Culture and 21st Century Challenges

Reframing Culture's Role in Shaping Sustainable Futures

Cover Image: View toward Stac Pollaidh mountain in Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Scotland. Credit: James

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A note on contents:

From 2005 - 2025, Clore Leadership and AHRC offered a diverse range of cultural leaders the opportunity to produce a piece of extended research relating to leadership and to their specific cultural discipline. These papers, published on the Clore Leadership-AHRC online research library, reflect an important contribution to the field and we are extremely pleased to make them available to practitioners, scholars, and other interested parties.

We recognise that this research library contains a range of terminologies and outlooks: these are reflective of the significant and ongoing changes within the cultural sector over the past 20 years. As such we urge readers to recognise that the authors' thinking and language may have shifted since completion of these papers, or may be in the process of
as consequence of their enquiries.

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Executive Summary

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This working paper explores the role of culture, the cultural sector, and cultural leadership in addressing the interconnected challenges of the 21st century.

Based on a reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with twenty-three cultural leaders across three rural UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Estonia, Scotland, and Norway, the study finds that culture is not simply a sector - but the foundation of identity, meaning, and belonging, and an integral part of how communities understand and respond to change.

At a glance:

- Culture is not a discrete sector - it is the emotional and symbolic infrastructure of place, identity and belonging
- The cultural sector is under significant strain, yet offers vital responses to rural change, fragmentation and disconnection
- Cultural leaders mediate between tradition and innovation, shaping futures as much as preserving the past.
- To succeed, the sector needs integrated governance across places, long-term funding and leadership development

Key Findings

The complete results of the thematic analysis are available in a table on page 37.

1. **Culture is foundational**
   Culture is crucial in addressing the interconnected challenges of the 21st century. This is not just through technical fixes, but by its role in shaping identity, belonging, and meaning. Participants viewed culture as the emotional and symbolic backbone of resilient communities and places, serving as an interpretive lens for understanding the world and as the connective force that links people to their environment, each other, and their history.

2. **Culture helps communities navigate and understand change**

    'Cultural narratives' emerged as a valuable framework for understanding how communities understand place and change (Table, Page 39). These narratives comprise multiple interconnected layers, spanning physical heritage and landscapes to intangible traditions, embodied practices, and everyday customs. Together, they provide a lens through which individuals interpret their environment and shifting circumstances. In rural areas facing shared challenges such as demographic shifts, second-home ownership, population decline, and reduced local services, they demonstrate how culture is not merely a passive backdrop, but is actively shaping (and shaped) by these forces.

3. **The culture sector provides vital infrastructure**

    Museums, arts organisations, archives, and festivals transmit and help reintpret local cultural practices, therefore providing the social and emotional foundation for communities. However, the sector faces similar challenges as other rural institutions, such as underfunding, diminishing relevance, limited capacity, fragmented governance, and poor cross-sector integration. As the case studies show (page 67), rural museums and heritage sites are already re-evaluating their roles amid shifting demographics and the decline or ritualisation of traditional practices.

4. **Cultural Leadership is pivotal**

    The findings demonstrate how cultural leaders act as mediators, interpreting cultural practices to address both current and future needs. This includes their role in managing tensions between tradition and innovation, inclusion and exclusion, and maintaining identity while adapting to change. Although not always associated with formal sustainability initiatives, cultural leaders often actively seek to underpin the community resilience, cohesion, and future preparedness. Additionally, cultural leaders have begun to utilise cultural meaning-making to spark broader discussions on ecological changes and social resilience.

5. **Culture must be repositioned**

    For culture to effectively contribute to just and sustainable transitions, it needs to be more deeply integrated into sustainability frameworks, associated funding models, and governance structures. It should be positioned by cultural leaders and the sector as a key driver of place-based resilience.

Key Emerging Challenges and Needs

Interviews revealed a variety of challenges impacting the cultural sector's capacity to serve its transformational role. These challenges encompass issues related to funding, governance, leadership, and the tension between maintaining continuity and embracing change.

1. Fragmented and Short-Term Funding

- Once arguably central to community cohesion, local cultural institutions are under increasing pressure from decreasing public funding and an overreliance on short-term, project-based work from regional and national funders.
- Funding structures prioritise economic outputs over culture's intrinsic and systemic role in fostering community resilience.
- A funding gap persists between funding for small and large institutions - 'The Missing Middle'
- Volunteer-dependent cultural institutions lack the financial and technical capacity to sustain their work or expand their reach.

Recommendations

- Explore long-term, dedicated funding models that ensure continuity and foster innovation. This encompasses funding for basic support, such as governance and accounting, while empowering local communities to develop cultural offerings from the ground up, rather than through top-down approaches.
- Support direct community funding to define cultural priorities from the ground up.
- Create flexible funding mechanisms that enable dialogue, imagination, and inclusive futures, not just preservation.

2. Outdated Governance and Leadership Models

- The culture sector remains siloed at every level (both national and local, as well as sub-sectoral), preventing an understanding of its intrinsic value across broader policy and place agendas and sectors that underpin people's lives.
- Governance models continue to separate nature and culture, failing to recognise their interdependence.
- Cultural organisations are still required to justify their value in economic/financial terms.

- Decision-making structures are often centralised and slow, frustrating bottom-up community work.

Recommendations

- Pilot horizontal governance models that encourage shared leadership throughout the cultural sector. These should test bottom-up decision-making and embrace diverse knowledge systems that aren't reliant solely on economic impact assessments.
- Ensure stronger national-level recognition of culture across economic, environmental, and social policy.
- Invest in Leadership development that equips cultural leaders to navigate structural barriers, intergenerational tensions and shifting narratives.

3. Navigating continuity and change

- Participants consistently described tension between preserving cultural continuity and adapting to changing demographics, values and needs.
- Many are now shifting from preservation-focused models to ones that foster participation, dialogue and co-creation.

Recommendations

- More research and organisational shifts are needed to position the cultural sector as a facilitator of dialogue and co-creation around societal challenges, not just preservation.
- National and regional schemes could support museums, heritage sites, and arts venues or spaces through partnerships to become hubs for reflection, debate, and imagination about local futures.

Together, these findings suggest that if culture is to play a full role in addressing 21st-century challenges and shaping inclusive and sustainable futures, it must be resourced, valued, and positioned not as an add-on but as core social infrastructure.

Introduction

Introduction

"Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenkyiri" - Akan Proverb - Ghana

The Akan proverb from Ghana, Sankofa, *"It is not taboo to go back for what you forgot (or left behind)"* is often illustrated by a bird with its feet facing forward and its head turned backwards. It symbolises how the past always serves as a guide for planning and understanding the future (Stanley and Chukwuorji 2024).

Sankofa is a powerful metaphor for the role of culture in addressing 21st-century challenges. It demonstrates that culture, as our shared inheritance from the past, is not fixed but a dynamic force that shapes the values we carry forward, the stories we share about ourselves and our places, and the future(s) we aspire to create.

In recent years, culture has increasingly been recognised not as an extra in tackling 21st-century challenges, but as a cross-cutting driver of transformative change. This paper contributes to this discussion by examining the role of culture across three rural sites and understanding how it influences and aligns with the role of the culture sector and cultural leadership.

Three research questions:

1. **What is the role of culture in supporting and addressing 21st-century challenges?**
2. **How is leadership across the culture sector currently responding to various 21st-century challenges?**
3. **What are leaders' current and future needs/requirements in the culture sector to fully meet its potential in supporting wider approaches to addressing 21st-century challenges?**

To answer these questions, this report presents findings from a thematic analysis of twenty-three interviews with cultural leaders in three rural UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Estonia, Norway, and Scotland. Through these interviews, participants were asked to reflect on how they understand and respond to 21st-century challenges in their local contexts. It also presents the analysis of findings from a workshop with 40 participants in Edinburgh in December 2024.

Across all three sites, the findings show that culture is not a discrete set of activities, but rather the very fabric through which places become meaningful. Culture underpins the shared narratives, practices, and relationships through which people make sense of who they are, where they belong, and how they relate to others locally and globally. This reframes culture not as a static inheritance or fragmented sector, but as a dynamic, relational system deeply embedded across social and ecological systems. Positioned this way, culture becomes relevant to sustainability and essential to how change is understood, navigated and sustained.

However, for culture to effectively serve this transformative role, the interviews demonstrated that it is also crucial to address the tensions it can generate. While culture often provides continuity, belonging, and meaning, it can also reinforce divisions, isolate individuals and communities perceived as outsiders, and promote static, entrenched views of places that no longer reflect their nature-depleted reality. Cultural leadership can play a critical role as a meaning-making lens in managing these tensions by creating space for new inclusive narratives, encouraging dialogue, and helping to reimagine tradition not as fixed, but as something capable of evolving to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. As the report indicates, this challenge has long been at the heart of cultural leadership and the sector.

"Culture underpins the shared narratives, practices, and relationships through which people make sense of who they are, where they belong, and how they relate to others locally and globally."

The culture sector also plays a vital role. Institutions such as museums, archives, arts organisations, and heritage sites preserve and promote cultural narratives through which societies interpret the past and plan for the future. They are well-placed to help communities and individuals respond directly to change. They achieve this by providing local institutions and venues, as well as the cultural activities and social interactions that are crucial for fostering community resilience and enabling individuals to understand and adapt to change.

However, the sector also faces significant constraints. These include financial challenges, tensions between preservation and adaptation, tradition and innovation, expertise and communities, as well as the instrumentalisation and ritualisation of culture. Many cultural organisations must also balance competing expectations as stewards of memory, drivers of economic regeneration, and vehicles for social change, often with limited financial and human resources and fragmented mandates.

2.   Report Structure

This report brings together complex reflections from the three case study regions and purposely provides large amounts of detailed information. Rather than offering fixed answers, it aims to open space for deeper understanding, dialogue, and future research development. It is split into three sections:

- The **first** is a background literature overview that aims to provide an up-to-date, albeit non-exhaustive, account of the role of culture in addressing 21st-century challenges.
- The **second** section presents the thematic analysis. It also includes analysis of a workshop with over 40 participants at the CULTIVATE conference in Edinburgh in December 2024. The report's findings also draw on findings from the AHRC-JPI-funded CULTIVATE project led by the University of the Highlands and Islands.
- The **third** section aims to contextualise these findings within the broader research and policy landscape before examining their implications for cultural leadership.

To better understand the opportunities and challenges emerging from the literature review and thematic analysis, the report is structured around three interconnected domains:

- **Culture:** the broader set of meanings, values, symbols, and beliefs
- **The culture sector:** the institutional field supporting and mobilising cultural expressions
- **Cultural leadership:** the relational and strategic role/attributes connecting culture and its institutions to wider societal change

While these domains are analytically useful, participants often treated them as inseparable during interviews. This blurring at a local level reflects a broader critique of policy models that treat culture as a discrete sector, rather than a foundational, lived system of meaning-making. Given the absence of universal definitions, these domains have been shaped through the interviews and thematic analysis – more information is available in the methodological section.

3.   Audience

This report is aimed at leaders and organisations in the UK and European cultural and natural heritage sectors, as well as wider funders, practitioners, and policymakers engaged in sustainability. It also adds to the growing body of academic and policy literature emphasising the fundamental role of culture in tackling 21st-century challenges and notably provides an initial effort to connect this to a specific role and approach for the cultural sector and cultural leadership. Additionally, this report may benefit those researching how the cultural sector can support adaptation pathways or transitions within place-based approaches, while also exploring how culture can contribute to the broader "relational turn" within the social sciences and sustainable development sector.

It also aims to act as a resource for the network of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves and other UNESCO-designated sites, offering insight into how culture can both serve as a foundational and vital force in tackling complex and interconnected challenges.

Literature
Review

Literature Review

1.   Introduction

This literature review examines how culture, the cultural sector, and cultural leadership are addressing and responding to 21st century challenges. Drawing on policy documents and academic studies across Europe and the United Kingdom from 2015 to 2024, it also references broader multilateral frameworks where appropriate.

The analysis is organised around the three research questions (see page 10). The questions were intentionally designed to be broad. For example, the phrase "21st century challenges" was used not to specify a single issue, such as biodiversity loss, social issues, sustainability, or climate change, but to understand how culture is integrated into multiple overlapping agendas, often with underexplored synergies. Similarly, "culture" and "cultural leadership" were understood in a broad, context-dependent sense rather than through fixed definitions, allowing these ideas to emerge naturally during background research and interviews. This meant that the term "culture" could encompass both tangible and intangible heritage, ways of life, practices, and systems of meaning, aligning with UNESCO's broad definition of culture: *"A set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group, [which] includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs"* (UNESCO 2022).

This approach also underscores the complex and often fragmented environment in which the culture sector operates. Not only must the sector respond to intricate and overlapping paradigms and agendas, but it must also navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting or overlapping, definitions and values linked to culture itself. This is further compounded by the sector's often fragile and precarious funding, as well as the presence of multiple sub-sectors and governance frameworks.

This section is structured as follows:

1. **An overview of 21st-century challenges and approaches to them**
2. **The growing recognition of culture's role in addressing these challenges**
3. **How culture is variously defined and framed**
4. **The emerging role of culture within sustainability transitions and plural epistemologies; and,**
5. **The implications for leadership, specifically on cultural leadership and the cultural sector**

2.   21st-century challenges and approaches to them

The world faces a series of deeply interconnected global challenges. Decades of rapid industrialisation, urban expansion, intensive agriculture, and an overreliance on carbon-based energy systems have pushed the Earth's natural limits and triggered several crises, including accelerating climate change, social fragmentation, and mass biodiversity loss (Wernli, Böttcher et al. 2023).

While technological and economic progress has benefited millions worldwide, it has also come at an increasing and, in many cases, irreversible cost to planetary systems (Rockström, Steffen et al. 2009). Mounting scientific evidence suggests that Earth's systems are rapidly approaching - if not already exceeding - their safe limits for sustaining humanity (Richardson, Steffen et al. 2023). The United Nations has repeatedly warned that the window to address the root causes of climate change is rapidly closing - and may, in some respects, already have closed, risking dangerous and self-reinforcing tipping points (United Nations 2023). 2024 marked the first year when global warming exceeded the symbolic 1.5°C threshold, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres calling it a 'climate breakdown.' (Poynting, Rivault et al. 2024).

As a primary driver, climate change has already had devastating impacts, disproportionately affecting the Global South, including record temperatures, wildfires, prolonged droughts, and catastrophic floods. On average, African countries lose 2-5% of their GDP annually, and many divert up to 9% of their budgets in response to climate extremes, with the cost of adaptation estimated to range from US$40-50 billion annually over the next decade (World Meteorological Organisation 2023). These impacts are not new; instead, they compound long-term ecological degradation, exacerbate inequality, and disrupt and threaten the lives and livelihoods of millions

of people and communities. By 2030, it is estimated that up to 118 million people in Africa alone will be exposed to drought, floods, and extreme heat (World Meteorological Organisation 2023).

These impacts are not limited to the Global South. The effects of climate change are increasingly evident across the UK and Europe. For instance, the period between October 2022 and March 2024 was the wettest 18-month period on record for England, resulting in the second-worst arable harvest since records began (UK Climate Change Committee, 2025). The UK's Climate Change Committee found the country is unprepared to adapt to the escalating impacts of climate change, describing current efforts as piecemeal and disjointed. These impacts intersect with systemic issues and compound long-term challenges: for example, no stretch of river in England or Northern Ireland is in good overall health (The Rivers Trust 2024) and in 2022/23, one in five people in the UK lived in poverty, which equates to around 14.3 million individuals (22%) (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2025). The UN Global Compact's report, at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, notes that the UK performs well domestically on only 21% of the Targets (UK Global Compact Network, 2023).

Image: City of York during the annual floods in February 2020. Credit: Don Lodge

The understanding that human activity is destabilising Earth's systems is not new. Since the 1960s, international institutions have promoted the idea of sustainability as a framework for coordinated action. Popularised in the 1980s, 'sustainable development' has focused on balancing economic growth with environmental and social needs, a vision formalised in the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, adopted by 194 countries in 2015 (United Nations 2015). However, sustainable development as a dominant paradigm has increasingly faced criticism. Its application has often focused on top-down, siloed, and technocratic approaches, which have exacerbated problems, isolated local communities, reinforced power imbalances, and led to maladaptation or unintended consequences by focusing on narrow or decontextualised solutions (Jones, Cullen-Unsworth et al. 2022, Reuter 2023).

This has prompted growing calls for more transformative approaches, including those that combine sustainability with climate adaptation. These developments, as explored below, are opening new conceptual and policy spaces and laying the groundwork for a broader recognition of the role of culture, heritage, and lived experiences in shaping approaches to 21st-century challenges.

3.   The growing recognition of culture's role in addressing these challenges

Culture is increasingly seen as a crucial, cross-sector enabler in major international agendas, especially those related to sustainability and climate change (Brennert, Gesuri et al. 2023). While this recognition has long existed within the cultural sector and institutions such as UNESCO and the European Union (European Commission 2022), it is gradually becoming part of broader mainstream policy frameworks. Culture's multifaceted nature allows it to operate across multiple agendas:

- **As a foundational element of societal values, identity and belonging**
- **As a transversal influence intersecting with sectors such as the economy, education, well-being and the environment**
- **More recently, it has become an emerging framework for governance and decision-making embedded in tools and indicators (UNESCO Culture2030 Indicators, Climate Vulnerability Index, etc.)**

The Mondicault Declaration, adopted by 40 culture ministers in 2022, demonstrates these expanding and overlapping roles. The Declaration urges that culture be recognised as a global 'public good' with intrinsic value, and supports its inclusion as a standalone objective in future development plans beyond 2030 (UNESCO 2022). It emphasises the importance of the "systemic anchoring" of culture in public policy, highlighting its role, amongst others, as a force for resilience, social inclusion and cohesion, environmental protection, and sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

The Declaration further emphasises culture's significance across various sectors, including education, employment (especially for women and youth), health, emotional well-being, poverty reduction, gender equality, the environment, tourism, trade, and transportation. (UNESCO 2022). These themes are expected to remain central at the next Mondicault Conference in October 2025.

