence frameworks** that allow cultural participation to be articulated in relation to broader public goals (health, inclusion, quality of life), while safeguarding qualitative and narrative dimensions of impact.
5. **Ensure policy coherence across EU programmes** (Creative Europe, Erasmus+, ESF+, Horizon Europe) so that cultural participation and well-being are addressed in complementary rather than fragmented ways.
6. **Recognise and support non-metropolitan and medium-sized cities**, which often demonstrate strong innovation in culture-as-care approaches but face structural disadvantages in visibility and resources.

For national governments

At national level, the challenge is to translate European orientations into coherent frameworks that enable municipalities to act, while reducing structural barriers to participation and cross-sector collaboration.

1. **Integrate culture into national well-being and mental health strategies**, explicitly recognising cultural participation as a preventive and supportive factor alongside health and social services.
2. **Create funding mechanisms that encourage cross-sector collaboration**, allowing cultural, health, education and social actors to design and implement joint initiatives without administrative fragmentation.
3. **Strengthen equitable access to culture** by addressing structural barriers related to affordability, mobility, rural and peri-urban access, and by supporting informal and community-based cultural practices.
4. **Support youth agency in cultural policy**, including through paid participation structures, capacity-building programmes and formal recognition of youth-led cultural work.
5. **Invest in capacity-building for local authorities and cultural operators**, enabling them to design participatory, inclusive and care-oriented cultural ecosystems.
6. **Align cultural policy evaluation frameworks** with broader social objectives, avoiding narrow output-based metrics and enabling learning-oriented evaluation.

For European Cities (including Culture Next members)

Cities are at the forefront of implementing culture as care; their role is to embed participation, agency and well-being into everyday governance, spaces and practices.

1. **Adopt participation-by-design principles**, ensuring that citizens—and particularly young people—are involved from agenda-setting to evaluation, not only in consultation phases.
2. **Enable youth as co-creators and decision-makers**, through youth councils, co-curation roles, paid advisory positions and shared governance mechanisms within cultural institutions.
3. **Reimagine cultural spaces as infrastructures of care**, making libraries, museums, theatres and cultural centres accessible, welcoming and responsive to diverse needs and life situations.
4. **Develop city or regional Culture, Health and Well-Being strategies**, and use them to build durable cross-sector collaboration between culture, health, education and social services, supported by shared objectives, coordinated governance and, where possible, joint or aligned budgets.
5. **Support everyday and local cultural practices**, including informal, temporary and community-led initiatives that foster belonging and social connection.
6. **Invest in learning and peer exchange**, using networks such as Culture Next to test, refine and scale participatory and well-being-oriented approaches.
7. **Communicate cultural impact through stories and data**, combining evidence with lived experiences to build political and public support.

For various cultural networks and platforms

Cultural networks play a key role in amplifying local practice, shaping narratives and influencing policy agendas at national and European levels.

1. **Translate city-level practice into policy-relevant knowledge**, curating case studies, frameworks and tools that can be adopted by policymakers and practitioners.

2. **Advocate for participation and agency as quality standards**, promoting co-creation and shared governance as core principles of cultural policy and practice.
3. **Facilitate cross-sector dialogue**, bringing together cultural, health, youth and social actors across borders to build shared understanding and alliances.
4. **Support collective learning and experimentation**, enabling members to test new approaches to culture, care and well-being in safe, collaborative environments.
5. **Strengthen the voice of cities and practitioners** in European policy debates, ensuring that local realities inform strategic decisions.

For cultural operators

Cultural operators are the frontline actors in making culture a lived experience of care, relevance and belonging for diverse communities.

1. **Design programmes with communities, not only for them**, prioritising co-creation, responsiveness and long-term relationships over short-term audience growth.
2. **Lower participation thresholds**, addressing barriers related to cost, time, language, stigma and perceived relevance.
3. **Work across sectors**, partnering with schools, health providers, social organisations and community groups to embed culture in everyday life.
4. **Create safe and inclusive spaces**, where different generations, identities and experiences can meet, express themselves and build trust.
5. **Value process as much as output**, recognising that well-being and care often emerge through ongoing participation rather than final products.

6. **Document and communicate impact**, using both qualitative narratives and simple indicators to demonstrate cultural value to funders and partners.
7. **Contribute to public awareness of arts engagement as a health-supportive behaviour** by integrating well-being narratives into communication, programming and partnerships, and by working with local health, education and community organisations to reach broader audiences.

