

## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

### REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

<b>TO:</b>	<b>HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE</b>		
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>10 MARCH 2021</b>		
<b>TITLE:</b>	<b>READING PLACE OF CULTURE YEAR 3 EVALUATION</b>		
<b>LEAD COUNCILLOR:</b>	<b>CLLR KAREN ROWLAND</b>	<b>PORTFOLIO:</b>	<b>CULTURE HERITAGE AND RECREATION</b>
<b>SERVICE:</b>	<b>CULTURE</b>	<b>WARDS:</b>	<b>ALL</b>
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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 from the third and final year of the Reading, Place of Culture project. It outlines the profound and ongoing impact of covid19 on the project and sets out some indicative legacy plans.
- 1.2 Reading, Place of Culture, was one of 16 Great Places Schemes funded by Arts Council England, Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Scheme. It is jointly led and delivered by Reading Borough Council, Reading UK CIC and Reading University. The scheme runs from 2018-2020. A grant of £558,400 was awarded to deliver three core strands of work over three years.
- 1.3 Reading, Place of Culture aims to make Reading a better place to live, work and visit, fostering a culture of collaboration across sectors, and where caring for and engaging people is achieved in partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors. The scheme supports Reading to enhance its cultural offer, drive economic growth, and improve the quality of life for people in Reading. Covid19 has had a profound impact on the project's ability to deliver against its original plans. However, with the support of funders, innovation and agility on behalf of partners and arts, culture and heritage organisations in Reading have delivered some exceptional outcomes for some of Reading's most marginalised communities.

#### 2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

That the Committee:

- 2.1 notes the achievements of the Reading, Place of Culture project delivered to date
- 2.2 agrees the legacy plans as set out in paragraph 5 of the report.

#### 3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.2 The Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2021 (which was refreshed in Spring 2019) sets out six priorities, the Reading, Place of Culture project and proposed legacy plans support the following priorities:
- Securing the economic success of Reading
  - Promoting health, education, culture & wellbeing
- 3.3 A stronger arts, culture and heritage sector enhances quality of life and brings economic value to Reading. It impacts on place making and inward investment, and therefore, the future of Reading as a whole. One of the successes of Reading's Culture and Heritage Strategy is that arts, heritage and culture is recognised as contributing to the town's economic regeneration and is embedded in plans such as Reading 2050 Vision particularly theme of 'a city of culture and diversity', High Street Heritage Action Zones, and Reading Powered by People.
- 3.4 It was evident in early 2020, the covid19 pandemic was having a profound effect on the arts, culture and heritage sector and the ability of organisations to deliver against the stated aims of the project. The team agreed with the funders to reshape the final year of delivery to take this into account. The funders agreed the revised plans and extended the project delivery timeline to the end of June 2021. The main changes were:
- Repurposing funding for Reading on Thames Festival to establishing and creating a Reading Festivals Group to support the sustainability and development of Reading's independent festivals; and to create a new digital content platform for organisations to publish their work, [Reading Culture Live](#).
  - Amending the delivery methods of some cultural commissions.

Reading, Place of Culture reports regularly to its three national funders via progress report updates and presentations in person; they have approved the current plans.

#### **4. STRANDS OF WORK AND DELIVERY IN 2020-21**

- 4.1 Over the course of the project, Reading, Place of Culture has:
- Increased overall engagement by reaching new audiences and better understanding barriers for harder to reach audiences.
  - Established strong new strategic partnerships and continued to build on existing ones.
  - Continued to include community voices in cultural activity
  - Enhanced belonging and connectivity among Reading's communities using arts and culture as the vehicle to do this.
  - Strengthened the Arts, Culture and Heritage sector by providing opportunities for connection, skills development and support during the pandemic.
- 4.2 The project has continued to deliver against the three strands of activity and a summary of achievements is presented below.

#### **THE CULTURAL COMMISSIONING PROGRAMME, LED BY READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

- 4.3 The purpose of the commissioning programme is to empower local organisations to develop cross-sector partnerships to engage marginalised or hard-to-reach communities in arts, culture and/or heritage programmes. Many of these commissions have had to make significant changes in their delivery plans as a result of covid19 restrictions. Organisations have worked extremely hard to continue to support their beneficiaries as much as possible, although this hasn't always been possible due to the nature of the project or client group.

