



Reading, Place of Culture

Year 2 Evaluation Summary

Reading, Place of Culture, one of 16 Great Places Schemes funded by Arts Council England, Historic England and the Heritage Lottery is jointly led and delivered by Reading Borough Council, Reading UK CIC and Reading University and runs from 2018-2020.

It aims to make Reading a better place to live, work and visit, with a culture of collaboration across sectors – where caring for and engaging people is achieved in partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Through this it will support Reading to enhance its cultural offer, drive economic growth, and improve the quality of life for people in Reading.

Strands of Work

- 1. Reading Thames Festival** is an annual festival which celebrates Reading's unique identity, showcases new work and creates exhilarating audience experiences, revealing Reading as a place of 'parks and rivers' and 'culture and diversity'.
- 2. The Cultural Commissioning Programme** empowers local organisations to develop cross-sector partnerships to engage marginalised or hard-to-reach communities in arts, culture and/or heritage programmes. Year 2 saw the culmination of three commissions and the funding of three new ones. Other activity included pilot activity around ageing and young people and a new Ageing Well Partnership.
- 3. The Research Programme** is co-produced by the University of Reading and the Whitley Researchers. It aims to develop best practice for borough-wide engagement, geared towards the needs of Reading's diverse communities.
- 4. Culture and Business Engagement** aims to further develop the relationships between the business community and cultural organisations in order to support key economic development objectives for 'good growth' and delivery of the long-term 2050 Vision for the town.

Outcomes

Five key outcome areas have been identified across the four strands:

1. Developing strategic partnerships

At the heart of Reading, Place of Culture is the desire to fundamentally shift how arts, culture and heritage (ACH) are embedded into the town at a strategic level. Reading, Place of Culture emphasises the importance of ensuring strategic partnerships recognise the value of culture, and are influenced by ACH organisations, and, more importantly, by the key beneficiaries of the work.

Reading, Place of Culture has:

- Begun to develop new partnerships which embed culture.
- Supported projects which enhance local voice in commissioning.

- Further to go to fully embed culture into the key strategic partnerships in Reading as a whole.

2. Increasing Arts, Culture and Heritage Engagement

Offering more arts, culture and heritage to more people in Reading will provide more enjoyment and improve wellbeing for local communities, as well as generate longer term sustainability for the sector.

Reading, Place of Culture has:

- Produced high quality work which is appreciated by audiences.
- Taken steps to understand and overcome the barriers to engagement among the communities who currently engage least in culture.
- A need to carry out further work to broaden the reach of Reading Thames Festival beyond a local already-engaged audience.

3. Changing Pride and Perceptions of Reading's offer

Reading, Place of Culture aimed to change perceptions of Reading in three main ways:

- Increasing belonging, sense of community and pride in Reading among the people of Reading – to improve confidence and sense of self.
- Improving and increasing external perceptions of Reading – particularly its cultural offer – to show its attraction as a place to live and work.
- Improving knowledge and perception of Reading's cultural offer among the local business community – to enhance engagement, partnerships and funding.

Reading, Place of Culture has:

- Increased belonging and pride among those engaged in the Festival and in Cultural Commissions.
- Gained greater understanding of business perceptions of the cultural offer.
- Started to understand the barriers to changing perceptions among businesses and visitors.
- Considerable work to do in 2020 if it wishes to shift perceptions among businesses and potential visitors to Reading.

4. Strengthening the Arts, Culture and Heritage Sector

A stronger arts, culture and heritage sector enhances quality of life and brings economic value to the town. In addition, it can impact on place making and inward investment, and thus the future of Reading as a whole.

Reading, Place of Culture has:

- Increased skills, confidence and knowledge amongst arts, cultural and heritage organisations in commissioning.
- Led to the formation, or strengthening, of key cross-sector partnerships which are already delivering work.
- Developed ACH sector organisations' networks within the sector and with the voluntary and community sector.
- A continued need to develop skills, confidence and knowledge – particularly around engaging with business, evaluation and evidence development.

5. Creating evidence, tools and models to show the value of culture

Reading, Place of Culture recognised the need for the sector to be able to explain its worth in language that was understood by a range of funders and use evidence that would be seen as robust and meaningful.

Reading, Place of Culture has:

- Supported further development of the Whitley Researcher practice – offering high quality community-embedded research into the ACH sectors.
- Developed understanding among ACH organisations of the need to evidence their value beyond their usual networks.
- Developed understanding among non-culture organisations, particularly health staff, of the value of culture in delivering outcomes.
- Begun to develop the evidence base for the value of culture to Reading as a whole.
- Further work to do in embedding skills and understanding around evidencing impact within the sector.
- More work required in sharing the learning and ensuring the legacy use of the work beyond the project partners.

Conclusions

Reading, Place of Culture has greatest potential as a catalyst, sitting alongside a myriad of other local initiatives, building on previous work, while promoting a longer-term vision for change. At the end of year 2 of the Great Places Funding, Reading, Place of Culture is at a crucial point in terms of embedding learning so far and ensuring legacy. Positive outcomes include:

- **New, active partnerships formed** – for example, Ageing Well Partnership.
- **Real opportunities offered for an authentic community voice to feed into decision making** in Reading – through the work of the Whitley Researchers and from new projects, such as the Cultural Champions.
- **Positive experiences of audiences and participants** in Reading Thames Festival and the work of the Cultural Commissions in terms of enjoyment, pride in Reading, and increased sense of belonging and wellbeing.
- **Increased understanding of the barriers to engagement** of particularly hard to reach groups.
- **Stronger evidence and increased ability to understand the community** through the work of the Cultural Commissions and particularly the Whitley Researchers.
- **Strong partnerships** between arts, culture and heritage organisations, and those from voluntary, community, health and social care sectors. These deliver projects that bring significant life enhancement to participants, develop shared understanding of how different sectors work, and show the social impact that adding creativity can bring.

There is a lot of further work to be done, particularly around:

- **Embedding culture at a strategic level**, an essential step if Reading, Place of Culture is to achieve legacy from its three years.
- **Reaching the business community and potential visitors to Reading**, through more a more targeted approach to design and marketing of the Festival, and specific activities with the business sector.

- **Sharing and ensuring the legacy of the learning from the project**, through dissemination at all levels, but particularly with a focus on strategic partners and sectors beyond arts, culture and heritage.

Recommendations

We recommend that Reading, Place of Culture partners work together to:

1. **Ensure that culture is embedded in strategic partnerships.** This should sit with senior leaders from the partner organisations and the ACH sector.
2. **Develop a clear set of audience targets and outcomes for the Reading Thames Festival** – then use this to inform all marketing strategy and planning.
3. **Trial and evaluate specific approaches to business engagement** which fit with other elements of the Reading, Place of Culture offer.
4. **Continue to develop the level of evidence collection and dissemination of learning from the Cultural Commissions.**
5. **Carry out succession planning for key elements of the work – the Cultural Commissions, the Festival and the Whitley Researchers** – to ensure they continue beyond 2021.
6. **Share learning across sectors, maximise value and guarantee legacy** by ensuring dissemination is sufficiently supported with resources and strategic targeting of key audiences. The planned symposium at the end of 2020 is key to this.