

16/01/26

ITQ

Chester Place Branding

Chester is at a defining moment. Building on two decades of successful collaboration and investment, the city is now seeking to develop its first unified place brand. This ITQ invites confident, creative agencies to help articulate a bold, authentic narrative for Chester, one that honours its heritage, captures its contemporary energy, and positions the city for the future.

Introduction

Chester's first place marketing strategy was published 20 years ago, and its principles have underpinned city thinking ever since, but strangely we have not previously commissioned the development of a place brand. Chester now needs to take this step to help it become one of the UK's top historic cities and reassert itself as Cheshire's power brand.

Chester defies easy categorization. Roman walls frame tech startups; medieval Rows host independent retail alongside national chains; a world-class zoo sits minutes from a historic racecourse, which dates to 1539. This is a city with deep roots and restless ambition.

Today Chester is powered by collaboration, and city partners have committed to developing a unified place-brand that sets out what the city stands for – one that reflects its rich heritage and cements its future as a connected, confident, creative and cultural city, ready to thrive for decades ahead.

This project is being funded by a combination of:

- Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Chester Business Improvement District
- The University of Chester
- Grosvenor Group – The Duke of Westminster's Property Group and a significant Chester landowner
- Chester Zoo – the third most visited tourist attraction in the country
- Chester Racecourse – the world's oldest working racecourse
- Storyhouse – award-winning theatre, charity and independent arts centre

And it is being led collaboratively by civic, cultural, business, and education partners including the council, Chester BID, Marketing Cheshire (LVEP), Chester's One City Plan Chairs Group – more on that below – plus a collective of key city businesspeople and stakeholders called Chester Great and Small (GAS).

Background and Context

Chester's place development blueprint, its One City Plan (OCP), was published in 2012. A second iteration covering the period to 2045, followed in 2022. It has already delivered over 50 projects with a combined investment of over £1billion, including: a hugely improved hotel offering, the new indoor market, the Reserve at Chester Zoo, the new Cheshire Archives Centre and the massive success story that is Storyhouse. Following the post-pandemic OCP review, there's much to look forward to, with the planned Northgate phase 2 residential neighbourhood of 400 new homes and cultural space, together with other priority projects, recently announced under OCP 2.0.

In 2024 Chester BID was voted in for a 3rd term with a massive 96% support. Today the city-centre is deservedly enjoying a renewal with its enchanting historic streets benefiting from the return of in-person shoppers attracted by enticing retailers (recent additions include Sweaty Betty while Harrods Beauty will open in the spring), as well as an eclectic food and drink scene.

In recent times it's also collected a bunch of accolades and awards <https://www.investchester.uk/awards>

So, what's the problem?

Despite these success stories the uncomfortable truth is that Chester's story remains fragmented across heritage, retail, tourism, business, and culture. The perception reported last year in the media – both online and in print – is that Chester is “underrated”, “under the radar”, “overlooked”. In comparison, Bath and York are considered 'must see' cities and in addition to their significant heritage assets, both have strong brand identities with UNESCO associations and burgeoning film-offices with TV programmes McDonald & Dodds and Patience showcasing them to a national and global audience.

But Chester has always marched to its own beat, so it doesn't either want or need, to become an imitator of a competitor city, but rather embrace what is truly different about itself – the good, the bad and the... not so sure – creating a 'whole place' approach and communicate it with attitude and personality.

Purpose – what's our objective and who are we trying to reach?

Firstly, asking the question, what do we want Chester to be known for in the next 10 to 20 years? We're seeking a clear, authentic, and actionable place-brand for Chester that will:

- Tell a unified story of Chester's strengths and the city's desired future
- Define what Chester stands for and clearly positions the city in a competitive market
- Support inward investment, creating jobs and growing the local economy
- Build civic pride and shared ownership among residents (particularly the youth) businesses, and partners
- Enhance Chester's reputation as a place to live, visit, invest, and study
- Provide a narrative platform for Chester's role within the wider Cheshire and Warrington story

Clearly, we'd like to appeal to the widest demographic as possible but appreciate that in an attempt to please everyone, we're in danger of speaking to no one. Priority audiences are: investors, visitors and residents, young people – as they are the future.

We're not looking for safe, predictable, anodyne. We want a fresh, attention-grabbing, thought-provoking, disruptive approach—not to be 'edgy' for the sake of it, but one that challenges stakeholders and captures a past, present and future Chester: proud of its heritage yet unapologetically contemporary, creative, and outward-looking.

The appointed agency must have the confidence to challenge assumptions, provoke debate, and redefine how Chester is seen locally, nationally, and internationally.

We will provide access to a range of reports, surveys and data, collated over many years to supplement the stakeholder engagement activity.

Scope of Work – the process.

Phase 1: Discovery and Insight

- Review existing data, strategies, and brand assets
- Conduct stakeholder engagement (interviews, workshops, surveys)
- Challenge the existing narrative—identify what feels outdated and where Chester's true potential lies

Phase 2: Strategy Development

- Define the brand proposition and purpose
- Develop key messages, tone of voice, and narrative framework
- Test early concepts with stakeholder groups and refine
- Ensure the strategy is bold, differentiating, and emotionally resonant

Phase 3: Creative Development

- Create the brand visual identity
- Develop applications across digital, print, signage, and events
- Produce a Brand Toolkit for partners
- Present multiple provocative creative directions that reimagine Chester's identity for a modern, future-facing audience

Phase 4: Activation and Implementation

- Recommend an activation and communications plan
- Suggest a governance/guardianship model to sustain the brand
- Provide guidance for multi-year rollout, ownership, and evaluation

What Success would Look Like – evaluation.

