

Wakefield - The Perfect Partner

A Report to the Wakefield Arts Partnership by Andrew Dixon



'Connected Partnership in Wakefield – Illustrated with Rhubarb!' -
Wakefield Arts Partnership Creative Dinner - Conversation & Workshop, July 2015

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1 Introduction

Culture Creativity Place Ltd was commissioned by Beam on behalf of the Wakefield Arts Partnership as part of the Arts Council funded 'Arts in Place I' programme. The work was designed to look at the nature of cultural partnership in Wakefield and to explore how more collective action and leadership might add value to the existing cultural strengths of the City and District.

The project consisted of 4 days of workshops combined with one-to-one meetings and group discussions. This Report is not a comprehensive audit of culture in Wakefield, but aims to provide an objective outside view and observations on the current relationships and partnerships, locally, regionally and internationally. Over 120 different people attended the workshops, Creative Dinner and one-to-one meetings --- so whilst this is inevitably a snapshot of opinion, it is informed by a significant number of voices amounting to some very clear messages being delivered by the sector. A review of the Report with representatives of Wakefield Arts Partnership and a meeting with Graham Riding, Development Manager, Culture, Wakefield Council, have informed this final version.

I started with a good degree of local knowledge and some personal experience and affection for both Wakefield and its cultural offer. I now have even greater understanding, respect and confidence in the city. Wakefield has more to offer culturally than it perhaps appreciates. It has a number of national assets, it is geographically central to the UK, and it provides leadership way beyond its physical boundaries.

'Wakefield looks over its shoulder at Leeds. We should look at ourselves and have the vision to look forward.' Workshop participant

'Culture is carving a new identity for Wakefield but the city needs to recognise what it's got and have the confidence to promote it' Workshop participant

2 Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

- Wakefield has a distinctive set of cultural organisations and creative businesses in place
- The City (and District) could make more of its collective assets
- It has 3 'national' cultural institutions – more than any other city outside of London
- There is some fragility in the independent sector. Whilst facing further budget cuts the Council needs to recognise that it has a key role to play in investing in sustainability and helping lever other funds to the city
- Most cultural organisations have been understandably focused on their own change, survival or development, with limited room to take on broader leadership roles
- The sector is undergoing a significant period of change in personnel, with a new committed tier of younger cultural leaders emerging
- There are almost too many partnerships in place and some fatigue in meetings that result in no clear action
- Culture is being invited to take its place more centrally in broader partnerships with business and other agencies and should take its place with a representative on Wakefield First
- **No one currently has a clear mandate, authority, or the resources, to promote and facilitate the collective culture of the city**

- There is real potential for more collective programming of the annual calendar, but no mechanism to do so at present
- The Wakefield Arts Partnership should find further projects to work together on. The final workshop identified the Yorkshire Festival, a new web site, and an alternative culture guide to Wakefield as possible examples of this
- The workshops generated an energy and excitement because they broke down perceived barriers and shared in the collective strengths and story of Wakefield
- Wakefield has the location, assets and expertise to punch above its weight in Yorkshire, the 'Northern Powerhouse' and the arts nationally
- Wakefield is well positioned to make a contribution to, and to benefit from, UK City of Culture in Hull 2017 and Leeds' bid for EU Capital of Culture
- Wakefield is a great location for cultural conferencing, but needs to be more proactive in creating and attracting events
- The local authority has been a good supporter of the arts, but needs to either take on a greater cultural leadership role or provide a mandate and support for others to do so
- There is a gap for an events agency - though both Beam and Unity offer aspects of this. Studying the Leeds Inspired model or Newcastle-Gateshead Initiative may help provide some solutions
- There are around 13,600 people employed in the creative sector one of the fastest growing in the area (Reference: State of the District Report 2014, Wakefield Together)

Next steps might include

- Publication of this report and discussion of its findings within the Wakefield Arts Partnership (WAP) and sector and with Arts Council England (ACE) at regional level
- A presentation to the Council at member/ senior officer level of the key findings
- Council to consider a clear mandate for Wakefield Arts Partnership (WAP) facilitated by Beam's new Co-Director
- Study visits to other places and partnerships
- Council discussions with WAP to see if Creative Partners and/or investment can help lever external funds to deliver some collaborative projects
- A high level and well-choreographed visit by Darren Henley, ACE Chief Executive, to be planned for January or February in partnership between WAP and the Council, with a meeting at Council Leader and CEO level

3 Place

As part of the workshops we started to build a 'Cultural CV' of Wakefield including a look at the places and spaces that define Wakefield culturally. It is worth defining the obvious characteristics of Wakefield as these can often be taken for granted.

