

Leicester Leading

A Strategy for the Cultural and Creative Economy 2025 -2030

Intro

The cultural and creative sector in Leicester is strong already but has massive potential for growth. A central objective of this strategy is to grow our creative workforce by 25% from 15,600 to 20,000 people by 2030.

The enthusiasm and ability of both city universities to invest in culture and to support creative businesses generates a permanent momentum and supply of talent whilst our freelancers and creative businesses keep the city at the forefront of innovation in artistic genres and creative industry applications. It is no surprise Leicester was recently identified the 5th most creative city in the UK.

The number of Leicester organisations who are core funded through the Arts Council England's National Portfolio has tripled since 2017, increasing resources to the sector and enabling more work with different communities across a wide range of art forms.

For the last decade Leicester City Council has championed culture, especially through capital investment in the city's prime cultural assets and in the public realm and in re-presenting the city's cultural heritage on the street, in gallery and online. More recently the council has committed significant capital investment at Leicester Museum and at Haymarket Theatre and to develop new creative industry workspace.

Our new city strategy sets out some stretching ambitions for the next five years that can

- establish and strengthen new partnerships, grow new leaders, ensure engagement with our diverse communities and tackle inequalities.
- promote community cohesion and improve engagement through our plans for 'Inclusive Heritage'.
- attract new audiences and showcase our collective cultural offer via greater data sharing and joint programming.
- use arts and culture as levers to tackle worklessness and economic inactivity
- drive innovation and creative business growth, including positioning the city for a new 'Creative Cluster'.
- deliver the talent to keep Leicester buzzing and be recognized as a leader in performing arts education by re-shaping our cultural and creative educational offer.
- attract investment and grow our knowledge economy by helping our creative businesses to work more closely with each other.
- deliver the positive city profile that our talent and track record deserves by promoting our expertise and shouting about it!

This strategy has been based on extensive engagement and research led initially by consultancy Fifth Sector. Their detailed analysis of Leicester's creative and cultural economy can be found here. *(this will be a hyper link to the detailed research document)*

Why

This is our overall ambition. To be excellent in what we do, how we do it and with a view to the future. Much of our cultural and creative output already reflects excellence but our city challenge is to also be recognised as a leader in how we work and to keep a clear focus on who benefits.

As the first super diverse city in the UK there is a particular need not just to champion diversity but to lead the way in tackling the entrenched inequalities in jobs and careers, leadership positions and governance structures across both the cultural and creative economy. Genuine commitment to collaboration and partnership, anti racism, enabling access for all and to co creation is needed to make this work. Promoting these themes will be an integral thread of our 'Shouting' strand.

Excellence - What's already happening and what's the Plan

Many Leicester businesses and cultural organisations are already leading. Curve is one of the UK's leading producing theatres, making world-class work for audiences in Leicester and around the country. Creating possibilities for disabled children has made Bamboozle Theatre internationally famous. Let's Dance International brings the best talent in the world to the city every year. The King Richard III Visitor Centre has been identified by Trip Advisor as one of the top 10% visitor attractions in the world. The National Space Centre attracts 1/3 million paying visitors every year. In 2024 Soft Touch Arts and Navrang Arts were both national award winners for the 'Punks' and 'Re-building Lives' exhibitions.

Fifth Sector analysis confirmed the continuing legacy of design as a driver of employment, productivity and growth in Leicester's creative economy with the city and wider county economy showing highly similar patterns. It also found excellent examples of the development of new fusion and/or Createch learning in both FE and HE. Both the Institute of Creative Technologies at De Montfort University and the Institute for Digital Culture at University of Leicester are delivering cutting edge learning and research around new technologies. Both Universities have key cultural assets such as Attenborough Arts and The Gallery as part of their have superb new campus facilities.

The city was recently identified as the 5th most Creative city in the UK, no surprise given our longstanding entrepreneurial tradition. Ensuring Leicester continues to Lead will rely on multiple organisations and businesses being ambitious and other parts of this strategy being successful.

