

Full Council Meeting – 27 July 2021

Report of Councillor Caroline Ellis – Culture

Cultural life across SWT has sprung back vigorously post the worst ravages of lockdown and pandemic. Our business support grants and DCMS Culture Recovery grant has undoubtedly been pivotal but so has the sheer inventiveness and spirit of community arts groups and creative businesses. Partnerships have been key with businesses, culture groups and councils pulling together to inject life back into ravaged high streets with bold art, performance and entertainment whether in Taunton, Porlock, Dulverton, Dunster or elsewhere. Appetite for culture has never been higher, but the challenges for the creative industries and cultural sector remain huge.

Culture Strategy

At the time of writing final tweaks are being made to the Culture Strategy which will be presented for Decision at Full Council on 27 July. Behind the vision and high level objectives set out in the Strategy, which give us a framework for the decisions we make on investment and which guides our policy, lies a delivery plan which we are ‘cracking on with’ across different teams and with our partners and which I look forward to reporting to you on soon. For example:

- The Strategy says we want to “Provide high quality, sustainably designed buildings that allow new and existing communities to create distinct neighbourhoods”, so we have published and are consulting on the District Wide Design Guide which focuses on just that and which, if adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document, will give planners and Planning Committee greater power to demand better from developers.
- The Strategy says we are determined to “Provide the cultural activity young people want and need and offer them pathways to creative careers”, so we are investing in the TYCA festival (see below) and considering a proposal for a project which would involve a range of arts industry specialists going into schools, speaking about their careers in the arts and de-mystifying the pathways into the industry, with an emphasis on vocational learning.
- The Strategy says we must “Value health and wellbeing as well as GDP ensuring people can access the cultural experiences they need to bloom and prosper”, so we are supporting a bid by partners to deliver an ambitious project on cultural prescribing for older people.

Dan and me have logged all feedback from Members – actions will be incorporated into our delivery plan or are already being actioned x

Culture Grants

We have made a small grant of £750 to **The Regal Theatre Minehead** which, post COVID, is looking to broaden its programming, introducing new genres and activities to build stronger connections with existing and new audiences and help grow both its income and volunteer base. The Regal has been at the heart of Minehead’s cultural and social life for 25 years and is entirely run by volunteers. Minehead, in particular, is an area whose

inhabitants otherwise have little or no access to high-quality entertainment and culture, the nearest alternatives being over 25 (rural) miles distant. The grant has been used to arrange two concerts by the internationally acclaimed Carducci Quartet marking the return of live music to the Regal after a gap of 18 months. This is a small way in which we can support the Regal's recovery programme and we will be looking at what else we can do to enable this key arts venue and hub to flourish in the future.

We are also funding Arts Taunton's '**Art at the Heart**' grant programme aimed at filling needs for arts provision in our community and boosting engagement in areas of low take up. This programme has solicited a range of amazing project bids from right across the district – by the time of Full Council, successful projects will hopefully have been announced.

A new funding agreement is in place with the **Brewhouse**, our principal arts centre, backed by £132,000 core funding for this year. This is linked to a strong business plan by the Brew informed by consultation with audiences, which has already delivered:

- a strong programme of film, live music, dance, original theatre and art exhibitions, throughout the summer and into the Autumn;
- a new comedy Festival 'Brew HaHa' towards the end of July with top name acts – the fruit of collaboration between the Brew and Trish Caller of Genuis events and part of a plan to make us the 'Edinburgh of the South';
- a distinctive new look – that reflects the Brewhouse's ambitions, its industrial past and the nearby River Tone as well as the borough's historic coat of arms.
- a Youth Board bringing young people into the heart of decision making; and
- "The Distillery" a new and important programme of activity giving South West artists across genres the opportunity to experiment and develop their skills in a supportive setting

Cultural Sector Liaison

I am getting to know key players across the district and understand the opportunities and challenges ahead with zoom meets/briefings with the Regal, Museum of Somerset and others and visits to the Old Brick Workshop (an innovative artists studios and gallery on the outskirts of Wellington), buzzing Watchet (with an expert guide!) which will need better parking as it will be even more exciting and humming come the opening of East Quay, Porlock for the launch of the Porlock Vale Permanent Art Trail, Hestercombe to get a closer look at future development plans and understand better their artistic programme and engagement work to name a few.

