

'Places of Culture'

An Arts & Culture Strategy* for Wokingham Borough

2020 – 2030

Introduction

This strategy links directly to our community vision established in 2020 with the ambition for Wokingham Borough to be a great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business.

The Strategy was initially drafted immediately prior to the onset of the Covid pandemic and the immense challenges that this has presented to us all and society as a whole. The cultural sector has been particularly hard hit with performances and events cancelled, income decimated and planning for the future compromised. The resulting lack of opportunities to engage in cultural activities has thrown into stark relief how important this is to our health & well-being and to the quality of our lives. As we hopefully emerge from the restrictions and crippling impact of the pandemic later in 2021 this ambitious 10 year strategy can play a part in creating the post-pandemic future we want to see.

Despite current challenges it remains an exciting time for Wokingham Borough. Economically strong with a high quality of life that is recognised nationally as one of the best in the country and well developed plans to further bolster success through investment and regeneration to deliver new housing, infrastructure and thriving town centres.

But we know that quality of life is about much more than just having a job and a house. Our population is growing significantly, becoming more diverse and increasingly wanting convenient local access to high quality and stimulating culture and leisure opportunities. Taking part in creative acts delights and fulfils us, and helps us to relate to the wider world and we all have the potential to develop our creativity further. Culture and exposure to high quality cultural experiences should be a 'must have' for all, regardless of background or personal circumstances.

Connection to place, a sense of identity and being creative are important to us all. Nor are these things a 'nice to have', they are integral to the well-being of our residents, the future of our young people and to support the Borough's continued economic success.

**Cultural Strategy: To provide clarity the Arts Council's definition of 'culture' is adopted for defining the scope and content of the strategy: In this strategy we use culture to mean all those areas of activity associated with the artforms and organisations that ArtsCouncil England supports: collections, combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre and the visual arts.*

This 10 year strategy is about sustained development of the quality and appeal of the cultural 'offer' across the Borough, to ensure it is both commensurate with our economic strength and as transformational over time as our plans for regeneration: not only maintaining but enhancing quality of life, strengthening communities and growing the Borough's reputation as a great place to live, to visit and to work in.

Why Have a Cultural Strategy?

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:

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

The White Paper was intended to be a vision of 'culture in action', rejuvenating our society and national and local economies. The White Paper was based on an extensive evidence base, including the Warwick Commissions report: 'Enriching Britain: culture, creativity and growth' published in 2015. This report presented a powerful argument for a more systemic investment in cultural and creative talent at a national level, 'a powerful cocktail of public good and commercial return'. Significantly, the report emphasised the role of culture in 'place shaping' and the importance of locality, investing in culture but ensuring that this was grounded in and responsive to the distinct character of places and the aspirations of local communities (with the added benefits of enhancing accessibility and growing audiences).

At both national and local level the case for purposeful development of, and investment in, the cultural offer and the creative sector is compelling. Through a Cultural Strategy the Council and the wider cultural sector can better realise the nationally acknowledged benefits of developing the cultural offer here in Wokingham Borough: creating a 'buzz', building identity and reputation whilst benefitting the health and well-being of residents and attracting visitors and investment. Ultimately to make Wokingham Borough a cultural destination of the future. In this regard the Strategy will also link directly with delivery of the Council's strategic priorities of 'Enriching Lives' and 'Safe, Strong Communities'.

'We want to see communities that are more socially cohesive and economically robust, and in which residents experience improved physical and mental well-being as a result of investment in culture.'

'Shaping the next ten years' Draft Strategy 2019 Arts Council England.

Wokingham - 17 Parishes – One Borough

Wokingham's excellent quality of life is grounded in its rich mix of towns and villages (each with its own heritage and character), complemented by beautiful countryside and open spaces and interspersed with high quality business parks that attract talent from all over the world. The number and range of cultural organisations, covering many different genres and activities, across the Borough is also a real strength, providing a wealth of opportunities to both participate in and to experience culture in its many forms. This diversity of place and people is a unique cultural asset that can be embraced and further developed, not only for the benefit of each 'place' and its people but for the Borough as a whole – building and strengthening networks across the cultural sector and audiences to create a greater sense of identity and enhancing the Borough's reputation as a cultural hub.

