

Developing a Cultural Hub in Southend-on-Sea

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Executive Summary

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*“Our vision is to put Southend on the map as a new and vibrant university town by **creating an educational and cultural quarter** in Southend, comprising a university complex over a number of town centre locations encompassing study, business and community environments” (Vision 2012: “Meeting future demand for higher education and the business community in the South Essex Thames Gateway.”, p3).*

This report provides a strategic way forward for the development of a Cultural Hub in Southend-on-Sea, providing a creative home for the University of Essex Southend and a creative heart for the town. It establishes an actionable model for a Cultural Hub that drives the growth of the Creative Economy in the town and wider sub-region; that features prominently in the ambitious master plan for the town centre; and that carries forward the strategic development agendas of multiple partners, not least the University of Essex, Southend Borough Council, and the multiple businesses and organisations that make up the Creative Economy and Ecology of the town.

Commissioned by the University of Essex and an active wider partnership, the report offers options and recommendations for policy and action that can best advance the development needs of the University in a way that increases the potential of existing creative businesses, supports the retention of new creative talent, attracts incoming creative businesses for which the town and sub-region have not previously been deemed viable locations, and maximises the added value that cultural activity and creative businesses can bring to the wider economy and indeed to wider communities. It also offers a means to provide much needed additionality to existing sector development services, working to increase the sector penetration of regional initiatives, and complementing more local initiatives – including forthcoming major

opportunities such as the new Master Plan and Local Development Framework for Southend, an expanding airport, and a new base for the visionary arts and cultural organisation, Metal.

The report offers a means to better understand the dynamics and profile of the Creative Economy and Ecology in Southend, to identify opportunities for partnership and support, and to conceptualise how, by working together, partners can maximise the cultural and economic value of creative processes and activities located in a physical Cultural Hub that connects outwards across the town. Vital here is the establishment of a coherent, partnership-approach to creativity planning, building partnership and connecting the Cultural Hub to a wider fabric of infrastructure in ways that build a critical mass and focus for a genuinely creative sense of place. In turn, this can lead to a real culture-led transformation of Southend, with the Cultural Hub leading the way towards achieving the twin ambitions of the Borough Council for Southend: achieving within 10 years status as a thriving university town and a cultural capital for the Eastern Region.

Of particular significance here is the role the Cultural Hub plays for the wider Creative Economy and Ecology of Thames Gateway South Essex. This is a time of enormous change for the sub-region, with over 43,000 homes and 55,000 jobs anticipated by 2021. A successful and sustainable Cultural Hub will play a major role in improving the cultural offer of the sub-region, driving change in the centre of the sub-region’s largest town, and adding value to the cultural infrastructure of neighbouring communities. Not least, it will reposition and vastly improve the learning and skills offer of the sub-region: an urgent concern given the sub-region’s relatively low academic achievement levels and the positive role educational infrastructure can play in attracting and retaining a highly skilled workforce. It is important therefore that the Cultural Hub is

positioned as a key intervention within the forthcoming Thames Gateway South Essex 'Creating Cultural Opportunities' initiative: this will establish a cultural planning tool kit for the sub-region, drawing on the strategic priorities of key partners from the national to the local level, positioning culture at the heart of processes of regeneration and change.

Building the Content; Making the Connections

To support these ambitions, the report outlines how a physical Cultural Hub can be established in the town that plays a catalysing role for wider processes of cultural, social and economic development. There is a dual focus here:

- **Cultural Content:** The report explores the key constituent parts required for a dynamic and sustainable physical hub that supports the agendas of the University while providing a vibrant mix of activities that directly benefits the wider town. This includes a phased approach to establishing educational facilities, incubation space, and cultural production and consumption space for the University through the expansion of the School for Creative and Cultural Industries and South East Essex College; plus the consideration of new additions to this footprint, such as a new base for East 15 Acting School, Focal Point Gallery, and a new central library for Southend.
- **Cultural Connections:** The report explores the key connections the Cultural Hub will need to make if it is to be internally sustainable and, relatedly, externally valued. A successful Cultural Hub will mix benefits to the University with benefits to Southend. This requires the Hub to add value to other activities in the cultural sector of the town, to provide inspiration and support to creative businesses, and to provide a bridge between the town's traditional cultures and communities to their changing profile – including the increasing diversity of incoming communities.

