

EXETER CULTURAL STRATEGY

2026–31

The city of creative confidence



Exeter
City Council

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WELCOME

Culture matters in Exeter. It shapes everyday life for residents and visitors alike, and this belief underpins Exeter City Council's decision to commission a new five-year Cultural Strategy.

Our City has changed significantly since the last strategy was written. Exeter has grown and diversified. The way people live and work has shifted and so has the creative life of the city. At the same time, local government is operating in a far more pressured environment.

This strategy is about raising our collective ambition and building a city of creative confidence. It strengthens civic leadership, supports our cultural partners, and helps unlock the creative talent found in every corner of the city. But above all, it puts communities first. Culture isn't only found in venues or big events, it lives in community spaces, local heritage, youth opportunities, grassroots creativity, and the everyday moments that help people feel connected to where they live.

It contributes to wellbeing, skills, inclusion, and pride in place.

As a Council, our role is to help culture reach people where they are and ensure it reflects the diversity of our city. We want Exeter to remain the cultural heart of Devon while supporting vibrant, inclusive activity across all our communities. This aligns with our 2040 Vision and Corporate Plan: to be a City of Culture.

This strategy is shaped by lived experience. It doesn't impose a single idea of culture, but builds on what people have told us, creating something grounded, inclusive and optimistic, reflecting the Exeter we are today and the creative, confident city we want to become.

“We need to instill in people more of an imaginative, magical belief in themselves – that you can go out and just do anything that you want to do.”

INTRODUCTION

Why is a cultural strategy needed?

Exeter City Council has written a new five-year Cultural Strategy for the city, to reflect Exeter's creativity, community needs and ambition, so that culture matters in everyday life.

The new Cultural Strategy for Exeter aims to:

- establish a clear vision and mission aligning with everyone's needs.
- align with the ambition in our Corporate Plan 2025-28 to be recognised as a city of culture.
- reflect the current landscape – including existing assets, activities and partners, the importance of culture, Exeter's existing profile and the visitor economy.
- develop a methodology for consultation, ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion is reflected and enhances our perspective.
- be based on data and evidence.

This Cultural Strategy is structured around a new vision for Culture in Exeter, underpinned by four key themes and a series of strategic actions and outcomes.

Baseline Report: The project grew out of an initial assessment of scope, key strategies, reports, cultural assets and audiences together with benchmarking and sector trends analysis. This built a first picture from a depth of work already done from different perspectives on Exeter's cultural life.

Engagement: The strategy has been drawn from the results and analysis of extensive engagement of over 600 residents, artists, creatives and cultural organisations in Exeter between August 2025 and February 2026.



INTRODUCTION

How the Council worked and what was learned.

In this new snapshot of cultural life in Exeter, we conducted a public online survey which received over 500 submissions, linked to some visual activity packs. We held workshops with young people at Exeter College, we conducted more than twenty one-to-ones with experienced people from the sector and we recorded a public conversation between more than thirty attendees, hosted by Positive Lights.

We also publicly shared a first snapshot of our conclusions at a Cultural Summit event held at Exeter College. The event involved college learners and was attended by civic and community leaders as well as cultural organisations. From this experience, we held three further workshops with cultural community leaders and influencers, to further shape the vision and themes of the strategy.

While some of our findings echo many sentiments from past engagements, creative life in the city has also moved on since Covid.

Though the city has long been a place of making and entertaining and storytelling, it seems clear there is a shared expectation of expressing a new chapter, to join the dots in new effective ways for everyone. To look forward.



DEFINITION

The word *culture* – what do we mean?

The word 'culture' describes all the activities falling within different artforms. These include theatre, visual arts, music, dance, film and literature. This is also about heritage assets and the creative activities delivered by libraries.

Culture can be experienced in different formats – within a building or outside at a festival. People can also experience culture in different ways – as a member of an audience, or as a participant where they take part in a class or a workshop.

Culture is also about 'creativity' which means imagining, expressing or creating something new in one of the art forms under the definition of culture. Anyone can take part in creativity, informally or formally, as an amateur or professional.

