

Briefing Paper: Cultural activities in the city centre, city-villages and within estates

“Cultural activities” in the context of this paper includes the performing and visual arts, public art, museums and heritage, literature and film, architecture, fashion, food and drink, community festivals/events. The paper addresses only those cultural activities which affect streets and public spaces.

2. What is already happening?

2.1 Activities and Events: Oxford has experienced recent growth in cultural events using the city’s streets and public spaces. Organised by independent arts, heritage and community organisations, these events build on a long standing and popular tradition, This growth was kickstarted in 2000 with an extremely ambitious music, fire and sculpture extravaganza in South Parks, organised by two independent producers which attracted 50,000 people and featured 3,000 local participants.

Within the city centre events have been located in Broad St & St Giles (e.g. St Giles Fair, Luminox, French Markets), High St (May Morning), the Botanic Gardens (e.g. Magic Hour), the Covered Market (visual art installations), the Bodleian Library (Globe Theatre, The Ice Garden), Bonn Square (WinterLight, Alice’s Day), in the city’s parks (e.g. Festival Concert 2007, Summerscreen Film Festival) in college quads and gardens (e.g. Shakespeare, Literary Festival, Dancin’ Oxford) and at Oxford Castle (e.g. Earth from the Air, Creation Theatre, art market). Oxford Open Doors opens up new public access to spaces across the city. At a more routine level, there are street entertainers and busking in the city centre, although this is often of varying quality.

The Cowley Road Carnival is the most significant regular event in the public realm outside the city centre with others including the Oxford Mela, Elder Stubbs Festival and Blackbird Leys Fair. There are annual community street fairs in Barton, Blackbird Leys and Jericho. Cultural organisations run projects in city villages and (especially) in residential estates in East Oxford (e.g. Modern Art Oxford have “twinned” with Rose Hill to run a three year programme of activities). Emphasis is placed on attracting people to city centre events through providing special transport or through inclusion as performers and participants in celebratory events e.g. Christmas Lantern Parades.

If this appears to be a wide ranging and healthy programme of special events in the public realm it is still outstripped by the popularity of such activities and by the public’s appetite for them.

2.2 Public Art: Much of Oxford’s public art has been commissioned through The University of Oxford, with an excellent track record of quality and ambition. Given the nature of the University, public artworks - whilst not inaccessible to the public - are often out of plain sight, e.g., in college gardens. Others enhance the public realm for the casual passer-by e.g. Incisive Letterwork’s stone cutting on the Said Business School and the recently installed Anthony Gormley figure on Exeter’s roof.

Public art commissioning elsewhere in the city is less well developed and has the potential to deliver more high quality art interventions, whether integrated into the fabric of public space (e.g. seats or signage), as stand-alone objects or temporary installations. A Public Art Officer is contracted to the City Council for 2 days per month, the County Council has no specialist resource. Outside the city centre public art has often involved the local community, emphasising the potential to increase a community’s sense of pride in its locality (e.g. Botley, Barton, Blackbird Leys). Hospitals also commission art (e.g. at the Warneford and Nuffield). The exciting, and ambitious prospects for public art commissioning within the West End have been blighted by the economic situation. Four major commissions are in the pipeline around the new Westgate Centre.

2.3 Film: Film/TV production brings interest to the city’s streets, attracts visitors keen to tour “Lyra’s Oxford” etc and brings revenue to the city in location fees and spending on local supplies and services. In the past, Oxford has been described by film makers as “difficult” to work with and a new Film Location Services Office aims to overturn this perception by facilitating road closures etc and promoting the city as a location. Outdoor cinema screenings are infrequent although other cities have found them very popular and available through commercial partners e.g. “Stella Screen”

2.4 Markets and Fairs: The Covered Market is joined by weekly farmer’s markets in Gloucester Green and Wolvercote, a thrice weekly art market at Oxford Castle, occasional continental markets in Broad Street and Artweeks runs an annual open air event in Summertown. The interest from artists in an “empty shops “ programme and the proposed Christmas market indicate untapped potential in this area.

2.5 Publicity; Lamp post banners on road routes into the city are valued as is other public realm publicity, e.g. bus banners. Poster sites and other “what’s on” information could be improved.

2.6 Policy Framework: The City Council has a policy framework which asserts the value of culture to community cohesion, tourism and the local economy and which provides for public art commissioning in supplementary planning guidance. Recent work on tourism has recognised the value of culture to extending Oxford’s appeal and attracting overnight visitors. *Oxfordshire 2030* includes targets to grow the number of nationally significant cultural events and festivals in the county and to increase the contribution of culture to tourism. It includes a local target for Oxford’s Strategic Partnership to implement the West End Cultural Strategy. Arts Council England, the major external investor in cultural activities in Oxford, has a priority to encourage more arts activities in the public realm. ,

3. Who are the key players?

Cultural and community organisations: event organisation and delivery, public art commissioning service

City Council: cultural strategy, coordination of public space use, some event organisation, licensing, planning permission, public art commissioning, tourism strategy, town centre management

Oxford Inspires; large scale event coordination/generation and practical support to events by other organisations i.e. marketing, press, publicity infrastructure e.g. lamppost banners, licenses/street closures, financial support and fundraising,

County Council; road closures/parking suspensions, street design, tourism strategy, town centre

Universities; event organiser and provider of venues for events organised by others, public art commissioner

Emergency Services; health and safety, public order issues

Businesses: event venue or organiser e.g. Oxford Castle, publicity distribution

The financing for activities is provided through cultural organisations’ own budgets, City and County Council investment, developer contributions (S106), Arts Council grants and other fundraising from trusts and businesses. In kind support is provided by local authorities, the police, universities and local businesses, as well as the voluntary efforts of many local people and community groups.

4. What are the gaps and where might the OSP add value?

4.1 A shared vision and set of priorities – clear agreement across the key players on what we want cultural activities and events in the public realm to deliver for Oxford and how they play into agendas such as tourism, social inclusion, skills and community safety. Agreement on a set of priority events/activities to 2012 and beyond.

4.2 Capacity – joint planning on resource allocation and respective roles and responsibilities to ensure that the priority programme can be delivered and that capacity exists to fulfil existing commitments especially in relation to public art commissioning and implementation of the West End Cultural Strategy.

4.3 A mechanism to support joint working on culture in the public realm – a virtual or real group to progress the shared vision/priority programme and to proactively resolve practical issues including road closures and licensing, improving access to “what’s on” information in public space, design of public squares to facilitate events etc.