



HALTON CULTURAL REPORT

The Cultural Report for Halton Borough



Halton Cultural Report: The Cultural Report for Halton Borough

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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce this Cultural Report for Halton Borough Council that will provide a framework for all our cultural services over the next five years. This Report informs the Vision document and will shape the Action Plan which accompanies the Vision. This Report was produced through a collaborative process between Halton Borough Council, Art Reach and representatives of Cultivate and Halton Heritage Partnership (HHP) forums.

We know that culture and heritage is important to our residents and visitors and these documents will enable the Council to work productively with cultural partners, funders and communities to deliver ambitious and innovative, participatory activity with a focus on the past, present and future of the Borough.

As we saw during Halton's Borough of Culture year in 2021 there is a lot to celebrate in Halton. We have wonderful cultural assets including Norton Priory Museum and Gardens, which has just become Halton's first National Portfolio Organisation, Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum and The Brindley, as well as our waterways, green spaces, and a growing creative industry sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for cultural engagement demonstrating how, in challenging times, culture and creativity can be a source of inspiration and aspiration, resilience and positivity.

As well as making the most of our core assets the period ahead has lots of exciting new opportunities. The next couple of years will see extensive Town Fund investment in Runcorn, including an extension to The Brindley which will incorporate a library, creation of new green spaces and development for local creative industries and organisations. In 2024 Halton will celebrate its 50th anniversary, and, in 2026, we also have our next term as the Liverpool City Region Borough of Culture.

I look forward to seeing our cultural activity evolve, and to the delivery of a diverse portfolio of cultural activity that engages residents and visitors, and continues to celebrate Halton!

Cllr Paul Nolan

Executive Board Member - Employment, Learning & Skills, Community & Culture

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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Report and Vision have been developed by Art Reach, Halton Borough Council and representatives of Halton’s cultural and creative sector, supported by Arts Council England.
- 1.2 The Report was developed in 2022, building on the legacy of Halton’s Borough of Culture year, *Celebrate Halton*, in 2021 and aims to develop the cultural sector of the Borough over the next 5 years, bringing it to the next Borough of Culture for Halton in 2026 and thus laying the foundations for a review of the Strategy, and creation of a new Vision and Action Plan over the following 5-10 years.
- 1.3 The consultation process aimed to identify the strengths within Halton’s cultural sector, the opportunities and potential for what already exists, and the areas that are lacking or need support. The Report and Vision aim to guide the direction of culture for all of Halton, for its people and its cultural organisations.
- 1.4 Halton has a wealth of self-starting creative organisations, established cultural networks and assets. With a strong heritage of industrial science and canal heritage, Halton also has a proud sense of heritage and community to build on.
- 1.5 The two main towns of Runcorn and Widnes exist either side of the River Mersey, linked by iconic bridges. This brings its challenges as well as its unique identity formed by the river, as both a uniting and dividing feature of Halton. The Report reflects the sense of strong community, heritage, self-starting creativity and collaborative working that exists in Halton and has huge potential to develop the Cultural Sector in the Borough.
- 1.6 The Report identified four key areas that need to be prioritised over the next 5 years. The Report concludes with a suggested Action Plan to draw together the relevant people and put in place a structure to drive and deliver the priorities identified and which will be developed over 2023.
- 1.7 The four priority areas, which were agreed in an open Sharing Day including 17 local organisations, are:
 1. **Leadership and coordination** – to set up the structures that make the most of existing networks, and ensure that culture becomes embedded across different agendas.
 2. **Communication** – to address the disparity between the enthusiasm found in cultural groups and organisations with the lack of recognition in the general public, to raise awareness of the vibrancy of the cultural sector in Halton, both within and beyond the Borough.
 3. **Diversity of programming** - to achieve diversity of audiences and participants – to raise aspiration in the Borough, make accessible opportunities for all and

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inspire people to achieve greater ambition.

4. **Celebration, inspiration, aspiration** – make use of the existing outdoor spaces and accessible spaces in Halton, and create larger, Borough-wide festivals and celebrations which bring together and build upon initiatives already in place, raising civic pride, developing skills and attracting funding into the Borough.

- 1.8 An overarching priority - that supports these four is Funding – taking advantage of opportunities to draw funding into the Borough. These four priority areas and funding form the basis of the Vision – see section 7.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 What is a Cultural Strategy and why do we need one?

Halton Borough Council has recognised that, in order to build on the Borough of Culture and take advantage of other cultural opportunities available, a Cultural Strategy for the Borough is required.

