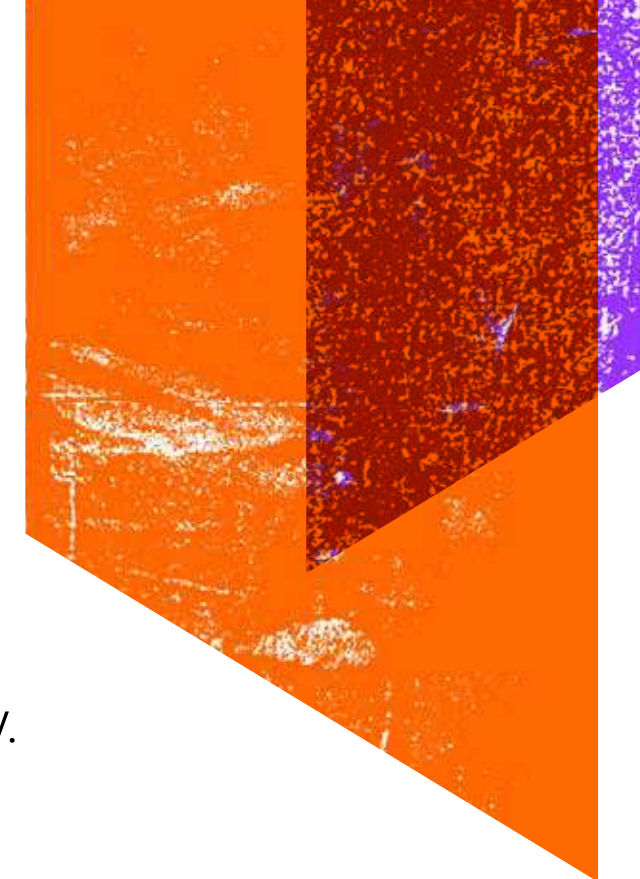


**EXETER
CULTURAL
STRATEGY**
2026-31

An assessment of what you said to us.

In this new review of cultural life in Exeter, we read, met and listened to as many voices, perspectives, assessments as we could. This document lays out what we found.



INTRODUCTION

p03 A snapshot of our city.

SURVEY

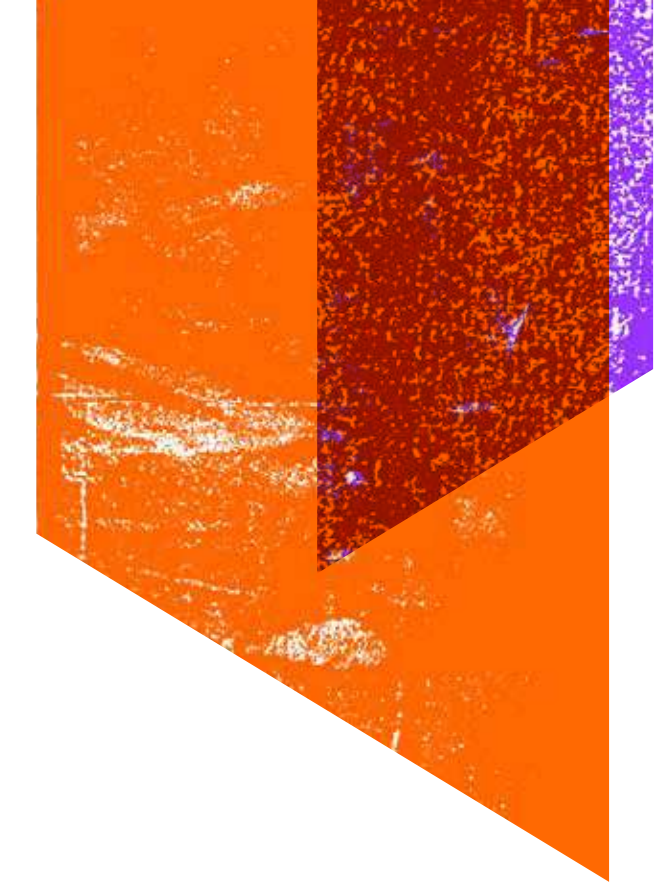
p04 Our survey results.

MEETINGS

p34 A story of us today – the key themes we heard across our interviews.

SURVEY

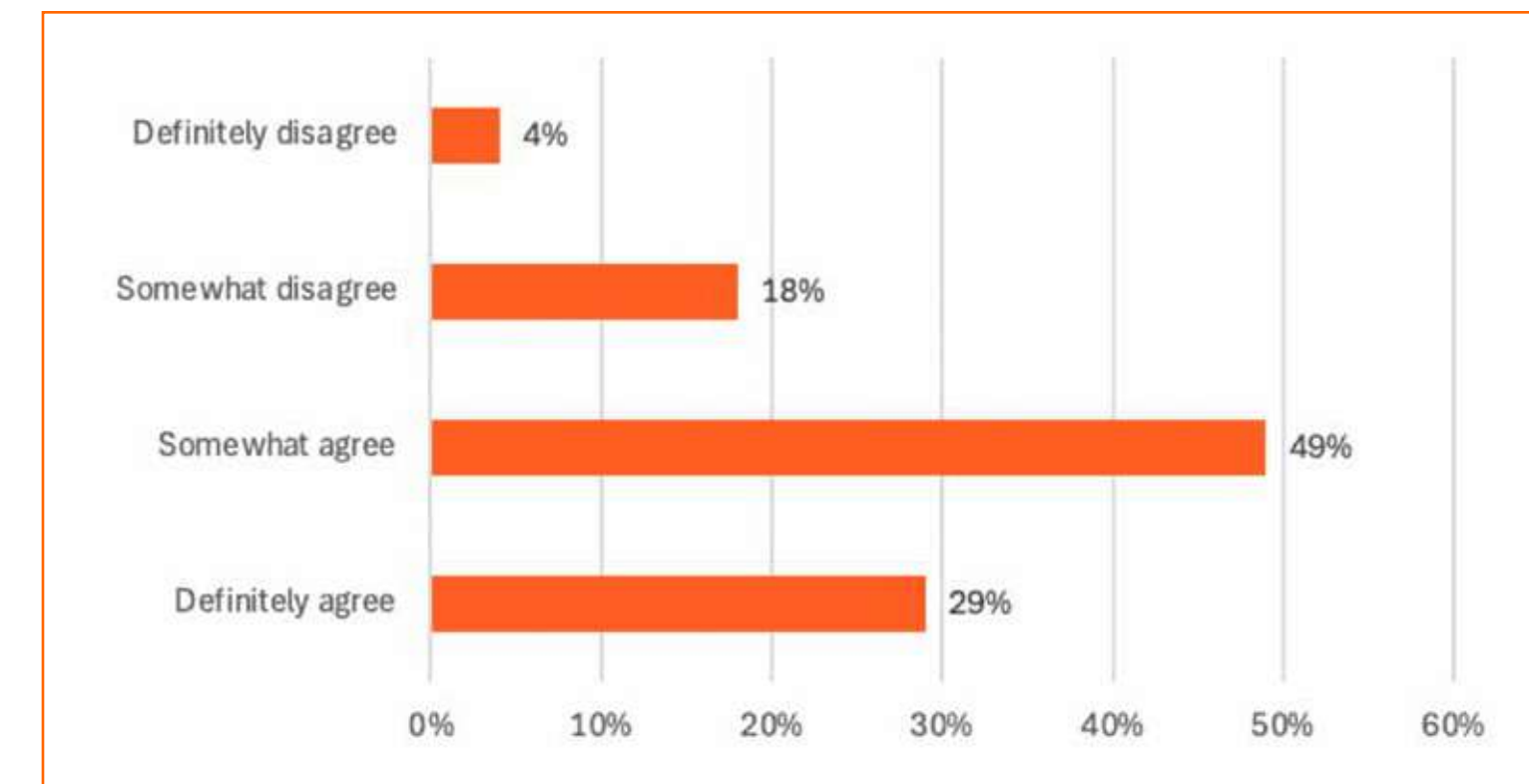
Culture audiences.



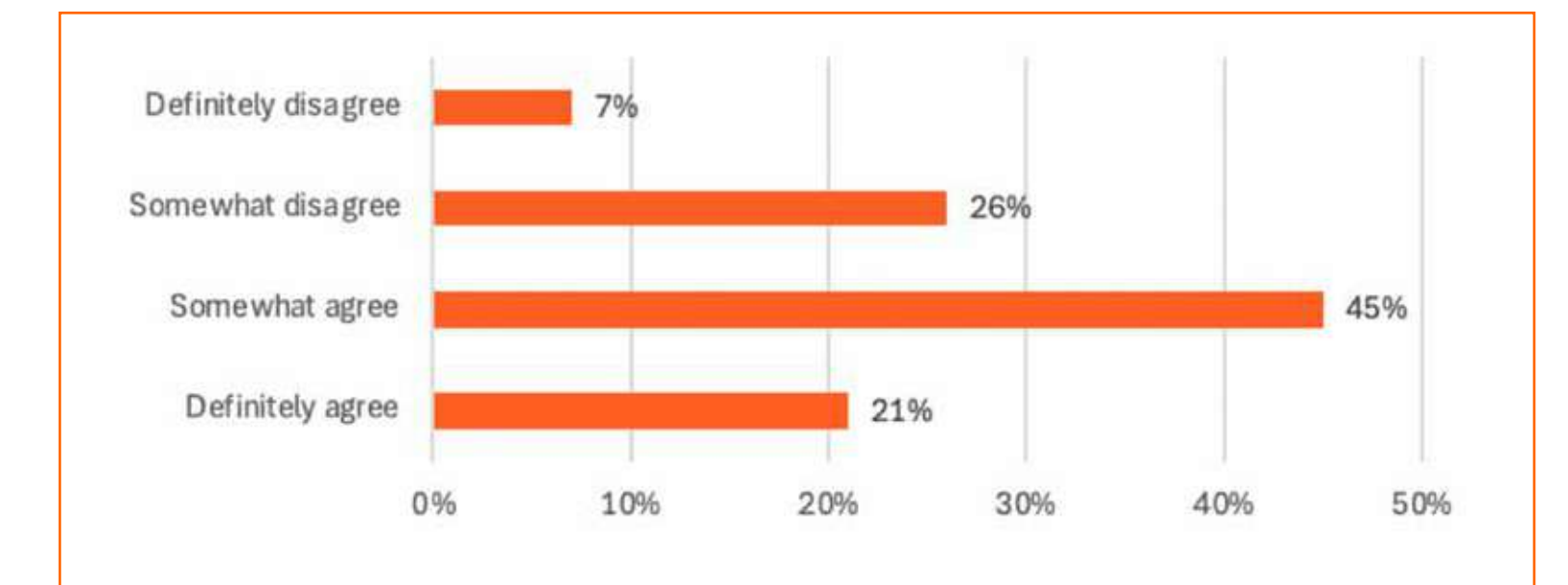
“Would you say Exeter is:”



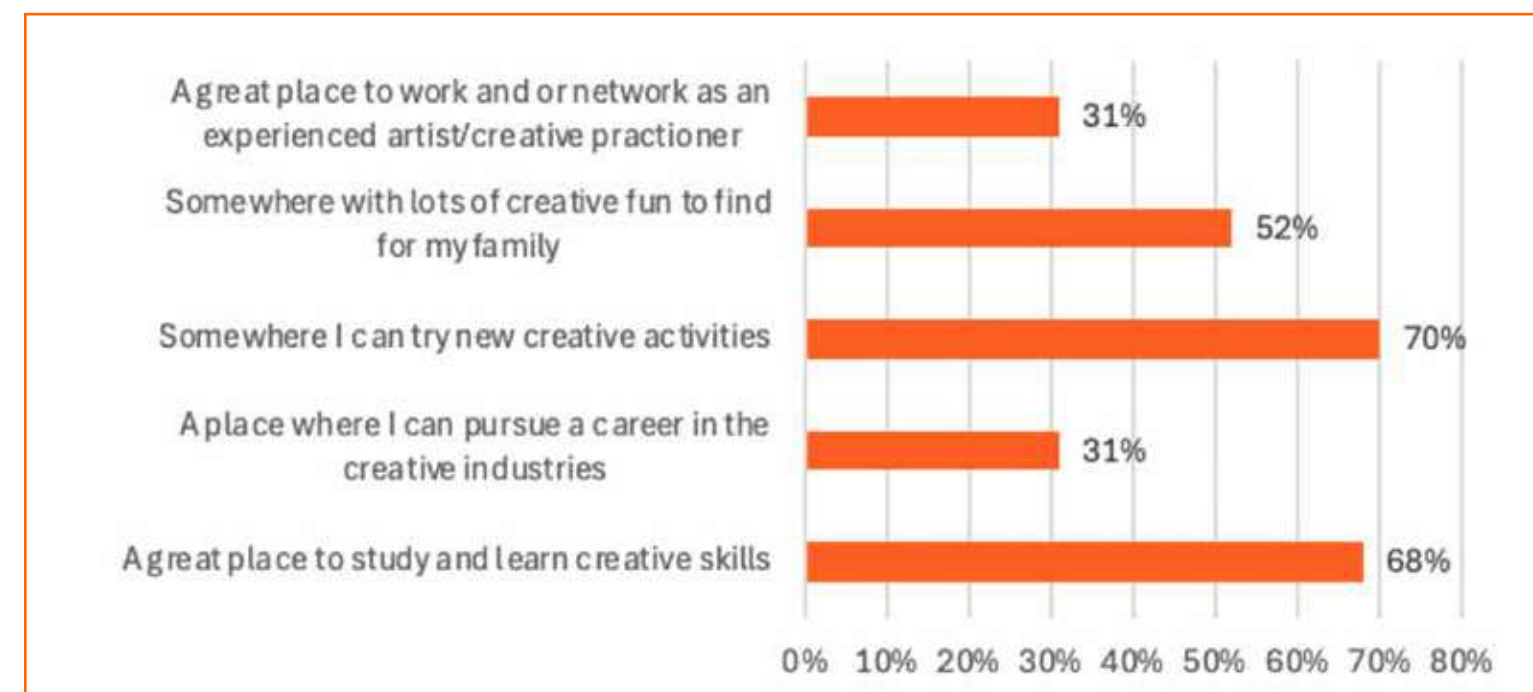
“I feel proud of Exeter as a city:”



