Reading

Culture & Heritage Strategy 2015-2030 Refresh

Consultation Overview

July 2022

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# Background

Reading Borough Council has a 15-year Culture and Heritage (C&H) strategy that runs from 2015 to 2030. Reading’s cultural sector has been through a wave of changes and has significantly developed since this C&H strategy was written. In addition to expected development in the sector, the pandemic has also had a huge impact leading, in some cases, to a reduction and change in activity and focus.

Reading has delivered several partnership projects over the last 7 years. In the evaluation of these projects, and due to the development of the sector, there has been an overwhelming feeling expressed by the cultural sector that they need to be more connected to the Culture and Heritage Strategy. This feeling that has been expressed is hugely important to respond to, and is, a key development milestone in the cultural development journey for Reading.

# Consultation undertaken

In response to feedback, in July 2022, Reading Borough Council commissioned Art Reach to conduct a series of consultations with the cultural and community sectors to review and refresh the Reading Culture and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030. This work was made possible by funding from the High Street Heritage Action Zone and generously donated time from our Culture and Heritage Sector. (Would it be possible to add in the HSHAZ logo as well?)

Consultation included:

* A full day workshop, facilitated by Art Reach, to look back and look forward, discuss, and explore the strategy and ideas to steer the direction for a forthcoming action plan
* 4 online focus groups, facilitated by Art Reach, to gain further insight
* Emails and notes from others in the sector have also been fed into this report.

Participants were asked to reflect on what had gone well so far under the three themes, identify areas that still need to be addressed, and identify their own questions looking forward, which were then discussed in-depth in smaller groups and in the online focus groups. This report collates the notes from each of the discussions and identifies common themes and priorities that were raised. These will inform an action plan, for which recommendations are made at the end of this document.

Please note: These notes will only be circulated amongst those delegates who attended the Culture and Heritage Strategy Refresh Workshop on the 7th of July and the follow up focus groups.

Groups consulted with were:

Jelly

Rising Sun

Rank and File

Double Okay

Readipop

Make Sense

REDA

RBC - Parks

Connect Reading

CultureMix Arts

Berkshire Maestros

Terry's Reading Walkabouts

ASPIRE2

RBC – Community & Events

RBC - Heritage

Museum's Partnership Reading/ MERL

OpenHand OpenSpace

Art Celebration

Read College / Access to the Arts

Through A different Lens

Reading Rep Theatre

Reading Writers Group

Reading Rock Academy

RBC Libraries & Museum

Reading Children’s Book Group, Federation of Children’s Book Groups

Reading Fringe Festival

Royal Berkshire Hospital NHS Trust

University of Reading

Newsquest Media

Dance Reading

RBC Community & Housing

ACRE

Vocal Network

Progress Theatre

RABBLE Theatre

Reading Arts

What’s On Reading

Baker Street Productions

Historic England

RBC – Heritage Champion

RBC – Lead Councillor for Culture

Reading Climate Action Network – Festivals’ Representative

# Summary of Results

The 3 priorities in the current Culture and Heritage (C&H) Strategy are:

**Enhance Identity Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

1. Enhance Identity - Being Reading/Made in Reading
   1. ‘Being Reading’ – not emulating other places but having our own identity is a key priority for the town. The people of Reading are proud of our heritage and what has been achieved, and we are ambitious and visionary about its future. The identity of Reading needs to be celebrated and expanded to recognise the diversity of its people, the quality of place and its role as the capital of the Thames Valley.
2. Increase Opportunity - increase Opportunities through working together
   1. Culture and Heritage offer a broad range of creative opportunities, for audience members, active participants and practitioners. It has the ability to bring people and communities together, to support learning and to expand the creative experiences of a growing population. Fostering a commitment to work together across organisational and sector boundaries. A ‘culture of collaboration’ implies a range of formal and informal links, from networking through to co-responsibility and joint enterprise.
3. Celebrate
   1. Create events that make people proud of Reading as well as encourage people to visit our town. Using culture and heritage to celebrate Reading is a key priority for the Strategy

## Where do you think the Culture and Heritage Strategy has worked well?

Through the next section, the participants expressed those events, festivals, projects and culture and heritage assets that they are most proud of, or feel have had the most impact. As well as which strands of the Culture and Heritage Strategy they most closely align with.

