

# Central Massachusetts Arts & Culture

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## Local Cultural Council Best Practices Guide

# 2025

This Local Cultural Council Best Practices Guide is the result of community outreach, stakeholder engagement, research, and conversations with Local Cultural Councils. The project was conducted in 2025 by CMRPC and funded by District Local Technical Assistance.

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# Executive Summary

Local Cultural Councils (LCCs) in Massachusetts play an important and admirable role in bringing arts and culture opportunities to the residents of every municipality in the Commonwealth. Funded primarily by the Mass Cultural Council, these locally appointed volunteer councils grant funds to visual artists, musicians, nonprofits, and other individuals and organizations that provide artistic programming and opportunities to residents. While their formal role is grantmaking, LCCs are uniquely positioned to advance community identity, civic engagement, youth leadership, placemaking, and municipal priorities through arts and culture.

This guide builds on the findings of CMRPC's Central Massachusetts Arts & Culture Initial Regional Needs Assessment (2024), conducted in collaboration with municipalities and Local Cultural Councils. That assessment identified shared challenges related to capacity, visibility, marketing and communications, technology, and municipal engagement, as well as strong interest in collaboration, training, and resource sharing across communities. The findings of that work, combined with research into documented Massachusetts and national case studies, directly inform the strategies presented in this guide.

The guide offers practical, adaptable approaches that Local Cultural Councils of all sizes can use to strengthen operations and expand community impact. Key strategies emphasize:

- Training and capacity building, including becoming familiar with social media, press correspondence, municipal government, and outreach and marketing skills.

- Partnerships, particularly active collaboration with schools, youth, municipal departments, and regional organizations, moving beyond transactional grantmaking toward shared goals and long-term relationships;
- Youth and Community Engagement, including opportunities for students and residents to serve as liaisons, ambassadors, and leaders in local cultural efforts;
- Accessibility and Support, such as clearer grant processes, applicant assistance, and transparent communication that encourages broader participation; and
- Regional Collaboration, including resource sharing, peer learning, and cross-municipal partnerships that help councils maximize limited funding and volunteer capacity.

Collectively, these practices reflect both the expressed needs of Local Cultural Councils and proven approaches observed in communities across Massachusetts. They are intended to strengthen councils' ability to serve their communities, increase public trust and awareness, and ensure that arts and culture remain a visible and valued part of local civic life.

# Purpose

This guide was developed by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) to support and empower Local Cultural Councils by providing practical, adaptable guidance rooted in real-world experience. As a regional planning agency, CMRPC works with municipalities across Central Massachusetts to promote collaboration, share resources, and support long-term community resilience. Arts and culture are a critical component of that work, contributing to placemaking, economic vitality, youth engagement, and overall quality of life.

The guide is intentionally flexible, recognizing that Local Cultural Councils vary in size, funding levels, and municipal context. Councils are encouraged to implement strategies incrementally and to select approaches that align with their community's needs, volunteer capacity, and local priorities.

In addition to identifying best practices, the guide responds to commonly identified capacity gaps, including needs related to marketing and communications, technology tools, social media, branding, and public outreach. By highlighting these needs and presenting practical approaches to addressing them—through training, partnerships, and regional collaboration—this guide aims to help councils operate with greater confidence and effectiveness.

While it is understood that many (if not most) LCCs have limited capacity to take on additional work, training, or planning activities, an understanding of these topic areas can nonetheless provide guidance and offer a roadmap for future endeavors.

Ultimately, the purpose of this guide is to position Local Cultural Councils as leaders, advocates, and connectors within their communities. By strengthening relationships, councils can expand participation in arts and culture, increase visibility and support for their work, and contribute meaningfully to the cultural and civic vitality of Massachusetts communities.

Many thanks to the LCC members we spoke with, and to regional and statewide arts & culture stakeholders for their involvement and support.

Mass Cultural Council  
New England Foundation for the Arts  
MASSCreative  
Greater Worcester Community Foundation  
Worcester Cultural Coalition  
Regional Local Cultural Councils

# Best Practice Topic Areas

# Build Technology and Capacity Skills Within LCCs

LCC members are volunteers with varying levels of experience, and have highlighted the need for technology, marketing, and administrative training, including things like logo design and press release writing.

