

Bath&NES Arts Strategy

Interim Report

Written by Stephen Taylor and Maria Santelices on behalf of Bath Bridge CIC. Our sincere thanks to the St. Johns Foundation, members of the Steering Group and all of our interviewees.

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Summary

Effective and visible collaboration between the arts sector, the business community and the council has been shown elsewhere to bring major social and economic benefit to a locality. The time is now ripe for this in Bath&NES. However the form it takes needs very careful design in order to succeed.

To date

We have completed the main stages of the project:

1. Documentary review of:

- six local bodies which influence sector activities
 - Creative Bath: <https://www.creativebath.org/>
 - Bristol & Bath Creative R&D: <https://bristolbathcreative.org/>
 - Centre for Cultural & Creative Industries: <https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/research-and-enterprise/research-centres/centre-for-cultural-and-creative-industries/>
 - Bath Cultural Education Partnership
 - Southwest Creative Technology Network <https://www.swctn.org.uk/>
 - I START
- the arts strategies of other UK localities including eg Lancaster, Bristol, Birmingham, Brighton, York
- the advice of various bodies such as DCMS, the Arts Council, and the Local Government Association ('Cultural Strategy In A Box').

2. Interviews and focus groups: mainly with heads of creative/cultural organisations in Bath and beyond but also with business and community organisations, councillors and council officers (*list at Annex 1*).

3. Monthly information and feedback meetings with the steering group followed by a draft of this interim report to the sounding board (*members listed at Annex 2*).

In this interim report we summarise the findings from which our proposal follows.

The arts in Bath&NES

1. There seem to be as many definitions of the creative and cultural sector as there are organisations in it. We have followed Dorset's midway definition (*annex 3*) but included STEM organisations that interact with cultural organisations and so contribute to placemaking (as opposed to just being located there). For brevity, we say 'the arts' to mean the whole sector, ranging from the Theatre Royal to street buskers by way of the Digital Festival and Radstock Museum.
2. We take the economic importance of the arts sector as known and given. Many studies elsewhere have demonstrated this, and we do not recite them here other than to underline that cultural visitors to Bath are known to spend ten times as much in the city as day-trippers. But more important is the social impact of the arts. Money raises wellbeing indirectly if used to do worthwhile things. The arts raise well being directly. They can make you happier or wiser or kinder - even all three - right then and there, whoever you are, wherever you live, young or old, rich or poor.
3. There are three 'tribes' within the arts, which we think of as the *Commercials*, the *Socials* and the *Joyfuls* (*annex 4*). They have different priorities and vocabularies, so can find it challenging to connect and communicate. Nevertheless, what they share (their contribution to the economy, placemaking and social value) is more important than what separates them, and they can work better together than apart.
4. A number of our interviewees made the case for wider inclusion and diversity across arts organisations in Bath&NES. In practice this means encouragement to those who might think 'not for the likes of me' and broader representation on e.g. boards, creative teams and working groups.
5. 'Collaboration' is not an end in itself. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Much turns on circumstance and personality. For example, there is fruitful collaboration via the Bath Museums Group as to scheduling and publicity, and Arts Marketing Bath connects the marketeers of more than forty organisations to the benefit of all.
6. Any collaborative machinery - e.g. a standing body, regular meeting, curated website - needs an apparent and continuing reason for people to want to be involved with it. That is likely to be about practical matters such as programming, signage, staffing, fundraising, marketing, venues. Otherwise, participation falls away because people have better things to do.

The wider picture

7. Bath is the hub of Bath&NES arts and the local economy and therefore the focus. But the cultural and creative offerings in NES towns and villages - communities with different history, challenges and economics from the heritage city - need recognition and support in their own right as well as the friendly welcome of the city itself.
8. Bath's '*Jane Austen*' identity is both a help and a hindrance. It is a help in that it draws visitors and hence income to the area and its arts activities. It is a hindrance in that it obscures the city's extraordinary level of contemporary creative ability and enterprise.
9. By contrast, Bristol in the last decade has developed a reputation as 'edgy' and adventurous. This seems to have been driven by three factors: the determination of a handful of individuals who have encouraged others, the development of venues such as the multi-arts Watershed, and more recently its 'One City' plan.
10. The compactness of Bath's city centre makes the establishment of flexible arts/community venues more challenging but the lack of them in Bath is a major obstacle. The reduction in retail occupancy in the city may create opportunities and, although early days, at least three sites are 'in play' at the time of writing.
11. WECA's arts strategy in relation to skills, infrastructure and business support and its voice at the national level can complement and underpin the arts strategy for Bath&NES. So it is entirely feasible and desirable to locate the second within the first.
12. Many small arts organisations prize their autonomy and are wary of the strings attached to external financial support. They may be daunted in any case by the process and demands of dealing with funders, particularly the Arts Council, so give up trying.
13. The relationship between business and the cultural sector has scope for step change, taking it well beyond a banner and a brochure mentioned in return for money. That can include long term partnerships between a company and an arts organisation in which they learn from and support one another. The business sector is up for that.

