

Re-framing the Performance Landscape

Options Analysis Paper for Exeter

This report was produced for Liveable Exeter
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1. Introduction

This short Paper provides outline analysis to inform a coordinated strategic approach to the performing arts infrastructure landscape of Exeter, with a focus on venues, especially those with a strong performing arts dimension. It builds from the 2019 *Place-based Cultural Strategy* for the city and presents a set of strategic options for the Liveable Exeter Board and partners to consider.

The study is about identifying gaps and opportunities and suggesting interventions from a short- to long-term perspective that can help the performing arts infrastructure be in a position to adapt to the changes that Covid-19 has caused. This will help with organisations and individuals connecting more successfully and enabling the sector to maximise future opportunities for investment. This will in turn assist senior stakeholders in the city to lobby, campaign and advocate for greater investment.

In different ways and at a range of speeds, the arts and cultural sector across the world is moving from Covid-19 rescue to a re-framing: of the value proposition for art and culture, and the partnership and investment models that will maximise impact and enhance viability for the future. Relief responses (e.g. emergency funding, rapid digitalisation and refreshed approaches to community

engagement) are pivoting toward longer-term strategy, where old certainties are gone and a new paradigm is required.

Exeter is moving faster than most UK cities to re-frame the role, position, model(s) and value proposition for arts and culture. Indeed, this work was already underway in the recent Cultural Strategy, which sets out an ambitious agenda for culture and place-making structured by four themes where:

“Exeter will be known nationally and internationally as a city of culture. It will innovate and lead in the areas of the environment, wellbeing, cultural literacy, creative making and heritage innovation to build a living city where everyone thrives.”



Writing the future of Exeter on the walls of a cardboard city, during a performance of 'Here, Now', part three of the digital art triptych *This City's Centre* by Blind Ditch. Photography by Benjamin J Borley.

Since the Cultural Strategy, Exeter has become a UNESCO City of Literature, and partners have continued to take significant strides in aligning agendas so that culture has a central role to play in shaping a city that is more liveable, where growth is sustainable and inclusive, and where environmental sustainability is cherished and delivered on¹. This is why, for example, culture is viewed as a key element in a re-imagined city centre where retail and residential are successfully blended with cultural participation, cultural tourism and creative making. This is also why Exeter is becoming a leading-edge city in interdisciplinary practice, with culture and the creative industries part of the wider 'knowledge economy' inclusive of science, technology, design and a range of associated future-facing activities.

Covid-19 has been an immense disruptor to the cultural system of Exeter and it continues to be hugely damaging to institutions and organisations, especially those that depend on tickets and associated service-based revenue for their survival. But it is also an accelerator of change, much of which was already underway. For example, Covid has required a radical readjustment to the ways in which audiences are engaged, with cultural organisations struggling to develop hybrid models that mainstream digital technology in ways that deepen and diversify relationships and experiences.

Covid has also increased the perceived value of and identification with cultural

organisations, facilitating a sense of loss and dislocation where many people have come to crave access to certain types of cultural content (such as the 'live experience'), and have sought support from culture in delivering pastoral care with regard to both mental and physical wellbeing. But Covid has also been hugely deleterious for the cultural workforce and its capacity to deliver this kind of value, causing unemployment and underemployment and jeopardising career opportunities for many talented people.

It is in this context of generation-defining change that the cultural sector of Exeter is now operating. The crisis has exposed existing frailties – such as in business models, talent development and some elements of partnership. The opportunity now is to build from the Cultural Strategy toward better partnership working, enhanced coordination, and a radical reframe so that Exeter can deliver on its potential to become a critical hub of national significance for talent development, R&D, practice, performance and participation.

¹ Such as through the new Cultural Compact, which will play an important role in attracting culture-led investment to the city.

Let's Create, the 10-Year Strategic Plan of Arts Council England, complements the city's Cultural Strategy and provides additional guidance. Its investment principles of ambition and quality, inclusivity and relevance, environmental responsibility, and dynamism collectively

chime with the ambitions of the Exeter cultural sector, City Council, the University, College and other key partners. This is because such partners, in their Cultural Strategy, collectively endorsed the following cross-cutting priorities for culture in Exeter, each of which provide a terms-of-reference for the strategic approach post-Covid:

- **Creative case for diversity** – embedding diversity in all cultural planning and production so it reflects the full range of backgrounds and perspectives in our society
- **Enhancing governance** – there is a need for stronger senior-level participation in the city's cultural conversation
- **Audience development and engagement** – identifying audiences for specific programmes and projects and learning from this is crucial
- **Invigorating partnership** – work better across organisations, communities and the business sector to maximise tangible opportunities for artists and organisations
- **Internationalisation** – better exploit Exeter's international networks and partnerships to create tangible opportunities for artists and organisations

- **Communication** – restructure and repurpose the ways in which the city articulates and shares its cultural offer and identity, internally and externally, locally, nationally and internationally
- **Evaluation** – embed evaluation into the delivery of the Strategy to understand impact
- **Nurturing talent** – with a growing and youthful population, we need to ensure accessible routes to cultural participation and opportunities
- **Urban and rural connections** – develop stronger cultural links between the city, rural communities and smaller towns.

