

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	6 JULY 2021		
TITLE:	ACCEPTANCE OF CULTURE RECOVERY AND HERITAGE GRANTS		
LEAD COUNCILLORS:	CLLR KAREN ROWLAND	PORTFOLIO:	CULTURE, HERITAGE AND RECREATION
SERVICE:	CULTURE	WARDS:	ALL
LEAD OFFICER:	DONNA PENTELOW	TEL:	07921 941 075
JOB TITLE:	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR CULTURE	E-MAIL:	donna.pentelow@reading.gov.uk

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise Committee of the award of a round two Arts Council England (ACE) culture recovery fund and leisure recovery fund, totalling £527,000.
- 1.2 In January 2021, Arts Council England announced a second round of Culture Recovery Funding to provide grants to support cultural organisations as they transition back to a viable and sustainable operating model during April-June 2021. A bid for up to £487,000 was submitted to round two of the culture recovery fund to support the reopening of The Hexagon, South Street and Reading Museum. In March the Council was notified that it had been successful with its bid for the full amount.
- 1.3 In June 2020, the council submitted an Expression of Interest to Historic England for a grant to their Covid-19 Emergency Heritage at Risk Response Fund to repairs some of the grade II listed chest tombs in St Laurence's Churchyard, in November we were informed that we were invited to submit a round two application and in January 2021 the council was notified that it had been successful with its bid of £25,000.
- 1.4 In February 2021 the Council submitted an application to Arts Council England under the project grant funding, for £15,000 to support specific artistic and cultural activities to the celebrate the 900th anniversary at Water fest. in May 2021 the council was informed it had been successful with its bid.
- 1.5 The organisations provided the Council with limited windows within which to accept the grants, and the Council accepted the grants within the grant offer acceptance period.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Committee notes the successful applications and acceptance of Arts Council England's culture recovery fund grant of £487,000, Historic England's Covid-19

Emergency Heritage at Risk Response Fund grant of £25,000 and Arts Council England's project grant fund of £15,000 by the Executive Director for Environment, Neighbourhoods and Economic Growth.

- 2.2 That the Executive Director for Environment, Neighbourhoods and Economic Growth, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage & Recreation, be authorised to allocate the grant funding of £487,000 from the Arts Council England's culture recovery fund to support The Hexagon, South Street and Reading Museum as they transition back to a viable and sustainable operating model.
- 2.3 That the Executive Director for Environment, Neighbourhoods and Economic Growth, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage & Recreation, be authorised to allocate the grant fund of £25,000 from Historic England's Covid-19 Emergency Heritage at Risk Response Fund for the repairs and conservation of six of the listed chest tombs within St Laurence's Churchyard.
- 2.4 That the Executive Director for Environment, Neighbourhoods and Economic Growth, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage & Recreation be authorised to allocate the grant fund of £15,000 from Arts Council England's project grant funding to support agreed specific cultural activities for the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey at Water Fest on the 19 June 2021.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 External funding is an important source of income to the Council, but funding conditions need to be carefully considered prior to entering into funding agreements, to ensure that: (i) They are compatible with the aims and objectives of the Council; (ii) The necessary procedures are in place to meet funding conditions and reporting requirements; and (iii) Appropriate budget provision is available if 'match funding' is required.
- 3.2 In March 2020 when the country moved into lockdown The Hexagon, South Street and Reading Museum were forced to close among many other businesses and venues. The Hexagon reopened for public performances in October 2020. As of 5 November 2020, all three venues are closed again under current lockdown restrictions. To mitigate these losses, staff were furloughed where applicable or redeployed and the Council has also been able to claim some of the lost income from central government a part of the scheme to compensate local authorities for irrecoverable income losses from sales, fees and charges. The scheme enables authorities to recover 75p in every £1 of budgeted income lost due to COVID-19 restrictions this financial year once the authority has absorbed 5% of those losses themselves.
- 3.3 In January 2021 Arts Council England announced a second round of the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF) designed to support cultural organisations as they transition back to a viable and sustainable operating model during April-June 2021.
- 3.4 A bid was submitted to the ACE CRF covering the costs associated with The Hexagon, South Street and Reading Museum. The bid outlined the costs, activity and investment required to re-open the venues to the public when the roadmap allowed. The bid

included costs relating to salaries, utilities, marketing and professional fees relating to supporting the venues while closed and preparing the venues to re-open to the public.

