A Place for Culture Summary

A strategy for culture and creativity in

the borough of Brentwood

2025 - 2030

Spring 2025

The NO Collective

Brentwood Borough Council

Funded by UK Government

Introduction

This strategy maps Brentwood's cultural identity, people and places to examine how strategic investment and support could contribute to a stronger arts and cultural offer for the borough's residents.

Commissioned by Brentwood Borough Council in Spring 2025 to set a plan for implementing the borough's creative vision over the next 5 years, this research provides a valuable insight into what types of art and culture are being interacted with in Brentwood, where it is happening and who is missing out in this current provision. It also details the unique opportunities that Brentwood possesses to make the borough stand out.

"We recognise the vital and far-reaching impact that arts and culture have on our communities, economy, and the health and wellbeing of our residents. In recent years, our borough has experienced a vibrant cultural renaissance, with artists and creatives coming together in bold, collaborative projects. These initiatives have sparked a wave of passionate, ambitious changemakers, nurturing creativity and driving forward new opportunities. This strategy sets out our five-year vision to harness this momentum—unlocking, accelerating, and celebrating the creative potential that defines our borough."

Cllr Tim Barrett, Chair of Housing, Health and Community Committee, Brentwood Borough Council.

Co-creating a strategy

A unique, co-created methodology was developed to ensure that local people were at the heart of the process, that their voices were heard, and community, businesses and creatives were accurately represented.

The research surveyed over 150 venues and organisations across the borough, conducted more than 40 interviews with community and creative leaders from within and outside of the borough, and benchmarked local and national strategy to provide a balanced picture of Brentwood's creative ecosystem.

In the spirit of co-design, the creation of the methodology and the research was conducted by The NO Collective, an arts organisation working in and around Brentwood with co-creation as a core theme to their work. 75 participants, in addition to those interviewed, gave insight, opinions and reflected on the borough's creative scene as well as detailing their own hopes and dreams for a more cohesive and exciting cultural landscape.

The methodology followed a simple structure, combining:

1. Creative Vision
2. Creative Place
3. Creative Scene
4. Recommendations

Through gamified tools, research outcomes were produced through engaging qualitative and quantitative means including interview and desktop analysis as well as sculpture, gameplay, creative writing and reminiscence.

Quote: *"We were delighted to see that Brentwood Borough Council was interested in co-design when researching a new cultural strategy for the borough. This facilitative practice in the context of strategy, refers to a way of working that engages the people who are most likely to be affected by its changes, or are best placed to make them. This is a radical way for the public-sector to curate a place-based strategy; however, it simply activates positive participation and cements a foundation of pride in cultural places and neighbourhoods. These progressive co-design ethics truly serve the people and places that the strategy is intended for."* - The NO Collective

Creative Vision

‘Brentwood’s Creative Vision 2023’ was written with key stakeholders to explore the borough’s need for a detailed, localised art and culture strategy. The vision had the intention of connecting residents and creatives in Brentwood to a common goal and to establish a clear direction for future cultural activity.

Through workshops and consultation sessions, four emerging priority areas were identified:

- Nurturing our Creative sector
- Giving Young people a voice
- Creative placemaking
- Connecting creative tourism and inward investment

As a result of funding directed towards meeting these emerging priorities, or through philanthropic means, many creatives in Brentwood are already addressing the Vision’s themes. Projects such as the ‘Brentwood Changemakers’ programme, the ‘Youth Art Factory’ at Brentwood Youth Centre, creative networking, and a small design studio offering work experience programmes, are all supporting national, countywide and local strategies.

Recommendations from the Creative Vision document included developing a detailed strategy that values local artists and allows for collaboration with creatives – an approach that maximises fundraising diversification, skills-building and holds measurable outcomes whilst offering a collective responsibility.

Creative Place

National context

Art and culture on a national scale focuses on several unified themes surrounding access. Accessible cultural opportunities for all, in the UK, has been a prominent priority since the release of the 2016 government's White Paper on culture (which was the first to be released in 50 years), and this priority has recently been re-affirmed almost a decade later by Sir Nick Serota's open letter of April 2025.

Brentwood's most recent funding of culture-based activity in 2022-2025 through the Government's 'UK Shared Prosperity Fund' has seen investment already catalyse a creative movement towards national themes, seen in projects which focus on accessibility and engagement for young people, supporting skills and career development for young adults, and supporting the creation of a museum to improve access to culture in more rural locations.

