

# Bristol's Cultural Futures

Overview & Emergent  
Themes

@CulturalBristol

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EUROPE / ENGLAND

# Bristol

*is creativity and innovation*

*“Bristol is creativity and innovation...if ever there was a British city on the rise, it's Bristol...the south west's largest city has reinvented itself as a hub of culture and creativity. From Clifton's iconic suspension bridge to Brunel's ground-breaking steamship, the SS Great Britain, it's a city that's awash with historical interest. But Bristol is also known for its offbeat, alternative character, and you'll find a wealth of art collectives, community-run cafes and music venues dotted around – not to mention murals left behind by the city's most notorious son, the mischievous street artist Banksy”.*

(Lonely Planet).

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/england/southwest-england/bristol/introduction#ixzz4GrMUUrzF>



## 1. Introduction

This briefing paper provides an update on progress in the new Cultural Plan for Bristol: *Bristol's Cultural Futures*. This Plan, led by Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy, has involved in-depth and extensive consultation and engagement across the city since September 2016 (see Section 2). It comes at a time of significant opportunity for Bristol, which is recognised as perhaps the leading creative city outside London, with a very active and high quality cultural life driven by an incredible cultural sector that includes many individual artists, world-leading organisations, brilliant museums, exciting and critically engaging festivals, and a buoyant creative industries sector. Bristol is an international cultural city, reaching out and connecting with cities, artists and audiences across the world; and it is a city of local cultural expressions and practice, with distinctive and diverse communities of cultural participation led by activists and pioneers who have generated a sonic and visual culture recognisable across the world.

The contribution of culture in Bristol should not be under-estimated. It has been a catalyst for economic diversification and growth, for talent attraction and retention, for inward investment and tourism, and for innovation and competitiveness. Culture greatly improves the quality of life for people across the city, with cultural participation occurring everyday in every place in activities which go far beyond what might be recognised as 'the arts'. It provides access to ideas, to community, to fun and to employment. It is impactful for confidence, cohesion, health and wellbeing. It is, put simply, the thing that makes Bristol and that offers hope for Bristol's future(s).

The city's cultural organisations include some of the best in the country for engagement, education and inclusion. The city is also home to an increasing number of socially-driven, passionately engaged artists. Bristol is becoming known across the world as a city that positions culture as a social good and as a place where values and principles point toward tolerance, inclusion, environmental and social sustainability.

However, Bristol, like other big cities in the UK, faces a set of systemic social and economic challenges. For example, while the city centre has prospered in recent years (with culture a vital ingredient), many of its neighbourhoods demonstrate multiple indicators of deprivation and too many people have limited social mobility and experience bad health and unsatisfactory housing. Such areas may feel disconnected, hard to leave and to reach, and they have been to the margin's of the city's wider success. But such areas are also very cultural – they are imbued with their own distinctive cultural identities, they house many different types of cultural practice, and they have the potential to play a much more fulsome role in Bristol as the city's population grows, gets younger and more intercultural.

The city's cultural sector is playing an admirable role across the whole of Bristol, but in the less well-off areas it struggles to make the kinds of social and economic differences witnessed in relatively prosperous neighbourhoods, in part because of the systematic and large-scale social pressure on the city's relatively deprived communities in an age of austerity and with Brexit looming. This Cultural Plan will identify how the cultural sector can work with key agencies in education, health, housing and business, to deliver a better future for the whole of the city.

The Plan – *Bristol's Cultural Futures* - will identify practical and fundable opportunities where the cultural sector, working in partnership with other key sectors, can collectively improve access, build progressive links between the city's heritage and its intercultural future, and connect the affluence and cultural, educational and economic power of central Bristol to the neighbourhoods that have for differing reasons been left behind. And a plan will couple inclusivity with ambition in ways that are distinctive to Bristol – where, for example, the city's excellent international links are effectively shaped to deliver local value; where the city's growing and increasingly diverse and youthful population drives change rather than inherits the decisions of other people; and where grander civic interventions such as large-scale festivals and new cultural infrastructure are part of the same process which delivers a rich cultural life in the city's schools, care settings, libraries and community centres.

