

ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL CULTURAL STRATEGY

CONTENTS

01 FOREWORD

02 SUMMARY

03 CULTURAL ESSEX

04 CREATIVE ESSEX

05 POPULAR ESSEX

06 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

07 ESSEX CULTURE AND CLIMATE

08 KEY OBJECTIVES



03

06

09

14

17

20

24

27

01 FOREWORD

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Culture and the arts are a key contributor in achieving the three underlying principles set out in the Everyone's Essex plan: Renewal, Equality and Ambition.

Essex County Council (ECC) recognises how important the arts, cultural and creative sectors are to our communities and to the economic development of the county. Our approach over the next few years will be to identify and exercise the potential of the arts, culture and creativity to enhance the lives of residents and to make Essex a great place to live and work.

Never was this so clearly demonstrated than during the COVID-19 pandemic when we saw how quickly our cultural organisations reacted to develop innovative, digital programmes to support our residents at a time when so many were facing isolation.

We saw how creativity and culture can bring joy to residents of all ages, provide solace in moments of sadness and encourage people to come together to express their innermost thoughts and feelings through art, music and movement.

This learning from the past few years has given us a reinforced appreciation of how vital culture is, not only to place making but in connecting communities and increasing wellbeing. We have therefore committed to four key strategic objectives which will underpin our strategy for arts and culture in Essex, they are: **Enrich, Empower, Amplify and Grow.**

The challenges and opportunities for arts and culture in Essex are considerable. The cultural and creative sector is still in recovery after the pandemic and the continual challenge of funding is ever present, however, the creative economy is one of the world's most rapidly growing sectors and has the potential to make a transformative impact in terms of income-generation, job creation and export earnings in addition, the link between culture and improved health and wellbeing is being increasingly heard.

Opinions on the identity of Essex are as varied and diverse as our landscape, however, there are some characteristics on which many people do agree. When it comes to defining the county, Essex is not afraid to stand out and is willing to challenge the status quo. Resilience and entrepreneurship are phrases, that continually came through as being synonymous with how we define ourselves.

Essex is a brave county of change makers and of potential. This strong character and sense of identity has resulted in cultural legacy which has built up over decades. From internationally renowned writers like Sarah Perry and musical acts such as Blur and Depeche Mode, to visual artists such as Michael Landy, Elsa James, and Grayson Perry; to icons of modern popular culture like 'The Only Way is Essex' and upcoming fashion brand 'Never Fully Dressed' demonstrating the huge potential Essex has as a cultural and creative destination.



Essex is a brave county of change makers and of potential. This strong character and sense of identity has resulted in cultural legacy which has built up over decades.

01 FOREWORD

The cultural sector in Essex is driven by a network of artists and makers, organisations and creative businesses who all hold a strong sense of purpose and who work together, enabling a joined-up approach to addressing disparities, promoting resilience and stimulating growth.

These ambitious networks and initiatives span the breadth of our cultural infrastructure, from the exciting regeneration of the Thames Estuary through to Colchester based Firstsite, which was named Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2021. However, we recognise that we have areas where culture and the arts are underrepresented and can be hard for residents to access. By mapping the county's creative networks and hubs, we will aim to build a picture of Essex which represents the strength of the sector as it is today, but also where we need to help improve it in the future.

This strategy document is not designed to be a prescriptive policy which is set in stone, but rather it is the opening of a conversation between communities, authorities and organisations around what defines art and culture in Essex, and how we can work together to nurture and promote it for future generations.

Part of supporting the sector to grow and flourish is our commitment to identifying ways in which we can measure how the arts, culture and creative sector positively contribute in terms of social value.

Our county is steeped in a history and has a legacy of creativity, innovation and invention, along with radical mindsets and new approaches. We're on the front foot in terms of the creative industries and technology which brings with it the potential for economic growth.

Access to high-quality cultural and creative experiences can make an impactful and meaningful difference to the lives of residents. The time has come to celebrate all that is great about culture in Essex and our dynamic identity as a county.

We have much to be proud of. Through art and culture, we can tell the stories that represent the people and culture of Essex today and we want to support those artists, makers, groups and organisations working across our county to continue to create great art which resonates with contemporary society.

Councillor Graham Butland,
Cabinet Member for Devolution,
The Arts, Heritage and Culture

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It is hugely powerful when a local authority makes a clear commitment to supporting arts, culture and creativity by publishing an ambitious cultural strategy.

In November 2022, we announced our 2023-2026 National Portfolio,

which included £12 million in funding over three years across 13 organisations in Essex, including five that will receive funding through our National Portfolio for the first time.

We're delighted that ECC is following that announcement by setting out its own commitment to arts, culture, and creativity with a new and ambitious cultural strategy. I look forward to working in partnership with ECC to ensure that more people across the county have the

opportunity to experience, participate in and enjoy all that the arts, culture and creativity have to offer.”

Hazel Edwards, Area Director,
Arts Council England



02 SUMMARY

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A need for cultural development

In 2022, ECC commissioned Counterculture Partnership LLP to undertake a series of workshops and consultations with the cultural sector, creative practitioners and residents to capture the essence of what makes up the cultural identity in Essex and to identify areas for development.

There were several cross-cutting themes which arose from the consultation and which align with the ECC’s Everyone’s Essex strategy and those of other local and national agencies and authorities.

