



Let's make it happen

Somerset's Cultural Strategy

2024 - 34

Shaping Somerset's Culture Together 2024 - 2034

Foreword by Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts, Lead Member for Housing, Communities and Culture

As the Lead Member for Housing, Communities and Culture, I stand proud of our county's remarkable and distinctive cultural offer.

Somerset Council's Cultural Strategy starts a new chapter for Somerset, ensuring culture remains high on Somerset's agenda for current and future generations.

Culture is our identity, collective narrative and the glue that binds our vibrant communities together. It enriches our lives, fosters connections, drives growth, addresses challenges, and helps embrace change.

Inclusivity sits at the very heart of our vision – every resident should have the opportunity to form, shape and participate in Somerset's cultural tapestry, regardless of their background, interests, and lifestyle.

Our aim is to promote, enhance and acknowledge what already exists in Somerset. It is a highly creative place with a rich and varied cultural offer with a global reputation. Our ambition is to build on the foundations that already exist and drive creativity and innovation – working collectively, dynamically, and collaboratively with partners, not forgetting our experienced and established Town and Parish Councils and Arts Council funded National Portfolio Organisations across Somerset.

Building a community where everyone can participate and take pride, culture should permeate every aspect of your council's work, from decision-making to community engagement, ensuring the importance, impact and benefits of culture are recognised.

Our journey will not be without challenges, but we are committed to developing the talents of our young people, embracing the wealth of our heritage, and driving creative partnerships to secure a sustainable and viable cultural life in Somerset for Somerset.

This is where the journey begins.

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts,
Lead Member for Housing, Communities and Culture





Contents

Foreword by Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts2

Executive summary6

Our vision..... 8

What do we mean by culture? 10

The power of culture.....12

What can culture do?14

Background and local context16

The cultural landscape22

Somerset’s four cultural objectives.....28

Culture for all.....30

Connecting communities.....34

Culture for economic prosperity.....38

Celebrating place.....40

Somerset Council’s commitment to culture44

Ways of working council wide46

The future of culture - Viability and Sustainability.....48

Delivery and next steps.....50

Join us on our journey52

Executive summary

Since becoming a unitary authority in April 2023, Somerset Council has faced significant financial challenges. Despite this, its commitment to culture remains strong. It has formed a Cultural Directorate and safeguarded many of its key cultural assets and services.

The Council continues to put culture firmly on the map with the creation of this strategy for Somerset. Its aim is to promote a viable and sustainable model that delivers meaningful, measurable outcomes for the sector across the county.

Culture is the lifeblood of our communities, encompassing festivals, arts, crafts, heritage, and more. We embrace a broad definition of culture, inclusive of both traditional and contemporary expressions, recognising the richness of our cultural landscape.

Our vision for the next decade is one where Somerset shines as a beacon of cultural excellence and where creativity knows no bounds. It will be a place where every resident finds a sense of belonging and where visitors participate in and enjoy a rich and diverse range of activities and events.

The strategy is founded on the Council's overall vision for Somerset: to 'build a fairer, greener, resilient, more flourishing Somerset that cares for the most vulnerable and listens to you.' It sets out a framework within which the Council will work with artists, practitioners, creatives, and performers to support the cultural life of the county, and enhance the quality of life for everyone living, working, studying here, and visiting the County.

We developed this strategy through extensive consultation with many organisations, stakeholders, and practitioners in the cultural field. We learned that they share a common vision of a strong and diverse cultural sector in Somerset, where everyone can access and enjoy a range of cultural experiences. This goal unites us and while a challenging task, presents us with a unique opportunity to shape culture in Somerset.



Our vision

...for culture in Somerset during the next ten years.

Somerset is known for its distinct and inclusive cultural offer, where creativity thrives and connects our communities. Culture in Somerset enhances our environment and enriches the lives of all who live, work, and visit here.

Setting the scene

What do we mean by culture?

Culture is a word with many meanings. It's about who we are and what we value, about how we live our lives and express ourselves as individuals, communities and organisations, about life experiences, stories and traditions.



The power of culture

We recognise culture as one of the drivers to bring about growth and a better quality of life for all. We are making a commitment to go beyond our statutory obligations to continue to resource and protect cultural services that our residents value.

