

Cheshire West & Chester **Culture Strategy**

Adopted 4th February 2015

Black Radley



Peter Latchford
Black Radley Ltd
peter_latchford@blackradley.com

www.blackradley.com

Tel: 0845-226-0363
Fax: 01694-722040

1. Introduction

There is strong and broad commitment to culture across CW&C stakeholders, especially amongst key leaders. This commitment is manifest in a wide range of projects, from the new Culture Centre to the public artists' programme. The area has an impressive cultural "bone structure" (e.g. Chester's Roman and Medieval infrastructure) and a good number of strong cultural players.

We are committed to culture. Cultural vitality is a good in itself: the human mind thrives where there is variety, activity and human connection. And culture is useful. Where there is shared economic success, there is enterprise and there is a vibrant culture.

The concept of culture is broad, covering a wide variety of activities and attitudes. There is therefore no standard formula for cultural success. But we can say that a strong culture is authentic to an area, building on its people, its natural strengths and its heritage. It is therefore obvious that culture cannot be "commanded" from the centre. The Council and its partners don't make the culture of an area. We can, however, create some of the conditions in which it can thrive. This strategy sets out how we plan to create those conditions.

When it comes to culture, most people have strong opinions. And these opinions can be diverse – even contradictory. Time and investment ends up being widely spread, achieving limited real leverage. This strategy is the product of considerable discussion, thought and challenge. It is not a shopping list approach to cultural investment from the centre. It is a framework, providing *ideas* of how to progress; a way of looking at the world that places the focus on feeding and watering the ground in which the cultural plants grow.

Culture is a key means of realising the Borough's vision and achieving new vitality. The approach to culture set out here therefore aligns directly with the Borough's growth and regeneration imperatives.

This document is a strategic approach, a way of prioritising how we support culture across the borough. It suggests next steps but it is not an action plan. Once approved an action plan will be developed using the area approach. This strategy includes a few potential next steps that are Borough wide and a number that are area specific.

2. Methodology

2.1. Process

In building this strategy, it was clear from the outset, not least through focus group feedback, that many people felt:

- they had been extensively consulted on related issues;
- action was more important than more words; and
- the new reality (constrained public funds) requires a more facilitative, inclusive approach.

In order to reduce the risk of duplicated consultation, around 30 existing documents were reviewed at the outset of the work. This was followed by focused interviews with 17 individuals, and 3 short workshops (with CW&C's regeneration teams, senior University players, and with a variety of arts organisations). This allowed a more embedded and action-oriented approach to be tested with a wider set of players.

To do this, two further workshops were then held; the first comprising 40+ culture sector and beyond stakeholders, the second comprising CW&C councillors. Feedback from these workshops was then incorporated into this document.

See Appendix 1 for details of consultees.

2.2. Strategic Approach

The above process led to some new thinking about the connections between culture and socio-economic success.

It is tempting to think that a cultural strategy should impose a simple approach consistently across all parts of the area. But the various areas within Cheshire West and Chester have very different characteristics and strengths. There is little to be gained by forcing them into a single cultural *positioning*. It would be better to have a coherent *approach* across the whole geography that plays out differently according to the specifics of each area.

We identified four broad Dimensions of Culture. These headings allow us to think about the different ways in which culture may add value.

We recognised that, dependent upon their history, different areas are at different stages of cultural progression. We set out a "Cultural Lifecycle", describing the stages through which an area will progress as its cultural life becomes stronger.

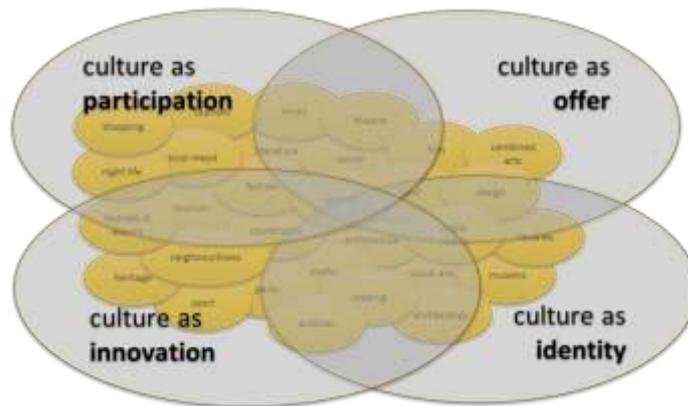
We recognised that each of the component parts of CW&C should be examined through these two prisms to determine their priorities.

We also recognised that, though the Council is in a considerably healthier position than many others, it is not in the business of running or substantially subsidising widespread cultural activity. It is therefore not possible for the Council – or any other player – to plan/determine/control cultural activity from the centre. What is

needed instead is: (1) a clear and shared sense of identity (at the level of the four sub-areas); (2) an agreed intervention focus (as per the Life Cycle); and (3) clarity concerning roles.

