

Oxford City Council

Arts Strategic Plan

Introduction

This document outlines a Strategic Plan for the development of the Arts in Oxford. It aims to provide a bold but achievable vision, and set out the essential roles of Oxford City Council and our Arts Partners in achieving this vision. While specifically relating to the period 2005-08, this plan recognises the importance of having a long-term perspective, laying foundations to ensure that Oxford's arts sector remains vibrant for decades to come.

Oxford City Council supports the Arts because they have a key and unique role to play in delivering our vision for the city. The Arts are a driver of economic and social change, but we also believe that the Arts should be supported on their own merits. Culture is an essential aspect of life and should not be seen as a peripheral issue – it is vital to our identity and enjoyment as a city.

Our aim is to ensure that the Arts fulfil their potential benefit for all of Oxford's people, with a diverse programme of activity and participation that grabs the imagination and raises the aspiration of the whole community.

Terminology

The arts are a constantly evolving field and therefore we will be open in our definitions. We will embrace art forms using new ideas and technology that may be difficult or impossible to classify, and we will embrace art forms that reflect the diverse cultures of our city.

Throughout this document, the term *arts organisation* is used to refer to organisations working in all artistic fields including theatre, dance, music, film, visual arts, craft, literature, community arts, art in the public realm, etc.

Throughout this document, the term *artist* is used to refer to individual creative practitioners working across all artistic fields, including musicians, actors, dancers, filmmakers, writers, visual artists and makers, etc.

The term *arts community* is used to refer to both individual artists and arts organisations.

Context

Oxford is a major centre for education, tourism, business, healthcare, and culture, and plays an important role as a hub in the South East region of England. Internationally renowned for its unique heritage, as well as being a centre for learning and innovation, Oxford is seen as an icon of excellence and aspiration in both industry and the arts. The city provides jobs for almost 100,000 people, and welcomes over 7.8 million visitors each year.

Oxford – Centre of Culture

Following its bid for European Capital of Culture, Oxford was awarded Centre of Culture status for 2008, alongside only four other cities in the UK, recognising the rich cultural life of the city. The bid worked with a broad definition of culture that included sport, science, the arts, learning, the environment and urban design.

The bidding process led to the creation of Oxford Inspires, a cultural development agency for Oxfordshire. Oxford Inspires supports the development of cultural organisations and adds value to the work of its funders. Oxford Inspires led on the successful £600,000 bid for the *Evolving City* festival in 2005, will manage its promotion and delivery, and is leading on the development of the Oxfordshire International Festival in 2007.

Oxford in the South East region

The Arts are a major driving force within the creative industries, and artists are the source of work that sustains whole industries, from publishing to fashion, advertising to architecture. Oxford is recognised by SEEDA as a major centre for the creative industries within the South East region, with significant potential for growth.

Arts Council England has nominated Oxford as one of three centres for cultural leadership in the South East. The new Arts Council England structure will see increased investment going into the arts and greater partnership working with local authorities, which Oxford needs to capitalise on. However, the merging of the Southern and South East Arts regions, and relocation of the regional office to Brighton, has placed more pressure on local authorities to provide development support.

In March 2003, Arts Council England released the document *Local Government and the Arts*, developed with the Local Government Association. It sets out a vision for partnership working between Arts Council England and local government, with the following four national priorities –

- The Creative Economy
- Healthy Communities
- Vital Neighbourhoods
- Engaging Young People

Oxford – *Building a City Where Everyone is Valued*

Local authorities have recently been given the responsibility of leading on a Community Strategy to link the work of public, private, voluntary and community sectors. The Oxford Strategic Partnership is leading on the development of Oxford's Community Strategy, *Building a City Where Everyone is Valued*, which will encompass cultural development. The Arts can and do deliver under all five of the strategy's themes –

- A Vibrant and Inclusive Economy
- Safer Communities
- A Better Living Environment
- Opportunities for Life
- Active and Healthy Communities

Oxford – Strategic Development of the Arts

Oxford City Council has a key role to play in providing a strategic lead for the development of the Arts in the city. By linking in to local and national priorities, the Arts Strategic Plan is intended to provide a focus for development, encourage creative vitality and confidence, and help to attract inward investment.

Oxford City Council set out its aspirations for the development of culture in *Making the Difference* (June 2002). However, it is ten years since Oxford last had a comprehensive Arts Strategy. In that time, much has changed, but there are problems identified then that have still not been properly addressed. A coherent and committed strategy is essential to securing additional investment into the Arts in Oxford. This strategic plan is a working document – it will be reviewed and updated frequently, ensuring that it remains relevant, and provides a framework for the development of the Arts into the future.