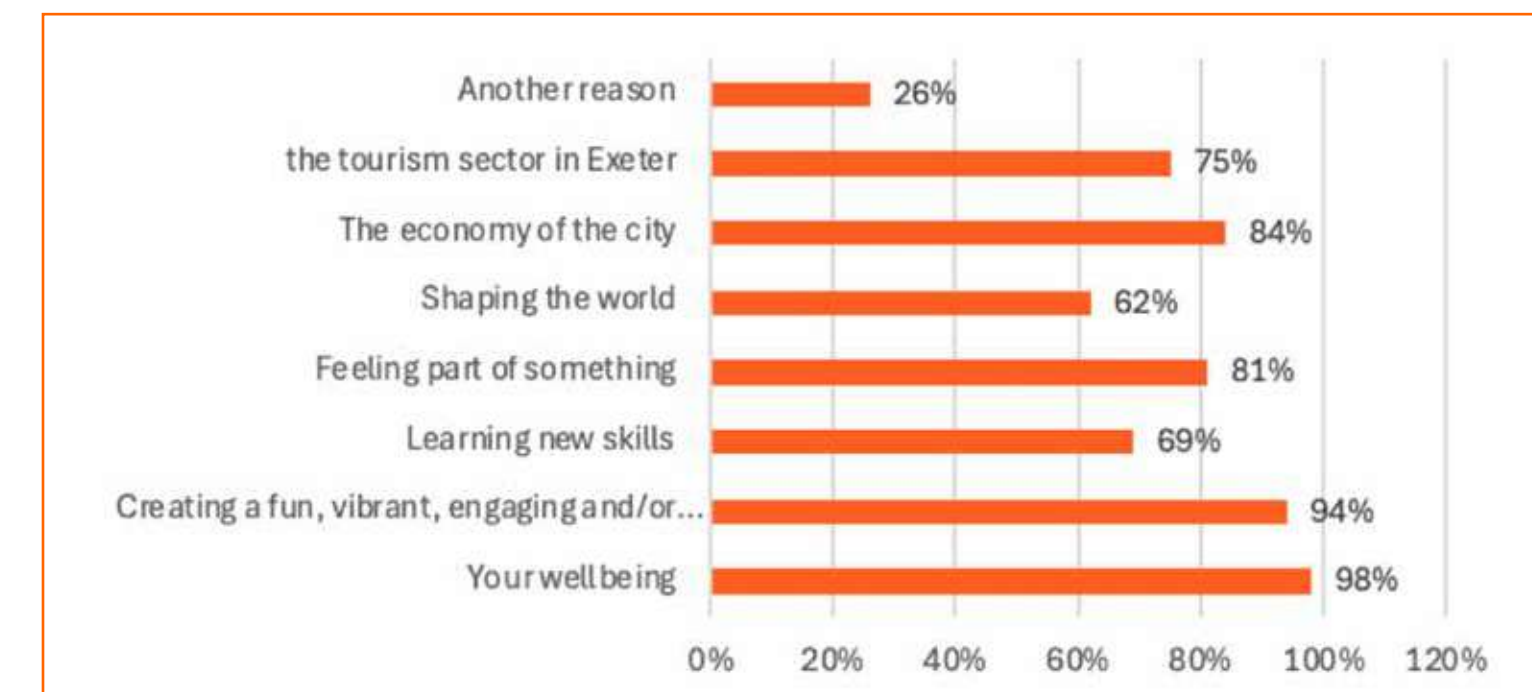
“In a recent survey, almost 50% of Exeter’s residents said that they didn’t experience any barriers to engaging in cultural activities:”



“What is it like to live and work in Exeter?”



“Do you feel like arts, culture and creativity is important for:”



The feedback regarding living and working in Exeter reveals a strong tension between the city’s high quality of life due to its physical setting and walkability, and deep frustration stemming from traffic, a perceived lack of cultural ambition, and socio-economic challenges.

SURVEY

LIVING AND WORKING IN EXETER.

1: HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

A prevailing positive theme is the city's physical setting, scale, and access to nature, making it feel highly "liveable" and manageable.

Access to Nature and Green Spaces:

Residents love that Exeter blends housing with access to nature and appreciate the easy access to countryside, coast, and moors. There are many parks and green spaces, and the Quay, parks, and green circle are special. The valley parks are also specifically enjoyed.

Walkability and Human Scale:

Exeter is described as a "very liveable little city", being small enough to not require a car and feeling human scale. It is highly praised as a walkable city, with the entire city often accessible within a 60-minute walk to the centre.

Friendly and Community-Minded:

The city is generally perceived as friendly, welcoming, and having a strong sense of community. People appreciate the friendly community on their doorstep.

2: SEVERE TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORT ISSUES

One of the most significant and consistent negative themes is the poor quality of transport infrastructure and high costs associated with travel, creating daily frustration.

Traffic Congestion:

Traffic is repeatedly described as difficult. The city is seen as gridlocked and choked with traffic, with uncontrolled development exacerbating the problem.

Poor Public Transport:

Bus services are widely criticised as unreliable and expensive. Some note the lack of bus service after 6pm, which impacts cultural engagement.

Cost and Access for Vehicles:

Parking is described as extortionate and expensive, deterring people from visiting the city centre, especially in the evening.

Cycling Concerns:

While some appreciate cycling infrastructure, others note that cycle paths are inconsistent or need improving, and shared paths can be dangerous.

SURVEY

LIVING AND WORKING IN EXETER.

3: CULTURAL UNDER-ACHIEVEMENT AND LACK OF AMBITION

Despite the presence of key cultural institutions, there is a widespread feeling that the city's cultural offering is limited, lacks scope, and does not fulfil its potential compared to neighbouring cities.

Missing Major Venues:

A major point of frustration is the lack of a central, large-scale theatre and concert venue. This means that to see major theatre shows or music gigs, residents have to travel out of the city to places like Plymouth, Bristol, or London.

Limited Art Scene and Galleries:

The city is described as lacking in independent art galleries and creative outlets. The art scene is viewed as small, often relying on the RAMM and Exeter Phoenix.

Lack of Vision and Ambition:

The city is often perceived as "sedate and sleepy, not vibrant" and as not fulfilling its potential. Some feel the culture is "staid and traditional" and needs more radical and creative activity.

Music Scene Decline:

The live music scene has diminished significantly over the last 10–20 years, with a lack of live music in pubs and a perceived inability to value and support professional musicians.

4: CHALLENGES FOR CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS

Creative individuals and artists feel unsupported, often struggling to find work, space, or opportunities within Exeter, leading to isolation or migration.

Limited Opportunities and Funding:

There is a desperate lack of funding limiting professional opportunities. Opportunities are few and far between, making it hard to work as a creative or find steady paid work.

Insular and Fragmented Community:

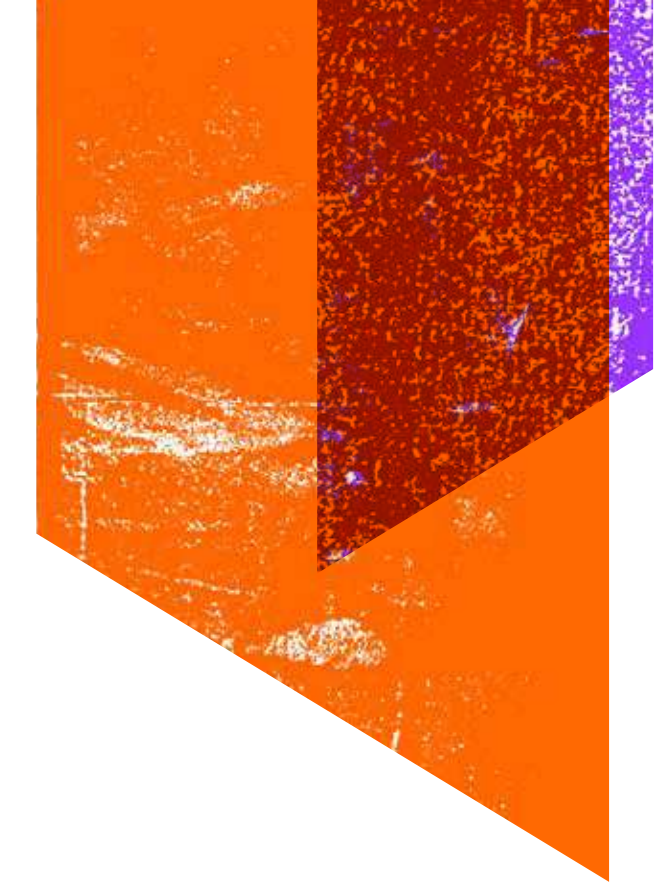
The creative community is often described as small, fragmented, and insular. Some feel it is a closed shop with a few established gatekeepers, and it can be creatively isolating.

Lack of Affordable Space:

There is a difficulty in finding workshop space and a lack of affordable rehearsal space.

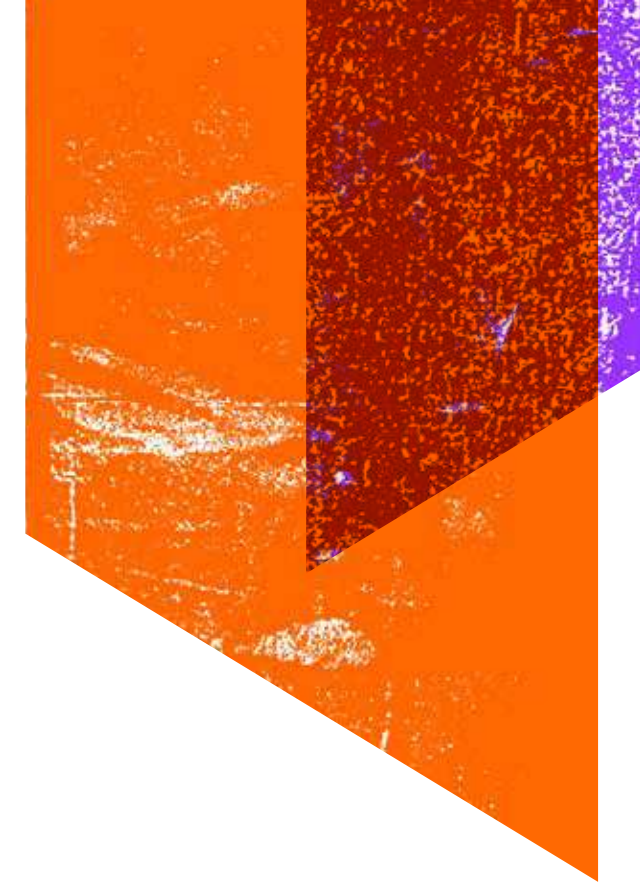
Talent Migration:

Many professionals feel they have to leave to work or travel outside the city frequently, and young creatives face a lack of affordable training or paid entry-level creative opportunities.



SURVEY

LIVING AND WORKING IN EXETER.



5: SOCIAL AND SAFETY CONCERNS

The social landscape of the city centre is a source of concern for many, impacting their willingness to engage with city life, particularly after dark.

Homelessness and Antisocial Behaviour:

There are serious concerns about homelessness issues and an increase in antisocial behaviour in areas such as Sidwell Street and South Street.

Safety Concerns:

Many people feel unsafe to go out alone after dark and express feeling unsafe in the city centre. Parts of the city centre are frequently described as run down, with visible under investment.

6: INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS AND IDENTITY

There is a sense that the city is failing to capitalise on its history.

University Influence:

There is a recurring belief that the city gives an emphasis to the university which in some way inhibits more investment in independent artistic flair or the non-academic. The perception is that the city caters “far more for transient students than for the local population”.

Lack of Coherence and Vision:

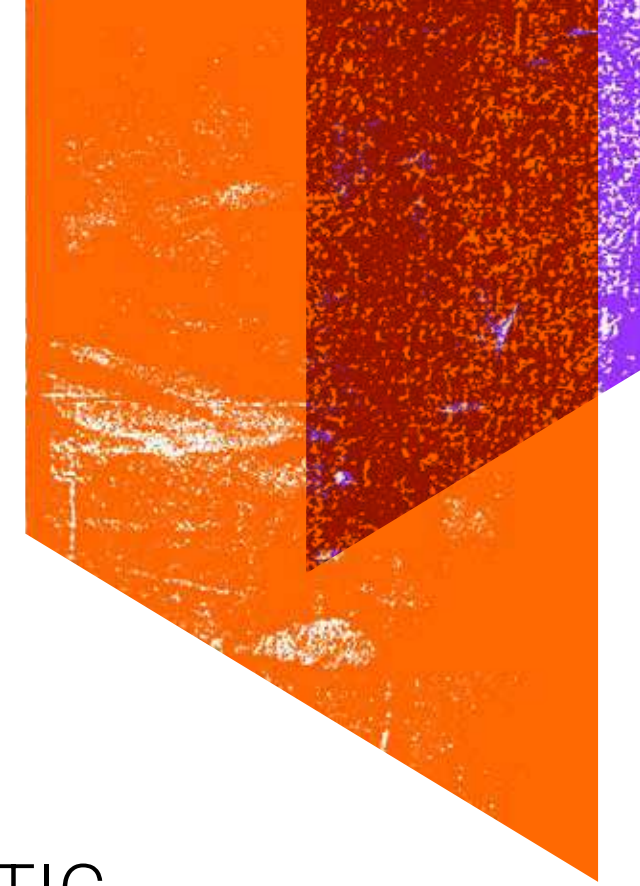
The city is criticised for having a “lack of vision” and being “responsive rather than proactive”. Cultural activities are seen as fragmented with a lack of coherence or consistency.

