

Cultural Strategy and Action Plan for Woking

Adopted May 2004

INTRODUCTION

What is Culture ?

The definition of 'Culture' used in this strategy embraces a wide range of activities, interests and pursuits that, to a greater or lesser degree, touch the lives of everyone who lives, works or visits **the Borough**. It includes the places where we go to relax, participate in sports, the arts and entertainment, where we can enjoy contact with our historic and natural heritage, and where we socialise and play. But is far more than just the physical environment, its facilities and attractions: Culture is also about the way in which we enjoy and experience these activities, the opportunities (or obstacles) for every part of the community, irrespective of age, physical ability, wealth or ethnicity, to enrich their lives through cultural activities.

This Cultural Strategy aims to identify how the Council, through working with its partners, can enrich the cultural life of the Borough for the benefit of the whole community. The Strategy advocates the benefits of cultural activities, identifies the areas of shared interest between this strategy and others, and sets out an action plan for working towards ever richer and more rewarding cultural activities throughout Woking.

Developing the Strategy and Action Plan

Widespread consultation was carried out over a period of 9 months in the development of this Strategy and Action Plan. Following an initial round of consultation with focus groups drawn from the Citizens Panel and stakeholders with an existing interest in the Borough's culture and, a draft Strategy and plan was prepared. These were the subject of a more wide-ranging consultation which tested the proposals and enabled the Strategy and plan to be fine-tuned.

1. COMMUNITY STRATEGY

Woking has adopted a Community Strategy, which sets out a future for the Borough based on the local communities' aspirations and vision. It identifies the priorities and targets for the next five years for a range of local organisations who, operating in partnership, will work together to achieve this vision. The main aims of the Community Strategy for Woking that relate directly to the cultural life of the Borough are:

- A strong community spirit with a clear sense of belonging and responsibility
- A clean, healthy and safe environment
- A community which values personal health and well-being
- Integrated and accessible local facilities and services

The Community Strategy sets out a number of priorities for action to achieve each of these aims. The Community Strategy, its aims and the actions planned to deliver it, are all directed towards improving the quality of life for everybody in the Borough, through wider consultation, greater involvement for the community in decision making, and closer working between the many organisations that operate in the Borough to eliminate duplication of effort and ensure they are all working towards common goals.

This Cultural Strategy has been prepared as a plan of action that fits within the aims of the Community Strategy. It focuses particularly on developing cultural activities that can contribute to the quality of life experienced by people in one or more of the following ways:

- Encouraging **Social inclusion** – providing fair and equal access and opportunities for people to enjoy and participate in cultural activities, irrespective of their age, ability, income, ethnic background or level of disadvantage.
- Promoting **Healthy Lifestyles** – enabling people to enhance their physical, emotional and mental well-being through a wide range of cultural activities that encompass the arts, sport, recreation, and social interaction

- Enabling **Lifelong Learning** – providing the opportunity for people to enrich their lives by developing new skills, knowledge or expertise, and new experiences at any stage in their lives.
- Stimulating **Economic Vitality** – contributing to the prosperity of the Borough through diverse and sustainable cultural activities that generate investment and employment

To strengthen its links with the Community Strategy, it is proposed that a new Cultural Partnership be formed to champion the cultural life of the Borough and help to co-ordinate the efforts of those responsible for delivering cultural activities locally with the agencies and organisations that have formed the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP).