Wakefield is central to the UK, easy to get to and well positioned on road and rail routes. People talked of Wakefield being in the shadow of Leeds, but others turned this to being a positive factor in Wakefield's location.

'The place is one stop from Leeds or Sheffield.'

Workshop participant

Wakefield's location offers a significant audience catchment for cultural activity and alternative options for city centre based residents to access culture and nightlife in several other cities.

The pride and commitment to Wakefield is evident in many people born and bred in the district, but also in more recent cultural settlers. Some older generations show a greater affinity with the West

Riding and others locate themselves in Yorkshire. However, whilst it is OK for locals to be critical of Wakefield, there is fierce defense of any external detractors.

People find pride in the history and heritage of the place, but also in its physical assets, the countryside, the people, the sport and cultural moments that help define the place. The author, the sculptor, the rugby player and local musicians add to the DNA of the city. Whilst many cited Barbara Hepworth, there were other names such as Jane McDonald, John Godber and *This Sporting Life* author David Storey. John Godber is the 3rd most performed playwright in the UK after Shakespeare and Alan Ayckbourn.

Local authority boundaries rarely mirror the natural place and Wakefield has no 'natural' boundaries. Formed out of the West Riding and part of West Yorkshire the area embraces many former coal towns and distinct communities as well as the 'city' of its name. Transport across the district can be difficult and some communities will naturally see themselves as closer to other places such as Barnsley.

Overall I sensed considerable and well earned respect for the local authority's place in developing culture, not least its commitment to The Hepworth, but also its support for more recent developments such as the Art House and Unity Works. There was some criticism of the Council having lost its ability to take a cultural leadership and facilitation role, and being less effective than it could at promoting its cultural assets and tourism. Having worked with over 80 local authorities across the UK, I would count Wakefield in the more progressive quartile of cultural investors. Its tourism promotion role is limited and with a different model from 'Welcome to Yorkshire' there is a more passive approach to tourism marketing in general.

The Council has achieved a great deal in physical regeneration, not just in the centre of Wakefield, but also in attracting business. It is interesting to note that after manufacturing and logistics, culture is one of the fastest growing employers in the District but its impact on regeneration has not yet been fully realised.

Officers, and as far as I can see, elected members, remain enthusiastic about culture, but in general people feel that it may not be as 'centre stage' as it once was.

The North, for a variety of reasons, is enjoying a particular political focus with the 'Northern Powerhouse'. This has a clear centre on Manchester, but others, including the Arts Council Chief Executive, have talked about the M62 'cultural corridor'. Wakefield is actually the nearest city to the M62, but is in danger of being left out of the cultural debate. Welcome to Yorkshire has secured £1million for a Festival of Yorkshire and Wakefield needs to find an effective and senior voice in this initiative. With millions being invested in Manchester and Hull there is a window of opportunity for Wakefield to be at the table – most probably around its national role in sculpture and the next stage of riverside development.

4 Cultural Assets

For a city of its size, Wakefield has a good range of cultural assets. The key physical assets include:

- Yorkshire Sculpture Park
- The Hepworth Gallery and Collection
- The Hepworth Prize
- Unity Works
- Theatre Royal Wakefield
- The Art House
- Wakefield Museum
- LS Live Rehearsal studios

- The Orangery & Beam
- Wakefield College
- Nostell Priory
- Castles – Sandal and Pontefract
- National Coal Mining Museum
- Wakefield Cathedral

The workshops also demonstrated the depth of community engagement in places such as Castleford, Pontefract, the vibrancy of the Civic Societies and the importance of schools and the music hub.