For Culture Next and its Policy and Advocacy Task Force

As a network of European cities, Culture Next has a strategic responsibility to consolidate learning, amplify voices and drive policy change. In the short to medium term (12–24 months), Culture Next will prioritise actions that strengthen youth participation practices, culture–health policy integration at city level, and public awareness of culture as a contributor to well-being. These priorities will guide the network’s conferences, policy outputs, peer-learning formats and advocacy efforts, complementing the broader set of recommendations outlined below.

1. **Consolidate outcomes of conferences and thematic working groups** into clear, accessible policy messages tailored to different audiences (EU institutions, national ministries, cities).
2. **Develop practical toolkits** for member cities on youth participation, culture–health collaboration and participatory governance.
3. **Strengthen advocacy alliances** with European and international networks working on culture, health, youth and urban development.
4. **Support member cities in piloting and documenting innovation**, turning local experiments into transferable policy models.
5. **Maintain the connected-actions approach**, ensuring continuous feedback loops between practice, learning, policy development and advocacy.

6. **Position Culture Next as a reference platform** for culture as care in European cities, contributing proactively to future policy debates and frameworks.
7. **Position arts and cultural participation as a health-supportive behaviour** within Culture Next's advocacy work, contributing to public and policy awareness while safeguarding the autonomy and intrinsic value of cultural practice.

An inspiration for other actors at global level

The experience of Culture Next offers concrete reference points for cities, cultural networks and international organisations worldwide that are seeking to strengthen participation, health and collective well-being through culture, while working within complex and resource-constrained governance environments.

1. **Treat culture as part of local social infrastructure**, by explicitly linking cultural participation to objectives such as social connection, mental well-being and civic engagement within urban and regional strategies, while continuing to develop and implement dedicated cultural sector strategies and plans.
2. **Anchor cultural policy in city-level practice**, where municipalities and local cultural actors are close enough to communities to identify needs, test participatory approaches and adjust them over time.
3. **Move beyond access-focused participation models**, and introduce mechanisms that allow people—particularly young people—to influence programming priorities, resource allocation and the use of cultural spaces.
4. **Integrate cultural participation into everyday settings**, such as schools, neighbourhood centres, libraries, public spaces and workplaces, making engagement regular and familiar rather than exceptional.

5. **Develop collaboration frameworks between culture and health**, including shared programmes, referral pathways or co-hosted activities, while maintaining clear boundaries that protect artistic autonomy.
6. **Use cultural spaces as multifunctional community assets**, where artistic activity can coexist with learning, social support, intergenerational exchange and informal care practices.
7. **Support collective cultural practices**, such as group participation, community-based projects and local rituals, which strengthen social bonds and generate well-being at community level.
8. **Document outcomes in ways that speak to decision-makers**, combining simple indicators (participation frequency, diversity of participants) with qualitative accounts of lived experience and local change.
9. **Invest in peer learning between cities and regions**, using networks and exchanges to share concrete tools, governance models and lessons learned, rather than replicating programmes wholesale.
10. **Allow cultural policies to evolve incrementally**, recognising that participation and care-oriented approaches require time, trust and long-term institutional learning and awareness-raising rather than short-term project cycles.

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Contact persons for further details

András FARKAS, Policy And Advocacy Coordinator, Culture Next

andras@culturenext.eu, +40757055591 (WhatsApp)

Rarița ZBRANCA, Policy Expert, Culture Next

rarita@cccluj.ro

About Culture Next

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is one of the most recognized action programmes of the European Union. The dynamics and dimension of the process makes it attractive to cities that seek cultural, social, economic and infrastructural transformation. The hundreds of cities participating in this process bring together a vast set of learnings, good practice and knowledge that it's important to share and by doing so, to be an agent of positive action for Europe.

Culture Next's 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.

Building on the experiences, processes and collaborations established during the ECoC bid, we support all cities, being them awarded or not, to implement culture-led local development programmes and policies. We are committed to deliver a sustainable impact and meaningful legacy of the ECoC programme.

Whether being ECoC labelled or not, all cities need support and inspiration in order to carry on with the implementation of their programmes. The partnerships, talents and resources mobilised through ECoC bidding make a strong base for culture-led sustainable development in these cities. We can all contribute to the success and legacy of the ECoC project.