The 'creative industries' encompass the different artforms we've referred to under 'culture' and also include some additional professions, sectors and new technologies. The term relates to industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent, and these industries encompass advertising and marketing, architecture, crafts, design and

designer fashion, film, TV, radio and photography, museums, galleries and libraries, music, performing arts and visual arts, publishing, IT, software and computer services, including video games.

A 'creative practitioner' describes someone who works in the creative industries.

Charles Landry makes an additional point for our purposes. In his well-received paper: *An opportunity in the making: Exeter and its creative placemaking*, he says:

"Culture is everywhere, it is all-embracing, it is the fabric of what we are and the air we breathe and since it is difficult to see outside of ourselves it can appear invisible. Culture is who we are, how we behave, what we think and so shapes our mindscape and fashions the physical fabric and landscapes we build and defines our economy, our social life, our cities, our use of technology. Our creativity determines what we can become. It runs through our lives like our unseen nervous system or electricity."

CREDIT: CREATIVE ARC, THEO MOYES AND LILLY SHERRY



"Like nature, culture is no respecter of boundaries. Culture is for everyone, and it's everywhere. It's what makes us human."

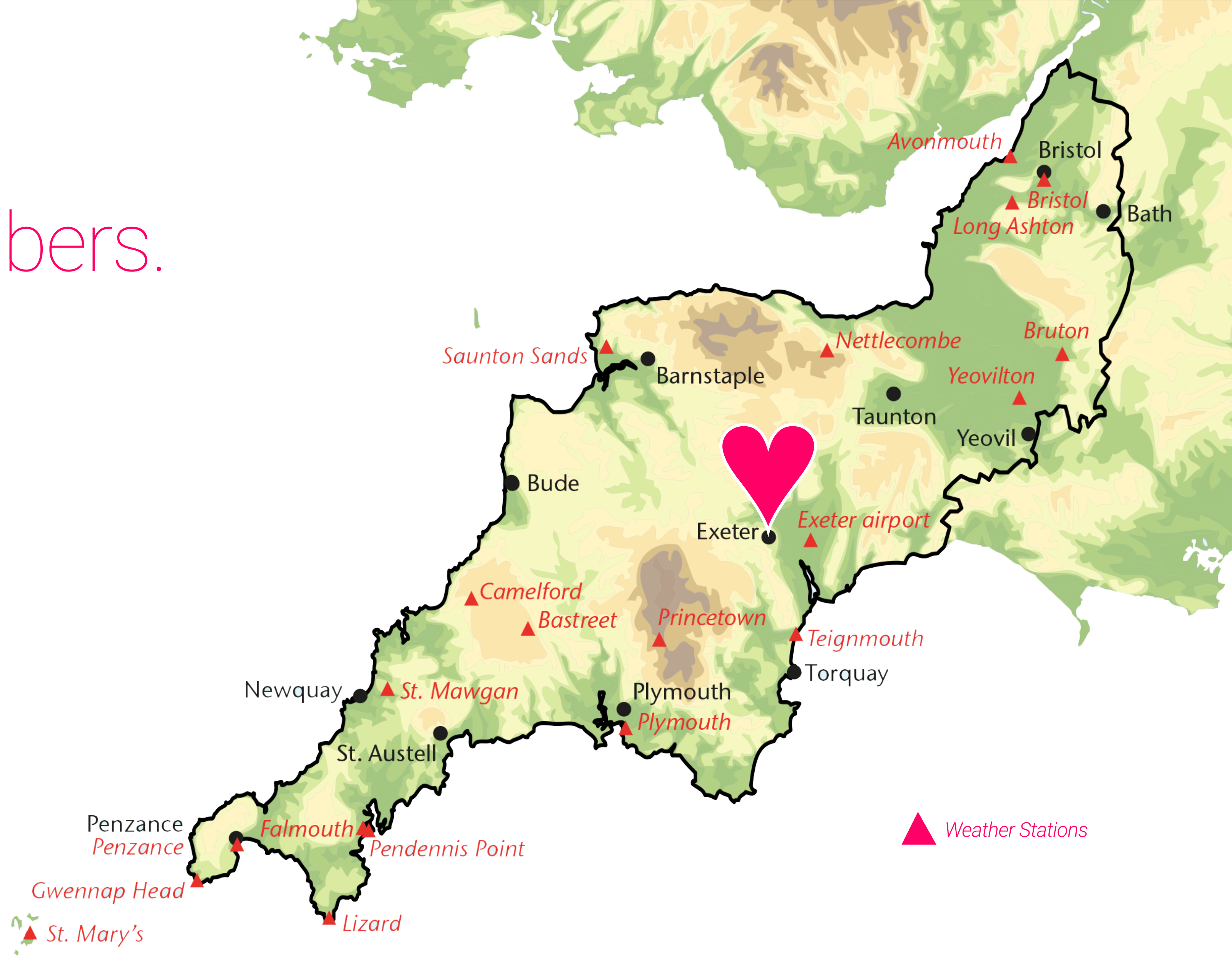
CONTEXT

Geography and numbers.

Exeter is at the centre of the South West Peninsular, one of the UK's 11 distinct regional climates. It is the region's commercial and cultural beating heart.

The city is at a crossroads from many places, including strong international connections. With some 3,000 people working for cultural organisations or as creative freelancers and more than 3,300 working in tourism, five National Portfolio Organisations add significantly to the city's offer and reputation. Exeter ranks in the top 1% of UK retail destinations with average total visitor spend in the last three years at £190,150,667.

Given that the Creative Industries are growing faster than the wider UK economy and that the South West's total economic output in this sector even back in 2022 was £5.25 billion, Exeter's cultural place in this context could be increasingly symbolic.



CONTEXT

Strengths and reputation.

As we begin a new chapter of expressing and exploring Exeter's story, we know it is readily known in various ways. Its heritage, its creativity, its climate expertise – and more. These markers of identity are strengths to feed our ambition for the city.



