# IPSWICH

# CULTURE & HERITAGE STRATEGY 2026–36

## VISION & TRAVEL BLOG

IPSWICH BOROUGH COUNCIL

Suffolk County Council

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# IPSWICH 2036: A CULTURE & HERITAGE STRATEGY

### What is a Culture and Heritage strategy?

Culture & Heritage relate to the places, spaces, stories and activities that make life in Ipswich feel like it belongs to you and you belong to it. A strategy is simply a shared plan that a wide range of people can sign up to. So, this Culture and Heritage Strategy is a plan that sets out what Ipswich wants and needs its cultural life to look like, how everyone will work together to get there, and what progress and success will look like.

### Why does Ipswich need one?

Brilliant things are already happening in Ipswich. The problem is that much of this happens separately and often has an uneven impact across the town. A strategy connects it all up. When education providers, artists, cultural organisations, businesses, community groups, and local government all pull in the same direction, each of them gets further than they would alone.

### Why now?

Ipswich is changing fast. Big decisions are coming about regeneration, investment and how the town approaches its future. If culture has a plan, it has a seat at the table when those decisions get made. Without one, culture gets left out of the conversation it should be shaping.

### What difference will it make?

This strategy sets five ambitions for the next ten years. They are long-term goals because real change takes longer than any single project, funding round or person in charge. The ambitions give everyone the same destination to aim for even when they are travelling by different routes or at different speeds.

### How does it help me?

However you connect to Ipswich, this strategy is intended as a tool you can use. If you run an organisation or public body, it helps you show how your work can intersect with culture and heritage, which makes partnerships and funding easier to secure. If you are an artist or a volunteer, it underpins what you are already doing and how you can be better supported. If you are a young person, it commits the town to building its future with you, and by you. You do not need permission to be part of this. Everyone is invited. If your ambition for Ipswich matches these ambitions, you are already part of the picture.

## Imagine what we can achieve together...

# A TRAVEL BLOGGER VISITS IPSWICH IN 2036...

If you cut through the geology of Ipswich, you'd find endless layers of characterful history. Rebellious, diverse, entrepreneurial. Histories formed from the bustling intersection between water and land, between urban and rural, from the Capital to the coast, every walk of life, and every age of human development, leaving its own mark on this unique location.

Long before England properly understood itself, people were arriving in Ipswich by river and by sea. Traders, pilgrims, migrants, merchants, dissenters and dreamers came here with hopes and intentions and left behind memories and stories. Tudor ambition flows through medieval lanes. Victorian industry rubs shoulders with fragments of Saxon street plans still visible beneath the modern town. Ipswich was a global port before Britain was a nation, an international crossing point before globalisation had a name.

A local tour guide joked that Ipswich, "fell out with Henry VIII 500 years ago and has been an outsider ever since." Like all good jokes, it contained more than a grain of truth. This was never a town entirely comfortable with polish or performance. Even at moments of extraordinary ambition, Ipswich struggled to tell its own story with confidence.

History has a habit of arriving unevenly in towns like this. Through the centuries, economic shocks, changing high streets, political fragmentation and underpowered storytelling left previous ambitions half-realised or hidden. By the early 2020s, Ipswich had become a place rich in assets but poor in connections. A place where some communities felt culture was happening around them, not with them. The waterfront, town centre and neighbourhoods seemed psychologically further apart than google maps showed. Empty shops were symbols of decline rather than possibility.

“Never underestimate the power of a community formed in the stratas of time. It may not yet be perfect, but they are well on the way to making this a reality.”

It seemed Ipswich voluntarily stepped down from its own pedestal. It simply lost its mojo.

So, in 2025, when Ipswich announced its ambition to bid for City of Culture, you'd be forgiven for believing the town had lost its way. Online naysayers were out in force. They projected a picture of a physically disjointed and socially fractured town, plagued by divisions and silos across communities. Perhaps beneath the barbed comments, many did feel overlooked by the systems at play? After all, education and economic opportunities had been historically suppressed and aspiration in day-to-day life was generationally low.

But dig a little deeper and there were tantalising clues that Ipswich was capable of far more than it believed. Public investment in culture had remained strong over many decades, resulting in a foundational infrastructure that was ready to be activated when the conditions were right. Over time, parks and public institutions had been built with a confidence that suggested culture and wellbeing belonged to the whole town. Ipswich was fostering a fiercely independent creative spirit that would bring about a renaissance of some force. That force gathered momentum in 2026 when the town shook off its inhibitions, put on its dancing shoes, wrote a new strategy, applied to be City of Culture. And now, in 2036, Ipswich is a confident, creative and outward-looking place where culture and heritage are a celebrated and expected part of everyday life...