4.   How culture is defined and framed

While momentum is growing around culture's potential to influence policy and support, its impact and visibility remain uneven, partly because there is no universal definition of what constitutes culture. How culture is valued, positioned, and operationalised depends on the frameworks through which it is understood.

Given this expanding role, a growing and complex body of literature now explores culture's relevance across multiple academic, policy and funding domains. This includes:

- Multilateral/International organisations (e.g. UNESCO, G7)
- Regional bodies (e.g. European Union, African Union)
- Government(s) and non-governmental actors (e.g. ICOMOS, IUCN, British Council)
- Academic publications
- Networks and groups (e.g. Climate Heritage network)
- Funding programmes and grants (e.g. EU Horizon Grant, Cultural Protection Fund)

However, how culture is conceptualised, framed and operationalised varies significantly based on several contextual factors, including:

- The **dominant paradigm or policy lens** shaping the analysis (e.g., climate change, sustainable development, health and wellbeing, biodiversity)
- The **scale** of engagement (international, regional/national, local/community-based)
- The **epistemological/ontological assumptions** used (scientific, Indigenous, constructivist or relational, human/nature)
- The **sectoral lens or definition** through which culture is viewed (e.g. intangible heritage, built heritage, natural environment, health, cultural economy).

These framings directly influence how culture is used, funded, evaluated, and integrated into policy. For instance, narrowly defining culture as built heritage often excludes living cultural practices or non-Western perspectives on value and significance.

Within the climate change paradigm, culture and heritage are increasingly viewed in two main ways: as assets under threat from climate change (e.g., flooding, wildfires), and, secondly, as vital resources for adaptation and resilience (Sesana, Gagnon et al. 2021). A systematic literature review of climate change impacts on cultural heritage (2016-2020) found that English-language publications were dominated by research on built heritage or sites (Orr, Richards et al. 2021). However, the review also identified a growing interest in landscapes and intangible heritage, reflecting an expanding recognition of different forms of cultural value.

Conversely, viewing culture as a fundamental system of values, relationships, and practices broadens its potential role in sustainability, resilience, and systems change (Seekamp and Jo 2020). Lerario (2022), for instance, critiques the narrow focus on built heritage in SDG Indicator 11.4 and instead investigates how cultural heritage can support other goals such as health and climate action. Similarly, Palomino and Pardue (2022) explore how Alutiiq subsistence practices in Southwest Alaska intersect with multiple SDGs, including those addressing poverty, health, well-being, climate change, and maritime ecosystems. This shift away from built heritage is reflected in the growing body of emerging literature. For example, a preliminary UNESCO bibliography from 2023 identified over 2,700 publications on the intersection of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Climate Change (UNESCO 2023).

Frameworks have also emerged to help navigate these various perspectives. Brennert et al. (2023) propose a typology that maps culture's instrumental roles in sustainable development, including health and well-being, gender justice, climate action, and community development. Dessein et al (2015) offer a widely cited framework that distinguishes between three

orientations: culture in sustainable development, culture as sustainable development, and culture for sustainable development.

While these frameworks offer clarity, multiple academics (Labadi 2022, Brennert, Gesuri et al. 2023) have noted that culture and heritage remain peripheral in mainstream international policy frameworks. For example, while the UN Pact for the Future, adopted in September 2024, recognises culture (and sport) as enablers of sustainable development under Article 11 (United Nations 2024), the culture sector has argued that this recognition falls short of endorsing a dedicated, standalone goal (Culture2030goal 2024).

5. The emerging role of culture within sustainability transitions and plural epistemologies

One significant shift in how culture is now being positioned, especially outside the cultural sector, is its growing recognition within climate adaptation as a catalyst for systemic transformation.

As the impacts of climate change intensify, adaptation is emerging as a key policy approach for how places, systems, and communities respond to a changing planet. Concepts such as climate-resilient development pathways, developed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), exemplify this shift. Rather than treating adaptation as a technical afterthought, these pathways position it as a central paradigm for reimagining development. They call for anticipatory, justice-centred approaches grounded in local values and knowledge systems (Schipper, Revi et al. 2022). Closely linked to this is the concept of 'transformative change' - a fundamental shift in institutional cultures, values, behaviours, and the ways individuals relate to place and one another (Hammond 2020, Schipper, Revi et al. 2022) (West, Haider et al. 2024).

These frameworks represent a shift from linear and technocratic models towards a more inclusive and pluralist understanding of knowledge, rooted deeply in local contexts. This has led to a growing interest in equity-focused approaches that embrace complexity and integrate diverse ways of knowing, including scientific, Indigenous, artistic, and relational knowledge systems (Lah 2025). Notably, the IPCC has announced plans to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and diverse worldviews into its next major assessment (IPCC 2023).

Within these frameworks, culture is increasingly understood as central to transformation, not merely as a means of communication or behavioural change (Potts 2021). Its perceived role

extends to systemic and infrastructural adaptation, community resilience, individual actions, identity formation, and social cohesion. The systematic literature review, mentioned earlier by Orr (2021), also identified a growing body of studies exploring how culture and heritage can actively support adaptation and mitigation. A recent British Academy report reached a similar conclusion, emphasising the need for more evidence to demonstrate how 'heritage can enable adaptation more widely when understood as a process which involves continuity and transformation amidst a changing climate' (Simpson, Sabour et al. 2024).

Seekamp (2020) exemplifies this reframing by advocating for a shift beyond traditional preservation paradigms in cultural heritage management towards approaches rooted in transformation and resilience. Instead of perceiving heritage merely as a record of the past, Seekamp argues that the sector should welcome change and foster broader learning in response to a changing planet. In this way, Seekamp argues that heritage values and identity are not fixed; instead, they actively contribute to meaningful societal transformation.

These insights also align with the broader 'relational turn' across the social sciences and humanities. Increasingly, sustainability challenges are viewed not merely as technical problems with fixed solutions, but as "wicked problems", characterised by multiple stakeholders, uncertainty, spatial and intertemporal externalities, the interaction of human and natural components, and conflicting values (Popa, Guillermin et al. 2015). From this perspective, it is not always a specific ecosystem that shapes a research process. Instead, it is a particular problem (such as flooding or biodiversity loss) that demands both theoretical and practical action (Popa, Guillermin et al. 2015). These will depend on a normative agenda, power dynamics, perceived importance, and available human/resources. Here, culture profoundly intersects with this framing, providing an interpretive lens through which priorities are debated, meanings are constructed, and futures are envisioned.

"Heritage values and identity are not fixed; instead, they actively contribute to meaningful societal transformation."

This recognition is echoed in critical heritage studies. As Smith (2022) and others have shown, discourse on cultural heritage has shifted from an 'authorised heritage discourse' that focuses on built heritage and state-led narratives to a framework where heritage is re-theorised as 'practices or performances where the past is mobilised in the present to address contemporary social and political issues centred on claims to identity and sense of belonging' (Smith 2022). Heritage is a performative process in which heritage meanings are 'continually made and remade to address contemporary needs and negotiate cultural and social change' (Smith 2022). Harrison (2015) has demonstrated how heritage is fundamentally about continuity, memory, and the transmission of cultural, historical, and natural legacies to future generations, grounded in stewardship (Harrison 2015).

Together, these viewpoints offer a valuable point of convergence. Viewing sustainability challenges as constructed and heritage as a dynamic system of meaning-making allows a more nuanced understanding of how places adapt. They also demonstrate how such adaptations are inextricably linked to evolving social values, identities, and cultural narratives. For example, a report in Galloway, Scotland, shows how sustainability challenges varied across four villages along the River Nith. Community workshops revealed that this was not solely due to ecological conditions, but also to distinct social and cultural factors that shaped each community's relationship to the river, land use, and climate adaptation priorities (Tippett et al. 2023).

Image: Community workshop in Galloway and Southern Ayrshire. Credit: Matthew Rabagliati

The broader relational turn in theory further supports this, advancing ontologies that challenge long-standing separations between subjects and objects, such as human and non-human, and culture and nature. For example, Karen Barad (2007) argued that phenomena do not exist as independent entities but emerge through entangled relations. In the context of culture and sustainability, this perspective reframes identities and values as co-produced through ongoing interactions among people, their places, and the environment. Culture, then is not merely a backdrop - but an active force within sustainability transitions. This relational paradigm has prompted a growing interest in post-humanist and more-than-human ontologies, which extend moral and legal agency beyond the human. Writers such as Macfarlane (2025), for example, explore legal and cultural movements to grant nature legal representation and rights – often drawing from indigenous knowledge systems (Macfarlane 2025).

These debates also raise significant questions about sustainability and heritage, such as what is preserved, who makes these decisions, and whose identities are legitimised or excluded. They also demonstrate how trade-offs related to sustainability are never purely technical but are deeply rooted in shifting and different understandings and worldviews of our environment, alongside history, culture, and politics.

6.   The implications for leadership and the cultural sector

This final section examines the implications of this reframing of culture and sustainability for the culture sector and leadership. Although leadership is not explicitly detailed in global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, there is increasing recognition that achieving these goals requires a shift from top-down leadership models to more participatory, place-based, and systemic approaches. For instance, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) emphasises inclusive, accountable, and participatory institutions, while SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals) stresses the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Leadership literature and programmes have also evolved similarly. Scholars and practitioners have long advocated for a shift from hierarchical models to more distributed and relational forms of leadership, especially when tackling complex and interconnected challenges (Collinge and Gibney 2010). For example:

- **Systems leadership** (Senge 1990, Scharmer 2007) focuses on creating conditions for collective problem-solving and systems change or behaviour change
- **Sustainability leadership** (Visser 2011) focuses on the core skills and attributes needed to address sustainability. For example, the Inner Development Goals (https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org)
- **Mission-oriented innovation** (Mazzucato 2021) and collective impact (Kania and Kramer 2011) focus on cross-sectoral leadership between institutions and organisations (Boorman, Jackson et al. 2023)
- **Place leadership** (Atkinson, Tallon et al. , Horlings, Roep et al. 2018) puts these practices into the contextual, relational and dynamic nature of leadership as found in the uniqueness of places

7.   Place Leadership

One area where leadership literature on culture and sustainability intersects is in the development of place leadership. Collinge and Gibney (2010) note, new "cross-boundary" or relational leadership forms are increasingly needed to address complex, place-specific challenges. These approaches call for leaders to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, community engagement and long-term systems thinking. In this space, place leadership is gaining recognition as a distinct and necessary response to global challenges that manifest locally. As Boorman noted, this shift is leading to more literature and management practices addressing issues such as social justice, climate change, alternative energy, and economic inequality (Boorman, Jackson et al. 2023). This move also reflects a greater acknowledgement that leadership is inherently context-dependent (both sector and geography/place) and cannot be explained within a single discipline or approach (Boorman and Jackson 2025). This new place-specific understanding of leadership is also emerging in UK policy frameworks. For example, HM Treasury's recent research agenda included a key question: 'What funding and powers should we devolve to empower local leaders to provide stronger place-based leadership, and what other reforms are needed to support the sustainability of local government finances?' (Government 2024).

Culture is also increasingly being recognised within these approaches. As Horlings (2015) argues, culture plays a vital mediating role within place leadership, by 'shaping people's intentions, way of life, sense of place, practices, norms and rules' (Dessein, Soini et al. 2015). As above, this follows the broader recognition that leaders need the skills and attributes to support a transformation to sustainability that is not only driven by political structures, but also by individual and shared

beliefs, values, worldviews and paradigms that influence attitudes and actions (Dessein, Soini et al. 2015). This emphasis suggests that cultural leaders, including people working with heritage and community identities, are uniquely placed to support such approaches. Initial research shows that the cultural sector is increasingly aligning with place-based leadership. For example:

- In July 2024, Darren Henley (CEO, Arts Council England), explained why 'place' plays such an essential role in its work, and directly positions creativity and culture as key to unlocking place to achieve local communities' aspirations and ambitions (Henley 2024). Building on over a decade of evidence in the People and Places programme, Henley explains that cultural activities are at their best when they are rooted in place, and that 'by working with locally elected leaders, we can help ensure that their creative and cultural sector is ideally placed to boost economic growth, give young people the skills and opportunities they deserve, and build the reputation of their regions on the national and international stage' (Henley 2024).
- **Historic England's** recent Future Strategy (2021) recognises the importance of the historic environment as the foundation of a place. The strategy aims to position heritage as a critical component of national and local responses to climate change, emphasising the need to collaborate with communities in inclusive and participatory ways throughout the country, across the arts, culture, heritage, and environment sectors (Historic England 2021).
- The **National Lottery Heritage Fund** has committed £200 million toward place-based investment, linking culture to broader environmental and civic goals. This also forms a key part of their 2033 Strategy (National Lottery Heritage Fund 2022)
- The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** launched the Emerging Future Programme, which included funding a programme around 'collective imagination' and funding to embed culture with place-making to address various systemic issues (Parker 2023).

Despite this, the cultural sector faces practical barriers to achieving this leadership vision. Research by Clore Leadership indicates that the sector remains entrenched in hierarchical, structured, and outdated governance models, and there is a lack of investment in leadership development to support its transition to a more systemic role (Leadership 2024). A recent research paper has also shown that the heritage sector requires better governance, from local to national and international levels, to enhance the capacity of citizen-led interventions and increase the effectiveness of approaches to heritage adaptation (Simpson, Sabour et al. 2024).

Findings

Findings

1.   Introduction

This section presents the findings from a thematic analysis examining the role of culture in addressing 21st-century challenges, alongside the current and future roles of the cultural sector and cultural leadership. The results are based on twenty-three semi-structured interviews with twenty-three cultural leaders across three semi-rural UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Estonia, Norway, and Scotland. This also includes an analysis of a workshop with over 40 participants at a CULTIVATE conference in Edinburgh in December 2024.

The thematic analysis presents its findings in three interrelated sections in line with the research questions:

1. The **role of culture:** The first examines how culture anchors local identity, memory, and belonging, grounded in everyday practices, narratives, and attachments to place. This is seen as a vital interpretive lens for how communities navigate and adapt to change.

2. The **role of the culture sector**: The second part discusses the role of the culture sector, examining how it has traditionally operated at the intersection of preservation and innovation, and mediates tensions between continuity and change. Building on this, the section then explores how the sector might broaden its role by embedding environmental, social, and economic issues within local understandings of identity and culture.

3. Finally, the chapter explores the **role of cultural leaders** across both themes. The findings show that cultural leaders possess many qualities needed to manage these tensions: they serve as mediators and interpreters of change, facilitators of dialogue within and between communities, and guardians of both heritage and emerging identities. Positioned uniquely within their communities, they can work across generations, disciplines, and sectors, and help to promote collaboration and resilience in the face of 21st-century challenges.

2.   Methodology

This study followed a **reflexive thematic analysis** (Braun and Clarke, 2024), recognising that themes are constructed rather than discovered. The meaning was co-produced between participants and the researcher, shaped by both the participants' situated knowledge and the researcher's embedded position within the AHRC-JPI-funded CULTIVATE project.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). The appendix includes the interview questions, consent forms, and participant information sheets. UNESCO Biosphere Coordinators at each site were contacted after an introductory meeting to recommend individuals involved in their local cultural sectors who could be interviewed. Each site coordinator provided a list of potential interviewees, who were then sent an information sheet, a consent form, and a request for a one-hour interview at their workplace or volunteer site. Once they agreed and gave consent, participants provided additional contextual data, such as their country of origin, gender, age range, and whether they identified as cultural leaders, to support the analysis. All interviews were conducted in English across different countries and locations.

Participants were guided through open-ended questions designed to explore local definitions of culture and leadership (available in the appendix), their understanding of societal challenges in their specific context, and how culture might help address these challenges. This structure was intentionally designed to avoid prescriptive descriptions of culture and cultural leadership, allowing for a locally grounded understanding of place and challenges to emerge in each country.

Each interview was initially transcribed using Otter.AI and then manually reviewed and edited for accuracy. Analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework for reflective thematic analysis. This involved: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) coding and generating code labels, (3) developing initial themes, (4) and writing a thematic analysis report. After familiarisation, the dataset was initially coded in NVivo, resulting in 546 nodes from the 21 interviews. These were organised into initial themes aligned with the three research questions guiding the study and then compared with the conference workshop outcomes to develop the final themes. Themes were refined iteratively to reflect the complexity and scope of the dataset. In addition to the interviews, a workshop with 40 participants was conducted at the CULVITAVE Conference in Edinburgh in December 2024. Details of this methodology and approach are provided separately.

