

STRONGER COMMUNITIES & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY BOARD

08 SEPTEMBER 2021

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(HYBRID MEETING)

MINUTES EXTRACT

1. SUPPORTING CULTURAL RECOVERY IN SOLIHULL

In attendance: Councillor Mrs K Grinsell – Cabinet Member (Leisure, Tourism & Sport) and Martyn Sargeant (Head of Customer Services).

The Board considered a detailed report which set out how the Council was acting to support the recovery of the cultural sector in Solihull.

The report covered two aspects for consideration. Firstly, the practical response to the post-Covid period and secondly, the Council's ongoing and future cultural activity. Officers reported that from a cultural perspective, the next 18 months were significant. The Commonwealth Games provided an opportunity for worldwide focus on Solihull and the proposed package of measures outlined in the report were intended to grow people's confidence as the Borough continued to emerge from the pandemic, whilst supporting recovery and enhancing capacity.

Having considered the report, the Board made the following observations and comments:

- The report highlighted that there was a limited number of cultural/arts venues and few museums/galleries within Solihull. Members asked what was being done to make a greater number of venues available? In response, officers advised that the Council had an enabling role to support the cultural infrastructure and also explained the Council's own ongoing efforts to "rebuild" its cultural facilities in the context of the wider town centre redevelopment.
- Members also highlighted the limited cultural and arts venues within Solihull in comparison with Birmingham and noted that Solihull's own Core Theatre also competed with some of the smaller arts venues regionally. It was perceived that some smaller theatres were now at risk of permanent closure which could have an overall negative effect on the future "touring-performance offer" within the region. Members asked what was being done to limit that risk for Solihull. Officers advised that the main factor for Solihull, at the present date, was the limited size of Solihull's Core Theatre and the constraints as to what type of production could be offered together with the limitations on audience capacity. The wider town centre redevelopment included exploring whether there was scope to increase the size of the theatre to attract future larger performances. In terms of the regional picture, officers also advised that the Core Theatre was not competing with regional venues such as the RSC in Stratford upon Avon and the Hippodrome in Birmingham City Centre. Out of the town centre redevelopment work, a piece of analysis work had been undertaken by the Councils consultants which had suggested that, for the size of theatre, Solihull did a really good job in gaining the most benefit from the current cultural offer and its associated income. West Midlands Combined Authority was also leading on a piece of work to develop a strategy for the entire region. Solihull would be supporting that work over the next couple of years and the provision of regional venues was part of that overall strategic picture.
- Councillor Mrs K Grinsell – Cabinet Member (Leisure, Tourism & Sport) also highlighted the use of outdoor spaces for cultural and arts use and how that outdoor approach might also be developed further in the future. The Board was advised that

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as a result of the pandemic, residents had become more used to using outdoor space so it was felt that there were now good opportunities to explore this further e.g. street performances, pop-up theatres and a greater use of Solihull's parks and open spaces for cultural and arts events. Such locations included the town centre and other community and business locations across the wider Borough. The Commonwealth Games would also bring a large number of visitors to the region and Solihull wanted to maximise those opportunities to promote Solihull's cultural and arts offer.

- Members asked how success was being measured against the Council's Priorities together with how the Council were engaging with Solihull's diverse communities on the cultural and arts agenda? Officers advised that work around the reported Festival of Cultural Movements was a six-month programme and included a range of opportunities for people to engage in different cultural activities. Working with a creative producer would also assist with the overall monitoring of success. Work was also being undertaken with communities to identify routes into specific cultural communities and to hold specific events such as a future potential Asian film festival/comedy festival. Members also highlighted the existence of the amphitheatre as part of the original Touchwood development and asked if there was now an appetite to use that open-air venue. Officers confirmed that there was and this was part of ongoing work around outdoor venues.
- Members also highlighted the importance of continued work with the voluntary sector to support cultural and arts events across Solihull. Officers were asked if there were any improvements that could be made to streamline the working relationships with those organisations to make it easier to apply for events? Officers advised that some of the application processes were statutory so the Council had no discretion to vary those. Application processes were, however, being reviewed this year to see how the Council could better support organisations and some streamlining of (non-statutory) processes would result.

RESOLVED

That, subject to the comments and views recorded in the preamble above, the Board **UNANIMOUSLY** made the following **RECOMMENDATIONS** to the **Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Tourism & Sport**:

- (i) That, the Board welcomes the ongoing work to support the cultural and arts sector within Solihull; and
- (ii) That, the Board receives a further progress update in 6-12 months time on the matters included within the original report together with the additional issues raised at this meeting as recorded above.