Historic Potential:

While the city has a rich history, there is frustration over missed opportunities to further develop this heritage and a concern that new buildings are not in keeping with the historic site. The Quay area is specifically cited as a wonderful asset.

SURVEY

KEY DESIRED CHANGES IN EXETER'S CULTURAL OFFER



1: MAJOR VENUE DEVELOPMENT AND CENTRALISATION

This is the most frequent request.

There is a critical and repeated demand for larger, high-quality performance venues located centrally in Exeter to compete with cities like Bristol and Plymouth. Specific requests include: A proper, large city-centre theatre capable of hosting national touring productions, West End shows, and large plays, replacing or supplementing existing venues seen as too small or inaccessible. A modern concert hall or decent music venue to attract major rock, soul, classical, and touring acts that currently skip Exeter.

2: COORDINATED PUBLICITY AND INFORMATION

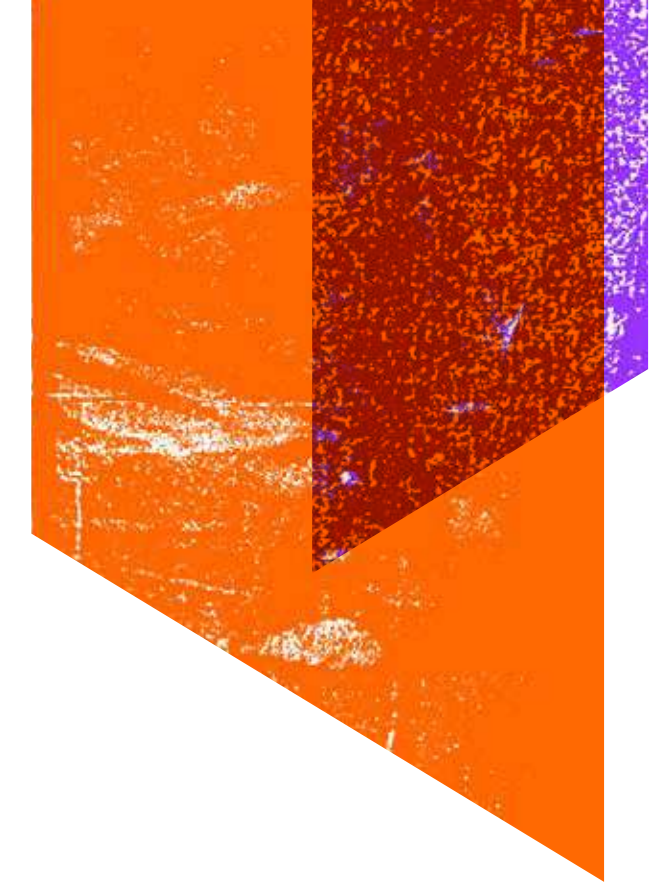
A primary need is overcoming the barrier of “not knowing what is on” through better organisation and communication. Desired changes include: Creation of a centralised resource, digital hub, or ‘What’s On’ guide that consolidates all cultural listings in one place. Better, joined-up advertising across traditional (eg: posters) and digital platforms, ensuring events are visible and communicated effectively to residents outside of specific organisational social media bubbles. Greater coordination between cultural organisations to avoid duplication and overlapping schedules.

3: EXPANDED ARTISTIC PROGRAMMING AND VARIETY

Respondents seek a richer, higher-quality, and more varied cultural menu, moving beyond perceived niche or amateur focus. Key desires are: More live music, gigs, and performance, including contemporary, jazz, folk, and specific high-calibre classical music and non-mainstream classical repertoire. High-quality art exhibitions and permanent galleries showcasing contemporary, touring, and “big name” artists (eg: more like the Van Gogh exhibition or Grayson Perry). More festivals spanning arts, literature (leveraging the ‘City of Literature’ status), food, film, and heritage, including the revival of events like the Exeter Festival and Carnival.

SURVEY

KEY DESIRED CHANGES IN EXETER'S CULTURAL OFFER



4: CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The artistic community needs more accessible space and greater funding, particularly for emerging artists and independent activity: More support, investment, and funding for artists and small arts organisations to ensure ticket affordability and sustainable careers. Better use of empty retail units to create pop-up studios, community hubs, galleries, maker spaces (eg: expanding the library maker space), rehearsal areas, and affordable creative studios. More accessible workshops, short courses, and evening/weekend classes (especially creative ones like dance, pottery, and art classes) offered at affordable rates.

5: PUBLIC REALM AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

These requests focus on utilising open spaces, improving city atmosphere, and connecting cultural experiences to residents: More free, accessible, and inclusive community events (eg: car-free street festivals, street food, parades, outdoor concerts, and outdoor theatre in parks/shopping centres). Greater focus on public art, street art, and commissions that involve the community and help define Exeter's unique identity, moving beyond simple decorative murals. More family-friendly, youth, and teen activities, including specific offerings for parents, often requested to be brought out into the neighbourhoods rather than solely confined to the city centre.

Increased cultural diversity in events, programming, and festivals, specifically celebrating minority populations, foreign cultures, and cross-cultural collaborations. Integration of science as a part of the city's cultural offer, leveraging the Met Office presence.

6: CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Respondents want culture to reflect both the past and present communities of Exeter: Better celebration of Exeter's history and heritage (eg: Roman baths, city walls, local stories, literary history) through modern means and restored buildings.

7: SAFETY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Many desire improvements to the overall city environment that makes attending events more feasible: Improved public transport (especially evening services) and cheaper/safer parking to facilitate access to events. Enhanced safety and cleanliness in the high street at night, specifically addressing antisocial behaviour and homelessness, which can make the area feel "hostile".

SURVEY

Cultural creatives.

The experience of being a creative person living and working in Exeter is characterised by a stark duality: While creatives appreciate the supportive community spirit and inspiring environment, they find it extremely challenging and often financially untenable to sustain a professional career due to severe structural deficits in funding, space, and organisational support.

1: FINANCIAL PRECARITY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR PROFESSIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

The most dominant theme is the overwhelming difficulty in earning a living wage, necessitating external income and leading to high professional stress.

Financial Unsustainability:

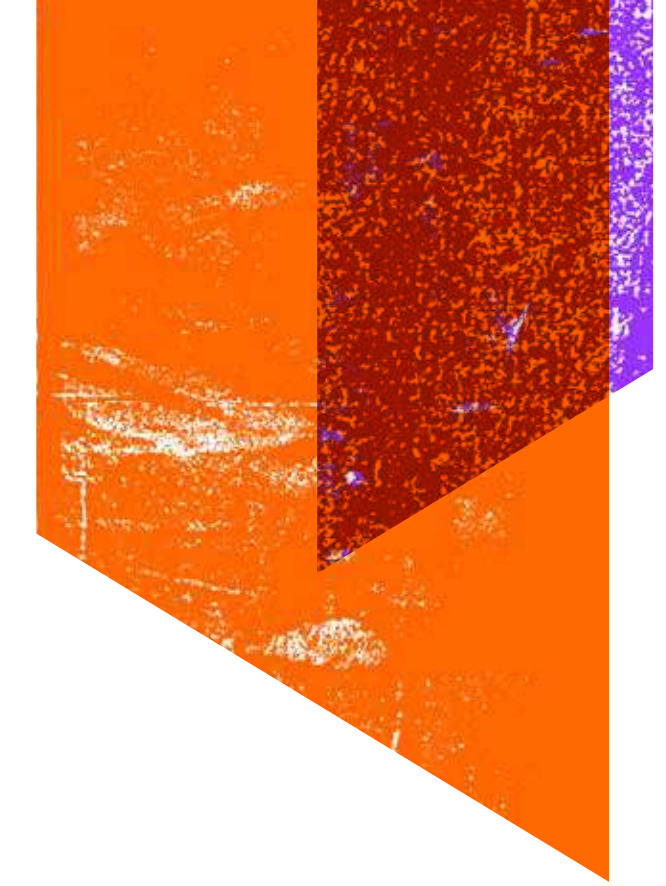
It is “increasingly untenable to sustain a creative professional life in Exeter”. Creatives find it “hard to earn a living from just creative projects”, and many must maintain a full-time job alongside a creative practice. Some resort to working three jobs and seven days a week.

The Cost-of-Living Barrier:

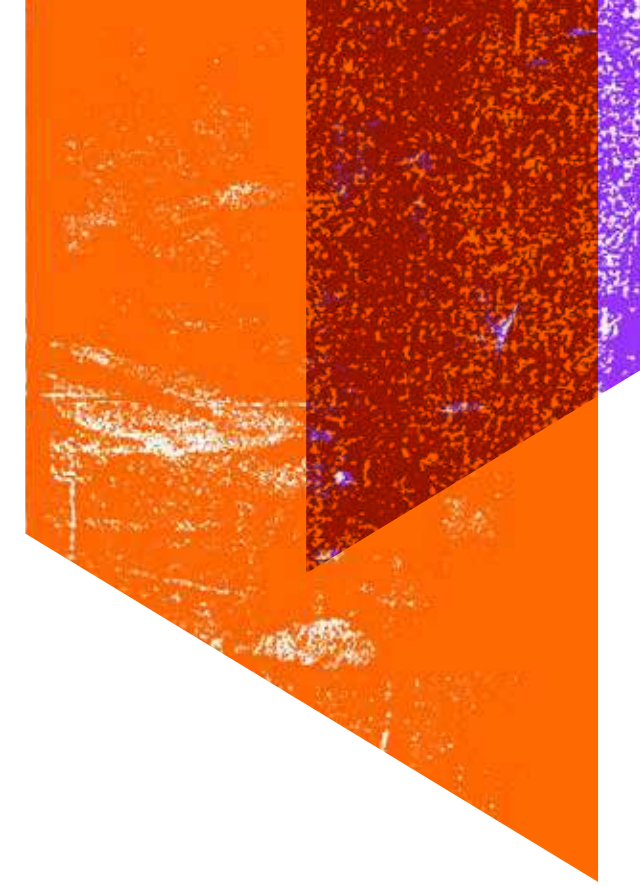
The high cost of living and unaffordable rent/house prices mean that even creative degree graduates are forced into administrative, non-creative jobs to afford to live in the city. Rent is so expensive it “couldn’t financially sustain you as a full-time job”.

Devaluing of Labour:

Creatives report being paid very little for opportunities, with funding usually only covering materials, and their time and labour is “almost never paid for”. Promoters often “glean the profits, earning more than the artist”. For dance professionals, it is “not possible to make a minimum wage living here”.



SURVEY



2: INFRASTRUCTURE AND SPACE DEFICITS

Creatives face acute limitations concerning physical space, forcing them to rely on make-shift arrangements or to abandon local projects.

Lack of Affordable Studio Space:

The lack of affordable studios and practice spaces in Exeter is acute. The city's lack of "post-industrial infrastructure" prevents the provision of cheap, large spaces.

Venue Cost and Accessibility:

Finding a place to run a free or low-cost group is "very, very difficult," as community centres operate as "expensive rental spaces". Everything provided by cash-strapped organisations "becomes a transaction, space hire etc".

Underutilised City Space:

Enthusiasm for local projects is "dampened by no space". Creatives note that Exeter has "so many empty shops and first floor spaces that could be utilised," citing the model of Bristol's Sparks space as a missing asset.

3: SYSTEMIC ISOLATION AND TALENT MIGRATION

Many artists feel isolated and compelled to look outside Exeter for professional development, leading to talent drain.

Need to Work Elsewhere:

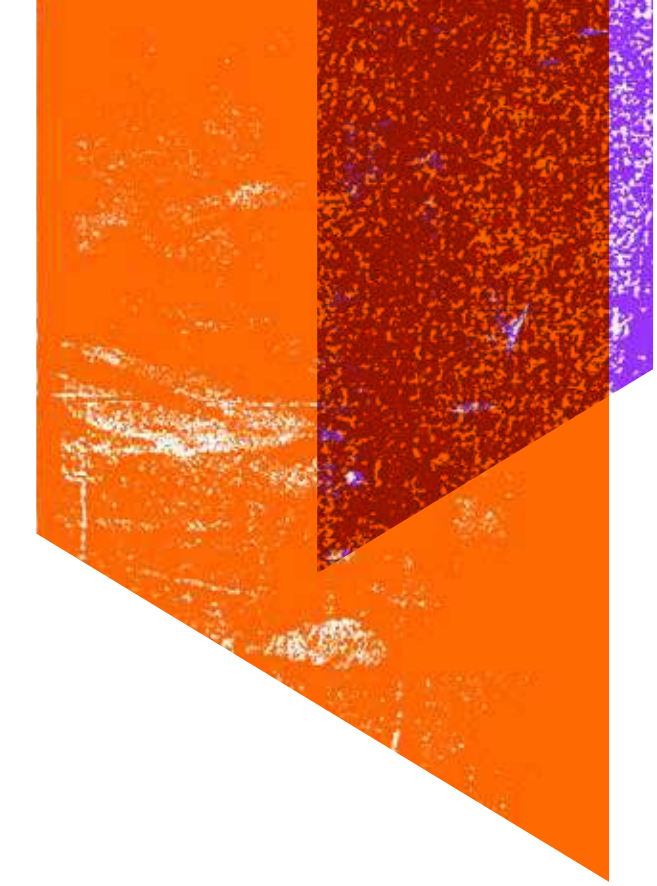
It is a "structural necessity" for many to seek contracts outside the city, frequently traveling to Bristol or Plymouth for work, or accessing their best commissions from outside the city (Oxford, London, Brighton). Some take their work to London to sell.

