

22 February 2022

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| Report of | Lucie Breadman Assistant Director, Communities | Author | Claire Taylor ☎ 282655 |
| Title | Review of Colchester Borough Council's partnership arrangements with The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite | | |
| Wards affected | Not applicable | | |

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Review of the partnership arrangements between CBC (Colchester Borough Council) and organisations in receipt of a Strategic Arts Grant from the Council: The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite.
- 1.2 Representatives from the three organisations will attend and present to the Panel at the meeting:

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| Mercury Theatre: | Steve Mannix, Executive Director Tracey Childs, Executive Producer |
| Colchester Arts Centre: | Anthony Roberts, Director |
| Firstsite: | Sally Shaw, Director |

The Chairs of the respective Boards of Trustees have also been invited to attend.

2. Action Required

- 2.1 The Panel is invited to review the range of activity and programming delivered by each organisation and how effectively this supports the Council's strategic priorities and provides value for money for the grant funding provided.

3. Reason for Scrutiny

- 3.1 Regular reviews of Colchester Borough Council's strategic arts and cultural partners are undertaken by the Panel at their request

4. Background Information

4.1 Introduction

Colchester's leading cultural organisations help make the Borough a vibrant place to live, learn, visit and work. Together they play a vital role in ensuring a diverse range of experiences and activities are accessible to all. They offer not only access to great entertainment and art, but also opportunities for individuals and communities to be creative and to come together in welcoming and safe spaces, supporting their health and wellbeing.

These organisations are also integral to the creative industries and tourism, priority sectors for economic growth. In partnership with CBC each is custodian of a key landmark building and community asset. They work closely with the Council to ensure these remain fit for purpose, and crucially to lever in external funding and inward investment to maintain and improve these facilities.

The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite are Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisations and in receipt of ACE funding in the current cycle 2018-2023 (extended from 2022). The funding partnership between the Council, the organisations and ACE delivers a strong cultural asset base for Colchester, underpinning the wider creative community. In October 2021 the Council announced a new funding settlement with the organisations for four years from financial year 2023/24. This will align with the ACE funding cycle and provide the organisations with additional certainty and stability for their medium-term financial planning, supporting their recovery after the disruption of the Covid 19 pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on cultural provision and practice has been severe. However, the crisis has also served to highlight the importance of the arts to individuals and communities. Led by these organisations the Borough's cultural sector has demonstrated inspirational resilience and ingenuity during this period.

As key organisations and leaders in the sector the three organisations have been partners in the development of a new Cultural Strategy for Colchester, commissioned by the Council from specialist consultancy Counterculture and to be published in March 2022.

4.2 The Organisations

The Mercury Theatre

The Mercury Theatre is the most active professional producing theatre in East Anglia, engaging pre covid/redevelopment with more than 130,000 people each year through a broad and vibrant programme staged across two auditoria, and education, outreach, and mentoring programmes such as Mercury Creatives. Through Mercury Productions they reach audiences and generate critical attention regionally and nationally, helping to raise the profile of Colchester. The theatre is a significant local employer and a major driver of the restaurant and hospitality economy in Colchester, with audiences estimated to spend £3.8 million annually in the town centre.

The theatre is celebrating its 50th Anniversary in 2022, having reopened in autumn 2021 following an £11.8 million redevelopment of the site which saw it close to audiences there in 2019. These major works were a significant boost to the local economy with £10.6 million of the budget being spent with local firms. As a result of the project 44 new jobs have been created.

Now complete the 'Mercury Rising' project has delivered a highly impressive, state of the art facility for the organisation and audiences, and a new community hub for Colchester town centre which welcomes everyone in, whether for a performance, an activity, a coffee, or even just free WIFI. And the impact will be felt beyond the building itself, with new activity and events designed to make the most of improved public realm around the site and animate an historic area of the town centre, adjacent to the Roman Wall and Jumbo.

Colchester Arts Centre

Housed in St Mary's at the Wall church, in a normal year Colchester Arts Centre reaches over 40,000 people with a diverse programme across a wide range of contemporary performing arts and popular events. It takes a leading role in the development of live art through commissions and partnerships.

