

**Extract from the draft minutes of the Scrutiny Panel meeting of 18 March 2021**

**297. 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.**

The Chairman welcomed guests and viewers and gave an overview of the range of dynamic arts organisations operating within the Borough, and the invaluable outreach work that they carried out for the Borough's communities.

Councillor Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Performance and Deputy Leader of the Council, described the Council's investment in the Borough's cultural organisations. These organisations were held up to be important to the future recovery of the Borough and the Council was proud of the partnership working that was carried out between them and the Council. Additional investments were being made to ensure Colchester provided the best possible cultural offerings.

Steve Mannix, Chief Executive of the Mercury Theatre, highlighted the diverse programme of activities provided by his organisation. The Mercury had also worked to provide support to those who depended on it for work, including the setting up of a hardship fund for casual and freelance members of staff. This fund had totalled around £45k.

118 online events had been carried out by the Mercury during the pandemic. A pantomime had been held and viewed 419,000 times, with free screenings provided to care homes. Fundraising was being carried out to enable the Theatre to conduct future live-screened events. 214 creative engagement sessions had been held during the past year. A syndicated production had also been possible with the BBC.

21 new jobs had been created to support the Theatre's work, with funding provided by the European Support Fund. Engagement with schools had been carried out and the Theatre had worked with 19 disabled young people to achieve nationally recognised qualifications.

The pandemic had caused a delay of around seven months to the Mercury Rising project, but as much progress was carried out as had been possible, and 25 April had been set as the expected completion date. £864k had been obtained from the government's cultural funding, and details were provided on the slides shown to the Panel. However, the Chief Executive informed the Panel that the Theatre was now being let down by Essex County Council, which was withdrawing its funding.

The Theatre had worked with the Business Improvement District and the One Colchester Partnership, seconding its staff to assist with communications work and support for the Council, providing volunteers to help foodbanks, local schools and in producing items of personal protective equipment.

Anthony Roberts, Director of Colchester Arts Centre, described the engagements that the Centre had carried out during the past year, which had reached a total of around 219,000 personal engagements with members of the public. 136,000 of these had been via social media. 45,000 people had attended events in person prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, and social media engagement had increased the reach of the Arts Centre and this had been recognised and had encouraged the Centre to find new ways to engage with the public in the future. This could include events, free events, day sessions, clubs and outreach activities. The Arts Centre wished to not only provide performances, but also to find ways to start conversations regarding artistic activities.

A song contest had been held during lockdown, allowing the performance of 30 new artists' works, films had been commissioned, poetry workshops held, and carol shows performed. John Cooper Clarke had held an online show. This had all been carried out whilst £800k of work had been carried out to the Arts Centre's venue, to upgrade the building.

Sally Shaw, Director of Firstsite, emphasised the creative agility which had been necessary over the past twelve months. This included reaching out to artists to ask if they could help Firstsite to help people at home to engage with different artistic forms and activities. Firstsite had worked with national, regional and local artists to produce activity packs to engage people with the arts. There had been a huge spike in the email circulation list going into lockdown, when the first pack had been produced, and a second spike when the second action pack released. The list had gone from around 11,000 email addresses to around 45,000. Activity packs had been downloaded by around 90,000 households. Each one helped to publicise Colchester's arts and had contributed to an increase in new people visiting Firstsite betwixt lockdowns.

Whilst open, Firstsite had conducted its Holiday Club, providing days of free family activities and food. 7,500 meals had been provided since the Club had started, with around 1,500 being provided in Summer 2020. Tate Modern had invited Firstsite to conduct a canteen/meal club in the Turbine Hall in Summer 2021. Firstsite were also looking to replicate the Holiday Club in ten other arts facilities in Essex and were looking for partners in this work.

The Director of Firstsite warned that Essex County Council funding for Firstsite would now end at the end of March, and that their help was desperately needed in order to ensure that Firstsite could continue its art and outreach activities for local communities.

Future work planned included 'The Great Big Artist Exhibition', upcoming shows and works and a continuing project, across Colchester and Ipswich hospitals, to talk with staff and capture their experiences of the past year. These accounts would be displayed, with pictures, to show what life had been like for NHS staff and Covid-19 patients. Counsellors would be on-hand to engage with those affected.

Karen Loweman, Director of Operations at Colchester Borough Homes, emphasised and agreed with the importance and impact of art outreach work to improve life for many residents of Council-owned properties.

The Panel discussed the work of the three organisations over the past year, praising the new ways found to do things that could be kept going, and which engaged with thousands. This had provided people with much needed positivity during lockdowns.

The guests were asked how much of their organisations' future work would involve online productions, outreach work and activities, and whether this was likely to be financially viable.

Tracey Childs, Co-Chief Executive of The Mercury, confirmed that there would be future livestreaming carried out, following on from this having been used during lockdown, including to nursing homes, children and vulnerable individuals. There would be difficulties in obtaining permission to livestream performances (outside of lockdown) and the Theatre was seeking funding to obtain the technology to create inhouse streaming opportunities. It was noted that the provision of high-speed broadband in the Town centre would be key to making this possible.

The Panel praised the work on survival and finding new ways to continue to provide artistic work.