We believe that our strategic commitment to culture and the role it plays in our society will realise the following benefits:

- **Develop a vibrant Somerset:** fostering our county of culture, promoting civic pride, and changing perceptions, contributing to improvements in wider social and economic outcomes and, in turn, ensuring our sustainability.
- **Benefit our economy:** culture has a vital role to play in economic prosperity, particularly in relation to our vibrant visitor economy and the growth of the wider commercial creative sector. Culture has the ability to encourage people to visit and travel through Somerset which by proxy supports growth and allows our businesses to thrive.
- **Improve social mobility:** addressing educational and skills inequalities and challenges around social mobility and encouraging our young people to enjoy and express themselves and to aspire to work in fulfilling occupations.
- **Address health inequalities:** enjoying and participating in culture improves our physical and mental health. Culture plays a valuable role in improving our physical and mental health, and alleviating pressure on local services.



What can culture do?

Culture has a significant impact on health and wellbeing. It is proven that participation can help develop empathy, tolerance, and a broader perspective of the world. It helps us foster creativity, critical thinking, and social skills as well as mitigating the impacts of loneliness. **Somerset will adopt a partnership approach that supports:**

- Arts organisations that engage communities
- Creative mental health initiatives
- External cultural event promoters and public art providers

Encouraging children to learn, explore and interact with the world in a creative manner contributes to richer cultural landscapes.

Participation in music, art, storytelling, performance, sports, community events and other creative outlets allows for expression and connection.

Creativity cultivates hope and empowerment and can serve as a tool for self-expression, problem-solving, resilience and community building life changing experiences for individuals and communities faced with socio-economic challenges.

Creativity is a mindset – enabling complex problem solving and equipping us to overcome challenges.



Background and local context

Somerset is a county where ancient myths and modern creativity meet. Here you can explore the legends of King Arthur and Avalon, the battles of Alfred the Great against the Danes, and the poetic innovations of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

But Somerset is not just a place for history, Somerset offers a rich and diverse cultural experience for visitors from all over the world. You can enjoy its vibrant art scenes, alternative lifestyle communities, a wealth of shops, cafes, community events, literary connections, medieval streets, and scenic views. Somerset is a place where culture and nature blends in harmony.

Somerset's landscapes are stunning and diverse. You can admire the wild beauty of Exmoor, the Brendon and Quantock Hills in the west, the Blackdown Hills in the south and the Mendip Hills in the north. You can also explore the fertile farmlands producing cattle, sheep, cider, and cheese, as well as the unique and fragile Somerset Levels and Moors. Somerset's churches are among the finest in England, with soaring towers that showcase the skill and ambition of medieval builders. The cathedral at Wells is a gothic masterpiece and the abbey ruins at Glastonbury are a testament to the power and glory of one of England's richest monasteries.

The changing climate is already altering our unique landscape and threatening our historic environment through coastal erosion, flooding and wetter, warmer conditions. The increased pace of climate change presents challenges to all those involved in the care, protection, and promotion of the historic environment.

Somerset has never been dominated by a single town or city. Instead, it has a mosaic of small towns and villages, each with its own identity and history. This may explain why Somerset has a reputation for being a county of strong individuals and rebels. Somerset is a county that has shaped and been shaped by the stories of its people and its land, and we strongly celebrate the diversity of our community, which enriches our cultural offering.





124 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSI's)

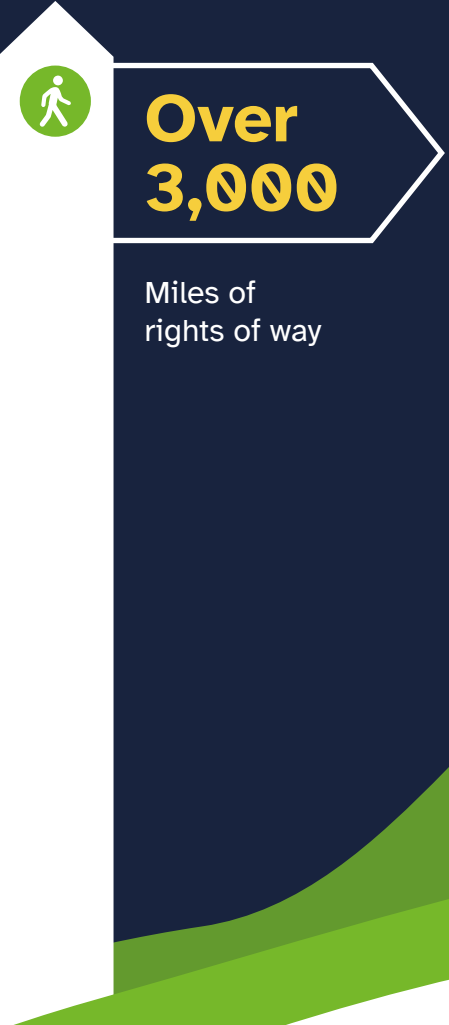


11 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's)



2 Special Protection Areas (SPA's)

Protecting our most sensitive and indicative habitats.