Outcomes

- Events, stories, seminars and conferences showcase Leicester regionally and nationally
- More Leicester based organisations are added to the Arts Council England National Portfolio
- More Leicester creative businesses are recognised as sector leaders and enabled to grow

Tackling Inequalities - What's already happening and what's the Plan

Opal Arts, 2 Funky Arts, Phizzical, Nupur Arts, Cosmopolitan and Inspirate were Leicester's new NPOs in the 2023 round and all lead work with global majority communities. Together with the broader NPO network they are making the Creative Case that includes targets to diversify their governance, leadership, workforce, programming and audiences.

Work is underway to review how the city's cultural offer can better reflect our Muslim communities, now a very significant proportion of the city population but currently underserved by the offer. The city's new 'All In' group is helping to improve the consistency of accessibility standards across our arts and cultural venues.

This strand dovetails with the 'Inclusive Heritage' work that will identify gaps and opportunities for working with underserved groups and with the 'Shouting' theme that will focus attention on work with global majority communities and others who are currently under-represented. The Plan is to ensure these topics are regularly discussed and reviewed while we implement this strategy.

The data clearly shows that the wider Creative economy remains disproportionately white and many parts are still less accessible for working class communities. Some sectors are already embracing that challenge. For example, work to develop our music sector can link to initiatives such as UK Music's Ten Point Plan to increase diversity and boost inclusion within industry trade bodies.

Arts and Cultural interventions and experiences play a crucial role supporting people to improve their life chances, confidence and employability. Tackling worklessness and increasing levels of economic inactivity is a national priority and levels of economic inactivity are particularly high in Leicester. The strategy seeks opportunities to graft such support on to more traditional skills, support and advice programmes that target vulnerable groups such as offenders, care leavers, the long term sick, young people not in education, training or employment (NEET) etc.

Outcomes

- New arts and cultural initiatives are co-created with Leicester communities
- Spaces, events and experiences enable genuine access for all regardless of abilities
- Better career opportunities, representation and leadership roles for global majority communities
- Leicester becomes known for effectively delivering inclusion
- Clear data platforms that enable us to track how we are doing which are regularly reviewed
- Programmes to tackle worklessness and economic inactivity use arts and cultural practitioners to work with vulnerable people to maximise their potential

2 Empowering Talent

Why

Although the power of arts, culture and creativity to inspire, improve personal confidence and develop teamwork skills is well known, the reality is a significant drop in the time apportioned to these subjects in the curriculum at all educational levels. Partly that reflects a lack of demand from students who have been directed to and are attracted to other subjects which can make it uneconomic for learning institutions to offer courses. Partly it reflects national requirements that have prioritised other STEM subjects.

The new creative economy is developing job roles that haven't previously existed and that often prize skills and knowledge combinations that aren't reflected in traditional study and learning programmes. This represents both a major challenge and opportunity.

What's already happening and what's the Plan

Leicester enjoyed a reputation, especially for performing arts training, for many years. That legacy remains strong and means there are healthy foundations to build on. For example Wyggston and QE sixth form college has one of the broadest creative arts offers in the country. De Montfort University remains a conveyor belt for talent in festivals and arts management and the broader design sector including fashion. The city has a particularly healthy dance sector including Addict Dance Academy, Studio 79, Nupur Arts, People Dancing and produces world class artists such as Aakash Odedra and Akram Khan.

Leicester University is world renowned for the quality of its Museum Studies and Space research. The Institute for Digital Culture is fusing technology and culture to generate new ideas in digital humanities, digital heritage, media studies, creative computing and data science.

De Montfort University has now commissioned research to answer the key question 'To what extent is the Creative Industries Sector in Leicester and Leicestershire supported by, aligned to or divorced from the local skills and talent pipelines?' The answers will help shape the detail of this part of the strategy.

Outcomes

- Successful new learning programmes that reflect the needs of the creative economy
- Education and learning institutions work together on a shared plan over the life of this strategy
- Leicester has a national reputation as a provider of high quality learning for the performing arts

B AUDIENCES 3 Shouting and Sharing

Why

Consistent feedback when developing this strategy has been

- Leicester undersells itself so we should shout louder and celebrate our expertise
- we can be better at sharing information and coordinating our plans
- diversity is our superpower BUT
- some communities and groups aren't engaged or getting enough access to opportunity, attention and resources

Shouting - What's Already Happening and What's the Plan

Many individual organisations and businesses are very effective promoting what they do but it is difficult to get a view of our collective city offer. The plan will create a specific communication platform dedicated to showcasing our cultural and creative offer which people sign up to and support. We want people to feel part of something bigger but also to sign up because it is interesting, informative, practically useful and fun. Otherwise they won't. We will establish the platform by March 2025.

