

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	29 JUNE 2022		
TITLE:	MUSEUMS PARTNERSHIP READING NATIONAL PORTFOLIO ORGANISATION BID FOR 2023-2026		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR BARNETT-WARD	PORTFOLIO:	LEISURE AND CULTURE
SERVICE:	CULTURE	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Museums Partnership Reading and to seek agreement to delegate authority to extend the partnership agreement with the University of Reading in the event of a successful funding bid. The Museums Partnership Reading is a strategic partnership between Reading Museum and the University of Reading's Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) which is part of the Arts Council England National Portfolio 2018-2023. The two museums work together to provide cultural opportunities for Reading's diverse communities.
- 1.2 The report focuses on the application submitted by the MPR on 18th May 2022 to Arts Council England's 2023-26 Investment Programme seeking a further three years investment from 1 April 2023 until 31 March 2026 from the National Portfolio Organisations programme.
- 1.3 A National Portfolio Organisation is defined by Arts Council England as an organisation that receives direct investment from the organisation in order to help support and realise delivery of Arts Council England outcomes based on the ACE Strategy 'Let's Create'. This portfolio is refreshed every few years, the portfolio for 2018-22 invested £1.6bn into 828 organisations, including 3 in Reading for the first time (Museums Partnership Reading, CultureMix and Readipop).

2. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

That the Committee:

- 2.1 Notes the successful track record of the Museums Partnership Reading (Reading Museum and the Museum of English Rural Life) to date.

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| 2.2 | Agrees to the Council extending its partnership with the University of Reading until 2026 to continue the Museums Partnership Reading as a National Portfolio Organisation if Arts Council England offers NPO funding for 2023 to 2026. |
| 2.3 | Authorises the Executive Director for Environment, Neighbourhoods and Economic Growth, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Leisure & Culture, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services and the Director of Finance to extend the partnership agreement with the University of Reading for the Museums Partnership Reading. |

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Reading Museum has Full Accreditation status from Arts Council England. This forms part of the nationally agreed Museum Accreditation Scheme - the UK Standard for museums and galleries. Accreditation is often an essential criterion for grant giving bodies including Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It is a requirement for all museums in ACE's National Portfolio to have Accreditation. Reading Museum is part of the Museums Partnership Reading which is part of the Arts Council England National Portfolio 2018-2023. The current Museums Partnership Reading Business Plan 2022-23 embeds the outcomes and investment principles of ACE's 2020-2030 strategy 'Let's Create' and was submitted to ACE in February 2022.
- 3.2 A Forward Plan is an accreditation requirement to demonstrate effective forward planning approved by the governing body. The Reading Museum Forward Plan 2020-2025 was adopted at the Housing, Neighbourhood and Leisure Committee on 6 July 2021, and includes an action for the MPR to seek ACE investment from the 2023-2026 NPO programme. A Collections Policy is another requirement for accreditation, this was adopted via Decision Book on 27 April 2022.
- 3.3 The Arts Council England Investment Programme provides regular funding to National Portfolio Organisations that help realise its strategy, 'Let's Create'. National Portfolio Organisations deliver the ACE strategy by delivering on one or more of its outcomes, along with embedding its Investment Principles in their work.

The Let's Create outcomes are -

- Creative People
- Cultural Communities
- A Creative and Cultural Country

The investment principles are-

- Ambition and Quality
- Dynamism
- Inclusivity and Relevance
- Environmental Responsibility

These principles, in turn, align with the Council's ambitions around Healthy Environment, Thriving Communities and Inclusive Economy.

4. THE PROPOSAL

- 4.1 This report seeks the Committee's approval for the Council to extend its partnership with the University of Reading until 2026 to continue the Museums Partnership

Reading as a National Portfolio Organisation if Arts Council England offers it funding for 2023 to 2026.

