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# Culture Aberdeen

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# Introduction



*Culture Aberdeen*, a network of the cultural organisations in Aberdeen and the City Council, has the greatest pleasure in commending the city's new Cultural Strategy.

The title of this strategy, *Culture Aberdeen*, is also shared by the new independent cultural network who played a pivotal role not only in developing this strategy, but will also lead on and deliver the ambitions set out within these pages. It embraces the collaborative spirit and shared responsibility which has been displayed in the development of both the network and this document. Furthermore, it reflects the journey the sector has been on in developing a new strategy, recognising our strengths and unique assets, having the confidence to say Aberdeen is already a city of culture with a strong scene, distinctive identity and creative sector.

Considering the progress to implementing the city's last cultural strategy illustrates the cultural sector's renewed sense of purpose and confidence. Vibrant Aberdeen sought to achieve four ambitions:

- **Improve the quality and impact of the arts, culture and heritage provision in the city:** demonstrated by the development of a City Council supported cultural programme of activity and the creation of the Aberdeen Festivals collective and enhancement of the city's festival offering particularly in the public realm.
- **Prioritise existing financial resources for more effective investment in arts, culture and heritage:** demonstrated by the provision of a significant extra resource to support existing cultural activities and aid the development of new activities.
- **Support and develop new and existing venues throughout the city:** demonstrated by the redevelopment of the Music Hall and the Art Gallery as well as a host of smaller developments.
- **Attract and retain creative and cultural professionals across the sector:** demonstrated by the creative funding for projects and individuals and the support provided to the development of creative spaces, notably the Anatomy Rooms development.

This strategy, formulated upon discussions within and outwith the cultural sector and with extensive consultation, builds upon our achievements to date, identifies areas where we still have room to grow. Within this strategy we are proud to offer a bold ten year vision of the impact of the cultural sector on our city:

Our vision for Aberdeen is a city...

- **opening doors:** where everyone can be transformed and inspired through engagement in the arts and culture; a place releasing our creativity
- **to experiment in:** a home, a place, a destination and testing ground for artists, creative enterprises and new ideas; a place which has become Scotland's creative lab
- **which inspires:** where exciting cultural experiences are around each and every corner and where there are no creative boundaries; a place where all the city is a stage
- **like no other:** where we celebrate and promote our culture and heritage, the things we make and create, a place where culture connects us to the world
- **growing in ambition** and confidence with a strong collective of cultural leaders collaborating to realise the city's potential; a place where the arts shape our future

To deliver this bold vision we have developed a series of short-term outputs and longer term ambitions for our sector and the city. These longer term ambitions include:

- Ensuring access to cultural activity to all within the city and that cultural activity is broadly representative of our communities;
- Developing dedicated living and working spaces for our creative practitioners to enable and increase retention of talent;
- Establishing a Scottish Centre for a particular art form in Aberdeen;
- Creating an Aberdeen Biennale of festival activity to celebrate Aberdeen;
- Applying for designation as a UNESCO Creative City;
- Recognising the importance of culture within city development by pledging to follow the principles contained within the international Agenda 21 for Culture.

We recognise that as we articulate our ambitions as a cultural and creative sector for our city we cannot achieve these in isolation. We offer this strategy as a starting point for further conversations and development with interested parties and communities across the breadth of the city.

Dearest Aberdeen,  
I love your location, your light and your sparkle. I love your generosity and giving nature. I love the air, especially by the sea! You allow me to access so much, from good food, interesting buildings, amazing people and good quality events. You offer so much but could offer so much more. You are an opportunity for the taking and I want to be part of this new Stage! In the future can I please have a day of experiences, unexpected and expected to enrich my quality of life even more.

