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Visioning a Creative and Cultural County (VCCC) Research Policy Impact Project

A Blueprint for Developing Leicestershire County Council's *Cultural Strategy*

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 3

Introduction 4

1. Why a Cultural Strategy for Leicestershire County Council (LCC)? 7

2. The Partnership Approach 11

3. Brief Development and Commissioning 14

4. Baseline Asset Mapping and Literature Review 16

5. Consultation and Engagement 17

6. Benchmarking 20

7. Prioritisation, Mission and Vision Development 21

8. Action Plan Development 25

9. Launch and Roll Out 27

10. Review 27

Conclusion 29

References 30

Executive Summary

Amid austerity and a challenging political climate within which local authorities are being compelled to operate, it seems paradoxical that these are exciting times at, and for, Leicestershire County Council (LCC). LCC has just recorded two recent remarkable successes: (1) receipt of £1.2 million from the Create Growth Programme (CGP) as part of the East Midlands Creative Consortium (including Leicester, Derby, Derbyshire, Rutland and Greater Lincolnshire Councils) and associated Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), and (2) award of more than £750,000 from the Arts Council England's (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) scheme for the period 2023-2026. Against this backdrop, it would be tempting for LCC to sit back and rest on its laurels. But it is not. Instead, it is going full steam ahead by joining up culture, heritage and creative practice through development of a Cultural Strategy. Building on its existing, strong co-production ethos, LCC has partnered with the University of Nottingham since January 2023 to undertake consultation and engagement exercises with a wide range of stakeholders within and outside the county council. The overarching goal has been to co-produce a framework that LCC could adopt to facilitate development of an inclusive and shared vision of creative and cultural engagement with differently situated stakeholders across Leicestershire, the East Midlands and beyond. The idea is then to develop the framework into a Cultural Strategy following extensive consultation. The University of Nottingham is committed to supporting this work throughout.

This blueprint is one of the outputs emerging from the co-production process. As the co-authors of this blueprint, we take great pride in the fact that the widest possible range of voices and views that we could garner are prominently featured throughout. In addition to the comprehensive and rich input gathered from various stakeholders within LCC and Leicestershire's creative and cultural ecosystem, this blueprint is informed by a key guide for Cultural Strategy development published by the Local Government Association (LGA, 2020). It is further informed by a review of a sample of carefully selected Cultural Strategies developed by a number of local authority organisations with models of Cultural Strategy development that reflect good practice and demonstrable evidence of effectiveness and success. Particular emphasis has been placed on Cultural Strategies developed in Fenland, Derbyshire and Kent, but key insights are also drawn from those developed in Bristol, Buckinghamshire, Herefordshire, Nottingham, North Yorkshire, Rochdale and Warwickshire. Drawing on analyses and surveys of the processes of Cultural Strategy development identified in the specified places and the road map recommended by the Local Government Association as outlined above, this blueprint discusses the recommended ten-stage approach to creating an LCC Cultural Strategy.

That approach is helpfully structured in the following sections: (1) Why a Cultural Strategy for Leicestershire County Council (LCC), (2) The Partnership Approach, (3) Brief Development and Commissioning, (4) Baseline Asset Mapping and Literature Review, (5) Consultation and Engagement, (6) Benchmarking, (7) Prioritisation, Mission and Vision Development, (8) Action Plan Development, (9) Lauch and Roll Out, and (10) Review. As readers will note, these stages are not necessarily linear. Flexibility can be applied wherever and whenever it serves the desired purpose best. Readers will also discover that a Cultural Strategy is not merely a document that is written, published and stored away. On the contrary, it is an iterative process that has no end date because it is periodically 'refreshed' in consideration of continually evolving circumstances of a political, financial, demographic, social, environmental and technological nature.

Introduction

> I just loved hearing how we may all differ in some approaches to what we think about culture and cultural provision, but actually we all have one common goal which is to carry on giving that cultural provision to as many people as possible (Volunteer/Project Participant).

> [We need to develop a] commitment to make sure that all of us, individually, make sure that culture is on the agenda. And we use the different platforms that we have, and the opportunities we have, to kind of keep making that possible (Strategic Leader).

> [W]e were talking about […] how important quotes are for people who have been involved in this so far. […] And it's really powerful, to show just how much is the work we're doing, which is perceived as soft and fluffy by most people in the county council, I'm sure. […] We are making people's lives better. And we need to be stronger in our language and promoting ourselves. We are experts. You know, let's not be shy. You know, we need to show that we are actually doing very, very valuable work. So, we need to strengthen our language and our message out there (Frontline Officer).

> I'm wondering whether having somebody like Martha [a freelance copywriter] come in and work as a wordsmith or a poet come in and really help give [the Cultural Strategy] absolute energy and maybe work with the visual artist as well so that it becomes a totally engaging document as well as the content. But actually, the experience of it is engaging — then you create an enthusiasm and an energy. The energy is kind of one of the critical things in any situation, because once you've got the energy, then you've got the drive to go and do something, otherwise there's a potential dissipation… (Creative Practitioner).

This blueprint provides a plan to guide the process of developing a Cultural Strategy[1] for Leicestershire County Council (LCC), particularly the **Libraries and Heritage Services** (**LHS**). The blueprint has been generated in the context of an ongoing academic-policy research impact project between the University of Nottingham and Leicestershire County Council titled **Visioning a Creative and Cultural County: Developing Leicestershire County Council's *Cultural Strategy* (VCCC)**. The ultimate goal is to develop a Cultural Strategy for LCC as part of the county council's efforts to enhance service delivery in response to a changing political and socio-economic climate and in the context of LCC's status as an Arts Council England's (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation until 2026 — and beyond. The plan is to strategically align creative and cultural services across the county, the East Midlands and farther afield in order to contribute to among other things (1) unlocking and spreading opportunities for cultural engagement more equitably amongst diverse local communities, (2) revitalising the cultural and social fabric(s) of the county, (3) attracting visitors to interact with and enjoy Leicestershire's distinctive library and heritage offerings, and (4) stimulating creativity to improve productivity and to contribute to an inclusive regional and national economy.

This blueprint sets out a pathway to Cultural Strategy development that LCC will adopt to be able to realise the overarching goals outlined above. Methodologically, the blueprint is informed by: (1) a literature review of existing, national case study local authority organisations that demonstrate good-practice, strategic models for Cultural Strategy development; and (2) comprehensive and varied stakeholder input and insights generated via a range consultation exercises — ranging from one-to-one, face-to-face and virtual interviews

[1] The work presented in this blueprint is focused on the development of a Cultural Strategy for Leicestershire County Council. Leicester City Council has recently disseminated a summary report of its own Cultural and Creative Industries Strategy which can be accessed via: https://cabinet.leicester.gov.uk/documents/s145755/APP1%20-%20Leicester%20Cultural%20and%20Creative%20Industries%20Strategy%20summary.pdf.

to focus groups and workshops to written responses via email and social media to knowledge exchange events (e.g., Culture Leicestershire's Volunteer Sharing Day, VCCC Project Conference, and the Online Cultural Strategy Symposium). Because **VCCC** in general, and stakeholder engagement in particular, are being strongly informed by a co-production ethos, the names of all the stakeholders who took part in one or more of the consultation exercises held during March, April, May, June, July, and September 2023 — and whose views and voices are featured prominently in this blueprint throughout — are listed below as follows.

Culture Leicestershire Volunteers and/or Project Participants

Name	Role	Name	Role
(1) Margaret Martin	HLS	(8) Farzana and Ammarah Hannan	Hijaz
(2) Anila Sisodia	Community Curator	(9) Gurpreet Grewal-Santini	Sikh Ladies Group
(3) Niru Patel	Community Curator	(10) Surinder Kaur Sandhu	Sikh Ladies Group
(4) Steve Smith	1620s House	(11) Lynne Dyer	Charnwood Spotlight
(5) Bill Huddlestone	Bosworth / 1620s	(12) Rhiannon Barton	Harborough Research
(6) Gary Jesionowski	Melton Research	(13) Nabeel Choudhury	Community Curator
(7) The Anand Mangal Ladies (x7)	Community Heritage Curators	(14) Kathy Phillips and Sharon Gray	Loughborough Library Local Studies Volunteers Group

Leicestershire County Council's Commissioned Creative Practitioners

Name	Affiliation	Name	Affiliation
(1) Danielle Vaughan	http://daniellevaughanartist.com/	(8) Debbie Longley-Brown	https://www.pedestrian.info/
(2) Liga Orlovska and Louise Jaggard	https://www.buzzingroots.co.uk/	(9) Rachel Carter	www.rachelcarter.co.uk/
(3) Khyati Koria-Green	www.kcurator.com	(10) Martha Moger	www.thestitchwriter.com/
(4) Eleanor Hodgkinson	https://www.babygigs.co.uk/	(11) John Sleigh	https://jonsleighfreelance.wixsite.com/about
(5) Jo Fairfax	http://www.jofairfaxstudio.com/	(12) Indre Rimselyte	https://indrerimselyte.wixsite.com/home
(6) Ruth Singer	www.ruthsinger.com	(13) Kate Lugar	Freelance Artist
(7) Ben Glover	https://www.enteredem.co.uk/	(14) Emma Dawes	https://www.enteredem.co.uk/

Leicestershire County Council's Frontline Officers

Name	Role	Name	Role
(1) Juan Pardo	Business Adviser/Policy Officer	(18) Claire Bradshaw	Community Participation Worker
(2) Sarah Carter	Communities Business Partner	(19) Esther Shaw	Community Participation Worker
(3) Sabrina Malik	Communities Business Partner	(20) Richard Knox	Access and Interpretation Manager
(4) Sacha Johnson	Engagement and Consultation Manager	(21) Sarah Coulson	Librarian
(5) Djenne Kamara	Policy Officer	(22) Kath Perry	Creative Learning Services Manager
(6) Rabinder Lail	Senior Policy Officer	(23) Alison Clague	Senior Collections Manager
(7) Caroline Lockwood	Collections and Conservation Manager	(24) Nicola Levin	Participation Manager
(8) Saral Nicol	Engaging Collections Curator	(25) Lindsay Swift	Curatorial Assistant
(9) Tim Savage	Local Museum Officer	(26) Kirsty Ballard	Cultural Outreach Manager
(10) Richard Wilding	Business Intelligence Team Leader	(27) Anne King	Cultural Participation Worker
(11) Helen Murray	Community Participation Worker	(28) Jemma Atkin-Barrett	Cultural Participation Worker
(12) Simon Dalby	Head of Service Delivery – Public Health	(29) Catherine Overton	Cultural Participation Worker
(13) Victoria Barton	Librarian	(30) Macha Barnden	Community Participation Worker
(14) Laura Taylor	Senior Archivist, Record Office	(31) Debbie Howard	Community Participation Worker
(15) Nicole Jordan	Senior Creative Learning Services Librarian	(32) Stephanie Strange	Community Participation Worker
(16) Bethany Nugent	Community Participation Worker	(33) Sian Matthews	Culture To You Project Officer
(17) Sally Coleman	Strategic Tourism Manager	(34) Mandy Sohanpal	Cultural Participation Worker

