the CULTURAL POLICY UNIT

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BBC on the High Street

A Corporeal Culture in Every Community

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Background

This paper develops proposals we first advanced in *Arts for Us All* (with the Fabian Society, 2024) and *Breaking the Fourth Wall* (with the Good Growth Foundation, 2026). It is a standalone CPU proposal for turning the BBC's civic purpose into a visible, useful and enduring presence in communities across the United Kingdom. It also responds to the BBC's Made of Here campaign and related place-based activity current at July 2026.[i,ii,iii]

The central contention is simple: the BBC cannot secure its future only by becoming more digitally available and more easy to find. It must also become more physically present. A universal public institution should be encountered not only through a screen or app, but in libraries, shopping streets, town squares and the ordinary civic life of the country.

Reach is Not the Same as Relationship

The BBC remains the UK's leading media brand and reaches 94 per cent of adults in an average month. It is investing more of its network television budget outside London and

has built major production centres across the nations and regions.[iv] Yet reach is not the same as relationship. Ofcom records continuing pressure on the BBC's connection with younger and lower-income audiences, while our CPU/GGF research found that 43 per cent of adults use the BBC less than they did ten years ago and that people outside prominent production centres can feel unseen.[ii,v]

Public trust in the BBC remains substantial, but the relationship between institution and citizen has become more fragile. *Breaking the Fourth Wall* found that while around two-thirds of people continue to value an independent public service broadcaster, many feel the BBC no longer sufficiently reflects or visibly invests in their communities. Focus groups repeatedly described the Corporation as remote and concentrated elsewhere, despite its national remit. The challenge is therefore not simply one of audience reach but of civic presence.

This matters because the BBC occupies a unique constitutional position. Unlike a commercial streaming platform, it is funded to serve every part of the United Kingdom. Rebuilding that civic bargain requires more than commissioning programmes outside London; it requires making the institution itself visible as a contributor to

everyday community life.“Made of Here” is an intelligent response. Launched in 2025, the campaign celebrates the people and places behind BBC storytelling.

Libraries are also particularly suited to supporting this role. More than half of England's traditional high streets already contain a public library within walking distance, giving the BBC an existing civic infrastructure through which it can become physically present without creating an entirely new estate. Rather than constructing BBC buildings, the proposal is to embed the Corporation within institutions people already know and trust.

CORE RECOMMENDATION: The BBC, working with public library services, councils, devolved administrations and high-street partners, should establish a permanent BBC on the High Street programme. It should begin with a three-year, twelve-place pathfinder and grow into a tiered UK network of BBC Library Hubs, CBeebies and CBBC Library Corners, open local studios, archive access points, communal screenings and carefully regulated retail partnerships.

Ten Recommendations

- Launch a three-year BBC on the High Street pathfinder in twelve contrasting places across the four nations, including large cities, smaller towns, coastal communities and rural service centres.
- Create a tiered network: full BBC Library Hubs in strategic central libraries; lighter CBeebies/CBBC and archive corners in branches; and mobile provision for communities without a suitable library building.
- Co-locate selected BBC local journalism teams and newsrooms in libraries, without closing services or reducing editorial coverage, and require public-facing studio design wherever security and safeguarding permit.
- Make every hub a place for children and families, with librarian-led CBeebies story times, CBBC clubs, digital literacy and direct links to books and local cultural activity.
- Establish local BBC Archive Rooms, similar to BFI's Mediatheques, and Community Archive Licence enabling educational and community use of BBC archive material under standardised licensing terms.

- Create a regular calendar of Town Square Moments, supported by a national rights and production framework so councils do not have to negotiate each event from scratch.
- Build on Made of Here with permanent local trails, murals, displays and collections connecting programmes to the places, crews and communities that made them.
- Pilot retail partnerships and pop-ups under a public-value code: local procurement, transparent revenue, no displacement of independent traders and a strong educational and heritage offer.
- Give councils and communities a real role through Local Partnership Boards, while protecting the BBC's editorial independence and preventing premises from becoming channels for political influence.
- Publish common measures for reach, repeat participation, trust, representation, library footfall, high-street spillovers, skills and value for money; evaluate the resultant pathfinder independently before national expansion.

