24 October 2008

Councillor Warren Bradley,
Chair of Liverpool First Executive Board and Leader, Liverpool City Council
Municipal Buildings,
Dale Street,
Liverpool L2 2DH

Dear Councillor Bradley,

Liverpool Cultural Strategy: Consultation Draft

Merseyside Civic Society welcomes this opportunity to comment on the draft strategy.

1. We are pleased to endorse many aspects of the emerging strategy. However, we believe that much more emphasis should be given to recognising that the city’s historic environment – its buildings and townscape, landscape and public realm – is something that is integral to the city’s cultural values and identity and should not be viewed simply as a ‘backdrop’ to activities and events. This needs to be given more explicit recognition in the cultural strategy [for example, in the identification of ‘assets and achievements’]. Further, the historic environment also deserves to be given greater direct and sustained support if it is not to deteriorate and become downgraded.

2. Consistent with this principal point, we have a number of comments on the opening sections of the draft, before turning attention to the five themes, in relation to which a series of principles and recommendations are set out. We are happy to support and endorse many of the latter. However, we believe that, under the five themes currently adopted, insufficient consideration is given to the crucial role of the appreciation and celebration of the built heritage of the city and thus propose the adoption a sixth theme - Built Heritage Appreciation and Celebration, together with corresponding principles and recommendations for action to contribute to strategy delivery.

3. Recognition of this special quality was very cogently expressed recently, by both you and Simon Thurley, at the launch of the Historic Environment of Liverpool Project (HELP) publication series at the Bluecoat. It is also found in the section of the draft on ‘Heritage’ (pp. 17-19) which elaborates on the different aspects of the historic environment – but some appreciation of the distinctive contribution that is made by the built environment is lost as a result of it being treated in much the same, rather passive, way as the historic collections and artefacts, held in the libraries and museums, that are discussed in the same section. At the conclusion of this section, we welcome the acknowledgement given to “the work of a wide range of voluntary heritage organisations ... in developing programmes to ensure communities can access, explore and celebrate their heritage”. Much of what follows seeks to build on this positive note.
4. It is our view that the strategy should include a clear ‘Vision Statement’ that sets out where Liverpool First wants to see the cultural component of city life in 2013. There are elements of a vision present in the document but they are scattered and need to be pulled together – going beyond the reference to “maximising culture’s contribution to the city’s vision for 2024” to which reference is made on Page 3. Such a statement should be a focal point for the rest of the strategy, with the themes and recommendations traceable back to the Vision Statement and robust enough to endure beyond 2013, taking into account intervening ‘rough water’, such as the current economic circumstances. That said, the strategy should also demonstrate a much clearer understanding of the wider economic significance of cultural activities. These are rightly recognised as having benefits for the education and well-being of the citizenry, but if positively managed, the strategy can be directed at generating new jobs, revenues and investment which will help to provide funds for the further enrichment of the city’s cultural heritage.

5. In setting the strategic context of the strategy (pp. 11-14), the national context discussion features no reference to the remarkable scale of support provided by English Heritage, in terms of funding, expertise and staffing, over the last decade, during which the national significance of the city’s historic environment has been celebrated, for example, in the course of the HELP project. This deserves more prominent mention here than in the footnote on Page 18. Similarly, no mention is made of CABE’s involvement in helping the city to promote the adoption of the highest quality of design in new developments.

6. Under the heading of ‘A proactive international partner’, the international context should not be restricted to Liverpool being a ‘partner’, a notion that is well explored here. The text at present relies too much on the Capital of Culture experience at the expense of explicit acknowledgement of the city’s European and global recognition, such as through its sporting achievements, and its historic environment, such as the World Heritage Site inscription, which is a UNESCO initiative. The universal values implicit in this designation do not seem to be taken on board by the draft at this point, nor generally throughout the rest of the document. Instead, reference to this matter is only given emphasis in the ‘heritage’ section (p. 18).

7. Subject to the above qualifications, we welcome the coverage given to components of the historic environment in the ‘heritage’ section of ‘cultural assets and achievements’.

Our comments now turn to the presentation and content of the five Themes.

Theme 1 : Cultural Vibrancy

8. In the blue box, line 1 draws attention to the city’s ‘cultural infrastructure’, with Principle 1 serving to reinforce this point. MCS welcomes Recommendation 7, in overseeing “the successful completion of the city parks regeneration plan”, but we suggest that there is a need to qualify the term ‘maximise’ with “consistent with long-term ecological health”, in recognition of the fact that parks are living entities, that require continuous management, and that their attractive qualities can be easily eroded through over use.
9. We also believe that there should be an equivalent recommendation relating to the city’s built infrastructure. It is not enough simply to mention a few key facilities (Recommendation 6). The whole point about the vibrancy of the townscape is that it comprises the collective presence of individual buildings, groups of buildings, public realm and landscape components. A recommendation is needed here that urges the adoption of a more forceful programme (and the commitment of requisite resources) to improve the city’s performance in the protection of listed buildings and conservation areas against neglect, demolition and unsympathetic new developments.

10. MCS is happy to support the principle set out under Recommendation 9, with its stress on the importance of partnership working.

