



**Greater Morpeth  
Development Trust**  
Regeneration of town & countryside  
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# Morpeth Cultural Centre – HeArt of Morpeth

## Options appraisal / Feasibility study

### Executive Summary

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Supported by:



Morpeth  
Town  
Council



Friends of Morpeth Museum



Queens Hall Arts

## **Executive Summary**

There has been a long history of discussions relating to the possibilities of establishing an Arts Centre and / or Museum / Heritage Centre in Morpeth. However, although there was a local heritage museum at the Morpeth Chantry lasting from 1965 to 1997, unfortunately this has never progressed to a point where there is a sustainable cultural and arts facility in the town.

In February 2015 the Greater Morpeth Development Trust (GMDT) facilitated the establishment of the HeArt Steering Group to more robustly take forward these discussions. In May 2015 this group, thanks to funding from Morpeth Town Council, the Friends of Morpeth Museum and Queen's Hall Arts, commissioned Karen Taws to undertake a feasibility study to robustly explore the potential to establish a sustainable Cultural Centre at the HeArt of Morpeth.

### Methodology

To ensure a wide range of sources were used to inform this study a range of approaches to gathering information and views were used including:

- extensive desk research
- a review of potential audience demand including a Market Size Analysis using data from the national Audience Development Agency<sup>1</sup> and an online survey
- detailed discussions with a range of people with an interest in and experience of arts and culture and policy and development issues affecting Morpeth and the wider region
- a review of 15 similar Arts Centres in market towns across the UK including financial analysis of 8 comparable venues

### Strategy & policy alignment

The ambitions for a Cultural Centre in Morpeth aligns strongly with the plans, proposals and objectives of some key strategies and policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Audience development expert Caroline Greener was commissioned to undertake this element of the study

The *Northumberland Economic Strategy 2015-20* provides the framework to secure opportunities for Northumberland's residents and businesses in a resilient economy. There is particular alignment with the Business and Place Themes. Under the Business Theme culture has been prioritised as a sector for development and a priority for growth is: *"Supporting tourism and culture businesses who are a major part of the Northumberland offer capitalising on our Northumbrian identity. We will focus on improving the quality and productivity of the sector and related leisure, arts and heritage activity with integrated support."* A Cultural Centre will also contribute strongly to the priorities under the Place Theme where there is a focus on how *"We need to nurture and celebrate the qualities that people most value and that make Northumberland special."*

There are also major infrastructure development plans which are of significance both in terms of the need to ensure that any housing growth for Morpeth is supported by appropriate investment in community infrastructure and in relation to increasing the potential number of visitors to Morpeth. This includes Morpeth being identified as a priority town under *Delivery Programme 1: Investment Zone* which will include new employment and housing growth plans, improving transport connections with the Newcastle city-region and developing new business locations and inward investment. *Delivery programme 2: Growth Network* aims to support and facilitate the growth of Northumberland's network of market towns including investment in infrastructure, connectivity, key sectors and cultural and heritage assets with a focus on populous commuter towns and rural service centres including Morpeth.

In May 2015, after significant local consultation, Morpeth Town Council published *The Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan 2011-2031*.

The plan acknowledges that *"Sports, Arts and Leisure are an integral part of any healthy social community. They involve a discretionary use of personal time enabling both individual and collective happiness. They can also facilitate learning and development, through participation in new activities or enhancing existing skills."* and that *"There is strong local support for a commercially sustainable 'Arts and Performance Centre', possibly to include a Heritage Museum visitor attraction. The MNP concludes that there is*

*a case for a new facility combining all of these elements, making a major contribution to the development of Morpeth’s visitor economy and the cultural life of the town.”*

Plans for a Cultural Centre at the heart of Morpeth fits strongly within many of the MNP’s priorities including:

*Plan Objective 1 – Historic Market Town Character (PO1): Develop Morpeth’s strong sense of place, community and local identity; and its integrity, character and rural setting, including the green approaches, as an historic market town.*

*Plan Objective 2 – Rural Service Centre (PO2): Strengthen Morpeth’s role and competitiveness as a rural service centre, with a strong retail sector and a broad mix of local and visitor attractions.*

*Plan Objective 3 – Accommodating Growth (PO3): Accommodate growth and support new economic activity and economic diversification in a sustainable manner.*

*Plan Objective 7 – Community Wellbeing (PO7): Address the challenges of an aging population, foster a sense of community, and promote wellbeing.*

