

**EXETER
NORTHCOTT
THEATRE**

CREATING CHANGE

LET'S IMAGINE

**A PLACE TRANSFORMED BY CULTURE
BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER**

HAPPIER, HEALTHIER, EXCITED, INSPIRED

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THE POWER TO CHANGE – OUR VISION

Change becomes possible when someone dares to imagine a different future. Big change happens when people come together to imagine a different future and unleash their collective power to make that a reality.

Theatre is also about coming together to imagine; a space where people can discover their creative talents, find the confidence to tell their story, and experience the privilege of stepping into someone else's shoes; an opportunity to feel part of something bigger. Theatre has the power to change lives.

We believe every person in Devon should have the chance to experience theatre, to get creative, to play an active part in the change they want to see, which is why we're changing as well, to make that happen.

We'll be listening to the people we work with and the communities we serve, and working with partners in theatres, community settings, digital spaces and other unexpected places, to make those opportunities as welcoming, accessible and inclusive as possible.

Let's imagine!

INTRODUCTION

Exeter is one of the fastest-growing small cities in the UK, consistently punching way above its weight in terms of its economic, social and cultural performance. It was awarded Garden City status in 2019 and UNESCO Cultural City status in 2020, and is now embarked upon an ambitious plan to build 12,000 new homes by 2040 and become one of the UK's first Net Zero Carbon cities by 2030. This vision of sustainable growth, with culture and quality of life at its heart, is being spearheaded by the Liveable Exeter Board, a powerful compact of local organisations, which holds the city's cultural compact with Arts Council England. This Business Plan sets out how the Northcott expects to play its part in this ambitious sustainable growth agenda, and how the change we're looking to make over the coming year will contribute to the wider process of cultural renewal within Exeter and the surrounding region.

In March 2021 Exeter Northcott Theatre published a Business Plan 2021/2022, which sought to chart the organisation's course out of lockdown, and on into the next phase of its development, with an ambitious vision of a changing role within the cultural life of Exeter & Devon, framed for the first time by Arts Council England's Investment Principles.

Six months on from the publication of that document, with early progress made against many of the objectives we set out at that time, and the first fragile signs of returning confidence starting to be seen within the theatre sector, we've approached the task of extending our planning into 2022/2023 as an opportunity to deepen our thinking about the Northcott's changing relationship with the communities it serves, and to diversify the range of voices and perspectives contributing to shaping our future direction.

We've therefore designed a consultative process to involve our staff team, our trustees, and our strategic, community and creative partners in an active dialogue about how the Northcott can best deliver what's important to them and the groups they represent.

This document summarises the key findings of the first stages of that consultation process, which we expect to complete during Autumn 2021, and seeks to translate these into an initial reframing of the organisation's Mission and Strategic Aims, identifying the kind of cultural organisation we want to become over the next five years and the key steps we'll need to take to achieve this.

What's already becoming clear is that, moving forwards, we're looking at taking a radically different, place-based/partnership approach to meeting the creative and cultural needs of the communities we exist to serve in Exeter and across the wider region, built on a recognition that it's a 'sense of place' that connects those communities, the staff and freelancers we employ, the artists we support and the organisations with whom we collaborate. It's likely that this will see us making a very different 'ask' of Arts Council England and our other funding partners as we move into a new NPO period.



STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Exeter Northcott Theatre exists to serve the communities of Exeter, Devon and the surrounding region by providing opportunities for people to engage with culture and to develop their creativity, particularly within the performing arts, and does this by working within a range of strategic/funding partnerships. It's therefore vital that this plan is built upon a firm understanding of those communities we exist to serve, and how our aims intersect with the priorities of those strategic/funding partners.

Our Audiences

The most detailed picture that we currently have of the demographic make-up of the constituency we exist to serve, and how that compares to the make-up of our existing audience, comes in the form of data produced by the Audience Agency, which uses a basket of indicators to categorise all UK households into one of ten 'Culture Segments', pointing to likely patterns of cultural engagement. By applying this approach to households within a 45min drive time of a venue, and comparing to an analysis of the venue's current audience, it's possible to see where gaps exist, and can be used over time to track progress.

According to a recent Area Report prepared for the Northcott by the Audience Agency, we know that 613k adults live within 45 mins drivetime of Exeter, of whom 42% said they had been to a theatre in the 12 months prior to Covid; 37% have dependent children; 80% are not limited by day-to-day ill health; and 3% identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic.

An Audience Finder 'Culture Segments' analysis of booking data from our last complete year of operation paints a clear picture of the composition and motivations of our current audience, and how it differs from the overall demographic profile of this area.

