

Perceptions and Purpose of IF Oxford: a discussion document

1. Summary

The charity Oxfordshire Science Festival (OSF) created IF Oxford in 2018. It runs long-term science and cultural projects, and operates a 'core' and 'fringe' programme of public events within an annual science and ideas festival in October.

With over 500 contributors annually and tens of thousands of authentic public engagements with content through the IF Oxford platform, there are many reasons for innovators and creatives to get involved, including: reaching new audiences, being part of events with a coordinated marketing effort and potential for meaningful organisational and individual cultural cooperation.

Digital, print and commissioned creative output during the Covid pandemic was well-received by stakeholders. Contributors and audiences value the Festival's independence, creative innovation, comprehensive offer (topic and format), social inclusion and broad impact.

Contributing delivery teams could become more powerful advocates for the Festival collective effort, communicating publicly and professionally, eg. within their organisations and networks.

The charity needs greater financial stability and the mismatch in resources and ambition requires attention. Risk factors include changes within contributing organisations (champions or priorities), short-term planning and global issues. Long-term investment generates sustained impact but a continued threat is that the "Festival after the next Festival" is far from certain.

2. Context

This assessment of IF Oxford was generated from a series of professional discussions and anonymised interviews with a range of contributing and non-contributing stakeholders.

The review period September 2021–March 2022 included the marketing, delivery and evaluation phase of the 2021 science and ideas Festival. This document was written when the UK government removed legal requirements to self-isolate following a positive COVID-19 test meanwhile continuing to advise good public health behaviours towards the pandemic.

The research methods comprised: semi-structured interviews by Trustees of the Oxford science and ideas Festival charity (Charity Number #1151361) with active sponsors and content providers; a three-month undergraduate business consultation on performance and peer analysis; and reflections from individuals involved in the OxLEP peer and mentor networks over a five month period. For more information about IF Oxford, visit: if-oxford.com/about

3. Why do people and organisations get involved? – a brief and recent history

Recent experience of public engagement with STEM and arts has been affected strongly by the Covid pandemic, and all organisations are still adapting to cultural and economic change.

The necessity for small, independent organisations to constantly pivot is well-known and the Oxford science and ideas Festival emerged in 2018 from the previous Oxfordshire Science Festival (OSF, the charity's name.) The reframing of a STEM festival in 2018 with a broader context of science and ideas culture faced initial objections from those who continued to use the Deficit Model of STEM, but otherwise was well-received by stakeholders of all kinds.

By maintaining constant dialogue with stakeholders, including the annual 360-degree processes where OSF Trustees enquire on Festival performance, the team consulted widely on options for coordinated public engagement activity in October 2020 during the pandemic (and subsequently in 2021.) IF Oxford took the decision to commit all of its limited resources to plan, organise and run (with 450 contributors) a month-long digital Festival in October 2020, when many other comparable activities were being cancelled at the height of the pandemic.

IF Oxford always is a product of community (professionals and publics), and collective agile action during the pandemic was appreciated by audiences: *"this has been a lifeline for me" and "fun and fact-filled Friday [2020] Lockdown"*; and valued highly by a range of institutional contributors: *"It was amazing... I don't think I would have done any public engagement if it wasn't for the encouragement of IF Oxford going ahead and providing a framework."*

Motivations and triggers for academic and business groups getting involved over the past few years typically include:

- *"To share wonder and inspire others"*
- *"To explore contemporary and future careers"*
- *"To build public trust"*

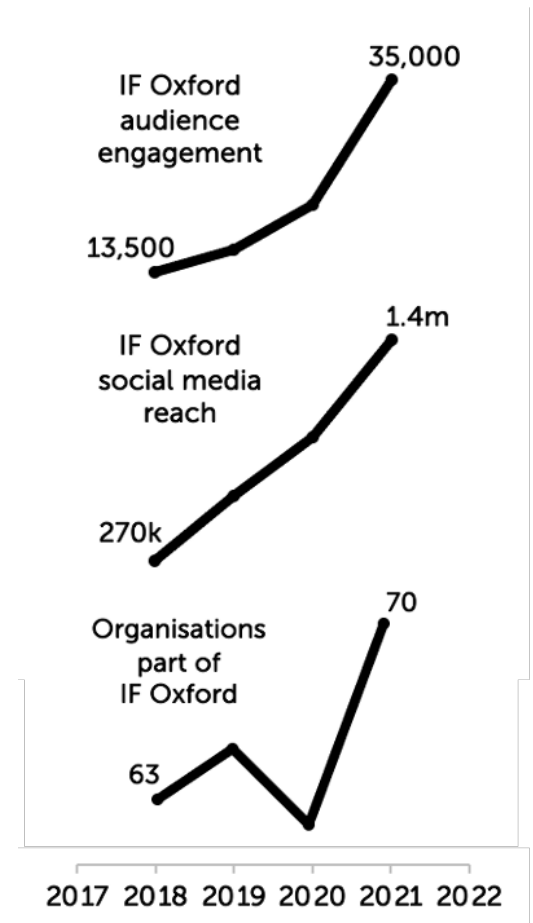
These broad aims are supplemented by the Festival's ethos that sharing content produced by an equitable diversity of communities, within a single platform, can more accurately reflect society. By doing this across science, humanities and art ("science and ideas"), collective effort can more effectively contribute UK culture, welcoming people who may see their values within IF Oxford.