From these workshops we know that these themes create both challenges and opportunities for the cultural and creative sector and this strategy aims to begin the process of mapping out ways in which we can address these key themes.



DIVERSITY

We’re a diverse county in all its forms. We need to celebrate these differences and create opportunities which reflect the diversity of our communities and make the most of our assets.



SUSTAINABILITY

Our natural environment is a key asset in Essex. We will find sensitive and creative ways in which to utilise our green spaces and encourage engagement with arts and nature in line with the ECC Climate Action Pledge.

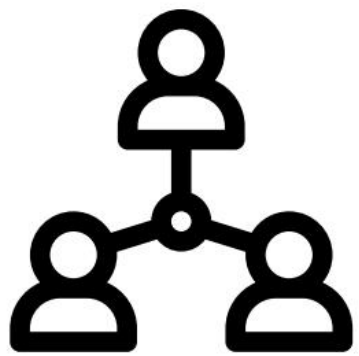
The evolving demands of running an economically sustainable creative businesses mean that owners and organisations need to be skilled in business management, in addition to creating the artistic product.



PLACE

We’re ideally placed to make the most of our connections to London, the east and south east and Europe. We will actively seek ways to build partnerships and networks outside of Essex. We will celebrate the geography of our county and find ways to create and support more cultural activity in rural area.

02 SUMMARY



CONNECTION

We're widespread between cities, towns, villages and rural areas. We're home to some of the fastest growing communities in the UK and our demographics are constantly shifting. The nature

of some art forms require solitude, while others work in small groups and communities. We need to create greater opportunities for formal and informal connection by building on existing networks and working across art forms.



TALENT RETENTION

Our proximity to London could work against us. Without the opportunities for career progression in the cultural and creative sectors many young people, graduates and those in

their early career will leave Essex. We need to work in partnership to develop and promote a joined-up approach to talent development which addresses the current and future needs of the sector.



ACCESS AND EQUITY

As a county we have a track record of being successful in attracting funding and support to develop significant areas of Essex, however, there are still pockets of relative deprivation and a lack

of equity in terms of access to cultural activity. We need to take a county-wide approach to attracting funding to develop arts and to join forces to realise ambitious projects and to support access to culture where it is most needed.



IDENTITY

How we feel about Essex, our place in it, and how the county is perceived all influence our growth. We will explore new narratives and create a county-wide approach to celebrate the contemporary cultural identity of Essex.



CREATIVE ECONOMY

We appreciate the economic value of the cultural and creative industries but need to do more to advocate and influence beyond our peer network. As a county we aim to create an environment in

which creativity and innovation can thrive and to work in partnership to develop a holistic approach to culture which includes hospitality, tourism and leisure, transport and the environment.

03 CULTURAL ESSEX

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03 CULTURAL ESSEX

The Essex Geography and Narrative

From the North Sea to the east, down to the estuary in the south where it meets the Thames, Essex has always had a strong connection to the sea. The deep estuaries along the coast give Essex a coastline of over 350 miles, one of the longest of any county in the UK. This porous coastline has welcomed many visitors and new arrivals across the centuries who have all contributed to the unique essence of what makes Essex the place it is today.

Essex occupies the eastern part of what was, during the early Middle Ages, the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Essex, or Kingdom of the East Seaxe from which Essex derives its name and coat of arms. Colchester's Roman legacy is still strikingly evident with stretches of Roman wall weaving in and around the city centre, a striking reminder of it being England's oldest recorded city.

From the Romans to the Vikings and Anglo Saxons, for centuries new people and communities have made their home in Essex. More recently, the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush, which docked in Tilbury in 1948, brought new dimensions to our communities and enriched once again the breadth and depth of culture in Essex. As a county we are continually evolving and reshaping the narrative as our communities and our landscape change.

The cultural history of Essex is captured and held safe by the Essex Record Office in Chelmsford. The archive is accessible to the public, and indeed people across the world, via a digital records service. With records dating back 1,000 years, including parish registers, diaries, letters and wartime records, the collection takes up nearly eight miles of shelving, making it one of the largest county archives in England.

Essex has a strong sense of place, a rich heritage, varied history and diverse natural landscapes. Heritage, history, contemporary arts, technology and creativity are all intertwined into the modern cultural offer and are key contributors to a sense of pride in place, positive perceptions and prosperity for our towns and cities.

As a county we are continually evolving and reshaping the narrative as our communities and our landscape change.

03 CULTURAL ESSEX

The county has a wealth of existing high-quality cultural assets with content and programming covering a range of cultural sectors and therefore supporting a broader range of audiences.

It is the proximity to London to the south, Norwich to the north and Cambridge to the east which provides Essex with a unique position at the heart of a group of some of the UK's most prominent cultural and creative hubs.

Whilst the majority of cultural organisations and buildings in Essex are situated in towns and cities across the county, particularly around the three cities of Chelmsford, Colchester, and Southend-on-Sea, the county also sustains pockets of cultural and creative activity throughout its geography.

However, as with most of the UK, rural and some coastal areas of the county have less cultural infrastructure and subsequently can struggle with transport and access to cultural activities.

Many of the Essex based arts organisations are working to increase equality of access, with outreach programmes, local partnerships and digital platforms.