Audience Finder Segments

Culture Segment	45 min Drivetime	ENT Audience	Variance
Commuterland Culturebuffs Affluent & professional - consumers of culture	13%	24%	+11%
Dormitory Dependables Suburban & small town – interest in heritage & mainstream arts	17%	27%	+10%
Trips & Treats Mainstream arts/popular culture – influenced by children, family & friends	20%	16%	-4%
Home & Heritage Rural areas & small town – daytime activities & historical events	19%	9%	-10%
Experience Seekers Highly active, diverse, social, ambitious – engaging with arts on a regular basis	8%	8%	0%
Up Our Street Modest in habits & means – popular art, entertainment and museums	12%	5%	-7%
Facebook Families Younger suburban and semi-urban - live music, eating out and pantomime	7%	2%	-5%
Kaleidoscope	1%	1%	0%
Heydays	3%	1%	-2%
Metroculturals	0%	3%	+3%

What this analysis makes clear is that we currently have a significant over-reliance on the most engaged and affluent groups (Commuterland Culturebuffs and Dormitory Dependables) who we are over-serving by a combined 21% - but that we are struggling to reach the groups most likely to be experiencing socio-economic barriers (Trips & Treats, Home & Heritage, Up Our Street and Facebook Families) who we are under-serving by a combined 26%, pointing to a clear inclusion & relevance challenge for the organisation.

Whilst this segment data is useful for targeting interventions where clear geographical clusters of households from a particular under-served segment exists, we also need a more nuanced approach. It's important we understand and can respond effectively to the needs of under-served communities that are defined by shared characteristics, particularly protected characteristics, or by shared interests.

We can add this kind of detail to our understanding through the demographic data we capture from our audiences through surveys, through schemes such as our existing U26 membership, or the Access membership and VIP programmes that we are developing, and from data/insights shared by community partner organisations.

Current survey data, whilst currently not based on a big enough sample to provide definitive information, suggests that in our last complete year of operation 2.2% of our audiences identified as Black, Asian or minority ethnic, pointing to another intersectional inclusion & relevance challenge for the organisation.

Current ticket sales data also provides a snapshot of how the age profile of our audience compares to the overall age profile of the area we serve, and suggests, perhaps contrary to expectation, that we are currently performing better than average in attracting younger adults and underperforming when it comes to the 65+ age range.

Age Profile

Age Range	45 min Drivetime	ENT Audience	Variance
18-24 years	9%	8%	-1%
25-34 years	10%	17%	+7%
35-44 years	13%	16%	+3%
45-54 years	14%	17%	+3%
55-64 years	13%	13%	0%
65+ years	22%	12%	-10%

Moving forward, in addition to continuing to use Audience Agency 'Culture Segments' tools, we plan to significantly increase our use of direct customer surveys, as the only reliable mechanism for monitoring the diversity of who we're reaching while leaving individuals fully in control of how they identify and what data they give us.

Our Strategic Partners

Whilst we currently work directly with three main strategic/funding partners, these relationships frame a wide range of other working relationships:

1. Exeter City Council

In pursuit of its ambitions for sustainable growth, and with wellbeing and environmental responsibility at the heart of its thinking, Exeter City Council has for some time recognised the central role that Culture can play within the development of healthy communities and the animation of public and civic spaces.

In 2019, working closely with Exeter Culture and other partners, it oversaw the development of an Exeter Cultural Strategy, focusing on Exeter becoming a city of:

- Culture & the Environment
- Culture & Wellbeing
- Heritage Innovation
- Creative Making
- Cultural Literacy & Learning

In 2020, working with Exeter Northcott Theatre and Exeter Culture, and in partnership with Liveable Exeter, Exeter City Council commissioned a follow-up study looking specifically at the development needs of, and opportunities for the city's performing arts ecology post-Covid-19. This study identified a strong foundation of civic and cultural assets within the city, and considerable levels of innovation and creative thinking within the performing arts sector. It also identified a number of specific developments that could deliver significant return on investment, including:

- Positioning Exeter Northcott Futures as an anchor talent development programme for the city, working in tandem with partners including Maketank – providing vital ecosystem development;
- Advancing a 'Creative Academy' model to formalise partnerships with and between education institutions and the creative & cultural sector;
- Establishing an 'Exeter Commissions' programme – a statement of intent to scale-up and embed innovative practice – providing a major return on investment;
- A re-imagined and refurbished Barnfield Theatre managed by the Northcott, thereby turning the Northcott into a multi-location organisation, and driving programme development, with creative making and community engagement at its heart, and programming and audience development working seamlessly across both its venues – a key intervention which builds capacity, connects different parts of the ecosystem, and links the University and the city centre – providing a major return on investment.

It's clear that there is a need for the Northcott to develop its presence within the city centre and its engagement with and presence within a wider range of communities, in support of Exeter's ambitious sustainable growth agenda. There is also a need for the organisation to play a key enabling role in the development of an innovative and sustainable performing arts ecology within the city.

2. University of Exeter

With the Northcott Theatre sitting right at the heart of the University of Exeter's Streatham Campus, it is perhaps no surprise to learn that this is the Northcott's longest-

standing and most stable strategic partnership. For over fifty years, the theatre has delivered against key University objectives around attracting and retaining staff and students, by providing opportunities to engage with cultural programmes alongside academic pursuits, and in terms of the University's wider civic role, by attracting a broad cross section of the wider community onto the Campus with those same cultural programmes. Latterly the Northcott has also collaborated with the Drama department, providing line of sight into the theatre industry for undergraduates; with Special Collections on a major HLF-funded archive project; and with the Wellcome Centre for Cultures & Environments of Health, on a major AHRC-funded project looking to 'stage LGBTQIA+ experiences of loneliness and belonging'.