2.3. Dimensions of Culture

For CW&C, we recognise the following four dimensions of culture:



Participation

This is the extent to which people express themselves, connect with others as they do so, take exercise, play sport, and show interest in their surroundings. It results in strong social capital which, in turn, results in better health, crime, educational and economic outcomes.

Identity

This is the feel and character of a place, the extent to which its people feel part of it, and have a sense of loyalty to it. This fosters pride, neighbourliness and profile for an area; linking directly to socio-economic success.

Innovation

This is the extent to which an area generates new ideas – in all fields of human endeavour – leading to cultural and wider economic success. It is directly related to the wider vibrancy and creativity of the area.

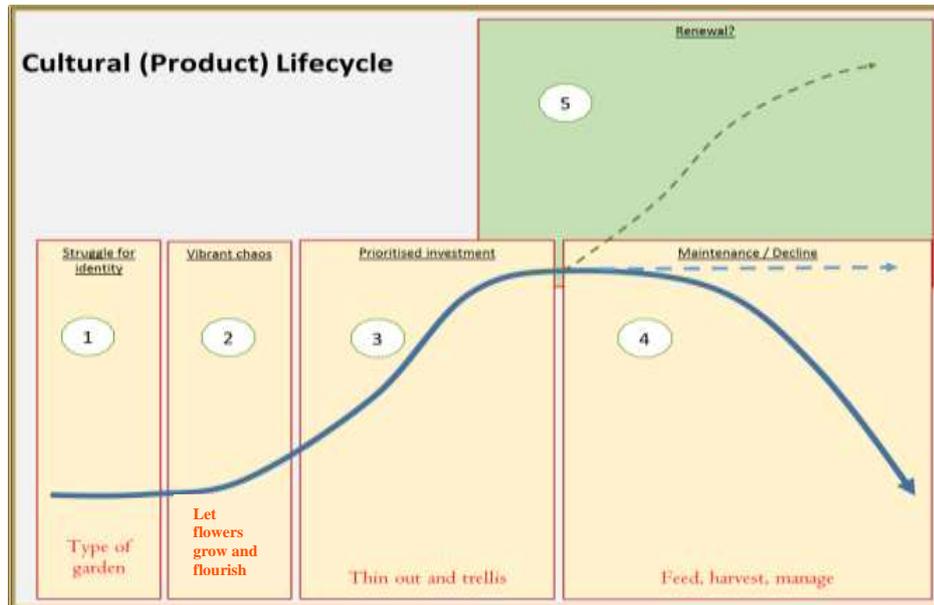
Offer

Culture is about both creativity and consumption. The *products* of a strong culture – performance, sport, craft, visual arts etc. – will be enjoyed by an audience from the local area or further afield. These products, taken together, are the area's cultural offer. For the offer to work in the long term, it must build on and be consistent with the other dimensions of culture – participation, identity, innovation.

Each area of the Borough, depending on its existing state of play, has a different balance of priorities across these headings.

2.4. Cultural Lifecycle

The culture of a place changes over time. The success of its culture will develop (or decline) through different phases. If cultural success is to be maintained and developed, different interventions will be needed at different phases.



Phase 1

A place will initially need to develop a sense of itself; what it is and what it is for. Without support, this task may go on for decades. It is the **struggle for identity** we see in many post-industrial towns and cities.

Phase 2

If a positive identity starts to emerge, like-minded people will come together and generate a wide variety of activity, some profitable, some not so good. This is the **vibrant chaos** phase. It does not itself generate significant increases in wealth, but it is the bedrock of subsequent sustained economic and cultural progress. Glasgow's renaissance at the end of the last century is a clear example.

Phase 3

Amongst the diverse activity in phase 2, some projects and players will have greater strength and potential. A **focused investment** in these will result in a substantial socio-economic return. In this phase the core proposition and audience of the overall area is clarified and strengthened. Bilbao's investment in the Guggenheim Museum is a good example. Other less successful examples which attempted a similar tactic – but where the previous phases had not been sufficiently progressed to provide the solid foundations – might include Walsall and Sheffield.

Phase 4

CW&C Culture Strategy

By this point, a strong and coherent culture is in place. It now needs on-going **management**. This applies across all aspects of the cultural scene (identity, participation, innovation, offer). Venice and Bath are good examples.

Phase 5

The maintenance phase cannot last forever. The area's culture will eventually weaken. At this point there comes a choice: do we continue to invest in maintaining what we have established (running the risk of decline), or do we enter a **renewal** phase, rethinking our identity and running through the phases again?

Each part of the Borough is at a different stage of this life cycle.

2.5. Priority Framework: Regeneration and Growth

Recent years have been tough. Economic downturn has affected the Borough's economic vitality. The Borough is therefore going through a period of regeneration to improve prospects. The approach to culture set out here therefore aligns directly with the Borough's growth and regeneration imperatives. It directly supports their achievement.