The sheer variety and number of events taking place at the venue, on almost every day of the year, make it a key asset in attracting people into the centre of Colchester. During lockdown Colchester Arts Centre was the only venue in the UK to create and distribute fresh and original digital content every single day with 'The Daily Poetry' project attracting 392,250 viewings.

Backed by the ACE Small Capital Grant scheme and supported by the Council, a £700K project to upgrade the venue has recently been completed. The works have transformed accessibility for disabled artists, improved environmental efficiency and technical infrastructure, and redecorated and restored areas of the historic Grade 2 Listed Building. As an example of the care taken to create a unique environment reflecting the building's past and present, the mosaic artist Anne Schwegmann Fielding was commissioned to incorporate artworks into the architectural design created from the old crockery and historic coinage, donated by the people who use and love the venue.

Firstsite

Housed in a landmark building designed by international architect Rafael Viñoly, Firstsite is leading contemporary visual arts organisation presenting free exhibitions of both local and internationally renowned artists, as well as events, activities and workshops. The organisation is a national leader in commissioning new art, providing innovative learning opportunities, and supporting the professional development of local and regional artists.

The venue provides an accessible space in the heart of the town centre for diverse individuals and groups to interact and engage in a variety of ways, from attending a screening or participating in an activity to relaxing in the café or even ice skating at Christmas. As a unique building and a free attraction is it an important tourism asset for Colchester.

In October 2021 the Firstsite building celebrated its 10th anniversary, just a month after being named Art Fund Museum of The Year 2021. This prestigious award recognised the excellence of the programme delivered on site; the support offered to the local community and far beyond during the covid lockdowns via the activity packs delivered to over 92,000 households and the Great Big Art Exhibition; and also its ground-breaking Holiday Fun programme and other community projects. Since 2017 through Holiday Fun Firstsite has provided over 12,000 freshly cooked meal to local children and families along with free creative activities, sport and physical exercise sessions. The Art Fund Museum of the Year award ceremony was broadcast on TV and radio via a special edition of the BBC's Front Row programme and received wide coverage across other media channels, earning an estimated £1.2 million of free publicity (source Art Fund) for Colchester as the home of Firstsite.

4.3 Partnership Delivery Arrangements

Annual Funding Agreements are agreed in close consultation with each organisation and set out the activity and targets around delivery. The Funding Agreements for the previous financial year with outcomes and the current agreements for 2021/22 are attached as Appendices. It should be noted these Funding Agreements have been amended and simplified to take into account the unprecedented situation of the pandemic, which in some degree rendered the normal range and type of targets unachievable or irrelevant.

A Member of Colchester Borough Council is nominated to sit on the Board of each organisation. Currently these are:

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| Mercury Theatre: | Cllr Lyn Barton |
| Colchester Arts Centre: | Cllr Darius Laws |
| Firstsite: | Cllr Martin Leatherdale |

4.4 Financial Arrangements

Grants to these organisations are agreed by Cabinet and full Council. The current financial year 21/22 is year two of a three-year settlement from 20/21 – 22/23.

In each financial year over this period the Council is providing revenue grant funding of:

- £168,175 to The Mercury Theatre
- £48,175 to Colchester Arts Centre
- £97,000 to Firstsite

A new funding settlement starting in FY23/24 and maintaining the grants at this level for a further four financial years was agreed in 2021.

5. Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications

5.1 Not applicable

6. Standard References

6.1 There are no consultation or publicity considerations; or financial; community safety; health and safety or risk management implications of this review.

7. Strategic Plan References

- 7.1 The relationship between Colchester Borough Council and the Strategic Arts Partners relates to the 'Celebrating Our Heritage and Culture' key strategic priority theme in the [Colchester Strategic Plan 2020-23](#)

Appendices

- Appendix A Funding Agreement with The Mercury Theatre 2021/22
- Appendix B Funding Agreement with The Mercury Theatre 2020/ 21
- Appendix C Funding Agreement with Colchester Arts Centre 2021/22
- Appendix D Funding Agreement with Colchester Arts Centre 2020/21
- Appendix E Funding Agreement with Firstsite 2021/22
- Appendix F Funding Agreement with Firstsite 2020/21