Over the last 18 months, the University has been considering its role within the local and regional cultural ecology, with three projects in development, with the aim of linking the institution directly into the creative and cultural sector and driving regional growth – City of Literature (co-ordinated by Exeter Culture); Creative Arc (a collaboration with the RAMM), and Creative Futures (within which the Northcott hopes to play a key role, perhaps with a focus on data and environmental responsibility). This work has also informed early thinking about the development of the Northcott site into an ambitious 'Creative and Cultural Hub', with enhanced theatre facilities alongside a range of other creative and cultural spaces and opportunities. The University had been about to embark on a feasibility study in Spring 2020, when Covid-19 forced this work to be suspended. It is hoped this will resume soon.

3. Arts Council England

Arts Council England funding made up less than 5% of the Northcott's income pre-Covid, and, as a Tier#1 NPO, the theatre enjoys a 'lighter touch' working relationship with its principle cultural funder than many other, similar-scale regional theatres. However, the aims and investment principles set out in ACE's Let's Create Strategy, and explored in more detail elsewhere within this document, are fully reflected in the developments that the theatre is currently undertaking.

A key ambition for the Northcott and its other strategic/funding partners is to 'reset' the theatre's partnership with Arts Council England, based on an understanding of the organisation's current direction of travel, as it seeks to become a regionally-significant driver of inclusive creative and cultural innovation in Exeter and across Devon.



OUR CONSULTATIVE PROCESS

The consultative process we designed and have been executing comprises six steps:

PART ONE

1. ACE Investment Principles Workshops

We invited consultant/trainer Pippa Warin to run two sessions, one with staff and one with trustees, to explore ACE's Let's Create Strategy and the thinking and values contained within the associated Investment Principles, and to reflect on how these might relate to the specific circumstances and priorities of the Northcott.

Coming out of these sessions staff and trustees indicated which of the Investment Principles they would each be most interested in exploring further.

2. Exeter Northcott Theatre Principles Open Space

Our new Co-Chairs, Ben Qasim Monks & Becky Chapman, convened and ran a half day Open Space conversation for staff and trustees to come together and explore the big strategic questions facing the theatre within this process.

3. Staff/Trustee Working Groups #1

We brought staff and trustees together again in four Working Groups, each looking at one of the Investment Principles and considering the change we want to see in the next five years, how we might go about achieving that, and the metrics and mechanisms we could use to measure our progress.

4. Strategic Partner Dialogue/Feedback

We shared the work of these four groups with our strategic partners, University of Exeter, Exeter City Council and Arts Council England, and incorporated feedback.

PART TWO

5. Community Partner Dialogue/Feedback

At the next stage of this process, we plan to consult with our community partners to test the priorities emerging from our conversations to date, to hear what these groups want to see Northcott delivering over the next five years, and incorporate feedback.

6. Staff/Trustee Working Groups #2

And finally, we plan to reconvene our four Working Groups to review the specific targets we've set ourselves and the associated delivery plans, with the intention that some version of these groups will continue to meet and keep these targets and delivery plans under review, with trustee members reporting back to the Board.

INCLUSIVITY & RELEVANCE

Our Working Group started by discussing the twin challenges facing any theatre seeking to respond meaningfully to this Investment Principle – firstly, the fact that UK theatres have been content to let expectations, systems of behaviour and language that exclude some sections of society build up over so many generations that the very ‘cultural artefact’ of theatre has become a barrier to many - and secondly, the fact that identifying, let alone reaching out to, those people we’re currently excluding, to begin a conversation about how we could become more relevant to their lives and needs, is extremely difficult.

We discussed Inclusivity being about people recognising themselves in who we are and what we do, and Relevance being about people understanding why that’s important; and noted the need to be clear that inclusion is about more than just what’s on our stages, and thinking about relevance needs to be informed by a real understanding of what ‘under-served communities’ mean in the context of Exeter and the South West.

We need to be able to talk confidently about specific protected characteristics and other barriers to engagement, and be ready to explain how we’re targeting action and be willing to have difficult conversations about balancing the needs of different groups.

We noted that it would be all too easy for an organisation to feel a pressure around this issue, with it being the only Investment Principle that ACE has singled out for all NPOs to work on, and the only Investment Principle where NPOs receive an annual rating that is published and available to one’s peers. Consequently, it feels as though there’s a danger of organisations having inauthentic conversations focused on ticking funding boxes. We know that there are different ways of doing this work, and what’s important for us right now is finding an approach that is an authentic reflection of who we are as an organisation, and the make-up and needs of the communities we serve.

We agreed that it’s important to reflect on the progress we’re already beginning to make in this area, as well as on what still has to change, and noted that over the last couple of years we’ve initiated a range of new partnerships and piloted a range of new ways of working, directly linked to this Investment Principle, and we must keep developing and deriving the learning from these, alongside any new initiatives.

We know that effecting meaningful change will require sustained investment over time, as we seek to nurture trust, engagement, confidence and a sense of ownership within communities for whom we may simply not have felt relevant previously.

We recognise that we will probably need to move forward on two parallel timelines – one that starts with a detailed mapping exercise, using a range of data and internal and external perspectives to establish baselines for how different aspects of our operation perform in relation to different protected characteristics and barriers, and looks to develop a long-range action plan and associated targets – and one where we continue to respond dynamically to emerging needs/opportunities.

