

Maldon District Culture & Heritage Strategy

Briefing and Discussion Papers – 1st June 2026

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Introduction

This document brings together fifteen discussion (or briefing) papers on each of the themes or issues that were identified and explored through the work on the Culture and Heritage Strategy. This has been informed by meetings, research and workshops as well as a community survey and discussions with strategic organisations.

The intention is for the discussion papers to be summarised into a simpler ‘public facing’ document that will become the final Culture & Heritage Strategy for the Maldon District. This provides time for review and further discussion. It also provides time to see how the UK Town of Culture Expression of Interest progresses for Maldon Town, as well as for more progress to be made on the current proposals for an Arts & Cultural Centre at Promenade Park (and associated considerations relating to the Museum).

It was not the intention to cover every event, programme, space or organisation in the papers. Rather to explore relevant themes and issues that would make a difference across the District, and improve the overall understanding, governance and flourishing of the cultural and heritage sectors. The environment is also explored given its relevance to the ‘Saltmarsh Coast’ concept and importance of nature, coast, rural and agricultural settings and spaces to the cultural and tourism profile of the area.

The reports have been produced by the Cultural Engine CIC working with Maldon District Council and many other important organisations and groups across the District. This has very much been a collaborative effort.

1 - Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution

Introduction – The Relevance of Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution to the Culture & Heritage Strategy

This strategy, and indeed virtually all strategy and policy development at a District or County level in Essex, is framed to a greater extent by what is emerging through the UK Government's English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. Specifically local government reorganisation and devolution which will affect the Maldon District alongside all of the other local authorities across Greater Essex.

Of most relevant to the cultural and heritage sectors (and indeed wider community and voluntary sectors) is to ensure that their importance is recorded, contextualised and promoted as the new Mid Essex Unitary Authority develops. The point of this is the stated ambition for 'community empowerment' that is a key part of the new legislation, and the important role that local organisations and groups play in supporting this. Some are informal, others established charities, but they are all key partners in terms of supporting engagement with local issues, meaningful participation in civic life and in the advocacy they provide for their communities or communities of interest locally. There is obviously a key role for MDC and its partners including Maldon & District CVS, and this strategy aims to consider how support, representation and advocacy can best be achieved over the next few years to support 'community empowerment' at a local level long-term.

Greater Essex Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution

The new Mid Essex unitary authority is a major restructuring of local government that will merge Brentwood Borough, Chelmsford City and Maldon District into a single authority (as well as taking on the responsibilities of Essex CC in this part of Essex). Confirmed in March 2026, the new body will replace the existing district councils by March 2028, with a shadow authority operating before that to align policy, budgets and governance. Work is already underway to create new, larger electoral wards and to reduce the overall number of councillors, reflecting the streamlined structure of a unitary model compared with the current three separate councils. This reorganisation sits alongside the wider move toward a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Greater Essex, which will hold devolved powers over housing, regeneration, economic growth, transport and - under recent new proposals - culture.

This gives culture a formal strategic role for the first time (under the Mayor), and the new Mid Essex authority will have responsibility for cultural development, heritage, and place-based initiatives (tourism for example). For Maldon specifically, this shift reinforces the importance of articulating its distinctiveness and cultural contribution to Mid Essex - for example its maritime heritage, Saltmarsh Coast brand, remote and biodiverse landscapes and its unique visitor offer. These must remain visible and prioritised within a larger governance system. Over the coming years, decision-making at district level will increasingly reflect the priorities of the emerging Mid Essex authority, with long-term planning focused on integration, shared services and preparing for the expanded powers and responsibilities of the new unitary structure.

Furthermore, projects or initiatives proposed at this stage in June 2026 that involve Maldon District Council will have to be considered in a way that gives due consideration to the fact that the District Council will no longer exist (at least in its current form) beyond March 2028, and prior to this will be

part of a ‘shadow’ unitary authority where the strategic mindset will very much be on integration and policy development relating to the new powers of a unitary (compared to the three tier-two local authorities that will make up Mid Essex).

Mayoral Combined Authority for Essex

The proposed Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) for Essex will bring together Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council under a single strategic body with a directly elected mayor. Under current proposals the mayor would gain devolved powers and multi-year funding for housing and regeneration, local transport, economic growth, and adult skills, along with wider responsibilities for climate action, public service reform and strategic planning. The intention is to strengthen long-term decision-making across the county, tackle infrastructure and growth challenges more coherently, and align investment more closely with priorities that emerge locally, rather than the current system where Essex CC and other tiers of local government largely respond to shorter-term central government priority programmes.

The theory is that this would give Essex a stronger and direct voice to the UK Government, and unlock additional resources to support growth, environmental improvement and nature recovery and to invest in infrastructure. There will be collaboration with the new Unitary Authorities including Mid Essex, and the Local Growth Plan that the MCA will produce will identify major projects and influence future funding for place-making, tourism, heritage, skills and transport, while opening opportunities to embed culture and the visitor economy more firmly within the strategic Essex context. The level of priority afforded to culture and heritage will depend to an extent on the elected Mayor (election scheduled under current plans for 2028). Elections for a Mayor were originally to be in 2026, but currently there is an interim management system under a Chief Executive who is working with local authorities and other partners to produce an evidence base for the Local Growth Plan.

Recent updates to the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill introduce culture as a formal area of responsibility for Mayors and Strategic Authorities for the first time. New amendments mean combined authorities can play a key role in championing local cultural assets, support creative industries, and integrate culture into wider priorities such as regeneration, skills, placemaking and community wellbeing.

Community Empowerment and Neighbourhood Governance

Community empowerment is meant to be at the heart of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, and central to understanding the implications of local government reorganisation for the whole of Essex. For Mid Essex, new authority will serve a far larger population - around 337,000 compared with Maldon’s 66,000. This scaling-up raises the risk of decision-making becoming more distant from local communities, and this has been a concern throughout the process. The Bill therefore emphasises “neighbourhood governance” as the mechanism through which people can still shape local priorities, influence public services and protect the identity of their places. However, what constitutes a “neighbourhood” remains loosely defined, and the varying capacity of Town and Parish Councils means they cannot uniformly take on this expanded role. This uncertainty makes it essential that community-based organisations - cultural, heritage, environmental and voluntary groups - are recognised as key partners in shaping meaningful neighbourhood-level empowerment.

Maldon District offers a strong foundation for this, with deep grassroots traditions, a rich maritime and rural heritage and active cultural participation. Local heritage and environmental assets are critical to community identity, pride and sense of belonging - an argument strongly reinforced in ultimately successful Five Unitaries proposal, which highlighted heritage as a source of civic pride and “soft power,” especially in rural and coastal areas.

‘Residents feel that an understanding of local heritage helps to shape their identity and connection to place. This desire to champion local identity and connection to local areas underpins the need to ensure that LGR respects locality, maintains local representation, and promotes local civic pride.’ Page 18 – ‘Creating a Local Future for Greater Essex’

‘Mid Essex is an area rich in heritage and legend, boasting one of the oldest intact stone churches in the UK, the seventh century chapel of St-Peter-on-the-Wall at Bradwell, and the site of a 10th-century battle between the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings which was immortalised in one of the most important Old English poems, ‘The Battle of Maldon’. (Page 64 – Creating a Local Future for Greater Essex’).

Mid Essex’s own strategic narratives explicitly draw on Maldon’s unique assets, referencing everything from St Peter-on-the-Wall to the site of the Battle of Maldon as symbols of shared identity. These heritage anchors, alongside cultural activity and environmental stewardship, are not just ‘nice to have’; they are practical tools for community cohesion, local distinctiveness and democratic engagement.

The Bill also proposes extending powers originally established under the Localism Act 2011, offering communities greater rights to influence public services, own or manage assets of community value, shape social-value commissioning and access new funding mechanisms such as a community wealth fund. For Maldon, Brentwood and Chelmsford, this presents an opportunity to empower local groups to take a more active role in shaping the future of their communities. Given the distinctive landscapes and environmental designations within Maldon - its saltmarsh, estuaries and wild coast - environmental participation is particularly important. Cultural, heritage and environmental organisations already bring communities together and engage residents who may otherwise feel disconnected from local decision-making. These organisations can help address the challenge identified in the survey for the culture & heritage strategy: the apparent limited confidence many residents currently feel in their ability to influence change.

Finally, Maldon District Council’s work on initiatives such as the Saltmarsh Coast concept, Visit Maldon District, the Regenerative Tourism Strategy (developed as part of the work on the Culture & Heritage Strategy) and the Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival demonstrates the critical role local authorities can still play in enabling community-led action. As the District transitions into the Mid Essex unitary structure, it will be essential to preserve and strengthen this identity, especially through the work of the Saltmarsh Coast CIC, which is developing a governance and advocacy model rooted in local empowerment. Ensuring that culture, heritage and environmental participation remain central to the new governance landscape will help Mid Essex achieve genuine community empowerment, rather than a purely administrative restructuring.

The obvious challenge however is to really understand the resilience of local neighbourhoods, villages and hyper-local institutions and groups that might be expected to play a key role to inform ‘community empowerment’ processes as the Mid Essex concept develops further. Particularly the concept of ‘Neighbourhood Committees’. Prior to full scale local government reorganisation and further develop

of proposals for neighbourhood governance, MDC and its partners should seek to identify what might be needed to strengthen local resilience and therefore community's/group's ability to be proactive and represent themselves and their local assets appropriately and effectively in the near future. This would require an analysis of each parish, the resilience of its key assets (community spaces, key businesses, pubs etc.), and what might be needed to strengthen these longer-term (as well as sharing good practice). This can then feed into emerging strategic priorities for investment through Mid Essex and the MCA (heritage, culture and nature likely to feature), as well as how effective local voice and advocacy are likely to be in the new governance structures (the centres of power are likely to be in urban areas remote from many parts of Maldon District). This could be seen as a Community Empowerment Task Force for the Maldon District.

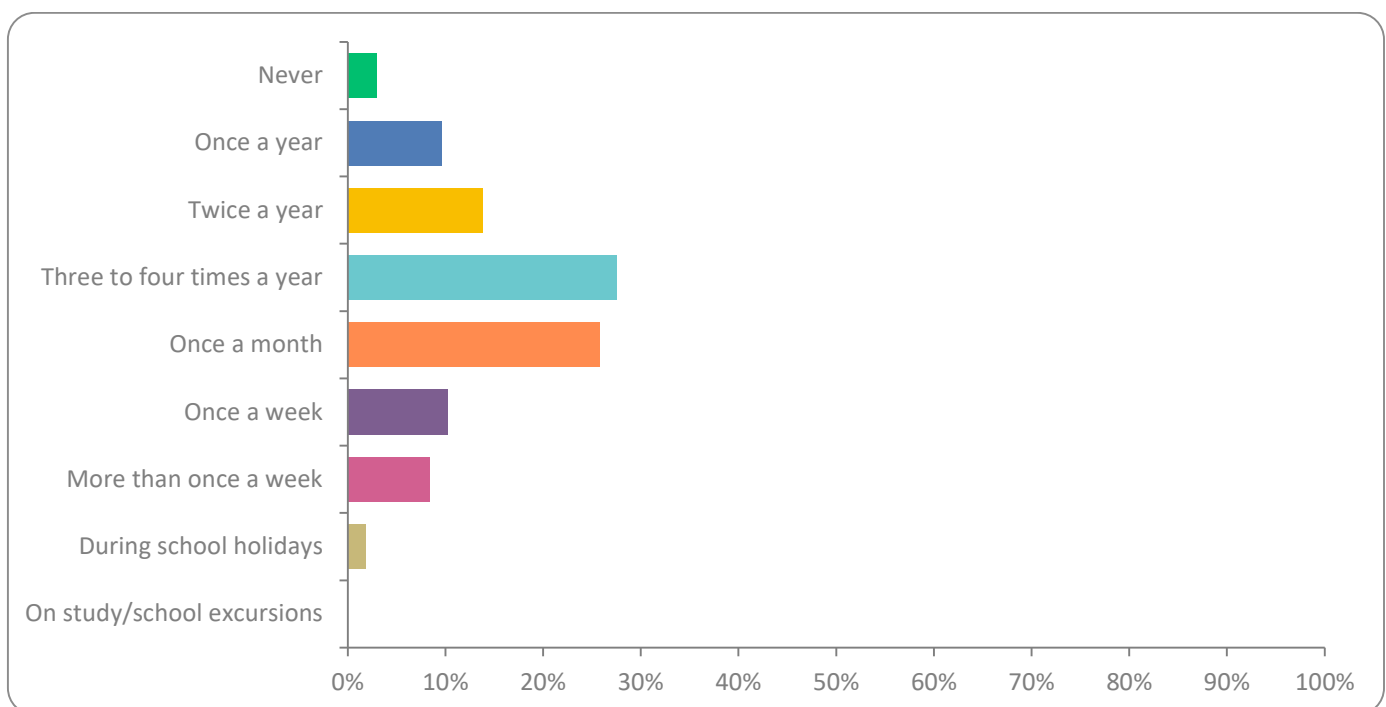
2. Culture & Heritage Strategy Community Survey Response

The community survey was opened to complement the research on the ground and wider engagement process. It was open to anyone who had something to share and in total there were 169 responses. The respondents were very much of an older age profile (the majority over 55 and over 40% over 70). The experience of engaging with organisations working across heritage in particular demonstrates that older people are far more likely to take part in activities and as volunteers – so the older age profile of the respondents would suggest they are more likely to be involved locally.

The vast majority of the respondents were from the Maldon District and therefore provide a small but useful insight into what local residents think about the heritage and cultural scene locally.

Question 2 - How often do you visit local cultural and heritage sites and spaces (i.e those in the Maldon District - for example museums, galleries etc.)?

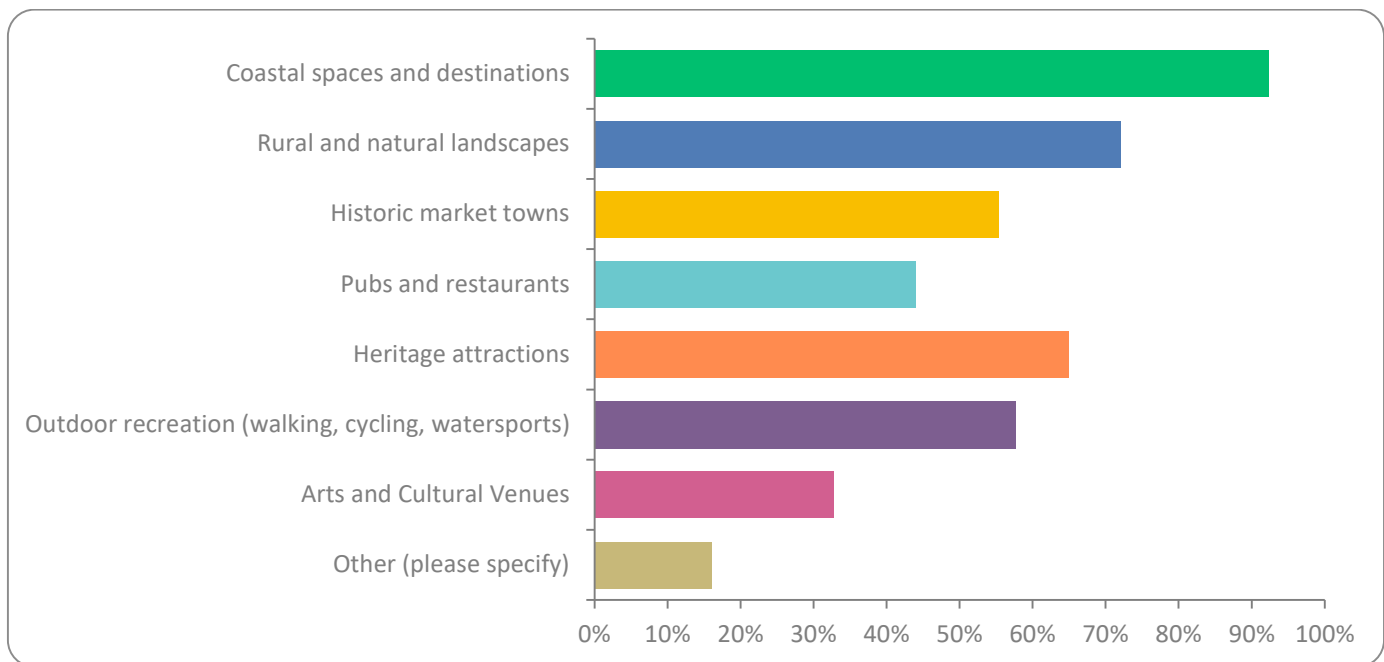
Respondents showed a reasonably high level of activity when it comes to **visiting local heritage and cultural sites** (the sites could be anything they consider to be relevant). The majority answered '3 to 4 times a year' or 'once a month', and it was a similar picture for visiting cultural and heritage sites outside of the District.



In answer to **Question 4 – ‘Do you ever attend local festivals or events? These could be in a venue or outdoors, and could be large or smaller community focused’** there was an overwhelming positive response with almost 80% indicating that ‘Regularly’ or ‘Sometimes’. This demonstrates that events throughout the year are of interest to local communities (even if these respondents are not fully representative of the wider population).

Question 5 - ‘In your opinion, what are Maldon District's best visitor, cultural and heritage assets? Tick all that apply’

The responses demonstrate a preference for the coastal and rural. This is not surprising given the nature of the District, and the lower response for 'Arts and Cultural Venues' is a reflection of the lack of obvious spaces to reference.

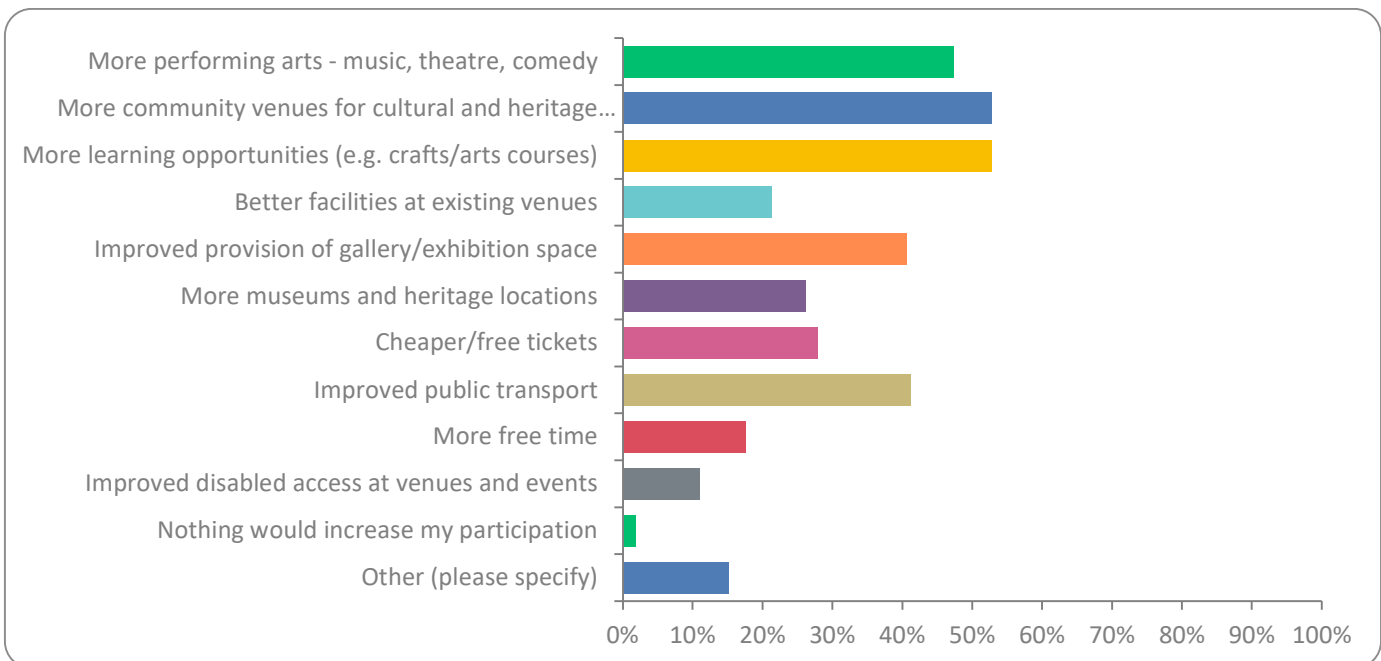


Question 6 - What would increase your participation in culture and heritage within the Maldon District?

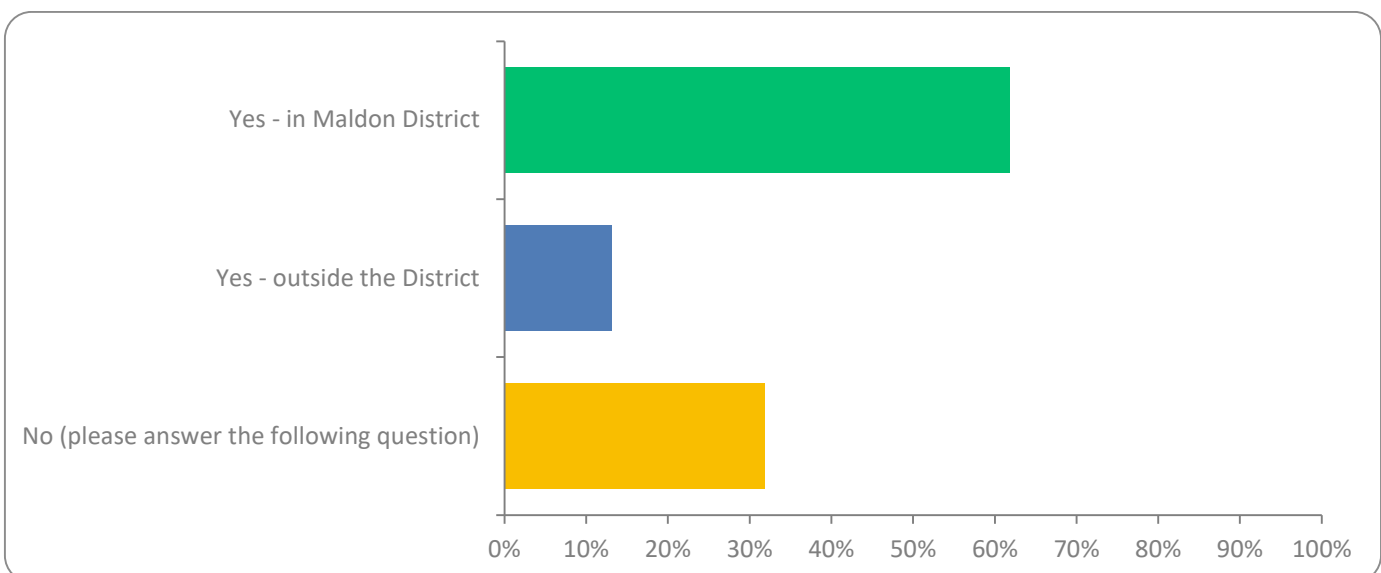
The responses reflect the desire amongst the respondents to see more spaces for cultural (and heritage) activities, with the most popular answer being 'More community venues for cultural and heritage activities' and 'More Learning Opportunities (e.g. crafts/arts courses)'. There was also interest in more performing arts space.

The responses to this question are very much in line with the wider engagement across the District (and particularly in Maldon), with a clear sense that there is a desire for new cultural space - although no clear consensus on exactly what kind of space.

The reference to a lack of public transport options to access spaces across the District is also important to note.



Question 7 – Do you currently volunteer (or work) for a cultural, heritage or community organisation or group?

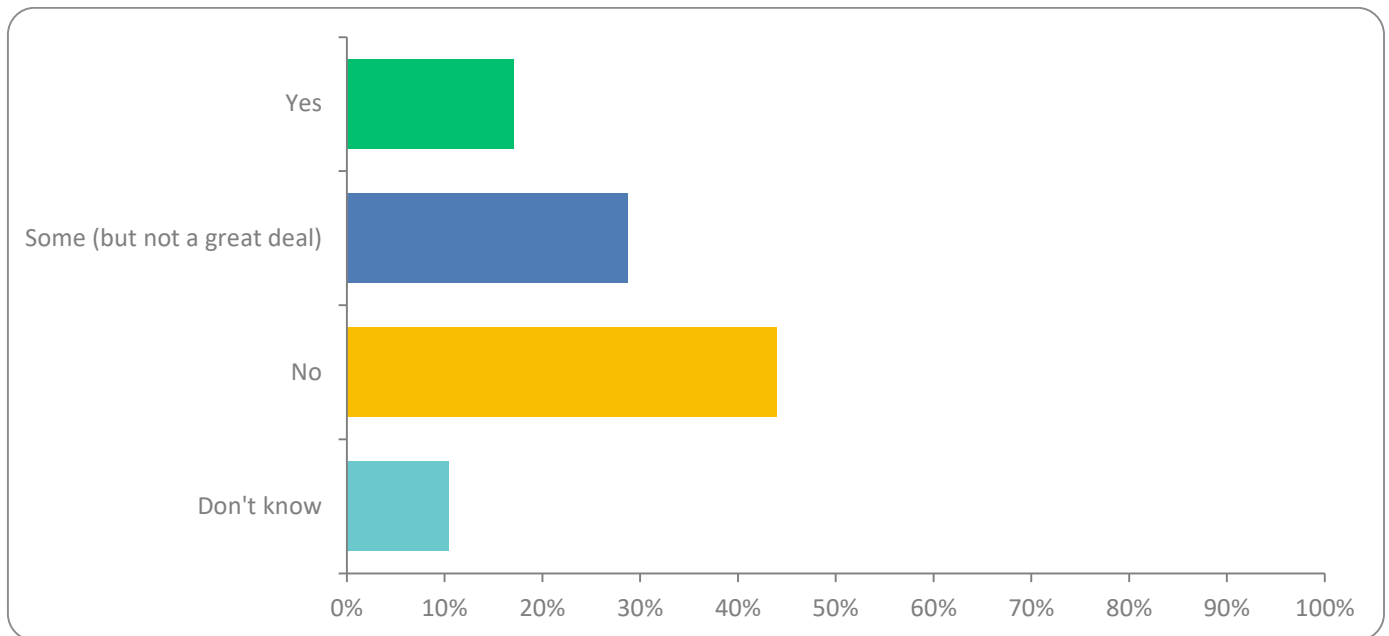


Of those that didn't volunteer at all (32%), the reason the vast majority gave was a lack of time.

Question 9 asked if respondents thought there were space or buildings that could be put to better use. Just under half that answered said 'Yes', with a wide variety of views expressed. The most popular concept was to utilise currently empty buildings (primarily in Maldon), with a number of examples given. References were also made to churches/church buildings. The Maeldune Centre is also referenced many times in terms of needing investment or being utilised more often (the two are linked). The Town Hall is mentioned a number of times as needing investment and increased use, and there are references also to the Station House building in Burnham on Crouch.

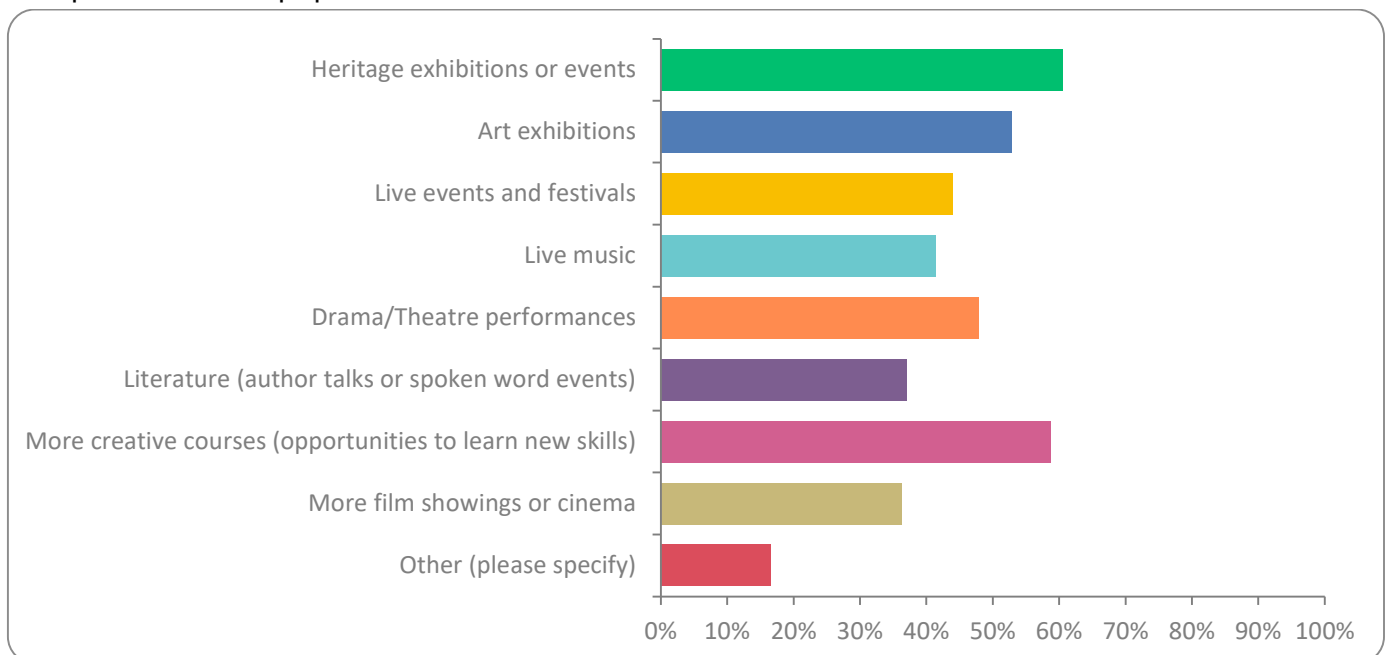
Q10: Do you feel you have the power, influence or ability to start something in your area? For example a heritage project, new organisation or cultural programme/event?