Participant	Country	Gender
1	Estonia	Female
2	Estonia	Female
3	Estonia	Female
4	Estonia	Female
5	Estonia	Female, Female
6	Estonia	Female
7	Estonia	Male
8	Norway	Male
9	Norway	Female
10	Norway	Female
11	Norway	Female
12	Norway	Female
13	Norway	Female
14	Norway	Female
15	Norway	Male, Male
16	Scotland	Female
17	Scotland	Female
18	Scotland	Female
19	Scotland	Female
20	Scotland	Female
21	Scotland	Female

Country	Number
Norway	9
Estonia	8
Scotland	6
Total	**23**

This report draws directly on the voices of participants and community perspectives from the three case study regions. While contentious themes emerged, particularly around belonging, heritage, and identity, these are not presented as universal truths or criticisms of specific communities. Instead, they have been included to highlight the emotional complexity of place-based culture and the need for a delicate balance, as well as the mediation skills that cultural leaders require.

Limitations:

One of the main limitations of the study was that the three sites are predominantly rural, characterised by small to medium-sized towns and villages. Consequently, although each site had a cultural offering or museum, they lacked large urban museums or similar facilities. This means that many of the findings regarding the role of the cultural sector may not be applicable in more urban settings or different contexts.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves were selected for the CULTIVATE project because they exemplify bottom-up, local, and place-based approaches to addressing interconnected sustainability challenges. The three sites also highlight broader systemic issues faced by rural areas across Europe, including ongoing rural population decline, limited access to essential services and infrastructure, the impacts of migration, the erosion of traditional knowledge and communities, as well as concerns about climate and sustainability. An additional significant challenge arose from the interviews being conducted in English, which limited the ability to capture subtle nuances in local dialects and languages.

Interviews were conducted with cultural leaders from the voluntary, government, municipal, natural, museum, and intangible cultural heritage/dance sectors. This also covered a range of age groups, although most interviewees fell within the 40+ age bracket and were female.

Another limitation identified was time. The interviews and workshops encompassed a substantial amount of nuance and data. Despite conducting a comprehensive analysis, the final report and its structure could not be thoroughly examined due to time constraints. These interviews would greatly benefit from a more in-depth analysis and the inclusion of other UNESCO Biosphere reserves throughout Europe and beyond.

The Case Study Sites

Three case study sites were chosen for the interviews in line with the CULTIVATE project:
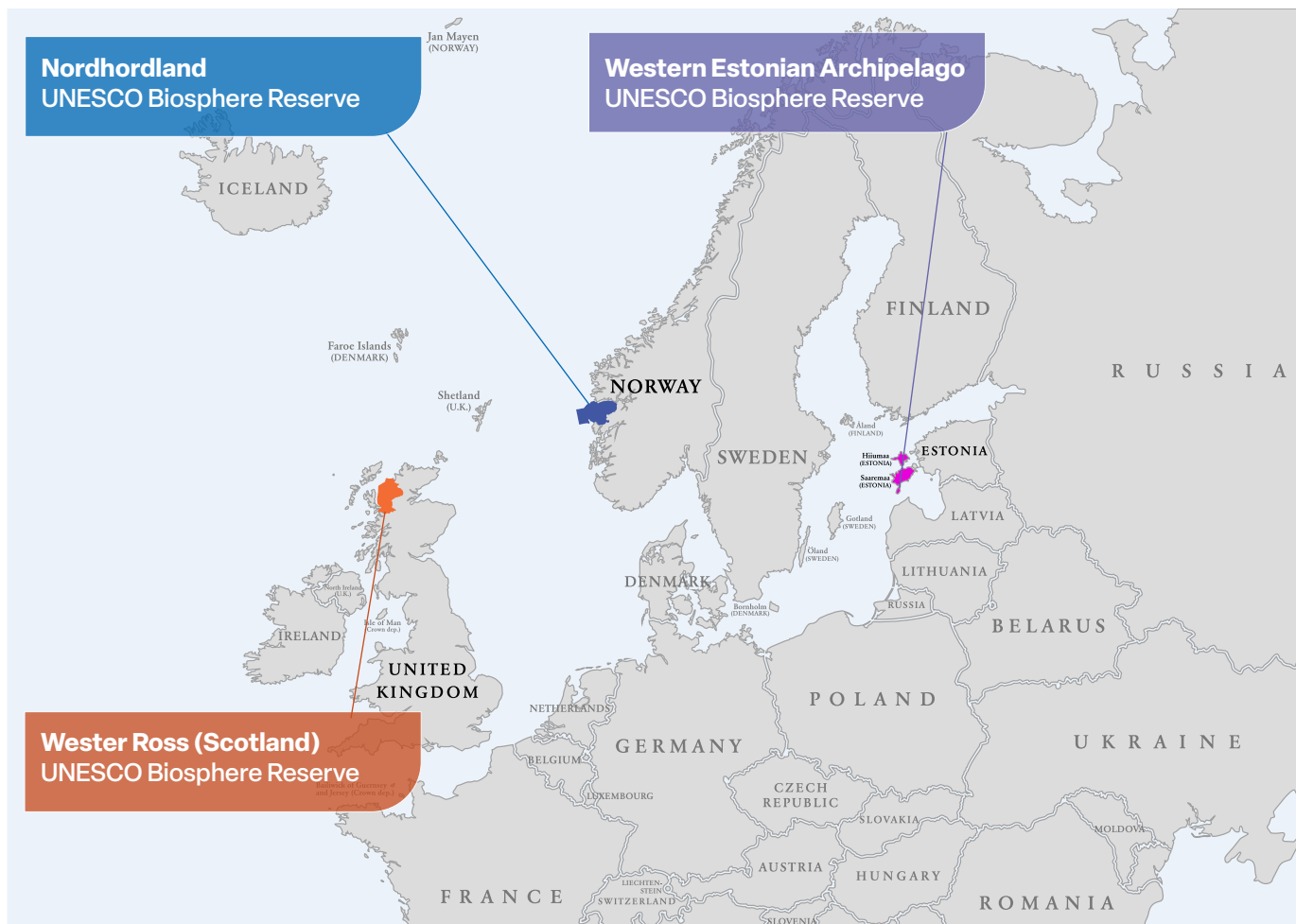
Image: A map showing the location of the three case study sites in Estonia, Norway and Scotland

Western Estonian Archipelago, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (Estonia)

Image: Aerial view of Saare Nina peninsula on Hiiumaa, Estonia. Credit: marketanovakova

Designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1990 while still under Soviet occupation, the **West Estonian Archipelago UNESCO Biosphere Reserve** encompasses five major islands, Hiiumaa, Saaremaa, Muhu, Vormsi, and Ruhnu, alongside over 200 smaller islets. The Islands are recognised for their unique blend of well-preserved cultural landscapes, traditional land-use methods, and biodiversity-rich coastal and forest ecosystems (Biosphere Reserve 2023). The biosphere covers an area of 3,933km2, with a population of around 46,000.

This study concentrates specifically on Hiiumaa, Estonia's second-largest island, where 70% of the land is forested, with small communities scattered throughout. The island's relative remoteness has helped protect its cultural and ecological heritage, but it has also seen significant cultural influences and occupations (Sweden, Germany) from across the Baltic. Cultural identity on the island is characterised by living traditions such as singing, dancing, and folk crafts, activities that played a central role in Estonia's peaceful resistance movement and continue to support social cohesion today.

More information is available at: **https://www.mabestonia.ee/west-estonian-archipelago**

Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (Scotland)

Image: View looking out from Ullapool towards the north. Credit: Matthew Rabagliati

Wester Ross, located in the remote and rugged North West Highlands of Scotland and centred around the small fishing town of Ullapool, was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2016.

Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is recognised for its dramatic coastal and mountain landscapes. It is also a deeply cultural landscape shaped by centuries of complex land management, including the Highland Clearances and crofting traditions. These events have left a deep imprint on the land and its people, and can continue to be seen through the Gaelic language, crofting practices, storytelling, music, and a strong sense of place.

The Biosphere covers an area of around 5,200 km2 and has a total population of around 8,000 people.

More information is available at: **https://www.wrb.scot**

Nordhordland UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (Norway)

Image: View over the harbour of Hosanger, Norway. Credit: Grietje

Designated in 2019 as Norway's first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, **Nordhordland UNESCO Biosphere Reserve** spans 6,698 km² of dramatic coastal, fjord, and mountain landscapes just north of Bergen. Long shaped by traditional fishing, farming, and subsistence livelihoods, the region has undergone rapid transformation over the past fifty years due to oil exploration, aquaculture, hydropower, and expanding urban infrastructure.

Once only navigable by boat, this deeply cultural fjord landscape is now interconnected with tunnels, roads, and bridges linking it to Bergen's expanding commuter belt. While much of Norway's modern success is attributed to its oil refineries and aquaculture, this progress has also led to the erosion of traditional knowledge, dialects, and practices. Creating the Biosphere Reserve demonstrates a deliberate effort to address these tensions, uniting communities to promote sustainable development rooted in local identity, culture, and history. As such, Nordhordland exemplifies how contemporary industrial and environmental issues intersect with deep cultural memory and the need for inclusive, place-based futures.

For more information see: **https://nordhordlandbiosphere.no/**

Framework: The role of culture in addressing 21st century challenges (see following pages for details)

	Role of Culture	Role of the Cultural Sector	Role of Cultural Leaders
Theme 1 Culture and Identity	**Culture as the Foundation of Place and Identity** • Culture is the root of identity and belonging • Culture is the lens through which people see and interpret the world • Culture is a way of meaningfully connecting communities and place • Cultural creates shared stories or narratives that explain, justify or contest change	**Custodian of Collective Memory and Identity** • Archives, museums, and cultural institutions preserve and reinterpret the narratives that define community identity. • Serve as anchor points during societal transition and disruption.	**Foundational Role of Cultural Leaders** • Culturally rooted and place-based leadership • Collaboration and facilitation across diverse groups • Skills and capacities for new contexts • Cultural leadership as narrative and meaning-making • Inclusion, representation, and challenging exclusion • Balancing tradition and innovation • Strategic and systemic change-making • Values-based and relational leadership
Theme 2: Culture and Sustainablity	**Culture as Driver of Sustainable and Just Transitions** • Culure as a gateway to sustainability • Cultural practices for sustainable futures • Cultural narratives and the politics of change	**The Sector as catalyst for Sustainable and Just Transitions** • Embed circular economy values (repair, reuse) through traditional knowledge and crafts • Connect sustainability to local emotional and cultural sites/places, helping to make abstract policies tangible • Can act as a mediator between old traditions and new innovation.	**Sustainability and Transition Leadership** • Embed cultural traditions in climate resilience, circular economy, and landscape adaptation • Bridge scientific and traditional knowledge systems • Advocate for culture as infrastructure, not an accessory to development
Challenges	• Loss and fragmentation of local identity • Intergenerational disconnect • Ritualisation and tourism pressures • Technological dislocation • Culture as boundary-making • Cultural institutions and static narratives	• Fragile funding and limited resources • Decline of communal spaces • Inadequate infrastructure and staffing • Disconnect between cultural offers and community relevance • Fragmented Governance • Fragmentation of sector/silos • Cultural Instrumentalisation • Marginalisation in wider policy contexts • Preservation vs adaptation (or static vs change) • Museumification and exclusion of local communities • Loss of cultural participation	• Balancing tradition and innovation • Engaging diverse and changing communities • Navigate power and representation • Working across sectors and silos • Sustaining visibility and influence with policymakers • Adapting to emerging sustainability agendas • Limited support for relational and values-based leadership • Skills gaps in strategic change-making • Burnout

Table X presents the findngs from the thematic analysis. They are ordered by the three overaching sectors/areas (culture, culture sector, and culture leadership) and by the core emerging themes. The data shows that culture, the sector, and cultural leadership are deeply entangled. These also correspond to the three research questions, which examine them all in relation to 21st-century challenges.

Theme 1: Culture and Identity: the Role of Culture

Culture as the Foundation of Place and Identity

- Culture is the root of identity and belonging
- Culture is the lens through which people see and interpret the world
- Culture is a way of meaningfully connecting communities and place
- Cultural creates shared stories or narratives that explain, justify or contest change

One of the principal findings of the thematic analysis is that 'culture' emerged across the three sites not as a bounded 'sector,' but as a layered network of meanings and symbols through which communities understand their identity, interpret their past and imagine their future. These 'cultural narratives' anchor communities through shared reference points, provide emotional grounding in and between communities, and are a lens through which people interpret place, nature, relationships, and the wider world.

Rather than imposing a predetermined definition, participants were invited to reflect on what culture meant to them personally, its role in addressing 21st-century challenges, and how it manifested locally. The result was not a static or siloed view of culture but a lived, felt, and relational one. Participants repeatedly described culture as foundational to their sense of identity and belonging, often referring to it as the "root", the "everything", or the essential grounding of community life. These insights were not expressed in abstract terms. Instead, culture was often described through interwoven everyday experiences, emotional ties, and embodied practices – usually spanning generations and deeply entwined with landscape, tradition, and values. For example, one participant from Hiiumaa articulated this profoundly personal understanding when responding to the prompt "how do you define culture?":

> "For me, culture is almost everything. It connects with our mindset and our style of living. It is everything - it is dancing and singing and such kind of things. It is connected with a forest; it is also connected to the sea. It is connected with fields and stones. And of course, it is connected with architecture. It is connected with our food. So, in that meaning, it is everything." **(Participant 4)**

Similarly, in Scotland, another participant emphasised the emotional and embodied connection of culture:

> "Culture is like everything. It's within the landscape, it's within the language, it's within people from the past. And I think it lives within generations. It's more of a feeling, in a way, like I feel quite emotional when I talk about culture. I think because it means a lot to me, and it's in people's music and traditions. And I suppose that can even be just families as well. And it includes a lot of things like cèilidhs, and traditional music in Scotland, and Highland dancing, and Gaelic language, but other languages – ways of speaking and how people use the land – so that would include crofting to me as well." **(Participant 19)**

The table below synthesises participants' descriptions of how culture was expressed, experienced, and made meaningful across each site. Rather than presenting a singular definition, these descriptions emerged as overlapping layers, often intersecting and varying in emphasis across places, individuals, and communities. Ordering the examples this way demonstrates how culture holistically materialises across practice, built and intangible heritage, landscape, memory, society, and perception:

Table 2: Synthesis of how participants defined culture

Layer(s)	Participant examples	Function
Embodied practices	Dance, music, crafts, festivals, food	Express values, belonging and are entry points for inclusion or differentiation
Spatial and environmental (natural/ cultural)	Forests, sea, buildings, farming, monuments, houses, villages, architecture.	Memory embedded in the landscape, physical continuity with the past
Social and symbolic	Intergenerational stories, humour, language, ways of living	Construction of shared identities
Temporal	Historic moments (the Clearances, the Oil Boom, Soviet occupation)	Selected anchors for continuity/disruption – a lens for understanding change
Epistemic/ Relational	Ways of seeing, boundaries of us vs them.	Frameworks through which people perceive and relate to each other.

These symbols and practices, organised into five layers, form the core of 'cultural narratives' - the evolving and often contested stories through which individuals and communities see themselves and their identities (Bryce 2021). They also challenge the idea of separate silos between culture, nature, and heritage, illustrating how they intersect in people's lived experiences at a local level. Importantly, these narratives are neither uniform nor universally accepted. Instead, they can promote unity or division within and among communities, shape a sense of belonging, or highlight differences. Furthermore, these narratives operate on different levels or scales. These narratives are influenced and linked to local and national identities and are also shaped (and often perceived as interrupted) by global mainstream culture. Further analysis is provided in the findings section below.

The analysis identified several challenges that complicate these narratives, adding important nuance to their role in supporting community identity and resilience. Furthermore, they were regarded as the "21st century challenges" to which the culture sector was and should respond. As summarised in the table below, these challenges are classified as either internal or external to culture. Many are driven by broader forces or cultural influences, such as globalisation and consumer capitalism, along with the complexities of managing and understanding change. Since these challenges appeared consistently across the interviews, they are revisited throughout the analysis to deepen understanding and provide country-specific context. Overall, the findings highlight the complex and sometimes conflicting ways in which culture and identity are navigated, especially in regions with histories of trauma, migration, and ongoing change.