# How we developed this strategy and how we will implement it



## Development of the strategy

This new cultural strategy for Aberdeen has been developed through a partnership, facilitated by *Aberdeen City Council*, but led by the organisations and groups operating within the city that make up the North East's creative and cultural sector. The process of developing this new strategy has taken a number of years but as a plan and shared vision it is now far richer for this time to truly reflect and consider our future. In developing this strategy we have engaged in a number of activities, including:

- A conference on the approaches to cultural strategies within other oil and gas cities with guest speakers from Stavanger, Houston and Calgary.
- A programme of workshops which examined a series of themes in turn to identify key priorities for the next ten years for the cultural sector in Aberdeen.
- A number of consultation sessions throughout the process with the cultural community and the creative industries sector.
- Consultation events engaging with representatives from communities, business, education and other sectors to consider wider impacts of culture.
- The development of a *Citizens' Circle* to consider the view and standpoints of individuals from a range of backgrounds and prior experience of cultural participation and engagement.

## Our ambitions for Aberdeen

We have taken care that the strategy outlined in the following pages is rooted in the city we live, work and practice in. It is rooted around a sense of pride about our developing and growing cultural offering. We have developed a plan which has considered and responded to our most significant opportunities and challenges in five areas which correspond to the five strategic ambitions:

- **Extending and enriching participating and engagement in culture** (Set out in ambition 1: *releasing our creativity*).
- **Support and development for creative practitioners** (Set out in ambition 2: *becoming Scotland's creative lab*).
- **Uses and develops our cultural infrastructure but also recognises the city as a backdrop to cultural activity** (Set out in ambition 3: *making all the city a stage*).
- **National and international recognition of our creative and cultural sector** (Set out in ambition 4: *connecting us to the world*).
- **Develops the cultural sector** (Set out in ambition 5: *shaping our future*).



Our objectives are ambitious and for this reason we have chosen to develop a ten year strategy. In each of the areas of the strategy we have included ideas and projects of scale and significance to respond to the challenges the cultural sector will face while providing long term benefits for Aberdeen.

The strategy outlines each of our ambitions in turn and includes:

- a vision statement of the Aberdeen we are committed to creating and shaping;
- a brief outline of our assessment of the Cultural offer in relation to the context that exists in Aberdeen;
- a series of short-term outcomes which are developed further in the accompanying three-year action plan; and which we have articulated into short-term actions and longer-term ambitions;
- our ambitions or outcomes which we aim to achieve in ten years.

## Implementing the strategy

This strategy is accompanied by an action plan which captures activity over the next three year period to support the implementation of the strategy. This will be refreshed annually and our intention is that this will become a rolling three year action plan.

Both the strategy and the action plan will be monitored by Culture Aberdeen, a group of cultural organisations operating within the city and facilitated by Aberdeen City Council. This group will take the lead on developing the ideas and projects that will develop and take responsibility for realising the ambitions within this strategy.

# AMBITION 1:

releasing our creativity



***Our vision for Aberdeen is a city opening doors, where everyone can be transformed and inspired through engagement in the arts and culture; a place releasing our creativity***

## Where are we now?

Participation in cultural activity across the whole city is high. All of our city's cultural organisations actively promote and facilitate access to a range of different art forms. Examples of this include the *Station House Media Unit* which supports residents in the city's seven regeneration areas engage in radio and video production as well as traditional and online publications, music production and digital inclusion. The *Big Noise* programme works in Torry to widen participation in musical education. The city's non-professional scene is thriving with the opening of the *Tivoli Theatre*. Over 40 professional, amateur and youth companies use *Aberdeen Arts Centre* which has over 100,000 visitors each year. Many cultural organisations run public classes and *Aberdeen Performing Arts* has co-ordinated the city's Youth Arts Strategy as well as running youth theatre, youth music and youth arts learning and development opportunities for children and young people. *Citymoves* and *Gray's School of Art* have run many public classes in recent years. Most of the city's festivals and other cultural organisations have outreach programmes to encourage participation and engagement from different communities and groups.

Aberdeen has had a strong history of community engagement in cultural activity. The City Council's *Creative Learning Team* offers two main strands of work. The first *Artistic Pathways* supports the acquisition and development of artistic skills and knowledge at professional and non-professional levels. The *Creative Partnerships* strand aims to maximise the contribution of the arts, culture and creativity to effect social change. The City Council also makes a significant investment in culture. Following feedback from the city's bid for UK City of Culture status, the cultural budget provided by the Council has been increased by £5.5 million over five years. The Council also runs a creative awards scheme for organisations and individuals with the explicit aim of engaging communities in their cultural offering.