The Case for a Corporeal BBC

The BBC was created as a universal service, but universality has usually meant signal coverage: the ability to receive radio, television and, later, online services. That definition is no longer enough. In a fragmented media market the BBC can be technically available everywhere while feeling institutionally remote. The relationship becomes transactional: a household pays, opens an app and chooses a programme from a menu shared with global competitors. In effect, the BBC risks becoming a service people consume rather than a national institution to which they feel they belong.

A public-service broadcaster is different from a subscription platform because its purposes reach beyond individual consumption. Under the Charter it exists to provide impartial news, support learning, show the United Kingdom to itself, reflect the nations and regions, and project British values and creativity around the world.[ix] Those purposes imply a civic relationship. They are strengthened when the public can see journalism being made, meet the people making it, use its archive, take part in its cultural life and understand how public money returns to their place.

The response should not be cosmetic. Putting a logo in a shopping centre is not, by itself, civic renewal. Physical presence must give people something useful: trusted local information, free cultural activity, access to heritage, help navigating and using digital media, routes into creative work and occasions on which neighbours share an experience.

Why the High Street?

The high street is where national institutions become local. It is also changing from a primarily retail environment into a mixed civic, cultural, service and leisure centre. Evidence assembled for the High Streets Task Force identifies educational and learning facilities, including libraries, as important drivers of town-centre footfall.[x] Libraries are particularly valuable because they are free to enter, familiar across generations and already combine quiet individual use with collective activity.

Physical library use is recovering: CIPFA's 2024/25 survey reported a 3.2 per cent rise in visits and a 10.4 per cent rise in web visits, even as revenue expenditure barely moved.[xi] The longer-term resource picture is much harsher. Libraries Connected estimates that local-authority net expenditure

on public libraries fell by 47 per cent in real terms between 2009/10 and 2022/23.[xii] A BBC partnership must therefore bring additional staff and investment. It must not use an underfunded library as free real estate or ask librarians to absorb a broadcasting programme within existing capacity.

Why Libraries?

In *Arts for Us All*, we argued that modern libraries should remain rooted in books, literacy, knowledge and quiet study while widening access to digitised archives, audiovisual content, creative technology and skills. We proposed a 'silicon corner', a national streaming offer, automatic library membership and the integration of local radio and newscasting into libraries.[i] That remains the right foundation. Libraries are already trusted sites of digital inclusion, providing devices, connectivity and assisted support to people who can otherwise be excluded from essential services.[xiii]

By locating activity within libraries, every investment simultaneously strengthens two universal public institutions instead of one.

A library-based model also creates reciprocity. The BBC gains an accessible public threshold and a deeper local listening post. Libraries gain activity, equipment, training and new audiences. The public sees two universal institutions reinforce one another rather than retreat separately.

A Tested International Precedent

The most developed precedent is the partnership between GBH and Boston Public Library. A satellite newsroom and glass-fronted studio opened in the central library in 2016. It hosts live Boston Public Radio broadcasts, cultural programming and GBH Amplifies, a community-conversation series led by local voices.[xiv,xv] The importance of the model is not simply co-location. Journalism becomes observable and participation becomes routine. The BBC can adapt that principle to the UK's much larger public-library network and its own established local radio, television and online services.

From Made of Here to Present Here

Made of Here supplies the right narrative bridge. The campaign celebrates homegrown stories and the places that shape them. Its launch film connected programmes including *Peaky Blinders* in Birmingham, *Gavin & Stacey* in Barry, *Blue Lights* in Belfast, *The Responder* in Liverpool, *Dinosaur* in Glasgow and Shetland to their locations. It was produced across the UK and designed for television, cinema, radio and social media, with local activations intended as an evergreen platform.[iii]

Those activations have begun to move beyond conventional advertising. Liverpool carried the campaign on more than 100 screens and billboards. Birmingham combined more than 100 sites with a public 'What's Brum Made Of?' wall and a live BBC Radio WM broadcast from the Bullring. Belfast used 950 drones to recreate the Titanic, tied to a locally made BBC factual series. In the North East, a regional film was projected onto Alnwick Castle and the BBC commissioned a Smoggie Queens mural in Middlesbrough.[vi,vii,viii,xvi]

This is valuable place-making: it links BBC content, regional production and civic pride. But it remains primarily a campaign about what the BBC has made. BBC on the High Street would create places in which the public can make, learn, watch and speak back. 'Made of Here' should therefore become one strand of a broader promise: made of here, present here, accountable here.

