

Cultural Destinations

Learning Points



The Arts Council and Visit England have commissioned an evaluation of the programme to inform policy around cultural tourism and to help local areas learn the lessons of Cultural Destinations. This evaluation will conclude after the end of round 1, but the following initial lessons, drawn from the 10 round 1 Cultural Destinations partnerships, will be of use to anyone thinking about how culture can help grow the visitor economy.

‘Good partnerships depend on people’

- Partnership working takes considerable effort, time and patience. It's key to build up trust, explore differing agendas, and understand the different timescales that the culture and tourism sectors operate on.
- Clarity and honesty are crucial. All partners need to be clear about what they want and hope to achieve. It's vital that all partners have a good understanding of how all aspects of culture and tourism come together to make it a complete package.
- Good partnerships depend on people, not organisations. Assemble a coalition of the willing - find the right person in the organisation who can take decisions, and make things happen. If someone doesn't want to join in, you can't force them.
- Focus on outcomes and impact rather than specific activity and outputs. Longer term goals and visions are much more likely to engage partners in successful collaborations, and will engage strategic leaders. This way, activity delivered is a by-product of the successful collaboration, rather than the end result. It will last longer and have a greater impact on the organisations, staff and audiences.

‘Everything takes longer than you think’

- Although businesses can see the benefit and want to be involved in the project, getting their time commitment to help undertaking tasks can be

difficult. Make sure you have the capacity in the project to do a lot of the work.

- Timeframe should be carefully considered when developing collaborative projects as every partner could incur time delays on research and activities they intend to deliver.
- Don't class in-kind support as inferior to cash - it means an organisation is willing to give time, resources, and thought to your project, which often requires a lot more effort and commitment than writing a cheque.
- Limited resources and time mean it might be better to think about 'curating' existing cultural content rather than 'creating' new content. Think about what you can do to add value, or to help small but promising initiatives grow. Don't underestimate the importance of packaging and communication.
- Everything takes longer than you think - relationships take time to build and develop, as does shared knowledge and experience. However, spending the time and learning together can pay significant dividends.

‘Put yourself in the visitors’ shoes’

- It is essential to establish the overall geography of a project in potential visitors' minds, together with key routes. This can be challenging if public transport is inconsistent and distances between attractions are large.
- Be aware of the importance of the local 'wraparound offer'. As well as the cultural offer which attracted them in the first place, visitors will also want somewhere good to stay, an interesting place to eat, a bar or pub to hang out in. Think about how the cultural attractions relate to other attractions, e.g. heritage, retail, countryside.
- Put yourself in the visitors' shoes. View the project from their perspective, not your individual organisations. Think of how you make decisions when you visit somewhere new - how do you find out about what's on offer, how long do you stay, and where? Try to live like a tourist in your own destination.
- Link up the sectors on the ground by organising cultural familiarity trips for hotel staff. Even if someone thinks they know a destination's cultural offer, there might be big gaps in their knowledge.

- It is important to develop a common understanding across your partnership of what a “cultural tourist” is and what the potential market is - learn from what other places internationally have done as well as building upon existing work in your locality. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel.
- Don’t underestimate the importance of making a project unique to an area. Anyone can say ‘bring culture here’, but it’s important to work from the fabric of a place – and the existing strengths of its cultural sector.
- A project does not have to be all things to all people. Targeting your work and developing a strong individual narrative can draw in work already existing around it.

‘Data is complex’

- There are often overlapping and very different research methods at play across these sectors. It’s worth thinking about how these research methods, and the data they produce, should be gathered and compared.
- Have a robust plan on how activity will be monitored and what results, outcomes and feedback it is possible and reasonable to capture.
- Event data is much more complicated than it seems at first and a lot of time and resource will be required if you’re seeking to build an open source event data pool.
- Baseline statistics are useful in monitoring changes but the activities delivered by the project may change from those originally planned, so be ready to adapt your research plan.