Responses to this question provide a simple snapshot of how respondents feel about their level of influence or ‘power’ within their community. It is difficult to draw significant conclusions as the reasons for answering will depend on the individual context and what kind of project they might be imagining (or actively trying to start). The majority do not appear to be particularly ‘empowered’, with some reasons reflecting the challenge of accessing advice or ‘red tape’.



Question 10 - What kinds of things would you like to see more of in your area? This could be things you are interested in, or things that would improve the area more generally. (Choose all that apply)

There is no one issue that particularly stands out from the responses to this question with most options having a fairly positive response. The most popular was ‘Heritage Exhibitions and Events’, which is unsurprising given the wealth of heritage across the District and the relative lack of interpretation. Also popular was a desire to see ‘More creative courses’



Question 12 - Do you have any ideas for projects or initiatives that you might like to share, that could improve or add something new to your area?

This was an open question for respondents to answer with any ideas they might have. The most popular response is for a new 'arts' or 'cultural' centre in Maldon for various uses. There are also references to improved interpretation space for local heritage (Vikings for example). The need for Adult education space is also mentioned a number of times.

'I would like a cultural centre that included a coffee shop, arts and crafts, gallery space, cinema and theatre and space for workshops. The Mareel in Lerwick, Shetland is a fine example of the sort of centre I mean.'

'An art hub would create a place for artists to run workshops and sell and display their work. It would be an accessible place for everyone to drop in, find out what's available and connect with artists.'

'Maldon needs a central music spot, currently everything is at the whim of pub venues, or promoters putting up the expense of using terrible town halls or community spaces. There is nowhere for someone starting out to play without great expense to themselves. Very few of the available spaces are suited to music either due to neighbour noise issues or size.'

'Viking reenactment day, Moot Hall reenactments'

3 - History and Heritage

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture and Heritage Strategy?

Maldon District in Essex holds a particularly rich historical significance, shaped by over a millennium of recorded events and architectural heritage. The area is perhaps best known for the Battle of Maldon in 991 AD, one of the most celebrated conflicts in Anglo-Saxon history, commemorated in an Old English poem that remains a cornerstone of early English literature. The District's heritage extends through its medieval salt-making industry, its role as a prosperous trading port, and its many listed buildings, including the distinctive Moot Hall (first brick-built private residence in England) and the Chapel of St. Peter on the Wall (church still in use dating back to the 660s). This layered history contributes to local identity, tourism, and community pride.

Much of the heritage and historic context, and the organisations that support the efforts to record, discover, interpret and share, is at the all-important grassroots level. Run by people (mainly volunteers) who are dedicated to their local area and want to ensure that the varied and unique heritage of places across the District is celebrated and cared for. It is not possible to look to large organisations or the local authority for comprehensive leadership, although the District Council recognises it has an increasingly important role to play now and into local government reorganisation. With the emergence of a Mid Essex Unitary Authority in 2028, there is every opportunity to ensure that this new larger authority is able to utilise the experience from Chelmsford City Council and its museum service to support the heritage development of the Maldon District (Saltmarsh Coast), working with local partners in the process. This will require a coherent Maldon District voice on priorities and a structure for other Mid Essex partners to engage with; and there are inevitable risks associated with a larger well-established system potentially dominating. Either way, the new unitary area will need a clear and coherent 'place' narrative to support the wider place making, regeneration, economic, rural and cultural development process. Maldon District has many stories to tell that can contribute to this.

Strategic Reflection – National and Regional Context

The importance of history and heritage to places and communities is reinforced through national, regional and local policy. A strong sense of heritage is analogous to a distinctive sense of place. The events, the people, the buildings and landscapes are all part of a distinctive story of the District (and its many unique places) that is rightly taken very seriously.

In March 2026, Maldon Town made an Expression of Interest for UK Town of Culture. This opportunity was focused primarily on the strong heritage of the town and surrounding area, responding to the government's guidance that recognised the '*catalytic effect of culture and heritage to bring people together*' and its importance in '*building a sense of place and inspiring local pride*.' The TOC EOI played heavily on the heritage of the area, and in particular framed the Battle of Maldon as an opportunity to explore 'origin stories' that are framed by key historic events (and the resulting literature and art that frames them in the public imagination). The ambition for Town of Culture would be to see benefits to the whole District, recognising how Maldon's history is interlinked with the wider area.

The Government's Pride in Place programme (although not funding projects in the Maldon District) includes investment in heritage assets as an intervention and a key part of securing regeneration and improvement in high streets.

‘Strong communities love where they live and take pride in the cultural assets they share. They come together to celebrate their unique heritage and recognise their community heroes. We understand the value of recognising our places and the key role this plays in restoring dignity and instilling a shared pride in communities.’ (UK Government Pride in Place Strategy September 2025)

The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) which has funded many projects across the District over years, sets out the broad interpretation of heritage as *‘adapting to contemporary and future uses and challenges’*. This is a key point that reflects the importance of continually refreshing and updating heritage interpretation, programmes and activities, ensuring that ways in to appreciating and valuing heritage are open to all ages and supports diverse participation. NLHF funding (particularly larger projects) is focused not only of preservation and conservation, but increasingly on participation and inclusivity; recognising that for heritage to be valued and cared for into the future, more people need to be involved.

‘From the historic and natural environment to our museums, libraries and archives. From our industrial legacy to cultural traditions, stories, memories, celebrations and more. Heritage can be anything from the past that people value and want to pass on to future generations.’ (NLHF Strategy 2023-33)

There is also an increasing focus on the ‘emotional’ importance that heritage has for people, and that this plays out not only in terms of personal connections to places and historic sites, but also can feed into future place-based and economic strategy development.

This is best summarised in a 2026 Report ‘Connecting People and Place: Valuing the Felt Experiences of Historic Places’ (Arts & Humanities Research Council Place-Based Research Programme). The report argues that people’s emotional, sensory and cognitive ‘felt experiences’ of historic places are fundamental to how they form attachments, belonging and identity, and that these deep human connections have measurable impacts on wellbeing, social cohesion and economic behaviour. The report argues that historic places meet existential needs for security and continuity while also shaping everyday feelings such as pride, joy, anger or comfort, and concludes that embedding felt experience into place-based policy can unlock more effective, people-centred decision-making and stronger socio-economic outcomes. This framing of heritage has infiltrated national policy and research including ‘Levelling Up’ and ‘Pride in Place’, and is certainly a key factor across the District as evidenced by the dedication and pride shown by 100s of people involved in heritage related activities of all kinds. There is also significant pride in local heritage evidenced through the responses to the survey undertaken to support this strategy (while also reflecting the need to do more with the heritage that is associated with the District).

Relating to the importance of heritage to places, communities and the economy, the Museums Essex Advocacy Report (2025) recognises that museums ‘provide accessible spaces for residents and visitors alike to engage with local heritage, creativity, and shared stories’, and ‘contribute significantly to the visitor economy and community wellbeing - key priorities for local authorities seeking to build resilience and cohesion in times of change’. For Maldon this is relevant to all heritage spaces including established museums, and positions heritage organisations and groups as key players in terms of community engagement and resilience.

The Heritage Alliance’s ‘Backing the Bedrock’ (2025) report argues that England’s heritage sector is a major economic and social engine which contributes £44.9bn GVA, supporting over half a million jobs,

and delivering exceptional returns for public investment. It called for urgent and coordinated action by government to address the long-term decline in public funding, market failures and policy gaps. For example, creating long-term investment and capital funds, reforming tax and planning systems to favour repair and reuse, strengthening local authority capacity, securing community-ownership pathways, embedding heritage in education and skills policy, integrating it into health commissioning, and enabling net-zero delivery through retrofit and environmental schemes. The report frames heritage as essential national infrastructure that underpins growth, wellbeing, pride in place and environmental resilience, and urges government to treat it as a strategic priority rather than a discretionary amenity.

On a similar strategic trajectory is the report published in November 2025 through the Eastern Arc Heritage and Culture Network. This explores the concept of heritage as a major economic and social asset across the Eastern region, underpinning tourism, shaping local identity and contributing billions to county economies. It highlights strong public participation in heritage (in-person and digital), and demonstrates how historic sites, museums, landscapes and cultural assets drive visitor spend, support jobs and attract creative industries such as film (which is relevant to the Maldon District). The analysis reveals uneven recovery from COVID-19, gaps in data (especially for museums), and significant variation in access and engagement across socio-economic groups, ethnicities and disabilities. It concludes that heritage should be treated as essential regional infrastructure within devolution and growth planning, and calls for better data collection, stronger cross-sector collaboration, and a unified digital strategy to raise the profile and impact of the heritage economy.

Summary of Local Context

Maldon District's heritage is the district's defining asset – every bit as fundamental as its natural environment. It provides the narrative, identity and distinctiveness – a thread that runs through how the area is promoted, from the District Council's own logo to the stories told in tourism materials, local festivals and community-led initiatives. What makes it powerful is not just the age or rarity of the heritage, but the grassroots energy behind it. This can be seen through volunteers restoring chapels and barges, local historians interpreting complex archaeological finds, and community groups keeping alive the skills, memories and traditions that anchor Maldon in the national imagination. This civic stewardship is arguably the district's greatest cultural strength - an active, knowledgeable public who treat heritage as a living resource rather than a museum piece. The richness of the heritage is astonishingly varied. Place names across the district whisper fragments of the ancient past; beneath them lie layers of Iron Age settlement, Romano-British occupation, early medieval coastal trade, and the more modern histories of salt-making, maritime industry and wartime defence. Salt is Maldon's most famous export and connects these eras, a product shaped by geography, climate and centuries of human ingenuity. On the Dengie peninsula, the story deepens further: the landing of St Cedd and the establishment of the chapel at Bradwell make this one of the most significant sites for the spread of Christianity into eastern England. Few districts can claim such a continuous, multi-period landscape where archaeology, belief, industry and environment interlock so tightly.

Taken together, this makes heritage (alongside the environment) the district's most important strategic asset. It defines place identity, drives tourism, strengthens community pride, and provides a coherent story that can guide regeneration, investment and cultural programming. In Maldon, heritage is not a backdrop; it is the district's most powerful organising theme and concept.

The challenge of course – and this is not unique to the Maldon District – is to ensure that the museums, spaces, organisations and programmes are sustainable and resilient long into the future. This is particularly challenging for rural areas.

National Lottery Heritage Fund – Maldon District

Official National Lottery Heritage Fund data shows there was a total of £2,983,600 investment through grant programmes in heritage projects across the Maldon District between 2013 and 2025. The largest grant was for the Museum of Power’s ‘Powering Forward’ programme, and there has been significant investment in maritime heritage. This compares favourably (for example) with just over £350,000 for the neighbouring Rochford District and similar for the Brentwood Borough (soon to be part of Mid Essex with Maldon). It is not easy to produce a quality application to the NLHF, taking time, clarity of vision and outcomes, partnerships and experience. It is not easy to deliver them either

At the current moment there are further bids at various stages in for projects across the District, including some multi-million pound applications. There does not appear to be any coordination between organisations making applications. This perhaps is not unreasonable given the competitive nature of these kinds of funding programmes, but this could limit the potential for collaboration.

What should be noted however is the lack of alternative funds for heritage projects over the years, although some organisations/groups have been successful in attracting smaller amounts from other sources.

Challenge of Preserving and Maintaining

Maldon’s heritage organisations share a common challenge: sustaining and recruiting volunteers at a time when capacity is already stretched. Although the District’s historic environment is central to its identity, quality of life and visitor appeal, there is no local authority museum service or single strategic body providing coordinated oversight of heritage development. This brings both resilience and vulnerability. On one hand, independent organisations are insulated from potential local government funding cuts; on the other, they rely heavily on volunteers and a patchwork of fundraising, with no unified mechanism for long-term planning or shared investment.

The Maldon Town Heritage Group, supported by the Town Council, offers a valuable forum for collaboration, but its remit is necessarily limited to the Maldon town area and not District-wide. There have been collaborations including on materials (most recently a tea towel representing the architectural heritage of the town) and Heritage Open Days – but these are limited largely due to the lack of time by participating groups to consider issues outside of core functions and basic survival. The Maldon Society works hard to promote the area’s historic built environment, hosting talks and proactively engaging with the planning system. The emerging governance model proposed through the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group offers a practical route to addressing these gaps. Its steering groups - particularly the History and Heritage Steering Group - create a structure for strategic coordination, shared priorities and joint advocacy across the District. While Maldon has benefited from significant National Lottery Heritage Fund investment over the years, this alone cannot sustain the sector. A more integrated system, combining strategic leadership, diversified funding and strengthened volunteer pipelines, is essential to secure the long-term stewardship and activation of the District’s heritage.

Audiences

Locally, as explored elsewhere in this report, audiences in the Maldon District (and those within a reasonable drive time) tend to be interested in more traditional offerings and experiences. This works well with the current offer based around some core museums and a broader informal experience across both urban and rural areas (for example on Hythe Quay or in the built heritage of many villages). But increased interest through regular programming and activities drives renewed interest (and helps to attract new audiences).

There is good national and international interest in the heritage of the District, evidenced for example through the visitor profiles of Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome and the Combined Military Services Museum (both have nationally and internationally relevant collections and stories). Two thirds of the Museum of Power's visitors are from outside of the local area. Of course there is much to be gained from securing local interest and audiences (as well as visitors), and all local assets are keen to see more local people visit and take part where possible (as volunteers for example).

The survey undertaken to inform this strategy demonstrated that respondents considered that 'Heritage Attractions' were the District's most important 'assets' (64%) followed by 'Historic Market Towns' at 56%. The respondents to the survey were of an older age than the average for the District, but this still demonstrates good awareness of local heritage and its importance to the area.

Museums and Heritage Sites

Maldon District hosts a rich and varied network of museums and heritage sites, ranging from nationally significant destinations to small, volunteer-run centres that anchor local identity. Key attractions include Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome - the best-preserved First World War airfield in England, with most buildings listed Grade II*—the Museum of Power, Mangapps Railway Museum (a private collection of historic railway carriages and other related artefacts on the outskirts of Southminster), the Combined Military Services Museum (ranked number three in TripAdvisor's *Best Museums in Essex 2026*), and the Maeldune Centre, home to the Maldon Embroidery. Maldon Museum in the Park now operates under a three-year lease (previously one year rolling), though like many sites it continues to face challenges around volunteer recruitment and trustee capacity. Burnham-on-Crouch Museum, run by the Burnham History Society CIO, is one of the District's four Accredited Museums, alongside Stow Maries, Combined Military Services Museum and the Museum of Power. These accredited institutions can access support from Museums Essex, though they are not well-resourced to provide wider strategic leadership across the District, although the Museum Manager at the Museum of Power does provide wider support and advocacy (both in and outside of the District).

Perhaps the most recognisable and evocative heritage asset in the District (and perhaps in Essex) is Hythe Quay with its iconic Thames Barges and other historic vessels including the Steam Tug Brent. The area is a draw for visitors, a site for events and regular programming and where many get a chance to get out on the water and learn important skills. The Maldon & Heybridge Heritage Harbour was granted charity status in July 2025 and works alongside others including the Thames Sailing Barge Trust (TSBT) and Topsail Charters to ensure the historic quay has a key role in terms of heritage interpretation and related activities. The TSBT ambition for a permanent interpretation and activity space in the Bailiffs Hut on the Quay appears to be an important potential addition to the existing heritage offer (if it can progress in partnership with Maldon District Council). The historic waterfront in Burnham-on-Crouch is also of great importance of the District's maritime, industrial and social heritage and sense of place and has benefitted from significant community-led efforts to restore wharves and jetties along the waterfront. This has been overseen by Burnham Wharf Heritage who completed work on the

restoration of Kings Wharf in 2026 – with further plans for wharves at Burnham Sailing Club and Tucker Browns.

Beeleigh Abbey is one of the most important historic sites in the District. It is in private ownership although it does offer open garden days for visitors who can take in the historically inspired gardens and purchase unique produce, and there are specially organised history tours (hosted by a local historian). The owners have invested significantly in the ancient buildings and also have influence over a wider area (River Chelmer that borders the wider Abbey site and the Golf course) and are open to collaboration with other partners.

Partners in Tollesbury – led by Tollesbury Maritime Heritage CIC – have ambitions to significantly increase the heritage programming (including activities), interpretation and restoration of key historic assets. Recent investment from Essex CC Community Initiatives Fund is helping the CIC to work on plans for an ex-industrial space at the hard, with a view to converting to a community heritage and craft space. A community photographic project will support outreach and the development of an archive of relevant images. The plan is then to raise additional funding they have plans to renovate the last surviving traditional fishing boat built in Tollesbury. There are also longer-term plans to repurpose the old granary on the hard as a small museum and ‘pop up’ creative hub in addition to our community workshop space.

There are many other sites across the District, mostly managed by volunteers with limited capacity and funding. There is no guarantee that museums (or any other heritage attraction) will be in place forever. There was once a Maldon & District Agricultural and Domestic Museum in Goldhanger (the brown road sign still in-situ on Maldon Road – and still drawing would-be visitors in). This was a private initiative but has been closed for over 15 years although there is now an online ‘museum’ for Goldhanger. Other notable digital heritage assets include the Maldon Society Archives which are available to view in the Maeldune Centre (on a large screen which allows visitors to search over 8000 images from Maldon’s past (mainly photographs from the 1930s to the current day).

Other key sites include the remains of St. Giles Leper Hospital on Spital Road, which along with Beeleigh Abbey and the Carmelite Friary was closed with the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. The Friary’s remaining walled gardens adjacent to Maldon Library are maintained by the Maldon & Heybridge Horticultural Society.

Maldon Museum in the Park

In March 2026 a concept emerged from Maldon District Council for a capital project on the site of the existing Maldon Museum in the Park and adjacent land. This was presented as an opportunity to enhance the existing museum building (including necessary underpinning and renovations), and to create new space connected to the existing building that could be utilised for exhibitions, interpretation and activities as well as hosting a café/restaurant offer. This responded to the Promenade Park Plan and Central Area Masterplan which both explored opportunities for new all weather community facilities in the park. This proposal has changed to become an outline concept for a new Arts and Cultural Centre, although there is a reference in the consultation to the Museum needing investment.

Maldon Museum in the Park is the charity that runs the space, currently on a 3 year licence from MDC. The charity has very limited resources and relies upon a core group of volunteers (including the

Trustees of the Charity). 27 volunteers in total - although not all as active as a core group which recently was as low as 3 people.

The Museum currently attracts up to 3,000 people per year, a relatively low number given the location in the park. However, the museum is closed throughout the winter months and the key challenge is the inability to plan ahead as until recently the charity operated on a rolling 1-Year licence. This would limit any organisations' ability to develop and plan for the future and severely restricts any fund raising ambitions (capital or revenue), or indeed accreditation. MDC does not provide any ongoing support for the Museum apart from a contribution towards insurance costs. The Museum's collection is extensive (artefacts collected prior to 1997 are actually officially owned by MDC, with the post-1997 collection mostly owned by the charity (or loans from individuals). The Trustees/volunteers are all knowledgeable on the history of the area and have a good understanding of key themes, as well as knowledge of the archive materials and visitor interests.

Taken together, these museums and heritage sites form a distinctive cultural ecosystem that contributes to tourism, education, community identity and pride in place. However, the sector remains heavily reliant on volunteers and fragmented fundraising, with no single strategic body overseeing development or long-term planning. While the District has benefited from strong National Lottery Heritage Fund investment over the years, this alone cannot sustain the breadth of activity. Strengthening coordination - particularly through emerging structures such as the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group's proposed History and Heritage Steering Group - offers a pathway to greater resilience, shared advocacy and a more coherent approach to safeguarding and activating Maldon's heritage for the future.

Tourism and heritage related signage is seen as being poor across the District (gathered from engagement and consultation – for example to and from the town centre in Maldon and Promenade Park or Hythe Quay. The North Quay regeneration proposals (which have not developed – largely because MDC does not have enough land ownership to affect change there) provide a concept for improved connectivity and use of historic buildings to create new links between Hythe Quay and other parts of the town. The issue of how to get people to walk between Maldon Town Centre, the Hythe and Promenade Park is a long-standing challenge.

Built Heritage across the District

The built heritage of the Maldon District is of great importance and provides a real sense of uniqueness and difference. There are over a 1000 nationally listed buildings in the District, and fifteen conservation areas spanning Bradwell-on-Sea, Burnham-on-Crouch, Goldhanger, Heybridge, Heybridge Basin, Langford, Latchingdon, Maldon, Mundon, Purleigh, Southminster, St Lawrence, Tillingham, Tollesbury, Tolleshunt D'Arcy and Woodham Walter.

Maldon District's conservation areas play a vital role in protecting the historic character towns, villages and coastal landscapes, and their importance aligns closely with paragraph 203 of the National Planning Policy Framework. These areas help sustain and enhance the significance of heritage assets, ensuring they remain in viable use while retaining their distinctiveness. They also generate wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits by supporting local identity, heritage-led regeneration and the district's appeal for tourism. By guiding new development to make a positive contribution to local character and by drawing on the historic environment as a defining element of

place, Maldon's conservation areas are important as part of a strategy to ensure the long-term stewardship of what makes the District such as an interesting place to live and visit.

Maldon District is rich in historic churches that anchor local identity and continuity, most notably the ancient Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall, built in the 650s by St Cedd for the East Saxons using the remains of the Roman fort of Othona. These churches embody centuries of spiritual, architectural and cultural heritage, acting as landmarks, community spaces and tangible links to the district's earliest recorded history. Some churches are cared for outside of the formal church governance – for example St. Mary's in Mundon and St. Peter's in Wickham Bishops are managed by the Friends of Friendless Churches who have cared for the historic buildings over recent years (and invested grant funding).

There is one particularly outstanding example of a community coming together to save an important heritage asset – St. Andrew's Church in Althorne. The church was closed to the public in 2023 as it had become unsafe (it was also placed on the Historic England 'At Risk Register' - it is Grade II Listed). A successful first stage application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) enabled the local team of volunteers to bring in much needed expertise to develop the project further and put together plans for crucial capital works (underpinning of the building, repair cracking walls etc.), and develop an activity plan that focuses on how the church can once again be at the heart of community life (recognising that the congregation is small and aging and a new vision was needed to ensure its long-term sustainability). The second round application to deliver the capital works and activities (which includes new volunteering roles) was submitted in May 2026. This is a good example of a heritage asset bringing the community together to take action and support the vibrancy and connectedness of a rural community.

A rather unusual historic asset is the Chalet Fields at Barrow Marsh Caravan Site; a rare Arcadian enclave of 36 privately built 1930s and 1940s chalets created by owners who camped on site while constructing their modest holiday homes. Together this forms a unique historic landscape that illustrates how people have shaped and inhabited Maldon's coast over time.

Folklore and Intangible Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage plays a vital role in shaping Maldon District's identity, fostering continuity between generations, and sustaining traditions that make the area distinctive. Practices such as sail dressing on Hythe Quay, shanty singing, barge rigging, knot-tying, Morris dancing, and the long-established regattas at Maldon and Heybridge Basin embody skills, rituals and social customs that connect people to the District's maritime past. The recent submissions to UNESCO for Sail Dressing and the Heritage Harbour at Hythe Quay, along with expressions of interest for other living traditions, demonstrate how these practices are increasingly recognised as part of the District's shared cultural capital. They are not museum pieces; they rely on active participation, intergenerational teaching and community pride to survive, imbuing everyday places with meaning and keeping Maldon's maritime character alive in the present (as well as helping to raise awareness, funding and volunteers).

Modern expressions of local folklore, such as the Maldon Mud Race, Maldon Gig Rowing and the enduring presence of Thames barges, show how intangible heritage evolves while still reinforcing communal bonds and local distinctiveness. Groups like the Friendly Brothers of Goldhanger and the tradition of historic dress worn at Maldon Town Council meetings illustrate how community identity is enacted through ritual, costume and shared values. Together, these elements shape a cultural

landscape that is as important as the District's built heritage, ensuring that Maldon's character is defined not only by its historic buildings and waterfront but also by the living practices that are strongly rooted in history but every bit as important today.

Industry and Agriculture

The industrial heritage of Maldon District is a crucial part of its story, showing how a largely agrarian landscape gradually diversified into an area shaped by ingenuity, maritime industry and small-scale manufacturing. The history of Benthalls (which started with the invention of the world-famous Goldhanger Plough) are reminders of this transition (some buildings remain), illustrating how local enterprise influenced both rural communities and the growth of Maldon's wider economy. Grassroots heritage archives such as *Goldhanger – In the Past* and other local heritage resources online further preserve memories, photographs and oral histories of industries that once defined everyday life. Maldon Salt, still produced today, is a rare surviving link to centuries of craft-based production, carrying forward techniques and traditions that have placed the District on the global culinary and cultural map.

Among the most significant industrial heritage assets is Beeleigh Mill, where the Beeleigh Mill Restoration Group - an entirely volunteer-led effort - maintains and restores the 1845 steam engine and the historic milling machinery of the former flour mill. Their work keeps alive the engineering, craft and mechanical skills that shaped Maldon's industrial past while offering a vivid, working example of nineteenth-century production.

In terms of agriculture there are a wealth of historic buildings and associated cultural heritage across the rural areas of the District. Often these are not seen by the public or visitors on the regular basis, but they are important nonetheless and often can be put to alternative uses that supports rural sustainability. Examples include buildings at Lofts Farm (Great Totham) and Lauriston Farm (Goldhanger) – both of which are working to create new creative and community spaces in historic structures. Both the Historic Environment Farm Environment Record (HEFER) and the Selected Heritage Inventory for Natural England (or SHINE) can be utilised to record important heritage on agricultural sites and inform local policies and investment programmes.

Actions

Increased efforts around collaboration and a 'shared diary' for heritage related events – mentioned by a number of people. There is some good collaboration around this – for example Maldon Town's Local History Week that takes place in May. District-wide collaboration and programming of this kind is scarce (although there are opportunities to promote events on the Visit Maldon District Website which is available to everyone holding events and special programmes). As the concept of the 'Saltmarsh Coast' grows in significance (with local government reorganisation seeing MDC disappear), the importance of collaboration across this area will increase. This can support the awareness of the area's unique heritage and support the development of shared projects, activities and research (where relevant).

Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome is a unique asset so requires a dedicated relationship with local authorities: Not only heritage but covering environment, education and skills, social, health and wellbeing with over 33,000 volunteering hours (many highly skilled) each year supporting a small staff

team. It is the world's most complete surviving First World War aerodrome, with a concentration of original buildings, landscape setting and aviation archaeology. The technical, planning and access challenges require a partnership approach with local authorities needing to be proactive to ensure Stow Maries can operate effectively long-term (and access the funding and partnerships needed). With the emergence of the Mid Essex Unitary Authority comes potential benefits to Stow Maries (it is very close to the existing border with the City of Chelmsford), and Chelmsford has a good understanding of military heritage (although Stow Maries offer much more than this).

Resolve the Future of Maldon Museum in the Park: If there is support/funding available through MDC (which could in theory be matched by an external funding drive), then this needs to be resolved as this investment could have implications for other potential investment/support for culture and heritage across the District. The Museum needs capital investment and this could then boost the charity's opportunities for evolution and sustainability, which in turn could create opportunities to upgrade the exhibitions, interpretation and archive. Although current proposals are for a new Arts & Cultural Centre (adjacent to the existing Museum), there is no reason why the two spaces cannot be linked (even if not physically), as creative exploration of local heritage can be an opportunity to increase awareness and community engagement with the collections and associated cultural heritage and stories.

Improve signage and promote connectivity between Promenade Park and Maldon Town Centre: This issue has come up repeatedly in engagement and is also relevant to the events programme in Promenade Park where the town centre economy would benefit from greater levels of exploration given the 1000s of visitors each year to the Park (and in particular for specific events in the summer months). Routes along Mill Road from the Park exit on Mill Road (near the Museum) to the High Street are not particularly welcoming (parking and lack of pavement for part of the way), but can be walked in under five minutes. The route along the Hythe and up Church Street (or indeed North Street) is a bit longer (and possibly more pleasant), but again only a matter of minutes.

Tollesbury Maritime Heritage: Tollesbury is already popular for visitors (many are drawn to the Woodup Pool) and has a vibrant cultural and community scene as well for the local community. The Tollesbury Maritime Heritage CIC are working on plans to adapt an underused ex-industrial space at the hard, with a view to it becoming a community heritage craft space. This would require funding and there is ongoing community engagement through a photographic archive project. A further phase would be raise funding for work on the last surviving tradition fishing boat built in Tollesbury (which would include skills development and traditional seafaring and fishing activities). The restoration of the boat would take place in the community workshop and would be an excellent community engagement and visitor experience opportunity. The final phase would see the repurposing of the old granary as a small museum and 'pop up' creative hub that would not only save this important heritage asset but act as additional space to the community workshop. This is a very ambitious long-term strategy – but it is a strategy that is being actively pursued and should be supported as part of ongoing efforts to increase awareness and engagement with the history the Saltmarsh Coast.

