PLYMOUTH White Papers

Issue 1: Ambition
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#PlymouthWhitePapers

An initiative by Luke Pollard MP

1. CHALLENGE
   Thoughtful pieces designed to confront and challenge

2. PROVOKE
   Views from people in Plymouth to make you think differently

3. INSPIRE
   Ideas to inspire and create political change through discussion
In 1946, filmmaker Jill Cragie set out to document the rebuilding of Plymouth in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In the closing sequence of the resulting film, The Way We Live, young people from across the three towns march along what would soon be Royal Parade carrying banners embroidered with their hopes for the city’s future. Alongside their calls for larger homes and safer roads is the demand for a theatre, youth clubs, swimming pools and, my personal favourite, ‘Less Monotony Please’.

How we define culture is the subject of much debate. For some, it’s synonymous with art: paintings and performances, literature and music. For others, culture is a much broader, less tangible thing, an ongoing conversation through which we debate and articulate the diverse history and hopes for the future that bind us together as Plymouthians. For others still, it is a growing industry in which products are made and services provided.

To be truly ambitious about the role of culture in Plymouth’s future, we must see each of these definitions as complimenting the others. Like those young people marching through the rubble of the Blitz, we must view culture as a kind of infrastructure, helping us not just to express our creativity, bring our communities closer together, and provide for economic growth—but all of these at once.

Culture-led Development

The latest figures show the UK’s creative industries to be growing at more than five times the rate of the country’s economy as a whole (SDG Economic Development, 2017). The sector is now ‘bigger than automotive, life sciences, oil and gas and aerospace combined’ (Serota, 2017). Accounting for 1 in 11 jobs in the UK and with a necessary human touch that ensures little risk
from automation (Kampfner, 2017), our nation is a world leader in such future-facing creative industries.

For a long time, the social and economic benefits of culture were held hostage by London. Nevertheless, over the past fifteen years, economists have increasingly made the case for placing culture at the centre of urban economic development in other cities, particularly in those like Plymouth which have often felt the less-positive repercussions of the shift to a service-driven economy (Miles and Paddison, 2005). Alongside these direct benefits, placing culture at the centre of a city’s development has also been shown to drive tourism, improve community cohesion, and reduce stress on health services.

In 2020, Plymouth will play a central role in the Mayflower 400 celebrations. Though rooted in the commemoration of events past, it also places in our path a springboard into the city’s future, allowing us to showcase the incredible cultural assets we already have and to foster the emergence of new ones.

**What We Have**

Plymouth is a modest city by nature, yet we live amongst some truly outstanding cultural organisations. Theatre Royal Plymouth, the Barbican Theatre, Plymouth Arts Centre, Peninsula Arts, and KARST all bring internationally-renowned artworks and performances to our city, entertaining and inspiring both visitors and locals alike. When it sheds its scaffolding, our innovative new history centre, The Box, will further add to the incredible culture Plymouth has to offer.

Despite this, in the past, there has been something of a disconnect between the city’s arts organisations and those who they serve. Although home to such prestigious organisations, for a long time Plymouth had the lowest levels of cultural engagement for any city in the South West (Plymouth Culture, 2013).

It’s worth noting both that these figures rely on a very particular definition of culture and that progress in cultural engagement has been made in the years since 2013. However, it does foreground the crucial challenge that lies in ensuring our cultural sector remains open and responsive to the wider city. In seeking to develop the city’s cultural offer, we must ensure we do not wipe away existing notions of what our city’s culture might be.

In short: culture in Plymouth is one thing, but how do we ensure that the culture being promoted is truly the culture of Plymouth?

“We must harness the power of our existing cultural institutions and lay the foundations for new ones in order to grow our own artists.”
Culture in Plymouth/Culture of Plymouth

In recent years there have been a number of projects which have set out to combine artistic excellence with community-ownership. The visual arts organisation Take A Part has developed a revolutionary approach to co-commissioning work with residents of Efford and Barne Barton. Rather than simply imposing public art upon the community, the focus has been on involving locals in decision-making processes and, increasingly, in the creation of the work itself.