Cities are where democracy, inclusiveness and innovation are produced, and culture is a facilitator of this entire ecosystem. More cities with cultural programmes mean more power to address European challenges and opportunities.

Within Culture Next, the Policy and Advocacy Task Force (PATF) supports the network's policy reflection and advocacy work by translating insights from member cities, thematic working groups and network activities into policy-oriented outputs. It develops policy papers and advocacy messages on topics such as ECoC legacy, culture-led sustainable development, culture and the SDGs, wellbeing, environmental transition and international cultural

cooperation, contributing to informed dialogue with policymakers and partner networks at local, national and European levels.

TL;DR

What this report is about

This report explores how culture contributes to care in European cities by examining two key perspectives: **youth participation** and **well-being**. Rather than treating these as a single policy agenda, the report uses them as distinct entry points to understand how cultural participation supports agency, connection and quality of life in different ways.

Drawing on the experience of the Culture Next network and two major conferences held in 2025, the report shows how cities are already experimenting with participatory and care-oriented cultural approaches—and what policy conditions are needed to support them.

Why it matters

European cities are navigating a complex landscape marked by social fragmentation, declining trust in institutions, mental health pressures and unequal access to cultural and civic life. Culture is often expected to respond to these challenges, yet cultural policy frameworks frequently remain fragmented, short-term and focused on outputs rather than lived experience.

This report argues that culture's contribution to care cannot be understood through a single lens. Youth participation and well-being highlight **different dimensions of the same challenge**: how to create cultural ecosystems that support people not only as audiences, but as active participants in social and cultural life.

What Culture Next learned from youth participation

Youth participation sheds light on culture as a space of **agency, recognition and democratic inclusion**.

Across Europe, young people are active cultural producers, yet they often remain marginalised in formal cultural institutions and governance. The Leeuwarden conference demonstrated that this gap is rarely explained by lack of interest. Instead, it reflects deeper issues of relevance, power and trust.

Cities shared practices showing that when young people are involved as co-creators, curators or decision-makers:

- cultural programmes become more relevant and responsive;
- participation becomes more sustained;
- young people gain confidence, voice and a sense of belonging.

From this perspective, culture functions as care by enabling agency and recognition—key conditions for social inclusion and democratic life.

What Culture Next learned from culture and well-being

The well-being perspective highlights culture as a source of **connection, prevention and collective resilience**.

The Bielsko-Biała conference explored how everyday cultural practices—music, storytelling, shared rituals, embodied activities—can support mental and emotional health, reduce loneliness and strengthen social bonds. Culture was discussed not as a therapeutic intervention, but as a relational practice embedded in everyday life.

Participants highlighted the role of:

- cultural spaces as welcoming, accessible environments;
- collective participation rather than individual consumption;
- long-term engagement over short-term projects.

From this perspective, culture functions as care by sustaining relationships, creating safe spaces and supporting collective well-being.

What connects these perspectives

Youth participation and well-being point to **different functions of culture as care**, but they converge on several structural insights:

- participation must go beyond access to include voice and agency;
- cultural spaces matter as everyday environments, not only venues;
- care is generated through relationships, not only through services;
- cities are central to translating policy into lived experience.

What needs to change

- Move beyond one-size-fits-all participation models.
- Recognise youth as present cultural actors, not future audiences.
- Value collective and relational forms of well-being.
- Support cultural spaces as long-term social infrastructure.
- Encourage cross-sector collaboration without instrumentalising culture.
- Use evidence that combines indicators with lived experience.

Who this report is for

- **European institutions**, shaping frameworks for culture, health and participation
- **National governments**, enabling cities to act coherently
- **Cities**, experimenting with participatory and care-oriented approaches
- **Cultural networks**, amplifying local practice into policy discourse
- **Cultural operators**, designing meaningful participation
- **Global actors**, seeking adaptable, city-based models

Culture as Care shows that culture contributes to care in **multiple ways**. Through youth participation, culture supports agency, voice and democratic inclusion. Through well-being, culture supports connection, prevention and

collective resilience. Together, these perspectives offer a richer understanding of how cultural policy can respond to contemporary urban challenges—without reducing culture to a single function or instrument.