Leicestershire County Council's Strategic and/or Senior Leaders

Name	Role	Name	Role
(1) Kate Lister	Library Resources Manager	(7) James O'Brien	Environment Policy and Strategy Team Manager
(2) Philip Warren	Collections and Learning Manager	(8) Leon Charikar	Policy Manager
(3) Brian Kennedy	Cultural Participation Team Manager	(9) Jo Miller	Head of Business Intelligence
(4) Kristy Ball	Team Leader Communities	(10) Rochelle Gluyas-Cain	Library Operations Manager
(5) Sarah Rudkin	Economic Growth Manager	(11) Zafar Saleem	Head of Communities, Policy and Resilience
(6) Katie Greenhalgh	Environment and Net Zero Carbon Programme Lead	(12) Suzie Parr	Heritage Manager

Stakeholders Outside Leicestershire County Council

Name	Role	Name	Role
(1) Kate Earl	Arts Council England	(7) Lucy Keeley	Kent County Council
(2) David Wright	Harborough District Council	(8) Laura Ewart	Nottingham Trent University
(3) Owen Little	Head of Social Policy, DLUHC	(9) Samantha Lahai-Taylor	Kent County Council
(4) Carole Troake	Harborough District Council	(10) Joanne Lee	Learning Curator and Art Historian
(5) Jaime-Lea Taylor	Fenland District Council		
(6) Alison Foote	Derbyshire County Council		

1. Why a Cultural Strategy for Leicestershire County Council (LCC)?

> [T]here is a level of motivation that actually gets people out of bed in the mornings. I think culture is one those things (Strategic Leader).

> I wasn't born in Leicestershire. I moved to Leicestershire seven years ago, but I still have a feeling that this is my culture. That Leicestershire, Harborough specifically for me, their cultural heritage is also my cultural heritage, but that's not a physical thing for me — that's the feeling that I have gotten from living there (Volunteer/Project Participant).

> We are really passionate about going into communities and giving them high quality art experiences and inspiring the next generation of artists or making people think and reflect on life or making them smile. God knows it's difficult enough to do that at the moment but that's what we want to do. But sometimes we have to go: 'We can't do that because we have to feed ourselves. We would love to spend all that time planning and stuff but sometimes the finances just aren't there!' (Creative Practitioner).

A review of existing literature on approaches to developing a Cultural Strategy revealed that it is vitally important to define — in the clearest of terms — what 'culture' means in the context of a given place or in relation to individuals, and sometimes even whole communities, regardless of whether or not mobility is involved. As such, definition is considered to be an important step before thinking about creating a Cultural Strategy. During our stakeholder conversations and discussions, defining 'culture' was understandably not easy considering that the word can mean different things to different people in different contexts. We learnt that the meaning associated with 'culture' can range from being ambivalent to negative to positive. One comment captured how the ambiguity of the term can foster ambivalence:

> So, I think because culture has such a wide definition and means different things to different people, if you said it to someone who's struggling to pay their bills, [they would probably say:] 'I don't have the money, time, [and] energy to take part in culture because this is more important to me'. [By contrast], someone more affluent [would affirmingly say:] 'Well yes, I go to the ballet or whatever'. That is their culture. You can't do anything until you clarify those definitions of what we are trying to achieve as Leicestershire County Council … what culture means to us in Leicestershire (Strategic Leader).

Some stakeholders expressed a negative perception of the term — associating it with 'elitism' as implied in the quote above. It was noted further that 'this can pose a barrier'. Indeed, one stakeholder working at a local authority organisation spoke of how some of the local communities being served 'sometimes feel like [culture] is not for them'. Here, the stigma attached to the term has compelled the local authority organisation in question to 'sometimes not label things as [culture]' but instead introduce those offerings to local communities 'in a different way that feels more approachable and feels easier to accept'. This was echoed by a number of other stakeholders we spoke with. For instance, one strategic leader commented that 'it's being clever about how you then package [culture] up to make sure that we're efficient in terms of delivering … as many outcomes as we possibly can'. For the most part, however, our stakeholders not only associated 'culture' with positive aspects, but a number of their contributions also captured an understanding of the term that was generally shared across the board:

> Culture is anything that enriches you as a person … whatever that may be (Volunteer/Project Participant).

> I think there's the idea that culture is something which people choose and select to form their own identity. So, the things that, actually, they can take from their environment, from their experiences, from the things that they are brought up with to form their identity. I think there's things which people engage with which gives [sic] them an insight and experience which is outside of themselves (Strategic Leader).

> [As a little girl in Jamaica], [m]y great-aunt used to sit me down and tell me all these amazing stories of Jamaica and it just brought it to life for me. That's where my head went when we were talking about culture. It's the culture that's been embedded in me which I will then carry on with my children and so on and so forth. So, it's everlasting. In a word, culture is everlasting. It's always going to be around because somebody is always keeping it alive (Frontline Officer).

Clearly implicit in this set of perceptions and understandings of 'culture' — and elaborated on in our stakeholder conversations and discussions — is the possibility of taking the liberty to (1) acquire 'culture as one goes through life by choosing to add extras to one's everyday life', (2) experiment 'by looking at different things' and identifying 'culture out there that one thinks is for them' and in doing so, 'finding one's tribe', (3) muster up 'the courage to say: 'This isn't for me', but also 'not carrying on with something that one feels is not for them', (4) embrace culture as 'lifelong learning' or 'a life-time work or process' that encompasses a journey of discovery that evolves as people grow older and their attitudes and interests change, and (5) tell

stories of personal, family and communal lived experiences — past and present alike. To this can be added (1) the creation of accessible and safe spaces for local communities to come together, (2) the importance of carving out opportunities for community participation in placemaking (widely considered), and (3) the provision of the requisite resources to support all the above at both individual and collective levels. Incorporating this learning into a Cultural Strategy would considerably benefit LCC's co-design and co-delivery of cultural offerings in ways that are meaningful to local communities across the county. This is substantiated by recent research conducted by Arts Council England (ACE). That research strongly champions investment in cultural resources (broadly defined) and cultural organisations, something that is viewed to be of paramount importance in generating, facilitating and sustaining cultural offerings and associated engagement. Such engagement can foster a range of desired outcomes that can take different forms:

> Culture and the experiences it offers can have a deep and lasting effect on places and the people who live in them. Investment in cultural activities and in arts organisations, museums and libraries helps improve lives, regenerate neighbourhoods, support local economies, attract visitors and bring people together (ACE, 2023: n.p).

This aligns with LCC's current vision(s) of the **Libraries and Heritage Services** (**LHS**). The library service aims to improve wellbeing and opportunity for the people and communities of Leicestershire by providing access to reading, learning, information and culture through physical and digital spaces in line with the Libraries Connected: Universal Library Offers. The heritage service is working to shape Leicestershire as a place with a rich and distinctive history that values its heritage, engages its communities, welcomes those who visit the county and works together to ensure a future for the past. Development of a Cultural Strategy could play a key role not only in joining up the services much more effectively, but also making them much more visible to the public — including articulating how those services embody 'culture' and why that is important. With 'culture' defined based on the specific context of Leicestershire, the next step would be to set the parameters in terms of what is achievable. Virtually all the stakeholders we consulted with highlighted the importance of expressing very clearly and strongly what a Cultural Strategy for LCC is intended to achieve in relation to the varied perceptions and understandings of 'culture' and heritage — and what it is not intended achieve. An in-depth discussion about focus, direction and priorities is presented later in this blueprint. For now, it suffices to take a look at the recurrent questions that were asked and discussed in connection with what the priorities and mission of an LCC Cultural Strategy would need to be. Should a Cultural Strategy for LCC:

(1) be aimed at getting people to use LCC assets (e.g., museums and libraries) more regularly than has been the case in the past?

(2) be about providing a future for the county council's cultural assets during this time of cost-cutting? Or perhaps be about making those assets economically viable by getting people to pay for their use and upkeep?

(3) be used to encourage people to participate more often in cultural activities and events — based on a shared understanding of what 'culture' is? In turn, could regular participation in cultural activities and events enable more people to reap the numerous benefits associated with cultural engagement as outlined above?

(4) be solely about people?

(5) be about strengthening communities?

(6) be deployed as an internal document for use within LCC only?

On the whole, there was a general consensus amongst stakeholders that a Cultural Strategy could help demonstrate, in a tangible way, the value that LCC assets have for local communities. Capturing that value effectively could help justify the importance of LCC assets and the impact of associated cultural engagement. Above and beyond capturing value and impact, a Cultural Strategy could be used to (1) link cultural provision to LCC's broader strategic agendas and priorities as outlined in the Strategic Plan (2022-2026), (2) apply for grants to develop and fund more cultural activities underpinned by co-creation between LCC and the diverse local communities it serves, and (3) aid LCC officers in decision-making — with a sense of clarity of purpose, including a certain level of protection. Interestingly, there were views that expressed some doubt about the effectiveness and need of an LCC Cultural Strategy. One view expressed ambivalence based on the perceived marginal or peripheral status that cultural services are generally associated with inside the county council. The other view was critical in nature and questioned the need for a Cultural Strategy for LCC. According to this view, what if what is needed is not a Cultural Strategy *per se*, but instead embedding a statement about culture in existing strategies across LCC? Both views are captured in the following — starting with the ambivalent one which is then followed by the critical one:

> [W]e are usually a very, very small voice within the council, in terms of being cultural services. And I wonder how much impact a Cultural Strategy will have on the big organisation if some seriously important things like the economy, the environment, and [transport] sometimes feel [more important?] (Strategic Leader).

