

Arts & Entertainment – Service Update

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Purpose of the Report

This report provides an update on the work of the Arts & Entertainment Service in Area North.

Public Interest

The Arts & Entertainment Service at South Somerset District Council (SSDC) works to provide access to high quality cultural events across South Somerset. Through Arts Development the Service supports and encourages various arts agencies and organisations to deliver arts activity across South Somerset. The Service operates The Octagon Theatre – Somerset’s premier theatre for arts and entertainment and Westlands Entertainment and Conference Centre – the newly refurbished venue for conferencing and entertainment. This report details arts activities taking place in Area North which is supported and initiated by the Service and the development of two venues which attract audiences from across South Somerset and beyond.

Recommendation

That the Area North Committee notes the report and identifies:-

- Suggestions to improve service delivery;
- Potential projects it wishes to see incorporated into the 2018-19 service planning process.

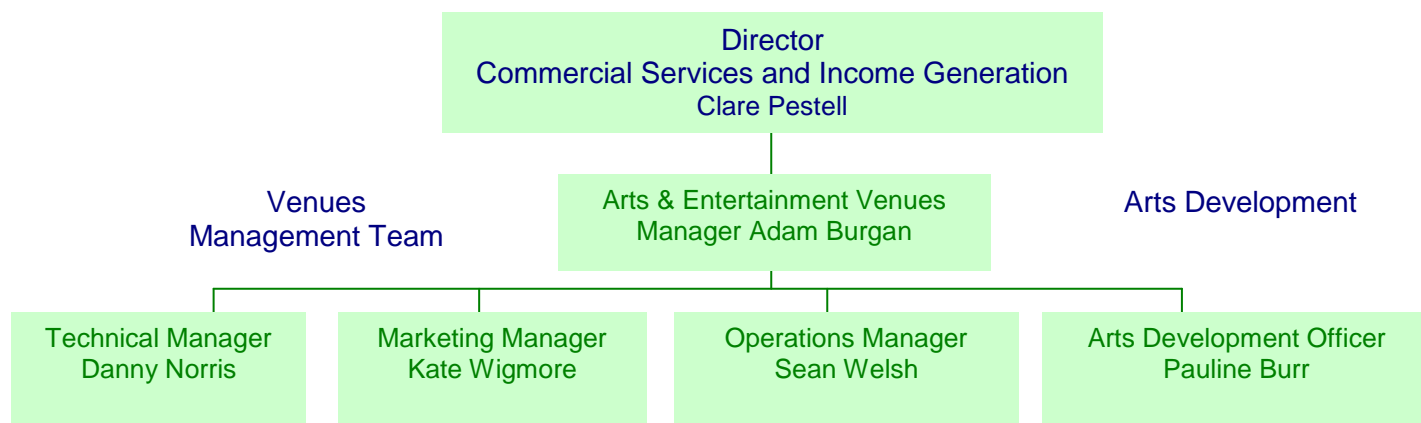
Background

The Arts & Entertainment Service aims to provide access to high quality cultural events across South Somerset. Using The Octagon Theatre as a hub of creativity we work with our partners to engage the residents of South Somerset in arts activities and encourage visitors to the region. The recently re-opened Westlands Entertainment and Conference Centre will complement the existing programme at The Octagon, broadening the programme of entertainment events on offer and striving to become the premier venue for conferencing, banqueting and meetings in the area. We aim to deliver a programme which inspires, educates and ultimately enriches the lives of those taking part, making South Somerset an ever improving place to live and work.

Report

The Arts & Entertainment Service consists of The Octagon Theatre, Westlands Entertainment and Conference Centre and Arts Development and is part of Commercial Services and Income Generation under Director, Clare Pestell. We aim to offer a cohesive approach to developing and promoting the arts in South Somerset with venues being a ‘cultural and entertainment hub’ for the District.

Arts & Entertainment Structure



The Arts Development Service

The Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment and Conference Centre

With the addition of Westlands Entertainment and Conference Centre and management for the Westlands Leisure Complex site, the Arts & Entertainment Venues Service has gone through a significant transformation with the team almost doubling in size via recruitment for specialist and dedicated staff team. The service has grown from 9.8 FTE staff to 22.2 FTE. The management team work across both venues ensuring that programming at the venues complement each other with the ambition to develop audience and attendance across both venues. Sharing resources such as the Box Office, staff, marketing and customer database and making the most of the combined buying power, means that both venues also benefit from the share knowledge and skills of staff and the ability to develop staff skills across two venues and a more varied and diverse programme. The flexibility of the venues and increased capacity at Westlands is balanced by the stronger technical capability at The Octagon which will lead to a more diverse programme of events serving a wider range of tastes and customers.