This strategy is shaped by the four regeneration programme headings (Chester, Ellesmere Port, Weaver Valley, Rural and Market Towns). These areas have the distinctive cultural characteristics needed to make this approach work. The cultural strategy's analysis and actions are shaped to complement the economic development, skills, jobs and inward investment imperatives of the Regeneration Teams' place programmes.

The CW&C area is a diverse and varied geography: a powerful set of assets with different needs and strengths. We recognise these nuances by working with four areas: Chester, Ellesmere Port, the Weaver Valley, and the Rural area. The principles set out above result in a clear framework, providing a consistency of approach combined with area-specific consistency.

For each of the four areas we can ask two questions:

- I. Which phase is it in?*
 1. Struggle for identity
 2. Vibrant chaos
 3. Focused investment
 4. Maintenance
 5. Renewal

- II. Which dimensions of culture are most relevant?*
 1. Participation
 2. Identity
 3. Innovation
 4. Offer

3. The Area as a Whole

3.1. CW&C Positioning

CW&C's sheer diversity means that its cultural *personality* is complex. It has coast, countryside and city. It has layer upon layer of industrial and ancient heritage. It has the spectrum of retail offers: outlet, destination and convenience. It has established communities and developing communities; it has gardens, parks and waterways. It has sporting excellence, performance excellence, and explosive academic growth. Defining an overall cultural proposition for the borough is no simple task as each area is distinctly unique and each has its own strengths which are distinctly individual and often personal.

We accept that this is how we are, we celebrate it, and we will recognise and develop this diversity as a strength. Our identity and our offer is not narrow and limited: we combine the very old and the very new, the familiar and the challenging.

From a cultural perspective, what does this mean? What are we?

Each area has its own personality (highlighted within this document) the overriding aspiration is that our borough will be.

Alive with Culture

It recognises the overarching ambition for CW&C and celebrates the range and vibrancy of the cultural offer currently and it's potential. And it provides the space in which the four areas can mark out their different propositions.

3.2. Overarching Imperatives

Though this strategy focuses on the four regeneration areas, the following five themes emerge as crucial at the Borough level.

Buildings

Culture is not principally about bricks and mortar. Buildings do not drive cultural vibrancy, and a focus on the built environment can stifle the creativity on which society and its economy depends. But buildings are an important enabler for a strong cultural sector.

There is a strong perception across the Borough that the cultural sector's need for appropriate buildings, galleries and venues is not being met. This issue plays out differently in different areas. Ellesmere Port may have underused space, whereas Northwich may have very little spare capacity. Chester has buildings that are iconic but inflexible.

None the less, it is clear that more could be done to re-purpose existing, under-utilised buildings for cultural use. There are challenges to be overcome in so doing (rental rates, planning issues). But the advantages

CW&C Culture Strategy

to the Borough's economy as a whole are significant, animating empty blocks in the infrastructure, and enhancing an atmosphere of innovation and vibrancy.

Action 1

We will initiate a task-and-finish project group to build and implement a buildings re-purposing framework.

Enterprise Culture

In the austerity era, it is clearer than ever that Councils and their partners cannot command people to be enterprising. Council funding is in short supply and, in any case, can perversely suppress enterprise by encouraging a focus on the wrong customer. The Council's job is to create the conditions in which enterprise, including cultural enterprise, can flourish.

CW&C recognises that a strong and successful culture (and indeed wider economy) results from vibrant competition, not from centralised control. Cultural organisations must become more resilient with a clear focus on their audiences, and a robust understanding of their underpinning financial model. CW&C is committed to being the catalyst for a vibrant, innovative, world-beating cultural economy. For this, we need brilliant artists, entrepreneurs and cultural investors.

The Council's emphasis will, over time, shift towards a focus on enterprise-enabling activity. This will comprise, amongst other things, programme coordination, business skills support, investment coordination, external promotion, cultural leadership facilitation, and incubation enabling.

Action 2

We will develop a detailed plan for delivery of this enterprising enabling approach. One aspect of the plan will be to develop an agreed policy with property around cultural use of property e.g. shop units. It will be a Borough wide policy, but will highlight geographic areas of priority.

Strategic Programme of Commissioning

CW&C – Lead Artists Programme, proposal for Strategic Programme of commissioning

Background

CW&C have spent the last 2 years implementing a strategic approach to the role of artists in the placemaking of our towns and cities imbedding lead artists in the work of our regeneration colleagues, supported by a Grants for the Arts award from Arts Council of England. Lead artists have been working in Neston, Chester and Ellesmere Port and they are now reaching the end of their research stage and have provided proposals and frameworks to deliver an innovative approach to *commissioning* in these areas.

Chester - In Chester the lead artists research was framed within an approach of contemporary heritage and positioned within the 'One City Plan', Chester's masterplan that sets out a vision for the city over the next 15 years.

Ellesmere Port – the lead artists research has been focussed around *promoting* the value of culture within the town's Strategic Regeneration Framework, with particular reference to transforming perceptions of the town and empowering communities within a strategic programme.