This dual agenda provides a major opportunity for Southend, not least because it has not been effectively achieved elsewhere and it

will thus provide Southend with a distinctive and high profile development that makes the news as a best practice approach to embedding creative education within processes of creative place-making. The combined offer of this approach will ensure the development of a truly innovative and connected Cultural Hub for Southend that matches the delivery of learning and skills opportunities unseen in most other parts of the UK, with a creative and cultural development programme for a transforming town with enormous potential.

To ensure a sensitive and genuinely partnership approach to development is achieved, a phased approach is undertaken, focusing on:

- **The short-term (1-2 years):** establishing required partnerships and advancing elements for which agreement has already been reached (i.e. that identified through Phase 3 of the University Expansion Plan) – such as the development of East 15 Acting School in Southend and the required focus and tone of the University's learning and skills provision
- **The medium-term (3-5 years):** adding to the physical hub and connecting outwards as part of a high quality fabric of cultural infrastructure for the town, sub-region and region. This is based on a type of 'gap analysis' that ensures additional needs can be met and future development opportunities can be successfully achieved. It will also include a risk analysis of foreseeable investments
- **The long-term (6-15 years):** scoping how the Cultural Hub responds to direct and indirect skills and employment needs to ensure sustainable growth in the Creative Industries and wider knowledge economy over the next 10-15 years; and directly or indirectly supports new cultural infrastructure provision.

A Model with 3 Core Principles and 3 Main Aims

The conceptual and practical development process outlined in this report is then supported through the identification of a preferred model for the Cultural Hub. This isolates the key partner requirements, likely funding implications, and critical milestones. The final product of this report is therefore a clearly mapped way forward for implementing a phased approach to the Cultural Hub over the next 10-15 years. This is to be viewed very much as a partnership programme, with the Hub envisaged as a highly innovative centre of learning and skills for the Creative Economy and Cultural Ecology, and as a major catalyst for culture-led change in Southend that in turn adds value to the wider cultural sector and supports the fulfilment of opportunities in sectors such as tourism and financial services.

There are 3 core principles to the development of a Cultural Hub in Southend. These are used to inform the development of recommendations throughout this report:

- **The adoption of a joined-up, at times sub-regional and regional approach to sector development and support.** This includes building stronger strategic partnership for cultural and creative development initiatives, with the Cultural Hub at the centre. The Cultural Hub needs to be recognised as *the* major cultural development opportunity and a *top 5* economic development opportunity for Southend over the next 10-15 years. It also needs to be valued as critical to the success of other initiatives – such as a new museum and gallery complex at Cliffs Slip
- **The mainstreaming of creativity across public policy,** from education to planning, with a particular focus on how the Hub can contribute to processes of convergence, enabling sectors such as tourism to benefit from new processes of creative production and consumption. The Cultural Hub needs to be recognised as a central feature of the town centre Master Plan and Local Development Framework, and as a critical connecting force for economic, cultural and social policy

- **The development of a fabric of creative infrastructure,** where the Cultural Hub is recognised as a beneficiary of and contributor to the development of a connected infrastructure offer for Southend. As the report will show, the Creative Economy and Ecology of Southend are currently under-connected, with various assets failing to contribute to an overall offer that operates as much more than the sum of its parts. The Cultural Hub needs to be recognised as a critical connector of existing and forthcoming creative infrastructure, providing Southend with a clear and accessible fabric of creative infrastructure in keeping with that anticipated in a thriving university town and cultural capital. This complements the wider recommendations of the DCMS Creative Economy Programme, where Southend has the potential to develop into a 'Core Creative Place' with a fabric of creative infrastructure that reaches the quality and connectedness of that experienced in a major city.