Interpret and Explore the District's Early Medieval Heritage: There is a definite increase in national interest in the early medieval period, which stems from increasing media, archaeological and cultural engagement. Given Maldon's prominent national position in this important period, and that the Battle of Maldon marked an important moment in the concept of an England (perhaps as much as in the literary telling of the event as in the reality), there does appear to be far more that could be done to critically explore this history, linking the national and the local stories together to engage visitors. This

was proposed as a theme focusing on 'Origin Stories' as part of Maldon Town's bid for UK Town of Culture. The active debates about where the battle took place only creates more interest and supports exploration of the wider area (and the environment).

Prepare for the transition to Mid Essex: The importance of heritage to the Maldon District is clear, and relates closely to the visitor economy (and the wider Regenerative Tourism concept) as well as being core to the sense of place (although this is a diverse concept across the whole District with local distinctiveness very much an important concept). Chelmsford has an established Museum Service and could offer interesting opportunities to enhance engagement with Maldon's heritage as well as around governance and long-term sustainability. Early engagement and identification of where collaboration can take place across Brentwood, Chelmsford and Essex is important for heritage.

Hythe Quay and Heritage Interpretation and Activities: The Thames Sailing Barge Trust is well advanced with a project that will enable them to develop plans for long-term sustainability as a charity through activities and improved heritage interpretation, focused on space at Hythe Quay. In terms of the District's heritage and visitor profile, as well as the work with communities and volunteers, this is a key project for Maldon and the wider area with the Trust in a good position to source significant external funding with support of partners.

Mobilise the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC to effectively support and oversee District-wide heritage collaboration and resilience planning: Given the importance of tourism to the District (and that much of this relates to the strong heritage offer), the new CIC will need to be able to operate effectively to support collaboration between groups/organisations across the wider area, and advocate effectively to the new strategic authorities for the importance of the heritage to the wider economy, community engagement (and empowerment) and health and wellbeing.

4 - Arts and Culture

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture and Heritage Strategy?

The Maldon District provides so much in the way of cultural and creative inspiration. In the natural environment and coast, historic buildings, myths and legends and much more. For a culture and heritage strategy it is important therefore to focus on the vitality and resilience of the cultural and arts sectors, recognising where there are limitations and challenges, and looking at where more can be done to support organisations, groups and individuals to do what they need to do to.

As is explored across this strategy, culture and arts are important for so many reasons. Opportunities for creative participation is vital for everyone; for personal flourishing and to bring people together either as participants or audiences, for health and wellbeing, and for exploring themes and issues that affect us all. The District is well known for events (of many different kinds), but increasingly arts and culture are being elevated through very successful art trails and literary programming or through the multi-arts Maldon Festival. This all improves internal and external perceptions of the District, supports the visitor economy and creates more momentum for cultural programming and projects (success is built upon experience and confidence).

What is clear is that this is largely built upon the all-important ‘grassroots’. There is no major cultural institution or organisation that has a role to lead the development of the creative and cultural sectors in the District. No major publicly-funded art gallery, theatre, performance venue or arts collaboration space (like an arts centre or studios). This limits the scope and scale of cultural programming across the District, but it also means that activity is very often community-focused and therefore accessible (or potentially so). Cultural activity takes places in many different spaces including village and church halls, pubs and breweries, libraries and in the open.

Responsibility for cultural development is therefore dispersed and democratic albeit with limited capacity and challenges associated with a large rural area. When the cultural vitality of a community is thriving, it fosters a sense of belonging, strengthening the social fabric by bringing people together in shared spaces and through collective cultural experiences.

Cultural activity strengthens local identity and creates the kind of shared experiences that make places feel alive rather than anonymous. Arts activity also fuels economic vitality - supporting local businesses, attracting visitors, and helping towns compete for residents, workers, and investment. The quality of the cultural offer can also influence the development of the wider creative economy – those businesses that require creative skills to succeed including design and fashion, film and production, marketing, advertising, publishing and software/games development. These sectors can be important for local economic productivity (as they tend to be higher value added and require a highly skilled and educated workforce), as well as increasing demand for cultural experiences and events locally.

One of the defining images of the District is in the form of the statue of Brythnoth, Ealdorman of Essex of the Battle of Maldon fame. It is probably the most well-known piece of art in the District and used on all kinds of marketing. This is by local artist John Doubleday, and it brings together themes that are all relevant to the culture and heritage strategy in one excellent and engaging piece – art, heritage, environment and tourism. It also stands alone looking out while encouraging people to visit and take a

picture, relax and reflect, learn about local history and take in the amazing (and forever changing) natural environment. Very much reflecting the Maldon-context.

Strategic Reflection – National and Regional Context

Arts Council England

Arts Council England's *Let's Create* (2020–2030) set out a ten-year vision for a country where everyone's creativity is valued and everyone can access high-quality cultural experiences. It was built around three interconnected Outcomes: Creative People, supporting personal and lifelong creativity including amateur and youth activity; Cultural Communities, strengthening local cultural ecosystems through collaboration between professional and voluntary sectors; and A Creative & Cultural Country, developing an innovative, internationally engaged professional cultural sector.

To deliver these Outcomes, the strategy introduces four Investment Principles. These are Ambition & Quality, Inclusivity & Relevance, Dynamism, and Environmental Responsibility. These Investment Principles set expectations for how funded organisations should work.

Following on from the Hodge Review of Arts Council England (2025), a review of *Let's Create* as a strategy was announced, along with the development sector-specific guidance (music, visual arts etc.), and this will guide future investment decisions (across all funding programmes) as well as that national advocacy role ACE plays for the creative and cultural sectors.

As an interim measure ACE published (May 2026) a Strategic Framework 2026 which sets out three strategic objectives that their investment in organisations, individuals and projects must support:

- It must support Excellence
- It must deliver for Everybody
- It must reach everywhere

'A commitment to excellence will sit at the centre of every service we design and every investment decision we make. We will back individuals and organisations who are dedicated to producing outstanding work, in terms of output, practice, or engagement.'

'We believe our investment should support everybody in every community, village, town and city to connect with excellent art and culture. It should help more people, especially children and young people, to develop and express their own creativity.'

It is noticeable that there are references in there document to the wider benefits of participation with arts and culture including health and wellbeing and 'rebuilding social fabric' – both of which are very relevant to the Maldon District, as well as the references to villages and towns (recognising that there needs to be a focus on all areas – not just the larger urban centres of England).

Shaping the Future of Essex's Creative Sector

Published in 2025, in part as a response to proposed Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation, the report (funded by Essex CC) seeks to identify strengths (established clusters, space to grow, strong community festivals), and barriers (low and precarious earnings, skills and talent pipeline gaps, transport constraints, and a 'brain drain' to London). The report positions Culture Essex

(Essex CC) as a coordinator, investor and ‘bridge-builder,’ using catalytic seed funding and longer-term support to join up networks, embed culture across council priorities, and attract external investment.

Headline opportunities include piloting Creative Opportunity Zones to strengthen existing clusters, boosting skills and lifelong learning pathways, intensifying collaboration through networked programmes, and promoting Essex as a creative industries destination via a clear prospectus or manifesto.

Place-based implications highlight the value of coastal and heritage assets for creative production, cultural tourism and identity. This is very relevant to the Maldon District with strong maritime heritage, festivals, and heritage-led visitor appeal. Where towns combine distinctive settings, affordable workspace, and connected networks, the report sees potential to retain talent and grow businesses. Conversely, gaps in evening transport (particularly affecting rural areas) and workspace supply constrain participation and sector growth.

The roadmap emphasises co-produced, locally rooted interventions, which could be backed with local funding, to turn these assets into sustained creative economy gains.

Essex Cultural Strategy and the Essex CC Arts & Cultural Fund

The Essex Cultural Strategy is a high-level document that framed the opportunities for investment and support by Essex CC and its many partners and stakeholders in the cultural and creative sectors. The document aims to explore what makes Essex culturally unique including its stories, communities, landscapes, and creative energy. The Maldon District certainly contributes to all of these. Themes explored include:

Enrich – To support flourishing of the cultural and creative sectors across Essex – more collaborating and sharing of information across Essex

Empower – Recognising the need for more skills development and opportunities for young people to work in the sectors in Essex

Amplify – Supporting sector collaboration and commissioning Essex-wide programmes – support leaders to be more effective

Grow – supercharge the growth of the creative sectors across Essex with investment in infrastructure and making the case for culture as a driver of the economy

The Arts & Cultural Fund (and other associated funding for culture through ECC) has been available on an annual basis since 2022, and in that time there have been at least 5 projects that have seen activity take place in the Maldon District. This includes the Maldon Festival (twice). The Maldon Festival secured investment for 2026-27 to continue the development of this important cultural programme and align with other events/festivals.

It is currently uncertain whether there will be any further funding from Essex CC for arts, culture and heritage following the political changes in May 2026. The Portfolio of ‘Arts, Culture and Heritage’ has not been continued, with ‘heritage, culture and arts’ now part of a new portfolio ‘Regeneration, Planning and Heritage’. The portfolio also includes ‘tourism’ and ‘marketing Essex and place promotion.’

Summary of Local Context

There is a good arts and cultural scene across the District, with activities around visual art and workshops, commercial galleries, art trails, amateur dramatics, music festivals and events, U3A activities, Blackwater Arts Society, and local activities in village halls for example. The District has one Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) – Paper Birds – a socially engaged theatre company who have national and international reach and are keen to work more locally where possible. The lack of a focused cultural centre has come up fairly regularly during engagement (and through the consultation), and indeed has been something of an ongoing discussion point for a number of years.

Although not particularly well defined, the cultural centre concept would appear to be a space that can be utilised for exhibitions, workshops (including practical hands-on sessions), small events. This is something to develop further (and appears to be ongoing through MDC which Cultural Engine will be supporting where possible).

Creative health concepts are an opportunity for the District and for the cultural scene (explored below). This should be explored in more detail (work has already taken place on events and setting up a network with Maldon & District CVS).

Core events like the Maldon Festival will also be important as collaborative systems to develop over time, encouraging District wide programming and collaboration around themes, promotion and development of new audiences for high quality cultural output.

The rural nature of the District means it is difficult for many people to access cultural events and sessions, so recognising the importance of local assets such as village and church halls, pubs and other communal spaces is key, as is understanding the capacity that exists around them (mainly based on volunteer time with very little funding).

Visual arts

The Visual Arts are reasonably well represented in the District, with the three established Art Trails being the most prominent example. The Art Trails in Tollesbury, Maldon and Burnham-on-Crouch are excellent collaborative systems that have brought creatives together to demonstrate the fantastic talent locally, and attract significant local and visitor interest (evidenced by increased visitor numbers at key locations including museums). This is a good example of cultural, business and strategic coordination (as MDC has provided some support over the years), and directly supports the ongoing vibrancy of cultural practice across the area. The Trails should be seen not only as important cultural and visitor economy events, but also as broader cultural development opportunities where more could be done to sustain and support this kind of collaboration, skills development and publicity throughout the year. As part of the development of the strategy, Cultural Engine organised the first District wider cultural network gathering (in Heybridge in March). This was attended by creative practitioners from across the District and demonstrated a clear interest in this kind of event and ongoing process. This should be maintained and supported on an ongoing basis and should also be the Steering Group for the new Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC.

Many of those involved in the Art Trails engage with local art groups that are fairly prevalent in the District. This includes those linked to U3As (for example Burnham-on-Crouch), or clubs including Maldon Art Club (meets at Plume School) and Mayland Art Club. The Blackwater Arts Society (part of the wider Arts Society movement) has a healthy membership and holds regular (and very popular) art-focused talks at Wickham Bishops Village Hall. They also support small projects each year, including

working with local schools. The Othona Community (Bradwell) also host arts and crafts, music and nature exploration on a regular programme throughout the year.

Although there are six commercial galleries in the District, there is no major or central publicly funded space. Commercial galleries include The Gallery in Maldon which holds regular exhibitions and artist talks. There is also the Sculpt Gallery near Great Baxted which has held regular exhibitions and is now completely dedicated to the work of Anglo-Dutch artist Maurice Blik (open to visitors to view the collection). Exhibitions can take place across the District and are a good way of opening up arts and culture to a wider audience. In 2022 Essex Cultural Diversity Project (Arts Council England NPO) funded artist Nabil Ali to create new works not only inspired by the coastal landscapes of the Dengie, but also made out of materials found there and the wider area (using ancient recipes). An exhibition entitled 'Along the Saltmarsh' was staged at both St. Thomas' Church Bradwell, and St. Peter on the Wall Bradwell.

Exhibitions of local artists are also held at the Maeldune Heritage Centre, which holds one of the most important art/craft works in the District in the form of the Maldon Tapestry. This work commemorates the 1000th anniversary of The Battle of Maldon, with images of the history of Maldon from that time until its unveiling in 1991. It was overseen by artist Humphrey Spender who worked with over 80 local people for over three years, and remains popular for visitors today. The Cole Gallery at Burnham Museum also holds exhibitions, particularly during Burnham Art Trail which attracts many visitors to the area (and the Museum).

Accessible and affordable studio spaces for emerging (or indeed established) artists are not easy to find. Infrastructure of this kind is important for the cultural (and visual arts) sector to thrive in any location, encouraging local creatives to stay local. Space had been available prior to Covid in the Station House in Burham-on-Crouch, but this has since shut (although the Town Council has the lease and is investing in renovations with a view to opening it again – not necessarily as studio space).

There had been a popular annual art exhibition in Langford (Langford & Ulting Art Exhibition) until 2024, but this has not been able to continue due to the organisers moving away from the area (thereby demonstrating how much reliance there is upon a relatively small number of volunteers for events of this kind).

Arts Council Funding

It is the case that Arts Council England (ACE) has not had Maldon District in its sights for some time, particularly for projects through the core Project Grant funding programme. There is one National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) based in Maldon (Paper Birds), but their programme is very much national and international (although they are certainly keen to collaborate more with local partners where there are opportunities).

ACE data demonstrates that there were only 3 successful applications for ACE funding in last 2 full years in Maldon District, and much of the resulting activity would not have been in the District from these projects. This compares poorly with many other parts of Essex (although neighbouring Rochford is very low). ACE funding is very competitive, but there is funding to be had for good projects that meet the ACE Outcomes (although there is an ongoing review of ACE strategy and funding priorities).

One recommendation from the Hodge Review of ACE that was published in December 2025 is that all local authorities should have a cultural strategy, recognising the importance of local funding, support and delivery to arts and culture across the country at a local level. This recommendation reflects the importance of local authorities (and local authority funding) for arts and culture across England (although the situation is different across all local authorities)

For Project Grants, match funding is encouraged partly because it demonstrates support and partnership but also because it relieves the pressure from ACE funding. However, it is possible to apply without if securing match of any kind (in-kind or cash) is challenging. Small pots of local authority funding that can support additional fundraising (from ACE or other sources) can be a good strategy. Another is to support the arts and cultural sectors to make applications – as there is not very much evidence of this happening (and certainly not happening successfully for many years).

Although Project Grants will fund project by project rather than supporting long-term sustainability of organisations or individuals; it is the case that securing ACE funding (or indeed other sources) can support the development of new ideas and concepts which can lead to new opportunities. Along with Project Grants, there are other sources of funding from ACE including Developing Your Creative Practice (DYCP) which is aimed at giving artists time to literally do what the title of the fund says – this might be to take some time out to research and develop new ideas. Following the Hodge ACE Review there does appear to be a commitment to support longer-term investment in individual creative practitioners (in the way that organisations can be supported) – although details are scarce currently.

Other larger strategic grants and programmes such as Creative People and Place or Place Partnerships will be challenging for the Maldon District as it is not a priority area for ACE investment. However, Chelmsford did secure a Place Partnership funded programme without being a priority place (emphasis on developing young people's creativity which is very relevant to the Chelmsford City area).

It is worth noting that there is much more success in the District when it comes to National Lottery Heritage Funding – another of the National Lottery related funding programmes. However, this definitely reflects the much more developed heritage sector (even if reliant largely upon dedicated volunteers), and a good case that can be made for investment in infrastructure and activities.

Audiences

As set out in this document, the Audience Segmentation data analysed for this strategy demonstrates that audiences for arts, culture and heritage tend to be more traditional, as well as older (than the Essex average) – although the differences between the Maldon District and the rest of Essex are not hugely significant. However audiences for culture, heritage and events come from across a wider area (including areas with younger and more contemporary cultural interests), and this has benefits for the economy as well as influencing the cultural scene locally.

Literature

Literature and writing festivals are increasingly popular across the UK, with many events hosted in Essex (including the annual Essex Book Festival). Literature festivals contribute to cultural exchange by providing a platform for different voices and perspectives to be shared, debated and celebrated. These events facilitate interactions between authors, readers, and cultural practitioners from various backgrounds, fostering dialogue and understanding across different cultures. They can also be

beneficial for authors to gain a following and for businesses and/or venue to host. They can be relatively cost effective to organise and host as the infrastructure required is limited.

The Essex Book Festival does host events every year in the Maldon District. For example in 2026 the 'Future Power Half Term Fun' at The Museum of Power, as well as 'In the Steps of J. A. Baker' at Heybridge Basin (the latter demonstrating the potential interest in nature writing in the District).

The main focus of literary programming in the Maldon District is currently through Maldon Books in Maldon town centre; an independently-owned business that contributes significantly to the interest and vibrancy of the high street in the town. This is not easy in an Amazon-dominated market, but through intelligent stocking and offering wider engagement opportunities and events they are an important cultural space. Maldon Books holds fairly regular author talks throughout the year, as well as other gatherings or meets, for example chess related.

There does appear to be scope for more literary-related programming across the District with a relatively affluent and older audience profile for culture.

Theatre

Although there is no purpose-built theatre in the District, theatre and amateur dramatics is still very much part of the cultural scene. The only Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in the District is Paper Birds. They run a thriving participatory programme that sees them work with up to 20,000 young people each year as workshop participants, co-creators and audiences. Paper Birds are named practitioners on several UK exam boards, meaning their theatrical devising methods are taught at GCSE and A-level within schools and colleges. The company runs regular Continual Professional Development for drama teachers and practitioners. Their courses have been attended by thousands of participants nationally and internationally, as well as delivered for organisations such as The National Theatre. However, their work in the Maldon District is very limited. This is partly due to the national and international nature of their work, but also a reflection on the lack of suitable theatre spaces for their theatre programmes, performances and rehearsals which require high-level technology (as there is significant digital content).

The Town Hall in Maldon has a stage and the space for audiences to watch theatre. However, the space doesn't appear to be suitable for most theatre with significant feedback on poor acoustics and lack of accessibility to the rear of the building. Maldon Town Council may look at options in the near future for the Town Hall building which does need investment in many different areas (although not commitment currently). The following quote from the survey sums up the general feeling regarding the town hall: *'Improve the Town Hall performance space, and some additional performance space that's less expensive to use/hire.'*

Touring theatre takes place at various locations across the District and is included in the Maldon Festival as well as special events at Beeleigh Abbey. This provides opportunities for audiences to experience quality theatre/performance, but not for taking part.

In terms of amateur dramatics, there are some notable groups that are all based around community participation and generate good audiences. Most significantly (partly because of the unusual location) is the Latchingdon Arts & Drama Society (LADS) who meet, rehearse and perform at the Tractor Shed on the outskirts of Latchingdon (the last event was 'The Mirror Crack'd' by Agatha Christie in April

2026). Other groups including Dengie Amateur Dramatics Group (who perform once a year in Dengie Village Hall), and Wickham Bishops Drama Club (who perform at Wickham Bishops Village Hall). Maldon has some fantastic stages with good capacity for audiences in various halls across the District, notably Wickham Bishops & Tollesbury in particular.

Although not ‘live’ in the sense that the performers are in the same space as the audience – residents of Tollesbury can view performances at the Tollesbury Centre through National Theatres Live. This is very unusual (as usually at larger venues and place), and demonstrates the commitment and ambition for culture (and heritage, environment and community) show across Tollesbury.

Music

Music, like most of the cultural scene in the District, is most active at the grassroots. There are many musicians who are also promoters who have worked hard over a number of years to develop music events. The larger festival programme at Promenade Park is the obvious focus for large scale music – for audiences but also potentially for local talent.

The Maldon Festival demonstrates a large number of venues in Maldon that are willing to open their doors for musical performances and support the arts, which counters the lack of permanent facilities in the town. At the moment programming is varied, but the festival demonstrates that Maldon can host a multi venue event, if a third party promoter was interested.

There are good local initiatives that run without any significant capacity or funding, such as the Southminster Competitive Festival of Music. This is an event supported by Southminster Parish Council that takes place each year in April at St Leonard’s Church. The purpose is to encourage young people from across the Dengie Peninsula to perform, develop confidence and gain musical experience in a friendly, non-exam setting. This is an outlier of an example however and demonstrates the commitment of key individuals to support music in their localities.

Midsummer Music Festival takes place at the Parlour Café in July and hosts local bands as well as local food and drink. The Parlour Café is an important cultural and social space in this part of the District. The Blues at the Barns (Creeksea) programme no longer takes place however as there was limited capacity to organise and the changing focus of the barns (now a wedding venue). The programme brought together local and national Blues performers, so was a significant date on the cultural calendar.

Pubs and bars across the District are where the majority of accessible music performances take place throughout the year. Well over half of the pubs in the District host music (and often other cultural) events. This puts pubs and bars in an important position culturally, supporting the local music scene and providing audiences with an important cultural experience. For example the Station Arms in Southminster hosts a monthly folk club and other gigs, giving the opportunity for music making (and for people to develop their confidence in music making).

Maldon Shanty Festival is very popular and attracts large crowds given its clear cultural relevance to the heritage of the area. The second year of the festival took place in May 2026 on Hythe Quay, and in St. Mary’s Church, raising money for the Thames Sailing Barge Trust.

Essex Music Services support the 'Maldon Community Music Centre' at Plume School in Maldon, which offers a combination of individual, small group, and ensemble music provision after school on Tuesdays during term-time. The Essex Music Services programme in the Maldon District does appear to be smaller than in some other parts of Essex, and they do require proactive partnerships to deliver.

One potential musical growth opportunity in the District could be Bell Ringing. There are a number of bands that keep this important tradition alive. A current focus for training new bell ringers is St. Mary's in Maldon, where there has been much activity over the last couple of years. The South East Essex District Master (of Bell Ringing), appointed in 2024, has rapidly reignited bell ringing in Maldon, building new bands at St Mary's and All Saints through an energetic, multi-channel recruitment drive that has drawn see over 20 new learners. He works with schools, youth groups and local media, and is looking for new opportunities in Maldon and elsewhere in the wider area. Something different for the Maldon District to specialise in.

It is also worth noting that Sam Ryder, the UK's most successful Eurovision entry in recent times, hails from Maldon and gained early experienced playing venues across the District.

Creative Sectors

In Maldon there are a total of 21,000 employees across all sectors - 505 of these are in the creative and cultural sectors (2.4%). This is lower than the proportion of creative and cultural businesses in East of England (3.41%) and lower than the proportion in England (5.05%), as well as Chelmsford (2.91%) and Brentwood (4.04%). Brentwood is likely due to proximity to London. There should always be an ambition to increase this sector, although this is dependent upon many factors including affordability of space for start-ups ups, availability of flexible space, perceived connectivity (to urban areas like Chelmsford or London), and the quality of wider cultural offer and hospitality sector. The Audience Agency segmentation backs up this picture of the District, indicating that more traditional audiences for arts and heritage are less likely to work in the creative industries more generally (compared to parts of London and the South East for example).

People working in the creative sectors tend to be educated and the sector as a whole is seen as having higher productivity than many others, including those that are prominent in the Maldon District (hospitality and retail for example). Even small increases in creative employment can disproportionately raise overall economic output because creative subsectors (design, digital, film, architecture, advertising) generate significant GVA per job.

The Maldon District already has a relatively well-skilled population and an economy that is focused around micro-level businesses with just under 90% of enterprises being micro-firms meaning they employ fewer than 10 people. Creative sector businesses tend to be smaller, so there would appear to be opportunities for creative sector development locally.

[UK business: activity, size and location - Office for National Statistics](#)

UK Town of Culture – Maldon Town

The UK Town of Culture programme was announced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in early 2026. The concept encourages towns to use culture, creativity, and local heritage to drive regeneration, civic pride, and community participation. It's designed as a lighter-touch counterpart to UK City of Culture, giving smaller places a platform to showcase their cultural identity, test new partnerships, and attract investment without the scale or cost of a full city-wide bid.

As part of the work on the Culture & Heritage Strategy, Maldon District Council supported an Expression of Interest (EOI) for Maldon Town (and parts of Heybridge as one continuous urban area). This was submitted on the 31st March with endorsement also from Maldon Town Council.

The EOI required a vision and a story of the town (and contribution to the national story) to be presented, and the key themes for future creative exploration were:

Origin Stories: From the Battle of Maldon in 991 to the present day, we will explore how stories shape places and people. This theme brings together heritage events with new creative work across art, spoken word - including 991 new poems for Maldon - theatre and performance. Maldon excels at turning stories into events: the Mud Race began as a local curiosity and became a national spectacle. With its instinct for storytelling, the historic Plume Library, and figures like Byrhtnoth and Captain Anne, Maldon has deep wells of inspiration - even Tolkien drew on the Battle of Maldon when imagining Middle-earth.

Preserving: Inspired by Maldon's world-famous salt, we'll examine what it means to conserve and protect - from the historic built environment and local archives to traditions, myths and the intangible heritage that binds communities. As heritage organisations across the UK rethink how they engage younger audiences and adopt new technologies, TOC will invite creative practitioners to respond to the idea of "preservation": what we value, why we value it, and how this will evolve for future generations. Maldon's own traditions will offer a rich starting point for exploring how customs are maintained, adapted and reimagined.

Festivals of the Future: Maldon is a town that hosts events of all sizes and welcomes thousands of visitors each year. TOC provides an opportunity to explore how festivals can evolve in a changing world: how expectations differ across generations, how can temporary social spaces like festivals/events spark new ideas that support long-term cultural development, and become more sustainable (in all senses), responsive to local context, digital enhanced (where relevant) and inclusive. Maldon's track record highlights creative ambition and operational competence. The range of events that we already enjoy - art trails, literature and food events through to large soul concerts demonstrates appetite for creative risk taking which will be essential for TOC 2028. Let's explore and have fun together!

Town and Climate Maldon: sits on the frontline of climate change. The tides that held back the Danes in 991 now threatening marshland, farmland and urban areas. Alongside this, new opportunities such as viticulture are reshaping landscapes and diversifying the visitor economy. This theme will bring together artists, environmental organisations, farmers/producers and maritime sectors to explore how creativity can help communities understand and respond to environmental change.

Use of Empty Spaces for Culture – Town Centres

This is a common issue and there were various references to opportunity space during the consultation (generally in private ownership). To get these kinds of initiatives off the ground requires liaison with private owners of property – which can be done but needs a dedicated focus. The role MDC (or the new CIC) can play in supporting this process should not be underestimated and could be part of a wider drive to support the vibrancy of the town centre economy in Maldon and Burnham-on-Crouch.

Arts and Cultural Centre Proposals

Throughout the strategy development and consultation process, the lack of a central (and publicly funded) cultural centre or space for the District has been raised regularly. The desire to see more art exhibitions and creative courses was also a feature of the survey for the Culture and Heritage Strategy.

Although not particularly well defined, this would appear to be a space that can be utilised for exhibitions, workshops (including practical hands-on sessions), and small events. This is something to develop further, and indeed there is an active consultation process for a proposed new Arts & Cultural Centre at Promenade Park in Maldon, led by Maldon District Council. This is very early days, but progress needs to be made quickly if this is to materialise (with local government reorganisation taking shape), and a sustainable long-term business case will need to emerge as reliance upon public funding without any other sources of income is challenging. A design has emerged for a space adjacent to the existing Museum in the Park. Notwithstanding the planning challenges and issues relating to development in Promenade Park (not universally popular), this is an interesting start and should be fuel for further engagement.

Actions

Strengthen networking and collaboration across the cultural sectors. In order to support the cultural sectors – which tend to be grassroots and largely voluntary – there is a need to strengthen collaboration and support with access to funding. Building on the early work undertaken through the strategy to form an Arts & Cultural Network will need to be continued.

Related to the above, **the emergence of the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC as a new delivery and strategy body** to provide advocacy and support all sectors that support the Saltmarsh Coast ‘place brand’ and tourism more generally – the Steering Group for Arts & Cultural that is proposed could fulfil the function of a network and a system of collaboration and co-production. This would recognise importance of the cultural scene to the profile of the area.

Improve the rate of public money coming into the sector – primarily through Arts Council England (ACE). The current situation is poor and there doesn’t seem to be a culture of applying (outside of the one NPO that Maldon District has). Funding workshops can be delivered and focused sessions on developing projects. Total reliance upon ACE or other public funding isn’t necessarily sustainable, but can help with specific projects and developing ideas that can lead to new opportunities.

The three Art Trails should be seen as partners of MDC (and the new CIC) in terms of cultural development and visitor economy. Their engagement with businesses demonstrates their ability to work across sectors, and the opportunity for a wider programme to be delivered around the core Trails is promising, if there is more capacity and certainty over funding. It takes a year to organise a Trail, so working to annual funding deadlines isn’t really sustainable.

Resolve the future of the proposed new Arts and Cultural Centre (and Museum) – there is a clear desire across stakeholders engaged in the strategy (and for many years before) to see something new that can be a central focus for arts and culture (exhibitions, workshops, events, public engagement etc.). There is no clear vision for this however as many different interests. Developing a capital project is one challenge (with issues around planning, objections to development in the park etc.), but a longer-term sustainable business case with mixed model of income (public and generated) will also need to be developed. Engagement with Mid Essex partners (particularly Chelmsford which has an established museum service and theatre) could be part of the long-term strategy.