An example of this is Harlow, the UK's only Sculpture Town. The town is home to an exceptional and growing collection of over 100 public artworks.

Started by the Harlow Art Trust in 1953, works by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth inspire artists and allow free access to high-quality art for all.

The role of parish and town councils and community run facilities - such as local pubs and village halls often drive engagement and community cohesion and should be a key consideration in ensuring rural communities have access to culture. Arts Council England's 'Lets Create' strategy refers to villages, towns and cities thriving through a collaborative approach to culture, and notes that people should have access to a full range of cultural opportunities wherever they live. However, opportunities for engagement are currently uneven, particularly for those living in towns or rural areas, where public transport is often either unavailable or expensive.

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03 CULTURAL ESSEX

Our museums and galleries are a key asset of the county, ranging from Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations, such as Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service, through to voluntary run local venues. Many draw upon local history in their collections or are based on historic local industries, such as railways, historic buildings and maritime, and these are often located in rural areas which can benefit from tourism.

They act as key touch points to our county's history, interpreting our past to inform our current and future.

Other key aspects of the Essex physical cultural infrastructure are the arts centres and mixed-use spaces offering work, exhibition and public facing areas. Building on success to date, there is potential for these spaces to become 'cultural hubs', supporting both artists and professionals, as well as the public.

Essex's key cultural venues are both big and small enough to attract local and regional audiences. Standout venues include visual arts organisation Firstsite, Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre, Southend Cliffs Pavilion, Saffron Hall and the High House Production Park, which have the capacity and profile for professional high-quality programming including touring.

The core cultural venues in Essex offer broad professional programmes, but it is important to ensure that there is provision for residents and creative communities to access performance and gallery space, particularly if Essex is to make the most of the opportunity to nurture emerging talent.

Essex has a strong track-record of cultural infrastructure development. From being chosen as the home for Firstsite to the Mercury Rising project, which secured £9.8million investment to improve its facilities, to National Lottery Heritage funding to secure community venues in the heart of Jaywick. Essex has many projects already underway or in the pipeline including the Cliffs Pavilion theatre redevelopment and Basildon's proposed Digicult creative space within the Arts Council England's Creative People and Places programme.

Workspace development also remains a key priority for artists and organisations in Essex and through initiatives such as the Thames Estuary Production Corridor and the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP), a greater focus than before is being put on attracting creative businesses into areas. We know that many creatives move to Essex for its more affordable workspace and good infrastructure. We are committed to supporting and enabling this migration of talent into the county to drive job opportunities and stimulate economic growth.

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03 CULTURAL ESSEX

Partnerships and Networks

There is a real strength in the number and diversity of cultural organisations, networks and governing bodies in Essex, and the potential opportunities which exist around joined-up programmes, knowledge exchange, collaborative bids and more.

The majority are locally driven, acting as capacity-building vehicles from both a strategic and programming point of view. Partnership working as exemplified in creative collectives, provide successful models for collaboration, and joined up approaches to sector development. A county-wide collaborative approach will be key to enhancing the success and impact of the diverse sector.

Established cultural, commercial and sector-specific organisations are vital in providing guidance, networking, and opportunities for artistic and professional development in creative sub sectors such as digital, film, dance and music.

The creative and cultural sector in Essex collaborates with, and receives support, from a wide range of national organisations including the British Film Institute, Royal Opera House, Creative UK, UK Theatre, UK Music, and Contemporary Visual Arts Network England to name but a few. Fostering these relationships and identifying new partnerships will be critical to ensuring that Essex can contribute to, and benefit from, wider national agendas and initiatives.

Essex has an active and committed voluntary sector covering the environment, health and wellbeing, cultural networks, youth, minority ethnic groups, community groups and more. This often underrepresented group of volunteers are actively engaged across the county and in many cases are the only reason that venues and spaces are able to be kept open to the public.

The Friends of Jaywick Martello Tower for example support events, activities, research and funding bids. Supported by ECC, the Friends of Jaywick Martello Tower have successfully secured funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund for programmes relating to the environment and local heritage, including the Tides of Tendring, exploring the events of the 1953 North Sea floods.

This model of friends groups acting as essential support for our cultural organisations is found across the county and plays an important role in the success of so many of our arts and heritage institutions.

As an artist challenging the cultural identity of Essex, the ability to work collaboratively and centre new perspectives has been enabled by the support of Essex's strong infrastructure of arts organisations, practitioners and communities who together have been willing to work with me to radically challenge perceptions of this historically misaligned county."

Elsa James,
Artist and Activist



04 CREATIVE ESSEX

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The UK is widely regarded as a leader in the creative sector, both in terms of economic potential and global cultural influence.

Creative sector businesses are at the forefront of addressing net zero challenges by driving innovation in concept design, material sciences and construction. Its job market offers a range of rewarding roles with many vocational entry routes. Clusters of creative businesses are located across the country, which supports the wider Levelling-Up agenda.

Numerous reports set out in detail the sector’s domestic and international economic vibrancy, positive spillover potential, job creation, geographical distribution and civic value contributions.

More than one in eight UK businesses are part of the creative industries, according to 2019 figures. The sector accounted for £115.9 billion—almost six per cent of the UK’s entire Gross Value Added in the same year. In recent years, the creative industries have delivered more economic value than the life sciences, aerospace and automotive sectors combined.