- 3.5 The bid also outlined the financial procedures in place including a financially robust review of accounts and ongoing finances, and dedicated finance and accountancy support.
- 3.6 St Laurence's Churchyard, is no longer in use for burials and is managed by Reading Borough Council as public amenity space with a well-used path connecting the Town Hall Square with Forbury Gardens and the wider Abbey Quarter. However, eighteenth and nineteenth century listed chest tombs which are at varying degrees of dilapidation, including subsidence, are at risk of losing stone panels, erosion, frost damage, broken slabs, plant growth, accelerating water damage and the risk of vandalism. Covid 19 crisis has seen an increase of vandalism of heritage structures, including these churchyard tombs. The reduction of grounds maintenance, due to necessary prioritisation during the various lockdowns, has also exacerbated plant growth on these listed structures, accelerating their degradation.
- 3.7 In summer 2020 Historic England released a Covid-19 Emergency Heritage at Risk Response Fund, the council submitted an Expression of Interest in October 2020 and subsequently a second-round application in November 2020, that was successful in January 2021. This grant will help to fulfil another element of the on-going Abbey Quarter project and vision, further enhancing the rich heritage of the town on a key pedestrian route which connects the railway station, the historic high street and Reading Museum with the Forbury Gardens and Abbey Ruins. This conservation work will help with the provision of much needed, well kept open spaces for Reading's residents and visitors to enjoy, further reinforcing the sense of pride and belonging that Reading's diverse community has for its heritage.
- 3.8 2021 is an incredibly auspicious year for Reading, celebrating 900 years since Reading Abbey, one of Europe's largest royal monasteries, was founded by King Henry I of England. The flagship celebration one day event for this landmark year will be Reading Water Fest in June. Reading's largest free outdoor town centre festival will feature an exciting mix of arts, culture and heritage, through live and digital performances, activities and workshops. This accessible day event will take place within the Abbey Ruins and along the River Kennet, celebrating the Abbey's rich 900 year history and its environmental and heritage connections with Reading's waterways.
- 3.9 In March 2021, we submitted an application to ACE to support key artistic activities of this celebration event and our bid was successful. The bid includes a light installation focusing on the Abbey's atmospheric historic space. Creating a bespoke piece on lighting that will link to the 900th anniversary of the Abbey which will be displayed on Chestnut Walk during the evening of the event. The Abbey's dormitory will host 4 unique artist-led workshops and life drawing sessions, co-designed with Jelly, Reading's leading visual arts organisation, and will be themed on the Abbey's textures, colour, sounds and images. The grant will enable to curate a new floating stage with local organisations such as local NPO, CultureMix. They will present a performance from RASPO, an award-winning steel band that has performed at WOMAD, Glastonbury, and the Notting Hill Carnival. This will be a new approach for the festival increasing opportunities for programming across the site using non-traditional staging to help connect the performers to this unique environment and the diverse communities.

4. THE PROPOSAL

4.1 Current Position:

The conditions of the ACE grant required the Council to accept the respective grant funding agreements within two weeks of them being awarded to it. These conditions were accepted by the Council.

- 4.2 In order to draw down the ACE and HE grant funding, the Council needs to submit a claim form, and confirm its participation in a programme evaluation. The Council also needs an activity report and income and expenditure account for the final payment.

Other Options Considered

- 4.6 The Council could have chosen not to accept the grants. The implications of this would be continued pressure on the 2021/22 revenue budget due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions limiting revenue generating activity at both the Council's art venues.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 The acceptance of the grants supports the following Corporate Plan priorities:

1. Healthy Environment
2. Thriving Communities
3. Inclusive Economy

The Council is committed to investing in the culture and heritage of the town, including helping cultural venues recover after the pandemic.