A specific question was asked as to whether the cost overruns reported on the Mercury Rising had been borne by the contractors, the Council or by the Theatre itself. The Chief Executive of The Mercury stressed that there had been no precedent to the Covid-19 situation and that best endeavours had been made to keep capital building projects going. Teams had been able to operate at around 25% the expected rate because of restrictions on workplaces. Most of the project funding had been from Government and Arts funds so overruns had had limited effect on the Theatre or the Council. The project would finish on time and on budget.

Concern was raised by one Panel member regarding the ending of funding from Essex County Council, and the effect that this would have on the arts organisations. The guests were asked what had been discussed and planned for regarding their future financial situations. Sally Shaw, Firstsite Director, elaborated on the situation, explaining that the withdrawal of funding from the County Council would see £100k lost from the budget of Firstsite. The organisations affected were creative and determined to find ways to cope but would find it difficult to absorb the lost funding and did not want to lose the partnership working which had been conducted with Essex County Council. This would be even more of a loss than the cancelled funding. It had been shown that ideas such as the Holiday Fun programme had been heavily in demand and work would be done to sell ideas like this on to other organisations.

[At this point of the meeting, Sally Shaw, Firstsite Director, had to leave the meeting]

Steve Mannix, Chief Executive of the Mercury Theatre, warned that the loss of the connection with Essex County Council would mean the loss of a regional avenue for potential inward investment from larger funding sources and increase the pressure on remaining local funding and Borough Council support. There was currently no

regional tourism strategy and the Chief Executive ventured that it was necessary to produce strategies at sub-regional, regional and national levels.

Members of the Panel praised the quality of the productions made in the Borough, and several members expressed the view that there would be continuing markets for these to be livestreamed and broadcast online. A strong online offering was expected to increase the numbers of people then visiting the venues in person to experience productions. This would then act as an economic driver, with visitors also using local shops and hospitality businesses in the area. The Panel also noted the positive effects of the local economy, such as by contracting local businesses on projects like 'Mercury Rising.' There were also many sources of funding which were not open to the Council, but which were open for applications by the three arts organisations.

A Panel member suggested the Council look at whether it could adopt a procurement model which would help to support local businesses, partners and arts organisations.

The Panel asked for information on the potential for more outdoors performances. Nigel Hildreth, Colchester Arts Centre's Chair of Trustees, explained that various options had been considered, costed and necessary equipment sourced. Some outdoor performances had already been carried out. Steve Mannix detailed carol singing visits carried out by the Mercury, such as to care homes, and explained their outdoor options for the coming Summer. 'Shakespeare in the Park' had been explored as an option, but this had been replaced by performance of 'Baskerville' at the Mercury, with associated events and activities, which could showcase the new building.

Anthony Roberts told the Panel of the Arts Centre's 'Comedy in the Park' events, and noted the possibility of a County-Council funded festival on the green behind St Botolph's.

The Panel and guests discussed the effects of new ways of working on the demographics of audiences. Anthony Roberts confirmed that they had seen changes, although the exact changes were difficult to quantify due to a lack of formal data. It had been possible however to see that the new ways of working during the past year had reached people who had never previously visited the venues. The Panel were informed that the online offerings from The Mercury had reached more younger people and more people with disabilities. Working online, and offering cheaper ticket options, had increased the diversity of audiences and increased uptake by people from lower-income households.

In discussion of the organisations' staffing and use of furlough, the Co-Chief Executive of The Mercury informed the Panel that core staff had continued to work and facilitate the 'Mercury Rising' project, whilst the majority of staff had been furloughed. Social get-togethers had been run online to maintain contact and reduce isolation. Furlough had been very helpful and had helped The Mercury to avoid any redundancies. The advance of grant money from the Council had been very important, especially in the context of around 30% job losses being seen throughout the industry nationwide.

Councillor Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Performance and Culture, affirmed that the funding from the Borough Council was money well spent and that the organisations worked hard to raise public spirits, provide outreach work and support communities.

Councillor David King, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources, likewise praised the organisations and thanked them for all their work. He confirmed that the Council was in this partnership for the long term and offered to see if the County Council could be persuaded to resume their funding, as a cross-party effort.

Councillor Adam Fox, Portfolio Holder for Housing, hailed the strength of the partnership working between the organisations, the Council and Colchester Borough Homes [CBH]. CBH project management had helped ensure that the 'Mercury Rising' project stayed on track. With County Council elections in the near future, it was stressed that it was important for Colchester's members of Essex County Council to stand up for local arts organisations.

The importance of sourcing local contractors, where possible, was stressed, with an example being the work planned for the building of new Council housing.

*RESOLVED* that the PANEL regretted the arts organisations' loss of funding from Essex County Council and was disappointed that the County Council had not responded to calls from the Mercury Theatre for a continuation of funding for the 'Mercury Rising' project.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that: -

- (a) Cabinet formally recognises the importance of the three art organisations, built on trust and partnership working;
- (b) Cabinet explore whether the procurement model used for the 'Mercury Rising' project can be used more widely by the Council to boost the local economy;
- (c) All councillors be kept informed of all outreach work and events by the arts organisations, to ensure that they can share the great work undertaken within the cultural sector and ensure that those who could benefit from them have the opportunity so to do.