



Chester Heritage and Visual Arts Strategy

Summary Document

VISION

The City is the Stage – We Will Act On It

We will use its stories, traditions and visual arts to inspire and engage the community and its visitors through bold creativity informed by the riches of archaeology, the built environment, archives, museum collections, parades and ideas.

Introduction - What we are setting out to achieve

Chester has authenticity, with over 2,000 years of history in a compact city centre, you cannot get the same experience anywhere else in the UK. The heritage is alive in the historic walls you walk, the medieval row level shops you visit and the Cathedral in the heart of the city centre. Heritage is visible in so many places and in so many ways that if you live here it is part of your everyday life.

Visitors come to Chester to explore the living heritage, relax in its parks and on its riverside, shop in its historic surroundings and experience the newest most innovative cultural destination in the country with Storyhouse.

People are at the heart of the city and Chester has long been a place of change and invention. Chester's communities and entrepreneurs bring the city to life with public parades, guided tours and attractions that are the envy of many other cities and towns but there is capacity to do more. The streetscape and buildings, the objects and materials within its collections, the museums and archives all work hard to make the city unique but they are often hidden and cannot tell the story to its full capacity.

Alongside this, the scope for visual arts to renew our curiosity, highlight the charm of the city's past and contribute to its future is also understood. The high quality and innovative nature of the projects which have been developed and delivered in recent years are a strong starting point but, in the future, we aspire for the city to be recognised as a destination for high quality visual arts alongside its heritage.

Chester is changing, known for being a beautiful city with unique retail and heritage it is once again now a city of culture and experience. It is an exciting time for residents and visitors to Chester and the Borough and they need to be involved in shaping their own future.

What we want the strategy to deliver

We want a clear and coherent direction for interpreting and presenting its heritage and visual arts to deliver a world class offer that inspires audiences and visitors. This will guide future development and projects allowing Chester to fully realise its true potential as a heritage city.

This strategy will shape the development and delivery of heritage and visual arts in the city. It sets out an ambitious plan to support the delivery of community

heritage initiatives, to invest in our museums, heritage and visual arts, nurture creative talent, to give visitors a reason to return and everyone a reason to dwell longer in the city.

The strategy will grow the heritage attractions in the city and bring back to life assets that are not currently used to their maximum potential and capacity. It recognises that Chester's unique heritage should be valued, respected, protected, interpreted and celebrated. It will also deliver a step change in the city's visual arts, making sure that this unique heritage backdrop provides a creative setting for the visual and contemporary arts.

The primary data gathered in the strategy tells a story of a complex city that has an amazing opportunity to capitalise on its strengths. The data has created a clear understanding of the motivations for visitors, what they come to see, how they view the city and what its weaknesses are. It allows everyone in the city to understand their audiences but more importantly how to target new audience sectors and ensure the people that come to Chester have a reason to come back again.

For Chester to thrive it needs investment and innovation, challenge and voracity, excitement and credibility, tenacity and simplicity. The focus is Chester city centre, however projects, programmes and development will include surrounding communities.

How we developed the strategy

- We used an evidenced based approach - extensive primary and secondary research to build understanding.
- We undertook robust research on the perceptions of current and future audiences.

- We analysed the key assets (buildings, collections, stories).

What will it do?

- Shape the future direction of the heritage and visual arts in Chester.
- Build on a range of other related existing strategies and plans that have already been consulted on and developed, including the Culture Strategy and One City Plan.
- Create a high level Council strategy to take to stakeholders to support the planning of key development projects and to discuss investment collaboratively.
- Support working with heritage stakeholders/ visual arts partners on the resulting action plan and implementation.

What the Strategy is not

This is not a conservation heritage strategy; it is about understanding our audiences, engaging residents, working to attract more people to the city and improving the heritage and visual arts attractions and offer in the city. It is to support Cheshire West and Chester Council and partners when applying for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council England and other strategic funders for the delivery of projects.

Consultation - Who have we asked so far?

During the development of the strategy, consultation was undertaken in a range of ways with a number of stakeholders, individuals, Councillors, residents and potential visitors.

People said:

“Heritage needs to be reinvented to appeal to a modern audience”.