In my experience the most significant cultural assets are often the people and cultural leaders – past, present and future. These can be directors of cultural organisations or passionate and active artists, creative entrepreneurs and business people. Wakefield has plenty of these, and I return to the issue of leadership later in this Report.

The development of The Hepworth Wakefield, with its award winning architecture, took real vision. It is already a national institution through the significance of its collection and its recent coup of establishing the Hepworth Sculpture prize. Some say it should have been located more centrally in the city, but its location is an important long-term investment in rediscovering Wakefield's historic relationship with the Calder river and canal. Water gave Wakefield one of its reasons for existence and its industrial wealth, but the city has turned its back on the water and it is still one of the most undervalued aspects of the place. The plans to redevelop the warehouses around the Hepworth offer the chance to breath new life into the area.

The Hepworth's launch year saw exceptional visitor numbers and whilst figures have dropped they have settled way above original projections. The recent organisational restructuring has strengthened its ability to work more strategically and to be a more active player in Wakefield. The fact that the gallery attracts such a high proportion of its visitors from outside Wakefield should be seen as strength. It is a tourism asset driving employment in the economy. The high proportion of visits from Leeds and Sheffield demonstrates even greater potential. The initial local enthusiasm about the gallery has fallen off, but being rooted in Wakefield will be essential for its long-term success. The Hepworth recognises that more effort needs to be made to engage with the local population and the rest of the cultural sector.

Its ability to mount world-class projects is clearly demonstrated by the current Caro exhibition in conjunction with the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Henry Moore Institute. This has probably attracted more positive media coverage for the city than all other cultural activity in the last year and the trick is to help translate this into a broader celebration of what else Wakefield has to offer culturally.

There is inevitably some envy about the scale of The Hepworth's funding. I have experienced this in many cities. The local authority and Arts Council clearly recognise that to build a world-class facility with a cultural engine the size of The Hepworth requires ensuring that it has the petrol to deliver. The city should be in no doubt that this is currently the most important gallery in Yorkshire. Its collection and its reputation are showcasing the name of Wakefield internationally. However The Hepworth needs Wakefield as much as Wakefield needs the Hepworth.

The Yorkshire Sculpture Park is also nationally and internationally significant. Whilst it doesn't have the world 'Wakefield' in its title, it is firmly rooted in the local landscape and is going nowhere other than up. It is hugely successful at realising earned income and is working internationally, with its most recent foray taking a bit of Wakefield to Venice. Some have commented that YSP doesn't play its part in broader cultural partnerships in Wakefield and sees itself being more national than local. There may be some truth in this, but there is no doubting its success and the two factors may be interlinked. YSP has been through a major extended period of growth and has been very

focused on itself. In terms of local authority funding its annual revenue is relatively low for the scale of benefit. It has a long standing director, but also some younger curatorial energy. YSP is perhaps ready to play more of a role locally.

The existence of Wakefield College is important for its access to cultural development, careers and vocational engagement in Further Education and Higher Education. However, the city is one of the largest in the UK without a resident university. Universities have become major engines of cultural growth in even less well culturally endowed places. Sunderland is a good example. It is no surprise that other HE institutions want a footprint or relationship with Wakefield. Leeds University was keen to have the Hepworth in their cultural portfolio. The College has courses accredited with Teesside and Huddersfield and the city has a relationship with Leeds Beckett for business and creative industries advice. The ambition to have a university, or at least a university college, in Wakefield is both laudable and achievable. Culture, and Wakefield's cultural assets, could play a significant part in that ambition.

Beam has been an important agency for Wakefield with its emphasis on public realm and 'place' and the role of the arts in successful place-making. Recently, its role has been valuable in stimulating debate and bringing people together. However, the organisation has been difficult to define. It is perceived as an 'art in public places' agency, but it offers considerably more, running innovative artists residencies, programming Wakefield Lit Fest and organising local and national critical debate. The running of the Orangery has complicated its role locally. Important as the Orangery is to the heritage offer and as a venue, it may have been a burden and drain on Beam. The value of organisations such as Beam may lie mainly in their ability to be fleet of foot, creative and peripatetic. Association with the Orangery has had its advantages, but may have diverted energy from its core artistic role.