Whilst the dispersed nature of settlements in the Borough presents challenges, not least the resultant lack of obvious major cultural venues, this cultural strategy recognises the great potential offered by the distinctiveness of the 17 parishes and their communities: a network of creative people and places that can be strengthened and a cultural offer that can be enhanced, improving access to high quality cultural experiences right across the Borough.

Nor will this only benefit the Borough's residents, an enhanced reputation as a cultural hub helps attract businesses, including in the fast growing creative industries, supports the recruitment and retention of employees and draws in visitors from further afield to bolster economic success.

The Cultural Strategy is therefore an integral component of broader plans and initiatives for future growth, economic success and an excellent quality of life.

Vision

By 2030 Wokingham Borough will be recognised regionally and nationally as a dynamic cultural hub, a Borough of surprises that delight across all our towns and villages, a Borough where everyone can access or get involved in creating high quality cultural experiences and where creativity is nurtured across all age-groups.

Strategy and Priorities

Essentially this strategy identifies key priorities that will enable this vision to be realised and an initial route-map, via a dynamic and evolving Action Plan, of how we plan to get there. The priorities have been informed by consultation with the public, town and parish councils, cultural organisations and the wider business community. Across all these key stakeholders there is a real appetite and energy for making the Borough more of a cultural destination and realising the many benefits that flow from this.

The early consultation has highlighted the following six key priorities:

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.

Implicit in all of these is the need to significantly enhance the Borough's current cultural offer in order to increase cultural engagement, to ensure that all sectors and stakeholders make a positive contribution and to enable access to cultural opportunities irrespective of background, social or economic circumstances. The extensive current network of cultural organisations in the Borough provides a great platform from which to achieve this step-change.

In addition the consultation on the draft strategy also flagged the significance of connecting the strategy to the Climate Emergency and ambition for the Borough to be carbon neutral. Arts and cultural activities provide great opportunities to both explore and promote themes linked to environmental issues and protecting our planet for future generations. Practical action can also be taken to ensure that cultural activities are as close to carbon neutral as possible and, for example, this is already a key consideration in plans to commission public art linked to the development of the Carnival Hub complex in Wokingham. These themes will be further developed and integrated with the ongoing development of the Action Plan.

Cultural Ambitions for 2030

1. Enhance cultural identity and sense of 'place'

- All 17 parishes have a clear cultural footprint and distinct offer that is contributing to the Borough's overall identity and reputation as a dynamic cultural hub.
- High profile cultural events, activities or installations that have a regional and national reputation and profile.
- Cultural enhancement of the public realm, both public art and activities, to create interest and excitement across the Borough.
- Culture and cultural opportunities are integrated into regeneration and renewal plans as part of place-making strategies as the Borough's population grows.

- New and enhanced cultural venues are attracting large numbers of residents and visitors and are financially sustainable.
- The Borough's Town Centres are vibrant and thriving with an extensive, varied and renowned cultural programme across all the main towns.

2. Fostering Social Interaction and Community Cohesion

- An expanded and varied programme of events across the Borough that attracts a wide range of people from different backgrounds and with different interests.
- Cultural organisations know their audiences and make concerted efforts, in partnership with the Council, to reach out and engage with under-represented groups thereby diversifying their audiences and fostering cohesion.
- Cultural activities and programmes break down perceptions and stereotypes and stimulate new ways of thinking.
- The Council's network of libraries and community centres have a popular, thriving and stimulating cultural offer accessed by a wide demographic.
- Communities are actively engaged and involved in developing the Borough's cultural capital and co-producing work that is meaningful to them.

