

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

19 MARCH 2013

- Present :-* Councillor Kevin Bentley (Chairman)
Councillors Helen Chuah, Beverly Davies, Bill Frame,
Pauline Hazell, Peter Higgins, Kim Naish, Nigel Offen
and Terry Sutton
- Substitute Member :-* Councillor Philip Oxford for Councillor Gerard Oxford
- Also in Attendance :-* Councillor Tim Young

33. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held **12 February 2013** were confirmed as a correct record.

34. Review of the Council's funding and partnership delivery arrangements with Colchester Arts Centre, firstsite and the Mercury Theatre

Councillor Bentley (in respect of being a Member of Essex County Council and Chairman and Director of Mosaic Publicity Ltd), Councillor Sutton (in respect of being a Patron of The Mercury Theatre) and Councillor T. Higgins (in respect of being an employee of the University of Essex) all declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5);

The following invitees and guests attended the meeting for this item;

Mr. Anthony Roberts, Director, Colchester Arts Centre
Mr. Matthew Rowe, Artistic Director, firstsite
Mr. Wayne Warner, Commercial Director, firstsite
Ms. Judith Merritt, Head of Learning, firstsite
Ms. Theresa Veith, Executive Director, Mercury Theatre

Ms. Amelia Brompton
Mr. Reece Clark
Mrs. Molly Warren
Mr. Nicholas Barton-Wines

Also in attendance from Colchester Borough Council;

Councillor Tim Young, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Community Safety and Culture

Mrs. Pam Donnelly, Executive Director
Ms. Lucie Breadman, Head of Community Services
Ms. Fiona Duhamel, Regeneration and Estates Manager

Ms. Josie Worner, Regeneration Partnerships Officer
Ms. Jenny Ruder, Commercial and Business Manager

Have Your Say

Mr. Andy Hamilton addressed the Panel, expressing disappointment that the firstsite had been used to hold a Council meeting. Mr. Hamilton described the firstsite building as a structurally deficient carbuncle run by an elitist organisation with an arrogant group of people who think rules do not apply. He said that the building was never wanted by local people, and their protests were ignored. Mr. Hamilton said other public organisations are now accepting failed organisations and enterprises and cut the funding accordingly, so given there was such a negligible interest in the firstsite building, he felt it was time to stop funding firstsite and end the project.

Joint Presentation from Mr. Wayne Warner, Mr. Matthew Rowe, Ms. Theresa Veith and Mr. Anthony Roberts

Mr. Wayne Warner provided a financial overview for the three partner organisations.

He said they collectively employ 135 direct staff and 70 indirect staff, with annual salary costs of £1.731m, and hosted 322,000 visitors in the last year.

In respect of grants and revenue, all three partners received grants totalling £463.5k from Colchester Borough Council for 2012-13. The total annual revenue (including grants) was £4.33m. The Council's funding represented 11% of the total income equating to £1 contribution for every £9.34 of income generated.

Mr. Matthew Rowe in post for only eight weeks, said firstsite had 132,000 visitors in its first year. Whilst you would expect a spike in the first year and a second year dip, the organisation had exceeded their target of 150,000 visitors per year. He said firstsite was part of a family of national arts organisations, transforming arts, visual arts and culture across the country.

Mr. Rowe said firstsite provided great art for everyone including exhibitions, visitor experience, participation to nurture next generation artists and partnership working. The venue was exemplary in what it offers to visitors, an enhanced gallery experience that provided a programme of events catering for a wide range of audiences.

firstsite organise many community programmes for all age groups. An example was Airlock, a project that works with young people. Staff worked with young people from Colchester to develop a sub-group called YAK (Young Art Kommunity). This young people's group actively plan, programme and deliver their own events, including choosing regular Friday films screened every second week in the Auditorium. This season the YAK group plan to visit youth venues and colleges across Colchester to recruit new members. YAK focuses on developing and sharing skills and unlocking the potential of young people to develop new and innovative ideas. Airlock will support young people by giving them a voice, allowing them to represent their peer-group, and become involved in the future programme of work.

Mr. Rowe said they remain actively involved in community projects, in super output

areas, for example, the 'Turf Twinning' project designed to build links between communities across the Borough. FETE is a collaborative two-year project bringing together the three arts partners under the banner of the Arts in Colchester. Since its launch at Willow Brook Primary School's summer festival last year, FETE has been working with community groups and residents in the St Anne's area of Colchester to build relationships, discover talents and interests, and to explore visual and performing arts alongside artists and actors.

Mr. Rowe explained that the organisation was currently undertaking a three month review, including exploring the development of programmes, marketing and tourism, and increasing income from catering, venue hire and merchandise.