Countywide context

In addition to accessibility, art and culture on a countywide scale focuses on the value of artistic collaboration. Brentwood is the furthest Western most borough of Essex and, while in neighbouring proximity to London, is arguably a marker for Essex's archetypal identity. This deep cultural connection is beneficial for integration within a county-level strategy, which presents key themes that are looking for cross-county dynamism.

Despite similarities to national strategy, the Essex County strategy has established its identity in selecting priority strategies on creative health and creative hub networks. Unique identifiers of growth in Essex include hyper-locality, and a distinct way of looking toward culture as a method to encourage the natural growth of the county's economy. Previous strategies in the county, such as Metal's the 'Creative Industries Report' which focused on the South of Essex, highlighted actions to improve creative growth alongside national economic areas of national interest such as The Thames Estuary.

Local context

Borough activity circles around creating a strong identity with arts provision for hyper-local issues. Whilst benchmarking borough strategy and organisations, the research looked towards both Essex and London. Although Brentwood may have an affinity to Essex in terms of identity, London is a huge draw for residents due to its easy commute and globally acclaimed cultural assets and thus serves as a threat to the borough's cultural strategy.

That said, outer London boroughs also have outcomes and investment principles that mirror national and county-wide themes. This includes pinning down 'specific identities', utilising art and culture for health inequalities and ensuring all residents can access art and culture wherever they live.

Environment

Art and culture alongside the environment and climate awareness is a constant priority across every cultural strategy. Geographical environment is particularly pertinent for Brentwood. All consulted stakeholders identified parks and green spaces in Brentwood as the primary 'gem' of the borough. As a result, this is a hyper-local opportunity for Brentwood and has driven further recommendations related to maximising green spaces as cultural assets.

Creative Place

Venues

Research shows that creative venues in the borough are not all cultural organisations and more art and culture activities in Brentwood are found in everyday places. Only 23% of venues surveyed in this research were dedicated to an artform in its primary purpose, as opposed to for example, 26% of venues being pubs and bars, which are noted for regularly supporting live music and bands. Churches are also well located to support arts and culture, broadly across the geography of the borough. This is a positive discovery, as residents stated that creativity is an integral part of their everyday lifestyle in the borough. Key findings include:

- The most prominent experiences of art and culture in Brentwood are through music, dance and visual arts with 38.6% of venues surveyed hosting music performances.
- Visual arts were hosted in 14% of venues and made up 27% of Brentwood's organisations.
- According to the 'Creative Lives Report 25' in Essex, Brentwood borough is the lowest across Essex in visual arts participation (only 15.5% compared to the national standard of 19.0% was reported for visual arts) despite general engagement in culture being high in comparison to the rest of England (93.2% comparatively to 90.4%).
- While local data suggests that the visual arts are well attended in the borough, benchmarking highlights that it isn't accessed as much as it could be, especially for the benefits for good health.
- Brentwood has the lowest level of computer game programming and making in Essex. A typically 'youth-led' medium, this is further exacerbated by the absence of local venues for design or new media. Only 4.5% of organisations surveyed stated that they were active in this field.
- Venue hire is inexpensive in Brentwood compared to Greater London and Chelmsford, yet venues are not advertising this broadly.
- There are only two dedicated youth arts venues in the borough, highlighting a desperate need for dedicated resources across the borough to support creative and digital youth enterprise and employment for young people aged 18-30.

Creative Place

Cultural Tourism

A ‘unique selling point’ for towns, boroughs and place-making is not only important for a resident’s sense of belonging to a place but also the cultural economy for the place within its region. Brentwood has a strong national recognition through ITV’s ‘The Only Way Is Essex’, a show staging the ‘real lives’ of young and social Brentwood residents who own their own businesses in and around Essex. There is a divided opinion as to whether this is a ‘good’ reputation, however, it is clear from this research that it cannot be ignored, whether seen as an opportunity or threat. The threat of an identity entirely reliant on a television show conversely displays an opportunity to re-define Brentwood, maintaining the positive elements of the show, keeping the borough firmly placed within in a national context. Positive elements encapsulated by both the show and research include:

- Brentwood’s intellectuals and independence, in both its attainment levels and nationally high rate of entrepreneurship
- Brentwood’s love of dancing, music, and social and vibrant nightlife
- Brentwood’s beautiful parks, places and people

