



Leicester Riverside Festival Overview & Update

Culture & Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission

Date of meeting: 16th April 2026

Lead director/officer: Graham Callister

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: Westcotes, Castle
- Report author: Graham Callister, Head of Festivals, Events & Cultural Policy
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- Report version number: 1

1. Summary

To provide Members with an overview of Leicester Riverside Festival, including its history, location, activities, partnerships, and recent development. The report also outlines how the festival has evolved and its current strategic relevance to the city.

2. Recommendation(s) to scrutiny:

Culture and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission members are invited to note:

- The strategic role of Riverside Festival within the city's cultural offer.
- The sustainability of the current free-to-attend delivery model.
- Opportunities to further develop Riverside as Leicester's proposed "Signature Festival".

3. Detailed report

A. Background

Leicester's eclectic and popular Riverside Festival is an annual, free, family-focused outdoor event that takes place on the first weekend of June and is held along the River Soar in Leicester.

Established in 1997 the festival achieved its 25th anniversary in 2024 (the event was not held in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions), and 2027 will see 30 years since its original inception.

Originally conceived as a modest Sunday afternoon celebration linked to the regeneration of the riverside (particularly the Bede Island area), the festival has grown significantly post-COVID into one of Leicester's largest free outdoor events and biggest arts festival in the sub-region, attracting weekend audiences between 60,000 – 70,000 in recent years.

Key Data

- **Established: 1997**
- **Annual attendance: 60,000+**
- **Festival sites: 5**
- **Artists / Performers: 80+**
- **Businesses, Traders & stalls: 100+**
- **Partner organisations: 9**
- **Council investment: £35,000**

- **Total budget: c.£146,500**
- **Estimated economic impact: £3.1m**

B. Location, Footprint & Activities

The festival takes place across multiple interconnected city-centre sites adjacent to the River Soar:

- **Bede Park** – Main festival hub featuring the principal music stage, walkabout performers, family entertainment, funfair, street food and bar, and the central information point.
- **Western Boulevard** – Artisan craft market, community stalls, student visual arts exhibition and food/drink traders.
- **Castle Gardens** – Family arts activities, live music, community stalls, food vendors and the festival Access Hub.
- **River Soar (Mile Straight)** – Water-based activities including accessible boat trips, kayaking, dragon boat racing and demonstrations.
- **De Montfort University Campus** – Expanded cultural programme including student-led Cultural eXchanges activities, outdoor performance and film screenings, workshops, council cultural services (Libraries and Museums), and public access to key heritage venues and exhibitions including **Newarke Houses Museum** and **Jewry Wall**.

The festival programme is designed to be inclusive and reflective of the city's communities, creativity and cultural heritage, offering a mix of free and low-cost multi-generational activities.

C. Governance, Delivery and Partnerships

Leicester City Council

Leicester City Council Festivals and Events (F&E) team is the strategic lead and organiser of Riverside Festival. The F&E team receives support from colleagues across the City Council services including Licensing, Parks, Highways, Waste Management and Community Safety. The festival is delivered under a comprehensive Event Management Plan covering safety, crowd management, emergency planning and traffic control, developed in partnership with 'blue light' services.

De Montfort University

From 2024 the F&E Team expanded the festival into the DMU Campus securing DMU as a major event partner and supporter in the form of:

- Significant in-kind event / logistical support.
- Marketing and Communications support.
- Programme content.

- Funding.

The benefits to DMU are several and include:

- Presenting Riverside as an 'end-of-year' / 'kick off the summer' festival and celebration to DMU students.
- An opportunity to showcase the work of DMU students e.g. Cultural eXchanges (see below).
- Greater public / community engagement showcasing DMU Campus facilities and cultural / heritage buildings to local residents and visitors to the city.

Previously Cultural eXchanges was a standalone DMU festival that took place in February. Due to low audience engagement the decision was taken to relocate the festival within Riverside to secure higher exposure and better student experience.