Mr. Rowe concluded by saying firstsite had occupied the firstsite building for 18 months and it was their intention to create a sustainable business model for Colchester.

Mr. Roberts said the Colchester Arts Centre (CAC) promote a range of contemporary performing arts and takes a leading role in the development of live art through commissions and partnerships. CAC operate in a little church with a big attitude in the heart of Essex.

Mr. Roberts gave the Panel an insight into the work placement and apprenticeship schemes for young people, an aspect of work vitally important and relevant to Colchester.

School Placements, plus Work Placements and creative apprenticeships (where pay is partly funded by Essex County Council) play an important role in the vitality and running of the CAC. With nine apprenticeships for 16 – 20 year olds, it is an opportunity for them to train in a variety of skills such as ticketing and marketing, bar management and stage and lighting management, tasks that are all symbiotic to the overall running of the centre. These young people, whilst being provided an opportunity to learn and develop in a commercial environment are an important investment that contributes to the operation and success of the CAC and in turn gives them the knowledge and confidence that can be life changing.

In 2012 a new leadership team took over at the Mercury with Daniel Buckroyd (Artistic Director) and Theresa Veith (Executive Director) leading the theatre in a new direction, most notably with the creation of the Made in Colchester branding of the Mercury's 'in house' work.

Theresa Veith spoke about the Mercury Theatre (MT), creating work for local audiences and communities, and how it strives to reach a younger and broader audience through high quality, diverse work. The MT also aims for regional, national and international collaboration, partnerships, and recognition.

The high quality of the theatre's homegrown work made by the talented team of theatre-makers at Colchester marks the MT out as one of the leading producing theatres in the country. The MT is a highly respected regional theatre staging a broad mix of classics and new writing as well as working extensively within the local community. It produces the highest quality theatre and is a venue for the best touring theatre and entertainment

as well as providing a platform for local performing arts groups and artists.

Ms. Veith said the MT is undertaking a fundamental review, including audience research, a pricing review and a review of their community work with a view to increasing community participation and development.

Guest Speakers

Ms. Amelia Brompton addressed the Panel and spoke about her involvement in the YAK (Young Art Kommunity) Group, a group of ten 16 – 24 year olds who meet weekly and actively plan, programme and deliver their own events and themed gaming (Xbox 360) sessions as well as choosing and organising regular Friday film screenings in the firstsite Auditorium.

YAK was about trying to create opportunities to involve young people, for example Flow Group meet on a Wednesday, and from this a free session evolved to learn and experience Hula Hooping.

Amelia said YAK has invited entries for their short film festival, an amazing skills development project, where films can be about anything and from any genre but shouldn't be longer than 7 minutes. The films should be suitable for a young audience and Amelia said it was an opportunity to film, edit and create and overdub music.

Thanks to the opportunities created by her invited involvement in YAK, Amelia, who started in January has decided to continue with the project.

Reece Clark addressed the Panel and spoke about his involvement with the Community Arts Centre (CAC).

Reece said that following contact by Mr. Roberts and the subsequent interview, he commenced with the CAC as a work placement in September 2012, initially for an eight week period.

Reece has been given experience in bookings and enquiries (box office), bar tending and generally helping out with the work associated with holding the many variety of events held at the Centre.

Reece said he had really enjoyed his stay at the CAC, that everything he had learnt has been of benefit to him, and thanks to Mr. Roberts he was able to stay on as a volunteer.

Reece concluded by saying his stay had provided him with an insight into the world of performing art and it had been a pleasure and an honour to work with the CAC Team.

Mrs Molly Warren addressed the Panel. She explained that she had worked at Severalls Hospital and was actively involved in their concert group. In retirement she wished to remain active and with her friend Janet Coleman, began participating in Monday events at the Mercury.

Molly said her class get involved in many activities such as exercise and dance classes, and she has now been going on a regular basis for 17 years in which time she

has seen her class grow to a membership of forty.

Molly said it enables her to start the week off well and she has a wonderful time. She said her message was 'It is never too late to participate in events and activities'.

Mr. Nicholas Barton-Wines addressed the Panel. A twenty one year old emerging actor and director he began at the Mercury Theatre Summer School as a twelve year old.

In the last three year Nicholas had shadowed two productions and has been invited next year to act and assist in stage production and direction. He said that two years ago he began to teach 11 – 14 year olds in the Youth Theatre, something he continues to be involved in. Nicholas said that as part of his career development he is now applying for top drama school posts, to which the Mercury Theatre is fully supportive.

Nicholas concluded by adding that he has now started his own Production Company and will be appearing at Hotbed 2013. Nicholas said he was grateful for the start given to him by the Mercury Theatre.