Correspondingly, this report introduces **3 main aims** for the impact of the Cultural Hub in Southend:

- **That Southend is established as a recognizably creative place** – a place to do creative business, a place to enjoy culture and creativity, and a place that prioritises culture and creativity across every strategic agenda
- **That Southend is established as pioneering centre for creative learning** – with internationally recognised courses in the Higher and Further Education sectors, innovative approaches to incubation and knowledge transfer, and a pioneering approach to learning and skills across different creative communities – from local community projects to continuous professional development schemes for creative practitioners
- **That Southend is established as a Core Creative Place for the national and regional creative economy** - offering a fabric of infrastructure that enables high growth

alongside creative innovation and exploration. Here Southend will be recognised and valued as a Core Creative Place alongside the major cities and other high profile creative centres such as Brighton and Exeter.

A Long Way to Go: 5 Major Challenges and 5 Major Opportunities

If Southend is to fulfil these aims, it must respond positively to a series of structural, strategic and sectoral challenges, as well as energetically and collectively pursue a set of major opportunities. Currently, as will be shown throughout the report, there is a long way to go if either the Cultural Hub is to reach its true potential for Southend, and in turn if Southend is to respond positively and progressively to its current position on a set of real and imagined cultural, economic and social hierarchies. The headline opportunities and challenges for Southend are introduced below:

The 5 Major Challenges:

- **Southend has an underdeveloped Creative Economy, with a lack of depth and breadth in sector activity.** For example, it lacks medium-sized enterprises, does not have any significant sector specialism (bar emergent activity in digital media), and has weak supply chain relationships within the town and across the sub-region. The Cultural Hub must therefore develop in a location for which there is little track record of sector development.
- **Southend has an underdeveloped Creative Ecology, with weak networks and under-connected infrastructure.** Low visibility, low level confidence and the under-use of cultural infrastructure also provide challenges. That said, there are concentrations of intensive and high quality activity, such as visual arts and crafts in Leigh-on-Sea, community dance and performance across the town, or through the emergent connections driven through partners

such as those at Mediashed, Focal Point Gallery, and the Leigh Film Society.

- **Southend suffers from low levels of self-confidence and negative stereotypes** – proffered by both residents and non-residents. This represents a long-held challenge for the town that has had a detrimental impact on learning and skills attainment, business start-up rates, inward investment, visitor/tourist profiles, and social mobility.
- **Southend has lacked strategic leadership and effective partnership.** Until recently, strategic partners in Southend have not recognised the role of culture and creativity as a critical transformer of the town's and sub-region's fortunes. Support for culture and the Creative Industries has been piecemeal, short-lived, and too often limited to narrow partnerships. Support for a Cultural Hub must be established for the long term through multilateral partnership and it must be located as part of a much larger push for the 'cultural dividend' across previously under-connected partnerships.
- **Southend provides a challenging physical terrain for the development of high energy, deeply concentrated cultural and creative activity.** It is situated at the end of a railway line, thus lacking 'passing opportunities'; it is circumscribed by water to the east and south, by rural marshland to the north, and rural development to the west; it is a linear settlement with developments most intensive along arterial routes and thus spread across the town rather than concentrated at its heart; and the town centre suffers from a generally low quality public realm of piecemeal developments and a long, thin high street. However, as will be shown, these matters of physical and human geography are at once a real asset and critical marker of difference that bodes well for the town's creative transformation.