The arts and the council

14. Bath&NES Council has had no arts officers and no significant grants to local arts organisations since 2017. A Cultural & Creative Strategic Advisory Board formed that year was soon dissolved. This is seen to have contributed to an impression in the Arts Council and elsewhere that the arts were not thought important here and hence to the loss of national portfolio income.
15. There is astonishment that the council's forty-six pages 2020-24 strategy makes no mention of the arts despite its importance to the economy and social wellbeing and despite Bath being one of only two whole cities in the world to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site (the other being Venice).
16. The interface between the council and the sector gets at best mixed reviews. Small arts organisations say much turns on which officers they deal with, hence their need to build personal relationships. But they perceive its approach as defaulting to 'That's not allowed' rather than 'I can help you find a way to make that work.' So they 'scoot around the bureaucracy' or avoid dealing with the council altogether.
17. The experience of larger arts organisations is generally better, perhaps because they have the knowledge and capacity to deal with the council's requirements. Some constructively emphasise how what they would like to do will also benefit the council. But they still speak of having to deal with many officers across many services to get things done and of long decision times, particularly where there is a property or heritage aspect.
18. Arts organisations also believe that the council is conflicted. It has an obvious interest in the overall success of the arts in bringing visitors, money, businesses and jobs to the area. But maximising revenue from its properties and protecting the interests of the arts sites it owns and runs is seen to be at the expense of the overall sector and hence of the local economy in the longer term.
19. The council can reasonably respond that it has inescapable legal obligations in relation to council land and property and public events. Its new website sets out clearly the requirements, procedure and timetable, covering for example public liability, risk assessment, site plans, and management plans. However for some this simply underlines how onerous, irksome and expensive the process is.
20. The council can also reasonably respond that it is under acute financial pressure, particularly post-covid and that it has a duty to seek income where it can to fund, for example, ever-rising social care costs.
21. A 'who's right, who's wrong' debate is not the way forward. What's needed is better mutual understanding, a simplified and accelerated decision process and greater

insight into the trade-offs between the council's short term financial interests and the longer-term vision for the city and its outlying areas.

22. There have been recent steps to make the council-arts interaction work better. Collaboration at Christmas 2020 between the council, the BID, Bath Festivals, Bath Carnival, Visit Bath, The Holburne and others to replace the cancelled Christmas Market was seen as highly successful.
23. More broadly there has in the last two years been a tangibly greater spirit of co-operation between the council, the two universities and the college. In May this year, the former council leader took specific responsibility for culture alongside her children's services portfolio. So the opportunity of a better relationship between the council and the arts sector is to hand.

'Bath&NES Arts Hub'

24. We have only one proposal: to create the Bath&NES configuration of what the Arts Council calls a cultural compact. We've given this the working title 'Bath&NES Arts hub': *BAhub* for short. The first creative task may be to find a better name.
25. *BAhub*, following the Arts Council model, is a partnership between arts organisations, business, the community and the council designed to enhance and promote the local sector. We make no further proposals because without a vehicle of this kind anything else - as we have found before - is likely to amount to little more than wishful thinking and exhortation.
26. The purpose of *BAhub* is both strategic and tactical. It is essential that it functions at both those levels. It would set out to do five things:
- Build a more constructive relationship between the arts sector and the council, repositioning the latter as a champion and enabler. Correspondingly, the sector would assist the council in pursuing its priorities such as reducing life inequalities and achieving the carbon-neutral target
 - Contribute to articulating Bath's city identity and ambition. Engaging people in a story is, after all, a core arts skill. The phrase 'City of Imagination' is gaining traction and *BAhub* could play a primary role in bringing that to life, promoting it in and beyond the city
 - Build stronger bridges between commerce, residents and the sector, both strategically (demonstrating the value of the sector to the economy and to social wellbeing) and tactically (eg increasing arts opportunities for young people in Midsomer Norton)
 - Grow understanding and collaboration across the sector in ways that add tangible value to its organisations. This would include assisting access to funding and sharing learning about the evolution of the sector, eg through audience research, digital technology, blending of art forms
 - Demonstrate to WECA, the Arts Council and other relevant external bodies that BathNES is determined to make the sector increasingly successful and is united in doing so.

