

APPENDIX G

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL EXECUTIVE - 20TH MAY 2008

Title:

INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEATRE IN WAVERLEY
[Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture: Cllr R J Steel]
[Wards Affected: All]

Summary and purpose:

This report, which was considered by the Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 28th April 2008, considers options to improve the range of opportunities for Waverley residents to access theatre-making and theatrical performances in the Borough. It identifies ways in which the Council may support theatre companies and venues address this aim.

Environmental implications:

There are no environmental implications.

Social / community implications:

Theatre can transform the lives of individuals and benefit communities by bringing people together. The range of positive impacts includes increased confidence and self esteem, a sense of ownership and personal achievement, integration with the rest of society and enhanced social cohesion and community spirit. This report puts forward options, which aim to increase opportunities for people to access theatre within their local communities.

E-Government implications:

There are no e-government implications arising from this report.

Resource and legal implications:

Certain options may depend on securing external funding. There are no legal implications.

Background

1. The findings of this report are based upon the careful consideration of evidence presented in the Michael Holden report (2006) the 'What do theatre-makers need in Waverley' report (2007), the Arts Council's 2007-2011 Theatre Policy and a series of stakeholder presentations to the Leisure Special Interest Group (SIG).

2. This report identify ways in which the Council may consider supporting the development of theatre opportunities in Waverley based on the findings of the research and consultation carried out to date. This report does not consider the merits of the provision of a purpose built theatre within Waverley as the Council has previously set out its policy in relation to this issue which remains unchanged at this time.

Findings

Professional Theatre

3. An increasing number of professional theatre companies are choosing to produce work in Waverley. The Farnham Maltings has become a lively hub for the region's touring companies while the New Farnham Repertory Actors Company has developed a popular season of plays that has become an annual cultural event in Farnham.
4. While the production of professional theatre appears to be thriving in Waverley there are issues associated with the style and sustainability of the work.
5. The work produced at the Farnham Maltings is designed for rural touring, which is one of the most effective ways of recouping the costs of production. However there is a perception that the work produced locally is not created for local audiences and subsequently it is often overlooked and undervalued in the place where it is made.
6. In contrast, the New Farnham Repertory Company produces large-scale plays, which involve local volunteers in the cast and backstage. The plays, which are mainly performed outdoors under a marquee, attract good audiences but incur high production costs and the company struggles to break even.
7. In the absence of a dedicated space for professional theatre in the borough, touring provides the greatest potential to extend opportunities to access professional theatre performances. However, the relationship between the audience and the work is vital and more needs to be done to ensure that promoters in the community are informed of and enthused by the work available.

Amateur Theatre Groups

8. Waverley has a strong tradition of amateur theatre and there are a great many groups providing entertainment in village halls across the borough. However a number of factors are threatening their existence in the longer term.
9. The rising cost of venues for rehearsing and performing is making it expensive and increasingly difficult for amateur groups to stage productions and most have to rely on year round fundraising and the support of core audiences. Staging and technical facilities vary greatly from hall to hall and some groups have expressed concern over the safety of equipment. Companies struggle to find directors and backstage crew and there are

significant skill shortages in the more technical aspects of theatre production. Their choices of material combined with the demands of daily life, can make it difficult for amateur dramatic companies to attract and retain younger members, especially those in the 18 to 40 age range. This can lead to an ageing membership and influence the average age of the audience.

Youth Theatre

10. Waverley's youth theatre co-ordinator is over half way through a two-year post funded by Waverley Borough Council and Farnham Town Council. The youth theatre co-ordinator operates out of Farnham Maltings and supports eight youth theatres around the borough including three, which were set up in areas of relative deprivation. The groups are entirely reliant on the small amount of income they generate and applications being made to funding bodies. Although the co-ordinator has had some significant successes in fundraising, including £20,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund, it is an on-going challenge to sustain the groups on a weekly basis particularly in the more deprived areas where the costs of participating are kept deliberately low.
11. To encourage theatre participation in early adulthood, the youth theatre coordinator has established a new grant scheme to help young people aged between 18 and 25 make their first piece of theatre. 'No Strings Attached' is one of 10 national pilot projects supported by the Arts Council's Young People's Participatory Theatre programme and funded by the DCMS. The overall grant for the scheme has been devolved to Farnham Maltings to distribute to young theatre makers in the region.
12. The provision of a theatre co-ordinator role has significantly raised both the ambitions and profile of youth theatre in Waverley, however consideration needs to be given to the long- term development and sustainability of youth theatre.

Places to Present Theatre

13. A generic issue for professional, amateur and youth theatre companies is about opportunities for presentation, rather than specifically production. Furthermore, some members of the community, particularly those who have lobbied on behalf of the Redgrave, hold a view that Waverley lacks a venue that is dedicated to the purpose of presenting professional theatre.
14. However the Arts Council of England's national review of Regularly Funded Organisations sends out a clear signal that arts funding is no longer being directed towards the provision of new buildings or indeed theatre for that matter.
15. It should also be acknowledged that buildings alone do not constitute theatres. A whole range of infrastructure is required to meet the needs and expectations of professional theatre companies including marketing, box office, backstage and front of house. It is unlikely that volunteers alone could provide the level of professional expertise needed and the Council has indicated that it is not in a financial position to provide on-going revenue assistance to a purpose built new theatre.

Options

16. There are three strands of activity that emerge from the findings, which provide opportunities for greater leadership, co-ordination and partnership working with the sector. They are:

- Sharing resources and expertise
- Venues
- Audience development

17. In response to these key areas, Members are asked to consider supporting the following options:

a) Establish a Waverley Theatre Forum

The aim of a Theatre Forum would be to encourage networking between amateur and professional companies. It would be sector-led and provide a space for companies to share specialist knowledge and expertise. It would also provide opportunities for the development of projects, which address some of the needs identified in this report including for example training days, joint marketing, equipment and resource sharing and events to promote membership and develop audiences.

