

TITLE	Arts & Culture Strategy
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 February 2021
WARD	None specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Chris Trill

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Council currently does not have a cultural strategy but has an aspiration that the Borough's cultural offer will grow and develop into the future. The strategy has the potential over time to significantly enhance the cultural offer in the Borough to the benefit of the vast majority of residents, improving quality of life and enhancing well-being. The strategy is closely aligned with the principles and priorities of key national agencies such as Arts Council England (ACE) and Public Health England (PHE) and has the potential to leverage external funding.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee considers the attached Arts & Culture Strategy and offers comment.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

In the context of a growing population and the Borough's reputation as an excellent place to live with a high quality of life, the quality of the cultural offer can play a significant role in enhancing the Borough's reputation and enriching the lives of residents.

Following approval of the draft strategy by the Executive consultation has taken place with the public, arts & culture organisations, Town & Parish Councils. Whilst the Covid pandemic has significantly restricted the nature of the consultation, especially as regards to face to face interaction with the public, there has been a good and positive overall response.

Effective delivery of the arts & culture strategy will be dependent on the actions and resources of a wide range of agencies, partners and stakeholders, including our residents. A key element of progress since the consultation draft strategy was approved has been the establishment of the 'Arts & Culture Alliance' (in October 2020) as a partnership vehicle involving key stakeholders for taking forward implementation of the strategy. The Alliance includes cross-party political representation as well as a range of key local arts & culture organisations.

Background

The arts & culture strategy is set firmly in the context of national policy and guidance and with the associated priorities of key national agencies: Arts Council England and Public Health England. Over recent years national policies have shifted from a focus on activity to outcomes and particularly the impact on health and well-being of residents and an increasing focus on environmental sustainability.

As recently as 2016 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) produced and presented to Parliament its 'Culture White Paper', the first for over 50 years. The White Paper was very clear about the benefits of culture and why the Government should invest to support its development:

- The intrinsic value: the enriching value of culture in and of itself;
- The social value: improving educational attainment and helping people to be healthier; and
- The economic value: the growing contribution culture makes to economic growth and job creation.

Arts Council England launched its new ten year strategy 'Let's Create' in January 2020. The new strategy for 2020-30 focuses on individual creative potential and the need for artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries to play an important role in every community, bringing people together, supporting local economies and helping to improve lives. The four key investment principles for the next 10 years will be inclusivity and relevance, dynamism, environmental responsibility and ambition and quality. There is also a specific pledge to boost library spending.

PHE have a strong influence on policy and practice nationally with regard to promoting enhanced well-being and, in parallel, the NHS has a challenging target to make a step-change in the quantum of 'social prescribing' over the next three to four years. They also have a strong evidence base of what works and are a key source of data for informing local strategies and priorities.

Analysis of Issues

In the context of a growing population and the Borough's reputation as an excellent place to live with a high quality of life, the quality of the cultural offer can play a significant role in enhancing the Borough's reputation and enriching the lives of residents.

Cultural activities are universal in their ability to contribute to well-being and impact on all residents across all age-groups. In addition they can support better outcomes for more vulnerable groups, be this tackling social isolation, improving health and well-being or educational attainment. Unsurprisingly the strategy therefore links to a range of the Council's key priorities and has touch points with a large number of Council services. The Borough does not currently have a cultural strategy and with increasing interest in, and support for, developing the cultural offer and identity of the Borough this is a substantive gap. An up to date approved strategy that aligns with both national imperatives and local priorities is extremely useful in shaping future provision, extending reach to more vulnerable cohorts and communities, co-ordinating and aligning activity across a range of partners and stakeholders and for maximising the impact of collective resources. Set within the context of national policy, the attached 10 year strategy sets out an ambitious vision, key priorities and desired outcomes. The priorities themselves

were established following an earlier pre-drafting phase of consultation and examples of best practice and are as follows:

1. Enhancing cultural identity and sense of 'place'.
2. Fostering social interaction and community cohesion.
3. Improving health and well-being.
4. Developing opportunities for children and young people.
5. Supporting economic growth.
6. Maximising partnerships and collaboration.

