

Explore York Libraries and Archives

Report against contract April 2022- March 2023

Explore is a different kind of public service – an independent mutual society owned by our staff and community members and everything we do is shaped by the needs and ideas of the communities we serve. Explore receives two thirds of its income through its contract with City of York Council and the remainder we need to raise through trading, grants, and other fundraising. The cost of running Explore in 2022-23 was £3.8 million.

At Explore:

We inspire everyone to challenge their imagination, explore their potential and connect with each other, supporting and enriching our communities.

We make a difference to the communities across York, deliver on the requirements of our contract and achieve this vision by focusing our work on these six key purposes:

1. **Strong and Sustainable** – we are well governed, financially sustainable, and entrepreneurial.
2. **Connect communities** – we build stronger communities by being a safe, welcoming space where all can belong, enjoy new experiences, and connect to each other and the wider world.
3. **Share the joy of reading** – we enable everyone to share the joy of reading and literacy.
4. **Support Digital Inclusion and Information Literacy** – we support digital inclusion and enable access to trusted information.
5. **Challenge Imaginations** – we inspire people to learn, imagine, create, and share ideas.
6. **Wellbeing** – we support individual and community wellbeing.

This report is structured around our six core purposes and identifies key successes over the last year (April 2022-March 2023).

Overview

In a city of approximately 200,000 residents Explore has an impressive array of statistics. We had 724,717 visits to our libraries and 79,118 engagements (self-directed and staff led) engagements with our Archives. We provided over 2,571 events attended by 39,578 people. We recruited 10,628 new members, saw 430,712 visits to our website and our volunteers gave us over 18,914 hours of their time, equivalent to around £250,000 of staff time.

This second “post-pandemic” year has clearly demonstrated the value we provide in supporting our communities with new challenges. The role of libraries in improving literacy, digital skills and health and wellbeing in communities have been even more important as our communities have moved from a pandemic into a cost-of-living crisis. Day to day we have supported our communities through provision of warm and safe places and working closely with our partners to ensure they receive the support they need. This is evidenced throughout this report.

Our organisational resilience was strengthened in October by the appointment of 2 new non-executive directors, both with experience in the culture sector, in addition to the 2 new community directors appointed at our AGM in September. The appointment of my role in January 2023 now puts us in an excellent position to focus on organisational growth and sustainability for future years.

Our financial resilience has been tested with the inflationary increases that have been seen, dramatic increase in all our costs but most notably in heat and light, made more challenging by our desire to be warm spaces for our communities, however we have continued with the sound financial prudence that we have demonstrated over the past four years to ensure we have ended this year with an operational profit.

We continue to think innovatively, as demonstrated by the fantastic news in November that we would be an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation, one of only 16 library services across the country. This is a brilliant accolade for us and recognises our

reputation as a provider of high-quality cultural experiences across all our communities.

Strong and Sustainable

Overall Performance

We continue to track our performance against our pre-pandemic data however as the visit's performance demonstrates we are on track to be "back" to pre-pandemic levels next year. To have achieved this within three years is a sound achievement.

Visits: 724,717 visits in total across the year exceeding our target by 9%. Our aim was to be at 80% of pre-covid levels by the end of the year and we had achieved this by November. Our Explore Centres continue to perform strongly as does New Earswick and the new Haxby and Wigginton Library. The downward trend in attendance to our mobile library continues and will be a focus for our overall Service Review to be carried out in 2023-24.

Physical and E-Issues: Physical issues were at 95% of our pre-pandemic levels benchmarking ahead of the Libraries Connected sample. There is a decline in issues of large print and audio books however this is countered with an increase in e-issues which are 9% ahead of target (397, 376) which are generally considered to have better accessibility features.

PC Usage: There is a continued downward trend in PC usage with 41,866 sessions this year.

Website Usage: Our website has seen an 8% increase in visits compared to last year. We have seen an increased use of the on-line catalogue in the final quarter of the year which is potentially attributable to the removal of reservation fees.

Customer Feedback

In Autumn 2022 Explore ran the Public Services Quality Group (PSQG) survey, which is a national pen and paper survey of Reading Room users administered by Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy (CIPFA). Overall customer satisfaction rating was 9.3 (out of 10) and there were many areas where perceptions had improved from the last time the survey was run in 2016, so the results were very positive overall. We identified some useful

information about our audiences: for example, over half the responders were new users (either new to Explore or to Archives in general) and the age of the audience has decreased since last time with the largest age group now being under 25s.