A new cultural strategy for the city.

Practicing anything builds confidence,
creativity and futures.

Exeter has been a safe place for makers,
storytellers and creative thinking for
centuries. A place with imagination in the
heart of its beautiful natural region.

To make sense of changing times, where
do we go? When the ways that things used
to work no longer work – in a city, in a
country – who do we turn to?

What if we went to Exeter, and it helped us
create something new and special?

CREDIT: CORN EXCHANGE



VISION

A POSSIBLE STORY OF US TOMORROW: THE CITY OF CREATIVE CONFIDENCE.

CREDIT: ALMANAC THEATRE, EMILY APPLETON

This is an era of unbelievable change. We think we're used to it, but many belief systems are being challenged about work, technology and economics. The people best equipped to cope with change and turn it into innovation are those who feel not just informed but creatively confident.

What if Exeter was a city full of them?

What if our city built such an eco system of experimentation, personal expression and cultural exploration for people already here and coming to the city to feel safe and build their creative skills?

What if Exeter became a place known for how confidently it looks forward? Because it has such a history of sharing stories and ideas, surrounded by nature, it has attracted lots of makers and cultural knowledge alongside climate expertise – and because it has built such practical structures for developing ideas?

Innovation is linked to both the creative industries and emerging climate knowledge and technology – but it's also linked to heritage, and stories of where we've come from. The effect of encouraging creative confidence in Exeter would not just be artistic, it would be seen in the growth of progressive creative business, sustainability networks and leading-edge research. The sort that might increasingly fuse artistic, scientific and heritage leadership. The ingredients are here.

Though Exeter sits at the heart of its region, Exonians' strong sense of roots and values could increase the city's reputation for being welcoming and for holding space for different experiences and for some leading edge thinking and creativity. Permaculture's view of the natural world is instructive to our times as well – that life is richer where ecosystems mix.

If Exeter has long been a city full of stories, attracting as many makers as climate scientists how could we not expect to find our own creative confidence in Exeter?