The LCC F&E team has been supporting the DMU Arts & Festival Management faculty and students for 3 years providing practical lectures / presentations on festival programming and a host of operational considerations and hosting under and post-graduate student internships within the team providing 'live work' experiences for participating students.

New initiatives for 2026 include Main Stage industry 'shadowing' opportunities for DMU Music Technology students and Riverside branding / marketing pilots with MSc Cultural Event Management post-grads and Graphic Design students. There is significant scope for further expansion of DMU student projects / showcasing opportunities within Riverside over future years.

Leicester Music Board

New for 2026 will see the newly formed Leicester Music Board (LMB) co-programming the Main Stage with the LCC F&E team. The LMB currently comprises the following partner organisations:

- PPLPRS
- DMU
- Leicestershire Music Service
- Leicester City Council
- HQ Familia
- 2FunkyArts
- Technology in Music Education (TiME)
- UMC Management

The Main Stage music programme will be sponsored by PPLPRS and feature young emerging talent funded via a successful LMB bid to the Youth Music Trailblazer Fund.

All-In Leicester

The F&E team has been liaising with All-IN Leicester in relation to improved accessibility at the festival. All-In Leicester brings together people with a wide range of lived

experiences and access needs, from different backgrounds and communities, to assist cultural venues and festivals with their Access Plans.

Brightsparks Arts

BrightSparks is a community of people who use mental health services, alongside their families and volunteers. By taking a creative health approach to support and showcase people's talent their events and projects promote positive images and narratives of mental health and wellbeing. This year Brightsparks Arts will be delivering 'Bloom' – a mix of free arts / crafts activities and performances in Castle Gardens, and location for the Riverside Access Hub, a dedicated space for families with children with extra access and communication needs.

LCC Public Health

New partnership with the Public Health team encouraging a Healthy & Sustainable Food Commitment, gathering insights to inform future food and drink provision. LCC Public Health wishes to promote healthier food and drink choices for festival visitors without restricting personal choice. F&E will be encouraging traders to consider for example:

- Providing at least one healthy option in their menu.
- Offering smaller portion sizes for children.
- Including a reduced-sugar choice.

Healthy Food traders will be mapped across the festival with feedback gathered to help shape a future Healthy Trader Award. This approach ensures Riverside can build on healthier food options in future events while promoting balanced choices to families and visitors this year.

This successful festival model combines council coordination with community and institutional partnership, enabling cost-sharing, programme diversification and expanded reach.

D. 2026 Programme Highlights

Since 2023 the F&E Team has focused on developing the festival as an inclusive platform to showcase the best of the city's creativity across its stages through a growing number of Leicester-based arts organisations and artists, combined with a diverse food and local heritage offer that is family-friendly and appealing to the cities many communities, which in turn helps to attract a festival audience that genuinely represents the cities demographic make-up.

New activity for 2026 includes:

- **Main Stage relocation to Bede Park**, creating a stronger central music hub. The stage will be co-programmed by the Festivals & Events team and the Leicester Music Board, showcasing emerging and established Leicester/Leicestershire artists.
- **'Bloom' in Castle Gardens** – a sensory arts programme focused on wellbeing and mental health, delivered by Brightsparks Arts with partners Enter Edem, Pedestrian Arts

and Leicester Print Workshop Trust. Highlights include the interactive ‘**Plants and Play**’ floral wall installation and workshops by artist Mandeep Dhadialla.

- **The Newarke** – vintage vehicle display by the Leicester Transport Heritage Trust featuring classic Midland Red and Leicester City Transport buses.
- **Castle Mound and Castle Pub** – live folk music programme featuring The Grandest Union.
- **Additional activity** including BUSK Leicester acoustic performances, a DMU/Phoenix outdoor film screening, and an official Riverside after-party at 2Funky Music Café.

Further activity to be supported via a successful Arts Council England funding application will include:

- Storytelling performances in local libraries and at the festival as part of the **National Year of Reading**, delivered by LCC Libraries.
- Spoken word performances from Literati Arts artists and poets.
- Indian dance and African music collaboration by Nupur Arts and Kaine Management.
- Graffiti and street art workshops delivered by Graffwerk.
- Virtual reality experiences from MBD Limited.
- Development opportunities for young producers and enhanced accessibility, including BSL provision.

