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***European Economic and Social Committee***

**NAT/738**

**Contribution of rural areas to the 2018 EYCH**

**WORKING DOCUMENT**Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment  
**The contribution of Europe's rural areas to the 2018 Year of Cultural Heritage ensuring sustainability and urban/rural cohesion**

(own-initiative opinion)

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| For the attention of the study group members | |
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| Contact | [nat@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:nat@eesc.europa.eu) |
| Administrator | Maarit LAURILA |
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Rapporteur: **Tom JONES**

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| Study Group | Contribution of rural areas to the 2018 EYCH |
|  |  |
| President | Brendan BURNS (UK-I) |
| Rapporteur | Tom JONES (UK-III) |
|  |  |
| Members | Brian CURTIS (UK-II) |
|  | Henri MALOSSE (FR-I) |
|  | Sandro MASCIA (IT-I) |
|  | Lidija PAVIĆ-ROGOŠIĆ (HR-III) |
|  | Irena PETRAITIENĖ (LT-II) |
|  | José Manuel ROCHE RAMO (ES-III) |
|  | Martin SIECKER (NL-II) |
|  |  |
| Expert | Lone Leth LARSEN (for the rapporteur) |
|  |  |
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# **Conclusions and recommendations**

*Conclusions*

## The EESC fully supports the designation of 2018 as the European Year of Cultural Heritage and commends all efforts by promoters and organisers at all levels to increase visibility and celebrate Europe's diverse and rich cultural heritage.

## The EESC encourages participants to adopt the widest possible definition of culture and to be inclusive of all citizens.

## This year should not only be a celebration of the past, but should also promote evolving, new and challenging expressions of human inspiration and skill.

## Twelve months is a small window, but it is hoped that this extra effort and investment will incentivise citizens to build a re-energised, aesthetic, social and economic treasury of wellbeing for present and future generations.

## The EESC endorses the European Alliance for Culture and the Arts' call, of January 2018, for the European Institutions and Member States to ensure "substantial support within the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)". It also welcomes the European Commission's proposed commitment to culture in its draft budget of May 2018.

*Recommendations*

## Rural Cultural Heritage with all its richness and diversity should be formally recognised for its intrinsic artistic value and its economic and social contribution to the wellbeing of all European citizens.

## Investment by public and private funders should be "rural proofed" when any new funding streams are designed.

## Existing EU funding streams, including the Rural Development Programme should increasingly support projects protecting, promoting and enhancing biodiverse landscapes. Agri-environment schemes should continue to build farmland habitats and the built environment should reach higher standards of design, respecting traditional cultural patterns while being relevant to modern usage.

## Sustainable woodlands and forests and waterways deserve support measures to avoid degradation and pollution.

## The contribution of farm open days, school rural visits, shows, fairs and cultural festivals deserve public funding support as do measures to build bridges between rural and urban citizens through cultural projects.

## Measures to introduce rural culture and traditions to new generations through innovative modern idioms should be encouraged and the economic and social benefit measured, with good practice shared and celebrated. Artists and other inspiring cultural actors, sometimes from other locations, should be supported to help communities realise the full potential of local cultural assets.

## The serious loss of craft skills needs to be addressed through increased investment in training, while rural schools should teach the employment potential of rural assets as well as external career opportunities.

## Rural cultural heritage should be promoted sustainably for the purposes of tourism and in order to attract urban citizens to choose rural homes and work in remoter settlements.

## Marketing of rural cultural produce should be promoted and PGI status protected..

## Volunteering, community participation and social enterprises as well as rural private businesses, should be encouraged to develop and share their cultural activities, for the benefit of all citizens.

## While projects to mark the 2018 Year of Cultural Heritage will likely continue into the future, it is important that a clear stocktake and evaluation of quantifiable investment and outcome be carried out, taking account of economic, social and cultural factors.

## More research is needed to quantify and measure the quality of the benefits of heritage and ongoing cultural activity for citizens' wellbeing.

# **Introduction**

## This opinion specifically focuses on the wide range of assets and talent that rural areas and their citizens have, and will, contribute to Europe's cultural heritage and on how this wide definition of culture contributes to a more viable and prosperous rurality.

## This initiative has to be subject to "rural proofing" and the EESC is concerned that sufficient knowledge about the year will not reach the small community groups in villages and small towns in time for them to prepare and celebrate the vast array of cultural assets around them.

## Listing existing cultural activities and learning from successful projects has real value, but the 2018 celebrations should also include new, innovative cultural events which build on the past and transfer cultural heritage on to new generations in a contemporary way, giving new opportunities to rural areas.

## While it is difficult to quantify the economic and social benefits of cultural activity, it is important for the 2018 EYCH organisers to undertake some analysis which could justify future public investment. There should be a clear account of how successful the year was in reaching rural and remote areas and how any legacy of good practice can be built upon for future prioritisation at European and regional levels.

# **General and specific comments**

## Rural landscapes, the mosaic of natural geological structures and human imprints of agriculture, forestry, lakes, rivers and built settlements provide, perhaps, the greatest cultural heritage there is. From national parks and Natura 2000 sites to urban fringe green spaces, there is a diverse beauty to appreciate, a source of inspiration to generations of artists, musicians, litterateurs, dancers, and to all of us, who fall into none of these categories.