Related to the above, **an operational meeting on existing and planned investment in culture and heritage (and tourism) between Mid Essex local authorities** is something that should be considered. This will identify where there are overlapping priorities, and potential challenges. The focus should be on placing culture and heritage as a key issue for the new unitary authority and planning for the sustainability of assets and programmes at all levels

To support the Mid Essex collaboration – present St. Peter’s Way as a collaborative project that links Brentwood, Chelmsford and Maldon together – environment and nature, myths and legends, stories (nature writing), pilgrimage, urban and rural context, and art commissions that encourage people to think about Mid Essex connections. This could be a defining project of the new Mid Essex – and one that gets going before 2028 (supporting community engagement for the new administration).

Accessible and affordable creative studio space for emerging creative practitioners is not part of the current mix across the District. There is an opportunity for stakeholders to work together on Station House in Burnham-on-Crouch (they are investing in renovation currently). However, other opportunities should be identified thinking about existing public sector assets where possible. Maldon & District CVS can support this with their experience of Men’s Sheds and an interest in creative health and wellbeing.

Building on the UK Town of Culture bid with some actions that develop the key themes presented will be important to show momentum and confidence in Maldon’s creative future. This is as much about positioning Maldon as an ambitious town (and wider area) that is open and confident in its heritage and culture (and story of place). New work could be commissioned relating to ‘Origin Stories’, ‘Preserving’ and ‘Town and Climate’ in particular. Festivals of the Future concept could feed into updated MDC strategy.

Support the Maldon Festival - The Maldon Festival has been revived and secured some investment from the Essex CC Arts & Cultural Fund to support its development as a cultural development programme, with the ability to bring cultural events to diverse locations across the District and encourage creative exploration of the wider area. This programme has the opportunity to become a leading multi-arts concept with high-quality performers from the local area, nationally and abroad. As ever, short-term and uncertain funding does not support long-term planning, partnerships and creative vision.

5 – Environment, Nature and Coast

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture and Heritage Strategy?

"Out on the salt marshes near Maldon, the land seemed to dissolve into water and the water into land. Mud, tide, creek, sky — all shifting, all merging. It was a place where boundaries blurred, where wildness lay in flux rather than fixity." (Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, 2007)

It is impossible to consider the natural, coastal and rural context of the Maldon District without placing it at the centre of any culture and heritage strategy. The environment shapes a distinctive sense of place, and for many years the idea of the 'Saltmarsh Coast' has been inseparable from the wider area. Maldon Salt is world famous and uniquely tied to the District. Red hills scattered along the coastal edges are remnants of long-established salt-harvesting practices.

Robert Macfarlane references the Maldon District of Essex when exploring the salt marshes and coastal landscapes of eastern England. He describes the coastal marshes as forms of overlooked wildness – places where tidal rhythms, mudflats and estuarine ecology express both cultural history and natural environment. These are not only spaces of great ecological importance but cultural places weighted with meaning, shaped by thousands of years of human interaction - fishing, sailing, settlement, infrastructure and realignment.

Rurality is the dominant factor across much of the area, with Defra classifying Maldon District as 80% rural. Although significant development continues across the District, particularly around the urban fringes of Maldon and Burnham-on-Crouch, the rural context persists and many settlements remain relatively isolated from urban areas (especially on the Dengie). Farming is a key industry in terms of its impact on the District's landscapes, and although it employs relatively few people directly it remains a cultural reference point across the area. This includes the many village and parish signs that are part of the District's heritage and a sense of pride for communities (as well as many having good artistic qualities).

The District is the agricultural, wild, natural and watery edge of the new Mid Essex Unitary Authority – a vital patchwork of parishes, settlements, nationally and locally important sites for nature. A well-developed network of paths creates opportunities for exploration (although many feel more could be done to maintain and promote these historic rural arteries – and that more are still needed).

The UK is one of the most nature depleted nations in the world, but there is so much positive activity taking place across the Maldon District to reverse this. This is happening at scale and hyper-locally and it is something of which everyone in the area should be proud. Much of this is under-the-radar and there is a clear role for culture to inspire and mobilise, particularly in relation the Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy which will require significant community mobilisation across the county over the coming years if progress is to be made.

In relation to this strategy – the natural environment is both a cultural and heritage reference point as well as crucial to tourism and the visitor economy. It is also a focus for increased community and strategic action in relation to nature recovery – and the arts, culture and heritage can inspire and facilitate this action. This particularly relates to the Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) that needs a significant upscaling of activity to deliver on over the coming years. Conservation is not (just) a

science. The work of charities, government, local groups and individuals is supported by an ongoing multi-disciplinary process that includes creative input and leadership conservation

Creative health research and arts-based environmental projects demonstrate that creativity can unlock new forms of engagement. Art, storytelling, and participatory design help people imagine alternative futures, understand ecological change, and feel part of a shared stewardship mission. Regional and Essex-wide programmes such as the Wild Essex Imaginarium, Beach of Dreams, EA Sustain Festival, or the national ReMeMaRe programme are regularly exploring the importance of culture and arts to important issues relating to environment and climate change. The popularity of nature writing similarly (nature writing programmes would work well across the District). Storytelling and meaningful cultural and social experiences can be as important as scientific facts when it comes to mobilising engagement with nature.

Maldon is at the forefront of so much that matters to the future of the UK – coast and climate change, renewable energy, changing rural and agricultural context, reimagining the resilience of rural parishes and their key cultural and heritage assets. This is a creative and inspirational opportunity for mass participation and action.

Strategic Reflection – National and Regional Context

Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The most important nature and environmental related policy document is the Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Greater Essex - published in 2025 responding to national government guidance. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) introduced Local Nature Recovery Strategies through the Environment Act 2021 as part of the government's wider policy agenda to halt biodiversity decline and support nature recovery across England. The Essex LNRS has been delivered through significant collaboration (overseen by Essex CC) across the county including local authorities, farmers, charities and community representatives. Its primary purpose is 'to identify locations to create or improve habitat most likely to provide the greatest benefit for nature and the wider environment'.

The LNRS should help local planning authorities integrate nature recovery into development planning and decision-making, and guide a coordinated, spatial approach to identifying priorities for habitat creation, restoration, and enhancement at a local level.

The Essex LNRS is full of evidence-based proposed interventions and priorities for nature recovery – but it is also a fantastic opportunity and inspiration for cultural programming and engagement.

Environmental Improvement Plan 2025

The Environmental Improvement Plan (published 2025) is the UK Government's approach to addressing many different environmental opportunities and challenges across the country – including recognising the importance of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and outlining plans to ensure they have legislative weight in terms of planning and development. There are also aspirations to improve access and engagement with nature, as well as recognising health benefits from engagement with nature and recognising the skills needs for modern agricultural practices.

‘Everyone has a role to play in restoring nature – from individuals managing our gardens and farmland for biodiversity, to those enjoying our parks, nature reserves and Protected Landscapes.’

‘Reduce barriers to access, boost children’s connection with nature and increase their understanding of the natural world and how to protect it.’

Natural England – ‘Recovering Nature for Growth, Health and Security’

This ‘Recovering Nature’ strategy, published in 2025 sets out how restoring and protecting the natural environment can support economic prosperity, public health, climate resilience, food security, and sustainable development in England. The strategy promotes large-scale nature recovery through stronger ecological networks, nature-based solutions, greener planning and development, and improved access to nature, while emphasising collaboration between government, local authorities, landowners, businesses, and communities to reverse biodiversity loss and deliver long-term environmental and societal benefits.

‘We are part of nature and wholly dependent upon it. Nature shapes, and is shaped by, our history, culture and land use. It continues to define the places where we live and work; enjoying and caring for nature continues to shape the quality of our lives.’

The recognition of the importance of nature to culture and a sense of history relates strongly to the Maldon District context.

National Lottery Heritage Fund

Although primarily a funder of heritage projects, the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) places strong emphasis on nature recovery, biodiversity enhancement, and environmental sustainability within its funding guidance. Natural heritage features significantly in NLHF’s funding priorities including projects that protect and restore habitats, create larger and better-connected ecological networks, deliver nature-based solutions to climate change, and reconnect people with landscapes, coasts, and green spaces.

Nature is also framed as an integral part of cultural and historic heritage, with the fund supporting initiatives that combine conservation of the natural environment with social, educational, and wellbeing benefits.

Biodiversity Duty – Town and Parish Councils

Under the Environment Act 2021 (Section 102), Town and Parish Councils (and indeed all levels of local government) have a duty to consider what actions they can take to conserve and enhance biodiversity in exercising their functions. This means in practice that they consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity, agree policies and specific objectives, informed by local context and opportunity, and they must demonstrably act to deliver their policies and achieve their objectives. While not required to publish a formal biodiversity report, councils must integrate biodiversity into decision-making, land management, and partnership activity, and may use council funds to support biodiversity conservation. In reality the way this is interpreted very much depends on the individual circumstances of the Parish or Town Council, and the capacity and leverage it has over land and assets. It is however an opportunity for local communities to articulate their priorities and work together for nature recovery. Many of the District’s local councils do have a Biodiversity Plan or Statement. It is likely that greater impact could be had if there were focused support packages, and

collaboration with local nature and climate groups (as well as larger environmental charities). The Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy should provide impetus for this.

Health Benefits – Access to Nature

In 2022 the Office for National Statistics released a bulletin entitled ‘Health benefits from recreation, natural capital, UK: 2022’. It recognised that access to nature is important for mental health, and important for inspiring people to engage and take action to protect and conserve local environmental assets (rivers, coast, natural spaces including in urban areas). The value of health benefits associated with outdoor recreation within the UK was estimated to be between £6.2 billion and £8.4 billion in 2020. This is a significant benefit to society and the Maldon District has so much opportunity (across all parishes) for people to get into the environment (in many different forms).

ReMeMaRe Heritage Group

This sub-group of the wider UK ReMeMaRe (Restoring Meadow Marsh and Reef) mission seeks to unite interested parties to share experiences of engaging with cultural heritage in habitat restoration projects. The group promotes learning and collaboration to better understand and celebrate our cultural heritage in support of marine & coastal habitat restoration. This project is notable as it recognises cultural heritage as important to nature conservation, with government agencies including Environment Agency and Natural England key partners.

Summary of Local Context

Given the rural, coastal and agricultural nature of the Maldon District, there is so much to consider and such as wide variety of projects, activities and strategies that provide a very rich context for heritage, culture and the unique sense of place that sets this part of Essex apart.

The environment - nature, coast, rivers, marsh, historic landscapes, agriculture and rurality. Maldon District is defined by its relationship to the natural environment as much as it is to its heritage. While there are concerns about the future relating to a range of factors including development, climate change and loss of rural amenities, it remains central to so much localised activity as well as local and strategic environmental policy. Maldon’s landscapes have provided inspiration for literature, film and art (including many local artists who take part in the excellent art trails). The Dengie is an ancient landscape with ancient field systems, paths and landmarks (including St. Peter’s Church at Bradwell).

The largest areas of natural and wild space are managed by the larger environmental charities including the RSBP, Essex Wildlife Trust and National Trust. These are predominantly but not entirely coastal. The entirety of the District’s coastline, including the Blackwater Estuary and tidal reaches of the River Crouch, is included in both nationally and internationally designated sites. These include a variety of important coastal habitats, including saltmarsh, grazing marshes and mudflats. The District’s coastal grazing marshes are part of a series of distinct managed landscapes and are a major heritage asset as well as environmentally important.

Summary of Important Sites for Nature

Maldon District’s internationally designated sites include the Blackwater Estuary National Nature Reserve Ramsar/Special Protection Area and the Dengie National Nature Reserve Ramsar/SPA, with the southern fringes also intersecting the Crouch & Roach Estuaries Ramsar/SPA. Much of the shoreline and intertidal zone also falls within the Essex Estuaries SAC (Roach, Crouch, Blackwater and

Colne), reflecting the importance of its saltmarsh, mudflats, sandflats and estuarine habitats for internationally significant bird populations.

Nationally, the principal SSSIs are Blackwater Estuary SSSI (covering much of the district's foreshore, saltmarsh, mudflats and grazing marsh), Dengie SSSI (open coast and marshes on the Dengie peninsula), and component/overlapping units such as Old Hall Marshes SSSI and Tollesbury Wick Marshes SSSI; there is also the small geological Maldon Cutting SSSI and the Bradwell Chenier Ridges (within Dengie SSSI). Together, these protected areas form a near-continuous belt of internationally and nationally important coastal wetlands around the district's coast.

Essex Wildlife Trust and RSPB Sites in the Maldon District

The RSPB's flagship site in Maldon District is Old Hall Marshes near Tollesbury and Salcott — one of the finest examples of coastal grazing marsh in England. Sitting alongside the Blackwater Estuary, the reserve features historic sea walls, reed-fringed fleets and red hill salterns, and is nationally important for breeding waders and wintering wildfowl. Public access along the sea wall paths makes it a popular destination for birdwatchers and walkers, offering an immersive experience of the district's wild, open coastal landscape.

Essex Wildlife Trust manages several complementary sites across the district, together forming a rich and varied network of habitats. Tollesbury Wick Marsh is a large reclaimed peninsula of grazing marsh, rills (shallow channels) and saltmarsh on the Blackwater, managed primarily for lapwing, redshank and wintering birds with permissive seawall access. Elsewhere, Maldon Wick Nature Reserve occupies a former railway cutting with chalky grassland and scrub rich in butterflies and wildflowers, while Heybridge Gravel Pits support wetland birds and dragonflies through freshwater pits, reedbeds and scrub. Chigborough Lakes near Heybridge and Goldhanger offers a more accessible family and education-focused experience, with lakes, reedbeds, wet woodland and hides, and Bradwell Shell Bank provides important coastal habitat on the Dengie coast.

Underpinning much of this work is EWT's Conservation Grazing programme, which deploys hundreds of cattle and sheep across key sites - including Tollesbury Wick and Blue House Farm at North Fambridge - to maintain the open, species-rich habitats on which internationally important wildlife depends. The Grazing programme requires significant resources each year to manage and maintain, and EWT are keen to increase awareness (and funding) to support this important work.

National Trust and Northey Island

Northey Island is a tidal island and saltmarsh in the Blackwater Estuary (one potential site for where the invading Vikings landed and came ashore across the causeway for the Battle of Maldon – other possible sites have also been put forward). The National Trust coastal adaptation project at Northey Island has been a long-term environmental conservation scheme designed to protect and restore the island's internationally important saltmarsh habitat in the Blackwater Estuary. The project responds to the growing impacts of climate change, rising sea levels, and erosion, which are threatening wildlife that relies upon the existing marshland. Dredged material, including from the Blackwater, has been utilised across four areas to support the delivery of this project (and example of BUDS – beneficial use of dredged material). There has also been an important cultural project – 'Conversations with the Sea' where artist Sara Hayes worked with visitors and local communities to increase understanding of the conversation efforts relating to the island and its importance of wildlife (and the challenges of climate change and rising sea levels).

The Blackwater Partnership

The Blackwater Partnership (managed by Essex Wildlife Trust) is a collaborative network of environmental and coastal-management groups, landowners, farmers and academics working across the Blackwater Estuary in Essex. The partnership is important as it focuses on landscape-scale restoration opportunities and projects that have a significant impact on the coastal areas of the Maldon District. This includes coastal adaptation and flood resilience, saltmarsh restoration, habitat creation for birds and wildlife, natural flood management, climate-change adaptation along the Blackwater.

Government agencies Natural England and The Environment Agency are both engaged and opportunities for collaborative approaches to landscape-scale projects. This includes the potential for a Higher-Level Countryside Stewardship Scheme bid for Tollesbury Marshes which would require collaboration between landowners, farmers as well as environmental charities.

The Blackwater Partnership is an important forum for collaboration, not only between environmental charities, NGOs and landowners, but also for culturally-focused work that can support community awareness and engagement with important projects and environments across this part of the District. The wider Blackwater Operational Catchment covers a much larger area than is often recognised, starting with the River Pant that rises near Saffron Walden. From there the river flows south-east through rural Essex settlements before becoming the River Blackwater at Braintree and eventually reaching the Blackwater Estuary at Heybridge Basin.

Essex Coastal Grazing Marshes Project

As a distinctive and complex historic environment, coastal grazing marshes are a major heritage asset, contributing to the special landscape character of many parts of the Essex coast. In 2014 a report was published – ‘Essex Coastal Grazing Marshes Project’ – that explored the cultural, heritage as well as environmental significance of the marshes (primarily in and around the Maldon District). The documents their historic character, extent and significance while highlighting progressive loss since the 1930s, noting that conservation efforts along with detailed analysis of their importance has (and continues to) address the issue. These efforts continue today with a key focus through the Blackwater Partnership for example.

The report explores literary references as a key part of the wider (and ancient) cultural heritage that is so important to this area of Essex. John Betjeman for example captures the sense of remoteness (despite being actually rather close) and aliveness of the environment and related coastal activity:

*‘Far Essex, - fifty miles away
The level wastes of sucking mud
Where distant barges high with hay
Come sailing in upon the flood’*
(‘Essex’ – John Betjemans’s Collected Poems 1979)

The report argues that value lies not only in exceptional natural importance of the marshes, but also in their ‘typical and commonplace’ fabric - drainage patterns, sea walls, field systems and industrial/maritime traces - and that this heritage should guide day-to-day management, agri-environment funding and strategic decisions (for example Shoreline Management Plans). By analysing

the significance of each surviving marsh area, it proposes a more integrated, heritage-informed stewardship alongside nature conservation and flood risk management.

A further report from 2019 - 'Heritage, natural capital and ecosystem services: Case Studies for Coastal Grazing Marshes' considers how to embed the historic environment within natural capital and ecosystem services frameworks for coastal grazing marshes, using Old Hall Marsh (RSPB) and Tollesbury Wick (Essex Wildlife Trust) as case studies. It sets out a heritage asset register (sea walls, sluices, borrow dykes, counter walls, creeks, saltern "red hills", duck decoys, WWII defences, oyster pits, rail and pier remains, place-names and traditions) and maps how each asset contributes to provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural services. The method adds heritage evidence and risk registers to standard natural capital accounting, showing that grazing marshes are human-made, historically rich landscapes where physical and intangible heritage is integral to sense of place, flood defence, water management, recreation and education.

At both sites, the study links heritage significance to practical management and valuation: it assembles asset and risk registers, illustrates benefits (nature conservation, flood storage, carbon, recreation, volunteering, landscape/aesthetics), and shows where changes (managed realignment or habitat works) could unintentionally damage below-ground archaeology or characteristic features. The conclusion is that heritage can and should be assessed alongside ecology in natural capital accounts, using a shared methodology to inform Shoreline Management Plans and other strategic planning approaches. This is important long-term so as not to erode the historic fabric of these sites.

Maldon Nature Conservation Study: Assessment of Selected Sites (2022)

This report is a high-level appraisal of 19 sites across Maldon District to inform planning (and could be referenced for future community action). Most sites are brownfield with scrub/grassland mosaics or hardstanding and includes sites such as Sadds Wharf, Basin Road (Heybridge Basin), Oval Park (Langford) and Barnhall Road (Tolleshunt Knights). The study's purpose is screening and evidence-gathering, not definitive designation: it maps ecological value, highlights risks to nearby protected areas, and identifies where further survey and Biodiversity Net Gain design will be required to manage impacts and secure gains.

Essex Estuaries Farm Cluster

The establishment of a new Farm Cluster that is focused on the Maldon District estuaries (although covering a larger area of coastal/estuarine Essex) is an important step forward for the area. Farm Clusters support the agricultural sector to collaborate to undertaken nature recovery and resilience, but they can also be good partners for wider community awareness raising and even specific projects. Public engagement is part of the ambition of the new Essex Estuaries Farm Cluster CIC - with opportunities for cultural programmes to support this and greater awareness of the area's agricultural context.

Local Action and Projects

There are three local environmentally focused groups in the Maldon District – Dengie Climate Action Partnership, Tollesbury Climate Partnership and Heybridge & Maldon Climate Action Partnership. Along with other local groups and charities, such as Blackwater and Chelmer CIC and Lauriston Farm, they play an important role in supporting nature recovery and promoting climate resilience (as well as other issues such as recycling and sustainable transport). All of the groups recognise the importance of culture and cultural activity as a way to engage communities and support action. For example, the

eARTh youth project works with local young people to make nature-based art and share ideas of relevance to the future.

The first meeting of the groups from Tollesbury, Heybridge and Maldon and Dengie took place in May 2026 with the intention to explore future collaborations to support wider awareness raising, engage with concepts such as Regenerative Tourism and strategic input to local government reorganisation.

There are some local spaces that are managed by volunteering including Our Wild Local Space (OWLS) a site owned by Moat Housing in Maldon but managed on a 10-year licence by Heybridge and Maldon Climate Action Partnership. OWLS offers many opportunities for over 20 regular volunteers as well as being an important space for local home education groups.

Another is Ironworks Meadow which is managed as a community nature reserve by the Chelmer Blackwater Reserve Community Interest Company (run completely by volunteers). The site was protected from development and holds strong links to Maldon's industrial past. Large sections have remained largely untouched for many years. As a result, it offers an exceptional setting for wildlife conservation and community engagement with nature – small mammals, reptiles and many invertebrates which exist amongst the reedbeds, flowing water channels, open meadow, scrub, a narrow woodland belt and an old borrow dyke. A fire caused significant damage to the site in 2025 resulting in the need for pathways through the site needing to be rebuilt (with funding coming from local fundraising).

Lauriston Farm (Goldhanger – behind the seawall on the Blackwater Estuary) is managed by a dedicated Charitable Community Benefit Society and works to manage the 210 acres using Biodynamic principles, as well as offering education and training and day placements for adults with learning difficulties. 85% of the of the farm is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and there are two listed building as well. There is a dedicated community space and kitchen that supports the operation and the farm hosts a number of guided walks each year demonstrating the work to support biodiversity. Recognising the links between cultural practice and environment, there are emerging plans to host creative practitioners on site for residencies which would be a unique opportunity to engage with many important issues relating to the land, nature, farming and how communities relate to all of this.

Lofts Farm (Great Totham) is another interesting space that is emerging as a centre for cultural practice focused on nature and engagement with the environment (including natural dyes that are grown on site). Lofts Farm already hosts workshops including 'An Introduction to dying fabric sustainably'. Lofts Farm (and Lauriston Farm) are excellent local examples of bringing culture, heritage and environment together to inspire, take action and educate. They both should be recognised and supported in their endeavours as they contribute something very different and important to the District.

Stow Maries is obviously most often associated with the historic WW1 Aerodrome. However important work takes place at Stow Maries in relation to nature (and the all-important opportunities for people to engage with it). 93 acres at Stow Maries has become a haven for wildlife largely due to the fact that it has been so little interfered with since WW1. The open expanses of grassland provide space for butterflies and other insects, while pockets of woodland and sheltered ponds create refuge for important species. cooler, quieter refuges. Stow Maries hosts Family Nature Days which included guided walks of

the site, and has a team of dedicated volunteer who support maintenance and community engagement.

Regenerative Tourism and Environment

The emergence of the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC (addressed elsewhere in this strategy document) provides an opportunity to increase collaboration between environmental organisations and groups, and the wider cultural, heritage and tourism sectors. After all, the environment is *the* main attraction for visitors and loved by local communities. Those responding to the survey undertaken to inform this strategy are clear that ‘Coastal Spaces and Destinations’ is the District’s best asset (93%) followed by ‘Rural and Natural Landscapes’ (72%).

Regenerative Tourism puts environmental conservation at the centre – recognising that it is often the natural environment that is a big part of the draw for visitors to a particular location, while also seeking to acknowledge and mitigate the potential threats that come from increasing numbers of visitors. The Regenerative Tourism Strategy that is being developed for the Saltmarsh Coast will bring local organisations and activists together to ensure that conservation is right a central concern and focus for action. Essex Wildlife Trust’s Eco Tourism plans are a good example of bringing together the concepts of experiential tourism and conservation, with a test programme that will focus on EWT sites in the District (plans for roll out in 2027).

The Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival is a core programme that will be managed directly by the new CIC, recognising the potential that comes with encouraging considerate exploration of the District’s environments (inland and coastal), supporting awareness raising of conservation and nature recovery efforts. The festival also links to the District’s Public Rights of Way network which is important for providing access to the countryside and coast, supporting recreation, tourism, health and wellbeing, and enabling people to experience the district’s natural and historic environment.

St. Peter’s Way – A Potential Joint Project for Mid Essex

St. Peter's Way is over 50 years old as a concept. Primarily a formal walking route, it links the three local authorities of Mid Essex together. This is a unique project opportunity to explore a unifying concept for Mid Essex, connecting sites of cultural and heritage interest while raising to nature recovery priorities and healthy lifestyles. An initial feasibility stage could be supported which would identify opportunities for cultural programming and community engagement, and future plans for sculptures, alternative and digital interpretation and a range of community-facing events. Ultimately the project will explore the connections between places, the history, culture, environment, agriculture, and creative health opportunities.

Actions

Engage with and support the Blackwater Partnership: Strategic and (where relevant) operational support should be given for major landscape scale project concepts (and ultimately delivery) - the sense of place and place brand depend largely on the organisations that make up the Blackwater Partnership (including farmers and other landowners). Overseen by Essex Wildlife Trust, the Partnership are open to participation by Maldon District stakeholders and recognise a cultural framing of challenges and opportunities can be an opportunity for wider community awareness and to support specific projects. MDC and/or the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC can identify some landscape

scale projects that are proposed and offer support if it is needed (funding, community engagement, letters of support, technical etc.) - for Higher-Levels for a Higher Level Countryside Stewardship Scheme bid for Tollesbury Marshes.

Essex Estuaries Farm Cluster: The establishment of a new Farm Cluster that is focused on the Maldon District coastal/estuaries (although covering a larger area of coastal/estuarine Essex) is an important step forward for the area. Farm Clusters support the sector to collaborate to undertake nature recovery and resilience, but they can also be good partners for wider community awareness raising and even specific projects. Public engagement is part of the ambition of the new Essex Estuaries Farm Cluster CIC - with opportunities for cultural programmes to support this and greater awareness of the area's agricultural context. The partners in the Farm Cluster are more than capable of progressing with ambitions and nature recovery, but where MDC and/or the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC can be helpful and of delivery or strategic support, then this should be offered.

Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) - Creative Collaborations: Working with the local climate action / nature partnerships and other groups at a hyper-local level - commission four environment and culture themed programmes that raise the profile of key nature recovery priorities in the District (informed by the LNRS), the work already underway to protect/enhance, and the local action that can support this. This will also raise the profile of the local groups that are taking action and support town and parish councils with their 'Biodiversity Duty'. Other simple actions that bring culture and nature recovery together should also be explored (film showings, nature writing events etc.) in partnership with local climate and nature groups and town/parish councils.

Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival and Nature Recovery: The Walking Festival is very popular and the primary focus is often the District's unique environment (and heritage). There is already good integration between the organisers and the wider business, tourism and heritage sectors. The Festival can become a key focus for enhancing understanding of nature recovery priorities (and successes). Given the Festival's regenerative core concept and its importance to tourism/place brand, this is one of the core programmes for the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC.

St. Peter's Way: St. Peter's Way is over 50 years old as a concept. Primarily a formal walking route, it links the three local authorities of Mid Essex together. This is a unique project opportunity to explore a unifying concept for Mid Essex, connecting sites of cultural and heritage interest while raising to nature recovery priorities and healthy lifestyles. An initial feasibility stage could be supported which would identify opportunities for cultural programming and community engagement, and future plans for sculptures, alternative and digital interpretation and a range of community-facing events. Ultimately the project will explore the connections between places, the history, culture, environment, agriculture, and creative health opportunities.

6 - Regenerative Tourism

‘Regenerative tourism is an approach which reimagines the tourism industry as a force for sustainability, inclusivity, accessibility, and genuine hospitality. Regenerative tourism aims to leave a place in a better condition than if it did not have tourism. Rather than maintaining or sustaining a place, regenerative tourism seeks to improve a place through tourism.’ (The Social Value of Tourism – Visit Britain)

‘Maldon District offers a canvas for people to paint their own experiences’ – Culture and Heritage Strategy consultation response (2025)

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture & Heritage Strategy?

Through the process of developing the culture and heritage strategy, a plan and governance process for regenerative tourism has also emerged as a corollary. Tourism and the visitor economy is crucial to the wider economy across the District for employment, particularly in some of the more rural areas. The tourism offer is interlinked to the cultural, heritage and environmental offer of the District. 18% of the Maldon District Workforce were employed in the wider tourism/hospitality sectors in 2024 (which is higher than for Essex as a whole). Tourism and the visitor economy matter.

The aim of the Regenerative Tourism approach is to recognise that a successful tourism and hospitality sector is part of an ecosystem that includes heritage, culture and environment. In other words, tourism and the related economic and social benefits, are reliant in large part on perceptions of the Saltmarsh Coast area, and that these perceptions are to a significant extent based on the cultural, heritage and environmental offer. This is true for visitors and also for local communities (who are also visitors and spend money and volunteer locally). For many years the Saltmarsh Coast concept has been utilised to promote tourism, based on the unique landscapes and heritage of the District. A Regenerative Tourism strategy reinforces this and seeks to develop collaboration further and greater understanding of the interrelationship between sectors (for the benefit of all).

