

Scrutiny Panel

Tuesday, 13 December 2016

Attendees: Councillor Christopher Arnold, Councillor Phil Coleman, Councillor Beverly Davies, Councillor Adam Fox, Councillor Mike Hogg, Councillor Lee Scordis, Councillor Barbara Wood

Substitutes:

Also Present: Councillor T.Young

97 Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2016 were confirmed as a correct record.

98 Review of the Council's funding and partnership delivery arrangements with Colchester Arts Centre and The Mercury Theatre

Councillor Arnold (in respect of his spouse being a benefactor of the Mercury Theatre and his daughter the Manager of the Roman River Festival) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5).

Councillor Davies welcomed the attendees to the Scrutiny Panel meeting.

- Steve Mannix, Chief Executive, Mercury Theatre
- Daniel Buckroyd, Artistic Director, Mercury Theatre
- Anthony Roberts, Director, Colchester Arts Centre
- Nigel Hildreth, Chairman, Colchester Arts Centre
- Councillor Young, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Regeneration

The attendees then proceeded to give the Scrutiny Panel a presentation about the Mercury Theatre and the Arts Centre in Colchester.

Steve Mannix informed the Panel that between the Mercury Theatre, Firstsite, the Arts Centre and Signals, the arts organisations in Colchester employ a total of 159 people. In a recent report by Nesta, Colchester was ranked as one of the top ten fastest growing creative clusters in the UK.

With regard to the Mercury Theatre, the number of visitors reached 123,838, an all-time

high and a 17% increase from the previous year. The Theatre also played to an average capacity of 78% compared to the national average of 58%. Surveys, undertaken routinely throughout the year, placed visitors' satisfaction of the Mercury Theatre at 4.5 out of 5. The total economic impact of the Mercury Theatre is estimated to be a total of £4.5m towards the Colchester economy. In terms of skills and employability, Steve Mannix stated that the Mercury Theatre had seven paid internships last year and has just launched the first vocational technical theatre degree in partnership with University Centre Colchester; the new apprenticeship levy would be included in the figures for the next financial year.

Steve Mannix also informed the Panel about the Mercury Theatre's involvement in the touring circuit, which completed 182 performances in 26 Towns and cities across the UK. With regard to creative learning and talent, last year 22,300 people participated in a Mercury Theatre programme, these included youth theatre workshops and schools' programmes. In addition the Mercury Theatre hosted one round of the Regional Theatre Young Director Scheme and the winner of the Cameron Mackintosh resident composer competition. The Mercury also launched a new youth theatre group for young people with autism, held a digital technology event called 'Hacked' and will shortly be launching new youth theatre for the garrison community.

Daniel Buckroyd, highlighted to the Panel that the last three years at the Mercury Theatre have been focused on further improving the quality of the work as well as growing and diversifying the audience. Looking forward the focus is to continue the pattern of growth, aiming to increase audiences to 150,000 and participation in the creative learning courses to 29,000. In addition, the Mercury Theatre will aim to increase employment levels and its contribution to the town of Colchester. There will also be a focus on developing the level of talent in Colchester as well as continuing to support a number of national initiatives. The Mercury will also be looking to improve sustainability and environmental credentials, as well as enhance the possibilities for local businesses to use the facilities by adding digital presentation technology within the theatre. Daniel Buckroyd highlighted that the Mercury will soon be launching a major international project at the Theatre, and will be looking to continue to improve and sustain the audience experiences. Daniel Buckroyd informed the Panel that the front end of the theatre, including the café, facilities and visibility of the theatre will be improved. In addition to this a production block will be built at the back of the theatre to provide rehearsal space, improve workshop and wardrobe facilities and house more community organisations.

Steve Mannix stated that a memorandum of understanding had recently been signed between the different cultural and heritage organisations in Colchester to work in partnership and look at the potential for shared services in the future. In addition, Daniel Buckroyd highlighted the other partnerships that the Mercury Theatre is involved in including the Tamasha Theatre Company, English Touring Theatre and Cheek by Jowl.

Steve Mannix informed the Panel about the changing landscape for the Mercury and the requirement to diversify the income. Whilst the ticket sales have increased from £1m to £1.6m there has been a requirement to focus on increasing trading activity through merchandising and drinks to counteract the reduction in core grants. Steve Mannix confirmed that the Mercury would shortly be applying to renew its National Portfolio Organisation status with the Arts Council, and highlighted that Colchester Borough Council's support in this area is key. Steve Mannix also informed the Panel that whilst Essex County Council revenue support grant would cease, Essex County Council did make an investment into the capital scheme at the Mercury.