Where We Are Now

Key Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats for the Arts in Oxford.

Strengths

- Large and diverse professional artistic community with a broad range of skills and talents.
- Large number of artists, arts organisations and venues of regional, national and international significance.
- Broad and diverse range of arts activity for residents and visitors.
- Arts organisations delivering nationally recognised programmes of work with socially excluded groups.
- Emerging strategic vision for the development of the Arts.

Weaknesses

- Significant weaknesses in capital infrastructure, including chronic shortage of affordable creative workspaces.
- Lack of enough venues and opportunities for local professional artists.
- Lack of diversity, with some major areas of activity being under-valued and under-supported.
- Significant difficulties in promoting arts activity, selective media coverage and low profile of the arts.
- Lack of capacity in local authorities to provide enough advice and support.

Opportunities

- Centre of Culture and Centre for Cultural Leadership (ACE) status offer opportunities for increasing inward investment.
- Major capital developments offer opportunities to invest in the infrastructure needs of the arts.
- Improved support through emerging development partnerships, with specialist organisations providing leadership in their field.
- Development of festival activity will increase community involvement, the profile of the arts and the capacity to deliver.

Threats

- Lack of stable long-term investment linked to strategic vision.
- Lack of investment in capital infrastructure.
- Increasing cost of living in a low-paid sector will price artists out of Oxford.
- Over emphasis on short term projects and festivals could adversely affect long-term sustainable activity.

Future Development

This strategic plan is split into three interdependent Primary Aims, from which are derived a series of Strategic Priorities. All of these are underpinned by a set of Core Values.

The Strategic Priorities form the basis of the accompanying action plan.

- **Primary Aims**

- Enable a well-resourced and vibrant arts community to flourish.
- Engage more people with diverse and accessible arts.
- Use the arts to transform lives and build communities.

- **Core Values**

- Excellence & Innovation
- Social Inclusion & Cultural Diversity

- **Resources and Delivery**

Primary Aims

1. Enable a well-resourced and vibrant arts community to flourish.

Artists and arts organisations must be our priority. They are essential to sustaining and developing Oxford's creative, cultural and economic prosperity, and without them, none of the other benefits of the arts can happen.

Funding

Oxford City Council is an important investor in the arts, and our continuing support is vital to securing larger investment from other public sector sources and elsewhere. To meet the aims of this Strategic Plan, we must work to maximise the investment in the Oxford arts community, through targeted funding, improved advice and support, and increased partnership working. We must build on the success of our support at leveraging in additional funding, and review our funding to reflect changing priorities and new opportunities.

- We will work to maximise funding and support for the arts community

Physical Infrastructure

Significant development of the physical infrastructure for the arts needs to be a priority. In Oxford, as in other areas of the South East region, the high cost of property means that there is a lack of suitable spaces for artists to create or rehearse. Inadequate buildings hamper the work of many arts organisations, and we must find ways to overcome these issues so that organisations can deliver to their full potential. We must also build on our relationship with commercial venues offering important resources for local and visiting artists.

- We will assess the physical infrastructure needs across the arts, and work in partnership to develop solutions to meet these needs.
- We will ensure that wider capital developments take account of the artistic community's needs.

Information and Training

Artists and arts organisations are the front-line of our service, and we must ensure that they have access to the training and support necessary to acquire new skills and deliver work of the highest quality. We are developing ways of using new technology to improve access to information, but must make sure that those without access to this technology are not excluded. We recognise the importance of providing opportunities to share information and skills amongst those working in and with the arts, and will encourage dialogue between local artists and visiting national and international artists.

- We will build on existing training and professional development for artists and arts organisations.
- We will improve access to information, provide networking opportunities, and facilitate partnerships across the arts community.

New Talent and Recent Graduates

Oxford has highly respected degree and postgraduate courses in the arts at both universities. Many well-qualified, well-motivated creative people emerge from the universities and further education sector in need of resources and outlets for them to advance their work, and perceiving these to be lacking, have tended to move away. We must build on the success of existing initiatives, and encourage more graduates to remain in the city and contribute to the vibrancy of its cultural life. We must also work to support talented people who may not have formal qualifications in the arts.

- We will nurture new talent, improve mentoring opportunities, and work to engage students and recent graduates in the creative life of the city.

Creative Industries and the Wider Economy

Artists are the source of work that sustains whole industries, and the importance of the creative sector to the local economy should not be underestimated. We must work to develop a full picture of the importance of the creative sector to the city's economy, and work to ensure that the commercial sector sees the benefits of working alongside the arts.

