CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel was held on Thursday 21 January 2021.

PRESENT:	Councillors C McIntyre (Chair), R Arundale, C Dodds, L Mason, J Rostron and J Thompson
PRESENT BY INVITATION:	Councillors M Storey
ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:	A Payne (Chairman - British Esports Association), A Leaman (Schools and Colleges Liaison Officer - British Esports Association) and G Tibbett (Education Manager - British Esports Association)
OFFICERS:	S Bonner, S Gilmore, R Horniman, M Jackland, S Lightwing and D Watson
APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:	Councillors L Lewis, J Goodchild and M Saunders

20/26   **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

20/27   **CULTURAL EVENTS IN MIDDLESBROUGH - ALTERNATIVE FORMATS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Panel and advised Members that representatives of the British Esports Association were in attendance to provide information relating to the second terms of reference of the Panel's review into Cultural Events. The Chair also advised that Members of the Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel as well as officers from the Council's Regeneration Department were in attendance.

The Chair invited Andy Payne, Chair of BEA, Alice Lehman, Schools and Colleges Liaison Officer for the BEA and Gary Tibbett the Education Manager at the BEA to deliver their presentation. The Schools and Colleges Liaison Officer described her role as engaging with schools and colleges in the North of the UK to help them understand what esports was and how it could be used. The Education Manager outlined that his role was to embed esports qualifications, such as the BTech in esports that was available at levels one, two and three. He also clarified that Higher Education qualifications were being developed in esports.

During the presentation the following points were made:
- It was important to understand how esports had potential cultural

and commercial impacts.

- The BEA were a not-for-profit and had been in existence since 2016. One of the Association's objectives was to promote esports, foster British talent and raise awareness of the industry.

- The BEA also offered advice and expertise as well as educating a range of stakeholders such as parents, teachers and policy makers.

- Importantly, the BEA was not a governing body for the digital industry like the Football Association was for English football.

- The BEA was a member of different organisations including the Welsh Sports Association and the Creative Industries Federation.

- Watching sports was part of our culture and watching others play video games was a continuation of this but in a different format.

- Competitive video gaming was always human verus human, and often team versus team.

- Esports and competitive video gaming was a game of skill, and games became an esport when the community decided to take that game to a different level.

- Some video games were modern mind games, having rules, choice and consequences.

- Competitive gaming had various rewards including medals and cash prizes.

- Esports was gender neutral with just as many female participants as males globally.

- The BEA had pioneered the Women in esports Committee.

- Global audiences watching esports were expansive given that many events were broadcast on Youtube and Twitch.

- Professional gaming had the same level of support as many traditional sports, such as coaches and nutritionists.

- Other countries recognised eports as an actual sport, but this is not the case in the UK. However, the esports sector did report to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

- The sector as a whole was projected to move to have a global audience of approximately 645 million people by 2022.

- Accessing esports was easy and transnational in nature. This was due to the popularity of games but also because of social media

platforms such as YouTube and Twitch.

- Global revenue streams for esports, not including video games, was worth approximately $950 million.

- There was a perception that those participating in esports were lazy and were de-skilling. However, the BBC carried out research showing participation with video gaming enhanced certain skill sets such as spatial working, memory retention and verbal reasoning.

- Participation in esports was very inclusive as anyone could play, and did not rely on physical ability.

- It also contributed to improved mental health which was especially important during the Covid Pandemic. This applied to both young and old people as older people playing video games had showed improved memory function which also assisted with dementia prevention.

- Participation in esports also helped to reinforce life skills, or soft skills, such as communication, choice and consequence decisions, concentration and team work.

- There were career pathways created by participation in esports. An example was playing Minecraft and Civilisation and how these helped career paths into the intelligence services.

- Importantly, eco-systems developed around esports that included roles and careers such as PR, business management, and event management.

- Esports also contributed to important academic disciplines including computing, mathematics, engineering and the creatives industries.

- The UK was a world-beater in the creative industries.

- More established communications organisations such as the BBC and Sky TV often learned lessons from how esports was produced and broadcast.

- From an education perspective further education colleges were starting to add esports courses to their curricula.

- The BEA had helped launched the British Esports Btech which explored how the industry worked, both from a content, creation and commercial perspective.

- The University of Staffordshire had also launched a Bachelor of Arts

degree in esports in 2018 with others following suit.

- Importantly, Teesside University launched its Master of Arts in esports and Middlesbrough College also had an esports component.
- There were three leading video game companies that were based in Middlesbrough; Radical Forge, Double Eleven and Soft Monkey which employed approximately 200 people combined.
- Esports helped to support related supply chains such as keyboard manufacturers and other technical peripheries.
- An example of how esports was transformative was a Polish Town called Katowice that had embraced esports as an alternative economic base after its traditional industry of mining had faltered.
- Catalina, was also cited as the capital of European of esports which contributed millions of Euros to the local economy with events attracting more than 20,000 spectators.
- There was an esports presence in the UK with 72 schools and more than 260 teams participating.