The following findings provide summary analysis of a short consultation exercise with key partners across the city where we took a fresh look at how best to develop the city's existing and emergent portfolio of core performing arts venues and organisations as part of Exeter's Covid-19 recovery strategy. The aim overall is to help guide partners toward delivering a strong, sustainable performing arts ecology (as part of a wider and increasingly interdisciplinary arts and cultural sector), capable of showcasing the best work from around the UK and overseas, but simultaneously focused on supporting the development of creative individuals and cultural communities across Greater Exeter and the city-region.

2. The Opportunity – a Pioneer City of Culture

The Covid-crisis is causing all of us to reflect, reconsider and re-frame. From the personal to the global level, notions of home, work, wellbeing, mobility, community and culture are, in essence, under review. For Exeter, notwithstanding the considerable emotional, financial and of course health challenges caused by the pandemic, there is cause for optimism. The consultations for this Paper point to a set of assets – both civic and cultural, plus considerable levels of innovation and creative thinking – which will help the city re-boot and develop. The opportunity, which builds from the Cultural Strategy, is for Exeter to operate as a pioneer city of culture. This entails leveraging the following qualities:

The ‘15-minute city’ of culture

Exeter’s relative smallness can be a strength as it develops its cultural ecosystem and positions culture at the heart of a wider set of strategic agendas. Covid has exposed, for some, the emotional and cultural diseconomy of living and working in larger cities, such as the dislocation of lockdown, the links between air quality and health, or the challenge of mobility in terms of safety, cost and efficiency.

- **Exeter can be positioned as a leading smaller city for liveability and wellbeing** that attracts cultural practitioners and organisations reconsidering the virtues of a big city base. With a strong and accessible cultural sector, a dynamic and growing focus on creative making and innovative practice, and a talent pipeline through the University and College, the city can be a hub that connects emergent and established talent. To achieve this will require a new level of coordination across the cultural infrastructure landscape, plus a range of targeted interventions in infrastructure provision, programming, audience engagement and commissioning. See Section 4.
- **Cultural infrastructure is a key element in the city’s ‘liveable’ narrative.** For example, by clustering key infrastructure in the city centre, enhancing coordination and strengthening links to neighbourhood infrastructure and hubs such as the University, Exeter can be the UK’s first genuine ‘15-minute city’:



“The fifteen-minute city is about people on the ground, their daily experience, sharing and supporting each other. A Five Minute City helps organize neighbourhoods to generate more social capital by building a shared and relevant future together... in just five minutes of stress-free walking or cycling, you’ll be able to get to most places you want to be.”²

The planned growth of Exeter will need to hold dear an approach to liveability that recognises the role of cultural venues as key connecting agents and hubs, helping to give the city a human scale.

Preston Street Union performing ‘Serge/Surge’ - commissioned by RAMM as part of its ‘Migration’ programme - at the city wall, Exeter Quay, 2019. Photography by Jonathan Price.

2 Scot Hein and Colleen Hardwick, A New Way to Imagine a Better Vancouver, The Tyee, October 2018. Also see: www.ft.com/content/c1a53744-90d5-4560-9e3f-17ce06aba69a

The interdisciplinary city of culture

In part an outcome of the city's scale, which is an enabler for strong cross-sector partnership working and a 'whole place' approach to social, economic and cultural development, and in part an outcome of the city's social and industrial development – including the growth of the University – *Exeter is an interdisciplinary city with culture at its heart*. This is advantageous in becoming a pioneer city of culture post-Covid, with scope to deliver on significant 'spillover effects' such as talent retention/attraction in high-value jobs, city centre renewal, cultural tourism, and innovation in technology and knowledge industries. This is also advantageous in delivering a set of social and environmental outcomes, not least nurturing a more inclusive city and delivering on the global sustainable development goals. Key assets include:

- A University that champions interdisciplinary practice, R&D and talent development. For example, the Drama Department is part of an interdisciplinary landscape that includes visual culture, film studies, digital humanities, business and technology. The Business School, Global Systems Institute and Innovation, Impact & Business Directorate are connecting (and sometimes commissioning) agents for culture, linking cultural practice

to the key issues of our age. The university is also a critical international agent for the city, keeping Exeter connected and relevant, and generating human and knowledge capital through these relationships.