That commitment could include a visible local talent pipeline. Each Hub could offer paid internships and practical training linked to BBC apprenticeships and independent production companies. Opportunities could be advertised locally and designed to reach people who might otherwise regard a BBC career as geographically or socially inaccessible.

A Permanent Local Expression

Translating Made of Here into a durable local offer could include a programme-location trail developed with the local visitor economy; an exhibition about regional writers, performers and crews; archive listening posts; a mural or projection commissioned from a local artist; and an annual 'Made of [Place]' weekend combining open studios, screenings and talent workshops.

The editorial emphasis matters. A local collection should not imply that a place is reducible to the dramas filmed there. It should include factual output, radio, music, comedy, children's content, sport and news; acknowledge difficult or contested representations; and invite local people to add their own stories. The result should be a living civic conversation, not a corporate hall of fame.

What the BBC is already doing...

The proposal should be understood as an integration and expansion of existing strengths, not the invention of an unrelated estate. The BBC already has local radio and regional television newsrooms; CBeebies, CBBC, Bitesize and Teach; live events such as Radio 1's Big Weekend; public tours and recordings; a commercial shop and licensing operation; a vast archive; apprenticeships and other entry routes; and place-based production agreements under its Across the UK strategy. In 2025/26, 59 per cent of the BBC's network television budget was spent outside London.[iv]

The BBC's latest plans for Children's & Education point in the same direction. In February 2026, it announced CBeebies Bedtime Stories 'Read and Raves' in libraries across the UK, delivered with the British Library's Living

Knowledge Network, alongside new classroom-ready Bitesize resources, Live Lessons and assembly films. The stated ambition is to reach children wherever they are: in communities, online and in schools. BBC on the High Street would provide the permanent local infrastructure through which that ambition could be delivered consistently, rather than through occasional events alone.[xvii]

There are also precedents for opening the archive. Make Film History gave 50 emerging filmmakers aged 16–30 access to 150 BBC films for creative reuse in 2022, supported by mentoring and local engagement in Belfast, Glasgow, Leeds/Bradford and London.[xviii] The lesson is that archive access creates most value when rights clearance, curation, skills and a public platform are designed together.

The BBC on the High Street Network

A single national template would fail. Buildings, library capacity, BBC staffing and local media ecologies differ markedly. We propose a tiered network with common standards and local design.

Tier	Typical location	Core offer	Indicative footprint
1. BBC Library Hub	Central library in a city or large town, normally linked to a BBC local service.	Public-facing newsroom/studio; event space; archive room; children's corner; skills programme.	Substantial permanent zone, equivalent of BFI Mediatheque
2. BBC Library Corner	Branch library, nursery-linked library or smaller civic building.	CBeebies/CBBC activity; archive terminal; programme discovery; scheduled visits by BBC staff.	Smaller space; flexible and modular.
3. Mobile/Pop-up BBC	Rural communities, markets, vacant units and places without a suitable branch.	Touring studio; archive booth; workshops; Made of Here display; outside broadcast.	Vehicle, temporary unit or shared room.

Open Local Newsrooms

At the heart of a full Hub should be a working BBC local journalism presence. Depending on the place, this could range from a small radio and podcast studio used on set days to a co-located newsroom producing radio, online and television material. Glass-fronted studios should make production visible and accessible without turning serious journalism into theatre.

The public offer could include regular open editorial meetings or 'news surgeries'; explainers on verification and misinformation; school visits; community interviews; and bookable podcast or vodcast facilities supported by trained staff. Community groups could record oral histories or public-interest audio without obtaining access to BBC editorial systems.

N.B. SAFEGUARD: Co-location must never allow councils, library authorities, funders or commercial partners to influence BBC journalism. Editorial access, security, source protection and complaints remain governed solely by the BBC. A Local Partnership Board may shape civic programming and access, but not news agendas or individual coverage.

