

We Are Island! Supporting and Developing the Isle of Wight's Cultural Offer

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The Isle of Wight is home to a growing number of creative practitioners, many of whom have moved to the Island inspired by its natural beauty, its strong sense of community and the wealth of opportunities it offers. Since 2019 [the Island Collection](#) has brought together a network of creative people and organisations to help establish the Island as a significant cultural environment and destination.

In October 2022 SPC Director, Simon Eden, took part in a conversation with creative practitioners from both the Island and the Mainland, an event design to begin the discussion about a new cultural strategy for the Isle of Wight. It took place in a marquee being set up for the weekend's Hullabaloo Festival: an appropriate location as the Festival offers a showcase for local culture and creativity.

The wide range of participants in the day's presentations and discussions demonstrated the rich variety of cultural practice across the Island, and the depth of enthusiasm for producing a unique Island offer: a participant spoke about "culture by Islanders for Islanders". Cultural practice and activity across the Island is very much 'bottom-up' originating with freelancers and sole practitioners: what one participant called the Island's "Hidden Heros". Another described how proud he was of the "place-based" dimension of culture across the Isle of Wight.

Taken together, activity across the Island shows what culture can achieve for the local community, with initiatives, projects and plans which address people's physical and mental health and wellbeing, are designed to help young people develop skills or aim to protect and restore the natural environment. It offers a distinctive profile for a place which can all too often be forgotten by those on "The Mainland". Overall, the plethora of cultural and creative activity is a strong component of the Island's sense of self and identity, something that generates a sense of pride.

There was enormous enthusiasm in the tent for building on this solid local base to, as one speaker described, make culture "an engine for change". The Chair of the Island Collection spoke about the Island's ambition, and the importance of enabling the cultural sector to grow and flourish. He was anxious to avoid the "false starts" which he felt had too often characterised previous initiatives.

The challenge is, of course, to decide what you want to transform: what Islanders want their place to become and how the cultural sector can help realise that. The

event was design to begin to address that question, and, whilst there is no simple answer, a few key messages emerged:

- A thriving cultural sector offers enormous opportunities for tackling the big challenges the Island faces: lack of skills, poverty, declining wellbeing, a damaged natural environment or economic stagnation
- Collaboration is essential, practitioners need to come together to articulate a persuasive and exciting vision, one which can influence key decision-makers and potential investors (public or private)
- The cultural sector should create a narrative and use stories to illustrate how their offer can improve Islanders' quality of life: a strong narrative is powerfully persuasive. That must be underpinned by robust data on impacts and outcomes, but data cannot create passion in the way a good story can
- Investment is vital, and the Island needs a clear understand of where to target that investment – whether in facilities, skills development or in providing other supportive resources

There is a clear sense that the “bottom up” way in which the Island’s cultural ecology has developed is its strength. The day’s discussions demonstrated there is an opportunity to build on what Island culture offers. The Island Collection are already creating a shared conversation about the future, and that can pave the way for a collective approach to co-ordination and planning. Most importantly, those involved in Island culture should articulate an ambitious vision – an inspiring narrative – for what they can offer to all Islanders as well as those on the Mainland.

This more strategic approach is important, but in thinking about visions, planning and co-ordination the Island needs to take care not to lose what makes it distinctive and strong: the rich mix of sometimes quirky practitioners who focus on their place and their community. There is a real opportunity for the Island to make culture a key part of its future: by embracing innovative and new ideas, by being ready to change and develop, and by respecting its distinctive offer without that being a brake on the sector’s evolution.

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