

So why 'Reading-on-Thames'?

Reading has an emergent 'Place-shaping' 2050 Vision developed by a strong business led partnership and Reading University. The Council has endorsed the direction of travel and engaged as a partner but has not driven this visioning process, itself indicative of a wide stakeholder base with a real grasp of how culture can be pivotal to the town's future success. Based on wide-ranging stakeholder engagement and 'hands-on' workshops the vision is that by 2050 Reading will be renowned as:

1. 'A city of Rivers and Parks'.... Recognising how water has shaped much of Reading. Not just the River Thames, but the River Kennet, the Kennet & Avon Canal and the Holy Brook that all weave their way through and under much of our city, defining and offering opportunity via their river banks and crossings. The City would celebrate Reading's waterways, opening them up to offer recreational spaces and animated parks.
2. 'A City of Festivals and Culture'.... Building on the success of the iconic Reading Festival to deliver arts and culture to people of all ages and ethnicities. We would look to facilitate community interaction and opportunity within Reading, weaving festivals back into and throughout the city, offering vibrant public gathering spaces and integrating and celebrating our city's heritage, bringing our city to life.
3. 'A Green Tech City'.... Evolving from the established technology focus of our city. It celebrates and encourages diversity through business incubation units, 'Ideas Factories' and a city centre University campus through which to exhibit and test cutting edge ideas, no matter what faculty they are emerging from.

This vision thus already embraces cultural excellence grounded in Reading's particular attributes as a place, its diverse multi-cultural demographic and its economic and business strengths. It is also fully aligned with the aspirational Culture and Heritage Strategy (developed through the Cultural Partnership) and both place culture firmly at the heart of the town's future, this being both continued economic success and delivering a better quality of life for all.

In this regard "culture" as referenced in this application is shorthand for the whole indivisible gamut of arts, culture and heritage, all intimately connected and related. For Reading this is grounded in the pivotal role of the medieval Reading Abbey and its patronage by Henry 1 in the development of the town and this growth being strongly associated with its waterways. The dissolution of the Abbey reminiscent of a complex history resonating through the ages with today's 'Abbey Quarter' a focus for the restoration of the Abbey Ruins and reconnecting the town with its illustrious past; bringing back Abbey Gate building (Grade 1 Listed) into use as an education centre, reflecting its one-time role in Jane Austen's schooling; the fully restored 'Green Flag' Forbury Gardens; and the exciting future possibilities of the adjacent vacant Listed Reading Prison, highlighting not only the strong Victorian heritage of the town and its growth but also the infamous association with Oscar Wilde; all of this juxtaposed with the modernity of the iconic 'Blade' office building. These connections and inter-relationships have already figured strongly in Reading's 'Year of Culture 2016' with an acclaimed new play based on the life of Henry 1; the phenomenally successful 'Inside' exhibition by

Artangel at Reading Prison; and a wide range of contemporary cultural events grounded in and celebrating Reading's personality and distinctiveness.

We are clearly not starting from a low base and context is vitally important to fully understand our Great Place proposals, how these complement, extend and deepen the impacts of current activities and why this is such a timely opportunity to really deliver "networked arts and heritage" in Reading.

Reading is a vibrant economically successful town at the heart of the Thames Valley and widely recognised as the sub-regional 'capital'. The town has a resident population of approximately 161,000 within tightly drawn boundaries. This resident population is richly diverse, with diversity increasing in younger age cohorts. Despite the Borough's small geographic size the town directly serves a wider catchment of approximately 400,000 people within a 20 minute drive time of the town centre who regularly come to the town centre for a range of activities. The population of the town continues to grow (9% in the last 10 years) and major housing developments in surrounding Boroughs will significantly increase the population in Reading's catchment over the next decades. Whilst focused on activity within the town, our Great Place proposals will benefit this much wider catchment and extend it.

Despite these many attributes of a thriving and successful town: high levels of employment; prosperity; a skilled well-educated workforce; and a high quality of life enjoyed by many people within Reading, there are significant numbers of residents who are struggling. Reading has many of the attributes of a London Borough with affluence sitting cheek by jowl with areas of significant deprivation. Across the Borough nearly 20% of children, and their families, live in poverty and 30% of Reading pupils are eligible for the pupil premium. Whilst the Borough has a young population overall, the frail and elderly are increasing and Reading has a relatively high proportion of vulnerable elderly. Building from existing activities, such as the established Cultural Education Partnership (CEP), the Great Place Scheme offers great potential to address these issues of inequality and to improve outcomes for local people.