- 2.1.1 A Strategy can be understood as a set of principles which help guide decisions. The Strategy aims to identify approaches which will contribute towards a set of desired outcomes. The Strategy aims to provide a guide to all organisations and individuals who are engaged with culture in Halton, to ensure a shared vision and direction. This Report informs the Vision and Action Plan which together form the Cultural Strategy.
- 2.1.2 Used effectively, culture and the institutions and services of culture (museums, libraries, festivals and many other elements) can contribute toward the revitalisation of communities, the development of trust, improved health and wellbeing, and the possibility of a more positive future. In order to be effective, a Strategy and Vision is required to provide a sense of direction across the Borough, which can guide all organisations and lead to improved outcomes.*
- 2.1.3 Having a Cultural Strategy and Vision in place, as well as strategic partnerships, increases the likelihood of securing larger amounts of funding, such as from Arts Council England. This is because those councils are seen as demonstrating a strategic commitment to culture and the role it can play for society. The inability to produce a Cultural Strategy for some councils not only results in a lack of a strategic cultural vision for the area, but also a lack of funding, which is already problematic against the challenging funding circumstances that most councils are currently facing.*

2.2 Defining Culture and the scope of the Cultural Strategy

- 2.2.1 Culture should be seen as not only the commissioning of arts and the production of events, but also as a tool that builds upon the heritage of the area; that builds a shared vision and identity for the area that is steeped in history and has a wealth of cultural assets; that builds the local economy particularly in the context of tourism

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and creative industries; that improves the local quality of life and encourages engagement in community activities; and that provides new ways of tackling challenges around health and wellbeing.*

- 2.2.2 For the development of the Halton Cultural Strategy documents, Culture has been defined as **encompassing arts and heritage, with a strong sense of community identity and pride in its abundant open green spaces**. This provides the scope of the Strategy and Vision.

* Source: *Cultural Strategy in a Box*, Local Government Association, February 2020

3.0 Consultation Process

- 3.1 In order to create a strategic Vision that is relevant to the whole Borough, its people, heritage and cultural organisations, Art Reach was commissioned to undertake consultation across the Borough and draw up the Report informed by local people's and wider stakeholders' views.

- 3.2 The following consultation activity was undertaken from February to May 2022 and the full results are available at Appendix 2.

- i. **Inception meeting** with Halton Borough Council staff including Libraries, The Brindley, Visitor Economy

- ii. **Visits and meetings with stakeholders**, including:

- Halton Borough Council elected members
- Hazlehurst Studios
- A Place for Us CIC
- Norton Priory Museum and Gardens
- Halton Primary Arts Network (HPAN)
- Halton Heritage Partnership (HHP)
- Cultivate (Local Cultural Education Partnership)
- Arts Council England (ACE)
- Halton Regeneration Team
- Leisure Service at Halton Borough Council
- VCSFE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector)
- Sci Tech Daresbury

- iii. **Creative workshops**:

- Public workshop at MakeFest in Runcorn Shopping City
- Public workshop at Widnes Market
- Public workshop at Halton Lea Library
- Community workshop at Chi Café
- Community workshop with young people at The Studio

- iv. **Public consultation survey**.

4.0 Context and Opportunities

4.1 About Halton Borough

4.1.1 The Borough of Halton has a population of around 131,000, including Widnes and Runcorn, either side of the River Mersey. Cultural engagement generally in Halton is significantly lower than the national average. At the time of writing, the Audience Agency¹ Profiles in Halton, describing resident population cultural interests, are predominantly:

- **Frontline Families:** (most prevalent and significantly higher in proportion than the regional average): These are frugal, semi-urban renting families, light on arts and culture but heavy on community.
- **Trips & Treats:** Mainstream arts and popular culture fans influenced by children, family and friends.
- **Dormitory Dependables:** People living in suburbs and small towns, interested in heritage activities and mainstream arts.

4.2 Health and Wellbeing

4.2.1 The One Halton Health and Wellbeing Strategy was written for 2017-22 and which is now due for review. However, the Report identifies older people as a key target group, as there is a higher than average proportion of people aged 65+ in the Borough. Culture can play a part in this – there are identified needs for opportunities to tackle loneliness in the older population, which cultural activity can contribute to through social, cultural activity and events.

4.2.2 The One Halton Health and Wellbeing Strategy included an identified priority to improve mental health as there are higher levels than average of poor mental health in the Borough (Statistics are given further on in the Report). Again, culture can play a part in supporting overall mental wellbeing: by celebrating difference/diversity, sense of self and identity, enabling self-expression, therapeutic activity and providing joyful events, supporting connecting with people and creating shared celebrations.

4.2.3 Mental health is a major issue affecting many people and particularly since the Coronavirus (COVID 19) pandemic which has had a profound effect on all aspects of society. Already it is evident that direct and indirect psychological and social effects are widespread, with data revealing that over half (53.1 percent) of British people have reported that it is affecting their well-being (Office of National Statistics, 'Coronavirus and the Social Impacts on Great Britain: 16 April 2020).

4.2.4 Culture can bring people together, especially for moments of regional, national and international significance. It can provide opportunities for engagement, as audience

¹ Audience Agency www.theaudienceagency.org

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members, participants and as volunteers. It can develop new skills and passions and can enhance physical and mental strength and agility. Community organisations, such as those represented through HHP, rely on active and enthusiastic volunteers to deliver meaningful change and opportunities that benefit the wider community.