- Exeter College, which provides a talent pipeline across Devon and, through its courses, connects a diversity of subjects, and links learning to its application in the workforce, including the cultural and creative sectors.
- A set of emergent and more established hubs for creative practice that combine talent development, R&D, making and performance. For example:

- **The Northcott is sharpening its role as a talent development organisation via Northcott Futures. Partnership with the Barnfield Theatre is set to give it a city centre home and enhance capacity for emergent creative practice as part of a commitment to 'creative making'**

- Kaleider continues to excel as a hub and platform for interdisciplinary work, and is a router and amplifier of Exeter internationally
- Maketank is becoming a vital incubator and propagator of often radical new performance-centred cross-art-form practice. It is part of a producer and incubator community that includes Dreadnought SW, Scare the Horses and Blind Ditch. It is also, with organisations such as Scare the Horse and Topos, catalysing a re-imagined and re-balanced city centre where independent cultural production and performance are central to renewal post-Covid. An emergent network of independent practitioners is emerging which is impact-driven and keen to build stronger connections with the rest of the cultural landscape.
- The Phoenix provides a diverse range of programming and plays a vital role in developing and presenting work across different art forms, and is a social and cultural hub at the heart of the city. This includes offering a home and platform for key organisations such as Double Elephant, Sound Gallery and Phonic FM.
- Exeter Library excels as a safe and accessible space for learning, engagement and

creative practice. It is a 'social technology', operating as both a venue and participatory tool which can open-up access to culture for different communities as well as provide the space for new types of cultural practice to be tested and presented.

- UNESCO City of Literature has mobilised new levels of cross-sector partnership and provides a thematic architecture for new types of interdisciplinary programme development, linking literature to other art forms. The Custom House will be an important hub for new work that connects different art forms and audiences.
- The Corn Exchange can, with some enhancement and a street level presence, play a role as a trusted 'cultural front door' for the city, a low-threshold access point to the diverse and interdisciplinary performance and wider arts and cultural landscape.
- Essence of Exeter, the city's social enterprise CIC, is helping to grow new networks of practice and is actively seeking to build socially driven cultural collaboration.

The interwoven city of culture

Exeter's relative smallness, and its qualities as an instinctively interdisciplinary city, do – in theory – help future-proof for a sustainable and inclusive approach to economic, social, and of course cultural development. Yet in practice, the cultural infrastructure of the city is not sufficiently interwoven as a fabric of coordinated development, practice and performance. This is changing, and Exeter has stronger partnerships and more advanced coordination across its cultural assets than many other cities. But the city does not yet play to its strengths in terms of its scale, interdisciplinary instincts, or the combination of its collective cultural assets.

Specific challenges are introduced below in Section 3. But first, the opportunity is introduced for Exeter to supercharge its cultural sector to the heart of its growth and development. This builds from the commitment to culture as a holistic approach to city-making in the 2019 Cultural Strategy. For example:

- **Talent development, attraction and retention.** Exeter is well-placed to become a hub for performance talent. The alumni of the University and exceptional teaching and research provision, the expanding teaching offer of the College, the alumni of specialist organisations such as Cygnet Theatre School, and talent that has worked with key organisations such as Northcott Theatre, demonstrate the city's credentials as an incubator for early-stage talent. But talent retention remains a challenge and the city is not yet competitive as a hub for early or mid-career talent seeking a base outside London. In part this is a factor of Exeter's smallness: it lacks the critical mass in terms of audiences and work opportunities. But smallness is also a strength: the opportunity exists to collectively support talent pathway development, directly linking education provision to the growing independent cultural production offer (e.g. an increasingly talent-development-focused Northcott), championing the city's venues as platforms for new and experimental work (e.g. 'tried and tested in Exeter'), and expanding an interdisciplinary commissioning culture with performance a 'sand box' for science, technology and wellbeing.
- **Incubation and radical practice.** Exeter has an emergent independent creative making scene, but there is some way to go to realise the city's potential as a hub for new work, experimental and radical practice, and the type of innovation and excellence that will attract talent and leverage investment across a range of agendas (from environmental sciences to artificial intelligence). At an organisational level, this commitment to nurturing talent and making new work is very apparent – e.g. the Northcott Futures programme, the core work of Kaleider, and emergent incubator and practitioner activities (e.g. Maketank), and the role of the library as a development platform for diverse talent. However, these different elements are not yet interwoven as a strategic development programme. An 'Exeter Futures' creative commissioning, R&D and production programme could provide the catalyst Exeter needs if it is to establish itself as a city that welcomes and provides a low-cost and high-value enabling environment for ambitious talent. There is certainly appetite for such an approach from across the sector.
- **Practitioner Networking.** Maketank recently commissioned a survey for Exeter-based theatre and performing arts practitioners (as part of the Arts Council England Emergency Funding agreement). The survey demonstrated real appetite and need for practitioners to meet (both online and offline) and have facilitated conversations that enable them to 'cook up' shared ideas and projects, activate skills and practice exchange, coordinate opportunities for residencies, and provide flexible access to project and development space. The survey also demonstrated appetite to establish a network for theatre-makers and performing arts practitioners, connecting freelancer and organisations, with Exeter operating as a hub / gateway for a wider 'peninsular network'. Critical is the connectivity between independent makers and producers, who feel isolated and struggle to access opportunities to develop new work over a sustained period. If Exeter is to grow as a city that welcomes and nurtures talent, its network capacity needs attention. Below is a sample of quotes from the Maketank survey, which highlight a blend of concerns and perceived opportunities.