> [A question to consider is] whether or not we even needed a separate Strategy, and whether what we needed was a statement in everybody else's Strategy about culture? Might be even more effective than actually another Strategy that somebody's got to read [in addition to everything else vying for attention]. And, actually, feeling that culture is almost the interconnectivity that links everything together. And you're never going to achieve any of those other Strategies unless you get the culture bit right (Strategic Leader).

The overwhelming response to the two views above was best captured as follows:

> [W]hether we need a Cultural Strategy or not, it would be much more effective if we did have one rather than relying on everyone else's Strategy, because that's far more likely to make us be driven by (Strategic Leader).

> [It is important to have a Cultural Strategy so that] other people in other departments [get] to understand the benefits of that [especially if the Cultural Strategy connects] to their own strategic priorities and agenda. [In doing so, we would play the role of] a cultural advocate [which would enable us to] connect better to other service priorities, other teams, other agendas (Frontline Officer).

For LCC going forward, it is clear that developing a Cultural Strategy would be a valuable investment in terms of (1) articulating cultural offerings much more clearly and strongly, (2) enhancing cultural engagement in ways that (a) render those offerings much more visible to the public, and (b) enable more people to engage with the offerings to enrich their lives, (3) building new collaborative partnerships both within and outside the county council, (4) engaging more effectively and regularly with local communities — both existing and new, (5) empowering frontline officers as cultural advocates and ambassadors, and (6) supporting creative practice and creative practitioners in ways that enable them to (a) build capacity, (b) connect to networks of other creative people and organisations across the county, and (c) grow their creative entrepreneurial capabilities.

2. The Partnership Approach

> [W]e are all aware that, you know, within the wider county council there are lots of different departments with huge amounts of crossover. And then there's all the district councils, and it's great to see some representatives of them today. But there are people doing very much similar sorts of work. So, it's making sure that we're synergists, and whatever we're trying to do with what, you know — Market Harborough or Charnwood and elsewhere is also trying to do. [B]ecause together we're stronger. […] [W]e need to celebrate together and share our agenda as much as possible, because we are all there for the same reasons. Let's work together not against each other (Strategic Leader).

> [W]e can't do it on our own, and we really need to work together. And if we can do that, we can increase our impact, even where we have quite limited resources. [I]t's nice to have money. Really, really good. But it's often not the money that makes the difference. It's actually having the time and the space and the willingness to work together (Strategic Leader).

Successful approaches to Cultural Strategy development have been said to take a partnership approach. One aspect of this is establishing a steering group at an early stage to oversee the production and delivery of a Cultural Strategy (LGA, 2020: 7). The understanding is that the steering group establishes (1) culture as a shared strategic agenda, (2) its own terms of reference, chairing arrangements, and approaches to internal and external communication, and (3) the scope of expertise needed to lead the development process effectively such as possession of (a) local knowledge, (b) know-how of the cultural sector, (c) good communication and engagement skills, and (d) good familiarity with existing, good-practice models for developing effective Cultural Strategies (ibid.). For example, during the Online Cultural Strategy Symposium held in April 2023 — we learnt about the formation and composition of the steering groups at district and county councils in Fenland, Derbyshire and Kent respectively.

Jaime-Lea Taylor (Creativity and Culture Development Officer, Fenland District Council) narrated that the steering group in Fenland was named the 'Cultural Forum' and comprised thirty members drawn from (1) the tiered council levels in the district, (2) a local cultural education partnership, (3) museums and library services, (4) national trust properties, and (5) individual and creative practitioners. Of the remit and expertise of the 'Cultural Forum', Jaime-Lea Taylor added:

> [It] has representation that is really just to provide some support and direction but also to help inform decisions so that everything has got input from a variety of perspectives and just help keep things on track really. And that group includes people with key roles or backgrounds in local government too, external funders, individual creatives and then specialists in running an arts venue, the voluntary sector, fundraising expertise and also a focus on children and young people.

In Derbyshire, the Cultural Strategy is referred to as the 'Cultural Framework'[2] and is overseen by a steering group known as the 'Culture, Heritage and Tourism' (CHAT) Board — according to Alison Foote (Senior Economic Development Officer, Culture, Heritage and Tourism, Derbyshire County Council). As a countywide strategic partnership of public sector and cultural organisations led by Derbyshire County Council, the CHAT Board advocates for, promotes and facilitates the development of culture, heritage and tourism in Derbyshire. It does this by (1) leveraging new resources, (2) developing new audiences and participants, (3) and growing Derbyshire's cultural ecosystem (Culture, Heritage and Tourism Board, 2021: 4). In Kent, the steering group

[2] It is worth clarifying that whilst Derbyshire County Council speaks of a 'Cultural Framework', Derby City Council does actually have a 'Culture Strategy' that covers a ten-year period (2020-2030). More details about the latter can be accessed here: https://culturederby.co.uk/wp-content/themes/culturederby/assets/pdf/Culture-Strategy-Derby-2020-2030.pdf.

is called the 'Cultural Transformation Board'. According to Lucy Keeley (Principal Project Officer, Cultural and Creative Economy Service, Kent County Council), the 'Cultural Transformation Board' was formed in 2012 as an unincorporated group of cultural leaders who not only advocate for the Kent cultural offer and an increase in creative productivity, but are also responsible for strategic planning to develop and sustain that offer and productivity across Kent and Medway to enrich and transform the lives of people in the county.

For an LCC Cultural Strategy, it is going to be vital to put in place a steering group to ensure that the role and value of the former are understood both within and outside the county council. To succeed in this endeavour, working in close partnership with stakeholders in the cultural ecosystem within Leicestershire is going to be critical because it is these stakeholders that 'are set to gain from a strong and focused Cultural Strategy' (LGA, 2020: 7). These stakeholders could range from cultural organisations and venues to artists and creative businesses to faith groups and youth services to local charities and voluntary sector to sports and other relevant interest groups to universities and colleges (ibid.). In addition to these stakeholders — and in the absence of a cultural compact[3] in Leicestershire at the time of writing, LCC could take the initiative by bringing together stakeholders outside the county's cultural ecosystem. Such stakeholders could include representatives from tiered council levels, businesses, and education providers among others that could be brought on board with a view to (1) consulting on and co-designing a vision for the role of culture in Leicestershire, and (2) delivering against shared priorities (ibid.: 8).

Some of our stakeholder conversations and discussions revealed that partnership working can be quite deep and meaningful though not always unproblematic for a range of reasons. This is particularly the case when considering the circumstances of constituencies such as volunteers/project participants, local communities farthest from LCC's cultural and heritage offerings and creative practitioners. For example, volunteers/project participants talked about how LCC could be 'smart' about identifying when and how volunteer support might be called upon when needed to contribute effectively and helpfully to working in partnership more generally, and Cultural Strategy development in particular:

> '[H]aving that sort of opportunity to participate at any time in the way that suits you — with no obligation [is important]. Giv[ing] it a try. And we know that that's an area that probably most volunteer groups struggle with. People that have been there a long time, it's hard to keep that retention, and it's okay when you have different people participate and move on. But if they, again, see themselves having a platform to express themselves and identify with what's being showcased, in the library or museum for example, then they're more likely to want to be involved' (Volunteer/Project Participant).

> I'm a silo. I do research, not quite at the level that you do, but I have a very clearly defined role within the museum. I do research, I write it up, I present it and then they use it or not. So, it's quite pigeon-holed. I don't interact with the public. I had no idea any of this really existed. I hadn't! I kind of guessed it would, but I've not met any of the other volunteer groups. I had no idea what the culture and heritage piece of the County Council was. So, yeah, I'd love to be more involved in it to help inform the [Cultural] [S]trategy in any way that I can. It seems like a great initiative. What I actually do maybe less of a question (Volunteer/Project Participant).

The fact that a relatively long-serving volunteer working as a researcher in a museum feels they have no knowledge of LCC's 'culture and heritage' services is something to be taken seriously. Two important

[3] For a recent review of the Cultural Compact programme initiated by Arts Council England, please access: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/201102_Compacts_Report%20_031220_0.pdf.

questions emerge from this — responses to which would be very useful in informing consultation and engagement processes involving volunteers/project participants during Cultural Strategy development and beyond. Might a review of communication channels between the county council and its volunteer/project participant base be warranted to identify where gaps might lie? The importance of establishing a two-way line of communication and enhancing information dissemination were strongly emphasised in conversations with volunteers/project participants. In addition to events such as the Volunteer Sharing Day and social media exchanges, how else might LCC enhance information flows and exchanges with volunteers and vice versa? Effective responses to these questions have huge potential to help with tapping productively into the invaluable resource that volunteers/project participants present.

Over and above seeing LCC leverage volunteer support more 'smartly', some stakeholders felt strongly that LCC could utilise the process of Cultural Strategy development — and the Cultural Strategy itself when ready — to embed the co-production ethos into the design and delivery of cultural offerings in ways that appeal to local communities typically perceived to be hard to reach. This could also encompass those who feel that the existing cultural offer is not for them as well as those who experience barriers of different kinds that deny access to cultural engagement. Far from being a one-off approach or one that is deployed on occasion, co-production or co-creation could be framed and used as a hook to draw in those communities as partners in cultural and heritage co-curation. Making this an integral part of LCC's standard model of cultural engagement that is sustained, inclusive and meaningful to all involved would animate cultural engagement across the county and help deliver the numerous benefits outlined earlier that are associated with interacting with culture. The following comment captures how such co-creation could look like in a spirit of genuine and sustained partnership working:

> [Y]ou can look at the visitor demographics [of Bosworth Battlefield Heritage Centre] and it will be white affluent families, however you want to classify them. How do we change that and make it relevant, accessible, inclusive for other people across Leicestershire communities? It wasn't that difficult. So now, the new project is a Tale of Two Reinternments[4] and it's the saint who actually has been reinterned three miles away by the Muslim community and they're having their co-curated exhibition about this reinternment at Bosworth. You want to see the demographic [composition] of the audience change. That's culture but it's culture on their terms. It's not culture on our terms. It's about saying: 'Well, what do you want to see? What would make you visit? So yes, it's about making sure this Cultural Strategy actually has input from people who haven't been able to input before (Strategic Leader).