Dearest Aberdeen,  
This city may be granite grey, hewn stone;  
industries on the edge - hard work, hard-earned income,  
but, beneath hard edges  
- cosmopolitan, glittering.

A city that can shine in so many ways;  
a place with so many stories.

A "big village" with so many talents under its "big tent".

Our city, together needs to find the ways to celebrate -  
celebrate all that makes "the who" who live and work here.  
Tell the world what we know, that this place is  
unique, and say what makes it "tick".



## What next?

As our city becomes increasingly more diverse, it is clear we can do more to ensure that our cultural provision and activity reaches a broader range of individuals and communities regardless of their circumstances. We therefore need to understand better the current make-up of our audiences so we can focus our activities. Related to this, one of the themes that has emerged from our discussions with other cities across the world is that of cultural entitlement. We recognise that access to cultural provision can have a profound and significant positive impact on both individual's health and wellbeing and communities' quality of life. As a cultural and creativity sector we acknowledge the wider role that we can play within the Community Planning Partnerships and a range of local improvement plans across the city.



## Short-term outcomes:

1. Improve the accessibility of information available on the range of cultural activities across Aberdeen.
2. Improve accessibility and engagement with individuals from all protected characteristics and ensure that cultural activities reflect more clearly the increasingly cultural diversity of Aberdeen.
3. Increase the opportunities to use cultural engagement as a means of promoting well-being, social cohesion and a tool to support individuals through challenging life transitions and positive destinations.
4. Develop and implement approaches to working within the Community Planning Partnership so cultural activities can contribute to other city-wide strategies.

## In ten year's Aberdeen will be recognised for:

- Our citizens are fully informed and recognise the range and diversity of opportunities available to engage and appreciate Aberdeen's cultural offer.
- Inclusive cultural opportunities are supported, that brings us together to reflect upon, embrace and celebrate our diversity and shared values.
- Our citizen's lives have been transformed by cultural and artistic activity which is celebrated as being central to their quality of life.
- All our citizens have the rights and opportunities to be a cultural confident and creative society through engagement and empowerment, discernible through a strong and robust evidence base of cultural impacts and lasting social legacy.

In order to achieve these ambitions we have to release our creativity; we must work collectively to create an environment that empowers all our citizens to engage in or with cultural activity, recognising the inherent value this brings to all our lives and transforming our city for all.



# AMBITION 2:

becoming Scotland's  
creative lab



***Our vision for Aberdeen is a city to experiment in, a home, a place, a destination and testing ground for artists, creative enterprises and new ideas; a place which has become Scotland's creative lab***

## Where are we now?

In recent years Aberdeen's cultural organisations have developed their capacity to create a more experimental programme and to sustain and develop local and regional talent in doing so. The annual *Sound Festival* remains Scotland's most significant new music festival and as it has extended to year-round programming it has developed a UK and international reputation. The development programme run by *Citymoves* for professional dancers based in the region receives significant support from *Creative Scotland*. The development of a Producers' Hub through *Aberdeen Performing Arts* has been a catalyst for talent development and retention as well as an opportunity to develop new works. The collaboration between *Citymoves* and *Peacock Visual Arts* in developing a range of performing arts in the city centre as well as the *Spectra* and *Look Again* festivals have pointed to a reconsideration of the public realm as a place for high quality visual arts. The *Anatomy Rooms* based at Marischal College have provided rehearsal and studio space. Both the developments of the Art Gallery and the Music Hall contain spaces for learning suites and rehearsal spaces. In the last couple of years there has been a growth in the number of collectives formed by artists and performers.

Collectively the universities and colleges within Aberdeen produce a significant number of creative graduates each year. This supports a significant creative industries sector within Aberdeen which employs a larger number of individuals than in Dundee and represents a larger share of the city's economy than in Dundee. Nevertheless, the visibility of this sector is often obscured by the fact that much of it is hidden within the oil and gas sector or within the supply chain serving that sector. The emergence of digital fabrication labs in Aberdeen has demonstrated the demand for creative technologies across many economic sectors. This underpins the fact that investment in the creative industries can stimulate development in other economic sectors. Given this, there is a need to reflect whether the North East of Scotland ought to have the smallest number of *Scottish Enterprise* account-managed companies from the creative industries than any other region in Scotland.