2. THE VALUE OF CULTURE

This Strategy recognises the many ways in which cultural activities can improve the quality of life for everyone in Woking:

- Cultural activities can have an inherent value in themselves. There is a strong innate need for people to participate in what we now call arts, sports or leisure activities. Cave paintings dating from 30,000 years ago are evidence of a desire for self-expression in early mankind. Today, we are able to choose from a huge range of cultural activities that provide a vital counter-balance to the non-discretionary activities that are part of every day life. The opportunity to participate in sport, attend a concert, visit a gallery or simply enjoy a few minutes of reflective solitude in a park or garden, is a dimension to life that is easily taken for granted.
- Health and well-being - as people live longer and remain physically and mentally active later into life, cultural activities can make a significant contribution to ensuring good health is enjoyed throughout our lives. Physical exercise, whether through sport or more informal recreation, promotes good physical health in all stages of life from childhood to old age. This is particularly important as many people experience increasingly sedentary lifestyles in the workplace. Cultural activities also have a number of psychological and emotional benefits stimulating mental agility, providing companionship and uplifting the spirit
- Lifelong learning and personal development – cultural activities can be enjoyed throughout life in many different ways and at a variety of levels. Museums, galleries and performing arts make a significant contribution to education, help to inform opinions and broaden our understanding of the world. Participation in sport and recreation can enable new skills to be acquired and developed, from novice level to expert. Cultural activities can also enrich our intellectual and social development and enable people to ‘get more out of life’.

- Strengthening local identity – the success of a local sports team, recognised excellence in the arts or simply an attractive environment in which to live, work or visit, all contribute to the value we attach to a place. There are many ways in which cultural activities can stimulate a sense of pride in the Borough and enhance its reputation as a place to be. And when a community values the place where it lives, it will work harder to protect it and ensure the safety of its citizens. Furthermore, engaging people in cultural activities who may otherwise be inclined to commit crime can in turn lead to increased community safety.
- Enhancing the environment – the built and natural environment are integral to our history and wildlife, and together these shape our environment and impact on our quality of life. The enjoyment of cultural activities such as walking and riding, visiting a playground or playing a round of golf, are all directly influenced by the quality of the environment. Places that are clean, safe and welcoming encourage people to participate in cultural activities. This can in turn, directly enhance the environment for example by seeing colourful boats on the Canal, vibrant street cafes after dark in the town centre, or simply creating an unthreatening environment in a park.
- Promoting economic vitality – cultural activities make a significant contribution to the economy. Tourism in the South East generates an estimated 125,000 jobs and visitors to the region spend £3.2 billion and sports-related expenditure by consumers in 1998 was valued to be £11 billion nationally. Cultural activities provide many different sources of employment at all skill levels often offering flexibility in hours of employment. Participation in cultural activities also generates much economic activity in other sectors, such as transport and parking, food and retail.

3. THE LOCAL CONTEXT FOR THE CULTURAL STRATEGY

Woking has a number of characteristics that contribute to the wide diversity of activities that make up the cultural life of the Borough:

- Nowhere in the urban area of the Borough is more than 1 mile from open countryside and there are over 1,000 acres of publicly accessible common land and open space, much of which is of high importance for wildlife and access
- A diverse community, with the most diverse ethnic population in Surrey, an active voluntary sector and well developed services for older people
- A vibrant town centre, with successful arts and entertainment facilities including theatres that have established regional status, a modern hotel and popular and accessible shopping centres, restaurants, cafés and bars
- A diverse and unique heritage including historic buildings and places ranging from Woking Palace and Sutton Place to the Shah Jehan Mosque and Brookwood Cemetery and a rich horticultural legacy which has contributed to the landscape of the Borough and is continued today with Wisley gardens immediately adjoining the Borough
- High quality sporting facilities that provide a wide range of opportunities including successful public and private sectors providing sports clubs, gyms and golf courses
- A good track record in developing partnerships with other public sector, commercial and voluntary organisations to provide facilities and events
- A belief in the ability of the not for profit sector to deliver services for the community in an economic and sustainable way. The visual arts and heritage provision in the Borough is being enhanced by support for the Woking Galleries project. This is the creation of a new Cultural Centre in the town which will provide a temporary exhibition gallery (one of the

largest in the South East) and a History Gallery, focussing on the heritage of the Woking community. The Borough is providing substantial capital and revenue funding support to the project run by a community based charity. The provision of the new Centre, due to open in 2006, will be a major contributory factor to the successful completion of the Action Plan