The first meeting would be initiated by Waverley and facilitated by Farnham Maltings in a central location such as the Godalming Borough Hall. It would include a presentation of the theatre-makers report to introduce the context and would evolve into a discussion about the concept of a theatre forum including its aims, objectives and operating principles. Presuming there is enough interest; the Council's Arts Officer would then assist forum members in writing a constitution and terms of reference and would attend future meetings to help develop its role and remit as an enabler and promoter of events and initiatives, which help raise the profile of theatre in Waverley and offer professional development opportunities to its members.

Both Waverley and the Maltings would be prepared to drive the theatre forum forward and maintain its administration during its first year with the intention that it becomes more independent in the longer term.

b) Conduct a Venue Audit

A venue audit would cover a range of facilities across the borough to ascertain their suitability for presenting theatre. A small group of local theatre specialists could assist in and advise the process and the findings would be shared with members of the Theatre Forum. Conversely the audit provides an opportunity to raise awareness of opportunities to present theatre among venue providers.

- c) Continue to support Farnham Maltings, Cranleigh Arts Centre, the Borough Hall in Godalming and Haslemere Hall and develop further opportunities to improve their cultural offer

The Council already supports Farnham Maltings, Cranleigh Arts Centre and Haslemere Hall through the Sponsored Organisation Scheme (SOS) and by providing advocacy and support to their Boards.

Through the SOS we shall seek the agreement of the above to offer customers the benefits of the Council's IN2 Leisure scheme, which entitles those in full time education or in receipt of benefits to a discount on services.

- d) Where appropriate the Council could use its relationship with venues to encourage collaboration in certain areas of artistic activity or profitability.

In Spring 2007, officers encouraged Farnham Maltings and Cranleigh Arts Centre to form a creative alliance following an unsettling period of financial uncertainty at Cranleigh Arts Centre. Initially Cranleigh Arts Centre has been the main benefactor of the relationship but both venues are reporting clear advantages of working together including a range of efficiency savings and economies of scale. Extending the principles of this model to Haslemere Hall could help its Board and staff to develop their capacity and enhance the venue's cultural offer to the local community.

- e) Increase awareness of and access to touring theatre

Increasing awareness of touring opportunities in Waverley may well require a pro-longed approach to engage village halls and audiences. However an article in 'Making Waves' combined with a small grant as an incentive to first time promoters has significantly increased the uptake. The touring scheme needs to allow local promoters to get more involved in shaping the product so they feel confident and enthusiastic about presenting it. New and existing promoters could be invited to social occasions so they can meet theatre companies, offer feedback and provide encouragement to other venues.

Two young promoters clubs have been successfully set up in secondary schools in the borough and there may be an opportunity to extend this practice to other schools, youth clubs and youth theatres.

- f) Marketing

Professional, amateur and youth theatre companies could all benefit from more coordinated approaches to marketing and publicity. There may be ways in which the Council's communications team could assist for example the re-design of the website, an events calendar in 'Making Waves', up to date press lists and information on notice boards and other publicity outlets.

g) Audience Development Initiatives

The Arts Officer and Youth Theatre Co-ordinator could potentially assist a Waverley Theatre Forum to develop a range of audience development initiatives, which may well include community plays, drama seasons and festivals. Drama events encouraging collaboration between professional, amateur and youth theatre companies could bring groups of people together, attract new and wider audiences and develop the profile of theatre making in Waverley.

Conclusion

18. The options set out in the report will help theatre provision in Waverley move forward in a positive way, whilst acknowledging the Council has no additional resource for theatre provision.
19. Whilst the Council can help facilitate, the actions are aimed at encouraging the sector as a whole achieve more effective leadership and co-ordination by working together, utilising existing facilities and developing projects and approaches that respond to identified needs.

Timescales

20. It is envisaged that an initial meeting inviting theatre makers to form a Waverley Theatre Forum could take place in May 2008 with the aim of having a constitution and terms of reference in place by September.
21. A community events calendar on the new Waverley website, which theatre groups can add their own events to, will be investigated in accordance with the timescales for the development of the Council's website, however it is likely that it will require a Waverley officer to moderate the content and add it to the site. Further approaches to marketing and audience development will be explored and pursued by the Waverley Theatre Forum.
22. An audit of venues will be completed by September 2008 along with the implementation of the Council's IN2 Leisure Scheme at Cranleigh Arts Centre and Farnham Maltings as a condition of their SOS partnership agreement. Waverley officers will play an active role monitoring and evaluating the Creative Alliance between the arts centres and if appropriate broker further relationships with other arts venues in the borough such as Haslemere Hall.

Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee

23. The Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered this report at its meeting on 28th April 2008 and made the following observations:
 - Councillors felt that the venue audit should extend beyond the Borough and County boundaries;
 - Councillors felt that the Forum should also be used to assess and research the market on what people would attend or go to watch;

- Councillors would like officers to explore improving connections between adult and youth theatres;
- Councillors had concerns about the conflicting demands on venues, such as the Borough Hall;
- Councillors would like officers to explore alternative venues for performing arts, such as in schools;
- Suitability of venues for attracting various types of theatre such as travelling productions;
- Councillors would like officers to research past reports and provide these to newer Members via the Members' Zone;
- Councillors asked the Portfolio Holder to provide all Members with a summary of developments for Theatre in Waverley; and
- The Committee supported and was encouraged by the steps that were being taken for theatre in Waverley.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Executive endorses the report and the comments received from the Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

CONTACT OFFICER:

Name: Charlotte Gardiner **Telephone:** 01483 523390
E-mail: charlotte.gardiner@waverley.gov.uk