For creative practitioners, one problematic aspect singled out in relation to working in partnership with organisations that commission cultural projects underpinned by co-creation with local communities concerns ineffective communication and a perceived lack of clear and uniform ways of working:

> One of the things that is important for organisations to understand about freelancers is that we work with loads of different people all the time. Generally, at the same time, very rarely doing one project for one organisation at a time. And you are all over the place. And everybody has different systems and different structures, and it's really difficult. And when you work with an organisation who is clear in their communication, and it's really straightforward, it makes such a massive difference in

[4] For more information about this exhibition project, please visit: https://www.bosworthbattlefield.org.uk/events/a-tale-of-two-reinterments-exhibition/.

> how that works, as a freelancer. And, so, you're able to [focus on] the creative work [as opposed to firefighting] (Creative Practitioner).

For LCC, developing a model of partnership working that helpfully accommodates as best as possible the circumstances of volunteers/project participants, local communities that do not engage with the existing LCC cultural offerings for a range of reasons, creative practitioners and other partners is going to be invaluable when creating a Cultural Strategy. One of the co-authors of this blueprint — Dr Sophie Frost — remarked that volunteers 'really are the beating heart of cultural organisations and [that the latter] could not survive without [the former]'. It is reasonable to extrapolate this remark to creative practitioners whose innovation and resourcefulness (among other features) are what drives the creative and cultural ecosystem in Leicestershire. As key drivers, innovation and resourcefulness have been said to contribute considerably to the development of effective and successful Cultural Strategies across England and beyond. Stakeholder conversations and discussions also engaged with what has tended to work well in partnership — and how that could be built upon in developing a Cultural Strategy for LCC.

Where partnerships have worked well, we learnt, they have achieved some great successes. One such success has been where LCC has provided partners with resources that would otherwise not be available to them — and vice versa. In these instances, it was noted, partners have been relieved of pressure — allowing them to free up their limited resources for other vital use. It was refreshing to learn about the 'statement of values and behaviours' that creative practitioners generated and shared as encompassing key ingredients for success in partnership working: (1) respect, (2) empathy, (3) collaboration, (4) risk-taking, (5) purpose, (6) equality, (7) integrity, (8) responsibility, (9) courage, and (10) gratitude. This list is, of course, not exhaustive but creative practitioners expressed their desire to have as many of these features as possible incorporated into the process of creating an LCC Cultural Strategy, and into the Cultural Strategy itself when it is written. Overall, the importance of adopting the partnership approach to Cultural Strategy development was summed up neatly in the following:

> [Partnership working] is at the heart, isn't it? [I]t's around saying: 'Actually, what — let's listen and understand [our partners'] drivers... What are those? Where do we align and where can we do something together.' When we get that right, that's when we get the greatest success (Strategic Leader).

> [P]artnerships with our district and borough colleagues, our city colleagues, our community partners, our volunteers [are extremely important]. We all need to work very hard, as strategic leaders, to build those partnerships within and outside the council (Strategic Leader).

3. Brief Development and Commissioning

Existing literature on Cultural Strategy development shows that there are different approaches to creating one. One approach is to commission external expert consultants with a track record in developing place-based Cultural Strategies — including experience of developing a suite of (1) effective engagement instruments, (2) mapping techniques, and (3) strategic analysis tools (LGA, 2020: 8). If LCC has resources at its disposal, this can be an option. For example, Fenland District Council (2021: n.p) commissioned an arts and cultural charity based in Leicester called Art Reach[5] to write the council's Cultural Strategy. Art Reach

[5] More details can be accessed via: https://artreach.org.uk/.

was commissioned based on (1) its vast experience of supporting creative and cultural organisations in the UK and across Europe, and (2) a self-reported track record of generating over £1.25 million worth of funding and investment for partners since 2016. More recently, Leicester City Council commissioned a consultancy organisation called the Fifth Sector to draft a Cultural and Creative Industries Strategy that maps and reviews the history, condition and distinct identity of the city (The Fifth Sector, 2023: 2-3). Like Art Reach mentioned above, The Fifth Sector — which has bases in Liverpool and Manchester — was commissioned based on its self-reported, extensive national and international expertise and experience of providing research, insight and tools to cities and regions to develop resilient, place-based strategies and effective action plans to boost growth of, and investment in, their cultural, creative and digital economy ecosystems (The Fifth Sector, n.d.). Clearly, there is value in taking this approach — and this came through in some of the conversations and discussions we had with our stakeholder groups. For example, some stakeholders suggested that looking outside one's role and outside one's own organisation for expertise and experience can be fruitful:

> So, I think one of the things that really struck me about what I heard this morning was actually how much I need to listen and really get a grip of what things are going on outside of my role. […] I need to look outside of myself and look outside [LCC]. I've got 30 years' experience of museums, and I tend to fall back on that. But then somehow looking outside of that experience and looking where others' expertise lies, and where I can learn and incorporate that into my outlook. So, actually it's kind of, if you like, having a bit of humility, that actually that expertise only gets me so far. Part of the whole thing about [Cultural Strategy development] is actually looking beyond each of our roles (Strategic Leader).

Another approach is to draw on the expertise and experience of in-house teams — provided that the teams are adequately resourced. Particular emphasis here is placed on the capability to (1) undertake an in-depth asset mapping exercise, (2) conduct deep and diverse engagement, and (3) establish effective partnerships. **VCCC** has already mapped and produced a baseline asset mapping document[6] that audits LCC's cultural and heritage assets — along with other key resources in the county's creative and cultural ecosystem. More on this follows in the next section immediately below. Additionally, the document reviews literature that contextualises the evolving demographic, economic, political and technological circumstances of Leicestershire. In many ways, this is an important document that will not only inform the process of Cultural Strategy development going forward, but also an LCC Cultural Strategy when written, launched and rolled out — including iterative refreshing over the period of its life cycle. It is also worth noting that the document is intended as a 'living' resource that will be updated continually to reflect changes and developments in Leicestershire's cultural ecosystem as well as wider county and regional contexts. To avoid reinventing the wheel, (1) the model of stakeholder engagement (i.e., the varied consultation exercises) deployed by **VCCC**, and (2) the partnerships built so far will not only be deepened and maintained, but also expanded to make the consultation processes at different junctures of Cultural Strategy development as inclusive and meaningful as possible. The University of Nottingham is committed to continuing this work. Discussion of the importance of the asset mapping exercise during the process of Cultural Strategy development now follows.

[6] See Frost, S., and Mutibwa, D. H. (2024). *Leicestershire's Cultural Assets*. A Visioning a Creative and Cultural County (VCCC) Project Output.

4. Baseline Asset Mapping and Literature Review

> You need an audit of your assets, physical assets I suppose, so that will help inform. You probably need to do an audit of the cultural assets [and the communities that use them]. What communities are represented in Leicestershire? Where are they? How long have they been there? […] If you don't know what you have, you can't measure it. And if you can't measure it, you can't improve it. That's true in lots of aspects of life (Volunteer/Project Participant).

> So, as a starting point to inform a [Cultural] Strategy, look at the area within Leicestershire which is the least engaged in cultural things. [Then] determine why. What is missing there? What is that about? I think if you then can get it right, to understand that, you can probably get it right for the whole county. Setting yourself a challenge to look and understand why one area particularly is not engaging, it will give you lots of insights into: 'There's not enough cultural providers around, there's not enough opportunities'. People have got a specific perception of the area, perception of what's available (Strategic Leader).

> [In our team], we really are about collaboration, participation, asset-based [approach], social interaction, and working with the people. And that's how we want to see the county council work. We want to see the strengths in our communities and say: 'What can we do?' Not: 'What can't we do?' (Strategic Leader).

As noted above, **VCCC** has produced an audit of the cultural infrastructure, existing activities and related actors operating under the stewardship of LCC. Some key cultural assets across the county not run by LCC have also been mapped, and key county-wide demographic, economic, political and technological contexts reviewed. The rationale for this mapping exercise is to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Leicestershire's cultural ecosystem. During the process of developing LCC's Cultural Strategy, three key tasks are going to be particularly important in relation to baseline asset mapping. First, in addition to mapping and auditing key cultural offerings as well as well-known tangible and intangible heritage assets — it is going to be valuable to audit any lesser-known cultural and heritage assets. Doing this would ensure that cultural activity happening in these spaces is captured and featured in an LCC Cultural Strategy, if deemed appropriate. But it could also be that the direction and support offered by that Cultural Strategy may shape the complexion of the cultural activity in those spaces in ways that are productive and create synergies.

Second — and following good-practice elsewhere, LCC could use the baseline asset mapping document as a basis for generating an easy-to-use, annotated and 'updateable' map which could be made publicly accessible as a resource to consult on available cultural activities and sites (LGA, 2020: 9). Third, that map could be used to (1) enable councillors to understand the current cultural offer of the county and how it contributes to the local economy, and (2) generate informed data to support evaluation and value maximisation of assets (ibid.). If not captured elsewhere, the following data could be gathered as part of the evaluation and mapping exercises to inform Cultural Strategy development and its periodic 'refresh': (1) number of visitors, (2) annual profit (if any), (3) employee numbers, and (4) details of the cultural offer at any one given time — including any evidence of its impact on the local economy. It is reasonable to assume that much of these data are currently captured via different means and systems which may or may not be talking to each other to foster alignment and efficiency. Might LCC consider putting a mechanism in place to coordinate the capture, review, and analysis of those key data to support Cultural Strategy activity? The idea of putting a 'Cultural Strategy Engagement Officer' in post to oversee coordination not only of associative data management, but overall Cultural Strategy activity sounds like an excellent one:

> [T]here's no use having a Cultural Strategy unless we've got a better [way of coordinating related activity]. And yeah, there's someone working for the Cultural Strategy, to tell the story of what it's all about […] [W]e talked about the dream of having a Cultural Strategy Engagement Officer — someone dedicated to culture in Leicestershire, and also to the activities that came up (Frontline Officer).

The prospect of having a Cultural Strategy Engagement Officer coordinating associated activity, supporting the steering group, and brokering and maintaining relationships with the wide range of stakeholders involved in Cultural Strategy development leads us to the discussion of matters of consultation and engagement.