- A spirit of innovation that has commissioned unique works of public art, created prize-winning show gardens at Chelsea and Hampton Court and promoted sustainable 'Gardening for Life'

There are a number of organisations that play a major role in the delivery and development of cultural activities and facilities in the Borough. These include commercial operators such as the Ambassadors Theatre Group and the Big Apple. Woking also benefits from a strong not for profit sector: The Galleries is pivotal in co-ordinating cultural activities; there is a well-established voluntary sector spanning sports, the arts, heritage and recreation; and, the Surrey History Centre provides a unique resource for the promotion of understanding of the Borough and County's heritage.

All of these sectors have a role to play in sustaining the rich cultural life of the Borough and can contribute to the implementation of this Strategy.

4. PRIORITIES FOR THE CULTURAL STRATEGY

There are 8 priorities for the Strategy that have emerged through consultation and lie at the heart of this Strategy:

- **Building a strong spirit local community spirit** – strength of community spirit is one of the principal aims of the Community Strategy, and culture has a key role in defining a positive identity for the Borough that the community wants to associate with. Cultural activities can bring together people from all sections of the local community, irrespective of age, ethnic origin or wealth.

The Strategy Action Plan includes a number of proposals that will help to strengthen community spirit, including the development of a programme of events to celebrate cultural diversity.

- **Meeting the needs of young people** – the Strategy identifies culture as a vital ingredient in the development of children and young people, and proposes a range of measures that may contribute to their health, well being and social development, and the contribution young people can make to the community.

The Action Plan includes a commitment to review the provision of play and recreational facilities, to develop employment skills through volunteering, and to explore the potential for the creation of new entertainment facilities for young people. Nurturing of young talent in sport and the arts, and the value of positive role models, is also recognised by the Strategy and the Action Plan includes initiatives to support talented young people. In addition, the Strategy has responded to a need expressed by many young people for the development of a greater choice of venues for rehearsal and performance of live music, comedy and dance. Regrettably, young people are often associated with anti-social behaviour and crime (as victims as well as offenders) and the Strategy seek to maximise the value of cultural activities in combating this.

- **Enriching the lives of older people** – participation in cultural activities can help older people to remain physically fit and healthy, and to combat the loneliness and isolation that is too often a consequence of older age. The Community Strategy identifies

personal health and well-being as a priority, and enabling older people to stay fit and healthy through cultural activities is a priority for this Strategy.

A number of measures are proposed that will contribute to the social inclusion of older people and promote health and well-being in later life. In addition there is a commitment to work more closely with other service providers in developing new opportunities for older people to participate in cultural activities through the planned Quality of Life Strategy for Older People.

- **Enhancing the Borough's environment** – quality of the local environment (and our safe enjoyment of it) is a priority of the Community Strategy, and visiting parks and local countryside makes the greatest contribution to quality of life in the Borough. Our built and historic heritage is also greatly valued, and contributes to the community's 'pride of place'.

The Strategy recognises the value of our environment as a cultural asset in itself, as well as a place where we can enjoy leisure activities. It is committed to protecting its intrinsic qualities, and to helping people to enjoy and understand our built and natural heritage. The Action Plan includes proposals to promote better understanding and enjoyment of our historic heritage, to achieve 'Green Flag' status for a number of parks, to involve the public in promoting excellence in the design of new buildings and open spaces, and to develop a programme of outdoor events. In addition, the Strategy recognises the need to respond positively to the challenges and opportunities that may arise through climate change.

- **Promoting Woking as an attractive destination for evening activities** – consultation has revealed some concern that more should be done to improve Woking town centre as a place to enjoy cultural activities, especially during the evenings when some people are fearful of alcohol-related crime. However, this needs to be balanced with the evident success of the regeneration of parts of the town centre (especially the Chertsey Road area), and the strong appeal of the Ambassadors cinemas and theatres.