Beam has been responsible for many memorable and lasting moments and projects in the city. Beam has also been important in bringing external speakers, artists and voices into the city. It also works beyond Wakefield and has developed considerable expertise and national respect in the field of public art and architecture. It has been successful in attracting Arts Council project funding, but is possibly undervalued on its local turf. Its skillset is important to Wakefield and one would hope that it might have more space to work across the city. It is valued for its role in the Lit Fest and could help grow other events. It has attempted, more than any other agency, to play a coordinating role and to bring partnerships together despite having no clear mandate to do so. The transition to a new directorial team offers a chance to redefine the focus of Beam and to build a renewed relationship with the local authority and others.

Unity Works is an impressive new resource for Wakefield. Its location, local support and flexibility as a venue offer huge potential for expanding the cultural offer for local residents and in attracting niche audiences for festivals and events. It is still very new and its business model will take time to bed down. The fact that creative businesses want to be based there is no surprise and it could develop into a hub for culture in Wakefield. The scale of local philanthropy in its capital project and the sense of local achievement in its opening is a major asset. It also offers an interesting new conference venue in one of England's most central locations.

The Art House is a relatively new physical addition to the city and also has new leadership. It is well located and has an interesting mix of social, health and economic activity. It has 40 to 50 creative spaces. The city has effectively developed a creative cluster with the Art House, Theatre Royal and Unity within a few metres of each other. The city has an increasingly good range of creative workspace and the potential of the warehousing around the Hepworth offers further room for growth.

The Theatre Royal Wakefield is a well-loved local landmark and cultural facility. It has recently had to completely reinvent its operating model to be more commercial, achieving new sponsorship and increased audiences. It takes the name of Wakefield beyond the city with its extensive tours of

John Godber's work. It has successfully built a body of private sector supporters. It is also an organisation about to experience a change of leadership, but through the current Director the theatre has shown a willingness to be more active in promoting other cultural activity and partnerships. A city the size of Wakefield should have, but currently does not have, a central box office and the Theatre and Unity offer the potential to fulfill this role.

LS-Live is Europe's biggest and best production rehearsal arena complex based in Wakefield. Voted Favourite Rehearsal Facility and Favourite Staging Company at the prestigious TPi Awards 2013, its 30,000 sq ft site offers a one-stop-shop rental solution for staging, set design and construction, automation and studio rehearsal space for the concert touring, TV & film, festival, experiential and installation sectors. Its client list includes The Stone Roses, Jay-Z, Kasabian, Robbie Williams, J-Lo, Dizzee Rascal, The BBC and ITV. Yet it is almost invisible.

Non-building based assets include the music service and a long-standing jazz club/ promoter. The music service has an exceptional track record with over 70 ensembles active across the borough. I didn't have time to explore this more fully or to visit school facilities, but any successful city needs 'talent ladders' and the music hub provides that. Its possible synergy with Unity offers further potential. Wakefield Jazz Club started in 1987, has been promoting jazz for three decades, and is about to promote its 1000th gig. The club presents weekly Contemporary Jazz of local, national and international origin. Its promoter is Chair of the Organisation of Voluntary Jazz Promoters across the entire North of England and the club is a partner of the Wakefield Music Hub and Jazz North (the National Portfolio Jazz Development Agency for the North of England).

Cathedrals are often important cultural assets and Wakefield is no exception. In addition to being a central landmark in the city, the Cathedral has been involved in commissions, concerts and festivals.

It is beyond the brief for this report to comment on future uses of the Orangery but its importance in terms of its history and architecture would suggest that it ought to be kept in public and cultural use. Earlier ambitions for its development may have emerged at a time of financial challenge, but its central location and tranquility in the heart of the city are major selling points. Its time will come again.

My visit had limited time to touch base with individual artists. There are impressive stories to tell of digital success and of Wakefield as a 'neon capital' of the UK, and finding the artist voices can often offer distinctive qualities that help define the difference between Wakefield and its competitors. The City could really position itself as an attractive and affordable place for artists to live and work. The role of freelancers and individual artists can be important to help develop projects and profile.