VISION

Economically it can seem like there's no mood to experiment culturally. Yet communities are likely hungrier for inspiration. In these cultural times, we're also having to find the confidence to face a few things, global and personal. How might we inspire new tastes, experiences, openness and experimentation? Curiosity is a practice of resilience.

What if Exeter was a place known for doing everything it can to encourage people to try things creatively for themselves, and to make it easier to follow an idea into experimentation? Where many people have felt that culture in Exeter is "not for them" – what if it became increasingly obvious that it could be? That opportunities to discover new ideas, hear new voices, even join them, are to be easily found in the city.

Creativity, wellbeing and nature are natural partners –and surely look very at home in Exeter. If "the creative industries are at a crossroads" for a number of reasons, they should easily find themselves at the meeting point that is Exeter. A place where innovation could thrive because of the easy intersections of creativity, artistic and scientific research and a

freedom of healthy and active lifestyle.

Is this a city to feel safe being yourself? In streets, spaces and opportunities. To feel at home making and exploring, all rooted in some of the tradition of doing things your own way, but with identifiable support. If we are culturally in a time of transition, for the city, for the country, for the world, then this historic moment is not the past, but it's not quite tomorrow, and we all have some exploring to do.

As the Exeter Cathedral clock was among the very last places to hold out against railway time, so this city has always done things its own way, with different insights. As the clock ticks down on sustainability initiatives, could this be a place to put the creative confidence into facing the future?

CREDIT: THE MOSSY CARPET, ISOBEL THOMAS

**SOCIALISING >
MODELLING >
EXPERIMENTATION >
EXPECTATION.**
THIS IS HOW A
CULTURAL
REPUTATION
FLOWS.

VISION

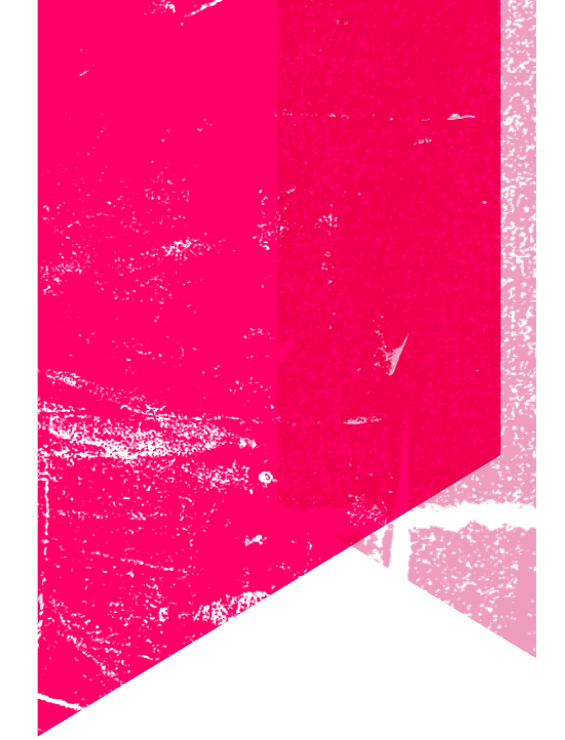
CREDIT: CREATIVE ARC, THEO MOYES AND LILLY SHERRY

A vision statement for Exeter.

Exeter will be a place where everyone feels more creative confidence – included and connected to culture, environment, heritage and exploring new ideas.

VISION

Theme 1: How we think and act.



Aim:

Exeter to grow into its role as a confident regional cultural capital.

How we'll achieve this:

Foster a culture of ambition and joined-up leadership across Exeter's cultural sector, together with effective partnership working.

Strategic Actions:

1. Leadership: Establish an effective lead strategic partnership for culture and the creative sector for key deliverables. The Exeter Partnership to adopt the Cultural Strategy and through the Connected Culture Group (EPCC) become the sector's strategic leadership and advocacy body.