Walking through the medieval lanes and Victorian streets of the town, culture and creativity spill out of every corner contributing directly to how people experience life in Ipswich. Culture and Creativity shape the town's public spaces, celebrating communities, creating opportunities, and supporting wellbeing. Ipswich residents report a pride in living here. It can certainly be said with some confidence, that as a vibrant place to live, work and visit, it's now collectively punching well above its weight. There are pop up projects and creatives everywhere. Old shops are quickly reused as gallery spaces or community hubs. Wellbeing projects happen in theatre foyers, and young entrepreneurs are basing their creative businesses here. You can't miss the families in the museums and the parks, making the most of

these incredible free services on their doorstep.

As a tourist, you can feel the vibrancy and enjoy the spoils of this regeneration. But there's a powerful collective behind this movement and the change they set out to make was clear, rooted in data and driven by people who believe:

- Communities should have access to opportunity and culture on their terms
- A town's culture must be shaped with and by its young people
- Communities and institutions should be visibly connected and collaborative
- Culture and heritage should sit at the heart of placemaking and planning
- There must be a healthy ecosystem between creative individuals and organisations

Never underestimate the power of a community formed across the strata of time. Powered by youth voice and social action, an independent creative sector that has burst its banks, and a set of institutions willing to listen and enable, today, Ipswich is reborn as a cultural powerhouse.

**You can definitely claim that Ipswich is a town that seriously got its mojo back.**

# 1. THE STARTING POINT: IT'S 2026...

Ipswich is in the midst of a significant period of transition and opportunity. Major regeneration activity, renewed cultural investment, local government reorganisation, and the City of Culture process together create an opportunity to rethink the role culture and heritage play within the future identity, confidence and development of the town. The cultural infrastructure exceeds that of many places of comparable scale, and includes nationally recognised organisations, major heritage assets, community led activity, and a significant and visible grassroots, freelance and creative economy.

A momentum is visible across the town. The transformation of the waterfront has reshaped how residents and visitors experience it. DanceEast has built a national reputation whilst deepening its local roots. The University of Suffolk is one of the top 50 universities nationwide (Complete University Guide 2027). Investment is flowing into the town's museums. Heritage activity is thriving, and the story of Ipswich Town Football Club continues to celebrate the importance of culture and bind generations together. Alongside a national reputation for creating high-quality theatre, the New Wolsey Theatre is carving out new ways of intersecting with health & social care . Innovative youth initiatives such as the #iwill movement are opening routes into creativity and leadership. Brighten the Corners have exploded on to the scene with three new grass roots music venues and a plethora of youth-led creative learning opportunities. Gecko Theatre are on the national curriculum and tour the world, taking Ipswich's name with them. Spill Festival continues to bring innovative contemporary performance right into the heart of the town. Organisations such as Red Rose Chain, Eastern Angles and Suffolk Libraries are providing accessible, high quality locally informed work. And all of this is resulting in burgeoning connections, networks and projects across sectors that rarely used to share a table.

Working together these assets power a growing visitor economy, drawing people into the town for culture, heritage and events, and generating

spend that supports jobs and businesses well beyond the cultural sector itself.

The task now is to make sure everyone builds a shared momentum. Strategy consultation and data analysis show that the benefits of this activity are still felt unevenly, with persistent challenges around participation, aspiration, visibility, connectivity, retention and self-belief.

These challenges represent the gap between the cultural life Ipswich has built and the opportunity that a strong focus on culture and heritage could unlock for every resident. This strategy responds by connecting the town's considerable strengths to a more inclusive and ambitious cultural vision, so that what is already working can reach further. The work is already happening. This strategy will help Ipswich do more of it, and amplify it, together.

# 2. HEADLINE VISION

## VISION

Ipswich will be a confident, creative and outward-looking town where culture and heritage help shape everyday life, opportunity, belonging and civic identity.