Table: Synthesis of the key challenges to culture's foundational role

Challenge	Description	Internal/External to Culture
Loss and Fragmentation of Local Identity	Disconnection from traditional practices, dialects, and place-specific culture.	External
Intergenerational Disconnect	Cultural forms perceived as for older generations; fading transmission of knowledge.	External
Ritualisation and Tourism Pressures	Traditional practices commodified for visitors, losing depth, and meaning for locals.	External

Challenge	Description	Internal/External to Culture
Technological Dislocation	Screen-based culture and digital life undermining hands-on, place-based practices and understanding.	External
Culture as Boundary-Making	Culture as Boundary-Making "Us vs. them" narratives; challenges around integration and cultural legitimacy for outsiders or newer communities. Often rooted in efforts to safeguard fragile cultural continuity or resist perceived erasure.	Internal
Cultural Institutions and Static Narratives	Museums and cultural spaces struggling to represent contemporary, diverse, or plural narratives.	Internal

Culture is the root of identity and belonging

Across all three case study sites, participants consistently described culture as foundational to their identity and sense of belonging. While expressions of culture varied widely, as outlined in the table above, there was a consistent sense that culture provides the framework or structure through which individuals locate and ground themselves in the world. As one participant in Estonia expressed it:

> "I mean culture for me as being also an artist, it is like everything you know it is, and it's also everywhere it's like, so, like, it's so intertwined with our being" **(Participant 6)**

This intimate view of culture was similar across the case studies. In Norway, one participant described culture as the connector that links individuals to history, place, and community over time:

> "It's important for us to have roots, some kind of roots, to be a part of something. [...] And I think for people living here to connect to what has happened before, to the story, it's important to feel, it makes a connection to the place you live. And it also makes a connection between people living here." **(Participant 12)**

Importantly, these cultural roots could persist even when people no longer lived in the place itself. On Hiiumaa, a participant reflected on how food culture had preserved a sense of place and continuity across generations even when they no longer lived on the Island:

> "But just as a visitors, we came here, and I thought, it was very usual all that cooking, for example, that my mother made at home. Now, when I'm here, I have realised that it is a kitchen from Hiiumaa. But I just didn't know that before. [...] So actually, even if you do not live here, you can just carry on that cultural place or the things. And of course, I'm now doing the same with my kids. They have the same things or thinking or jokes and so on." **(Participant 6)**

However, while many held this deep culture cultural attachment to a place, numerous participants highlighted various forces eroding this connection. Recurring, yet often shared concerns included the hollowing out of local life due to second homes and demographic shifts, over-tourism and the ritualisation of culture, and increasingly individualised and compartmentalised lives. One participant in Estonia noted how communities' cohesion had declined:

> "So, if comparing life in the village, like, 30 years ago or 20 years ago, life was much more like, you know, active. There were, like, younger people also in the villages. And like, there was, like, this village fetes where it was a lively place. But now a lot of this kind of farmhouses are bought by, like, the summer tourists. So half people in our village, they are not there anymore at all." **(Participant 6)**

This erosion was felt not just physically but socially. In rural areas, cultural practices of mutual exchange and cooperation were described as disappearing under the pressures of consumerism:

> "And, like, my dad is the only one who is this kind of guy that all the people ask say, "Oh, can you fix this?" [...] But back in the days it was like, much more this kind of (people), and people helped each other, like, I bring you some fish and you give me some eggs, you know. But this is also, like, I guess it is also disappearing." **(Participant 6)**

A participant in Scotland observed how moments of unity and community cooperation have been lost due to a combination of factors, including the recent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant expressed that the pandemic was not only a health crisis but also compounded the difficulties faced by communities in the fragile, depopulating rural areas:

> "It feels like it's dwindling, I guess. I think the impact of COVID has meant that people don't gather together as much. So I think that is quite fundamental. I would really like to organise a Cèilidh that we have every summer. There's not that many opportunities for the community to get together, which is not going to Tesco, and it's a little bit depressing [...] So, it's just figuring out how to bring people back together again." **(Participant 19)**

This excerpt illustrates how creating spaces outside of commercial experiences to gather was crucial in fostering a sense of community. Across the sites, numerous participants highlighted a deficiency of such gathering places. Participants noted that this was particularly significant in rural areas, with ongoing rural depopulation and the closure of key services, such as schools, shops, and community facilities. One participant emphasised the importance of having venues or meeting places for the community to come together:

> "Some would argue that the school is closing because the countryside is dying, although others will say that the countryside is dying because the school is closing. For me, I would say the first, because the problem with the countryside is that people are not moving back. [...] And there are absolutely local communities who have lost their school 10 years ago or 50 years ago. Some schools closed in the 70s, and yet they are some of the most vibrant local communities. Because they have been able to create meeting places where people care where they are." **(Participant 8)**

This further illustrates how cultural life is deeply connected to everyday infrastructure. Institutions such as schools, churches, and even informal gathering places function as cultural nodes that encourage interaction and a shared identity. Their decline, whether through closure, depopulation, changing habits (or relevance), the loss of local industry, or traditional hampers the cultural fabric and sustainability of rural communities. One participant linked informal gathering places to the traditional hearth, and a deep human need to have spontaneous conversation which supported the informal transmission of shared stories, values, and practices (Participant

16). Many participants observed that this face to face interaction is now being replaced by digital communities, and individualised online lifestyles. Participants noted that young people in particular are increasingly influenced by globalised culture, often at the expense of local traditions and practices. While this posed a challenge, it also served as a call:

> **"But for young people, it's very easy to see everything as global culture. But it's necessary to educate them about local culture and so on, local music, local dances, all this, Estonian culture. <...> because - the roots. Yeah, don't lose roots"** **(Participant 5)**

However, in Scotland (and other countries), participants noted that even when the emotional desire for rootedness among young people was strong, they were often constrained by economic realities:

> **"I think culture and heritage encourage young people here to be proud of their identity and who they are, and it encourages them to root their identity here. And they're desperate. Young people desperately want to stay here and desperately want to have work here in homes. That's more challenging because we don't have equity when it comes to the housing market." (Participant 18)**

This loss of cultural homogeneity was also felt through tourism and the ritualisation of cultural practices. Across Estonia and Scotland, maintaining a balance between cultural traditions and the influx of both domestic and international tourists remained a constant, and long challenge. Participants highlighted the tension between relying on tourists for the local economy and how, at the same time, tourism could potentially undermine and overwhelm local communities. These issues ranged from traditional dress and local dance or crafts becoming purely performative or designed for selling to tourists (Participant 3), to the large number of festivals and cultural events during summer months unintentionally limiting access for residents. This included factors such as high ticket prices, events being designed for tourists, or locals being too busy hosting tourists in their own homes to attend. As one participant in Estonia explained:

> **"In the summer, it is very in the heritage, you know, like there's so many events happening and there's people coming and visiting, but it's so all I feel like becoming very like kind of tourist attractions or bringing tourist in, but not so much for the local communities. Or like, there needs to be more of a balance of this. I guess." (Participant 6)**

This experience was not consistent across the three sites. In Nordhordland, for instance, participants highlighted the challenge of marketing the region as a tourism destination due to its proximity to Bergen and its reputation as a commuter area, as well as its role as a location for oil and aquaculture. Many recognised that a shift towards tourism was necessary in the coming decades as the area moved away from a reliance on these industries (Participant 14).

Culture is a lens through which people see the world and others

Culture was often described as a collection of practices or traditions and as a lens through which individuals see, interpret, and understand the world. It was also regarded as an internal inheritance, an often-unspoken continuity passed down through generations, shaping how people experience place, self, and others. As one participant in Hiiumaa explained:

> And if I think about Hiiumaa, we are separated as an Island. So in that meaning we have some behaviours and thinking that we have had during the centuries, and it doesn't even matter how much we just write or talk about it, we have them inside of us, and then we take them with us from one day to another." **(Participant 4)**

This idea that geography shapes cultural behaviour was echoed in Wester Ross:

> "Maybe that's because we are more sparsely populated. So we know that we have to rely on our neighbours no matter what. So you would never express anything too strongly or fall out with people too strongly, because tomorrow they might need to dig you out of a snowstorm, or they might need to help you, or so you have to maintain good relations" **(Participant 18)**

Another Hiiumaa participant extended this view by describing culture not just as a shared tradition, but as a boundary-making system that distinguishes between groups:

> "It's a human feature to reflect the world [....] When we speak about the island and life in this local space, then it's the group of people who carry this culture, and to the specific peculiarities of this group of people [...] And when I speak about or think about culture, is the notion of 'us and others'. This means that it is defined even better if you talk about local culture, and it is 'this is ours and

this is theirs'. So this is something that makes a difference between groups of people, and these things which belong to us, this can be defined as our culture". **(Participant 7)**

Across these reflections, culture emerges not only as a shared identity but also as a relational framework, one that defines belonging, marks differences, and guides how communities navigate themselves and others.

Culture can meaningfully connect communities, place, and emotion

Participants emphasised that culture is not just a means of expression but also a tool for integration, connecting people to their place and each other. In this context, cultural expressions such as dance, music, and craft are not merely performative; they are deeply linked with identity and how individuals form emotional bonds with one another and their environment. In Estonia, one participant described how traditional practices serve as both a form of emotional expression and a link between people and the land:

> "But when we are dancing in the village or on these small places, or on farm places, it means that you can do what you feel, how you feel. And it was for me, it was very important for dancers to do something not so straight, yeah. It means that you must feel it, where you are going out, where your roots are, and you must feel it." **(Participant 3)**

The participant also noted that although many of those involved in activities were newcomers to the Island, learning the traditional practice became a way to establish social and emotional roots (Participant 3). In this way, cultural expressions provide an accessible entry point for newcomers to find their place within a community and place. Cultural expressions were also regarded as essential in helping communities manage complex emotions such as joy, adversity, and uncertainty, and often served as a means for collective grounding during uncertain times.

> "If there are very good times, we can dance and sing. But if there are bad times, we can sing as well. We can do some movements as well. It means that it keeps our minds, it keeps our body to be in this moment [...] helping to understand what is going on, what I can do, what I must do, what I feel."**(Participant 3)**

Through its ability to hold complex emotions, this statement demonstrates how cultural expressions have supported, and could continue to support, communities in dealing with dramatic change or disconnection. Similarly, a Norwegian participant highlighted how traditional cultural practices emotionally impact both visitors and locals, helping to ground individuals even when traditions fade away. They explained that introducing people to the Laksegilje (salmon fishing houses) - wooden structures perched above fjords that were once central to community life - offered deep emotional grounding and an alternative to more commercialised tourist activities such as 'kayaking' (Participant 15). Although the practice had largely disappeared by the early 1990s due to various regulatory, demographic, and environmental factors, including the rapid decline of wild salmon populations, it had historically held significant local social value. The participant pointed out that many local children no longer understood the purpose of the houses or their vital role in creating a sense of community and purpose within the settlement, showing that the connection to place and community had been broken. Yet, re-engaging with this heritage proved to be a powerful way to reconnect:

> **"I take them into stuff. They can hear. They use their ears and eyes, and I also see they use their emotions. Because for somebody, it's very emotional coming here because they find something quiet and peaceful, and I think they feel very grounded when they are doing this with me."** **(Participant 15)**

Outside of this connection to place, one Norwegian leader made a similar observation, noting how even relatively recent cultural imports to the region, such as brass bands, could foster a sense of belonging and rootedness, especially among young people (Participant 8). These less traditional cultural activities were also seen as a vital entry point for integrating newcomers (particularly refugees), who might find it difficult to engage with more local and traditional Norwegian cultural activities.

Despite this, many participants observed how cultural practices or traditions can serve to exclude individuals who were not considered 'local'. Across the three sites, several participants noted that traditional cultural practices were used to differentiate or establish hierarchies. One participant on Hiiumaa mentioned that even after residing on the island for 30-35 years, there was always a sense from others in the community that a person could never fully be 'local'.

> **"Yeah, we accept them among us. [...] But it is when you are making a big mistake, which is unacceptable here, and then you are always hearing this, 'oh,**

he or she is not an islander, really" **(Participant 3)**

These narrative points were inciteful, given that many of these practices were reinvigorated following the Soviet occupation of the Island. These narratives were also evident in Scotland, with community attitudes often shaped by who had the right to own land:

> "You've got families that have lived here for generations, yeah, who are incredibly entrenched and often sceptical about incomers - even though they themselves have married incomers. And I don't know how you resolve that, because it's a mindset that says, 'this is my land, and you guys are just visiting'". **(Participant 20)**

These claims were often put forward when a person had little tangible continuity to the area showing a cognitive dissonance (e.g., families that left centuries ago still claim a connection to the land). These sentiments also surfaced online, with some expressing ancestral connection and historic grievances (Participant 20). These reflections show that while cultural practices can be essential for fostering emotional bonds, social inclusion, and a sense of belonging, they also have the potential to exclude others.

Culture as a Framework for Continuity, Disruption and Future Imagination

Culture emerged as a source of identity and belonging, as well as a narrative framework through which communities interpreted change across the past, present, and future. At all three sites, participants referred to shared historical moments, such as the Highland Clearances, the Soviet Occupation, or the discovery of oil, as reference points shaping their understanding of disruption and their vision of continuity. These cultural narratives offered emotional grounding during periods of rapid upheaval, serving as interpretive tools through which communities made sense of change. At the same time, they provided communities and individuals with the means to envision the future, emphasising culture as a living and dynamic entity rather than a static tradition.

As several participants pointed out, culture does not merely mirror the past – it influences how people perceive and understand the future. One participant in Estonia expressed this concisely: 'Because I think that a future not based on cultural heritage – that's not possible to imagine. We are all doing that' (Participant 10).

However, this future-oriented view of culture is also selective. The same participant remarked on how the choice of which cultural heritage was remembered, revitalised or allowed to fade often raised important questions: 'to spread more knowledge about the way our cultural heritage has been formed through the 100 years before us is really important' (Participant 10).

Central to these narratives was an understanding of the landscapes as deeply cultural, shaped by communities over thousands of years. Participants described how settlement patterns, roads, infrastructure, and field systems contributed to shared histories and stories among families and communities across generations. Such landscapes and their features, like the locations of trees, historic buildings, or other elements, carry memories and provide tangible points of continuity linking the past, present, and future. A participant from Wester Ross highlighted how these collective memories continue to anchor local identity:

> **"Trying to engage and keep our community aware of what's happened, because local families, again, they do remember things. They remember these, you know, the Loch Broom families. It is handed down. You hear things and it's important. It really is the soul. I'd say, I feel it, and I'm not from this district, but I think I value it." (Participant 21)**

Historic events, therefore, can serve as crucial markers within these narratives. For example, in Nordhordland, participants described how the fjord system fundamentally shaped local life, restricting large-scale industrial farming practices common in the flatter eastern parts of Norway. Instead, isolated communities developed mixed subsistence economies over generations, centred around farming, annual heather burning, salmon fishing, and trade, particularly with Bergen, a city historically part of the Hanseatic League. This isolation was also evident in the variety of bunad (traditional Norwegian dress) found across the region, with 45 distinct women's dresses alone (about 10% of Norway's total) (Participant 9). This enduring need to adjust to tough, isolating conditions fostered what participants called the 'Western Norwegian Spirit': an entrepreneurial outlook that embraces new opportunities:

> **"In Nordhordland, they are hungry. They are hungry. They grip every chance they have. They are coming some. And there is a culture to do that. Yeah, I think that's what I have experienced, and what I think is typical for the region"' (Participant 12)**

The discovery of oil in the 1970s massively transformed the region, sparking rapid infrastructure growth such as roads and bridges to support the industry and the wealth it brought. At the same time, Bergen's geographical constraints (mountains and fjords) meant these new networks turned Nordhordland into a commuter belt. Another participant explained how locals welcomed these new industries and developments because of this shared cultural narrative:

> "You are diving into the Western Norwegian soul, I would say, when you take up that. Because, here people are very proud of being able to produce and make a living, and exporting and trade. Non-Norwegian cultures are not a new thing here, where people had travelled the world for centuries on merchant ships or so, many will have pride in the oil, because we may have managed to build all those things, right. We managed to do all these things, create riches, and be better off than our predecessors. And so it's part of the same narrative, as the leather makers factories, it's part of what we were able to do, or build that bridge, which is 30 years old, but you'll still find a lot of pride in being able to finance and build that bridge. It's part of the same story." **(Participant 8)**

This excerpt demonstrates how shared narratives about the past influence people's perceptions of the future. Due to recent changes in wealth in Nordhordland, participants also observed that communities no longer clung to the past in the same way because of their association with recent poverty. One participant explained how people had shifted from being "fishing and sheep" farmers to "oil and sheep" farmers:

> "There is a challenge, because this change itself happened so recently, it is the parents' generation who experienced this change, and they have left poverty. [...] They won't go back to that situation, and then it's easy to leave all the culture behind. This is only connected to poverty and to old fashioned homes and to the life we don't want. So we won't take anything with us. We want to face the modern world with good income and modern houses and cars and whatever. So they throw it away. They burn it. One of the challenges is to make people understand and think that, oh, it has some value and we should take care of it." **(Participant 12)**

Similarly, participants on the Estonian island of Hiiumaa highlighted geographic isolation and limited commercial development as key aspects of their shared cultural narratives. One participant explained how this perceived isolation shaped local identity and lifestyle, contrasting

sharply with the fast pace of modern mainstream life:

> "We do not have these high skyscape hotels, or all these big shopping centres, disco bars, or different kinds of entertainment, but I said it, it's empty. If you just come, you have to get used to or enjoy the part that we have. We can offer all these beaches where you can be alone, forests where you can walk around, pick the mushrooms or berries or just be alone. [...] So the world is somehow so crazy, and the people cannot even take the time to be alone somewhere. But for us, it is our heritage and the richness we can offer, and we don't want to change it." **(Participant 4)**

Culture provided a shared narrative and a point of continuity through which change was recognised and understood. In some cases, these shared cultural stories created a sense of disruption after a long period of perceived cultural stability or highlighted moments when major changes took place. For example, one of the main stories shared by participants in the Scottish Highlands was the deep social, political, economic, and environmental legacy of the Battle of Culloden in 1746, which led to the end of the Clan System and the Highland Clearances and still influences land use and Highland identity today. One participant noted that forced relocations to unproductive land and the introduction of large-scale sheep farming from abroad remain visible in the landscape, shaping modern perceptions of place, belonging, and community identity:

> "I think scars, emotional scars, of the clearances, are still very much with the population, whether they draw that line themselves back to that point in time. Some will do more so. But there's a feeling of being like in many areas, ruled from far away, pushed off the land, denied access to certain things. There is also a common theme, "why would we do that?" Nothing will happen. I think this is what drives some of the apathy and engagement." **(Participant 20)**

This was not just an emotional scar, but also appeared to underpin current governance and systems, which were created for different cultural realities that seemed out of touch with the present reality:

> "What works for modern society? Because the current system was set up for a completely different cultural situation, and it doesn't work anymore. Some people are trying to make it work, and they're really stubborn about it, but it doesn't work. People are so like, attached to that system because it was set

up as, I think, a bit of a propaganda tool. We'll give you, a strip of land, and it'll be yours, and you'll have control over it, but you can't make a living off it." **(Participant 17)**

Theme 2: Culture as a Driver of Sustainable and Just Transitions

Culture as a Driver of Sustainability

- Culture as a gateway to sustainability
- Cultural practices for sustainable futures
- Cultural narratives and the politics of change

Introduction

While the first theme explored culture as a foundation of identity, this second theme examines how this shapes – and sometimes limits – how communities engage with sustainability, adaptation, and change. While participants readily described the link between culture and identity, many described the difficulty in articulating a direct link between culture and broader issues such as climate change or sustainable development. Nevertheless, one Norwegian participant noted a possible sectoral shift to recognising cultures growing importance in sustainability contexts:

> "And it makes a connection between people living here. It is a new value for cultural heritage to connect to sustainability and sustainable practices. It has, well, in my mind, it has been coming up for the last five or 10 years that we have a new kind of value, when we previously valued culture as identity and so on. But this is a new setting, a new connection for the cultural heritage, to see it as important for sustainable practices, the analogy of sustainable materials and so on." **(Participant 12)**

This aligns with the Sakfona quote in the introduction, which illustrated how culture is constantly reinterpreted to shape how individuals imagine the future and what they value and believe is worth protecting or changing. It also shows an increasing sectoral and policy shift to

sustainability. This section examines how culture can serve as a gateway, mediator, or catalyst for sustainability. Building on the first theme of culture as the foundation, this has been divided into three sub-themes.