Given more time, a full cultural capacity audit could comment on all of this in more detail, and other aspects of the city such as fundraising, marketing, educational capacity, sponsorship culture, talent development, audience profiles etc. This may be a valuable exercise to do at some point.

5 Partnerships

'There are almost too many partnerships in place in Wakefield.' Workshop participant



I captured the list below.

- Welcome to Wakefield – building-based venues
- Wakefield Arts Partnership – cultural organisations
- Wakefield First + Bondholders – the main business and promotion network
- City Centre Partnership – focused on city centre traders
- Leeds City Region Cultural Partnership – chaired by Hepworth Director
- Cognitiv digital network – creative & digital industries sectoral network
- Tourism Partnership
- Wakefield Civic Society – membership organisation - plus societies in Castleford, Pontefract, Ossett, Horbury
- The Five Towns
- Yorkshire & Humber Visual Arts Network (YVAN) – sector specific
- Art Walk – bi-monthly event partnership
- Wakefield Lit Fest – event partnership led by Beam
- Long Division Festival – event partnership led from Unity Works
- Yorkshire Sculpture Triangle – 3 way collaboration with Henry Moore Institute/ Leeds Art Gallery, YSP, and The Hepworth
- The Local Enterprise Partnership – not yet really engaged with culture
- Unique Wakefield initiative / business network

Some are business partnerships and others have broader geography, but the overall picture is complex. In terms of the cultural partnerships there is some evidence of fatigue with the number of meetings and some drop off of both meetings and consistency of attendance. The local authority led the Welcome to Wakefield partnership and has stopped calling meetings. Wakefield Arts Partnership has had mixed attendance with some of the bigger players not fully participating. This report is hopefully providing the catalyst and focus for WAP to set a new agenda.

More focused partnerships such as the Art Walk and Lit Fest have worked well as they have a clear purpose, and the Civic Societies have active memberships – as witnessed by the number of people at the workshops organized by Beam as part of my work here.

The city needs to find its place in national networks. During my work the suggestion emerged of Wakefield joining the Creative Assembly. Kirklees has used this to address better coordination and promotion of the cultural sector online www.creativekirklees.com working with other authorities across the UK. This is worth further exploration.

One observation is that many senior people have been too busy with their own survival or development to look up and take a wider city role. There is expertise there, but it lacks the time and resources. There was also a comment, from more than one source (including the Council) that

everyone is sitting around waiting for some leadership to emerge. The image below sums up the issue!



Work by Jaume Plensa at YSP, 2011

The workshops identified significant energy and commitment from volunteers and an emerging new generation of younger creative professionals. Partnerships don't always have to involve CEOs or Directors and my experience is that strong leadership can emerge at different levels within both organisations and cities. The city needs to find a vehicle to harness this energy and to give one agency a mandate to take forward collective action.

Its role could include:

- Programming the city – working collaboratively around themes, gap months and attracting events
- Identifying the potential to pilot and nurture new events
- Representing culture at the top table of Wakefield First and elsewhere
- Share resources – e.g. training, external input
- Engaging with wider opportunities – e.g. Yorkshire Festival, Hull 2017 and Leeds 2023, M62 cultural corridor
- Informing better promotion, websites and media
- Driving social media and public awareness of Wakefield's collective assets

There may be models based in a local authority or ones outside. I would suggest study visits to Leeds Inspired and NewcastleGateshead Initiative.

Leeds Inspired consists of two culturally engaged staff 'seconded' out of the local authority to support the independent sector, manage grants and drive 'what's on', social media and new events such as 'Leeds Light Night'. It develops an image bank for the city and is growing its capacity for what's on data.

NewcastleGateshead Initiative, though now much smaller than in the past, has delivered an independent festivals and events role alongside tourism promotion. It has helped programme new festivals and spun off a new Arts Council 'National Portfolio Organisation' – The Juice Festival. It is nearer to Wakefield First as a model, but with more significant staffing capacity. Also in NewcastleGateshead is the Arts Forum of major agencies - they jointly programme around themes and work on advocacy.

The Council might also want to look at how other local authorities are dealing with sustainability. Coventry in the Midlands is rolling out a whole programme of capacity building, mentoring and project leverage funding to help its local organisations to be more sustainable.

