

A Cultural Strategy for the City of Exeter

1.0 Why a Cultural Strategy

- 1.1 “Culture” might be intangible and virtually indefinable, but it is the best word we have to describe that complex set of characteristics in a community which make it unique, and provide quality of life for its members, once their more basic needs have been satisfied. A local council should have a cultural strategy because its main job is to lead the community in maintaining and improving that quality of life. It should be clear about how and what it is doing to carry out that job.
- 1.2 There are many attempts at a definition of culture. They differ because they describe different aspects of what culture is, they look at it from different angles. Culture might mean a whole civilisation, or simply describe the social habits and preferences of a small group. It can mean sophisticated art, or it can mean leisure. For the purposes of this strategy we have taken it to mean all those activities and facilities which will help the citizens of Exeter to communicate, express themselves, enjoy themselves, educate themselves and entertain themselves. The Government, in encouraging local authorities to adopt cultural strategies, does not provide a definition: it proposes what the scope of the strategy should be, and emphasises that culture has both material properties and values. The latter are harder to incorporate, but without such qualities as imagination, inclusiveness and spirituality, the facilities and the activities will lack any cultural meaning. The shortest, most satisfying, imaginative and yet limitless, definition is one which might not pass any tests of measurability, but describes what we should be doing: culture is what you grow people in.
- 1.3 Exeter Vision, the Community Strategy for the City, also acknowledges cultural development as a key component in the improvement of this community. It acknowledges that a good cultural climate imparts economic and spiritual self-confidence to a community. Culture is one of the 10 themes within which the City Council and its partners aim to shape their work over the next 5 years. “**A cultural and a fun place to be**” is the Vision’s aspiration for Exeter: an aspiration which the Cultural Strategy itself seeks to turn into reality. The City Council has been fortunate in its timing; it has been able to write the Cultural Strategy alongside the Community Strategy, so that they complement each other. Just as the first draft of the latter was being completed in fact, the Government announced plans to make cultural strategies an explicit component part of the much bigger community strategy – something which Exeter has in effect already done.

2.0 The Scope of the Cultural Strategy

- 2.1 Guidance provided by the Department for Culture Media and Sport suggests that a cultural strategy should include the arts, libraries, heritage (including museums), sport, tourism and outdoor recreation, which it describes as parks, countryside, play,

carnivals and other events. It can also include the creative industries, such as design, broadcasting and architecture, whose products and activities both inform and draw on a local cultural scene. Its definition of arts is widely drawn and includes performance, visual arts, crafts, media, literature. We have followed the guidance, but also included eating and drinking and shopping, seeking to avoid altogether any suggestion that “culture” is only for a small group interested in the more arcane pursuits of sport or the arts.

- 2.2 The guidance stresses how important it is to link a new cultural strategy to the policies of regional and national cultural bodies and neighbouring local authorities, and to those of local organisations. In particular the strategy must link to Devon County Council, to Culture South West and its component agencies South West Arts, the South West Museums Libraries and Archives Council, South West Tourism and the regional arms of Sport England and English Heritage. It is equally important to co-ordinate it with our own corporate strategies, and this strategy covers the same ground as the over-arching community strategy.
- 2.3 The perspective taken by this Cultural Strategy is to show how cultural facilities, services and activities can help to deliver the objectives of the Community Strategy: how culture in its broad sense strengthens and extends almost every facet of community life; how the City Council and others can use the power of culture to help deliver real improvements to health, education, social inclusion, access and prosperity. It might be difficult to define culture, but when it becomes a vital tool in everything the City Council does, that ceases to matter. It has not always been easy to justify spending scarce resources on cultural issues, but now it can be seen that such spending plays a real role in creating the prosperous, well educated and healthy city which is the aspiration of all its institutions. Putting culture at the heart of community policy works because it touches the lives of everyone, and can empower and create individual and organisational capacity, which will improve the community at every level.
- 2.4 This document will not replace the existing Leisure, Tourism, Allotments and Play Strategies, or the new Arts Strategy currently being written. They will continue to be important in defining more detailed operational policy. As these strategies and the Cultural Strategy come up for review, the Council will align them, and eventually bring them into an integrated hierarchy, with the Community Strategy at the top. Beneath it will lie the Cultural Strategy, focusing on how the cultural sector can deliver community objectives, and beneath that again the service strategies, providing an operational framework. Each service strategy will have its own service plans providing the actual work plans for each year. This will then form part of the Council’s business management system.
- 2.5 Nor should anyone take this strategy to imply that it replaces the real work of creating and managing activities and facilities, which goes on at every level in Exeter on an hourly basis. The Council recognises that cultural vitality depends on the energy and imagination of the people participating, and that a strategy such as this can only marshal some of the resources which go into supporting such activities in a more rational and productive format.

2.6 The Council has based the strategy on an analysis of cultural activity and potential in the City, issued as a consultative document to stimulate discussion and comment. This in turn led to the updating and enhancing of the analysis, which is now the key background document on which the strategy itself is based.