- **Culture as a gateway to sustainability** explores how emotional, place-based, and identity-rooted cultural practices help localise and interpret global challenges.
- **Cultural practices for sustainable futures** emphasises everyday practices of craft, reuse, repair, food, and land stewardship as practical expressions of sustainability.
- **Cultural narratives and the politics of change** examines how inherited stories shape what people perceive as valid or possible during transitions.

Culture as a gateway to sustainability

Culture was considered an essential lens for adapting global challenges and approaches to local contexts, by anchoring them in local values, memories, and practices. For example, one participant in Scotland showed the importance of engaging in discussions about sustainability through a cultural lens as opposed to a technical solution:

> "You're not going to tell the crofter, who has, maybe, who's got a family legacy, and he's trying to replicate something that failed economically in the 19th century. That's all he's been left with. Yeah, and it's not a data question. It's not a "how do we solve this problem?" It's an identity question. And without taking that into account, without creating space for that, and even quite a long lead into that, to go straight to the "you're doing that wrong", it just, it's, you cannot create dialogue with that." **(Participant 16)**

This insight – viewing sustainability as an identity and cultural issue rather than just a technical one – emerged as a key framework for understanding the role of culture. It demonstrates how engagement should begin with emotional connections, observation, memory, and meaning instead of starting with policy frameworks, data models, or technical solutions. As the quote illustrates, it also invites subtle reframing of sustainability questions from "how can I help" to "what is important". One participant reflected on this using the example of farming and the importance of local knowledge:

"I think when you're farming, for example, I mean, you might look at a field and you could just go in it all quickly and see what you were told to do in the book, sort of thing, like plough it up and fertilise and all this kind of stuff. But if you took a bit of time and watched that field through the year, you get to know the characteristics of that land or culture. Without sounding too parochial, I think it is probably about local knowledge or just sitting, standing back, and observing and watching others. [...] It's also being and spending time with local people." **(Participant 18)**

In this excerpt, sustainable knowledge about places and how to care for them builds through intergenerational instruction, lived experiences, stories, and a deep connection to the land and its people. It further demonstrates how cultural engagement often comes before technical or behavioural change and should be the foundation for discussions about the future of places. In this sense, one participant emphasised that culture in these discussions is not an optional addition but ultimately unavoidable:

"Well, I think you can't escape culture. It's always there. So if you're trying to ignore its presence, you're going to set yourself up for failure. And it's like using a climbing rope, right? So if you don't put the knot in the climbing rope where you want it, it will always be where you don't want it. But if you like, plan it and go right, "I'm going to put it there", then it won't get in the way. So, yeah, I think you have to recognise that culture has a role. And if you just ignore it, it will, it will rear its head in the wrong place and cause problems." **(Participant 17)**

Despite the power of this analogy, several participants noted that the culture sector were often absent from major sustainability initiatives. For example, participants in Wester Ross noted that current regional sustainability initiatives do not sufficiently address the deep cultural stories of displacement running throughout the region. These stories often block progress on issues like infrastructure and housing, even when land is available. In one coastal Highland community, for example, recent land reform laws and new funding options allowed residents to buy land for local projects. But owning land did not automatically bring new ideas or actions. Long-established cultural structures related to land, identity, and historical hierarchies still influenced what was seen as legitimate or possible.

Despite this, participants also emphasised the importance of culture as a foundation for creating appealing and sustainable places for communities to live, as well as strong communities that care for one another and their environment (particularly in rural areas). Ultimately, culture was considered vital for ensuring the existence of resilient communities that can maintain and look after these places:

> "What I want to see in 10 years' time would be lights on in the houses year-round, and children in the schools. Because I suppose maybe the biggest threat is losing culture, as in losing people here, and that, yeah, we just the culture will be gone if it just turns into a, you know, a six months of the year theme park." **(Participant 20)**

Of course, as this quote illustrates, the broader challenges around tourism, demographic shifts, and digital life remain significant. One participant in Norway argued against an idealised vision of rural life, noting how places and individuals had already changed dramatically:

> "Norwegians will say, 'Well, we live far apart from each other, and nobody smiles', but the people used to live in closely knitted communities, in villages… If you go back 100 years, there are deeper structures here, but the community that we have today are not the same as our great grandparents. They lived in a very different framework locally than we do." **(Participant 8)**

This sub-theme shows that culture can act as a gateway to sustainability by providing a grounded, emotionally meaningful foundation. It also illustrates that without culture, sustainability risks becoming abstract, external, and disconnected from people's real lives.

Cultural practices for sustainability

One of the more direct ways participants connected culture to 21st century challenges was through the transmission and revitalisation of traditional cultural practices. Participants observed how these practices often mirror local environmental conditions and are therefore sustainable, are driven by necessity (the ecological and social circumstances of local areas), and evolve across generations. These practices included sustainable building techniques, repurposing old structures, reusing and repairing textiles, and low-impact land management such as small-scale fishing, grazing, or controlled burning. Rather than viewing these practices as nostalgic, many

participants saw them as tangible and practical routes into broader sustainability discussions. For instance, one Norwegian participant described how a museum incorporates ancient textile techniques into modern educational activities, using the region's unique warp-weighted loom as a tool to teach sustainability across all age groups:

> "We have education programmes from kindergarten to university level in textile. And, it started with warp-weighted loom, and it has become more and more about materials, about sustainability, textile heritage as a textile, traditional knowledge as a need in sustainability practice, so we can connect this 1000-year-old knowledge to our future needs." **(Participant 12)**

Cultural activities, but also wider sporting activities, were also crucial for localising and showing people and communities how landscapes were changing:

> "When people are in their kayak on the fjord, they see the change. When they don't get fish anymore, when they pick up half dead salmon from the fjords, when they see how landscapes are changing. That I think, or the impact of more rain, for instance, which we do feel and more extreme weather, more there is something to work with there." **(Participant 8)**

Traditional practices also fostered emotional connections between people and their environment. Several participants noted that local crafts, historic landscapes, and communal rituals served as compelling entry points for engaging individuals in sustainability discussions. These practices embody collective memory and a sense of belonging, forming a foundation for grounding sustainability conversations:

> "Like the crafts, like the wool traditions that we have here, and others like the cultural landscape, also. If you use those as an introduction to what you want to talk about, then you can start the dialogue by saying, 'Okay, we have all this, how, what?' How should we develop? How should we…[…]? What could we do to ensure we are passing this on?" **(Participant 10)**

Participants also stressed that these traditions were not static but had long been responsive to changing climate and environmental conditions. One participant reflected on how a change in sailing culture due a changing climate could show communities how to adapt:

"I'm sailing, and we have a sailing club, and over the last 20 years, everybody would tell you that the weather is not so good for sailing anymore, which means that we must take some new decisions in our sailing culture. I don't know what - smaller sail, bigger boat. I don't know. But it will somehow change. So, I think cultural things will be the same as the sailing example. There is more flooding in the small rivers. The fields will change. The crops will change. It will be gradual change, but something will happen." **(Participant 7)**

However, the same participant also cautioned against romanticising the past. Traditional practices were not always based on an environmental ethic or a deep sense of stewardship, but sometimes existed because of necessity or technological limits. As one participant noted:

"And when you do something and you do not know how to do it, then people say, use the "farmers wisdom", which means something that comes from the old generations. And people used to say that our farmers wisdom is how to keep nature as it is. Imagine that the farmers 300 years ago, all the landlords here had a chainsaw. Do you think our forest would be the same? No, they would cut down all the forest. Which means that this wisdom was not because they were clever, but because they didn't have the means to destroy it. And that's how it is today here. We have this nature not because we are clever, but we don't, just don't have the use value for it." **(Participant 7)**

According to this participant, traditional practices were not always based on the idea of individuals consciously 'living in harmony' with nature. Instead, our deep seated human nature is to exploit and extract from nature using the tools at our disposal. Furthermore, not all traditional practices are free from a potential adverse ecological impact. Sheep grazing and heathland burning, common in Wester Ross and Nordhordland, have arguably been linked to biodiversity loss and an increase in carbon emissions. Nevertheless, several participants noted that these practices have persisted for generations with minimal effect on biodiversity, and that rapid losses are more indicative of recent techniques and global greenhouse gas emissions, which cause wider biodiversity loss (Participant 13). Moreover, these practices also reflected a deep cultural connection to the landscapes, and practices such as limited annual burning, had helped maintain local species. One participant noted that by no longer continuing these practices, whether through legal restrictions or the loss of local farms and populations,

these actions have increased fire risks and hazards due to overgrowth (Participant 13).

Cultural practices, ranging from traditional land use to crafts, building techniques, and resource management, can therefore serve as a powerful gateway to sustainability. Many participants highlighted that revitalising and adapting these traditions, often honed over generations to respond to local conditions, can inspire and instruct innovative approaches to modern challenges.

Cultural narratives and the politics of change

Building on the previous theme, one key emerging finding was that competing cultural narratives actively influence how communities envisage and participate in discussions about a place's future sustainability. Participants emphasised that culture plays a defining role in transitions, not as a passive legacy but as a living framework that shapes both the direction and value of change. As one participant observed:

> **"I think that the way we are living now is really based on our cultural heritage. But it's because, you know, it's the way we are as a person […] But it's whether it's the right cultural heritage we want them to use is something else, isn't it?" (Participant 10)**

Several participants noted that inherited cultural narratives can anchor communities to outdated versions of the past that no longer reflect current realities. These stories, while meaningful, may obscure the social and ecological changes that have since transformed a region. For example, in one coastal Highland town, participants reflected on the enduring identity of Ullapool as a "fishing village" - even though the fishing industry that once supported it has almost vanished:

> **"Well, I suppose you could say here, Ullapool is a fishing village. But it's not a fishing village anymore, but that's how we define ourselves. […] In the past, you know, maybe three-quarters of the class, their parents or their father, probably would have been connected with the fishing industry. And now its probably one in a class who might have a parent connected to the fishing industry. […] And you know, the pier is like the life heart of the place, and it's still the pier that contributes money to the culture and the heritage of the place through cruise**

ships, which are contested, I think, while cruise ships are one of their main bearthers. And then there's also the fish farms, again, which are contested." **(Participant 18)**

The legacy of fishing continues to shape collective memory and place identity, even as the economic factors supporting the harbour have changed significantly. Today, aquaculture and tourism dominate the harbour economy. Additionally, substantial investment in the harbour infrastructure (a £10 million regeneration) has allowed the town to become a key destination for cruise ships and marine-based tourism (Highlands and Islands Enterprise 2022). Participants described how the town's cultural identity still relies on this image of a fishing past, despite the rise of new industries. These tensions are not only economic but also historical: Ullapool was established in the 18th century by the British Fisheries Society and was part of a broader colonial infrastructure linked to the transatlantic slave trade. Later, in the 1970s and 80s, it became a hub for a fishing boom that depleted local stocks (Russell 2022). Although some fishing activity continues, participants observed that stocks are only beginning to recover. This example illustrates the layered and sometimes conflicting narratives that underpin local identity and are embodied in a physical place.

A similar dynamic was observed in Nordhordland, where a participant reflected on the aforementioned intergenerational perceptions of heathland heritage and land use:

"I asked my grandmother, because she lived close by, 'what did you think about the heathlands - should it be preserved in this way and should it have a centre'. And you know, for her, it was just poverty connected to the heathlands. Because they had sheep their the whole year around, because they couldn't do anything else […] So she didn't understand the meaning of the Heathland Centre at all. Why on earth should anybody bother, we should leave that all behind. So it's really interesting and that was the case then, but now I think it's very much the opposite, that 'Oh this is an important part of our history and culture'. So it's really valued as it is." **(Participant 10)**

Both examples illustrate how environmental realities and cultural perceptions can become reversed entirely over time. What was once recently poverty is now becoming heritage, and what was once abundance now turns into a nostalgic memory. Such narratives also influenced attitudes towards the green energy transition. Across the three pilots, participants expressed

concern that hydroelectric schemes and wind turbines, essential to national sustainability objectives, posed direct threats to the region's natural beauty and cultural landscapes. Participants also reflected on the contradictions between how people describe their cultural identity and their everyday behaviours. While environmental stewardship is part of many national or local narratives, these ideals do not always translate into action. As one Norwegian participant noted:

> "We did a little calculation, we found that 40-50% of people live (in an area) so they can walk safely on a sidewalk or a path or whatever it is to their local activities, but they don't. So there's something deeply rooted - there's a car culture. It's deeply rooted in something that's; I find it hard to grasp." **(Participant 8)**

This reveals that sustainability efforts involve not only policies, but also shared and individual cultural norms, values, and self-perception. Finally, some participants situated their places within their longer-term narratives, directly contrasting with dominant cultural narratives of crisis. One participant in Estonia reflected on the long timescales of environmental change on the island of Hiiumaa and questioned whether dominant contemporary narratives of catastrophe were always appropriate:

> "So, if now things turn back, and there will be sea here in 2000 years, these people will adapt. They will just move away from here for the higher places. So I don't see it as a big catastrophe. Catastrophe means that nature is interfering with your way of living. If there are no people, there are no catastrophes. If you are angry that their rivers are flooding your houses, then the question should be, "why did you build your houses where the river wants to come?" So I think that it's bad for people, but it's, it's adaptable, it's adaptation." **(Participant 7)**

The role of the culture sector and cultural leadership

This section examines how the cultural sector and cultural leadership contribute to tackling the challenges of the 21st century. This builds on the results of the thematic analysis detailed in the previous section. Although the analysis of the cultural sector and cultural leadership was conducted separately, findings closely aligned thematically. This section is organised accordingly. Each theme first discusses the cultural sector's role in delivering its functions, including museums, libraries, archives, heritage centres, and other institutions. It then assesses how cultural leadership supports and enhances this role through individual agency and the essential attributes and skills required.

As in the first section, the thematic analysis identified interconnected yet distinct challenges that hindered the cultural sector and cultural leadership from fully fulfilling their roles. These challenges included persistent issues related to fragile and limited resources, fragmented governance, and decreasing communal spaces. As mentioned earlier, these are incorporated throughout the analysis and summarised in the table below.

Culture and Identity: the Role of the Culture Sector

Custodian of Collective Memory and Identity
- Archives, museums, and cultural institutions preserve and reinterpret the narratives that define community identity.
- They also serve as anchor points during societal transition and disruption.

Custodian of Collective Memory and Identity

Participants described the cultural sector as essential in safeguarding, interpreting, and passing on communities' collective memory and identity. This role was seen as going beyond preserving artefacts or heritage sites, it also involved the continued work of nurturing and revitalising the cultural links between people, places, and shared experiences. Whether through exhibitions, oral history projects, cultural practices, community events, or the documentation of endangered

practices, participants discussed how the sector aims to anchor local identities within their local cultural contexts.

Participants noted that museums, archives, churches, libraries, and local heritage centres serve as anchors during periods of disruption, offering continuity, a sense of belonging, and meaning. As one Estonian participant reflected:

> "For me, it's ideal that people know and value culture. I accept that they don't need and want everything. And sometimes it's not possible to continue - for example, if seals are under protection, we can't hunt seals. It's impossible, so we forget this part. Now I am writing a book about national costumes to put this knowledge all together, and I know that fewer people know how to wear them. But have many younger generations who know it quite well. So, you have people to ask, and if you want to use this knowledge, you can get it. But our people, they have to know it, to value it. And of course, it's not everyday life, but they have. They can be proud to show it that it's a part of our culture." **(Participant 2)**

This quote highlights the crucial role of cultural institutions in preserving, promoting, and sharing local cultural traditions, fostering a sense of pride and identity while ensuring their ongoing relevance and accessibility. It also demonstrates how cultural memory is always changing. The cultural sector plays a key role in shaping and evolving cultural knowledge across generations through stories, traditions, languages, and rituals, ensuring that this heritage remains accessible and relevant to communities today. Many participants explained how preserving cultural practices is also a race against time. With an ageing population, old traditions are being swiftly lost, and younger generations are no longer continuing them. This was especially evident in Nordhordland, given the rapid changes in the area since the 1980s:

> "Our purpose (as an organisation) is to collect and make our traditions alive by educating people and delivering this to the newer generation. [...] It's a race against time. We might need to do the work and get it on paper, because they [older people] have been teaching this by showing the next generation" **(Participant 9)**

The culture sector is crucial for preserving the past as it diminishes from an area. Its role in this context is to safeguard and sustain it, ensuring cultural continuity for future generations through

education. However, as the table below outlines, the sector faces significant barriers to fulfilling this role: an overreliance on short-term project funding, fragmented governance, and siloed working often hinder a coordinated, strategic approach to place-based cultural development.

