



Scrutiny Panel

Item

13 February 2024

Report of

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Culture and Tourism

Author

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and Cultural Services
Manager

Title

Review of Colchester City Council's Strategic Arts Partners: The Mercury
Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite

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Wards
affected

Not applicable

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Review of the partnership arrangements with organisations receiving a Strategic Arts Partner Grant from the Council: The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite.
- 1.2 Representatives from these three organisations will attend and present to the Panel:

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

Their presentations are attached as Appendices G to I.

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 performance and programming of each organisation and consider how effectively this supports the Council's strategic priorities and provides value for money for the funding provided.

3. Reason for Scrutiny

- 3.1 Regular reviews of the Council's grant funded strategic arts partners are undertaken by the Panel at its request.

4. Background Information

4.1 Introduction

Colchester's leading cultural organisations help make the city a vibrant place to live, learn, visit, and work. They offer audiences high quality art and entertainment, but also provide a huge variety of opportunities for residents to come together and be creative, in welcoming and accessible spaces, supporting health, wellbeing, and community cohesion.

In partnership with Colchester City Council (CCC) each is custodian of a key landmark building and community asset. They work closely with CCC to ensure these remain fit for purpose and have an impressive record of success in leveraging in external capital investment to maintain and improve the venues.

These organisations are also integral to the creative industries and hospitality sectors and are active participants in key partnerships across the city, including the Creative Colchester CIC and the Business Improvement District (BID).

The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite receive funding through the Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) investment scheme. The Mercury and Firstsite also receive annual grants from Essex County Council (ECC). Together the funding provided to these key organisations by ACE, the Council and ECC helps deliver a strong cultural asset base for Colchester, underpinning the wider creative community.

In October 2021 the Council announced a new funding settlement for the three Strategic Arts Partners from financial year 2023/24, providing the organisations with certainty and continuity in terms of their financial planning, and supporting their continued recovery after the disruption of the Covid 19 pandemic and the current challenges of the cost-of-living crisis.

The impact of the recent pandemic on cultural provision and practice was severe. However, this period also served to highlight the importance of the arts to individuals and communities. Led by these organisations the city's cultural sector has both recovered and continues to demonstrate growth, resilience, and ingenuity despite the economic headwinds.

The Organisations

The Mercury Theatre

The Mercury Theatre is the most active professional producing theatre in East Anglia, attracting audiences of more than 100,000 people each year with a broad and vibrant programme staged across two auditoria. Community, education and outreach sessions, attended by a record 36,000 children, young people and adults in 2022/23, are a vital and hugely popular resource for residents. Professional mentoring programmes such as the Mercury Creatives programme support the wider creative economy. Mercury Productions has an ambitious touring programme, reaching audiences and generating critical attention at a national level, helping to raise the profile of Colchester. The theatre has a large and positive economic impact, as a significant local employer, contractor of services, and a major driver of the restaurant and hospitality economy in Colchester, with audiences estimated to spend over £3million annually in the city centre.

The 'Mercury Rising' redevelopment project delivered a highly impressive state of the art facility for the organisation and audiences, and a new community hub for Colchester city centre which welcomes everyone into the building, whether for a performance, an activity, a coffee, or just free WIFI. It has been a designated 'warm place' over the past two winters. The impact of the redevelopment goes beyond the building itself, with new activity and events making the most of improved public realm around the site and animating a key area of the historic city centre, adjacent to the Roman Wall and Jumbo.

In January 2024 the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) confirmed a capital grant of £500k to the Mercury to further improve the onsite facilities including an extension on the second floor to create new rehearsal/meeting room space, the purchase of new theatrical LED lighting equipment and the installation of permanent digital cameras in the theatre, studio, rehearsal room and creative engagement spaces. This work is scheduled for completion by Sept 2024.

Colchester Arts Centre

Housed in the historic St Mary's at the Wall church, Colchester Arts Centre (CAC) reached its largest total audience to date in 2022/23 with a diverse programme across a wide range of contemporary performing arts and popular events. 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.

The Arts Centre takes a leading role in the development of new live art through commissions and partnerships, including the Wonderful Wednesday's programme which showcases emerging talent at a pay what you can price to encourage audiences to support new performers.

CAC is also a leader in widening access to the arts through a comprehensive and ongoing programme of improvements, ensuring audience members with additional needs receive excellent customer care from the booking stage through to arrival at the venue, where the introduction of Access Host roles has ensured they have the best experience on the night.

Backed by the ACE Small Capital Grant scheme and supported by the Council, a £700K project to upgrade the venue was completed in 2021. The works 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. As the result CAC was recognised at the Loo of The Year Awards in 2023!

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, regional 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 artists, particularly those from diverse backgrounds.

The venue provides an accessible space in the heart of the city centre for 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. As a unique building and a free attraction is it an important tourism asset for Colchester. Recent upgrades to the cinema and auditorium, as well as ongoing work to replace the lighting throughout the building, are all improving the visitor experience as Firstsite moves into its second decade open to the public on this site.

The introduction of new opening hours in summer 2023 and the launch of a Membership scheme at the end of last year demonstrate how Firstsite continues to innovate to attract new users. With open hours extended into the evening on three nights a week it is supporting the diversification of the early nighttime economy, enriching the city centre offer.

Since 2017 Firstsite's Holiday Fun programme has provided children, young people and their families the opportunity to eat, learn, be active and have fun together through offering free art and movement based activities throughout the holidays, crucially along with free hot meals to families who will benefit from them. The number of meals provided over this period now stands at over 21,000. An increasing necessary and vital programme it has provided a template for other organisations to follow.

4.2 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 completed by the organisations and the current agreements for 2023/24 are attached as Appendices A-F.

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

Mercury Theatre:	Cllr Lyn Barton
Colchester Arts Centre:	Cllr Mick Spindler
Firstsite:	Cllr Steph Nissan

4.3 Financial Arrangements

Grants to the Strategic Arts Partner organisations are agreed by Cabinet and full Council. A new funding settlement from FY23/24 was included in the Council's Medium Term Financial Forecast in October 2021. At the time it was agreed this would align with the Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation investment programme 23/24-25/26. In January 2024 ACE

announced this would be extended by a year, subject to application, and the Council will now review whether it is possible to extend their own commitment to match this.

Under the current settlement 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

Grants are paid in quarterly instalments.

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 City Council and the Strategic Arts Partners relates to the 'Celebrating Our City, Heritage and Culture' theme in the [Strategic Plan 2023-2026](#)

Appendices

Appendices

Appendix A Funding Agreement with The Mercury Theatre 2022/23

Appendix B Funding Agreement with The Mercury Theatre 2023/24

Appendix C Funding Agreement with Colchester Arts Centre 2022/23

Appendix D Funding Agreement with Colchester Arts Centre 2023/24

Appendix E Funding Agreement with Firstsite 2022/23

Appendix F Funding Agreement with Firstsite 2023/24

Appendix G Mercury Theatre: Presentation to the Panel

Appendix H Colchester Arts Centre: Presentation to the Panel

Appendix I Firstsite: Presentation to the Panel