The starting point of *Bristol's Cultural Futures* was to explore in depth the emergent priorities developed through the city's Cultural Inquiry Day, held in December 2015:

**Connectivity:** A successful cultural plan be based on a strong working relationship within the cultural sector and between the cultural sector and the rest of civil society (in particular the education sector, health, planning, and business). Bristol has achieved a lot in building cultural partnership, especially within the sector. In addition, culture is positioned as a key strategic driver and civic priority, as demonstrated by the new mayor's manifesto and recent declarations. This helps to ensure it is understood as a cross-departmental agenda within the city council and that organisations are increasingly looking to work together.

**Inclusivity, diversity and identity:** Bristol is an increasingly young and intercultural city. It is one of the fastest-growing core cities and the younger generation is a lot more diverse than those who preceded them. The proportion of the population who are not 'White British' has increased from 12% to 22% of the total population. In Bristol, there are now at least 45 religions, at least 50 countries of birth represented and at least 91 main languages spoken by people living in the city. This is approaching a level of hyper-diversity akin to that of a global city such as London. But Bristol is yet to make the most of its growing diversity advantage – whether this be for innovation, economic development or cohesion. In part a historical legacy of the slave trade and in part an outcome of the distinctive topography and social landscape of the city, Bristol has for a long time been understood as a relatively fractured city where multiple, often thriving communities, co-exist but do not cohere as a whole.

*Bristol's Cultural Futures* is mobilising new connections and encouraging activities and projects that help increase social interaction between different groups. This is all about enabling intercultural dialogue to flourish rather than an old-fashioned approach to celebrating (multi)cultural difference

Bristol has one of the most progressive and attractive identities of any UK city and culture has played a transformational role, dragging the city from its rather sleepy and marginal 1980s image to one in which creativity, innovation and quality of life are to the fore.

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In part this has been driven by distinctive sub-cultures of creativity, shaped by a distinctive urban culture forged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Bristol's Jamaican heritage and latterly global environmental issues so influential. But it was also shaped, animated and catalysed by the city's enviable contemporary cultural organisations, its many artists and creative businesses, its festival sector, and its historic cultural fabric which is anchored by infrastructure as old as the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (1823) and as young as Upfest (a 'millennial' cultural experience if ever there was one). Bristol has one of the most complex and thriving cultural ecosystems in the UK and it benchmarks well internationally. But the city is not as effective as it might be in converting this cultural capital into an identity which is recognised and valued by a more diverse, global demographic beyond Southern England. The city also struggles to marry an outwardly-facing identity which is attractive to the highly skilled and mobile workforce with one recognised and valued locally and across the city.

*Bristol's Cultural Futures* is engaging with Bristol's many senses of identity and place. It is also exploring how to build a culture-led narrative for the city which reaches out internationally to attract new audiences, talent and investment; while finding local voices to refresh the offer and inspire participation across the city. Much of this rests on how the cultural sector works in partnership – internally and externally – to continually reinvent what it means to be in Bristol, to be Bristolian and to be at once local and global.

**Learning and development:** Bristol is a city of very high achievers, but it is also a city where too many people are held back from achieving their potential. With two excellent universities, many great schools and colleges, some world class creative businesses, and a strong non-formal learning sector and voluntary sector, Bristol has the moving parts needed to lift

achievement and attainment, to build opportunities for all, and thus to improve economic performance, cohesion and wellbeing. Culture has a huge role to play here – as a direct provider of learning and as an active and equal partner to education institutions.

*Bristol's Cultural Futures* is exploring how the cultural sector currently delivers value to learning and development – from its role in supporting STEAM activities in schools to the reach and effectiveness of apprenticeship programmes; or from its role in generating new research and knowledge in partnership with the higher education, technology and media sectors, to how it delivers those tacit skills and critical pathways which enable vulnerable people to shape their own lives. With diminished resources for cultural education and where cultural, arts and creative education are being squeezed from the curriculum, this sets a major challenge for Bristol. Yet few cities have anything like the mix of expertise, skills and energy within their cultural ecosystems and fewer still have set as their strategic priority the need for ambition to be inclusive.

**Major and minor cultural expressions:** If we are to maximise the value of culture to Bristol and if the cultural ecosystem is to be sustainable, then a balance must be reached: between the large-scale events (which are so important to the visitor economy, for generating a local marketplace for the local cultural sector, and for the city's identity and brand) and those many smaller 'grassroots' events (which are the lifeblood of local cultural participation and through which so much talent is inspired and nurtured). Vital too is the need to connect and coordinate programming, production and promotion, where the city flourishes as a 'festival of festivals', with the offer clearly accessible to different audiences and with approaches to licensing, ticketing and funding as legible as possible. For *Bristol's Cultural Futures*, partners in Bristol are think imaginatively about how to connect festivals and events, to scale up and reach out, and to bring the best of Bristol to the world in ways that enable local people to co-create that offer.