As well as being an artistic hot house, Porlock is the home of innovative performance company Stacked Wonky who are based right on the high street and are providing local kids with regular performing arts workshops (oversubscribed!). I zoomed with Stacked Wonky and the Somerset Wildlife Trust to find out more about their joint creative, eco-themed project "One 24 Hours – One Ocean". The Bristol Channel is part of 'One Ocean' with its many species and ecosystems, an ocean which faces multiple threats from plastics to climate change. Young people from West Somerset with either a drama background or an environmental interest or both are being recruited to devise mini performance pieces which highlight their hopes, fears and desires for a life lived in balance with the Ocean.

They will get professional support to devise their miniatures and then perform them on the hour, every hour, for 24 hours on a West Somerset Beach in September. A-M-A-Z-I-N-G!

I have lost count of trips to the Brewhouse – latterly met famous Tauntonian, Joe Garbett, of aka Dance Theatre Company who is putting us on the map for contemporary dance with a string of performances in different venues this summer.

In addition to attending the launches of LoveWINDows and the Rainbow Pathway, in June, I attended the private view of an exciting and innovative exhibition at the Creative Innovation Centre in Taunton showcasing the work of LGBTQIA+ artists from the South West organised by a new not-for-profit called Q Collaborative CICIC lead by up and coming Taunton artist Zahra Hoccom. Together with Go Create's amazing Pride Festival and our much celebrated Rainbow Pathway, the presence of Q Collaborative puts the district in a strong position to become a real hub for LGBTQIA+ creativity and culture. Pride Festival is a huge asset and we will look to continue support for it in Taunton and any other town where there is a demand (Note: in the past Watchet held a Pride on the Beach event. They have a Pride group and may be planning another beach event in 2022. Bravo Watchet!!).

I attended our Arts Taunton Liaison meeting on 27th May - me, the Leader and CEO met Kit Chapman, Tony Laurance and team to discuss:

- TYCA (Taunton Youth Culture & Arts Festival – SWT funded) which this year will have an empowerment theme – young people have been recruited to join the TYCA crew as this festival is 'by' as much as 'for' young people); in the run up to the Festival proper over two weekends in October, TYCA has delivered free performance/creative workshops at North Taunton Youth Centre and other locations aimed at young people from deprived socio-economic backgrounds.
- Design and the built environment – Arts Taunton are keen to see garden town principles and beautiful design embedded in all new developments going forward; they act as a 'Civic Society', for example, campaigning to save the iconic Debenhams art deco frontage and bringing that to national attention.
- The project to create an Iconic Artwork for Taunton (visible from motorway) for which we and Somerset County Council have committed £5k each to progress initial work on.
- The possibility of art (digital/ projection) at Taunton Station to welcome visitors to the town which Arts Taunton are leading on.

The SWT Cultural Forum will meet at the end of July and we have invited Wellington Arts Association to join.

Cultural Resources and Assets

I have been auditing cultural resources and assets across the whole district and an output from that work is a log/directory which can be accessed here :

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ioPLvMhZ5DWhjvkhvipKy7EF4RdYdG63/view?usp=sharing>

This is a live document, subject to regular updating. It covers:

- Heritage assets including listed monuments (those owned and managed by us as well as English Heritage/National Trust assets).

- Local heritage history and civic groups.
- Venues - from our theatres and arts centres to village halls, community centres, parks/playing fields and churches which regularly host cultural events.
- Theatres and art centres.
- Arts agencies, design agencies.
- Galleries and studios.
- Professional theatre companies, performing arts companies, choirs and orchestras.
- Local bands, amateur dramatic societies, film clubs (including those which are part of the Moviola network), art groups, craft groups.
- Professional artists, designers, sculptors, ceramicists and photographers (it reveals where there are clusters of creatives)
- Festivals and markets.

