

CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel was held on 15 October 2020.

PRESENT: Councillors C McIntyre (Chair); L Lewis (Vice Chair); Councillors; Arundale, Goodchild, Mason, Rostron and and Saunders.

OFFICERS: S. Bonner; R. Horniman; M. Jackland and S. Lightwing

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Councillors Dodds and Thompson.

DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were made at this point in the meeting.

1 MINUTES - CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL - 10 SEPTEMBER 2020

The Minutes of the Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel were submitted and accepted as a true record.

ORDERED: That the minutes be noted.

2 CULTURAL EVENTS AND MIDDLESBROUGH'S CULTURAL OFFER - OVERVIEW

The Director of Regeneration and Culture provided the Panel with information about how the Council supports and delivers cultural events.

As part of the presentation the following points were made:

- This was a very pertinent topic, especially given the different tiers of Lockdown.
- The Council delivers and funds events on a set range of objectives, which had been agreed by Executive. Those objectives were; raising the profile of the area i.e. making sure people know where Middlesbrough was and what it stood for; attracting higher footfall/ increase in dwell time - the idea being to attract people to events but to also keep visitors in those places where events are being held. This would also hopefully see those visitors spending money in the town, such as hotel stays for the bigger events as well as restaurant bookings and public transport use. This would, overall, generate economic impact from having the event. Community engagement - the aim here was to try and boost local pride and to bring communities together but importantly, this is not confined to smaller events as larger events can be about this as well.
- The role the Council played in events could differ depending on what the event was, however the Council's preference was to simply deliver support to others holding events, as this was a more efficient use of time and money.
- Support was provided to those approaching the Council with ideas, both from a technical, licensing and safety aspect. Ultimately there was a sliding scale of how much the Council was involved in certain events.
- In instances where events were held on Council land, the Council needed to grant the relevant permissions and to ensure the relevant safety standards had been adhered to. To help achieve this the Council was a member of the Independent Safety Advisory Group along with the Fire Brigade and Police. This group ensured that events are conducted in a safe manner.
- There were events that were provided by others that were funded by the Council.
- The Council only had a budget of £68,000 to hold events and 1.5 FTE working on events. Consequently, it was better that the Council offered support from the side lines rather than hold events itself.
- There were several examples of events from the usual events programme including the MELA for which the Council offered funding and advice including safety processes; the Council funded and hosted the Orange Pip Market; the Council, in conjunction with others, helped to run the Discover Middlesbrough event; Animex was

a good example of how the Council provided support to other stakeholders, in this case Teesside University; the Council tended to take the lead on Christmas events in the Town which, while expensive to run, experienced high footfall; the Council also got involved in Armed Forces day and in some of the religious events such as Nagar Kirton; in conjunction with Public Health the Council helped to hold the 10k and 5k road races. Occasionally there were events that sat outside the normal schedule, such as the Radio 1 Big Weekend. Such events required significant investment from the Council but also had a significant impact on the town as a whole.

- The Council had big plans for 2020. The Executive Member for Culture and Communities was keen to improve the visibility of Middlesbrough through the events that it holds.
- Some of the plans included the growth of the Orange Pip brand, holding more and different kinds of, events.
- There was also an intention to improve relationships with sponsors and funders.
- Unfortunately the continuing COVID Pandemic halted most of those plans and there were now several challenges for holding events.
- Social distancing meant that large scale events could no longer accommodate the same number of visitors, although some very small scale events had been able to proceed. This has had a detrimental impact on income for the Town Hall. This was especially the case as profit was usually marginal, with most of the takings at the Bar as the cost of the ticket covered the cost of the performer. Therefore, from a commercial perspective, the Council was better not to hold events during this time.
- The nature of events that were delivered, as well as how they were delivered, was increasingly dependent on managing visitor's respective bubbles.
- Due to prolonged retail closures, there was also little point in holding some events, because the added financial benefit for retailers would have been lost, especially within the food and beverage sector.
- Arts organisations had also had their income cut due to budget reductions, so there was little chance of depending on them for support. This was the same for funders, as they were usually funded by Government or their income was derived via means already affected by Covid.
- Sponsors were also reluctant to provide sponsorship opportunities as there was increased risk that they would not recoup their sponsorship offer.
- However, one of the main concerns and challenges for running events was the uncertainty of future restrictions. For example, most events were planned in a year in advance, however this was difficult given the uncertainty surrounding COVID.
- This uncertainty was coupled with not knowing how the public would feel about attending events. A great deal of research had taken place with the Council's customer base who, after the first wave, felt they would leave it a long time before returning to attend events, especially events with a relatively large audience.
- In order to host events, there was a set process of booking acts and paying for their performance or paying for space and stalls. This could be quite expensive, especially when factoring in promotion. The Council decided to take a cautious approach to holding events in order to mitigate potential abortive costs. So far, this had proven to be the prudent course of action.
- For the financial year 2020/2021 all events had been cancelled, with only small test events being held both within and outside the Town Hall.
- The Christmas programme had almost been a moving target, therefore there were plans to explore if events could be taken out to the public rather than held centrally. However the latest restrictions suggest this may not be possible either. Therefore, a suitable Christmas programme was required that supported retailers but would not cause visitors to gather in a central place. To this end, events like trails were suggested.
- It was difficult to make commitments to things that would be happening in the spring and the summer of 2021 in order to minimise abortive costs.
- The Panel were asked to consider that one of the main benefits from holding events was the economic impact they can bring, however how could this be done when gatherings were not to be promoted?
- How could plans be made for 2021/22 when there was no certainty, both on restrictions and on visitor confidence? It was also questioned if visitors would ever return to events without having concerns over personal safety.