Consultation on the strategy elicited responses from 5 Town & Parish Councils, 11 arts & cultural organisations and 99 members of the public (via an on-line survey). A summary of the consultation responses is attached at Appendix 4. Whilst the Covid pandemic has significantly restricted the nature of the consultation, especially as regards to face to face interaction with the public, there has been a good and very positive overall response.

Many of the more detailed and specific responses to the consultation will need to be picked up in the ongoing implementation and via the Action Plan. They also highlight the acknowledged and ongoing need for further engagement and collaboration into the future: with arts & cultural organisations; our Town & Parish Councils; and with local residents and communities, including children and young people who were not strongly represented in the feedback to date (this links with one of the key priorities in the strategy).

With regard to the draft Strategy itself, the consultation responses have directly resulted in the following significant changes to the draft:

1. The Covid pandemic – the draft Strategy was written immediately prior to the pandemic, indeed it's consideration by the Executive was delayed by a month because of the resulting cancellation of the scheduled meeting in March 2020. Feedback was that it was important to reference this context because of its widespread impact directly on the arts & culture sector and residents' lack of opportunity to engage other than virtually. This has been addressed in the re-drafted introductory section of the Strategy.
2. Climate Emergency – there was a desire to ensure that the Strategy made a more explicit connection to the issues of environmental sustainability given the significance of this in the context of the Borough's declaration of a Climate Emergency. How the Arts & Culture Strategy links to environmental issues has therefore been added, along with a commitment to ensure that the aspiration to be carbon neutral is fully factored in to implementation plans and related activities.
3. Cultural Venues – whilst the wealth of local arts and cultural organisations and activities was strongly supported, the absence of 'major' cultural venues or a 'cultural hub' was a feature of responses from both arts & cultural organisations

and the general public. Addressing this ‘gap’ is undoubtedly a major challenge but for an aspirational 10 year strategy it feels appropriate to articulate this need. New and enhanced cultural venues have therefore been included within the desired outcomes for Priority 1 in the Strategy: Enhancing cultural identity and sense of ‘place’.

In parallel with the consultation process work has been undertaken to establish the Arts & Cultural Alliance as a partnership vehicle involving key stakeholders for taking forward implementation of the strategy. The Alliance held its first meeting in October 2020 and is subsequently playing a pivotal role in the development of an initial Action Plan to progress implementation of the Strategy from April 2021 and this pays testimony to the enthusiasm and commitment of the many cultural organisations in the Borough. The Alliance includes cross-party political representation as well as a range of key local arts & culture organisations.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	20,000	yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil		

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The appointment of a Cultural Development Officer in April 2020 acknowledged the need for a dedicated resource to support the Council’s aspirations to develop the Borough’s cultural offer and raise its profile. The annual cost of approximately £40,000 would be offset through income generation linked to an expanded programme of cultural activities and events. Through 2020/21 the scope for income generation has been curtailed by the Covid pandemic and that is anticipated to continue to impact over the current year, not least because of the uncertainty that undermines the effective planning for events. The figures above therefore reflect a ‘part-year’ effect with income generation to offset costs strengthening as the year progresses.

Cross-Council Implications

The strategy is potentially a key strand for delivering the Council's Community Vision: 'for Wokingham Borough to be a great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business.' In particular it addresses the linked strategic priority for 'Enriching Lives' but it also contributes to 'Safe, Strong Communities' as well as addressing elements of the Health and Well-being Strategy.

It is worth noting that the Council is also developed a refreshed Leisure Strategy and that both strategies play a complementary role in 'enriching lives', as well as having connections between them, particularly in relation to the shared use of indoor and outdoor leisure venues and country parks, creating animated spaces and some areas of activity, such as dance, contributing to both.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard has been taken to the Public Equality Duty and an Equalities Impact Assessment was considered as part of the decision to approve the draft strategy in April 2020.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

N/A

List of Background Papers

None

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