Thinking about how this might translate into action, we focused on five areas:

1.1 WHO WE ARE

To ensure that anybody living in Devon feels able to approach us and get involved in what we're doing, whether as an audience member, a participant, a volunteer or a member of staff, we need to be able to demonstrate that our team, including our trustees, reflects the diversity of the communities we serve, and that our working culture is inclusive and welcoming of all. Therefore, recruiting, retaining and equipping a diverse team to deliver that welcome, and finding ways to communicate this priority effectively, must be right at the top of our to-do list.

We recently piloted a new inclusive approach to our recruitment of an Associate Director and a cohort of new Trustees, with both campaigns attracting a significantly more diverse pool of candidates than normal, so we now need to refine our standard recruitment processes to embed the learning from these, and carefully monitor whether we manage to build on this positive first step. We're also keen to explore options for using targeted positive action around entry-level or career progression roles, and will consider deploying this for any suitable positions.

We recently invested in a suite of training for staff and trustees around unconscious bias and anti-racism, but it's clear that this was just a first step, and we will now look at providing regular (perhaps quarterly) training, supporting staff to contribute to the development of an inclusive working culture and deliver an inclusive welcome for all, by raising awareness of the barriers associated with different protected characteristics, and modelling, encouraging & supporting different behaviours.

We recently commissioned Louisa Adjoa Parker and Louise Boston-Mammah of The Inclusion Agency to work with our team over an extended period to review all aspects of our operation, help us understand external perceptions of the organisation within under-served communities, develop a long-range equality, diversity & inclusion action plan and targets, and provide on-going mentoring/support while we deliver that.

We know that, in common with most UK theatres, we have significant work to do to overcome historic perceptions of the Northcott as a venue appealing predominantly to white, able-bodied, middle-class audiences. Whilst this is clearly a deep-rooted problem which will require a multi-faceted solution, there is much that we can do to signal our change in direction through the visual identity we project, both through our various communication channels and in the look and feel of our buildings. We are therefore planning a raft of new video content communicating our values and a make-over of both our Northcott and Barnfield public spaces.

As part of our process of thinking about who we want to *become*, we've also been looking back into the Northcott's history, courtesy of a HLF-funded archive project, to discover who we *were*, and how the organisation has already been changing. This has involved us in addressing and sensitively contextualising problematic aspects of our history and we're mindful we need to own these as we move forward.

1.2 WHO WE'RE LISTENING TO

If we want to disrupt established expectations about who we're here to serve, then we have to be ready to share the decision-making power and resources that we control, and involve a more diverse range of voices and perspectives in informing what we do and how we do it, and that has started with a new approach to listening.

We need to be listening better to existing audiences/participants – which is what our Real Views focus groups were initially set up to achieve, and why we'll be restarting and expanding these as we re-open after lockdown. It also means finding ways to ensure we're hearing the perspectives of people we aren't currently engaging.

We've piloted some approaches to this that have suggested that working in partnership with community-based organisations, already trusted by the groups we want to hear from, can yield results, so long as we give the process time, and recognise that people who don't yet value what we do can't be expected to give us their time and views with no reimbursement for the value of their input.

We also recently piloted a creative consultation with a group of young people who haven't been engaging with the Northcott, leading towards the development of a manifesto outlining the creative opportunities they want to see available in Exeter.

1.3 MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

We can't expect people unfamiliar with who we are and what we do to suddenly feel comfortable walking through our front door and trying something new, so it's important we start any new relationship-building from the perspective of meeting someone 'where they are'.

This might mean getting out of the building to meet someone or making something creative happen in a space where they feel comfortable. It might mean recognising that they'll feel more confident initially doing something they're already familiar with rather than trying something new, or that they need the support of family and friends around them to try something new, or that they need to know that they'll have a consistent/friendly point of contact in any dealings they have with the theatre. It might also be about socio-economic barriers and the availability of genuinely affordable tickets. There's not a one-size-fits-all approach. It's about recognising that we must be alert to these needs and be ready to adapt.

We're hoping that the city-centre location and informality of the Barfield Theatre will provide a useful stepping-stone for us engaging with some groups who would be reticent to access the more formal Northcott Theatre on the University campus.

1.4 HOW WE SHAPE OUR PROGRAMME

We have to find a way to ensure, and demonstrate that the conversations we're having with the communities we're seeking to serve, and the ideas and ambitions that we're hearing, directly inform the composition of our creative programme, including work on our stages, our projects & participation programme and digital outputs, and that as part of this we're positively impacting the representation of under-served groups within our programme.

1.5 A LEADERSHIP ROLE

Being seen to do this work mustn't become more important than the change we're really trying to make, however, given the platform we have within the local community and regional creative sector, ensuring the visibility of our journey towards inclusivity & relevance has the potential to act as a powerful catalyst for change within other organisations.

This visibility should include a high level of transparency around our plans and targets in this area, the resources we're allocating to this work, the progress we're making and the challenges we're wrestling with, and it should include active solidarity for artists and communities with whom we're collaborating.