## 01 Best Practices

- Recognize that volunteer councils need ongoing technical and communications training and provide onboarding training for new members.
  - Offer or attend training in areas like:
    - Website management
    - Social media strategy
    - Press release writing
    - Event promotion
    - Accessibility and DEI
    - Municipal government
  - Encourage mentorship between experienced and new members.
  - Use regional forums to share templates, workflows, and best practices.
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## 02 Action Steps

- Advocate for regional or statewide trainings rather than duplicating efforts town by town.
  - Partner with regional planning agencies or cultural organizations for workshops.
  - Create shared templates for:
    - Press releases
    - Social media posts
    - Event listings
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## 03 Case Studies

- The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts (PCA) partnered with Americans for the Arts to run a multi-year capacity-building initiative focused on arts marketing and audience engagement. This program provided intensive training in digital and traditional marketing strategies, audience development practices, and communications planning for arts organizations across Pennsylvania. It included workshops, cohort-based learning, and practical marketing skill development tailored to local cultural organizations' needs. [Americans for the Arts](#)

- Arts & Business Council Professional Workshops: The Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston runs capacity-building workshops and clinics on topics such as contracts, marketing fundamentals, and business practices for artists and arts organizations. These are structured as interactive professional development opportunities designed to meet real-world needs. [Arts & Business Council Boston](#)
  - Organizations such as the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative and Massachusetts Municipal Association offer courses and webinars to help volunteers and newly-elected officials understand the workings of municipal government; knowledge of things such as MA procurement law, Robert's Rules, MA Open Meeting Law, and succession planning are ways to enhance LCCs' ability to engage productively at a municipal level. [Citizen Planner Training Collaborative](#) [Massachusetts Municipal Association](#)
  - Brookfield & Rutland & Grafton Cultural Councils (Central MA) – These councils specifically identified marketing and Facebook training as critical needs, along with gaps in digital outreach and social media skills in general - reinforcing that capacity-building is foundational to successful programming and applicant support.
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#### 04 **Why this matters:**

LCCs with basic tech and marketing skills, along with an understanding of municipal government, are better positioned to support applicants, promote events, and demonstrate impact.

# Position the LCC as an Active Municipal Partner

Local Cultural Councils operate within municipal structures but often have varying levels of connection to local leadership. Strengthening relationships with Select Boards, Town Managers, and other municipal officials can help councils raise awareness of their role, align with community priorities, and build long-term support for arts and culture at the local level.

## 01 Best Practices

- Move beyond operating as an isolated volunteer committee.
  - Involve municipal leadership (Select Boards, Town Managers, Planning Boards) as active participants.
  - Frame arts and culture as tools that advance town goals such as downtown vitality, public health, education, and inclusion.
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## 02 Action Steps

- Invite a Select Board or Town Administrator representative to attend at least one LCC meeting annually.
  - Present LCC grant awards and community outcomes to the Board of Selectmen and/or Town Meeting.
  - Coordinate with planners, councils on aging, libraries, and DPWs on multidisciplinary projects.
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## 03 Case Studies

- Edible Avenue on the Bradford Rail Trail Extension (Haverhill) – A community beautification project funded by the Haverhill Cultural Council and sponsored by the Haverhill Garden Club, in partnership with Team Haverhill, and Haverhill’s Brightside, that integrates native plantings, and educational signage along the Rail Trail, enhancing both aesthetics and environmental learning for residents and school groups. [masshistorycommons.org](http://masshistorycommons.org)
- Plant Paint Cross-Pollinate (Amesbury) – A public mural project supported by the Amesbury Cultural Council that fosters “botanical belonging” and incorporates native plants into visual storytelling, linking art with ecological literacy and public space improvement. [Mass Cultural Council](http://MassCulturalCouncil.org)

- Needham Vacant Storefront Art Displays (Needham) - The Needham Council for Arts and Culture, in partnership with the Needham Art Association, used LCC funding to activate vacant downtown storefronts with mini art galleries featuring local artists' work. This project turns underused commercial real estate into public art experiences, encouraging foot traffic downtown and strengthening local identity — a form of placemaking that blends arts, economic vitality, and community presence. [Mass Cultural Council](#)
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#### 04 **Why this matters:**

These projects show how LCCs can impact and elevate municipal spaces or initiatives; LCCs can gain credibility and influence when arts funding is tied to visible municipal outcomes.

# Invest in Marketing, Communications, and Visibility

Local Cultural Councils support a wide range of impactful arts and cultural projects, yet their work and funded activities are not always visible to the broader community. Limited capacity poses challenges for councils to promote events, increase attendance, and clearly convey the value of local cultural investment to residents and municipal leaders.

