

Report to	cabinet 15 July 2025	
Lead Cabinet Member	Antoinette Nestor, Culture, Economy and Skills	
Lead Officer	Frances Alderton, Strategic Lead for Culture	
Key Decision	No	

Director Approval: Chief Executive confirms that the report author has sought the advice of all appropriate colleagues and given due regard to that advice; that the equalities impacts and other implications of the recommended decisions have been assessed and accurately presented in the report; and that they are content for the report to be put to Cabinet for decision.

Folk Festival Review

Executive Summary

The Cambridge Folk Festival should be relaunched in 2026 with a refreshed, citywide, multi-venue approach to secure its long-term future. Cherry Hinton Hall would remain the festival's anchor and spiritual home, recognising its central place in the festival's identity and history.

The programme would expand to include other much-loved venues across Cambridge, to enable greater accessibility, new creative opportunities, and wider community engagement. The refresh is designed to protect what makes the festival special while ensuring it is more inclusive, financially resilient and culturally relevant.

Following an independent review by sector experts the options identified were developed with further feedback from a wider range of stakeholders including local venues and artists, industry peers, folk festival audiences and staff. The officer recommendations in this report incorporate that additional feedback, as well as more detailed financial modelling.

Multi-venue formats have proved to be very successful for Celtic Connections in

Glasgow, the Brighton Festival, and Edinburgh's Fringe festival. These renown examples demonstrate the viability of a distributed venue format to enhance audience experience, inclusion and financial sustainabilityle.

Building on the festival's strengths and embracing a new multi-venue format offers a positive and practical route to secure for future generations one of Cambridge's most cherished cultural assets.

Separate attachments:

- 1. Counterculture Review of the Folk Festival
- 2. Equalities Impact Assessment

Relevant background information

- 3. Previous Folk Festival papers: Special meeting of Environment and Community Scrutiny Committee on 20 March, 2025
- 4. City Council Culture Strategy: Agenda for Environment and Community

 Scrutiny Committee on Thursday, 21st March, 2024, 6.00 pm Cambridge

 Council

1.	Recommendations
1.1	It is recommended that Cabinet:
	1. Approves the relaunch of the Cambridge Folk Festival from 2026 as a city-wide multi-venue, multi-day festival as described at para 3.1.
	2. Endorses the principle that Cherry Hinton Hall, the spiritual home of the festival, should remain the anchor venue.
	3. Approves in principle a contingency budget of up to £215,000 to be used if necessary to fund the risk of income loss in the first year as the new format establishes itself; and an additional investment of £60,000 to enhance marketing, infrastructure, local audience and artist development; subject to a budget bid to full council as part of the 2026/27 budget setting process.
	4. Notes the importance of maintaining the festival's identity, community links, and programming quality, including through ongoing engagement with Folk Clubs,

artists, and cultural stakeholders.

- 5. Delegates authority to the Director of Communities to finalise a business plan and implement delivery, in consultation with the Cabinet Lead; and,
- 6. Notes officers would like to encourage the Chair of O&S (Services, Climate and Communities) to consider a review of progress to deliver the refreshed festival format at its meeting in February 2026.

2. Purpose

The recommendations arise from a comprehensive review process, from the Festival Team, specialist consultancy and engagement with audiences, sector experts, audiences, and local Folk Clubs to explore the festival's long-term viability.

Following a 'fallow year' in 2025, this report recommends a new format retaining Cherry Hinton Hall as the anchor venue, alongside a broader multi-venue approach across the city for the Cambridge Folk Festival from 2026. The recommendation sets out a new direction for the festival that can establish a financially resilient, culturally relevant, and community-rooted format for the future of the festival.

The relaunch commits to preserving the festival's core spirit while enabling a refreshed approach that responds to wider audience expectations, financial pressures, widens accessibility for the city's residents and the Council's ambition for a thriving culture across the City.