‘Full of potential but struggling to make itself heard.’

‘A lot of wonderful individual artistic projects living in Exeter without a home to connect up.’

‘Full of potential and in a process of changing, growing and hopefully blossoming into something more supported and sustainable.’

‘Disjointed with lots of well meaning, but ultimately ad hoc, connections playing to an isolated "arty" audience.’

‘A place with lots of interesting makers, sense of experimentation, poor audience engagement with wider population. i.e. a cool scene that speaks to itself.’

Exeter is:

The Maketank Theatre and Performance Survey, August 2020

‘Underfunded, small but varied and driven by passion.’

‘Varied but lacking the international standard events that a city of this standing deserves.’

‘Culturally vibrant considering its size, but it lacks very little opportunity for newcomers/early-career artists/recent graduates to develop their ideas, showcase, grow as a company, take risks etc. There are also too many artists self-producing, and not enough producers. Additionally, companies and artists who are established and closer to mid-career, struggle to confirm comprehensive national and international tours. There's also a huge lack of representation of Devon artists at Edinburgh Fringe.’

‘There is a wealth of creative activity, but would welcome more opportunities to network, skills-share, collaborate.’

- **Collaborative engagement, programming and commissioning.** Exeter has a reasonable track record of collaborative engagement, programming and commissioning, with, for example, the University playing an active role convening relationships, exchanging knowledge and commissioning across sector and art form boundaries. Yet collaborations have not regularly led to coordinated medium- to long-term programming or led to more systematic approaches to provision, such as through a shared festival programme or a city-wide engagement strategy. UNESCO City of Literature is a potential game-changer (which also connects with other key parts of the cultural landscape such as the RAMM), as is the overarching Liveable Exeter model:

- *To provide a programme development umbrella for the city, with a potential ‘Year of’ model where key organisations coordinate programming linked to a specific theme (e.g. the environment, de-colonisation, a particular writer or genre). There is considerable appetite for this, with most organisations very open to a shared programming horizon which can be underpinned by collaborative branding, talent development, engagement and ticketing. Or in other words, can deliver a system-wide approach to cultural provision and city-making. This won’t be easy and would benefit from some pilot activities to test appetite and practicalities.*
- *To establish a cultural prospectus / shared assets approach for cultural development. This requires the mapping of all types of cultural infrastructure across the city, inclusive of outdoor space and heritage assets (e.g. the Cathedral, churches, halls, empty retail, etc); the coordinated promotion of this infrastructure prospectus both within the city and for incoming productions across art-forms; and a committed city-wide programme of development to ‘work these assets’ and increase visibility and access, to include rehearsal, experimental, development and performance.*

- *To unlock additional infrastructure assets in the city to increase scale, diversity, flexibility and sustainability. This can include longer-term commitments to re-use of office and retail space for flexible cultural production and presentation (e.g. securing a permanent home for emergent organisations and championing the city centre as a hub for creative production and presentation). It can include the active pursuit of additional capacity that would enhance Exeter’s appeal for touring work and provide a more diverse offer to local and regional audiences. And it can include the revitalisation of existing cultural infrastructure so it can play a more active and compelling role in the above-mentioned cultural prospectus (e.g. a re-vamped role for the University’s Great Hall as a live events venue, investment in outdoor spaces for a diversity of performance and events programming, and a transformed Barnfield as the Northcott’s and partners’ city centre development hub).*
- *To develop a ‘shared front door’ model for Exeter cultural venues. This can operate at different levels. The most basic approach would involve an informal network model based on an agreement to share information on programming,*

to promote each other’s programme, and to actively avoid clashes for activities with a clear shared audience. The most structured approach would involve an ‘Exeter Venues’ model with shared management, bookings, operations and even governance. The most appropriate model for Exeter sits somewhere between these approaches. There is clearly scope for much stronger coordination in ticketing and data. The proposals for a central ticket office / one-stop-shop at street level below the Corn Exchange is a welcome testbed to explore ways to attract audiences ‘back in’ as the Covid pandemic subsides. It could also provide the foundations for greater coordination, encouraging partners to think of the city as an ongoing ‘Exeter Festival’ programme. This transcends a building-based model and strengthens the connecting tissue between venues, such as in audience development, programming, education and innovation.

Specific infrastructure and development needs / opportunities are listed in Section 4. These are based on the expressed priorities of consultees.

3. Gaps, Challenges and Threats

Consultees identified a range of structural / systemic as well as specific challenges for the performing arts sector in Exeter (as part of a wider arts, cultural and creative sector where work is increasingly interdisciplinary). Consultations were pitched to explore opportunities and identify how the city can build on a set of strategic assets – from talent to built infrastructure. However, it is important to do this with sight of perceived gaps, challenges and threats.