The Somerset Wetlands

Designated as the second Super National Nature Reserve (NNR), by Natural England in 2022. Protecting 6,140 hectares of lowland wetlands and the species within it.

Highlands and Lowlands

Our rural heritage and traditions - contributing to the overall fabric of Somerset.

Somerset, with its levels, moors and hills, weaves a captivating cultural tapestry depicted by picturesque villages, long coastline, big skies and non-conformist spirit.



The cultural landscape

Somerset is a county with a remarkable cultural diversity and richness, reflected in its urban, rural, and natural settings. Some of the highlights of cultural life in Somerset are:

Festivals, Carnivals and Events

- Somerset hosts a variety of festivals and events, from the world-renowned Glastonbury Festival to unique, community-driven, illuminated Carnivals. These events highlight the different facets of Somerset's culture and attract visitors from near and far.

Rural Touring and Exhibitions

- Somerset's rural areas are vibrant with creativity and culture, as evidenced by the touring and exhibition programmes that reach out to remote and isolated communities. Somerset's culture is rooted in its people and their imaginative use of assets and resources, not just buildings. Touring groups and local village and parish productions make cultural experiences more accessible - a recent example includes the production of 'The Scarecrows Wedding' in Westbury-sub-Mendip village hall.

Community Arts

- Somerset has hundreds of small and voluntary arts organisations that play a vital role in maintaining and developing its creative life. These organisations offer opportunities for participation, learning and expression for people of all ages and backgrounds.

Libraries

- Somerset has 32 libraries of varying sizes that provide access to a wide range of cultural events, activities and resources (physical and digital) and works with many partners to encourage and enable all people to consume and create culture in their local community.

Museums and Heritage

- Somerset has a rich and varied heritage, preserved, and celebrated by over 50 museums and heritage organisations and attractions. Almost every town in Somerset has its own museum.

Cultural Venues and Sport and Leisure

- Somerset boasts a wide and diverse range of cultural venues, including theatres, arts centres, galleries, libraries, and exhibition spaces, as well as sports and leisure facilities, including the County Ground in Taunton, the home of Somerset County Cricket Club.
- Somerset Council's ambitious project to create a Flagship Cultural and Arts Hub for the county (via the redevelopment of Octagon Theatre in Yeovil) has received national funding and recognition and will enhance the cultural provision and impact for the region.

Cultural and Creative Economy

- Somerset's creative sector is a significant contributor to its economy, with a higher proportion of cultural and creative workers than the national average. These workers include artists and designers; makers and craftspeople; writers; musicians, actors, dancers and performers, and creative entrepreneurs, who bring innovation, diversity and vitality to Somerset's culture and economy.



Burnham on Sea Lighthouse



Somerset County Cricket Club



Puppet show - Yeovil



32
Libraries

19
Directly managed libraries



13
Community partnership libraries



42
Museums

112
Community Arts Organisations



53
Built heritage sites

12
Natural heritage sites



95 Venues

£1,298,028

NPO investment funding in
Somerset 2023 - 24

65
Festivals
and pop-ups



*Data collected in 2022

A county of Carnivals and Festivals

Bridgwater Carnival
Credit: Alex Smith Photography

Case Study - Glastonbury Festival

The largest greenfield music and performing arts festival in the world, situated in the heart of Somerset. The Glastonbury Festival aims to encourage and stimulate youth culture from around the world in all its forms, including pop music, dance music, jazz, folk music, fringe theatre, drama, mime, circus, cinema, poetry and all the creative forms of art and design including painting, sculpture and textile art.

The festival is attended by over 210,000 people, with over 3,000 artists performing, streamed across the world with upwards of 23 million views and supported by close to 2,000 volunteers behind the scenes.