On an ongoing basis Explore gathers ad hoc feedback from customers via many channels, primarily face to face conversations, but we also gain feedback via our online form; email and social media comments. We collect these comments on a database to monitor trends and calculate response times where required.

The key themes identified in 2022-2023 were suggestions for shaping the new Haxby Library (e.g. furniture and signage); requests for longer café opening hours across the library cafes; requests for foreign language books; and suggestions to re-instate printed newspapers and magazines following our move to digital provision.

The majority of comments recorded however are complimentary, with customers keen to tell us what our services mean to them. It's clear that Explore has a significant social impact on our customers, especially in terms of their sense of connection to the community and to their wellbeing. A few comments from 2022-2023 are:

“This really is my happy place. It's a wonderful library with great books and lovely staff. I look forward to coming.”

“I don't know how I would survive without the library.”

“Thank you for helping me to get warm.”

Financial Overview

Libraries have a pivotal role to play in enriching our communities by offering access to a diverse range of knowledge, resources, and cultural experience, fostering literacy, lifelong learning and social cohesion.

In line with many organisations, particularly in the charitable sector, the inflationary increases in 2022-23, particularly those linked to fuel, were huge. Explore's energy costs increased over 111% from £97, 339 to £206,022. Explore continues to focus on

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and build its financial sustainability with our cafes showing a 26% increase and room hire a 38% increase from the previous year. In addition, we raised over £58,000 from grants and other fundraising income.

The income we receive from our contract with CYC remains essential, providing 2/3 of our overall income. The index linked increase we receive each year, equating to 5% in 2022-23, was critical in ensuring we could continue to support the communities of York. This support in difficult times is gratefully received and acknowledged and envied further afield!

We understand the sustained challenges on the public purse and a key focus for us over the next five-year strategic period will be to build our capabilities around income generation and fundraising and to retain close scrutiny of our expenditure. Three of our core contracts are due for renewal in 2024-2025 and we will need to ensure value for money and demonstrate financial jurisprudence in our procurement decisions.

Our People

Our organisational resilience was strengthened with the appointment of two new non-executive directors Helen Apsey (Make It York) and Sarah O'Brien (York St John University) both with experience in the culture sector, and two new community directors – Rosemary Cook and Luke Castle appointed at September's AGM. In addition, I was appointed as new CEO in January. The aim over the next 12 months will be on developing a five-year vision with core themes already standing out including organisational growth and both environmental and financial sustainability.

Operationally, our staffing teams were boosted by several externally funded roles – a team of 6 part-time Coordinators to support the delivery of Our City Hub at York Explore every weekend, and a Digital Coordinator supporting on the delivery of the 100% Digital York project for the city, led by Explore.

Volunteers

With the new target of one volunteer per library opening hour, our volunteer support has increased across the year with 18,914 hours

donated by 549 of York's resident. Key activities such as the Summer Reading Challenge and the Big City Read recruited volunteers specifically to deliver those projects, whilst the launch of Explore's digital offer in October saw the introduction of a new role to support customers who need 1-to-1 help accessing digital resources. Our volunteers also tell us how volunteering makes a difference to their wellbeing too, helping them gain new skills, experience, and confidence.

Friends' Groups

Explore has Friends groups at Haxby and Wigginton, Bishopthorpe, Dunnington, Dringhouses, Copmanthorpe, Fulford and Poppleton. These groups are strong and active advocates for the local libraries working tirelessly to raise funds and spread the word of the importance of their local library to their communities. Over the year they have built back the level of activity at their branches raising money, arranging community events, and supporting their libraries in a myriad of other ways.

Community Members

Community Members can act as powerful advocates for Explore in York and beyond; 23 new community members were added to the register and 36 members were removed during 2022-23 There was a total of 774 community members on 31 March 2023.

We communicated regularly with Community Members during the year through the director recruitment campaign and election and through various other direct emails. Explore will look to developing this cohort further in the coming strategic period working with our members to develop their voice further and look at potential for broader support against some of Explore key strategic challenges.