- 4.2 Until 2018 Reading had no NPOs. In 2018 three National Portfolio Organisations were awarded across four Reading organisations - Culture Mix, Readipop and Museums Partnership Reading. Given the competitiveness for National Portfolio Organisation status and funding this was a major achievement for the town's cultural sector.
- 4.3 Museums Partnership Reading is a strategic partnership between Reading's two leading museums, Reading Museum, and the University's Museum of English Rural Life which is part of the ACE National Portfolio 2018-2023. The two museums have developed a strong partnership and track record based on collaborative programming, sharing skills and resources and maximising community and digital engagement. It has grown out of a decades long working relationship that aims to place The MERL and Reading Museum, as MPR, at the heart of Reading's place-making agenda, engaging with and delivering high quality engagement and access to collections for its young people and diverse communities. The Museums Partnership Reading's current approved Business Plan for 2022-23 gives priority to refreshing and re-setting in light of Arts Council England's new 'Let's Create' Strategy and Outcomes and Investment Principles.
- 4.4 Since 2018 Museums Partnership Reading has developed a wide range of projects and programmes and been agile in responding to the challenges created by the pandemic of reaching audiences. Key areas of work have been collections, digital, partnerships/placemaking, volunteering, and children and young people.
- 4.5 Collection projects at both museums have improved collection care and access, with the Reading Museum store move in 2020 being a key achievement with the assistance and expertise of Museums Partnership Reading staff. The partnership has delivered high quality exhibitions celebrating the diversity of the Museums Partnership Reading's collections that have been enjoyed by almost 150,000 people (19/20 to 21/22) including:
- 'Ladybird Books - How it works'
 - 'From Rubens to Sickert - the study of drawing'
 - '1971 Reading Festival - For the first time'
 - and this year's Biscuit Town programme celebrating 200 years of Huntley & Palmers.
- These exhibitions reach existing and new audiences; the Museums Partnership Reading visitor survey for 1971 Reading Festival found that 23% had not been to Reading Museum before, 37% said 1971 made them feel proud of Reading, 32% said they were curious to find out more; and 17% said it made them want to go to a festival!
- 4.6 The Museums Partnership Reading's experience of digital and a focus on agile working meant it was able respond quickly to Covid with high quality online content. Staff, volunteers and partners have created innovative digital content on the museums' websites and social media based on the MPR collections and Reading's heritage including blogs, online exhibitions, and over 6000 objects added to online catalogues. 2021-22 was a record-breaking year for MPR's digital platforms, with the websites surpassing one million pageviews. This included significant year-on-year increases of 26.77% at The MERL and an incredible 122.05% at Reading Museum.
- 4.7 Museums Partnership Reading partnerships have assisted and delivered programme for Reading Abbey Revealed, Reading High Street Heritage Action Zone, Thriving Communities, and Cultural Commissioning for the Reading Great Place scheme. MPR has worked with Reading UK CIC to form the Reading Tourism Group, promote the

museums through the Great West Way and Tourism South East, and promote Reading Biscuit Town, celebrating 200 years of Reading's biscuit heritage in 2022.

- 4.8 Volunteer management has been integrated across both museums, achieving the Investing in Volunteers national standard in 2019. In 2020 the Museums Partnership Reading launched a new online volunteering platform 'Better Impact' especially aimed at engaging volunteers from a younger and more diverse background, including offering more online volunteering opportunities. In 2021/22 MPR had 162 volunteers who contributed 4,970 hours of time, 45% of new volunteers identified as ethnically diverse, and 27% of active volunteers were aged between 15 -24.
- 4.9 The Museums Partnership Reading Youth Strategy has delivered new learning resources and sessions for The MERL, teacher's conference and literacy INSET days at Reading Museum, and during the pandemic created a new Virtual Schools Session. These sessions have been incredibly successful engaging with 3,664 children and young people, even reaching an international audience in Canada and Kenya. Between 19/20 and 20/21 there were 19,010 participants in MPR's formal learning sessions. Young people from the Museums Partnership Reading Youth Panel, No. 5 and Reading College have participated and co-produced activities, displays and a Youth Manifesto film. Museums Partnership Reading is also trialling 'Museums, My Way', a new series of sessions for neurodiverse visitors to explore the museums in a safe environment, developed in partnership with Autism Berkshire.
- 4.10 Museums Partnership Reading is seeking a further three years investment from the Arts Council England Investment Programme, which will invest in National Portfolio Organisations that help realise its strategy, Let's Create. A key benefit of this status, over and above the reputation and kudos it provides, is multi-year core funding. The current investment period being applied for is from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2026. Applicants will be informed whether Arts Council England will be making them a conditional offer of funding by the end of October 2022.
- 4.11 As an existing National Portfolio Organisation (2018-2023) Arts Council England provided Museums Partnership Reading with a planning figure of £254,599 per year, which is the maximum amount that Museums Partnership Reading can apply for per year and is based on the current funding level, so represents 'standstill funding'. This represents £763,797 over three years for 2023-2026.
- 4.12 The Museums Partnership Reading application for 2023-2026 is led by The MERL in an equal partnership with Reading Museum. As the consortium's lead organisation, The MERL, is the responsible for the submission of the application on 18th May 2022, and if successful the University of Reading will be accountable for the grant award and governance. An extension of the current formal partnership agreement with Reading Borough Council (RBC) as a consortium partner will be required if the application is successful.
- 4.13 The University has delegated formal oversight and governance of MPR to the Committee for Museums Partnership Reading. This Committee is subject to the University's governance and legal policies and is constituted as a Committee of the University of Reading. This fulfils Arts Council England guidance on the importance of good governance and the new Arts Council England strategy, Let's Create. RBC will be represented on this Committee by the Museum Manager and one other RBC representative (tbc).