3. Options considered

- 3.1 A structured options appraisal was undertaken to assess alternative models for the future delivery of the Cambridge Folk Festival. Each option was evaluated against criteria including:
 - Financial resilience
 - Operational feasibility
 - Reputational risk
 - Stakeholder and audience support and feedback
 - Alignment with the Council's cultural strategy

Option 1: Revised greenfield model at Cherry Hinton Hall

This option sought to retain a single-site greenfield format, with cost reductions achieved through smaller staging and some service reductions. While familiar to audiences, this model carried high financial risk. Key challenges included:

- Infrastructure and operational costs that would likely exceed income, with a commercial risk of incurring a financial loss of up to £550,000 each year
- Dependence on strong ticket and camping sales in a volatile market
- Limited flexibility to scale, innovate, or to reach new audiences

Despite efforts to revise it, the greenfield model was ultimately assessed to be too highrisk and financially unsustainable in current market conditions and is not recommended.

Option 2: Multi-venue city-wide model (Recommended)

This approach retains Cherry Hinton Hall as the Festival's anchor venue while expanding the programme across multiple city-based venues. It provides:

- A scaled back two-day greenfield event with flexibility to scale up or down in future combined with the use of other venues across the city, lowering the financial risk, including basic camping on site.
- Greater accessibility and engagement with local communities for a more inclusive
 Festival with programming spread over an extended period of a week or more.
- Flexibility to adapt and grow audience reach over time
- Better alignment with public sector values, inclusion goals, and environmental impact reduction

While this model requires stronger coordination and early partner commitment, the risks are more easily mitigated and offers greater return on investment over time.

Option 3: Outsourcing to a commercial partner

This option explored full external delivery by a third-party operator. While it could reduce direct financial exposure, concerns included:

- Loss of local control over programming, identity, and community engagement
- Potential commercialisation at odds with the festival's ethos and audience values
- Limited interest from suitable providers without guaranteed financial return
 This option is not recommended.

Option 4: Permanent closure

This approach would involve ending the festival in its current form. While eliminating all

financial risk, this option was judged to have significant downsides:

- Loss of a nationally significant cultural event with strong brand recognition
- Negative reputational impact locally and nationally
- Missed opportunity to modernise and lead within the festival sector

Closure, and significant rebranding, of the festival was strongly opposed in stakeholder engagement and is not recommended.

4. Background and key issues

- 4.1 The Cambridge Folk Festival has been a central feature of the city's cultural offer since 1965. However, by 2024 the festival incurred a significant financial loss due to increased costs and reduced income. These factors also had a significant impact on the wider festival sector. A fallow year was agreed for 2025 to enable a full review. Key considerations related to this decision included:
 - Unprecedented financial losses: the 2024 Festival achieved a deficit of over £320,000, reversing a pre-COVID trend of surpluses and raising immediate concerns about the festival's financial resilience.
 - Sector instability: More than 70 UK festivals were cancelled or paused in 2024, reflecting wider volatility across the industry due to rising costs, market saturation, and post-pandemic shifts in consumer behaviour. More recent <u>local reports</u> identified 24 other festivals were cancelled in 2025 in the East of England.
 - **Declining income**: Ticket and camping sales were significantly down compared to pre-COVID years, with camping revenue halving since 2016, reducing income from one of the festival's key profit drivers.
 - **Escalating delivery costs**: Infrastructure costs rose dramatically, with equipment costs increasing by 60% since 2016, and Covid and national economy related pressures adding complexity to logistics and staffing.
 - **Eroding market position**: Increased competition from larger commercial festivals such as Latitude, coupled with the festival's fixed site model which makes it less adaptable to changing audience expectations.