Talent Drain:

Young people often have to move away to pursue opportunities and "seldom return". The general wisdom at the college level is that students "will need to leave Devon to have a good chance at a career in media or art". Dance artists are "lost every year who move up country to find more opportunities".

Networking and Fragmentation:

While some find the community "supportive, friendly and generous" and enjoy the cafe culture, others describe the community as "small-scale and fractured", "cliquey" and sometimes feeling "a bit exclusive". There is a lack of opportunities to "unite the creative sector".



4: INSTITUTIONAL AND SECTORAL LIMITATIONS

Creatives are frustrated by institutional constraints, a perceived lack of strategic vision, and specific gaps in arts education.

Narrow Definition of Culture:

Some feel their creativity is judged based on whether it aligns with the funder's "view of culture," a belief sometimes reflected in the idea that "Exeter seems to define *culture* in too narrow a way".

Lack of Career Pathways:

Opportunities for emerging and mid-career professionals are lacking, and it is difficult to progress a career. The loss of the Art School from Exeter and the end of Foundation Degrees in Art at the College are cited as tragedies that removed vital opportunities for a vibrant arts scene.

Sectoral Neglect:

Specific sectors feel excluded, including:

Music: There is no support for composers or classical musicians since the loss of the University music department. Institutions lack "knowledgeable music programming, production and curation". Exeter is perceived as a 'B city' that has "fallen off the map for touring artists" due to poor infrastructure.

Dance: There are "no specific opportunities... to support, promote and nurture the development of dance artists" since Dance In Devon was lost.

Film: The sector is felt to be "undervalued by the city and county," with no real professional film industry.

SURVEY

5: NEED FOR GRASSROOTS SUPPORT AND VISION

Creatives call for practical, low-cost support that fosters organic growth rather than top-down schemes.

DIY Ethos:

Exeter is characterised as a “DIY city” where artists “have to make things happen yourself”; the city “thrives on the fringe, small-scale work”.

Need for Grassroots Infrastructure:

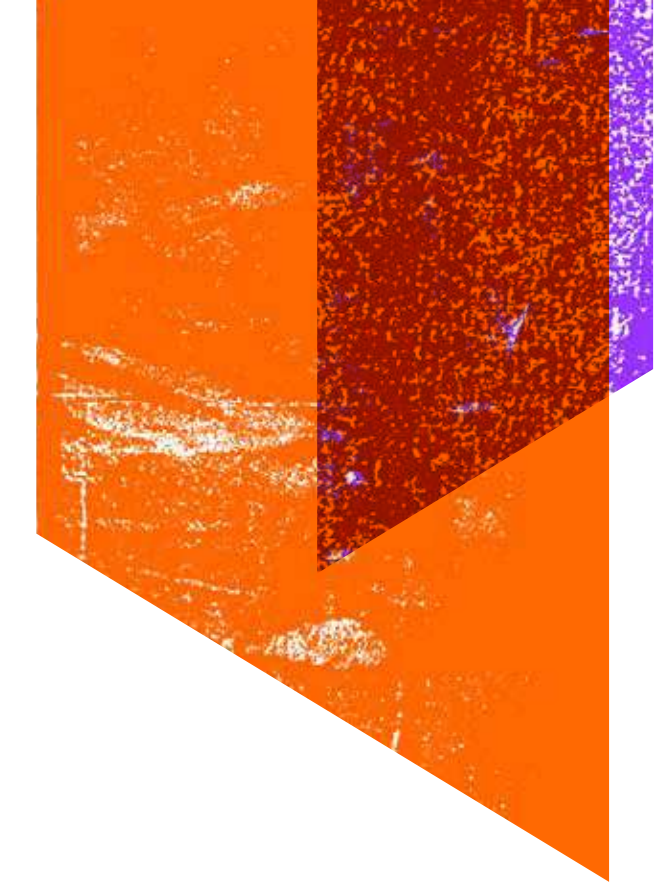
Instead of funding employed people for festivals, there is a demand for municipal spaces where bands can practice and artists can find affordable studio space to create grassroots growth.

Desire for Vision:

There needs to be an organisation “holding a city-wide approach and driving a vision”.

Exeter is “Tough” but Inspiring:

Despite the professional difficulties, many acknowledge the existence of a “generous and thriving creative community” and find the sea, moors, and space and peace around Exeter invaluable for inspiration.



SURVEY

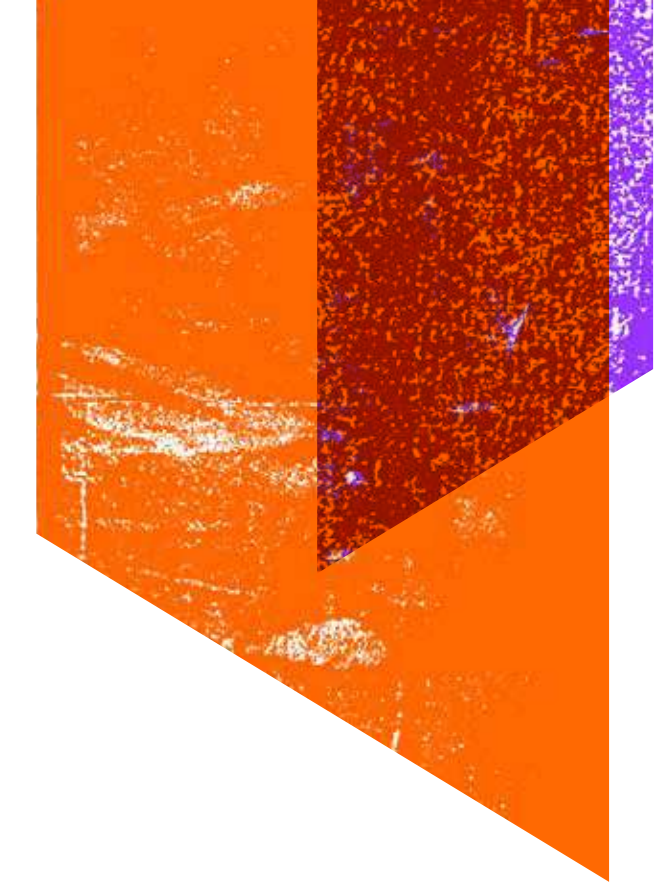
Cultural organisations.

A wide range of businesses and groups currently in creative production filled out the survey. This included:

Alright Mate?
Bigwave Marketing
Contemporary and Street Dance Programmes
Devon Music Education Hub
Documental Productions C.I.C.
Double Elephant Print Workshop
Exeter Academy of Dance
Exeter and District Ramblers
Exeter Canal & Quay Trust
Exeter College
Exeter College Art Faculty
Exeter Northcott
Exeter Respect Festival
Exeter Science Centre
Exeter Seed Bank
Exeter Students' Guild - Senior Events Coordinator
Exeter Working Papers in Book History (Devon Bibliography)

InExeter – the Business Improvement District
International Film Festival (EDIFF)
Jazz at The Mermaid
Libraries Unlimited
Literature Works
MilkLand CIC
Music In Devon Initiative (MIDI)
Our Exeter CIC
Phonic FM
Promenade Promotions (Prom-Prom) Limited
Show of Hands
South West Dance Hub (SWDH), Swift Dance Co, Exeter Dance
St Nicholas Priory History Group
Swindon Dance Centre For Advanced Training – Exeter
The Art and Energy Collective
The Arts Society Exeter
The Devon and Exeter Institution
The Flat Restaurant

The Friends of RAMM
Topsham Estuary Players
Traction Project Space
Wandering Tiger Productions



SURVEY

EXISTING CHALLENGES.

1: FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS

Cost of Living and Income:

The city is cited as an expensive city that presents affordability challenges for young creatives. There is a high cost of living and lack of disposable income among residents.

Funding Instability:

Cultural organisations face chronic funding instability and rising costs, often relying on unsustainable models.

Investment Gaps:

There is a pervasive feeling that the city is held back by a lack of investment in culture and people.

Creative Business Viability:

It is difficult to make a living for early career creatives. There is a lack of local funding for Research and Development (R&D).

Underfunding:

There is a lack of investment and support for artists, with perceived underfunding from Arts Council.

Consumer Costs:

Financial barriers exist, as theatre tickets and art classes are seen as too expensive.

2: INFRASTRUCTURE, SPACE AND VENUES

Lack of Space:

The creative community is significantly held back by a lack of venues, infrastructure, and promotional capacity.

Specialist Space Deficit:

There is a critical lack of affordable maker space or studio space, and a lack of experimental/practice/development spaces to try new things.

Venue Capacity: There are not enough venues to take work.

Major Venue Gaps:

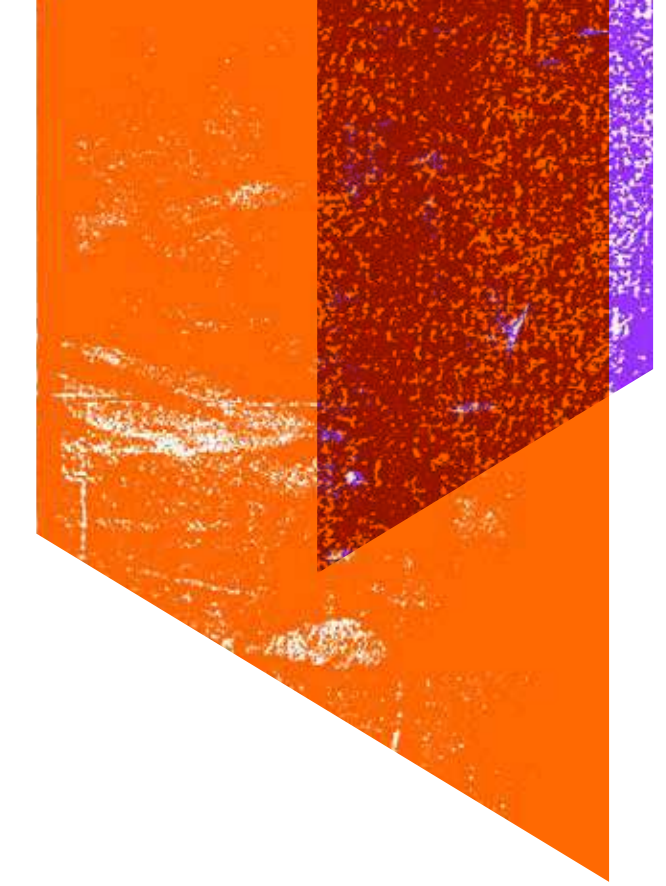
Exeter lacks a central, large-scale theatre and exhibition space, causing the city to lose out on larger acts and exhibitions to Plymouth and Bristol.

Space Quality/Cost:

Challenges include the availability, cost, and fitness of spaces and infrastructure for creative and cultural activity.

Meanwhile Space Precarity:

Meanwhile cultural spaces often operate under short-term tenancies, creating a sense of precariousness and a lack of a sustainable model.



SURVEY

EXISTING CHALLENGES.

3: WORKFORCE, TALENT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Career Limitations:

Creative practitioners feel they need to go elsewhere to pursue a creative career because the city cannot support them.

Opportunities for Artists:

There are limited paid opportunities for those working in the arts and creative industries.

Lack of Commissions:

There is a lack of regular commissions for local artists.

Emerging/Established Talent:

There is a lack of opportunities for emerging artists at the start of their careers, and a lack of opportunities for mid-career/established artists to find or make work.

Skills and Training:

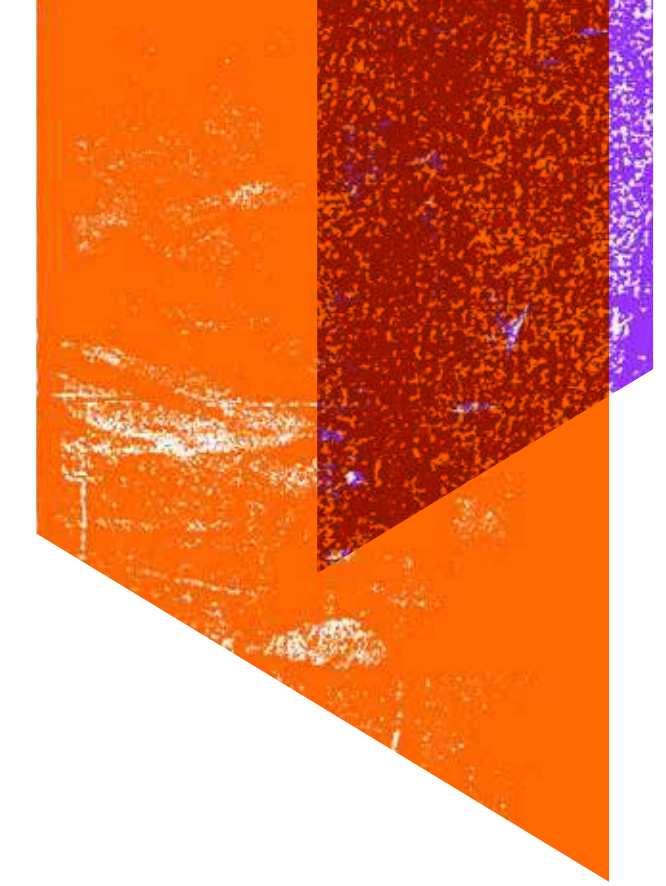
Creative workers struggle to find entry-level or affordable training.