These are summarised in brief below:



Exeter Street Arts Festival 2019. Photo by Rhodri Cooper

Scale / Capacity

- A relatively small city which lacks critical mass in infrastructure, organisations and resident talent. This limits profile and reach to deliver for the wider region.
- The City Council has been an exemplar municipality in its support for culture. However, its budgets are severely limited and it requires co-investment from a range of public and private sources if the cultural sector can deliver on the Council's ambition. Given the long-term, high-level local authority commitment to culture in Exeter, there is a collective sense of under-investment from the wider partnership landscape.
- Limited organisational capacity to drive sector development, especially in ways that connect creative making to programme development which can draw larger audiences to the city.
- Limited capacity re. volume e.g. the lack of a medium-sized venue (800 plus) for touring shows (and long-term, locally developed work) and live music.

- The lack of 'capacity range' – e.g. anchor venues Northcott and Corn Exchange have a capacity of 500. This can lead, in theory, to a level of product overlap and competitiveness for the same audience.
- Smaller organisations struggle to develop beyond perpetual fragility. In part this is because they are not yet effectively plugged into opportunities of scale (e.g. through the University or in collaboration with NPOs). It is also due to a precariousness of tenure (e.g. short-term access to meanwhile space), and still underdeveloped sector networks, which limit access to different types of capital.
- Whilst the city has a good number of National Portfolio Organisations, the levels of investment from ACE are relatively modest. Exeter should look at equivalent cities and their investment to create a future NPO Investment Plan.

Fragility

- Covid-19 has exposed the financial fragility of key organisations, especially those that depend on ticketed revenue and associated services (e.g. drinks, room hire, etc.). Such 'hybrid models' are most robust in 'normal times', but are not fit for purpose if audiences are unable to enter the building in any great number. Beyond emergency relief, such organisations will benefit from investment to build digital capacity and extend their reach to programme and develop work outside in other locations across the city. This can be as part of a city-wide approach to coordinated programming, production and development.
- Freelancers, micro enterprises and smaller cultural organisations are in total crisis due to Covid-19. With a very 'hard Brexit' to come, the ecosystem is under unprecedented threat. In addition to emergency funding from Arts Council England, other measures will be needed and with urgency – e.g. local commissioning programme that connects to wider strategic agendas, a dynamic and effective B2B network for performance and

making, and dedicated space for talent to establish its practice in the city to seed longer-term development and growth.

- Elements of the existing infrastructure landscape require modernisation to improve the quality of the audience experience and increase flexibility in development and programming. Some venues also have scope for expansion. This includes the Corn Exchange, for which there are plans to moderately increase capacity and establish a street-level presence.
- The city centre is going through a radical and painful restructuring process. This has to be re-framed as an opportunity to develop an attractive, productive and dynamic city centre with cultural production a key element. Vacated retail provides a platform for emergent work and in turn emergent organisations will benefit from security of tenure as part of a new look city centre that operates as a cultural production campus.

Talent Pipeline

- There is a structural disconnect between emergent talent and the professional theatre and cultural sector of the city. The University generates some incredible talent and it is a major centre for interdisciplinary practice across the arts, humanities and sciences. It is, however, very large. Targeted pipeline activities such as co-commissioning, and the use of space and expertise of the city's cultural organisations, will help to facilitate exchange. The importance of establishing a 'meeting place' or 'watering hole' and stronger hubs and networks was a common thread across the consultation.
- The need for stronger alignment with further education and the professional cultural sector, especially with regard to 'backstage skills'. This is to provide direct pathways for local talent into the local sector. Such an approach is currently under development via a growing partnership between the Northcott and Exeter College (e.g. tailored accredited courses and the opportunity presented by the re-imagined Barnfield Theatre as a space which connects emergent talent to larger-scale work).
- Exeter Library is an under-utilised asset for cultural sector talent development and socially engaged programming. Partners across the cultural sector can make better use of this incredible resource, as demonstrated by successful collaborations with Theatre Alibi, Kaleider and the RAMM. The library (and its connections across Devon via Libraries Unlimited) is a natural starting-point to explore coordinated participatory work and to create an open, accessible and trusted hub for diverse and socially engaged practice in the heart of the city centre.
- Links between education, skills, R&D and city-making are under-explored from a talent pipeline perspective. The proposed Creative Academy (linking Exeter College, Kaleider, Exeter City Futures and UNESCO City of Literature) could be a catalyst for developing innovative urban solutions through active engagement with the local talent base.

