

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	10 MARCH 2021		
TITLE:	READING'S CULTURE AND HERITAGE STRATEGY UPDATE AND PRIORITIES FOR 2021-22		
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the committee on the achievements of Reading's Culture and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030, outline the council's Culture Service response to the covid19 pandemic and to outline the key areas of priority for 2021-22 given the profound and ongoing impact of covid19 on the cultural sector.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION That the Committee:

- 2.1 note the achievements of Reading's Culture and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030 delivered to date and the council's Culture Service response to covid19.
- 2.2 agree the key areas of priority 2021-22.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Reading's Culture and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030 is now in its fifth year of delivery. Produced by Reading's Cultural Partnership it is focused around three strategic objectives of Enhance Identity; Increase Opportunity; Celebrate. A summary of the achievements of the first 5 years of delivery are outlined below. Covid 19 has had a profound effect on the arts, cultural and heritage sector and therefore it is proposed some key areas of priority are identified to support the sector's response and recovery.

4. ACHIEVEMENTS OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE STRATEGY 2015-2020

- Recognition and active support by businesses of cultural organisations celebrating our local cultural heritage and amplifying the heritage offering to attract people from outside of Reading. For example, The Oracle supported Burial of Henry I and Matilda reimagining; Rabble received support from local businesses for their reimagining of our history and heritage.
- Businesses have been providing free space to the arts for community meetings, launches, performance, events, and workspace. E.g. Roseate Reading WorkLife, White Building, Oracle, Broad Street Mall and many others.

- Arts, heritage and culture is embedded in the town's **economic regeneration** Reading 2050, High Street Heritage Action Zones, and Reading Powered by People.
- There has been increased collaboration with ReadingUK, bringing businesses and cultural organisations together, including the successful Twilight Trail, a festive light trail illuminating Forbury Gardens and the Abbey Ruins held in December 2020.
- The allocation for arts and culture features in the **Local Plan** for first time for planning and development.
- **Reading, Year of Culture 2016**, a year long programme of cultural and heritage events including the hugely successful Artangel art installation in Reading Prison.
- **WhatsOnReading.com** launched and consolidates all listings and cultural offer in one place, used by over 150 organisations.
- **Reading Culture Live** a new digital streaming platform showcasing Reading made cultural and creative content. Launched in 2020, as a response to covid19, it has delivered 278 online activities, reaching over 15,000 unique visitors across 80 countries, representing over 100 local arts organisations, festivals and venues. It has initiated 43 commissions for new digital first content.
- The award winning **Abbey Quarter and Reading Abbey Revealed** project, working with National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England, to conserve, reopen and animate the Abbey Ruins. This project won the *Best use of Heritage in Placemaking'* category at the Planning Awards 2020.
- **More festivals reaching more people** - new festivals started since 2016 include Down at the Abbey, Earth Living Festival, Blue Grass Festival, and Reading Climate Change Festival.
- **Cultural commissioning programme** and Reading Culture Live Commissions focus on health and wellbeing, reaching new and marginalized participants with both open access and targeted programmes.
- **Reading Cultural Education Partnership** launched in 2016 with the mission to allow every child and young person in Reading to aspire, achieve and participate in quality cultural activities. Since then 94% of Reading schools have engaged with a CEP partner, 17 schools have gained Artsmark accreditation, 1,355 Arts Award qualifications have been achieved and £200k+ in external investment has been gained for CEP partners through the partnership investment scheme.

5. CULTURE SERVICE DELIVERY DURING 2020-21

5.1 The start of 2020-21 was in the middle of the first national lockdown where all of the council's buildings were closed to the public. Although the doors were closed, the teams were adapting and pivoting the service offer to maintain a level of access to culture and heritage. The teams gained national recognition, having featured in the Local Government Association's case studies for good council practice in response to covid19.

5.2 Our cultural teams completely changed the way they provided services through a variety of digital platforms offering much needed fun, educational, health and wellbeing content and advice remotely to the heart of the community. These transformational approaches have received an overwhelming positive response giving people an opportunity to actively engage and enjoy themselves during these difficult and isolating times. Reading Culture Live, was created to provide a platform for local cultural organisations to have a digital venue whilst everything was closed, and became more successful than we imagined in reaching wider, even global audiences. We are now looking at how we develop and utilise this as a vehicle for the future, to expose Reading's cultural offerings to wider audiences.

Reading Museum

5.3 Reading Museum created new digital content to increase and deepen community engagement. By May 2020 resources had been viewed or downloaded over 50,000 times, representing a 206% increase from before the lockdown. Social media engagement similarly increased by 258% from before the lockdown. There has been lots of user feedback and appreciation, especially for the VE Day hub, online Animal

exhibition, Windrush Day hub and the Archaeology Festival online events. By early September, there were over 3.2 million views on social media and 120,000 website visits since lockdown started.