## 01 Best Practices

- Use coordinated, multi-channel promotion to reach potential applicants as well as residents who are not already engaged.
  - Establish a recognizable LCC identity within the community.
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## 02 Action Steps

- Dedicate a portion of LCC funds to paid advertising, graphic design, or shared regional marketing.
  - Develop a basic LCC brand kit (logo, colors, boilerplate language).
  - Offer or attend training on:
    - Writing press releases
    - Managing Facebook and Instagram content
    - Creating simple graphics using tools like Canva
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## 03 Case Studies

- The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum’s “Gardner After Hours” program used targeted marketing and event programming to draw a younger demographic and increase audience recommendations, highlighting how focused promotional strategy can expand institutional reach. Wallace Foundation
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  - The Lowell Canalway Cultural District (one of Massachusetts’ 44 designated cultural districts) functions as a cultural hub promoted through coordinated marketing that highlights festivals, galleries, cultural venues, historical tours, and dining experiences. While not an LCC, event calendars, weekly newsletters, and partnerships with local media help maintain consistent visibility for cultural activity in the downtown area year-round. [Likelowell](#)
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## 04 Why this matters:

These programs illustrate how marketing investment directly correlates with attendance, awareness, and can impact perceived value of LCC work.

# Partner With Schools: More than Just Funding

Schools are central community institutions and natural partners for arts and cultural programming. Local Cultural Councils have opportunities to move beyond transactional grantmaking toward collaborative relationships with school districts that support student engagement, creative learning, and shared community goals.

## 01 Best Practices

- Shift from treating schools solely as grant recipients to active planning and implementation partners.
  - Embed arts into education and community initiatives.
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## 02 Action Steps

- Co-design projects with teachers, students, and administrators.
  - Support artist residencies, murals, performances, and projects involving students.
  - Align projects with service learning and civic education goals.
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## 03 Case Studies

- Salem and Peabody schools received Creative Youth Development grants for school-based creative learning experiences for K-12 students. While not entirely LCC-funded, some of these awards were announced in collaboration with the Peabody Cultural Council which indicates LCC involvement in local project support and active partnership with schools. [senatorjoanlovely.com](https://senatorjoanlovely.com)
- The Cambridge Arts Council funded multiple projects in 2024–25 that specifically involved students and school settings, including a Student-Created Mural at Fletcher Maynard Academy. This grant funded the creation of a student-created mural, illustrating direct student artistic engagement supported by local grant funding. [City of Cambridge](https://www.cityofcambridge.org)

- Northampton: STEAM-Mobile Pop-Up Reading Room – A multidisciplinary grant project that integrates science, technology, arts, engineering, and math activities for children and families, demonstrating effective collaboration between the Northampton Arts Council and community education partners. While not an engagement with the public schools, this project does indicate an effort to build connections to the local education community. [thecommunityclassroom.com](http://thecommunityclassroom.com)
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#### 04 **Why this matters:**

These projects demonstrate how partnerships deepen impact beyond a single grant cycle, and allow for arts integration beyond one-time programming.

# Engaging Youth as Leaders: High School LCC Liasons

Local Cultural Councils benefit from engaging young people as active participants in cultural work. Involving high school students as volunteers, advisors, or liaisons can expand council capacity and provide meaningful leadership and civic engagement opportunities for youth.

## 01 Best Practices

- Treat youth as contributors to LCC operations, not just program participants.
  - Recognize youth engagement as civic leadership development.
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## 02 Action Steps

- Appoint high school students as LCC liaisons or youth members
  - Offer community service hours or internship credit.
  - Engage youth in:
    - Social media management
    - Event promotion
    - Photography and documentation
    - Youth-focused outreach
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## 03 Case Studies

- The Mass Cultural Council’s official LCC Toolkit includes a “Working with Youth” section that describes how councils can recruit and appoint youth members (including high school students) to their LCC. Melrose, Acton & Amherst are noted as having implemented this, and may be good resources. [Mass Cultural Council](#)
- The Museum of Fine Arts Boston Teen Arts Council is a structured teen leadership program where high school students:
  - Advise the museum on engagement strategies for youth
  - Lead peer-oriented tours and workshops
  - Organize performances and teen-focused event
    - Advocate for teen visibility in the art

This arts-oriented youth engagement program can be a model or provide examples for LCC strategies. [Museum of Fine Arts Boston](#)

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## 04 Why this matters:

Youth involvement strengthens relevance, outreach, and long-term community investment in the arts.

# Improve Grant Accessibility and Applicant Support

Local Cultural Councils serve a diverse range of artists and organizations, including many first-time applicants. Clear communication, accessible processes, and applicant support can help ensure that grant opportunities are understandable, equitable, and welcoming to a broad cross-section of the community.

