

**UK Town of Culture 2028 Competition - Expression of Interest (EOI)
Application****Report by Kevin Anderson, Executive Director Place****Report for Decision****1 Recommendations**

Council is recommended to:

- i. Approve submission of an Expression of Interest (EOI) recommending Dalkeith as UK Town of Culture 2028, and
- ii. Express support to the separate community- based application for Penicuik area.

2 Purpose of Report/Executive Summary

This report seeks approval to submit an Expression of Interest by the council to the UK Government's Town of Culture 2028 programme, proposing Dalkeith as Midlothian's candidate town.

Date 04/03/2026**Report Contact:**

Nathan Gallogley Tel No 07901864996

Nathan.gallogley@midlothian.gov.uk

3 Background/Main Body of Report

Overview of Opportunity

3.1 The UK Government's Town of Culture 2028 programme seeks to empower towns to deliver ambitious, place-based cultural programmes that:

- Tell distinctive local stories
- Drive town centre regeneration
- Empower communities
- Improve access to culture
- Create sustainable legacy beyond the funded year

3.2 The current stage is an Expression of Interest (EOI). Towns invited to the next stage will receive up to £60,000 development funding to support activity in:

- Community engagement and co-design
- Programme development
- Governance and partnership planning
- Financial modelling
- Evaluation framework design
- Strengthening of delivery capacity

3.3 Shortlisted towns will then be invited to submit a full application for designation as UK Town of Culture 2028. The successful town will deliver a year-long programme of cultural activity supported by strong governance, partnership, financial planning and evaluation. Culture is positioned not as a standalone arts initiative, but as a catalyst for economic renewal, civic pride and long-term place transformation.

3.4 For Midlothian, this represents a significant opportunity to leverage culture as a practical regeneration tool aligned to wider economic development and place-making priorities. Given that there are expected to be applications from across the region and nationally, it is important that Midlothian positions itself proactively at the Expression of Interest stage to remain competitive. Early engagement will allow the Council and partners to demonstrate strategic ambition, partnership strength and delivery readiness, ensuring Midlothian is not disadvantaged in a highly competitive national process.

Why Dalkeith

3.5 Dalkeith is one of Midlothian's largest and most historically significant towns. It presents the strongest strategic fit against the programme's criteria, balancing scale, identity and deliverability.

3.6 Dalkeith benefits from:

- A clearly defined town centre and civic identity
- Significant heritage assets, which includes Dalkeith Palace and Country Park and Dalkeith Museum, providing an important cultural and heritage link to the town centre and strengthens opportunities for storytelling, interpretation and community engagement
- Established community and civic infrastructure
- Ongoing town centre regeneration ambitions
- Strong regional connectivity and transport links

3.7 Dalkeith offers the strongest balance of:

- Deliverability and infrastructure capacity
- Distinctiveness and heritage narrative
- Regeneration potential
- Community reach and partnership base

3.8 The proposed thematic framework, “Meeting Points”, reflects Dalkeith’s identity as a place where rivers, routes, markets and communities converge. This positions culture as a connector across geography, generations and sectors.

Strategic Alignment

3.9 A Town of Culture bid would align directly with:

- Town centre regeneration ambitions
- Economic development priorities
- Midlothian Tourism Strategy for Inclusive Economic Growth 2026 - 2030
- Skills and employability pathways
- Place-making and community empowerment objectives

3.10 The programme would support inclusive economic growth by increasing footfall, strengthening local businesses, and enhancing Dalkeith’s profile regionally and nationally.

3.11 Culture in this context acts as a delivery mechanism for regeneration and economic resilience, rather than a standalone cultural intervention.

Proposed Programme Approach

3.12 If successful, the 2028 programme would combine:

- Flagship cultural commissions inspired by Dalkeith’s heritage and landscape
- Outdoor and town centre activation
- Community-led neighbourhood activity
- Youth leadership and creative skills pathways
- Digital storytelling and heritage interpretation

- 3.13** Accessibility would be embedded from the outset, ensuring a balanced programme of free, low-cost and participatory opportunities.
- 3.14** Community co-design would underpin programme development, ensuring authenticity and local ownership.

Governance and Delivery

- 3.15** At Expression of Interest stage, there is no requirement for direct financial contribution from Midlothian Council.
- 3.16** Should the Expression of Interest be shortlisted:
- Midlothian Council would act as the Accountable Body
 - Officer time would be required to progress partnership development and community engagement
 - A cross-sector Programme Board would be established
 - Dedicated project capacity would be recruited, funded through the development grant
 - Community advisory mechanisms would be embedded
- 3.17** A further report would be submitted prior to any full application.
- 3.18** The Expression of Interest deadline of **31 March 2026**.