Wakefield First is a powerful alliance of agencies and individuals and its Chair is committed and engaged with culture, seeing it as important to the future of the city. They are willing to see a cultural representative at the top table, but they need someone who will speak for the whole cultural sector and not someone who mainly represents their own organisation. Whatever partnership structure emerges it should do so with some clear link to Wakefield First. They have the potential to take on a greater promotional role for culture in the city and deserve credit for what they have done to date.

The ambition for the City Centre Partnership to have a Business Improvement District offers an exciting opportunity for culture to be at the heart of animating the daytime and evening economies.

The city should learn from the characteristics of existing successes – Wakefield Lit Fest and Art Walk were cited as good models. The Rhubarb Festival, by contrast, was described as multiple people trying to do their own thing.

Wakefield could position itself as a ‘perfect partner’ with others. It has already done so with the Sculpture Triangle and could do likewise in other areas by networking its existing events with others in the North. Real partnerships can be hard work as the Sculpture Triangle has proved, but the results can be worth the collective effort.

Had Hull not been UK City of Culture in 2017 and Leeds not been bidding for European Capital of Culture in 2023, Wakefield would have been a credible candidate for either competition. There is a sense that Wakefield needs a process like this, or the next big step of a longer-term cultural vision to work towards. Having worked on bid processes for several cities it is clear to me that they can be a galvanising force for a wide range of partners. They build public pride, greater awareness of cultural assets, and deliver real economic change. Wakefield has a stronger cultural infrastructure than many other cities, but it also has its challenges and problems. It could easily bid for events like the Turner Prize, but needs to find a bigger rallying call.

6 Workshop Output

The workshops produced various outputs including a mini ‘cultural CV’ for the city and an image bank from the ‘Google my city’ exercise. The workshops were the starting point for helping to understand Wakefield’s collective cultural strengths, local pride, and the images that define the place. The materials have been lodged with Beam. The final workshop explored some practical projects that Wakefield Arts Partnership might work on together including:

- A joint approach to the Yorkshire Festival
- An alternative cultural guide to Wakefield
- Better ‘what’s on’ website provision
- A Wakefield day, weekend or week to provide a cultural focus
- Planning a major cultural VIP visit to Wakefield

‘I think culture is going to define Wakefield at some stage’

Paul Reid, Chair, Wakefield First

About the Author:

Andrew Dixon - Culture Creativity Place Ltd

Andrew has expertise from over 30 years in the arts, tourism and regeneration sectors in the North of England, Scotland, and internationally. He was Chief Executive of Northern Arts in Newcastle where he led the regional Case for Capital, championing projects such as the Baltic, The Sage Gateshead, The Arc, and The Angel of the North. He was Chief Executive of the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative from 1995 to 2010 in charge of tourism, marketing and the delivery of a region-wide programme of festivals and events. More recently he has worked as Director of Creative Scotland and as Bid Advisor and Programme Director for Hull's successful bid to be UK City of Culture 2017. www.andrewdixon.org

About the Commissioners & Funder:

Wakefield Arts Partnership

Wakefield Arts Partnership is an informal independent network of arts organizations working together across the Wakefield District seeking opportunities to create a more connected cultural community.

Beam

Beam is an arts commissioning agency established in 1986, based in Wakefield but working regionally, nationally and internationally. It draws upon extensive experience linking arts, people and places to embed the arts and creativity into places and spaces through arts commissions and events. Beam is also programmer of the annual Wakefield Lit Fest. www.beam.uk.net

'Arts in Place – I'

This Report has been commissioned by Beam on behalf of the Wakefield Arts Partnership as part of a wider series of events and commissions called 'Arts in Place I'. It is supported by Arts Council England through its 'Grants for the Arts' funding stream.

Activity in preparation of this report (led by Andrew Dixon):

- 8 June 2015, Public Talk & Open Forum Discussion – The Orangery
- 20 & 21 July 2015, 121 meetings, Creative Workshop at Unity Works, Creative Meal at Iris restaurant
- 14 October 2015, Feedback meeting – The Orangery



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