There is a circular concept at the heart of the regenerative strategy for the Saltmarsh Coast – ensuring that a growth in tourism delivers lasting benefits for culture, heritage and the environment. It is therefore imperative that cultural, heritage and environmental organisations think collaboratively about attracting new audiences, deepening engagement with existing audiences, offering distinctive and engaging experiences, and how their insight and data can feed back in to a governance system that has oversight and accountability.

A regenerative tourism approach provides an opportunity for a ‘whole system’ approach, understanding that tourism is unpinned by a complex ecosystem of organisations, locations, environments, stories, narratives and infrastructures all interwoven and (to some extent) reliant upon each other. It enables local partners to look inward while considering the wider benefits – thinking critically about how the area is outwardly positioned to visitors, investors and local communities.

Strategic Reflection – National and Regional Context

The concept of Regenerative Tourism has been gaining traction over a number of years in the UK and across the world. For example, in Norfolk partners are working on the Brecks being recognised as the UK’s first Regenerative Tourism National Character Area. This focuses on the landscapes, geology and

natural environment and apparent underdeveloped tourism offer, seeking to attract high-value, environmentally aware visitors, help spread tourism across different seasons and locations, and strengthen the area's identity as a destination in its own right while protecting its local character and fragile natural resources.

The concept can also work at a regional level, with Destination North East England publishing a Regenerative Visitor Economy Framework 2024:

'Our vision is a thriving North East England where tourism and events are a catalyst for transformation, seamlessly integrating economic growth and innovation with social and environmental regeneration. Our region's inclusive visitor economy contributes to the wellbeing of local communities and the revitalisation of our stunning natural landscapes and cultural heritage.'

In Essex, Maldon District is already leading the way on establishing not only a strategy for regenerative tourism, but also a collaborative governance system that is capable of looking long-term (beyond local government reorganisation) at the needs and opportunities of the wider tourism and visitor economy. This can influence the approach to tourism and the visitor economy through the new Mid Essex Unitary Authority.

Essex Destination Management Plan 2025-2030

The Essex Destination Management Plan (Visit Essex) highlights the need for a clearer and more coordinated visitor offer across Essex, with stronger links between attractions, market towns, festivals, food and drink, and distinctive landscapes to create high-quality visitor experiences and themed destination clusters. It also emphasises the growing importance of sustainable and regenerative tourism, encouraging low-impact travel, support for local businesses and communities, and diversification into tourism activities (very relevant to the Maldon District), particularly within the farming sector, to strengthen rural economies and help conserve the landscape.

The distinctive nature and diversity of the Maldon District means that it is a good place for Regenerative tourism, and indeed it has been recognised by Visit Essex for the success of the Saltmarsh Coast concept and the work of the District Council and many other partners in effective promotion, marketing and packaging of opportunities for visitors.

'Travellers are increasingly taking action to make sustainable choices whilst on holiday, such as choosing to walk, bike or use public transport, and buying local, and travelling outside of peak season to avoid overcrowding. Regenerative travel is also increasingly popular, with travellers seeking to ensure the money they spend goes back to the local community in some way.'

The concept of 'experiential' tourism aligns well with 'regenerative' as people look for distinct experiences often related to culture, heritage and the environment – *'appropriate experiences and products linked to unique Essex landscapes and attractions.'*

Rural diversification is also recognised as not only important for the local economy, but also for experiential tourism – *'Encourage the diversification into tourism, by farmers, to help keep their businesses sustainable and protected our landscape.'* Again, this is something that the Maldon District is already delivering on (growth of viticulture experiences for example) with potential for significantly more – with the regenerative tourism concept a helpful focus. The new Local Plan process for the

Maldon District (or indeed Mid Essex) will need to consider this issue and provide the necessary and appropriate flexibility to support rural diversification.

There is also interesting reflection on the importance of technology and social media in relation to tourism (and regenerative/experiential tourism in particular). Technology and social media strongly influence Generation Z's travel choices, with many seeking authentic, local and culturally rich experiences. This can also encourage more sustainable and socially responsible tourism options, encouraging the growth of eco-friendly travel and community-focused destinations.

Visitor Levy Proposals for England

The UK Government is currently consulting on proposals to introduce an overnight Visitor Levy in England, sometimes referred to as a 'tourist tax', which would allow local areas to charge a small fee on overnight accommodation such as hotels, B&Bs and holiday lets.

Unlike in Scotland and Wales, where local authorities are being given these powers directly, the English proposals are closely linked to the Government's devolution agenda, with powers intended primarily for Mayoral Strategic Authorities led by elected Mayors. Revenues generated through the levy would be retained locally and could be reinvested into tourism infrastructure, transport, cultural assets, public realm improvements and wider economic growth initiatives, helping destinations manage visitor pressures while supporting sustainable tourism development.

Should the Visitor Levy be introduced it will be overseen by the Mayoral Combined Authority for Essex (led by an elected Mayor from 2028), and this reflects the importance of Maldon District being able to have an effective voice and advocate for the importance of the visitor economy. A well established regenerative tourism system led by an independent not-for-profit organisation will be important in this endeavour.

The Social Value of Tourism – A report by Visit Britain (2025)

This report examines the broad social, cultural, and community impacts of tourism, with a particular focus on the experiences of local communities most directly affected by it. Drawing on polling evidence, case studies, and statistical analysis, it highlights the ways tourism can support community pride, well-being, and regeneration, while emphasising the need for sustainable and inclusive approaches to tourism development. The case is made that there is an appetite across the British public for travelling within the UK *'that is both good for communities and the environment. Nearly 60% of the public say that when they travel, they try to leave the place better than they found it.'*

'The regenerative approach goes beyond goals of previous decades, prioritising not only environmental stewardship but also the lasting well-being of local communities, economies, and cultural heritage. This proactive, forward-thinking approach views tourism as a tool for tackling economic, social, and especially environmental challenges, aiming to rejuvenate and restore rather than capitalise on the places and people that make tourism possible. By putting the needs of host communities and visitors at the forefront, regenerative tourism fosters a sustainable balance that benefits everyone. Ultimately, this model creates opportunities while reducing risks, ensuring tourism contributes positively to people, places, and shared prosperity for generations to come.'

Summary of Local Context

Development of the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC

Building on the excellent partnership working over the last few years, supported by Maldon District Council, with the participation of businesses and organisations from across many different sectors, the establishing of a new not-for-profit organisation – Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC is taking place. The current T26 Leadership Group that has been working for a number of years on promotion, marketing, supporting collaboration and share projects will remain in place. The new system will therefore see a new Community Interest Company (CIC) with a Board of Directors responsible for overseeing the strategic direction of the regenerative tourism strategy (and ultimately paid staff), with the T26 Leadership Group being the forum through which new sector-focused ‘Steering Groups’ will feed in and influence the direction of travel for strategy, initiatives and advocacy for the Saltmarsh Coast area. The Steering Groups including Heritage, Culture & Arts, Environment and Nature, Events, Waterways & Maritime, Food & Drink, Rural and Town Centres.

Some of the core concepts that will make up the regenerative strategy include the following, with detail developed through the Steering Groups.

- Local economy – offering local products and experiences that are distinctive and relevant to the Saltmarsh Coast area. Ensuring that visitors (and local residents) buy local and support local producers, businesses and organisations (including by visiting sites and spaces)
- Stay local – encouraging the sustainable growth of hotel space and other overnight opportunities (including glamping, development of agricultural spaces etc.). This will ensure more direct spend from visitors into the local economy.
- Authenticity and local distinctiveness – authentically ‘saltmarsh coast’ experiences that are rooted in the area’s history, heritage, culture, environment and terroir – opportunities for experiences and taking part
- Preserving, conserving and interpreting the heritage and culture of the Saltmarsh Coast area – ensuring investment goes where it is needed to support local organisations to deliver and meet the expectations of visitors and participants (high quality exhibitions and programmes, relevant and compelling interpretation, accessible buildings with good facilities, digitally engaging and educational including for schools)
- Carbon Neutrality - Implement programmes to reduce carbon emissions from tourism activities and place/space (existing and new build). Support tourism businesses and attractions to reduce their carbon emissions and encourage sustainable travel
- Environmental restoration and resilience of ecosystems – Raise awareness of the unique environments across the Saltmarsh Coast and support initiatives to protect and enhance environments in keeping with ambitions in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and other strategies and plans, and support efforts to secure membership of organisations. Promote low impact activities including through events and guided walks that focus on nature restoration (and offer opportunities for participation)
- Community empowerment – Local communities recognise the benefits of tourism – linked to civic pride (improve volunteering), economic benefits (high streets etc.) and inward investment, and recognise themselves as tourists (with the ability to play a role in a ‘regenerative approach’) and can share their experience as volunteers
- Skills development, business support and investment in innovation and partnerships with Higher Education.

Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival

The Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival (SCWF) was launched in September 2023 and celebrates the Saltmarsh Coast landscape through guided walks focused on nature, wildlife, heritage and local food and drink. It encourages both residents and visitors to explore the District on foot, helping people connect more closely with the area's landscapes, communities and local businesses.

The SCWF has been very popular and was rated one of the best 10 Walking Festivals in the UK in the Guardian (2024) – alongside well-established festivals including Isle of Wight and National Forest Walking Festivals. Over 120 guided walking sessions have been delivered since 2023 and 85 businesses have benefitted from engagement with visitors. The concept is regenerative in that it focuses on creating meaningful and deeper visitor experiences with environments and local places including businesses (such as pubs). Walking tourism aligns strongly with a regenerative approach, helping visitors connect more closely with landscapes, heritage and local businesses in a low-impact and 'slow' way.

The SCWF will be one of three core initiatives managed directly by the new Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC in recognition of the importance of programmes that embody the concept of 'regenerative', as well as encouraging considered exploration of places across the District (which is also 'experiential').

There are also wider opportunities to support sustainable and regenerative visitor experiences through walking – for example through promotion and creative exploration of St. Peter's Way which runs through the three local authority areas that will make up the Mid Essex Unitary Authority – Brentwood, Chelmsford and Maldon. Further to this, cycling is also an important part of the mix and Maldon has much to offer visitors on bicycles, including the National Cycle Network 1 which runs from Dover to Shetland, as well as other routes that take in the Blackwater Rail Trail (the former Maldon to Witham Railway Line). The Friends of Flich Way charity plays a significant role in maintaining the Blackwater Rail Trail with volunteer parties undertaking work to keep the route clear and ensure the local heritage is visible (including the historic Railway Halt at Langford).

There are other events that also embrace the concept of 'regenerative' in the District. This includes the world-famous Maldon Mud Race that supports local charities and businesses, provides a rich and diverse culture and sporting experience for visitors, puts the District on the map nationally and internationally, and is embedded in the natural environment of Maldon and the Blackwater.

Launch Event – Regenerative Tourism Strategy and Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC

An event was organised at the Tin Roof Café (Woodham Mortimer) to launch the concept of a Regenerative Tourism Strategy for the Maldon District and the important role that the new CIC would play in this. There was significant enthusiasm for increased levels of collaboration and buy-in to the core concept of 'regenerative'. Issues raised included accessibility (lack of sustainable transport options across the District), need for funding to support initiatives, collaboration and support for events, opportunities for sailing clubs to continue diversifying their core offer (to support increased visitor interest), and practical issues of relevance to the environment and nature including the need for effective control of dogs in protected natural areas.

Since the event much work has taken place to set out the immediate and mid-term priorities for the CIC and the wider regenerative tourism system, and the application to establish the new CIC has been made.

Overnight Stays and Hotels

The current overnight stay offer in the District is limited and expensive – for example the one Travelodge in Maldon is more expensive than comparable Travelodges elsewhere in the country.

A stronger overnight stay offer from other areas including Chelmsford means that visitors can come to Maldon but not necessarily stay in the District overnight. This is certainly the case for larger events where those working often stay outside of the District (in Chelmsford for example) – mainly due to the lack of available hotel spaces. The need for new hotel and overnight stay options has been recognised for some time (for example in the evidence base for the Local Plan in 2015), with the situation becoming more challenging as the tourism offer develops (including through the proactive work of the District Council in partnership with local businesses).

Farm and rural diversification is one strategy that can increase not only the options for visitors but also the ‘experiential’ and ‘regenerative’ principles and practice of tourism in the District. One example of this is Grove Cottages in Tollesbury (on land associated with Mell Farm), with many other similar examples across the District. Camping and glamping options are also important as part of the ‘experiential’ mix for visitors.

While overnight stays are not automatically ‘regenerative’ – the concept of encouraging longer (and therefore generally higher spending) stays will help to ensure that spend is retained within the Maldon District economy, and that the distinctive experiences people have visiting the area results in direct investment.

Actions

Establish and empower the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC, ensuring independence from all local authorities while also being accountable to the many interested stakeholders who will play a role in the Regenerative Tourism strategy and action plan. A crucial part of the 'community empowerment' process; establishing an organisation with the capacity, strategic insight and local connectivity to deliver into and beyond local government reorganisation. The new organisation can be a successor body to MDC functions around tourism, promotion and marketing and cross over with wider policy areas including planning, environment, community development and health/wellbeing. It is critical therefore that the new CIC has the resources to scale up and take forward the existing strategy and emerging action plans without spending significant time (and often volunteer time) looking for external investment (at least initially).

Study to develop the core concept of 'Regenerative' - linked to the particular opportunities across the 'Saltmarsh Coast'. The concept at the core of 'Regenerative Tourism' is the crucial difference between a standard tourism approach (i.e. more visitors and higher spend) and a regenerative approach which aims to feed directly into the assets and people that make the District attractive to visit (and to live and do business in). The existing Regenerative Tourism Strategy (delivered as part of the Culture & Heritage Strategy) identifies a process for this and a governance and engagement system that will enable many different stakeholders to feed in. Continue hosting collaborative events that

enable stakeholders to feed in and learn from good practice examples from across the UK and internationally.

7 – Planning

Why is this Important to the Culture & Heritage Strategy?

The local planning system has a potential role to play when it comes to culture and heritage development across the District, and is certainly important for environment and nature recovery (through Biodiversity Net Gain for example). The main reference points will be the Local Plan (and the process to get there) and Neighbourhood Plans (where they are in place or being developed).

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) gives culture and heritage a strong, explicit role in plan-making by setting out clear expectations for how local planning authorities should recognise, conserve and enhance the historic environment. Chapter 16 emphasises that heritage assets are irreplaceable and should be conserved ‘in a manner appropriate to their significance.’ It requires plans to develop a proactive strategy for the historic environment that sustains and enhances heritage assets, supports viable uses that are consistent with their conservation, and recognises the wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits they bring. This includes requiring development to contribute positively to local character and distinctiveness and encouraging opportunities to draw on the historic environment to shape a strong sense of place.

Emerging reforms published in 2026 maintain this trajectory by reinforcing the need for long-term strategies for heritage within local plans and by linking heritage more closely to regeneration, community wellbeing and placemaking. Proposed policy HE1 (Plan-making for the historic environment) builds directly on paragraph 203 of the existing framework and strengthens requirements for early evidence-gathering, identification of at-risk assets, and the integration of heritage considerations into growth strategies. This widens the policy rationale for investment in heritage, positioning it not only as an asset to protect but as a key element in shaping sustainable development, cultural identity and local economic resilience.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (October 2023) introduced a new 30-month plan-making system with a streamlined evidence base and defined project management stages, supported by secondary legislation published in March 2026. Because the work on the emerging Maldon District Local Plan cannot be submitted for examination under the legacy system by the Government’s 31 December 2026 deadline, the MDC is instead required to publish its intention to begin plan-making under the new system by that date, which will formally trigger the 30-month timetable.

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

Maldon District Council currently has no CIL policies, and it is not clear whether CIL would be appropriate for developments across the District. This has been the subject of some specific analysis that will now feed into the new local plan process (when that is initiated). A Community Infrastructure Policy can support cultural infrastructure where cultural facilities are recognised as essential community assets, enabling councils to secure developer contributions for new or improved cultural spaces, creative facilities, heritage assets, and community-led cultural activity. However, it is likely that there would be many competing demands for investment in community facilities and infrastructure, so there is no guarantee that funding for culture or heritage would happen in the event of there being a CIL policy and schedule in place.

Section 106 agreements are another potential way of securing investment into local community (and cultural) infrastructure. Section 106 agreements can be used to secure site-specific mitigation where a development creates additional demand for cultural or community facilities. This would have to be demonstrated and there would likely to other competing demands for the investment.

Rural Diversification and Regenerative Tourism

There are examples across the District where historic agricultural buildings (or buildings on or near farms) are in need of investment and reinvention. This is an important part of rural diversification, ensuring that rural communities remain viable socially and economically. Cultural activity (workshops, small events etc.) are increasingly popular across the District in rural locations with some good examples of spaces being reinvented. This is also a core part of the 'regenerative tourism' concept that is emerging as a strategic priority for the Maldon District, and planning has a key role to play in terms of the visitor economy and tourism. So policies that support sustainable travel, create a context for rural diversification and a flourishing of distinctive businesses (with locally relevant products) will be important as the new local plan process emerges. This broadly fits with the NPPF 'Supporting a Prosperous Rural Economy' Paragraph 88b which states that policies should enable – 'the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses' and 88c – 'sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments which respect the character of the countryside.'

8 – Town and Parish Councils

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture and Heritage Strategy?

Town and parish councils are democratic institutions most closely rooted in their localities and the lives of people across communities. It is the layer of government where trust is often highest and people can feel genuinely connected to decision-making processes. Every part of the District is covered by a Town or (in most cases) a Parish Council, and because they operate at the hyper-local scale, they are uniquely placed to reflect the priorities of their communities, whether rural or urban. Town and Parish Councils need not simply be administrative bodies maintaining local amenities (although this is important); they are locally focused institutions capable of convening residents, supporting community groups, and can enable people to shape the places they live.

At a time when the emergence of larger unitary authorities risk widening the distance between communities and decision-makers, Town and Parish councils will remain in place and can continue to play a role to connect communities to strategic decision makings and policy. For Mid Essex, they can act as a bridge between local community voice and the strategic level of unitary and mayoral authority. This responds directly to the fact that there will be fewer local authority councillors per resident, and challenges around the relevance and visibility of key decision-making processes. Whether through neighbourhood planning, parish meetings, participatory budgeting or simply the everyday act of showing up to a parish meeting, they are likely to be important in ensuring the devolution and local government reorganisation strengthens rather than diminished community voice and empowerment.

Across the Maldon District Town and Parish Council are of many different sizes, so their ability to affect change, develop local programmes and hold regular events and debates varies. Some clerks only work a few hours a week. They are all important however and play a key role in supporting local heritage, events and in some cases cultural activities. They very often provide a digital information source for those wanting to find out about a particular parish or area (including visitors), more often than not they include information on local history and heritage.

The importance of Town and Parish Councils to heritage and culture across the District isn't necessarily in their direct support through funding. Rather it is their understanding of their village or parish that can provide context and opportunity for cultural and heritage related programming. Cultural, heritage and environmental participation can be important for engaging people in local issues and civic life more generally, so town and parish councils are part of the essential infrastructure across the Maldon District to support the all-important grassroots movements. The nature of cultural, heritage and environmental participation across the District is through many different local groups, organisations and informal gatherings.

Strategic Reflection

The main strategic reference point for Town and Parish Councils across England at this point in time is the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. This is because in Essex, as in many other areas, there is a fundamental shift taking place which will affect town and parish councils across England. Many of the current town and parish councils were established during the previous round of local government reorganisation through the Local Government Act 1972 (enacted in 1974). This is still very much in the memory of some older people still involved with Town and Parish Councils today.

The English Devolution White Paper from 2024 which set up the process for the current round of local government reorganisation (lgr) and Devolution states that the Government ‘will expect new councils [unitary authorities] to take a proactive and innovative approach to neighbourhood involvement and community governance so that citizens are empowered’. The current Bill does not have a clear role set out for town and parish councils, partly because they do not fit in to a one size fits all concept for neighbourhood governance (or the proposed ‘neighbourhood committees’).

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) published a response to the announcement in March 2026 of the new unitary authorities for many parts of England.

‘We emphasise that strong neighbourhood governance must be built around empowered communities that are trusted and enabled to lead. As new unitary councils take shape, they should recognise and work with existing local structures, carefully considering which elements of current pre-local government reorganisation neighbourhood models can be strengthened rather than replaced.’ (NALC calls for parish and town council involvement following announcement of new unitary councils – March 2026)

NALC also made reference to the potential for existing second-tier local authorities to consider transferring some assets to Town and Parish Councils prior to local government reorganisation – in order to protect them as community assets into the future (not that there is necessarily any suggestion that lgr will undermine community assets – although there is uncertainty in the process).

NALC have also reported on debates in Parliament (House of Lords) that recognised that the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill was not clear on the role of Town and Parish Councils.

‘In the debate, peers highlighted strong cross-party concern that parish and town councils are undervalued in the legislation, stressing that they are central to community life, essential for neighbourhood governance, and should not be sidelined by larger strategic bodies or ministerial powers’ – (NALC Reporting December 2025)

A Paper published in December 2025 entitled ‘The Future of Local Democracy – Devolution and the Need to Empower Town and Parish Councils’ (University of Birmingham) explores the challenges and opportunities faced by the most local level of government in relation to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. In particular ensuring there is an effective and ‘independent’ system for communities that is not dominated by the big strategic authorities:

‘There is a risk that without independent mechanisms for community voice and activity, the strategic priorities of larger areas will be pitched against smaller communities and perpetuate the “David and Goliath” battles that have hitherto affected community voice in decision making’

There is much good practice in this paper with examples from areas of England where the Town or Parish Council has achieved success with significant projects and effect community voice and representation. There is also recognition however of the capacity and skills challenges faced by smaller local councils.

Mid Essex will see a merger of three local authorities which do have a good number of Town and Parish Councils (although Maldon has far more than Brentwood which currently has 9). In 2023 Chelmsford

City Council supported the establishment of a new Chelmsford Garden Community Council (formed from areas that were previously parts of Little Waltham, Springfield, Boreham and Broomfield parishes), in recognition of the significant growth in the area and the need for improved local representation of the new communities. The Town and Parish Councils in the Maldon District know their communities and their local areas well and this knowledge will be crucial in making the wider devolution and local government reorganisation processes successful and relevant – as long as there are effective systems in place to ensure they have voice. Their voice is very likely to be important when it comes to supporting local assets, heritage, culture and environment.

Community Right to Buy

Although not necessarily a ‘right’ that has to involve Town or Parish Councils, in many cases they will be involved in one way or another when it comes to communities looking to purchase important local Assets of Community Value (ACVs). The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is strengthening the process through which communities can work together to purchase and take over local assets if they come up for sale and are considered at risk (for example likely to close and potentially see a change of use). The ‘Community Right to Buy’ element of the legislation replaces the previous ‘right to bid’, with an increased timescale for communities to raise the necessary funding to purchase a registered Asset of Community Value (ACV) – up from 6 months to 12 months. The ‘Community Right to Buy’ listing will also be for 10 years (up from the current 5 years).

Summary of Local Context

Town and Parish Councils in the Maldon District

Across the District there are 34 parishes, 3 of which are twinned to make up Maldon District’s 31 parish/town councils. There are two Town Councils (Maldon and Burnham-on-Crouch), with the others being smaller Parish Councils. The fact that they vary in size and capacity (and resources) means that the scope for local action (projects, advocacy, responding to planning etc.) varies. Some Parish Clerks only work for around 4 hours per week (officially – in reality many of them do many more hours than they are paid for). Funding for local projects is fairly restricted but there are some good examples of where the Parish Councils support local events. The Tillingham Flower Show for example, or the Southminster Competitive Music Festival (although in both cases these are also driven by key individuals).

The two larger Town Councils do directly support and fund some local events. Burnham-on-Crouch Town Council supports a number of key events in the town including the Carnival and Quay Day during Burnham Week (and manage the very popular Pirates on the Quay programme). The Town Council is also working on a way forward for the Station House which has been closed as a community space since Covid – this includes investing significantly in the building renovations.

Neighbourhood Plans

Neighbourhood Plans can be important for setting out local priorities, and providing an evidence base and record of local issues and priority projects that can support broader advocacy and investment. Currently there are four ‘made’ Neighbourhood Plans in place across the District, with work ongoing for a new Neighbourhood Plan for Maldon Town (supported by Rural Community Council for Essex – RCCE). The status of being ‘made’ means that it has been through the full process (including

examination) and has been approved and formally published. The plans in this ‘made’ category currently are – Langford & Ulting, Wickham Bishops, Great Totham and Mayland.

Neighbourhood Plans form part of the wider development planning process for local authority areas, and are taken into account when planning applications are decided upon. There is no legal or statutory duty for a Town or Parish Council to have a Neighbourhood Plan, and the policies and detail of the Plans must not conflict with the wider policies set out in a District Local Plan for example.

The Maldon Town Council Neighbourhood Plan has established an effective community engagement process which includes a working group focusing on heritage. The Maldon Society has also published a Vision for the Town which will feed in to the Neighbourhood Plan process (and support the wider focus on the importance of heritage and culture in the town centre context). Woodham Walter Parish Council are also in the late stages of developing a Neighbourhood Plan. In the Woodham Walter Plan (not yet ‘made’) culture is referenced as important to the sense of place:

‘The village has developed over many years and has an established culture and presence that reflects the way of life that it represents. That should be valued, honoured, and not changed lightly; it is a cultural heritage. The Neighbourhood Plan is the shared vision, shaped by local voices and local values to support these sentiments and to create a stronger village for tomorrow.’

The Mayland Neighbourhood Plan (2021 – 2042) includes as one of the key ‘Objectives’ to ‘Celebrate local heritage and culture in new development and local events and activities.’ This is an important statement as it recognises that a Neighbourhood Plan can consider wider cultural and heritage outcome, and that these are important for a local sense of place.

Notwithstanding the challenge for Town and Parish Councils around capacity and resources that comes with developing a Neighbourhood Plan, they can be important for highlighting local priorities which can include heritage, culture and environmental initiatives and proposed investment/projects. Where Neighbourhood Plans are proposed (or in process), then MDC and other stakeholder should support them where possible, and encourage an exploration of local heritage (including intangible heritage), culture and environment – strengthening the evidence base and potentially supporting future investment.

Village and Church Halls

Most villages in the District have a Village Hall and often other local facilities (sometimes linked to a church), and these provide a very important part of the local community infrastructure upon which local activities (including culture) rely. Although Parish Councils often play an important role in supporting village hall (and sometimes providing funding), the majority are run by separate charities or committees. Village Halls are well utilised throughout the year across the District, and this demonstrates a good level of community-based activity including health and wellbeing, culture and workshops/meetings. Given that Village Hall are more-or-less entirely reliant upon dedicated volunteers, consideration should be given in any review of community resilience to how sustainable the situation is in each parish. Some Village Hall have attracted good levels of external investment over the years, including Goldhanger Village Hall secured National Lottery funding for significant improvements to the Hall, and Steeple Village Hall was purpose built in 2004 utilising significant external funding. Tolleshunt D’arcy Village Hall Charity Trust was established in 2019 to support efforts to raise funding to replace the existing village hall (on the same site). A major funding bid to the

National Lottery was not successful (in 2019). Work continues on fundraising and the focus is now on a progressive improvement programme for the existing building - all of this demonstrates significant local voluntary commitment to securing the future of an important local asset (that holds a wide range of events and sessions)

Some church spaces and connected buildings are very important for regular events and gatherings. For example St. Mary the Virgin Church plays a crucial role as a space for meetings, workshops, music, as well as hosting local art exhibitions (and sales).

Assets of Community Value

Town and Parish Councils, and other local groups, can seek to register local buildings as Assets of Community Value (ACV). The process is overseen and assessed on a case by case basis by the District Council. This process can help to protect important local buildings and spaces by giving communities a legal opportunity to pause potential commercial sales and organise to purchase the property to ensure that it remains a key local asset (a shop or pub are most common). The 'Community Right to Buy' concept is being strengthened through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, meaning that local communities will have longer to raise the necessary funding to buy assets that are on registered as Assets of Community Value and are up for sale. Currently there are six such assets registered in the Maldon District including pubs, Wickham Bishops Library and allotments in Burnham-on-Crouch. Given that such spaces often host local events, gatherings and programmes, ACV can be important for protecting local heritage and culture.

Actions

Community Resilience Review: In the run up to and through to Local Government Reorganisation (which is framed around 'community empowerment') - build a clearer understanding of the resilience of local grassroots assets that are crucial to the local community, what 'community empowerment' models need to be in place (or strengthened) to support their long-term viability. Work with Town and Parish Councils and other local partners. Culture and heritage assets will be a key part of this as the accessibility of existing and future activities will rely upon local assets/spaces, and participation in heritage, culture and environment activities can support wider civic participation. Use this to inform discussions around the establishment of 'neighbourhood committees' (or whatever the process will be).

The Town and Parish Forum to feed in to the Regenerative Tourism Strategy: A real strength of the visitor offer across the District (Saltmarsh Coast) is the variety and distinctiveness of local areas (villages, rural areas, towns and coast). Town and Parish Councils all have views on the visitor economy and what is important to their local area, as well as extensive local knowledge, so it is important that they are able to feed in to the Regenerative Tourism strategy as it develops. This is best done through the existing Town and Parish Forum which has been managed by MDC for some time with opportunities for briefings and discussion on strategic issues such as planning, health and wellbeing and economic development.

9 – Health and Wellbeing

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture & Heritage Strategy?