3.0 Key Aims

3.1 **Establish Exeter as the major cultural and leisure centre for Devon and the surrounding area.**

3.2 **Improve the quality of life of the residents of Exeter by promoting cultural participation, access and development.**

3.2 These aims build on the Exeter Vision overall objective:

To be the regional capital of the south west

and the Council overall objective:

The existing mission of the Council is to enhance Exeter as the regional capital and to work in partnership to improve the quality of life for all people living, working and visiting the city.

as well as the specific cultural objective in the Exeter Vision:

For Exeter to be a major cultural and leisure centre in the region, increasing the vitality of the city for the enjoyment of both residents and visitors.

These aims recognise the potential of Exeter to meet the needs of a regional catchment, and thereby improve quality of life for its resident population, building new opportunities for education, appreciation and participation. The benefits of scale of facilities and activities, and of the economic activity stimulated by the creation of a larger cultural market are worth having and striving for. The aims also however acknowledge that there are substantial benefits to the community from cultural investment at a lower, local, scale. The reverse is also true – the existence of a solid local demand for facilities and activities stimulates more economically directed investment for visitors.

4.0 Barriers

4.1 The chief issue facing Exeter in its cultural role is whether it is able to raise its game and become a genuinely regional cultural centre. Does it have the capacity for extra participation, engagement and access which would demand an enhanced cultural infrastructure? Do its institutions, of which the City Council is only one, have the ability and resources to respond to that demand? What facilities are lacking? Exeter

certainly has the cultural capacity to fulfil a role as an area centre, but if there is a strong aspiration to meet regional criteria, then those institutions face a serious challenge. While the standard and capacity of the larger organisations are well known, there are many artists and small organisations working at regional and national standard in the city who have no profile here at all. It will be important to know who they are and what they do in order fully to promote the City's potential.

- 4.2 To meet this challenge the City needs to improve its stock of regional quality facilities and activities. There are organisations in Exeter operating easily at regional and national level, but not across the full range, so the overall "offer" of the City lacks critical mass. The night-time economy is also under-developed, and lacks information, transport and public safety support, as well as the diversity which would make it attractive to a wider range of ages. To achieve the ambition of establishing itself as a cultural capital, Exeter needs to build to a critical mass of popular cultural activity with day-time and evening attractions, underpinned by a greater variety of eating and drinking and transport opportunities.
- 4.3 Whether or not the city looks at enhancing its cultural performance to serve a wider catchment for economic purposes, it will also need to protect and enhance its local provision – what the residents of the city might reasonably expect it to offer them. The city is a lively and active place, with lots of activities run by voluntary, public and commercial organisations, but there are patches where community facilities and organisational capacity, and participation rates, suggest that there is much more to be done. These patches can be geographical or demographic, and sometimes both. There are some key gaps – studios and outlets for artists and craftspeople, exhibition and performance space for example. The whole voluntary sector is under increasing pressure from changes in insurance and licensing, and must meet huge demands from new legislation on health and safety, child protection and data protection, which soak up their scarce resources.
- 4.4 In particular it seems there is potential for the cultural needs of the young citizens of Exeter to be further addressed. Their right to high standards of education is being asserted, and alongside should go their right to cultural provision which meets their needs and involves them, and enables them to play their part in decision making and the development of new activities and facilities. There is much good practice in sport and the arts, offered by many bodies, and many new funding schemes, but the latter are often short-term and there is a need for more stability in this part of the sector.
- 4.5 While the City Council has an enormous commitment to cultural services of all kinds, and devotes a very large proportion of its budget to that commitment, it could invest more in the infrastructure to support those services. This means that a large proportion of its facilities – sports centres, museums and outdoor facilities – could be improved. To an extent this also applies to the facilities operated in the city by other public bodies.

5.0 Meeting the Aims, Overcoming the Barriers

5.1 A Prosperous City

Exeter Vision Objective: *To promote sustainable investment and maximise opportunities enabling all people to achieve their full potential.*

Cultural Objectives:

Establish a cultural quarter in the city, around the area between the RAMM, the Castle and Gandy Street, aiming to build a critical mass of cultural attractions and creative industries, together with space and outlets for artists and craftspeople.

Develop new heritage attractions, including enhanced museum and Rougemont Castle, and research better tourism contribution from Roman Wall, St Nicholas Priory, Cricklepit Mill, the Canal and the Quayside, the Cathedral cloisters and other heritage buildings.

Carry out a feasibility study for the development of a new multi-purpose venue in the City Centre.

Continue to seek development of modern multiplex cinema in city centre.

5.2 An Accessible City

Exeter Vision Objective: *To improve accessibility for all and to promote and extend alternatives to car use.*

Cultural Objectives:

Better public transport information interchange and improvements to lead to more accessible services, to connect to facilities and activities throughout the city, with particular reference to support of the night-time economy.

Develop a network of walking and cycling routes to provide safe routes and incentive to physical activity.