Additional key findings around cultural tourism include:

- There is a strength in the variety of activities in Brentwood, but a weakness in minimal awareness and visibility of the borough's most ‘prominent’ assets, such as the borough’s largest theatre and youth music venue being noted as ‘tucked away’ behind Brentwood High Street.
- Residents stated that they ‘can’t find what they want’ in the borough, so often travel elsewhere to find cultural activities.
- There is an appetite for cultural groups to ‘put themselves out there’, with many seeking more ways to get their communities involved in festivals and events.
- More support is needed for raising awareness of important cultural assets in the borough. This is essential to increase the desire of audiences to participate in the borough’s cultural scene.
- Free promotion of cultural assets through social media is inaccessible to those experiencing digital poverty or lack of connectivity.
- There are few large-scale events that raise awareness of the borough as a ’destination’. This is harboured by the array of ownership of buildings, infrastructure, meaning coordination is intricate and difficult to animate.
- There is an appetite to work on joint initiatives to generate collaborative cultural growth in the borough.

Key reflections: Creative Place

- There are connecting themes between national, countywide, neighbouring borough and local, including:
  - Improving engagement of young people and embracing new technologies
  - Improving accessibility for all, with an emphasis on representing diverse communities, and reaching all geographical areas
  - Addressing health issues and wellbeing
  - Supporting environment through art and culture
  - Supporting creative skills and career development
  - Establishing a cultural identity for the borough
- Venues are saturated around Brentwood High Street, with some key assets considered 'tucked away'.
- Most venues are not considered traditional cultural venues (26% are pubs!)
- Brentwood's cultural identity should include highlights of Brentwood including - smart residents, beautiful places and a love of music and dance.
- There are few places for young people to access art and culture in Brentwood
- Residents struggle to find their desired cultural experiences in Brentwood so travel elsewhere

Creative Scene

Organisations, creatives and participation

Brentwood is home to a broad range of confident and welcoming organisations and artists, with its venues supporting a spectrum of art practices, small cultural events, and community celebrations in green spaces, which are ever growing in popularity. From grand halls in Ingatestone, historic centres in Kelvedon Hatch, community centres, expansive green spaces and historic pubs spanning the borough, Brentwood's creative culture is strong in its identity and important in its wider story.

Organisations

- Cultural organisations are currently clustered around 'town centres', with 49% in Brentwood High Street, 19.3% in Ingatestone and Fryerning and 10.2% in Shenfield.
- Blackmore, unexpectedly for its small population density, hosts 8% of organisations.
- There is a distinct correlation between Indices of Multiple Deprivation and access to arts and culture, with the lower IMD than national average rated areas of Hutton, Pilgrims Hatch and the 'Running Waters' Estate' having few arts organisations operating within them.
- Many places that cultural organisations inhabit are not necessarily built for cultural activity, with community and parish halls being home to many, particularly in the rural areas, where creative activities are happening in unexpected places, such as farm buildings.
- There is a number of voluntary arts organisations aiming to provide 'high quality art' across the borough. Many of these are members of Brentwood Arts Council and have yearly subscription models. They find it hard to recruit new members owing to lack of awareness and advertising and desired more cultural spaces to connect across the borough.

Creatives

- London's super-employment in arts, culture, production and heritage is shrinking with many creatives moving into surrounding greener counties with an easy commute to the city. As a result, there is continued growth of creatives resident in Brentwood.
- Census data places Brentwood as a viable place to live for creatives and employment in the creative industries has grown by 0.1% of the population from 2011 to 2021.
- ONS data places the entertainment industry as Brentwood's fourth largest employment sector, with Brentwood statistically being a 'hub' for broadcasters.
- Brentwood shows an increase of resident producers and creatives of 0.3% - the fourth highest in Essex.
- Despite a continuing influx of creatives seeking employment in Brentwood, the borough's ecosystem is relatively small, being one of only two districts in Essex without an Arts Council England regularly funded and supported, 'National Portfolio Organisation'.
- Creative business catalysation will be essential for the growth of Brentwood's creative economy and its organisations. Not only in size, but also in national recognition its ability to raise national funding.