- 4.2.5 Additionally, there is a growing body of evidence to indicate that with increased feelings of stress and anxiety, many people are now seeking additional support within their communities, and this is where creative, cultural, art and science activities can help. Certainly, participation with museums and art, has the power to enhance health and wellbeing². Below is an example of an intervention designed by Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum that aims to address mental health issues through engagement with science.
- 4.2.6 MindLab is an award-winning mental health programme (originally developed in 2019) and run by Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum, that offers participants a dual frame for mental health issues and well-being – a therapeutic one and a scientific/cultural one. Delivered three times per year over four weeks per theme, in partnership with one of the Borough’s leading mental health provider, Mind Halton, participants take part in group counselling led by a qualified counsellor and then participate in a variety of Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM) and creative activities led by Catalyst staff. The cycle of support consists of three elements – Manage Your Anxiety, Resilience Training, Manage Your Emotions. Capitalizing on the specialist resources within Catalyst, including a lab, classrooms, interactive museum exhibitions, a planetarium and an observatory, the project aims to incorporate science discovery into Mind Halton’s mental health programme for people in the local community. It is also a unique opportunity to explore their wellbeing in a supportive, inspiring, and creative environment.
- 4.2.7 In a report undertaken back in 2017 by Halton Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), NHS Halton CCG states it will celebrate and support the immense value afforded from accessible, high quality cultural experiences to promote individual and community wellbeing through their partnership work and commissioning commitments, recognising that by engaging with cultural activity people are able to develop a strong sense of self, find purpose; achieve a level of self-determination and a sense of control which builds resilience. It is believed that cultural experiences help reduce barriers to learning and engagement; which helps people realise or fulfil a diversity of talents often unrecognised elsewhere and reach their true potential. This then creates building blocks for personal wellbeing whilst simultaneously providing an opportunity to promote economic wellbeing through investment in creativity and innovation.
- 4.2.8 Cultural experiences provide ways to wellbeing where other things fail. There is an important and robust evidence base which demonstrates when cultural know how is combined with medical knowledge we can create new exciting tools to help people

² Konlaan et al. 2000; Chatterjee and Noble 2013; Napier et al. 2014.

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live well and support recovery. Too many of life's problems are seen as only amenable to medical treatment. We all too readily turn people into patients. There are no pills for loneliness and poverty but a rich cultural context can help ensure residents are better connected to each other and feel more able to cope.

4.3 Regeneration

4.3.1 There are several regeneration initiatives which connect with culture in Halton.

4.3.2 In Halton, Runcorn was selected as part of the government's Town Deal fund, a fund announced in 2019 to support 100 towns in England. Reconnecting Runcorn is the Runcorn Town Deal, undertaking 7 projects to regenerate an area of Runcorn, and Halton Borough Council received £23.6 million to improve the economic prospects of the old town. The Town Deal Investment Plan aims to improve long term economic growth with a focus on regeneration, improved transport infrastructure, better digital connectivity, skills and culture.

4.3.3 Relevant projects include:

- i. New enhancement of The Brindley Theatre with a large café/restaurant and outdoor space. The Granville Street Library will be relocated into The Brindley, inspired by the success of Storyhouse in Chester. This is part of a wider stated ambition to create a cultural hub for Runcorn.
- ii. The creation of a Health and Wellbeing Hub: part of its function is to signpost users to community and third sector provision that enhance wellbeing. Cultural activity can be linked to this as part of the offer.
- iii. New housing adjacent to the Theatre area, aiming to a) provide independent housing for older people, and b) attract young professionals who might want to settle and start families. These are both potentially additional visitors and audiences for the cultural offers at The Brindley. The theatre is considering how these potential audiences will affect their programming.
- iv. Creating a new visitor attraction called Unlock Runcorn, based on canal heritage. Located close to The Brindley, this can be seen as part of a "Cultural Hub" area and can be a joined up marketing strategy for the visitor economy.
- v. High Street connectivity, including a new pedestrian link from the High Street to The Brindley.
- vi. Creative and Digital Skills Centre. It also aims to create a link to The Brindley to generate more audiences to local creative and digital arts, refurbishing the Camden Buildings to create a Cultural Hub of creative organisations on the high street, including housing Mako Create, A Place for Us, Hazlehurst Studios and Power in Partnership (a youth development organisation).

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4.3.4 There is also an ambition to create a “Cultural Hub” in Runcorn, with The Brindley as a flagship cultural asset as an anchor – this requires joined up thinking, especially in terms of marketing Runcorn as a destination.

4.4 Use of non-traditional cultural venues

4.4.1 Following the national trend, Runcorn’s Shopping Centre has seen the demise of retail and suffers from many empty shop units. For many centres, effective recovery has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and restrictions. However, as part of Celebrate Halton, a Culture HQ was set up in an empty unit in Runcorn Shopping Centre, which provided an information point for the Borough of Culture, as well as a venue for participatory arts activities and exhibitions. Many local organisations were positive about this initiative and how it helped them connect with the wider community.

4.4.2 Also a national trend, many shopping centres are turning to culture as a way of revitalising the attraction of their town centres and shopping areas. Culture HQ was an excellent pilot and exemplar of how culture could support the vibrancy of the town centre and could be used as a springboard for more partnership work between cultural organisations and Runcorn Shopping Centre.

4.4.3 The base of the local CVS – Halton and St Helens Voluntary and Community – in the former St Marie’s church building in Widnes, is another great example of the use of a non-traditional heritage base for the delivery of a heritage programme.

4.5 Liverpool City Region (LCR)

4.5.1 The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) is a strategic authority with powers over transport, economic development and regeneration. In 2020 the combined authority started a land commission- reported as the first of its kind in England- to re-orientate the city-region's economy around community wealth building (in partnership with Centre for Local Economic Strategies.)

