

Engaging Multicultural Communities through International Programming Zsuzsi Page, United Kingdom

The Story of Reading 2014 to 2019 - and how culture helped shape this story

2014 was a time of substantial economic growth in Reading, (the UK's largest town) however, the town's gap in cultural offering was obvious. Whilst there was a very rich undercurrent of cultural activity, a melting pot of diverse communities and an enthusiastic audience that had not yet been activated, this would not have been immediately obvious to the outside world. Reading's arts community was not being recognised by national, international funders, businesses and audiences outside Reading. To many, Reading was a new town, that was filled with high risers, modern big offices, overshadowing the historical and multicultural nature of the town.

It was a town that was struggling with its proximity to London, but at the same time benefitting from its location. People were able to commute easily to work in the city, equally businesses could relocate to Reading and take advantage of the cheaper property but also benefit from the its connection routes with the rest of the country. It was also this connectivity that made the town feel like a transient place with little personality. People travelled in and out of Reading but didn't stay to enjoy everything else that the town had to offer.

At the same time, soft indicators¹, in terms of personal discourses and what the media reported, seemed to point to the fact that no one really wanted to move to Reading, and those that did, weren't particularly proud of the fact. Lines such as 'Reading is a cultural wasteland', 'there is nothing to do in Reading' on social media platforms were commonplace. Media was more focussed on economic growth, than on Reading being a great place to live, it was regularly reported that 'Reading is set to become UK's most successful economic city'², 'Reading is UK's fastest growing economy'³ or 'Reading is in Europe's top ten cities for Direct Foreign Investment'⁴. It was in these personal discourses and media reporting that it became obvious that work needed to be done to draw the community together, to create a sense of place that people could be proud of, but also to ensure that the upward turn in the economy was a constant growth, by attracting the right candidates to Reading for the long term⁵. The obvious answer to this challenge that Reading now faced was to ensure that the cultural sector was given the support it needed to change how the town was perceived.

¹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248973964_Deconstructing_the_City_of_Culture_The_Long-Term_Cultural_Legacies_of_Glasgow_1990

² <https://livingreading.co.uk/news/reading-set-to-be-uks-fastest-growing-economy>

³ <https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/reading-predicted-to-be-one-of-britains-economic-powerhouses-over-next-three-years/>

⁴ <https://www.getreading.co.uk/news/business/reading-ranked-top-10-european-6730037>

⁵ <https://www.peoplescout.com/insights/economic-impact-talent-acquisition/>

With this in mind and given that our town was so transient, meaning that a critical mass of people were located within local businesses, it was clear that business engagement was going to be key in the development of the sector. While there was some isolated support from businesses for individual arts organisations, generally they were not engaged with the cultural sector. But yet, early surveys carried out by Reading UK CIC, the economic development organisation for Reading, suggested that businesses viewed the arts as an important factor when judging the attractiveness of a place and in the recruitment process. In a survey carried out in 2015, 85% of businesses who were surveyed believed they should be doing more to work with local arts groups to support the economy and 100% of those businesses surveyed also felt that arts and culture were important to attract and retain good employees. It was clear that we needed to engage these businesses in the arts, with large scale events and more visibility for our arts organisations, thus our journey started.

This desire to activate, create a step change, catalyse ambition and grow the cultural sector in line with the economic prosperity of Reading, was at odds with the cuts that the arts were experiencing, both nationally and locally as a result of austerity. Reading Borough Council (RBC), local government, had been asked to make savings to budgets on a yearly basis by central government. Reading Borough Council was already stretched and was continually facing challenges around delivering essential social services and finding resource to support to the development of grassroots arts and culture both through direct grant funding and capacity building support. With further cuts on the horizon, the Cultural Partnership, that had been brought together by the RBC to service the arts community and allocate funding, reallocated their remaining funds to match funding for a large Arts Council bid around a Reading Year of Culture concept, with the hope that this would be enough to catapult the arts sector to the next level.

For the first time, three partners -- RBC, Reading UK and Reading University -- came together to position Reading for a Year of Culture ⁶ and they made a successful application to Arts Council England. The programme ran for 12 months, celebrating a different theme every month. Each theme centred around positive areas throughout the town as well as locations that would benefit from development. It was a mixed variety of artists, local, national and international artists that came together to deliver the programme.

This application by RBC, Reading University and Reading UK to the Arts Council was successful and put Reading on the cultural map of the UK. The Reading Year of Culture engaged more than 50 local arts organisations, 30 national and international arts organisations,

⁶ <https://www.getreading.co.uk/all-about/reading-year-of-culture>

35 local and multinational businesses and raised £100,000 in business investment. But more than that it created long term partnerships between Reading Borough Council, Reading University and Reading UK, for further more ambitious applications to larger funding schemes, a 130% increase in arts council applications from local artists and organisations, stronger partnerships within the arts community and a number of new and exciting projects.