Retention and Labour:

There are issues with the retention of skilled staff and a reliance on unpaid labour.

Booking/Promotion:

There is a lack of bookers or promoters who will take new work.



SURVEY

EXISTING CHALLENGES.

4: STRATEGY, GOVERNANCE AND IDENTITY

Fragmentation and Cohesion:

The creative community is described as insular and fragmented.

Systemic Barriers:

Cultural organisations face systemic barriers and a lack of co-ordination, including challenges related to collaboration, political will and advocacy, and stakeholder instability.

Lack of Vision:

The city suffers from cultural underachievement and a lack of vision, with a perception that the city “does not fulfil its potential”.

Reputation:

The city is often perceived as ‘sedate and sleepy,’ not vibrant, and “doesn’t ever punch above its weight”.

Identity Crisis:

Some feel the city has lost character and is becoming ‘bland and corporate,’ failing to leverage its history effectively.

Targeting:

There is concern that the city’s offerings cater “far more for transient students than for the local population”.

Planning Issues:

Historically, art and culture were treated as a “reactive fix” and public art commissioning practices have suffered from a lack of coherence, transparency, and consistency.

5: ACCESSIBILITY AND ENGAGEMENT

Public Transport:

Unreliable and expensive public transport is cited as a barrier.

Information Hub:

There is a lack of awareness about cultural activities, people still find it difficult to find out what is happening, exacerbated by the absence of a central event/information hub.

Venue Access:

Parking costs and poor accessibility to some venues are barriers, and some venues are hard to get to without a car.

Timing Conflicts:

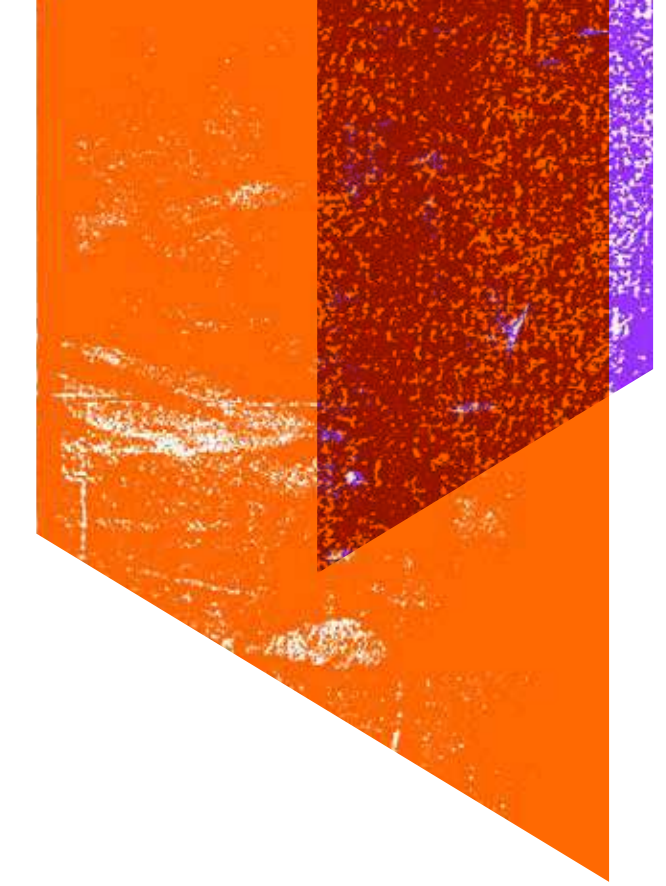
The timing of events, particularly those happening during working hours, poses a significant barrier to attending evening events for people, such as parents.

Safety:

Safety concerns and antisocial behaviour lead many to feel ‘unsafe’ attending city centre events at night.

Exclusivity Perception:

There is a perception that cultural activities cater to certain demographics, specifically the ‘educated white middle classes’.



SURVEY

APPROACHING CHALLENGES.

The key challenges and blockers facing cultural organisations in Exeter over the next 1–5 years are extensive, with the sources consistently highlighting financial precariousness and lack of suitable physical space as the most significant threats. These challenges can be grouped into four core themes:

1. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND FUNDING GAPS

The primary and most frequently cited blocker is the difficulty in securing adequate and reliable funding, which jeopardises the survival and growth of cultural entities.

Insufficient Funding:

Organisations face insufficient public funding for music and creativity and financial pressures. The sector constantly struggles with funding locally and nationally.

Unsustainable Funding Models:

The current business model of presenting touring work is unsustainable. Organisations rely on short-term grants,

commissions, and crowdfunding, creating financial fragility, and their income streams (like touring, licensing, training, and merchandising) require development before they can offer consistent year-round income.

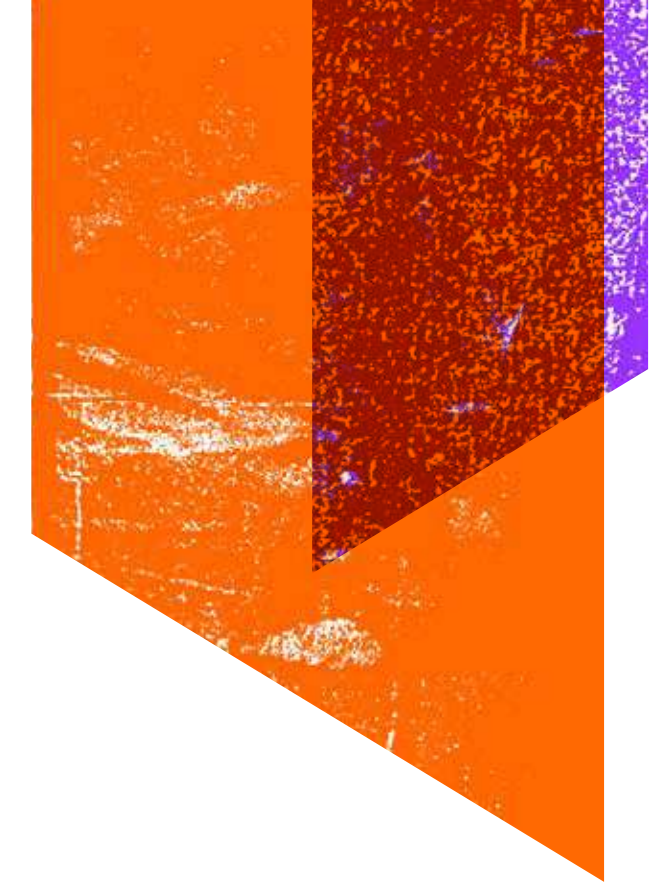
Lack of Core Funding:

Many groups are totally reliant upon funding themselves through courses and project funding, which is very hard to cover core costs from. The previous loss of modest core funding grants from Exeter City Council (ECC) has increased the risk of organisational failure.

Difficulty Accessing Grants:

Organisations struggle to find pots of money to apply to. Arts Council England has not targeted Exeter for special consideration and there are also blockers for the creative sector to access central government funding.

Rising Costs and Economic Pressure: Organisations face rising costs, and the cost-of-living squeeze makes it harder to cover costs from courses alone.



SURVEY

APPROACHING CHALLENGES.

2: INFRASTRUCTURE AND SPACE DEFICITS

The physical limitations of the city's cultural infrastructure and the cost of property severely restrict activities and expansion.

Lack of Affordable Space:

Organisations face constraints of space – space and funding are the blockers for several organisations. Rent prices are too high to expand into bigger or private space.

Missing Specialist Venues:

There is a critical need for professional dance spaces that are available for the community and permanently house dance organisations, ideally three good size spaces in one building, not attached to the University or College.

Unsuitable Venue Conditions:

Existing theatre spaces, such as the Northcott Group's space at the Barnfield, may be carpeted, and other studios are multi-purpose or prioritised for music nights, making them unsuitable for dance.

Mismanaged Assets:

The Custom House is cited as being under-used.

3: WORKFORCE CAPACITY AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Challenges related to staffing, retention, and the ability to attract sufficient human resources are significant, often leading to overstretched teams and volunteer dependence.

Capacity Overload:

Small, highly skilled teams are increasingly stretched, managing delivery, administration, and partnership work which competes with time needed for creative development and strategic planning.

Lack of Dedicated Roles:

Teams lack dedicated capacity for project management, technical fabrication, and marketing/communications.

Need for Core Staffing:

Organisations need to consolidate and grow their core team and create permanent part-time roles for continuity and sustainability.

Volunteer Dependence:

Some organisations are totally volunteer run, and volunteers need more support, including basic administrative assistance, maintenance, and a new Board of Trustees. There is a need for acknowledgement that projects can't run on a voluntary basis forever.

Talent Migration and Opportunity Gaps:

There is a lack of opportunities for young people to pursue creative careers without moving out of the region.

Skills and Retention:

Key challenges include retaining skilled staff and the need to create new roles or increase hours. There are also skills gaps in technical roles and challenges in developing higher skilled staff for succession planning.

SURVEY

APPROACHING CHALLENGES.

4: STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Systemic and political issues related to governance, education, and partnership inhibit collective progress.

Lack of recognition:

There is perception that city leadership don't acknowledge the importance of the arts or the significance of the sector for Exeter as a city".

Stakeholder Instability:

Organisations face managing substantial changes among key stakeholders resulting from public sector and university restructures, and general instability within the cultural sector.

Collaboration Issues:

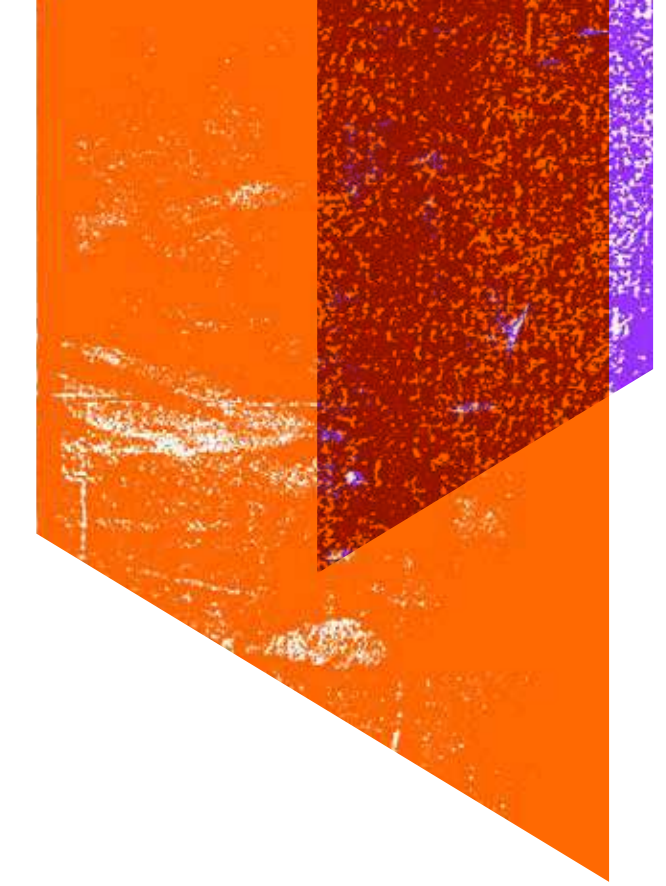
Anchor institutions need improved partnership working as no one organisation has sufficient funding to do everything. Better collaboration practices also helps to avoid "them and us" perceptions between different organisations.

Lack of Voice:

The cultural sector needs a voice in local decision-making.

Education Threats:

The government appears to be further side-lining art education, Organisations across Exeter have identified a wide array of partnership opportunities, categorised primarily by institution type, focusing on leveraging existing assets, skills, and funding for mutual benefit, community engagement, and regional growth.



SURVEY

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES.

1: CORE EDUCATIONAL AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

Collaboration with universities and colleges is highly sought after for R&D, student engagement, and skills transfer.

University of Exeter (UoE):

Climate and Energy Collaboration:

Co-design interactive solar artworks with the Engineering, Environment & Energy teams.

Research Projects:

Run research and development projects, such as a musical focused on life-long learning for People with Learning Disabilities (PWLDs).

Academic Research:

Collaborate on research projects with UoE and other UK universities, sometimes in partnership with Exeter Cathedral Library and Archives.

Student Engagement:

Collaborate on student showcases, joint exhibitions, or discounted workshops for students.

Skill Sharing:

Colab and the University have the opportunity to share skills, knowledge, and funding with community groups and non-profits to enable more work in communities.

General Partnership:

Build on existing collaborations.