Table: Synthesis of participants' understanding of challenges facing the cultural sector

Challenge	Description	Theme
Fragile funding and limited resources	Over-reliance on short-term project funding and grants. Cultural organisations often face unstable and insufficient long-term financial support.	Funding and resources
Decline of communal space/inadequate infrastructure and staffing	Many local facilities are outdated for modern needs, and staffing levels are often insufficient to meet community needs	Access and infrastructure
Disconnect between cultural offers and community relevance	Cultural programmes/offers often fail to reflect the realities of local populations or are no longer relevant	Cultural relevance and access
Fragmented Governance	Small, overstretched institutions (both financially and human-resource) lack capacity and coordination for broader impact. Over-reliance on volunteers and absence of long-term strategy	Governance and capacity
Fragmentation of sector/silos	Segmentation and lack of integration across cultural sectors (e.g., tourism, environment, education).	Governance and capacity
Cultural Instrumentalisation	Culture is only valued for economic or education outcomes	Strategic positioning
Marginialisation in wider policy contexts	Culture is often not included in transitions/sustainability or environmental agendas. Instead it often struggles to shift identity from preserving the past to addressing current and future societal challenges.	Strategic postioning

Challenge	Description	Theme
Preservation vs adaptation (or static vs change)	Treating culture as static rather than evolving and lived.	Strategic postioning and identity
Adaptation and Change	Transversal across challenges – but pace of change is too fast for culture too keep up	Cultural relevance
Museumification and exclusion of local communities	Culture and heritage sites/activities are turned into tourist attractions with little community access	Cultural relevance and access
Loss of cultural participation	A generational and societal decline in everyday engagement with local cultural practices – often due to urbanisation, time poverty, and weakening communal traditions/more individualised lives.	Cultural relevance
Digitisation and dominance of screen culture	Digital media and consumer culture increasingly displace hands-on, place based cultural engagement, or connection with nature – particularly for younger people	Societal and technological shifts

Despite this, participants across the three countries highlighted how the cultural sector is also beginning to respond to these challenges. For example, one participant discussed efforts to consolidate the various cultural and natural assets of Nordhordland into a cohesive and sustainable tourism proposition that highlights the uniqueness of the fjords, an area rich in both cultural heritage and environmental significance:

"People have been living in the hillside farms for thousands of years, and you can't see that in New Zealand, or in Greenland in the same way that you can experience here. […] You can put 200/250 people on a modern boat, which is a site in itself, way better than a boring bus, and much faster too. And then you can bring people and their money out to these small places, and then you can create business, and then you can create experiences." **(Participant 14)**

This excerpt shows how cultural leaders are redefining heritage as a vital part of preservation and a driver for sustainable tourism, local economic development, and community identity. It also emphasises an increasing awareness of how the landscape shapes why culture exists where it does. Many participants noted that modern road networks do not align with the region's historical travel routes, which, until recently, relied on fjords and waterways as primary connections. In this context, using boats to access cultural sites was practical and closely linked to the area's cultural and natural history.

In Estonia, one participant noted how the establishment of themed years through a consortium of tourism and culture/heritage organisations and businesses had helped to coordinate and foster a shared sense of place across the island:

> **"Now the tourist cluster has been organised, we can be the leader of the different theme years for Hiiumaa. We had a year of literature, a year of music. At the moment we have year of art. And everything is connected with the culture, and we try to get all different kind of schools, museums, all these cluster members and everybody just thinking how they can, what they can do during that year, under that roof. Then we also have a reason to talk about Hiiumaa all year around, if it just puts these different things together under that cultural roof."** **(Participant 4)**

Participants illustrated the cultural sector's importance in the face of shifting demographics, globalisation, and technological advancements by emphasising its role in creating accessible, inclusive, and culturally significant spaces. Libraries, local heritage centres, museums, and community halls were often highlighted as essential venues for community gatherings. These spaces facilitated the practice of traditional crafts and activities like dance, cultural dialogues, and interpersonal connections. As previously discussed, they were crucial for nurturing identity, education, belonging, and resilience.

In this sense, a common theme emerged that emphasised the need for the cultural sector to proactively create and maintain gathering spaces. This was noted as particularly important in rural areas considering the decline in traditional industries, subsistence livelihoods, and land-based lifestyles that once fostered community cohesion. Participants stressed that it was not just about reviving old traditions, but also about creating new cultural opportunities that enabled meaningful community bonds beyond digital interactions. Shared experiences, such as

a Cèilidh or communal art-making, were seen as important moments for reconnecting fractured communities. One participant highlighted the gradual loss of such spaces over time and the importance of reinvesting in their accessibility and significance:

> "There's a tension between the old that want to focus on how it used to be, and the new ones that cannot create these new places where people can meet. But I think that is coming together - that we see the importance of establishing more places to meet, […] So where to meet? Parents - that's fine. When you have kids, you meet other parents at football or brass band, but it's really lacking those places to meet. And I think that is what we must do. We must create more places." **(Participant 8)**

Importantly, cultural spaces were not just valued as heritage sites or institutions, but as everyday places where people could feel welcome regardless of background or skill level. As one participant expressed:

> "I really want people to feel welcome. They should think that's for us too. You can come with your jeans and T-shirts, you can come to cafeteria, you can come to paint, even if you haven't painted since school, you can come and join in. You're welcome." **(Participant 1)**

Together, these reflections underscore the cultural sector's potential to act as both a physical and symbolic anchor, building resilience through preserving traditions, reinterpreting them and making them places where community can take root.

Two examples from the research stand out in this regard. Together, these examples illustrate how cultural spaces, even those once confined by very narrow historical narratives, can become powerful tools for fostering community, reflecting the complex histories and stories of places, and enabling dialogue across generations and identities. As mentioned earlier, community spaces that connect people to place persist long after schools, shops, and other services have vanished. Their reinterpretation in response to changing and expanding circumstances is not just a curatorial task, but a matter of cultural leadership. Cultural leaders must support communities to understand who they are and how they can coexist now and in the future.

Case Study

Clachan Church – Wester Ross

Clachan Church is situated on the shore of Loch Broom in Wester Ross, Scotland. For over 800 years, this building has stood at the crossroads of many layered histories reflecting diverse cultural narratives - religious, cultural, and migratory. As one participant noted, it has borne witness to Jacobite and English conflicts, sits among visible evidence of the Highland Clearances, and was the site of the final departure of emigrants aboard the Hector in 1773, bound for North America (Participant 21). Today, it remains a point of connection for diaspora communities from Nova Scotia, New Zealand, and Australia seeking to reconnect with Scottish traditions, often through the multiple emigration records, militia rolls, and archives held within the church.

The church is also trying to build a new narrative as a community space. Facing deliberate dereliction by the Church of Scotland, it was saved through local community action and repurposed as a shared community space. One participant describes how it now hosts concerts, art exhibitions, and events (and the occasional religious ceremony). They spoke of the importance of preserving not just the building, but also reimagining it as a community centre, despite the complex and often painful narrative it bears witness to.

The church's ongoing transformation into a welcoming space is now tied to the next generation. Plans are underway to work with local schools, helping children understand the significance of the site historically, but also as a space that belongs to them:

> **"To know that it is their background, yeah, this is what's happened here. And to feel: I'm entitled to be here, you know, I'm entitled to come and do it and have an interest or your enjoyable time." (Participant 21)**

Case Study

Western Norway Emigration Centre

Deep in the fjords of Sletta in Nordhordland lies the **Vestnorsk Utvandringssenter (Western Norway Emigration Centre).** This open-air museum showcases buildings originally constructed by Norwegian-Americans in the United States, which were later relocated to Norway. It features an immigrant church still in use, community spaces, and a café. Visitors come to learn about the stories of 19th-century Norwegian migrants who settled in America. However, as demographic changes and local community needs have evolved, so too has the Centre's purpose. Since being acquired by the Museum Centre in Hordaland (MUHO) in 2010, the site has been carefully maintained to serve as a local gathering place and an inclusive cultural centre.

Credit: Matt Rabagliati

With many local shops, schools and gathering places having closed, a café has become a vital space for connection and belonging:

> "The Thursday cafe, it's just for making a meeting place for the local community and the local people here [...] We know that the people who are coming here appreciate it and say it almost every time. It's so important for us that we have this place to come and to meet." **(Participant 11)**

The Centre also promotes wider inclusion – collaborating with day centres for people with dementia, selling locally produced goods from workshops, and actively welcoming individuals beyond religious or tourist groups. As the participant observed, the aim is to create a space that embraces all community members, reflecting current social realities. Importantly, the Centre is also broadening its interpretive scope to encompass stories of modern migration, including those of refugees, migrant workers, and recent arrivals to Norway. This marks a shift from a narrative of nostalgia towards one of dialogue:

> **"We want to use this as a kind of backdrop for telling about migration of today. And that's what we want to use this instead of this nostalgic [...] We want to be telling all people's stories [...] not only of the Syrians or the Ukrainians, but of people, which is kind of interweaving the whole how people live and how people have migrated, and how people settle in, and how to they have to adjust, and how they build new societies, from what they have in common, and how they build a new culture." (Participant 11)**

This transformation, however, has not always been universally accepted. The participant described how some resisted these connections, favouring a nostalgic or isolating view of Norwegian emigration:

> **"Some people didn't want to see this connection, and they didn't want to keep this nostalgic feeling, and they didn't want to see that there were similarities." (Participant 11)**

Nonetheless, the participant views these moments as opportunities for reflection and growth – and, as the next section explores, as part of the work of cultural leadership:

> **"Some people get the connection themselves. And somebody had to be pointed out this connection about how the migration has been through all the old times, and we have some, we call it 'Fear of strangers'. One of the best days at work is when I get this nudging aside from a pensioner who said: 'my generation needed to hear this.' That's really good too." (Participant 11)**

As the next section on cultural leadership will explore further, these shifts require more than a conservation or preservation skillset; they demand skills such as facilitation and empathy.

Catalyst for Sustainable and Just Transitions: the Role of the Culture Sector

Catalyse for Sustainable and Just Transitions
- Embed circular economic values (repair, reuse) through traditional knowledge and crafts
- Connect sustainablity to local emotional and cultural sites/places, helping to make abstract policies tangible
- Can act as a mediator between old traditions and new innovations

Building on theme two from the previous section, one of the key ways the cultural sector could support approaches to addressing 21st-century challenges was through directly linking their work and activities to issues ranging from sustainability and climate action to teaching and contextualising change.

Embed circular economy values (repair, reuse) through traditional knowledge

Participants discussed how they already act as a focal point for local sustainability discussions. Local communities often visit museums or centres, observe sustainable practices, and ask how to get involved. Cultural experiences or sustainable practices, therefore, serve as key entry points, not only for discussion but also for action on individual and community sustainability and climate initiatives. One interviewee at a traditional rural museum in Nordhordland remarked:

> "The people who are coming here ask, "What can we do today"? [...] Because people want to know. I have an oil (derived) fleece on me. I also have a fleece with wool. And we can show them what will you get if I get fire on this [the oil fleece]? Plastic. And if you get fire on the wool, it will nearly burn, because it's very sustainable. It gets burning, but you can put it in the soil, and this wool has a lot of fertiliser. So, we try to use this to show people how they can live sustainably."
> **(Participant 13)**

Connect sustainability to local emotional and cultural sites/places, helping to make abstract policies tangible

Many interviewees emphasised that projects or approaches must be tailored to specific communities, even within small political boundaries or areas. Even when projects share common goals, such as preserving cultural traditions or fostering social cohesion, their implementation must be tailored to the unique characteristics of each location. As one participant in Norway explained: "We can't just copy-paste and do the same in the next [municipality] because it doesn't function like that." (Participant 10).

The cultural sector can be a critical entry point for deep and meaningful action on addressing unique and interconnected challenges. As often part of the community, locally embedded, and with long experience engaging with local communities, the sector also provides an important entry point for inclusive approaches.

Can act as a mediator between old traditions and new innovation

One participant discussed using local shared culture, such as language and dialect, to facilitate conversations between different groups about how places are changing (Participant 8). For example, the city of Bergen and its surrounding rural areas in Nordhordland have always been notably distinct. This was summarised through the complex concept of 'Stril', a historically derogatory term used by residents of Bergen to describe people living in rural districts (Strilelandet) who would come to the city to sell their produce. With the landscape around Nordhordland changing dramatically over the past 30-40 years, this dialect was rapidly disappearing. The participant discussed how rural communities now use this term to reclaim pride in themselves and foster a new kind of collaboration. The participant, therefore, discussed how leading conversations around terms such as 'Stril' is essential for building social integration between different groups:

> 'So for me as a leader, I would say a lot of what I do is also play on the opportunities and possibilities and sensitivities of local culture, which are changing. And that is very difficult, not necessarily in sustainability or in a more environmental way, but in social sustainability. It's quite difficult, because creating a real understanding of what that's about can often drown in the 'old

and new', and 'we and them'. And I think it's getting better because, yeah, times change, but yeah, it's getting better, but it's a difficult thing. **(Participant 8)**

The role of cultural leadership

Building on the previous section, this section explores the role of cultural leadership. It shows how cultural leaders operates at two intersecting levels:

1. As a foundational force, shaping identity, place and meaning **(Foundational Role of Cultural Leaders)**
2. As a form of transition leadership, enabling communities and institutions to navigate complex 21st-century challenges, from climate change to social cohesion **(Sustainability and Transition Leadership)**

These two dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Cultural leaders rooted in their local context and lived experience build the emotional and social infrastructure that allows more adaptable, strategic, and sustainability-focused practices to emerge. In this way, cultural leadership has the potential not just to respond to change but to influence how change is understood, appreciated, and managed.

Culture and Identity: Foundational Role of Cultural Leaders

Foundational Role of Cultural Leaders
- Culturally Rooted and Place-Based Leadership
- Collaboration and Facilitation across Diverse Groups
- Skills and Capacities for New Contexts
- Cultural Leadership as Narrative and Meaning-Making
- Inclusion, Representation, and Challenging Exclusion
- Balancing Tradition and Innovation
- Strategic and Systemic Change-Making
- Values-Based and Relational Leadership

Participants noted that effective cultural leadership is deeply rooted locally, inclusive, and skilled at balancing tradition and change. However, they also emphasised the emotional and structural burdens faced by cultural leaders, including burnout driven by ongoing underfunding, fragmented support networks, and the undervaluing of culture's relational and foundational roles. Many participants argued that cultural leaders should push for increased funding for culture itself- not merely as a means to advance other goals but as an essential pillar of resilient and sustainable communities:

> "For schools, culture is something that the kids in school need as part of learning, teaching, and educating themselves. For us, culture is also that, but not because of that. Playing the piano does well for the kid, whatever, if that's a part of learning about music history, but just in itself as an activity, that kid will not be the same on the other end of that learning period, that playing period." **(Participant 8)**

The table below summarises the key leadership roles and capacities identified across the interviews, alongside the practical and emotional challenges faced by those working at the intersection of culture and society.

Theme	Description	Associated Challenge
Culturally Rooted and Place-Based Leadership	Leadership must be grounded in place and provide continuity with local culture and identity.	Leaders must balance continuity and rootedness with evolving social and cultural realities, alongside community dynamics
Collaboration and Facilitation across Diverse Groups	Leadership involves working across differences, facilitating, uniting, and building bridges between communities and sectors.	Cultural work is often fragmented and siloed, limiting cross-sectoral coordination and shared action.
Skills and Capacities for New Contexts	Leaders require a broad, adaptive skillset to respond to contemporary challenges, technologies, and stakeholder needs.	Many leaders operate without structured support or training in strategic or systems-oriented leadership
Cultural Leadership as Narrative and Meaning-Making	Cultural leaders can act as storytellers, shaping identity, heritage, and the meaning of place and change	Tensions over representation - "who speaks for culture" and whose narratives are included
Inclusion, Representation, and Challenging Exclusion	Leadership must be inclusive, representative, and capable of addressing both visible and hidden power dynamics.	Leaders must confront exclusionary practices, and there is also a lack of access to leadership for some groups
Balancing Tradition and Innovation	Leaders must navigate the tensions between preserving cultural heritage and enabling adaptation, innovation, and integration.	Upholding tradition can conflict with the need for adaptation and innovation
Strategic and Systemic Change-Making	Cultural leaders must navigate institutions, funding, and system-level change while linking culture to broader societal challenges.	Leaders are expected to achieve this impact without adequate support or resources, or political support.

Theme	Description	Associated Challenge
Values-Based and Relational Leadership	Leadership is relational, values-driven, and deeply personal - requiring resilience, humility and quiet influence/diplomacy	Institutional systems undervalue care, dialogue and relational forms of leadership preferring top-down structure.