Black History Mural. **Enhance Identity Celebrate**

The reopening of Reading Abbey Ruins, the surrounding celebrations in 2018, and the Abbey being the centre of the quarter to celebrate Reading culture and heritage. It also hosts successful events and music festivals. **Enhance Identity Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

Reading Carnival was celebrated by the whole community, while also providing an opportunity for Black community to celebrate their culture. **Enhance Identity Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

The resilience of the arts organisations in Reading should be commended, as they are still here while many others around the country have had to close. **Celebrate**

Independent organisations are increasing opportunities. **Increase Opportunity**

The launching of What’s on Reading website (<https://whatsonreading.com/>) **Enhance Identity Increase Opportunity**

The High Street Heritage Action Zone is creating opportunities for people who wouldn’t normally engage in culture and heritage **Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

Initiatives that are not trying to copy other towns and instead celebrating what Reading has that’s unique are important. For example, Reading Biscuit Factory brings opportunities for lots of organisations to get involved and celebrates the local history connection with Reading and biscuits. What’s really Reading? **Enhance Identity**

Reading International Programme with Fine Art students at Reading University (which included an exhibition with Reading prison) worked well. Open Hand Open Space artist led studio and gallery space helps to fill the need for space for visual arts as there is no contemporary art gallery in Reading. Visual Art has an important role in tackling issues and debates in the current political climate. **Enhance Identity Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

Local festivals have two benefits: to give a platform for local artists and bring in national and international artists and present them to a Reading audience. These have started to resume after the pandemic. **Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

Reading Cultural Awards were vital in bringing groups across the culture and heritage sector together in the same room. This helped to build the foundation for where we are now in terms of the connectedness of organisations. **Celebrate**

Partnerships working well: the Culture Education Partnership under the community and learning focus, the work on tourism led by the CIC under economy, and when thinking about the creative community, the networks like CAN that seem to bring many of the independent organisations together well. **Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

The University has developed public art commissions.  **Enhance Identity**

The Heritage and Creativity strand of research continues. **Increase Opportunity**

Reading has a number of annual events that MERL and Reading Museum attend to meet different strands of the local community (Museums on Wheels).  **Increase Opportunity Celebrate**

## Other successes discussed from the last 7 years of the strategy:

A number of successes were celebrated, and observations were made in the workshop and in the focus groups, however on reflection they were difficult to categorise into any of the above.

Partnerships are key

* Pride in Reading is growing significantly which is great
* When the strategy was brought about ACE were not investing in Reading
* Reading UK – sees this as an economic development possibility, culture offer needs to be good otherwise businesses will go elsewhere. Reading UK has embedded the narrative of culture as an economic catalyst into all of the work that they deliver and see it as a way to attract people to Reading town centre and to retain employees at some of our multinational businesses. However, the grass roots support outside of the town centre is missing
* Culture is incorporated into the Reading 2050 vision and into the RBC Corporate Strategy

## 

## What still needs addressing?

* Raise **awareness** beyond Reading and surrounding area of what Reading has to offer culturally, to draw visitors and people to live here (with the new housing developments)
* Raise **awareness** within Reading for residents of what is on offer, so they don’t always go outside the Borough for cultural offer
* Arts and Culture should not just be focussed on the city centre but also take place and celebrate culture in **surrounding areas, strengthening communities**
* Reading needs a **big venue** for communities to come together for larger scale activity
* Heritage is a living thing and always changing, involve newcomers to the town in part of the **ongoing story of Heritage** to support sense of belonging.
* Reflect **local stories** too, listening to local voices and capturing stories for local areas, enhances sense of pride.
* How do we **measure success** against the strategy?
* How do we **share research** across the sector for the whole sector’s benefit? (Ref CCQL which was held in March)
* Seems that there is not much on offer for **people with disabilities**, of all ages. Does this require some research into what needs to happen in this area?
* About the **audience development** so not just about creating the opportunities
* There has not been much progress in Reading for artists needing **workspaces**.
* Looking forward to the possibilities of where the jobs are going to be
* Do we need a **digital strategy?**
  + 40% of the population are in the digital space but there is a shortage of people
* Don’t get a sense of shared ownership as community are not involved from the beginning
* Local communities feel despondent as they don’t see the outcomes from the interaction

Individual organisations are doing really well at delivering against these targets, but often in isolation. People are tired of consultation and not seeing any output as a result of their contribution. Consultation is sometimes done with one member of the community that they are trying to reach; this can often lead to challenges for the ‘chosen’ representative. People want to see more action, and they want to feel represented in the way in which the cultural sector is spoken about.