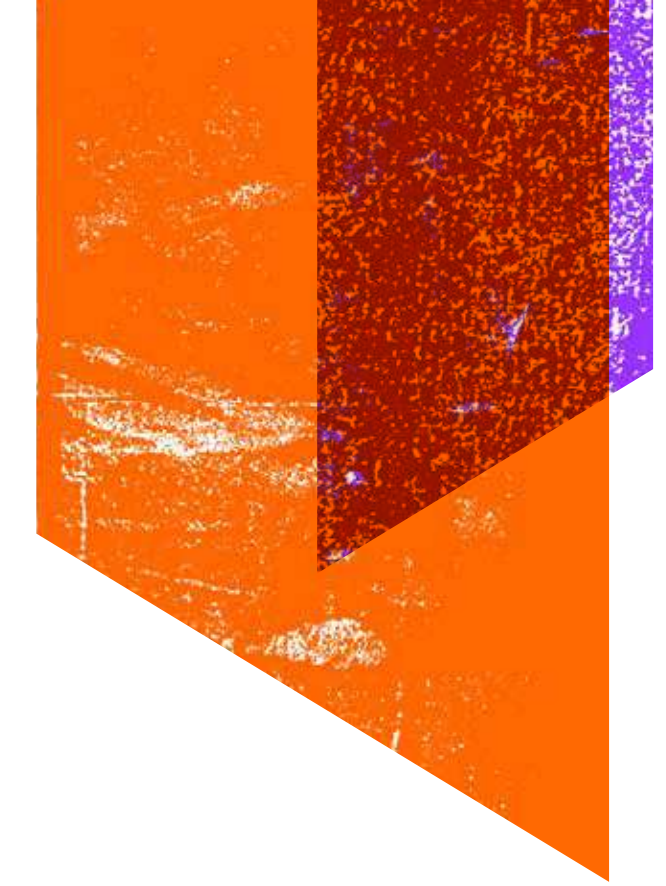
Exeter College:

College to improve better links with the Cultural Sector and University.

Collaborate on projects that lead to mutual inspiration and creativity.

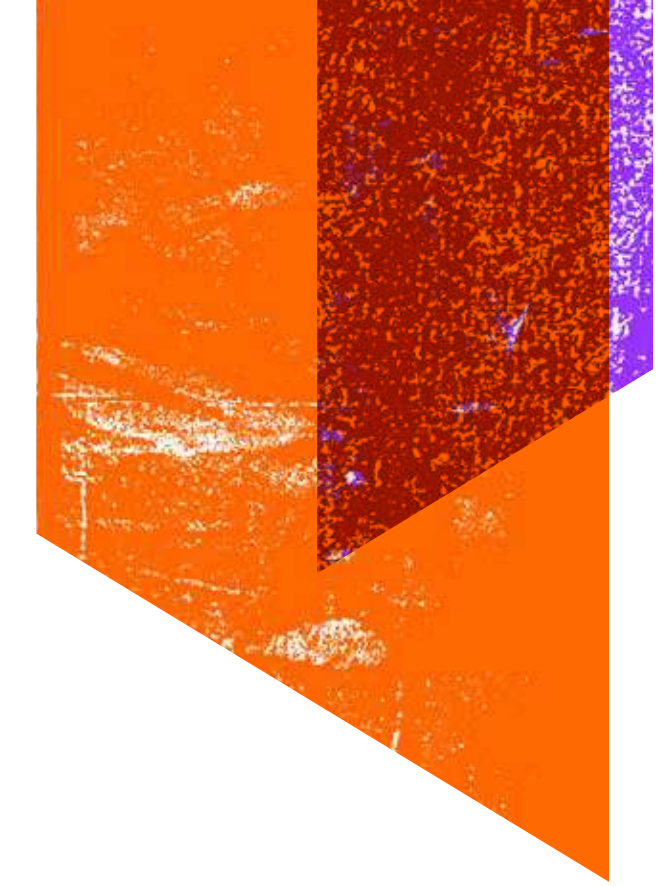
Build on existing collaborations.

Provide support for those undertaking training programmes.



SURVEY

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES.



2: LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND STRATEGIC BODIES

Partnerships with local authorities and strategic cultural organisations are needed to embed culture into city planning and climate action.

Exeter City Council (ECC) / Devon County Council (DCC):

Joint Provision:

Work with DCC and other partners for a more joined up approach to provision.

Public Art and Climate Action:

Collaborate with ECC and DCC (Culture, Climate & Place teams) to create public artworks and participatory projects that help residents engage with Net Zero plans and solar development.

Improved Governance:

Cultural Sector to seek improved partnership working and better links with the Council for regular strategy meetings and clear leadership.

3: MAJOR CULTURAL AND HERITAGE VENUES

Organisations are keen to utilise and activate the city's key historical and arts venues for joint programming and exhibitions.

RAMM (Royal Albert Memorial Museum):

Co-Creation:

Co-create cultural events or student-led installations.

General Collaboration:

RAMM to work with education and other cultural partners on join projects, building on existing collaborations.

Arts Collaboration:

Work with RAMM to lead to mutual inspiration and creativity.

Building on Existing Work:

Continue building on existing collaborations.

Exeter Phoenix:

Collaborate on student showcases, joint exhibitions, or discounted workshops for students.

Cultural Partners to expand working with Exeter Phoenix as regional exemplar.

Other Historic Venues:

Organisations are interested in working with the Devon and Exeter Institution, Rougemont Gardens, Exeter Custom House, Tuckers Hall, and Exeter Cathedral.

Specifically, there is interest in working with the Devon and Exeter Institution again on collaborative projects.

4: COMMUNITY, SOCIAL, AND

SURVEY

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES.

CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

These opportunities focus on widening access, sharing skills, and leveraging community expertise. It was suggested that the Cultural Sector could collaborate with partners across 7 key areas:

Community Groups and Charities:

Work with local charities supporting special needs and music.

Collaborate with InFocus (a couple of choir members are supported by this organisation).

Collaboration with existing partners like Pelican Project & Creative Connections.

Work with allotment associations and potentially get a soil scientist to join an advisory panel.

Work with organisations to support groups or artists.

Heritage Partnerships:

Support the development of the Exeter Heritage Partnership to support the sector and programmes such as the Exeter Heritage Champions Project which is an NHLF Funded programme.

Establish an education service/partnership between Merchants House (St Nicolas Priory), Merchants Guild (Tuckers Hall), Customs House, and Guildhall.

Work with other heritage organisations to provide activities and learning opportunities related to the heritage sector.

Libraries and Archives:

Work with Libraries Unlimited.

Work with the Devon Record Office.

Dance Organisations:

Collaborate with South West Dance Hub, Royal Ballet Associate Scheme, Chhaya Youth, Pugmill Dance Company, and other freelance dance artists/community leaders to share a building that advocates dance.

Business, Media, and Industrial Collaboration:

Opportunities exist to integrate the creative sector with local commerce and technology.

Creative Business and Tech:

Collaborate with Creative Tech Companies on workshops for digital art, animation, or creative coding.

Explore immersive digital technology as well as the FabLab to trial combining 3D printing and laser cutting with traditional methods.

Pursue industrial collaborations and corporate sponsorship.

Skills Outsourcing:

SURVEY

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES.

Develop connections for skills outsource/in sourcing via freelance and third-party businesses.

Retail and Media:

Work with Independent Cafés and Galleries for student art exhibitions or pop-up performances.

Work with Local Festivals (for student involvement in planning, performing, or volunteering).

Work with Local Media Outlets (Radio Exe, Devon Live) to promote creative work and events.

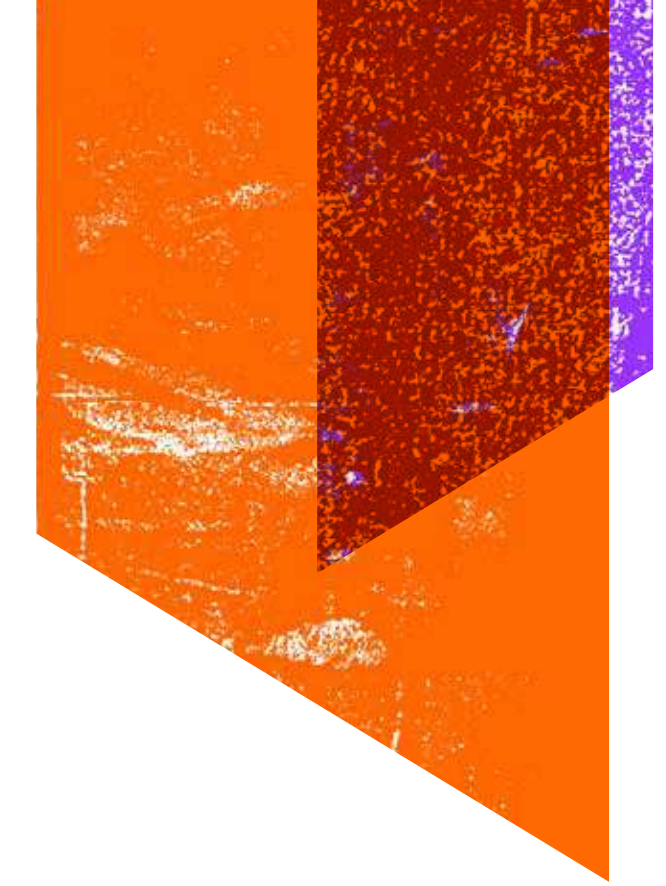
Seek improved partnership working with local businesses and Shopping Centres.

Regional and County-wide:

Explore opportunities with organisations in the rural hinterland, Devon wide.

Pursue Creative cluster collaborations across Devon.

Formalise national and international connections.



SURVEY

IDEAL PRIORITIES.

If resources were unlimited, organisations in Exeter would prioritise transformative infrastructure projects, establish national leadership in specialised creative fields, and massively scale up talent development and community outreach, ultimately aiming to position Exeter as a major national creative hub.

Based on the ambitious plans previously detailed in our conversation history, the projects and directions are grouped thematically below:

1: CAPITAL PROJECTS AND NEW CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

These directions address the critical lack of suitable, specialised physical space by building new assets or radically overhauling existing heritage sites.

Major Performance and Exhibition Venues:

Build an amazing concert hall and arts centre in Exeter.

Build a City Centre Theatre capable of attracting major national touring shows and West End productions.

Acquire a bigger venue in the city, potentially transforming a large empty building (such as the old Debenhams site) into a central theatre or gallery complex.

Specialist Creative Hubs:

Establish a community dance building that permanently houses dance artists and resident youth dance programmes, advocating for dance alongside other art forms.

Creative individuals would secure their own permanent gallery space in the city with studio spaces.

Establish a network of 4+ physical science centres across the South West, with one being in Exeter, focusing on education around global issues.

Build a dedicated music studio and secure a permanent base for rehearsals and storage.

Establish a physical 'heritage hub' in the heart of Exeter, including a tourist information centre, specialised working space for school groups, and an exhibition room for permanent displays on Exeter's history.

Renovation and Expansion of Existing Assets:

Organisations would pursue comprehensive conservation of important wall paintings, major roof repairs, adaptation of the aspects of their buildings for commercial income, and development of access facilities.

Other organisations would move to bigger venues to house its operations.

A local radio station would pursue the provision of a third, training-based studio to meet the demand from potential presenters and volunteers.

SURVEY

IDEAL PRIORITIES.

2: CREATIVE CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT AND RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

Organisations focused on climate action would secure Exeter's status as a leading city for blending creativity with environmental innovation and policy.

Creative Climate Lab:

Establish a "Creative Climate Lab" in Exeter, acting as a dedicated innovation space and regional hub for climate-focused cultural R&D.

City-wide Solar Art Network:

Create a City-wide Programme of Interactive Solar Artworks co-designed with communities that generate renewable energy and communicate local climate narratives.

Ecological Governance:

Create a council-adjacent position to support and advise on ways local growers can manage urban land (allotment gardens) to meet environmental, biodiversity, and human health goals.

Sustainable Printmaking:

Engage with the University of Exeter on research projects to develop improved environmentally sustainable printmaking methods.

3: TALENT PIPELINE AND PRODUCTION SCALE-UP

These directions emphasise creating self-sustaining career pathways, high-quality local productions, and national/international reach.

Major Production and Touring:

The priority for the Theatre sector would be funding productions made in Devon, premiering in Exeter, and going on tour, including commercial runs in the West End, thereby creating a sustainable pipeline of creativity opportunities.

Dance companies would create regular full-length works and put together a strong touring package.

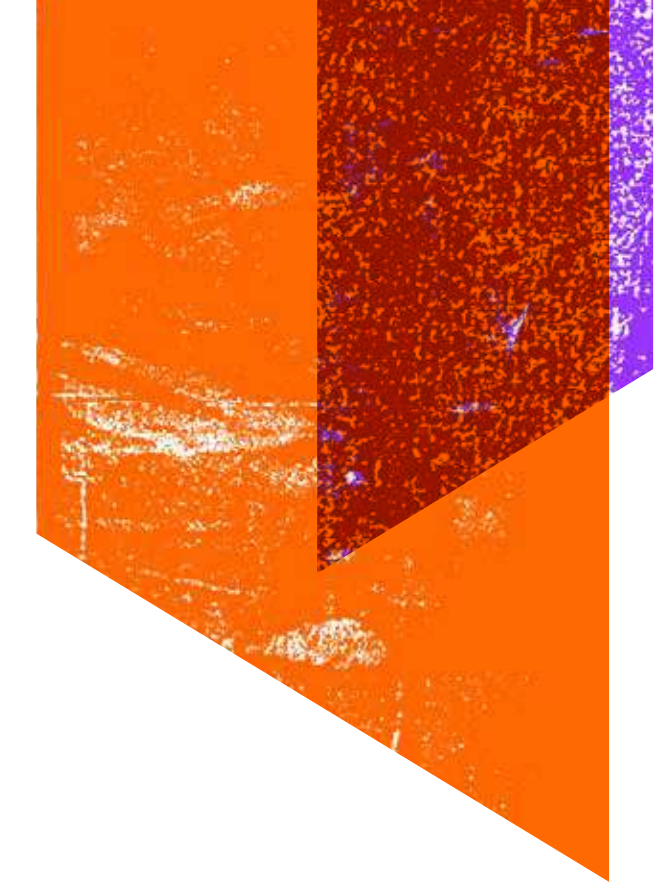
Specialist Talent Development:

An organisation focusing on disabilities would create a large-scale commercial musical with an integrated cast (performers with and without learning disabilities), creating a blueprint for integrated productions and franchising the associated choir.