- Local creatives are proud of their ability and showcases, easily recalling successes through collective initiatives. Collaboration alongside venues, businesses and other creatives was noted as desirable in the future.
- Creatives have a mutual desire for a dedicated creative hub or more spaces to work collectively.
- They note a lack of grant funding to grow locally, but comment that many participants are able to pay appropriately for activities and therefore feel supported by their community. This has enabled artists to share their skills with more vulnerable members of the community philanthropically, for example through volunteering to provide SEN arts or free children's creative activities.
- Creatives stated a need to increase fundraising and promotional skills, which are deemed a barrier to making their work a full-time career.

Young people

- Young people's prominent understanding of culture centred around sport, shopping and enjoying eateries.
- When 'going out' to experience art, film, music and culture, young people are led by what their caregivers introduce them to, leaving them very unaware of what is happening in the borough.
- Young people demarcated Brentwood High Street as the most prominent place to access 'their culture' with little want to travel elsewhere in the borough.
- When prompted to think about those who may not be able to access art and culture, many young people noted and related to 'those with financial difficulties'. This was the only demographic surveyed to mostly mention finance as a barrier.
- Young people surveyed were very aware of their own health and wellbeing and how creative mediums could help them cathartically, with many already creating visual art at home for this purpose.
- Young people noted there were few creative provisions in Brentwood for them, with most creative activities being for ages 18 and over.

Diversity and inclusion

- Brentwood has a number of minority cultures, but they are unlikely to be found unless through direct searching or incidental exposure to an ethnically diverse community group.
- Ethnically diverse community groups are unlikely to be constituted or advertised and most 'meet ups' are spread through word of mouth. There is a need to support the awareness and capacity of these groups, as some have large numbers but little volunteers.
- Other ethnic minority groups would love to share their culture with more people in the borough and are seeking opportunities to do so.
- Young people noted a lack of LGBTQIA+ spaces in Brentwood and a desire to have more spaces where they can 'be themselves', expressing a multitude of cultural activities that could be available for everyone, not just individual subcultures.
- There is a lack of diverse theatrical programming in Brentwood, often due to cost risks associated with 'experimental' programming, meaning that despite the desire

to do so, it is difficult to justify in a small/ medium performance space that relies on ticket sales for primary income.

- Vulnerable older people in the borough have described fond memories of Brentwood, specifically surrounding the parks and film. There is a desire to have the cinema experience back in borough.
- Music is important for older people, from classical orchestral to live music and reminiscing about nightclubs. There is a thirst for more events for their age group.

Creative Scene

Participation in creative mediums

Music

- Music is an important creative genre for Brentwood residents, with a large access base. Many local venues choose to host live music, including more than a dozen pubs.
- The borough is home to a selection of classical music organisations including orchestras and a number of choral and operatic groups who provide performance opportunities for audiences and players.
- There is a diverse music offer for young people, from rock and contemporary music lessons to a youth marching band. However, there are not many opportunities for young people to showcase their skills outside of youth venues.
- New music production in Brentwood is genuinely supported too, with the local radio station hosting an ‘open mic’ night and ensuring new music by Brentwood artists is played on air regularly.

Performance, theatre and dance

- The Brentwood Centre (the largest indoor cultural performance venue in the borough since 1985) has hosted recent, nationally revered sell-out comedy and has ambition to bring back the large Summer Music Festival and continue collaboration with smaller cultural businesses to expand its offer.
- There are a number of nationally recognised performance academies in the borough offering a range of mediums, including 17 independent dance schools which are scattered across the borough, including the villages.
- Amateur theatre groups and children’s dance regularly perform at Brentwood Theatre and village halls, whilst smaller music recitals are held at schools.
- Opportunities to watch dance performance usually occurs privately or once or twice a year at public community events such as the Strawberry Fair.

Visual arts

- There are more visual arts organisations in the borough than any other artform.
- Craft clubs are found throughout the borough, with bespoke artist and artisan businesses selling locally crafted wares, but these are not generally aimed at young people.
- There is a lack of opportunity in the borough to access new media visual arts, including animation and gaming – only 1 film production course was found for children and teens in the school holidays.
- There are no active design societies or other informal opportunities to enjoy digital medium without internship or work experience. Similarly, there are no venues that cater to design as a medium. The ‘Creative Cove’, a temporary, Brentwood High Street, pop-up enterprise in Summer 2024, provided such opportunities for young people aged 14+ to learn creative mediums in a hub that supported wellbeing as well as creative enterprise.
- Almost all under 18s consulted expressed an interest in film and the re-emergence of a cinema in Brentwood.