Nigel Hildreth, informed the Panel of the funding streams for the Arts Centre; Colchester Borough Council contributes a total of £63,500, with the remaining amount from external sources totalling £714,500. The other grant funding includes £190,000 from the Arts Council and £10,000 from Essex County Council. Nigel Hildreth highlighted the importance of the support from Colchester Borough Council which gives the Arts Council confidence to continue its funding. The Arts Centre generates 66% of its own income, and holds a total of 339 events which cover a variety of show types and attract an eclectic and diverse audience.

Anthony Roberts highlighted as the Arts Centre is a smaller venue it allows for a more flexible approach to its programme, which means that it can showcase more contemporary shows. With regard to the known visitors to the Arts Centre, which totalled 45,392, there was a near equal split between those who live in the Borough and those who live outside the Borough Council area. Anthony Roberts highlighted to the Panel that following analysis of where visitors to the Arts Centre live, residents of all wards and all levels of social deprivation have attended shows at the Arts Centre.

Nigel Hildreth highlighted the success of digital marketing at the Arts Centre, including YouTube, text message, e-mail and Facebook. Anthony Roberts also highlighted that the Arts Centre in winning the Big Choice vote received 900 votes.

Anthony Roberts informed the Panel of a recent art project at the Arts Centre. The project involved asking members of the public through the e-mail database to share their problems or issues. Following this an Opera singer visited a total of 18 residents in their houses to discuss their problems and then perform an aria that was related to their issue. Anthony Roberts then proceeded to introduced Caroline Kennedy, an Opera Singer who was involved in the Opera Helps programme, who performed an aria for the Panel.

Following the performance Councillors thanked the opera singer for her performance, and asked the following questions;

- Councillor Davies – Asked for clarification on the performance targets within the strategic funding agreement with the Mercury regarding concessionary ticket rates inconsistencies, and questioned why the concessionary ticket rate and

- accessible performance targets were not reached.
- Councillor Hogg – Questioned whether there is a relationship with businesses that benefit from the Arts Centre and Mercury Theatre given the benefit that the arts organisations provide. Councillor Hogg also asked whether there were further improvements that could be made.
- Councillor Fox – Requested further information about what the funding that Colchester Borough Council provides to the arts organisations delivers for Colchester.
- Councillor Davies – Questioned how 18 people were identified for the Opera project.
- Councillor Coleman – Questioned what the impact of the reduction of the Essex County Council grant would be; how well the Mercury Theatre is doing with regard to fundraising for the new build. Requested further information about the pay what you can afford at the Arts Centre. Also questioned whether there was a gap in the market for contemporary dance.
- Councillor Davies – Questioned the reduction in audience attendance figures for the Arts Centre and how visitors for the farmers markets are provided.
- Councillor Arnold – Asked how many visitors to the arts organisations were first time visitors, and what is achieved socially for Colchester Borough Council residents.
- Councillor Davies – Requested further information about the big choice vote that the Arts Centre won.
- Councillor Wood – Questioned whether the business plan had been completed; whether the three apprentices as stated in the report had been employed; questioned who were the Colchester Borough Council representatives on the arts organisation board's.
- Councillor Fox – Asked for further information about how the softer outcomes from investment in the arts organisations are measured.

The following responses were provided to Councillors;

- In response to Councillor Davies, Councillor Young stated that the concessionary tickets rate target inconsistency within the strategic funding agreement would be looked at and a response provided to Panel members after the meeting. Steve Mannix stated that the level of accessible performances is dependent on the programme that has been put on during the year. The target of 21 is a high target, and this year the Mercury Theatre reached a total of 16 show. Moving forward the Mercury is looking at expanding its range of accessible performances with the programme. In addition, assisted listening equipment and audio description equipment has been installed and wheelchair access has been improved due to a flexible seating arrangements. The lift at the Mercury Theatre will continue to be addressed.
- Steve Mannix highlighted the economic impact study survey commissioned by both The Mercury and the Arts Centre, which asked respondents where they spent their money in Colchester and confirmed the strong link. There is a relationship with restaurants and other facilities in the town through Colchester Presents and other promotional activities. There are plans to introduce a corporate membership as well as plans to share the data collection with other partner organisations in Colchester. Daniel Buckroyd stated that historically there may have been a silo mentality between the arts organisations which may have

restricted the full potential. Over the last few years this has started to break down benefitting the image of Colchester and what the town has to offer.

