

Case studies

STORYHOUSE

# Storyhouse

**A model for sustainable  
library provision**

A case study from the 2019 Public service:  
state of transformation report



## The headlines

- Storyhouse prides itself on being the UK's most accessible cultural centre, open 364 days each year from 8.00 am to 11.00 pm, and the second most visited in the UK with over 1,000,000 visitors annually.
- It is a model for both safeguarding and expanding library services in the UK, using a fully integrated blend of commercial, charitable and statutory services.
- An innovative community programming and management model sees 131 different community groups use Storyhouse for free each month: from choirs to Syrian conversation groups; board game groups to Spanish classes for the over-50s; and organisations offering mental health support.
- In total there are over 2,000 activity sessions per year aimed at marginalised communities.

## The local context

Chester has a local population of 118,000. It is a proud county town as well as an important heritage and visitor city. The city had been struggling with a declining high street, falling tourism and a loss of sense of place and identity. Its theatre and cinema had been closed since 2008 and its communities were without somewhere to share their stories and come together. The city library, like so many, was open for restricted hours and as a result was struggling to attract younger customers.

Meanwhile, Storyhouse, a cultural and education charity, had been running community and staged

programmes since 2006. Working closely with its partners at Cheshire West and Chester Council, it had been driving the development of a new venue for the city since that time. In 2010 it founded Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre, one of the country's leading regional outdoor theatre projects. The runaway success of that project gave the city a sense of confidence that something more ambitious might also be possible.

## Our story so far

The result was the creation of a new cultural centre, the city's largest capital project since 1976, with an inspirational £32 million investment from Cheshire West and Chester Council and unswerving cross-party political support.

Storyhouse opened the new building in May 2017 and is on course to exceed one million customers in each of its first two years of operation, equally split between people attending events and festivals, library customers, and those taking part in other activities. Storyhouse has a stated aim of 'normalising' its conversation about culture, avoiding barriers to participation. Its highly descriptive name has become synonymous with its combined activity, with the words library and theatre rarely used whether in the building or in the city.

Within the complex, Storyhouse runs the city's central library, now with the longest opening hours in the UK for a public library. There are no lockable doors in the library, which is operated by 23 city librarians through its core hours, with assistance from Storyhouse's 180 volunteers and 106 permanent staff, who also run the library outside these hours.

The organisation now runs a hugely diverse programme, supplementing the library with a 120-cover restaurant and café serving Levantine cuisine; an 840-seat proscenium theatre stage (which uniquely converts into a 500-seat thrust stage); a 150-seat studio theatre; and a 100-seat cinema. Fifty per cent of all the stage work in the building is created by Storyhouse.

## The key partners

Cheshire West and Chester Council invested £32 million in the capital project. The council contributes 18 per cent of Storyhouse's annual turnover and runs the city library in partnership with Storyhouse.

Storyhouse raised the remaining capital in collaboration with its local authority partners, including a 3-year, £600,000 commitment from local credit card provider MBNA. It also brought its existing customer base, funding streams and reserves to the new operation. Storyhouse raises 82 per cent of its £6.5 million annual cost from trading and fundraising.

Arts Council England invested £3 million in the project and has been supporting Storyhouse as a charity since 2007.

## What's been the impact of our work?

There is now a tangible sense of cultural pride in the city, which was fully on display in June 2018 when the building was formally opened by HM The Queen and the Duchess of Sussex.

The amazing popularity of Storyhouse is as much to do with the city's sense of need for such a space, as it is to do with its design and operation. Storyhouse has responded to community demand by opening the creation of much of the activity in the building to the local community and volunteers, resulting in an ambitious, innovative, future-facing cultural programme, defined as much as possible by the local people themselves.

The pioneering library within Storyhouse, where members of the community work alongside city librarians, has the longest opening hours of any UK public library and is open every day until 11.00 pm. Storyhouse offers over 2,000 activities each year for local marginalised groups, including autism-friendly colouring sessions, sewing groups for refugees, and regular classes for isolated and older communities.

The organisation runs a nationally-acclaimed theatre company with home-produced stage shows each year, including the first ever version of Enid Blyton's *The Secret Seven*. Alongside Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre, and an open-air cinema, it also produces and is home to a number of specialist festivals each year, including Chester Literature Festival, WayWord Festival, Storyhouse Women, Blink Festival for early years parenting, Love Later Life and The Great Get Together for older communities, Kaleidoscope Festival for adults living with a disability, regular Young Takeover events, and Storyhouse Festival of Languages, celebrating diverse and immigrant speaking cultures.

The many awards won by the operation include two key national awards – as the overall winner

in the 2018 Guardian Public Service Awards, and the Special Award for Community Impact and Engagement from the Civic Trust.

Storyhouse employs 106 permanent staff plus the 23 city librarians who are based in the centre. Of its £6.5 million turnover, over two-thirds is spent directly on people.

## The key elements of our success

Our success has been based upon:

- a new model for designing library provision, wrapping books around retail activities and hence safeguarding the library's extended opening hours;
- a model of community- and volunteer-generated content and management, built around statutory provision;
- the integration of commercial and charitable services in a model of mutual support; and
- no lockable doors, reception desks or points of intervention – customers are in charge of their own journey

## And if we were starting again...

If we were starting again:

- We knew at the start of the building phase that we were short of meeting and community space, but it is easy to design something out if you cannot see an immediate use. The level of demand for our services has put a lot of pressure on space for community-generated activity.
- We would have worked even harder at empowering local communities to take over our operation.

- One of our greatest successes has been in the number of young people working and gathering in the building and we would have liked to provide more space for their activities. We would encourage those looking to re-imagine libraries to focus hard on the things that support how young people gather and communicate.

## Our key contacts

**Andrew Bentley**, Chief Executive, Storyhouse [andrew@storyhouse.com](mailto:andrew@storyhouse.com)

**Alex Clifton**, Artistic Director, Storyhouse [alex@storyhouse.com](mailto:alex@storyhouse.com)

### Andrew Bentley

Andrew Bentley is the founder and CEO of Storyhouse, the charity that runs a community-focussed theatre, library and cinema hub in Chester, now one of the country's most accessible cultural centres with over one million visits per year. His varied career, in and out of the third sector, has embraced running festivals, concert halls, theatres and community venues, and includes a very happy stint as a hotelier, Andrew having founded and built Liverpool's well-known Hope Street Hotel.