The 5 Major Opportunities:

- **Southend is home to an increasingly active, vocal and high quality Creative Ecology**, with real advances made in recent years to develop networks, showcase local talent, and explore new opportunities (such as the role of digitalisation for the creative process). By building on these existing processes, Southend can become a confident and distinctive centre for new types of creative process, with digital media an obvious strength, but the main strength being the convergence of activities – such as the fusion of underconnected activities in visual culture such as film, performing arts and animation. The arrival of Metal and East 15, a potential new Central Library, a major cultural destination at Cliffs Slip, and an improved theatre offer, can only add to this increasingly connected fabric of cultural infrastructure.
- **Southend provides a unique physical terrain for culture-led development.** It is the closest 'seaside town' to London, the 'end of the line' location can for some be alluring (especially given its proximity to London), it provides a fine grain landscape attractive to in-coming creative firms, it mixes a fine estuary setting with a diverse townscape, and it therefore has the potential to be a very attractive location for creative businesses displaced from London and open to opportunities to 'leapfrog the suburbs'. This distinctive mix provides a real opportunity through the ongoing Master Planning exercise. The opportunity exists for the Cultural Hub to sit at its heart – as a binding force in the physical landscape and a generator of ideas and connections in the cultural landscape.
- **Southend is already changing in many positive ways.** It is an increasingly diverse town, with the energy, innovativeness and connectivity that this brings. It is also located within the Thames Gateway – the largest regeneration and place-building exercise in the UK. As the largest town in Thames Gateway South Essex, and as the

only town with an emergent mix of the what have been defined by the DCMS as the 'infrastructural conditions for creative growth', along with Norwich and Cambridge its sits as the major opportunity site for the establishment of a Core Creative Place in the Eastern Region. For the Cultural Hub, the hugely impressive and significant development on the High Street of a new campus for South East Essex College, and the subsequent first phase development of the University of Essex, reflects this new confidence in Southend with both style and substance.

- **Southend is benefiting from new levels of spirited leadership and partnership.** For many years, the potential for the culture-led transformation of Southend was overlooked, with intervention too often piecemeal, short-term and supported by fragile partnerships. This is changing. From the Joint Prospectus on Culture at a regional level (led by Arts Council England East and EEDA), to the Creating Cultural Opportunities initiative at sub-regional level (led by TGSE), to current processes of Master Planning in Southend, culture no longer sits to the margins of strategy and partnership. However, much progress is still required here, with the Cultural Hub providing the major opportunity to bring partners together in a high profile, high quality and low risk cultural, economic and social opportunity for the town and its region.
- **Southend can benefit from a transformation in the conceptualisation and delivery of learning and skills.** Institutions such as universities and colleges are no longer those 'ivory towers' with debarring characteristics such as inaccessible buildings, weak knowledge transfer and little attention to postgraduate progression routes. Southend is set to benefit – indeed has the opportunity to shape – an agenda that prizes and invests in learning and skills facilities that connect to local communities, provide access to new flexible learning opportunities, conflate production and consumption activities, go beyond knowledge transfer to knowledge exchange, prioritise graduate retention and

return, and work to incubate a sector and a place as well as individual businesses. The Cultural Hub in Southend can embrace this new agenda to the benefit of the establishment of Southend as a genuinely creative place.

The 7 Key Parameters for the Cultural Hub

To maximise the potential of the Creative Economy and Cultural Ecology of Southend, and thus to address some of the issues of market failure and sector under-development introduced above, this report establishes a model for the development of a Cultural Hub with a set of 7 Key Parameters:

A: Creativity at the heart of an innovative academic offering:

The Cultural Hub is underpinned by high quality and innovative research and teaching – the lifeblood of any university. To succeed, the academic foundations of the Hub need to be in place. These include:

- **Cross-departmental Curriculum Development** – the Hub must promote and develop a rigorous and innovative cross-departmental offering in terms of teaching and research. This means in particular that East 15 that the School of Entrepreneurship and Business need to explore in detail the possibilities for joint working that could forge something genuinely innovative. The School of Health must be considered as well. There are possibilities that an International focus could be built up, based on Southend's increasing global connections.
- **Informal and formal academic links with the cultural sector** – the Hub will only truly build relationships with the town's varied and important cultural organisations if it integrates the relationship into academic practice. This means that it must explore integrating research and teaching with the organisations, and creating ways for students to benefit from the nationally and internationally recognised expertise in these organisations.