Somerset's four cultural objectives

This strategy is shaped around four strategic priorities that describe the Council's objectives in terms of outcomes from arts and culture-led activity:



Culture for all

Somerset aims to be a place where culture is inclusive, relevant, and accessible, where everyone can benefit from cultural and creative opportunities.



Connecting communities

Supporting and enabling our communities and cultural sector to partner, collaborate and develop cultural activities across Somerset.



Culture for economic prosperity

Somerset aims to continue to be a place of culture and creativity, where arts and culture are valued for their role in supporting a sustainable and flourishing local economy, attracting, and retaining talent for our business economy as well as bringing in visitors and investment, growing the creative economy, and enriching the lives of local communities and residents.



Celebrating place

Culture is the lifeblood of Somerset, a place where diverse communities, a rich heritage and natural beauty come together. Whether you live, work, or visit here, we will nurture our culture to ensure there is something to inspire, delight and connect people with this wonderful county.

Culture for all

We envision a place where everyone can access, enjoy, and participate in cultural and creative activities that enrich their lives and communities. We strive for a vibrant culture, inclusive, relevant, and accessible for all, regardless of age, background, or ability. We aim to foster a culture of diversity, collaboration, and innovation that celebrates the unique identity and heritage of Somerset.

What success will look like:

- A county-wide offering of activity which is relevant and inclusive for all.
- Increased participation in cultural activity in respect of a higher volume of participants, a wider geographical reach, and new audiences.
- Higher levels of engagement for all but specifically:
 - For our existing cultural assets and activity.
 - For our rural areas.
 - For children and young people.
 - For those experiencing social deprivation.



Live in Somerset - Taunton



Case Study - Octagon Music Hub (Dorset and Somerset)

The Music Hub is a consortium set up between Dorset Council and Somerset Council to deliver high quality music education. It was appointed by the Arts Council England to lead Music Education in these two Councils from September 2024 as part of an ambitious national programme to provide high quality access to music for all children and young people. This will be achieved through diverse partnerships between educational, creative and community organisations, both in their local communities and throughout the two county regions.

Case Study - South Somerset, Octagon Arts Engagement and Outreach Programme

Unleashing creativity, connecting our communities, improving access to the arts and nurturing talent here in Somerset and across the South West. Running a wide variety of programmes offering residents and visitors to the south of Somerset opportunities to take part and experience the joy of the creative arts. Providing more opportunities for communities to watch, take part and benefit from arts and cultural activities, where they live. Activities and events support benefit health and wellbeing, enrich learning and education in and outside school, inspires young talent, celebrates local artists and tells 'local stories'.

Connecting communities

Our vision is to create a vibrant and inclusive cultural landscape in Somerset, where communities and cultural sector work together to enrich the lives of people and places. We believe that culture is a powerful force for social change, and that by connecting communities through shared experiences, we can foster a sense of belonging, identity, and pride. We aim to support and enable our communities

and cultural sector to partner, collaborate and develop cultural activities across Somerset, reflecting the diversity and creativity of our region. We want to make culture accessible and affordable for everyone, and to celebrate the achievements and contributions of our local artists, organisations, and groups. By connecting communities, we can inspire, empower, and transform Somerset.

What success will look like:

- A diverse cultural offer that celebrates the heritage of all our communities.
- County-wide collaboration and co-production of activities and projects to produce the widest possible offering of community-led cultural opportunities.
- Increased collaboration in seeking external funding and pooling resources.
- Increased social prescribing to cultural activities, leading to reduced social isolation and loneliness within the community.
- Rural communities and our parishes and villages have and continue to provide cultural experiences for our communities and working in partnership with them will be key.



Front Garden Music Festival 2022, Seed Sedgemoor
Credit: (c) Beni Evans

Case Study - Seed Sedgemoor, everyone can be creative

Enabling more people across the north of the county to take part in and enjoy the creative arts, providing opportunities to those who are not usually participants in or audiences for arts activities. Since 2020, 62 Seed projects reached nearly 20,000 participants with more than 320k audience engagements. As one of 39 Creative People and Places locations, Seed works to foster an increasingly creative community across the north of Somerset and believes everyone can be creative.