- 5.2 The Hexagon and South Street generate £4.5M in revenue and both venues support a wider ecosystem of SMEs and freelance workers to produce and stage performances, delivering an arts programme to over 200,000 people a year. The Hexagon is the largest theatre in Reading, and the local region, connecting with audiences from a wide geographical range. The venue presents a busy mixed programme that attracts audiences from the local community and provides a wide range of community uses. With over 250 events a year the venue is popular on the national touring circuit. There are no other similar venues in Reading, and it provides a crucial cultural and economic driver for the night time economy, enabling Reading to achieve Purple Flag status and supporting the hospitality sector in central Reading. South Street is the only professional arts centre in Reading and the only one to regularly present high-quality touring theatre programmes. South Street has a national reputation for its high quality, small-scale, contemporary performing arts programme and is a vital part of the UK's touring ecology. It is unique in Reading, offering audiences access to high quality, nationally acclaimed work & has a long history of programming early work from artists that have gone on to receive national recognition.

- 5.3 Reading Museum works with its local partners to provide cultural opportunities to underserved groups, particularly through the ACE supported Museums Partnership Reading's youth strategy and volunteering scheme. The Museum's learning and engagement team reach large numbers of young people. Up to 20,000 children visit each year and another 50,000 use our loans boxes a year. Its 'Museum on Wheels' outreach project attended 16 community venues in 2019 and reached over 6,400 people. The Museum is also a founder member of Reading's well-respected Cultural Educational Partnership co-ordinating cultural opportunities for young people.

- 5.4 Reading's communities see Reading Museum as the 'go to place' to explore and present their histories. The team works with a wide range of local groups to co-produce programmes that tell stories from Caribbean carnival to football, from Asian architecture to climate change, both within the museum and in the community, as well as online. Examples this year include the nationally acclaimed Windrush Day project and a school's Diwali dance project, both of which were adapted to virtual cultural offers due to the pandemic.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 6.2 There are no environmental and climate implications resulting from these recommendations.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 No public consultation has been carried out on the proposal to apply or accept the Arts Council England funding or Historic England funding. However, Reading Museum, Hexagon and South Street theatres have customer feedback and evaluation embedded as part of their operations and use this to inform future service delivery.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 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 There are no equality implications as a result of this decision. Accepting the grant has enabled Reading Museum, in particular, to continue to carry out its work with underserved and diverse communities in Reading, including those protected by the Act.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 ACE's offer of funding under the Arts Council England's Recovery Grants programme is made available to all recipients, including local authorities, pursuant to ACE's standard terms and conditions for grant dated July 2020.
- 9.2 These standard forms of grant require that all grant funding must be used by the Council to deliver the activities set out in its application for funding (the "Plan"/ "Recovery Plan") as agreed respectively by ACE and HE. Any activities/services documented in the Plan/Recovery Plan cannot be unilaterally reduced or changed by the Council without ACE's or HE's prior written consent.

- 9.5 The ACE standard forms of grant include a “pay restraint” conditions as required by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Confirmation has been requested and received by the Council from ACE that any pay restraint condition referenced in the standard forms of grant will not be enforced against a local authority where it is not legally possible for that local authority to implement such a pay restraint condition.
- 9.4 As the grant comes from public funds the Council is required to carry out a Subsidy Control analysis. The Council has carried out this analysis and is satisfied that the support provided through ACE and Historic England grants is compliant with Subsidy Controls.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 These grants will provide financial support for a range of important cultural services, and will help the council manage budget uncertainty as facilities re-open in 2021/22. The Heritage at Risk Response grant will require match funding of £3,000 from the council which will come from the archaeology budget.
- 10.2 These financial implications were reviewed by Mark Jones, strategic business partner on 28/5/21.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 Arts Council England, Culture Recovery Fund: Grants.
Historic England: Grant