A successful place brand for Chester will be:

- Collaboratively Developed – Inclusive engagement with stakeholders, businesses, residents, and community groups, including formation of a steering group, to make sure partners adopt it
- Data-led – Pulling on economic, demographic, cultural and other data sets
- Strategically Robust – Complete brand assets including narrative, visual identity, tone of voice, strapline, and key messages
- Ambassador-Ready – Clear structure for stakeholder engagement and advocacy (drawing on successful place brand models)
- Built to Last – Minimum three-year activation plan (ideally five years)
- Properly Resourced – Proposed model for ongoing brand guardianship ensuring consistency across partners and alignment with wider Cheshire and Warrington place brand

Contributing to increased:

- Footfall and student numbers
- Business investment –Start up – or scale up
- Community pride and wellbeing (Youth Champions and Adult Ambassadors)
- Visitor numbers to attractions and hotels
- Media profile
- Image and perception
- Awareness of key activities in Chester, including the OCP

Governance and Collaboration

The project will be governed by the OCP Chairs Group, with regular input from an Advisory Working Group comprising representatives from CWAC, Marketing Cheshire, Chester BID, and Chester GAS.

The appointed agency will attend key review meetings, present progress updates, and work collaboratively with Marketing Cheshire.

Budget and Timetable

Maximum indicative budget: £60,000

Proposals should demonstrate maximum creative impact and value within this budget—prioritising boldness, originality, and future relevance over volume of outputs.

Timeline

Stage	Target Date
Finalise brief and confirm funding	January 2026
Publish ITQ	02 February 2026
All queries and comments by	18 February 2026, 23:59
ITQ submission deadline	20 February 2026, 23:59
Agency appointment	February 2026
Discovery and insight	March - April 2026
Brand development	April-June 2026
Testing and refinement	July 2026
Launch and activation plan	Autumn 2026

Selection Criteria

Submissions will be assessed on:

1. Quality, originality, and bravery of approach
2. Ability to provoke new ways of thinking about Chester's purpose and positioning
3. Understanding of Chester's challenges, potential, and audiences
4. Experience with multi-stakeholder civic or place-brand projects
5. Team capability, creative innovation, and strategic depth
6. Value for money and ability to deliver within funding conditions

Contact and Submission Details

For questions or clarifications, please contact:

Cristian Marcucci, Managing Director, Marketing Cheshire

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Tender Questions for Agency Evaluation

Agencies should respond to the following six questions. Responses will be scored and form the basis of agency selection. Submitted Tenders will be assessed against the above criteria and scored using the following points system principles, with scores then weighted for each question:

Scoring criteria	Score
Failure to respond or irrelevant information which fails to meet the requirement	0
Response is inadequate, significantly failing to meet the requirements	1
Response is unsatisfactory partially meets the requirement	2
Response is acceptable and meets the minimum requirement	2
Response is good - better than merely acceptable	4
Response is excellent, exceeds the requirement and gives added value	5

Question 1: Strategic Approach (20 points)

Based on your initial understanding of Chester, what is the single biggest challenge or missed opportunity in how the city currently presents itself? How would your approach address this?

Guidance: Maximum 800 words. We're looking for evidence of strategic thinking, insight, and the confidence to challenge received wisdom.

Question 2: Creative Vision (25 points)

Describe a place branding project you've delivered that took creative risks and genuinely disrupted perceptions. What made it brave? What were the results?

Guidance: Maximum 800 words. Include visuals if helpful. We want to see evidence of bold, original thinking that delivered measurable impact.

Question 3: Stakeholder Engagement (15 points)

Multi-stakeholder place branding projects require balancing diverse voices while maintaining creative integrity. Describe your methodology for engaging stakeholders in a way that both listens and leads.

Guidance: Maximum 600 words. Show us how you build consensus without compromising creativity.

Question 4: Activation & Legacy (15 points)

The brand needs to live beyond launch. Propose a governance model and activation approach that ensures the brand remains relevant, owned by the city, and actively used by partners for at least three years.

Guidance: Maximum 600 words. We want practical, sustainable solutions, not just launch ideas.

Question 5: Team & Chemistry (5 points)

Introduce your core team for this project. Why is this the right combination of people to help Chester tell its future story?

Guidance: Maximum 300 words. Include brief bios and explain the team dynamic, not just CVs. A further 20 points are available based on price – see attached pricing schedule.

Total: 100 points

Agencies may include supporting materials (case studies, visuals, testimonials) as appendices, but these will not be scored separately.

Appendix 1: Pricing Schedule

Deliverable	Price
Research, engagement and development of place narrative	
Brand visual identity, including brand toolkit and creative applications	
Photography and videography	
Activation and communications plan, including proposals on multi-year resource requirements and ambassador programme	
Total	

Staff broken down by role

Staff role / name	Amount of time to be spent on project	Day rate	Total