B: Quality of aspiration and openness define the Hub's relationship to the town:

The Cultural Hub has the chance to be something extraordinary in the everyday life of Southend. To do this it must not be all things to all people as that would render it vague. Rather, it must exist as an open, easy to access institution that positively embeds a quality of aspiration. It must raise the bar in terms of how a new university can become part of the life and soul of a town.

C: At the vanguard of where the public realm, architecture and art meet:

It is vital to the success of the hub that its physical being reflects the innovation and creativity of the rest of its existence. It must provide a variety of internal and external public spaces that allow for a variety of creative uses, including performance and showcasing. The architecture of the Hub, while allowing for the challenges of the site and the iterative nature of the Hub's build, must be of a lasting and deep quality.

D: Providing the types of creative space that Southend lacks:

While Southend is home to three leading organisations in the field of digital media work - Mongrel, Leigh film Society and Focal Point – it currently lacks facilities to properly project and showcase this cutting edge talent. In the future this trio will be joined by Metal and East 15, both of which will be working increasingly in the digital sphere. The Cultural Hub must include facilities that will enable the showcasing of digital work as well as providing the connectivity (through wifi and more) that will enable, to use the MediaShed's phrase, a 'rich media ecology encompassing multiple mediums to develop around the centre'.

E: Based on a funding model that bridges the creative and commercial:

The Hub must look more towards business models such as The Forum in Norwich and away from those of traditional arts centres and university projects. With revenue funding for the arts soon to be squeezed, it is vital that the Hub ensures that it has multiple revenue streams encompassing not only Regional bodies, the University and

the Council; but private partners such as in retail, food and drink, and property development.

F: The space where convergence and the knowledge economy come together:

The Hub must play a leading role in ensuring that Southend benefits economically from the rise of the knowledge economy. It can do this by ensuring that it becomes *the place* where different sectors and elements of the economy such as the commercial and creative, scientific and technology, producer and consumer can come together. Without a space for these dialogues the town cannot hope to be recognised as a Core Creative Place for the regional and national Creative Economy.

G: A magnet for creative talent: The hub must relate closely to the University and South East Essex College by working to ensure that as much of the creative talent enshrined in the 20,000 students that the two will have by 2010 is retained and kept. The town's retention of students is a complex area encompassing both economic prospects and quality of life issues, but the Cultural Hub must play an important role by linking together targeted enterprise support, business space and incubation, with close connections to the town's existing business community, to ensure that students are presented with an attractive proposition. The Hub must also play a role in establishing Southend and the wider sub-region as a place to return to if, as is often the case, the creative individual moved away upon graduation.

Specific Recommendations

The window of opportunity to exploit agreed and potential funds for the development of the Hub is not infinite. In particular there is a five year window of opportunity for HEFCE funds in relation to the development of University buildings. It is vital to ensure that iterative progress is maintained, particularly in a period which is likely to see a squeeze on arts and cultural funding. The Hub needs to maintain the 'rapid response' to opportunities: **impetus and momentum are vital**. The following recommendations are positioned as short-

to-medium 'must haves' for a successful and sustainable Cultural Hub over the longer term:

Recommendation 1: The Cultural Hub Steering Group needs to assume the key leadership and steering role. The steering group, consisting of members of the leading cultural organisations in the Borough, representatives from local, sub-regional and regional funding and strategic bodies, must be empowered to take forward the agenda of the Cultural Hub - thereby ensuring that the Hub, from its origins, is not perceived as a 'University-driven project' but as a key part of the Borough and region's cultural infrastructure. This will embed the Cultural Hub as of and for a Cultural Southend.