## What next?

In order to fulfil our ambition of becoming Scotland's creative laboratory we will not only need to reconsider the support we provide local artists but also how we provide opportunities to those from outside Aberdeen. We will need to continue our reconsideration of creative space within the city. There are huge opportunities in recognising that Aberdeen provides a perfect base for many practitioners to develop in the early stages of their career and gain recognition for their work. We will seek to collaborate to provide more and joined up opportunities for residencies across the city and across organisations. There is also a significant need to nurture the existing talent residing within the city at all stages of their career and studying within our universities and college at the outset of their career. We need to recognise given the relative high cost of living that the provision of commissions may not be enough to aid retention of talent within our city. Demand for affordable artist living and working space has been a recurrent theme throughout the development of this strategy. There are also significant benefits to local artists by ensuring that visiting artists to the city have opportunities to share and develop practices. Appropriate holistic support will enable a larger number of individuals living from creative practice within the city and see a larger number of creative start-ups and businesses present in the city.



## Short-term outcomes:

1. Foster a producing culture through a balanced approach to support and funding, supporting the development of local artists to produce and tour work while attracting high quality artists and work from elsewhere to enrich the city.
2. Ensure funding opportunities empower artists and organisations to undertake and promote bold, experimental, high-quality, risk-taking work.
3. Grow the number of individuals whose main occupation is a creative one by supporting the development, retention and celebration of our city's creative talent.
4. Increase the volume of supported spaces available for creative practitioners to use and grow the numbers of makers in incubation spaces.
5. Grow the number of creative start-ups and businesses in Aberdeen by co-ordinating and enhancing entrepreneurial and business development support across a range of agencies.

## In ten year's Aberdeen will be recognised for:

- Aberdeen is recognised as a destination and testing ground for artists and creative producers to create world quality work.
- Aberdeen has a strong track record for support, development and retention of creative talent. Aberdeen has a more creative and diverse economic workforce through a strong and resourceful independent creative sector.
- Aberdeen has a diversified and prosperous economy through its growing number and variety of innovative artists and creative businesses.

In order to achieve the ambitions we have to become Scotland's creative lab, we will identify and implement a preferred option for developing work and living space for artists and performers as well as developing a Scottish centre in a particular art form.



# AMBITION 3:

making all the city  
a stage



*Our vision for Aberdeen is a city which inspires, where exciting cultural experiences are around each and every corner and where there are no creative boundaries; a place where all the city is a stage*

## Where are we now?

Aberdeen is fortunate enough to have significant cultural organisations and buildings that animate the city and are known well within Scotland and further afield. Over the last five years the city has made a significant investment in capital developments to support and enhance the city's cultural scene. Most significantly these developments have included the multi-million pound re-developments of two of the city's iconic cultural institutions - the Art Gallery and the Music Hall. Other developments include the re-development of the Station House Media Unit.

In addition to the buildings the cultural sector occupies, the city's festivals and other programming activity have, in recent years, made much greater use of the city's spaces. This includes new initiatives such as *Spectra* (Aberdeen's festival of light), the *Look Again* visual arts and design festival, the *Nuart* intervention from Stavanger in the city centre, as well as *Aberdeen Performing Arts' Artist in the City* and *Stepping Out* programmes. These activities have increased audiences to high quality activity and unique experiences, as well as brought national and international artists to work in the city and showcased local talent often through the same platforms. Above all it has promoted debate and discussion by the public on the city centre and encouraged thousands to explore and see their city through new eyes by '*becoming a tourist in their own city*'. Beyond the city centre other activity has encouraged individuals to celebrate their own local communities. Station House Media Unit works across many of the city's regeneration areas; our universities' public engagement programmes engage many different individuals and communities across the city. This enhances the daily creative activity in our schools, community centres, libraries and parks across the whole city. By continuing a dual approach to cultural programming using both cultural space and other space we can ensure that arts and culture transform the entire city.