Somerset libraries - Digital resource

Case Study - Somerset Library Service and Cultural Engagement

Libraries are an important community hub, enabling cultural engagement and participation. Over the last 8 months a new initiative in Yeovil has gained momentum to become a popular monthly event showcasing local musical talent, as demonstrated by one of the attendees: “The Library Sessions gives the community access to FREE good quality musical experiences. This makes it accessible financially to all and offers the opportunity for people from all sections of life to meet up and promote their mental and social health in a welcoming environment, which you create.” Yeovil and Taunton libraries also support and host various popular Literature Festival events each year, and libraries throughout Somerset have hosted author talks for all ages.

The well-presented gallery space in Taunton library helps to inspire and showcase local artistic talent, whilst recent journaling sessions in several libraries have supported people’s wellbeing and socialisation through creative engagement. Talent Academy sessions in Taunton Library’s Glass Box have focused on inspiring and developing the creative pipeline by working with local partners from opportunities in gaming to the digital creative sector and AI computing.

Culture for economic prosperity

We believe that culture and creativity are essential for our social and economic well-being, and we will continue to ensure we value their role in supporting sustainable Economic Development, attracting visitors, and ensuring that local businesses thrive as well as retaining and attracting talent to the area. We envision a future where culture is integrated into every aspect of our lives, from education and health to tourism and business.

We want to foster a culture of growth and exploration that values innovation, diversity, and community engagement. We want to be a place where people can express themselves, explore new ideas, and connect with others through artistic and cultural experiences.

What success will look like:

- The creative sector continues to make a substantial contribution to Somerset's local and visitor economy.
- Somerset firmly established as a cultural destination, a place where more people live, stay, study, work, and visit.
- Increased commerce and a desirable place for businesses to locate.
- People decide to live and work in Somerset and choose careers in the creative sector.
- Culture will support employment and skills development to benefit the wider economy.



Hinkley Point C


 **£1.3 Billion**
Generated by Tourism for the local economy

18 million
Visited Somerset in 2021

 **£35m** Generated by Glastonbury Festival for the local economy


9,500 People in the cultural workforce

£492m Estimated gross value added (GVA) by cultural and creative industries per year

 **£94.5m** GVA generated through crafts, by 1,335 makers
(about the same as IT, software and computer services combined).

Celebrating place

Somerset is a county of cultural richness and diversity, where people and places are connected by a shared sense of belonging and inspiration. We value our heritage and natural beauty, our vibrant city and charming towns and villages, and our diverse communities

and traditions. We want to nurture and celebrate our culture, so that everyone who lives, works, or visits here can find something to inspire, delight, and connect them with Somerset.



Tarr Steps

What success will look like:

- The cultural character of Somerset is recognised and admired on a national and international level.
- Residents feel an increased sense of pride in where they live.
- Our distinctive natural and cultural assets are celebrated and protected.
- Champion creative involvement in place-making and regeneration schemes.



Credit: Craig Stone Photography

Case Study - Heritage Services

The South West Heritage Trust was created in 2014 to provide heritage services previously delivered directly by Somerset County Council (now Somerset Council) and Devon County Council. The Trust runs three museums, namely Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury, the Museum of Somerset in Taunton, and Somerset Brick & Tile Museum in Bridgwater. The Trust also provides statutory archive services, statutory local studies library services and the statutory Historic Environment Record on behalf of Somerset Council and supports the local authority in the discharge of its statutory obligations under the National Planning Policy Framework. In 2023, The Trust achieved National Portfolio Organisation status, securing funding from Arts Council England.

As part of its engagement activities, the Trust's Learning Service experienced its busiest academic year in over a decade, reaching 143 schools and over 16,000 pupils. Thanks to 'Museums and Schools' funding from Arts Council England and the Department for Education, rural schools and those in areas of multiple deprivation benefited from visits. Additionally, The Trust's early years provision and social prescribing programmes have extended cultural and heritage opportunities to underserved audiences throughout the county.



Horse and carriage, Ham Hill, c. 1890 (South West Heritage Trust)

Case Study - East Quay, Watchet

A contemporary arts centre housing two galleries, a creative education space, a print studio, paper mill, artist studios, restaurant and places to stay. Established by five local women and run as a social enterprise, the venue is about culture, purpose and imagination and runs an evolving programme of exhibitions, events, workshops and activities year-round.



Somerset Council's Commitment to culture

We recognise that our cultural goals are bold, especially in a tough financial climate, however our belief in the power of culture to transform lives and communities is strong. We will collaborate with various council service areas alongside our cultural partners and make culture and creativity a core part of what we do.