3. Improving Health and Well-being

- 'Cultural Commissioning' and social prescribing of cultural activities by health and social care organisations is an integral part of their activities to improve well-being.
- Cultural organisations, where applicable, fully understand and can evidence and promote their relevance to, and impact on, the health and well-being agenda.
- Links between culture and sports and leisure activities, both indoors and outdoors, are well developed with extensive cross-promotion, joint working, sharing of venues and this is generating mutual benefits for both sectors.
- A lively and regular programme of cultural activities has extended reach and participation rates, reducing social isolation and enhancing emotional and mental well-being.

- Cultural interventions not only improve individual well-being, they also raise awareness of key health issues and increase accessibility and engagement for more vulnerable residents.

4. Developing Opportunities for Children and Young People

- A focus on those children and young people who might otherwise miss out on great cultural experiences means that every young person can access opportunities whatever their background and can develop their creative potential.
- There is a strong cultural offer in early years' settings and libraries catering for young children and their families, supporting the early development of creativity and better attainment in later years.
- Schools have embraced culture and creativity within the curriculum with a high proportion of local schools achieving 'Artsmark' accreditation for the quality of their cultural offer to students.
- There are a wide range of accessible and exciting cultural activities outside of school settings and during school holidays that are enhancing learning opportunities and fostering creativity.
- Children and young people have a strong 'voice' in determining the nature of the cultural opportunities available to them, both in and out of school settings, and their views have a strong influence in shaping provision, thereby raising engagement and participation.

5. Supporting Economic Growth

- The enhanced cultural reputation of the Borough and major events are bringing in greater number of visitors and boosting spend in the local economy.
- The creative, digital and film industries are thriving in the Borough boosting the overall level and pace of economic growth.
- Creative cultural hubs have developed providing spaces for creative start-ups and attracting private-sector investment.
- Reading University and Bracknell & Wokingham College are centres of excellence for cultural learning, providing a pipeline of talent and career pathways into the cultural sector and creative industries.
- The Borough's cultural reputation is supporting inward investment, employment growth and the attraction and retention of skilled workers.

- The increased cultural offer locally has supported growth of the night and day time economies helping local centres and businesses thrive.

6. Maximising Partnerships and Collaboration

- There is a more co-ordinated and strategic approach to programming, marketing and promotion of cultural events and activities across the Borough to the benefit of the whole sector and to audiences.
- The use of public assets to host and promote cultural activities is maximised, including those buildings and spaces in Council ownership.
- There are strong and collaborative relationships across tiers of local government with Parish, Town and Borough Councils working collectively to maximise the impact of cultural activities and assets.
- There are strong networks across the growing cultural sector that foster collaboration and innovation, raising quality and increasing engagement.
- With support and investment from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), collaboration between the public and private sectors is embedded with strong business support for cultural activities and organisations.
- There are close links with major national institutions that are helping to drive up standards, embed innovation and best practice, raise profile and increase funding into the cultural sector and associated initiatives.

Developing and Delivering the Strategy

Appropriately ‘Partnerships and Collaboration’ has emerged from consultation as one of the key priorities for a cultural strategy. The scale of ambition outlined above means that delivery of the strategy can only be achieved with the sustained engagement, support and enthusiasm of a wide range of stakeholders working together. The Council’s investment in a new Cultural Development Officer post in April 2020 reflects the importance of establishing capacity to support this collaboration and joint-working.

A key function of this strategy and the initial action plan is to garner ongoing feedback and ideas and, in particular, to continue to gather partner and stakeholder contributions to further develop the action plan over time and to foster involvement and collaboration. The establishment of the Arts & Cultural Alliance in October 2020 as a key partnership vehicle for delivering the strategy is a major step forward and pays testimony to the enthusiasm and commitment of the many cultural organisations in the Borough. The Alliance has played a key role in developing the initial action plan and will continue to be pivotal to the delivery of the strategy into the future.

The action plan will also inform the Council's medium term financial plan setting process and the identification of opportunities for funding from other sources, acknowledging that certainly in the short-term the funding environment remains challenging.

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