The composition of contributors to IF Oxford varies year-on-year, with large and long-term Oxford-based **supporters choosing to increase or withdraw resources according to their own interests**. It is important to note, by contrast, that the science festival in Manchester is run by the Science Museum Group and the festival in Cambridge is run by the University of Cambridge, each with paid staff and institutional infrastructure. The operating budget for the science and ideas Festival in Oxford is a fraction of these two peers, and is formed from sponsorship, grants and participation fees (with two thirds of contributors' participation fees waived because, as an individual or an organisation, they could not find this money; a quarter of 'lost' annual turnover.)

Flexibility in this business model has facilitated over the past four years, equitable profiling of 200 student and researcher-led groups, 100 business-led groups and 170 charitable or independent community organisations or individuals. Contributions across years have ranged:

- 30–55% academic activities from universities, colleges and schools
- 20–25% business-led input or philanthropic support
- 30–50% charity, individual or neighbourhood groups contributing to the programme

Alternative public engagement opportunities exist (eg. Patient and Public Involvement, schools enrichment, nature reserves, television, other festivals and more), but the inclusive scope of



IF Oxford's programme (range of professional content) and market exposure (audience reach and cultural reputation) gives contributors a confidence to try something new, supporting valuable experiential training and CPD. Variation keeps the Festival fresh, but for some people this can foster a perceived sense of strategic ambiguity resulting from a need to remain sensitive to stakeholders' shifting priorities while maintaining a reliable public-facing identity.

Challenges and learning opportunities presented by the Covid pandemic have, for most long-standing contributors, erased the memory of poor Festival performance up to 2016, with broad agreement that a 'STEAM' (STEM+Arts) approach is the right one. Consensus across the city, and the IF Oxford contributors and audiences is that the Festival's response to Covid was impressive, developing organisational science-cultural capital. A substantial number of organisations are eager for a return to In Real Life (IRL) experience, though fully reverting to this would be a mistake – the social and communications tools honed during Covid should not be discarded.

IF Oxford is an engagement innovator and was the first UK science festival to create a magazine as part of its integrated IRL-digital-print offer; to create a free-flow digital multi-participant zone; and to simplify its reporting material as an infographic: if-oxford.com/past-festivals. Several other UK Science Festival Network members have since adopted these approaches.

It takes time for people's needs, interests and priorities to align, and several contributors have been aware of the Festival before taking the step to be part of it, eg. through its public-realm (street banners) and digital campaigns. Sometimes a **contribution trigger** for them has been a promotion, retirement or a new recruit within a team / group, a new funding requirement or an updated staff / public engagement strategy. Unfortunately, owing to resource instability, there is no guarantee that IF Oxford will be present in three years' time, so contributor recruitment from a broader range of 'science and ideas' sectors – to also financially contribute – must accelerate.

Engaging new partners and sponsors is underway, with teams from the private sector that are *"very pleased with early engagement...looking to develop a good relationship with IF...to build a long-term relationship to engage local community."* Diversifying the range of STEM and cultural voices within the Festival allows a more complete picture of the positive impacts of innovation, increasing awareness and access to business and educational opportunities in a place which is often seen (internally and externally) from a viewpoint of endowed privilege.