Open Discussions

Councillor Chuah thanked the guest speakers for their passionate presentations, the arts partners for their participation in community projects in St Anne's Ward and the contributions they make to Colchester.

Councillor Frame said given the Arts partners work with young people on projects within their respective buildings, for example YAK, couldn't firstsite find a way of engaging with the young people who congregate outside the building. Mr. Rowe said how to address this issue was an ongoing challenge. He was aware of the impact of visitor expectations to youths both inside the foyer area of the building and outside the building. He did not want firstsite to become a waiting room for young people and they are actively looking at activities to engage with those people. Mr. Rowe said it will be possible to fund these activities in the building from within, but additional resources would be needed to put in place external activities, and this remained an outstanding challenging task. Councillor Frame said the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Leisure would need to consider a business case that included a programme of engagement, to determine if some funding could be made available. Later in the discussions and in response to Councillor P. Higgins who believed in some way the skateboarders themselves provided life and cultural input to the area and local community, Ms. Judith Merritt said the skateboarders are not excluded and do enter the building and use the facilities, and some are involved in the Airlock and YAK programmes. firstsite offer a host of creative and educational opportunities for young people within Colchester.

Councillor P. Higgins expressed disappointment of some aspects of building management when recently visiting firstsite. He said the first things he noticed when visiting the building was a beautiful open floor area that had not being swept and unclean loos. On a number of other occasions he has visited the restaurant it never appeared to be busy, and on every occasion there was dirty crockery on display.

Councillor Higgins said it sounds trivial but it is important because these things give the impression that no one cares. Councillor Higgins also felt the building was never bustling, contrary to his experiences at other provincial galleries where visitor numbers can be high if the right exhibition choices are made, and suggested an exhibition of 'Pop Art' would provide a busy and vibrant atmosphere.

In response to Councillor Higgins, Mr. Warner said the revenue generated by the Donation boxes was £700 - £1000 per month. Mr. Rowe said it was firstsite's intention to display more boldly and prominently the grants and donations received so that visitors can see more visibly the public's generosity.

Mr. Rowe said the firstsite project was one component of the St Botolph's Quarter Regeneration project, and this project remained incomplete. This has caused the firstsite building to remain cut-off from the town centre and the challenge was to develop a closer relationship and links with other art and commercial centres in Colchester. He accepted that programmes and exhibitions needed greater name recognition to provide the pulling power needed. Mr. Rowe confirmed to Councillor Offen that the footfall numbers are recorded electronically with a % subtraction to take account of Councillors and staff visits.

Councillor Offen said the MT had produced an outstanding 2013 programme and the work of the CAC continues to delight, but he made a plea for firstsite to provide a livelier atmosphere as there never appears to be anything going on.

With respect to the building foyer and the lack of pictures, Mr. Rowe responded to Councillor Offen by agreeing that the large foyer space created a key visitor impression but did need improving, having the potential to be Colchester's equivalent to the Tate Modern. Councillor Bentley said well known artists creating art with a local connection, such as Gilbert and George, would draw large numbers of visitors.

In response to Councillor Naish and the wards chosen for community projects, Mr. Roberts said in regards to the 'Fete' project, they were invited to look at areas of low engagement, not specific wards, but super output areas. The idea is to give residents who would otherwise not have the opportunity, an art experience and where they go is usually driven by community groups rather than a geographic area. Ms. Veith said these projects more often than not involve community groups such as 'Teenage Mother Groups' that engages with young mothers and their families and with the intention of broadening horizons and increasing confidence. Quite often funding is a problem, but they remain committed to creating these opportunities for a wide range of people from different backgrounds. Ms. Merritt added that in respect of school work, they offer a range of standard or bespoke programmes to all the schools in the borough and they have a regular long term relationship with the Lexden Springs School and Lavender House childcare / caring establishment, and offers do go out to local scouts and guides groups.

Councillor Davies said community projects needed to reach the more deprived communities in the rural areas of the borough. Councillor Davies also believed many adults, not just young people, would love to experience some of the events e.g. circus skills, and concurred with some of the earlier comments that the lack of local art in the

firstsite building is a real public perception.

Mr. Robert said there could possibly be a role for the development of other Outreach groups, and if any transpired he would if asked try to provide assistance. Ms. Veith said the organisations are not promoting what they do widely enough and there is a desire to create more opportunities. She said the appointment of the new Communications Director will be tasked with developing their promotional work. Mr. Rowe said there has been six historic local artists exhibitions since the opening of firstsite, but success in visiting figures was to some extent dependent on the exhibition being permeable on many different levels, and placing artists at the centre of every aspect of work that we do e.g. learning, exhibition and retail.