5. Consultation and Engagement

> [I]t's a bit too early in the day but I'd be very interested to see how we put this altogether, how we're going to be engaging, how we're going to try and embed this [Cultural] [S]trategy not only as an organisation but to our communities. Once the how has been worked out, I can't wait to see it flourish — if I'm honest (Frontline Officer).

> It's going to be really time-consuming and you're going to get a shed load of information and some of it will cross over, some of it you'll be like: 'where do we even put this? So yes, be prepared…! (Frontline Officer).

> So, our consultation spanned a twelve-month period during which we held one-to-one interviews and two stakeholder conference-style events. We also consulted across departments internally. We ran an online survey which received in excess of two hundred responses. We were mindful through the consultation of giving people different ways to respond to account for different learning styles. And one thing we did was to run a local conversation where we invited sector partners themselves to host sessions and provide us with their feedback, so it was more of an individual experience for them without public sector bureaucracy (Lucy Keeley, Principal Project Officer, Cultural and Creative Economy Service, Kent County Council).

Effective and successful Cultural Strategies are known to invite input from a diverse range of stakeholders at an early stage (LGA, 2019). As we saw above, stakeholders can range from volunteers/project participants and youth groups to councillors and cultural leaders to creative practitioners and cross-sectoral business organisations to support service providers, colleges and universities to a wide range of interest groups in the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSC) sector. The goal is to (1) harvest local ideas and form new partnerships, (2) engage with local communities that regularly use the existing cultural offer, but also try and reach out to those that do not engage for a range of reasons, (3) refine ideas, (4) draw on the knowledge and skills of various stakeholders, and (5) ultimately build consensus about needs and shared priorities (LGA, 2020: 10). To ensure broad and inclusive participation, some local authorities across England have come up with innovative and unusual ideas.

For instance, Rochdale Borough Council has reached out to young people in nightclubs and enlisted Rochdale Football Club as a partner in the Cultural Strategy (ibid.). Might this be an approach that LCC could consider — if deemed feasible? All in all, LCC could replicate the consultation exercises deployed on the **VCCC** project thus far, as outlined earlier on in this blueprint, to (1) establish a visible public presence of the consultation and engagement processes, and (2) to test the vision and goals of the Cultural Strategy amongst the diverse stakeholders (ibid.: 10). For this to happen effectively and meaningfully, strategic leaders (but also frontline officers who act as the eyes and ears of the county council whilst out and about in neighbourhoods and local communities) would be called upon to 'lead from the front', to 'listen', to enable opportunities for 'feedback', and to offer themselves to local communities as a 'resource' that 'does practical things for them' as well as act as 'an asset' beyond service delivery:

> And I think we've got a responsibility to consider [consultation and engagement] in all of our service areas — [and to reflect on] how we do that. And that maybe leading from the front with our staff and making sure they understand whatever mission statements, strategy, pledge we put in place. Keep listening to our staff. Keep listening to our communities that come in. Making sure that they have the measures in place to be able to feedback. So, you know, considering some people might not fill in the survey. How are you actually going to get that feedback from them if they don't have access during the hours that you're open? If they don't have a computer? If they're illiterate? If they don't understand? (Strategy Leader).

> [O]ne of the ways in which I communicate with communities [and engage with] community agendas [in ways that support] other people is to quantify myself as a resource. [I see myself as] a resource to people [that does practical things for them] (Strategic Leader).

> [We need to get local communities to] recognise that we're an asset not necessarily just a service that we deliver. So, the assets we have — we have some fabulous resources within our services. Our buildings, our collections — they're amazing. They're not ours. They are everybody's and we need to work really hard to see how we could share those (Strategic Leader).

Within LCC itself, consultation and engagement during Cultural Strategy development would ideally need to take place fairly regularly. As a tested and proven approach that we touched on earlier, the **Libraries and Heritage Services** (**LHS**) could frame culture as delivering value across (1) LCC's five strategic outcomes framework[7], and (2) multiple agendas and strategic priorities in multiple departments and units within the county council. Proceeding this way would work particularly well if culture were presented as issue-based, something that would render it more likely to be given a role of strategic importance and priority (ibid.: 11). At the organisational level, the following quotes show how tying culture to LCC's strategic outcomes framework could work in a way that demonstrably adds value:

> We are a deliverer of cultural and creative services but also a commissioner, also an enabler of activities. We can look to relate because we have a really strong outcomes framework with five key outcomes. We can try to seek to relate it to that which really helps. So, you talk about keeping people safe and well and if you've got a singing group of people with dementia — well, that's cultural but it's also keeping people well. If you're looking to say: 'How are we going to reuse junk to create artwork?' Well, that's clean and green as well as art and culture and creativity. So, it's linking in the Cultural Strategy to our overall outcomes framework [and that] will be key to justifying why it adds value (Strategic Leader).

> So, what about if we linked [the Cultural Strategy] to the [five strategic outcomes framework]. So, if you go to a museum with your family, that's always been a thing for as long as I've been alive and that's something we should be encouraging more of. So, there's more to that little circle but that's one bit. Then we've got the Net Zero. So, encouraging the gardening and the allotments and stuff and growing your own and embedding that culture back in and bringing that into play to our future generation. That helps with Net Zero — it helps with self-sufficiency and all the rest of it. Then we've got our mental health bubble doing the gardening, being outdoors. So, we can link it to the Strategic Plan and honestly, you'll be able to link into every single bit (Frontline Officer).

Across teams and departments within LCC, the steering group spearheading Cultural Strategy development could convene meetings with frontline officers and teams to discuss any unresolved problems they are facing. The reasoning behind this would be to explore how culture might serve as the glue that connects together interventions aimed at addressing persistent problems. We learnt that some of this has happened in the past, but — for a wide range of reasons — perhaps not with the consistency and regularity that would be required to embed this approach as part of good, common practice in a sustainable way. There is a real opportunity

[7] To view a summary of this framework, please access: https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/about-the-council/council-plans/the-strategic-plan.

here to incorporate this way of working into LCC's organisational culture. Experience elsewhere has shown that doing so ignites new types of interdepartmental conversation that can lead to the development of 'whole place' interventions informed by culture (ibid.). In the particular context of **LHS**, proceeding this way would further demonstrate the value of culture — and help to make the case for why it is important to continue to invest in it even during times of austerity.

Beyond capturing the value of culture, **LHS** could leverage interdepartmental interactions and collaboration to align the existing cultural offer with the aspirations, agendas, priorities and vision of other teams and units within LCC. Building on the links made between culture and LCC's five strategic outcomes framework introduced in the two quotes above, alignment could work by identifying 'hooks' and articulating 'key benefits' to people's everyday lives as conveyed in the following commentary in relation to the connection between culture and the Net Zero agenda in particular:

> I think there's a lot of parallels [between culture and] the environment [based on] some of the experience we've got from delivering the Net Zero Strategy. I think the environment, traditionally, has always been considered as fluffy and something that gets added to what we do. But I think we're trying to really shift that perspective to make sure people understand the impact of loss of biodiversity, of not being able to reduce carbon and really maximising the co-benefits. In our [Environment] Strategy, we've been really explicit about the co-benefits of delivering on environment and Net Zero. So, I think there's lots of parallels with culture and making sure that people really realise the importance of it, the impact it has, using examples through COVID-19, when we didn't have access to different services or experiences — how did that change our lives? I think just really making people aware of the impact that not having culture — I think it's just about trying to elevate this agenda and how you tie it in to other agendas that might already be higher up on people's agenda. I think it's the hooks. That's something that we've really tried to do with environment and Net Zero — find those hooks, find the key benefits (Strategic Leader).

Similar examples involving other realms were also discussed — including exploration of how valuable it would be to bring service users into consultation and engagement exercises held by frontline officers. A case in point involved the triad of youth services, alternative education provision and social care:

> I'm only just joining the dots. It is about linking across departments, letting everybody know what you're doing and maybe doing some roadshows to widen your reach with our young people services. We've got our care leaders team, we've got our children in care team, we've got people that are on alternative education provisions. All of these young people could be brought in to understand the archaeology (Frontline Officer).

It was delightful to see stakeholders championing interdepartmental interactions and collaboration in this way and reflecting on the benefits and opportunities that potentially lay in store for them. The idea of bringing service users and those who regularly engage with LCC's offerings into the consultation and engagement exercises as deemed appropriate has great potential to help co-produce and deliver services that are not only meaningful to local communities, but also fit for purpose and articulated as such in a Cultural Strategy when ready. This approach would enable LCC to gain vital first-hand knowledge of its service users which could be utilised to co-create activities and offerings that neither exclude nor create barriers for sections of people in Leicestershire's diverse, local communities. We were particularly struck by the huge potential that interdepartmental interactions and collaboration had to (1) galvanise frontline officers and decision-makers into contributing proactively to the process of Cultural Strategy development, and (2) reinvigorate the work of

those officers and decision-makers across LCC. Nowhere was this most apparent than in the conversations and discussions we had with frontline officers in the very first focus group held during early March 2023:

> [T]he county council has been doing various things like this — piecemeal but it's the first time we've ever done it altogether. That's the huge thing, isn't it? (Frontline Officer).
>
> That's exactly the same for me. I've worked here 25 years and it's the first time I've sat in a room with so many people from so many other departments. It's brilliant! (Frontline Officer).
>
> I think for me, the response from other departments as well which is really positive, the enthusiasm but it is, you can feel it, can't you, that actually people want to contribute to this and understand why we need it (Frontline Officer).
>
> I'm thinking — well, we've done bits of that, Nicola's probably thinking the same, with different teams and we've just dipped into it and done bits and tried to take it further and it's not always happened. I think this will give us the opportunity to remove the blockers … Sometimes it's more about getting the right person in another team on board and you make that connection and that they're able to do it — but this will help us to do it across the board (Frontline Officer).

