

18 March 2021

Report of	Assistant Director Communities	Author	Claire Taylor ☎ 282655
Title	Review of the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on Colchester Borough Council's Strategic Arts Partners: The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite		
Wards affected	Not applicable		

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 A review of the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the 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 for a discussion with the Panel:

Mercury Theatre: Steve Mannix, Executive Director
Kathleen Hamilton, Chair

Colchester Arts Centre: Anthony Roberts, Director

Firstsite: Sally Shaw, Director

2. Action Required

- 2.1 The Panel has invited these organisations to discuss the following:
 - How they are coping with the ongoing Covid-19 situation
 - What innovative ways they have been using to connect with the public
 - Plans or options to encourage people return to their venues when lockdown is lifted and restrictions are gone.

3. Reason for Scrutiny

- 3.1 The Panel recognises the importance of these organisations to the community and local economy. Regular reviews of Colchester Borough Council's (CBC's) strategic arts and cultural partners are undertaken at their request.

4. Background Information

4.1 Introduction

Colchester's leading cultural organisations contribute to making the Borough a vibrant place to live, learn and visit. Together they play a vital role in ensuring a diverse range of experiences and activities are accessible to all. 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 investment to maintain and improve these facilities.

The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre (CAC) and Firstsite are Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) and in receipt of ACE funding in the current cycle 2018-2022 – now extended to 2023 as a Covid-19 support measure. The funding partnership between the Council, the organisations and ACE delivers a strong cultural asset base for Colchester, underpinning the wider creative community.

The impact of the pandemic and resultant shutdown 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 in the face of Covid 19. All three are members of the One Colchester Partnership which has been instrumental in supporting the community response to Covid 19.

4.2 The Organisations

The Mercury Theatre

The Mercury Theatre is the most active professional producing theatre in East Anglia. In normal times it engages with more than 130,000 people each year through a broad and vibrant programme staged across two auditoria and education, outreach and mentoring programmes. Under the Made in Colchester brand the Mercury reaches audiences and generates 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.

The Mercury main site was under redevelopment at the time of the first lockdown in March 2020. A programme had been taking place off site, including at the innovative 'Big Top' temporary venue on the Abbey Fields over autumn/winter 2019.

Backed by the ACE Major Capital Grant Scheme and supported by the Council with £1million of match funding, the multi-million pound 'Mercury Rising' redevelopment of the Mercury site should have seen the theatre reopen in autumn 2020. Inevitably the pandemic delayed the project which will now reach practical completion in April 2021. To help cover additional pandemic-related costs associated with the project the Mercury has been awarded a grant of

£864,089 from the DCMS/ACE Culture Recovery Capital Kickstart scheme, and other funds have been secured including an offer of £350K from the Colchester Town Deal Fund.

The Mercury has also received £250K from Round 1 of the DCMS/ACE Culture Recovery Fund towards operational costs and loss of income during the period Oct20 – March 21 and is applying for funding to Round 2, which supports organisations as they transition back to a viable and sustainable operating model during April-June 2021. It is also the recipient of a grant from the Garfield Weston Foundation of £100K.

Information on the Mercury's extensive work to engage and support the community in Colchester and beyond during the pandemic can be found in Appendix B. Steve Mannix, Executive Director of the Mercury will be attending to talk to the Panel in detail about this and the organisation's future plans.

Colchester Arts Centre

Housed in St Mary's Church, Colchester Arts Centre (CAC) has been closed to audiences since March 2020, but in normal times would expect to reach over 40,000 people a year with a full and diverse programme across a wide range of contemporary performing arts and popular events.

Backed by the ACE Small Capital Grant scheme and supported by the Council with match funding of £35K, a major project to transform the venue's accessibility for artists and audiences and improve energy efficiency and technical infrastructure has been delivered in the past year, with additional pandemic related costs met by a grant of £128,182 from the Culture Recovery Capital Kickstart scheme.

CAC has also received £51,986 from Round One of the Culture Recovery Fund towards operational costs and loss of income during the period Oct20 – March 21 and is applying for funding to Round 2 covering the period April to Jun 21. They are also the recipients of a grant from the Garfield Weston Foundation of £100K.

Information on CAC's extensive work to engage and support the community in Colchester and beyond during the pandemic can be found in Appendix D. Anthony Roberts, Director of CAC will be attending to talk to the Panel in detail about this and the organisation's future plans.

Firstsite

Housed in a landmark building designed by international architect Rafael Viñoly, Firstsite is a leading contemporary visual arts organisation presenting free exhibitions of both local and internationally renowned artists, as well as events, activities, workshops and a film programme that together aim to bring art to the heart of the community.

During the first national lockdown Firstsite partnered with Community360 to make the building a hub for co-ordinating support for vulnerable members of the community under the One Colchester Operation Shield initiative. It reopened under social distancing requirements in July 2020 and again after the

second national lockdown ended in December. The profile of the organisation is at an all-time high following their nationally recognised programmes of engagement during lockdown including the 'Art Is Where The Home Is' and 'Great Big Art' Exhibition activity packs.

Firstsite has received £250K of ACE Emergency Response Funding for National Portfolio and Creative People and Places Organisations.

Information on Firstsite's extensive work to engage and support the community in Colchester and beyond during the pandemic can be found in Appendix F. Sally Shaw MBE, Director of Firstsite will be attending to talk to the Panel in detail about this and the organisation's future plans.

4.3 CBC Strategic Partnership Delivery Arrangements

Annual Funding Agreements are agreed in consultation with each organisation and set out the activity and targets around delivery. Those for the previous financial year with final outcomes and the current agreements for 2020/21 completed to date are attached as Appendices.

The Funding Agreements for 20/21 were amended and simplified to take into account the unprecedented situation of the pandemic, which 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:

Mercury Theatre:	Cllr Lyn Barton
Colchester Arts Centre:	Cllr Theresa Higgins
Firstsite:	Cllr Julie Young

4.4 Financial Arrangements

In 2020 the Council agreed to extend the current level of funding to these organisations for a further three years from FY 20/21 – 22/23. The funding is agreed by Cabinet and full Council.

Therefore, in each financial year over this period the Council will provide revenue grant funding of:

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

The terms and conditions of funding including eligibility criteria and performance monitoring arrangements are set out in the Funding Agreements attached here as Appendices.

In recognition of the impact on their operations and cashflow of the first lockdown and ongoing restrictions, in the 20/21 financial year the full award to each organisation was released in two grants in the first half of the year, rather than quarterly as normally specified.

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 [Better Colchester Strategic Plan 2020-23](#)

Appendices

Appendix A	Funding Agreement with The Mercury Theatre 2019/20
Appendix B	Funding Agreement with The Mercury Theatre 2020/21 (current)
Appendix C	Funding Agreement with Colchester Arts Centre 2019/20
Appendix D	Funding Agreement with Colchester Arts Centre 2020/21 (current)
Appendix E	Funding Agreement with Firstsite 2019/20
Appendix F	Funding Agreement with Firstsite 2020/21 (current)