The move must also pass a local-media competition test. Ofcom's Local Media Review found no evidence that the BBC had a significant adverse impact on local news overall, but recognised serious challenges to the sustainability of reliable local journalism.[xix] Hubs should therefore create collaboration where compatible with independence: public events with local publishers, shared skills sessions, signposting to a plurality of trusted sources and commissioning opportunities. They should not use public subsidy to crowd out local commercial reporting.

CBeebies and CBBC Library Corners

Children's provision is the most immediate way to make the BBC useful in everyday family life. In *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, we found that users of BBC children's services were the only audience subgroup with a positive net assessment of quality change over the previous decade. Parents valued an ad-free alternative to commercial platforms.[ii]

The BBC has already demonstrated the appetite for this approach through partnerships with BookTrust, which have taken CBeebies storytelling and family activities into libraries across the country. BBC on the High Street would help make such initiatives permanent.[xx]

A CBeebies Library Corner should be recognisably joyful but remain a library, not a branded play shop. Its programme should be co-designed by children's librarians and early-years practitioners and should always connect screen content back to books, language, play and human interaction.

- Weekly story times drawing on CBeebies programmes and the books, rhymes and real-world subjects around them, delivered by librarians and occasional BBC guests.
- "Watch, read, make" sessions: a short clip followed by a related book, craft, music or movement activity.
- Parent sessions on healthy media habits, online safety, misinformation and the developmental value of shared reading.
- CBBC clubs for older children combining Newsround, Bitesize, coding, animation, audio and critical media literacy.
- A clear route from participation to free library membership, the Summer Reading Challenge and local museums, theatres and cultural organisations.
- Quiet, accessible and sensory-aware sessions, with materials in community languages and provision designed with disabled children and families.

This builds directly on the case we made in *Arts for Us All*: libraries already host early-years activity and can turn a broad cultural offer into first-time attendance. The 2023 Summer Reading Challenge recruited more than 133,000 new child library members and generated more than 14 million loans across books, ebooks and audio titles.[i,xxi] BBC characters can provide the invitation; the library's professional literacy mission supplies the substance.

The BBC Archive Room

Every Hub should provide a curated gateway to the BBC archive, with lighter access terminals in Corners. The archive is not merely content inventory. It is a record of the country's voices, places, arguments, entertainments and changing self-image. Physical access allows it to support local history, intergenerational exchange, reminiscence, education and creative practice.

The offer should have three layers. First, a free viewing and listening layer using material already cleared for public access. Second, curated local collections assembled with BBC archivists, libraries, local record offices and communities. Third, a Community Archive Licence that

permits defined non-commercial educational and creative reuse of selected material.

Rights are the central constraint. BBC programmes can contain underlying rights in scripts, music, performance, footage and formats that the BBC does not wholly own. The answer is not to promise universal access that cannot be delivered. It is to create a standing rights-clearance team, publish simple permitted-use categories and expand collections in tranches. Make Film History shows that a curated, rights-cleared model can work.[xviii]

Town Square Moments

The BBC remains uniquely able to convene national attention. A regular programme of communal screenings would translate that power into local public life. Events should include major sport and national ceremonies, including coronations, jubilees and occasions of national mourning, but also selected cultural broadcasts, concerts, children's occasions, documentary premieres and finales of programmes, such as *The Traitors*, that have become shared national conversations.

The principle has already been tested in smaller forms through outdoor screenings and public broadcasting

events. BBC on the High Street would scale this into a coordinated national programme with consistent rights management, accessibility standards and local partnerships.

The point is not to reproduce living-room viewing outdoors every week. Town Square Moments should be scarce enough to feel special and broad enough not to become a sports-only programme. Smaller library screenings can serve audiences for whom a large outdoor event is inaccessible or unsuitable.

Licensing must be designed nationally. A TV Licence is ordinarily required for a community live screening, and public showings may engage additional copyright and public-performance rights.[xxii,xxiii] The BBC should create a single event pack covering rights status, technical standards, accessibility, insurance, branding, safeguarding and bad-weather contingencies. Where an event of national importance qualifies, the existing BBC dispensation process should be simplified and proactively communicated.[xxii]

A BBC presence in Shops

BBC Studios already licenses and sells merchandise. A high-street programme could create temporary BBC areas in department stores, bookshops, toy shops and vacant units, combining commercially successful brands with public-service content. The strongest model is not a generic souvenir shop. It is a curated mixture of children's books, educational kits, programme-related publishing, regional products, archive reproductions, repairable or sustainable merchandise and ticketed experiences.