## Rural communities even add value to the landscapes. It is farm and woodland managers and employees and craftspeople – male and female – who have sculptured these landscapes. Generations of skilled people who harnessed land and water for food, shelter and to generate income. They shaped field boundaries from stone and branch, erected barns and workshops, tended animals and managed vegetation.

## Rural people created their own culture, reflecting their work, leisure and social challenges, in all forms of art and community activity, including through a diversity of language and dialect. They have, and still, create a legacy of value to society generally.

## However, their economic activities also evolve and sometimes disappear. Not all landscapes are pristine. Some bear witness to industrial exploitation, to wars and pillaging, to the ravages of drought, flooding or fire. They all have a story to tell, lessons to learn. Mitigating the impact of climate change will require positive intervention to retain diversity and a choice of experiences. Maintaining links with the past is branded "provision of public goods" and landscapes become degraded if there is not sustainable biodiversity, sensitive planning and managed access. Even the artistic cultural manifest is diluted as rural populations decline below sustainable levels.

## Developing rural-cultural tourism, linked to health and recreational activities is, and will be, a major bridge between urban and rural peoples. The city of Galway is a good example of rural- urban cultural partnerships and the Capital Cities of Culture Programme (e.g. Plovdiv, Bulgaria, in 2019) should always demonstrate rural as well as city cultural characteristics. In Wales, the Heritage Statutory Body, CADW, has an open doors initiative, which is part of a 50-country project to help citizens trace the footsteps of change, to better understand their being – "to plan your future you need to understand your past."

## In Greece, there is another example of shared knowledge, at the Art Farm, developed by Sotiris Marinis. In the village of Megali Mantineia in West Mani, he has built tree houses and a training centre, working on the principle that "an experience here educates about our rural and cultural heritage".

## Rural cultural tourism is an existing and growing economic and social resource- provider and the basis of joint investment. Traditional, regional culinary recipes, beers and wines, costumes and music, as exhibited at Berlin's Green Week, attract thousands of visitors annually and help connect the present with the past.

## Places for solitude, listening to and watching birdlife and experiencing woodlands – forest diversity as well as plant species for medical uses – all contribute to wider citizen curiosity, exploration and wellbeing. This builds added economic and employment value, based on rural core assets, a value already appreciated by smart villages and communities.

## Disseminating and depicting cultural information using digital technology will, creatively, narrow a divide that was increasing between town and country, between young and older generations. There are many emerging examples of innovative ways of portraying cultural traditions, such as the artistic project used in Aasted in Denmark and the village of Pfyn in Switzerland. These are projects resulting from local initiatives and identified local needs, use participative processes, which are themselves part of Europe's cultural tradition. Public and private resources should be available at European, state and regional levels to accelerate investment in similar initiatives.

## More research is needed to understand how cultural activity matters to people and what health benefits are derived, while existing Erasmus Plus Programmes, such as the TEMA Masters, currently fund good research opportunities. The high-level Horizon 2020 EYCH conference on "Innovation and Cultural Heritage"[[1]](#footnote-1) called for further efforts to develop research work to identify priorities and best practice in promoting cultural activities.

## Initiatives by charitable foundations, such as inter-school cultural competitions to involve young people in defining and delivering their choice of cultural activity, are welcomed. One example, which enables young people to explore their cultural heritage, is the school in Piscu, Romania, which is both a specialist heritage school and an organiser of workshops and conferences. The EESC, itself welcomed pupils from schools across Europe in March 2018 to discuss their cultural priorities under the "Your Europe, Your Say!" banner[[2]](#footnote-2). They concluded, "*I want to live in a Europe that gives valor to and protects all forms of culture… want to avoid elitism and popularise culture…but also have the opportunity to create our own..*.".

## Village and small town agricultural shows, such as the Royal Welsh at Builth Wells, farm open days, fairs, cultural festivals, such as the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, concerts, walking processions, such as the one in Veurne in Belgium, and traditional dance troupes, all contribute immensely to maintaining and promoting rural cultural heritage. The contribution of volunteers at these events, over many generations, is itself, a significant part of our cultural legacy. The work of the European Volunteer Centre and national and regional voluntary organisations in promoting quality cultural volunteering is applauded and they are encouraged to continue their valuable efforts.

## However, there is an increasing shortage of skilled artisans to transfer knowledge and train a new generation in ways to protect and develop this diverse heritage. The JEMA initiative (Journées Européennes des Métiers d'Art) which originated in France, regularly promotes the work of craftspeople and the need to train new generations. Addressing this need is a good opportunity for intergenerational bonding through, and for, cultural purposes. More training is essential within existing EU and national/regional programmes, concentrating, not only on existing craft and environmental skills, but also on mentoring, developing new techniques and cultural business entrepreneurism. Support is required for artists and others to work with local rural and urban schools, inclusively developing cultural ideas across generations and between ethnic groups.

## Rural cultural heritage is also about participative democracy. There is a strong European tradition of communal solidarity and of tackling isolation and disadvantage through community activities, many of which are based on culture. Building local sustainable leadership and delivering local priorities through community-led local development (CLLD) and the Leader method adds to a legacy of organised civil groups and movements. Social and cultural activities help bind people together in geographical areas with sparse public and private services. A tradition of voluntary sector intervention, sometimes as a deliverer of last resort, sustains sensitive, vulnerable landscapes of human survival. Public support for such activities is vital.

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1. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/events/innovation-and-cultural-heritage-2018-mar-20_en> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/civil-society-citizens-participation/your-europe-your-say> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)