Current commissions include:

- 4.4 Project: Age UK Berkshire and The Museum of English Rural Life delivering a storytelling and reminiscence project for older people at risk of loneliness and social isolation to improve wellbeing.**  
Age UK and The MERL moved all of their delivery online. They hosted Older People's Day online along with a coffee morning, they have also created Life Story Boxes for those who are at risk of social isolation. They have also delivered training to volunteers, who will be capturing the stories of these individuals. All face to face delivery has been paused until April 2021 as many of the community are shielding. Strong partnerships have been created with arts organisations including Realtime, Strike Up theatre and Annice Thomas.
- 4.5 Project: Alana House, Rahab and Reading Rep delivering theatre for women at risk to enhance communication and conflict resolution skills.**  
Delivery of this project online has not been possible, due the restrictions of being able to work online with vulnerable people. Discussions on how best to proceed and deliver this project are ongoing.
- 4.6 Project: Sport In Mind and Junction Dance are working with Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, schools and community settings to use dance in the treatment, management and prevention of mental illness.**  
This project has extended delivery to 31 March 2021. In September, they delivered mum and baby movement classes outdoors, which have since been paused in line with lockdown restrictions.
- 4.7 Project: Rosetta Life dance, music and spoken word project for long term conditions such as living with the effects of stroke, dementia or Parkinson's.**  
Rosetta Life moved their weekly sessions online and completed in December 2020. As a result of their project they have created a strong partnership with Royal Berkshire Hospital and Stroke Associate Reading, Rosetta Life will be continuing to work with them to support patients.
- 4.8 Project: Reading Rep, Jelly and other partners are delivering theatre for young people with SEND to develop confidence and independence, develop skills and decrease social isolation.**  
This has worked so well with their target group that they will continue to deliver their workshops in this way. 124 children and young people took part in a mixture of face to face and online youth theatre sessions. Additional funding was received by Reading Rep from Brighter Futures for Children to deliver holiday schools at the Avenue School. They employed Neuro diverse camp leaders to help run the sessions.
- 4.9 Project: Mustard Tree, Real Time and Cranbury College are delivering a creative employment project based around film for young people with SEND to build confidence and key skills. Groups will restart once lockdown rules have been relaxed.**

#### **THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME, LED BY UNIVERSITY OF READING**

- 4.10** The Research Programme is co-produced by the University of Reading and the Whitley Researchers, an active research partnership between Whitley Community Development Association and local residents. It aims to develop best practice for borough-wide engagement, geared towards the needs of Reading's diverse communities. In March 2020 the majority of Research/Evaluation budget was repurposed to fund the extension of the other strands as a result of Covid-19. The Whitley Researchers and University team continued to support the others strands of the project, focusing on the legacy of our participatory action research and partnership working with communities through projects.

Those projects and activities include:

- 4.11** On behalf of the Ageing Well Partnership a piece of research was commissioned to explore the delivery of arts culture heritage activities to older residents in Reading

and better understand the challenges faced by local organisations and service providers. This was carried out prior to the pandemic and particularly highlighted the challenges faced by Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee groups. The research has led to discussions about equality, diversity and inclusion, and identifying and delivering tangible actions will be a key part of the legacy plan.

- 4.12 Whitley Researchers had developed a variety of research projects that have evidenced the lived experiences of Covid-19, including a pilot research on Digital Inclusion in collaboration with RVA and RBC, to better understand the barriers facing local families/communities for accessing and engaging in online cultural offers. A research on the experiences of the lockdown with a focus on wellbeing, social isolation and home-schooling. The WRs wrote a story that reflects their journey through the RPoC programme.
- 4.13 The Whitley Researchers have continued to develop and are now working with a range of partners across different policy areas championing the role of participatory community-based research. One of the key legacy actions will be to explore a sustainable organisation model for the researchers.

