

Herefordshire Cultural  
Partnership

# Developing Cultural Spaces and Places in Hereford City

Final Report

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—  
**BOP**  
Consulting



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# Executive Summary

## Hereford, people and places

The story of Hereford's cultural places and spaces is one of distinctive and important assets and heritage. The telling of that story, preservation of those assets and recognition of their contribution to the economic and social wellbeing of the city and county are, however, undermined by a lack of evidence, shortcomings in strategic coordination and underinvestment in their fabric.

In recent years, central Government's austerity policies have resulted in significant cuts being made to the budget for local cultural activity. More recently, however - prior to the Covid-19 emergency - the Council had begun plans for further cuts. Its actions have been influenced by a surge of activity dedicated to raising the level, visibility, and quality of the local cultural offer, spurred on by a range of local actors via the Hereford Cultural Partnership and leading to the first dedicated Cultural Strategy for the county.

Recent strategies, stakeholders, and policies across fields including tourism, retail, and community development recognise the local cultural industries' (CCI) contribution to wider local economic and social agendas. The county has a relatively low economic output level and high employment levels in lower wage sectors, with a large small business economy and lack of available skilled workforce. The Council sees skills development and building on local assets - including the defence & security sector, heritage and culture assets, and others - as important to economic development. Whilst Hereford lacks the scale to be a creative industries hub, greater focus on its existing strengths - including a vibrant visual arts sector, fuelled by the presence of the region's only specialist art college - can be used to more effectively counter some of the structural imbalances in the sector, attributable at least in part to its relative remoteness from large centres of population and markets for creative services.

Natural environment, historic sites, films and theatre are particularly popular cultural pastimes. However, the local visitor economy is underperforming. Its development is critical to several plans and strategies, highlighting a need to

create a shared brand and raise awareness of the area's cultural and natural assets. This means recognising the central role of cultural tourism in Hereford's economy, and using that to leverage an 'attract and disperse' strategy which presents the city as a base from which to explore the surrounding countryside and nearby market towns. Efforts to bring about and coordinate the delivery of this are supported by a range of local actors.

Whilst the city of Hereford's population age is comparable to the national average, the county has a comparatively old population; data and forecasts suggest this is an ongoing trend. The urban population (Hereford and the surrounding market towns, all in 'day-trip' driving distance from Hereford) is growing proportionally faster than its rural population. However, poor road and rail infrastructure constrains local and longer-distance travel: with a potential impact on attracting visitors to the city, and on the ability of to convert day visitors to longer stays involving travel around the county on either a first or subsequent visits. Improvement plans - including the development of Hereford railway station and improvements to public spaces across the city - are critical to ambitions to improve the visitor economy. There is no current data on demographic variations in cultural engagement, but anecdotal evidence of a lack of activities for teenagers, consistent with an overreliance on private cars as the main means of transport.

Significant efforts have been made in recent years to improve central Hereford's vibrancy and retail offer, led by developments such as Old Market and the work of the local BID. Pre-COVID, these efforts were beginning to show results in a reduction of empty retail spaces and increase in footfall.

Various plans highlight the importance of community engagement and health. The Council's Talk Community initiative, which aims to 'help the community help each other', sees culture and creativity as, "part of resident's everyday lives." The Cultural Strategy recognises the importance of, "*working together [to] achieve great things,*" and this communitarian spirit is reflected in survey findings which suggest that the county enjoys a level of regular volunteering that is significantly higher than the national average.



## Cultural infrastructure

Hereford Cathedral and associated treasures are **significant heritage assets**, key visitor attractions and a 'geographical anchor' in the city centre. Hereford is one of only five cities in England to be designated an Area of Archaeological Importance (AAI). The conservation area and AAI, which incorporate the city defences and castle foundations are also significant, but have limited visibility. A 2011 Council conservation plan recognised the value of the defences to the city as visitor destination and suggested ways to increase their visibility.

Compared to all mapped assets, there is a relative proliferation of **museums** and **visual arts organisations**. Whilst Hereford is home to several museums, most are very small, open only sporadically or by appointment. Most have a (local) heritage theme and are based in heritage buildings. Several have had recent investment. Hereford boasts modern, state of the art museum learning and archive facilities with recent considerable investment from the Council. But there are key questions around the future of two of the Council's main sites, MAG and Town Hall, both of which are in need of investment and renewal.

Hereford is home to a range of visual arts organisations of different types and scale, including several smaller-scale galleries and studios. There are three existing, small artist studios, each are small studios for with around 10 tenants each, largely artists. Several galleries and studios have connections between themselves and the Hereford College of Arts, the region's only specialist art college: which highlights the service it offers students in linking up with (local) partners and suggests a degree of networking within the city's visual arts scene.

Heritage sites and cultural assets are spread out across the city, with a large number located in the historic centre of city within easy walking distance of the High Town, train station and each other. The animation of the city centre is enhanced by a vibrant and fast-growing **independent food sector**. Complementing this is the Butter Market, currently undergoing regeneration, which includes proposals for a multi-purpose arts venue on the top floor.