The building blocks to achieve this are varied and significant, Reading as a 'cultural hub' has made a significant step-change over recent years epitomised by the '**Reading Year of Culture 2016**' and its role as a catalyst for a sustained programme to raise Reading's reputation and profile, delivering a range of benefits to local people and further bolstering economic success:

- A new aspirational **Culture and Heritage Strategy** and its vision that: 'By 2030, Reading will be recognised as a centre of creativity with a reputation for cultural and heritage excellence at a regional, national and international level with increased engagement across the town';
- '**Reading International**': an ambitious three year visual arts programme led by the University's new Institute of Heritage & Creativity in partnership with Artangel, the Council and Reading UK CIC (the Council's arms-length economic development company), with funding from ACE's 'Ambition for Excellence' programme. The funding has supported **Artangel's 'Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison'** as the 'front-end' of this three year programme and it will culminate in a major exhibition in the re-opened Abbey Ruins in 2019. This offers an unprecedented opportunity to transform the visual arts in Reading, create a legacy for Reading Year of Culture 2016, deliver a high profile celebration for the reopening of Reading Abbey Ruins, and develop partnerships with local arts organisations, schools and

communities. This in turn will generate a culture of artistic ambition, community involvement and audience development in the region to support a legacy biennial Reading International 'festival';

- **The 'Abbey Revealed'** project funded by the Council and HLF: Of national significance the project involves the essential conservation programme to the Abbey Ruins and the Abbey Gateway (both Scheduled Monument and Grade I listed); associated branding, signage, interpretation; and a five year engagement programme of events and activities across the heritage site. Reading's Museum service is pivotal for the successful delivery of the project and a rejuvenated 'Abbey Quarter';
- HLF funded redevelopment of the University's **Museum of English Rural Life (MERL)**: The new museum aims to challenge perceptions about rural England by revealing the historical and contemporary relevance of country life to urban settlements and evolution over the ages. The new interactive galleries explore questions of identity, environment, technology, culture and health. As with the Abbey Revealed project there is an extensive engagement and activity programme extending into future years;
- A new **Institute of Heritage and Creativity** established by the University to focus on research, innovation, partnership engagement and Reading as a place. Pulling together expertise, capacity and commitment from across the University's many areas of relevant expertise to research and develop best practice, engage with other stakeholders, including local communities. Ultimately to bring the University 'off-campus' and impact more widely on Reading's future development and the well-being of its citizens;
- Ongoing **collaboration** across the Museum's sector and the potential, in particular, for the collaboration between Reading Museum, MERL and the Institute of Heritage and Creativity to become an exemplar for community engagement and interaction. The two Museums are currently jointly applying to ACE for National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status.
- Refurbishment of **South Street Arts Centre**, a vibrant hub for original and eclectic work resonating across different generations and Reading's diverse communities. Extensive remodelling and refurbishment will consolidate the venue's national reputation for excellence, particularly for its contemporary theatre and music, and also enable an expanded outreach and educational programme. South Street is currently applying to ACE for NPO status;
- Developing a **Year of Culture legacy**, embedding culture and heritage as integral to the future success of the town and outcomes for its citizens. The Year of Culture has already delivered the engagement of national arts organisations in Reading; the development of new relationships between artists, arts groups, Reading businesses and stakeholders; the unlocking of new funding for the arts in Reading and new platforms and venues for artistic output in the town and an increase in the quantity and ambition of artistic output;
- **The Cultural Education Partnership (CEP)** with an agreed action plan to transform cultural opportunities for young people, especially those young people who otherwise might not have access to such opportunities. The CEP is acknowledged to be at the vanguard as an early adopter and has committed representation from key stakeholders, including Berkshire Maestros, the College, the University, schools and the Culture and Arts Network (CAN) of local delivery organisations.

- **The Cultural Partnership** has successfully overseen the development of the Culture and Heritage Strategy and the delivery of a Year of Culture, that itself emerged as a result of extensive consultation to develop this strategy. It is acknowledged that in the light of all the progress and developments referenced above, and not least the emergence of new key strategic partners, the Partnership needs to grow and evolve. The Cultural Partnership is already in the process of reviewing its membership and terms of reference in order to ensure that it can drive and add value to delivery of the Culture & Heritage Strategy. Taking forward the legacy of the Year of Culture, key initiatives as outlined above, and facilitating further activity and collaboration will be key objectives and fully integrated with our Great Place Scheme.

We are determined to build on this momentum with carefully considered complementary programmes of exceptional quality to create a fully networked permanent legacy, transforming cultural opportunities both for residents and visitors. This is why context is so important, we need to ensure that scarce resources are adding value, carefully targeted to broaden the reach and impact of cultural activity on outcomes for the town. Key areas identified for the Great Places Scheme to achieve this on the back of already strongly developed partnerships and initiatives are:

1. A new delivery board which embeds culture at a strategic level and creating new sustainable sub-groups for culture, such as 'Ageing Well' and supporting new delivery partnerships such as the Cultural Education Partnership (CEP), Reading International and Junction Dance.
2. Using the momentum and success of 'Reading International' to build profile, reputation, partnerships and community engagement. This will include pulling together the research capability of the University, including the new Institute of Heritage and Creativity, in various fields to develop best practice geared to the needs of Reading and its people.
3. A community cultural outreach programme for targeted communities – connecting cultural organisations and partners such as public health, adult social care and education, creating a platform for mainstreaming cultural commissioning and helping to deliver key social outcomes.
4. Creating a new *Reading -on-Thames Festival* that will cement and celebrate Reading's unique identity and provide a platform for cultural excellence. The Festival will create a sustainable celebration of Reading's identity, enhancing a sense of place for residents and the attractiveness of Reading's cultural assets to visitors.
5. Build from the business engagement success of the Year of Culture to embed culture and heritage in economic development and business strategies.