‘Creative health activities can include visual and performing arts, crafts, film, literature, cooking and creative activities in nature, such as gardening; creative health approaches may involve creative and innovative ways to approach health and care services, co-production, education and workforce development. Creative health can be applied in homes, communities, cultural institutions and heritage sites, and healthcare settings. Creative health can provide tools for engaging with communities that often do not get a voice and support a better understanding of the issues they face.’ National Centre for Creative Health Toolkit

Culture and heritage are important in so many ways to communities – the opportunities to critically explore locally relevant or challenging issues, bringing people together and supporting civil society, supporting economic development and tourism. What is emerging ever more prominently in research and strategy across the UK and internationally is the importance of participation in cultural, heritage and environmental activities to health and wellbeing. This is often framed as ‘creative health’ or similar concepts such as ‘green prescribing’, and there are clear links to the established practice of ‘social prescribing’ where patients are offered opportunities to take part in social activities to improve their health. The ‘wider determinants of health’ concept reflect the many factors that affect the health and wellbeing of individuals, and this includes the social, economic, and environmental conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age.

The Maldon District has everything that is needed to support communities to have good health outcomes, through taking part in activities (including cultural and heritage) and engaging with the natural environment. There are many local organisations and larger charities supporting this throughout the year and across the District. The recent shift towards ‘Neighbourhood Health’, part of the wider restructuring and strategic direction relating to the NHS 10-Year Plan, provides new opportunities to embed creative health into locally-relevant strategy and delivery of services and projects.

Government health policy over the last couple of years has created new opportunities for the cultural and heritage sectors to become recognised as part of the wider context when it comes to good public health outcomes. In particular it is the strategic move towards ‘prevention’ of poor health (NHS 10 Year Plan) that is the opportunity and the most relevant element of the health policy shift to this strategy.

Strategic Reflection

NHS 10 Year Plan

The UK government’s 10 Year Plan for the NHS (2025–2035) sets out three ‘transformational shifts’:

- Hospital to Community: Expand neighbourhood health centres for integrated, place-based care.
- Sickness to Prevention: Prioritise early intervention, lifestyle support, and mental wellbeing.
- Analogue to Digital: Leverage digital tools for access, prediction, and personalised care

This emphasis on ‘prevention, in particular has created new opportunities for the cultural and heritage sectors to become recognised as part of the wider context when it comes to good public health outcomes. In practice this means a move and towards a more proactive, locally relevant approach to prevention of poor health outcomes, getting in early at all ages to stop people getting ill and developing more serious or long-term conditions. Accessible, affordable and community-based activities, including those that incorporate or focus on arts and creativity, can form an important part of this approach.

Integrated Care Boards and Neighbourhood Health Plans

A key element of the NHS 10 Year Plan in relation to ‘prevention’ and a more locally-focused and relevant approach is Neighbourhood Planning. This can best be understood and

In order to prepare for this, the Integrated Care Boards that currently cover the Essex area (and in some cases into neighbouring counties) are restructuring to form one for Greater Essex. This will then enable a locally responsive system of placed-based governance that will align to the five proposed unitary authority footprints through the ongoing local government reorganisation (LGR) process. The ambition is that this then can strengthen local leadership, accountability and partnership working across the NHS, local authorities and the all-important voluntary and community sectors (which includes heritage, culture and environment).

Similarly to LGR where the initial strategic move is to create larger governance structures, the focus will then be on neighbourhood health plans aligned to the new neighbourhood areas which will be co-produced with a range of local organisations. This includes the many potential system partners who will have a chance to work in partnership and deliver a wide range of services (including community-based) that contribute to health and wellbeing locally. Ensuring that creative health and the value of the cultural, heritage and environmental sectors is recognised in this process will be important.

In order to achieve this there will be a process of devolving budgets, service planning and decision-making to a local level to ensure that partnerships are built between organisations to deliver services that go beyond traditional health care to address the wider determinants of health. The current proposal is that there will be a ‘convenor’ model established to allocated funding based on the local priorities, working closely with the central ICB but with necessary autonomy. The ‘convener’ will be a lead organisation that will set the agenda locally, broker relationships across NHS, councils and voluntary and community sector, align resources to agreed outcomes, track progress of funded initiatives/projects with simple shared metrics, and support wider system-wide learning. It is not yet clear on what scale/geography this would operate.

Alongside this community model, work will take place on identifying a site and operating model for new Neighbourhood Health Centres which will provide a focus for local services (complementing the neighbourhood and community approach).

‘Centres should bring together NHS, local authority, and civil society services to provide a coordinated, population-focused offer. In doing so, due regard should be given to the Civil Society Covenant principles of partnership, working throughout the planning, decision-making and operational service delivery of NHCs’

Creative Health

‘Creative health should form an integral part of a 21st-century health and social care system – one that is holistic, person-centred, and which focuses on reducing inequalities and supporting people to live well for longer - Creating the conditions for creative health to flourish requires a joined-up, whole system approach incorporating health systems, local authorities, schools, and the cultural and VCSE sectors’ – All Party Parliamentary Group on Creative Health

Creative health refers to using creative practice to support and improve health and wellbeing. It spans activities like arts and performance, crafts, film and writing and nature-based creativity such as gardening, as well as innovative ways of designing and delivering care through co-production with groups and through workforce development. These approaches can be embedded in everyday life and services — at home, in communities, in museums and heritage settings, and across health and care environments.

The positive contribution that creative health activities and programmes can make to public health across both rural and urban areas is well documented. Two major pieces of research have been produced by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Creative Health – including one published in 2023 ‘Creative Health Review’

‘Creative health can help people to stay well, recover better and enjoy an improved quality of life throughout the life course. It can help communities, especially where there is disadvantage, to thrive. Our recommendations are not just affordable; if implemented, they will, as we demonstrate, save public expenditure and help us to become a more.’ - The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing and the National Centre for Creative Health (December 2023)

Following the publication of the ‘Mapping Creative Health in Essex’ report in 2025, which was supported by Essex CC and delivered by national charity Creative Lives, an Essex Creative Health Network has been established with the aim of

Arts Council England or other cultural and heritage funders will not be able to support a significant upscaling of creative health activities and projects across the District. Given the opportunities for creative health to address issues such as rural/social isolation and poor mental health and the depth of creative health experience across the cultural and heritage sectors in the District – now is the time for coordinated action. The public health system is complex and the standard expectation is that creative practitioners and organisations (and museums etc.) make the case for the effectiveness of creative health from outside of the core system. The changes to policy and strategy mean that the emphasis will shift on to neighbourhood health and prevention – so this will become ‘the system’ and creative health can be a key part of new broader and more partnership-focused delivery strategies.

There is also significant evidence of the importance of heritage activities to health and wellbeing. This demonstrates the underlying issue that gathering people together for positive and productive activities is good for individuals and wider society, and that the cultural, heritage and environmental sectors are well placed to play this important role.’

‘Heritage has a direct positive impact on our health. The overall wellbeing value of everyday heritage encounters is worth £29 billion every year, with health benefits equivalent to over £1,600 NHS spend

per citizen annually). Heritage visits save the NHS over £193.2 million annually through reduced GP visits and mental health service usage.’ – ‘Backing the Bedrock’ Heritage Alliance (2025 Report).

There is also significant evidence that show how access to nature can improve public health outcomes – and there are clear opportunities for creative activities and nature access as part of the same experience.

‘.....regular access to greenspace reduces GP visits by 28% and could save the NHS £2.1 billion annually. As healthcare shifts toward prevention, these natural spaces provide a powerful complement to clinical interventions.’ – ‘Growing together - how community-led green infrastructure delivers health and climate benefits’ Natural England (2025)

The NHS 10 Year Plan will focus on the establishment of Neighbourhood Health Centres that will provide comprehensive provision of health and other related services (with a focus on prevention and wellbeing) – a concept that creative health activities should be at the core of. Further to this, local government reorganisation will mean an apparent commitment to neighbourhood governance, with communities able to identify their own policy and funding priorities. A vibrant and inclusive cultural and heritage sector should be part of this, relevant to communities and with funding to support it in recognition of its positive impact on health, wellbeing and community cohesion

This increased focus on ‘neighbourhoods’ and concepts of community empowerment and leadership should provide fertile ground for the mobilisation of creative health approaches (or more broadly community-focused activities which support the concept of prevention of poor health.

Essex CC - Health and wellbeing strategy 2026-29

The Essex CC Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2026-29 provides a framework for Essex CC and its partners to target capacity and resources in support of the direction of travel for national policy (including NHS) – providing a bridge between current systems in place and the changes to strategy and delivery that will emerge over the next few years (primarily neighbourhood-focused approaches).

‘The strategy is focused on strengthening a place based, preventative, and community-led approach to health and wellbeing. It encourages system-wide collaboration across health, care, local government, and the voluntary and community sectors. The strategy aims to complement the principles set out in the Essex Caring Communities Commission, which champions neighbourhood-based care, community empowerment, and a rebalanced relationship between public services and residents.’

Priorities set out in the strategy provide scope for a roll out of creative health projects across Essex – Essex CC originally funded the ‘Essex Creative Health Mapping Report’ in 2025. These include:

- Scaling up proven interventions - Scaling what works, amplifying impact through trusted partnerships, and strengthening the collaborative infrastructure that exists across Essex
- Act early to prevent ill health and embed healthy habits – *‘listening to residents and working closely with communities to understand their needs....co-design approaches that are rooted in lived experience’*
- Being rooted in place – Aligning with the 10 Year Plan and the move towards neighbourhood health boards and neighbourhood plans, and fostering *‘strong local connections and champion inclusive, community-led health and wellbeing outcomes.’*
- Collaborate – Bring together *‘health, care, local government, and community partners to align efforts and maximise impact’*

Nationally Public Health budgets across England are important for local programmes that aim to improve the health of populations with through prevention, advice and support. The Kings Fund's analysis shows that for 2026-27 local government will receive £4.4bn for its public health activity in cash-terms, rising to £4.5bn in 2027-28. This is behind the 'real value' of the grant for 2016-17. This means for England (and it will be a similar figure for Greater Essex) that the government is committing to just over £70 per head for local government public health spending over a year (which is the cost of four to five packets of cigarettes).

This has also to be considered alongside the significant advertising push through television, online/digital, in stores and in public spaces by the food industry, and the high number of fast-food outlets across towns (although Maldon and Burnham on Crouch appear to have fewer than other larger towns in Essex). Although public health programmes can be very effective and much of the spend is determined a District-level, the pressure on the wider health system means that considering concepts such as a 'neighbourhood' approach, 'prevention' and 'caring communities' – there is potentially much to be gained from voluntary and community, culture, heritage and environmental sectors looking to evidence the impact of their work in relation to wellbeing and community cohesion.

Essex Caring Communities Commission

The Essex Caring Communities Commission report 2025 sets the scene for a broader and community focused approach to health and wellbeing, focused on the community and very much reflecting the wider determinants of health. The Essex Caring Communities Commission Report recognises the importance of community collaboration, placing health and wellbeing very much in the context of community resilience. Rather than focus on public health and the NHS, the report recognises the importance of wider civil society, and this in turn creates a strong strategic and practical backdrop for creative health. The importance of 'grassroots' organisations and groups across the Maldon District is a key issue, and in particular the cultural, heritage and environmental organisations that make up so much of the social infrastructure that supports civil society, community cohesion and good health and wellbeing outcomes.

Taking inspiration from the Essex Caring Communities Work, it will be important to support and mobilise the cultural, heritage and environmental sectors to engage with public health where there are opportunities and mutual benefits from doing so.

Essex Devolution

The proposed Mayoral Strategic Authority for Essex (and the Mayor) will have a statutory health duty, which will require them to have a regard to improving health and reducing health inequalities across the full breadth of their responsibilities. This also includes having a seat on the Integrated Care Board for Essex and overseeing good partnership working between the Mayoral Authority, local authorities and health sector organisations (including the ICB). Creative Health as a concept can feature as part of this if partners recognise the opportunities, particularly around neighbourhood health and the importance of prevention (NHS 10 Year Plan). This has happened in other Mayoral Authorities including South Yorkshire where there is now a Creative Health Enabling Plan in place that works with partners across Doncaster, Barnsley, Rotherham and Sheffield.

'The Creative Health sector in South Yorkshire is ready and able to play a core strategic role in health creation in our region. Changes in the policy landscape related to health and devolution offer

opportunities for Creative Health to become embedded in new delivery structures and systems.’ – South Yorkshire Creative Health Enabling Plan

Summary of Local Context

Maldon District Health

Although Maldon District is officially relatively affluent compared to other areas of Essex, the most recent Index of Multiple Deprivation data highlights pockets of deprivation within parts of Heybridge, Maldon East and the Dengie Peninsula (parts of Bradwell and Tillingham). In rural and coastal communities, deprivation is often less visible than in urban areas and is closely linked to issues such as poor access to services, transport isolation, limited local opportunities and ageing populations. These factors can contribute to a wider perception of communities being overlooked or disconnected from employment and social/cultural activities, and this therefore creates a case for targeted place-based and accessible initiatives that could include creative health, as well as programmes such as ‘Strength and Balance’ and ‘Walks for Wellness’

It would be appropriate, recognising that resources are always scarce for new community and public health initiatives, for activities (including creative health) to be targeted at the most deprived areas of the District.

One Maldon District Partnership

The One Maldon District Partnership (OMDP) is a senior-level partnership bringing together public sector organisations, voluntary groups, community organisations and private sector partners to improve health, wellbeing, community resilience and prosperity across Maldon District. It was established in 2022 to create a more joined-up approach to tackling ongoing challenges and to make the most of collaborative opportunities.

The partnership has provided strategic leadership for Maldon District by bringing organisations together to share intelligence, align resources, strengthen collaboration and respond collectively to emerging opportunities and challenges at both local and wider regional levels. There has been an ongoing aim to place communities at the centre of decision-making through effective engagement, community development and partnership working, while maximising funding opportunities and improving outcomes through coordinated action.

The nature, framing and oversight of the OMDP is currently being considered (May 2026), but the principles reflect a long-standing commitment to collaborative working supported by Maldon District Council over a number of years. There has been a focus on the issue of ‘frailty’ as well as utilising the Thriving Places Index to guide investment (for example highlighting the importance of access to green space for health outcomes).

The OMDP provided the first opportunity for the consideration of a creative health approach for the Maldon District, and this led further into work to develop a programme and some initial pilot project funded through public health.

Maldon & District CVS

Maldon & District CVS plays a key role in delivering the Maldon District's health and wellbeing agenda by acting as both a frontline community support organisation and through partnership oversight that connects residents, voluntary groups, local authorities and health services. Its work directly supports local priorities around mental health, physical activity, loneliness and prevention, helping residents stay active, connected and resilient. Through projects such as Walks for Wellbeing, Get Active, the Community Gaming Initiative, Public Living Rooms, digital inclusion support and the Social Supermarket, the organisation tackles social isolation, improves physical and mental wellbeing, and provides practical support for vulnerable households. The CVS also strengthens the wider voluntary sector through volunteering, training and community coordination, making it a critical delivery partner for preventative health and community resilience across the district.

Maldon & District CVS hosted the first event focused on creative health and the opportunities through the strategic move towards neighbourhood health in March 2026, and is working to establish a creative health network for Maldon, identifying opportunities for projects and engaging proactively with the emerging neighbourhood health context.

Essex Shed Network

In partnership with UCAN (Uttlesford), Maldon & District CVS employ the Essex Shed Network Project Lead (hosted in Maldon). The whole support programme across Essex is funded by Essex CC (not the individual Sheds). The Essex Shed Network, established in 2016, supports both new and existing Men's Sheds across Essex. Its role includes offering practical guidance on setting up Sheds, drawing on experience from established Sheds to support new opportunities. Support covers funding applications, governance, health and safety, and codes of conduct. The Network also delivers training and organises regular county-wide events that enable Shedders to share knowledge, build connections and strengthen the overall network. All of the Sheds are independent groups and not directly managed by the CVS. In Maldon there are currently 2 Sheds (Southminster and Maldon), but there is interest in establishing others.

Social prescribing in the Maldon District

The Maldon District currently has two established Social Prescribing initiatives, both linked to Primary Care Networks (PCNs) – Maldon and Witham PCN, and the Dengie (Dengie & South Woodham Ferrers PCN). Each has a dedicated Social Prescribing Link Worker who work across their areas to refer people to a wide range of activities and support services. The key aim is to stop people presenting frequently at a Doctor's Surgery for health (and mental health) issues that could be linked to social isolation - essentially enacting the principle of 'prevention' at the heart of the NHS 10 Year Plan. Many patients tend to present at a Surgery because there is very little in the way of local support and they are very often socially isolated.

The Link Workers maintain an extensive database of locations and activities, including village halls, churches and local community programmes that might be relevant to those being referred. This requires significant collaboration with the Public Health team at the District Council and many local organisations and charities. The main challenge is accessibility for those who might live in some of the more rural areas and cannot access public transport (either at all, or at the right times to access activities). There is currently nothing in the way of Community Transport that might have been relied upon in the past.

The Link Workers do prescribe arts and crafts activities, as well as walking groups. However, it is not a simple process as not everyone who is referred to activities will necessarily make it on their own, so finding ways to support people to take part is a challenge. Often this is down to poor mental health, particularly affecting younger and older people. Strategies can include chaperoning (through volunteers), particularly for walking groups, although securing volunteers can be a challenge.

Creative health approaches require effective evaluation and monitoring of progress if they are to be integrated into the wider public health programme. The Social Prescribing Link Workers could play a key role in this as they regularly input information on their prescribing/referral activities into SystmOne – the NHS’s digital system for patient records. It is therefore potentially possible to look at the impact on patients who have been referred into and through the social prescribing system over a period of time (anonymised and reported without referring to personal data etc.).

If creative health (and positive activities more generally) is to take off as a concept in the Maldon District, then close collaboration with the Social Prescribing Link Workers and their connections will be critical. They understand the local context in each of the parishes in which they work, the spaces and the opportunities and challenges.

Active Essex

Active Essex is the county’s strategic body for sport, physical activity and health improvement, working across Essex to increase physical activity, reduce health inequalities and support healthier, more connected communities. In the Maldon District, Active Essex has become an important delivery and partnership organisation within the wider One Maldon District Partnership and Livewell agendas, helping to embed physical activity into prevention, community wellbeing and social prescribing approaches. Through the Find Your Active Maldon network, Active Essex brings together local authorities, health partners, community organisations and voluntary groups to promote, support and fund activities (through a regular small grants programme).

Active Essex are key partners for a strategic creative health approach, with opportunities to support the development of new initiatives, and scope to offer advice and support for integrating creative health activities within existing activity programmes.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

More broadly there is good evidence to show that social relationships are particularly in relation to good health outcomes. Individuals with adequate social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with poor or insufficient social relationships. The magnitude of this effect is comparable with quitting smoking and it exceeds many well-known risk factors for mortality (for example obesity and physical inactivity).

Loneliness is an increasing challenge for society and for health outcomes in particular. 8.4m people live alone in the UK with the cost of loneliness being £9,900 per person each year. The rate of one-person households in the Maldon District for 2021 is 26% (7,418 in total). This is likely to have increased since 2021 although is still lower than the national average of 30%. Maldon’s older age profile (25.9% over 65 compared to 20.2% for the national average) suggests the many single-occupancy households are likely 65+ with many living in more isolated rural areas. The average age across the Maldon District is 48 – this is higher than national and for Chelmsford (41) and Brentwood (44).

Actions

Continue to develop the Maldon District Creative Health Network: This would support a continued focus that was initiated through discussion at the One Maldon District Partnership (OMDP). It would be led by Maldon & District CVS in recognition of the connections they have to communities and many local groups in the area, their management of key health and community initiatives such as Wellness Walks and Essex Sheds, and their direct engagement in Neighbourhood Health. The Network would also be the collaborative local system to feed in to emerging Neighbourhood Health Plans and other associated policy and strategy development (including the potential ‘Convener’ Model for distributing funding at a neighbourhood level).

Pilot Creative Health Projects: Where possible draw upon small pots from the Maldon Public Health funds (or other relevant funding). This would help to build strategic understanding and work towards a collective evidence base of impact, feeding in to the Maldon District Creative Health Network. This could then lead in to a larger bid to external organisations such as Arts Council England (who do fund some creative health projects and programming). Targeting initiatives to the most deprived wards in the District (where there are opportunities to do so) would be appropriate – (parts of Heybridge, Maldon East, Bradwell/Tillingham).

Additional to (or as part of the above Pilot Programme) look at opportunities for micro-interventions linked to existing health and wellbeing or social activity: Consider opportunities to fund creative activities where there already gatherings – this could be described as ‘micro creative health interventions’ that could be additional activities at Essex Sheds, Walks for Wellbeing or Community Gaming – all overseen by Maldon & District CVS. A similar approach could be taken to working with local environmental groups and charities. This would be cost effective and easy to mobilise, with a gentle introduction to creative health to participants and the benefits that stem from ongoing programmes that encourage participation over a number of weeks/months (to support evaluation).

Maldon District Partners should continue to engage with the Essex Creative Health Network: This was established to follow on from the Creative Health Mapping Report published in 2025 and funded by Essex CC. Its purpose is to bring different partners together from across the relevant sectors (health, local authority, creative) and work towards embedding creative health practice and projects across the county. There are many benefits to taking part (good practice, insights into partnerships and public health strategy, funding opportunities, evaluation) and all sessions have been attended in preparation of the Culture & Heritage Strategy

Engage with the Social Prescribing Link Workers: Accepting that capacity within the social prescribing system is stretched and it can be difficult for those prescribed to activities (including creative/craft/green etc.), seek to learn what the on-the-ground and hyper-local challenges are when it comes to prescribing activities to improve health and wellbeing (prevention). This can inform the Maldon District approach to creative health development. Where new pilot (or micro) initiatives are established, ensure that there is liaison with the social prescribing link workers.

Evaluate Health Benefits of Existing Activities: Where it is feasible to do so, and where the organisation/group overseeing the activities recognises the value, one way of building up a locally-relevant evidence base of positive health impacts from creative (or heritage) related activities and participation (including volunteering), would be to work with those organisations that are already successfully engaging local people in regular activities and seek to understand the health benefits over a longer-term period. This could feed into a collective evidence base approach referenced above.

10 – Festivals and Events

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture & Heritage Strategy?

The Maldon District, and in particular Promenade Park, has a good reputation for hosting a range of events and festivals. Culturally this brings interest into the area for communities and attracts 1000s of visitors each year. The sector delivers many different cultural opportunities, as well as sport, heritage, food/drink and community. Festivals and events are important therefore to the District's cultural and social vibrancy, and for supporting the local economy.

Festivals can act to bring people together, perhaps around shared interests in music or heritage, and can stimulate and inspire people to get involved themselves. As with the vast majority of the culture, heritage and environmental sectors in the District, there is significant grassroots support and engagement particularly across rural areas, and even some of the larger events such as the Maldon Mud Race and Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival are volunteer led.

Strategic Reflection

British Arts Festival Association - 'Festivals Forward: Festivals Mean Business 4'

Published in 2024, the 'Festivals Forward: Festivals Mean Business 4' report from the British Arts Festival Association, the key findings make a strong case for the importance of the sector. It found that Festivals in the UK form a vast and diverse ecosystem, spanning everything from major national programmes to tiny hyperlocal celebrations. They are deeply rooted in place with around 40% of audiences travelling less than five miles. As part of the UK's cultural infrastructure, more than 1,000 arts festivals collectively drew over 5.5 million in-person attendances in 2023, many supported by year-round outreach programme. It also reports that the sector is financially fragile despite its scale and impact. In 2023, festivals delivered 11,500 events, showcased 34,000 artists and created 2,700 new works, but average expenditure (£245k) continues to exceed income (£225k), reserves are declining, and costs have risen sharply while ticket sales remain below pre-pandemic levels.

Most festivals operate with extremely lean staffing, typically just three FTEs year-round and rely heavily on volunteers, even as they generate significant cultural, social and economic value. The evidence points to a sector that is 'surviving, not thriving', and warns that without stable investment and a coherent national festivals policy, the UK risks losing many of the hyperlocal cultural assets that underpin community engagement, artist development and local economic vitality. Although Scotland does have a festival strategy, there isn't one for England (or indeed the UK). So it is important for local authorities and their strategic partners to make the case.

Association of Independent Festivals

The Association of Independent Festivals represents the interests of much of the sector, and works to advocate to government, share insights and good practice. It has highlighted a sector under intense pressure, with organisers facing steep rises in core costs such as security, medical provision, power, waste, insurance and infrastructure, alongside growing compliance demands including Martyn's Law and updated drugs and alcohol guidance. The Association has demonstrated how festivals are increasingly exposed to climate-driven weather volatility, requiring far more robust preparedness and resilience planning, while workforce shortages, volunteer burnout and the loss of experienced freelancers continue to undermine capacity. Alongside all of this, over the last decade there have been

expectations for festivals to improve sustainability, accessibility, inclusion and ethical practice, but often without the funding or supply-chain support to deliver these ambitions.

The point is that there remains a reasonably vibrant independent festival and events sector, while at the same time it is becoming vulnerable to increasing challenges and risks – the main ones being ever tighter financial margins (less consumer spend) and increased costs (much associated with health and safety and infrastructure). This has resulted in many festival going under in recent years, or taking a ‘fallow year’ to work on their longer-term sustainability.

East Anglian Festival Network

The East Anglian Festival Network is a subscription based organisation that covers the East of England – Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. The Network’s role is to share good practice, listing/promotion, and host networking events (including a core networking event in St. Ives Cambridgeshire every year). Engagement with the Network indicates that in 2025 there around 150 fewer events listed in the region than in 2024. Many have scaled back on promotion, taken a ‘fallow year’ or have folded.

Essex Destination Management Plan 2025-30

The Destination Management Plan recognises the importance o festivals and events in the wider tourism and visitor economy mix for Essex.

‘Festivals and events are an important component of Essex CC’s visitor economy. In 2024, there are at least 470 events of various different types planned in the County. Festivals and events are distributed across the study area with a pronounced nucleus in the urban centres.’ – Essex Destination Management Plan 2025-30

Essex Cultural Diversity Project Regional Research

Between 2024 and 2026, Essex Cultural Diversity Project worked with the East Anglian Festival Network and Cultural Engine to look at key trends and issues affecting the festival and events sector – with a focus on small and medium-sized events. The research engaged with over 100 organisers and events and festivals of all sizes.

The research found that there were more events in Essex than other parts of the region with the majority having audiences of either 500 – 2500, or (in more cases) 2,500 to 10,000. Funding festivals was mainly through ticket sales and sponsorship, along with donations and concessions at festivals (food and drink). The importance of public funding (particularly those with 100% public funding) was much lower (with a perception from those engaged in the research that it had declined significantly over the last few years). Public funding did remain important as part of the funding mix however, enabling many festivals to survive and reduce ticket prices (or have no charge at all). This is backed up by the British Arts Festival Association research which shows that only 29% of income was from the public sector in 2023 (although this remains important in the overall mix). The research also found that the majority of organisers stated that if they were to consider public funding, they would require support with this.

Overall the research found that strategic organisations (Arts Council and local authorities) should prioritise support for small and medium-scale festivals and events, which already demonstrate strong local engagement, deep community roots and reliable volunteer capacity, particularly in rural areas

with limited cultural provision. Backing activity at this scale would be affordable and would build on existing town and parish council funding (and other hyper local fundraising) and infrastructure. Given the prevalence of local festivals and events across the Maldon District, these findings are particularly relevant.

BBC Research – Ticket Price Inflation

Recent BBC research (May 2026) found that ticket prices for major UK festivals had risen significantly over the last decade, increasing faster than inflation. Although the Maldon District has no ‘major festivals’ (and many are free), the research points to wider pressures on the sector around costs – staffing and technical labour, infrastructure, security and health and safety, power, transport and production.

Summary of Local Context

The Maldon District, and in particular Promenade Park, has a good reputation for hosting a range of events and festivals. Culturally this brings interest into the area for communities (music, family, thematic programming), and attracts 1000s of visitors each year. However, it is challenging times for the wider events sector and regionally many events (of all sizes) no longer take place. There are many factors relating to this including cost of living, infrastructure and health and safety costs and changing leisure and cultural habits. Maldon sits in an Essex context with ‘competition’ from Chelmsford, Colchester and Southend, and there is an increasing trend towards major national/international players dominating the market which could threaten the viability of independent promoters and festival organisers (who would tend to be interested in Maldon). Commercial viability is therefore an ongoing challenge, and something that MDC should be aware of if there remains an ambition particularly for larger music-focused festivals and events in Maldon.

Colchester has become a particular hotspot for larger music events over the last few years, particularly the Colchester Castle Summer Series, which for 2026 will see major acts including Bastille, Fat Boy Slim, Richard Ashcroft and Billy Ocean playing to large crowds. Other events in locations such as Chelmsford City Racecourse, Hylands Park as well as in Southend mean there is an increasingly busy summer calendar for those interested in these kinds of events from across Essex and beyond. For the Maldon District the situation appears healthy with major events such as Soutasia still taking place, as well as many smaller events throughout the year.

MDC Events and Concessions Strategy (2023-28)

The Vision for the Strategy is ‘For the Maldon District to become one of the top coastal destinations in Essex for events and concessions, providing exciting and enjoyable experiences.’ Published in 2023 it was intended to guide the MDC approach to working with festival and event organisers, as well as articulating the strategic and operational reasons why MDC takes a proactive approach. It is primarily focused on land owned by MDC (in reality the main focus is Promenade Park), although there are references to Riverside Park in Burnham-on-Crouch.