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## 2. Status and Approach of *Bristol's Cultural Futures*

*Bristol's Cultural Futures* will, by completion, seek to ensure the delivery of an enhanced, inclusive and sustainable cultural offer.

This will:

- Have the full endorsement of the local cultural community and stakeholders, with their commitment and buy-in to support the delivery of the objectives.
- Be evidence-based and result from research and findings of local consultation and a wider knowledge of national arts and cultural development.
- Develop the framework for the delivery of a sustainable cultural programme and the development of an appropriate cultural infrastructure, physical and human, to support the objectives
- Include a 10-year action plan
- Be supported by a fundraising and resource development strategy that identifies potential funding sources.

The main consultation and engagement period for the research is drawing to a close. It has involved over 180 conversations and many more via social media. Core approaches include:

- An interview programme where individuals from across the cultural sector, plus in partner sectors (such as education, health, business and governance), have been engaged. Over 70 in-depth interviews have been undertaken.
- A thematic workshop programme where different stakeholders have been reached in a range of settings.

- Social media – with the twitter handle @CulturalBristol enabling wider coverage of activities and a different way of staging the conversation.
- Extensive desk-based research – to ensure a detailed understanding of the strategic landscape – from an international to local level. This includes issues of urgent relevance such as devolution, Brexit, Arts Council England priorities, and changes to local government funding.
- Ongoing liaison with the *Bristol's Cultural Futures* steering group and lead officer Laura Pye (Head of Culture).

*Bristol's Cultural Futures* will be completed in late March / early April, with a period of review anticipated.

### 2.1 Workshops

The workshop programme has played a vital role – in engaging with a wider range of people and in exploring key issues in a more inclusive and conversational way. *Bristol's Cultural Futures* has involved 8 workshops. These were:

- **Bristol as an international city of culture.** This workshop brought together 15 key cultural and educational partners to explore how Bristol 'does international', how it can do better, and how it can connect international and local activities. It resulted in a new thought leadership paper which is published via @culturalbristol and available via Laura Pye.

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- **Culture and community value.** Co-hosted by Voscur, this workshop brought together over 20 people from across the community, voluntary and education sectors of the city. It focused on how we open up cultural opportunity, different models for procurement and engagement, and alternative approaches to commissioning and partnership. The event was aided by a visual scribe – see Figure 1.
- **Bristol's Festivals and events.** Co-hosted by Bristol Festival and Events Forum, this workshop explored how the sector can grow, diversify, innovate and play a more strategic role for the city.
- **Children and Young People.** Co-hosted by the Bristol Creative Youth Network, this very interactive workshop explored different senses of identity and place and worked to reimagine a future Bristol which is more open and relevant to the diverse interests of young people.
- **Digital Creatives.** Co-hosted by the Pervasive Media Studio, this workshop explored how Bristol delivers the enabling conditions for creative practice and creative business. This included a focus on the key spaces and platforms, networks and support programmes. It also focused on different senses of place, aspirations for the city and ideas for improvement of the city's creative and knowledge infrastructure.
- **Bristol as an intercultural city.** Co-hosted by the Black South West Network, this workshop explored how Bristol operates as an intercultural city. It discussed the city's incredible range of cultural activities and identified the main challenges to and opportunities for diverse cultural practice to flourish.
- **Additional workshop-style interventions.** These have involved participation in previously planned events – where *Bristol's Cultural Futures* has secured a slot on the agenda. This includes two meetings of the DIY Arts Network and a symposium on higher education and cultural partnerships (hosted by Watershed; produced by the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership).



**Children and Young People workshop**

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Figure 1. Culture and community value workshop.





### 3. Emergent Themes

The *Bristol's Cultural Futures* consultation and engagement phase has just drawn to a close, so the following themes are necessarily emergent and yet to be tested with the Steering Group. They are designed at this stage to be compatible with the four pillars of the Cultural Inquiry, with an additional three cross-cutting themes:

**Theme 1:  
City of openness &  
generosity**

**Theme 2:  
City of Counter-  
culture**

**Theme 3: City of  
Imagination**

#### The Value Proposition

Bristol is unique in terms of the UK's big cities in having a cultural sector so finely balanced between the commercial, the subsidised and the street; the formal and the counter-cultural; to the extent where no one part dominates. The conjunction of the three has driven innovation, risk and creative partnership and help make Bristol a distinctive, vibrant and growing city. A combination of factors including the availability of space, dynamic cultural leaders, investment in infrastructure, clustering of creative talent, the growing impact of universities, growth of alternative communities and more, have seen the city establish a national and international profile as a place of cultural production and performance.