4.5.2 LCRCA is one of the few areas in the country to allocate 1% of its funding agreement to culture.

4.6 LCR Culture and Creativity Strategy and Cultural Compact Business Plan

4.6.1 The LCR Cultural Partnership facilitated the Compact with funding from Arts Council England (ACE), focusing on the role of culture to emerge from the pandemic in March 2021.

4.6.2 The Culture Working Group is delivering a number of LCR-wide initiatives, including Halton:

- Lost Castles (Norton Priory Museum and Gardens)
- Constellations (Victoria Park)

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- Bridge to Bamboo (2022-2023)

4.6.3 In addition, the Growth Platform operates a Visitor Economy Officers Group and Destination Marketing Board; the latter is delivering a SIF-funded destination marketing campaign until March 2025, looking to better promote the assets of the LCR Boroughs to visitors.

4.6.4 The above initiatives are led for Halton Borough Council's Programmes Office Manager and lead for Visitor Economy; and Halton Borough Council's Leader of the Council, is currently LCR Portfolio Lead for Culture, Tourism and Visitor Economy.

4.7 Boroughs of Culture

4.7.1 Initiatives in the Compact include supporting the **Boroughs of Culture**, awarding the status with funding to the different local authorities in the Liverpool Region on a 5 yearly basis. In 2021, Halton had Borough of Culture status and this Report and Vision aims to build on the learning from that year of celebration. Halton's Borough of Culture was named **Celebrate Halton**, and one of its aims was to test the appetite for annual or biannual events.

4.7.2 Three strands developed for Celebrate Halton 2021, following consultation:

- Pioneers & Trailblazers – how people and heritage have a positive impact on Halton today and tomorrow
- Future Makers – investing in talent and offering aspiration around careers in the creative industries
- Creators – supporting and developing artists in Halton

4.7.3 Celebrate Halton built on established partnerships which already have strong networks in the Borough:

- Cultivate, Halton's Local Cultural Educational Partnership (LCEP)
- Halton Heritage Partnership (HHP)
- Halton's Primary Arts Network (HPAN) – 45 of the borough's primary schools

4.7.4 It also formed a Halton Borough of Culture Marketing Group, with key stakeholders, venues and businesses. HBC's Community Development Team connected community groups to artistic organisations across the borough. The Culture HQ retail unit in Runcorn Shopping Centre was set up by the Programmes Office at HBC, and managed by Hazlehurst Studios, as a hub for the Celebrate Halton Festival, and acted as a point for visitors to find out what's going on in the Festival, as well as a space for workshops and exhibitions by local artists.

4.7.5 Halton Borough Council's Programmes Office (formerly External Funding Team) led on the securing of match funding from Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), totalling £307,000.

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4.7.6 The consultation showed that co-ordination was the main element required, a hub or central point of information, as well as ‘connectors’ to connect communities to cultural activity.

4.8 UK Shared Prosperity Fund

4.8.1 The UK Shared Prosperity Fund(UKSPF) succeeds the previous EU Structural Funds. As part of the government’s Levelling Up agenda, this fund will go directly to local places to support their aims. For Halton, the funds will be devolved through the LCR. Halton Borough Council’s element is led by the Programmes Office and is linked in at a high level through the LCR to ensure that Halton’s cultural needs are included in investment plans to use this funding. Halton’s allocation of the total funding is 7.9% and a sum of £188,000 has been allocated over a three year period for arts, culture and heritage.

4.9 Cultural Assets and Forums

4.9.1 Halton is home to many cultural assets which provide a range of arts, heritage and leisure offers, as well as reflecting particular aspect of Halton’s industrial heritage, resulting in science and technology centres that represent this important aspect of Halton’s past, present and future.

4.9.2 Some of Halton’s physical cultural assets include: Norton Priory Museum and Gardens, Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum, The Brindley, The Studio, Riverside College, SciTech Daresbury, Hazlehurst Studios, The Lewis Carroll Centre, Halton Castle, the Childe of Hale and its canals and waterways, parks and nature reserves.

4.10 Network organisations

4.10.1 Cultivate

4.10.2 Cultivate Halton currently operates as Halton’s Local Cultural Education Partnership (LCEP). A consortium of independent organisations with the shared aim of supporting the children and young people of Halton borough to gain a better start in life through cultural education. Each partner has their own set of goals and strategies, but they all have the common interest of helping to make Halton as culturally diverse, engaging and creative as possible.

4.10.3 Cultivate is a strong group and has undertaken some development to identify its strategic aims and has a representation of organisations. The group has recognised that there are more needs for culture that go beyond the remit of an LCEP and the group is, therefore, looking to expand its remit and will act as the key cultural forum going forward to support the delivery of Halton’s Cultural Strategic Vision.

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4.10.4 See full list of current Cultivate members at Appendix 1

4.10.5 Halton Heritage Partnership (HHP)

4.10.6 HHP is a constituted group, and successfully attracted lottery funding to establish the *Exploring Halton's Collections* initiative, a really good example of a collaboration between four heritage sites sharing their collections as part of one project. This has formed a good grounding for further partnership work. HHP also co-ordinates Heritage Open Days, with the support of the Programmes Office (formerly External Funding Team) at HBC, as part of the national annual celebration of Heritage.