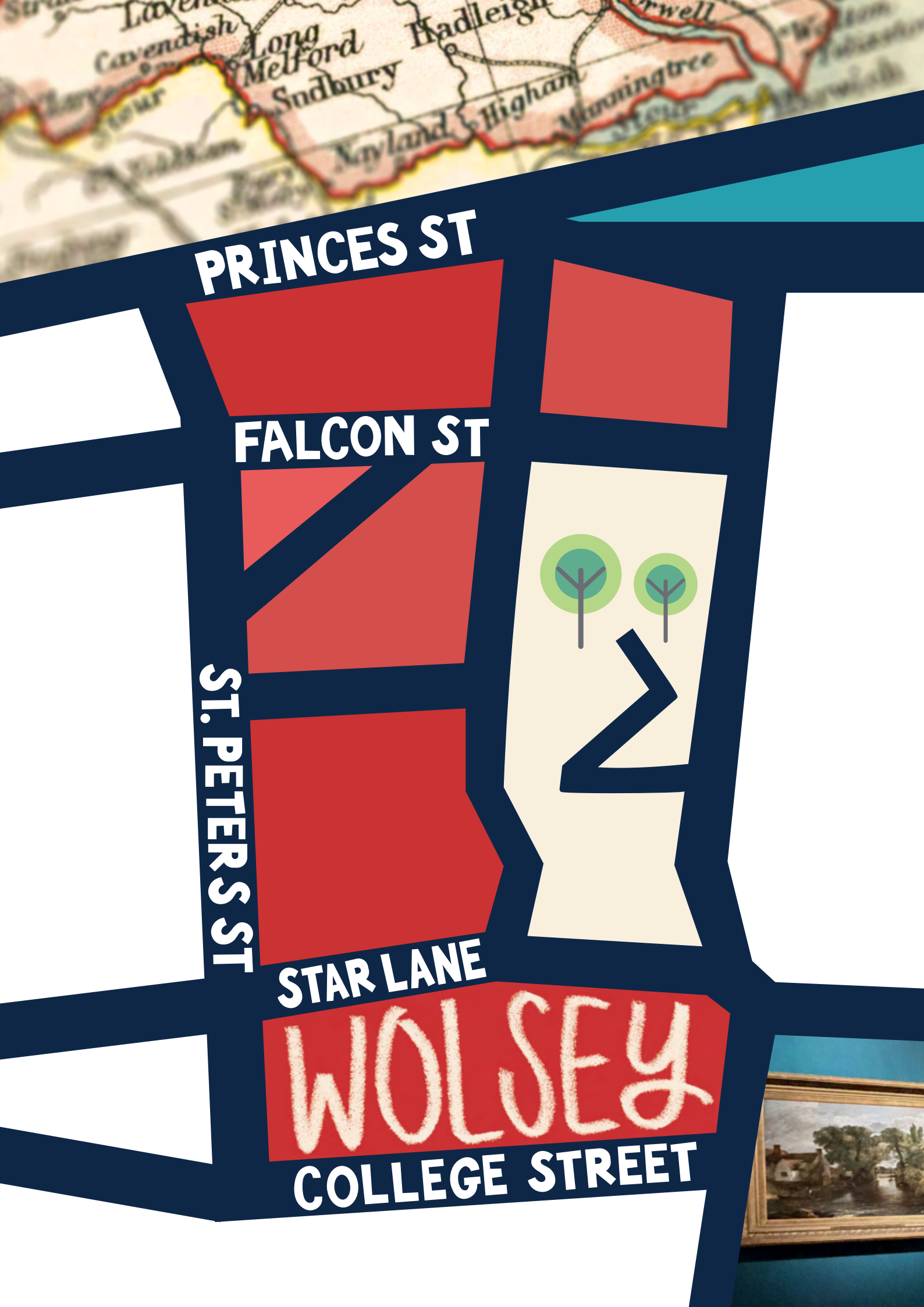
By 2036, culture and heritage in Ipswich will be embedded across the life of the town: in local neighbourhoods, public spaces, schools, high streets, workplaces and community hubs. Creativity will be recognised as a vital part of daily life, wellbeing, economic opportunity and belonging.

This strategy presents an Ipswich where communities access culture on their own terms, where young people help shape the decisions that affect them, and where the achievements of institutions and independent creatives are intertwined. It imagines a town where heritage is actively connected to contemporary identity, diversity and future ambition.

We believe Ipswich's greatest strength lies of course in its incredible cultural assets, but more so in its people: its young population, its independent spirit, its grassroots creativity, its diverse communities and its growing confidence in itself. The long-term success of the town will depend on strengthening the connections between all people, place, creativity and opportunity, ensuring culture contributes meaningfully to local pride, social cohesion and quality of life.

