

# SCRUTINY PANEL

## 28 FEBRUARY 2017

*Present:-* Councillor Davies (Chairman), Councillor Arnold, Councillor Coleman, Councillor Fox, Councillor Hogg, Councillor Scordis, Councillor Wood

*Also in Attendance:-* Councillor T.Young

### **106. Minutes**

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

### **107. Review of the Council's Funding and partnership arrangements with Firstsite**

The Panel is asked to review the progress of Firstsite since the decision by the Arts Council to withdraw their National Portfolio Organisation status and to consider how effectively they support the Council's Strategic Plan priorities and provide value for money for the funding provided.

Noorzaman Rashid, Chairman of Firstsite and Sally Shaw, Executive Director of Firstsite attended the meeting and provided the Panel with a presentation. Councillor Tim Young, Portfolio Holder for Culture was also in attendance.

Noorzaman Rashid provided the Panel with a brief summary of the history of Firstsite, and informed the Panel that Sally Shaw, the current director, joined in April 2016. Noorzaman Rashid praised the work of Sally Shaw during her tenure to date. The Panel were also informed of the visitor numbers to Firstsite, which stood at 125,000 for last year, up from the previous figure of 80,000.

Noorzaman Rashid confirmed that Firstsite have in place a three-year funding strategy, a business plan, a service level agreement with Colchester Borough Council and a detailed agreement with Arts Council England. Firstsite have, so far, completed the vast majority of recommendations made to the organisation, with those remaining currently in progress.

Noorzaman Rashid stated that Firstsite is a nationally and internationally recognised organisation. The facility is an important part of the development of the cultural quarter in Colchester, and the Borough as a whole. Noorzaman Rashid highlighted that Curzon Cinema would assist with the development of the cultural quarter and confirmed that an agreement for Curzon Cinema to use Firstsites auditorium for the most popular films had been finalised.

With regard to the governance arrangements, these have been further strengthened; all but two of the board members are new in post and the gender split is almost equal. Firstsite will continue to further improve its relationships with local residents; in order to do this a Programme Advisory Board has been set up using analytics to gather a greater understanding of the exhibitions and events that residents and visitors would wish to see. In addition to this, Sally Shaw is meeting with a variety of stakeholder groups to gather further information.

An Innovation and Enterprise Group has been created to look at how Firstsite can operate more efficiently. The group includes staff members, trustees and local businesses. An example of the increase efficiency is the 'We Walk the Line' café which has recently been launched and will return a 10% profit by the end of the financial year 2017/18. Further opportunities such as pop-up food stalls, improvement of the retail experience, a business hub and other uses for the auditorium will be explored. Noorzaman Rashid acknowledged the challenges ahead, which include whether Firstsite receives the four-year funding agreement from the Arts Council.

Sally Shaw provided the Panel with information on her previous roles, which included Modern Art Oxford, London Underground and the Mayor of London. Sally Shaw also informed the Panel of the groundwork that had been completed at Firstsite prior to her arrival.

With regard to the programme going forward, Sally Shaw stressed the importance of providing both familiar art forms and those which are more unusual which would help attract local residents and visitors from further afield to Colchester. The aim is to cement Firstsite as a default visitor attraction within a 45-minute catchment area and further work is being undertaken to achieve this goal.

Firstsite has improved its reach, particularly in terms of diversity and with those aged over 45. Improvements have also been made in how Firstsite creates news coverage for the different range of events. Further work is required to ensure partnerships are made in Colchester and further afield; a collaboration is currently being worked on with the University of Essex.

Sally Shaw highlighted the success of the open submission exhibition where members of the public were able to showcase their own pieces of art. The event attracted 60,000 visitors and will be taking place again focused around a particular theme. Sally Shaw also highlighted the importance of regional culture and informed the Panel of a local artist that displayed their work in Firstsite and subsequently gave a donation back to Firstsite due to the success. Further to this Firstsite also has the capability to display renowned artists work including Andy Warhol. An artist will also be commissioned to produce a piece of work on the outside of the auditorium that will stay in place for a full year.

Sally Shaw also highlighted the Gee Vaucher exhibition which proved very successful, was promoted well through social media and managed to make the national newspapers.

Firstsite also held a Syrian pop-up café, in partnership with Refugee Action Colchester which received 2,000 visitors in one weekend.

Sally Shaw informed the Panel of a number of other events such as the Veterans Weekend, which included a talk from a Turner Prize winner and a two-week young artist's festival which attracted 9,000 visitors. The young artists' festival was delivered in partnership with the Paul Hamlin Foundation and Tate; since April 2016 young people have spent 27,000 hours at Firstsite.