4.2 Objectives of the review

The review aimed to:

- Explore financially resilient delivery models not reliant on long term subsidy
- Ensure the Festival becomes more relevant, resilient and inclusive in the future
- Develop options aligned with the Council's Cultural Strategy
- Preserve Cherry Hinton Hall as the spiritual home of the Festival

4.3 | Summary of review findings

The review, led by Counterculture (Appendix 1) and supported by Council officers, included detailed financial modelling, sector benchmarking, and engagement with artists, venues, folk clubs, audiences, and peer festivals. It concluded that a traditional greenfield model posed significant financial and operational risks, primarily driven by infrastructure costs including staging, production, and on-site facilities such as camping.

Alongside this, the review identified strategic opportunities to improve long-term resilience and cultural impact:

- **Programming**: strong interest in refreshed programming that diversifies genres, strengthens ties with the local folk scene, and promotes emerging and underrepresented artists.
- Marketing and audience development: potential to build the Festival's national profile through improved digital marketing and targeted outreach to younger and more diverse audiences.
- Partnerships and local engagement: expanded collaboration with Cambridge venues, educational institutions, and community partners.
- **Brand positioning**: reframing the Festival as both rooted in tradition and progressive in its ambition to remain relevant in a competitive cultural landscape.

Consultant recommendations

- A city-wide, multi-venue model offers greater flexibility, accessibility, and resilience
- Audiences are open to change, provided identity and quality are preserved
- Alignment with the Council's values and wider festival sector trends

The consultant's report (separate attachment 1) presents financial analysis and proposals with a cost associated with the different options. The details of budgets have been

redacted where Festival contractor costs are commercially sensitive.

Feeback from Overview & Scrutiny Committee

5

The O&S Services, Climate and Communities Committee met on 1 July 2025. Officers presented an update on the Folk Festival review and answered questions from members of the committee. Chair, Cllr Karen Young summarised feedback from the committee to Cabinet, as follows:

"The Overview & Scrutiny agreed with the principles that officers had been working to — as outlined at the meeting. These include, financial prudence/viability; supporting a thriving city, audience and resident satisfaction; supporting creators, community cohesion, local youth; enhancing the national reputation of the city, and greater inclusion.

There was support from the committee for a focus on folk music as a genre, supporting local talent and involving local communities. The inclusivity of any proposal was stressed as important, as was financial viability. There has been a wide variety of festival formats that have been explored during the review. Overview & Scrutiny would like to comment on these once they have seen the Cabinet paper."

6.0 Recommendations and rationale

6.1 The proposed multi-venue model represents a forward-looking refresh of the Cambridge Folk Festival. It offers a balanced response to the operational, financial, and cultural challenges identified through the review, preserving the Festival's identity while evolving its delivery for long-term resilience and relevance.

While the move away from a fully greenfield model represents a shift, the proposed approach draws on well-established models of city-based festivals that retain artistic quality, audience intimacy, and a strong identity.

Events such as Brighton Festival, Edinburgh Fringe, and Celtic Connections demonstrate how multi-venue formats can successfully combine large headline performances with smaller, participatory events — supporting artistic collaboration, widening access and audience inclusion, and reducing risks associated with infrastructure costs.

In this context, Cherry Hinton Hall should remain the spiritual home of the Festival, hosting

key performances and anchoring the wider programme. Its continued role provides familiarity and continuity for long-standing audiences, while supporting an expanded Festival across more parts of the City providing greater flexibility, accessibility, and inclusion.

A multi-venue approach would enable the Festival to attract new audiences and enhance its global profile by leveraging Cambridge's renowned cultural assets, including iconic venues and community spaces. This reflects both local expectations and broader trends in the festival sector, and supports a distinctive experience that remains creative, and community-centred while also being financially resilient.