Hereford boasts several successful and long-standing recurring **festivals and events** which cover a range of themes from music and film to food and drink

and event to an international blacksmithing festival. It also participates in Herefordshire Art Week, which provides an opportunity for local studios and galleries to open their doors the public.

What little data is available on the **creative economy** specific to Hereford suggests a small creative sector with a relatively high proportion of musicians, performing and visual artists. Pre-COVID-19, local creative employment has been growing at a substantial rate, above national average, and there were indications of a pool of CI talent resident in Hereford but working elsewhere.

At present there is no **dedicated shared creative workspace** in Hereford, beyond the three small artist studios included in the mapping in chapter 3. One of the studios offers a space to a College HCA graduate each year for a year, reporting that most stayed on as tenants beyond the year. Whilst anecdotal, this indicates potential to retain graduates if they find the right environment to work in. Assessed against several other county towns and smaller cities, Hereford emerges as the only city without any workspace provision for creative tenants, beyond those three artist studios.

Across all comparator cities, artist studios and creative workspaces tend to be located in city centres, often in converted buildings and of varying sizes, indicating a certain degree of flexibility possible in converting spaces to their new use and in the viability of spaces in terms of size. Artist studios often include other public spaces such as cafes, workshop space, gallery/ exhibition space. Several locations have a mix of studios for 'clean' and 'dirty' creative use. Evidence of the variety and flexibility of successful models, and their integration within areas of high footfall (rather than on new build business parks) should be shared with commercial landlords, as it presents Hereford with an opportunity to take advantage of any 'distressed inventory' in city centre retail premises that may be a consequence of the Covid-19 emergency.

Hereford's strengths in heritage, museums and visual arts are offset by the small number of specialist performing arts venues (including theatres as well as larger-scale flexible music venues). There are only two significant performing arts companies (Courtyard Theatre and 2Faced Dance – although both are Arts

Council England National Portfolio Organisations. Despite the relatively limited offer, cultural participation levels in Hereford are similar to those in the comparator towns and cities.

**Herefordshire Cultural Partnership** has a critical role to play here in translating the Council's corporate objectives, and those of the Cultural Strategy, into an evidence base and set of deliverable plans. This includes:

- Mapping creative industries: cultural organisations, creative businesses and stakeholders will need a clear, shared understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment and businesses.
- Creative workspace: engaging artists and creative businesses to shape spaces designed around their needs, and in some cases, managed cooperatively. Aggregating up these tactical opportunities would present a new model of resilience, reassurance, and restart for the city centre property market and the creative sector.
- Measures to restart and rebalance the economy need to take account of the Social function of art and culture in securing both economic resilience and social provision. This may include an expanded role in social prescribing of arts for health, and mental health.

## Great Place programme

The Great Place programme has been met with considerable enthusiasm locally, posing a challenge in terms of, *"managing expectations for what [a] three-year programme can do"*, and how to create long-lasting impact.<sup>1</sup> Its outputs include the first dedicated **10-year Cultural Strategy for Herefordshire 2019-2029**. This covers the whole county, highlighting its *"distinctive cultural identity"*, *"creative and entrepreneurial vibrancy"*, *"high quality of life"* and *"unique sense of place"* as key elements to build on. It formulates five outcomes to work towards, which echo those of the Museum Plan, HCP and Great Place

Programme in their focus on widening participation (particularly amongst on young people), economic development and profile-raising:

1. A sustainable cultural infrastructure underpinned by a creative workforce offering high quality arts and heritage activity and experiences to all residents and visitors
2. Herefordshire's rural communities have opportunity to be fully engaged and proactive in shaping, participating, growing the county's cultural offer
3. All children and young people have access to high quality contemporary cultural education and career development opportunities
4. Culture and creative industries play a distinctive role in contributing to economic success of the county and region
5. County's cultural profile and offer attracts national and international audiences, visitors, new businesses

## Visitor economy

A sustained focus on cross-agency initiatives to develop Herefordshire's visitor economy has resulted in £444k funding for visitor economy infrastructure (marketing and website), to be funded by the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership and to be delivered by Herefordshire Council and Herefordshire Business Board.

This will stress wayfinding, identifying heritage and cultural assets in Hereford as a "walk through the ages," and in the process emphasising the importance of the city's status as an Area of Archaeological Interest.

## Conclusions and opportunities

'Cultural spaces' of many kinds represent the underpinnings of the local cultural infrastructure. Whilst Hereford has a significant number of regional and national assets, it also has weaknesses relating to those assets' size, visibility, and, in

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<sup>1</sup> BOP Consulting (2019). Case Study of 'Hereford's a Great Place' for the Year 1 Evaluation Report of the Great Place Programme for Arts Council England & National Lottery Heritage Fund

some cases, physical condition, which require more or less significant improvement and investment.