## 01 Best Practices

- Reduce barriers for first-time applicants and underrepresented artists.
  - Treat grantmaking as relationship-building, not just administration.
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## 02 Action Steps

- Host grant-writing workshops or office hours.
  - Provide plain-language guidance and sample applications.
  - Include application access in multiple languages and reasonable accommodations for those who may need them
  - Promote opportunities via QR codes, social media, and schools.
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## 03 Case Studies

- Grant Writing Virtual Office Hours: Cambridge Arts Council held scheduled sessions where prospective applicants could ask questions, get help interpreting guidelines, and receive support preparing applications — all made publicly available to anyone interested in applying. [City of Cambridge](#)
- The Worcester Arts Council (WAC), which co-administers LCC-related funding in Worcester, holds virtual grant workshops aimed at:
  - first-time applicants
  - anyone interested in learning how to apply for council or arts fundingThese workshops are offered as part of the official grant cycle, providing step-by-step information and opportunities to ask questions in real time. [City of Worcester](#)

- Northbridge Cultural Council (Central MA) – This LCC described a high demand for grants paired with a clear need for applicant support workshops, highlighting the importance of outreach and guidance.
  - Rutland Cultural Council (Central MA) – Noted that outreach and accessibility are key to diversifying applicants.
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#### 04 **Why this matters:**

With more varied media, diverse cultural contexts, and emerging artists comes renewed interest from residents as well as a broader spectrum of potential viewers and attendees.

# Encourage Regional Collaboration and Resource Sharing

Local Cultural Councils often face similar challenges and opportunities across communities. Regional collaboration allows councils to share resources, exchange ideas, and learn from peers, helping to strengthen individual councils while building a more connected and resilient cultural ecosystem.

## 01 Best Practices

- Look beyond municipal borders to maximize limited funds.
  - Share performers, marketing, ideas, and infrastructure.
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## 02 Action Steps

- Participate in or organize regional LCC forums; leverage existing groups or councils that may include non-profit or other arts organizations
  - Build regional connections & networks
  - Pool funds for larger or higher-impact projects.
  - Share templates, vendor lists, promotional tools, and supplementary grant opportunities
  - Share successful initiatives or council activities
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## 03 Case Studies

- In western Massachusetts, a coalition of 10 arts organizations formed the Berkshire Arts & Culture Alliance to jointly advocate for the region's cultural ecosystem, share promotional strategies, and unify efforts to sustain cultural tourism. [Times Union](#)
- Mass Cultural Council supports regional cultural councils, where two or more towns form a single council to pool funds and expertise. Examples include:
  - Acton-Boxborough Cultural Council
  - Cultural Council of Northern Berkshire
  - Martha's Vineyard Cultural Council
  - Mid-Cape Cultural Council[Mass Cultural Council](#)

- Central Massachusetts Regional LCC Engagement (CMRPC) – Conversations across multiple towns highlighted strong interest in collaboration and shared learning among councils.
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#### 04 **Why this matters:**

Peer-to-peer learning, collaborative planning, and pooling of resources can lead to increased efficiencies, new ideas, and creative solutions.

# Summary: How Case Studies Support Best Practices


Best Practice Area	Examples	Demonstrated Impact
Technology & Capacity	PCA; Art & Business Council; Brookfield, Rutland, Grafton LCCs	Identified training as foundational need, regional organizations are available to assist
Municipal Partnerships	Edible Avenue (Haverhill); Plant Paint (Amesbury); Needham storefronts	Built cross-departmental & multidisciplinary relationships
Marketing & Visibility	Gardner Museum; Lowell Cultural District	Illustrates strategies to improve awareness & attendance
School Partnerships	Salem & Pabody; STEAM-Mobile (Northampton); Cambridge Arts Council	Deeper youth and family engagement along with creation of long-lasting programming and connections
Youth Leadership	MCC; MFA	Youth as creators and civic leaders
Accessibility & Inclusion	Cambridge; Worcester; Northbridge; Rutland	Greater grant accessibility and diversified applicants
Regional Collaboration and Resource Sharing	Berkshire; MCC; CMRPC	Value of shared resources, capacity, and conversations

# Conclusion

Across Central Massachusetts, Local Cultural Councils are already demonstrating how their grantmaking can make an impact on their communities. With strong partnerships, increased strategic marketing, youth leadership, and municipal engagement, LCCs are poised to build on this impact and provide an even greater benefit to the residents of our region. By adopting these best practices—and learning from successful LCC-funded programs statewide—LCCs can strengthen their role as civic partners and cultural leaders.



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