Recommendation 2: Establish a cross-Southend 'Creativity Executive', charged with mainstreaming creativity across key strategic agendas and establishing the implications of policy decisions from a creativity perspective. This should configure key directorates and be led by a team of sector champions from both the Creative Economy and Ecology. This provides the major supporting context for the Hub and ensures that the Hub alone is not tasked with carrying the cultural expectations of a transforming town.

Recommendation 3: Reinforce the sub-regional and regional strategic case. The role and value of the Hub must be strongly and vigorously articulated through the appropriate structures and mechanisms at a sub-regional and regional level. In particular, the TGSE 'Creating Cultural Opportunities' initiative and the EEDA/ACEE Joint Prospectus provide platforms to ensure that the Hub is built into the major regional cultural planning agenda.

Recommendation 4: Agree a Section 106 Policy for Culture and Creativity in Southend, with a designated proportion allocated to Cultural Hub development (for revenue and capital). The Creativity Executive will lead this process (its members will include Planners and members of the Development Team), guided by recommendations in the Thames Gateway South Essex Creating Cultural Opportunities Toolkit. This is a means of ensuring

cultural investment is *mainstreamed* within regeneration and transformation of the town, with the Cultural Hub at its heart.

Recommendation 5: Establish a Cultural Hub cross-school academic steering group The purpose of this steering group, comprising member of the three University schools represented at Southend, SEEC, and representatives from the leading cultural organisations in Southend, is to ensure the development of the unique, cross-discipline creativity and enterprise teaching and research offer on the Campus. This Steering Group will ensure that University, College and local college resources are pooled in a way that creates a genuinely new and attractive offer.

Recommendation 6: Demonstrate the economic value of the University to the Town. The University must, through its business plan, demonstrate the economic value it brings – currently and in the future. It must demonstrate that without its planned physical developments and the Cultural Hub concept, Southend will be economically and aspirationally poorer. With Southend engaging in a number of significant and costly developments, the University must build both confidence in its ability to deliver sustainable value for the town as well as prove that the ‘opportunity cost’ to develop the hub far exceeds the potential ‘opportunity lost’ if is not pursued.

Recommendation 7: Influence and respond to the emerging Master Plan and Local Development Framework. These represent a once in a generation opportunity and it is thus critical for the University and Cultural Hub to be included within the key planning documents for Southend. It is vital that they reference the full vision of the Cultural Hub within the development of the Central Southend area. If the plans for the Cultural Hub and the development of the University are not included, there is a real danger that development may be curtailed or hindered.

Recommendation 8: Establish a new name and brand to replace the ‘Cultural Hub’. It is currently a place-holding moniker and not a brand. A new name and brand is vital for the development of the Cultural Hub as a distinctive and unique offer. The term ‘Culture’ is too limiting, subjective and potentially exclusive in terms

of reaching to a wider audience; while ‘Hub’ is too hackneyed and location-limited to have meaningful and positive import.

Recommendation 9: Develop a programme of sector-led creative outward missions for Southend - to be led by creative businesses and organisations and to promote the Cultural Hub. This could include a presence at Venice Biennale; or a series of interventions at major media industry events (e.g. making trade-focused connections in Silicon Valley); or organisational partnerships (e.g. connecting Mediashed and the Hub to global artist residency programmes developed in the heart of a global digital media clusters – such as by the Montalvo Arts Centre in California).

Recommendation 10: Establish a Creative Learning and Skills Manifesto for Southend. This will identify and agree the key roles and responsibilities of key delivery partners to support the creative health and vitality of the town. The Cultural Hub in particular has a huge role to play in this – way beyond its function as the supplier of graduate labour. It forms a pivotal part of the network of people and institutions that underpin any knowledge economy and in their student populations, HE and FE institutions provide a large and ready audience for cheap, often experimental, music, art, film and other creative and leisure industries. The Manifesto will establish a set of actions that actively embed learning and skills partners (and thus the Cultural Hub) into the cultural mainstream – such as through network initiatives, utilising expertise to provide business support, and through capital developments such as incubation space.