4.10.7 See full list of current HHP members at Appendix 1

4.10.8 Halton Primary Arts Network (HPAN)

4.10.9 HPAN is an initiative set up by the headteacher of Beechwood Primary School to encourage engagement in the arts for young children. HPAN organises an annual celebration of children's achievements in the arts, involving 45 schools and aiming to involve more. HPAN are also developing projects to bring arts expertise into schools for the benefit of children's creative education. The initiative is financed by member subscription and they undertake their own fundraising for projects.

4.11 Strategic Opportunities

4.11.1 Arts Council England (ACE)

4.11.2 Although Halton is not currently listed as a Priority Place for ACE, it is one of 109 Levelling Up for Culture places in England and there are still a number of strategic priorities that ACE has that Halton can take advantage of. The Arts Council's **Let's Create Strategy**, published in 2020, has an emphasis on creating artistic opportunity to more people who currently do not have access to quality opportunities, and ensuring inclusivity. As a place that has been recognised as having relatively low cultural engagement, projects in Halton that bring opportunities to participate in, experience or develop skills in the arts within the Borough have the potential to be supported by Arts Council England. Two of the Arts Council's specific Outcomes are also priority areas for Halton: Outcome 1, Creative People, is about ensuring that everybody has access to quality opportunities to participate in the arts, particularly young people but also everybody throughout their lives; Outcome 2, Cultural Communities, emphasises communities and organisations working together to create thriving and vibrant cultural places. Halton already has developing borough-wide cultural networks such as Cultivate, HHP, and the beginnings of culture becoming more embedded in other priority areas, particularly in regeneration.

4.11.3 The formalisation of Cultivate as the overarching cultural forum for Halton, that starts to bring together representation from more areas including health and wellbeing, economic development, parks and outdoor spaces, etc. would generate

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even more potential to support the Arts Council's Outcome 2.

- 4.11.4 Initiatives such as the Borough of Culture and the activity that can be galvanised to work towards the festival will also work better with a cross-community approach, bringing organisations together to make wider impact, as well as being a catalyst to support the development of people's own creative activity in the Borough.
- 4.11.5 The Arts Council's **National Portfolio Organisation(NPO)** scheme supports organisations undertaking significant arts programmes with multi-year funding agreements, providing sustained funding support that can really enhance the impact that organisations can make. As organisations in Halton develop their programmes, they could look towards NPO status and funding as a goal, with the next round for applications likely to be in 2026/7. Norton Priory Museum and Gardens now operates as Halton's first NPO from April 2023; over the next few years other organisations could also build on their strategic work to be better placed to consider this option.
- 4.11.6 **Creative People and Places (CPP)** is a funding programme which focuses on parts of the country where involvement in creativity and culture is significantly below the national average. It is funded by the National Lottery and administered by Arts Council England. Projects are led by consortia and must include community groups and/or grass-roots organisations as well as cultural organisations such as museums, libraries or arts organisations. Other partners might include clubs, housing associations, private-sector organisations or universities.
- 4.11.7 Consortia are only eligible to apply to CPP if they are included in the Arts Council England's list of places of lowest engagement. Halton is currently on that list and a CPP application was submitted; although unsuccessful, there remains an ambition to carry this work forward.
- 4.11.8 **National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF)**
- 4.11.9 NLHF, as the UK's biggest heritage funder, set out their strategy for 2019-2024. The strategy recognises the role of heritage in wellbeing, and increases its focus on wellbeing, capacity-building and innovation. Their two priority areas are landscapes and nature, and community heritage. In addition, all projects funded by NLHF have to meet their inclusion outcome of "a wider range of people will be involved in heritage". All these areas connect with the priorities in Halton for heritage too. Organisations in Halton have already successfully accessed NHLF funding, including to develop the Halton Virtual Museum, and more recently £207,000 for the delivery of Celebrating Halton's Heritage project that was part of Halton's Borough of Culture Programme and a £100,000 development grant for Catalyst to begin to refresh its heritage offer. There is groundwork to build on, as well as scope for the NLHF to further support work in Halton.

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4.12 Liverpool City Region initiatives

4.12.1 As previously stated, the LCR places culture as a significant part of its strategic plans, with the LCR Culture and Creativity Strategy and Cultural Compact Business Plan, as well as the Borough of Culture initiative. Halton has already taken advantage of these initiatives with the Borough of Culture in 2021, and remains connected in to the LCR initiatives, with an eye to the next Borough of Culture for Halton. Halton is also heavily involved in the Bridge to Bamboo and World Reimagined projects.