- Anthony Roberts stated that the Colchester Borough Council funding provides a significant level of support when bidding for funding from the Arts Council. The support is greatly appreciated, and especially so when reviews are taking place. In addition without the support from Colchester Borough Council it would not be possible to support new and upcoming artists and projects like Opera Helps would not be feasible. Daniel Buckroyd stated that the funding sustains a staff team which can support emerging businesses and talent and makes the activities provided significantly more affordable. Steve Mannix confirmed that without the funding the Mercury would have to sell out for each performance and the ticket price would increase to an average of £29 rather than an average of £11-£12. In addition there would be no community, school, summer, or elderly schemes without the funding.
- In response to Councillor Davies query, Anthony Roberts stated that a short video about the project was circulated to everyone on the Arts Centre mailing list. Responses were provided to a specific box office and required assessing before processing into a route where the Opera singer could visit the resident. Anthony Roberts also confirmed that the project leads were able to assist those who responded with more significant issues. Councillor Young also highlighted that the Opera performance highlights a gap in the market for classical music, which could be looked at in the cultural strategy. Daniel Buckroyd also stated that they Mercury Theatre is working with the Roman River Festival looking to establish regular concerts promoted at the Mercury. The aspiration is to potentially produce an opera in cooperation with the Roman River Festival.
- In response to Councillor Coleman, Steve Mannix stated that the reduction of the County Council grant had caused some difficulty, however they Council had invested in the capital programme and there is further scope for discussions around provision of a skills programme. With regard to the fundraising, Steve Mannix stated that this is going well, with the possibility of sponsoring items in the new build on the website; further funding applications to trusts and foundations are due to be submitted. In response to Councillor Coleman's question around pay what you can afford, Anthony Roberts stated that it is an opportunity to showcase new and upcoming acts, with the focus on bringing people to the Arts Centre to see acts rather than charging a price. With regard to contemporary dance, Anthony Roberts stated that he would like to stage more contemporary dance, but was hindered by the lack of sprung dance floor. Daniel Buckroyd confirmed that a sprung dancefloor is part of the capital programme for the Mercury Theatre, and this may include hosting Essex Dance Network in Colchester.
- In response to Councillor Davies, Anthony Roberts stated that the figures for the year so far are looking good. However, the audience figures do vary, and it depends on the type of act that is on the programme which requires a balance. With regard to counting the attendees at the markets, Anthony Roberts stated that this was an estimate provided by the organisers.
- With regard to the figures for this year this can be provided after the meeting. The information collated from the box office can provide statistics down to ward and street level if requested by Councillors. The number of first time visitors at The Mercury during 2016 was 20,000; this provides a good balance between first time attenders and repeat attenders. Daniel Buckroyd confirmed that 66% of the

audience figures during the year are one time attendees, and there is a focus on, particularly through an improved programme of family shows during the summer, developing this so people come back during a year. With regard to social benefits there is a broad offer engaging people to participate in activities, as an example work has been undertaken at the Colchester and Tendring Women's Refuge and with the Garrison community. Daniel Buckroyd highlighted that the audience figures provided do not include the participatory activity which is highly targeted and driven by a clearly identified need.

- In response to Councillor Davies, Anthony Roberts stated that the funding from the big choice award will be used for a project scheduled for during 2017. Councillor Young confirmed that it was made clear in the application that the project would not be launched until 2017.
- Steve Mannix stated that the business plan will be submitted in advance of the extended deadline of the 1st of February; this is for the period of 2018 to 2022. With regard to the apprenticeships, these have been converted into six paid internships. Legislation changes have had an impact, but going forward there will be a relationship with Colchester Institute to deliver the apprenticeships but in a different model. It was confirmed that Councillor Lyn Barton was on the Board of the Mercury Theatre and Councillor Theresa Higgins was on the board for the Arts Centre.
- In response to Councillor Fox, Daniel Buckroyd stated that the Mercury do extensive visitor satisfaction surveys, with regard to the targeted participatory work impact assessments are provided when working with partner organisations. In addition The Mercury has worked with a number of struggling schools and is looking in to how it can work with the University. Steve Mannix confirmed that the Mercury Theatre works with particular targeting communities responded to need; this included autism Anglia, and working with the Chinese and Nepalese communities. Anthony Roberts also highlighted the invisible outcomes of the arts that are not possible to measure but help to inspire individuals.

RESOLVED that;

- a. The Scrutiny Panel thanked the Arts Organisations for attending the meeting
- b. That the range of programmes delivered by each organisation and how effectively they support the Council's Strategic Plan 2015-18 priorities and value for money has been reviewed.

99 Half-yearly Performance Report including progress on Strategic Plan Action Plan

Matthew Sterling, Assistant Chief Executive, and Councillor Young, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Regeneration introduced the report. The report requests the Scrutiny Panel to review and comment on the Half Yearly Performance Report including progress on the Strategic Plan Action Plan ahead of the Cabinet meeting on 1 February 2017.