**Theme 2 : Access and Participation**

11. MCS is pleased to support Recommendation 4 relating to Creative Communities and other participatory programmes, with particular reference to local historic environments. Consultation has demonstrated that these local assets are valued as much by their residents as is the celebrated architecture and public realm of the city centre, a conclusion that challenges traditional ‘city centre focused’ perspectives of heritage. Wider recognition of the benefits of this ‘local awareness’ is likely to encourage residents, of all ages and communities, to explore and cherish their localities.

12. In relation to Recommendation 7, there is a need here for a neighbourhood leadership role as well as a sector led response as the barriers and opportunities are encountered locally in terms of specific places not just with respect to sectors.

13. With respect to Recommendations 7 and 9, it important to reflect here the scope for interpretation of, and educational opportunities relating to, the historic environment in ways that are accessible to older and younger groups and not just at specific leisure venues or facilities, as currently footnoted. [This can be usefully cross-referenced to ‘Learning and skills development’ and to the benefits of age group coverage being accessible to all].

**Theme 3 : Learning and Skills Development**

14. As a general point, and perhaps as a principle, there is a need for heritage education, outreach and community participation to be at the heart of Liverpool’s achievement of a vibrant, culturally diverse and innovative historic city.

15. We strongly support Recommendations 10 and 11 (encouraging understanding and awareness of community histories – and maximising use of assets, such as the World Heritage Site and National Conservation Centre), subject to the addition of local historic environments to ‘local and family history’, so as to recognise the specific context in which these aspects are grounded and visible to residents and local communities. Archives have a vital role to play in developing understanding of local historic environments [together with direct observation and experience], offering opportunities for creative, innovative interpretation services and support.
16. In the case of Recommendation 11, we suggest rewording as follows: “Ensure the use of the World Heritage Site and National Conservation Centre as comprehensive educational and training tools, with access to all, according to the principles of Life Long Learning.”

**Theme 4: Economic Growth**

17. We suggest that this theme should be re-designated as “Sustainable Economic Development”, in order to convey the view that the Strategy is not about grabbing growth at all costs but is aware of, and has incorporated, wider aspects of Liverpool First’s responsibilities.

18. In our view, the whole text should be ‘proofed’ with a view to expressing the relationship between the cultural sector and tourism and employment resource development in the city [consistent with Theme 5, Recommendation 1, and the development of the proposed tourism strategy, and with our observations in para 4 above concerning the economic significance of cultural activity].

19. To this end, we would urge the adoption of a new principle under this Theme, perhaps replacing current Principle 3, along the following lines: “To ensure that Liverpool’s historic environments are protected, retained and restored and, where appropriate, enhanced and new high quality design is encouraged, for their positive contribution to city branding, developing the tourism offer and promoting regeneration.”


**Theme 5: Image, Identity and Sense of Place**

21. MCS is pleased to support Principle 1 (relating to the city’s cultural assets ... “remaining core to a balanced approach for old and new”) but would like to see a much stronger direct relationship between this principle and the various recommendations that follow.

22. Recommendation 1 is, arguably, one of the most significant recommendations to emerge from this whole exercise – for the development of “a tourism strategy to 2020” – and is central to, and consistent with, recommendations set out below with respect to the proposed Theme 6.

23. Unsurprisingly, MCS endorses the sentiments underlying what is expressed in Recommendation 3 concerning the need to “ensure that the future development of Liverpool’s physical fabric reflects the quality urban design and architecture expected of a world heritage site ...”. However, we would favour rewording the recommendation to reflect the wider application of these standards, as follows:
“Ensure that the future development of Liverpool’s physical environment, including the World Heritage Site, reflects the unique character of the locality, where the value of high quality architecture and urban design are universally acknowledged and demanded and delivered as a matter of course.”

24. We believe that the subsequent points, that are currently made in the rest of the over-lengthy ‘sentence’ that is Recommendation 3, should form the basis of a separate, complementary recommendation, perhaps as:

“Demand the adoption of exemplary approaches to contemporary developments, and improved pedestrian and transport links between cultural attractions, moving towards zero carbon developments and implementing a robust strategy for environmental sustainability”.

25. MCS is also pleased to support the subsequent Recommendations 4, 5, 6, 8 and 11.

26. In the above comments on the current draft, we acknowledge and welcome the coverage that is given to certain aspects of the heritage and built environment issues that fall under the five themes currently identified. However, we are convinced that, overall, the strategy document fails to represent sufficiently strongly the significant heritage and built environment dimensions of Liverpool’s culture and the contribution that these should be making to the development of the cultural strategy as a whole. We believe that an effective way of achieving recognition of the importance of the heritage dimension is to put forward a sixth theme which gives greater prominence to the appreciation and celebration of the built heritage of the city with the title Theme 6: Built Heritage Appreciation and Celebration.

27. Details of this proposed new theme are set out in the attached annex to this letter in a format that is consistent with that employed in the presentation of the other five themes. The intention is that the principles and recommendations should complement and reinforce, rather than duplicate, those set out under the current five themes.

28. We believe that the adoption of the recommendations that we have set out will help to ensure that the implementation of the Cultural Strategy is more consistent with your own admirable contention, expressed with such conviction at the Tim Leunig debate, that “regeneration ideas should come up from the bottom, not just be imposed by bureaucrats”.

Yours sincerely

Peter Brown (Dr)