5.0 SWOT Analysis

5.1 Art Reach worked on developing a SWOT analysis with consultees and some of the key comments they received are detailed below:

5.2 Strengths

- *The legacy of Celebrate Halton – brought organisations together, and tested a Culture Hub in Runcorn Shopping Centre.*
- *Strong, active, motivated and ambitious arts and heritage organisations in the Borough, including Norton Priory Museum and Gardens, Hazlehurst Studios, A Place for Us CIC, The Studio (music), Cultivate (LCEP) and HHP.*
- *Halton Primary Arts Network (HPAN) has been self-organised since 2016 by the Headteacher at Beechwood Primary School, Runcorn, who coordinates an annual showcase at the The Brindley of performances by children from all the primary schools, celebrating their achievements and raising aspirations, and developing excellence, including through holding Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers and projects such as currently working with Royal Opera House. They are also linking in more to local projects including Celebrating Halton's Heritage and with Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum. The Accent Music Education Hub support them.*
- *Halton has an abundance of good quality open green spaces, iconic bridges and riverside walks.*
- *Norton Priory Museum and Gardens has been awarded National Portfolio Organisation status by the Arts Council England.*

5.3 Weaknesses

- *No defined central leadership to date for Culture at local authority officer level. Also Arts development role has vanished from HBC, leaving a gap in service for the Borough along with an expectation for those who remember the arts development role that HBC used to be able to deliver.*
- *Culture HQ longevity not sustained beyond March 2022.*
- *There is currently no 'go to' place for people to find out what's on locally. The Celebrate Halton website (Visit Halton) that offered a central cultural listing has*

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lapsed since the Borough of Culture, and there seems to be no identified structure for who could continue facilitating this.

- *Some of the annual Civic events that used to run no longer continue. Since the annual Halton Show and art exhibition ceased and the Vintage Rally was postponed (due to return in 2024), there is no regular annual festival activity that local creatives can work towards being involved in. This needs to be redesigned and brought back in collaborative, useful, accessible and sustainable fashion, as soon as possible, in order to make best use of the Borough of Culture legacy.*
- *Many of the cultural groups and organisations are in survival mode and unable to see beyond and plan for growth or development.*
- *Many organisations, such as HPAN, feel that local media and press do not represent their activities or showcase the cultural activity in the borough so there is a lack of awareness in the general public of what is being achieved.*

5.4 Opportunities

- *The wider regeneration programme in Runcorn (Camden Buildings, The Brindley etc) presents an opportunity to use cultural activity to promote regeneration, bring the community together, raise the profile and positivity of the area, raise profile of local creative activity growth and ambition e.g. Hazlehurst Studios' plans. There is already talk of this being the Cultural Quarter for the Borough, which could be a brand to promote the ambition and aspiration of this development and the arts organisations involved.*
- *Norton Priory has ambition to be a leading cultural hub for Halton. They see their role as supportive to other cultural organisations in Halton.*
- *Arts Council England recognises that Halton is investing in regeneration and cultural assets. ACE is encouraged by the Camden Buildings development, Norton Priory Museum and Garden's work and the development at The Brindley Theatre. ACE are following developments and it feels like the legacy from the Borough of Culture has sparked an interest and support from ACE for Halton's development. ACE wants to see culture embedded in the Borough Council at leadership level, and wants to see culture a part of statutory services such as Education, Economic Development and Health. ACE would like to see an overarching culture group that meets regularly with Halton BC, to coordinate culture and work on their cultural plan across areas such as Education, Health, Open Spaces, Regeneration, and Visitor Economy, Events, and Libraries. ACE believes that the best role for HBC is to facilitate the cultural sector to be self-sufficient, providing quality venues and facilities but not a delivery role, so that local groups can deliver activity within those facilities. HBC need to better co-ordinate the money that they are spending on regeneration and facilities through a cultural forum, as described elsewhere in the Report.*
- *There is commitment from the Borough Council to introduce a part-time Culture Officer role, which would facilitate and support co-ordination of external organisations and groups who want to undertake cultural activity. This Officer would act as the named contact person to provide a central point of contact for*

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external groups. The role could also provide the facilitation of meetings of a wider cultural forum (Cultivate), which could be chaired by the Council's Cultural Portfolio holder to provide status and link back into the Council for strategic value. The cultural forum would drive the delivery of the Cultural Strategy, which would then be monitored as part of the existing Borough Council reporting structure.

- *The legacy of Culture HQ perhaps provides an opportunity to find spaces for visual arts. The Borough Council could act as a broker (through the proposed facilitator role) between arts groups and places such as Runcorn Shopping Centre. Possibility for brokering commissions for visual artists to brighten up the empty unit shop fronts, and create vibrancy in the shopping centre.*
- *The wealth of green spaces in Halton should be seen as cultural assets and considered for cultural activity. This links with wellbeing and accessibility agendas, being highly accessible spaces and encouraging outdoors social and physical activity.*
- *Visitor Economy remit needs to form part of the cultural vision for Halton and provide a joined up picture of the key cultural assets in the Borough, their roles and how they complement each other to provide a fuller cultural offer. Halton BC is now part of a Single Investment Fund (SIF) funded Destination Marketing Programme which will run over the next three years to promote the LVR assets. Halton BC has commissioned Viv'id to deliver its Destination Marketing programme, including reinvigorating Visit Halton and reconvening Halton's Visitor Economy Network.*
- *Other Runcorn Regeneration projects can also present an opportunity to support cultural development: Runcorn Station skills centre/incubator for new SMEs can support new cultural organisation and creative industries.*
- *Cultivate (the LCEP) is a strong group with enthusiasm and some expertise. They recognise that a leadership role in the Borough is required for Culture, and they may well be a group well-placed to provide this.*
- *LCR's initiatives include the Borough of Culture which comes to Halton every 5 years. Halton's Cultural Strategy and Vision needs to feed through into these major funding bids to ensure that Halton continues to gain from those opportunities.*
- *There is expertise in the Borough for business and organisational development which, if linked up, could support developing cultural organisations.*
- *Halton Borough Council's Community Development Team supports cultural organisations. The Team can support with initial set up of groups and some initial funding.*
- *Halton Borough Council's Programmes Office supports with various cultural initiatives; The Programmes Office Manager sits on the LCR Culture Officers Group and co-ordinates Halton's involvement in LCR cultural initiatives. They are also the lead for Visitor Economy and sits on the Visitor Economy Officers Group and the Destination Marketing Board. The Team led on a number of successful strands of the Borough of Culture programme, namely Culture HQ and*