A leadership role could also extend to actively sharing learning, training and resources with other cultural or community organisations locally, and actively seeking to develop partnership working on this locally and/or regionally.



ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Our Working Group began by considering the moral imperative to engage with the issues thrown up by the climate emergency, and reflected on the fact that, whilst theatre is not generally a massively polluting industry, there is plenty that we can do to reduce our carbon footprint, and lots more that we can do to drive awareness and behaviour change in the theatre sector and by using the platform we have within the communities we serve.

We also noted ACE's shift from talking about 'environmental sustainability', which has always seemed to suggest a local focus, to talking now about 'environmental responsibility', which points to a much wider role and sphere of influence.

Looking forward and reflecting on how we can put environmental responsibility more firmly at the heart of our work and working practices, we've focused on understanding and addressing our direct and indirect environmental impacts, and thinking about how we can play a leadership role in this area:

2.1 OUR BUILDINGS

Neither the Northcott Theatre nor the Barnfield Theatre were built with any consideration of environmental performance, nor have they had any interventions since they opened that have significantly improved their efficiency in terms of energy and water usage. However, we have recently been working with architects to explore the scope for making adaptations to the fabric and mechanical/electrical infrastructure of the Barnfield Theatre, as part of a refurbishment project, that would enable it to meet the EnerPHit standard (the retrofit version of the Passivhaus net zero carbon standard) which seems eminently achievable. With the possibility of a refurbishment and development project at the Northcott Theatre also under discussion again, there may be an opportunity coming up for us to work with both Exeter City Council and University of Exeter to underline our collective commitment to net zero carbon, by making both of these cultural buildings examples of best practise in this respect.

2.2 OUR OPERATIONS

As an ACE NPO, we've been participating in the 'Julie's Bicycle' environmental monitoring exercise for a number of years, however we're aware that this only provides the most basic snapshot of our environmental performance. By gathering a much more bespoke set of data, and working at a departmental level to review procurement and working practices, we hope to reach a real understanding of where we can deliver meaningful improvement to our operational environmental performance.

We're in touch with the work of ABTT/Theatres Trust to develop a set of industry environmental standards/toolkits, with a BETA version of the 'Green Book' production standards/toolkit now published, and operations and touring standards/toolkits due for release very soon. We're therefore about to have an opportunity to begin benchmarking our operations against these Green Book

standards as soon as they are released, and it may be helpful to set ourselves a timeline for progressing through the different levels of adherence, with the standards offering Bronze, Silver & Gold levels.

Although our operations don't generate significant levels of direct travel/transport, it will be important to include staff travel to/from work and suppliers travel/transport within our analysis of environmental performance, and to consider ways in which we can minimise the impact of these.

In addition to moves already underway to remove single use plastic and increase recycling within our food & beverage operation, we could also use the post-lockdown 're-set' of our catering offer to look at a 'statement' change linked directly to our environmental mission, such as moving to a vegetarian only food offer, which might also provide us with a useful differentiator in terms of the appeal of our daytime/University trade.

2.3 OUR CREATIVE PROGRAMME

With the majority of our performance programme being made up of touring product, our ability to reduce the environmental impact of this part of what we do is, again, largely a question of the values we apply to procurement. It may be that we need to set ourselves an increasing target for the proportion of shows in our programme that are being produced/toured in accordance with the industry-recognised Green Book standards.

We do, however, produce or co-produce a small proportion of our programme, as well as running a wide range of project & participation activities, so it's important that we also hold ourselves to these same industry standards. Again, it may be useful to set ourselves a timeline for progressing through the different levels of adherence to the Green Book standards in respect of the work we make or deliver.

There is also a clear opportunity for us to encourage our audiences to engage with the wider discourse about climate change and environmental responsibility by featuring creative responses to the climate emergency within our performance programme, by including information about our approach to environmental responsibility within our wider communications, and by developing partnerships with environmental groups as part of our work with young people and communities.

2.4 OUR AUDIENCES

Although we don't yet have solid data about the environmental impact of our audiences' travel and other behaviours linked to attending Northcott events, we know that a significant proportion of our audience travel from outside Exeter, with the vast majority of this group relying on the use of a car, meaning that this is likely to be one of the biggest indirect environmental impacts of our work, and potentially one of the trickiest areas for us to address. As we re-open post-lockdown, there is an opportunity for us to engage audiences with the story of our journey towards net zero, to improve the data we're collecting about our audiences' travel and its

environmental impact, and to pilot a radical approach to involving our audiences in responding to this.

An innovative approach that we discussed looked to reward audience members who use an environmentally friendly means of getting to the theatre (perhaps with 'Green Points' that can be built up and redeemed for tickets to future shows), and offer audience members who use a non-environmentally friendly means of getting to the theatre the option of 'offsetting' their carbon use with a donation to a 'Green Fund' that supports Northcott environmental initiatives, and environmentally-friendly creative projects within the community.

2.5 A LEADERSHIP ROLE

If we approach this as both a process and a campaign, getting our own house in order and doing what we can to drive positive change more widely, then we could play a cultural sector leadership role on this issue, locally and regionally.