5.3 An Electronic City

Exeter Vision Objective: *To encourage people, businesses and other organisations fully to embrace the latest technology and use it to improve the way we live and work.*

Cultural Objectives:

Develop a City partnership to use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to promote access to cultural opportunities, including electronic booking and information services.

Develop the quality of cultural provision on the web, for example by launching and continuing to build a museum website to parallel its other services.

All cultural services should consider their potential for providing learning and seek to exploit it by digitisation and web enablement.

5.4 A City where People are Healthy and Active

Exeter Vision Objective: *To promote well-being and prevent ill-health for all, so that every citizen is able to live their life as fully, actively and independently as possible*

Cultural Objectives:

Ensure that everyone in the city, regardless of their age, where they live or their economic position, has good access to appropriate exercise facilities, both physical and mental, with a good range options, and that those facilities are promoted vigorously.

Develop a network of walking and cycling routes to provide safe routes and incentive to physical activity.

Help to promote good physical and mental health by offering all residents of the city active and absorbing activities which teach and maintain physical and mental skills and provide social interaction.

5.5 A City of Strong Communities

Exeter Vision Objective: *To be a city where every resident is able to play a full and active part in its social, economic, political and cultural life.*

Cultural Objectives:

Promote social inclusion by ensuring that all services and initiatives consider how they will provide for parts of the community not traditionally engaged with those activities.

Create a proactive grants system which has at its root the intention of equalising access to all cultural services and activities.

Invest in capacity building within community groups to enable them to create and manage their own programmes, supporting them with facilities where appropriate.

5.6 A City which Cares for the Environment

Exeter Vision Objective: *To protect and enhance Exeter's environment so that it makes a major contribution to quality of life, supports balanced economic growth, and makes a positive contribution to the global environment.*

Cultural Objectives:

Conserve and enhance the countryside areas of the City, and encourage community ownership of all green space.

Through good management, education and the use of planning policies protect and enhance habitats and bio-diversity within the City boundaries, for example by creating wildlife pathways around the City.

Use the Valley Parks as an educational resource

To preserve and enhance Exeter's historic environment and safeguard its archaeological heritage.

To promote good design in all developments.

To encourage the use of the work of artists and craftspeople in public places.

5.7 A Safe City

Exeter Vision Objective: *To achieve and maintain the position of being the safest city in the South West*

Cultural Objectives:

Create a climate where the range of activity and participation opportunities discourages any tendency towards crime.

Invest in capacity building within community groups to enable them to create and manage their own programmes, supporting them with facilities where appropriate.

Develop a diverse late night economy in the City, to offer a range of facilities for a variety of audiences in a safe and well-serviced environment

5.8 A Learning City

Exeter Vision Objective: *To generate a culture of learning in Exeter, raising the quality of education and training for everyone in order to maximise personal achievement, promote social inclusion and support economic development.*

Cultural Objectives:

Ensure all cultural services are integrated into the learning city culture, and that their potential is exploited, to create accessible ways into learning.

Use cultural activities of all kinds to build skills, self-confidence and the ability to learn in individuals so that they can take advantage of all the opportunities available to them.

Build links with schools and colleges and other institutions, to ensure that informal learning opportunities are available to complement and enhance formal learning.

6.0 Maintaining the Momentum

- 6.1 In the future it is likely that cultural strategies will become a part of the Community Strategy process. Given this document's close connection with the emerging Exeter Vision, the Community Strategy, this will not prove a difficult process in Exeter. It is intended therefore that the monitoring and review of the Cultural Strategy will either take place as part of the same process for the Community Strategy, or parallel to it. Details of the process to be used for the monitoring and review of the Community Strategy are not yet available.
- 6.2 The development of strategies, from the Community Strategy down, must be an organic process, so that as operational strategy reviews take place, they will be influenced by the Cultural Strategy, and will in turn influence it in its future reviews. Thus in effect the Cultural Strategy will be reviewed and monitored every time its component strategies are reviewed or renewed, keeping it as a live document which responds to community needs and demands. The Cultural Strategy therefore will never be "finished".
- 6.3 Equally important is the creation of a mechanism to keep the Cultural Strategy in touch with the many partners the City Council has in the cultural sector. There are many individual and group connections, for example in the form of the Exeter Council for Sport and Recreation, or the Exeter Arts Council, but no overarching vehicle where cultural policy can be debated and formed. Nor is there at present any means whereby that part of the community involved in cultural activity can develop ownership of this strategy. It is therefore proposed to develop a mechanism, perhaps in the form of a forum of cultural organisations, or a standing conference, which could monitor the Cultural Strategy, and help to co-ordinate the sector more generally. Such a body would need to offer all strands of cultural activity in the City a voice, without over-generalising all issues, and a format in which plenary and sector sessions could be co-ordinated to build a genuine sense of community is necessary. If the plenary body could also generate a small executive body to speak for the cultural community between conferences, this would be a valuable resource for all bodies in the City and the region.