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Celebrating Halton's Heritage. They sit on Cultivate and HHP forums and are very experienced in this field and are well placed to ensure involvement from relevant forums and organisations in a range of cultural initiatives.

- *A Centralised cultural listings site was active on <https://celebratehalton.co.uk/> during Borough of Culture but has been abandoned since then. However, the website is still there and could be revived and built upon to address the need for a central listings site. It would require someone to approve or coordinate / upload the listings and promote it.*
- *Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum has a new Community Engagement Co-ordinator in post who has enthusiasm and imaginative ideas for new ways to engage. This role will show the museum is a community neighbour and doing more to engage local people in the museum, as they already do well for visitors from further afield. Catalyst has an ambition to develop links between culture, heritage and wellbeing and do more outreach work.*

5.5 Threats

- *The Brindley has to continuously work to an annual break even financial position, which requires balancing with Community Activity. Many organisations feel that The Brindley is a flagship cultural venue and could promote community-led culture more. However, The Brindley's role needs clearer defining in these terms, and how its new development will affect its operation and priorities.*
- *Financial pressures on the Borough Council make them wary of committing to support culture, especially delivery of activity, however there is willingness to support culture in Halton through a facilitation and coordination role and they would consider supporting a specific cultural coordinating role, especially if funds could be brought in from an external funder.*
- *Transport is an issue across the Borough and has been highlighted by several venues as a barrier to their accessibility to people without cars.*

6.0 Vision

- 6.1 A Vision document, *The Crucible of Culture*, now complements this Report, developed by Halton Borough Council and creative and cultural partners.
- 6.2 A crucible is a ceramic or metal container in which metals or other substances may be melted or subjected to very high temperatures. It reflects the chemical industries which the borough is founded upon. It is a place in which elements can interact, leading to the creation of something new.
- 6.3 The Vision's roots can be traced back to the Celebrate Halton initiative, as part of Halton's Borough of Culture celebrations in 2021. The Celebrate Halton initiative provided a place to start for this.
- 6.4 The definition of Culture in this Report places an emphasis on community pride, which is reflected in the heritage and some of the unique assets of Halton, such as

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the iconic bridges and the chemical industry heritage. Today, this industrial heritage has become a focus on science and technology.

- 6.5 There is a sense that grass roots organisations are getting on with it and taking a proactive approach to making things happen, although they acknowledge that they often need support and the benefit of expertise to help them achieve their aims.
- 6.6 Partnership working is certainly strengthening in Halton's cultural sector, and there is strong willingness to do more together to benefit the Borough; this sense of working together and desire for the Council to be an enabling force is reflected in the Vision statement.
- 6.7 The Council's own Vision in its Corporate Plan³ is: "Halton will be a thriving and vibrant Borough where people can learn and develop their skills; enjoy a good quality of life with good health; a high quality, modern urban environment; the opportunity for all to fulfil their potential; greater wealth and equality; sustained by a thriving business community; and safer, stronger and more attractive neighbourhoods."
- 6.8 Cultivate recognised in their vision development that they want Halton to be a place where children and young people have a full and true sense of belonging within their community, where they feel an increased sense of connected community. Therefore, there is a sense of better quality of life and sense of community and connectedness within Halton's overall vision.
- 6.9 The **Vision Statement** for Halton in *The Crucible of Culture* states: ***Our Vision is to establish Halton as a crucible of culture, bringing together elements of excellence to create a new, vibrant cultural economy, improving health and wellbeing for residents and visitors alike, whilst building a strong economic platform and creative opportunities for all.***

7.0 Priority Areas

- 7.1 The following areas for priority were drawn up following the consultation period and through further discussion with Cultivate partners and together provide the basis for a new way of working between Halton Borough Council and those organisations, be they professional, amateur, or volunteer-led, which form the bedrock of the Borough's vibrant cultural sector.
- 7.2 Leadership: Providing a conduit between Halton Borough Council and the Borough's Cultural Sector to maximise opportunities and establish culture as a cross-cutting priority that forms a golden thread through the Council's different agendas.
- 7.3 Communication: To increase awareness of cultural opportunities and activities with both residents of and visitors to Halton. Halton has an active cultural sector, the

³ 2018-2020

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vibrancy and impact of which can only be enhanced through heightened public awareness.