- 5.4 Reading Museum's Windrush online exhibition, Enigma of Arrival: The Politics and Poetics of Caribbean Migration to Britain, a partnership with Barbados Museum and the University of the West Indies, was critically acclaimed, featuring in the Arts Council England's national round-up. Locally the project included Reading's Caribbean Associations Group, the Alliance for Community Cohesion and Racial Equality, AGE UK Berkshire, and Globe Church Community.
- 5.5 The Museum was able to reopen for booked visits within a Covid-safe environment from 5 September 2020. October half term was fully booked with popular take home craft packs. Black History Month was celebrated with the loan of a portrait of Paul Robeson from the National Portrait Gallery and a video tribute by Reading Community Gospel Choir featured on Reading Culture Live. At the same time the Museum's online shop was relaunched and in Q3 of 2020/21 saw a significant year-on-year sales increase.
- 5.6 The service continues to support schools creating new live virtual sessions that can be delivered by the learning team direct to the classroom. Since October, seven new sessions, ranging from Bayeux Tapestry to Victorian Childhood, have been created and by Christmas 2020 over 1,000 children had already enjoyed a virtual museum visit. A Friends of Reading Museum crowdfunding drive further enhanced the reach of this programme to local schools but also to some across the country.

Libraries

- 5.7 Reading Libraries have reopened Central, Caversham and Tilehurst libraries since all sites were initially closed in March 2020. The libraries operate an 'order and collect' service and provide free access to PCs via appointment in line with legislation and guidance. On average 400 people per week are accessing libraries in person across the network. The home service, supporting around 400 of the most vulnerable people in Reading, has been operating since July.
- 5.8 During lockdown Libraries developed means to allow instant digital access for the first time, meaning customers could quickly access online resources - this service has grown to around 5,500 uses per month across the year. Our digital offering includes story, rhyme and craft videos, along with local history, which have totalled around 30,000 views over the year. We worked with partners such as the British Library to provide a good digital offering.
- 5.9 Being able to access library resources, to support people's mental health and wellbeing, reducing isolation and supporting education and family literacy, at a time when all buildings were closed, was greatly appreciated by our customers. We are looking to restore more buildings and services as soon as we are able.

Hexagon and South Street

- 5.10 The Hexagon theatre, within ten days, was transformed into a community hub. It provided over 1,232 food deliveries and supported hundreds of Reading's most isolated and vulnerable families, offering support and signposting to organisations that could provide help. Over 20 theatre, events and leisure staff gave their time to assist the Council's response to the urgent needs of local residents.
- 5.11 The Hexagon reopened for socially distanced public performances in October including the welcome return of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's family show, Noisy Kids, which was sold out. However, the last public performance was on 17 December 2020,

due to national lockdown restrictions. South Street secured Arts Council England funding to create in collaboration with resident artists, an innovative show that attempted to address ‘the strange times we all find ourselves in - whilst we’re still experiencing them.’ ‘Behind Closed Doors’ was performed socially distanced in South Street and extremely well received by audiences.

Berkshire Record Office

- 5.12 The Berkshire Record Office has continued to provide a full remote enquiry service, including copies and research. The facilities reopened to visitors from August until the second lockdown, and again briefly in December. Over 3,000 research requests have been met despite the pandemic. The service retained its accredited status by The National Archives for another three years, placing the service within the top 6% of all archives services nationally.
- 5.13 The service has delivered online talks and podcasts in lieu of face-to-face public engagement. Similar to Reading Museum, the spring VE Day 75 exhibition was moved online and can be viewed at www.throughtheireyesww2.com. The exhibition showed the Second World War through the personal experiences of Berkshire people. It included testimony from the Home Guard, ARP volunteers and evacuees.
- 5.14 The externally-funded project to catalogue over one thousand items in the Thames Conservancy archive will complete on time and within budget. This will be celebrated with an online exhibition in spring 2021, as part of the Reading 2021 anniversaries.

High Street Heritage Action Zones

- 5.15 The national HSHAZ scheme was formally launched by Historic England (HE) and DCMS on the 19th September 2020. The Reading scheme has a total budget of £1.6 million and focuses on the high streets within three Conservation Areas: Castle Hill/Russell Street/Oxford Road; St Mary’s Butts/Castle Street; and Market Place/London Street. The scheme focuses on physical interventions, community engagement and cultural enrichment. Reading was successful in achieving a further grant of £9,231 to run a pilot project on the Oxford Road conservation area to create art installations along the Oxford Road which celebrates the amazingly diverse lives and cultures that make up the unique heritage of the Oxford Road.

6. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE ORGANISATIONS

- 6.1 A report has been compiled by University of Reading, 2020, on behalf of Reading, Place of Culture to record how the arts sector has been impacted by the pandemic and to find out what support is most needed. 30 art, culture and heritage (ACH) organisations responded to a questionnaire sent to Reading’s arts organisations, producers and individual artists by Reading Place of Culture between 26th October 2020 and 7th November 2020.
- 6.2 The main impacts on the sector are:
- Live events and bringing people together is the sort of activity that is most challenging under social distancing rules.
 - There are reduced numbers of staff, volunteers and beneficiaries now compared to pre-pandemic.
 - Negative impact on employment and collaboration.
 - Continuance of activities relied heavily on organisations being able to adapt their offer to online/digitally. Some target social groups are harder to reach in this way, such as the young, marginalised communities and areas of deprivation.
- 6.3 Key concerns are:
- Difficulty engaging with people because of ongoing social distancing restrictions.

- Uncertainty - changing times making it difficult to plan.
- Difficulty engaging people because of changes in what people are willing to participate in.
- Funding

6.4 The main areas where support would be welcomed:

- Funding support.
- Shared marketing resource (publicity).
- Business Engagement resource (a person who engages with businesses on behalf of the cultural sector).
- Venues for meeting (rehearsals, performance).
- Opportunities to collaborate with other organisations.
- Admin support.
- Office space.

7. THE PROPOSAL

7.1 Covid19 has had a profound impact on the cultural sector. In response it is proposed to set out a single year plan of priorities in direct response to the pandemic to support the sector's recovery.

7.2 It is proposed that a one year delivery plan is developed to respond to the impact of covid19 on the sector based around the following key priorities.

Strategic Priority One: Enhance identity - being Reading/Made in Reading

1. Develop legacy actions from Reading, Place of Culture project and produce delivery plan.

Strategic Priority Two: Increase Opportunities through working together.

1. Work with strategic leaders of Reading's creative industries to identify how best to support and facilitate the recovery of Reading's creative industries post covid19.
2. Continue to innovate and transform services to provide access to culture despite ongoing impacts of covid19.
3. Deliver the High Street Heritage Action Zones project objectives.
4. Work in partnership to further the community and council ambitions for Reading Prison within the wider context of the Abbey Quarter and national and international arts, culture and heritage opportunities.
5. Agree and commence delivery of the new Cultural Education Partnership plan 2020-2024.
6. Continue to support and develop the Ageing Well Partnership.
7. Initiate a wide ranging conversation with communities and partners to shape a robust and sustainable the future three year delivery plan 2022-25 for the Reading's [Culture and Heritage Strategy](#).

Strategic Priority Three: Celebrate

1. Deliver Reading 2021 Anniversary activities.
2. Agree a framework for the programming of events and engagement activities throughout 2021 in the borough's parks and open spaces.
3. Celebrate Reading's diverse arts, culture and heritage.

7.3 Other Options Considered

7.4 At the end of the Place of Culture funding period, the intention had been to bring forward a three year delivery plan. However, given the ongoing uncertainties relating to covid19 and the recovery of the sector this was felt to not be prudent. Instead a one year delivery plan, that sets out tangible yet aspirational goals to, is recommended provides focus on the response and recovery of the sector post covid19.

8. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

8.1 The Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2021 (which was refreshed in Spring 2019) sets out six priorities, the delivery plan set out below would support the following priorities:

- Securing the economic success of Reading
- Promoting health, education, culture & wellbeing

8.2 Reading Powered By People 2020-22 economic recovery strategy was adopted by the Council in September 2020. Centred around three objectives Inclusive Reading; Smart Reading; and Destination Reading the role of culture features strongly in supporting Health and Well-being in the work place; reinventing vulnerable sectors hit hardest by covid19 and the town centre economy; and Reading, as an arts heritage and cultural destination.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no environmental or climate implications as a result of this report.

10. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

10.1 The key priorities have been developed with informal engagement with the sector. Further engagement to shape the delivery of the priorities will take place with sector leaders and we will initiate a wide ranging conversation with communities and partners on shaping the future three year delivery plan 2022-25 for the Reading's Culture and Heritage Strategy.

11. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

11.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

11.2 It is imperative, that in planning for the recovery we look to protect the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society. The achievements of the strategy to date and in particular the cultural commissions have sought to engage and work with vulnerable and marginalised groups. The arts, culture and heritage sector has a strong track record in delivering positive outcomes with targeted priority groups.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 No relevant legal issues have been identified by the report.

13. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Existing Council budgets will be deployed in partnership with external parties to achieve shared outcomes.

The financial implications were reviewed by Mark Jones, Strategic Business Partner, on 3/2/21.

14. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 14.1 None