



Borough of Telford and Wrekin

Cabinet

11 April 2024

Cultural Peer Review for Telford & Wrekin

Cabinet Member:	Cllr Carolyn Healy, Cabinet Member, Climate Action, Green Spaces, Heritage & Leisure
Lead Director:	Fliss Mercer, Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services
Service Area:	Culture Service
Report Author:	Psyche Hudson, Culture and Wellbeing Service Manager
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Wards Affected:	All wards
Key Decision:	No
Forward Plan:	No
Report considered by:	SMT - 12 March 2024 Business Briefing - 21 March 2024 Cabinet - 11 April 2024

1.0 Recommendations for decision/noting:

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 1.1 Notes the feedback and recommendations from the Local Government Association and Arts Council England Cultural Peer Review, as summarised in Section 4.
- 1.2 Endorses and approves the action plan developed in response to the Peer Review (Appendix A), and its delivery and continued development, to provide a framework for monitoring and supporting the cultural sector for the borough.

2.0 Purpose of Report

- 2.1 This report summarises the feedback from the Cultural Peer Review undertaken in November 2023. The report details the specific review questions set for the peer team and a summary of the key findings and recommendations that will support our vision for culture and cultural participation across the borough going forward.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 Telford & Wrekin Council recognise the importance of culture and events to the borough. We are committed to enabling residents, visitors and businesses to have access to and benefit from cultural activity. Taking part in the Peer Review came from a desire to explore how we could use our resources most effectively, and to support community organisations to deliver more cultural activity themselves.

- 3.2 On 22 and 23 November 2023 Telford & Wrekin Council Culture Service voluntarily took part in a Local Government Association (LGA) Cultural Peer Review, which was delivered in partnership with Arts Council England (ACE).

- 3.3 The peer team were:

Jill Dickinson
Assistant Director - Community Services
Central Bedfordshire Council

Cllr Sarah Courtney
Lead Member for Towns, Tourism & the Voluntary Sector
Calderdale MBC

Paul Bristow
Director – Strategic Partnerships and Place Policy
Arts Council England

Val Birchall
Peer Challenge Manager
Local Government Association

The team was joined on the final day by:
James Millington
Advisor - Local Government Support (West Midlands)
Local Government Association

- 3.4 The peer team were given the following questions to shape the review:

- 3.4.1 ***How can the Council broaden participation in culture across Telford & Wrekin using the investment that is being made such as Levelling Up Funding?***

3.4.2 ***In its leadership role, how can the Council work effectively with partners and local communities to develop their cultural capabilities and to support more community-led cultural activity?***

3.4.3 ***How effective is the Culture Service in contributing to the key strategic objectives of the Council?***

3.5 Prior to their arrival the peer team were provided with background information in the form of a position statement on the cultural landscape of Telford & Wrekin (see Appendix B).

3.6 The peer team met with officers from a range of Council services, the Senior Management Team, members, and a diverse mix of external cultural sector partners, including cultural organisations, individuals and Town and Parish Councils. Through these meetings and extensive reading in advance of their visit, the peer team were able to form a comprehensive view of culture in Telford & Wrekin.

4.0 Summary of main proposals

4.1 Overall feedback was very positive, with the peer team picking up the ‘energy and enthusiasm’ of external partners and Council teams, as well as ‘the positive foundations on which to build.’ The peer team also recognised the range of partners the Council’s Culture Service works with, and the significant investment in culture and events.

4.2 The peer team evaluated our current priorities, acknowledged future ambitions and then identified where they felt we could have the best impacts given available resources.

4.3 *‘The Council’s current priorities for cultural development are to ensure the successful redevelopment of the Telford Theatre in Oakengates, the sustainability of the large-scale free events programme and capacity building of the grassroots arts and cultural organisations.’*

4.4 Partnership will be key for the future resilience of the Culture Service and growth of the cultural sector. The peer team recognised the strength of our existing work with partners and community stakeholders and suggested that increasing our focus on partnership working, collaboration and diversifying our connections with communities will further improve the cultural picture. Reduced capacity is impacting the whole sector and therefore working together will offer more opportunities in terms of accessing and sharing funding and resource.

4.5 The peer team also identified some areas of development. For example, the development of a new cultural strategy, which would be shared between the Council and external partners, to deliver the needs and ambitions of all, aligned with the broader vision for the borough.

4.6 The peer team also identified that there was an opportunity to update our baseline data and that an audit of the existing cultural activity, venues and delivery partners

across the borough will enable us to better understand local participation levels and types of activity. This will help to identify gaps in provision, and therefore where resource can be best targeted to offer support. Since the peer review was completed, we have secured funding from the Arts Council that will enable us to carry out this research.

4.7 *'... in considering how to broaden participation, the Council should articulate where it intends to focus its attention ... and why. Strengthening a data-led approach to identifying strategic priorities will help to target action. In shaping its cultural strategy, it could then identify the most effective approaches to reach these residents, and distinguish the roles of the theatre project, free events and grassroots development ... in achieving its objectives.'*

4.8 In addition, with the re-development of Telford Theatre @ Oakengates, the peer team identified a significant opportunity to test out the effectiveness of different cultural programme and activities within community settings and begin to build new audiences for the remodelled venue, which will have a studio space for smaller scale and niche cultural programming, such as spoken word and a more diverse music programme.