## What next?

Both the city's recently approved City Centre Masterplan and the 365 Events Strategy afford opportunities to develop further projects, opening other areas in the city to cultural activity. From our discussions we have a much clearer understanding that residents and visitors alike enjoy engaging in cultural activity within open, unusual spaces across our city. We will therefore develop this strand of activity within future programming. Equally, we acknowledge that there will be opportunities and needs to develop the existing cultural infrastructure further in the future. We will in the future speak with one voice in support of such ideas and projects.



Dearest Aberdeen,

Our distance from other 'epicentres' of culture should not deter you from encouraging, facilitating, enabling and promoting music, visual art, dance, film and theatre that is not bland and mainstream.

Please try to attract young visionary and explosive minds to the city and encourage those who already live, work or study here to follow their instincts and build a future here to share with all of us! It can happen.



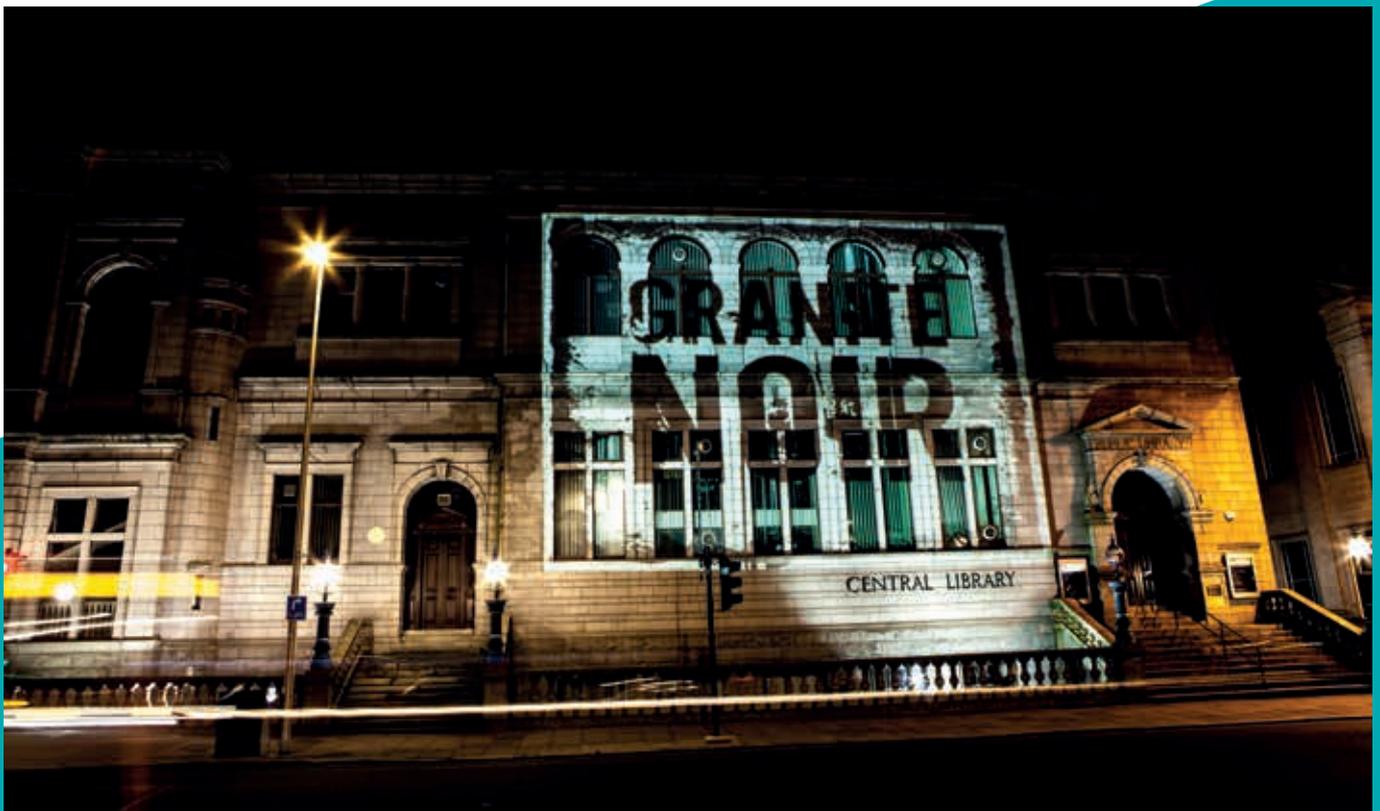
## Short-term outcomes:

1. Investment in Aberdeen's Cultural infrastructure to support the realisations of the strategy ambitions.
2. Animate and promote the heart of Aberdeen as a vibrant cultural centre.
3. Extending the range of locations used for cultural programming across the full range of Aberdeen's neighbourhoods and encourage greater ownership by those communities.
4. Deliver activities and new commissions which enable the city and its people to explore and reflect on Aberdeen's distinctive character and its rich and evolving heritage and culture

## In ten year's Aberdeen will be recognised for:

- Aberdeen continues to develop its cultural infrastructure, ensuring world class visitor experiences, increasing tourism, supporting the local economy and enriching lives of both residents and visitors.
- City centre venues which are thriving and attracting a growing number of residents and visitors alike to high-quality artistic activity
- Cultural activity engages and empowers a wide variety of individuals which is visible across the whole city.

In order to achieve the ambitions we have to make all the city a stage, we will commence planning a Biennale of festival activity drawing upon the experiences and strengths of our existing festivals and events.



# AMBITION 4:

connecting us to  
the world



*Our vision for Aberdeen is a city like no other, where we celebrate and promote our culture and heritage, the things we make and create, a place where culture connects us to the world*

## Where are we now?

One of the key themes that has emerged from consultation and discussion with the citizens' circle has been the importance of the city as a means of celebrating what is distinct about Aberdeen and the people who live, work and study here. Aberdeen has a rich and long history of international connections and these have shaped the economy, society, people and traditions of the region. Aberdeen was exporting natural resources to all corners of the world long before the arrival of oil and gas. Aberdeen Harbour Board is Britain's oldest business. The city was renowned as a major maritime centre with a substantial fishing and shipbuilding industry. The fastest sailing ship ever, The Thermopylae was built in Aberdeen. Local quarried granite from the famous Rubislaw Quarry was used to build the terraces of the Houses of Parliament and Waterloo Bridge. Over the centuries, trade has both been stimulated by and encouraged diaspora of the region's people while welcoming folk to the city. This has resulted in our city sharing its name with 34 Aberdeens in 8 countries and to our city being one of the most internationally diverse places in Scotland.

Our cultural activity can both tell these and other stories to ourselves and to others across the world. Equally, the commissions and productions developed here in Aberdeen can present a richer image and brand of the city and the region to other areas of the UK and the rest of the world. This is visible in recent commissions such as 'Belongings', a Sound festival co-commission with London's Tête à Tête, which was premiered on the sleeper from Aberdeen to London, as well as 'Spiders' light installation by art agency Groupe Laps, commissioned and premiered at Spectra 2017 before going on to be presented around the world through the global network of light festivals. This is further reflected in the success by grassroots artist, in particular Aberdeen musicians such as Best Girl Athlete and Clype who are gaining wider recognition and success while remaining intrinsically rooted in the North East. It is important to continue to support such activity, recognising that the success and benefits of this activity go beyond those organisations and individuals, in turn promoting the city as an attractive place to live, work and visit.



## What next?

We believe that the cultural sector in Aberdeen has a powerful role to play in the story-telling of Aberdeen and its people. We can have a powerful effect in creating an inclusive and vibrant image and brand of city that has given much to the world and will continue to do so. The cultural experiences provided within Aberdeen by cultural organisations and practitioners based within the city have the potential to be more widely shared across the UK and the world. This will increase people's knowledge and understanding of Aberdeen. As our economy diversifies and our society undergoes further social transformation we can make a critical contribution to how the wider world views Aberdeen in the future.





## Short-term outcomes:

1. Increase the amount of individual and organisational work created in Aberdeen shown nationally and internationally.
2. Create and implement a plan which priorities the cultural sector's international links and sustains existing European partnerships.
3. Increase the number of organisations with international partnerships and events which have an explicit international element in their programming.
4. Build stronger and deeper Aberdeen-wide national and international exchange programmes benefitting artists and organisations.