ECC recently committed over £1.5m to supporting arts and culture. In 2021, ECC launched a new Arts and Cultural Fund to support the creative sector and help it recover in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fund provides a platform from which artists and groups can kick start their projects and can apply for match funding from regional and national bodies.

Essex has a rich history of scientific exploration and technological innovation. Its role in digital culture and technology is often under recognised despite having a legacy of innovation which continues today.

Amstrad was one of the first businesses to bring computers into UK homes and was founded by Lord Alan Sugar on Brentwood high street in 1968. In 1978, the world’s first online multi-user game, MUD1, was developed by students at the University of Essex.

In more recent times, renowned game designers such as Toby Gard, creator of Tomb Raider, and award-winning game companies - such as Semaeopus - are all testament to the creative digital talent of our county.

During the height of the pandemic in 2020, Essex based cultural organisations developed exceptional projects exploiting digital connectivity reaching out to audiences and participants across the county. Arts organisations, such as Firstsite, had amazing success with their activity pack programme. Featuring leading contemporary artists, the online packs were downloaded over 70,000 times reaching local, national and international communities.

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04 CREATIVE ESSEX

Contemporary Essex has a strong tech sector with significant potential to develop further. Geographically, it is well positioned with its proximity to London and transport links, particularly with the opening of Crossrail which extends into the county. In addition to its ultra-fast fibre network (with speeds in the top 1% of the UK), this makes Essex an attractive option for tech investors, start-ups and creative businesses looking for affordable and efficient workspaces.

Higher and further education in Essex offers an abundance of opportunities, with two leading universities, the University of Essex and the University of East Anglia majoring in computer science, data analytics, gaming and film making. The Innovation Centre Knowledge Gateway and tech hub opened in Colchester in 2019 to attract emerging enterprises such as digital marketers, digital asset companies, cybersecurity companies, software designers, researchers and digital architects. Essex is also home to The Games Hub, an award-winning game development studio, offering an educational programme and a shared studio space.

The Creative Centre for Screen and Immersive Digital Industries project, which aims to open in 2025 is an exciting, forward-thinking development for Essex. The project, backed by Basildon Borough Council, Creative Estuary, Thames Estuary Production Corridor and a range of other partners, will bring two empty council properties in Basildon town centre back into use, creating a flagship facility of specialist digital and post-production workspace for the screen and immersive digital industries.

Our proximity to the Thames Estuary, one of the busiest gateways in the world, allows Essex to work alongside neighbouring counties to maximise opportunities for sector growth. Creative Estuary, a consortium of public sector and cultural organisations, aims to transform 60 miles of the Thames Estuary across Essex and Kent into one of the most exciting cultural hubs in the world. The Thames Estuary Production Corridor (TEPC) is an initiative which aims to unite east London, the north Kent coast and south Essex to create a world-class centre for creative and cultural production, creating new jobs, developing local talent and supporting the rapid growth of the creative economy.

There is ambition and support from local authorities to develop the tech sector. If we are to attract talent and business into Essex, we must ensure that the infrastructure is there to support it.

ECC has created Digital Essex, its central project for digital initiatives, the Superfast Essex programme has a strong track record of delivering faster broadband connections and secured the Best Superfast Programme award at the Connected Britain national industry conference in 2019.

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05 POPULAR ESSEX

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Visual and performing arts are particularly strong sectors in Essex. Boasting several local cultural organisations, with many focused on youth participation, as well as High House Production Park and the Royal Opera House for theatre production, education, set design and fabrication, Essex is a significant exporter of both talent and intellectual property.

Music and dance programming is prevalent in Essex and there is potential to grow the music offer with the introduction of Quartermaster Studios in Purfleet in particular. Other key sectors which Essex has the potential to grow and develop are digital led, such as film, TV, gaming and immersive business.

There is already some alignment between local growth sectors and the local cultural education offer including the University of Essex, the National College of Creative Industries, South Essex College and Colchester Institute.

Cultural organisations have a part to play in bridging the gap between education, skills and employment and are working in partnership to identify and further opportunities around training, internships and employment outcomes will be key to the continued growth of the sector.

When referring to culture, the importance of pop culture cannot and should not be ignored. From pop music to social media influencers, one of Essex's major success stories in recent years has been the stream of talent to emerge from the county.

From chart topping musicians like Sade and Alison Moyet, shaping British musical culture, to sporting heroes like Sir Alastair Cook, acting icons like Dame Maggie Smith, and writers and filmmakers telling the stories of the county, the cultural landscape of Essex is broad and hugely influential. From social media influencers to the creation of celebrity stars via shows such as 'The Only Way Is Essex' popular culture which is made in the county, reaches millions of people worldwide.

Essex has become known for exporting creative and cultural talent with musicians like Sam Ryder and Olly Murs becoming modern media icons. Essex's Jamie Oliver is now one of the world's most famous chefs and food campaigners and Russell Brand, with his vast podcast and YouTube following, continues to reach audiences everywhere whether via his own searing brand of stand-up comedy and activism or his Hollywood movie roles.

Essex film office

The last few years have seen a significant growth of high-end television (HETV) and film production in the UK. The combined spend by film and HETV production during 2022 reached £6.27 billion, the highest ever reported, and £1.83 billion higher than in 2019.