It is quite staggering just how diverse and vibrant our cultural groups and businesses are and just how many places, including tiny parishes, are home to lively cultural activity (some facilitated with partnerships with Take Art rural touring and Moviola for film, some entirely home-grown). Some new theatre companies, orchestras and creative businesses have sprung up during the pandemic which is really exciting. Much of the data needs to be migrated to Somerset Arts Business Culture Alliance's website where they are attempting to log and map all creatives and arts businesses in order to be able to demonstrate the need for better sector support from Government.

There are future projects we are looking at supporting which would enrich our cultural landscape further – for example, relating to Taunton, we are interested in a nascent project relating to a prominent, empty high street store being used for community art exhibitions and activities and a proposal for a new street music festival.

Some authorities produce a **Public Art Register** i.e. a catalogue of the art to be found in public spaces (in parks, squares, on the side of buildings etc) and includes murals, sculpture, memorials, integrated architectural or landscape architectural work, community art installations. I am working on this now since I consider it could be useful for engaging people with the history of our towns and villages and provide a means of highlighting our rich cultural heritage. The amazing seasonal trails delivered by Go Create are hugely popular and a permanent public art trail would likewise provide a free opportunity to enjoy culture.

Marketing and communications

As an interim response to calls from councillors and cultural partners for a calendar of cultural events across the District to ensure easier access to event information, an events guide has been instigated which can be accessed here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1k9VungR_G-DiLB9eLgFoYzwULYz1pq/view?usp=sharing

People often miss out on key experiences because they simply did not know something was on. It is vital that events right across the district get the audiences they deserve especially those delivered by community/voluntary groups who do not have the money to do significant amounts of promotion and marketing. We are, however, also working on a more robust marketing and communications plan which will address barriers to finding out about and accessing relevant culture opportunities for residents, with a specific focus on

young people who according to our research are missing out because of the absence of bespoke communications.

Hopefully by the time Full Council comes along you will be able to access basic, core information about culture across the district and how we support it on a dedicated culture webpage on our website and we will have set up a regular all-councillor culture debrief and forum for discussion.

FUNDING BIDS

Cultural Development Fund – Expression of Interest Submitted

Strategy Specialist, Dan Webb has teamed with Heritage Manager, Jo O'Hara to mastermind a bid to the Cultural Development Fund. This is a Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) fund administered by Arts Council England geared towards capital investment in transformative place-based creative and cultural initiatives. An Expression of Interest has been submitted for "Creative Tonedale" which, to our minds, perfectly fits the bill. Applicants can apply for between £2 and £5 million for capital activity with a limited proportion of resource activity. There is a minimum requirement of 15 per cent match funding (which I am assured we have). Projects need to take place between 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2025. An Expert Advisory Panel (representatives from arts and culture, heritage and the creative industries sector bodies, independent figures and government departments) will review EOIs by 31 August to determine which applicants to invite to make full applications. If we make it through that stage our application will need to be in by mid October. NB This is in addition to the Levelling Up Fund Bid (see Cllr Kravis's report).

UK Community Renewal Fund – SWT backing a Creative Industries Growth and Development Bid

We are supporting a crucial bid for half a million to the UK Community Renewal Fund by Somerset Arts Business Cultural Alliance CIC to deliver a project called Digital and Creative Industries Sector Growth & Business Development. The purpose of the project is to identify micro clusters in rural and urban areas, to identify skill gaps and needs, barriers to growth, to connect businesses and organisations to sector related knowledge and skills, stimulate innovation development and digital adoption, and for individuals and businesses to learn about opportunities to develop new products and services, and to use this data and knowledge to inform future government investment in the Digital and Creative Industries sector in Somerset and create a creative industries roadmap for the county of Somerset for 2022-2025. SABCA have a broader project in the same vein which they are promoting to Government via the Local Economic Partnership. Please cross everything that these are successful. If they are not, I will be seeking support for us as an authority to find another way to take this forward - since the creative industries are key to our cultural and economic future.