Further partnership working is being undertaken with the Royal Opera House Bridge in Thurrock, and Creative Colchester Board to set up the local cultural educational partnership. The idea of the group is to bring the educational and cultural organisations together to understand what can be done better for children and young people. Sally Shaw also highlighted a Britishness project, which would aim to represent young people's view on Britishness and citizenship in the current political atmosphere.

With regard to outdoor spaces, Sally Shaw confirmed that the aim is to make the best use of the facilities with activities taking place throughout the summer months that would be free. This would benefit the whole area in terms of regeneration.

In conclusion to the presentation, Sally Shaw stated that the team are determined to make Firstsite relevant to a wide range of people. Over the next four years there will be annual themes;

- 2018 – World War One
- 2019 – Digital and Innovation
- 2020 – Essex Landscape and cultural significance (including wellbeing)
- 2021 – Tenth Anniversary of Firstsite

With regard to the tenth anniversary, Sally Shaw highlighted that this would be an opportunity to show the cultural impact and benefit to communities that Firstsite has had on Colchester.

## **Have Your Say!**

### **Jonathan Pearsal**

Jonathan Pearsal highlighted that he had always been a supporter of Firstsite, and was pleased to hear from the presentation the intended programmes for the facility. Jonathan Pearsal acknowledged that in previous years Firstsite had struggled, but it is now looking more positive with projects like flipside, and the new café 'We Walk the Line'. Whilst Jonathan Pearsal was concerned that the press coverage presented Firstsite in the wrong image, he hoped that the Committee and members of the public would respond positively to the presentation from the organisation.

### **Nick Chilvers**

Nick Chilvers stated that whilst he was impressed by the intended programme for Firstsite, the message still needed to be circulated to members of the public to combat negative perceptions. This communication would need to be delivered in a variety of different formats rather than just electronically; Mr Chilvers suggested pop-up stalls in the Town Centre, attending different community groups and libraries across the Borough. Mr Chilvers believed that Firstsite should not proceed in becoming a venue for weddings and should also not invest heavily in providing food and beverages as this is provided across the Town Centre. Mr Chilvers stressed the importance of sound finances and ensuring the exhibitions displayed are accessible, which will increase the footfall at the facility.

### **Maria Wilby**

Maria Wilby from Refugee Action Colchester, which supports refugees and asylum seekers across Colchester, highlighted the work undertaken in partnership with Firstsite to operate a pop-up Syrian café. Maria Wilby informed the Panel that the pop-up café started following conversations with Sally Shaw and the eagerness of the Syrian refugee families to demonstrate Syrian food and to find work. Maria Wilby thanked the staff at Firstsite for being so supportive which has led to further events taking place. The pop-up café provided the Syrian refugees with experience of working in a professional kitchen which has led to some receiving job offers and others being sent on food hygiene courses. The café also helped the Syrian families learn more about Colchester. Maria Wilby stressed to the Panel that through Firstsite providing this opportunity the families have felt empowered, benefitting both themselves and Colchester.

### **Lorna Fox O'Mahony**

Lorna Fox O'Mahony from the University of Essex informed the Panel that Firstsite and the University have developed a strong partnership over the past year. Following changes in higher education over the last few years, the University and Firstsite have worked together to identify different opportunities for partnership working. The University has been involved in the Gee Vaucher and Andy Warhol projects and is also part of the local education partnership. The University is also part of a project called 'Go Essex'; a submission has been made to the Government as part of the great places scheme which will award £15m in places across England. The project, which is currently at the second stage of the bid, is seeking locations that can place arts and culture at the heart of local planning.

Below is a summary of the responses provided by Firstsite to Councillors questions;

- An updated milestones document and performance overview document will be circulated to Councillors following questions about recent performance. Firstsite confirmed that 90% of the recommendations made had been completed; the next objective is to develop a retail and marketing action plan. The current number of active volunteers at Firstsite is 70 compared to the target of 100.
- The most successful films that take place at Firstsite are the live streamed events from the National Theatre, the larger blockbuster films were not as successful but the

partnership with Curzon will improve this situation. Firstsite have upgraded the equipment and the license agreement in order to further develop the partnership with Curzon Cinemas and allow films to be shown in the auditorium. The number of films that Firstsite currently shows is approximately 2-3 per week.