Essex has become known for exporting creative and cultural talent, from musicians like Sam Ryder and Olly Murs.

05 POPULAR ESSEX

With a combination of favourable tax relief schemes for UK produced content and boasting some of the best production teams in the global industry, the UK has a reputation as a world class centre for film and TV production.

The success of the film and HETV sector not only generates billions of pounds for the UK economy but also thousands of jobs in production hubs, many of which are in regions outside of London. Film and TV also has the power to significantly boost screen tourism with both domestic and international visitors attracted to a place they have seen on screen.

Well placed geographically, and boasting cinematic landscapes, Essex has the potential to offer UK and overseas productions with the perfect backdrop to almost any scene from Medieval court halls to brutalist architecture and everything in between.

Attracting film and TV production into Essex has the potential not only to generate spend in the county but also supports the industry professionals and crews who live and work in the region.

With productions such as the AppleTV+ adaptation of Sarah Perry's 'The Essex Serpent,' set and shot on the Blackwater Estuary, to Hylands House in Chelmsford doubling as the White House in the Netflix hit 'The Crown,' Essex is welcoming more productions than ever before and has the potential to attract more.

Attracting film and TV production activity into the county will help to stimulate inward investment from film related industries, providing skills and training opportunities for Essex residents looking to enter a career in film and production.

In 2022, ECC formalised a dedicated Film Office for Essex with the objective of positioning the county as a go to location for the film and TV production industry, specifically:

Sector engagement – mapping the sector and creating a collective Essex voice.

Infrastructure and investment – identifying opportunities and attracting investment.

Production activity – attracting more productions into Essex.

Skills, talent and the supply chain – harnessing growth opportunities for young people to enter the sector, advocating homegrown talent and opening doors for those business involved in the supply chain around TV and film to gain more opportunities closer to home.

Equally as important as attracting the film and HETV sector into Essex is the opportunity to export the county's film making talent. Essex has a vibrant film making scene and boasts successful film festivals in both the north and south of the county. As a sector with a high number of freelance workers, building networks and mapping the talent within the county will be a key priority in ensuring that Essex based creative talent is showcased.



06 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



06 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Essex has a rich heritage; it's a place where history and contemporary arts combine. It's a county with a thirst to embrace new technology and harness the opportunities of digital creativity. All these are cultural and creative elements and are key contributors to a sense of pride in place and to creating positive perceptions and prosperity for our towns and cities.

There is a strong and growing commitment to culture at all levels of governance throughout Essex and from public and private organisations to develop the provision of quality cultural projects to deliver on economic growth, health and wellbeing, education and other policy areas. Nevertheless, challenges to provision remain, which will need to be addressed, to strengthen the county's cultural offer and provide a positive impact for residents.

We know that Essex has a significant aging population which is going to increase over the coming years.

In 2021 there were 1.5m residents in Essex with an average age of 41.3 years. In 2019 ECC's Joint Needs Assessment report found that the proportion of the population classified as "Working Age" was 2% lower than the national average, whilst the population aged 65+ was 2% higher and is predicted to increase to 380.4 per 1000 by 2034.

In terms of ethnicity, 90.8% of the population of Essex classify themselves as White British; 3.6% White Other; 2.5% Asian; 1.3% Black; 1.8% of Multiple or Mixed Ethnicity.

We are fortunate to have world-class cultural practitioners operating throughout Essex, with the support of networks - such as the Essex Cultural Diversity Project - we are starting to see increasing opportunities, participation and celebration of cultural diversity through arts and heritage activity in communities and featuring at the forefront of artistic programming. But we can do more to further encourage and establish programmes of work which include, represent and support Essex's culturally diverse communities.

Through arts and culture we will work to improve outcomes, opportunities and cultural and community engagement and cohesion, working with partners to deliver and commission programmes of work which explore community, diversity and place, supporting artists, arts organisations and communities to deliver projects in their communities along with training, networking and signposting.



With the support of the National Lottery, ECC commissioned a project called 'Snapping the Stiletto' designed to challenge contemporary narratives around 'Essex Girl' perceptions. The project gave a voice to underrepresented groups in the community such as women of ethnic heritage and victims of abuse, and empowered young women and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds via oral history and museum projects which documented the lives of women in Essex both past and present.

The project made National headlines in 2020 by challenging the stereotype around the term 'Essex Girl'. The campaign removed offensive expressions in the Oxford University Press which referred to 'Essex Girl' as a derogatory term.

06 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

We are fortunate to have world-class cultural practitioners operating throughout Essex, with the support of networks such as the Essex Cultural Diversity Partnership we are starting to see more work and projects led by makers, artists and organisations being delivered in communities and featuring in programming, but we will need to do more to. We have yet to harness the power that diversity can bring to a sense of place.

Essex is also one of the largest authorities in England. The most northern and southern areas are almost 50 miles apart, a journey of approximately one hour and 20 minutes by car. It is home to wide range of landscapes, with the north predominantly rural, and the south characterised by its much-loved seaside towns, industry and proximity to London.

Like almost every county in the UK, Essex has areas of deprivation where cultural provision is not as accessible as it should be. The most significant structural factors affecting deprivation are incomes and employment, but recent changes in deprivation across Essex stem from small changes in barriers to housing and local services; health outcomes; and levels of crime. The Joint Needs Assessment report found that within Essex there is a large and growing gap between the most and least deprived districts. It's important to recognise that culture and creativity has an important part to play in bridging this gap and can make a difference to outcomes for young people and adults.