E. Strategic Contribution

Riverside Festival contributes to the Council’s objectives in the following areas:

Leicester Leading: Cultural and Creative Industries Strategy – A Signature Festival

Leicester Leading, the city’s cultural and creative industries strategy produced in partnership with De Montfort University, University of Leicester and Arts Council England, identifies the opportunity for a major large-scale Signature Festival as one of the key routes to enabling greater arts engagement from the widest range of its citizens combined with the ability to attract regional attendances, delivering both economic and social benefits for the city.

The proposition is for:

‘A new signature festival that celebrates the city’s growing creative and cultural offer, showcasing its global artists, creativity, Universities, heritage, fashion, public realm, food a drink. The ambition is a multi-artform festival to offer audiences a mix of live performance, installations, exhibitions, film, talks, workshops, free and ticketed events. The programme would 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 showcase Leicester but that are already planned and budgeted. 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.'

While not wholly delivering upon the *Leicester Leading* Signature Festival proposition outlined above, Riverside Festival has been continually evolving to deliver against this strategic vision by playing a unique role within Leicester's festivals portfolio by combining arts, music, community activity and river-based programming in a large-scale outdoor setting. Unlike Diwali Day or Light Up Leicester, which focus on specific cultural or seasonal themes, Riverside provides a broad multi-artform platform that can showcase the city's local artists / organisations, heritage assets and capitalise on the potential for FE/HE engagement.

Given the scale and scope of the festival there could be multiple volunteering opportunities designed for students and residents, supporting skills development in event production, hospitality and cultural programming. Presently however this would require additional resource to manage a dedicated volunteer programme as the capacity to undertake this does not exist within the F&E team.

If successful Arts Council England funding will help to raise the artistic quality and excellence of the festival and include some limited opportunities for young producers. The ambition for Riverside however is to fully deliver on the Leicester Leading proposition over the next 3-5 years.

City centre vitality and Visitor Economy

Riverside Festival regularly attracts attendances of over 60,000 to the south-west fringe of the city centre with attenders benefitting local businesses in the immediate vicinity, on Narborough Road and city centre as attenders return to local bars, restaurants, car parks and major transport hubs.

Community cohesion and inclusion

Riverside Festival is actively designed to present an inclusive and accessible cultural offer that is appealing to all ages and abilities across the cities many communities. The F&E team ensure that the artistic programme presents artists across its stages from Global Majority communities, equally that the food offer also reflects local tastes and interests, and that the activities available are fully accessible with provision for families and individuals with additional / complex access needs.

Support for local businesses, charities and council services

With regular annual attendances of 60,000+ Riverside offers a great business opportunity for local independent traders and local vendors and provides smaller charitable / community organisations the opportunity to partner on the event and raise greater awareness of their cause / activity e.g. PROSTaid - organisers of the dragon boat racing.

Further the event presents other important council services to engage with residents in an informal, fun and engaging capacity e.g. Family Hub, Library and Museum Services among others.

Promotion of Leicester's waterways, parks, heritage assets and public realm

Riverside Festival promotes the local waterway and natural environment through a range of activities on the River Soar that include kayaking, accessible boat trips and dragon boat racing, and utilisation of Castle Gardens and Bede Park. The recent expansion into DMU Campus has brought high quality public realm within the festival footprint combined with several of the cities most significant heritage assets that include Newarke Houses, Castle View, The Great Hall and former Courtrooms, St Mary de Castro and The Magazine.

Sustainability

A Carbon Baseline Measurement & Methodology Development for events was developed by DMU and trialled at Leicester Riverside Festival 2025 with an indicative carbon footprint analysis of the event produced covering Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions. A key development this year will be an on-site, a short visitor survey (target over 600 responses) that will collect data on travel modes. The festival will also support a targeted Travel Campaign, promoting more sustainable routes via buses, walking, and cycling, building on existing Choose How You Move initiatives.