Neston – the context for the lead artist has been within a regeneration programme for a Market Town, responding to a concept that emanated out of engagement with local communities; to utilise this and create a holistic 'sense of place'.

The Plan

We are developing a 10 year plan to deliver a strategic programme that layers residencies, commissioning and creative engagement; a programme through its innovation, flexibility and dynamism will change the cultural landscape of Cheshire West and its strength being that it is built upon our research and learning through the lead artist projects.

The programme will deliver place-based strands that are intrinsically linked to the town they are sited in and their communities. Each strand has been developed with its own identity, they are unique and distinct; yet they sit within a wide ranging, strategic programme that stretches across the authority to provide an overarching and coherent framework; a framework that places a personalised and subjective approach to place at the forefront of an artistic intervention within regeneration programmes and capital investments.

ACE have been a key partner in the research project are encouraging the development of this and want to be a strategic partner in the programme.

Action 3

Develop and submit a proposal for the delivery of this strategic programme to ACE and partners.

Integrating cultural strategy into Place Programmes

The approach for this cultural strategy has been shaped by the four regeneration programme headings. It is, therefore, vital for the adoption of this approach that the actions are embedded into the four place programmes. It is also important to the approach that the cultural strategy links into locality planning and working.

Action 4

Regeneration area place programmes and localities integrate cultural strategy priorities and actions into forward planning.

Exploring Alternative Models for Cultural Services Delivery

The Council currently directly delivers a wide range of cultural services to customers across the Borough. The Council is undergoing wide spread change and is thinking differently about the way services are delivered in the future. There is potential for a number of services to be brought together as a cultural offering and delivered in a different model e.g. Charitable Trust.

The benefits of moving to a Trust model generally comprise four factors: certain beneficial tax treatments, an increase in fundraising given the independent identity, a reduction in the cost of central support services and an enterprise dividend of increased commercial income.

Action 5

Explore opportunities for establishing a sustainable trust model for cultural provision.

4. Chester

4.1. State of Play

Chester has tremendous spirit, a highly active volunteer sector, supported by a borough wide Voluntary Arts Network, and high levels of participation. Among its many successes, Theatre in the Quarter, Chester Mystery Plays and Chester Performs have become synonymous with the vibrancy of the city. It is underpinned by phenomenal geographic and heritage assets, including the Cathedral and Chester Racecourse as well as continued development of the waterways. It is a highly successful heritage and retail destination, with a strong tradition of successful outdoor parades and festivals. This proposition is in decline, as the recession, changing patterns of (online) shopping, and competition from elsewhere have taken their toll.

Chester provides a unique setting for intimate events that show off the strengths of the City. The challenge is find the right offer for the City and to spread visitor attendance and increase per person spend.

Chester has a large and growing student population, alongside an active and settled population, with a strong sense of stewardship responsibility for their city. The new Cultural Centre is the outcome of careful and intelligent dialogue and planning. Its likely audience has built up over time, not least through an impressive outdoor theatre programme; demonstrating a level of demand necessary to justify the investment. The Chester Business Improvement District is ambitious and focused, with a real interest in ensuring the cultural offer is effective.

4.2. Points of Focus

The challenge is therefore to establish a cultural offer which (1) increases opening hours (e.g. exploit aspects of the evening economy) and (2) increases spend per visitor hour. This means broadening the offer and adjusting the audience mix towards those with greater disposable income.

From a life cycle perspective, this means a **renewal** focus. From a dimensions perspective, this is an **offer** focus, combined with a **participation** focus, to include both student and established populations. Chester must find a proposition that meets a 21st century demand for culture and shopping, identify the target markets at which the proposition is aimed, and turn this into a higher spend per head in the city's economy. It must do this in a way that enthuses its population.

4.3. Making Progress

Proposition

Chester is constrained by (a) its physical size, (b) the nature of its fundamental heritage, and (c) the potential for tension between the perceived conservatism of its residents and the youthful challenge of the University. These constraints can be perceived and exploited positively: they provide the authenticity that underpins a successful proposition.

Chester is CW&C's principal shop window. The Chester proposition should epitomise the CW&C ambition whilst reflecting the distinctiveness of Chester.:

Chester - a tradition of daring

Note: "A Tradition of Daring"?

*Chester's physical form demonstrates its warlike history; its willingness to innovate by building on, in and over existing infrastructure; and its resultant long term economic success. It is a clear manifestation of the energy resulting from the willingness to take risk (**daring**) balanced by an enthusiasm for honouring what has come before (**tradition**).*

Maintaining this balance is the key to Chester's successful future. No city will survive that simply tries to preserve what it already has. But no city will thrive that does not recognise and exploit its assets, particularly if they are as strong as Chester's. The challenge will be for Chester to reframe its heritage offer in ways that bring to life the theme of daring (economic innovation, heroism, war, social innovation, scientific discovery), whilst honouring the ways in which these histories have since been encoded in tradition. This will not be an easy task: it will require daring to see it through. The University – with its student base and its intellectual ability to challenge accepted truths, will be a useful participant and critical friend in this endeavour.