- The only opportunities to watch and talk about film are hosted at 18+ venues and play BBFC 12+ ratings, playing films during school hours.

Literature, writing and academic arts

- With the opening of Shenfield's new library in 2025, there is an opportunity in Brentwood for literary arts and academic arts to thrive.
- Creative health data shows that reading is one of Brentwood's prized creative activities, yet there are few dedicated artistic venues for reading and writing. Of these, most are bookshops, placing a financial obligation on those wishing to take part.
- There are a handful of book appreciation societies and writers' clubs servicing the borough and these have stated concerns about dwindling numbers and an inability to connect with younger members, who they desperately need for succession planning.
- There are a few venues hosting literary events for families including an independent bookshop in Crown Street which prides itself on engaging its customers through a genuine love of reading. Brentwood's book shops also offer academic talks on literature topics.
- The epicentre of academic arts, heritage events and recording is in Ingatestone, where a society hosts a year-round programme of lectures and meetings about cross-medium art and culture. This group is also leading on archiving religious and historical artifacts from places of workshop around the district.

Heritage and museums

- Heritage is an important medium with regard to pinpointing Brentwood's individual culture from its neighbouring boroughs.
- There is an appreciation of local history, and this is celebrated in Brentwood Museum and the forthcoming Ingatestone Museum.
- Historic buildings, such Ingatestone Hall and Kelvedon Hatch's Secret Nuclear Bunker, have regular public opening times and the 'volunteer run' Brentwood Museum, hosts annual events and exhibitions.
- Heritage organisations commented that many historical and heritage spaces in the borough are inaccessible to the disabled and elderly, with many found down uneven trails or unreachable by public transport.
- Unfortunately, heritage documentation does not currently appear to be centralised, despite a highlighted interest from all interviewed.
- The heritage of Brentwood's parks and green spaces, through interviews, were recognised and poignant intangible heritage for the borough.
- There is an opportunity for Brentwood's idyllic green landscape and rich heritage sites to be used as film locations. The borough could maximise the Essex Film Office to provide support to those wishing to promote their venues to catalyse local professional filmmaking as well as granting opportunities for residents to grow a film career locally.

Key reflections: Creative Scene

- Dance, music, performance and visual arts are the most accessible mediums, with digital arts and writing being harder to find.
- Brentwood town centre hosts almost 50% of the borough's cultural organisations.
- People in areas of low IMD have less access to the boroughs cultural offer.
- Larger cultural organisations in Brentwood want to support smaller organisations to succeed together.
- Heritage is treasured in Brentwood with environmental heritage being a unique asset for the borough. There is an opportunity for film to be in these areas.
- Diverse communities want to share their culture with wider audiences and venues want to present more diverse stories.
- Creatives and organisations are looking for collaboration, funding and skills support and growth.
- Young people are aware of the health benefits of participating in cultural activity but struggle to access it.
- Vulnerable groups are looking for inclusive places to experience a range of art and culture in Brentwood.

Recommendations Summary

According to the 2021 census, Brentwood borough is a happy and healthy place to be, and this has been reaffirmed through interviews with an array of enthusiastic creatives, excited to help establish their borough as a cultural hub for Essex.

The strategic recommendations therefore suggest support, added value and importance to the current creative scene. By promoting its unique assets and ensuring every resident has access to arts and culture, these recommendations emphasise the importance of projects that establish Brentwood's distinct cultural identity, aside from London and other Essex boroughs.

The research suggests that resources should be invested in nurturing the creative communities that already inhabit Brentwood's neighbourhoods, while also promoting its underutilised spaces.

Recommendations

1. **Celebrating Brentwood**

Boasting about Brentwood! Promoting active, creative and social lifestyles. Showcasing unique and individual cultures and making the most of our remarkable places and spaces.

2. **Connecting the borough**

Nurture through culture. Creating and sharing arts and entertainment in every corner of the borough. Building on talent through touring and improving aspiration and health through creativity and the arts.

3. **Sustaining talent**

Strengthening the scene. Giving agency to our organisations, upskilling our creatives and supporting our young people to take the lead in their own creative practise.

These categories lead to exciting movements that can be led by residents, artists, businesses and organisations alike, empowering all who are interested, or are in-need of, art and culture in Brentwood.