The insights and analyses of the previous chapters offer up some conclusions and scenarios that Hereford could take up or investigate further, in its aim to, *"have a connected and sustainable cultural infrastructure underpinned by a creative workforce offering high quality arts and heritage activity and experiences available to all residents and visitors."*

Any effective and viable future development of the local cultural infrastructure should rest on three principles:

6. The most fundamental of these is to identify strengths before trying to address weaknesses. Build on Hereford's distinctive collection of cultural and heritage assets, rather than trying to create an entirely new image. Invest in growth and use the proceeds of growth to address problems. This requires:
  - Better evidence, and sharing of evidence, about creative businesses, employment, students and workspace, retail, and visitor economy
  - Identifying a 'niche' (e.g. heritage, visual art, the town as a basis to explore the country) and using this as the main guiding principle.
7. The impact of combining cultural and creative assets can - through its increased offer, visibility, and reach and efficiency of shared marketing - be larger than the sum of its parts.
8. Developing interlinking elements across sectors - cultural assets, retail and visitor economy, infrastructure. - together, through communication and collaboration will have a multiplier effect on the impact of each on the other and on the identified specialism.

These three principles inform a set of tactical and strategic opportunities for cultural and heritage development.

## The role of culture in post Covid-19 recovery and rebuilding

The research phase of this study took place before the emergency response which led to the closure of all cultural venues and cancellation of festivals and public events. The full impact of the virus on Hereford's cultural sector cannot yet be measured. However, it is likely to be profound – accentuated by structural factors, including an over-reliance on activities that rely on generating footfall as opposed to those which generate IP that can be exploited through broadcast or online, the absence of large-scale creative employers and the lack of creative workspaces to provide a focus for relief.

The response will need to draw upon the core values expressed in Herefordshire's Cultural Strategy, notably on the resourcefulness of its cultural organisations, creative individuals and communities:

“ We make the most of what we have, take pride in resilience and welcome innovation

One benefit of the emergency response is that the Great Place project, including its evaluation of the role of Herefordshire Cultural Partnership, has been extended to March 2021. The research points to the importance of a central coordinating function in drawing together and projecting Hereford's heritage and cultural assets, and in collating evidence and commissioning the new research needed to provide a baseline to inform renewal and growth plans, and bids for strategic funding, such as Towns Fund and the proposed Destination Business Improvement District.

Any attempt to simply 'wind back the clock' to the pre-COVID state of the cultural sector, and the places and spaces which are themselves an integral part of Hereford's offer, will fall short of what is needed to protect employment and rebuild the city and county economy. Recognition of this needs to reflect the importance of doing bold things now: pressing for investment and joint action which may have seemed unrealistic prior to the emergency, such as in creation of a major new museum venue, but now presents itself as essential to restoring the economic and social health and wellbeing of Hereford.



## 8. Conclusions and opportunities

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### 8.1 Build on existing strengths

#### 8.1.1 Build on your heritage assets

Hereford already possesses a range of attractive assets - its wide-ranging heritage, visual arts scene, and the social capital evident in the many actors who are coming together to progress and support its cultural and visitor economy. Hereford demonstrates an exceptional proliferation of more and less visible heritage assets. Along with the existing interest in heritage among locals and tourists, this makes 'Heritage in Hereford' an obvious specialism for further development. There is potential to do this iteratively, bring together smaller, tactical activities to animate the city centre whilst planning and fundraising for larger capital developments. The former could include:

- Create a visible heritage route as part of a new wayfinding strategy, connecting many small heritage sites, encouraging visitors to explore the city, and increasing the reach and effectiveness of shared marketing
- Raise the visibility of Hereford's AAI and conservation area as well as individual assets such as the town's defences and castle foundations, for example with support of the new MA being developed by HCA, or other local visual artists
- Expand the existing guided tour offer, through creating more creative or unusual tours, using Augmented Reality to bring the hidden archaeological heritage to life, or creating online experiences to entice 'nervous' visitors to consider visiting the city once lockdown restrictions are lifted
- Make more out of Hereford's state-of-the-art Archive and Research and Learning centre
- Identify Hereford more clearly with the heritage assets of the surrounding county, styling Hereford as the centre from which to explore as the hub of an 'attract and disperse' strategy

## 9. Postscript

### The role of Hereford's cultural places and spaces in post Covid-19 recovery and rebuilding

The research phase of this study took place before the emergency response which led to the closure of all cultural venues and cancellation of festivals and public events. At time of writing, the date at which venues may reopen remains unknown, and therefore the full impact of the virus on Hereford's cultural sector cannot be measured. However, it is likely to be profound – accentuated by structural factors, including an over-reliance on activities that rely on generating footfall as opposed to those which generate IP that can be exploited through broadcast or online, the absence of large-scale creative employers and the lack of creative workspaces to provide a focus for relief.

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# BOP Consulting

BOP Consulting is an international consultancy specialising in culture and the creative economy.

BOP convenes the **World Cities Culture Forum** (WCCF), an international network of more than 35 cities. [www.worldcitiescultureforum.com](http://www.worldcitiescultureforum.com)

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