Bristol's position is though at risk . Ever increasing property prices threaten the availability of appropriate space (especially for emergent and informal activities), Brexit threatens the economic and social model and growing inequality could undermine the balance between the elements that make the city successful. Furthermore, while the city has undergone significant regeneration and repositioning thanks to culture this success has not been universal with too many communities not benefitting. In addition, the city's cultural sector while among the most admired in the UK, has struggled to develop significant alternative revenue and investment streams. Bristol's physical and psycho-geography also works against their efforts to reach out beyond their physical footprints to deprived areas, despite impressive outreach work.

Bristol's future as a city of culture is not guaranteed unless the ecosystem which has allowed it to achieve its current strength is nurtured and supported. As a City, it faces the choice of whether to back what makes it work and help the individuals and institutions which facilitate the success onto the next level or risk a potential decline. If it chooses to back – then it should seek to expand the core themes of openness and generosity; counter-culture; and imagination. This is to back the talent and energy of the city, to encourage and enable creativity and innovation in ways which open them out to everyone, and to position cultural life to the heart of a city where ideas can be realised and all the talent has a change to flourish and prosper.

**Pillar 1:  
Connectivity**

**Pillar 2: Inclusivity,  
Diversity and  
Identity**

**Pillar 3: Learning &  
Development**

**Pillar 4: Major and  
Minor Expressions**

### 3.1 Theme 1

#### Theme 1: City of openness & generosity

The cultural sector in Bristol has thrived through its openness and generosity – it is relatively informal, networks are organic and the overarching sense of identity is one of tolerance, inclusion, sharing and environmental sustainability. However, individual organisations and artists have limited capacity to reach out and ensure Bristol culture as a whole is open. This theme focuses on opening up cultural participation across the city through a new level of cultural partnership and leadership, through the development of capacity, events/expressions and infrastructure in different neighbourhoods; on opening up the city centre for more types of cultural activity; and through a passionate plea and clear offer of cultural education.

The theme also focuses on Bristol as a city of generosity. This includes expanding notions of a cultural good or cultural intervention. For example, Bristol has a very substantial house-building programme. Houses and the neighbourhoods they shape are themselves cultural interventions. Think of Georgian housing in Clifton and St. Paul's or container housing in Amsterdam. With a strong and committed approach to excellent design, an openness to playfulness and experimentation, and a passion for public space, Bristol can pioneer housing-led growth as a cultural programme. Similarly, with clear guidelines, imagination and inventiveness, the city can encourage generosity through commercial developments (e.g. in the Temple Quarter Enterprise Zone), which can, for example, unlock resources (e.g. via Section 106) for city-wide cultural programming and capacity building.

*For example: The Bristol Cultural Commission – a new leadership network for cultural investment, coordination and advocacy. This is charged with opening up the sector and ensuring generosity across all areas of investment.*

*For example: Housing as culture: engage artists and embed generosity in master-planning and design briefs. Commission artists early in the design phase. Include affordable work-live for artists and studio/activity space for culture.*

*For example: Cultural pathways: scaling up and connecting the cultural education offer, working with schools and universities, embracing the private sector and linking to national initiatives to ensure all young people in Bristol have a cultural education.*

*For example: City as a cultural landscape: a new vision and plan for culture in public space; a meanwhile space commissioning programme; and a 'district of culture' programme.*

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## 3.2 Theme 2

### Theme 2: City of Counter- culture

The cultural sector in Bristol has thrived through its independent spirit, embrace of the alternative and pursuit of the 'authentic'. This ranges from 'formal' cultural programming in major theatres and galleries, to the street. So much of what is great about the city happens outside the traditional institutions and is unplanned and unsupported. This is why the city has generated such distinctive sounds and a rich visual culture. It is also why the city has become so attractive to independent, socially and environmentally conscious and often quite radical practice.

