



## “Be the change” — how Cheltenham Science Festival used a central theme to centre social change within the festival

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### Reviewed by

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### Abstract

‘Be the change’ (BTC) was the theme for Cheltenham Science Festival. BTC set out to empower audiences as individuals and as a collective to enact positive change across a wide range of global issues linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We examine the role of theming within festivals and analyse how BTC centred social change within the science festival. We conclude by noting that science festivals do not have to have science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM) themes, but can instead be themed around global social issues.

### Keywords

Informal learning; Public engagement with science and technology; Social inclusion

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### Introduction

At this year’s Cheltenham Science Festival, the central theme for the festival was ‘Be the change’ (BTC). As world leaders grapple over the biggest issues of our time — the climate crisis, pandemic, gender inequality, war — BTC set out to inspire festival audiences to take things into their own hands and make a positive difference as individuals and as a collective. BTC was a thread that ran through the programme of the festival with events across a range of topics aligned to the theme. In this review, we delve into the literature around festival theming, and review how this was applied at the science festival.

### Festival theming

Theming of any festival is a key creative and artistic decision for the programming team. Themes are often particularly prominent within music and performing arts festivals. A theme for a festival is a “unifying idea or concept which gives meaning, or is the object of celebration or commemoration” [Getz & Page, 2016, p. 223].

Usually, many of the design elements, principles and the décor of the festival need to fit in and reinforce the theme [Pine & Gilmore, 1998]. A festival's theme is often the common thread that weaves together separate events and activities within the festival. The programme of a festival should therefore reinforce the theme with all sensory stimulation, sound, light, entertainment and spectacle being consistent with the given theme [Matthews, 2015].

Festival themes come in various guises. Festivals can be themed around a place, a period of time, a genre of music or cinema, fashion, architecture, commodities and literature to name but a few [Bryman, 2004]. Festival themes can be visual, such as an outdoor festival in a forest using lighting as the major aspect of décor. Themes can be sensory such as a vegan food festival or a real ale festival. There can be activity related themes such as a sports festival that may be centred around a mega sporting event. A festival may be fantasy themed insofar that it combines décor with entertainment e.g., a science fiction themed festival. Themes can be emotional such as festival of healing, religious or spiritual festival. Indeed, many festivals can have an intellectual theme such as a science festival [Matthews, 2015].

Regardless of what the chosen theme for a festival is, it should be memorable, stimulating and provide a take-home message whilst simultaneously tapping into universal belief systems [Matthews, 2015]. Applying the principles and techniques of event design is key to creating a festival that captures the imagination of the audience, engages them with the content of the festival, and provides a meaningful experience [Brown, 2005]. Often, festivals are designed to achieve particular social objectives, and this requires imagination, creativity and application of both event design and experience design methodologies [Richards, Marques & Mein, 2014].

### **Aims of the “Be the change” theme**

BTC was visible within the content and branding of the festival (Figure 1). BTC had three objectives:

1. To position Cheltenham Science Festival as the key destination for speakers and audiences who seek out intergenerational, credible scientific discussion about key issues related to BTC.
2. To authentically support individual changemakers and the broader sustainability agenda, raising awareness of their initiatives and inspiring audiences to confidently engage in causes they care about.
3. To improve the festival's approach towards sustainability across all departments, demonstrating commitment and responsibility in relation to causes and issues BTC will bring into focus.

### **How “Be the change” theme was weaved through the festival**

Events within the festival set out to empower audiences to ‘be the change’ and consider how they can enact change through individual and collective action and innovation. A collective of six young changemakers working across a range of fields collaborated with the festival as guest curators. The 2021 collective was led by campaigner Gina Martin; in 2022, Daze Aghaji took this lead role. Together with the programming team, they created a series of events that appeared throughout



**Figure 1.** Front cover of Cheltenham Science Festival brochure 2022 with ‘Be the change’ theme branding on the cover page [*Cheltenham Science Festival*, 2022].

the festival programme. These events reflected the ambitions and activities of the changemakers, spotlighting their work with the festival audiences. A number of these events were aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UKRI Industrial Strategy Challenges.

The flagship event was ‘We Make Tomorrow’, where the cohort discussed their inspiring work on a range of topics from climate justice and mental health to international diplomacy and cyber bullying. The young changemakers discussed the importance of having young voices in contemporary debates and challenged the audience to speak up and have their voices heard. Another event ‘Young Minds Under Pressure’ explored the impact of the pandemic on young people’s mental health. We heard from the panellists about the pressure that Gen Z are under to get back to ‘normal’, and the audience were given tips on how to help support young people in their mental health.