4.14 Arts Council England has asked applicants to identify up to three Outcome Elements (out of 18) for which they will deliver up to nine activities in 2023-24. The Museums Partnership Reading application focuses on:

- A) *Creative People – Supporting people at all stages of their lives to design, develop and increase their participation in high-quality creative activities*
- J) *Cultural Communities – Working with communities to better understand and respond to their needs and interests, resulting in increased cultural engagement and the wide range of social benefits it brings*
- K) *Cultural Communities – Working collaboratively through place-based partnerships to: Support and involve communities in high-quality culture; Improve creative and cultural education for children and young people; Improve health and wellbeing through creative and cultural activity; Build skills and capacity in the cultural sector and grow its economic impact*

4.15 In its application the Museums Partnership Reading has outlined nine core activities in 2023-24:

- Activity 1 - 'We Are Open' will reimagine how people explore and engage with collection stories through digital methods including VR. At Reading Museum this will build on trials in the 3D scanning of objects such as tins from the Huntley & Palmers Collection and online access.
- Activity 2 - 'Untold' will push the boundaries of interpretation & engagement by discovering and sharing hidden stories through co-curation of our collections to hear different voices and perspectives. At Reading Museum we will build on work exploring the diversity of Roman Britain using the Silchester Collection, and uncovering climate change stories in our natural history collections.
- Activity 3 - 'Green Screen' will champion and advocate for environmental responsibility through a creative residency commission at both museums for participatory film maker(s) connecting with Reading families, communities, and volunteers with our collections.
- Activity 4 - 'Museums, My Way' will widen access for neurodiverse audiences and diverse communities by the development & delivery of a supported visits programme. This extends the model that the MPR is currently evaluating at both museums in partnership with Berkshire Autism.
- Activity 5 - 'Museums on Wheels' will create participatory opportunities beyond the museums. Focused activity in Reading communities with high levels of deprivation, including working at Southcote/Whitley Libraries. This evolves this successful outreach model that was developed for the Reading Abbey Revealed project.
- Activity 6 - 'Reading's History and Cultural Curriculum' will plan and develop an inclusive curriculum with local schools, focused on Reading's own stories of migration and cultural change, through the development of the Museums' participatory sessions. This build on the development of Black History resources and virtual sessions in 2020-21.

- Activity 7 - ‘Sanctuary’ - will work with Reading partners using the Cities of Sanctuary as a model to connect asylum seekers, refugees and other new arrivals to Reading with participation in culture and heritage opportunities.
- Activity 8 - ‘Sow Seeds’ will develop an outdoor based programme aimed at men (particularly younger men for improving mental health) as an under-represented group within museums using The MERL garden and the Abbey Quarter.
- Activity 9 - ‘Pathways’ will create a programme to develop creative industries skills and employability for young people from underrepresented communities in Reading, through partnerships including Widening Participation to higher education.

4.16 Further to the nine core activities outlined above, there is an additional Activity 10 to extended Museums Partnership Reading’s successful model of partnership to develop some of the activities with cultural partners in Slough. Slough is one of Arts Council England’s Priority Places and this activity would be part of an Additional Funding Request over and above the Arts Council England planning figure for Museums Partnership Reading. The request would provide extra capacity for the Museums Partnership Reading to help partners in Slough deliver cultural activity in Slough. This Additional Funding Request does not affect the assessment of the MPR’s core funding application for its work in Reading.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 Reading Museum cares for an important public collection and unique cultural resource, which through its use and interpretation contributes to the delivery of the strategic priorities within the *Corporate Plan 2022-23*- Healthy Environment, Thriving Communities and Inclusive Economy. It particularly contributes towards the Council’s strategic aim to establish Reading as a Learning City and a stimulating and rewarding place to live and visit. It also contributes to the *Culture and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030*, and the *Reading 2050 Vision*, particularly the theme ‘a city of culture and diversity’.
- 5.2 Museums Partnership Reading is an established strategic partnership that places The MERL and Reading Museum at the heart of the town’s place-making agenda engaging with and delivering high quality engagement and access to collections for the town’s diverse and thriving communities. It is a key partner delivering engagement activities as part of the Reading High Street Heritage Action Zone. The Museums Partnership Reading programme also promotes environmental awareness through the museums’ collections and services as part of its work with local communities and users especially schools, families, and young people. It works closely with Reading UK CIC and the Reading Tourism Group to provide and promote events and activities that attract visitors to Reading, for example last year’s 1971 Reading Festival exhibition and this year’s Biscuit Town 200 initiative.