4.9 The full report from the peer review team is attached at Appendix C. There were 6 key recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: Develop your strategy for culture within your broader strategic Telford & Wrekin Vision 2032.**
- **Recommendation 2: Develop a strong cultural partnership.**
- **Recommendation 3: Be clear about the role of the Levelling Up Fund and the theatre development within the wider cultural strategy.**
- **Recommendation 4: Use the time available now to test, discuss, and build consensus.**
- **Recommendation 5: Create an inclusive model for dialogue with the sector that makes use of the total resources available for culture across Telford & Wrekin (e.g. map assets, activities, audiences).**
- **Recommendation 6: Don't try to do everything but explain your vision and how your choices have been made.**

4.10 Appendix A sets out a proposed action plan in response to the peer team's recommendations.

5.0 Alternative Options

5.1 The Peer Review provides alternative options for the Council to reflect on and further improve its cultural offer by means of support and facilitation alongside direct delivery.

6.0 Key Risks and Opportunities

6.1 A strong cultural sector and enriching cultural life can contribute to welcoming, distinctive and attractive places. Used effectively, culture and the institutions and services of culture (museums, libraries, festivals and many other elements) can

contribute toward the revitalisation of communities, improved health and wellbeing, and a more positive future.

6.2 Having a cultural strategy in place as well as strategic partnerships with public and private sector and independent cultural institutions increases the likelihood of securing larger amounts of funding, such as from Arts Council England. This is because those councils are seen as demonstrating a strategic commitment to culture and the role it can play for society. A lack of a strategic cultural vision for the area increases the risk of not securing external funding, adding to the challenging funding circumstances that we are already facing.

6.3 The Peer Review recommendations may lead to a raising of aspirations of the cultural community, however there is a risk that we will be unable to deliver on actions if we do not work effectively in partnership and secure external funding.

7.0 Council Priorities

7.1 The adoption and implementation of the Cultural Peer Review Plan will support the following priorities:

- Every child, young person and adult lives well in their community.
- All neighbourhoods are a great place to live.
- A community focused innovative council providing efficient effective and quality services.
- Everyone benefits from a thriving economy.

8.0 Financial Implications

8.1 The actions and measures outlined in the Cultural Peer Review Plan will be funded from within existing resources, including additional one-off resource available during the period of closure of the theatre.

8.2 Current one off funding is sufficient to fund the events programme in 2024/25 and 2025/26. For 2025/26 onwards external funding will have to be secured. Finance support will be provided as such opportunities arise.

9.0 Legal and HR Implications

9.1 There are no direct legal or HR implications arising from this report, but legal advice will be provided if required on any policy amendments in future.

9.2 There are no direct HR implications arising from this report and the proposals contained in this report can be delivered using existing resources.

10.0 Ward Implications

10.1 The Cultural Peer Review Plan is relevant to the whole borough.

11.0 Health, Social and Economic Implications

11.1 The health of the local economy has a direct impact on the social and economic wellbeing of residents across the borough. There remain significant inequalities within and between our communities. The Council's approach to economic growth seeks to ensure the benefits are felt across all parts of the borough. The Cultural Peer Review has identified a number of ways we can better support the cultural sector. The actions in Appendix A will support and join up with community-centred approaches to improving wellbeing and engaging diverse communities.

12.0 Equality and Diversity Implications

12.1 Increasing participation and social inclusion are key factors of the Arts Council England 'Let's Create' National Strategy and our cultural action plans will need to consider what activity will be delivered to support these priorities in order to seek funding and support for future activities. The 'Lets Create' Strategy centres around three outcomes to be delivered over the next decade:

- **Creative People:** Everyone can develop and express creativity throughout their life.
- **Cultural Communities:** Villages, towns and cities thrive through a collaborative approach to culture.
- **A creative and cultural country:** England's cultural sector is innovative, collaborative and international.

To achieve these, the Arts Council and the organisations and people they invest in will need to be steered by 4 investment principles, one of which focuses on inclusivity and relevance. This states that diversity is fully reflected in the organisations and individuals that we support and in the culture they produce.

13.0 Climate Change and Environmental Implications

13.1 The Arts Council Lets Create Strategy's also includes an investment principle around environmental responsibility, stating that cultural organisations should lead the way in responding to the climate emergency. Creative and culture bodies are best placed to innovate and provide solutions to environmental impacts as well as educate and inform the public through their art.

14.0 Background Papers

14.1 None.

15.0 Appendices

- A - Cultural Peer Review Action Plan
- B - Telford & Wrekin Council Culture Service Scoping Document
- C - Cultural Peer Review Final Report

16.0 Report Sign Off

Signed off by	Date sent	Date signed off	Initials
Legal	29/02/2024	01/03/2024	EH
Finance	29/02/2024	08/03/2024	PT
Director	29/02/2024	05/03/2024	FM