Whilst it is difficult to fully convey or elucidate the complex and positive links between these strands of activity and existing initiatives, they are considered more fully below (with further detail in the Work Plan):

1. Strategic Partnership Building

The Cultural Partnership needs to evolve to reflect the many positive developments in Reading over recent years and to formalise delivery arrangements with a greater range of committed partners. Until recently key players such as the University, Reading UK CIC and their business stakeholders, the health and well-being sector (also reflected as a 'gap' in 3 below) and heritage focused organisations, including Reading Museum and MERL, have not

been directly represented. In addition new partnerships and networks have developed, not least through the impetus provided by the Year of Culture and the rapid development and support for the CEP. There is a need to ensure that relationships and delivery plans are effectively networked across this expanded range of activities and that there are strategic linkages that add value and drive progress and impact. The Cultural Partnership has already formally agreed to re-invent itself and our Great Place Scheme proposals include external support to assist in accelerating and embedding this process. It is currently envisaged that this new strategic 'Great Place Board' will provide overarching co-ordination and drive to deliver on the ambitions of the Culture & Heritage Strategy (and the Great Place Scheme itself) with a number of delivery focused 'sub-partnerships': CEP, Ageing-well, Skills & Economy, as well as separate implementation groups for key initiatives such as Reading International and the Abbey Quarter.

2. Research and Evaluation

The establishment of the Institute of Heritage and Creativity, with its strong existing links to Reading International, provides a real opportunity to focus on researching best practice, based on national experience and local needs, and ongoing evaluation to inform the iterative development of successful new initiatives and interventions. As well as the existing academic strengths across a range of faculties this will also involve the innovative 'Participation Lab' that utilises community representatives from Reading's more deprived communities to research local needs and to develop solutions to meet these. It is envisaged that this programme of research and evaluation will directly inform the development and delivery of strand 3 below over the course of the 'Scheme' and beyond.

3. Cultural Outreach and Commissioning

As outlined above, Reading has a challenging socio-economic demographic with complex patterns of inequality and deprivation. Reading has already engaged with the national 'Cultural Commissioning' initiative attending a number of workshops with senior officers, public health and commissioning leads attending. Whilst we have begun to broker conversations, for example with our social care and mental health services, cultural commissioning to deliver against key local priorities is weakly developed. In the context of the Great Place Scheme we believe that this is a key area to address, embedding cultural activities as a means of delivering against service priorities and improving outcomes for local people. The capacity of the research strand outlined above will be a key ingredient in facilitating this along with the already established willingness and goodwill of service providers to engage. Activities will also serve to embed other sectors and agencies in partnership and delivery structures.

4. Reading-on Thames Festival

We need to build on the ambition of the Year of Culture to continue to do new things and provide new opportunities for Reading's arts and cultural groups, supporting their increasingly ambitious plans and programmes. Our experience of the Year of Culture was that having a theme to respond to, however broadly and creatively, helped generate a focused and energetic response from across Reading's vibrant cultural sector, helping to build

networks and collaboration, as well as raising artistic quality and ambition. There is also strong evidence that free to access activities played a significant role in broadening engagement, especially with more disadvantaged communities. Led by Reading UK CIC, whose key role is to increase investment and grow the economy, the proposed Reading-on-Thames Festival would meet multiple objectives and assist in the ongoing development of a relationship with the town's business community. N.B. Delivery of this Festival in 2017 is subject to a parallel application to ACE for Grants for Arts funding on the basis that any decision on the Great Place Scheme application will be too late to enable delivery. The two separate applications are complementary but not interdependent.

5. Economic Development and Business Engagement

As reflected in the key role envisaged for Reading UK CIC in strengthened cultural partnership delivery, the potential contribution of culture to the future economic success of Reading is both widely acknowledged and embraced. The Year of Culture elicited a positive response from the business community with significant cash and in-kind contributions. We believe that the Great Place Scheme can help embed this win-win relationship as Reading continues to grow and prosper, creating new and sustainable funding platforms as well as enhancing inward investment, quality of life and visitor numbers. The existing strength of business leadership with regard to the 2050 visioning process is indicative of potential here for Reading to become a national exemplar.

We believe that our Great Place Scheme proposals will wrap around and add value to existing initiatives and activities that have already resulted in a step-change in the contribution of culture to the life of the town, its status as a cultural hub and the resilience and ambition of local cultural organisations. With the pivotal role of culture already acknowledged in visions and strategies for the future, the strands of activity we are proposing will accelerate progress, strengthen and extend relationships and significantly increase impact, especially on addressing key social and economic outcomes, and provide even greater scope for the involvement and growth of the sector. Truly networked arts and heritage.