2. Co-ordination: The Council to enable a cultural sector forum to share best practice, expertise and forge partnerships, ensuring alignment between the Cultural Strategy and other city-wide strategies, visions and place branding.

3. Ambition: Foster a culture of authentic ambition, and position Exeter as regional cultural capital as the city adapts to local government reorganisation and boundary changes. Cultural partners to collaborate and scale up ambition in how to use the UNESCO City of Literature designation for the benefit of the city.

Strategic Outcomes:

1. Exeter recognised as an international city of culture, securing increased success with inward investment through strong joined-up advocacy and collaborative funding bids.

2: Council known for enabling leadership for the cultural sector, advocating with investors and funders, bridging the knowledge gap between cultural leaders across the sector, from NPOs through to smaller cultural organisations and independent practitioners.

3. A future Exeter grows into its role as regional cultural capital and visitor destination for the Southwest Peninsula and secures access to increased investment.

VISION

Theme 1: How we think and act. [cont]

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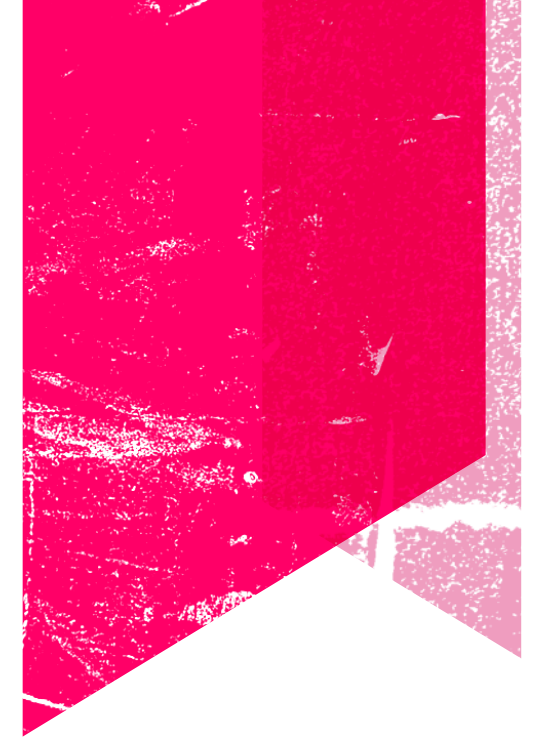
4. Council as an Enabler: Establish a council-wide strategic approach to facilitating and delivering a City of Culture, with the commitment to culture a core aim running through the whole organisation.

5. Investment: Work with funding partners to support Exeter's cultural assets, securing increased investment for cultural infrastructure, talent development and the audience offer, reflecting the trajectory of growth of the city and its increasing needs.

Strategic Outcomes:

4. The Council's cultural assets and services to be financially sustainable, streamlined, networked and effective with the capacity and resources to deliver and facilitate an excellent cultural offer and access increased funding.

5. Exeter's cultural assets operate on a stable and sustainable financial basis, allowing room for growth and development of organisations and programming. New organisations, venues, and artists are able to emerge and flourish, inspiring creative enterprise, leading to job creation, skills up-lift and talent development. The cultural offer becomes world class.



VISION

Theme 2: Connecting with our grass roots.



Aim:

To grow sustainable cultural and creative structures that join the dots.

How we'll achieve this:

By nurturing our eco-system of artists, creatives and makers by unlocking spaces, providing affordable facilities, supporting talent development and creating opportunities for people at the early stages of first or new careers.

Strategic Actions:

1. Spaces: Work with local businesses to bring vacant shops and other spaces into use to support the creative industries.

Encourage meanwhile uses which support cultural activity.

2. Learning: Cultural organisations, Schools, Higher and Further Education to work collaboratively to identify need and lead partners to apply for funding to promote new talent development schemes for young, aspiring and on-going career support along with those transitioning into the creative sector.

3. Funding and Employment: Cultural organisations to provide opportunities for employment in and access to funding for the creative sector, including commissions for artists.