Connecting Communities

Explore is in the community, for the community and shaped by the community. We work collaboratively with a broad range of community and cultural partners to facilitate and support a broad array of events and activities that provide our communities what they want.

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Our libraries, archives and reading cafes create a shared, inclusive sense of place where people of all ages and the varied communities of our city can connect and know they belong. Our Library managers build relationships with local partners such as local area co-ordinators and front-line contact is seen as crucial, and a game-changer as can be seen from the following experience at Acomb Explore:

A lady came to the desk in February 2022. At 71 she had lost her husband to cancer a couple of months before. She was really struggling to cope and was very nervous about even leaving the house, although she seemed physically able, because of Covid and just being alone. She was Chinese and her English was good, but she felt dis-associated from other people because she felt she couldn't speak to them as well as she would like. But since she had been out of China so long that she didn't feel like she conversed well in Chinese either and felt like she didn't belong anywhere. She was extremely distressed and upset. She spoke to the Acomb Explore Manager, who happened to be on the Reception Desk at the time. She told her that she wondered whether it was even worth carrying on with life. Fiona chatted to her and after a while told her about Penny Hutchinson the Local Area Co-ordinator. She asked if she could pass her details on to Penny and ask Penny to get in touch with her. A couple of days later Penny met the lady at Acomb Explore Café for a coffee and a chat. Many months later in July 2022 Penny told Fiona that she had seen the customer at a coffee morning in the community. She reported that she had made a lovely supportive network of friends and was feeling much stronger and was doing very well. In fact, Penny had given her a list of things in the local area, and she had replied "I am actually really busy Penny so I don't think I would have the time".

Penny Hutchinson said "we wouldn't have been able to do this without that initial contact from you all at the library. That crucial front-line contact is really a game changer."

Our City Hub

June saw the launch at York Explore of Our City Hub for migrants and refugees, a partnership with City of York Council. The hub was

held every Saturday for an initial 12 month funded project (4 x 10-hour co-ordinator posts) and has now been extended to June 2024. The hub is supported by 40+ volunteers from migrant communities who speak a variety of different languages.

The standard format is two sessions from 9.30-11.30am and 1-3pm. The morning session is a drop-in information session. Co-ordinators are on hand to support with information and referral to support organisations if needed. During the morning volunteers provide activities in the children's library while parents access the information they need. The afternoon English classes have been so popular that an additional class is now held during the morning, the afternoon is also a time for community activities.

A special event in August marked Ukrainian Independence Day. The Lord Mayor attended and gave out certificates to the Hub volunteers and engaged with the activities which included workshops based on Ukrainian culture, talks around the history, culture and literature of Ukraine and a look at traditional embroidery.

Library Lawn: A community space in the heart of the city

We took advantage of the glorious, hot weather in summer to share some great outdoor classic games - Chess, Connect 4, Jenga, Snakes and Ladders, Bowls, and Hopscotch - for everyone to enjoy on Library Lawn at York Explore. The games were all very popular, especially the chess set. We had great feedback from families saying how much they enjoyed the games and how much fun they had. Over the summer, lots of families visited the garden and also took advantage of the picnic tables donated by York Bid, which enabled them to stay longer and enjoy their lunch.

Future Libraries Investment Programme

Further evidence of CYC's continued support of Explore and what it provides for the City of York is demonstrated in the commitment to further developments of the city's libraries through the Future Libraries Investment Programme.

Haxby and Wigginton library closed 28 May and work started on the development of Oaken Grove Community Centre. Focus groups were held with partners, residents, and key stakeholders

directly informing the internal and external design and layout. The new Haxby and Wigginton Library within the Oaken Grove Community Centre opened on 4 January and has already proved to be a fantastic success, attracting over 8000 visitors, and receiving great PR and press attention.

As part of our continued commitment to working with and listening to our communities during 2022-23 we consulted customers, residents, and other stakeholders about the City's forthcoming library developments at Acomb and Clifton.

In May and June 2022, we ran a series of focus groups and informal discussions for the third phase of the Clifton consultation. The purpose of this third phase was to enable creative customer-led solutions around layout, design etc.; to identify problems/gaps in the proposed plans; and to learn more about the needs of specific audiences.