The Chair queried if there was sufficient safety checks in place in terms of age restricted video games. It was clarified that while there would always be loopholes for people to access games they should not, British Esports did not use certain games in their competitions, or tailored events that were age specific. It was also clarified that there were more rigorous checks at physical events, including ID requirements.

A Member expressed concern that young people spent too much time on digital devices which resulted in negative health implications. The Member recognised that esports was likely to form a significant part of Middlesbrough's Cultural and economic offer going forward.

It was clarified that while there could be health risks associated with excessive video gaming, it was important to achieve an effective balance between participation and non-participation as with any activity. It was also commented that technology was becoming increasing wearable meaning video-gaming could become increasingly physical. It was also commented that during the Covid Pandemic there was evidence that firm friendship bonds were being formed due to increased time spent online with similar minded people.

A Member commented that it was easy to draw parallels between video-gaming and negative cultural developments and that a balance was required. The Member queried if esports was a good engine for social mobility, in the same way that professional football was based on talent.

It was confirmed that video gaming was very diverse and drew on different groups in equal measure. It was also commented that esports was geographically equal and did not concentrate on certain areas. An example was provided in the video game Grand Theft Auto, which had grossed over $2billion internationally, which was developed in Leeds and Edinburgh.

However, it was recognised that access to esports could be limited depending on ownership of relevant technology, such as games consoles which could be expensive.

A Member commented that health concerns surrounding prolonged video game exposure should not be underestimated and that negative impacts of such exposure included mental health issues.

It was confirmed balance was important when participating in esports, just as with other sports. It was also confirmed that gaming consoles also featured parental controls and that there was a degree of parental responsibility to understand what young people were participating in. Research had been carried out that showed online gaming and the ability to connect through online gaming improved mental health.

A Member commented that it may not be beneficial to offer degrees in esports due to their expense and the perception that such degrees may not be regarded as useful in the wider job market. The Member also commented that esports may maintain its quality of talent through practical application rather than academic qualification.

It was clarified that a degree in esports was not only about becoming a professional video gamer. Instead such qualifications examined wider aspects of esports, such as how the industry worked and its business and commercial

elements.

It was queried if esports had facilitated small scale events in association with Local Authorities. It was confirmed this had not happened due to other commitments with Championship Tournaments. However, there was no reason why some kind of esports event could not take place in Middlesbrough as there were existing pre-requisites in place to run a successful event.

It was queried what economic benefits were realised by holding esports events, and what infrastructure would be required to host an esports event in Middlesbrough. It was clarified there would be no need for specific considerations in terms of size, but having stable networks and the potential to stream the event via social media was important. However, it was also confirmed that costs for such an event would be dependent on size and scale, but could be achieved at relatively low cost.

A Member commented that Teesside University held the annual Animex Festival and asked if esports could be folded into that in some way to complement the development of the Town's digital sector, Boho.

It was confirmed by officers of Regeneration that plans to bring the Animex Festival to the Town Hall and make the event town-wide rather than campus based were quite advanced. It was also confirmed that it would not be a significant step to bring a physical esports event to Middlesbrough.

It was commented that 12 digital clusters existed around the UK, and it was queried if Middlesbrough could form, or be part of, such a cluster. It was clarified there was no specific requirement for clusters to be created, and that they usually formed around and education base with digital industries growing around it. An example was Dundee whose traditional industry had been Marmalade manufacture but which now had a significant digital sector due to its University offering excellent digital courses.

It was queried if, educationally, the BEA had forged links with local schools and colleges. It was clarified that the BEA's Education Manager previously worked at Middlesbrough College and had contributed to the introduction of the Btech in esports there. This was in addition to the college intending to take

part in the British Esports Championships.

It was also confirmed that there were 22 colleges in the UK delivering Btechs at levels two and three with approximately 250 students undertaking them. This was in conjunction with Higher Education qualifications becoming available.

A Member queried if there were plans to introduce a mobile service for esports. It was confirmed there were some links with operators in this regard, but it was dependent on individual vendors establishing those services.

Due to the distress experienced on highstreets due to the Covid Pandemic, it was queried how esports could contribute to the wider cultural economy. It was clarified that leisure venues associated with esports had increased in number, such as esports bars. The BEA also carried out extensive work in Sheffield contributing to the creation of the National Video Games Museum to understand how its creation would impact on have the local economy.

Ordered: That the information presented to the Panel be noted.

20/28 **CHAIR'S OSB UPDATE**

The Chair advised the Panel that at the previous meeting of OSB on 14 January the Chief Executive and Director of Public Health provided an update in respect of the Council's response to the Covid Pandemic.

The Board also received an update from the Executive Member for Adult Social Care and Health Integration, who responded to questions on her portfolio, with specific reference to Dementia Friendly initiatives

The Board were also introduced to the new Chair of the Teeswide Adult Safeguarding Board, who with the Director of Adult Social Care and Public Health Integration provided an update on the 2019-20 annual report and the Strategic Business plan for 2020 to 2021.

The Chair of OSB commented that it was disappointing the final report of the Panel's review into Social Cohesion had not been presented to the Board

despite its appearance on the agenda.

20/29   **ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.**

None.