Set out below are the ambitions for Chester that must be addressed in the action plan:

- The city itself is the stage, its distinctiveness celebrated through consistently high quality infrastructure.
- Existing heritage assets (buildings) are made into flexible spaces to accommodate a variety of cultural activities, whose implicit purpose is to show off the city e.g. sporting events/parades.
- The emphasis is on a range of good quality cultural and retail activity, resulting in ever-changing bundles of cultural products, rather than a highly refined, narrow specialist focus.
- Traditional cultural products (Shakespeare as part of the Grosvenor Open Air Theatre, river regatta, the city walls) are balanced and challenged by more contemporary themes (experimental theatre, canoe championships, lighting installations).
- Key members of civic society and the University are involved in working up and maintaining this portfolio ("posh + fringe") in order to maintain both balance and support.

Audience

This offer works best for audiences looking for a rich and varied experience, rather than for specialist culture vultures. It opens up the possibility of cultural cross-selling, extending overnight stays and opening up the afternoon/evening economy.

The audience will be local and regional, attracted in to the city by a specific good quality cultural product, and drawn back in by the immersive city-stage of Chester itself.

The audience will be national; people attracted to a positive celebration of their rich national identity, drawn by the vibrancy and variety, the combination of familiar and contemporary this generates.

The audience will include international visitors, those looking for a more authentic England than they will find in London, a more daring offer than they will find in Bath, with the variety of experience that warrants more than a day visit.

Implementation

To make this real, the following key actions are required.

Action 6

The agreement of a simple **city-as-a-stage plan**. This will be a framework that speaks of the identity of Chester. It will capture the proposal we have set out and be shared across departments in the Council and with strategic partners. It will ensure coherence and consistency in what the Chester offer to the world is. This will establish a consistent built environment backdrop across Chester: a common standard for routes,

public spaces and public cultural premises in the city. It will ensure that the fabric of the city has a distinctiveness, coherence and authenticity; that a visitor could open her eyes on any street and know she was in Chester; that the location itself adds value to every transaction that takes place there; that, through word of mouth, the message goes out across the globe – that this is a place of tradition and daring. This will drive up footfall amongst high disposable income visitors. The Chester BID is a crucial partner in this work.

Action 7

Filling gaps in the culture portfolio in order to broaden the product offer. This means:

- a. Using existing premises, collections and civic groups, plus University expertise, to develop a clear Chester visual arts proposition - consistent the traditional/daring/inclusive/ English formula. This would start with the nurturing and development of a visual arts audience. Ideally this action would result in the repurposing and revitalising of an existing building. This would host a popular/traditional core collection ("**Icons of England**", perhaps) alongside temporary space hosting work which complements and challenges it - and which spills out into other spaces across the city, drawing audiences in to see the tension between the two. The first step to achieve this is to develop a task group with the University.
- b. Bringing coherence to the layered and varied heritage offer. At its most simple, this means using a single strap line (**a tradition of daring**, perhaps – see below). It means using this theme to rework the way Grosvenor Museum, the Rows, Dee House, Castle and amphitheatre are presented and interpreted. Again, a stakeholder group should be detailed to give support and momentum to this plan, starting with the development of the intended audience. Ideally, it would result in a major reworking of the 4 key building assets, the collections and the archives to create a continually evolving celebration of daring. First step is for Chester Renaissance and Cultural Services to holistically review these key cultural assets and aspirations and review proposed heritage schemes accordingly.

By successfully filling the culture offer gaps, the proposition will be strengthened, increasing high disposable income visitors and extending lengths of stay.

Action 8

Investigate the appointment of an independent **Chester Artistic Director**, an external respected sector figure, charged with overseeing the establishment of a traditional, daring and coherent programme of cultural products. In this context, charisma, charm and determination can be significantly more effective than consensus. There are already many

talented cultural leaders contributing to a diverse and high quality offer and they would need to be consulted on this proposal. For Chester to achieve the cultural leap forward of which it is capable, it may benefit from the independent creative leadership that an Artistic Director can provide, much as that role is fundamental to a successful culturally vibrant City.

Action 9

Working with the University to establish the conditions for an **entrepreneurial artistic community** in the city, bringing together iconoclastic creators and hard-nosed investment; establishing the hot bed of cultural innovation which will complement the established offer. At its most basic, this means studio space, competitions, and a positive civic orientation towards artistic risk. The Council's role is as broker - of partnerships, relationships and projects – with an emphasis on creating the environment in which enterprise can flourish. This does not mean "picking winners": it means creating the conditions in which winners can emerge and flourish. The cultural vibrancy resulting will further strengthen the proposition, continually refreshing the offer and encouraging repeat visits.

Action 10

Encourage and support cultural organisations to be inclusive and participative in their practice. This will include ongoing support for Cheshire West and Chester Voluntary Arts Network and ensuring that this is embedded into any future agreements with professional cultural organisations.