- We will seek to increase recognition and strengthen the role the arts play in the wider local economy.

2. Engage more people with diverse and accessible arts.

National statistics show that eight in ten people attend arts or cultural events, and 53% of people participate in arts or crafts activity. Contrary to perceptions of the elitism of the arts, the C2DE socio-economic group make up over 40% of the audience for live arts, as many people play a musical instrument as play football, and in the C1 socio-economic group (skilled manual workers) more people participate in the arts than in sport.¹ However, there is still much work to be done to engage more Oxford residents and visitors with the arts and ensure that the arts are accessible to all.

A Diverse and Accessible Programme

Residents and visitors alike should have the opportunity to benefit from a broad programme of arts activity that reflects the cultures of the city, and encompasses the best of local, national and international creative talent. We must continue to encourage new audiences from across the city to experience the arts. It is important that we continue breaking through barriers, real and perceived, that restrict people from enjoying the cultural life of their city.

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will work to support and develop a diverse programme of arts activity for residents and visitors in the city. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will support schemes to develop new audiences for the arts, particularly amongst people who currently feel excluded. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will encourage high quality arts activity in non-arts spaces and out from the city centre. |

Increasing Participation

Participation in the arts can have great social and personal benefits. Valuable in itself, participation also develops understanding and builds audiences for professional arts activity. We must work to increase the range of opportunities for participation and ensure that people are aware of the opportunities available to them.

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will work to develop more opportunities for participation in the arts, particularly amongst people who currently feel excluded. |
|--|

¹ Statistics taken from the National Campaign for the Arts.

Engaging Young People

Enabling young people to engage with the arts is key to encouraging the audiences and artists of the future. It is critical to the development of the arts, and helps to develop confident and articulate young people who can contribute positively to their communities. We must work to encourage more opportunities for professional artists within schools, and work to increase engagement with young people and families outside of the school environment.

- We will increase opportunities for young people to engage with professional artists and arts activity.

Cultural Promotion and Tourism

Oxford has a wealth of cultural events and activity, but too much of this activity remains hidden. We need to make it easier to access information on venues and events, and increase promotion of cultural events. Each year, 7.6 million visitors to the city bring over £420 million into the local economy. We want to increase cultural tourism, with its economic and cultural benefits, engaging more visitors with Oxford's contemporary culture as well as its heritage.

- We will work to consolidate and develop the promotion of arts activity across the city, and promote the city as a contemporary cultural destination.

3. Use the arts to transform lives and build communities.

While the arts have their own intrinsic value, they also benefit the city in many other ways. They support active and healthy communities, provide opportunities for life, contribute to making the city a safer place, and assist in creating a better living environment.

Arts in Communities

In the broadest sense, the arts are about a creative response to the world around us. As such, the arts are ideal for engaging people with their community, allow people to explore and respond to contemporary issues, and help to bridge divides. Though overall Oxford is a prosperous city, there are challenging pockets of deprivation, and the arts are playing an integral role in the regeneration of these areas.

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will work with local communities to ensure that we address the needs of local people. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will build on the successes of arts projects tackling key areas of social exclusion, and work towards ensuring that these factors do not deter people from engaging with the arts. |

New Opportunities and Skills

Creativity is an essential tool for life, and engaging in the arts can enable people to develop new skills and self-confidence, useful in many other aspects of their lives. Recent projects with disenfranchised people (e.g. young people at risk and the homeless) have demonstrated how the arts can provide new opportunities and transform lives, and help to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will continue to support and develop arts projects that enable people to acquire new skills. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will continue to support arts programmes to provide disenfranchised people with new opportunities. |

The Arts and Health

Engagement with the arts can play an important role in good mental and physical health, and in promoting a sense of well-being. We must ensure that these benefits are fully recognised, and work alongside the other agencies with responsibility for health in the city to maximise the potential for using the arts to improve health and promote healthy living.

- We will work with other partners to build on the success of arts based approaches to improving health and promoting healthy living.

Art in the Public Realm

Artists working in the public realm help to improve the environments where we live and work, and the public art process can generate community pride and cohesion. Oxford has lagged notably behind in the field of public art, although we are now making progress. Our new local plan seeks a contribution to public artwork from larger developments, and we will use these contributions in consultation with the local community and future users. We will support permanent artwork and temporary interventions that can be shown to have lasting impact, and seek to involve artists in the design and improvement of the public realm.