Platform and Network(s)

- For a relatively small city, Exeter lacks a coordinated platform where audiences can access information on upcoming work, where organisations and practitioners can connect, and where the rest of the world can see 'what's on'. Cultural venues across the city would benefit from shared promotion via a digital platform such as that being piloted via Kaleider – 'This is On Again'.
- Exeter lacks a coordinated approach to venue management and programme development. Activities are programmed on a building by building basis, most often by building-based organisations. This limits opportunities for a 'whole city' approach to cultural programming, which would involve a more seamless approach to shared programming, a more strategic approach to programming outdoors and in 'non-cultural' spaces, and fewer clashes. It would also help facilitate fresh approaches to thematic programming – such as via a 'Year of' or revamped Exeter Festival model.
- Professional networks are under-developed. There are several network gaps – such as between diverse and neighbourhood-based practice and professional cultural organisations; between independent cultural practitioners and larger institutions; and between imaginative creative producers and programmers and 'city-makers' such as those responsible for planning and licensing. Essence of Exeter CIC can play an important convening role for micro cultural enterprises and freelancers.
- Regional, national and international positioning. Exeter can play a more pronounced and innovative role across these three scales – e.g. as a broker and hub for cultural production talent at a regional level, working with partners across the south west; as a nationally significant test bed for new types of performance and interdisciplinary practice; and as an outward-facing place which actively pursues international collaboration and showcases 'Made in Exeter' work overseas. Much of the international-facing work made in Exeter is insufficiently championed back in the city; and incoming work is too often under-exposed, in part due to gaps in platform and network infrastructure.

4. The Exeter Cultural Prospectus

A summary interpretation of the gaps, challenges and threats listed in Section 3 above is that while Exeter has many of the elements needed to deliver on the ambitions of its Cultural Strategy, it does not function as a self-fulfilling cultural system. This involves the following qualities:

- **Inclusion and diversity.** All partners need to work together to open-up access and engage with communities that will be even harder to reach post-Covid.
- **Talent.** Building from above, Exeter needs to be far more accommodating for emergent talent, independent cultural practice, and potential incoming talent attracted by the city's quality-of-life promise.
- **Innovation.** Exeter can do more to champion risk and radical practice, backing its cultural sector to create new solutions – e.g. to a new type of city centre with creative production at its heart and where interdisciplinary practice is championed. The best ideas for urban mobility, wellbeing, or simple play, can come through investment in creative practice. Too often Exeter has waited for another city to take a risk or prove a concept, while Exeter would have been a better fit.
- **Incubation, propagation and acceleration.** Cultural venues lack the space (and security of tenure) for developing new work, nurturing talent and testing new types of practice. The re-imagined Barnfield will enable the Northcott to establish an active production and development presence in the city centre. In addition, there is significant scope and opportunity to unlock the creative potential of organisations over the long term and to better connect them to the knowledge capital of the University. This can include a serious look at establishing long-term leases or freeholds to anchor cultural production in the city. In turn, this can open-up the possibility of establishing an interdisciplinary cultural production campus across the city centre. Such an approach would be a game-changer for Exeter.
- **Capital development and place-making.** Existing parts of the city's portfolio require investment – to enhance the quality of the offer and enable some (limited) expansion in capacity. There will also be fresh opportunities to acquire buildings that can expand capacity and endow Exeter with the amenities required to develop and grow as a pioneer city of culture. This will include heritage assets and the imaginative re-purposing of retail, office and outdoor space toward a 'campus' model for the city centre. Models such as the establishment of a Cultural Trust, which can borrow to invest in cultural infrastructure, can be scoped to assess risk and reward.
- **Venue management and coordination.** A priority is to establish a coordinated approach to venue management. If not via a shared management system, it is imperative key venues work as a cluster to coordinate approaches to promotion (e.g. via a shared / overlapping platform), ticketing (digitally and via a potential shared front door at the Corn Exchange), programming (e.g. shared thematic programming via a 'Year of' model), and presentation (working together to promote Exeter's assets as a shared prospectus for both locally developed and incoming work).

In summary, partners in Exeter should work toward establishing a shared cultural prospectus. Starting with key performing arts venues and cascading cross-art-form, this articulates, celebrates and promotes the city's collective cultural offer. It involves a shared terms-of-reference for the above development areas. It also presents the city's collective 'ask' for strategic investment. This is a strategic ask where Exeter puts down a marker to operate as a pioneer city of culture: one that backs diverse talent and facilitates a system-wide approach so it can flourish and over time provide a return on investment through the social, cultural and economic value generated.

Below is a very elementary list of key projects, programmes and developments that can help Exeter to go to the next level as a pioneer city of culture:

Elements of the Cultural Prospectus	Interventions – as proposed by consultees	Timeline	Return on Investment Considerations
Inclusion and Diversity	Exeter Library and key socially engaged organisations (e.g. Theatre Alibi) draw up a plan for the co-programming of social infrastructure (schools, libraries, health settings, etc). This opens-up a new landscape of venues for performance and participatory programming.	Short-term as part of Covid response.	Significant medium-term engagement outcomes.
	Urgent diagnostic to understand audience change post-Covid, supporting venues to work together in an evidence-based way to reach those hardest to reach. Northcott Futures provides a good platform for this.	Short-term.	Significant quick win: enhancing audience relations at a time when social challenges are increasing.
Talent	Position Northcott Futures as an anchor talent development programme for professional theatre talent; co-design additional features with key local partners (e.g. Maketank, Scare the Horses, Blind Ditch, Dreadnought SW) to connect talent development across different parts of the performance ecosystem.	Short – Long-term: taking talent development to a new level with a clear structure and designated role for different parts of the ecosystem.	Vital ecosystem development proposition – will enable different parts of the sector to grow together.
	Advance the proposed ‘Creative Academy’ model to formalise partnerships in education, (performing) arts, creative industries and city futures – as a long-term programme of creative city-making.	Medium-term: co-designing an impact-facing approach to talent development.	A value-adding intervention which can facilitate opportunities for the cultural sector (and in particular young talent) to deliver on Liveable Exeter priorities.