Northumberland County Council has recently commissioned and is in the process of developing a new Cultural Strategy for the county. This will build on the previous strategy *Stronger together through inspirational culture: A cultural strategy for Northumberland 2011-2016*. This strategy was produced in the context of the *Sustainable Community Strategy for Northumberland* which seeks to “balance and integrate social, economic and environmental components of life in Northumberland” with an “aspirational long term vision for delivering a fundamental step change to the quality of life within the communities of Northumberland.” It clearly demonstrates how culture delivers against the specific priorities of the *Sustainable Community Strategy* including: Place shaping; Stronger communities; Economic prosperity; Health, care and well being; Families and children.

In line with this the vision for *Stronger together through inspirational culture* is “Culture is at the heart of all that we do, bringing a rich and meaningful quality of life for people in Northumberland” The particular objectives that a Cultural Centre in Morpeth would contribute to include:

- *The Arts: To increase contact with the arts regardless of circumstance by putting the needs of audiences and communities at the heart of arts activity*
- *Cultural volunteering: To increase the number of people volunteering in culture within their community*
- *Venues and facilities: To maintain and develop a network of high quality, accessible venues and facilities to enable all communities to enjoy cultural activity*
- *Heritage: To maximise the potential of heritage to contribute to place shaping and support the visitor economy whilst encouraging local people to have a sense of pride, involvement and ownership*
- *Cultural infrastructure: To maintain and develop the cultural infrastructure of the County, enabling culture to flourish*

#### Potential audience and current arts & cultural provision

Morpeth has a population of around 15,000. The Market Size Analysis shows that based on segmenting potential audiences, within a 45 minute drive time 590,354 people over the age of 15 (55% out of a total +15yrs population of 1,070,628) are actively engaging in culture. Taking into account the challenges of attracting people away from the strong provision of areas such as Newcastle a further analysis was undertaken of 'Local Core' postcodes which identified 156,711 people over the age of 15 (66% of a total +15yrs population of 235,195) are actively engaging in culture. This demonstrates a strong potential audience for a Cultural Centre in Morpeth.

291 people responded to the online survey with a further 8 individuals providing their response to the questionnaire in hard copy format. 95.3% of respondents said they and / or their family would either definitely or probably use a Cultural Centre in Morpeth with only 1.4% saying they would probably not or definitely not.

There is already a strong grass roots commitment to amateur arts and cultural activity across Morpeth with a wide range of groups with strong membership and attracting substantial audiences to their performances and events.

It is clear from this review that a Cultural Centre in Morpeth would add value through:

- Cultural / arts impact – providing a ‘cultural hub’ for Morpeth attracting high quality professional work whilst supporting and promoting the work of amateur arts and cultural groups in the area
- Social impact – focused on grass roots with a positive impact on both individuals and the community as a whole
- Economic impact – with people attending the venue also using other facilities in the town including shops, pubs and restaurants

### Facilities & programme

Based on the review of Arts Centres in towns similar to Morpeth it is proposed that the venue facilities should include:

- Main theatre – 200-300 seat capacity
- Studio theatre / rehearsal space
- Gallery / exhibitions space
- Café / bistro / bar
- Offices for businesses to rent
- Meeting rooms for rental

The programme should be broad ranging and include a strong mix of professional work alongside community / grass roots activity and should include:

- Theatre
- Music
- Dance
- Heritage
- Folk Arts
- Comedy
- Cinema
- Visual Arts
- Participatory Activity / workshops

### Making the programme accessible and sustainable

It is *essential* not to work on the assumption 'if we build it they will come'. To ensure that the programme is accessible and that it can attract the levels of attendance to make the venue financially sustainable it will be important to ensure that:

- there is effective audience development and community engagement
- the venue is involved in and takes advantage of opportunities through regional (and national) partnerships and networks
- the potential for a creative 'USP' is explored making it **the place** to see a particular art form / performances
- the pricing policy is accessible and attractive to local people whilst covering the costs of running the venue

### Venue management

It will be essential to ensure a strong staff team providing the necessary skills and experience to sustainably run a venue of this kind. This should focus strongly on ensuring there is a strong combination of the right professional skills including: venue management; arts programming; audience development; front of house / customer service; and, income generation. In line with this it the proposed staffing structure includes:

- Director (1 full time)
- Audience Development and Marketing Manager (1 part time)
- Fundraising and Business Development Manager (1 part time)
- Box Office Staff (equivalent of 1.5)
- Administrator (1 part time)
- Senior Technician (1 full time)
- Support Technician (1 part time / casual)

Volunteers will be an essential and invaluable element of the team running the venue. As well as supporting the venue to deliver its activity providing a volunteering scheme also provides a

real opportunity for local people to actively support and build a strong feeling of ownership of the building and its programme.