Yet there is a danger that growing inequality and increasing social fragmentation will prevent the collision of people and ideas which fuel so much success. There is also a danger that inward investment – though enormously welcome – will threaten the viability and security of the city's many micro and independent arts organisations. It is vital that Bristol continues to nurture an ecosystem of diverse practice – from artists' studios to new festivals, neighbourhood-based performances and events, to large-scale spectacles and symposia that champion radical and counter-cultural practice. The education and community sector will play an important role here – providing the space for expression and nurturing connections between different communities. There is also a regulatory element, where the city council and key land-owners can actively encourage cultural use (from meanwhile to long-term activity), facilitating opportunities for creative practice to flourish and in turn investing in the cultural practice which will define Bristol's identity for the future.

***For example: Crowd-sourced Cultural Value programme:***

Measuring cultural impact is increasingly important, but too often fails because it is not done on a large enough institutional or place footprint. This is not an academic exercise, but rather part of the way that the ecology can better describe its collective value.

#### Pillar 1: Connectivity

***For example: Unlimited culture:***

*From the Para Orchestra to Extraordinary Bodies, Bristol is home to a growing cluster of integrated cultural activity, providing opportunities for disabled and less able performers. The opportunity is to be a world leader.*

#### Pillar 2: Inclusivity, Diversity and Identity

***For Example: City of Circus:*** Circus is growing across the UK and Bristol is a global hub. The city should ensure that Circus organisations are as welcome as possible in the city, facilitate the skills and infrastructure needed for success, integrate circus into more aspects of city life (including education) and thoroughly embrace one of its richest cultural assets.

#### Pillar 3: Learning & Development

***For example: Capital of Counter-culture.*** Bristol can better position itself and its unique. This can be done by agglomerating and supporting the many excellent smaller, but scalable and festivals and events, encouraging them to scale and internationalise, and coordinating as the City of counter-culture.

#### Pillar 4: Major and Minor Expressions



### 3.3 Theme 3

#### Theme 3: City of Imagination

The cultural sector in Bristol has thrived across the city's vivid and interactive spaces and places, many of which have been produced, curated and actively encouraged by some quite visionary and passionate Bristolians. The city has a distinctive ecosystem of talent, facilities, businesses and organisations. These have, through the cultural practice they have inspired and businesses they have launched, given Bristol a longstanding reputation for innovation, especially in the fusion of art and science, creativity and technology. Bristol's strengths in advanced engineering and aerospace technology, its pioneering animation and wildlife film clusters, and its independent and counter-cultural arts should be the catalyst for a city-wide push to be the ideas and innovation capital of the UK. Culture should be central in this, as a driver, facilitator and bridge.

A critical agenda here will be the connections between a diverse, inclusive and at times very experimental arts and cultural sector; and a more commercially driven and growth-orientated creative industries. Also critical will be the spillover effects of arts and cultural practice to other sectors – in science, technology, manufacturing, tourism, health and wellbeing. To deliver this, Bristol will need to build on its lab and studio culture, with smart brokerage and commissioning in trust-based environments incredibly important. It will also need to more effectively formalise and scale up activity through effective partnership working (e.g. with the universities and business), enabling creative businesses to grow and to be able to recruit from an expanding regional talent pool. But it will also be vital to champion the messy, the marginal and the avante garde, where imagination drives the city of the future.

*For example: Re-imagining investment. Bristol will need a step-change in how culture is funded over the next decade to make up for further public sector cuts, but also to better connect culture to the commercial success of the city. To do this, both public and private tools will need to be imaginatively aligned.*

*For example: Neighbourhood based imagination hubs: Knowle West Media Centre and Trinity are exemplar imagination hubs for Bristol, just as Watershed is on harbourside. Integrated with housing and commercial development, other hubs can be generated – e.g. Bottle Yard Studios – linking access to imaginative practice to employability.*

*For Example: Ideas and Innovation Capital – leveraging UWE and ACE's 'Creative and Technology' MoU, Bristol can be a UK lead in cross-sector collaboration and knowledge exchange – with research and learning partnerships working across cultural programming, infrastructure and creative industries development.*

*For example: New cultural infrastructure programme. Bristol needs new and reinvigorated cultural infrastructure. This should embrace brave and exciting architecture and seek to connect and amplify the diverse communities of the city so the city as a whole can be reimagined.*

**Pillar 1:  
Connectivity**

**Pillar 2: Inclusivity  
& Diversity**

**Pillar 3: Learning &  
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