Commercial activity can help fund the civic programme, but it carries reputational and competition risks. Partnerships should be competitively tendered, disclose the return to public service, apply strong environmental and labour standards, and reserve meaningful shelf or event space for independent local makers and booksellers. A pop-up should add footfall to a place, not capture trade from businesses already sustaining it.

Participation, Talent and Accountability

A front door into the BBC

The most important cultural shift is from broadcast presence to public reciprocity. Every Hub should operate as a front door: a place to understand the BBC, challenge it, contribute to it and find a route into work. This does not mean open commissioning by popularity or the dilution of professional editorial judgement. It means making the routes visible.

- Monthly 'Meet the BBC' sessions explaining local services, commissioning, complaints, impartiality and the use of licence-fee income.
- Quarterly community story exchanges where residents and organisations can present under-reported issues or propose participation, not receive promises of coverage.
- Talent clinics linked to BBC apprenticeships, production partners and regional screen agencies, with practical guidance rather than one-off inspiration.

- Paid short placements and shadowing opportunities, prioritising people facing geographic, financial or social barriers.
- Community broadcasting days in which trained local participants contribute to non-news cultural output under BBC editorial standards.
- An annual open account of who used the Hub, which areas were reached, what was learned and what changed.

Local Partnership Boards

Each pathfinder should have a Local Partnership Board. This could encompass the library authority, BBC region or nation, council, local cultural and education organisations, disabled people's organisations, youth representatives, local business and independent media. It should approve the non-editorial programme, access plan and local evaluation framework

Civic proximity must strengthen the BBC's accountability without weakening its independence.

Access and Inclusion

A universal institution must design for the people least well served by a digital-only or event-led model. All permanent spaces should meet physical-access standards and provide hearing loops, captions and audio description where relevant. Programming should include British Sign Language, community-language and relaxed provision according to local need. Booking should never be the only route into free activity, and telephone or in-person booking must remain available.

The programme must also be geographically honest. A network centred only on large, well-connected libraries would reproduce the very distance it is intended to address. The selection formula should weight areas with low BBC engagement, weak cultural infrastructure, high deprivation, poor transport connectivity or limited local news provision. Mobile and pop-up activity should be funded as core delivery, not an optional outreach extra.

Delivery

A three-year pathfinder

Phase	Timing	Activity	Decision
Design	0–6 months	Select sites; assess buildings, rights, competition, accessibility and security; agree branding and standards.	BBC Board and partner approval.
Build and test	7–18 months	Open six Hubs and Corners; launch mobile programme; test archive licences and screenings.	Independent interim review.
Expand	19–30 months	Open remaining sites; expand talent, retail and Made of Here activities.	Assess repeat use and audience reach.
Evaluate	31–36 months	Independent impact, value-for-money and competition assessment; public consultation.	Decide on roll-out, redesign or closure.

Selecting Twelve Places

The pathfinder should test the model, not reward places already best equipped to bid. Selection should combine an open expression of interest with a needs-based invitation process. The portfolio should include at least one place in each nation; a mix of metropolitan, medium-sized, small-town, coastal and rural contexts; different library governance models; and places with and without an existing BBC production base.

National Responsibilities

- A small BBC on the High Street unit to own standards, brand, rights, safeguarding, evaluation and cross-BBC coordination.
- A national framework agreement with Libraries Connected and appropriate bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while respecting devolved library policy.
- A standard partnership compact covering additionality, editorial independence, data protection, commercial conduct, accessibility, staffing and exit arrangements.
- A central rights service for screenings and archive use.

- Training for BBC and library staff, including media literacy, working in shared public space, security and community facilitation.
- A public dashboard and annual report to the BBC Board, Ofcom, DCMS and devolved partners.

