

# Worcester Arts and Culture Strategy 2022 - Draft

## Introduction

Culture has been a part of Worcester's story for 2,000 years and we know it will play a significant and dynamic role in our future, helping us become a more prosperous, connected, inclusive, green, and active city.

Arts and culture impact on all elements of life, from where we live and work, to how we get around and how we spend our leisure time. In Worcester, our arts and cultural offer is wide-ranging, vibrant, and exciting, delivered by a sector that continues to develop and innovate. The city hosts hundreds of events each year, from small community events which play such an important role in community cohesion, to major festivals which attract thousands of visitors and provide a valuable boost to the economy and national profile of Worcester.

This Strategy sets out the City Council's long-term vision and commitment to working together with partners, inviting everyone to join us on an ambitious journey. It provides a clear framework, identifying priority actions for Worcester over the next five years to enable the development of cultural provision, capacity, resilience, and ambition.

In the process of developing this strategy, we have engaged with hundreds of creative practitioners, audience members and partners. It has shone a spotlight on Worcester's well-established and well-loved cultural scene, both amateur and professional. It has also shown us that there is an appetite to raise the bar, innovate, and diversify our offer; and we understand that more can be achieved by everyone working together. There is no shortage of ideas and talent in our city and the time is right to implement changes and take Worcester's cultural ambitions to the next level.

This Strategy represents the start of our city's cultural journey and Worcester City Council is looking forward to working with residents, cultural partners, and other stakeholders to make Worcester a city with creativity at its heart.

# What do we mean by Arts and Culture?

Culture inspires, unifies, and challenges.

Arts and cultural activity matters because it brings joy, fun and wonder to our lives, whatever our age. It brings communities together, contributes to jobs and prosperity, attracts visitors, and supports health and wellbeing, as well as encouraging inward investment and development.

It helps us explore and enjoy our historic buildings and public spaces in new ways and lets us delve into our histories in creative ways. Performance venues, museums, galleries, historic buildings, libraries, and public art are a core part of the unique picture of Worcester as a home, tourist destination, and business base.

This Strategy encompasses museums, music, theatre, film, dance, combined arts, and every kind of visual and digital arts. It includes art and culture that you watch or participate in, that which is made by professionals and amateurs, alongside 'everyday creativity' that you might enjoy at home.

## The Evidence Base

The Council commissioned Festivals and Events International (FEI) to support the development of this strategy. Between August and October 2021, the team undertook a number of activities to ensure that the Strategy reflects a true picture of the arts and cultural offering in Worcester. These included:

- A review of the strategic context in which our Strategy will operate – looking locally, regionally, and nationally. 21 policy, strategy, fundraising, and planning documents were reviewed
- Primary research to map the assets, agents, and activities that currently operate within Worcester. 226 cultural assets were identified, suggesting a substantial cultural ecology exists within Worcester, and this is a strength on which to build
- A review of current support for culture - reviewing grants given to cultural organisations and the process of support.
- Consultation to shape the Strategy, which comprised: 14 individual stakeholder conversations engaging 24 people; virtual workshops attended by 41 people, and an online survey which received 381 responses. This means that 445 people have engaged in the consultation

Almost all (94%) of the respondents to the survey felt strongly that culture was 'definitely needed' in Worcester and could contribute to all of the city's priorities, in particular supporting our aims to be a prosperous city and to have stronger and connected communities.

We have a strong base on which to build as demonstrated by our mapping exercise which identified 226 active cultural assets, agents, and activities in Worcester. From festivals to theatre, from dance to music - there is a wealth of activity taking place all over the city. There is a vibrant mix of volunteer-led and professionally led organisations, including three Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) based in the city who work locally, nationally, and internationally.

# The Local Picture

Set on the River Severn, Worcester boasts a historic cathedral, a growing university and a diverse retail, culture, and leisure offer.

As one of the oldest cities in the UK, Worcester's nationally significant heritage stretches back two millennia. The city is particularly noted for being the location of the closing battle of the English Civil War, for having over 700 listed and other historic buildings, for being the birthplace of the iconic Royal Worcester Porcelain, and home of much-loved composer, Sir Edward Elgar. The city is also host to a thriving racecourse, Premiership rugby team, and an internationally recognised cricket ground.

High-profile festivals dedicated to Elgar, grassroots music, and literature sit in the calendar alongside the oldest music festival in the world, The Three Choirs Festival, which we co-host with our neighbours in Hereford and Gloucester. Live performance venues including Huntingdon Hall, The Marris Bar, The Swan Theatre, and Paradiddles host local and big-name artists, as well as comedy and experimental work.

Tourism and culture are growing economic sectors, appealing to both domestic and overseas audiences. A range of diverse arts organisations are key employers, including:

- Severn Arts, a charitable arts company bringing high quality music and arts to people across Worcestershire
- Vamos Theatre, the UK's leading full mask theatre company
- Dancefest, a nationally focused company producing outstanding contemporary dance opportunities
- C&T, a team of applied theatre practitioners, technologists, and researchers, finding new ways of fusing drama and digital technologies.
- Worcester Theatres, which runs two successful performance venues in the city, hosts hundreds of productions each year alongside its own successful repertory theatre group.

There is also a fantastic provision for youth music and arts with several youth theatres providing opportunities for the creative development of young people from toddlers to teens.

Worcester hosts an extensive programme of festivals and events each year including:

- Worcester Light Night, a nationally recognised showcase of art installations which engages with thousands of visitors each year.
- Victorian Christmas Fayre welcoming in excess of 125,000 visitors each year with over 200 market stalls and a packed programme of entertainment
- Worcester Music Festival with 250 live music performances and thousands of visitors over one weekend each September
- Mela, a festival of togetherness in South Asian style
- Love the Arbo, an annual community-led light festival where residents light up their windows and neighbourhood with artistic displays

## Local Context

Worcester has benefitted from almost £40m of public funding in recent years and is undergoing a significant period of regeneration, transforming our built heritage and public realm, creating new spaces for performance and events, growing our year-round programme of festivals, and supporting our residents to both create and access high-quality arts programmes.