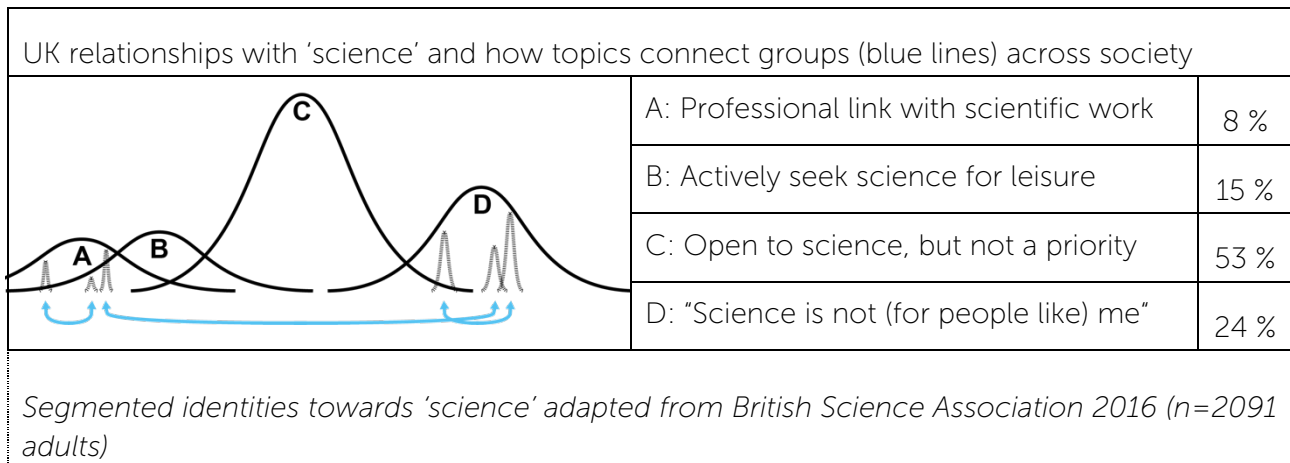
Helping a city and sector adapt in response to regional and global issues is an earned privilege. IF Oxford needs to find new ways to optimise financial and non-financial resources from its network, evolve its business model to remain relevant and work across partner networks to meet challenges visible to groups new to the Festival. By demonstrating a fuller range of outcomes from a science and ideas cultural offer, we can together narrow the socioeconomic and skills gap experienced by underrepresented groups in key employment markets.

Audiences and contributors have a range of learning and communications preferences, including visual, auditory, reading and kinaesthetic (VARK) options. The Festival helps partners recognise and implement formats suitable for a desired (individual, social or organisational) outcome. By encouraging adoption of a Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO) framework, Festival activities (and subsequent business-as-usual activities) can better support specific reasons for involvement:

- *"to get messaging out about '____'..."* and *"...contributing to future of sector."*
- *"Highlight companies we work with and get them involved too."*
- *"To engage [specific community of geography] with how the future could take shape."*

The role of a sustained annual cycle of planning, delivery and reflection gives space to innovate, but a limited and unpredictable resource means that audience priorities need to be made. In the 2017 Review of the Science Festival Landscape for Oxford, if-oxford.com/about/publications, OSF outlined its focus, changing its brand to "IF Oxford", with a view to:

- Build a quality Festival for new and existing stakeholders with varied science capital levels.
- Increase input and adapt operations to better engage with key harder-to-reach groups:
 - business in the innovation sector (who may not see festivals as outlets for them); and
 - underrepresented communities (who may not see science and as relevant to them.)



People working in science roles and those who – for a range of social and cultural reasons – do not see themselves reflected in, or that they could contribute to, science culture appear at opposite ends of an engagement logic model. This perception can, needs to, and does change.

By increasing the diversity of topics, presentation formats, locations, engagement opportunities, organisations and individuals making a contribution to IF Oxford, and the myriad other science and ideas cultural platforms, the four distinct identities – A: "I work in..."; B: "I am interested in...", C: "I might be interested in..." and D: "I'm not interested in..." – could begin to share a commonality of: ***"science and ideas culture is relevant to me and I'm willing to be involved."***

OSF recognises persistent structural barriers to many areas of UK society, culture and work, and that a greater representation across science and ideas is one way to positively transform perceived identity and involvement with innovation. The Festival works nationally, locally and internationally with partners like other UK science festivals, scientific professional bodies, and the Oxford Cultural Anti-racism Alliance to form a programme that is relevant and relatable to more people through IRL, print and digital activity.

- IF Oxford has a broad existing audience profile of young people and families, teenagers and adults and adults. With limited resources, however, a renewed audience focus may help develop greater impact in specific key areas.

4. The current value and what next for IF Oxford?

With over 500 contributors annually and tens of thousands of authentic public engagements with content through the IF Oxford platform, there are many reasons to get involved, including:

- Reaching new audiences, with broader geographical reach ***because "IF gives access to a more diverse audience [compared to those who typically attend events we run]."***
- Being part of events with a much greater marketing effort ***"delighted with outputs."***

- *"IF Oxford offers deeper, more meaningful engagement than other festivals [my team has contributed to, resulting in] people [attending being] more interested."*

Not all contributors and sponsors have specific goals in mind and instead want to make a positive contribution to society, working with *"hard to reach audiences"* and people with *"low science capital"*. There is value in coordinated activity and although some contributors say they are unclear on IF Oxford's aims and it feels like there are too many events, one University of Oxford contributor said: *"IF is a great platform for science, organised by others which is great as I couldn't do it alone. Great to involve students."*

The Festival team of two full-time staff, supplemented by contract and freelance staff, is small compared with equivalent science and arts engagement operations. Contributors are *"impressed by scale of event produced by a very small team"*, which comes across as *"very professional, fun and passionate about the Festival."* Some contributors (including from organisations with earmarked engagement funds) are keen to negotiate reduced participation fees; *"liked ease of negotiation over fee"*; whereas others recognise IF Oxford's financial fragility and comment that: *"[the Festival's planning and delivery] organisation was seamless [and we're] planning to pay for first time in IF 2022."*

People are on the whole impressed by good and consistent branding across brochure, posters, banners and digital output. Contributing delivery teams are getting better at running their own complementary marketing through their own channels, rather than simply relying on the IF Oxford marketing effort. Event contributors could be better supported to communicate their efforts throughout their own organisation, which would benefit contributors' internal recognition meanwhile opening up greater possibility for greater organisational support towards the Festival's mission, including participation fees or sponsorship options.

