CULTURE NEXT

Co-funded by the European Union

Cultural Participation

Focus on Youth

Conference Policy Brief

Culture Next 14th Conference

8-10 July 2025

Leeuwarden, Friesland, The Netherlands

Cultural Participation > Focus on Youth

Conference Policy Brief

CONTEXT

Established in 2017, Culture Next is dedicated to European Capital of Culture candidates, current or former, awarded or not.

Its mission is to contribute to having more European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programmes implemented in European cities and regions and to define a long-term European vision on local development through culture and creativity. Building on the experiences, processes and collaborations established during the ECoC bid, we support all cities, being them awarded or not, to implement culture-led local development programmes and policies. We are committed to deliver a sustainable impact and meaningful legacy of the ECoC programme.

The 14th Culture Next Conference, themed “Cultural Participation > Focus on Youth” convenes representatives from 50 European cities, young delegates aged 18–27, local artists, and cultural organisations in Leeuwarden and the Friesland region. This event aims to address the challenges and opportunities in fostering cultural engagement, with a particular focus on youth participation. The conference serves as a platform to develop strategies that promote inclusive cultural policies and practices across Europe.

RATIONALE

Cultural participation is a cornerstone of democratic societies. It promotes civic engagement, strengthens social cohesion, and supports individual and collective well-being. Yet, across Europe and beyond, young people

continue to face significant barriers to engaging in cultural life. Socioeconomic inequality, geographic exclusion, and underrepresentation remain persistent challenges. Equally critical, but less often addressed, is the question of relevance.

Cultural infrastructures and programming often reflect traditional definitions of culture that may not resonate with the evolving interests, identities, and lived experiences of young people. As a result, cultural offers are sometimes perceived by youth as “not for me,” “uninteresting,” or “irrelevant.” This gap in perceived relevance limits participation and weakens the potential of culture to empower, connect, and include.

Overcoming these systemic constraints is essential. If culture is to fulfill its democratic promise, then relevance—defined by and with young people—must become a core principle of policy design and institutional practice. From a policy standpoint, this calls for a shift—from designing cultural participation for youth to enabling participation by youth. Inclusive cultural policy must acknowledge young people not only as audiences, but as co-creators, curators, and decision-makers.

Giving young people agency to shape programming ensures greater responsiveness, ownership, and sustainability. However, many cultural institutions remain hesitant to relinquish control or adapt their frameworks to accommodate youth-led approaches.

The Role of Culture in (Social) Well-Being in Cities

Culture can be a catalyst in young people having a sense of belonging, feeling supported, and being able to connect with others in meaningful ways. It's a crucial part of overall well-being, influencing our mental and physical health. Cultural actors can foster belonging through inclusive cultural spaces, support mental and emotional health via creative expression, build social cohesion and cross-generational connection, enhance youth agency and participation in civic life, offer creative pathways to employment and skill-building, embed care and co-creation in urban cultural policy.

Cities as Laboratories for Cultural Policy Innovation

Cities are uniquely positioned to pilot and implement policies that support local cultural ecosystems and empower young citizens. Through participatory governance, cultural mapping, and co-creation methods, urban policy can respond more flexibly and responsively to the needs of young people. Culture Next exemplifies this potential, offering a translocal platform for experimentation, knowledge-sharing, and collective advocacy.

The Leeuwarden Context

Mienskip is a Friesian word that can be explained as a strong, shared sense of community in which people take care of each other and work together for the common good. It could be loosely translated as social cohesion or togetherness.

Leeuwarden, as a former European Capital of Culture and host of initiatives like Arcadia and the mienskip model, provides a compelling example of culture-led urban and community development. Its experience in engaging citizens—including youth—in bottom-up cultural processes makes it a fertile ground for reflecting on how policy frameworks can better enable participatory cultural governance.

Inequities in Youth Access to Culture

Youth are among the most underrepresented groups in formal cultural spaces, despite being prolific cultural creators and consumers in informal and digital realms. Structural barriers such as economic precarity, limited transport in rural or peri-urban areas, and underrepresentation in cultural decision-making roles disproportionately affect their participation. Moreover, cultural policies often fail to reflect youth-driven definitions of culture, which increasingly incorporate digital practices, community-based art, and hybrid forms of expression.

Cultural Participation as a Policy Priority

Cultural participation is a human right as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27). It enhances democratic resilience by fostering critical thinking, empathy, and intercultural dialogue. Policies that promote inclusive access to culture are thus not ancillary but fundamental to broader social policy goals, including education, social inclusion, and health. However, more is to be prospected on recognising culture as a drive for individual development.

A Policy Moment for Cultural Citizenship

The convergence of post-pandemic recovery, the European Green Deal, and new youth-focused initiatives like the EU Youth Strategy and Creative Europe 2021–2027 offers a timely policy window. Embedding youth cultural participation within these frameworks aligns cultural policy with cross-sectoral priorities—such as mental health, climate justice, and civic engagement—and reinforces culture's transversal value across the policy spectrum.

POST-CONFERENCE

Culture is not an afterthought in well-being policy—it's core infrastructure for belonging, healing, and possibility. Cultural actors in cities hold the tools to help young people feel grounded, hopeful, and connected, especially at a time when loneliness, instability, and exclusion define much of urban youth experience. Empowered by intentional design, partnership, and imagination, culture can be a key driver of social well-being in the cities of tomorrow.

Captured at the 'Culture Next 14th Conference', insights and discussions will be synthesised into a policy paper, serving as a roadmap for cities aiming to boost cultural participation among youth. This document will be disseminated across the Culture Next network and beyond, influencing policy and practice at local, national, and European levels.