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 Reading Museum makes a positive contribution to Reading’s ability to respond to the Climate Emergency and achieve a carbon neutral Reading by 2030. Reading Museum has an Environmental Policy (another Accreditation Scheme requirement, Decision

Book issue 542 refers) that assists with delivering its environmental objectives such as promoting the responsible and efficient use of energy and water in our buildings, reducing the consumption of raw materials and the production of waste in our operations, encouraging the use of environmentally sound and sustainable resources, and promoting environmental awareness as part of our work with local communities and our users. For example, the relocation of the Museum's off-site store improves the care and access of the collection, while also reducing environmental impacts through a more energy efficient and smaller footprint building (that is also better adapted to deal with the impacts of climate change). The Museum's new programme of virtual school sessions are accessible to more schools across the UK but have the positive contribution of reducing the need for travel by local schools.

- 6.3 The Museums Partnership Reading is required to embed Environmental Responsibility in its work as one of ACE's four Investment Principles. The MPR's current business plan (2022-23) includes the delivery a creative environmental campaign drawing on the collections of both museums and focused on improving Reading as a place to live, and the development and deliver environment focused schools' resources and an outdoor learning offer.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 Reading Museum's formally adopted Forward Plan (Housing, Neighbourhood and Leisure Committee, 6 July 2021) and Access Policy (Decision Book Issue 603, 24 June 2020) give local people and key stakeholders, including Arts Council England, a clear and transparent understanding of the Museum's planning framework for delivering its key aims and objectives. Through its Access Policy and Plan the Museum has a clear commitment to making its collections, buildings and services accessible, by removing as many physical, intellectual or cultural barriers to access as practicable, within the limits of legal, budgetary and planning considerations. Within available resources the Museum is committed to an audience-first focus, developing a programme of activities and events that are designed to involve, educate and engage groups from a wide range of backgrounds and all parts of Reading's diverse community.
- 7.2 Reading Museum regularly evaluates its services and consults with users following its Access Policy and Forward Plan. As part of Museums Partnership Reading, we use Audience Finder to evaluate the visitors and groups that we have worked with directly, we also consult through other evaluation methods. We involve our communities in the running of the Museum through consultative groups (youth panel, teacher's panel etc.), co-production and community steering groups for partnership projects and initiatives (for example the Reading Windrush Group, Heritage Action Zone). The Museum knows there are barriers to engagement, and there are opportunities for museums and Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee representatives to come together to find and develop cultural opportunities. Through its Access Policy and Plan the Museum is committed to actively engaging with Reading's diverse local communities. The MPR is also committed to embedding Arts Council England's Inclusivity and Relevance Investment Principles in its business plan that is submitted to ACE annually.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 The decision to continue the Museums Partnership Reading does not have a differential impact on: racial groups, gender, people with disabilities, people of a particular sexual orientation, people due to their age, or people due to their religious belief. The MPR is committed actively engaging with Reading's diverse local communities and is also embedding ACE's Inclusivity and Relevance Investment Principles into its current and future plans. Reading Museum has several existing

policies, including the Museum's Access Policy (Decision Book issue 603 refers), and addresses and promotes equality of services/opportunity to all sectors of the community. The Museum and MPR regularly consult and evaluate their services, projects and programmes, and has never received any indication or feedback that any of their policies or plans discriminates against any groups. Both the MPR and Reading Museum are positive about being inclusive to all sections of the community. Being free to visit, our museums are open to all residents and visitors. They provide opportunities for enjoyment and learning for all regardless of ethnic origin, social background or financial means.

- 8.2 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not relevant to the decision to the continue the Museums Partnership Reading.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 In the event of a successful funding bid, Arts Council England's offer of National Portfolio Organisation funding for 2023 to 2026 for the Museums Partnership Reading will be made to the University of Reading as the consortium's lead organisation, and will be subject to ACE's standard terms and conditions for grant.
- 9.2 As the lead organisation, the University of Reading will be accountable to Arts Council England for the Museums Partnership Reading's governance, including having in place a partnership agreement with the Council for the Museums Partnership Reading.
- 9.3 The University of Reading has delegated formal oversight and governance of the MPR to the Committee for the Museums Partnership Reading. This Committee is subject to the University of Reading's governance and legal policies and is constituted as a Committee of the University of Reading.
- 9.4 It will be necessary to review the partnership agreement for the Museums Partnership Reading with the University of Reading.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 If the bid for funding is successful, all activities will be met from the Arts Council England programme funding. There is no requirement for match funding from RBC and all programme expenditure is covered by the National Portfolio Organisation funding. If the application was not successful, the Museums Partnership Reading will consult with ACE to see if other funding programmes are available to support any of the proposed activities. The Museums Partnership Reading would then need to review its plans and staffing before the end of the current National Portfolio Organisation funding cycle in March 2023.
- 10.2 As the consortium's lead organisation, the University of Reading will be accountable to Arts Council England for the financial management of the grant award.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 There are none