We're at a pivotal moment in the contemporary history of Essex, with significant investment in the county through governmental agendas, local enterprise and major development projects in our towns and cities. Over the next five years, we need to embrace the opportunities these present to create a united cultural sector, one of which is strengthened by collaboration and a strategic approach.

We've a wealth of assets at our fingertips and will need to work hard to ensure that our offer remains relevant and accessible to our growing communities.

Cross sector partnerships will be key to the future development and sustainability of the sector and finding ways to attract external investment in infrastructure will contribute to the creation of a thriving creative and business economy.

Over the next five years, we need to embrace the opportunities these present to create a united cultural sector, one of which is strengthened by collaboration and a strategic approach.



Essex Cultural Diversity, 'Bhaji on the Beach'

06 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Our county is large, our communities and provision split between cities, towns, villages and rural areas. The division of financial support for culture across the county is not always equitable, travel to and from rural communities can be difficult and local authorities, and groups and organisations, will need to take a county-wide view to capitalise on opportunities and to reach diverse audiences. We need to share more information, resources, experience and knowledge, and to find new accessible and equitable ways to support the next generation of cultural leaders.

We know that culture can play a significant role in addressing issues around health and wellbeing, education, employment, crime prevention and social inequalities and that it will be essential that we take advantage of shared knowledge, social prescribing, partnerships and aligned agendas to increase relevance and access to cultural activities across the county.

Connectivity and co-creation between the voluntary sector, cultural and educational institutions and the private sector will be key to our continuing success.

ECC are starting a long journey of understanding the power of culture and the impact it can have across a broad range of areas, particularly social care, and are working to develop and capture more evidence to build the case for sustained investment in the cultural and creative sectors.

We know that culture can play a significant role in addressing issues around health and wellbeing, education, employment, crime prevention and social inequalities and that it will be essential that we take advantage of shared knowledge, social prescribing, partnerships and aligned agendas to increase relevance and access to cultural activities across the county.



07 ESSEX CULTURE AND CLIMATE

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With one of the UK’s longest coastlines and lowest levels of rainfall, Essex is at significant risk from the climate crisis. As well as being a medium through which to engage residents on immediate climate issues, arts and culture can mobilise communities towards positive action for a better future.

Sustainability, risk management and the mitigation of risk relating to our changing environment are all issues facing the arts and cultural sector including venues, organisations and creative practitioners. This is particularly the case in coastal areas where rising sea levels and extreme weather conditions are an increasing reality, in some cases becoming part of the cultural identity of a place such as in Canvey Island or Jaywick Sands.

Whilst higher temperatures and drier summers can have an immediate and positive effect on tourism, increasing footfall to some of our localities, there is a long-term threat to the sustainability of our heritage sites and cultural venues and the respective communities that benefit from them.

The urgency of the climate crisis is reflected in the priorities of several national funders, regional organisations and independent bodies who are recognising climate change within the strategic plans and funding projects in the worst effected areas. This indicates the need for a strong alignment and commitment from across the field to empower cultural leaders and communities to develop and implement resilience in face of a common threat.

Environmental Responsibility is one of four investment principles in Arts Council England’s 10-year strategy (2020-2030). The principle says: “Over the next 10 years, we will expect the cultural organisations we support to redouble their commitment to environmental responsibility. We also expect them to promote the need for environmental responsibility in the communities in which they work, through their partnerships and with their audiences.” This emboldens and necessitates cultural organisations to lead on change.

Essex’s unique landscape is changing nowhere more so than along its coastline. The immediacy of climate change often serves to anchors artistic projects in an area, which can be an effective way of drawing attention to an issue or place. In their ‘Beach of Dreams’ project, arts organisation Kinetika walked the entire east coast of England over 500 days in 2021, joined by residents, environmentalists and artists around the Essex coast.

This is particularly the case in coastal areas where rising sea levels and extreme weather conditions are an increasing reality, in some cases a known factor within the cultural identity of a place, e.g., Canvey Island and Jaywick Sands.

07 ESSEX CULTURE AND CLIMATE

As part of the project, residents were asked to imagine what the coast would look like in 100 years time and their thoughts and stories were added to an online map and archive.

Culture and creative programmes can be a powerful tool in communicating anxieties around climate change, particularly for young people and vulnerable groups. By enabling access to arts and culture, artists and residents are able to deal with some challenging issues through creativity and a higher public level of engagement can often be achieved.

For example, Nabil Ali's 'Sea People' project, created a series of haunting semi-abstract figures along Walton-on-the-Naze coast, bringing awareness to coastal erosion and the loss of the land whilst signifying forgotten ancestors and lost communities of the past which lay beneath the sea.

As part of the project residents were asked to imagine what the coast would look like in 100 years time, and their thoughts and stories were added to an online map and archive.

08 KEY OBJECTIVES

In 2022 we commissioned a series of workshops and consultations with the cultural community and residents to capture the essence of the cultural identity in Essex and to identify areas for development.

This consultation work has helped to inform and shape our statement for culture in Essex.