Visual arts organisations would focus on succession and develop a Youth Bursary programme to support young printmakers.

R&D and Immersive Work:

Creative organisations would pursue regular immersive theatre and film productions, pop-up film screenings with live music, and augmented reality experiences.



SURVEY

IDEAL PRIORITIES.

Film festivals and operations would like to expand to offer more screenings, talks, and workshops with highly regarded experts.

4: COMMUNITY ACCESS, WELLBEING, AND EDUCATION

Projects in this area aim to break down financial and social barriers, making culture an integrated part of community life, health, and civic engagement.

Free Education and Resources:

Make music education, equipment, mentorship, and resources free at the point of use, like the NHS.

Expanded Outreach and Workshops:

Some visual art organisations would roll out many more workshops in schools and communities across Devon (working with upwards of 1,400 people per year) and take on staff to manage this.

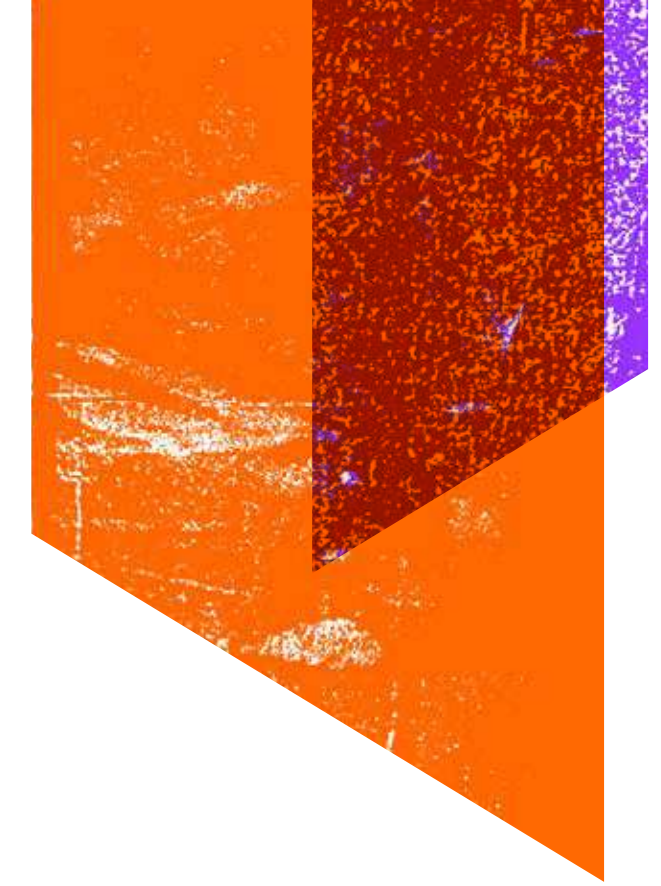
Targeted Wellbeing Programmes:

Run more projects promoting mental health wellbeing by bringing people together, sharing resources and skills, and actively mapping the city to find gaps in provision for care leavers, single parents, and specific health concerns.

Run a regular programme of social/creative activities for men (eg: comedy and pottery courses) and a touring programme of shows about men's experiences of their mental health.

City Activation and Civic Pride:

Going "bigger and better" on Christmas and Summer activities, including innovative light projections over the winter period reflecting Exeter's stories, increasing investment in Street Art, and developing cultural activities based on initiatives like June Boom.



SURVEY

HELPFUL EXEMPLARS FROM ELSEWHERE.

Organisations in Exeter have identified numerous examples of successful practices, programmes, and venues from across the UK and internationally that they wish to adapt and implement to address the city's challenges regarding space, public engagement, collaboration, and talent development.

These examples of good practice can be grouped into the following themes:

1: REVITALISING SPACES AND PROVIDING CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

Projects elsewhere demonstrate successful models for activating empty or redundant buildings and providing dedicated workspace for artists.

Temporary Space Activation:

Implementing models similar to Hypha Studios, which utilises empty buildings for temporary exhibitions across different UK cities, would be a great way to make exciting interventions in empty high street shops and provide artists with space.

Creative Hubs and Quarters:

Emphasising the accepted 'Creative Quarter' around the RAMM, similar to Ocean Studios in Plymouth.

Utilising Redundant Spaces:

The Mount Without in Bristol, a lovely venue housed in a redundant space, shows how buildings can be utilised for dance, weddings, and community events.

Dedicated Dance Infrastructure:

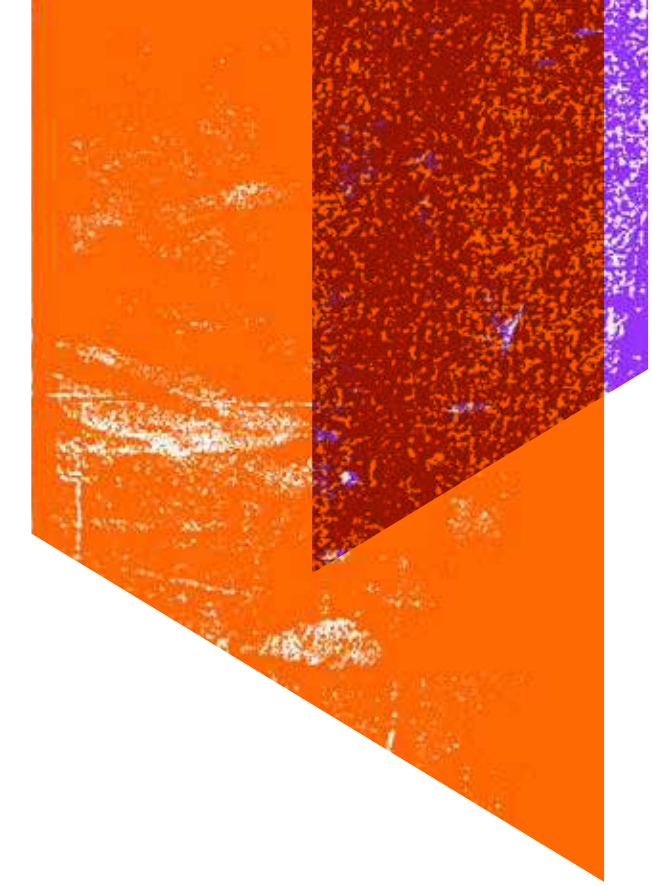
Implementing a model like the Almada Festival in Lisbon, which established a building dedicated to dance that supports city artists and promotes a cultural 'hotspot', is seen as a goal for supporting dance artists in Exeter.

Flexible Retail/Creative Space:

Adopting a set-up like the Bristol Boxpark, which provides flexible creative or commercial spaces, is recommended.

Integrated Gallery/Workshops:

Developing Print workshops with combined gallery and shop areas is a model already successfully implemented by print studios across the UK.



SURVEY

HELPFUL EXEMPLARS FROM ELSEWHERE.

2: PUBLIC ART, FESTIVALS, AND PLACE-MAKING

Examples focus on using large-scale, coordinated public events and urban design to enhance the city's profile and pedestrian experience.

Immersive and Experiential Attractions: Implementing Punchdrunk style immersive shows and experiences is sought. The Wake The Tiger project in Bristol is noted as a successful model for experiential attractions.

Major Light Festivals:

Implementing a city-wide festival similar to Bristol's Light Festival or the Colour and Light projections transforming York Minster would enhance the city's profile and public realm.

Coordinated Festivals:

Expanding and building on Exeter's existing June Boom programme, which was inspired by Birmingham's 100 days of culture, would allow for greater inclusion of arts.

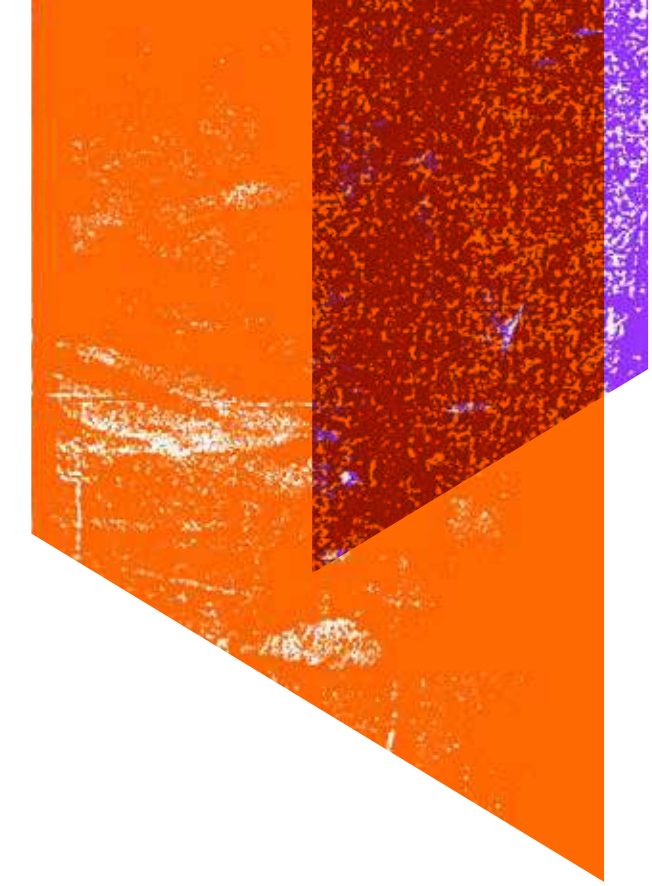
The Adelaide Fringe Festival in Australia is also noted as a fantastic program that supports dance artists in the city and region.

Public Art Commissioning:

Implementing the practices of a strong public art commissioning agency, like the one in Bristol, which provides specialist arts and curator insights, is recommended. Organisations also wish to revisit the public art commissioning consultation work undertaken by the Spacex Gallery team around 2016.

Community-Led Placemaking:

Adopting ideas from places like Totnes (around community decision-making and energy projects) and practices seen in the Netherlands and France where local authorities empower communities to make changes like de-paving, running festivals, or local food systems are desirable.



HELPFUL EXEMPLARS FROM ELSEWHERE.

3: INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION AND SECTOR SUPPORT

These practices focus on bridging gaps between organisations, sectors, and the wider community to create a more efficient and supportive environment.

Creative Cluster Development:

The formation of an Exeter/Greater Exeter creative cluster, modelled after the successful initiation in Torbay via Torbay Council, would support sector growth through connection, collaboration, and celebration.

Integrated Library/Archive Services:

Implementing the collaborative structure seen in Barnstaple, where the library and record office work closely with the North Devon Athenaeum (supported by local councils), or in Hull, where the University and City staff desks together, is seen as a way to improve access and resources.

Shared Project Management/Administration: Creating a “one stop place” for small projects and organisations to promote and access shared administrative support would help avoid duplication, reduce red tape, insurance costs and paperwork, preventing collapse within the first 6–12 months.

Connecting Skills to Opportunities:

Creating a streamlined way of connecting creative practitioners and arts organisations (like Double Elephant) to funded organisations (like local authorities, universities) that need their community engagement expertise is desired.

4: TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION MODELS

Examples demonstrate how other cities successfully attract and retain talent by supporting ambitious production and offering residential opportunities.

Ambitious, Integrated Theatre:

Taking inspiration from the business model of Hijinx Theatre and aspiring to make big, ambitious, creative shows like ‘Perfect Show for Rachel’ by Zoo Co, demonstrates a desired focus on high-quality, impactful productions.

Residencies and Community Engagement: The CMR project space model, which offers a residency space for artists to test and present ideas, requiring them to undertake a community engagement project during their stay, would attract artists to work with Exeter communities.

Long-Term Residencies:

Securing free or subsidised access to empty or underused spaces (shops, warehouses) for artists to be in residence over a longer period is necessary, as short-term bookings are not financially viable.

SURVEY

HELPFUL EXEMPLARS FROM ELSEWHERE.

Innovative Heritage Models:

The V&A East project demonstrated how cultural heritage organisations can rethink their model to pioneer new ways to display collections, experiment with architecture, and engage audiences.

5: SPECIFIC PROGRAMS AND COMMUNICATION

Creative Climate Labs:

Adopting the interdisciplinary studio models of Superflux's climate labs, the Royal College of Art's environmental design studios, or Olafur Eliasson's workshops would allow Exeter to establish a Creative Climate Lab combining artists, engineers, scientists, and community groups to prototype interactive solar artworks and public engagement tools.

Coordinated Communications:

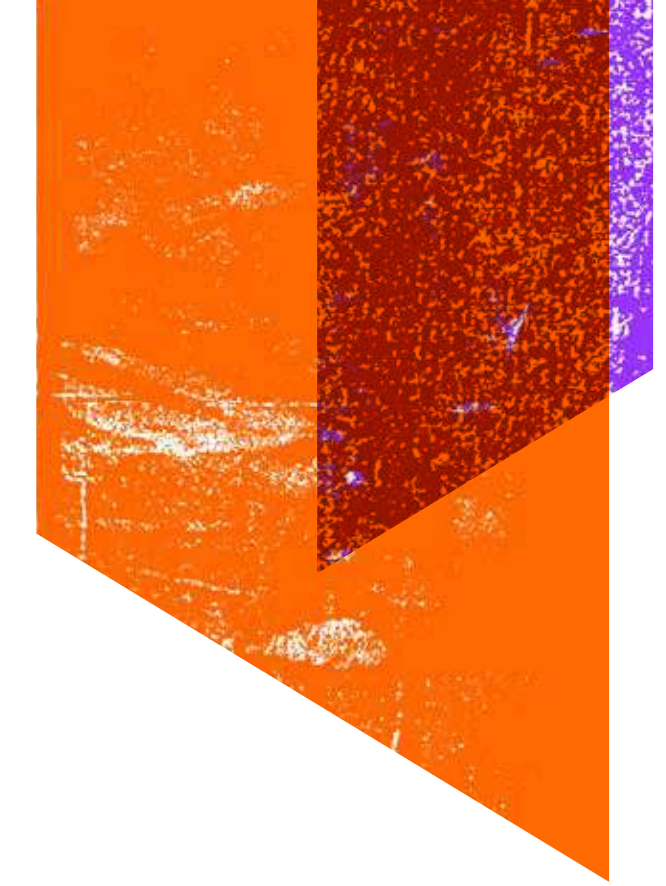
Implementing coordinated communications across the City Council and harnessing Exeter's DMO Visit Exeter, to effectively communicate and amplify different activities.