Celebrating Brentwood

Brentwood is home to a comprehensive number of venues and places where owners enjoy both promoting and being part of Brentwood's cultural and creative scene. However, these successes in Brentwood are often overlooked, and cultural assets are not celebrated enough. They should be promoted through a cohesive area guide for Brentwood so that its distinctive character can be platformed, promoting its independent shops, beautiful natural environment and social nightlife.

It is clear that Brentwood residents are driven, 'self-starters' with lots of small and vibrant creative businesses popping up actively across the borough. However, young people and those who are new to the area, or come from less established Brentwood cultures, are not always sure how to join these active movements. For the benefit of its culture, Brentwood should aspire to celebrate its newest residents and their diversity as the borough changes.

Utilising and promoting assets

One of Brentwood's most unique and memorable assets is its historic green spaces and the engagement it offers. Culture in parks, including the re-introduction of an outdoor cinema could easily bring back a reason to spend time in parks in a productive way for families and young people.

Assets could also be promoted through film, with Essex Film Office being available to support production and new media / film careers in the borough.

It was noted across benchmarking and local conversations that fantastic (and uniquely Brentwood) organisations should be supported and promoted as assets of the borough - for example, The Hermit, which is the only dedicated and functional music venue in the UK for young people.

Promoting the distinct, unique identity of the borough's assets through tourism marketing can support Brentwood's cultural hubs and cement its popular places as high-value destinations to its communities and tourists. This includes the borough's environmental heritage. These elements should be promoted in a unified voice across the borough, including businesses, organisations and public sector voices.

Celebrating the hyper-local

Helping local community groups to promote themselves through unique events and creative happenings. This support will not only help build these organisations' memberships, but also encourage rich and unique cultural events within Brentwood, led by passionate individuals.

This hyper-localised movement can be initiated by support to local communities to lead their own festivals through providing in-kind resources and venues, or micro-grants for organisations to generate activity.

This would also account for young people looking for exciting activities on Brentwood's High Street, so that young people can find pride and enjoyment in where they live and from pastoral support from schools or youth groups, for example, to help create a youth food or fashion festival.

Connecting the Borough

Geographically, the borough is sparse, predominantly requiring car travel to make connections. Research shows that this contributes to a disconnect between the creative scene of the 'town centres' and smaller districts and hamlets. This doesn't stop cultural activity from happening in these places, but creating less siloed neighbourhoods would enhance creative diversity and incubate quality and variety.

It is noted that pubs fulfil a quota for entertainment in smaller places in Brentwood, while churches and parish halls are well-used assets with potential for greater numbers of higher quality cultural events, through touring networks. Removing barriers for accessing the centre of Brentwood and its culture will in-turn reduce social isolation for the elderly and enhance a young person's experience living in more rural areas of Brentwood.

Rural heritage should also be highlighted in further connecting the borough, with a range of mapped and 'varying pace' walks connecting towns and villages. This would highlight the rich environmental heritage, and 'creative tours' would support participants' health and wellbeing.

Touring networks

Touring networks are an effective way to spread art and culture across a rural landscape. With over a dozen towns, villages and hamlets, one thing that connects these places (outside car travel) is the number of pubs and churches that are present across them. With research showing that pubs are key for cultural activity (through hosting live gigs), it would be useful to connect wider cultural activity through this already-active route, bringing high quality arts and culture to families and older people through additional community centres and churches. The benefit of using such non-traditional concert halls and gallery spaces is that residents can feel more at ease than in 'arts-only' spaces and be able to easily access culture locally.

Aspiration modelling

While ensuring that we promote the fantastic assets that the borough has, Brentwood should also look to nurture the local talent of performers from the age of 18. Creating places to creatively experiment and gig is essential for emerging musicians at early-stage careers. This aspiration modelling could take the form of the revival of 'adult band nights' and festivals at The Hermit Club, or collaborating with local venues such as Brentwood Theatre, Hey Joe or a wider pubs network to inspire and enhance aspiration for young artists. There is also room for collaboration across multiple boroughs too, with a new music scene emerging in Havering through the MyPlace youth centre and respected venues such as HotBox in Chelmsford.

A healthy agenda

Recent creative health research has shown that despite Brentwood being a physically healthy borough, residents are missing out on the creativity that the rest of the county utilises for health. Nationally, creative health is being showcased as a prescriptive way of keeping people mentally and physically well.