In March 2023 we ran a survey regarding the forthcoming development work at Acomb. Previous consultation exercises addressing the Future of Front Street (Spring 2021) and Library Satisfaction (Autumn 2021) had already given us a flavour of what residents and customers want, particularly around plants and trees; pedestrian areas; outdoor café areas; independent businesses and speciality markets; quiet study areas; better protection from draughts; and improvements to the library's appearance. Building on this, the March survey asked residents to rank their priorities for the work, and invited them to add their own comments.

Cost of Living

Explore responded to the need to raise awareness of various government funds available to residents to mitigate the cost-of-living increase. We partnered with City of York Council, Citizens Advice York and Age UK to provide one-to-one support to targeted households within the Tang Hall area. Twice a month, the mobile library stopped in 2 key locations within Tang Hall, and local residents could hop on and work with Citizens Advice staff to access the financial support they were entitled to. We have also held a number of free or low-cost activities over the year including live music, and theatre. Every library hosted a programme of free

activities before Christmas, to support families looking for low-cost high-quality experiences.

Joy of Reading

Reading is vital because it enriches our lives intellectually, emotionally, and socially. It opens doors to new knowledge, perspective and experiences, making it an essential activity for personal growth and wellbeing.

Reading can make a significant difference in the development of children, nurturing their cognitive, language and social skills while fostering a lifelong love of learning.

Explore delivered two major events in 2022-23 which ensured the joy of reading was illuminated to our communities.

The Summer Reading Challenge

The theme for the Summer Reading Challenge 2022 was Gadgeteers, with an aim to not only encourage reading for pleasure over the long summer holidays but also to inspire children to get hands on with invention and discovery. We had 2998 participants, with 152 taking part from nurseries in targeted areas. To ensure our activities and events remained accessible for all families, for the first time we had a range of free and/or pay as you feel events, so everyone was able to attend, regardless of their financial situation.

In addition to the above we continue to support reading in children with our work on early years development. A priority focus for Early Talk for York is to extend their work to focus on targeted areas where more help and support is needed to help get children ready for school. We worked with them to launch a Stay and Play session at Acomb, using ward funding.

The Bloodaxe Reading Challenge ran from 26 November 2022 to 28 January 2023. There was an increase of 8.5% of children starting the challenge this year compared to 2021/22, and 46% of children finished the challenge this year compared to 35% in 21/22.

The Big City Read

Our work bringing adults together to share the joy of reading is highlighted in the successful launch of the Big City Read, Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes* at the Museum at the end of September 2022. We worked with partners and other cultural providers to bring audiences together around the themes of the book. The programme ranged from traditional author events and pop-up readers' groups across all libraries and reading cafes, to theatre performances in libraries and targeted work with residents of The Groves area of the York where much of the book is set. A total of 679 people took part in 40 events, with many more engaging with the book.

5000 print copies were distributed in libraries and reading cafes, via partner organisations, and at pop-up sessions. They were also given out at all of the events. We also purchased unlimited simultaneous downloads of the title as an e-book and e-audio for the period of the Big City Read.

Feedback received demonstrates the importance of continuing to promote the joy of reading to our communities with comments such as:-

“The Big City Read encouraged me to pick up a book and start reading again!”

“The Big read got me to visit my local library for the first time”

“The Big City Read put me in touch with other people who have a joy of books and helped me feel part of a wider community.”

Support Digital inclusion and Information Literacy

Libraries are universal spaces; places of social inclusion offering safe spaces for communities to connect and engage. We can bridge the digital divide by offering access to information, free internet access and digital training.

Digital Inclusion

We secured funding for a 100% Digital York Partnership coordinator for 18.5hpw for 18 months. Digital Café drop-in

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sessions were provided in partnership with Keeping Digital at Tang Hall Explore and in community venues in Acomb at Sanderson House and St Wulstan's in Heworth supported by local ward fund. Over the course of the year, we have developed our approach towards a more targeted focus on communities within Acomb, working with community groups and organisations to introduce digital inclusion as a tool to achieve their aims and to support identified outcomes and impact. We have supported specific groups city-wide, for example supporting food banks with sim cards.

We re-focused and developed Explore's digital offer which was launched in Get Online Week in October. Supported by a team of volunteers, we delivered one-to-one and small group sessions on the basics of getting online. We continued to support customers needing one-to-one support to request and access Household Support Fund and Energy Rebate Payments online, with 42 customers supported in Acomb alone.