#### **READING CULTURE LIVE, LED BY READING UK (RUK)**

- 4.14 Reading Culture Live (RCL) was developed and delivered within 8 weeks of the first national lockdown. RCL was designed to be a sister site to What's On Reading. RCL was conceived to support wellbeing outcomes for the community, the sustainability of the local cultural sector and to promote continued pride in Reading. It had two associated commissioning pots to fund online activity specifically linked to the NHS 5 Steps to wellbeing, delivered by local organisations. In the first round RCL funded 11 projects, in the second 6, a third round was supported by RUK to tie in with the Magical Reading offering, this funded 24 projects by local artists. (<https://www.readingculturelive.co.uk/genre/commission>)
- 4.15 In RCL's first 7 months it has:
- Hosted 100 local arts organisations, 278 activities and events, 60 of which were premieres
  - Funded 47 organisations from a combined pot of £31,000
  - Reached over 80 countries
  - Reached 15K unique visitors and had 51k pages views
- 4.16 RCL's survey found that over 90% of the audience felt that interacting with the 'virtual' venue had a positive effect on their wellbeing, '*A focus for my weeks in lockdown, as a single person.*' They also commented positively on the engagement of families, older people, British Sign Language Users and the police. While 100% of the participants said that the engagement with the platform and the art organisations had a positive effect on their wellbeing - '*The activity helped me to escape from the loneliness of lockdown.*' Artists who engaged with the platform said that they had developed new networks, relationships and reached new audiences. Through this evaluation we have learned that in order to have a high impact on the wellbeing of the audience and the participants, we must ensure that the participatory element is always present in the online offering.
- 4.17 RCL is working with South Street and Reading Arts, to launch their first joint online venture in February 2021. This will also be linked with an online theatre club discussion live via Facebook. Work is continuing to develop interfaces between the Reading Arts ticketing platform, the third party video host for RCL and What's On Reading to offer a seamless experience for the user and artist. This has the potential to diversify income streams and reach audiences who are further afield or have accessibility needs that cannot be accommodated in the venue.

#### **READING FESTIVALS' GROUP, LED BY READING UK**

- 4.18 The Reading Festivals' Group is a partnership organisation, representing 17 Reading based festivals. It aims to create synergies in terms of best practice, sustainability, funding and support networks. In February, they will be working with Artwork to create a 'terms of engagement' that will enable the group in the future, to apply for funding from grant awarding bodies to best serve their development as individual festivals.

#### **THE CULTURE AND BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT STRAND, LED BY READING UK**

- 4.19 This has been a difficult year for businesses in Reading and across the world. Covid-19 and the resulting strain on the business sector, made delivering findings from last year's report especially challenging. In order to ensure momentum was kept within this strand of work, a report was commissioned to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on Reading's cultural sector. The findings of which are in Appendix 1. The focus of this report was to understand what would best support the recovery of the sector. The intention was to then see if and how businesses could step in to help, thereby promoting further engagement within between businesses and the arts organisations. This work has helped the Council shape its key priorities for the coming year.
- 4.20 The main impacts on the sector are:
- Live events and bringing people together is the activity that is hardest to sustain under social distancing rules.
  - There are reduced numbers of staff, volunteers and beneficiaries now compared to pre pandemic.
  - Negative impact on employment and collaboration.
  - Continuation 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 and the marginalised.

### **5. OPTIONS PROPOSED**

- 5.1 The following actions have been identified to form part of the draft legacy plan from Reading, Place of Culture to be discussed and agreed with funders and subject to further consultation with partners and the wider ACH sector.

#### **THE CULTURAL COMMISSIONING PROGRAMME**

- Continue to support cultural commissioning model encouraging children and young people to become key actors in shaping ACH programmes post Covid-19 via Cultural Education Partnership and other ACH platforms
- Continue to champion the role of culture in delivering against health and wellbeing, equality, diversity and inclusion outcomes

#### **THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME**

- Ageing Well research - identify and deliver tangible actions to address the challenges of equality, diversity and inclusion faced by communities in accessing culture and funding. ACH programmes can play a key role in bringing different voices and communities together if they are inclusive and participatory
- The Whitley Researchers model is being embraced as a tool for creative young people.
- The Whitley Researchers will be expanding their methodologies to other areas of Reading and cities in the UK through new grants to explore a sustainable organisation model for the researchers.