	Identify a set of clear professional development activities that link cultural organisations and practitioners to world-class assets at the University. With some of the best English and Drama courses in the country, co-commissioned residencies, events and even performances can enhance talent development across the city's cultural sector.	Medium-term: undertake initial audit, identify pipeline and collaboration opportunities, set out pilot projects.	Significant long-term impact on talent retention and re-attraction.
Innovation	Heritage innovation: bring the Cathedral, Powderham Castle, and other heritage assets into the 'cultural venues prospectus', giving scale and diversity to the asset base.	Medium-term – building from the Heritage Innovation theme in the Cultural Strategy.	Could be significant: scaling up and diversifying venue capacity, connecting different audience segments and increasing the attractiveness / competitiveness of Exeter for festivals, events and artists looking for 'boutique' or value-adding venues.
	Establish an Exeter Commissions programme – to champion new work and programme it across venues. This is a seeding process for emergent talent and could be the basis for an 'Exeter Fringe' or a re-booted Exeter Festival.	Short-medium term as a post-Covid re-boot of Exeter's cultural offer.	Major – a statement of intent to scale-up and embed innovative practice across Exeter's cultural landscape.

Incubation, Propagation and Acceleration	<p>A re-imagined and refurbished Barnfield “lays the foundations for a process of change”. The establishment of a new Exeter Northcott Trust (ENT) will facilitate a 100% lease and management of Barnfield by the Northcott – effectively establishing a multi-venue organisation. This will drive its physical and programme development, with creative making and community engagement at its heart, and programming and audience development working seamlessly across both venues.</p>	<p>Short-term delivering long-term change.</p> <p>This establishes a multi-venue organisation for Exeter and opens-up capacity and range for programme diversification, community engagement, talent development, and programming in non-theatre settings (such as outdoor). This boost in capacity, and the ambition that drives it, can be both an anchor and catalyst for the performing arts and wider making activities in Exeter.</p>	<p>Major – a key intervention which connects different parts of the ecosystem and builds capacity overall and will enhance coordination across the ‘value chain’, including links between the University and city centre.</p>
	<p>Emergent organisations such as Maketank and Scare the Horses are actively supported to grow in stature and scale as incubators for interdisciplinary practice, hubs/enablers for emergent talent and as flexible platforms for incoming talent. Maketank’s proposed theatre / producer network will help catalyse this, as would security of tenure and a more formalised relationship with the University. By working with more established organisations such as ENT, the Phoenix and Kaleider, a city-wide innovation campus could be co-designed and initiated.</p>	<p>Medium-term – work with these organisations and their networks to co-design an ‘innovation campus’ model.</p>	<p>Vital to the health and diversity of Exeter’s cultural sector, especially if it is to more effectively encourage radical practice, interdisciplinary making and activities which help re-balance the city centre.</p>
	<p>Prioritise platforms that bring the city’s touring work back to Exeter, building local audiences for radical practice and connecting local cultural practice to the world. Currently there is a relatively low ‘return rate’ and local audiences could be more engaged with the city’s touring product and talent.</p>	<p>Medium-long-term. This requires consideration of where blockages currently exist.</p>	<p>Not an immediate priority but needs to be factored into activities that focus on talent development, incubation etc. Exeter can be a ‘runway city’ for cultural practice, but it also needs a greater proportion of talent to return.</p>

	Custom House as a vital hub connecting literature and storytelling to the wider cultural ecosystem.	Medium-term – reaching out beyond its core role for UNESCO City of Literature.	A natural progression as partnership working evolves.
Capital Development, Resilience and Place-making	A Covid-19 training package / toolkit for indoor and outdoor activity. This is to help the future development of programming across the city when safe social distancing is required. It can draw on best practice and set out clear guidelines that are workable for Exeter.	Short-term (now).	Significant – in re-building trust and confidence. Also relatively low cost.
	A refurbished Corn Exchange (with a fixed roof and more!) to boost capacity, enhance quality and provide a shared promotion and ticketing function for the city's venues.	Medium-term.	As part of the 'slow re-opening', a re-fresh would help build confidence for both audiences and performers. A relatively low meanwhile investment can help the Corn Exchange play a meaningful role in the city's cultural offer for the next decade.
	Continue to investigate potential of venues that can support the development of performance-based work in Exeter. This could present an opportunity for Phoenix to grow across two sites and seed a multi-venue model for management, programming and promotion.	Short-term: analyse the opportunity and be ready to act. Medium-term: build capacity and diversify the type of venue available for a range of uses, including performance, rehearsal and development.	With the right building (and at the right price and scale), Exeter can demonstrate its ambition by adding to its portfolio and revitalising its heritage assets. Priority should be given to city centre venues – both for meanwhile and long-term activity, as part of a reboot of the role and purpose of the city centre.