Literary/Civic Initiatives:

The successful local project Spork, which elects a 'Bard of Exeter' each year to write and perform poetry, is highlighted as a lovely idea worth amplifying.

Heritage Festivals:

Developing an Exeter History Festival to rival the scale of the Chalke History Festival is desired.



SURVEY

LOCAL SUCCESSES TO LEARN FROM.

Cultural organisations in Exeter have compiled key learnings across successful projects, focusing heavily on the critical importance of genuine community involvement, the necessity of institutional collaboration, and effective organisational management strategies.

1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CO-DESIGN SUCCESS

The most profound learning shared relates to the depth and quality of community involvement, particularly when tackling complex issues like climate change.

Co-design creates ownership, but requires resources:

The most successful projects (such as Creative Arc, The Mossy Carpet and Sunlight Gathering) have been those where communities have shaped the artwork from the outset, which builds pride, agency, and emotional connection. However, co-design requires genuine resourcing. This process takes time and needs facilitation, careful planning, and budget for

people's involvement. When resourced well, the results are extraordinary; but when rushed, it can feel tokenistic.

Creative Climate Engagement should be joyful and accessible:

Creative climate engagement is most effective when it is joyful and accessible. Organisers have found that playful, hands-on creativity helps people approach climate issues with curiosity.

Local focus drives success:

Writing original work about local interests has proved very successful. Examples include shows about the history of the Exeter Ship Canal, Topsham in WW1, and the history of theatre in Exeter. These local projects also create opportunities for collaboration with other groups, such as the Topsham Museum and the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal.

2: INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION AND SUPPORT

Organisations stressed the necessity of better institutional relationships and the shared benefits of such support.

Need for institutional support:

Organisations often carry out projects alone or with few partners, despite the fact that a much greater reach could be achieved with wider partnership working and cross-sector and organisational support.

Shared Resources:

Sharing project resources might help underpin overheads.

Leveraging National Ties:

It is important to engage with relevant national organisations to raise profile and support funding.

SURVEY

LOCAL SUCCESSES TO LEARN FROM.

Existing Successful Collaboration Models: Organisations have successfully exhibited student work in a number of venues across the city and produced artwork for schools and the hospital, often collaborating with institutions like the RAMM and co-hosting talks at the Phoenix. They have also designed branding for local charities and participated in innovations like the gorilla sculpture trail.

3: ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCE GENERATION

Learnings address internal governance, financial resilience, and effective data collection.

Integrated Production Toolkits:

A toolkit of learnings for producing an integrated & inclusive production has been created and is available for sharing.

Volunteer Structure Viability:

An organisation noted that their volunteer structure is an interesting way of running an organisation.

Capital Project Evaluation:

Organisations completing major capital and strategic development projects are willing to share the evaluation reports with those responsible for the Cultural Strategic document and wider networks.

Historical Funding Models:

Past success was found when the Manpower Services Commission and Heritage Lottery Fund both provided funding which employed staff to undertake massive cataloguing and indexing projects for the Westcountry Studies Library. Similarly, funding has been successfully secured to digitise and conserve negatives of historical photograph collections.

4: TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND AUDIENCE INSIGHT

Learnings highlight successful models for nurturing young talent and gathering community intelligence.

Nurturing Young Talent:

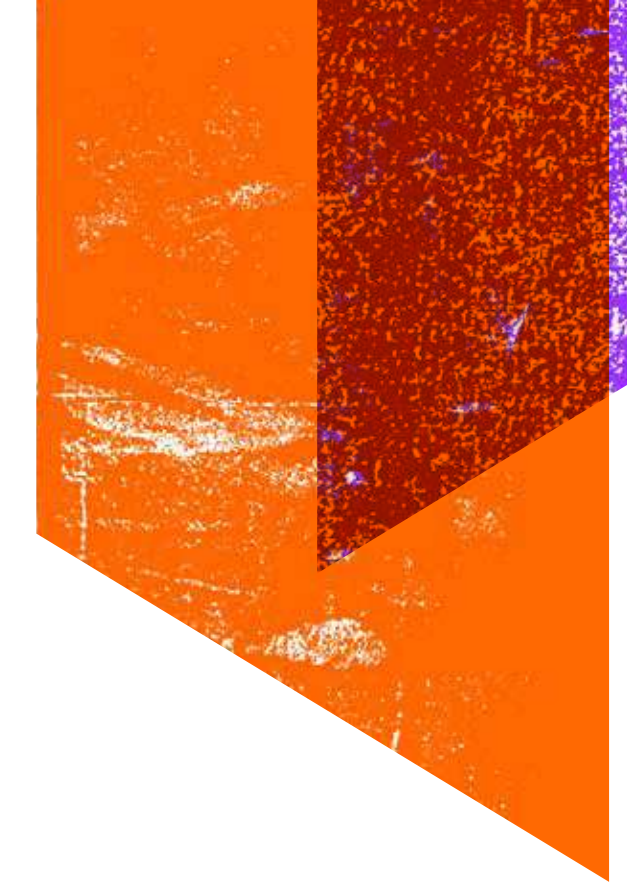
Schemes like the Swindon Dance CAT (Exeter) and Street Dance Programmes are considered “fantastic” as they support and nurture young people between the ages of 11 and 19 years to realise their potential for a dance career, particularly those without the financial means to pursue it. The alumni of this scheme are now working in dance and contributing to the next generation of Exeter and South West based artists.

Targeted Dance Support:

The Devon Youth Boys Dance Company actively supported young men to dance and was extremely successful until support was lost. This success indicates a clear need for re-established funding for this demographic.

Gathering Resident Feedback:

Outputs and learnings from events like the ‘Our Positive Future event’ (on what visitors wanted Exeter to look like in 2060) and feedback gathered on urban liveability and transport are valuable knowledge that should be shared with other local organisations.



MEETINGS

A story of us today.

For our one-to-one interviews, our time with students and our live event discussion, we wanted to hear the voices of creative practitioners. We spoke to people representing a core sample through the different layers of local cultural life.

That creative life of Exeter is expressed in the work of individual artists, creator economy professionals, creative industry businesses, communities of like-minded collectives, curators of cultural landmarks, educators of creative skills and champions of the local scene, like venue managers and promoters.



MEETINGS

INCLUSIVITY AND INVESTMENT.

What is the perspective on the cultural life of Exeter in our different pools of practicing creatives – and are there themes spilling across them all? In our direct conversations we began to hear perspectives that can be distilled into a key set of broad issues that everyone is dealing with.

One thing is immediately clear – independent local artists are peddling hard just to stand still. Many of them say they'd love to feel part of something with the collective confidence to swing big, but the energy of collaboration here currently isn't so bold. Echoed by many is the idea that artists lack any kind of infrastructural support to allow them to thrive. And that's not one thing – it's hard challenges like investment and direct support. But it's also soft things, tacit support and visibility.

If there is an ambition to become a much more active place, somewhere to live more healthily, people increasingly understand the need to connect more consciously with nature, with environment, with being outdoors. Creatively too, what's needed is something to **"feed the soil"** of the city.

We need a much more abundant cultural ecosystem.

This echoes a futures perspective; it's not enough to face the science of climate change, we have to change the cultural climate that's been driving it – and that starts at home. If Exeter grew a reputation for nourishing early artists – young people and career changers alike – it could grow the confidence to imagine life beyond austerity, political division, fears and systemic restrictions, because it would be a place full of people practicing how to change narratives and imagine alternatives. These are the futures skills to bring alive and so attract new, more resilient economics.

But this doesn't happen from a spreadsheet. It comes from doing the work – and the essential work of creativity sometimes looks like mere play. It is experimenting without constraints, even when you know there are some.

Exeter College students readily identify with arts and culture being about wellbeing and **"feeling part of something"**. They often focus on inclusivity in their individual creative experiences, and how creativity can foster this anywhere.

The challenge is clearly connections. Around the work of the NPOs and many other engines of creative and heritage activity and non-NPOs, there is also the cultural diversity of the student body and a host of academic knowledge networks. Creative Industry businesses have tended to work in isolation from all these groups but could connect them to wider business, including a growing tech sector and a growing progressive environmental sector. And this is all before we address how to support the independent creator economy in the city and open more pathways for grass-roots arts development.

But if we want to bring together a complete Exeter vision across very different sectors, we will need to start developing some basic shared language. If culture is to be that shared language, current culture leaders need to be sure they have learned some of each other's vocabulary and ambitions.

THEMES

In summary, we heard seven themes.

We can summarise the challenges everyone is facing and feeling under seven themes:

1: There is a an identified need for great leadership, ambition and connected thinking across the cultural sector.

2: We don't shout about the city with pride and a clear message.

3: We are lacking ways in to developing creative work and careers.

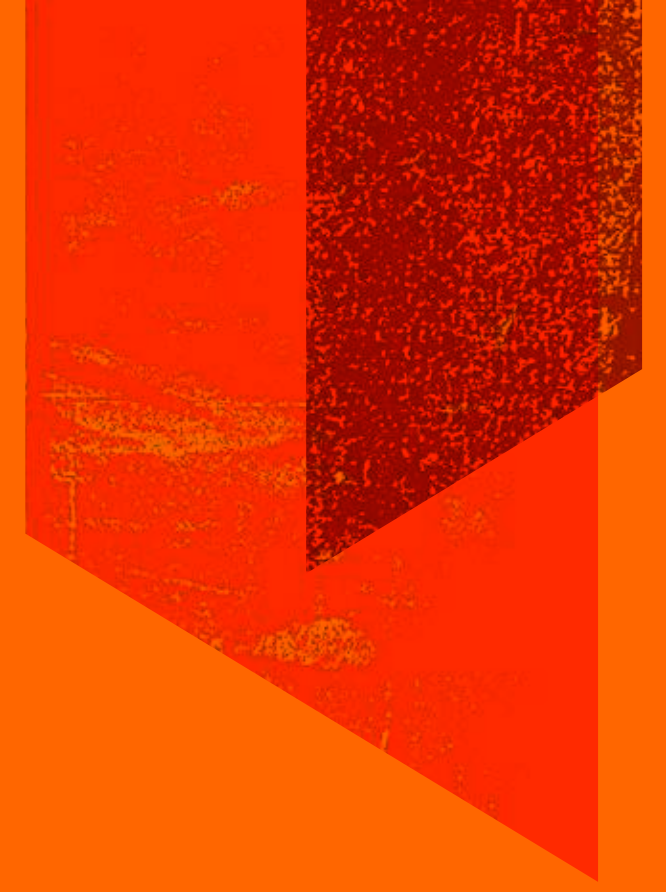
4: Many feel culture is not for them and don't appreciate how linked it is to wellbeing.

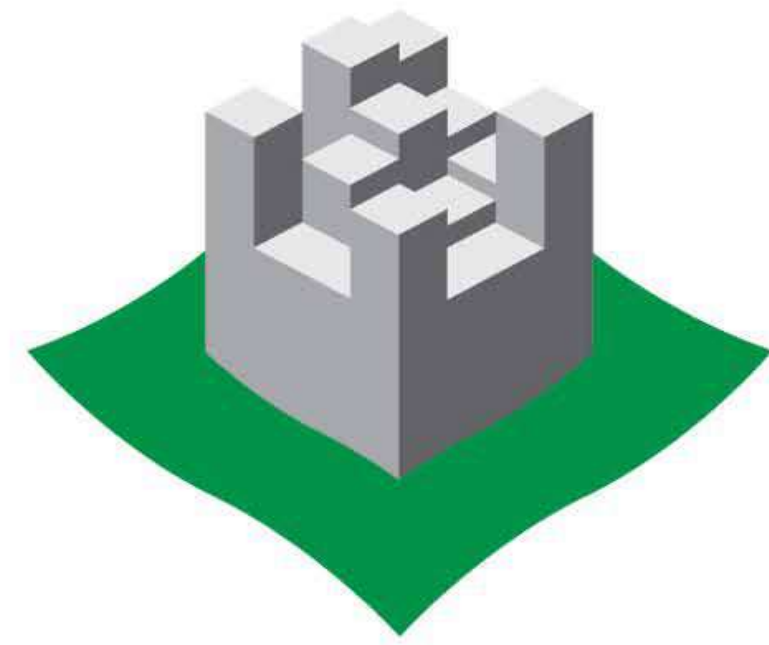
5: People go elsewhere to find big shows, exhibitions and experiences.

6: We don't take risks and we're not connecting our assets and institutions.

7: We behave as if we're a second choice to other bigger places regionally.

**“Culture is the loss leader
that pays dividends.”**





Exeter
City Council

INPLACE
CONSULTING