We will strive to deliver against our four key principles:

- 01. **ENRICH** by contributing to a confident and resilient cultural and creative sector.
- 02. **EMPOWER** by supporting cultural networks and collaboration.
- 03. **AMPLIFY** by increasing engagement and diversity.
- 04. **GROW** the cultural and creative sectors by supporting innovation and sustainable growth.

08 KEY OBJECTIVES

ENRICH

We are committed to making Essex a place where creativity and culture flourishes; where sectors, organisations and people come together to celebrate, engage with, and create culture which resonates with our communities and attracts visitors.

We are committed to establishing a county-wide local authority network across Essex to encourage collaborative working, ensure hyperlocal insights are considered and to create a joined-up approach to attracting funding and inward investment strategic development and provision of culture.

By fostering collaboration between people, organisations and networks, we can strengthen the cultural infrastructure in Essex, influence of the sector and increase opportunities for collaborative funding bids and co-creation.

We will include stakeholders from tourism, public health, education, at all levels, and community groups and set bold measures and targets for multiple agendas with aligned values and impact.

We will support opportunities for cross sector collaboration. We all appreciate the transformative power of culture, and its ability to create positive impact in areas such as health and well being, education, quality of life and our environment, the economy and many more.

We recognise the important role culture has to play in creating a sense of place, in building healthy and happier communities and adding to the vibrancy and distinctiveness of the county.

We will look to undertake socio-economic mapping to identify and target 'cold spots' for engagement with particular focus on isolated rural communities and minorities.

We aim to create robust reporting frameworks for data collection and dissemination at a county level. Understanding who we are engaging with, or not, and the impact our activities have not only on the individual but more broadly, we will support the development of future strategies and ensure that the cultural offer in Essex remains relevant to its communities and visitors.

We are looking to create a robust countywide cultural steering/advisory group. This will ensure that policy remains relevant and current to the needs and aspirations of the sector and communities of Essex, we will ensure that a diversity of cultural organisations and individuals across the county are included.

We will look to undertake socio-economic mapping to identify and target 'cold spots' for engagement with particular focus on isolated rural communities and minorities.

08 KEY OBJECTIVES

EMPOWER

We will support the development of our creative ecology to back new pathways for young people and early career professionals through vocational training, employment opportunities, volunteering, business growth and partnership.

We are committed to supporting and developing the capacity of the sector. There are many excellent providers of cultural education and training in Essex, both formal and informal. The challenges lie in bridging the gap between education and entry to the workplace and in continuing professional development for mid-career employees and independent creatives.

We aim to undertake a skills audit by mapping creative and cultural organisations and practitioners across the county. Feedback from the sector suggests that many people in creative roles often work in relative isolation. The nature of creation is for some, in itself solitary, while for others collaboration may be at the heart of their practice.

Artists, makers, producers, practitioners and leaders need to excel at many things. Skills in entrepreneurship, marketing, branding, communication, finance, business planning, strategy, technology and governance are all necessary to running a successful business or not for profit. We want to ensure that the training and support is available to the sector to enable it to grow and flourish.

We will support Essex's creative practitioners and organisations of all sizes and scales to take the lead in the development of the cultural sector in Essex through support, advice, partnership programmes and funding.

We recognise that the biggest asset of our cultural and creative sector are the individuals working in it. We cannot and nor do we want to deliver and lead on everything within Essex's cultural landscape, but we can add value, empower, support and advise.

We will - wherever possible - look to develop our work force and future leaders, trusting in the sector to deliver programmes on our behalf, whether via partnership projects or funded and commissioned directly.

We will attend cultural forums and networks across Essex to support the crucial work they deliver in their areas and seek to help them to be as robust and impactful as possible to enable arts and culture to flourish in our localities.

We will support Essex's creative practitioners and organisations of all sizes and scales to take the lead in the development of the cultural sector in Essex through support, advice, partnership programmes and funding.



08 KEY OBJECTIVES

AMPLIFY

Essex has a lot to be proud of and many strong advocates for culture. By creating collaborative events, commissioning Essex wide projects and investing in platforms and opportunities for the sector to engage with a wider audience, the county’s creative community can build on and communicate the power, impact, and relevance of culture in today’s society.

We will work to maximise the positive benefits of culture and amplify the impact on people’s lives. We will work collaboratively with organisations, across departments, sectors and art forms to identify potential partnerships and shared or complementary agendas.

Collaborative working means that we can support the cultural and creative sector can work from a place of strength, ensuring the relevance and sustainability of culture for future generations.

Our artists, practitioners, community, and cultural leaders have the ability to shift mindsets, to communicate creatively and persuasively and should be actively encouraged and supported to engage in debate and advocacy beyond the sector.

By identifying and mobilising strong cultural voices, we can create the opportunity and environment for diverse voices to reach new and powerful audiences. The sector benefits from a wealth of exemplary leaders and change makers, people doing great things but often in isolation or within their own particular niche.

The sector benefits from a wealth of exemplary leaders and change makers, people doing great things but often in isolation or within their own particular niche.



Theatre Témoin, 'Flood'

08 KEY OBJECTIVES

GROW

We recognise that the creative sector has the potential to support the county’s economic growth by developing capacity, driving innovation and sustained growth.

Our proximity to London and the rich quality of life in Essex; with its green spaces and coastal places, affordable housing and business premises, diverse communities and emerging creative and tech industries; has the potential to create opportunities for our young people, to retain talent and contribute to the economy by attracting new businesses and residents.