The Octagon Theatre

Background

The Octagon Theatre is the council's flagship venue for high quality professional theatre, music, dance, comedy, entertainment, visual arts and literary events. The theatre is the keystone of our cultural provision across the district and provides:

- One of the largest theatres in Somerset with 626 seats.
- 260 events per annum (25% local organisations / 75% professional performance companies).
- The Octagon Academy – The Octagon's participatory programme.
- CRE8ive Writing – The Octagon's literary section.
- The Johnson Studio – The Octagon's rehearsal studio and home of The Octagon Academy that is also available for hire, functions and seminars.
- The Foyer Club – The Octagon's team of volunteers who greet our customers at performances and show them to their seats. The Foyer Club is a charity that also undertakes fundraising activity to support the development of The Octagon.

- The Footlights Club – The Octagon’s special service to support regular attendees of the theatre.

The theatre was completely refurbished in 2003, and has excellent facilities, not only for staging performances but also in providing a bar, café bar and restaurant as well as a rehearsal studio.

The Arts and Entertainment Service (Octagon Theatre and Arts Development) is subsidised by South Somerset District Council by £254,355 (budget 2017/18 and achieving efficiency savings of £90k in the last two years), that equates to £1.61 per year, per resident, or 3p per week. Official statistics published in 2014 show that the UK’s creative industries, which includes the film, television and music industries, are now worth £71.4 billion per year to the UK economy – generating just over a staggering £8 million pounds an hour. The UK creative industries are renowned across the globe for driving growth, investment and tourism. The creative industries consistently punch well above their weight and are a powerhouse within the UK economy.

Between 50-70% of the population of South Somerset use the theatre throughout the course of the year and satisfaction levels are consistently high (80-90%).

The mailing list contains 20,000 households and 35,000 Preview Brochures are distributed to drive ticket sales three times a year. Customers come predominantly from Somerset and Dorset. Ticket sales are supported by effective marketing through a well-maintained website, social media, posters, flyers, press and ad-hoc promotions through local radio.

Report

The Octagon Theatre has enjoyed another successful and busy year welcoming approximately 200,000 people throughout the year. Here are some of the key points:

- Continued development of programme. Highlights included Sir Willard White, Lesley Garrett, Des O’Connor, The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain, Joe McElderry, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Blake, Dave Gorman, Blackeyed Theatre Company, Richard Alston Dance Company, Julian Lloyd Webber, Paul Merton, Al Murray, The Manfreds, Jack Dee, Reginald D Hunter, Pasha Kovalev, Rich Hall, The Pasadena Roof Orchestra, BalletBoyz, Tim Vine, Only Men Aloud, The Glenn Miller Orchestra, Pam Ayres, G4, Rhydian, Lee Mead, Josh Widdicombe, Adam Hills, Fisherman’s Friends, Northern Ballet, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Grimethorpe Colliery Band, Seth Lakeman and The Chinese State Circus. We presented the national tour of ‘The Mousetrap’ in May 2016 for 8 performances selling out every performance and 4,954 tickets!
- The Octagon Theatre is proud to be at the ‘heart’ of the community in South Somerset. Many local groups and societies stage performances and events at the theatre including Yeovil Amateur Operatic Society, University College Yeovil (Graduation), Helen Laxton School of Dance, Razzamatazz, The Dance Factory, Motiv8 Productions, Castaways Theatre Group, Yeovil Amateur Pantomime Society, Yeovil Youth Theatre, Yeovil Floral Society, and many more.
- The fifth Yeovil Literary Festival in partnership with Waterstones, Yeovil Library and Yeovil Community Arts Association will take place 26th – 29th October. The line-up includes Christopher Biggins, Monty Don, Michael Portillo, Suzi Quatro, Lord Robert Winston, Ben Fogle, Sarah Millican, Jacqueline Wilson, Jeremy Vine, Harry Hill, Cressida Cowell to name but a few whilst also showcasing the work of local writers.
- We were delighted to receive a Certificate of Excellence from ‘Trip Advisor’ for the second consecutive year. The Trip Advisor Certificate of Excellence is awarded to organisations that consistently achieve outstanding reviews on Trip Advisor. Businesses that are awarded the

Certificate of Excellence demonstrate hospitality excellence and represent the upper echelon of businesses listed on Trip Advisor, the world's largest travel site.