Likewise, there were expressions of positivity and enthusiasm from strategic leaders on and around consultation and engagement with the process of Cultural Strategy development and a clear recognition of the benefits to be reaped both within and outside LCC:

> I think there's just a real opportunity to promote this as a good news story and to get people's backing because it does bring so much value in a context of cuts and cost-of-living crisis and things. It's like a little bit of hope for people. So, I think I would really push that message. I think that the councillors would get on board with that as well. For example, out of all the projects in Net Zero, the domestic retrofit project is the one that they're really hooked on to and are asking us to push the most because it gives people — they're very focused on what's going to improve people's lives. So, I think if we use that message here, that would be really engaging for them (Strategic Leader).
>
> I think for me [it's] just really taking advantage of the connections between different agendas and how we can use each other as leverage to have greater impact (Strategic Leader).
>
> [I want to highlight the] interconnectedness when you look at health inequalities, sustainable transport, the carer's agenda, the wider environment, skills and learning. It can touch upon so much about what the wider council does and just making that visible and then just bringing that value and focus to the Cultural Strategy, I guess, [is going to be important] (Strategic Leader).

The steering group, which will be established to oversee the process of creating a Cultural Strategy for LCC, will benefit considerably from tapping into the energy and enthusiasm amongst frontline officers that **VCCC** has generated. That energy and enthusiasm are not limited to those officers alone — we know that these features are discernible amongst volunteers/project participants and creative practitioners as much as they are amongst strategic leaders.

6. Benchmarking

> One thing that could be helpful would be to do a tour of the local authority Cultural Strategies and have a look and see which ones we think are good Strategies and which ones aren't good. A good Cultural Strategy … gives a sense of direction. It says this is what we're doing, this is what we're not going to be doing. It is distinctive to the area so you can say this is Leicestershire and it gives an overall framework rather than going into too much detail. You don't want 80 pages in a Cultural Strategy with everything we're going to be doing. You just need the framework — the action plan follows from that. We can get caught up in writing it and spend three years writing a Strategy and not do anything and think we've been really busy (Strategic Leader).

We are going to look at the processes of crafting 'direction' and priorities as well as developing an action plan and the associated write-up task in two of the sections below. For now, it is worth recapping the following — bearing in mind the significant overlap between the exercises of benchmarking and asset mapping. In the baseline asset mapping document, we audited the cultural infrastructure in Leicestershire and reviewed the wider demographic economic, social, political and technological circumstances that characterise the county. Additionally, we also benchmarked LCC's cultural and heritage assets base against a carefully selected sample of national local authorities with a similar profile. We placed a particular focus on Fenland, Derbyshire and Kent — considering that these places are differently positioned in relation to their histories, geographies, demographic composition, economic performance and political leadership and vision but share some key similarities with Leicestershire. In the process of developing a Cultural Strategy for LCC — and once it has been written up and launched, it is going to be critical to widen the benchmarking exercise to incorporate more places to benchmark against — nationally and internationally alike. Here — and resources permitting, working with an experienced consultancy organisation with demonstrable national and international expertise could be extremely vital.

But regardless of whether external expertise is sought, or in-house teams are supported to undertake benchmarking, doing this work will ensure that LCC is continually informed about (1) what distinguishes Leicestershire from other places, (2) whether key strengths remain that way over time, and (3) if areas identified as needing improvement demonstrate progress — and if not, why? Based on the insights gathered from the latter, targeted interventions could be devised to address blockers. Overall, successful approaches to Cultural Strategy development have demonstrated that benchmarking at macro and micro levels can be very useful in obtaining as holistic a picture as possible of the cultural infrastructure and associated actors in a place. LCC could focus its benchmarking exercise on both whole-place and neighbourhood levels (LGA, 2020: 11). A particular benefit of focusing on the neighbourhood level is that data gathered can be granular in nature, thereby revealing nuanced factors and patterns that county-level data may not be able to provide (ibid.). Such factors and patterns could relate to cultural preferences or inequalities in access to culture that only drilling down to a granular level can provide. But as the quote presented above implies, benchmarking information does not need to be included in a Cultural Strategy. Rather, it is intended to inform and support the strategic priorities, mission and vision laid out in succinct form. During the Online Cultural Strategy Symposium held in April 2023, Lucy Keeley (Principal Project Officer, Cultural and Creative Economy Service, Kent County Council) introduced Kent's Cultural Strategy on a single page — laying out (1) the ten-year vision of the county, (2) the three key actions in the action plan, and (3) a number of succinctly presented high-level outcome. LCC could emulate this approach.

7. Prioritisation, Mission and Vision Development

> [The] Cultural Strategy needs to outline expectations [including expectation management, priority setting and] resources very clearly. [It also needs to make clear] what skills those working with the council's cultural assets [should] have. [Also, clarity is needed in relation to] aspirations — being really clear about how the Strategy is useful for people in different job roles across the council. So, being very forensic in the breakdown (Frontline Officer).

> We talked about defining what our resources are and being able to quantify that and making that understandable. What are we doing for people in Leicestershire? What will they get from us? And how do we make that clear? (Frontline Officer).

A survey of existing literature on Cultural Strategy development shows that many local authorities define key priorities and themes for Cultural Strategies that typically build on existing ideas and priorities which are generated from broad themes before being crafted into a defined vision (LGA, 2020: 12). In addition to being manageable and achievable, those ideas and priorities need not be direct cultural goals — but could be goals that tackle a specific challenge. A case in point is the quote provided earlier which points to parallels between Net Zero work and culture at LCC. The steering group established to lead development of a Cultural Strategy for LCC will need to take an inclusive and co-production approach not only to setting priorities, but also testing their feasibility to ascertain whether or not they resonate with stakeholders. Proceeding this way has been shown to increase buy-in or active support for, and wider participation in, the processes of creating a Cultural Strategy. Building on the approach from Kent where local authorities presented their Cultural Strategy on a page, LCC could craft a Cultural Strategy in a way that (1) presents a single clear sentence or very short paragraph at the beginning, (2) states the council's future goals for Leicestershire — including a brief outline of where LCC sees itself in five or ten years' time, and (3) articulates defined high-level outcomes (ibid.: 13). During our conversations and discussions across all stakeholder constituencies, we were struck by the great importance that stakeholders attached to the general need for (1) developing clear priorities, a shared vision and 'core focus' at an early stage for an LCC Cultural Strategy — ideally considering how 'limited resource' might best generate 'the biggest impact', and (2) communicating these as accessibly and clearly as possible:

> I think something that communicates very clearly what our overarching Cultural Strategy is and how we deliver that and how we might deliver that in the future would be really useful so that you don't feel like you're constantly trying to explain what we're doing and why it's important (Frontline Officer).
>
> '[T]here is always so much to do. And the teams do loads, and they're really busy. But [a Cultural Strategy] would give that priority, and it would make it really clear what we're working towards. […] [I]t's being very specific with our goals and what we're trying to do outside to make a difference to our communities — to have that priority' (Strategic Leader).
>
> I think we need to be really clear on our priorities and our vision and our mission. Because the only problem that we can do sometimes is, we're like jack of all trades. [Because there are] lots of opportunities, [we end up pursuing them indiscriminately] because we want to survive, and we want to achieve, and we want success. And then we don't do it well. And so, it's got to be really, really clear it's on your vision, on your mission, and communicate that across the board. And then everybody knows where you're positioned (Strategic Leader).
>
> I guess having a core focus will help you know what to prioritise and use your limited resource in a way that you know has the biggest impact (Strategic Leader).

Clearly, stakeholders recognised the significance of setting clear priorities, mission and vision when developing a Cultural Strategy. Because stakeholders are differently situated in relation to LCC's cultural offerings and engagement, we found it valuable to drill down into some further detail in relation to what priorities, mission and vision might look like based on where they are positioned. Positioning here is to be understood as an invitation to stakeholders to express what they would like an LCC Cultural Strategy to prioritise in order to meet their interests and needs in their capacities as volunteers/project participants, creative practitioners and LCC employees but also as citizens living and/or working in Leicestershire. A number of very interesting ideas and views were put forward — some even cutting across our stakeholder groups which was excellent to see. For example, while stakeholders want a Cultural Strategy that is very clear about priorities, mission and vision — some also advocate for the importance of adopting flexibility in

approach, particularly in the use and engagement with LCC's cultural and heritage assets. For this to materialise, according to some stakeholders, LCC would need to rid itself of the so-called 'provider mindset' and 'siloed mentality' so as to engender serendipitous interactions, interesting discoveries and enriching experiences that local communities would relate to and find meaningful:

> [W]e need to get out of our, what I'd call, 'a provider mindset'. We're not about providing services, which is exactly how we've approached things in the past — to provide services and people consume them. It's about recognising that culture isn't a thing that sits aside from people. It's a thing that people experience in their own lives. And they experience it in the way that they feel is most appropriate. It's about us being as flexible as possible. And with humility. Actually, understanding that, how can one experience culture? Culture is basically about going out of yourself and doing different things out in the world, isn't it? How do we [embed that in a Cultural Strategy?] It's not about providing fixed services. It's about how do we embed that flexibility for people to be able to access it in ways which actually are meaningful for them (Strategic Leader).

> I think one of the things the Cultural Strategy could do is to encourage a degree of flexibility in the provision that any particular venue makes. In the sense that was mentioned earlier on the silo mentality of: 'You know, yeah, we're a museum and that's what we do. Or, you know, at 1620 House we're an old house and that's what we do'. And just to give an example at 1620 House, we realised that we'd got a lovely house there and lovely gardens and a lovely tearoom. And that tearoom was standing empty for a fair proportion of the week. So, we thought: 'Right, what can we do with it? How can we use that differently? [We reached a consensus]. We've opened it up as a community space. Now that — from our point of view — serves various functions. It makes people more aware of our 1620 House as a place to come to visit and to educate themselves. But it also is a community thing where people can come, and we have direct evidence of people coming and actually getting great benefit from it. And to me that's an example of how we, as a historical house — if you like — have looked at how we can be a bit more flexible in the provision that we make. And I think, you know, if the Cultural Strategy could encourage that flexibility in other areas where people are not just saying: 'You know, we're a music venue and that's just what we do' — that might help culture to permeate around more than it does at the moment. [Lots] of people have come and said: 'When it's open in the summer, we're coming'. We've had a lot of returnees. We've had people with learning difficulties coming in who've thoroughly enjoyed it. We put on arts and crafts, and we've had adults coming in, they've sat down — we give them a free cup of tea and a bowl of soup, and they've said: 'Oh, I can't do anything with crafts'. We sit them down with Bill and within half an hour they're making something. They come out: 'I've made this!' You know, it's just a way of engaging people and getting them to perhaps look at things that they wouldn't otherwise do (Volunteer/Project Participant).