Access to quality information

We worked with partner organisations to provide communities with local access to specific information, advice and guidance in all of our Explore Centres including National Careers Service, Healthwatch York and Wilberforce Trust. To support sustainability, York Explore launched a climate corner, bringing library resources and City of York staff together as they consulted on the city's climate strategy. This was supported by other partner organisations who provided advice on energy saving and cutting energy bills at home, helping residents cope with the rise in cost of living.

Challenge Imaginations

Libraries are places to access culture and creativity providing a bridge to broader cultural participation.

“Not only is the library an arts venue it's an arts venue where new and unique things can happen. We are very grateful that it's on our doorstep.”

Explore received the fantastic news in November that we would be an Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation

(NPO), one of only 16 libraries in the country. Demonstrating our continued commitment to bringing in additional funding streams this will bring in £660,000 to Explore over three years. The programme builds on our excellent Explore Labs programme and uses our own magical mix of communities, the Archive and local artists to create amazing creative content. The programme will focus on a different Explore Centre each year starting with Burnholme, Acomb and finishing at the new Explore Centre at Clifton.

What is particularly significant about this award is the importance ACE have given to the partnership working between the six core NPO organisations (York Museums Trust, York Theatre, Next Door But One, National Centre for Early Music and Pilot Theatre) and the strength Explore can bring supporting those organisations in taking culture to communities. These partnerships are core to the delivery of Yorks Cultural Strategy.

Key Cultural Highlights of 2022-23

Children and families: The Firework-Makers Daughter performance

Working with Next Door But One (NDB1) eight performances of The Firework-Maker's Daughter were delivered in October half-term in Acomb, York, Tang Hall and New Earswick Libraries. Tickets were priced as low as possible to help ensure it was an affordable family activity. All were fully booked with 173 people attending the performances. The audience was 60% children and 40% adults.

- 20% of audience members had a disability.
- 12% of audience members had never been to the theatre before this performance. With only 4% of the total audience saying they were frequent theatregoers.
- Key reasons the audience chose to attend included: trusted family friendly activity (96%), familiarity of venue (68%) and an affordable price-point (64%).
- 92% of audience members would 'definitely' attend a future NDB1 performance and the remaining 8% would 'almost certainly' attend.

"A brilliant story that was adapted perfectly for the age of my children. The fact that all of us were giggling throughout is

evidence of lovely storytelling. Also love the inclusion of Makaton - spot on!"

"A beautiful story that takes you on an adventure and shows you the importance of friendship. Great for children's and adults' imagination."

Adults: Sonic Traces at Hungate Reading Café

Sonic Traces brought together a diverse group of artists. Throughout the day, a large-scale collaborative drawing was created in response to a continuously changing soundscape, encompassing environmental sounds through to experimental music. Artists interpreted the sounds they heard by translating their sensory experiences of sonic textures and atmospheric vibrations into marks on paper. The meeting area was turned into an exhibition white space. The artists that took part gave overwhelmingly positive feedback with interest about using the space.

The event also gave us the opportunity to use the Hungate Café Instagram platform to promote a creative event using short videos (reels).

Children and families: English Touring Opera: The Wish Gatherer

We hosted the English Touring Opera at Acomb Explore. They performed a children's opera, the *Wish Gatherer*. At only £4.50 a ticket it was a low-cost opportunity for the children of Acomb to encounter a cultural experience which would normally be out of reach. In addition, we provided 20 free tickets for disadvantaged families identified through our local contacts i.e., Local Area Co-ordinator. The event was popular and sold out really quickly. There were 71 attendees in total.

Wellbeing

Our libraries play a key role in supporting the health and wellbeing agenda by offering a wide range of resources, from books on mental health and self-help to activities and events that promote creativity and social inclusion. Additionally, we provide spaces

where communities can access information and connect with others.

York's Dead Good Festival

The festival aims to encourage people to be more open about dying, death and bereavement. The launch day was hosted at York Explore. Events and activities supported people to express themselves in different ways, whilst offering advice and support on practical matters.

World Mental Health Day

On 10 October 2023 World Mental Health Day was promoted on social media and we held a targeted Big City Read giveaway at Foss Park hospital. Reading Well for Teens new collection was launched at Explore Centres.