Making it work

27. Creating a piece of machinery that will succeed is not a trivial task. We have been here before with the Cultural Forum's 2011 manifesto and the Bath Bridge's 2015 recommendations. We can learn from those experiences.
28. The membership, priorities, activities and working methods of *BAhub* need careful consideration to forestall a bureaucracy or, as one interviewee put it, 'a moaning shop'. The experience of 'What Next?' - which brings together freelancers and small and large arts organisations to inform, debate and shape the future of the sector - may be useful.
29. Successful arts partnerships elsewhere are typically chaired independently and include participants from large and small local arts organisations, the cabinet portfolio holder, the council officer with focal responsibility for the sector and business people. Total membership would be capped at say nine so that the group is manageable. Membership would rotate regularly to maintain freshness and diversity.
30. It is important that members see themselves not as representatives of their organisation or their art form but acting on behalf of the whole sector. For example, a business member might take part on behalf of all the companies in Bath Unlimited. It is also important that membership extends beyond 'the usual suspects' to bring new voices to the table.
31. *BAhub* would be light on its feet, finding quick wins to grow confidence and credibility. These will be in the areas where sector organisations tell us collaboration could deliver early benefits. An early task would be to agree on quantifiable measures of success. A curated website providing information, advice, connections and signposting may prove worthwhile.
32. The council officer should, in support of the portfolio holder, be the proponent for the sector in the council and navigate arts organisations through functions such as property services, health and safety and the calendar of major activities.
33. We would expect *BAhub* to have close ties to its WECA counterpart, particularly in relation to grants, training and capital expenditure. In the medium term, we would expect *BAhub* to progress access to venues and pursue the establishment of a multi-arts facility.

What next?

34. There will be an event at Bath Spa's Locksbrook campus on 10 September to explore the proposed functions of *BAhub* with as wide a group as possible. The design of that event is in hand. In preparation we are sending a questionnaire by social media in early July to our database of cultural organisations and beyond.
35. In the light of the questionnaire and event we will prepare a more detailed proposal for *BAhub* and seek to initiate it by late September.
36. It is not our intention to produce a formal report. We have seen too many of those gathering dust despite pretty pictures. The test of the project will be whether *BAhub*, or whatever else it comes to be called, is implemented effectively.

Annex 1: Interviewees

1	Sue Rigby	19	John Cullum
2	David Metcalfe	20	Jamie Eastman
3	Robert Buckland	21	Steve Fuller
4	Martin Pople	22	David Hobdey
5	Ian McGlynn	23	Louise Harvey
6	Chris Stephens	24	Danny Moar
7	Ellie Rogers	25	Jane Wildblood
8	Philip Andrews	26	Katharine Reeve
9	Steve Henwood	27	Holly Tarquini
10	Linda Todd	28	Richard Samuel
11	Richard Wendorf	29	Will Godfrey
12	Dave Kelly	30	Allison Herbert
13	Liz Harkman	31	Caroline Kay
14	Jasmine Barker	32	Simon Johnson
15	Alex Bugden	33	Kate Pullinger
16	Sarah James	34	Margaret Heffernan
17	Rebeca Di Corpo	35	Celia Mead
18	Judith Robinson	36	Barry Gilbertson
		37	Kathryn Davis

Annex 2: Steering Group and Sounding Board

Steering Group:

Penny Hay	Bath Spa U/Forest of Imagination/BCEP
Adam Powell	Symplicity Corporation/Bath Bridge/Bath Philharmonia
Andy Salmon	Bath Spa U
Kat Dawe Schmeisser	The Art Cohort/Bath Artists Studio
Chris Stephens	The Holburne
Ian Stockley	Bath Festivals
Stephen Taylor (chair)	Bath Bridge

Sounding Board:

Kate Cross	The Egg
John Cullum	Bath Festivals
Jamie Eastman	Bath U (The Edge)
Luke Emmett	Freelance theatre and events
Steve Fuller	The House/Bath Bridge
Mick Heath	Bath&NES Council (Christmas Market)
David Hobdey	St John's Foundation
Stu Matson	Bath Carnival
Danny Moar	Theatre Royal
Kate Pullinger	Bath Spa/WECA
Philip Raby	FilmBath/Bath Bridge
Katharine Reeve	Bath Spa U
Richard Samuel	Bath&NES Council (Deputy Leader)
Jane Wildblood	Bath&NES Council ('One Shared Vision')

Annex 3: The Sector

What is Culture? - Taken from Dorset Cultural Strategy (Unpublished)

Culture is shared, creative experiences where we express, learn and reflect on our history, place, social issues and personal lives. These experiences can improve wellbeing, strengthen communities and develop vital life skills for employment and a better quality of life.

The culture sector encompasses organisations, freelancers, artists and creatives, public venues, institutions and activities. For the purpose of this strategy, this includes:

- Performing arts including dance, music, comedy and theatre
- Visual arts, design, craft and makers
- Digital media and film
- Museums, collections and archives
- Libraries, literature, writing and publishing
- The natural, historic and built environment
- Cultural tourism, locally produced food and drink, outdoor festivals and attractions
- Amateur and voluntary run events such as fetes and carnivals

Annex 4: 'Tribes'

The people of Culturia fall into three tribes, the Commercials, Socials and Joyfuls. They speak different languages. Sometimes it is difficult for them to comprehend one another, so they need translators.

Frequently used words in the Commercials' language are sales, leases, VAT, takings. Frequently used words in the Socials' language are diversity, inclusion, placemaking, cohesion. Frequently used words in the Joyfuls' language are fun, friends, adventure, excitement.

Research by linguists has shown that the three languages have emerged from different historical pressures and priorities and that the more the tribes can find a lingua franca the more they will prosper together.