This will be led by the LCB team who are already facilitating and supporting a wide range of creative industry networks and house many of our leading cultural organisations. The team will proactively reach out to showcase positive Leicester success stories not just locally but regionally and nationally. There will be a particular focus on how we strengthen the position of global majority communities and other under-represented groups across the sector.

The city boasts a unique set of assets including key cultural and heritage buildings across the Cultural Quarter, Old Town and the University campuses which will be promoted to attract more high profile events from the corporate, public and third sectors. This will also be a focus for the new Pilot House complex that will put a spotlight on our design sector.

We will also be shouting about the advantages and opportunities for living in the city. The city centre residential population has grown from 5,000 in 2004 to 22,000 in 2022 and is forecast to grow rapidly in the next decade. Creating a new city centre neighbourhood with a vibrant economy day and night, quality leisure and cultural assets and high quality accommodation will help drive new investment and encourage new creatives and businesses to locate here.

Outcomes

- More than 10,000 people sign up to the Leicester Leading communications platform
- Leicester has a national profile as a cultural and creative hub
- People feel proud and talk up Leicester
- More organisers choose Leicester for events about cultural and creative issues
- Talented people want to move here or stay

Sharing - What's Already Happening and What's the Plan

'Sharing' information and data about who we are (and aren't) working with, co-ordinating our ideas and joining up our programming can lever more resources, engage more people, create business opportunities and attract more attention to what we are doing. But it is also essential to shine a light on groups who are under-served, who we need to engage with and who need to be directing activity in the future.

Many organisations are already doing this work individually, much of it prompted by Arts Council England support. The opportunity is to join it up more effectively.

Sharing experiences and ideas is also a key plank of the plan for creative industry growth. That includes support to grow creative business networks that work for their members in practical ways that share skills, lever resources and build new supply chains. It also means ensuring learning institutions and business support agencies work together and agree priorities, particularly for attracting new investment. This theme of sharing and joint working is also developed in the plans for Inclusive Heritage and Creative Industries.

Outcomes

- A clear picture of who isn't engaged or benefiting from our cultural and heritage work now and a clear plan to address it
- Visibility of progress against this strategy and a commitment to discuss what is and isn't working well
- More opportunities for under-represented groups to deliver and direct the ideas contained in this strategy

AUDIENCES 4 A Signature Festival

SIGNATURE FESTIVALS

WHY

Festivals and events deliver demonstrable economic and social benefits for local communities, promoting access, inclusivity and civic participation, and creating excitement. They animate venues, public spaces and parks, fostering opportunities for new artistic and industry partnerships. They are a key tool in civic place-making and for cultural tourism. For 21st century cities, signature festivals and events provide a platform to showcase a city's creativity, diversity and unique cultural offer. Extensive consultation for this Strategy identified a new signature festival as one of 8 'Big Ideas'.

Leicester enjoys many secular and non-secular artform/theme-specific festivals, some with a national / international profile such as *Bring The Paint*, *Leicester Comedy Festival* and annual *Diwali* celebrations. However, despite our 20+ Arts Council recognised National Portfolio Organisations, many creatives of (inter)national repute and multiple events that take place throughout the year, the city still lacks a signature arts festival. Nor do we have any established annual major commercial music festivals. Previous attempts, notably *CityFest* and *Summer Sundae* both proved unsustainable.

A previous festivals review noted that economic and social benefits to Leicester citizens were greatest where festivals attract people from across the whole city and beyond and when the festival is not targeted at one specific group but is accessible to all citizens. Expanding events that deliver this approach is a key objective going forward. Some examples are included below.

WHATS ALREADY HAPPENING AND WHATS THE PLAN?

Light Up Leicester – A Collaborative Approach

The popular biennial *Light Up Leicester* will return in March 2025 for a secular four-day event designed to engage all communities across the city and beyond. Led by Leicester City Council, working with core partners BID Leicester, ArtReach and Leicester Cathedral, delivering significant visitor footfall and economic impact. Participating NPO arts organisations include Inspirate, Nupur Arts, Darbar Arts and MBD Ltd, with additional opportunities for local artist commissions. Other local partners will include City Retreat / Ramadan FM, Highcross, DMU, Visit Leicester and major local businesses and employers. Programme accessibility, with advice secured through All In, is a key programme aim as is environmental sustainability.