We imagine a future where culture is embedded through all our services. Our delivery plan and governance and leadership model that accompanies this strategy sets out how we aim to achieve our objectives.

We will identify actions that contribute to the strategic priorities in the following key areas:



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Continue to work with our diverse communities in Somerset to promote and support community led events.



Climate, Environment and Sustainability

Identify actions that contribute to the Council's Climate Strategy.



Public Health

Deliver on our health and wellbeing priorities, as set out in the 'Improving Lives' Strategy, and Public Health Operating model.



Children and Family services

Contribute to the council's responsibilities for education (i.e. the 'Education for Life' Strategy), and supporting vulnerable, isolated, and deprived families.



Adult and Social Care services

Deliver on our Adult Social Care Strategy and delivery plan – i.e. the objectives “People should be supported to manage their health and wellbeing” and “live healthier lives.”



Library Services

Continue to develop our libraries as inclusive community cultural hubs, enabling local people to engage with culture, especially where they reach into areas of high deprivation and/or individuals experiencing isolation, loneliness, and anxiety.



Information Technology

Integrate and utilise new and existing technologies to allow creative and cultural activities to flourish i.e. encouraging the use of technology in sports coaching/ integrating technology within creative spaces i.e. a podcast room being integrated into the build of the Firepool Centre for Digital Innovation.



Planning and Regeneration

- Champion creative and art involvement within regeneration projects both commissioned and authorised by Somerset Council.
- Support public realm.
- Collaborate with stakeholders to identify opportunities from new developments which require appropriate delivery and funding from developers through S106.
- Drive internal funding through the reviewing of the planning process and exploring the conditioning of public art in planning policy.



Partnerships, Localities and Cultural Services

Facilitate effective governance and leadership arrangements, support and enable communities, cultural sector and services across Somerset Council and local councils to partner, collaborate and develop cultural activities across Somerset.

Ways of working council wide:



Ensure the importance, impact and benefits of culture are recognised across the council.



Collaborate across all directorates in a flexible and adaptive way to achieve cultural outcomes.



Use culture as a powerful tool to address our most complex and pressing issues in Somerset.



Engage the community creatively and authentically through consultation.