Comparisons from the stakeholders contributing to this review included Cambridge (UK and USA), Cheltenham, Manchester and Norwich science festivals and the World Science Festival (New York, USA), with IF Oxford participants having experience with these peer Festivals. Typical comments triggered by peer comparison include:

- **Production value range.** The scientific quality is high and like other UK peers, the Festival mixes amateur authenticity with professional gloss. Certain production features, like sound quality at events cannot be compromised, whereas variation in activity zones – big-budget exhibition stands adjacent to more modest *activities* – is usually well-received. Greater curation or guidance (offered to all, but not always received) would be more feasible with a larger production team.
- **Local supporters.** A regular comment about Festival supporters is the conspicuous absence of a large university in Oxford from the Festival's roster of organisational logos, though many researchers from Oxford's universities value IF Oxford as a trusted engagement platform.
- **Covid-19.** Comments on health & safety and measures were positive (capacity limits, sanitiser, masks, bookings, etc.) together with experimentation of alternative formats during the past two years, with IF Oxford providing the only – occasionally experimental – engagement opportunity for many groups. There is a sense of digital fatigue and a strong appetite for a Festival with a solid IRL element (cf. 1/3 digital and 2/3 IRL in 2021.)
- **Event audience and cost.** A minority of contributors are questioning the Festival position on engagement with schools and Pay What You Decide (PWYD) ticket cost. IF Oxford

experimented with Pay What You Decide ticketing in 2018 – where audiences can book a ticket for free (reducing the risk to new audiences, allowing them to try out new and unfamiliar activities) and chose to pay what they decide or can afford – and has continued successfully with this ticketing model, with other cultural organisations adopting now PWYD.

- **Targeted audience.** Given evolving characteristics of contributors, audiences, the STEM engagement community and national (skills and levelling-up) agenda, consideration should be given to the business-as-usual approach as the country emerges from the pandemic. Careers fair-type elements, eg. People Like Me from WISE, used in pre-Covid IF Oxford zones and career spotlight events and features, could be developed further within future Festivals.

The Festival team and the charity's Trustees reflect regularly on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the charity Oxfordshire Science Festival. Many of the contributors and supporters, are keen to see the Festival grow into a larger and more successful operation. Organisations and groups are beginning to identify financial and non-financial ways to support the charity. It is important that investment meets aspiration soon, because **the "Festival after the next Festival" is far from certain.**

IF Oxford uses tools, techniques and language from other cultural sectors, and thinking from literature, eg. [James V. Lavery, *Science* 361, 554 \(2018\)](#) and [Fogg-Rogers, et. al., *JCOM* 18 \(04\), N01 \(2019\)](#) and shares its own learning: . The innovation ecosystem in Oxford is dense and complex, so could another organisation achieve similar social, cultural and organisational development outcomes? **Examples from IF Oxford include:**

- Starting and maintaining years of slow-burn conversations between several local youth charities and a charity that "looks like their own organisation", IF Oxford helped youth workers, charity managers and trustees develop their own science capital and creative projects when usually sceptical of large institutions "doing science to them".
- Changing the way local councils operate using research-related projects, eg.:
 - Oxfordshire County Council recognising and empowering criminalised youth to connect with their emotions, develop skills and see alternative ways to live without self-harm; and
 - Oxford City Council staff recognising the value of STEM culture as a route to youth engagement, aspiration building and civic pride in marginalised geographies.
- Spotting and nurturing talented individuals and groups to realise a social vision, eg.
 - Giving a group of students the initial platform and encouragement to develop the social enterprise Uncomfortable Oxford, now a popular feature of Oxford's tourism offer; or
 - Supporting an Alternative Provision school teacher and Leys resident to enlarge their freelance work and later develop successful and productive links with University of Oxford Colleges and museums with aims of decolonising and diversifying Oxford's culture.
- Helping Science Festivals across the UK and USA explore the arts-science paradigm – and have skills to programme social science and mental health content into traditional, volunteer-led and professionally managed, STEM festivals – providing within-sector leadership while creating research evidence and positively changing the way science festivals see their efficacy role in society.

There's more to do and IF Oxford will next take place in October 2022.