We should be leading by example, with a transparent approach to sharing our journey towards net zero carbon, the targets we set ourselves, the resources we're allocating to this work, and our progress against meeting those targets. We should be leading by fostering partnerships where we think we can achieve more working collaboratively, for example in terms of data gathering/analysis (perhaps a partnership with University of Exeter) or new approaches to procurement (perhaps a partnership with other Exeter venues). And we should be leading 'politically', by making the case that the cultural sector has a key role to play in mobilising the community engagement necessary to deliver Exeter City Council's ambitious net zero carbon target, and its wider Live Better quality of life objectives.

2.6 A REALISTIC APPROACH

We recognise that this work needs to be based on a firm foundation of data, so a vital first step is to identify a suitably-qualified research partner/critical friend who can help us arrive at an agreed set of metrics to monitor, and mechanisms for systematically capturing this information. Exeter has significant expertise in this field, with University of Exeter and Exeter City Futures both contributing to national and international debate around climate change and the way cities are responding to the issues it's throwing up. We should look to build on our existing links with both these organisations as we develop this area of our work.

We're also clear that this work will need an appropriate level of resourcing, both in terms of dedicated staff/management time, and budget to support expert input, operational pilots, infrastructure adjustments, environmentally-friendly procurement and community engagement/communications.



DYNAMISM

Our Working Group focused initially on the characteristics of dynamism and noted that the Northcott isn't starting from scratch when it comes to embracing these, with the last three years having been characterised by an extraordinary pace of change within the organisation, and in the relationships that it has with the communities it serves, the artists who look to it for support, and the strategic partners with whom it collaborates.

At the time of writing this plan, the theatre has a multi-faceted programme of community consultation, pilot projects and evaluation underway; we've just welcomed a diverse cohort of new Trustees to our team; and we are about to lay the foundations for the next stage in the transformation of the Northcott and its role within Exeter by taking on the management of an under-used, city-centre cultural venue and reimagining it as a 'creativity & wellbeing hub' for the community; and we've achieved this in dialogue with our partners and through a dynamic working relationship between our management and Board.

Looking forward, and reflecting on how we might further embed dynamism within our working culture, our discussions focused on the following areas:

3.1 VALUE

In common with many regional theatres, our current business model is based on striking a balance between a set of charitable and a set of commercial objectives. With the organisation reliant on commercial income generation to sustain its charitable activities, it matters to us *both* how many tickets we're selling *and* who we're engaging and what impact we've having. 'Value' means different things depending on which bit of our operation we're looking at.

We don't currently have a clear enough picture of the different types of value that we're seeking to create to ensure we're using the right metrics to gauge how we're doing, and gathering data in the best way to inform that assessment.

3.2 DATA

We've taken great strides in recent years in terms of the breadth of information we're gathering, with quantitative data about our audiences/participants now supported by qualitative insights into audience experience from a range of focus groups, and external evaluation of the impacts of our participatory work.

We're also now using a wider variety of digital tools than ever to gather data, although we're mindful that, as an organisation that's all about human contact, we need to keep a human dimension in all our interactions, even data gathering!

Moving forward, and linked directly to the development of our thinking about the different kinds of value that we're seeking to create, we discussed designing a 'dashboard' of the key metrics we want to monitor over the next five years, together with a plan for practically how we'll collect the data we need to populate it; the aim being that staff/Trustees/partners will be able to maintain an overview of the

progress the organisation is making towards its strategic objectives, and see how individual projects or programme areas are contributing to that progress.

We're interested in the possibility of developing a strategic partnership with the University around the collection/analysis of cultural sector data, and exploring the potential for a place-based consortium approach to the use of data, turning what is probably currently an area of weakness into a key strength for the city.

3.3 DIGITAL

During lockdown we've experimented with a range of digital approaches to making work and engaging with audiences, and we've begun to explore where *either* these might be of commercial value to the organisation, for example charging for streaming or using tools such as Crowd Engage to improve customer service and drive income generation, *or* where they might be better suited to helping us achieve our audience engagement objectives, for example through digital creation projects with communities or young people. We now need to reflect on the learning from these experiments, decide to what extent we want to maintain an online space as well as our physical spaces in future, and consider where we should invest next.

3.4 WORKFORCE

Our ability to be dynamic is directly reliant on us having access to a skilled, flexible, diverse workforce that we can deploy across a rapidly changing creative programme, so we are thinking now about investing in local talent, ensuring our pay, conditions and working culture attract and retain the best people, and broadening access to volunteering opportunities.

3.5 BUILDINGS

Arguably the least dynamic thing about the Northcott is its building, so at the same time as working to increase the potential for dynamism within our current building (prioritising accessibility/flexibility alongside commercial viability in the conversations about a potential refurbishment and development project), we also need to build on recent moves to take work out of the Northcott Theatre and off campus, into the city centre via the Barnfield Theatre, and out into a range of community settings, where we can connect with and respond creatively to the needs of a diverse range of groups.

3.6 IDENTITY

How we define ourselves, and how we communicate our identity to the communities we serve and the people and organisations with whom we work, is perhaps one of the biggest factors in determining how much 'space' we have within which to be dynamic. For many years the 'Northcott' has been synonymous with its building, and arguably our (and our audiences') expectations about what we do, have been limited by the constraints of that building. However, having developed a much more diverse/dispersed programme through lockdown we now need to consider whether that's still how we choose to identify moving forward, or if it's time to redefine ourselves as a multi-platform, place-based, creative organisation that also happens to run a number of cultural venues?