The two main drivers for MDC in relation to festivals and events can be summarised as aiming to generate an income to MDC of around £80,000 a year (primarily through Promenade Park), and to support cultural and civic interest and development and experiences through events that have a civic importance, events that promote Maldon District regionally, nationally, or internationally, and events that are of wide-ranging interest. There is also a recognition that temporary concessions (mainly food

and drink related and often – although not exclusively associated with festivals and events) can present opportunities to increase visitor number and spend within the local community.

Given the relatively healthy situation regarding the range of events taking place at Promenade Park, and the good working relationship that MDC has with organisers, the Strategy appears to have been a success. However, reviews are necessary (as the Strategy recognises), and with the advent of the ‘regenerative tourism’ concept for the Saltmarsh Coast and an ever changing (and competitive) environment for the sector, as well as the decision to underwrite the ‘special event’ in 2027 – the Strategy should be reviewed to consider anew the role of events and festivals in particular for 2027 onwards (and into Mid Essex).

The renewed strategy might also include consideration of how Riverside Park in Burnham-on-Crouch, which is also owned by MDC, might see investment in infrastructure that would enable it to be utilised more often than it currently is for events. Despite being close to a train station, the Park is poorly utilised for cultural and social gatherings compared to Promenade Park in Maldon. Engagement with the Town Council and other local stakeholders would be necessary.

Value of Festivals and Events

The importance of Festivals and Events to the wider economy is often a key factor referenced when it comes to local authorities and organisers making the case to stage them (particularly where they are in public spaces). This has recently been picked up by Colchester Amphora (who have a contract to support events with Maldon District Council), with a report finding that the wider events programme was worth £23.9m in 2024-25, including Castle Summer Park Series and the programme in Charter Hall. The reference is the value of overnight stays from visitors from outside of the city, and the positive impact on the local economy through retail, hospitality and transport spending. The report also recognised the wider positive impact on wellbeing, civic pride and social connectivity, as well as the skills development opportunities. Colchester is a much larger place and economy with a well-developed overnight stay offer, but the key issue of wider spend in the area around festivals and events is relevant.

Nationally, a recently published reports entitled ‘The Value of the UK Outdoor Events Sector’ by the trade body The Power of Events (April 2026) found that events tend to generate far more economic value than can be seen in the organisers own accounts. Essentially every ‘*pound of ticket income, sponsorship or grant triggers roughly another £1.50–£2.80 in spending by visitors, suppliers and staff - and in many cases much more. Understanding that gap is the foundation of any credible advocacy for the sector. This means that the sector’s total economic impact could be as much as £50billion.*’

Locally the case has been made by MDC that there is a significant economic impact from events and festivals in the District (primarily Promenade Park), presented in a ‘Special Event Performance Funding’ report in 2025 (later considered in March 2026 – see below). The case was based on the Economic Impact of Tourism 2024 for the Maldon District which uses the well-established Cambridge Economic Impact Model to provide figures for local authority areas. The report indicates that the Soutasia event in June 2024 could have generated up to £842,886 additional spend in the local economy based on a mix of local and visiting (staying) audiences. Whatever the actual figure, the key issue is that festivals and events are important as part of the cultural and social offer for the District, and that there is a wider economic benefit that justifies MDC taking a proactive approach (and in some cases co-investing).

Special Events Support – Maldon District Council

In March 2026 MDC agreed to contribute funding to support a ‘Special Events Performance’ demonstrating willingness not only to take a proactive approach to engaging with and working with festival promoters, but also (in certain circumstances) to invest financially where there are opportunities to test new models. For example commercial/public partnership models and/or supporting particularly cultural opportunities that are relevant to the Maldon-context. It will be important for the Maldon District to be competitive and attractive to investment in the sector, as well as supporting local and community-focused programming, so this kind of approach to investing (or underwriting) in partnership with commercial promoters suggests a potential way forward for the District (albeit expecting to get the investment back from ticket sales). The partnership was proposed with Soutasia which has been drawing large audiences to the District, with the opportunity to generate more visitor spend in the local area (and parking fees).

Summary of the events in Maldon District

There are a wide range of events and festivals that take place across the year in the District. This offers something for everyone, particularly in Maldon (although accessibility from more rural areas is a challenge).

The three ‘core festivals’ that will be directly overseen by the new Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC are the Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival, Maldon Festival and Heritage Open Days (including looking to develop beyond Maldon Town). The Walking Festival in particular is now well established and has been supported by MDC as well as dedicated volunteers who have led the development of guided and self-guided walks, engaged with businesses, recruited guides and undertaken promotion and partnership development. The Maldon Festival secured some investment from the Essex CC Arts & Cultural Fund for 2026, primarily to support scaling up to support the multi-arts programme to become sustainable, play a key role in promoting local talent (as well as drawing in talent from across the UK and abroad), and encourage exploration of the wider area by visitors and residents.

Across 2026, a wide range of locally organised festivals and events are taking place in the District, including Ashfest in Asheldham (invite-only but with a quality programme), the volunteer-run Burnham Carnival, the Little Totham Village Fete (June), the Mundon Summer Fete (September), the Tillingham Flower Show (July) with a full programme of activities, the returning TollesFest in Tollesbury, and the Tolleshunt Major Summer Fair (May) organised by the St Nicholas Village Hall Committee, as well as the Langford and Ulting Country Fayre & Classic Car Show (July) hosted at the Museum of Power.

Taken together, the majority of festivals and events across the District are delivered by hyperlocal groups - often informal and volunteer-led - with support from Parish Councils, which in many cases involve the same community members. This network of small-scale organisers forms an important part of the District’s cultural and social infrastructure, sustaining regular activity and community participation throughout the year.

It is also worth noting that there are events that have taken place in the recent past that are no longer happening – mirroring broader national trends and challenges for the sector at all scales. This includes Wibblefest in Southminster (was organised by the brewery), Purleigh Village Fete (having a year off due to capacity and funding challenges), Heybridge Summer Fayre, Tolleshunt D’Arcy Village Fete (no one

has come forward to support the organisation), Wickham Bishops Summer Fair and Bell Meadow Day in Woodham Walter (used to take place every two years).

Larger (mainly commercial) events taking place in 2026 include Maldon Mud Race (May), Soultasia (June), Smoke & Fire (August), and UFest (August) which promotes community initiatives and organisations and is organised by MDC (not commercial), Colourscape (August) and the Nearly Festival (September) which specialises in tribute bands.

Burnham Week

Burnham Week remains a key date in the cultural and social calendar for the District and for Burnham-on-Crouch in particular. Managed by a separate company (Burnham Week Ltd), it represents a successful long-term partnership between the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, the three other sailing clubs in Burnham-on-Crouch and Creeksea Sailing Club. Anecdotally it appears that the Week attracts fewer visitors than a few years ago due to changing social habits, with yachting visitors and visiting fleets less likely to spend the whole week in the area (with the knock-on impact on local businesses). Historically Burnham Week was seen as the last major regatta of the year, with boats mud birthing and staying for the week. However, there have also been environmental changes that has seen the river silting up meaning there isn't the depth required for many of the boats.

The Town Council host Quay Day (which is organised separately from the core Burnham Week – although there is close liaison) and other events around the core week and are keen to see more cultural programming as part of this, engaging existing and new visitors to the area. This could include more heritage walks and events, maritime history (and developing Pirate Day). A collaborative focus including all partners involved in Burnham Week and associated programming should work together to ensure the sustainability and increase the cultural and heritage elements.

Given the historic importance of Burnham Week and the importance of local businesses and the wider visitor economy (particularly important in this part of the District), as well as the opportunities that are being led by Burnham-on-Crouch Town Council to develop additional events and cultural programming around the Week; every effort should be made to support both the core Week and the wider programme.

Culture and Heritage Strategy Survey

Of those responding to the strategy survey the majority attended local festivals or events, with 30% stating 'regularly' and 40% stating 'sometimes'. There was strong interest in the District hosting more 'Heritage exhibitions or events' (61%) along with 'Live Events and Festivals (41%)'. This demonstrates that heritage is a key interest across the District and the perception that more could be done to celebrate it.

Festivals and Events Gathering – April 2026

The gathering brought a number of festival and events organisers together for the first time to discuss common issues and identify some challenges that might be highlighted through the Culture and Heritage Strategy and addressed through collaboration. Prior to the Gathering in April 2026, there had been a focused discussion on the Events and Festival Sector at the Regenerative Tourism Launch event in March 2026. The headline issues from this were focused on issues relating to ensuring that there is a more collaborative and 'joined up' approach to marketing events (and ensuring this feeds in to broader place marketing), exploring opportunities to share data and information across different events and

organisers, and accessibility and transport challenges. Health & Safety was also flagged (particularly relating to Martyn's Law), as well as a recognised need to attract younger audiences to local events (age profile of many is older).

These were also key issues identified at the gathering in April, with a particular focus on Health & Safety and Martyn's Law and the potential impact this might have on event organisers, planning, securing and cost (particularly for smaller events who rely upon volunteers who may not want to take legal responsibility). It was suggested that MDC (or in time the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC) could offer more direct support on health and safety, for example offering briefings, talks and good practice examples to support local organisations when developing their plans. It was also proposed that technical equipment could be shared between smaller events to reduce costs. There was also a strong desire to continue the Network approach for the whole District, with the opportunity to share insights and information. This should therefore continue and eventually should form the new Regenerative Tourism Steering Group that will feed into the Regenerative Tourism strategy and the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC).

Another issue was the apparent lack of young people with the necessary skills and experience who can work (or volunteer) on local festivals and events – part of a wider discussion around skills needs for the sector more generally. It was proposed that a 'pipeline' programme be coordinated between organisers to give young people a chance to develop skills and confidence (which can then build the resilience of the sector long-term – as well as being inherently 'regenerative').

Regenerative Festivals and Events

The wider 'regenerative' concept is important for Festivals and Events in the District, as there obvious economic, social and cultural benefits from successful events, festivals and gatherings. To this might also be added opportunities for local artists and practitioners to develop their profile, audiences and confidence, encouraging ever more collaboration with local suppliers of food/drink and infrastructure, and working to support local charities and groups through fundraising and giving them a platform. There will always need to be a balance however between wider benefits and commercial viability, as without commercial viability there cannot be wider benefits.

Some existing events that take place in Promenade Park do have clear links to the concept of 'regenerative', most obviously the Biodiversity & Regenerative Food Festival which takes place in May in Promenade Park (as well as other locations across Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Kent). This was a popular event and attracted local suppliers and environmental groups. The Maldon Mud Race is a major locally organised event that is totally rooted in the local context. The Mud Race attracts large crowds (and many competitors) and raises significant income for charities. This a good example of a locally-relevant and potentially 'regenerative' event that is rooted in the local area and context, contributes to the local economy (and charities) and puts the District on the map.

Actions

Produce an updated Events and Concessions Strategy that reflects not only the regenerative principles but also considering the role of MDC in investing where there are particular opportunities to do so. A greater focus on Burnham-on-Crouch and Riverside Park in particular where far fewer events take place than at Promenade Park. Eventually this strategic approach could be overseen by the new

Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC and/or Mid Essex unitary authority; but taking action now to support this process is important.

A ‘Regenerative Festivals and Events Charter’ – Notwithstanding the commercial challenges for the events sector, a regenerative approach would aim to support more spend in the local area (encouraging broader exploration by visitors), increase volunteering, giving local suppliers of locally distinct products a chance to supply events (improve the Saltmarsh Coast brand), and (perhaps most importantly for this strategy – identify ways of platforming local creative talent at larger events. This process could be overseen by the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC (and informed by the Steering Group for Festivals and Events).

Continue efforts to develop a Network for the Festival and Events sector in the Maldon District – Build on work that has taken place through the strategy development to ensure there are opportunities for those organising events and festivals (whether commercial or voluntary) to get together, engage with MDC, share experience, good practice and insight (and potentially infrastructure/kit where appropriate), and have briefings and information sessions on important issues relating to legislation, health and safety, volunteering etc. There might also be a focus on developing a coordinated approach to developing a ‘pipeline’ of local talent that could give young people the chance to develop skills and confidence in technical skills relating to events and festivals. The Network can become the new Steering Group for Festivals and Events identified as important to inform the work of the Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC.

11 – Volunteering

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture & Heritage Strategy?

Given the importance of grassroots organisations and groups across the District, the majority of which are supported by or entirely run by volunteers, there is a need to recognise this strategically. Nationally there are challenges related to volunteering that the Maldon District is not immune to. Anecdotally across the District many organisations are finding that people who may once have volunteered (either formally or for specific events) are no longer able to do so. Time is a key factor – not only in the sense that people appear to have less free time to volunteer for local organisations and initiatives, but also in the sense that time is of the essence when it comes to really understanding the issues relating to volunteering in Maldon - and working collaboratively to do something about it. So much that we value and need relies upon it.

All organisations engaged in the research for the strategy do have their own approaches to recruiting volunteers, and many remain very successful at this. However, the subject is one that often dominates discussions about the future sustainability of organisations and groups, with a heavy reliance upon older people in particular. Whilst Maldon District has an aging population (older on average than Brentwood and Chelmsford for example), this doesn't appear to automatically translate to increased rates of volunteering. Relying upon previous trends that have seen older people (retired people) stepping into volunteering roles isn't necessarily an appropriate strategy any more.

The key organisation for volunteering in the District is Maldon & District CVS, and they have been proactive in supporting work on the Culture & Heritage Strategy through collaborating on exploring the increasing relevance of creative and neighbourhood health to the District (with a strong emphasis on taking part and volunteering).

Strategic Reflection

'Volunteering with heritage projects and activities is a powerful way to boost self-esteem and develop a sense of purpose. Whether restoring historic sites, leading guided tours, or archiving local history, volunteers gain valuable skills while contributing to something meaningful. Engaging with others in shared tasks fosters social connection, combats loneliness and enhances overall wellbeing' (National Academy for Social Prescribing Website 2026)

There is a heavy reliance upon volunteers (and particularly volunteers from older age groups across) across the Maldon District, and this relates to the voluntary and community sectors as a whole and particularly (in the context of this strategy) heritage and environment. The grassroots nature of virtually all cultural, heritage and environmental groups and organisations means that volunteering matters for the future of these sectors. Reflecting on some national research and strategic approaches can help frame the approach locally.

Historic England's published 'Opportunities and Benefits of Heritage for Young People' (part of the Heritage Count series) in 2023 considers national research, demonstrating that young people are far more likely to engage with volunteering opportunities when they are hands-on, social and connected to issues they care about – for example nature. Evidence shows that early involvement in heritage

builds confidence, skills, wellbeing and a stronger sense of belonging, while giving young people a voice in shaping the places they live. For the Maldon District with its rich maritime, coastal and cultural traditions, this means creating supported pathways for young people to take part in storytelling, conservation, festivals, volunteering, environmental projects and digital interpretation.

The National Academy for Social Prescribing has resources online that share examples of projects that link to local heritage – for example the ‘Heritage Connectors: bringing social prescribing to the heart of Frome’s heritage’ which helped people in the town of Frome (Somerset) to get involved with local history and culture through informal social prescribing, recognising the physical and mental wellbeing benefits.

In terms of health benefits (explored more in the Health & Wellbeing Section of this report), Historic England’s ‘The Benefits of Volunteering’ (part of the Heritage Counts series 2023) shows that heritage volunteering has clear health and wellbeing benefits, with volunteers reporting improved mental wellbeing, reduced loneliness and higher life satisfaction. This is linked to confidence improvements, strengthened social connections and a sense of making a meaningful contribution to local places.

Whilst it is clear that volunteering has health benefits for those taking part, as well as clear benefits from the volunteering capacity for the organisations and groups, there are wider societal considerations to consider when it comes to developing local strategies. The power of social connections and the ability to affect positive change are important considerations that can have lasting impact on social cohesion, addressing some of the issues explored in the Government’s ‘Protecting What Matters’ Policy Paper (April 2026). The Paper highlights rising pressures on social cohesion nationally, including increasing polarisation, declining trust, and communities feeling less connected and resilient in the face of social and economic change. It argues that improving cohesion requires strengthening local relationships, tackling hate and extremism, investing in community infrastructure, and empowering local actors to build shared belonging and confidence across neighbourhoods. Increasing volunteering rates and opportunities at a local level could be part of a response to these challenges, as this can bring people together for public good and increase real (in person) social connections.

There are similar challenges articulated through the ongoing National Conversation – part of the Independent Commission on Community Cohesion - which states that – *‘Something has shifted in how people experience community life. Trust feels more fragile. Connections that once held neighbourhoods together – the school gates, the high street, the local pub, the place of worship – are harder to find in many places. And too many people feel that nobody is asking what they think about it.’* This is in part informed by the British Future Report (2025) ‘The State of Us: Community Strength and Cohesion in the UK’ which recognised *‘.....a decline in formal volunteering in recent years, with 16% of people offering their time to formally constituted organisations in 2023-24, compared with 35% in 2013-14’*. The report also states *‘Volunteering helps to build bridging and linking social capital, which drives cohesion. In turn, cohesive societies encourage further volunteering’*. This relates to the concept of ‘community empowerment’ that is explored elsewhere in this strategy document (and is also closely linked to local government reorganisation).

The survey undertaken to support the Culture & Heritage strategy asked the question ‘Do you feel you have the power, influence or ability to start something in your area?’ – with 45% answering ‘No’ and a further 28% answering ‘Some (but not a great deal)’. Those responding to the survey were of an older

age group and apparently reasonably well engaged with activities or their community. So learning from national research and local examples (explored below), strategies are definitely required to mobilise communities, with a coherent approach to volunteering one of the opportunities.

There is a need to shift the primary focus on volunteering from the capacity that volunteers provide, and focus additionally on the positive impacts for individuals and wider society. This is not an either/or situation – this strengthens the opportunities to put volunteering at the centre of wider policy and processes, linking to health and wellbeing, social cohesion and economic development for example. This shift in focus is recognised in the ‘Transformative Volunteering 2024-27’ report by the Heritage Volunteering Group *‘[volunteering]..can provide human connections and sever the chains of social isolation, it can give people new skills and pathways to employment and can provide a space for people from all walks of life to come together.’*

There are some good local examples of volunteering approaches that are linked to heritage, for example the Knowsley Heritage Grants Programme. A report into this programme found that it worked well because organisations invested in the infrastructure that makes volunteering possible: coordination, brokerage, training and small, flexible grants that helped groups design inclusive roles and remove barriers. This focused support turned interest into sustained participation, showing that enthusiasm alone isn’t enough without the systems that help volunteers feel confident, prepared and welcomed. Partnerships and peer-learning networks strengthened the sector further, giving groups space to share knowledge, build confidence and collaborate beyond individual projects. By embedding quality standards and securing follow-on funding, the programme created long-term capacity and a more resilient ecosystem for volunteering in the heritage sector.

Elsewhere in this strategy the concept of Neighbourhood Health is explored and the opportunities for community and voluntary organisations to play a key role in delivering health outcomes through a range of programmes is clearly there and needs to be recognised strategically. Concepts including creative health form a core part of this, and volunteering clearly has a role to play in relation to health as well as social outcomes. The Neighbourhood Health Plans that cover the Maldon District area will provide an opportunity for these issues to be explored and wider partners (across the Community and Voluntary sectors) recognised as playing a key role.

Related to health and wellbeing, the Essex Caring Communities Commission report recognises the importance of volunteering to civil society and social infrastructure, referencing the many people across Essex who contribute formally and informally through many different routes. There is a recognition that this kind of activity is not peripheral but a major driver of wellbeing, social connection, safety and resilience. Volunteering is also presented as a critical economic asset, with national data showing its enormous financial value and its role in reducing demand on overstretched public services.

‘...success in generating large scale volunteering by (1) generating a purpose for volunteering that is exciting and galvanising, (2) creating attractive volunteering roles with organisational structure to support those roles, (3) communicating volunteering opportunities in a way that reaches and engages people not currently doing volunteering.’ (Essex Caring Communities Report)

Summary of Local Context

The key theme of 'grassroots' upon which so many of the District's heritage, environmental and cultural movements and organisation rely upon is inextricably linked to the ongoing challenge of recruiting and retaining volunteers. There is a heavy reliance upon volunteers who work hard throughout the year to ensure that historic assets are maintained and heritage interpreted, community activities delivered.

According to a study commissioned by Essex Community Foundation and published in 2023 ('The Structure, dynamics and impact of the Third Sector in Essex'), the Maldon District has a very high percentage (41.1%) of voluntary and community sector organisations who are classed as 'Micro' – meaning they have a turnover of less than £10,000. For 'Small' (between £10,000 and £49,000) it is 38.2%. This is higher than many other Districts/Boroughs in Essex and demonstrates how resilience of the sector will be an ongoing challenge – relating to both volunteers and funding.

61% of those who responded to the survey to support this strategy stated that they did volunteer in the District, with a further 14% outside of the District. Respondents to the survey were overwhelmingly from older age groups. What the survey does highlight is that it is very much older individuals who provide the majority of volunteers, and this is backed up by research with groups across the District. This is largely because they have time to volunteer and very often have important skills that are needed. Of those that didn't volunteer it was a lack of free time that was the limiting factor (38%).

What emerges consistently however from across the heritage sector in particular, is the need to secure more (and younger) volunteers. Evidence nationally and locally shows that this is more likely to happen when there is clarity on roles being offered, support provided and the opportunities for people to see how they can expand their skillsets and CVs. This is not easy for organisations or groups that are themselves largely based on volunteer input or very restricted staff capacity, so a collaborative and strategic approach is probably required.

Nationally, youth unemployment has risen in recent years, with around one in six young people out of work and persistent concerns about the number of 16-24-year-olds who are NEET (not in education, employment or training). Former government minister Alan Milburn's work on social mobility highlights how NEET status can have long-term impacts on life chances, reinforcing the need for early intervention, skills development and meaningful opportunities for young people. Although Maldon District's overall unemployment rate is lower than both Essex and UK averages, the underlying issues remain relevant. The aim should be to ensure young people in Maldon can access locally rooted opportunities - particularly through heritage, culture and environmental participation - which can build confidence, skills and stronger pathways into work.

Volunteering opportunities are posted on to the Maldon & District CVS site, and this includes roles with local heritage organisations (for example Maldon Museum in the Park or Thames Sailing Barge Trust). The Thames Sailing Barge Trust is a good example of an entirely voluntary organisation with a very successful record of recruitment and training of volunteers for many different roles. At any one time they have around 100 with 40 involved in activities on a regular basis. The support given to those are keen to participate is impressive, with roles as skippers and many other technical and craft roles available. There is a similar situation at Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome where they have a dedicated and highly skills pool of volunteers who work on a wide range of projects (with over 33,000 volunteer hours each year).

Maldon & District CVS, as well as playing a District-wide role to support volunteering also have 80 volunteers who work on a range of local projects. This includes supporting the Essex Shed Network which is itself an excellent volunteer-led system (there are two in the Maldon District).

One thing in common with these good examples is that it is very clear at the beginning what the offer is for volunteers. There is a clear training and support programme and a well set out roles that enable people to see what they will be doing and achieving.

The Combined Military Service Museum has a core team of volunteers and this does include younger people who are given the support to build their confidence and skills, with some of them going on to get jobs in the heritage and community sectors.

The Museum of Power has two members of staff with all other roles covered by a team of committed volunteers. This is crucially important for the functioning of the museum and the success of the volunteering operation is down to a number of factors – most importantly the ongoing support of the staff and the way that volunteering opportunities are offered. The roles are clearly set out with the skills required and opportunities for personal development, being creative, social connections and even drink coupons! Opportunities that are clearly set out for would-be volunteers include Front of House, Learning (supporting school visits) and Events.

The majority of village halls are run by volunteers, and given the rural nature of the District this is a vital network that relies upon dedicated local capacity to function. Very active spaces in the District including Goldhanger Village Hall, Tillingham Village Hall and The Centre Tollesbury are all volunteer run. Tollesbury in particular has some very skilled technicians who support events and screenings, including National Theatres Live.

Despite the efforts of Maldon & District CVS to promote volunteering opportunities and offer some support to the wider sector, there is no direct funding from Essex CC or any other sources to support volunteering initiatives or infrastructure. Small pots of funding had been in place up to 2024, but this is no longer the case.

Actions

Strategic approach to volunteering: Some organisations do very well and have excellent numbers of skilled volunteers. Others struggle to secure new volunteer capacity. Given how significant the reliance upon volunteers is for so many of the organisations/groups across the District who work on culture, heritage and environment - the situation is precarious and needs a greater collaborative focus. This could be supported by Maldon & District CVS (who already support volunteering initiatives in the District but are not currently funded to support volunteering infrastructure). This would require a considered analysis at the needs of local groups, the skills and capacity requirements, development of volunteer sharing strategies (if appropriate), and a coordinated training / support programme. Could be linked to wider 'community empowerment' concepts and recognise the particular context of the Maldon District (i.e. the needs locally may be different from other parts of Essex).

12 – Pubs and Bars

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture & Heritage Strategy?

Pubs and bars have been a high-profile news story for a number of years, appearing to capture a sense of national concern over their future as both local community assets and something linked to a sense of national identity. Pubs sit in a complex policy context which means they are perhaps difficult to place in terms of national or local programmes of support. They are centres for social interaction for communities while also contributing strongly to the local tourism and visitor economy. Pubs offer employment and skills development opportunities and can underpin community resilience through the potential to offer other services. They can be part of the local supply chain supporting the local food, drink and rural economy, and – importantly for this strategy - they are also very often part of the local cultural scene providing host to music, cultural and social events. Many are listed and much-valued heritage assets that contribute to a strong and distinct heritage and sense of local distinctiveness. Some have become community-owned and managed, creating opportunities for local collaboration across communities increasing social capital and a local stake in the rural economy.

Strategic Reflection

Pubs across the UK are under intense pressure from a tax system that many in the sector argue is fundamentally unbalanced in favour of other sectors (retail or online businesses). There are combined challenges around business rates, VAT and National Insurance (and National Minimum Wage).

Over the past year, several national campaigns have highlighted the mounting pressures facing pubs in the UK, driven by rising costs, energy prices, supply-chain inflation and a tax system that sector bodies argue disproportionately affects hospitality. Campaigns such as Hands Off Our Pubs (HOOP) have grown rapidly from local activism into national movements calling for urgent government intervention on business rates, VAT reform and protections against large-scale closures, as reports show multiple pubs shutting doors permanently across the country. Alongside this, organisations like the British Beer & Pub Association, the Campaign for Pubs and the British Institute of Innkeeping have been campaigning for fairer taxation, support with energy bills and planning protections to prevent viable pubs being lost to redevelopment. Together, these campaigns argue that pubs are essential social infrastructure, central to community cohesion and local identity, and that without stronger national action, all pubs, including independent and community-run pubs will struggle to survive.

The *Telegraph* has run one of the most vocal national campaigns, Save Our Pubs, highlighting the rapid rate of closures - often more than one or two a day - and framing pubs as essential community assets under threat from rising taxes, energy bills and regulatory pressures. It launched a National Pub Day to rally public support and repeatedly argued that government policy must change to prevent the loss of Britain's 'local social infrastructure.'

National programmes including The Pub is the Hub have provided support over many years to pubs wanting to diversify their business model and develop additional services. The Purleigh Bell secured funding in 2014 and received a visit from the then Prince Charles (Charles III) who founded the Pub is the Hub in 2001. The Purleigh Bell was able to increase their focus on cultural programming and exhibitions is a key feature of their success today. The Pub is the Hub was founded partly to address the 'unprecedented challenges' facing rural communities and ways of life, also stated that the current

situation relating to the pub sector was like to result in ‘thousands of vital job losses that will be devastating for communities across the country’.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (which is also the legislation for local government reorganisation) will strengthen the process through which communities can move to purchase and take over local assets including pubs and local shops if they come up for sale and are at risk of closure. The ‘Community Right to Buy’ element of the legislation replaces the previous ‘right to bid’, with an increased timescale for communities to raise the necessary funding to purchase a registered Asset of Community Value (ACV) – up from 6 months to 12 months. The ‘Community Right to Buy’ listing will also be for 10 years (up from the current 5 years). The process of purchasing and taking over a local pub by the community is not an easy process, but it is increasingly common across the UK, with many examples across the East of England.

In Essex, Uttlesford District Council developed a pubs engagement and funding programme in 2025 which recognised the unique role pubs and bars play in the local community - economically, socially and culturally - as well as the challenging conditions in which they are operating - rising energy costs, particularly for older buildings, alcohol taxes, rent, staff retention and keeping up with social media promotion and website updates. The grant scheme (funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund) supported pubs and bars to carry out energy efficiency measures, trial new community initiatives and offered support for social media and website promotion (which can be crucial for attracting new customers and for wider place promotion).

The University of Northumbria have undertaken research investigating the importance of pubs to communities and ‘social capital’, as well as the impacts of pubs on rates of crime. Although the focus wasn’t cultural or heritage related, there are some interesting points that put the pub in an important position socially and culturally, particularly in rural area. The research found that the disappearance of public houses is inseparably linked to other institutions and traditions which have drifted away, such as post offices and organised activities. When there is a pub at the heart of communities there were more community events, suggesting that the very existence of a pub promoted local activity, especially when operating in tandem with other ‘third places’ such as village halls.

Summary of Local Context

Pubs remain important assets in the majority of the District’s parishes, albeit there have been many closures over the years (mirroring national trends). Research shows there are at least 65 pubs across the District, with well over half hosting fairly regular cultural and social events including live music. This includes pubs in the majority of the parishes which is important as often there are few other businesses or social spaces.