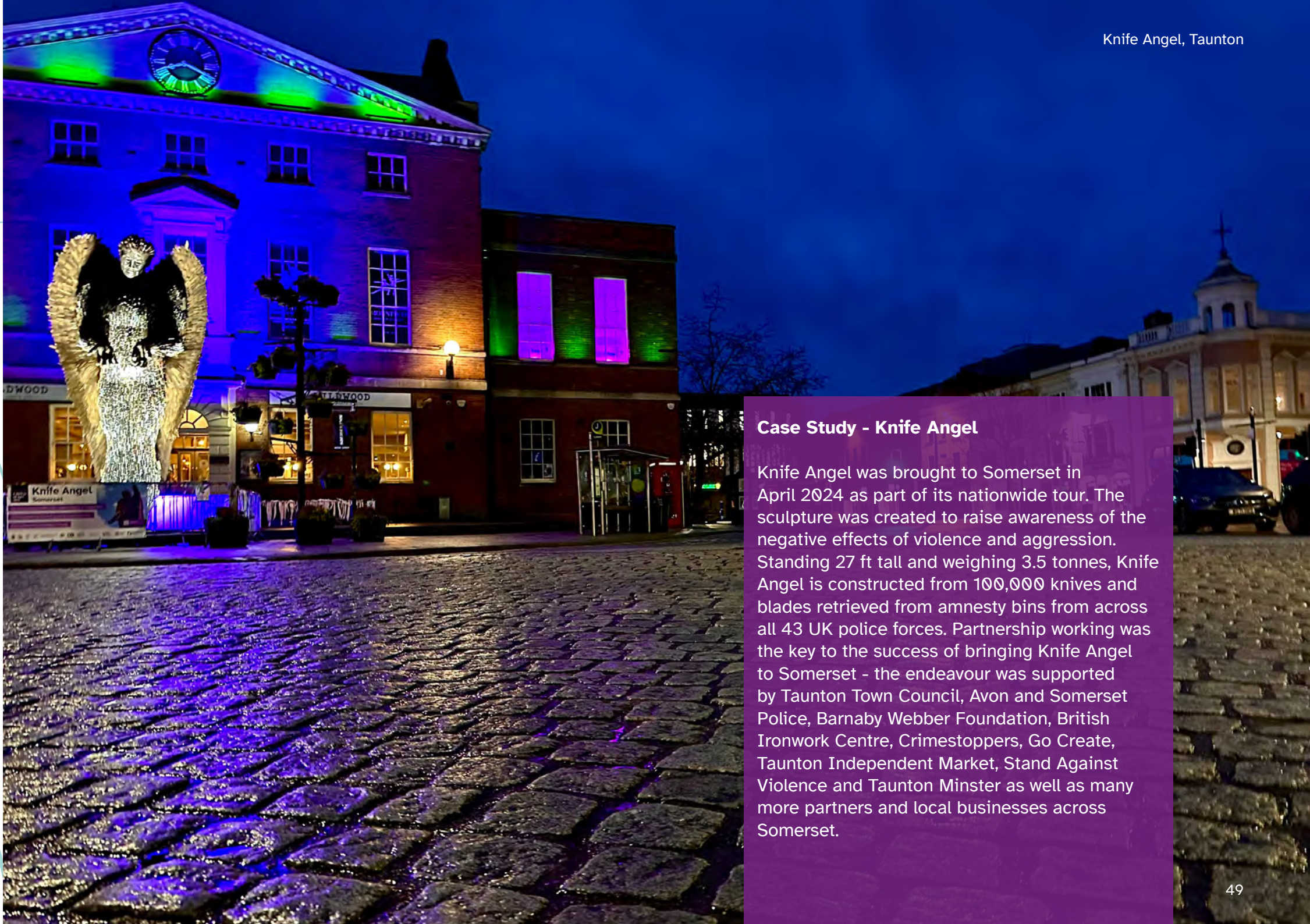
Sunday Street Market - Frome



The future of culture - Viability and Sustainability

The cultural sector and local government face unprecedented financial challenges. Adaptability to this changing financial landscape is vital and to continue supporting and promoting cultural activities, we need to be flexible and resilient. **This means we have to:**

- Prioritise what we do and invest in.
- Seek external funding.
- Collaborate with internal and external partners.
- Work efficiently and reduce costs sustainably.
- Drive creative thinking to find innovative solutions.



Case Study - Knife Angel

Knife Angel was brought to Somerset in April 2024 as part of its nationwide tour. The sculpture was created to raise awareness of the negative effects of violence and aggression. Standing 27 ft tall and weighing 3.5 tonnes, Knife Angel is constructed from 100,000 knives and blades retrieved from amnesty bins from across all 43 UK police forces. Partnership working was the key to the success of bringing Knife Angel to Somerset - the endeavour was supported by Taunton Town Council, Avon and Somerset Police, Barnaby Webber Foundation, British Ironwork Centre, Crimestoppers, Go Create, Taunton Independent Market, Stand Against Violence and Taunton Minster as well as many more partners and local businesses across Somerset.

Delivery and next steps

The delivery plan* sets out how Somerset aims to deliver against the strategy and can be found here: www.somerset.gov.uk/cultural-strategy-delivery-plan

The delivery plan aims to be clear and robust, but also adaptable and responsive to the changing needs over the next ten years. It is a flexible tool that shows what will be done, who will do it, when and how it will be done.

Culture is ever evolving and transforming - influenced by changing lifestyles, growing forms of creativity, and traditional and digital innovation. Somerset's cultural communities will be empowered to constantly shape and refine the delivery plan. Working with communities in an inclusive approach - listening to the voices and feedback from all ages will ensure Somerset's agility to embrace cultural change.

Younger generations define the future - they are the owners of our future culture, whilst our experienced creatives retain the historical knowledge which provides a robust foundation from which culture can grow.

*The delivery plan will be a living document and subject to change.



Join us on our journey:

We have a bold and ambitious strategy to make culture a vital part of Somerset's identity, wellbeing, and prosperity and we need you to be part of it.

This strategy is for everyone in Somerset. It is the result of listening and learning from the voices and experiences of people across Somerset. It reflects your aspirations, your challenges, your hopes, and your dreams. It celebrates your achievements, your talents, your passions, and your potential.

Whether you live, work, visit or study here, you are part of Somerset's cultural story and you have a stake in its future.

So, join us on our journey and let us make Somerset a place where culture enriches lives, connects communities, and inspires change for future generations to come.

Help us make it happen!