3.7 TIME

We understand that, paradoxically, being dynamic takes time – both in terms of the *hours* that individual members of the team need to think beyond the immediate demands of their roles, and the *years* that deep partnerships and major strategic developments take to realise, as evidenced by the fact that it'll have taken nearly four years to get from the closure of the Bike Shed to the relaunch of the Barnfield Theatre, which is a dynamic response by the Northcott to that situation. We need to reflect the time this work takes within our planning and resource allocation.

AMBITION & QUALITY

Our Working Group started by exploring the concepts of 'industry standard', where an organisation is judged to have reached an accepted/expected level of quality in a particular area, and 'gold standard', where an organisation is recognised by its users/partners/peers to have pushed beyond that level, demonstrated excellence in a particular area, and found ways to communicate learning and expertise with others.

We agreed that we need to identify those areas of our operation where we feel we could become the 'gold standard', with the ambitious pursuit of quality both driving performance and delivering reputational gains, and those areas where we are content to be 'industry standard', with a clear picture of what that standard is.

We noted that absolute notions of quality were exceptionally difficult to apply within a creative field, and that a mature cultural organisation should be seeking to assess the quality of everything it does in the context of its stated objectives - are we delivering what we set out to achieve? - and by involving a diverse range of voices in this process - if we want to mean more to more people we need to listen to a more diverse range of views.

We recognised that involving a diverse range of voices will mean that we need a broad range of evaluative tools at our disposal, and whilst we've piloted some new approaches, including establishing a number of Real Views focus groups made up of different cross-sections of current attenders and non-attenders, and working with an external evaluator on projects & participation activities, we haven't yet embedded the use of ACE's Impact & Insights Toolkit. This has largely been an issue of capacity, but we are keen to implement this, and believe that we could be well-placed to help develop a network of Devon-based peer-reviewers. We also plan to extend our use of diverse Real Views focus groups, review the benefits of working with an external evaluator when the current project concludes, and explore enlisting Northcott staff & trustees as reviewers, so that our whole team is regularly thinking about quality.

We also discussed three key strategic ambitions that we were keen to focus on over the next few years: realising our plans to take over the Barnfield Theatre and transform it into a 'creativity & wellbeing hub' for the city; positioning the Northcott to lead a major place-based cultural partnership or initiative within the city; and enhancing Exeter's cultural standing by programming at least one event of international significance every year.

We then focused on a number of key areas where we are ambitious to drive quality:

4.1 CREATIVE PROGRAMME

Whilst traditional measures of artistic quality, such as production values and audience reaction/participant experience etc. will obviously continue to be useful reference points, there was general agreement that the *diversity* of our creative programme also now needs to be seen as a key quality objective, both in terms of the representation of a broader range of voices/lived experience within our work and the

mix of genres/experiences on offer. It was also felt that the provision of opportunities for new artists to be making new work attracting new audiences should be a priority.

It was acknowledged that there could be 'risks' associated with both of these developments, for example if the work of diverse or emerging artists is programmed into the 'wrong space' from an artistic or commercial perspective, or if the Northcott fails to provide the resources/expertise needed to deliver quality diverse programming or effective production support. However, it was felt that the variety of spaces we'll have at our disposal at the Barnfield Theatre should allow us to get the 'fit' right for any project that we're supporting, and we can invest in diversifying our programming team and strengthening our production capacity.

The fact that we predominantly programme visiting artists/companies rather than producing our own work, that we're often booking shows long before they've been produced, and that our performance programme encompasses a wide range of artforms, makes delivering consistent quality and diversity particularly challenging. We're currently reliant on the experience of our Artistic Director/CEO, coupled with the advice/views we can access from industry networks/contacts, to determine what finds its way into our programme, and we need a greater breadth of artform expertise and lived experience within our team to ensure we are including the very best quality work within our programme. From both a quality and diversity perspective this is something we need to address.

We noted that there is a danger of confusing ambition with scale. Bigger isn't always better, and it's important to remember that quality is about making work at the 'right' scale, and sometimes the artists/projects we'll want to support will need a smaller canvas or be seeking to connect with a more niche audience.

4.2 FACILITIES & WELCOME

In customer feedback received through our existing mechanism of post-visit surveys, we're consistently rated highly for the welcome and level of service that we offer, with slightly lower ratings for some aspects of our building and facilities, such as auditorium seating and toilet provision. However, in more detailed focus group feedback just prior to lockdown, we were starting to hear customers paint a recurrent picture of the theatre feeling run-down, and struggling to live up to their expectations for a 'great night out'. We clearly need to be listening to this.

Last year, we responded to poor feedback about the experience of trying to book tickets through our website, with the development of an entirely new website that projects a fresh, modern, friendly energy and has transformed this vital part of our customer journey. What we perhaps hadn't considered is how this website makeover would exacerbate the disconnect between the quality of our digital front door and the experience people have when they come through our physical front door. The theatre currently feels more run down than ever. So, how can we quickly and dramatically address perceptions of the condition of the building?