> I'm quite encouraged by what Steve said about the 1620s House when using the venue for other things because it reinforces what we've being doing at The Old Rectory in Loughborough, which is a similar building, it's a small manor house. Well, originally it was a small manor house, but we've used that for art exhibitions. We've used it for all sorts of different things — not just as a building and a museum within. So, that's good because that's confirmed that we're on the right track there (Volunteer/Project Participant).

> [Speaking of heritage assets like the Melton Museum], does it have to be just [about heritage activities?] Can it not just be an artist in space? You know, and the museum or in the library, just using it as you would do your own studio. Why are we hiding away in studios nobody sees us? Let's be in a public environment where we're doing the work anyway — blocking people out or speaking to them if you want to, and people can see the progress because then, you know, people can actually see we exist (Creative Practitioner).

When working together in tandem, flexibility and serendipity as captured in the four preceding commentaries can generate powerful engagement and meaningful experiences for volunteers/project participants, the diverse local communities being served, and the creative practitioners working at and/or within LCC's cultural and heritage sites. This is an illustrative example of how embracing flexibility and facilitating serendipitous encounters can animate LCC's cultural and heritage assets and the nature of engagement and interaction

that take place within those sites and spaces. Other stakeholder groups zeroed in on specific tasks that an LCC Cultural Strategy could help prioritise. One such task is to deploy a Cultural Strategy as an evidence base for the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of LCC services and the value they add widely considered. This can help realign and recentre service provision as and when needed in response to an evolving cultural and political landscape. Another task is two-fold: (1) to make LCC cultural offerings more visible to the public while signalling that the county council continues to generously fund those offerings even during austere times, and (2) to enable LCC, especially **LHS** to embed partnership building and partnership working with various stakeholders outside the county council in LCC's work culture. Yet another task is to use a Cultural Strategy for LCC to prioritise support for creative practice and creative practitioners across the county and beyond in the wake of the withdrawal of arts development support infrastructure at local level:

> I just want to use [the Cultural Strategy] to prove, to have evidence and have proof about the impact of our services and why they're so important and how they [link] to the rest of the strategic priorities and agendas (Frontline Officer).

> [T]he county council still invest quite a lot in its cultural provision, but it's really hidden. It's invisible to people because people do engage with the cultural offer, but they don't necessarily recognise it's been delivered or supported by the county council, and I think that's a shame. When resources are really, really tight, it's still choosing to invest £5m a year in culture — that's a huge sum of money and actually, it needs to give better profile to that. The other benefit [of a Cultural Strategy] for us that are working in [LHS] is that we have to work really hard to go out and find partnerships because people don't think the county council does it (Strategic Leader).

> [W]hen I started as a self-employed artist, the one thing that was most useful which is now gone from many places is an Artist Development Officer. There was an Artist Development Officer in the area where my studio was based. They were the fountain of knowledge. If you needed access to community venues, they could point you in the right direction. If you wanted to do a project with certain communities, they could point you in the right direction and have those connections. They ran artist peer-to-peer networking events, roundtable talks, you know. They were the fountain of knowledge of where to go to and they've pretty much all disappeared (Creative Practitioner).

> I think if there were facilities of a usable space that could be hired out, you know, having those as central hubs within communities that people know and trust would be quite useful for an artist to be able to hire a space and have those resources available. I suppose it would give the community that are going to it a bit of a sense of trust that they're going somewhere that they know and are familiar with (Creative Practitioner).

In addition to the expressions above, many of our stakeholders spoke at length about how valuable it would be to use a Cultural Strategy for LCC to prioritise actions and interventions that demonstrably 'inspire' Leicestershire to become 'the best region' nationally — a place that the people of Leicestershire took pride in, and one that people elsewhere wanted to come and live. Suggestions for prioritised actions and interventions ranged from offering more support to creative businesses and cognate enterprises to crafting a disciplinary specialty[8] that distinguishes Leicestershire from other places to ensuring that the county is shaped to become 'an inclusive and diverse place for people to work and live':

[8] During the Online Cultural Strategy Symposium, some very interesting discussion revolved around how Margate — a seaside town located in the county of Kent — underwent considerable transformation as a result of a major regeneration venture that saw the establishment of the Turner Contemporary for which the town is now nationally and internationally renowned. More recently (April 2023), a television series set in the town called 'Dreamland' has been created — adding to the visibility and appeal of Kent as a unique place.

> [In relation to the mission of a Cultural Strategy for LCC, we could ask]: 'how can we really inspire this region? How can we make this region the best region in the whole of this country?' That would be the [priority] for me — how can we inspire this region so that everybody talks about: 'Wow, Leicestershire […] is a really special region … Actually, I'd like to relocate there?' (Creative Practitioner).

> if we can get the cultural element right and joined up, it adds so much [value]. [A Cultural Strategy for LCC should capture that value and prioritise that in a way that] makes Leicestershire a place that people want to come and live, bring their children in, have their businesses in, particularly in a rural county where there are challenges around employment. That's why the creative industries are so valuable because actually that allows people to have small single industries in their back gardens or whatever and make a living out of it. So, the more thriving the cultural sector is within the county, the more that we can support those economies and those businesses (Strategic Leader).

> So, what would make a Leicestershire County Council Cultural Strategy different from a Devon Cultural Strategy, or a [North] Yorkshire County Council Cultural Strategy? So, let's think about what it is. What is particular or unique about Leicestershire and in what direction do we want to travel in? Do we want to travel in the direction of where we're encouraging more film? Is it about IT digital services? (Strategic Leader).

> [T]he importance of a Cultural Strategy is making [Leicestershire] a place that people want to work and live and everything. When my brother was moving back to the UK, I was looking at places for him and his partner because they didn't want to raise their kids somewhere that was predominantly white, without any kind of cultural activities or anything. To me, not being from Leicestershire, Leicester is diverse, Leicestershire is not. Leicestershire is more white affluent. [That is concerning to me] because it doesn't fit with what my family looks like. So, a Cultural Strategy would [demonstrate] a commitment from the county council here to make sure [Leicestershire is] an inclusive and diverse place for people to work and live (Strategic Leader).

8. Action Plan Development

Places that have crafted effective and successful Cultural Strategies have typically put together an action plan structured in two key parts (LGA, 2020: 13). The first part defines planned activities and outputs that have a bearing on the outcomes collaboratively agreed while the second part encompasses an iterative process of activity programming that has no specific end date. Examples of activities and outputs in the first part tend to include among other things (1) co-creation and outreach events that target key people and places, and (2) interventions in key issues of priority and/or urgency. For LCC, it would be beneficial to co-produce defined activities and outputs — bearing in mind the constraints posed by 'limited resource' as we have seen. This is where the approach to partnership working discussed earlier in this blueprint demonstrates relevance in terms of facilitating the pooling of requisite resources amongst partners. Further still, it is recommended that activities and outputs are assessed using appropriate instruments and tools to analyse effectiveness and impact on a continuous basis. The assessment of effectiveness and impact carries over into the second part of the action plan as a way of monitoring progress. Here, for instance, it would be advisable for LCC to evaluate which stages of activity programming and output production are working well, and which ones are not — and why. Because this process is continuous, it allows for opportunities to revisit the planned outcomes and their desired impact and change course — if deemed appropriate.

Good-practice examples of successful Cultural Strategies typically include an outline of the action plan pinpointing (1) what will happen as part of the Cultural Strategy, (2) how it will happen, (3) the time period within which it will happen, (4) what the priorities, mission and vision are, (5) the programming activities, events and outputs via which defined priorities, mission and vision will be achieved, and (6) how the

effectiveness and impact of those programmed activities, events and outputs will be measured. As action plans within Cultural Strategies are normally developed as longer-term mini projects in their own right, it is recommended that a summarised, immediate action plan be outlined following the publication of the Cultural Strategy document with a view to exploiting productively the energy and enthusiasm generated amongst stakeholders and to maintaining momentum. Furthermore, that plan could indicate any intended activities that stakeholders could look out for. For instance, some local authorities in different places have deployed the immediate action plan to signal the intent to continue consultation and engagement exercises to maximise stakeholder buy-in and to form partnerships with identified new, potential partners.

Two points are worth picking up here in some detail, namely (1) the complexity surrounding how best to measure the impact of cultural offerings in general, and LCC's own offerings in particular, and (2) early-stage views on what an action plan might look like following the development of an LCC Cultural Strategy. Effective measurement and quantification of cultural offerings and engagement is notoriously difficult. This is a longstanding, major problem in the cultural sector nationally and internationally (Gray, 2007; O'Brien, 2012; Scott, 2014). As such, it would be naïve to think that a Cultural Strategy developed for LCC would change this overnight. It is also worth noting that this problem is not limited to cultural services at LCC, but also other services provided by teams such as the Environment Policy and Strategy unit within the county council. The following views from the strategic leaders' workshop held during the **VCCC** Project Conference bring the problem of measurement and quantification of cultural offerings and engagement — including environmental services — to the fore:

> So, we can give [LCC Councillors] how many people have visited a library or museum. We can tell them how many books have been taken out. But you can't say you've saved X amount of money on social care [even if] people have actually responded to your services […] And there isn't that way of quantifying the savings to the rest of the county departments. And some people then put less worth on the services because they don't recognise what it is doing for communities, and the overall picture for the county council (Strategic Leader).
>
> [W]e've got a similar issue on environment because people don't believe the figures, or it's very hard to measure many of the environmental issues. I'm at the point now, I think, if we just spent all of our effort trying to quantify the figures — we still won't win the game. So, I think we need to move to the point where people just accept this is a good thing to do or the right thing to do and forget about the figures (Strategic Leader).
>
> [W]e can show numbers of people that enter that house. That's another thing I can do. I can tell you the number of people that have received some sort of Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) service. That doesn't tell me anything (Strategic Leader 3).
>
> So, maybe our role as strategic leaders is to say: 'All right, I get what you're saying. We can't quantify it in the same way we can jobseeker rates coming down, or public health interventions on a National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance'. [But we could then articulate our value in a different way?] (Strategic Leader).
>
> To some extent, we can quantify and make the case to say: 'These are the wellbeing benefits'. The problem is that it may well be that the benefits aren't realised for another 10 years (Strategic Leader).