The Action plan developed should phase actions, for example, in the short term, develop a joined up heritage offer, a University partnership around contemporary arts and commence a strategic lead artist programme of commissioning. In the medium term, investigations around the appointment of an Artistic director for the city.

5. Weaver Valley

5.1. State of Play

The Weaver Valley comprises Northwich, Winsford and (outside of the Borough boundaries) Middlewich. This is an area of wide variety, with an industrial heritage but impressive countryside; and a deep-rooted waterways connection, but a dormitory town/overspill legacy. Despite this, the component parts of the Weaver Valley have a growing sense of themselves and their identity. They are actively engaging with culture and pursuing their aspirational ambitions through a burgeoning art community and growing levels of local pride and engagement. Cheshire Dance, Visual Arts Cheshire and Development of the Arts in Northwich (DAN) are testament to this growing sense of identity. The towns of the Weaver Valley are in the early days of exploring and celebrating their common assets and opportunities.

5.2. Points of Focus

The Weaver Valley is in a mixed position on the Cultural Lifecycle. Northwich is in a **focused investment** phase, placing its emphasis on a new leisure centre/theatre, which builds upon a significant level of local enthusiasm and activity. Winsford is making great strides with its cultural ambition and perhaps best positioned in the **renewal** phase; building a strong sense of common identity around the themes of salt, waterways and green space and celebrating its connectivity with the wider Weaver Valley. The soon to be opened Lion Salt Works provides a particular point of focus.

From a cultural dimensions perspective, the priority is **identity** and **participation**. This is accompanied by the development of a very specific **offer**, focused at the outset on this combination of salt/water/green space.

5.3. Making Progress

To build identity and participation, the emphasis should continue to be on process. A sense of self cannot be imposed from the outside. People cannot be cajoled into participation.

***Weaver Valley – Cheshire's
historic heartland***

Across CW&C, the lead artist's programme has demonstrated its effectiveness in helping to catalyse and enunciate a sense of local identity. In the Weaver Valley this has been most established, and to very good effect, in Northwich.

The key actions here are therefore:

Action 11

Supporting the continued growth of civil society in both towns (lead artists, community development, local cultural group support, delivery of Memorial Court as key cultural asset for Northwich). This will be based on an explicit enunciation of the areas' heritage and the intended trajectory, building on the Northwich lead artist's work in revitalising streetscape and revealing the deep rooted heritage infrastructure. Adopting a lead artist approach for Winsford should also be investigated. Strengthened civil society will increase social capital in the area (strengthening relationships between people and between communities), which consistently results in improved educational, economic, health and crime outcomes.

Action 12

Further catalyse Weaver Valley civil society growth (through the same mechanisms). This will generate a stronger cross-town identity, enabling wider community links, and further strengthening social capital. In Northwich culture is central to regeneration of the town and this approach should be adopted in Winsford. The HLF funded Saltscape project will be one mechanism for moving this forward.

Action 13

Shaping the Lion Salt Works offer into a spear head of the wide Weaver Valley salt/waterways/green space proposition, developing links and audiences over time. To do this, the project should be more explicit concerning how it connects with the constituent parts of Weaver Valley, providing that catalyst for the area and its offer. The project will be an exemplar for local people of what can be achieved, providing them with the incentive for further socio-economic collaboration and ambition.

6. Ellesmere Port

6.1. State of Play

Ellesmere Port is in phases 1 and 2 of the Cultural Lifecycle, having chosen a renewal path, embracing risk and reinvention. It is exploring its identity and wide ranging possibilities, building on sporting assets and a heritage (and strong on-going reality) as an industrial economy.

Ellesmere Port has built a strong legacy of being innovative and has its eyes firmly fixed on the future. West Cheshire College is growing the innovators of tomorrow, and the area explores inventive avenues to enhance engagement with culture, such as Action Transport Theatre, based in Whitby Hall Studio and The Paper Boat Gallery. Such explorations should be supported and built upon.

Ellesmere Port does not need, and is not ready to project, a polished proposition for the external world. Its population needs to continue to be encouraged and enabled as they develop an energetic view of themselves and their patch. As it stands, there is a sense of crazy, confused, vibrant potential. This should continue to be stoked and celebrated.

6.2. Points of Focus

For Ellesmere Port, the cultural dimension focus must be on **innovation**. With its industrial heritage, space, low costs, and good connections this is a town whose future lies in ***applied creativity*** across any aspect of the economy, rather than "high culture". The key is therefore to create an environment in which enterprise generally can flourish. This means to continue supporting local people in exploring the identity of the area, as exemplified in the work of Fab Lab, and further developing its links between its academies, schools and employers exploring how creativity is applied to industry.

Ellesmere Port will therefore demonstrate to its population, and to potential incomers, its enthusiasm for "letting flowers grow and flourish". Ideally this would mean active support for creative and cultural start-ups, not least in concert with West Cheshire College and the University of Chester. The wider population of CW&C should be an effective resource to support such a developing innovation hub: its shop window, its investor community, the source of its grey-beard mentors.