- It was also posed if events would be allowed to be held in any format in the future.

A Member queried if regional or sub-regional solutions to the issues described had been discussed with any of the Council's neighbouring Councils.

It was confirmed that prior to COVID discussion surrounding delivery of events took place as a matter of course, on a basis of working together to avoid clashes. It was also confirmed that Teesside Councils had also made approaches to the Tees Valley Combined Authority seeking investment for events in the coming years. The Combined Authority had a significant budget for cultural events and an example of their investment had been the ongoing celebration of the railways in Darlington.

Plans to hold similar events in the other Tees Authorities were put on hold due to COVID, but it was the intention that the Tees Valley Combined Authority would focus on large scale strategic events, such as the Rugby World Cup, and leave smaller events to individual Councils.

A Member commented that as part of the centenary celebrations for the Transporter Bridge, it was intended that the bridge would become a visitor attraction, but this had not come to fruition. The Member queried if this could be explored for future years. It was confirmed that this would definitely be the case.

A Member stated that, based on what had been presented in the meeting, the delivery of Cultural Events, like other Council services, faced difficult times until some form of normality returned.

A Member queried if Cultural Services had been the recipient of additional funding from government. It was confirmed that a significant amount of money was being distributed to Arts Organisations who, in turn, provided those funds to individuals and companies that were dependent on cultural events. It was also confirmed the Council had also been a recipient of some of those funds but because of how the Council delivered events, namely in that it supported rather than directly delivered them, it was not financially burdensome on the Council if events were not taking place. However, where events did not take place, this did have a detrimental financial impact on third parties such as retailers, with no money available to replace that lost revenue.

A Member queried if Council staff, whose jobs involved delivering events, were secure. It was confirmed this was the case, as those staff were being re-allocated tasks. This also allowed staff to plan for future events, to a certain degree, for example planning for Christmas events at Newham Grange Farm.

A query was made about the general context of Cultural Events and how the impact of holding events was measured. It was clarified there was difficulty in doing so from a community perspective. There were established models, adopted nationally, that informed what the economic impact would be following an event. However, where events were held for other purposes, such as community cohesiveness, it became difficult to measure. Realistically, the only way to measure impact of this nature was to issue surveys.

A query was made if Middlesbrough could foster a longer term cultural offer rather than lots of short term one-off events. It was confirmed that even more established cultural events, such as the Railways in Darlington, were appealing to an increasingly dwindling audience, despite having an international appeal. The closest Middlesbrough had to an equivalent historical cultural base was iron and steel. However, this was really only of interest to local residents, with a lack of interest to wider audiences.

Middlesbrough did not have a natural theme that it could excel at, instead it was more likely that Middlesbrough could make more of the multi-cultural aspect of events. One example was the Mela, which was one of the strongest outside of Birmingham, but which only received a certain level of investment and therefore was of a certain size. It was posed that should the Mela receive twice or three times its current investment, a programme of events, rather than a one-off events, could be developed and therefore have a greater impact. One of the benefits

of growing multicultural themed events would be its appeal to a wider audience rather than the relatively limited audience appeal of local themes, such as Captain James Cook.

It was queried if cultural events and their future growth could feed into other Council initiatives such as Town Centre growth. It was confirmed that the Council was awaiting the results of the Future Highstreets Fund and Town's Fund bids with the cultural bloc, and events, being a strong feature in both. There was a drive to transform the Town Centre to being less retail dominant, and while there was an acknowledgement that there was a great deal that could be done, the format was unknown at this stage. An example, in light of a drive to enhance the leisure aspect of the Town, could be the introduction of e-gaming. Were a venue be created to cater for this kind of event there could be a stream of other related activities to this, particularly if there was increased utilisation of technology such as big screens. However, there was still a large degree of unknowns surrounding this.

It was commented that if a move to such events as e-gaming and the increased use technology were adopted it would allow a greater reach to people without the need to hold large scale physical events. It was also confirmed that this approach may also improve inclusiveness, but would be season dependent, namely that some events were more suited to warmer seasons. It was also confirmed that the on-going Covid Pandemic was producing a great deal of uncertainty and the Council needed to understand this better.

A Member commented that in order to look to the future that the Town should have a suitable venue that could hold large scale events, and that the Council should be more proactive in seeking to secure such a venue. In having such a venue it would give confidence to both businesses and visitors to come to Middlesbrough.

It was confirmed there was ambition in having such a venue, and that work had been undertaken in scoping the this. It was found that irrespective of location, operators of large scale venues, such as arenas, lost large amounts of money. Therefore, should a venue such as an arena be agreed this would need to fit with wider strategic objectives, as there would need to be an acceptance of those ongoing costs.

ORDERED:

1. That future celebrations of the Transporter Bridge look to make it a viable visitor attraction.
2. That the panel considers the issues identified in the information presented.
3. That the information presented be noted.

3 CHAIR'S OSB UPDATE.

The Chair provided the panel with an update from OSB held on 1 October 2020;

As part of the update the Chair made the following points:

- The Mayor was in attendance and provided the Board with an update in relation Covid and the Council's finances.
- The Board considered the Executive forward work programme.
- The Chief Executive and Director of Public Health provided an update on the Council's continuing response to the Covid 19 Pandemic.
- The Executive Member for Finance & Governance provided an update on her portfolio and what challenges and opportunities were facing her brief and provided an update on Council finances in the wake of Covid.
- An update was received from all Scrutiny Panel Chairs on their Panel's activities.

ORDERED: That the information presented be noted.