“Having seen the positive effect of contemporary/visual art exhibitions and galleries in other British cities, I strongly support the vision of creating more such facilities in Chester”.

“Don’t copy other cities, make Chester unique”
“Engagement and partnership is key”.
“There is a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment in the community that should not be overlooked”.

Guiding Principles -
How we will go about things

A great deal of the feedback received about the draft strategy related to how heritage and visual arts projects, partnerships and programmes should be approached. It highlighted what is important to people about heritage and visual arts and led to the creation of a set of guiding principles to sit alongside the aims.

Authenticity - build on what is great about Chester, the real stories and gems. It is not about copying other places but celebrating what is special about Chester.

Community Engagement and Participation - this should run throughout everything the Council and partners do. When developing projects and in taking the action plan forward meaningful engagement is vital. We will creatively engage with our diverse communities connecting them to the stories of their city/local community; by encouraging connection, expression and ownership we will maximise the wider health benefits for our residents.

Youth engagement - engage with more and a greater diversity of young people in heritage and visual arts. Consider the needs, passions and skills of young people when engaging them with heritage.

Valuing People - it is important to value specialists (and their expertise) and to recognise the contribution of volunteers and the knowledge that exists in the community. The skills, knowledge, energy and ideas of curators, archivists, guides, teachers, artists, makers, conservationists and archaeologists is an asset to the

city and there is potential for inspiring creative collaboration.

Valuing Places - recognise what makes the city special. The unique bone structure of the city and the natural heritage that tell the story of the city. This strategy sits alongside a suite of related documents and policies e.g. Chester's Heritage Interpretation Masterplan and will aim to support and build on existing work.

Embracing and making the most of technology - use of digital should be a focus, considering how it can complement other interpretation and arts

Celebrating Creativity - encourage artists and entrepreneurs. Encourage them to creatively interpret and animate the city, provoking new ways of enjoying and appreciating its heritage and unique sites; exploring hidden and social spaces and encouraging people to appreciate the historic city.

Connecting People and Place - recognise the social role of heritage, the value of heritage to local residents and local identity and how heritage and arts can create pride in place.

Culture and Regeneration working together - Ensure linkage and joint working between heritage/visual arts and regeneration to create projects that meet the aspirations from both perspectives.

Place shaping - use the heritage of an area to inform regeneration and cultural development. Recognise the historic character of Chester influences place making policies, strategies, projects and celebrations, and how creative programmes, projects, responses and interpretation celebrate place.

Aims - What we want to do

1. We will build on the strength of the city's heritage stakeholders (especially the public and private sectors and the University) through better management and co-ordination which reflects the importance of the city's heritage.
2. We will make more of our unique built heritage which is the city's greatest asset: 'the city as the stage':
 - (i) We will exploit the full potential of our key buildings and monuments and we will do more to interpret and animate the city to bring it to life;
 - (ii) We will enable everybody to see, use and enjoy it more by 'leading' people around it;
 - (iii) We will protect our buildings, monuments and stories for the future and we will integrate the protection and development of heritage into other plans (such as the evening economy, arts, transport etc.).
3. We will create a museum which properly and appropriately interprets the city's magnificent heritage for everyone.
4. We will support visual arts development across the city in consultation with key partners:
 - (i) We will develop the visual arts commissioning programme across the city building on the Lead Artist's work.
 - (ii) We will undertake research with key partners to prioritise plans for visual arts and set clear ambition.

(ii) We will undertake research with key partners to prioritise plans for visual arts and set clear ambitions.

(iii) We will undertake feasibility to explore options to improve the infrastructure for the visual arts, incorporating visual arts venues and creative workspaces, working with partners including the private sector, Chester University and Chester Cathedral.

(iv) We will support the development of contemporary visual arts across the city in consultation with key partners and will set up a visual arts programming group that is forward looking, ambitious and pragmatic in coordinating shared objectives.

(v) We will work with key partners to support talent development; building in support for emerging artists within projects and identifying places and spaces for creating and exhibiting new work.

5. We will develop, promote and celebrate the city's unique heritage in parades and outdoor performance.

6. We will highlight and promote the city's heritage public realm to improve the city as a social space for everyone.

7. We will develop and invigorate the Archive creating new opportunities to engage with our social memory.