- Arts & Entertainment Manager, Adam Burgan, was presented with a 'Western Gazette Pride Award' for 'Contribution to the Arts' on Friday 4th December.
- Our new season has been well received with performances from 'America's Got Talent' Winner Paul Zerdin and Marty Wilde and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra all selling well.

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Number of Events	239	244	235	242	260	264	288
Attendance	85,358	93,519	90,149	101,634	119,366	123,339	132,376
Capacity for SSDC Promoted Events	58%	60%	62%	68%	82%	83%	78%

- Ticket sales broke all records selling 132,376 tickets for the financial year 2016/17 (9,000 up on the previous year).
- Our pantomime production of 'Peter Pan' broke the record set by 'Sleeping Beauty' the previous year being seen by over 29,000 people. Ticket sales were up 7% on the previous year. For Christmas 2017 we are presenting 'Cinderella' and ticket sales are currently ahead of this point last year.
- Our 'Strike A Chord!' project, which brought in Arts Council England funding of £49K, has been successfully delivered bringing The Philharmonia Orchestra to Yeovil to work with nine local primary schools with musicians going into the schools to deliver workshops. Charles Hazlewood conducted the full orchestra at a special schools concert in June introducing children to a live orchestra with the story covered on BBC Points West.
- Continued developing our relationship with local media and with a weekly column with the Western Gazette and regular appearances on BBC Radio Somerset.
- We have continued to develop our Social Networking sites – over 9,000 Facebook users, 4,174 followers on Twitter, 1,047 Instagram followers and 584 YouTube channel subscribers.
- The Octagon Academy was launched in 2010. We now have 17 weekly classes for all ages and abilities. Over 300 people aged from 15 months to 73 are taking part classes at The Octagon in singing, dancing and drama every week. The Octagon Choir now has around 70 members.
- Increasing daytime use of The Octagon with weekly hirers including Somerset Cancer Care Café, University of the 3rd Age, Castaways Theatre Group, Somerset Siders (retired Tesco employees) and Helen Laxton School of Dance.

Westlands Entertainment & Conference Centre

Background

Westlands Entertainment & Conference Centre is the council's flagship venue for conferencing, meetings, banqueting and entertainment events. The venue significant in provision across the district and provides:

- One of the largest and most flexible venues in Somerset with 870 seats, 350 capacity for banqueting, standing capacity of 950 or festival capacity (using the whole building) at 1,500.
- The venue is also home to The Wheeldon Suite and The Parish Suite, meeting rooms available to hire with discounted rates for local charities and 'not-for-profit' groups.
- The Lounge Bar is open through the day for users of the site or visitors to the venue offering a café style menu and Box Office for events at both Westlands and The Octagon.
- The flexible venue is suitable for a wide range of events from large-scale conferencing, weddings, parties, balls, boxing and wrestling events, trade fairs and standing gigs to theatre style shows.
- The Foyer Club – the team of volunteers who have been volunteering at the Octagon for over thirty years have taken on FOH duties at Westlands. The Friends of Westlands have setup as a independent fundraising body to support the development of Westlands.
- The Footlights Club – rewarding regular customers with discounted tickets and priority booking now applies to both The Octagon and Westlands.

We are taking a commercial approach to running Westlands. The venue is budgeted to be subsidised in the first year of operation by the following bodies:

SSDC £269,598

Leonardos Helicopters

Yeovil Town Council

Yeovil Without Parish Council

Brympton Parish Council

Following the petition to save Westlands that was signed by over 8,000 people, officially the largest petition ever submitted to SSDC, a £2 million refurbishment has taken place to improve the facilities for guests and artists. The venue refurbishment follows the agreement between South Somerset District Council and Leonardo Finmeccanica, of a 30-year lease. The cost of refurbishment has been paid for via a loan that will be repaid over 30 years with the introduction of a £1 ticket levy.

Report

Westlands is enjoying a busy first year since reopening with staff working hard to ensure the venue was ready to welcome guests. The builders left the site at the end of June and 'snagging' is still being completed but events have been going very well with thousands of visitors already through the door. Here are some of the key points:

- Sold out events from 'Justin's Party' – which sold out two performances within an hour. Popular events from stand-up comedians Joel Dommett, Rich Hall with Henning When - already sold out for end of May. Themed party nights like 'Poptastic!' proving a success. Joe Brown, Chris Packham and Dr Hook are all selling well for the autumn season.