In addition, Riverside Festival 2026 will gather clearer information to support future sustainable event practices. Traders will provide details on travel distance, vehicle type, cooking methods, and use of local, seasonal, and biodegradable products. Finally, while a Green Trader Award will not be introduced this year, the information collected will help develop this in future events. Riverside Festival also coincides with Great Big Green Week, supporting wider environmental awareness.

F. Budget (Provisional)

INCOME (Forecast)	£
Leicester City Council F&E budget contribution	(35,000)
Arts Council England grant	(29,500)
DMU & PPLPRS (sponsorship)	(25,000)
Traders (F+B; Market stalls; Funfair etc)	(47,000)
Small grants	(5,000)
Advertising	(5,000)
Sub-Total	(146,500)
EXPENDITURE (Forecast)	£
LCC casual staff & Young Producers	8,000
Electrical / utilities	11,000
Traffic Management	5,500
Equipment – Staging; Toilets; Fencing; Benches; PA; Hammocks; Van hire etc	26,500
Cleansing services	8,000
Security & 1 st Aid	34,500
Performance & access costs	37,500
Marketing / Advertising / Evaluation	7,000
Licences	1,500
Contingency	7,000

Sub-Total	146,500
BALANCE +/-	0

The Council contribution of £35,000 towards Riverside Festival represents approximately **24% of the total festival budget**, with the remaining funding secured through commercial income, sponsorship and partnership support. F&E team achieves a minimum return on investment of £3.18 per £1 invested by LCC, at a cost to LCC of 0.58p per attender.

Based on an annual attendance of 60,000 and an average day visitor spend of £51.96¹ however the estimated impact is far greater delivering a total direct and indirect economic benefit of £3.1m.

N.B. The budget presented does not include Arts Council England funding. If successful with a recent application the programme budget will be bolstered by an additional £30,000 investment.

In addition to direct financial support, partners including DMU provide significant in-kind contributions through public realm and venue access, staffing and marketing support.

G. Development Opportunities

Members are invited to comment on the following:

- Further development of and investment in Riverside Festival as a signature high quality multi-artform festival and visitor destination for the city and wider East Midlands as identified in the Leicester Leading Creative and Cultural Industries Strategy.
- Expansion of a festival 'city-side' fringe benefitting the local night-time economy.
- Long-term financial sustainability of the free delivery model. Maintaining a free model ensures accessibility and maximises community participation across Leicester's diverse communities. Comparable free city festivals such as Nottingham Riverside Festival (c.£60k NCC investment), Birmingham Weekender (c.£250k+ total festival cost) and Bristol Harbour Festival (c.£500k pa cost) attract similar scale audiences and play a key role in city branding and visitor attraction, although note that this is delivered with significantly higher investment.
- Developing further volunteering opportunities. The festival currently utilises a small number of volunteers annually through partner organisations, though there is scope to develop a larger structured volunteer programme.
- Growing partnerships and attracting further funding and sponsorship.
- Implementing further environmental and sustainability measures.
- Developing a Riverside brand identity.

¹ Based upon 2024 STEAM Tourism Economic Impact data which identified an annual day visitor value of £458m to the city generated through 8.8m day tourism visits, equating to an average spend per day visitor of £51.96pp.

- Crowd management, security and site logistics as attendance grows.
- Future strategic positioning within Leicester’s wider festivals portfolio which includes Diwali Day, Light Up Leicester and several council funded events.

H. SUMMARY

Since its inception in 1997, Leicester Riverside Festival has grown from a small community celebration linked to riverside regeneration into one of the city’s largest free outdoor events and a significant cultural platform for Leicester and the wider sub-region.

Attracting audiences of more than 60,000 annually, the festival delivers cultural, social and economic benefits for the city. It showcases Leicester’s creativity, diversity, heritage assets and riverside public spaces, while providing a major platform for local artists, community organisations and creative businesses.