#### **SUPPORTING THE SECTOR POST COVID19**

- Reading Culture Live - Continue to develop the platform sustainably, building a targeted schedule of events, developing fewer larger commissions, offering

technical support for development locally and explore options to amalgamate into What's On Reading.

- Reading's Festivals Group - support the ongoing development of this group and explore model as a possibility for other artforms in the town, like performing arts.
- Cultural Sector Research - create a one year sector recovery strategy based on findings of the research.

## **PARTNERSHIP**

- Agree the ongoing role of the project steering group and partnership between UoR, Reading UK and the Council. The partners will continue to engage with and assist other ACH projects, sharing learnings, good practices and delivery model developed throughout the 3 years of the RPoC project, that includes:
- the new UoR 'Public Engagement with Community Research Fellow' will facilitate and expand the participatory action research (PAR) embedded within this strand; lead to several co-produced grant applications with ACH organisations, service providers and communities; enables research/evaluation support for local ACH organisations
- to assist Reading's cultural sector to better represent its BAME communities and important lessons learned, such as a need for more diverse and inclusive partnerships/funding strategies between grassroots ACH organisations and Reading's cultural sector/service providers
- the research participatory engagement model can assist the development of other major ACH projects such as the new High Street Heritage Action Zone (HS HAZ) community engagement pilot on the Oxford Road and the wider HS HAZ community engagement programme.
- to explore further sources of funding to continue the legacy of the project's strands, such as using the Cultural Recovery Fund for Heritage funding to support 2021 activities on Reading Culture Live (two videos to be made celebrating the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Abbey Ruins).

## **Other Options Considered**

- 5.2 As the funding for the project ceases in June 2021, closing the project workstreams and ceasing the activities has been considered. However, the project team in consultation with the funders has decided to repurpose the funding and to adapt the activities ensuring the main aims and objectives are maintained within covid-19 secured parameters.

## **6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS**

- 6.1 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

## **7 ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

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

## **8. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION**

- 8.1 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.
- 8.2 The achievements of the project and in particular the cultural commissions have sought to engage and work with vulnerable and marginalised groups. However, more action is needed to address the barriers and challenges marginalised groups face engaging with arts, heritage and culture.

## **9. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

- 9.1 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.
- 9.2 Reading Place of Culture prioritises and positively benefits a number of groups with protected status as well as vulnerable populations of Reading. The arts, culture and heritage sector has a strong track record in delivering positive outcomes with targeted priority groups. However, more action is needed to address the barriers and challenges marginalised groups face engaging with arts, heritage and culture.

## **10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 Any funding granted to the Council for the purpose of support and recovery of the cultural sector of Reading, Place of Culture project, as described in this report, must be in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules and in compliance with the Subsidy Control regime.
- 10.2 The Council is also required to sign and comply with the Terms of Grants of different funding agents (e.g. Great Place Scheme, Arts Council England, the Lottery Heritage Fund, National Lottery Heritage Fund) from whom it receives the grant.

Legal implications provided by Anita Sakhare, Solicitor, on 03 February 2021

## **11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 A grant of £558,400 was awarded by Arts Council England, Historic England and the Heritage Lottery Fund to deliver four core strands of work over the three years. We claimed and received so far £383,042. We are in a process of submitting another claim for the period covering April 2020 to December 2020.
- 11.2 The Great Place Scheme bidding guidelines stipulated that a minimum of 10% of direct project costs should be provided by cash contributions from delivery partners. The Council and Reading UK have each committed to provide £50,000 over the life of the programme to meet this requirement. The council's contribution is contained within existing budget allocations for the Culture Service.
- 11.3 Matched funding worth £56,000 has been generated for the Cultural Commissioning Programme from Brighter Futures for Children, Berkshire Community Foundation and the University of Reading.

- 11.4 In the future we will consider how the indicative legacy plans may be funded via existing budgets or by securing external funding.
- 11.5 These financial implications were reviewed by Mark Jones, Strategic Business Partner on 5/2/21

**12. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 12.1 None