Local Responsibilities

Library partners should provide appropriate space and professional leadership over library activity; councils should coordinate public realm, licensing, events and local partnerships; BBC teams should provide equipment, staff, editorial governance and content. No partner should assume that another will meet recurrent costs. The compact must identify full staffing and maintenance requirements before a site opens.

Indicative Costings

The BBC and partners should publish a full business case after site surveys. To make the proposal testable, we suggest the following planning ranges. They are policy-design assumptions, not audited BBC estimates, and exclude the underlying salaries of staff already assigned to local services.

Cost area	Indicative assumption	Three-year range
Six full Hubs	Fit-out, accessible studios, equipment and archives; £350k–£600k per Hub.	£2.1m–£3.6m
Library Corners/mobile	24 modular Corners and touring units; £40k–£90k average.	£1.0m–£2.2m
Town Square Moments	Rights, production, accessibility and local delivery.	£1.5m–£3.0m
Central systems	Rights, branding, digital services, training, security and evaluation.	£2.0m–£3.5m
Staffing/programming	Coordinators, library backfill, facilitators and technical support.	£7.5m–£10.5m
Total	Subject to building, staffing and rights costs.	**£14.1m–£22.8m**

The core should come from a designated BBC transformation and engagement allocation, with capital and programme co-investment from public bodies and philanthropy. Commercial income and sponsorship may supplement delivery only under strict independence rules. Library contributions in kind should be transparently valued.

Long-term Funding

A future funding mechanism should explicitly recognise physical civic access as part of the universal offer. The Annual Letter to the Nation we proposed in *Breaking the Fourth Wall* could show households what was delivered in their area and how the programme was funded.[ii]

A Compact with Government

The BBC cannot establish this civic presence alone. The Government should work with the Corporation and relevant local and sector authorities to create a time-limited BBC on the High Street Pathfinder Fund. The BBC should provide the core programme investment, with government match-funding capital works, local delivery, coordination and independent evaluation. This should be genuinely

additional funding and must not be diverted from local journalism, programme-making or existing schemes and library budgets.

In return, the BBC should make physical civic access a clear part of its renewed public-service offer, demonstrating how a universal broadcaster can serve people not only as audiences but as citizens and participants. The Government should use the new Charter and Framework Agreement to recognise this role and provide the BBC with a fair and future-proofed funding settlement capable of supporting it beyond the pathfinder period. If the model succeeds, its recurrent costs should be incorporated into the BBC's post-2027 settlement rather than left dependent on short-term grants or sponsorship.

Data and Privacy

Participation should not require a BBC account unless technically necessary for a particular digital service. Library membership and BBC account data must not be merged. Children's activity should collect only the minimum information needed for booking, safeguarding and evaluation. Any personalised archive or

programme-discovery offer should be opt-in and usable in a privacy-preserving guest mode.

Measuring Success

A visible BBC is not successful merely because people pass its sign. The evaluation should combine common national indicators with locally chosen outcomes. It should be independent and publish unsuccessful results as well as successes and compare places with different models and, where possible, use matched locations without a Hub. This is necessary to distinguish genuine additional public value from general recovery in library visits or high-street footfall.

Conclusion: A National Institution People Can Enter

The BBC's greatest long-term risk is not that it disappears overnight. It is that it remains ubiquitous yet becomes abstract: admired in principle, used selectively, but no longer felt to belong to the public. Digital modernisation is essential, but it cannot by itself repair that relationship.

BBC on the High Street offers a different kind of modernisation. It joins the broadcaster's strongest assets encompassing trusted children's content, local journalism, live national moments, creative talent and a century of archive, to the country's most democratic cultural spaces. It gives libraries investment and new audiences without asking them to surrender their purpose. It gives high streets activity with civic content, not simply another retail offer. It gives the BBC a place to listen as well as transmit.

Ultimately this proposal is about renewing the civic bargain between broadcaster and public. Rather than asking audiences simply to consume BBC content, it invites communities to encounter, challenge, participate in and benefit from the institution itself.

Made of Here has shown that the BBC understands the power of place. The task now is to make that commitment durable. A national broadcaster that asks every household to recognise its value should allow every community to see, use and shape that value. The BBC should not only be made of here. It should also be present here.

Key Contacts

Please feel free to Contact Us with any questions

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