- We will develop a programme of permanent artwork and temporary interventions in public spaces around the city.
- We will investigate further ways in which artists can contribute to the design and development of the city.

Core Values

This Arts Strategic Plan has been written with the following core values.

Excellence & Innovation.

We will insist on excellence, integrity and sincerity in all that we support. Quality and standards are as important within the arts as in any other field, and we will encourage the employment of suitably skilled professional artists. We will insist that organisations we work with advertise all opportunities openly and widely, and consult relevant national guidelines when calculating fees and salaries.

The arts, like all aspects of society, are constantly evolving. Oxford has a deserved reputation as a centre for innovation, but we must not be complacent. We must continue to build on the success of numerous local projects that have achieved regional and national significance. We must be prepared to support artists and arts organisations to take risks and try new ideas, to build on successes but not be afraid to learn from failures. Where the city has under-achieved, we must be prepared to learn from others and build on examples of best practice. The continuous development of our expectations and aspirations should be central to our work.

Social Inclusion & Cultural Diversity.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts...” Social and family background, unemployment and low income, ill health and disability, low educational attainment and other factors can act as barriers to participation in the cultural life of Oxford. We will work closely with our partners to break through these barriers. We expect organisations that we fund to show a strong commitment to widening access - while at times the arts may challenge us, they should not be elitist. We must also work to ensure that these same barriers do not deter talented people from working in the arts.

Oxford is a city of diverse cultures. This Strategic Plan seeks to embrace all art forms – contemporary and long established – and members of the community from all ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds. We must increase our support for projects embracing culturally diverse communities, and make sure that opportunities reflect the needs of different cultures. We will nurture new talent, new work and new directions.

Resources for Delivery

Oxford City Council supports the Arts in a number of ways. We invest a significant amount of money in the Arts each year, in particular through our various grant funding schemes. This investment, valuable in itself, is also essential to securing external investment into the Arts in Oxford. As well as supporting and monitoring funded organisations, we provide specialist information and advice, facilitate projects, provide opportunities for networking, bring in external funding, foster partnerships, and give a focus for strategic development of the Arts in Oxford. The Council also has a key role to play in assisting the development of the capital infrastructure necessary for the arts to flourish.

Oxford City Council's Arts Development section leads on the strategic development of the Arts on behalf of the Council. Based within the Leisure and Parks Business Unit, it is the section responsible for co-ordinating the implementation, monitoring and review of this Strategic Plan.

During 2001 and 2002, the Council's financial difficulties meant that the Arts Development section suffered a significant reduction in staffing and budget, and grant funding for the Arts was reduced. Since 2003 there has been greater recognition, partly galvanised by Oxford's success as a Centre of Culture, of the unique role that the Arts, and Culture in its broadest sense, can play in the delivery of the Council's wider objectives. The Council's restored financial stability has allowed revenue budgets and grant funding for the Arts to increase to and surpass previous levels, although staffing capacity remains low.

The reduction in staffing has demanded a new approach to delivery. With a few exceptions, notably in the field of Dance, the Council no longer directly runs projects. There has been a greater emphasis on developing partnership working to increase the capacity to deliver, and add value to the existing service. This is particularly evident in the emerging Development Partnerships in music and the visual arts – perhaps the two areas where activity is most fragmented and there is greatest need to increase support. The delivery of this Strategic Plan relies on working in an open and mutually supportive partnership with the artistic community in Oxford.

Appendix

Oxford City Council Arts Partners

Grant Assistance Organisations (2003 – 2006)

These organisations are core funded on a three-year basis.

- Artweeks
- Fusion – Oxford’s Community Arts Agency
- ITHACA
- Modern Art Oxford
- OFVM – Centre for Film and Digital Media
- Oxford Playhouse
- Oxfordshire Touring Theatre Company
- Pegasus Theatre

Oxford City Council also funds a variety of projects through our annual grants programme and the Arts Development Fund small grants scheme.

Revenue funded development partnerships

- Oxfordshire Youth Arts Partnership
- Oxford Brookes University
 - Arts and Culture Initiative
- Oxford Contemporary Music
 - Music Development Partnership
- Oxfordshire Visual Arts Development Agency
 - X-change Gallery and visual arts development partnership
- Oxford City Council Dance Development
 - a series of dance development projects is managed directly by the Council, and partly funded by Arts Council England, South East

Other Partners

Oxford City Council works in partnership with the other Oxfordshire local authorities and Arts Council England, South East on joint development initiatives.

Oxford City Council is one of the five stakeholders in Oxford Inspires, the cultural development agency for Oxford and Oxfordshire.