Other such collaborative projects include We The People Are The Work (2017), Effervescent’s I.AM.NOT.A.ROBOT (2017) and productions such as Theatre Royal Plymouth’s Boots At The Door (2015), each work with sections of our community to create incredible animations, installations and performances. This approach has ensured a community ownership of the work and has also allowed the sharing of skills, awakening and developing creative and cultural abilities in people of all ages.

Perhaps another echo of Plymouth’s tendency to modesty, however, has been the long-held assumption that artists and creatives come to Plymouth from elsewhere. Often, where professional artists have been engaged by our cultural institutions, they have been imported. The flip side of this coin is that many of our brightest and best have chosen to move away. Plymouth has long been a net exporter of young people, and this is perhaps even more true in the cultural sector (Meethan and Beer, 2007).

In order to both feel the full economic benefits of the creative industries and also allow the culture originating in our city to be infused with that Janner twang, Blitz spirit, gallows humour and countless other local affects, we must harness the power of our existing cultural institutions and lay the foundations for new ones, to grow our own artists.

Growing Our Own Artists

The groundwork for this is certainly there. Many of our city’s arts organisations have expansive programmes of engagement including the Barbican Theatre’s Performance Training, Street Factory Studios’ Dance Crews, Plymouth Music Zone’s transformative groups for those of all abilities, and the Real Ideas Organisation’s work with young people in schools exploring how creative skills might combine with entrepreneurial ambitions.

Furthermore, against a backdrop in which creative skills have been increasingly marginalised in formal education, Plymouth School of Creative Arts places these at the centre of children’s development, and the Plymouth College of Art, as well as both our universities, provide a range of academic and vocational routes of training in creative skills and management.

With the establishment of Plymouth Culture to advocate and provide support for the sector and an increasing focus on partnership with the city’s existing organisations, Plymouth is fertile ground for the beginning of new creative ventures. Beyond Face, Plymouth Film Festival, New Model Theatre, Native Makers, U:1 Studios, Wonderzoo, Plymouth Fringe Festival and Imperfect Orchestra, to name but a few, are proof of this.
The challenge is now to ensure that our city remains a sustainable environment for such ventures to thrive, that support continues to exist for the emerging artists of the future, and that we harness the national awareness of our existing institutions and the spotlight that Mayflower 2020 will bring to Plymouth, to showcase the work of the incredible artists that inhabit our city.

**How Do We Support?**

The huge economic potential of the creative industries relies on a small, yet vitally important, foundation of public subsidy (Neelands, Easton and Robles, 2017). It is within subsidised organisations that passions are cultivated and skills grown. Elsewhere, small grants provide time and space for nascent ideas to be fleshed out and piloted.

Plymouth has had a huge boost from efforts by Arts Council England to achieve a greater parity of subsidy across the nation (Brown, 2017) yet there is still work to be done. Continued pressure from our elected representatives and residents alike can ensure that we get our fair share of this subsidy to unlock our city’s creative potential.

We must also look to explore how other models such as philanthropy, corporate sponsorship and investment by local government might allow for ever more ambitious cultural projects to take flight while flying the flag for local businesses in other sectors. To do so, we must better communicate the role cultural activity can play in driving tourism, filling our hotels and bars, and making our city an even more vibrant place to live, work and do business.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, what is key is that, as we look forward to Mayflower 2020 and far beyond, we are sure to manage a careful balancing act between growing culture in Plymouth and growing culture of Plymouth. In seeking the economic benefits of this growing sector, we must also ensure that the sculptures, sketches, dance, dramas, poetry and paintings that we raise up are ones that all in our city can take ownership of and feel pride in.

As the narrator of The Way We Live comments as he watches those young banner-carrying Plymothians of the 1940s:

“Cities of tomorrow, what will they be? Who can tell? Because their stories are still to be written by the citizens of today”

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PLYMOUTH White Papers

The Plymouth White Paper are an initiative by Luke Pollard MP. They are designed to provoke, inspire and challenge. The hope is that each set of white papers will contribute to the energy, direction and passion around Plymouth, our economy and campaigning.

These white paper submissions have been written by people across Plymouth. They have been free to voice their own opinions and these are their own words. The white papers are designed to be political and challenge established thinking but they’re not designed to be party political.

Want to get involved with a future white paper? Get in touch:

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