- A £3million Cultural Development Fund grant from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, for a culture-led regeneration project called 'The Arches – Worcester'.
- £17.9m Future High Streets Funding to transform the northern part of the city centre into an exciting leisure, cultural, entertainment and residential quarter.
- Towns Fund which will deliver long-term economic and productivity growth through urban regeneration, skills and enterprise infrastructure, and connectivity.

Over the past few years there has also been significant change in how culture is delivered locally, with new organisations, networks, festivals, leadership, and creative talent emerging.

Although Worcester is brimming with cultural and heritage assets and attracts visitors from across the country, there is still more that could be done to showcase the city on a national and global stage. The city has good connectivity via the national motorway network, with the M5, M50 and M42 all running through the county. There are also direct rail links from Worcester to Birmingham and London, and connections to other towns in the county, providing a range of access points for visitors from across the country.

This arts and culture strategy sits within a wider framework of strategies adopted by the City Council which include:

**The Worcester City Plan 2022-2027** which focuses not only on the Council's activities, but also on how residents and stakeholders can continue to work together for a successful, vibrant, and sustainable Worcester. It has five overlapping and interconnected themes:

- Stronger and connected communities
- A Prosperous City
- A healthy and active city
- A heritage city for the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Enhancing and sustaining our beautiful city for future generations

The **Worcester Town Investment Plan** which aims to bring improved employment opportunities to our residents, develop new opportunities that will grow an economy and create a city that is worthy of its heritage and one that will be a more attractive place to live, visit, work and relax. We are committed to creating 'levelling up' opportunities for our communities and contributing positively towards a sustainable environment that will provide positive health and wellbeing outcomes for our residents.

**The Worcester City Tourism Strategy** a high-level plan set out to achieve the Council's goals in relation to the economic growth and prosperity brought about by tourism development in the City of Worcester. It has three objectives:

- Enhance the visitor experience
- Raise the city's profile with successful marketing
- Provide strategic leadership and ensure stakeholder engagement

# The National Picture

## Economic

- The arts and culture industry contributes £10.8bn to the UK economy.<sup>1</sup>
- The sector contributes £2.8billion a year to the Treasury via taxation, and generates a further £23billion a year and 363,700 jobs.
- Productivity in the arts and culture industry between 2009 and 2016 was greater than that of the economy as a whole, with gross value added per worker at £62,000 for arts and culture, compared to £46,800 for the wider UK economy.
- BFI statistics show that a record £5.64 billion was spent in the production of film and high-end TV production in the UK during 2021

## Well-being

The sector has an important benefit on health and well-being. Those who had attended a cultural place or event in the preceding 12 months were 60 per cent more likely to report good health, and theatregoers were 25 per cent more likely to report being in good health than average. People valued being in the audience for the arts at about £2,000 per year, which is higher than sport.

## Place and community

There is strong evidence that participation in the arts can contribute to community cohesion, reduce social exclusion and isolation, and/or make communities feel safer and stronger.

Volunteering in arts and culture gives volunteers an opportunity to gain experience and benefit from training sessions which improves their productivity, employability and earnings potential.

Investment in arts and culture in deprived areas can be an effective way of establishing a 'city brand' which helps to attract young and creative people to the areas. In turn, this can attract commercial creative businesses, catalysing regeneration and urban redevelopment.

## Education

Reports suggest that learning through arts and culture improves attainment across many other aspects of the school curriculum and has a wealth of other beneficial impacts on young people, namely:

- taking part in drama and library activities improves attainment in literacy
- taking part in structured music activities improves attainment in maths, early language acquisition and early literacy – schools that integrate arts across the curriculum in the US have shown consistently higher average reading and mathematics scores compared to similar schools that do not
- participation in structured arts activities increases cognitive abilities

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<sup>1</sup> [Economic impact of arts and culture on the national economy FINAL \(artscouncil.org.uk\)](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/economic-impact-of-arts-and-culture-on-the-national-economy-final)

## The aims of the strategy

- ***To provide arts and cultural leadership for the city***
  - To increase Worcester's influence within the wider region as a dynamic, innovative, and distinctive place
  - To encourage and empower the sector to deliver ambitious creative projects in and around the city
  - To develop and nurture creative networks in the city and wider region, bringing together partners to facilitate ideas and developing a community of engaged and active collaborators
- ***To develop our capacity***
  - To assist the sector in securing funding to support a strong and sustainable infrastructure
  - To provide advice and advocacy to encourage business ambitions and employment opportunities for the future
  - To acknowledge the importance of our fantastic arts volunteers, without whom it would not be possible to deliver Worcester's cultural programme
- ***To improve the lives of our communities and widen participation***
  - To provide a range of opportunities so that more people, of all ages, can take part in the artistic and cultural offer of the city
  - To create the conditions for the arts and creativity to flourish, enriching the lives of our residents and visitors and celebrating Worcester's unique creative offer
  - To bring economic and social benefits, to create quality employment opportunities by supporting a strong and vibrant infrastructure
- ***To grow our audiences***
  - To promote creative and cultural activities to residents and visitors, to be recognised as a destination of choice for the arts by a greater number of people, through strong and wide-ranging marketing
  - To encourage and celebrate attendance at creative and artistic endeavours in the city
  - To develop a regional reputation for provision of quality arts and cultural activity, attracting visitors from outside the city to attend events and performances