Matthew Sterling provided the Panel with a half-year update on the key performance indicators. This included highlighting two previously difficult targets that are currently on track; the staff sickness in number of days and the level of rent collected. With regard to the amber schemes, which could still end the year at its target, this included the amount

of household waste reused, recycled and composted, and the number of net additional homes provided. There are two schemes that are categorised as red, which are the number of planning appeals allowed against Colchester Borough Council's decision to refuse and the amount of residual household waste per household.

With regard to the Strategic Plan Action Plan, Matthew Sterling highlighted that the lease had been signed with Curzon Cinema's, and that two neighbourhood plans had been adopted. In addition to this, Matthew Sterling highlighted the £100,000 invested in promoting Colchester; this has led to campaigns that showcase heritage in the town centre and the hot washer that has been used to clean the streets in the Town Centre. The Panel were also informed that the Creative Business Centre had now been opened, with all vacancies filled and a waiting list established.

The following questions were raised by Councillors;

- Councillor Hogg – Questioned whether it is possible to compare the sickness rate level with other authorities.
- Councillor Coleman – Questioned whether the new grounds maintenance contract had improved.
- Councillor Arnold – Asked for further information about the planning applications that were overturned at appeal; in addition Councillor Arnold requested information on the performance of other authorities.
- Councillor Coleman – Requested further information on the fixing the link scheme.
- Councillor Arnold – Questioned the progress on developments in the eastern part of Colchester.
- Councillor Scordis – Welcomed the litter warrior scheme and requested further information on regeneration plans for the Hythe area.
- Councillor Coleman – Suggested that it would be advantageous to publicise the twenty nine fixed penalty notices that had been issued.

Matthew Sterling and Councillor Tim Young, provided the following responses to the queries by Councillors;

- In response to Councillor Hogg, Matthew Sterling stated that it is possible to compare with other local authorities, but this depends on the way in which the sickness rate is reported by that authority; full comparisons can be provided at the end of year. The target of 7.5 days would ensure that Colchester Borough Council is one of the better performing authorities in Essex.
- Matthew Sterling confirmed that the performance of the grounds maintenance contract had improved; Ann Hedges confirmed that the issues at the start of the contract were a result of the handover period taking place during the busiest time of the year as the previous contractor did not wish to continue until a quieter period. Following this, the contractor has been performing as required.
- In response to Councillor Arnold, Matthew Sterling stated that there were a total of nine applications that were overturned, of which seven were officer decisions and two were Planning Committee decisions. Councillor Young confirmed that there was no pattern with the appeals that were overturned, but officers are examining the appeal decisions as the planning inspectorate is allowing for the appellant more often. Advice will be provided to the Committee following analysis

of the decisions. Further information on how the performance compares with other local authorities can be provided.

- With regard to the fixing the link scheme, Matthew Sterling stated that it relates to the walking link between the train station and the centre of town which provides improved signage to direct people to both locations. The first stage of the link has been implemented, and further information on the next stages can be provided following the meeting.
- In response to Councillor Arnold, Councillor Young stated that Colchester Borough Council are seeking out and being approached by developers for that area. Negotiations will continue and information will be shared with Councillors when an agreement is near. Councillor Young stated that progress on this is expected in the New Year.
- Matthew Sterling welcomed the comments regarding litter warriors and highlighted that enforcement has also been taking place during the year with 29 Fixed Penalty Notices being issued since April. With regard to regeneration further information can be provided after the meeting. Councillor Young stated that the work undertaken by Hythe Forward and Hythe Business Network, which Councillors are aware of will be the most up to date information. Councillor Young also stated that it should be possible to share news about the car breaking site in the near future.

RESOLVED that the Half-yearly Performance Report including progress on Strategic Plan Action Plan be noted.

100 Work Programme 2016-2017

Councillor Davies introduced the Work Programme for the Scrutiny Panel. Councillor Davies highlighted that she had requested that items on 'Think Global, Act Local' and on the Sustainability and Transformation Plans for North Essex come to the Scrutiny Panel when possible.

In addition, the Panel heard that the policy for advertising 'A' boards and a report on changes to the ICT support contract would be coming to the March meeting of the Scrutiny Panel. The Chairman also reminded Panel members that Firstsite will be attending the February Scrutiny Panel meeting.

Panel members discussed reviewing Essex County Council Highways, in particular how repairs to potholes, street lights and broken kerbs are prioritised. The Panel requested that the Democratic Services Officer contact Essex Highways to obtain further information on this issue. The Panel also suggested that an invitation be sent to the Portfolio Holder and relevant officers at Essex County Council to present information to the Panel at a future meeting date, following submission of questions from Panel members to the Democratic Services Officer.

RESOLVED that;

- a. An invitation be sent to Essex County Council to request that the Portfolio Holder

for Highways and relevant officers attend a future Scrutiny Panel meeting following submission of questions from Panel members to the Democratic Services Officer.

- b. That the Work Programme be noted.