6.2 The recommendation is further underpinned by:

- **Strategic alignment**: The multi-venue format supports the Council's Cultural Strategy and Corporate Plan by promoting community engagement, access to the arts, and cultural innovation without ongoing reliance on General Fund subsidy;
- Engagement and feedback: While recognising concerns about change, audiences, artists, folk clubs, and national peers expressed broad support for a refreshed model that retains core values while modernising delivery.
- Innovation and partnership: The multi-venue approach strengthens local partnerships, enables creative curation, and improves operational flexibility while reducing infrastructure risks, by utilising many of the city's cultural assets already set up for music and entertainment
- Sector benchmarking: The model draws from successful UK festivals operating across multiple venues, including:
 - Celtic Connections (Glasgow)
 - Manchester Folk Festival
 - o The Deer Shed Festival's recent adaptation into city-based programming

6.3 **Programming principles**

It is important to set out a commitment to the next phase of work to provide confidence that the proposed multi-venue model would remain true to the origins of the Cambridge Folk Festival, while creating new opportunities for artistic collaboration, creative development, and engaging with new and diverse audiences.

Programming will be guided by the following commitments:

- Artist collaboration: The Festival will enable collaboration between established and emerging artists, honouring its legacy as a creative space for musical experimentation and exchange.
- **Support for new talent**: Building on The Den and other initiatives, the Council will continue to support and further develop the ethos of the Christiane Raphael Prize, offering performance, mentoring, and visibility for rising artists.
- **Community feel**: Partner venues will be curated to reflect the Festival's inclusive and intimate atmosphere featuring workshops, and informal sessions.
- Local curation: Folk Clubs and community contributors will continue to help shape the programme, ensuring the Festival reflects and celebrates Cambridge's grassroots music scene.
- 6.4 Subject to development and programming of the 2026 Festival it is proposed that it will balance the familiar with the new. Cherry Hinton Hall will remain a central part of the programme, hosting a scaled back two-day greenfield festival with two medium stages, food and drink, core facilities, and a basic, on-site camping offer that is cost effective.

While scaled back compared to previous years, Cherry Hinton Hall will continue to offer a shared, open-air experience that brings people together retaining the distinctive spirit that makes the Festival special. Folk Clubs will play a role in curating part of the programme, helping to retain the atmosphere and community feel that long-standing audiences value.

The multi-venue approach will put an emphasis on a broader cultural programme across the city to complement the greenfield venue at Cherry Hinton Hall. Performances, workshops, and community events will take place in some of Cambridge's most iconic and well-loved venues, offering fresh ways for people to engage with folk music and the wider Festival experience.

6.5 To support the successful relaunch in 2026, Cabinet is asked to approve a funding

package comprising:

- £215,000 contingency budget to be used if required to cover the risk of financial loss should ticket sales underperform expectations.
- £50,000 to support longer-term marketing and audience development
- £10,000 to develop local talent and support the Cambridge folk scene to support the future growth of the Festival

Opportunities for local and national sponsorship and philanthropic contributions will be explored where these align with the Festival's values. Though the current context is challenging. Following the initial refreshed format the festival should operate on the basis that no Council subsidy is required in subsequent years.

Note that the council's current financial projections assume a net income from the festival of £46,000 per year from 2026/27 onwards, based upon previous budgets. This income will need to be removed from the budget on an ongoing basis, regardless of the option chosen for the future of the festival.

7. Corporate plan and vision

- 7.1 This proposal aligns with the Council's Corporate Plan (2022–27) to create "a city that celebrates culture and community" by:
 - Sustaining one of the UK's best-known cultural events
 - Investing in creative programmes and talent
 - Expanding cultural access and audience diversity
 - Promoting innovation in cultural delivery

And, the Council's Vision where "Arts, sports and culture are thriving":

- Cambridge celebrates the city's diversity through a vibrant arts and cultural scene, including music, festivals, sports, and food and drink.
- Accessible arts, sports and culture provide spaces for people of all ages to come together to enjoy the city, both during the day and at night.

8. Consultation, engagement and communication

8.1 The review has been an opportunity to engage with a wide range of stakeholders that include:

- Input from Folk Clubs, artists, and cultural stakeholders
- Peer feedback from national experts and producers
- Audience surveys
- Member engagement

9. Anticipated outcomes, benefits or impact

9.1 The proposed model offers a platform for re-launching the Cambridge Folk Festival in a way that is resilient, more accessible to people across the City, and aligned with the Council's cultural ambitions. It balances cultural integrity with innovation and financial realism, providing a strong basis for success and accountability.