We have done some great stuff linked in with each of the strands. However, we need to understand who is responsible for delivering against the strategy, how key partners are working together to support the strategy and that it doesn’t just fall on one organisation or small collective or organisations.

People want to feel more connected so that they can benefit from joint working but also what they can individually bring to the ‘party’. There is too much reliance on one person to deliver against certain targets (Ref EDI). Better access is needed for grass roots organisations to support structures and ways in which they can speak to the LA. We need to make sure that the story of why the refresh is being done is clear and what the outcomes of this is going to be.

We need to include ambition and skills development into the strategy to support future needs of all sectors. Need to link the strategy in with the Reading 2050 vision and Place Brand work, feels like the sector needs to have an understanding of what is going on more generally in terms of vision. We need to have more collaboration around marketing and making sure that we are shouting about what we do in Reading in the Cultural Sector.

Cultural & Heritage Strategy Group **– discussed as a proposed idea**

There needs to be a scoping out what the purpose of the strategy group is.

Suggestion would be the group be represented under strands: e.g. education, business, health, independent artists, music, museums, galleries, residents voice, dance, film, multi discipline art, university – each would have a sub section.

Must be future proofed to include culture and heritage not yet known in Reading.

## Defining Culture and Heritage

Does not include sport and leisure but there is some crossover.

Culture & Heritage Definition – enriches lives, creates a sense of belonging, doesn’t happen in isolation – leisure – locations for events, housing – heritage. Provides a sense of identity – peoples stories and lived experiences.

Culture and heritage don’t operate in silos – they intersect with all aspects of the lived environment, e.g. health and wellbeing, sport, leisure, housing, education.

Heritage = Both heritage of Reading and the heritage residents bring with them

Reading is culturally diverse, how to access different cultures?

Culture and Heritage should stay as one strategy, but distinctly define the visions for each of culture and heritage. Splitting the group could weaken potential for funding. Culture and heritage are two sides of the same coin.

How to communicate the strategy when terms like “culture” some people don’t relate to, for example is it about **people** and **activity**?

Heritage is part of our culture.

Proposed shared understanding of Culture in the context of this strategy:

We use ‘culture’ in this Culture and Heritage Strategy as an umbrella term*. It includes the creative industries, arts and cultural organisations, and sectors from visual and digital art, to theatre, film, music, dance, literature, and fashion.*

*Cultural organisations play a key role in defining the character and identity of the places we live, work and visit. They bring us together, help us to enjoy our cities and flourish personally. They also foster creativity and innovation, provide jobs and celebrate heritage. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

We recognise that as part of this it is really important to celebrate cultural diversity within our town, as that is part of what makes Reading unique.

## Sector development

**How can the C&H Strategy support the development journeys of individuals and organisations?**

Support networks - Identify organisations that can support emerging individuals and groups. This allows small/ emerging groups to progress further and shared resources - venues, funding etc

Map needs of space in Reading that can be used as venues, which goes further out than just the city centre. Needs to be managed as will go out of date otherwise.

Need to provide support for budding/new artists e.g. affordable/free/ ‘safe’ spaces to exhibit/ display talent.

Practical ways to facilitate more people being involved could be:

* library of things,
* library of skills,
* central place for resources
* networks, contacts made available for people.
* templates for risks assessments or how to organise events made accessible e.g.: [Event Management Plan (dover.gov.uk)](https://www.dover.gov.uk/Community/EventPlanning/Planning-Your-Event/EventManagementPlan.aspx)
* expertise can be shared in a useable way
* Clinics for face-to-face contacts.
* What’s On has a page on website for resources, this could be expanded.

A Forum could be more effective than websites as they can become out of date quickly. Forums could have weekly meetings for sharing knowledge from the area and wider. It would need a central facilitator.

Time and resources are a challenge as many are just hanging on with fingernails so would find it difficult to support others.

Not enough support for young or marginalised artists. Need Jobs available with mentors or support networks who could support less experienced artists.

## Looking forwards

There should be a balance of public, private, voluntary sectors included.

What are the different roles within the strategy?

Committed ongoing longer-term investment from the local authority is needed, as well as support to access additional funding elsewhere.

Legacy projects - Today’s culture being tomorrow’s heritage. Museum of the Future.