Leicester Music Conference & Festival

Familia HQ, PPL PRS, DMU, 2FunkyArts, TiME, UMC and Leicestershire Music Hub, are collaborating as a new Leicester Music Board to build upon the successful delivery of the inaugural Leicester Music Conference in February 2024. The plan is to expand it from a single-day conference and showcase into a dynamic two-day music and culture festival. That will incorporate cutting-edge music technology, educational workshops, and high-quality multi-genre and multi-ethnic performances, alongside a brand-new Leicester Music Awards element. The ambition for LMB is to establish an industry-relevant network for established and emerging music and creative industry professionals, positioning Leicester as a central destination for music, culture, and innovation.

The LMB will also explore commercial music festival models such as a variation of Brighton's successful *The Great Escape*, presenting artists in the city's array of music venues that reflects and builds upon its diversity. The city council, with the support of LMB partners, will continue to make approaches to UK music festival

producers to deliver major outdoor events that build upon the recent successes of *Radio 2 in the Park* and *Kasabian Summer Solstice II* events in Victoria Park, with the aim of establishing a regular annual event with commercial providers.

The Signature Festival Opportunity - 'This Is Leicester'

The proposition for a new signature festival for the city is one celebrates the city's growing creative and cultural offer showcasing its global artists, creativity, arts venues, Universities, heritage, fashion, public realm, food and drink. The ambition is to create a multi-artform festival platform for the 20+ NPO's, invited inter/national artists, HE/FE organisations, city arts and heritage venues, community groups and Leicester's flourishing independent creative sector to offer audiences a mix of live performance, installations, exhibitions, film, talks, workshops, free and ticketed events. The festival programme would be designed specifically to be reflective of and responsive to the city's communities and super diverse status.

A key element will entail promotion of aligned activity by partners. In other words performances, exhibitions, talks etc that match the festivals 'showcasing Leicester' objectives but that are already planned and part of organisational core programme budgets. This should include planned youth / community-based activity as well as work by professional artists. Also, training opportunities for aspiring young artists, producers and event production staff should be built in alongside volunteering options.

Event dates need to be confirmed however there is scope for the festival to sit between major UK arts festivals in Brighton (May) and Edinburgh (Aug), potentially benefitting from (inter)national touring artists/companies, new partnerships, collaborative projects and co-commissioning opportunities. Placing the festival in June would also coincide with the end of the University year, offering the potential for significant and wide-ranging FE/HE student and academic engagement via course modules (e.g. Arts & Festivals; Fashion; History; Media & Comms; Film; Music Production).

One options is to build out from an existing festival brand and platform – i.e. *Riverside Festival*. Increasingly designed to provide a platform for local artists / NPOs and a programme offer that is reflective of and appealing to all city's communities, in 2024 the festival attracted an audience in excess of 75,000 and for the first time included DMU as a partner. Further, plans are now in place to include DMU's *Cultural Exchanges* festival within *Riverside Festival 2025*.

The new signature festival would be led and curated by a new Steering Group of individuals and young producers representative of Leicester's NPO's and independent artists. Make-up of the steering group would be time specific to enable refreshed membership as the festival evolves. To deliver the new festival in June 2026 the steering group will submit an Arts Council England application and seek further buy-in and support from key University partners, NPO's and local businesses / sponsors.

OUTCOMES

- Supporting and showcasing Leicester's artistic and cultural diversity.
- Greater collaboration, co-design and new partnership working between Leicester's creative / artistic community, public, private and 3rd sectors.
- Create economic benefit and attract external investment.
- Promotion of social cohesion, engagement and participation, civic identity and pride.
- Provide opportunities for local artistic and creative talent.
- Promote environmentally responsible and sustainable festivals and events.
- Programming and activity that is reflective of and accessible to all Leicester's communities.
- Delivery of *Leicester Music Conference & Festival Feb'25; Light Up Leicester Mar'25; This Is Leicester Jun'26*.