Essex has the power to ‘supercharge’ the creative economy by working with agencies and partners to support the development of a fertile environment to attract creative and tech businesses and creative clusters.

Investment in infrastructure is vital, we will work collaboratively across the authorities at county and local level to embed access to culture within other departmental strategies such as Transport, Health and Wellbeing and more.

We will make the case for culture as an economic driver in order to reshape perceptions and attract investment.

We will be ambitious, and look towards Europe and beyond, exploring opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange.

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By collecting relevant data, we will create powerful narratives around the impact of the culture and the creative industries on regeneration and economy.

We will look for county-wide opportunities for the cultural sector and voluntary bodies to work more closely together, for instance through work experience, secondments and apprenticeships schemes. The Essex-based volunteer sector is strong, however, the population is aging and routes into cultural careers for younger people can be challenging.



Southend Forum arts and cultural centre

08 KEY OBJECTIVES

GROW

Essex boasts a broad wealth of assets, and the challenge lies in creating a cohesive offer where innovation and creativity thrive. Essex can really ‘own’ this with its proximity to London, green spaces and innovations around climate.

As one of the fastest growing populations in the UK the identity of Essex is shifting. Through culture, we have the opportunity, to shape how the people of Essex are represented today and how their narratives influence the perception of Essex as a progressive, inclusive and diverse county.

We can do this by committing to marketing Essex through great placemaking and by engaging with a broad range of audiences. We will support and develop wider more coherent offers by building partnerships within Essex and with neighbouring counties, to identify and celebrate the contemporary Essex identity.

We will look to create opportunities for increased partnership at an international level. Essex will be bold in its ambitions and actively seek to build collaboration and opportunities beyond the UK. With easy access to Europe, we should be looking to build partnerships, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

Through culture, we have the opportunity, to shape how the people of Essex are represented today and how their narratives influence the perception of Essex as a progressive, inclusive and diverse county.



“It’s great to see Essex County Council investing in the creative and cultural sectors through their Arts and Cultural Fund and recognising that the creative industries play a vital role in the good health and wellbeing of local communities. This financial investment should help boost the sector and I support the council’s aims of developing a long term, sustainable future for arts and culture in the county.”

Michael Landy CBE RA

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“Radical Essex is a programme re-examining the history of the county in relation to radicalism in thought, lifestyle, politics and architecture. The project celebrates the crucial role Essex has played in the history of British Modernism and its utopian ideologies. Focal Point Gallery in Southend-on-Sea continues to lead on this partnership programme, through its own art exhibitions, events and commission and through new collaborative opportunities.”

Katharine Stout
Focal Point Gallery

“We need not just to allow voices to be heard but to empower people and encourage change to happen through action. Our Thinker In Residence, The artist Vijay Patel helps steer the organisation towards real change. Part of Vijay’s work has been to commission artists from marginalised communities to present work and share ideas on inclusion. Not all the answers are easy and obvious and not all our efforts land quite where we hope they will. The worst thing is to do nothing and when we find ourselves struggling, we reset and return to the guidance we started with.”

Anthony Roberts
Colchester Arts Centre

“Our work reaches more than 150,000 people a year both here in Colchester but across Essex in educational and community settings. We all have all so much to be proud of. The breadth of the arts and cultural sector – whether professional or amateur continues to thrive and grow. It touches all our lives no matter who or where you are.”

Steve Mannix
Mercury Theatre

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“Our focus is on creating work in underused or undervalued public spaces, both indoors and outside. Our projects are collaborations with professional artists and the local community. Over the years we have worked with a number of amazing artists, including Anne Schwegmann-Fielding, Kiran Chahal, Jevan Watkins Jones, Nabil Ali and, more recently, Elaine Tribley and Rehmat Rayatt. They have all used the opportunity to get to know Dunmow and its residents while developing projects that stretch their creative practice. Projects that we have instigated have created opportunities for participants to share their own stories, to build connections with others and to discover more about how to look after the local environment.”

Catherine Mummery
Harlow Arts Trust

“We provide room, resources and platforms for professional visual artists to develop their creative practice and build resilience. Affordably priced studio space for artists and small businesses is critical to the early stages of their growth and there is high demand for studios in Colchester. Our Creative Practitioner Support Programme (CPSP) offers emerging and re-emerging artists in Colchester and Essex, with the chance to gain advice and feedback through peer-to-peer sessions, as well as collaborative opportunities. At Space, we are continuously exploring new partnerships on properties that offer added value with local authorities, developers and other partners.”

Eline van der Vlist
Chief Executive, Space

“We are interested in the role that arts, culture and heritage can play in supporting culturally diverse interest and participation in the environment, climate change, natural, rural and coastal places and spaces. We work with a range of partner organisations including the National Trust, Local Authorities and cultural organisations to ensure that everyone feels they belong in Essex’s many unique landscapes, parks and coastal areas, and we will continue to develop our programme to support this. We aim to gather evidence and good practice and work with any organisation or group that wants to develop ideas for increasing diversity in Essex. Art, creativity, cultural exploration, and celebrations are the key to success, and everyone should embrace the opportunities and recognise the benefits for all.”

Indi Sandhu
Creative Director,
Essex Cultural Diversity
Project

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