Financial Overview

- 3.19** If shortlisted, the Council would receive a £60,000 development grant to support preparation of the full bid. This would fund:
- Community engagement and co-design
 - Partnership development
 - Feasibility and access audits
 - Governance development
 - Fundraising strategy
 - Evaluation framework design
- 3.20** This ensures that progression to full application remains proportionate and controlled.
- 3.21** Indicative total programme cost for delivery in 2028 is currently estimated at £3/4 million, informed by comparable national culture-led place programmes and scaled proportionately to the size and ambition of Midlothian's proposed offer.
- 3.22** This estimate includes provision for:
- Programme commissioning and artist fees
 - Community engagement and co-creation activity
 - Production, staging and technical delivery costs
 - Marketing, branding and audience development
 - Project management and core delivery staffing
 - Monitoring, evaluation and legacy planning
 - Contingency and risk management

- 3.23** Should Midlothian be shortlisted, the £60,000 development grant would enable detailed financial modelling, partner contribution mapping and phased budget profiling to refine this estimate and confirm a robust, deliverable funding package.
- 3.24** It is anticipated that delivery funding would be secured through a blended model including external grants, public sector investment, sponsorship and business support, cultural partnerships, trust and foundation funding, and in-kind contributions, minimising direct financial exposure to the Council.
- 3.25** Delivery funding would be sought from a blended model including:
- Public funding bodies
 - Trusts and foundations
 - Business sponsorship
 - Cultural partnerships
 - Earned income
 - In-kind contributions
- 3.26** Any financial implications associated with a full bid would be subject to further governance approval.

Strategic Opportunity

- 3.27** The programme presents a significant opportunity to:
- Position Dalkeith nationally as a confident and distinctive cultural town
 - Accelerate regeneration ambitions
 - Strengthen community pride and cohesion
 - Build long-term cultural and creative capacity
 - Increase footfall and economic activity
- 3.28** Progressing to EOI submission therefore represents a low-risk, high-opportunity strategic intervention aligned to Council priorities.

4 Report Implications (Resource, Digital and Risk)

4.1 Resource

At EOI stage, officer time will be required within Economic Development. If shortlisted, a development phase would require dedicated project capacity funded through the development grant. Any future financial commitments would require separate approval.

4.2 Digital

The programme would incorporate digital storytelling, accessible communications and modern audience engagement methods. Digital inclusion and accessible formats would be embedded within the communications strategy.

4.3 Risk

Key risks include:

- Failure to be shortlisted (**low financial risk at EOI stage**)
- Funding gap at delivery stage
- Delivery capacity pressures
- Community disengagement

Mitigations:

- Phased programme design
- Diverse income strategy
- Early and meaningful community engagement
- Clear governance and experienced cultural producers

4.4 Ensuring Equalities (if required a separate IIA must be completed)

Design proposals will consider inclusive access and equality in line with Fair Work First principles, an IIA will be required for full application stage.

4.5 Additional Report Implications (See Appendix A)

See Appendix A

Appendices

Appendix A – Additional Report Implications

APPENDIX A – Report Implications

A.1 Key Priorities within the Single Midlothian Plan

The proposed Expression of Interest supports the ambitions of the Single Midlothian Plan by contributing to:

- Reducing inequalities through inclusive cultural participation and access to free and low-cost events.
- Growing the local economy by increasing town centre footfall, supporting local businesses and strengthening the visitor economy.
- Improving outcomes for children and young people through creative skills development, youth leadership opportunities and cultural pathways.
- Strengthening communities by building pride of place, encouraging volunteering and fostering collaboration across sectors.
- Supporting town centre regeneration by activating Dalkeith's public spaces and enhancing its identity as a civic and cultural hub.

Culture is positioned as an enabling mechanism to deliver wider economic, social and wellbeing outcomes rather than as a standalone intervention.

A.2 Key Drivers for Change

Key drivers addressed in this report:

- Holistic Working
- Hub and Spoke
- Modern
- Sustainable
- Transformational
- Preventative
- Asset-based
- Continuous Improvement
- One size fits one
- None of the above

A.3 Key Delivery Streams

Key delivery streams addressed in this report:

- One Council Working with you, for you
- Preventative and Sustainable
- Efficient and Modern
- Innovative and Ambitious
- None of the above

A.4 Delivering Best Value

The EOI stage requires no financial commitment beyond officer time. If shortlisted, development funding would offset preparatory costs. Long-term legacy focus ensures investment delivers sustained benefit beyond 2028.

A.5 Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders

Community engagement will include:

- Open listening sessions
- Youth-led design workshops
- Business roundtables
- Community advisory representation

The approach prioritises participatory design rather than top-down delivery.

A.6 Impact on Performance and Outcomes

Anticipated impacts include:

- Increased town centre footfall
- Enhanced town profile
- Improved participation in cultural activity
- Skills and employment pathways
- Stronger community cohesion

A.7 Adopting a Preventative Approach

The programme builds:

- Social connection
- Youth skills and pathways
- Local pride and belonging

This supports preventative wellbeing and economic resilience outcomes.

A.8 Supporting Sustainable Development

The programme will:

- Use existing assets and infrastructure
- Encourage active travel and local participation
- Embed environmental considerations in event design
- Support sustainable visitor growth

APPENDIX B

UK Town of Culture 2028 Competition Expression of Interest (EOI)