The Strategy supports measures to stimulate the evening economy of the town centre, and proposes working with town centre management, commercial operators,

community safety partners and others to widen the non alcohol-based entertainment for people in the town centre.

- **Raising the profile of the Borough as a venue for cultural activities** – Woking has achieved a strong reputation as a place where innovation thrives and initiatives such as Woking Dance Festival bring national acclaim and recognition to the Borough. The development of the Galleries, itself a landmark building, will provide a platform for further creative development which will help build on past success to further raise the Borough's profile. By strengthening this reputation, creative talent will be attracted to the Borough, and new landmark initiatives will emerge.

It is the role of this Strategy to help maintain an environment in which culture is valued and can thrive. The Action Plan has been designed to be flexible and responsive to opportunities to raise the Borough's profile as they arise.

- **Making better use of resources** – closer working between partners offers the opportunity to achieve more through sharing resources. This may take the form of expertise or facilities (such as school campus sites), and the Strategy makes a number of proposals for better use of resources to benefit local cultural provision. Further collaborative work (such as the proposed multi-agency Quality of Life Strategy for Older People) will provide new opportunities for better use of existing resources.
- **Effective marketing of cultural activities** – Woking is fortunate in having a rich and varied cultural life, and this Strategy aims to build on the strong foundations that exist. However, there are a number of barriers to take-up and participation in cultural activities that can prevent everybody enjoying the same opportunities for cultural activities. Some barriers are more difficult to overcome than others (for example, lack of public transport operating on some routes late in the evenings), but one of the most common barriers relates to low awareness of events, services and activities.

This Strategy is committed to improving the effectiveness of ways in which information is provided to the community, through better co-ordination of information, rationalising concessionary schemes and improving ways in which bookings can be made for services and events.

5. IMPLEMENTING AN ACTION PLAN

This Strategy will only make a difference to the cultural life of the Borough if it is able to put ideas into action. The Action Plan sets out ways in which the issues that have been identified can be addressed over the next five years. Some of these actions can be achieved within a relatively short term whilst others require a longer-term commitment. The Action Plan recognises that the Council acting alone will not achieve this, and the commitment of many different organisations working together is vital to the success of the strategy. The Action Plan seeks to build these partnerships by identifying the areas of common interest shared by different organisations expressed via links with other strategies and plans.

The Action Plan acknowledges that little can be achieved without the investment of resources - this may be through direct financial investment or grant aid, or may be simply a commitment of people's time or shared knowledge and expertise. Whatever the nature of the resources required, it is almost always the case that pooling resources through partnership working can achieve more. The Council's Procurement Strategy sets out the principles and policies that guide the Council in its procurement of goods and services, and advocates a number of approaches, including the use of effective partnerships and working with neighbouring authorities. Therefore, the Council will use the full range of approaches to secure the resources necessary to implement the Action Plan.

The success of the Action Plan will be assessed by a number of measures. Progress toward achieving these will be monitored and reported at the end of each year. This will provide the opportunity to review the effectiveness of the strategy and amend it in the light of changing circumstances. This will enable the strategy to remain relevant throughout its five-year lifespan. This commitment to a rolling review will be brought alongside the annual review of the Community Strategy to ensure widespread ownership of the strategy.

The Action Plan has also identified a number of areas where more detailed planning is required to set future priorities for particular aspects of cultural life in the Borough:

- Sports Development;
- Arts Development;
- Children's play and youth recreation;
- Health and Well-being;

- Green Spaces; and,
- A Marketing and Promotions Plan to co-ordinate the promotion of events, facilities and activities

The five-year action plan is organised on the basis of actions that can be commenced within the short term (2004-06), medium term (2007-08) and longer term (2009 onwards). The Action Plan also indicates the contribution that an action or proposal will make to one or more of the four quality of life attributes identified by the Council. The actions marked in bold are key priorities that will make major contributions to the cultural life of the Borough.