- Firstsite have been putting in place measures to maximise the possibility of being re-awarded status as a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). This included delivering on the key performance indicators, improving accessibility, footfall, press coverage and starting the process of applying for NPO status four months in advance. If there is a reduction in the funding provided by the Arts Council, the funding made available would have to be spread across the programme with a possible review on the money provided for marketing. Firstsite has a three-year funding plan which includes increasing and further improving applications to Trusts and Foundations, which would provide additional sources of funding, particularly for young people and well-being.
- Firstsite have been increasing the number of new visitors, repeat visitors and increasing the time that visitors stay at the facility. The current focus is attracting people who have yet to visit Firstsite; data on how to improve this is currently being collected. Events such as the Syrian Pop-up café, Veterans Weekend and the Flipside festival have brought a range of different and new people in to Firstsite.
- With regard to development around the site, the aspirations are there and it is likely that this will become a bustling area in 5-10 years' time. Firstsite will be applying for funding to develop the outdoor area, which will bring greater footfall and encourage the regeneration of the area. Firstsite are in contact with the Council's development partner and are being kept up to date with the latest developments as they occur. Firstsite welcomes those organisations and businesses that wish to invest in that area. The Panel also heard from the Portfolio Holder that the Creative Business Hub is already open, the Curzon cinema would be in place in the autumn and that the hotel was coming soon.
- Firstsite will be working in partnership with a range of organisations, some of which were not included in the NPO application. With regard to the Minorities, monthly meetings occur to discuss shared programme responsibilities; this has included in the past a Christmas Market and will now be looking towards other opportunities.
- Firstsite acknowledged the difficulty in ensuring that the galleries are open when evening functions and events are taking place; this is due to the resource required to staff the gallery at those times. Further work will be undertaken to assess the needs of those booking events space to ensure demand is met, alongside additional staff training that is being undertaken in partnership with Curzon. Firstsite do have an Innovation Enterprise Group that is looking into how the layout can be improved.

- The Ring of Towns event has not happened yet; venues that would be suitable around Colchester to display art and run activities from the different cultural organisations are currently being compiled. The aim would be for this to start to take place during the next financial year. Firstsite have contacted the Arts Council and informed them that this would take some time to implement.
- Firstsite are looking at the different galleries to assess what works best in each location and how Firstsite can improve. Firstsite have looked at arts organisations such as the Turner Contemporary in Margate, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Whitechapel Gallery in London. This is in terms of both the art displayed, role in the local community and an example of the regeneration of areas that arts galleries can provide.
- Firstsite confirmed significant levels of support from community groups across Colchester. Further planning will be required to ensure that the planned events can be delivered in the best possible manner; allowing for community groups to have the required funding in place and scheduled within a busy programme.
- In terms of footfall, Firstsite is aiming to increase the current figure by 25,000 over the next 18 months; this will be assisted by the opening of the Curzon Cinema. Further work is required to integrate Firstsite into the other cultural and historical attractions in the town, which will deliver further increases in visitors to the facility.

Councillors thanked Noorzaman Rashid and Sally Shaw for attending the Scrutiny Panel meeting and were encouraged by the progress made by Firstsite

*RESOLVED* that;

- a) Updated milestone and performance indicator documents be circulated to Panel members.
- b) Panel members are encouraged by the progress at Firstsite.
- c) The Panel reviewed the progress of Firstsite.

## **108. Work Programme**

Councillor Davies introduced the Work Programme for 2017-18. Councillor Davies informed the Panel that a recommendation will be made to Cabinet regarding restructuring of the Senior Management Teams at Colchester Borough Council. Councillor Davies requested that the proposals come to the Scrutiny Panel at the next available opportunity for review.

Panel members also discussed potential items for review during the next municipal year. This included discussions on whether there are different perspectives from which to review the Hospital; this could include looking at the issue from a patient point of view by speaking to different patient representative groups. Councillor Scordis highlighted the issue of the Walk-in Centre and the options that are being proposed.

Councillor Coleman highlighted an issue of funding for academy schools and whether there is any scope for the Scrutiny Panel to review this during the next year. The Democratic Services Officer confirmed that information would be circulated to Panel members informing them of the current Academy and Free School arrangements.

Councillor Davies also requested that the Big Choice awards be included in next year's review and Councillor Arnold also requested that the Vineyard Gate development be included on the provisional work programme.

Members of the Panel also requested a digital agenda training evening in the near future.

*RESOLVED* that;

- a) The Senior Management Restructuring report be scheduled for review by the Scrutiny Panel at its next available meeting.
- b) The Democratic Services Officer circulate information on Academies and Free Schools.
- c) That a digital agenda training session be arranged for Scrutiny Panel members
- d) That the Work Programme be noted.