6.3. Making Progress

To build identity and participation, the emphasis should continue to be on process. To build enterprise, the emphasis should be on creating the conditions in which risk can be safely taken.

***Ellesmere Port – the gateway
to innovation***

The key actions here are therefore:

Action 14

Ensure the continued involvement of a Lead Artist for Ellesmere Port to support the exploration of the town's identity and to help develop relevant, innovative cultural interventions for the town (see Action 3).

Action 15

Supporting the continued growth of civil society locally (lead artists, the new leisure centre, promote increased access for cultural organisations to partner facilities, local cultural group support). This will further strengthen local social capital, with a resultant positive impact on education, economic, health and crime outcomes.

Action 16

Providing an enterprise support infrastructure (flexible workspace rentals, network enabling, mentor and investor support) for the establishment of a strong creative and cultural economy. This will allow wealth generating businesses to flourish, providing jobs and the driver for improved skills levels. (see Action 2 – tailored approach for each area. Ellesmere Port to be at the forefront of the plan. Test bed area due to innovation focus)

Action 17

Encouraging the development of a youthful, challenging artistic and café sub-culture, which will attract a population of young innovators. The innovators will, in turn, attract investment; resulting in business growth, jobs and further economic opportunity. Steps would include university/college partnership to curate activity and targeted approach to attracting independent/unique brands.

Action 18

Strengthening college and University design/engineering/technology links with the population. These links are crucial if the skills needs of an increasingly innovative business sector are to be met.

7. Rural/Market Towns

7.1. State of Play

CW&C's market towns and wider rural area are varied and impressive. There is a high level of voluntarism, including a high level of cultural voluntarism and participation which is passionate and uniquely independent. These active and effective local groups, with guidance from authority officers, organise and deliver a wide range of cultural activities, events, festivals and facilities, such as the Castle Park Arts Centre in Frodsham and Community Activities Neston (CAN), Malpas Arts and Literary Festival and the Chester Folk Festival in Kelsall. The passion and effectiveness of local groups and volunteers is also utilised to great effect to support Cheshire Rural Touring Arts with volunteer promoters supporting high quality performances in local village halls.

This volunteer resource is actively encouraged by CW&C council, and should continue to be built upon. Furthermore, this is an area with a long and strong tradition of gardens and gardening; an environment in which enterprise is a daily fact of life; a resource which feeds the bigger conurbations and can be further utilised. Gardens and gardening is a powerful theme which builds on the strength another of Cheshire West's key assets: the natural environment. Cheshire West boasts an impressive array of habitats and hillforts, as well as the Mersey Forest and Sandstone Ridge, which provide a unique backdrop to inform and host cultural activity in the area. Besides this, there are a wealth of venues which are actively utilised for cultural activity, such as Bolesworth and Oulton Park.

Each of these diverse range of assets, both built and natural, allow for a thriving cultural scene in the rural and market towns, as well as a wealth of opportunity for the future.

7.2. Points of Focus

From a Cultural Lifecycle perspective, the rural area is in the **mature** phase, requiring careful maintenance and support for the real cultural vibrancy which exists. In terms of cultural dimensions, the emphasis is on continued **participation**.

7.3. Making Progress

The key actions therefore focus on the continued development of the underpinning communications infrastructure which makes this vitality possible, and on the celebration of the cultural gems that already exist.

***Rural West Cheshire – a
landscape of idyllic vibrancy***

This means:

Action 19

Maintaining hard infrastructure such as broadband, transport, and village halls. These are necessary to support relationships and communication in

the rural setting, which are the underpinnings of cultural vibrancy and enterprise.

Action 20

Providing light touch support for the continued evolution of cultural products and social capital (Cheshire Rural Touring Arts support, capacity building with rural event organisers, clubs and societies). This will ensure that CW&C's rural areas continue to be attractive areas to live, not least for those who may invest time and cash in innovation elsewhere across the Borough.

Action 21

Starting a cross-area process which is charged with identifying/developing a small number of cultural assets or activities – those that have the potential for significant positive economic contribution. This could be a cultural development group that identifies assets and promotes their development and best practice learning to other interested rural areas.

8. "Co-opetition": Links Between the areas

CW&C's four areas complement each other. To some extent they sometimes compete. This "co-opetition" is healthy and supports innovation. We will encourage and develop it constructively.

Participation

To spread the enthusiasm for participation, experienced in the rural area, to Ellesmere Port and to Weaver Valley.

Offer

To create bundled offers - linking the varied cultural products of Chester to the specific assets of the rural area and Weaver Valley – which keep visitors in the local area for more than one day.

Identity

To work with all players in developing and exploiting the overarching CW&C aspiration "Alive With Culture" and, more specifically promote area identities for Chester, Ellesmere Port, Weaver Valley and Rural/Market Towns so strengthening both local pride and the visit proposition.