Strategic Outcomes:

1. Opportunities for emerging artists to start their careers in Exeter, retaining talent and boosting the development of the creative industries. Support Exeter Plan aspirations to integrate live/work maker, public and performance spaces into development aspirations for strategic brownfield sites and regeneration areas.

2. Establishment of more development pathways for skilled and thriving creative and cultural skills in the city. Harness volunteering opportunities and existing networks.

3. Enhancement of a skilled and thriving creative and cultural workforce, plugging in more new skills and cultural assets in our communities.

Theme 3: Unlocking accessibility and wellbeing

Aim:

An accessible, inclusive and engaging cultural offer providing benefits for all our communities and audiences.

How we'll achieve this:

We will invest in our cultural offer, support the sector delivering it, advocate for continued funding, and consult with audiences to develop the continued relevance of the offer. Embedding cultural programming and infrastructure into wider housing regeneration and health priorities, we will advocate for links between our natural and built environment, creative experiences and health.

Strategic Actions:

1. Access: Improve access to cultural experiences and provide welcoming and safe spaces.

2. Promotion: Improve promotion of cultural activities for residents and visitors.

Support high quality cultural place-making projects in new developments.

3. Programming: Maximise existing opportunities and create new ones to enhance city-wide cultural programming which focus on community engagement and community resilience.

4. Wellbeing: Create strong links between the culture and health sector and viable models of activity.

Strategic Outcomes:

1. More people benefit from the positive impacts of culture on their lives.

2. Celebration of the city's heritage assets supporting the city's identity, place narrative and visitor experience. More people are able to access and enjoy the cultural offer. Cultural organisations see larger audiences and improve financial sustainability.

3. Prioritise securing resources and financial support for existing and emerging programmes which focus on community engagement and community resilience through culture, celebrating local heritage and unheard voices.

4. Access to new funding streams and creation of new programmes of work. Improving health and wellbeing outcomes through culture. Expanded links between culture and sport, building on the success of Women's Rugby World Cup.

VISION

Theme 4: Encouraging innovation where environment meets culture.



Aim:

Connect climate science, arts and literature, heritage, and sustainability with learning and innovation.

How we'll achieve this:

Use Exeter's strengths in Research and Development (R&D) and creative industries, as well as its wealth of heritage, as anchor points to inform and direct strategy, programme development, connection with communities and bids for investment.

Strategic Actions:

1. Innovation: Build culture, heritage and sustainability partnerships, developing new ideas and collaborations. Develop place-based proposals for future R&D and investment.

2. Knowledge: Create stronger links with scientists and climate collaboration groups in the creative industries with education knowledge sets and expertise, civic leadership and creative community groups.

Strategic Outcomes:

1. Exeter builds a strong reputation for innovation and R&D and grows its Creative Industries sector. Co-create solutions to social challenges around health and wellbeing and the climate emergency by linking with the benefits provided by the cultural sector and heritage.

2. Easier pathways to new perspectives, comparing and developing innovative responses to climate challenges. Knowledge escapes silos more effectively, and more people who have felt less connected to environmental challenges find creative confidence in engaging with them differently.

MEASUREMENT

How we will know we're on track.

This Cultural Strategy is focussing on the changes Exeter wants to realise, and using these Strategic Outcomes to inform Strategic Actions which have been grouped together into high-level Themes.

But what comes next? The Connected Culture Theme Group, of the Exeter Partnership will become the sector's strategic leadership and advocacy body, as well as facilitating a cultural sector forum to share best practice, expertise, and forge partnerships, which support culture in the city. One of its tasks will be to develop the key themes, principles, and high-level actions in our Cultural Strategy, into a detailed action plan, which is jointly owned by the sector.

It will be the responsibility of the Cultural Sector to interrogate and break down each suggestion into specific deliverables with time and resource allocated against each.

A Monitoring and Evaluation Plan will be critical for ensuring activities and actions stay on track, objectives are met, evidence and data are collected for accountability, measuring impact and for future learning. Methodologies for monitoring and evaluating progress against actions can be tailored for each action, depending on the data required or the audience engaged.