Why

Iconic spaces and buildings create pride, generate awareness of place and enable culture to be celebrated and businesses to grow. Leicester is already home to many such as Curve theatre, Attenborough Arts, the King Richard III visitor centre, Space City, the LCB Depot and a network of parks and squares that support events, festivals and celebrations. However, across the cultural arts, visitor economy and the wider creative business sector some elements are missing or insufficient.

There is a need to expand our city centre residential population, create new green infrastructure and adjust to the ways people now shop, live, move and use their leisure time. These themes will be developed in the city council's new Heart of Leicester plan to create a fully functioning city centre neighbourhood.

High quality spaces with the right technical infrastructure, aesthetic qualities and net zero credentials can also help us attract investment and new businesses, generate new collaborations and move us to the next level as a creative economy. This strategy will be used to seek other resource that can help us deliver on this ambition.

What's already happening and what's the Plan

The Jewry Wall Roman Experience visitor attraction will open in 2025. The final element of the Cathedral Revealed project, a new Heritage Learning centre, will open in late 2024 while the Cathedral itself has already re-opened after a major overhaul. Both will add to the compelling offer of the city's Old Town. You can read more about the city's Old Town offer [here](#). (will be a hyper link to a new brochure promoting the Leicester Old Town)

Further investment at Leicester Museum and Art Gallery will create new display spaces for art, for social history and that reflect the Climate Emergency we face. At Haymarket Theatre new investment will support additional learning and rehearsal space for the performing arts, especially dance, underpinned by a new long term deal with the Addict Dance Academy. Feasibility work is investigating the scope to enlarge seating capacity at Curve. A major opportunity has emerged to use the recently cleared area in front of the Corn Exchange as a high profile new events space at the centre of the city.

Across the city the growing number of Arts Council National Portfolio Organisations continues to drive investment in cultural assets whilst the legacy of successive Bring the Paint events has made Leicester the stand out city in the UK for street art.

Infrastructure to support the growth of the broader creative economy is also set to expand. More than 50,000 sq ft of Grade A space is available from autumn 2024 in three new DOCK workspaces that will further strengthen the success of Space City, a critical strand of the city's knowledge economy. Another 40,000 sq ft will support the growth of Leicester's Creative and Design sector at the Pilot House complex from spring 2025. Combined they deliver a £30m investment in new infrastructure that will enable businesses to grow and house hundreds of new jobs. Scope for further capital investment in new commercial workspace is referenced in the Creative Clusters strand.

Outcomes

- Leicester's 'Old Town' offer is celebrated as a visitor destination by Trip Advisor and similar
- More bespoke, occupied workspace for creative businesses
- More creative business relocate to the city

6 Inclusive Heritage

Why

This builds on imaginative work done in recent years to tell new stories that engage communities and groups who are typically left out of standard 'culture'. The specific opportunity for Leicester is as a pilot for the National Lottery Heritage Fund's new 'Place' programme. This new funding stream could be worth £10m over the next decade.

What's Already Happening and What's the Plan

Exploration and celebration of city Heritage has been central to cultural investment over the last decade in Leicester including the development of the Story of Leicester online; a network of more than 300 Heritage Panels on street; a new permanent gallery at Leicester Museum and Art Gallery co-curated with local communities. It includes extensive capital investment in Heritage buildings such as Leicester Castle, now home to the De Montfort University business school and the Heritage Action Zone programme that helped re-invigorate the old Georgian quarter of the city. Our Heritage talent and organisational infrastructure is strong including University of Leicester's recently launched Heritage Hub.

Recent initiatives include the Punks exhibition led by Soft Touch and partners and the Rebuilding Lives Ugandan Asian exhibition led by Navrang Arts and partners which both won national awards. Serendipity secured one of the largest Heritage Fund grants ever awarded to a black arts and heritage organisation for the Unearthed project to develop an archive to celebrate the diversity of African and African Caribbean communities across the Midlands.

Much new work is already planned by many of the arts and cultural organisations in the city that will support Inclusive Heritage so the focus for the strategy is the Place programme. The diversity of our communities distinguishes Leicester and is easily demonstrated. But diversity does not necessarily deliver inclusion, community cohesion and equality. The proposition is an 'Inclusive Heritage' programme that specifically promotes community cohesion, equality and inclusion.