	<p>Retain options for a new-build mixed-use arts / performance hub – which could be a longer-term legacy outcome for a city centre-based cultural production campus that actively re-purposes old retail and tertiary uses into dynamic cultural space.</p>	<p>Long-term.</p>	<p>Building from the above-mentioned activities which adopt a refurbishment and remodelling approach, Exeter should retain a preparedness to go for scale should the investment climate change.</p>
	<p>Outdoor arts / public realm innovation programme: connecting the building-based assets, animating the city and re-modelling the future city centre.</p>	<p>Short-medium term with long-term impact.</p>	<p>Significant: notwithstanding the Devon weather, outdoor arts activity is under-developed in the city. Short-term, outdoor arts can provide a solution to Covid-19 restrictions; long-term, Exeter can be a pioneer in ‘hybrid solutions’, making much greater use of the outdoors as a cultural resource and leading on planning and design solutions which put culture centre stage (e.g. for a re-imagined city centre).</p>
	<p>A cultural precinct? The Ramm, Exeter College, Phoenix and Exeter Library as a connected ribbon of facilities – with signage, public realm enhancements, outdoor space for programming, tailored co-commissions, and coordinated engagement activities.</p>	<p>Medium-long-term. The proximity of these assets presents an opportunity for the city to evolve a recognisable cluster of complementary cultural infrastructure.</p>	<p>Medium: this will need to leverage stronger partnership working, including approaches to programming and audience development. This will be a challenging process given the different organisational missions of each venue.</p>

	<p>The development of a full future NPO Business Plan. This enables Liveable Exeter to campaign and lobby with senior ACE staff, MPs & Government to help Exeter get the investment it deserves. It can include comparator cities, so that Exeter gets a deal for the organisations and city which is warranted, rational and fair.</p>	<p>Short – medium term</p>	<p>This will create a greater ROI for Exeter in that organisations will be funded at a level that can enable them to innovate due to an appropriate level of funding.</p>
<p>Venue Management and Coordination</p>	<p>Establish a shared platform for promotion and signposting – multi-venue and cross-art-form.</p> <p>Trial a one-stop-shop model for ticketing and signposting – via the Corn Exchange (ground floor).</p>	<p>Medium-term. This will require careful mediated planning and a pilot / test phase.</p>	<p>Significant if can be realised – increasing efficiency and amplifying the cultural offer to reach larger and more diverse audiences.</p>
	<p>Think and operate as if Exeter is a festival: establish shared planning horizons around clear themes – e.g. ‘Year Of’. Establish a cross-art-form programming working group to co-create themes and test programme ideas. Manifest this as part of a wider festival development strategy for Exeter, which aims by 2030 to be a leading city-wide, multi-venue festival which celebrates radical interdisciplinary practice with theatre and performance at its heart.</p>	<p>Medium-long-term, building on all of the above. A pilot ‘year of’ could be introduced for 2022.</p>	<p>Significant: Exeter can be a pioneer city of culture if it works toward a ‘big picture’ shared opportunity such as this.</p>

Appendix 1. List of Consultees

Cygnets Theatre – Rosalind Williams (Principal) and Alistair Ganley (Artistic Director)

Essence of Exeter CIC – Exeter's Social Enterprise Network - Amerie Rose (Project Manager)

Exeter Barnfield Theatre – Elaine Faulkner & Nigel Paul (Trustees)

Exeter Corn Exchange – Dave Lewis (Manager)

Exeter City Council – Jon Paul Hedge

Exeter Culture – Dom Jinks

Exeter Northcott Theatre – Daniel Buckroyd (Chief Executive), Kelly Johnson (Marketing and Development Director) and Emma Stephenson (Finance and Operations Director)

Exeter Phoenix – Patrick Cunningham (Director)

Kaleider – Seth Honnor (Director & CEO)

Libraries Unlimited – Daniel Clark (Creative Director) and Karen Huxtable (Senior Supervisor - Development at Exeter Library)

Maketank – Olya Petrakova (Director), Berengere Ariaudo De Castelli (Administrator) and Bryan Brown

Theatre Alibi – Nikki Sved (Artistic Director & CEO)

University of Exeter – Stephen Hodge (Associate Professor in Live Art + Spatial Practices), Professor Jo Gill (Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean – Humanities), Sarah Campbell (Associate Director for Art and Culture), Professor Jane Milling (Head of Drama)

Arts Council England – Sarah Crown (National Director for Literature & Exeter lead).

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