- 7.4 Diversity: To ensure programming speaks to the widest possible audience, providing a voice and a creative space for everyone, whilst raising aspiration and providing talent and skill development opportunities for all ages.
- 7.5 Dynamism: To enable aspiration, ambition and creative excellence to flourish across the Borough, through supporting bold and energetic programming at a Borough-wide level showcasing creative confidence at the heart of the crucible of culture.
- 7.6 Further information on these can be found in the Vision document.

8.0 Action Plan

- 8.1 The following section suggests elements that could form part of an Action Plan to begin setting to drive and deliver the Vision over the next five years. A planning schedule with wide steering groups and focused task groups will ensure that plans are robust and manageable and will deliver real outcomes for culture in Halton.
- 8.2 Funders will look favourably on strong plans that have been developed over time and grounded in community need.

Item	Action	Task Lead	Timescale
1	Establish new externally funded Culture Officer role in HBC who can act as first point of call for cultural groups needing support.	HBC	End of April 2023
2	Establish Cultivate as the cultural forum for Halton and develop to include regeneration, wellbeing, skills development and young people and align with Visitor Economy delivery. A dedicated Champion for the Cultural Vision should be identified from this group and could be a role that rotates to different people annually. The new Culture Officer role at HBC will convene and co-ordinate the meetings. The new cultural forum will drive elements of the strategy.	HBC	Cultural forum re-established/expanded and first meeting held second quarter 2023
3	Cultivate to agree the Vision and agree a Terms of Reference and remit for the group, which is to drive the Vision. Cultivate to decide on the frequency of its meetings and to plan regular	Cultivate	By July 2023

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	reviews (at least twice per year) of progress against the Strategy, re-focusing as necessary.		
4	<p>Cultivate to consider smaller Task Groups to take on specific areas and drive projects, such as:</p> <p>Festivals/Events group – working toward 2024 Birthday of the Borough and Borough of Culture 2026;</p> <p>Communications group – addressing the campaign to raise awareness and create a central point for people seeking information about what’s on in the Borough.</p> <p>Diverse Representation Group – addressing diversity of representation in leadership roles – this could be about giving young people a voice, giving older people better access, supporting access for people with protected characteristics etc., identifying the groups who need support for access to opportunities and engagement;</p> <p>Regeneration group – to continue to support regeneration plans through culture, linking to support health and wellbeing, skills development and knowledge sharing, developing facilities (e.g. re-purposing buildings) for the Borough.</p>	Cultivate	Task groups identified by end 2023
5	Plan towards 2024, the 50 th Birthday of the Borough. Utilise this for a celebration and awareness raising of Halton as a cultural place, celebrating innovation, linking between arts and its science heritage etc. 2024 could be used as a launch pad for the communication campaign and a catalyst to explore Halton further as a creative and cultural place.	Festivals/Events Group with Communications Group and Viv’id (Destination Marketing campaign)	Develop a plan first half of 2023

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6	Plan towards the next Borough of Culture, to link the Birthday celebrations into the next Borough-wide cultural celebration in 2026.	Festivals/Events Group	Planning begins end of 2024
7	Review the Action Plan twice yearly and refocus for the three-year period.	Culture Officer with Cultivate	Sept 2023; March 2024 and so on

A separate, fuller Action Plan will be developed during 2023.

9.0 Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1: Cultivate Partners and Halton Heritage Partners – current membership list

Cultivate:

A Place For Us CIC	Artistic Directors
Accent Music Hub	Music Education Commissioner and Deputy Music Education Commissioner
Catalyst SDC & Museum	Community Engagement Co-ordinator
CHI Community Café	Director
Cronton 6th Form College	Head of Centre of Excellence for the Arts
Curious Minds	Cultural Education Manager
Daresbury Laboratory (Sci-Tech)	Senior Public Engagement Officer
Ella Together CIC	Manager
Halton Borough Council	Executive Board Member - Employment, Learning & Skills, Community & Culture; Programmes Officer Manager, Community Development Officer, Libraries Development Officer, Leisure Services Divisional Manager, Brindley Theatre Manager
Halton HPAN	Beechwood School Head
Halton Heritage Partnership (HHP)	Chair
Hazlehurst Studios/Independent Artists	Director/Artist
Mako Create	Director

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Mersey Gateway Environment Trust	Chief Executive
Norton Priory Museum and Gardens	Chief Executive
St Martin's Primary School	Headteacher
The Castle Pub	Publicans
The Heath School	Cultural Arts Director
The Studio (LOOSE)	Studio Manager
Widnes Academy	Principal

Halton Heritage Partnership:

Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum	St Marie's Heritage Group
Daresbury District Heritage Group	The 8D Association
Halton Borough Council Libraries	The Danny
Norton Priory Museum and Gardens	Sankey Canal Restoration Society
Phoenix Amateur Photography	U3A
Preston Brook and District History Group	Widnes Family History Group
Runcorn and District Historical Society	Widnes Historical Society
Runcorn Family History Group	Widnes RUFC – The Wids
Runcorn Locks Restoration Group	Widnes Rugby League Museum
Runcorn Town Hall	

9.2 [Appendix 2: Consultation report](#)

9.3 [Appendix 3: Vision Document, *The Crucible of Culture*](#)