Communities will be supported to identify what heritage means for them and to celebrate it but also to move beyond themselves in ways that engage others and bring people together. That means people with visual impairments or who cherish the built environment as well as communities based on geography, faith and ethnicity. Genuine inclusion must be meaningful for all.

Working in partnership with the Audience Agency we will consult extensively to summer 2025 to generate this plan.

Outcomes

- New stories and ideas develop that are prioritised by Leicester communities, based on engagement and co creation principles
- Greater mutual appreciation between communities about 'shared' heritage themes (food / family / music / sport / stories / places of worship / transport or whatever)
- Initiatives that engage and involve everyone regardless of their abilities

D. Creative Industries 7 Creative Circuits

Why

Creative businesses grow faster when they are close to supply chains, can access expertise and skills, develop partnerships, access market opportunities, peer support, premises, finance and inspiration. This is particularly important for the disproportionately large number of creative businesses that are freelancers and who can't so easily access information and opportunity.

The above can be enabled by strong sector networks where businesses share information, set up new collaborations, share promotion and create greater visibility of opportunities. They are also assisted by the co-location of businesses in specific premises when informal contacts and conversations are made easier and by events that bring people together.

What's already happening and what's the Plan

Leicester is already home to creative hubs where businesses share locations such as the LCB Depot which already operates as a creative agency facilitating contacts, conversations and new partnerships. In the next few years Pilot House will create a further expanded hub for a spectrum of design related businesses and the growth of Space City will do likewise for tech and innovation businesses.

There are a host of networks that operate now to support music, film and tv, tech start ups etc. The Plan is to encourage these networks to be more sustainable, grow their memberships and engagement, develop awareness of business opportunities, attract other resources, create services that benefit their members and position the city to attract investment.

Resource from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will support four sector networks in 2024/25 that cover music; socially engaged artists; creative digital art and film and a new black arts forum. The Plan is that whatever replaces UKSPF will continue this and that support for sector networks will be embedded within other strategies and programmes for business support and economic growth.

Outcomes

- Sector networks extend membership and lever new resources
- New shared spaces encourage networks to grow, new partnerships are developed and new business opportunities identified
- Other economic strategies and business support programmes have a clear focus on supporting creative industry networks

8 Vision for Growth

Why

Alongside bespoke premises and support for sector specific networks we need a broader plan to drive innovation and the necessary investment across the whole of the creative industry spectrum. This strategy supports the analysis and direction of the Creative Industry Sector Vision, launched by DCMS in June 2023 which sets out both the rationale, the opportunity and many of the specific interventions that are needed. Find out more about that [here](#). *(this will be a hyper link to the Sector Vision document)*

The partners to this strategy will actively work together to increase investment in research and innovation, design bespoke business and talent support programmes and maximise opportunities for exporting and international trade.

What's already happening and what's the Plan

Leicester creative businesses with growth potential are already benefiting from the Create Growth programme designed to help them scale up and become investment ready.

Work is being coordinated by the three universities in the region for an overarching Innovation Strategy that can drive productivity and innovation throughout the sector. The new University Civic Partnership has created a vehicle through which this work can be developed.

This work will also include developing a compelling proposition for the Creative Clusters funding opportunity set to be invited in spring 2025. In previous rounds of the programme no allocations have been made to any midlands based groups. It is likely the bid opportunity will be for circa £5-£10m. Previous allocations from this programme have proved an extremely effective way to lever investment and to build stronger links between higher education research and development activities and creative businesses that can deliver economic growth. You can find out more about it [here](#) (hyper link to a document summarising the Creative Clusters programme)

The preparation work for the Creative Clusters bid and the broader Innovation strategy will include a major sector engagement exercise over the autumn and winter of 2024/25 to ensure both properly reflect the needs, priorities and opportunities of our creative businesses. The legacy of that engagement will be a new partnership that can strengthen collaboration and be an effective advocate for policy and programmes that support our creative sector.

Outcomes

- A new Creative Cluster programme driven by a partnership of Higher Education institutions and creative businesses
- An innovation strategy that clearly articulates interventions needed to drive productivity and investment
- A new Creative Industries partnership that guides the above and advocates for new policy and programmes that grow the sector