CREDIT: EXETER PHOENIX, KRIS SUM



DEVELOPMENT

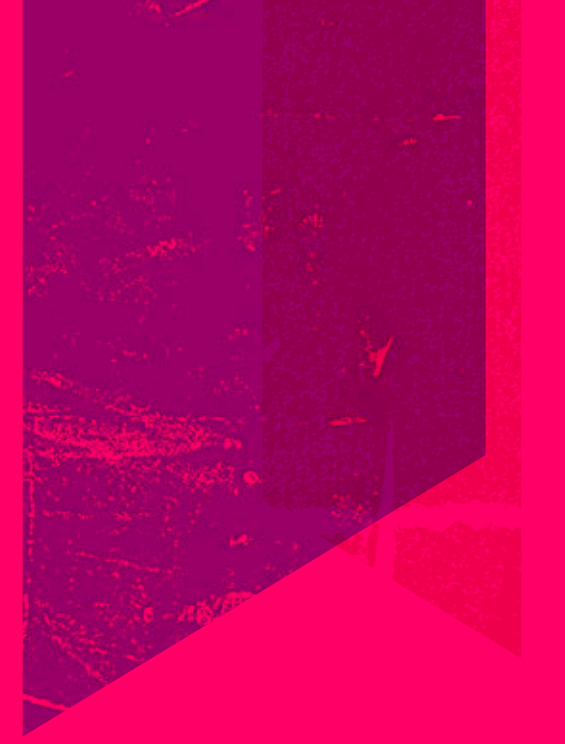
What happens next?

The priority is to work with Key Partners and Stakeholders to support the city's cultural ambitions.

Now it's time to help each other write the next stories of Exeter's people and their futures with new creative confidence.

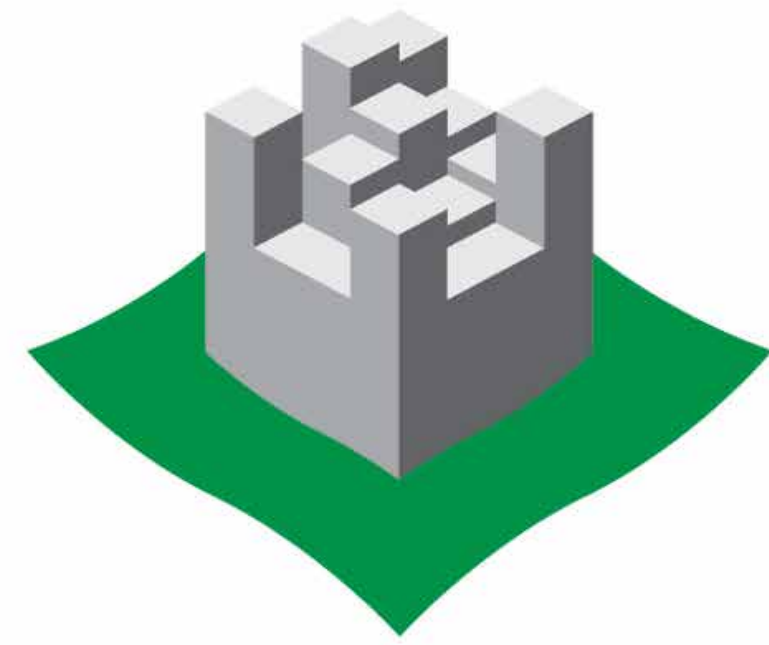
“Creativity is not necessarily an artistic endeavour – although it could be. Creativity can also be understood as using imagination to create the circumstances for innovation and inventiveness. At the most fundamental level creativity, as a core part of human experience and wellbeing, it is the will and opportunity to actively engage with the world around us with curiosity, flexibility, openness and courage.”

(Co)Mission report



WELCOME
TO
OUR
CITY

THE
CURIOUS,
THE
COURAGEOUS,
THE
EXPLORERS,
THE
EXPECTANT.



Exeter
City Council

INPLACE
CONSULTING