The BTC theme provided a platform for audiences to confidently talk about social issues whilst examining the place of science at the heart of everyday life, wellbeing and culture. This was amplified through a collaboration with VOICEBOX, a platform for young people, at the Festival. VOICEBOX provided a series of free digital events that showcased young changemakers and emerging young talent across various disciplines. The VOICEBOX series provided an opportunity for

audiences, including new audiences, to engage with the festival beyond Cheltenham and to hear from young innovators who are shaping the conversations of the future. VOICEBOX encompassed the BTC theme through discussions on body image, sustainable fashion, neurodiversity and inclusion within science. Bespoke VOICEBOX content was curated on Instagram<sup>1</sup> and TikTok<sup>2</sup> — platforms popular with young people, empowering them to ‘be the change’.

As the science festival is made up of a series of different event formats, one of the street performances that was curated around the BTC theme was ‘CastAway’ which was a stunning outdoor performance that explored the impact of today’s throwaway society on our waterways. Featuring a flying machine and all-female cast, the performance challenged the audience to think about what they can do as an individual and a collective to tackle climate change. In the event ‘Beach, Please!’ audiences heard about the importance of looking after our oceans and were given ideas on how they can take individual and collective action to help preserve our richly inhabited seas.

Podcast host and campaigner Dame Deborah James was one of the guest curators. Although the late Dame Deborah was not able to attend the festival due to her illness, she was heavily involved in curating a series of events within the festival around health and wellbeing. One such event that Dame Deborah curated was “The Future of Cancer”. In this emotional event, audiences heard panellists share their perspective on how our approach to cancer might adapt and evolve in the future. Aligned to the BTC theme, panellists spoke about the role of holistic lifestyle changes, cutting-edge technologies and the need to inspire young people to become the cancer researchers of tomorrow.

## Conclusion

Although there is no singularly agreed definition for a science festival, the most convincing definition comes from Bultitude, McDonald and Custead [2011] who define it as: a celebration of STEM; that sets out to engage non-specialists with science; that is time-limited and recurring; and has a common theme or branding. Cheltenham Science Festival have demonstrated through BTC that theme of a science festival does not have to be around the STEM subjects and can instead be around social issues. Going forward, there is the opportunity for the science festival to address a wider range of SDGs through BTC. Finally, BTC has demonstrated how intertwined science and society are whilst demonstrating the role and value of science festivals as vehicles for addressing the most pressing global social issues.

## Dedication

We dedicate this article to the festival’s late guest curator Dame Deborah James who served as an inspiration to us and to millions of people around the world, inspiring us all to ‘be the change’ through her tireless campaigning. We leave you with her final words:

*“Find a life worth enjoying; take risks; love deeply; have no regrets; and always, always have rebellious hope. And finally, check your poo — it could just save your life.”*

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.instagram.com/voicebox\\_\\_\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/voicebox___/).

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.tiktok.com/@voicebox\\_\\_\\_](https://www.tiktok.com/@voicebox___).

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Emma Whittle is an event curator and producer with a particular interest in the intersection of arts, science and culture with social issues. Currently Programme and VOICEBOX Manager at The Times & The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival and Cheltenham Science Festival, she creates events and activities across a range of disciplines and formats. In 2020, Emma was part of the team who delivered the world's first digital science festival and a pioneering hybrid edition of the Literature Festival, which won 'Event of the Year' at The Bookseller's FutureBook Awards. In 2021 Emma founded VOICEBOX, an innovative platform for young people that aims to amplify young talent and turn up the volume on local, national and global voices who are shaping the conversations of the future. She has a postgraduate degree in English Literature and Visual Arts and an undergraduate degree in English Literature and Philosophy, both from the University of Birmingham. Emma is a Board Trustee for Severn Arts, an arts charity that specialises in music and outdoor arts and is committed to offering new, inclusive arts activities for all.



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Dr. Marieke Navin is a science communicator who has used ballet dancers to interpret the collisions of protons at the Large Hadron Collider, and circus performers to demonstrate the strength and flexibility of graphene. For her Ph.D. in particle physics Marieke chased elusive neutrinos in a huge tank of water below a mine in Japan. Marieke is head of programming at Cheltenham Science Festival and in 2019 co-created the world's first AI festival curator and delivered the world's first online science festival during 2020 lockdown. Her current practice is focussing on creating an interactive free space on the festival site related to cybersecurity.



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