Councillor Sutton said he would like to see an examination of the Outreach Programme, where community projects are not concentrated in super output areas, with some thought going into providing some projects to other outlying rural and urban areas.

Councillor Sutton also said that given it was originally anticipated that 500k visitors were targeted in the original business case how did the figure reduce to the current 150k visitors.

Mr. Rowe said it was a misnomer to call firstsite an elitist organisation that fabricates rules and data, but accepted the need to develop a greater profile and partnership with all local communities, and this will go some way to lessening negative comments. Mr. Warner said the information presented to the Committee demonstrated the resilience of the organisation and the level of funds being leveraged in are way above the national average. Firstsite was not a niche facility with its own rules, and the visitor figures are collected electronically. The 500k visitors stated was the estimate figures expected to the whole St Botolph's Regeneration programme, not firstsite alone.

Councillor Bentley spoke about the need for a wider catchment area for promoting the local arts and culture scene as a tourist attraction, for example, the mention of firstsite in other towns and cities, and asked how this could be achieved and whether this aspect of work needed to be expanded within the partnership agreements. Mr. Roberts said in regards to promotion, the best national profile and form of promotion for the CAC was tour display notices by bands and other performing artists, and the recent Comedy Festival had a very good Facebook page thanks to the collaborative work with the Visitor Information Centre. People travel many miles, even internationally if they have a passion for a particular act, and the new electronic technology helped make their promotional work a huge success. Mr. Roberts said there was still room to improve and the Council could do more to help with this aspect of work, and this could be written into the partnership agreements. Ms. Veith said the 'Made in Colchester' productions appeals to and creates a wave of interest to others outside of Colchester, so it was vital a message about this work goes out to a wider audience. Mr. Rowe said firstsite would benefit from a regional promotion approach, with the partners acting as a critical mass with collective offers. Councillor P. Higgins said firstsite, being cut-off from the town centre would benefit by street signage from major car parks and public transport stations.

Mr. Rowe responded to Councillor P. Higgins saying firstsite are exploring the possibility of working in partnership with Picture House to bring live streaming of opera

concerts as an alternative to the cinema audience. Ms. Veith said the MT are still in an active partnership with Lakeside Theatre and are looking to involve them in the future development of emerging artists.

In response to Councillor Chuah's enquiry about the problems with the disabled seating arrangements at a recent Auditorium booking, Mr. Warner said there had been a disproportionate high number of disabled people in the party and firstsite had not been advised of this. Mr. Warner said subsequent to this incident, they have now amended their ticketing arrangements whereby the person making the booking is now prompted to advise firstsite of their disabled requirements.

Ms. Merritt responded to Councillor Offen concerning more involvement from the arts partners with the Garrison, and the potential to unlock some funding from the Armed Forces Community Covenant and their £50m grant to support community group projects across the Country. She said firstsite do get involved in community projects at the Garrison, and were actively involved in four projects last year.

Summary

Councillor Tim Young, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Community Safety and Culture thanked all the arts representatives and guests for their presentations and participation in the discussions. Councillor Young said all three organisations do great work that helps to promote Colchester.

Councillor Young agreed with the comments from Panel Members that more needed to be done to engage with young people who congregate and play on and around the Public Realm. He applauded the Comedy Festival that helped put Colchester on the map and the arts partners in general for creating the great reputation for arts and culture in Colchester.

Councillor Young said it would be counter-productive to reduce or stop the current grant funding and taking on board the comments from the Panel, promised the Council will continue to work in partnership with the arts partners to improve and provide continual value for money.

RESOLVED that the Panel -

- i) Thanked the representatives for their presentations and responding to questions from Members, thanked guest speakers for their contributions, and thanked firstsite for hosting the Council meeting.
- ii) Considered and noted the current performance against the current standard(s), and the fit between the contribution of the funded arts partners and the Council's strategic priorities and plans.
- iii) Requested the Cabinet to examine the Outreach Programme, so community projects are not concentrated in super output areas, with some thought going into providing some projects to other areas of the Borough.
- iv) Requested the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Leisure Services to work

with firstsite in improving communications with the young people who congregate and play on and around the Public Realm, and find more ways to encourage them to participate in other activities.

v) Requested the Cabinet to consider ways of helping the arts partners to promote the local arts and culture scene to a wider catchment area to attract more tourists, an aspect of work that could be improved upon. This was collaborative work, an aspiration that could be written into the partnership agreements.

vi) Requested the Cabinet to reconsider a previous request to provide an indication of two future years funding at the same time as the current grant(s) is agreed.