As a free and family-friendly event, Riverside Festival ensures that high-quality cultural activity remains accessible to residents regardless of income, enabling people from across Leicester’s communities to come together and participate in shared cultural experiences within the city’s public realm.

The festival is delivered through a collaborative model led by Leicester City Council in partnership with organisations including De Montfort University, Leicester Music Board and a growing network of cultural and community partners. This approach enables the festival to attract external investment, diversify programme content and create opportunities for students, artists and local organisations.

Through this partnership and mixed-income model, the Council’s direct financial contribution represents approximately 24% of the overall delivery budget. This investment helps leverage additional income through sponsorship, trading and partner support. Based on current attendance and visitor spending estimates, the festival generates an estimated economic impact of around £3.1m for the local economy, representing a strong return on the Council’s investment.

Looking ahead, Riverside Festival also supports Leicester’s ambitions to strengthen its cultural profile and creative economy. As it continues to evolve, it provides a strong foundation for developing a distinctive multi-artform “signature festival” aligned with the Leicester Leading Cultural and Creative Industries Strategy, with opportunities to further enhance artistic ambition, partnership support, sustainability measures and the wider city-centre festival footprint.

4. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications

4.1 Financial Implications

As detailed within this report, Leicester City Council provides a £35k contribution towards the funding of the festival, in addition to staff time in the planning of the event. Any development, changes or expansion of the event would need to be fully costed with clear funding sources to support those changes.

Signed: Stuart McAvoy – Head of Finance

Dated: 17th March 2026

4.2 Legal Implications

The Riverside Festival is delivered through a partnership arrangement involving a number of organisations. It is therefore essential that robust contractual arrangements are in place with all third parties, setting out roles, responsibilities and liability. Any in-kind contributions should also be subject to appropriate written terms to ensure legal protection.

The Council must ensure compliance with the Procurement Act 2023 in relation to the appointment of suppliers for services. Legal and Procurement services should be engaged at an early stage to ensure appropriate processes are followed.

In respect of external funding and sponsorship, the Council must ensure that all funding conditions are complied with, to mitigate the risk of clawback or breach.

Signed: Seema Patel, Principal Lawyer

Dated: 19th March 2026

4.3 Equalities Implications

Under the Equality Act 2010, the Council is subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) and must have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The paper provides an update on the history, current operational model, strategic value, and budget of the Leicester Riverside Festival. There are no direct negative equality impacts arising from the report. The festival provides a significant positive impact by ensuring accessible, inclusive cultural provision. The festival is a free, citywide event and brings together people from all backgrounds. While not a strictly protected characteristic under the Equality Act, maintaining a free-to-attend model removes financial barriers, ensuring that cultural experiences remain accessible to residents regardless of household income.

The diverse programming and food offer, featuring representation from Leicester's communities and local voluntary sectors celebrate the city's diversity and promotes community cohesion. Ongoing engagement with community networks will help ensure that the festival continues to reflect the city's diversity and to remove barriers to participation related to income, language, or accessibility.

Signed: Surinder Singh, Equalities Officer

Dated: 19th March 2026

4.4 Climate Emergency Implications

Events can generate carbon emissions where they lead to additional travel by staff, members of the public or staff of partner organisations using private cars, taxis/private hire vehicles or buses. There are also building emissions (heat and power) associated with the use of venues for events along with secondary impacts such as waste and recycling.

Embedding sustainability initiatives through gathering information on travel and sustainable catering from traders, conducting a visitor travel survey alongside promoting sustainable

and active travel methods in tandem with Choose How You Move demonstrates a best practice approach to managing event associated emissions. It will be important to ensure that this information is used after the event to support a positive impact on future events and to report on successes and potential future initiatives such as the Green Trader Award.

Signed: Phil Ball, Sustainability Officer

Dated: 23rd March 2026

4.5 Other Implications

N/A

Signed:

Dated:

5. Background information and other papers:

N/A

6. Summary of appendices:

N/A