The outcomes from the Year of Culture were so profound for the arts community that more funding was achieved from national sources to the arts sector in Reading and three organisations were awarded NPO status (National Portfolio Status). In addition, Reading’s Year of Culture concept was replicated in towns and cities across the UK, including a London borough competition for a pot of funding to run a Year of Culture.

The Year of Culture brought about the next stage in Reading’s journey in 2017. This was embodied by an application to the Arts Council to create a Reading on Thames Festival. The motivation for this, was to continue to engage the businesses that had supported the Year of Culture, to continue the town’s placemaking ambitions, but also, there was a recognition that whilst the Year of Culture had engaged a large number of people in Reading, it wasn’t representative of the town’s make up or diversity, this, they hoped, would be rectified by a single festival that was focussed on engaging a more diverse audience, celebrating one of the town’s most beautiful assets, its rivers. This Festival idea also helped to inspire the Reading 2050 vision⁷ that was launched in October 2017, to make Reading a place of diversity and culture, celebrating Reading’s green spaces⁸⁹.

This application was again successful, and the festival was well received by local organisations and audience members. It engaged some of Reading’s most deprived areas and was seen as a concept that had potential to meet both engagement targets and placemaking ambition. As a result, it was included as a part of a wider more ambitious application to a new pot of funding that had just become available called the Great Place Scheme in 2017¹⁰. This pot was about putting art at the heart of the town and had been conceived by the Arts Council and the National Heritage Lottery fund¹¹. The application was made again by RBC, Reading University and Reading UK.

⁷ <https://livingreading.co.uk/reading-2050>

⁸ <https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/a-glimpse-of-whats-to-come-at-reading-on-thames-festival-2018/>

⁹ <https://www.getreading.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/reading-launch-first-thames-festival-12413707>

¹⁰ <http://readingplaceofculture.org/greatplaces/>

¹¹ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/arts-council-england-and-heritage-lottery-fund-great-place-scheme-year-1-programme>

This funding pot gave the Reading on Thames Festival another 3 years to build on the outcomes from the first year. But it also allowed the development of two further strands to help address one of our biggest struggles, of engaging with our most diverse and hard to reach communities.

Reading's Great Place Scheme, "Reading, Place of Culture" Cultural Commissioning Programme focussed on supporting local organisations to develop cross-sector partnerships in order to engage the community's most marginalised and hard-to-reach groups, and to provide genuine social, health and well-being impacts.

Three exciting programmes were funded in year one, taking place between July 2018-2019. Each programme followed its own timeline, based on bespoke participant, partner and evaluation needs. They all began with an Action Research and Story of Change session. In addition, all three projects developed a joint Action Research question to explore during the course of their funding, which was, "How can partnerships with arts, culture and heritage enhance existing services for disadvantaged participants?"

The outcomes have been substantial for this work. In 2019, we saw the impact of these art events and activities, that had managed to attract business engagement to the sum of £220,000 in cash, with in kind support to the sector at well over £500k. Audiences for events increased and many events were selling out and venues reported an increase in ticket sales across the board. New events and festivals continue to pop up throughout the year, and Reading now has festivals that run from April to December! In addition, we have seen an increase in engagement of our most diverse and hard to reach members of the community through the Great Places Scheme strand of work.

This work was started because we wanted to affect the way in which the town was perceived by those living here as well as those who lived outside of the town, we wanted to attract some of the best employees to our town to ensure the future of its economic growth. What we learned along the way, was that in order to reach these targets we had to ensure a more connected community and to work to support a vibrant arts scene as a vehicle to achieving these aims.

In 2019, it was far more common place to see the media reporting good news culture stories about Reading and the town's reputation has vastly improved in personal discourses, with people quick to jump to the defence of the town when disparaging remarks are made about its cultural offering.

PriceWaterhouseCooper's most recent report listed Reading as the UK's second best Place to Live¹², and it was reported as such in the local media. Blogs have been popping up with lists of best places to eat, best festivals, best arts events, even the top ten places to live in Reading¹³, which would have been unthinkable when this work began.

What's next for Reading's journey? There is still more work to be done, we have only just started to engage with the most diverse and hard to reach members of our community, with the Great Places Scheme funding running out at the end of this year (2020), more money will be needed to continue to support these projects moving forward. Reading Borough Council have recently appointed an Assistant Director of Culture and their cultural team is growing, an indication that the continuation of this journey may well be possible. Reading UK also appointed a Reading Place of Culture Lead to help develop the 2050 vision and engage with businesses. In addition, Reading UK will be leading on work to link local businesses Corporate Social Responsibility targets in with Reading's cultural offering, with the aim of further embedding the relationship between businesses and at the cultural sector to ensure its sustainability. So, whilst Reading has come a long way from 2014 in terms of supporting its placemaking aims and the cultural sector, the journey is not over yet!

¹² <https://www.getreading.co.uk/news/business/reading-named-one-top-cities-17244489>

¹³ <https://www.comparemymove.com/advice/area-guides/where-to-live-in-reading>