While the analysis revealed that cultural leaders often see themselves as facilitators or managers of cultural sites and traditions, many also consider themselves guardians of identity, belonging, and continuity. This core role was both emotional and practical: conserving cultural knowledge while creating inclusive and accessible spaces where community life could be maintained and revitalised. For many, leadership involved being adept at transmitting and interpreting local cultures, encompassing music, dance, traditional crafts, and languages. This work was viewed not just as preservation, but as helping people stay connected to who they are and where they come from (Participant 1) - especially in environments undergoing rapid change:

> **"I think it is a lot about preserving the heritage or preserving what we had in the past, like, in terms of songs, clothes, and national dance. Because next year in Estonia, the National Singing festival is happening. This kind of cultural heritage comes back in waves […] it's always like, I feel like it comes a little bit, goes a little bit." (Participant 6)**

Skills or attributes needed for this foundational role include deep knowledge of cultural traditions, teamwork and interpersonal skills, teaching and interpretation abilities, as well as empathy and storytelling to connect communities with their culture and heritage. One of the key qualities for a leader was not just having the management ability to run cultural organisations, but also possessing the passion to ensure they stayed relevant in people's lives:

> **"Because everybody can run a library, not everybody, it's not, I was about to say it's not difficult. It is. But it's not. That's not what's difficult. What's difficult is to make the library important for people. Yeah, that is what's difficult." (Participant 8)**

The participants also described cultural leadership as deeply personal, often based on long-standing relationships and daily interactions (and understanding the subtle nuances of places

and people). Community cafes, libraries, festivals, and chats in local shops were all seen as gateways for building a sense of belonging and informal leadership. As one participant remarked:

> **"You can come to paint, even if you haven't painted since school, you can come and join in. You're welcome, and so that's important, because I know I talk with people in the shop. I even talk to strangers in the shop. So that's why I know how people think about this house. But people who have visited it, they have positive feelings about it, and then they're like, "Oh, that was nice, and I'm gonna suggest it, and I want to come here again." (Participant 1)**

However, interviewees also noted that this 'traditional model' of leadership has been under sustained pressure. These challenges include diminishing financial resources, technological disruption, the ritualisation of cultural practices, and global cultural influences that weaken local culture and the sense of place. Leaders are increasingly required to manage a hybrid set of responsibilities: preserving tradition, fostering community resilience, mediating, educating, communicating digitally, and securing funding. Many described the difficulty of 'holding' communities together during transitions, especially 'at a time when we all just sit at home and watch TV' (Participant 21).

Other participants emphasised the significance of cultural leaders providing opportunities for newcomers to integrate into the community (Participant 9). While shared cultural activities or sports such as football served as initial points of integration for new migrants, participants pointed out the challenge of progressing from participation to meaningful interaction:

> **"It's easy to get kids to participate in football…but to get parents to talk together and work together to understand the differences between cultures around football is time-consuming and not easy." (Participant 8)**

Many participants emphasised that 'cultural leaders' need to have a perceived local connection to be effective. They noted that while outsiders could be accepted as new leaders, there is an implicit expectation that these leaders will adopt local norms and respect the area's rhythms:

> **"And it's not because there's nothing that person is doing, there's nothing they're doing wrong, and it's nothing, no reflection on themselves. But I think because the way things move here quite slowly over time, it would almost seem like quite**

evangelical if someone came in here after two years and then started like leading, and people would feel a bit suspicious of that." **(Participant 18)**

"People tend to bow to whoever's been here the longest. And what I mean by I mean like, refer to, so if something's going to happen, they'll say, "Well, let's see what XX says, because they've been here the longest, that kind of thing. There is very much a chain of tenure." **(Participant 20)**

Others described how having deep roots, or even knowing how to 'read' the culture, helped build trust with the local community:

"In Hiiumaa, the first question you're asked is to which family or to which house you belong? Of course, there are also people living and working here, not having the roots here." **(Participant 4)**

This also raised wider questions about who gets to lead and what leadership means in a cultural context. Many participants expressed discomfort with the term "leader", due to its association with authority, power and representation:

"It's difficult to believe that I'm a leader of a place I'm not originally from […] So there is some hesitation to be a leader, because it, to me, implies power, and that difference in balance of structure and values. So a leader, as far as encouraging change and positive things to happen, yes, but not in the sense of holding power." **(Participant 20)**

"I think as I'm reticent to describe myself as a cultural leader, I think many other folks who maybe could do more would also be in a similar position of not wishing to or choosing to put themselves forward as a cultural leader. For me, how can we speak for anybody else, and "Who do you think you are to put yourself forward." **(Participant 16)**

Interestingly, others observed how dramatic change - especially in places like Nordhordland - was gradually transforming this culture of caution, and cultural leadership was increasingly about playing on the interplay between the old and the new:

"So, for me as a leader, and I would say a lot of what I do is also play on the opportunities and possibilities and sensitivities of local culture, which are changing. And that isn't easy, not necessarily in sustainability or an environmental way, but in social sustainability. It's quite difficult, because creating a real understanding of what that's about can often get drowned in the "old and new", and "we and them". And I think it's getting better because, yeah, times change, but yeah, it's getting better, but it's a difficult thing." **(Participant 8)**

One participant reflected on how alternative cultural narratives deeply rooted in a place could serve as powerful analogies for fostering more inclusive and resilient forms of leadership. Drawing on the tradition of gathering around firelight, they described a vision of cultural leadership as a collection and relational act:

"There's a cultural thing, a transmission occurs by gathering around fire light in a colder and darker place. So it's this useful analogy of leadership. So that's it,

anyone in that circle can be a leader. And you know, whoever scoots out first, just to be able to reassure the rest of the group, it's okay to bring this person in. {...} And again, we have these concepts within our language and within our culture of fireplace and fire keeping, and there are these lovely traditions of like need fire around the quarter days." **(Participant 16)**

This metaphor also reflects a wider aspiration expressed across the interviews - that cultural leadership is not merely a title or a role, but a practice of creating space for others, embracing identity and difference, while also positioning culture as something vital not only for memory but also for the future:

'So cultural leadership for me would be for me personally, would facilitate the silent voices to hear from those who are don't feel included.' **(Participant 16)**

Culture and Sustainablity: Foundational Role of Cultural Leaders

Sustainability and Transition Leadership

- Embed culture in climate resilience, circular economy, and landscape adaptation
- Bridge scientific and traditional knowledge systems
- Advocate for culture as infrastructure, not an accessory to development

The findings across the three sites demonstrate how cultural leadership can serve as a powerful yet frequently overlooked driver for sustainable and equitable transitions. In this context, cultural leaders are not only stewards of tradition but also support and help make sense of change. Their deep understanding of place, people, and cultural significance allows them to transform abstract sustainability goals into lived experience. This can help communities navigate challenging transitions while also prompting important questions about what truly matters. One participant in Estonia emphasised this point, highlighting that change originates from people and communities accepting it rather than having it imposed on them:

> "I believe that the change, which, if you want to change, it comes from the understanding and the acceptance of people, acceptance of the need for change, acceptance of the understanding of the problems. It doesn't come because somebody is a leader or there is an institution that tells you how to behave; it's because you need to accept it yourself. […] (our) role is to slowly and thoroughly make this change happen through understanding and through constant work." **(Participant 7)**

Participants also stressed the importance of cultural leaders in making people aware of the deep cultural nature of the landscapes and how they are constantly changing:

> 'Change is not a modern invention, although I think a lot of people feel that the past is a constant, and now everything is different, but it's all the same, isn't it?' **(Participant 8)**

Many participants expressed frustration that culture remains sidelined in sustainability debates, often seen as decorative rather than functional. They highlighted a strong need to embed

cultural perspectives into society to develop more holistic and locally grounded approaches to sustainability. Cultural Leaders regarded this as an essential part of their work, emphasising the importance of reframing culture not as a static inheritance but as an evolving and practical foundation for managing change.

There is a clear role for cultural leaders in guiding the difficult conversations that occur across different regions. Cultural leaders must operate within the spaces between various communities, demographics, and locations to ensure that transitions are fair and inclusive, and that they do not prioritise technological and economic metrics. In areas where livelihoods and landscapes are closely linked, the challenge is not only about reducing emissions but also about maintaining the fabric of local communities and ensuring these places remain attractive for residents.

If culture is seen as something that is not static or nostalgic but instead as a living and evolving resource, it can help shape discussions about sustainable futures. Many participants emphasised the importance of integrating traditional knowledge into conversations on the circular economy and resource efficiency. By linking issues of sustainability and reuse to local cultures and contexts, initiatives and schemes can become more relatable, localised, and actionable for communities.

The role of the culture sector: Analysis of the Edinburgh CULTIVATE Workshop

This section briefly presents the findings from a participatory workshop attended by 40 participants at the CULTIVATE conference in Edinburgh in December 2024. The workshop employed the Seeds of a Good Anthropocene methodology (Bennett, Solan et al. 2016) to explore the role of the culture sector in supporting sustainable development by 2033. Unlike the interviews conducted at the three case study sites, which focused on the role of culture in general, this workshop specifically examined the roles and responsibilities of the cultural sector and cultural leaders in fostering sustainability and systemic change. It therefore follows the last two sessions strategically to provide additional context and nuance.

Methodology

This workshop brought together 40 participants, including CULTIVATE site coordinators (Biospheres) and representatives from various institutions across Scotland, such as Historic Environment Scotland, NatureScot, the University of the Highlands and Islands, the University of Glasgow, and the University of Edinburgh. None of the participants were pre-selected, but instead were attendees at the CULTIVATE workshop who had chosen to attend the workshop. Each signed a consent form allowing their data to be processed anonymously for this research.

Participants were organised into tables of 5-8 and engaged in two 40-minute sessions. Each session was framed by a short presentation introducing the Seeds of a Good Anthropocene methodology and providing background on its integration into the broader CULTIVATE project. The methodology was chosen as it offers a novel approach to imagining the future - one that draws on diverse values, practices, and worldviews to identity transformative pathways to sustainability (Bennett, Solan et al. 2016).

The session was based on recognising that mainstream narratives about climate and ecological breakdown are predominantly negative. This dominant story is so widespread that research by the UCL Climate Action Unit has shown that 98% of environmental news stories are negative in nature (De Meyer, Coren et al. 2021). Increasingly, research indicates that creating meaningful change should instead focus on building people's agency for climate action by sharing a variety of stories about people taking positive steps on climate change. Therefore, this workshop adopted an alternative perspective, aiming to build agency by encouraging participants to highlight

stories of positive action and collective leadership, shifting their focus from issue-based thinking to action-based change (De Meyer, Coren et al. 2021).

To explore these ideas in a structured way, participants worked through four guiding prompts based on the Seeds methodology.

Question	Workshop Prompt
Vision: How could the cultural sector lead on sustainable development by 2033 (10 minutes)	N/A
Petals: What are the leadership attributes needed for that vision to come true?	
Seeds: What are the examples of initatives, programmes or concepts that illustrate effective cultural leadership in sustainable development?	Identify existing processes, projects, or initiatives that are already in your sector, region, place, and carry some aspects shared values with the vision
Pathways: How do we support "Pathways and stepping stones" to more effective cultural leadership, what is needed to scale up these seeds?	Come up with processes and mechanisms that must take place in the next few years to facilitate the development from seed to vision. These may be things that must happen or that help (enable) or thing that gradually disappear)

Each group used A3 paper, sticky notes, and pens to respond to each prompt individually before discussing their ideas and placing them on the paper in the form of a flower. At the end of each round, participants were asked to highlight key ideas (e.g., with an asterisk). A whole-group discussion followed the workshop to reflect on emerging insights.

All photographs were photographed in situ, transcribed into Microsoft Excel, and then thematically grouped, while providing their original phrasing and context. The results of this analysis are discussed in the sections below.

Findings

The two themes emerging from the workshop highlight a shared ambition for the cultural sector to adopt a more systemic, inclusive, and future-focused role. Across both themes, participants emphasised the importance of breaking down silos both within the cultural sector itself and also between the culture sector and other sectors. This also involved embracing more inclusive, decentralised, and locally rooted forms of cultural leadership. Similar to the primary thematic analysis, participants regarded culture not just as a sector or a collection of institutions but as a relational force that can shape identity, support societal transitions, and foster collaboration. This includes a vision of the culture sector moving away from traditional hierarchies towards one centred on equity, long-term sustainability, and participation.

To realise this, participants stressed how the sector importantly needs new funding models, cross-sectoral working, and new measurements not just tied to economic return. The following two themes, **Culture bridging silos (Theme 1) and Inclusivity and Diversity - New forms of Cultural Leadership (Theme 2)** explore these ideas in more depth.

As participants envisioned, the potential role of the culture sector until 2033 is not merely an adjunct to sustainability. It can and should play a foundational role by capitalising on its roots in identity and place, as well as its ability to reach across disciplines and systems.

Theme 1: Culture bridging silos

The first set of visions focused on the culture sector's crucial role in connecting internal and external silos. Participants highlighted that, by doing so, the culture sector can better facilitate meaningful conversations, shape individual and community values, and coordinate action around shared challenges. Participants emphasised how bridging silos was essential for shaping the narrative around identity and fostering stronger, locally empowered partnerships that are adaptable and future-ready.

To enable this vision to come true, participants suggested that the sector needs to move beyond short-term funding cycles and bureaucratic decision-making timelines towards new funding models that directly support communities in pursuing their cultural agendas. Within this, several key enablers emerged, including the ability to value interdisciplinary

work, holistically integrate all forms of culture in place-based responses, and foster cross-organisational collaboration. Key leadership skills and attributes needed include accessibility, an openness to new approaches, perseverance, the ability to manage ambiguity, and a commitment to inclusivity. Examples (links included), including CULTIVATE and Curating Discomfort, were provided to demonstrate how these approaches could be implemented and scaled. Participants noted the need for new horizontal governance models, distributed leadership models, and capacity building for leaders to recognise institutional barriers and navigate complex systems to support this shift.

Table 6: Seeds of a Good Anthropocene Results – Culture bridging silos

Vision	Petals	Seeds	Pathways
Cultural Sector bridges different silos so can help to enable conversations and shape people's values/community values	1. Accessibility and Inclusion, 2. Openness to new approaches 3. Perseverance and Resilience 4. Enabling sharing and cooperation 5. Recognising young people's knowledge and ideas	1. CULTIVATE (UHI), 2. Museum's Change Life (Museum Association), 3. Our Past, Out Future (Historic Environment Scotland), 4. Curating Discomfort (Hunterian), 5. Wellness Study (Historic England)	1. Horizontal Governance 2. Explore values that aren't linked to £ 3. Embracing diversity of knowledge systems + communication strategies 4. Enaging youth wiht successful projects
More collaborative working across 'the sector', to coordinate funding for the longer term and seize the narrative	1. Skills and opportunities to work across disciplines. 2. Value Interdisciplinary 3. Integrating Intangible cultural heritage, cultural heritage, and natural heritage in addressing place-based challenges 4. Links with wider place and community-led policy and practice. 5. Global cultural network for leaning and supporting one another (like the Biosphere network!)	1. Co-creation methodologies (especially community) 2. Funding calls requiring inter/trans disciplinary 3. Cross Organisational and Institutional working	1. Informed distributed communities. 2. Organisation or individual to lead plan of working and distribute funding 3. Barrier: short-term funding cycles and long decision-making timelines that frustrate work with communitie 4. Networking calls to support formation/conversation (a couple of key staff for secretariat)

Vision	Petals	Seeds	Pathways
Robust Locally empowered contextual partnership working that is flexible and future proofed	1. Managing ambiguity 2. Cultural sector – acknowledges and engages with a greater range of ways of knowing 3. Synthesis 4. Inclusivity 5. Representative(ness) 6. Plugging loop holes 7. Robust decision marking frameworks	1. Learning for Sustainability (Education Scotland)t 2. Creative Scotland / Creative Carbon Scotland Partnership for arts orgs / CCS training/ reviewing and sustainability practices 3. Community Landownership Academic Network (CLAN) (UHI) 4. Abbot House Dunfermline 5. Developing Trust Association Scotland 6. The Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh 7. Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities is an excellent leader and is aiming to improve EDI 1. Combine Historic Environment Scotland and Nature Scot to make a single land agency	1. Funding directly to communities to enable them to engage researchers who they want to work with to research issues that are important to them – bottom up not top down (See Science Ceilidh for Initiatives) 2. Training for leaders in spotting who is a useful collaborator, who has a hidden agenda 3. Funding support to match perceived/stated interest 4. Training/Support for 'leaders' to understand institutional or structural barriers and how they might be faced 5. Accessibility in terms of training offers/opportunities

Theme 2: Inclusivity and Diversity - New forms of Cultural Leadership

The second theme focuses on how the cultural sector and its leadership can support more inclusive, pluralistic, and systems-oriented approaches to underpinning societal change.

The first pathway (see the table below) examined the shift in cultural leadership required to enable leaders to embrace differences, facilitate participation, and operate with humility and adaptability. In this pathway, cultural leaders were not described as solution-providers but as bricoleurs - individuals who can work creatively with the tools, people, and knowledge available to them to foster environments of coexistence. As the attributes section shows, this is also underpinned by inclusivity, which involves creating and facilitating safe spaces, as well as an ability to unite diverse voices and perspectives.

Importantly, as with the Thematic Analysis in earlier sections, this vision also repositions culture not as a static asset but as a resource that underpins community resilience and long-term sustainability. Many of the identified seeds, such as StoryCorps, TRACS, Black Urban Growers, and the Logoten Green Islands initiative, demonstrate the importance of embedding culture and inclusivity at the heart of transformative change. However, the pathways (as shown above) reveal that barriers exist, including funding inequalities (the "missing middle"), short-term measurement indicators, and siloed governance. Underpinning this is a move away from extractive growth-based models toward long-term funding frameworks.