These challenges are real and there are clearly no easy and quick fixes. But what the process of creating an action plan could try and do in the run-up to Cultural Strategy development, is to reflect on possible, bespoke instruments and tools that LCC could devise to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of cultural offerings and engagement based on the unique complexion of Leicestershire's cultural ecosystem. Ideally, this would bring into the mix environmental services and other offerings in an aligned way for maximum impact. This is

important because, more often than not, local communities do not engage with services in isolation but as a whole. As one strategic leader aptly put it: 'people don't compartmentalise their lives into: "I'm thinking about environment now. I'm thinking about culture now" [because] that's not helping people live [their] li[ves]'. Part of developing innovation in evaluation approaches, we think, could focus particularly on tools that do not necessarily rely on quantifiable data as the sole yardstick for success — however success is defined and understood. As part of a Cultural Strategy when ready, that exercise in innovation could inform LCC's definition of what success means. Returning to the point about what an action plan might look like in terms of outlining defined steps following the development of an LCC Cultural Strategy, the following can be said. LCC would take the learning from the first stage of the **VCCC** project, build that into a policy document and determine the appropriate route for adoption. LCC would then determine if this included a public consultation or engagement process prior to going through internal processes, including political ones for adoption. As part of this policy development work, LCC would develop a 2-3-year action plan, outlining the steps needed to be taken to translate aspirations, priorities and mission into policy.

9. Launch and Roll Out

> It would be nice [when the Cultural Strategy is ready] to read it and go: 'I had a hand in that!' (Volunteer/Project Participant).

According to the Local Government Association, effective Cultural Strategies are a work in progress — with publication serving as a key moment for reflection, partnership consolidation and a positive rallying cry for the future (2020: 13). They are products of an intensive and extensive process of engagement, visioning, mapping and prioritisation as we have seen throughout this blueprint. The expectation is that stakeholders from diverse backgrounds will come together driven by a sense of collective agency to contribute valuable input, feel invested and committed, and understand that they are jointly responsible for the delivery and success of the Cultural Strategy (ibid.: 13-14). Following the production of LCC's Cultural Strategy, the steering group put in place to lead delivery will be required to set out (1) how it will work to deliver the priorities co-created by the differently situated stakeholders, and (2) how it will work with those stakeholders to do so.

10. Review

> The [Cultural] [S]trategy should be a living document and therefore in a state of constant review. It is vital to know what is working and what is not in order to make necessary changes and maximise impact. It is as much of a learning process as a delivery process, and failure in some instances should be seen as necessary in order to succeed (LGA, 2020: 14).

Conversations and discussions with our stakeholder constituencies revealed that there is no shortage of aspects to review relating to (1) the processes of Cultural Strategy development, and (2) related activity following the launch and roll out. The list can seem endless precisely because the process is iterative, intensive, extensive and extremely time-consuming. Often, what happens during development can be very useful in informing activity during the designated period when a Cultural Strategy is operational. This was invaluable learning for us as a project team — and certainly for LCC as a local authority organisation. During the Online Cultural Strategy Symposium, for example, Jaime-Lea Taylor (Fenland District Council), Alison Foote (Derbyshire County Council) and Lucy Keeley (Kenty County Council) provided a wealth of key aspects that are worth reflecting upon, internalising and reviewing regularly. We learnt a lot about some of the key aspects that require constant review. Relationship-building amongst partners is one such aspect. We learnt

that because it takes time, patience and energy to build relationships, it is valuable not only to build these into Cultural Strategy development processes right from the outset, but also review fairly regularly whether or not those relationships are working as desired. Also subject to review is when partnership working is tested — and whether or not it holds up. One such test relates to the fact that there tends to be short bursts of energy where a lot of things need to happen at once, something that may suit some partners more than others.

We learnt further that it is vitally important to remember that not all stakeholders who engage and support the process of developing a Cultural Strategy do so in a paid role. The same applies to stakeholder engagement following the launch and roll out. The key lesson here is to ensure that stakeholders in unpaid roles are looked after as best as possible to make it possible for them to still engage in an inclusive way. This is another aspect to review on a regular basis. Whilst stakeholders welcome opportunities to engage via consultation and engagement processes when invited, it is crucial to bear in mind that consultation fatigue can kick in. We learnt that stakeholders reach a point where they crave 'action' as opposed to listening to 'talk'. Keeping stakeholders updated on progress and ensuring they are brought on the journey all the way through is extremely important to help maintain enthusiasm and momentum. Moreover, sharing successes with stakeholders and updating them on developments helps to generate a sense of achievement which is crucial for stakeholders' meaningful and sustained engagement. We learnt that stakeholders see purpose in what they are contributing and that can be very motivating which, in turn, can only increase buy-in which is critical to achieving the overarching priorities and mission of a Cultural Strategy. How regularly and effectively this is done could benefit from review.

It was fascinating to hear Jaime-Lea Taylor, Alison Foote and Lucy Keeley reinforce the key point that the process of Cultural Strategy development is a long journey that requires time and should be approached as such, perhaps in a similar way that one would approach a marathon. During that marathon, it is important to prepare for the eventuality that a lot of time will be spent talking, listening and trying to understand differently positioned stakeholders and their motivations for engagement — time that might sometimes feel squandered when not much is happening or when no progress seems to be made. Earlier, we presented one stakeholder view which stressed the importance of marshalling 'limited resource' in ways that generate 'the biggest impact'. Tight LCC budgets mean not all activity undertaken in the context of Cultural Strategy development and delivery will be funded by the county council — although support may be provided in other ways. Local authorities in Fenland and Kent have addressed a lack of funds to support Cultural Strategy development activity and delivery by fundraising which, we learnt, can in and of itself be extremely challenging and complicated. The invaluable learning and experience generated here will need reviewing in order to not only draw out key lessons on what works and what does not, but also build up a bank of expertise and knowledge that will stand the steering group and LCC in good stead throughout delivery — and refreshing.

Earlier in this blueprint, we mentioned how Kent County Council managed to write and present their Cultural Strategy not on 80 pages — but on a single one. We noted that we think this is something that LCC will benefit from emulating. If this happens, a review of how that exercise occurred would be very useful going

forward. We learnt from Lucy Keeley that the process of writing Kent's Cultural Strategy on a page was anything but uncomplicated:

> [Once the priorities and vision were agreed and assembled in an outline framework], the writing of the [Cultural] [S]trategy was more of a challenge. So, our first draft proved too bureaucratic for our creative colleagues and the subsequent version drafted by a professional writer was too much the other way — with almost lyrical language masking the content and hiding what we were trying to say. It did illustrate quite well that the Strategy was needed to do two jobs. It needed to function as both a political tool and a script for creative advocacy. So, after many working groups and much back and forth inviting feedback and what felt like trying to please everybody, we took control. And together with one or two selected people, we sat down and distilled, pared back and stripped away to produce a version which sat between those two functions and presented brief and clear messaging which seemed to make sense to everybody.

Lucy Keeley narrated further that when developing Kent's Cultural Strategy, an agreement had been reached that a midpoint review would be scheduled. The Cultural Strategy was published in 2017 with a life cycle of ten years meaning the midpoint review would have been due around 2022/2023 — had it not been for the extensive disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the post-pandemic phase, a working group was instituted to undertake a refresh of the Cultural Strategy. Part of this exercise included reviewing where gaps were in the initial iteration — and the production of a series of strategic statements around revised priorities and associated action plans.

Conclusion

> I think when the [Cultural] [S]trategy is done and we've got over this hurdle of creating it, I think it should be mandatory training for officers across the council, like we've got our GDPR and stuff. So, everybody is knowledgeable, everybody understands it — you get your refresher courses and stuff. Then eventually, just like GDPR does, it just becomes second nature to you, and you'll be like: 'Oh, okay!' That needs to be filtered from Heads of Services, ADs, whatever, all the way down to the frontline workers (Frontline Officer).

> [In terms of what I would like to see in an LCC Cultural Strategy], I would say that if I read it — I'm not very creative — I can identify with it because sometimes culture is personal, isn't it? It is individual. So, I pick up that [Cultural] [St]rategy and I read it and I can identify something that relates to me (Frontline Officer).

> We're very aware that we are small slices of a much larger cake. And we know that, really for this to be effective, we need a lot more people from various organisations and communities that don't necessarily participate to be on board. And then we'll have a much wider outlook of people's stories, and what they're looking for as well, and who they are. We feel that it has to be two-way. So whatever feedback is given from those communities needs to be listened to. And it can't just be a tick-box exercise (Volunteer/Project Participant).

This blueprint demonstrates LCC's strategic commitment to developing an inclusive approach to culture and associated engagement by highlighting how differently situated stakeholders could be brought together to shape the role of culture in Leicestershire. Informed primarily by a key guide for Cultural Strategy development published by the Local Government Association (LGA, 2020) and comprehensive and rich stakeholder input emerging from a range of consultation exercises, this blueprint offers a framework that LCC could adopt to facilitate development of an inclusive and shared vision of creative and cultural engagement with diverse stakeholders across the county and beyond. The University of Nottingham is committed to continuing to work with the Libraries and Heritage Services (LHS) and its network of collaborators and partners to develop an LCC Cultural Strategy and — following its launch in 2-3 years' time — to support its periodic refreshment and revision to ensure that it remains effective, meaningful, and relevant.

The blueprint has shown the enormous benefits that would be reaped if an LCC Cultural Strategy were created, launched, and rolled out: (1) strengthening the profile of **LHS** within the county council, (2) shifting the perception of LCC as a county council that offers cultural services to one that fully embeds culture on its strategic agenda, (3) championing interdepartmental collaboration within LCC and partnership working with stakeholders outside of the county council with a view to achieving the greatest impact possible, (4) ensuring — through enhanced co-creation and co-production approaches — greater involvement of local communities and other stakeholders in the planning, decision-making and delivery of LCC offerings that affect those constituencies, and (5) LCC taking the lead on futureproofing service delivery and cultural engagement through fostering a collective sense of reimagining what might distinguish Leicestershire as a distinctive place in future.

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