With support from the University we are refurbishing our auditorium seating this Autumn, and, subject to us receiving an expected insurance windfall, we hope to deliver a thorough cosmetic overhaul of all the Northcott's public spaces later this year, based on plans we have been developing with an interior designer.

Aware that we will soon encounter many of these same issues with the Barnfield, we have also been developing cosmetic overhaul plans for that building, working with the same interior designer to begin the process of aligning the two venues, and we hope to implement these soon after taking over.

Beyond the immediate response to this important feedback about our spaces and facilities, we need to consider why we weren't picking this up through our existing channels, and think about what feedback/response mechanisms we want to have in place in future to ensure we're hearing our customers' views and responding seriously to their concerns.

4.3 FACILITIES & ACCESSIBILITY

Whilst accessibility is partly a function of 'Welcome', in terms of how inclusive the services we offer are, it is also very much a question of the physical accessibility of our spaces, and how we ensure access to our Creative Programme.

In respect of the Northcott Theatre building, which was designed in the 1960s without serious consideration of access issues and continues to present significant physical barriers for disabled customers and artists, we have probably relied too heavily in recent years on the narrative that any significant tackling of these issues will be down to our landlords, University of Exeter, and therefore falls outside our sphere of influence. However, we have a responsibility to think about what we can do now to improve access, at the same time as working with the University on how they might invest in the accessibility of their cultural infrastructure. Commissioning an up-to-date access audit, that reflects the site's use as a cultural venue as well as its University use, would be a good starting point.

We are about to face many of these same issues at the Barnfield Theatre, and have already begun to consider improvements to physical accessibility in the work we've been doing with architects on refurbishment plans for that venue.

Alongside considerations of physical accessibility, we have an opportunity to build on the excellent work we've already done on the provision of assisted performances, investing in the skills of our team in this area and the equipment we have at our disposal, and then looking at how we can share these resources with other cultural venues in Exeter and across the South West.

We already have strong informal partnerships with a number of organisations working specifically with people with access needs, and over the last few years have drawn on their advice as we've sought to address access issues. In future we will widen this out to include a broader cross-section of attenders and non-attenders, and recognise that an access-focused Real Views group would provide vital insight.

4.4 HEALTH & SAFETY

We have taken huge strides in this area over the last couple of years, with a comprehensive external audit of the organisation's Health & Safety performance in providing the basis for an action plan that we've been delivering since 2019. This has included the introduction of improved management systems, the provision of enhanced safety equipment, and a big investment in staff training. With the theatre now re-opening post-lockdown, we are at an ideal moment to revisit that audit and refresh that action plan, to start sharing the story of how we've been improving our Health & Safety performance, and alongside our Futures professional development programme, introduce the regular sharing of Health & Safety training opportunities with individuals and organisations in the South West.

4.5 PEOPLE & PARTNERSHIPS

Many of the most valuable insights into how we can improve the quality of what we do are likely to come from the staff and freelancers we work with and the partners we collaborate with. We therefore need to ensure that our HR processes enable our team to tell us what we need to hear, and ask us for the support and professional development they need, and that we build effective evaluative processes and space for reflection and learning into all of our projects and partnerships.

WELLBEING

One further priority area that has emerged from early conversations is 'Wellbeing', thinking both about how we look after our team, and how we might be able to play a part in delivering a wider civic approach to wellbeing within the communities we serve.

5.1 WORKFORCE

Even before Covid, there was a serious recruitment and retention problem within the theatre sector, due to excessive workloads, inadequate training and professional development, limited progression routes and poor pay and conditions.

Added to this, the sector had become heavily reliant on freelance and casual staff in many creative and operational roles, and maintaining a suitably-skilled teams had already become a business-critical issues for theatres in some regions.

The lockdown has simply exacerbated these problems, with some core staff and many freelance and casual workers having left the industry to take up roles in other sectors, often with better pay and conditions, and remaining staff exhausted from the experience of the last 18 months and now facing the possibility of even tougher working patterns as the industry starts to re-open.

We're also conscious that, as we get involved in more projects with under-served communities, often where the work we're doing is responding to specific or complex needs, we're increasingly asking members of our team to work in situations where they're being called upon to be mindful of the wellbeing of colleagues, collaborators and project participants, and we will have to think about how we support them to do this whilst also looking after themselves.

We clearly need to address staff concerns about wellbeing as a matter of urgency, and there was general agreement that every member of the team has shared some version of the stresses and strains of the last year. Rather than simply expecting managers to come up with solutions and implement them, we need to take a more collective approach to this, perhaps with an external facilitator helping us think about what we want the Northcott's working culture and conditions to be in future, and how we make the organisation as inclusive as possible.

5.1 COMMUNITY

One of the key changes that we've seen in our programme over the last couple of years is the amount of projects & participation activity we're undertaking with an explicit focus on supporting the wellbeing of participants, and how this has allowed us to reach beyond the traditional profile of Northcott audiences/participants.

Moving forward we want to build on this work, use the Barnfield Theatre as a platform for reaching out to a wider range of groups with creative conversations about wellbeing, and align what we're doing with Exeter City Council's Live Better strategy.