Innovation

To link the shop window of Chester, and the innovation engine of Ellesmere port - supported by the wealth of Chester/the rural area – to create a mutually beneficial economic growth engine.

9. Final Word

To create cultural vitality in an area you must respond to the existing state of play. Sometimes, that means investing significant sums in specific projects. Sometimes it means giving people the space and support to work it out for themselves.

As a Council, we are committed to working in that flexible manner. The era when councils tried to decide and deliver everything is over. From a cultural vitality perspective, this is good news.

The Council's principal role is therefore as catalyst. In the main, we will work with and through others, creating the conditions in which they can succeed. We stand ready to work with all players.

To take this forward a detailed Action Plan will be developed, however adoption of this area based, strategic approach to culture should guide investment decisions and prioritisation by the Council and partners. The 21 actions will be further developed and set out as short/medium and long term. This strategic approach should also be used to integrate cultural dimensions within the Regeneration place programmes (see Action 4).

This document is not here to constrain. It is not the final word in cultural strategy: how can it be? It is here to inspire, we hope – or perhaps to provoke.

Appendix 1: Stakeholders Consulted

Individual consultation

Carmel Clapson (Public Art/Regeneration Lead Artists)
Cllr Mike Jones (Council Leader)
Cllr Stuart Parker (Executive member for Culture and Economy)
Cllr Louise Gittins (Deputy Leader of the Labour Group/Shadow Spokesperson Culture and Recreation)
Alison Knight (Head of Places Strategy)
Mike Dix (Senior Manager – Culture and Environment)
David Atkinson (CW&C Events)
Ian Tordoff (CW&C Events)
Richard Green (Property)
Katherine West (Museums and Arts Manager)
Rita Water (Chester Business Improvement District)
Graham Lister (Project Director - Chester Theatre & Library)
Andrew Bentley (Director Chester Performs)
Katrina Michel (CEO Marketing Cheshire)
Sara Hilton (HLF)
Ian Tabbron (ACE)
Nayan Kulkarni (Ellesmere Port lead artist)
Gordon Young (Neston lead artist)
Cathy Newbery (Public Realm Curator for Chester)

Workshops (phase 1)

CW&C Regeneration team: Gemma Davies, Tony Clarke, Chris Capes, Ellie Morris

Chester University: Prof Rob Warner (Executive Dean of Humanities), Brendan O'Sullivan (Executive Dean Faculty of Arts and Media), Professor Neil Grant (Head of Art and Design)

Arts Organisations: David Woods (Chair, Cheshire West Voluntary Arts Network), Karen Parry (Action Transport, General Manager), Amber Knipe (Head of Operations, Chester Performs) and Julie Platt (Development Manager, Chester Performs) and Brian Pearson (Chair, Theatre in the Quarter).

Workshops (phase 2)

Organisations attending:
CW&C – Regeneration, Museums, Libraries, Archives, Total Environment, Contracts, Marketing, Place Strategy, Events, Arts, Councillors
Regeneration Board members
Groundwork Cheshire
Mersey Forest
Cheshire Dance

CW&C Culture Strategy

Action Transport Theatre
Cheshire Rural Touring Arts
Theatre in the Quarter
Chester Mystery Plays
Wearpurple Arts
Cheshire West Voluntary Arts Network
Cheshire and Warrington Social Enterprise Partnership
Marketing Cheshire
Northwich BID
Chester Zoo
University of Chester
Cheshire Military Museum
Curious Minds
West Cheshire College
Chester Civic Trust
Chester Freeman and Guilds
Weaver Housing Trust
Sanctuary Housing
Chester Performs

Appendix 2: Documents Assessed

1. 1291 West Cheshire Growth Plan
2. Cheshire & Warrington Cultural Strategy
3. Cheshire West and Chester Corporate Plan
4. Cheshire West & Chester Public Art Strategic Framework
5. Festivals and Events Strategy
6. Regeneration and Culture – business plan summary
7. Heritage Investment Strategic Framework
8. City of Culture - Initial Bid Feedback
9. Chester Business Improvement District Report
10. Chester One City Plan
11. Chester Transport Strategy
12. Chester Waterways Strategy
13. CW&C Budget 2014-15
14. Chester, UK (Urban Land Institute)
15. Chester BID Business Plan
16. Ellesmere Port Vision and Strategic Regeneration Framework
17. Ellesmere Port Events Guide
18. Art in the Port
19. CW&C Archaeological Services
20. Art Exhibition Venue Development pre-feasibility study
21. Weaver Valley Projects – Regeneration (BR generated report)
22. Public Art in Northwich
23. Public Art audit for Northwich
24. Witton Street research evaluation
25. Northwich Barons Quay Development Framework
26. Northwich Urban Design and Public Realm Strategy
27. Northwich Timeline
28. Winsford Neighbourhood Plan
29. Winsford Waterfront Strategy
30. Rural Regeneration Strategy
31. Heritage Works - Best practice guide by English Heritage on use of historic buildings for regeneration.
32. Adaptive Reuse website