Learning from elsewhere.

Struggle for producers to make work, need payment and support, otherwise they leave Reading.

Climate change needs to be included moving forward - [Adapting our Culture toolkit | Cultural Adaptations](https://www.culturaladaptations.com/toolkit/adapting-our-culture-toolkit/)

Need to understand what the barriers are and how we can overcome them, especially being so close to London and Oxford

Feels as though culture is in competition with everything else for example:

* + Housing – ref After Dark and Face Bar – residences and culture are not always comfortable bed fellows

Is there a need for a cultural zone?

Feels as though culture is being moved away from the community, but need a space where both can co-exist

Strategy needs to set out vision and reference funding needed

Finally the brown signs need to go up in Reading!!

* Going for city of culture
* Need 4th item ambition or something along those lines
* 5th part of it skills development
* Celebrating our success is important
* Need to be better at promoting what we are actually doing, need to be better at that
  + What’s on Reading
  + Place brand is an opportunity
  + Increase opportunities for the future

Better rating with funding bodies

Programming in parks that is accessible and appeals to a wide range of people

Young people (students at the Uni) are choosing their university because of the ethics it has rather than just about getting jobs, the values students hold are becoming more important when choosing a university. They are interested in activism and places that support their ideas and future, not just for jobs but ethical living too – climate change, social justice, inclusivity etc.

Need to be more open and honest about what we don’t do well and what we could improve on.

There needs to be more thought given to what will have a lasting impact, rather than a particular year's activity.

Significant challenges in the next few years: the climate and cost of living crises - both of which have significant effects on the ability of cultural sector to deliver.

Political drivers such as Levelling Up – how does Reading fit into this picture?

I think some of that civic branding might be delivered by the High Street Heritage Action Zone work which doesn't appear in the current strategy.

## Venues

Proximity to London can be a barrier as larger names don’t want to perform too close to their London venues.

A mid-size venue missing from the town.

Venues – costs are prohibitive. What are the barriers for venues in Reading to programme work or attract bookings?

Need an audit of what’s available for venues, is there a way to subsidise emerging work, are there opportunities for incubator spaces, what have other places done?

Need space to work – empty shops scheme?

Need to connect artists with spaces – e.g. Jelly has space but limited takers

* Space costs a lot of money in this area. Space is so expensive in Reading.
* Real opportunity is in the redevelopment of Hosier Street, expand that facility
* BSM more experiential offering great opportunity for mixed use

Pandemic recovery

Some of the pressures are:

* funding
* loss of skills
* people leaving the sector
* venues closed down
* prices rising

Aspirational work more difficult whilst groups are still in recovery.

It can be useful to view the sector as an eco-system. If one area is struggling it can throw the rest out of balance. It could be mapped out to identify where problems are now and where they are going to be in a few years' time.

Another Reading Year of Culture (last one 2016) could help kickstart recovery and get people involved again?

Role for Council: The strategy should be sector led and council provide support. Council could communicate better what they are already doing. The Council make strategic links, linking culture into other areas and thus identifying opportunities for culture.

What's On website and social media are really important

Community and connection – live feedback on barriers to engagement. People not feeling the centre of Reading is where they would naturally go. Reading is made up of a series of micro communities, one identity doesn’t fit all these areas.

Touring companies – could they be encouraged to do community engagement?

Cost of Living – Pay what you can and Pay it forward schemes could support people to get back to engaging and also support those on lower incomes to take part.

## What Next?

* **What do we collectively want to do next?**

Directory/audit of what is existing already

Document library – funding applications, risk assessments, live and dynamic sharing of resources and knowledge

Informal catch up to stay connected – meet up and talk now we have met. Keep the connection and conversation going.

Forum for learning from what's gone before

We need an action plan with allotted working groups to forward each action to take it forward.

Is there a need for a councillor who has overall responsibility for delivering the strategy?

Reading Borough Council could coordinate a large funding application for a brand-new multi-purpose venue.

Vision **- Do we need a clear vision for Reading’s Culture?**

Focused vision needed for arts and culture, and heritage, with their own distinct focus but not separating them.

promote Reading as the most integrated town in the UK

“We are diverse and inclusive. We are Reading.”

Create one platform for people to share #diversereading #wearereading #withinreading #sharingreading

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## Successes

Some of the successes celebrated by those represented in the workshop are listed below. We would like to expand this list of successes, so please do get in contact with any additions.