## In ten year's Aberdeen will be recognised for:

- Aberdeen uses cultural activity to confidently tell its story to the world and has been recognised internationally as a creative city, producing unique and high quality work.
- Aberdeen and its arts organisations develop strategic partnerships and shared best practice values with international organisations and leading global cultural institutions.
- Aberdeen is a home for international dialogue between artists and organisations, routed in a spirit of cultural exchange widening practise and cultural understanding.

In order to achieve the ambitions we have to connect us with the world, we will start work on developing an application to become one of the UNESCO Creative Cities. We will also consider what other international recognition the city and the wider region may attain through the strength of its cultural organisations and activities.



# AMBITION 5: shaping our future



*Our vision for Aberdeen is a city whose cultural sector is growing in ambition and confidence with a strong collective of cultural leaders collaborating to realise the city's potential; a place where the arts shape our future*

## Where are we now?

The region's cultural organisations have a strong collaborative tradition and encourage partnership working. The development of the *Aberdeen Festivals' Collective* as a vehicle for sharing good practice and pooling expertise and resource, has been significant in enhancing the profile and quality of Aberdeen's festival offering. The creation of AB+ as a forum for professional development of individual practitioners has been a significant step forward in articulating the confidence of the sector. The recent creation of *Culture Aberdeen* as the new network of cultural organisations across the city provides an opportunity to advocate for the sector and further develop collaborative and new approaches. Through the process of developing this strategy, the sector has developed and is now looking forward to playing a wider role in the formation, development and implementation of our city strategies within the city. These include the City Centre Masterplan, the regional Economic Strategy and through playing an active role in the *Community Planning Partnership*.



## What next?

One of the challenges we face is that over the next decade there will be continued pressure on public sources of funding. This may present challenges to the cultural sector and its ability to contribute to wider discussions within the city. Given the relatively low share of funding the city receives from national bodies and foundations, there are opportunities to increase funding from these sources in the future. There are large opportunities for ever greater collaboration and sharing of resource between organisations. Equally, given the role that cultural provision will have in the development of the city's image in the future, we look forward to more opportunities to develop meaningful partnerships with other sectors, including the business sector, in future years. We will therefore continue to make a strong case for the necessity of investment in the cultural sector.

In this environment, the quality of the city's cultural leadership will, more so than ever before, be instrumental to developing the ambitions outlined within this strategy. Collectively, we all can continue to learn from activities in other places, but for culture to create the biggest economic and social impact we must be mindful of getting the balance right between inviting activities to the city and supporting local practitioners. As a sector, we need to articulate the role that culture and creativity has in the economic development and sustainability of any city well beyond measures of quality of life. To do this we will seek to develop entrepreneurial leaders at all levels within our sector, and thereby nurture the next generation of leaders, to rise to the challenges and opportunities outlined in this document.



## Short-term outcomes:

1. Diversify the income of cultural organisations within Aberdeen to attract more external investment to the region.
2. Develop and deliver a leadership programme to grow entrepreneurial cultural leadership and succession planning.
3. Establish Culture Aberdeen as the regional independent Cultural Sector development body.
4. Develop and implement a system of peer evaluation of Aberdeen's cultural organisations.
5. Improve mechanisms for collecting, sharing and analysing information amongst different organisations.

## In ten year's Aberdeen will be recognised for:

- Cultural organisations that have creative, collaborative and entrepreneurial approaches with a quality and depth of leadership talent.
- A cultural sector that plays a pivotal role in the development and implementation of major city developments and regional strategies.
- The sector develops its infrastructure to better support the realisation of the Cultural Strategy ambitions.
- Cultural organisations across the city develop their individual and collective capacity for developing robust evaluation.
- A rich and in-depth range of information on cultural activity within Aberdeen is readily accessible to plan and allocate resources more effectively.

In order to achieve the ambitions we have to shape our future, we will join and fully participate in international networks such as Agenda 21 for culture, the charter of which views culture as being one of the central elements of a city's development.