## THIS STRATEGY IS BUILT ROUND FIVE AMBITIONS:

1. Communities have access to opportunity and culture on their own terms
2. The cultural future of the town is shaped with and by young people
3. Communities, institutions and decision-makers are connected and collaborative
4. Culture and heritage shape placemaking and planning
5. Creative individuals, freelancers and organisations thrive within a healthy ecology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Sudbury
Hadleigh
Nayland
Higham
Manningtree
PRINCES ST
FALCON ST
ST. PETERS ST
STAR LANE
WOLSEY
COLLEGE STREET

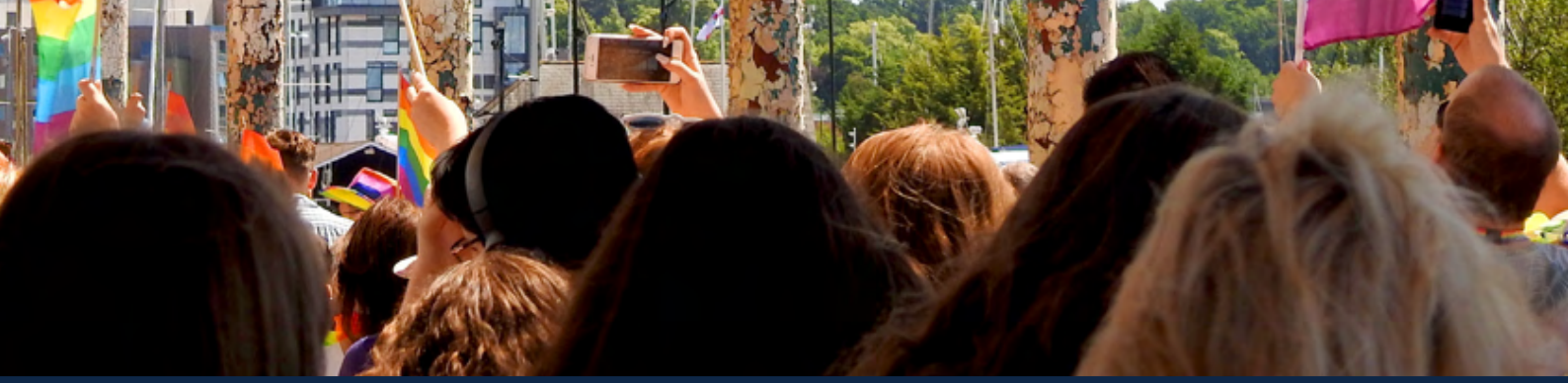
# GROUNDED IN EVIDENCE

These ambitions are rooted in a consistent pattern emerging across consultation, demographic analysis, investment & participation data and asset mapping.

Ipswich benefits from significant cultural investment, with Arts Council England funding standing at £31.80 per head in 2025/26. That is well above the national average and driven mainly by National Portfolio investment (core funding into organisations) rather than National Lottery Project Grants awards (project cost funding for organisations and individuals).

Other regional hubs show a similar picture. Norwich receives roughly twice the cultural spend per head for a broadly comparable population, and Cambridge is comparable too. It's important to understand that NPO investment reflects organisations carrying responsibilities well beyond the town boundary, across Suffolk, the region and nationally. Add to that a decade of real terms reductions in core funding and we begin to see that those headline figures understate the scale of pressure on that infrastructure.

So, whilst in-person arts engagement is broadly in line with national levels, the wider evidence points to uneven patterns of access, ownership and visibility across different communities, neighbourhoods and forms of cultural participation.



## WIDER SOCIETAL DATA SETS SHOW:

Ipswich has higher levels of deprivation than both the East of England and England overall

21.69% of residents aged 16+ have no qualifications, compared with 18.11% regionally and 18.08% nationally

Higher education participation is 30.23%, compared with 39.83% regionally and 42.23% nationally

31.62% of children aged 0–19 live in relative low-income families after housing costs

The creative and cultural economy has headroom for growth, with creative and cultural employment at 2.57% of all employment and creative/cultural GVA at 2.9% of total GVA

The five strategic ambitions therefore respond directly to this tension: Existing infrastructure is evidence that long term investment works, as without it, cultural engagement levels would likely be far lower, but the pressure of delivery needs to be shared across a wider stakeholder base in order to strengthen the relationship between culture, opportunity, belonging, aspiration and quality of life.