Table 7: Seeds of a Good Anthropocene Results – Inclusivity and Diversity

Vision	Petals	Seeds	Pathways
Non-traditional leadership that fosters a creative environment and different voices	1. Cultural Leaders as Bricoleurs – creating work from a diverse range of things 2. Mediating objects (using shared things that unite/create consensus around systemic issues) 3. Safe Spaces 4. Navigation (not solutions) 5. Facilitators 6. Convincing in their message 7. More inclusive and bottom-up 8. Embracing co-existence 9. More inclusive and bottom-up governance structures – ensure inclusion of marginalised group/leaders and devolved/forms of delegated leadership 10. Being able to create a well-rounded team of leaders who compliment each others attributes 11. Support in expertise is the 'Boring background stuff' 12. Knowing the right messanger 13. Know when to find someone or something else. We need bricoleurs! 14. Choosing the right tools of people for the situation – no single solutions!	1. Traditional Arts Apprenticeships 2. Forth Rivers Trust (UK) 3. Storycorps 4. Black Urban Growers 5. Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS) 6. Storytelling institute – Loughborough University 7. Forth Rviers Trust 8. Devolved funding model 'hub and spoke' where established org with research capability provides funding to smaller regional organisations or community groups. 9. Lofoten "the green islands" project towrads 2030 of low emission society for six neighbouring muncipalities across several islands.	1. Eliminate funding gap between big and smallest scale "missing middle" 2. The private sector? 3. Fellowships or other government programmes for leadership development (e.g.) UKRI Future Leader Fellowships consultation with existing leaders int he field, are there 'pilot models' of existing leadership frameworks for cultural heritage and sustainable development? 4. Grounded in local community funding and hire more engaged individuals on the topic.

Vision	Petals	Seeds	Pathways
That diverse cultures underpin our approach to society, economy and environment. **The power of many: the diversity of the culture sector is a tool for transformation**	1. Inclusive – recognising ALL voices. 2. "Allow for diverse voices to be heard" 3. How do we develop "systems leaders" i.e. people to shift systemic thinking. Can start at every hearth. 4. Enabling environment of government for bottom-up working 5. Leadership that are able to implement and understand the process of methodology from policy to practice 6. Invest in networking (informal networks) 7. Be bold 8. Think outside the box 9. A local, someone who knows and understands the local context	1. Citizen Assembly for Biodiversity in the Republic of Ireland 2. Regional Landscape Partnerships 3. Scottish Community Tourism Organisation (SCOYO) 4. Cross-sectional initiatives 5. Sustainability focus in schools 6. The Wales we Want importance of cultural approach to "wellbeing and SD ACT"	1. Duthachas as a worldview to explain the interconnectedness of people, place and culture. 2. A shift away from neoliberal growth agendas – away from "sustainable development" to sustainability or social justice – recognising, procedural, distributive, restorative. 3. Close the gap between Nature and Culture. It's two sides of the same coin 4. Include local knowledge and indigenous knowledge in research 5. Long-term funding for culture that recognises the longevity or change - 20 years funding models 6. "A shift in modes of governance especially how national government finances and supports cultural sector. 7. How it values culture as central to economy, environment and society. 8. Recognition of culture in national discussions 9. Focus more on transdisciplinary research 10. Who is not heard? What cultures are not promoted/ heard/safeguarded? 11. Work against neocolonialism in research and management 12. Distribution pathways to ensure economic gain is truly re-invested back with local culture and community 13. Find the root cause of the challenge and deal with it – as opposed to dealing with the problem itself. 14. "Avoid ""cultural greenwashing"

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion and Conclusion

This section synthesises the findings within broader policy and research contexts, addressing each of the study's three research questions. It uses the thematic analysis and a conceptual model to clarify how culture, the cultural sector, and cultural leadership contribute to 21st century challenges.

The section concludes by emphasising that, while cultural leadership has traditionally involved creating spaces for others to gather, share stories, pass on values, and foster a sense of belonging, these skills must not only be preserved but also actively cultivated and rethought to address the challenges of the 21st century.

1. Culture and Identity

In response to the first research question - **What is the role of culture in supporting and addressing 21st-century challenges?** - this paper found that culture is foundational, rather than an add-on, to sustainability. Rather than offering a set of technical solutions, culture provides the interpretive lens through which communities understand identity, navigate change, and express local values. This relationship is increasingly recognised and supported across policy, research, funding, and practice.

For instance, the New European Agenda for Culture (2018) and EU Work Plan for Culture (2023-26) describe culture as a 'vector of identity and cohesion,' highlighting its importance in fostering active citizenship, shared values, and intercultural dialogue - especially in integrating newcomers like refugees and migrants (European Commission 2017, European Council 2022). These frameworks also view the cultural sector across Europe as essential for strengthening democracy and social well-being by ensuring accessible or free cultural services for everyone.

Alongside this, an increasing body of literature examines how culture is deeply involved in the politics of identity and memory, providing critical nuance to its role in promoting social cohesion and inclusion. As this paper has found, culture can also act as a gatekeeper, reinforcing or maintaining existing power structures and legitimising hierarchies. Matthes (2024) identifies a key tension in cultural heritage ethics as to whether heritage should be universally shared or valued (universalist approach) or if it should be reserved for those with ancestral ties

(exclusionary approach). Korostelina (2019) further explored this tension, noting how the values assigned to heritage sites or objects are often connected to a group's need for enhanced self-esteem and pride, as well as a desire for justice and healing from past traumas. These values also serve to uphold social hierarchy and legitimise power, and different social groups may attach conflicting values to a heritage site, often intensifying tensions. While these tensions potentially complicate the message of culture, they also arguably strengthen its role in negotiating sustainability. For example, as with sustainability, it demonstrates how value is defined through the political, emotional, and moral meanings attached to specific events, places, or social practices (Korostelina, 2019).

Similarly, this report has shown that while issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, and inequality are often seen as environmental or economic concerns, they are also deeply cultural. Culture isn't merely an extra element in the sustainability agenda; it plays a central role in shaping how these issues are experienced, discussed, and tackled. As Brennert et al. (2023) highlight:

> **"Given that culture shapes values and patterns, impacting perceptions, interactions, and the coherence of individual actions, the modification of systems necessitates a transformation in the fundamental cultural beliefs that underpin them. This is where culture has the transformational power to make or break developmental processes: by being both part of the problem and also key to solutions. By harnessing the power of culture, meaningful progress and positive change can be achieved on a global scale"(Brennert, Gesuri et al. 2023)**

This is particularly relevant given the rural settings of the sites. Participants consistently highlighted that, beyond global concerns like climate change, culture and the cultural sector are already deeply involved in tackling local challenges. These include depopulation, poverty, migration, the decline of local services, second-home ownership, and the loss of regional identities (European Parliament 2025). Cultural practices and narratives actively respond to these issues, emphasising local identity and maintaining continuity amid rapid socio-economic change.
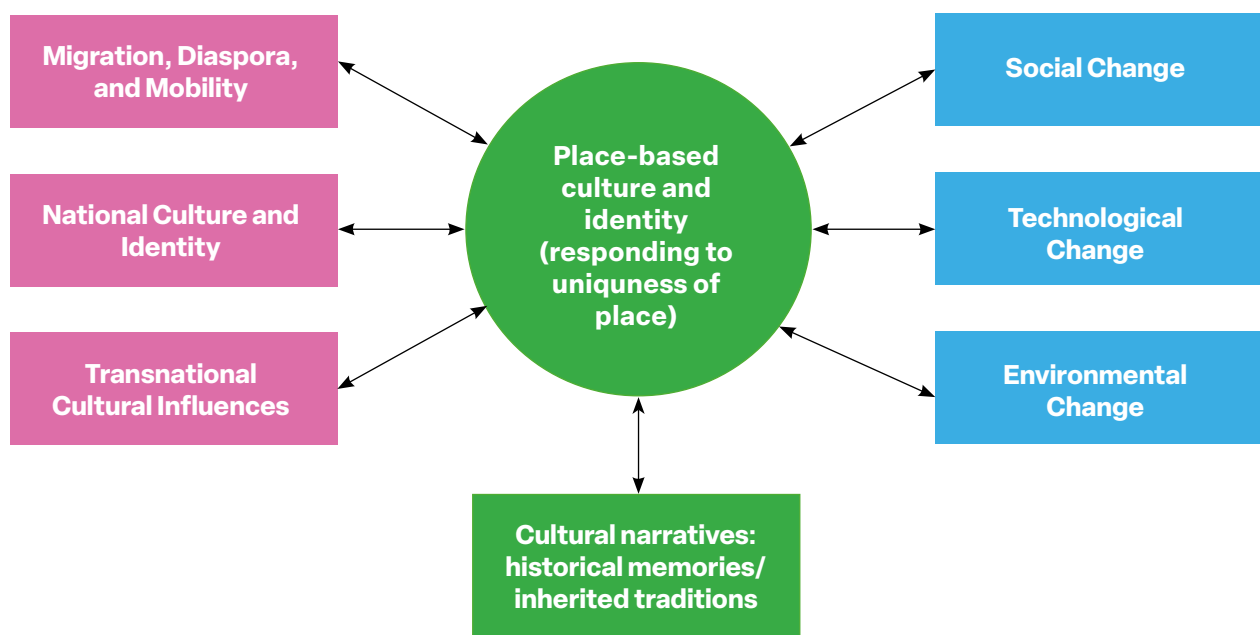
2.   Cultural Narratives and Place-based Change

The paper also demonstrates the importance of competing place-based 'cultural narratives' in shaping how communities perceive identity and respond to change. They shape how landscapes are perceived, how history is remembered, and how the future and change are envisioned. The conceptual model (Diagram 1) illustrates the dynamic interplay between identity, cultural narratives and physical change. On the left, influences such as national identity, migration, and international cultural influences shape how communities define themselves. On the right, physical changes - social, technological, and environmental - alter the physical context of places. At the centre, place-based culture and identity are continuously responding to and influenced by these forces. These are shaped by cultural narratives derived from inherited traditions and memory. This understanding aligns with a growing strand of scholarship in the CULTIVATE project and beyond, which increasingly emphasises the interpretive power of stories, symbols, and memory in shaping social and ecological systems (Bryce 2021, Bohnet 2025).

**Dynamic Influences on Lcoal
Cultural Identity and Expression**

Identity Influences

- Migration, Diaspora, and Mobility
- National Culture and Identity
- Transnational Cultural Influences

Physical Changes

- Social Change
- Technological Change
- Environmental Change

Place-based culture and identity (responding to uniquness of place)

Cultural narratives: historical memories/ inherited traditions

Diagram 1 Shows how both identity influences and physical changes are often interpreted through place-based culture and identity, which is often interlinked with historical memories and inherited traditions.

This conceptual model also clarifies several findings:

First, participants described how local cultural identity is formed not in isolation but through multiple layers: national narratives, international mainstream culture, and occasionally, global political shifts. For example, the Singing Revolution in Estonia was remembered as a defining moment of both national and local cultural identity. It served not only as a symbol of resistance and national self-determination but also as a unique cultural expression that linked local memory to national sovereignty (through the four-year festival).

Second, cultural narratives often lag behind real environmental changes. Communities' perceptions of their environment, and how cultural and heritage sectors reinforce these views, may not match ecological shifts or damage. This could be a form of 'shifting baseline syndrome,' altered by cultural influences, where each generation views its inherited environment as normal, thereby hiding long-term ecological decline. It also signals a change in how people relate to nature. Many participants observed that individuals are becoming increasingly detached from their roots and local areas. As Alleway et al. (2022) observe, using 'shifting baseline syndrome' to explore social-ecological interactions remains relatively underdeveloped. Moreover, mainstream environmental models often assume a 'pristine' nature untouched by humans. Yet, in many places - including in this research -landscapes are as much cultural as ecological. Ignoring these risks creates conservation and change strategies that overlook key human-nature relationships and traditional place-based knowledge (Alleway, Klein et al. 2023).

Third, this model views change as part of long-term trends. Participants observed that culture and places have always evolved due to migration, technological progress, environmental influences, and shifting social values. Yet, current changes- driven by digital platforms, demographic shifts, and global cultural exchanges- are faster, more complex, and harder to root in a shared understanding. Many participants noted a move towards 'service-led' cultural forms, especially among younger groups. Culture is increasingly segmented into modern, compartmentalised, and individual experiences, often digital, with fewer opportunities for collective participation through events, festivals, or activities beyond market-driven mechanisms. This makes it more difficult for culture to unite communities around a shared vision. Cultural leaders and the sector, therefore, see their role not just as preserving assets and traditions, but also as protecting and shaping identity amid these rapid, ongoing changes.

Culture is a crucial foundation for discussions on the future of local communities, acting as a reference point for evaluating and understanding change. By confronting its contradictions, cultural leaders and sectors can better leverage culture to support and promote meaningful, place-based sustainability efforts. Culture not only helps us understand a place but also plays a vital role in shaping the local contexts where sustainability issues arise and are tackled. In this way, it serves as the overlooked foundation of sustainability.

3.   The Evolving Role of the Culture Sector

In response to the second research question - **What role can the cultural sector play in addressing these challenges? -** the findings suggest a critical shift is required in the cultural sector (particularly in heritage) beyond traditional roles focused primarily on preservation and heritage management. Instead, the cultural sector must proactively, and in a united way across places, facilitate meaningful conversations, create inclusive spaces for dialogue, and support communities in interpreting and responding constructively to change.

As Harrison (2020, 2023) and others have argued, this is central to the origins of the culture sector. Much of the modern culture and heritage sector can be traced back to the 19th century, where institutions were established in response to rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation. Cultural heritage systems were created to preserve buildings, traditions, and practices becoming marginalised in new capitalist and industrial societies (Harrison et al 2020, 2023). The cultural sector responded by becoming a guardian to this change, preserving, collecting, and interpreting what was being lost, and trying to ensure it continued at the centre of binding communities (Harrison et al 2020, 2023). This unique position also means that the cultural sector has long been central to managing change and its intersection with local identity and distinctiveness across places. While parts of the cultural sector have focused on conservation and preservation (heritage sector), others, especially in the creative and performing arts, have taken on interpreting, provoking, and evolving culture. This dual legacy of preservation and creativity makes the sector uniquely positioned to respond to a new wave of environmental, social, and technological change.

Given this dual role, the sector can increasingly influence how sustainability, resilience, and adaptation are localised and reframed through a cultural lens. To achieve this expanded role, the sector faces several significant challenges:

- A critical lack of sustained funding for small cultural organisations, particularly funding that is flexible and not exclusively tied to economic outcomes or project-specific deliverables.
- A need for cultural institutions to become genuinely inclusive (due to human/financial resource constraints), and offer services and narratives that resonate with diverse communities, including marginalised groups, newcomers, and younger generations.
- A widespread misunderstanding among local decision-makers (including the national/local silos) about the intrinsic value of culture, often perceiving it narrowly as economic activity or as a tourism resource, rather than its essential role for social cohesion and resilience.
- Ensuring cultural services support year-round community engagement, not merely servicing tourism or seasonal activities.

Cultural Leadership: Navigating Tensions and Transformation

In response to the third research question - **How must cultural leadership evolve to meet these challenges?** - this research highlights cultural leaders' vital role in navigating the complex interplay between heritage, identity and sustainability. Effective cultural leadership must facilitate effective dialogue across diverse community perspectives, mediate conflicting cultural narratives, and bridge traditional cultural knowledge with contemporary global realities.

If culture defines how humans have adapted to the local climatic and environmental conditions over time, it will continue to shape how communities respond and adapt to emerging challenges. The critical question is not whether culture will influence sustainability responses, but rather what kind of culture will endure. Cultural leaders have a pivotal role in bringing together contested narratives alongside new partners and communities to co-create hopeful, inclusive visions for the future. As local places continue to face pressures from globalisation and challenges such as over-tourism, and decline - can cultural leaders drive a 'cultural renewal' – a joined-up and locally rooted sector- that fosters care, dialogue and collective vision for sustainable change?

Despite these challenges, many cultural leaders have already demonstrated powerful and inspiring examples of this renewed leadership. Interviewees described local cultural assets - churches, museums, community gatherings - not merely as repositories of heritage and memory, but as active spaces for dialogue and collective imagination about the future. Their visions focused on fostering an inclusive identity and repurposing traditional cultural practices to build sustainable futures for places.

Ultimately, cultural leadership must strike a balance between preservation and active participation in current realities, critically examining local stories to confront unsustainable practices and promote innovative, inclusive solutions for long-term resilience and sustainability.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Cultural heritage

- How do you understand/define culture?

- How do you understand/define leadership?

- How do you view the role of cultural leadership in this place, and how does your role contribute to this?

- What key challenges do you face as an organisation and cultural leader?

- What is the role of cultural heritage in the sense of place that this area holds for residents and visitors? Can you give some examples of both tangible and well-known heritage, and also some of the less tangible facets of culture that lend a sense of identity to this place and people?

Societal challenges

- What are some of the societal challenges your work/initiative/role is helping to address?

- Can you provide some examples of how cultural heritage is contributing to the improvement of sustainability challenges in the area?

- How would you like local communities and people to use culture and heritage to build a positive future for the area?

Leadership

- What key attributes/characteristics are needed for a cultural leader in your local/sectoral context?

- What do you think are the critical leadership attributes needed to address the area's societal challenges?

- Do you think there is a difference in the leadership skills needed between the two…

- What difference could cultural leaders make in addressing sustainability challenges?