The following outcomes and benefits are anticipated:

- Cultural continuity with creative evolution: The Festival will continue to honour its legacy while embracing new formats, audiences, and partnerships.
- Place-based pride and engagement: Cherry Hinton Hall will remain a cherished focal point, while new venues will enable broader community reach.
- **Support for local talent and ecosystems**: Expanded opportunities for local musicians, venues, and creative organisations through commissioning, performance, and co-curation.
- **Reputational enhancement**: A successful refresh will reaffirm Cambridge's role as a national cultural leader, demonstrating boldness in adapting to changing contexts.

Outcome Area	Target / Indicator		
Financial resilience	50% ticket sales achieved (against conservative baseline); underwriting use capped		
Local partnerships	ps At least 5 Cambridge-based venues or partners engaged in 2026 delivery		
Artist development and equity	Minimum 10% of line-up drawn from emerging or underrepresented artists		
Local artist support	3+ support/development opportunities initiated		
Public perception	≥60% audience satisfaction on feedback (post-Festival survey)		

10. Implications

10.1	Relevant risks					
	Risk	Impact	Likelihood	Mitigation		
	Failure to meet ticket sales target	High – increased draw on underwriting	Medium	Conservative target; phased ticket release; strengthened marketing		
	Venue / partner unavailability or changes	Medium – model disruption	Medium	Early agreements; flexible contracting; multiple venue options		
	Loss of stakeholder trust or buy-in	Medium – reputational risk	Low/Medium	Continued dialogue with Folk Clubs, artists, and cultural partners		
	Public confusion over new model	Medium – reduced engagement	Medium	Clear comms plan that boldly and clearly celebrates the programme and venues and highlights innovation		
	Programme quality concerns	Medium – brand risk	Low/Medium	Maintain headline calibre; invest in emerging talent; diversify offer		
	Operational risks	Medium – delivery failure	Medium	Dedicated coordination; use of known venues; phased planning		
	Cost inflation or unexpected delivery costs	High – pressure on reserves	Low/Medium	Conservative budgeting; model flexibility; monitoring through 2025		
	Financial Implications					
10.2						
	The 2026 relaunch will be used to test and refine a longer-term financial model,					
	encouraging external funding, sponsorship, and partnerships. Further detail noted above,					
	including the objective that following the initial refresh in 2026 the festival is self-funding					
	and would not require Council subsidy.					
	Legal Implications					
10.3						
	Equalities and socio-economic Implications					
10.4	Please see appendix 2	2 EQIA				
	Net Zero Carbon, Clir	nate Change and E	nvironmenta	al implications		
10.5	The Council's event m	anagement team ha	ive a strong r	ecord in reducing carbon use at		
	indoor and outdoor eve	ents. Traditionally, th	ne Folk Festiv	ral has been a leader and winner		
	of the UK Greener Fes	tival awards by impl	ementing a w	ide range of measures including		
			_	rt schemes for ticket holders, and		

	strict sourcing and environmental standards for contractors and caterers. These						
	principles will be continued in any new future format. With a smaller outdoor even						
	there will be a lower environmental impact.						
	Procurement Implications						
10.6	There are no procurement implications. A variety of outdoor event contractor suppliers						
	are procured to deliver outdoor events. Contracts allow for cancellation and also allow						
	for flexibility in the specifications.						
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11.	Background documents						
10.1	Link to decision for Folk Festival fallow year in 2026 and financial analysis - Agenda for						
Council on Monday, 17th March, 2025, 6.00 pm - Cambridge Council							
	Link to Cultural Strategy - Agenda for Environment and Community Scrutiny Committee						
	on Thursday, 21st March, 2024, 6.00 pm - Cambridge Council						
11.	Appendices						
11.1	Consultant's Report						
	• EQIA						
	To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact						
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