Big City Read Artist in residence

A major new element of the Big City Read was to host an artist in residence. In partnership with Supporting Live Art and Performance (SLAP) we hosted an artist as part of their Arts Council funded artist incubation programme during the Big City Read. We worked with Tabitha Grove to support her to develop her solo piece Them There Then That which included themes of loss, grief and mental health issues. As part of the development process, we hosted four workshops at Explore centres, followed by performances at five libraries including one at Hungate Reading Café. Audience sizes were small initially but grew as the mini tour progressed. Many people who booked had opted to book a free ticket but wanted to donate after the performance, testament to how much the audiences enjoyed and were moved by it. Tabitha will be touring the show nationally in 2023.

Archives

Explore is responsible for acquiring, preserving and promoting the Archive and Local History collections relating to the City of York council area. We hold just over 500m3 of records, over half of which are council records, and 5GB of born-digital records; two thirds of our records are held offsite at a depository in Cheshire.

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Explore York Archives (EYA) holds collections of national and even international significance. York's position as the second largest city in medieval England and its ongoing role in civic and community life leave an invaluable archival legacy, enabling The City Archive to tell the story of over 850 years of York's history, the most significant civic record outside of London. We applied for and were awarded provisional Archive Service accreditation in 2018 and were moved to fully accredited in 2020, maintaining this at review stage in 2021. We are due to submit a reapplication in June 2024.

Archives Accreditation focuses on three core areas of archives activity: the overall health of the organisation, its collections management and its engagement activities with stakeholders. EYA has a strong focus on engagement and collaboration which is clearly demonstrated in our activity over the year. EYA had over 130,00 engagements during the year; a proportion of those are staff mediated including researchers in the reading room plus attendees at events (be they on site, off-site or online; for adults or for children; public facing or for targeted audiences) but the great majority are self-directed which includes: Flickr views, sessions on the Images website, Ancestry Documents retrieved, and Find My Past records viewed.

Great examples of our engagement work within EYA include our work with York Museums Trust (YMT) on their Heritage Hunters programme. We worked with YMT to develop and deliver two archive sessions for participants of the group who are all from the Groves area in York. In addition, as part of the city-wide Residents Festival, in January we held two events focused on the theme of historical maps in York. The first event – Map Attack! Lego City of Wonder – invited families to build structures out of Lego, inspired by an historic map of York printed onto a large floor mat. The second event – Mapping Historic York - was an exhibition of original maps and plans of the city.

A significant part of the work of the EYA team involves managing the archive collections, especially in relation to processing new accessions to the archive, and then cataloguing those accessions to international standards to make them accessible to the public.

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EYA has experienced a significant staff turnover over the last 10 years with the current team being very new in post with the Civic Archivist appointed in April 2022 and the Community and Digital Engagement Archivist in August 2022. The focus of the new team has been on getting a sound understanding of the collections against the standards and ambitions as set out in the last Archives Accreditation submission. This work will form the basis of the resubmission in March 2024. As part of that work EYA carry out annual collections audit, in 2022-23 this was focussed on the Archive Pod.

During 2022-2023, EYA took in 28 new accessions. Processing new accessions involves liaising and negotiating with depositors and CYC officers about the material that they have, making appraisal decisions in line with our collections policy, physically taking in those items or digitally storing them, and then creating an accessions entry which provides basic information about the collection.

Once the collection has been accessioned, it must then be organised, re-packaged, and catalogued. This can be a lengthy and time-consuming process, and EYA has a considerable backlog of collections which are yet to be catalogued. These uncatalogued collections remain inaccessible to the public.

Confirmation was received in Q3 that a decision had been reached within City of York Council to finance and project-manage the implementation of Preservica enabling Explore to manage born-digital archives and securing the future of the archive holdings. A project team has been convened with Officers from CYC to ensure systems and methodologies are in place for the management of born-digital records.

Looking Ahead

There is so much to look forward to! Explore will deliver its first year of cultural activities linked to our ACE National Portfolio Organisation status; these activities will be centred around Burnholme working with the communities there to produce creative outcomes rooted in their knowledge of what Burnholme means to them. We are working in partnership with the Childrens Services department within CYC as part of the pilot for Family Hubs with our

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three main Explore Centres participating. In addition, we will be developing our vision for the next five years building on all the great work that we have done to date and ensuring we continue to support the key priorities for the City of York.

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