It is proposed that a trust is set up to take full responsibility for delivering and running a Cultural Centre for Morpeth.

### Ongoing revenue

A review of the accounts of 8 similar venues was undertaken to provide a basis from which an estimate of annual income and expenditure could be developed. Above and beyond covering the annual costs of running a venue it will also be important to focus on generating enough income to build reserves to ensure the venue is financially viable.

Based on the analysis of the other venues it is evident that it is possible for venues of this kind to develop a sustainable financial model through a range of approaches to income generation. 4 of the 8 venues reviewed did not receive any core subsidy or grant and ran completely on the basis of self generated income. The range of potential income streams for a venue of this kind includes:

- Box Office / Performance Space rental
- Venue hire (including meeting rooms)
- Office space rental
- Café / Bar / Bistro income
- Merchandise / Craft sales
- Friends programme / private donations
- Project grants

### Potential sites

At this stage no building or site has been officially agreed as a location for a Cultural Centre. However, discussions with staff from NCC do demonstrate that this is an opportune time to start discussions regarding a potential location. Plans are still being discussed regarding the potential relocation of Northumberland County Hall from its current site on the edge of Morpeth Town to a new location in Ashington. This means the

current County Hall site may be redeveloped including relocating some of the services currently being provided from sites in Morpeth town centre. Quoted in The Morpeth Herald, Thursday March 26 2015, Council Leader Grant Davey said: *“The potential closure of County Hall presents a once in a lifetime opportunity to positively change how Morpeth town works and supports its residents. This, together with surplus council assets, means that radical and exciting proposals relating to education, leisure and the arts can be put on the table for discussion.”*

There is overall agreement that a Cultural Centre should be based at the heart of the town centre. Being centrally located would ensure maximum economic impact on the town as people visiting the centre will potentially also use other local shops, pubs and restaurants. For the centre itself being centrally located would also maximise ‘passing trade’ and footfall and use by people who may be visiting Morpeth for other reasons.

Although it is clearly still the early stages of these discussions one site which has already been identified as having significant potential for a Cultural Centre is the current Leisure Centre building.

### Capital fundraising

As a building or site has not yet been formally agreed it is beyond the scope of this study to accurately estimate the costs of the purchase and build. However, it is safe to assume that these costs will be significant and it would be reasonable to suggest that, based on similar capital projects, the overall costs is likely to be £3-4 million. In line with this it will be essential to bring in expertise in relation to raising funds of this scale and put in place a major fundraising campaign to achieve it.

Funding could potentially come from a range of sources including:

- Trusts and foundations – mixture of contributions to overall projects and grants for specific elements e.g. media / digital equipment
- Lottery
- North East LEP – European and domestic funding
- Loans / Social Investment

- Private donations from the general public
- Business / corporate sponsorship / investment – mixture of contribution to overall project alongside potential to ‘buy’ rights to naming specific parts of the building e.g. gallery space

### Making it happen!

The findings of this study suggest that, with understandable challenges and risks for a project of this scale, delivering a Cultural Centre for Morpeth is feasible.

The HeArt Steering Group, facilitated by GMDT, has been the main driver behind this feasibility study and now need to consider, if taking the project forward is agreed, the role they will play in relation to establishing the structures and processes to make it happen.

It is important however, not to underestimate how long delivering this project will take. Based on the time it will take to redevelop the County Hall site and relocation of services currently being provided by town centre locations which would be seen as a preferred site for the venue it is safe to assume that a building / site for a Cultural Centre is unlikely to become available until at least 2021/22. That said, although this feels like a long timeframe if there is agreement on taking the project forward it will be important to immediately put in place actions to make it happen. Ensuring all the necessary ‘building blocks’ are in place early in the process is essential.

This feasibility study is just the first step in the process and the level of resource time and commitment which will be required to take this project forward should not be underestimated. However, the benefits of establishing a Cultural Centre in Morpeth are significant and will far out-way the challenges and work required to deliver the project.

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