Many of the District’s pubs are ‘free houses’, meaning that they are independent (i.e. not owned by a large regional or national pub company), and this affords some freedom in terms of the beer and food offer and for events. The Norton Pub in Cold Norton is community-owned, one of an increasing number of pubs that have been taken over by the community in the UK (not a simple undertaking). With the proposed strengthening of the legislation around the ‘right to buy’ local assets, there could be opportunities for this kind of direct community action where pubs are at risk of closure elsewhere in the District.

Some of the bars are linked to local breweries including Wibblers (Southminster) and Datum Attitude (Heybridge). Datum Attitude is located in a small industrial area in Heybridge and holds regular music events with local artists as well as art exhibitions. Independent breweries add interest to the area for communities and visitors (Datum is very popular with local communities around Heybridge). The Blackwater Brewing Company is based in Steeple and runs the Star at Steeple pub which host events including music and food related.

The Purleigh Bell has a very strong cultural/arts programme with a dedicated exhibition space with opportunities for local (and in some cases) international artists to show their work, as well as cultural and craft activities. The Purleigh Bell is very much an outlier in that it is recognised as an important cultural and arts space, taking its programming seriously and attracting interest nationally and internationally.

Many other pubs across the District act as key social and community infrastructure, organising events. The Hurdlemakers Arms in Hazeleigh runs a major fete and beer festival; the Swan in Little Totham leads the village car show and fete; the Beckingham Bell in Tolleshunt Major animates the village green with regular events including the Summer Fair and a monthly farmers' market. The Bell in Woodham Walter helps deliver Bell Meadow Day with the Parish Council, while the Jolly Sailor in Heybridge Basin hosts the monthly Basin Waterside Market. A number of pubs put on gigs and open mic nights all year round for bands and solo musicians. This includes The Kings Head (Tollesbury), The Station Arms (Southminster), The Ferry Boat Inn (North Fambridge), Hardys Bar (Mayland), The Muddy Duck, Hemlocks (Maldon), The Swan (Little Totham), The New Welcome Sailor, The Anchor, The Queens Head and The Victoria Inn (Burnham)

Two pubs have won National Pub of the Year – The Cap and Feathers in Tillingham (1989) and The Swan in Little Totham (2002 and 2005). This means the Maldon District is out on its own nationally in terms of winners.

The Maldon District Council Asset of Community Value register has pubs listed, demonstrating the importance to the local area – The Chequers (Goldhanger), Queen Victoria (Woodham Walter), The Cricketers (Bradwell-on-Sea), Olio at The Chequers (Wickham Bishops).

Pubs also feature on the many routes that are promoted through the Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival including 'Bradwell Pirates and Pubs', 'Burnham-on-Crouch to Southminster' and 'North Fambridge Seawall Stroll'. This highlights the importance of pubs to the visitor economy and sense of place.

Actions

Pub Engagement: Given the national coverage of challenges facing pubs and bars across the UK, and the importance of these businesses and social spaces to local communities across the District (and particularly in rural areas), specific engagement with the sector to identify and understand particular issues and challenges is recommended. Pubs are important cultural spaces as evidenced by how many regularly programme events of many different kinds (including music). Also to encourage pubs to look at national programmes (Pub is the Hub for example), and liaise with MDC to feed into economic and tourism development, and any advocacy that MDC and/or the new Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC can play strategically (Mid Essex/Mayoral Authority).

Music and Culture Offer for Pubs: Given how many pubs offer opportunities for musicians, it could be possible to offer mini tours to touring national bands, diarising dates between pubs and offering between 5 and 10 dates over a short period of time. This kind of offer might be attractive to larger bands across genres.

13 – Libraries

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture & Heritage Strategy?

Libraries are important educational, social and cultural spaces, and their role has evolved considerably over the last couple of decades to include a wide range of information, advice, services and events. Ultimately, for culture and heritage development in any part of the UK, libraries have a key role to play, and this is certainly the case in the Maldon District with many good collaborative examples to learn and take inspiration from.

Strategic Reflection

‘We see libraries as sitting at the heart of creative, collaborative, culturally vibrant communities - We also acknowledge and appreciate the work that libraries deliver that extends outward from their core offer of culture and creativity – particularly in the field of creative health and wellbeing. We believe that whoever leads on national development for libraries in future must recognise, support and champion their unique contribution to the cultural life of our country and the creative life of citizens and communities.’ (Arts Council England Response to Hodge Review March 2026)

Arts Council England (ACE) has been the national development agency for libraries for the last ten years. This has been undertaken through various schemes and initiatives including through targeted funding programmes such as the Libraries Improvement Fund and opening up opportunities for library services to become National Portfolio Organisations (which would increase their engagement with cultural sectors).

Local Government Reorganisation (lgr) will likely have an impact on the future management and strategic direction of libraries. This was reflected in the ‘Essex Libraries – Better Together’ campaign for example that sought to gain clarity on the oversight of what is currently a coherent library service for Essex managed by Essex CC (currently unresolved).

A report produced by University of East Anglia (UEA) in 2023 focusing on the East of England’s libraries – ‘Libraries for Living and For Living Better’ suggested that library services across England can generate social benefits to their communities to a value of at least £3.4bn per year. This relates not only to their core roles but also to their role supporting digital inclusion, health and wellbeing and targeted initiatives around children’s literacy. Libraries very often hold a range of community outreach programmes (health, digital, literacy, mental health etc.), as well as cultural, heritage and community events (this can depend upon having space).

Libraries can also be important for supporting the local creative ecology of places. Research published in 2024 by Libraries Connected (‘Public Libraries and the Creative Industries’) explored how *‘public libraries play a significant but often overlooked role in the UK’s creative industries, providing free cultural access, supporting diverse audiences, and acting as hubs for skills development’*. There is a specific reference to ‘makerspaces’ which offer collaborative space for creative and technical projects, with technical kit available (3-D Printers for example) and support for skills development. Ipswich libraries is a good example of this.

The Libraries Connected report shows how libraries can broker partnerships, host cultural programming, and deliver digital and creative learning, illustrated through case studies from Wakefield, Merton, Gloucestershire, Barnsley, Leeds and Coventry. The briefing argues that libraries should be recognised within national and local cultural strategies, included in cultural infrastructure planning, and given equitable access to arts funding, positioning them as essential civic assets within the wider creative economy.

The Culture Nature England (CNE) programme overseen by Natural England is another example of the importance of libraries as connector and collaborative spaces that facilitate engagement on key issues.

'...CNE reimagines public libraries as gateways to nature, creativity, health, and community resilience. At its heart, the programme aims to inspire more people to care about and connect with nature - especially those who may not typically engage with it. Delivered in partnership with Libraries Connected, CNE is bringing this vision to life through practical, community-led projects that strengthen both people and places.' (DCMS October 2025 – Collaboration is the Key – Public Libraries as Gateways to Nature)

A number of case studies relating to CNE explored how libraries can act as *'trusted, inclusive civic spaces that bridge people, nature and community partners, using collaboration to widen access, build confidence and strengthen place-based resilience.'*

Summary of Local Context

There are four libraries in the Maldon District – Burnham-on-Crouch, Maldon, Wickham Bishops and Southminster. Only Maldon Library is open five days a week (closed Wednesday), and some communities to the east of the District may well access Witham and Chelmsford libraries.

According to data from the DCMS and Arts Council England Participation Survey, 25.49% of people living in the Maldon District had visited a library in the last 12 months. This is only slightly lower than the regional or national average. While people will have visited for many different reasons, it does demonstrate the potential reach that libraries have to a large proportion of the population. However, given the rural nature of the District and the fact that only Maldon Library is open 5 days a week, access to the library for many will be challenging.

The four libraries across the Maldon District, and in particular the large library in Maldon Town Centre, are very important civic, social and cultural spaces that can help to shape healthier and more connected places. They sit at the heart of local life, reducing inequalities, strengthening community bonds and supporting everything from early years development to adult learning, wellbeing and economic vitality. As the local government reorganisation process develops, their role could be important as a key part of the social infrastructure through which local government (and its partners) can engage residents and seek to building a sense of local priorities for neighbourhood governance. Libraries are key partners in delivering on creative health ambitions (set out elsewhere in this strategy), cultural events and workshops, as well as ensuring that there is access to local information, advice and guidance on a wide range of issues

The local libraries have demonstrated effective place-based working, collaborating with other local organisations. For example Maldon Library launched the ‘Men’s Gaming Cove’ in partnership with Maldon and District CVS, supporting the mental health and wellbeing of men aged 30–50 as part of a wider programme to reduce suicide in this particular age group. Funded through the One Maldon District Partnership and supported by organisations including Mind Charity, Oddballs Foundation, Both Parents Matter, Healthwatch Essex, and Reach Out for Mental Health, the initiative offered literature, resources, and activities such as gaming sessions, a hair plaiting workshop for dads, male story times, health MOTs, and a fitness seminar with celebrity influencers.

Essex Libraries are part of the Arts Council England National Development Framework – a national accreditation scheme that is designed to support public library services to innovate and respond to the needs of communities. It is structured around four areas: People, Place, Purpose, and Policy & Practice, covering community understanding, local impact, leadership and resource use, and professional standards. As an accredited service, Essex will now participate in national networks that help shape and support the framework’s future development.

Regarding the Library Service in the District, it is important to note that whilst there are clear opportunities to increase the range of engagement sessions around themes including creative health and cultural events, that potential partners (and hirers) need to be aware of the costs to the Library Service, and the considerations that come with activities in a public library (with a wide mix of users and expectations). There are costs to the Library Service particularly when it comes to opening up the spaces in the evening (outside of core library opening hours) – staffing and utilities primarily. The Library Service has to factor these in, and it is important that potential partners are aware of this (although there are occasions when the case can be made for the importance of events or programmes to both the community and the library service). In practice this means that some events may need to be ticketed (or have a source of external funding), as was the case for the very popular talk by Maria Medlycott on ‘The Origins of Maldon’ (September 2025).

Actions

Maldon Library (and other libraries in the District) have already demonstrated effective collaboration with schemes to support health and community outcomes. As the **creative health system in the District develops, it will be important to engage directly with the leadership team responsible** for Maldon, Wickham Bishops, Southminster and Burnham-on-Crouch Libraries and identify where new initiatives could be (or existing initiatives developed further).

Support the Essex Library Service in the District to apply for funding (for example the Libraries Improvement Fund from Arts Council England). The Library Service is not overseen by MDC but libraries will be important spaces for creative health, heritage and cultural events and learning, and are already important for community outcomes. A collaborative approach, building on existing work, will support outcomes relevant to the Culture & Heritage Strategy including creative health, heritage and cultural events.

14 – Archaeology

Introduction – Why is this important to the Culture and Heritage Strategy?

Archaeology across the Maldon District, both as a subject of interest and the practice of undertaking 'digs', appears to be of great importance. There are active local groups and, given the District's ancient origins and landscapes, it is relevant to communities with many opportunities for participation, recording, preserving and interpreting.

The principal historical event associated with the District - the Battle of Maldon - is both an (ongoing) archaeological story as well as a literary and political one. The Viking sword in the Combined Military Services Museum (shrouded in some mystery in terms of origins) is probably the most important archaeological object in the District (certainly the most well-known). The story associated with the Battle of Maldon excites the imagination of many local people and visitors, so the discovery of actual objects that could be associated with such a notable historical event is of great interest. But there is so much more to be discovered, and unlike many areas of Essex where digs are more often associated with development sites (important though this is), in the Maldon District there are groups that have a history of taking on digs based on local research and interest. This is unusual and should be valued.

Strategic Reflection

Archaeology is increasingly popular on the national stage, with television programmes such as *Digging for Britain* and the significant online interest in *Time Team* (now online). In Essex, the Festival of Archaeology and Heritage (organised by Place Services) now hosts a wide range of talks and demonstrations. The interest in Maldon District is very much in keeping with wider trends.

Policy Context

From a policy perspective, the wealth of archaeology (and knowledge of it) strengthens the overall case for heritage and conservation being important considerations in relation to planning, regeneration, infrastructure development, and health and wellbeing. Equally, archaeology of the Maldon District (as well as geology and landscapes) can provide creative inspiration and support exploration of the area.

In 2025 a Report 'Trowel and Error: A Public User Needs Survey' was published by the Council for British Archaeology (in partnership with Museum of London Archaeology). The report highlights that archaeology often feels remote to people who are not already involved, largely because much of the work happens out of public view and the results are dispersed across specialist platforms that are hard to access. Practical barriers such as cost, travel, time and limited clear information make participation difficult for new or underrepresented groups, and even those who are curious frequently feel that archaeology is 'not for them'.

At the same time, professionals in the sector often lack the time, resources or skills to design effective public-facing activity, which limits opportunities for wider engagement. Although public interest in archaeology is high, the report concludes that its visibility and everyday relevance remain low, creating a gap between the value archaeology could offer and the extent to which people currently experience it.

The 'Trowel and Error' report offers a number of solutions to the challenge of encouraging broader understanding and engagement, and these will be relevant to the Maldon District. It proposes that

archaeology becomes genuinely accessible when it's shaped with communities from the start, presented in multiple formats and languages, and delivered through a blend of digital, print and in-person channels that meet people where they are.

By designing content that's accessible, locally relevant and connected to everyday life, and by mapping audiences early and working with facilitators, especially for children and students, the sector can open clear, confidence-building pathways for everyone to take part. For the Maldon District this might be initially in the form of improved interpretation of collections and stories relating to digs that have taken place over the past few years. Local groups do take part in the Festival of Essex Archaeology & Heritage that takes place at Cressing Temple.

Summary of Local Context

Why is archaeology important for the Maldon District? Archaeology and ancient landscapes (and buildings) are part of the imagination piece that can facilitate a tangible connection to the past - and importantly a local past. Although direct participation in archaeology is limited across the UK, people can be drawn to it as audiences because it offers a mix of mystery, evidence and a unique story of discovery each time. It offers storytelling opportunities around both discovery (and related intrigue) as well as the artefacts uncovered or traces in the ground.

Discoveries reflect a particular point in time, enabling us to imagine what that location might have been like in the distant (or more recent) past, offering a glimpse of a time very different to our own (or perhaps more familiar than we might have expected). Archaeological finds therefore can connect people to a place: understanding what happened under your feet, in your town, or along your coastline creates a sense of connection that few other disciplines can offer.

An important feature of the ancient landscape is the prevalence of Red Hills that are repeatedly documented along the Dengie Peninsula and the wider Maldon area, forming part of a dense concentration of prehistoric and Romano-British salt-making sites. This is an obvious link to what Maldon is world-famous for today.

Few places in England can point to such a continuous chain of human engagement and interaction with the land across the District - Saxon kings choosing high ground for defence, medieval communities shaping river trade, Civil War engineers re-fortifying old earthworks, and modern residents continually navigating the same topography. Archaeology is also important to the whole narrative 'sense of place' piece that contributes so much to the attraction for visitors to the District - somewhere a little mysterious and distinctive, supporting experiences that you can't have elsewhere. Archaeology therefore contributes to 'experiential' tourism and 'regenerative' in that it is supported by experienced volunteers and connects back to the local story.

Michael Portillo was drawn to Maldon on his 'Great British Railway Journeys' television programme. He met with local historian Stephen Nunn and they discussed the Battle of Maldon and the potential location for the battle, with reference to the Viking sword on display at the Combined Military Services Museum. This is evidence of national interest in the Battle of Maldon and associated archaeology.

Active Groups in the Maldon District

There are two archaeology groups currently active in the Maldon District – Burnham-on-Crouch U3A Archaeology Group, and the Maldon & District Archaeological and Historical Group (MAHG).

The Burnham-on-Crouch U3A Archaeology Group was founded in 2018 as part of the thriving Burnham-on-Crouch U3A movement, which brings together hundreds of members across a wide range of participatory groups. The Archaeology Group has around 50 members, with close to 20 regularly taking part in local digs, and holds the distinction of being the only U3A group in the East of England that actively participates in excavations. Operating to a high professional standard, its trained volunteers formally record all findings through the Historic Environment Record, ensuring their work contributes meaningfully to the wider archaeological knowledge base. The group's most celebrated achievement is the 2020–21 identification and excavation of the long-lost medieval palace of the Bishop of London at Southminster Hall, supported by grant funding from Turncole Wind Farm which enabled the involvement of a lead professional archaeologist. Other digs have taken place at Maylandsea, Creeksea Place and St Barnabas Church in Bradwell-on-Sea.

Beyond the excavations themselves, members contribute through background research, site work and interpretation, and the group has secured additional funding from Essex Community Foundation to support professional training delivered by Archaeology South East. The group actively promotes participation as an enjoyable and socially rewarding activity, welcoming people of all backgrounds into the world of archaeology. Its achievements are recognised locally through a dedicated display space at Burnham-on-Crouch Museum, which helps share the group's discoveries with the wider community and visitors to the town.

The Maldon Archaeological and Historical Group (MAHG), is a registered charity founded in 1977 to investigate and document the history of Maldon and its surrounding areas. Over the decades it has contributed important archaeological work, including the Lofts Farm excavation in Great Totham (1978–1984), whose records are now held by the Essex Record Office. Reports of other excavations over the years are available on its website. They have a clubhouse at Brickhouse Farm Community Centre in Maldon which holds many of the finds (although they are keen to find additional space and support for interpretation and engagement). Despite this legacy, the group currently operates with very few volunteers, limiting its capacity to continue its work at the same scale

Both groups have contributed significantly to the historical record of the Maldon District, working on projects that are not linked to development and are therefore inspired by local knowledge and research. This is rare in Essex and should be valued and, where possible, supported as an important part of the grassroots heritage ecosystem across the District.

Of recent interest was a talk by Maria Medleycott on the 'Origins of Maldon: An Archaeological Talk' at Maldon Library which attracted significant interest in September 2025, demonstrating an appetite for this kind of heritage programming. The talk revealed significant archaeology still to be uncovered in Maldon Town (although recognised this would be challenging due to development over centuries).

Maldon District Geology

It is worth reflecting on the importance of geology to the Maldon District, given the significant interest in this locally and the diversity in the geological record. This includes the ruins of the 12th century leper hospital (St. Giles) on Spital Road, which displays a variety of rock types in the walls which would have been collected locally – bringing together nicely social history and geology on one site.

“Geodiversity...has a cultural role to play, influencing the character of our built environment through building stones, providing inspiration to art, and helping to define where we live and our ‘sense of place’. It is the link between geology, landscape, nature and people” (Report on Local Geological Sites for Maldon District Council – GeoEssex August 2023)

The Local Geological Sites report explains how the Ice Age had radical impact on the course of the early Thames, and how this has created many of the natural landscapes across the Maldon District today. ‘The ribbon of flooded gravel pits stretching across the Dengie Peninsula from Burnham-on-Crouch to Bradwell-on-Sea mark this former route of the Thames Medway’

Exploring the concept of ‘local distinctiveness’ requires consideration of geology (it is arguably relevant everywhere). There is much for communities to explore, discoveries to be made including at Butt’s Cliff at Althorne (which is one of many Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the District), situated on the outer bend of the River Crouch where erosion of the London Clay reveals a rich source of fossils.

Actions

Ensure that local **archaeology groups can feed in to the Regenerative Tourism Steering Group for Heritage**, given the knowledge and experience they have, with an emphasis on ensuring that the groups themselves are sustainable and have the necessary volunteers and resources needed to continue their work.

When **MDC are working on potential options for an improved (or new) Maldon Museum, consider engaging with the archaeological groups**, not only for their insight and knowledge of local history and geology, but also because storage and interpretation is a challenge for them and facilities could be built in to new proposals to support them.

15 – Audience Segmentation

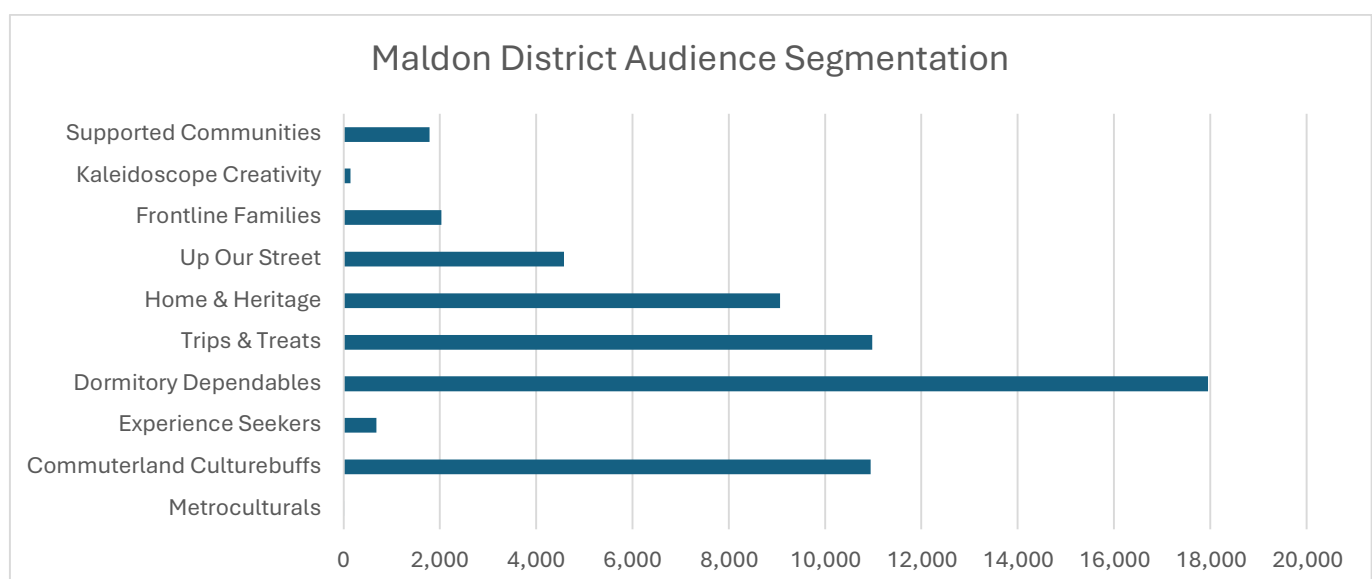
Audience Segmentation

The Audience Agency’s segmentation model - known as Audience Spectrum - is the UK’s most widely used cultural audience profiling tool. It divides the population into ten distinct segments based on people’s attitudes toward arts, culture, and heritage, as well as their social and demographic characteristics.

An analysis the Maldon District’s audiences demonstrates that the dominant audience segments are on the whole more ‘traditional’ in terms of their interests and engagement with culture and heritage.

The audience segments that are mostly to be found in the District are:

- **Commuterland Culturebuffs:** Affluent and settled with many working in higher managerial and professional occupations. Commuterland Culturebuffs are keen consumers of culture, with broad tastes but a leaning towards heritage and more classical offerings. Mature families or retirees, living largely in leafy provincial suburban or greenbelt comfort, they are willing to travel and pay for premium experiences, their habits perhaps influenced by commuting. Motivations are multiple, ranging from social and self-improvement to the pursuit of learning opportunities for older children. They tend to be frequent attenders and potential donors.
- **Dormitory Dependables:** A significant proportion of audiences are made up of this dependably regular, although not high frequency, engagement group. Most live in suburban or small towns and show a preference for heritage activities, alongside popular and more traditional, mainstream arts. Many are thriving well-off mature couples or busy older families; lifestage coupled with more limited access to an extensive cultural offer means that culture is more an occasional treat or family outing than an integral part of their lifestyle.
- **Trips & Treats:** This group may not view arts and culture as a passion, they are reasonably active despite being particularly busy with a wide range of leisure interests. Comfortably off and living in the heart of suburbia, their children range in age and include young people still living at home. With a strong preference for mainstream arts and popular culture like musicals and familiar drama, mixed in with days out to museums and heritage sites, this group are led by their children’s interests and strongly influenced by friends and family.

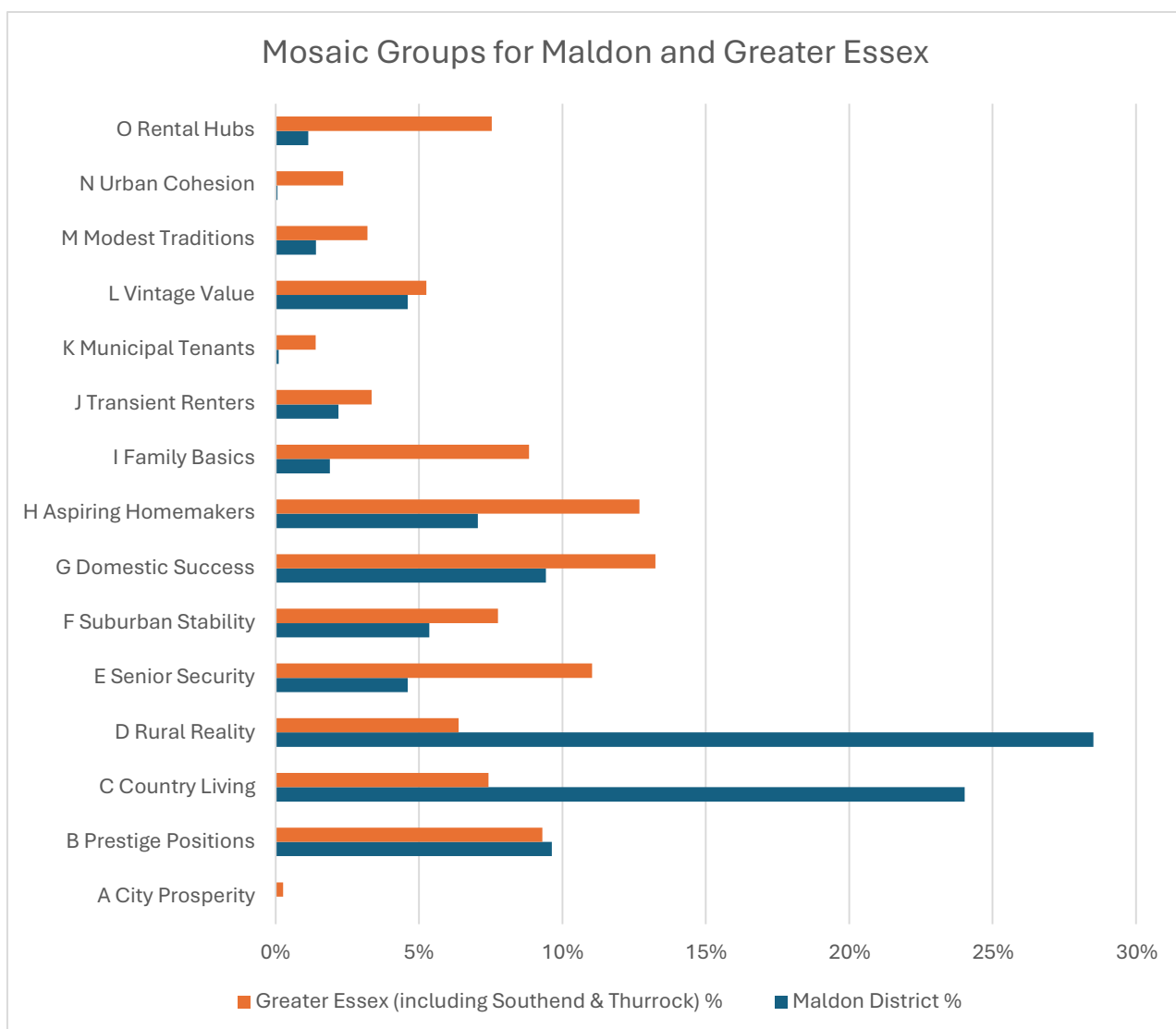


The audience segments that have the interest in the most contemporary arts and cultural experiences do not really feature highly in the Maldon District (or indeed in Essex as a whole).

The audience segment analysis for the Maldon District broadly reflects that of wider Essex, although the ‘Home & Heritage’ audience is a fair bit higher in Maldon than Essex (16% for Maldon compared to 10% for Essex as a whole), indicating a less regular cultural engagement (and certainly more traditional and child/family orientated in Maldon).

Mosaic Data

Another source of data that can be referenced to better understand audiences and interests in the District is Mosaic, designed by Experience as a ‘cross-channel’ consumer classification system which segments the population into 15 groups. These can be utilised to understand the likely customer behaviour of people/individuals in a particular area. The behaviour gives a strong indication of their interests (including culture).



The data shows that the most prevalent Mosaic Groups in the District are (overwhelmingly) ‘Rural Reality’ and ‘Country Living’. Both represent more traditional interests (including in heritage and culture).

- **Rural Reality:** Rural Reality are people who live in rural communities and generally own their relatively low cost homes. Their moderate incomes come mostly from employment with local firms or from running their own small business.
- **Country Living:** Country Living are well-off homeowners who live in the countryside often beyond easy commuting reach of major towns and cities. Some people are landowners or farmers, others run small businesses from home, some are retired and others commute distances to professional jobs.

As can be seen from the graph, these two Mosaic groups are far more prevalent in the Maldon District than in the rest of Essex, reflecting the rural nature of the District.

How Audiences Might Change in the Future

Consideration should be given to the significant new development taking place across the District, and the existing Local Plan's policy for 'mixed and balanced communities' that favours housing development with an emphasis on providing for families and affordable housing. This is in recognition of the existing availability of larger homes. With a strong heritage and cultural offer, the new developments are likely to see more families and younger people living on the urban fringes and therefore in touching distance of the town centres (Maldon in particular).

'To create a better balanced stock to address the impact of the ageing population and the needs of young people entering the market, the Council will need to deliver a higher proportion of smaller (1 or 2 bedroom) units over the life of the Plan.' – (MDC Local Plan 2014-19).