Successful partnerships, Reading’s diverse festivals, regular events, CEP, CAN etc.

Celebrating diversity through special projects including Carnival and Black History Mural

New spaces in Reading including – CultureMix Arts, Readipop, Rabble and Reading Rep

Survival of many of Reading’s Cultural Organisations throughout lockdown

Three NPOs in Reading and another four applying in this round

Cross sector collaborations specifically around mental wellbeing and culture

The What’s On Reading website

Abbey Ruins project has been successful

High Street Heritage Action Zone

Economic development now includes Culture in the Reading Vision 2050 and sees culture as an economic catalyst to attract people to Reading

## Areas to develop

visual art space (OHOS and Jelly supporting)

also workspaces for artists and producers: need affordable spaces to learn and develop their craft

unique identity of Reading needs definition

more awareness, linked to defined identity – this links in with re-brand by Reading UK

needs to reflect more than town centre and economy – needs to celebrate surrounding areas, local identities, local heritage stories

opportunities for all – seems to be a lack for people with disabilities – needs an audit of where the gaps are

needs a creative digital strategy, linked with museum and libraries as places for archives and display of digital work

connect communities better into decision making for culture

Cultural Strategy Group to be set up – needs defined remit and terms of reference and have sub sections for different strands that link with other priority areas

Have a Vision statement, which defines what is meant by Culture in Reading, and has an overall Vision that it aims to achieve. It has been suggested that this Vision is something that reflects and celebrates the cultural diversity of Reading and its people, united in diversity. What does Reading’s Culture and Heritage stand for? Is it about Inclusivity, Diversity, Social Justice? This also reflects some of the things that students coming to the University are interested in.

Set up opportunities for sharing knowledge across the sector. This could be a Forum – look at current models by Jelly for example, how can these be built on to be inclusive Forum events/spaces?

Generate case studies of how other places have supported artists with space, mentoring, knowledge sharing etc. such as Incubator spaces.

Bidding for City of Culture – get better at showcasing and celebrating Reading’s cultural scene

Future proofing = skills development

Venues – really need to tackle lack of affordable spaces and define what Reading can offer which does not compete with London. How can new work be presented and subsidised to be supported? What can smaller venues offer that don’t compete with London venues – more experimental spaces? What can reading do uniquely in its spaces? What can the development of Hosier Street offer here? Broad Street Mall developing along more experiential offering rather than retail, so what can be developed here as a cultural, buzzing hub – celebrating diversity and experimental work?

Revival after the pandemic – can we introduce Pay What You Can or Pay It Forward schemes to support returning audiences?

## Recommendations for action

1. Co-create an action plan based on feedback from the cultural sector and refresh the C&H Strategy.
2. Set up the Cultural Strategy Steering Group. This should be wider than RBC, though RBC could facilitate the group. The remit for the Group is to decide how the action plan is implemented: defining where there are task groups required and who should be on them, identifying funding opportunities and coordinating bids that support partnership work, etc.
3. Define what Culture is for Reading, and what is the Vision: consult widely on the idea of “We are diverse and inclusive. We are Reading.” Is this the right brand/vision?
4. Look at an audit of spaces available and needs of the sector for spaces, including community spaces and those outside the town centre. Work out how needs can be linked to spaces. Where can funding be found to subsidise or incubate new work?
5. Look at opportunities such as Hosier Street and Broad Street Mall for creating hubs of creative activity – how can these happen as part of regeneration of the town, as well as support the needs of creative communities? Could these areas be revived as Cultural Zones rather than retail? See the report from Arts Council England[, Creative High Streets](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/news/creative-future-high-streets), January 2022.
6. Set up a Forum, an informal meeting programme, ensuring it is a safe, inclusive space for people at different levels of their careers to share and learn.
7. Audit of opportunities for people with disabilities and those with mental health needs. Identify gaps and strategies to address these.
8. Develop a Creative Digital Strategy, in partnership with Museums, libraries, digital artists and the CEP, to support innovation and digital skills for the future.
9. Generate ideas for schemes to support revival after the pandemic and encourage audiences back – Pay It Forward Schemes, Pay What You Can, Loyalty Schemes (that could be shared across organisations) etc.

1. [improving\_places\_-\_culture\_and\_business\_improvement\_districts.pdf (london.gov.uk)](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/improving_places_-_culture_and_business_improvement_districts.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)