Brentwood should be looking to encapsulate this research to meet its strategic priorities for health and wellbeing. Visual arts and crafts has been noted in creative health research as an activity that is not regularly accessed in Brentwood in this context.

This approach is actively used in specific church groups for socialisation and could be shared with more churches and community centres to hyper-localise access. Wellness walks incorporating heritage, storytelling and performance would also be well placed in all areas of Brentwood. Brentwood's neighbouring borough Havering is due to begin a five-year strategy called 'A Good Life' which focuses on creative health through arts provision. To learn and share high quality outputs and outcomes via collaboration and audience participation on the west of the borough would be worthwhile through a strategic partnership.

Sustaining Talent

The borough has a healthy number of mid-level career and professional artists living and working within it. This is evidenced by the growing numbers taking part in Brentwood's annual art trail, and the regular arrival of new emerging creative networks.

Upskilling creatives and producers

While Brentwood's creatives are well equipped to work from home, they are looking for others to create with them and gain further skills to diversify their income and grow their practice into larger organisations through grants and sponsorship models.

Organisations within Brentwood are loved by locals, but do not regularly grow within the borough. Brentwood is deprived of having an Arts Council England, National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). Furthermore, local creatives are not achieving or applying for funding from large national funders, including the National Lottery. With the right coaching, spaces, skills support and positioning of cultural activity, networks of emerging artists could grow, and higher levels of funding could be sought by cooperatives or larger organisations.

During visioning workshops, it was evident that local artists wanted more ways to network, experiment and collaborate together. While there are activities that are sustained yearly, creatives find it difficult to grow their practice. This is through lack of knowledge or ability to apply for grant funding and limited collaborative opportunities. The borough would benefit from business training for creatives and small grant programmes that offer match funding for catalyst projects. Opportunities for creative socialising and collaboration would enable artists to grow their businesses, maintain their own networks and submit joint funding applications.

Emerging artist support

Currently there is a lack of visibility for emerging and young artists in Brentwood. With the draw of central London's creative districts being only 40 minutes away by train, and the borough not owning its own creative spaces for young creatives to inhabit, succession planning could become a problem in Brentwood.

To nurture the creative ecosystem in Brentwood, artists aged 18 - 30 need a well-established and networked place to make work in, nurture their practice and feel that as practitioners, they belong in the borough. This space should be well connected to local employers and contain facilities for new media careers.

Diverse community leaders and creatives also lack the provisions they need to be able to share their culture through events and experiences locally. Community leaders should be supported through catalyst grants and bespoke coaching to ensure they can increase their agency in nurturing their communities' ability to produce their own cultural experiences.

Strengthening local organisations and places

There are few, well established cultural venues in Brentwood, with none currently being funded as an NPO. This lack of national investment to the borough could be detrimental in a future of devolution in Essex. With the majority of arts organisations and venues only generating income from sales and sponsorship, Brentwood needs to make a huge step change in supporting its biggest cultural organisations in the borough to grow, both in diversity of experience, capacity and quality of production to futureproof their economic viability.

Currently, sustained, stable and long-standing organisations such as Brentwood Theatre, the Brentwood Centre, The Hermit, Phoenix FM and Ingatestone Hall could be supported to create individual or collaborative growth plans and large collaborative funding bids.

Summary Quote

'The findings of this research highlight that Brentwood's creatives are excited to establish their borough as a cultural place to live and work, while community groups are keen to share and enjoy each other's diverse identities. Brentwood is home to undeniable beauty in its landscapes and buildings, with added historic value that is notable from beyond its borders. However, despite its eagerness to share its many successes, the borough's residents struggle with an impressive yet divisive national stereotype that takes positive attributes from the borough, such as sociability and entrepreneurship and creates a character of culture in the borough.

It is also evident that young people, minority ethnicity and vulnerable communities are not participating as much as they could, which could hold the key in adding depth to the borough's character.

Businesses are open-minded to cultural development in the borough and are keen to harness a new wave of tourism. With the right support, organisations are eager to grow. Now is the time for Brentwood to shout about what it does well, reach further to all corners of the borough and make an identifiable cultural stamp between the country's super-served cities'.

– The NO Collective

Find further information and contributions at:

nocollective.co.uk/aplaceforculture

This strategy can be made available in alternative formats, on request:

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