- Local events like Yeovil Amateur Boxing and Yeovil Beer Festival have returned with over 3,000 people attending the Beer Festival alone. We have weekly hires from Westlands Ballroom and Latin Club and LeRoc modern jive.
- There is a subsidised rate for local 'not for profit' groups and it is good to see a number of local hirers returning to the venue.
- The Official Opening for the venue took place on Tuesday 27th June when Darcey Bussell CBE attracting much positive local and regional coverage.
- Screenings are proving popular with sofa seats offering a different film experience and a programme of film festivals, independent and foreign language films and the best of mainstream cinema.
- Interest in the venue for events has been very high and it has been difficult to accommodate all the requests for tours and meetings. Prospects for developing usage of the venue and a busy and vibrant programme look promising.
 - Full On Sport have taken up tenancy in one of the offices on the first floor .
 - A 'Residents Forum' has been setup to meet twice a year for those properties adjoining the site.
 - A 'Users Forum' has been setup for groups and clubs who use the site and will meet on a quarterly basis.
- Social Networking pages are still in their infancy but the Facebook page already has 2,228 followers.

The Chief Executive presented a report to District Executive in September 2017 concluding the refurbishment of Westlands. A revised operational business plan will be reported to District Executive in December 2017, now we have the first 6 months actual trading figures available. This gives us a sensible and realistic position from which to forecast the business going forwards, based upon fact and our recent knowledge of trading realities.

The Arts Development Service

The Arts Service works in partnership with a number of arts delivery agencies to bring a range of arts activities to the district, SSDC's on-going financial support ensures that this district maintains a good level of service for our communities. Our core funding helps the organisations to attract funding through grants, sponsorship and payment for services and gives a high level of return for the authority's investment.

These organisations include:

Take Art!:

This arts development agency is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation and receives funding from them. Their activities in the last year include:

- **Rural Touring:** the Take Art Rural Touring programme will have brought 22 shows to 16 different village halls across South Somerset, including in Area North; Chilthorne Domer, Compton Dundon, Curry Mallet, Langport and South Petherton.

- **Support to Performance Practitioners:** Take Art's Theatre Service continue to offer particular support to new emerging companies such as Wassail Theatre as well as established companies such as Boiling Kettle who now have a firm relationship with David Hall Arts Centre.
- **Tangle:** Tangle, SW African Caribbean Theatre Company continues to have their administrative base at the Take Art office. Take Art supported their Jan 2017 Towards the Sun Township tour to West Chinnock School and David Hall Arts Centre.
- **Spring Forward Youth Dance Platform** takes place at the Octagon Theatre with over 200 dancers taking part from across the Somerset.
- **Somerset Youth Dance Company** continues its long standing connection with the Octagon Theatre and as an extension to this we have developed an all-boys youth dance company 'Jump Start' that runs from the venue.
- **Diversity Forum:** Take Art launched this Forum in Jan 2017 in South Petherton. Attended by 41 people from the performing arts sector, including artists, venue programmers, graduates, SSSDC representatives it featured 5 diverse performances from Tangle, Word/Play, Viv Gordon, Open Story Tellers and Gloria Lawrence.

Actiontrack:

Actiontrack works collaboratively with individuals and groups to get involved with originally devised music, drama, dance and the visual arts. The organisation develops and delivers wholly accessible projects, predominantly with children and young people and often with marginalized groups. They continue to work with the pupil referral units in Chard and Yeovil providing music provision on behalf of Sound Foundation Somerset, the county's service for music in education. They are also a delivery partner in a variety of targeted youth support initiatives with the young offending team.

In Area North Actiontrack delivered a gamelan residency at Stanchester Academy, working alongside the local primary schools. They are currently developing a project to work with a number of arts centres in Somerset, to encourage new audiences. In South Somerset this will include the David Hall. Each year they offer a week long master class for young people in South Somerset who are interested in performance as a career, held at the Octagon Theatre.

Somerset Art Works:

The SAW Festival took place between 23rd September and 8th October 2017, attracting visitors into the county and generating sales for small, independent businesses and additional custom for local services. Twenty-two artists showed work in seven locations across Area North. A study conducted during the 2016 art week event showed that there were in excess of 50,000 visits to venues in Somerset and that visitors spent on average £203 at local facilities other than arts purchases.

South Somerset; Schools in Somerset can subscribe to arts support from the partnership of SAW, Take Art, Somerset Film and SPAEDA. They provide inset training opportunities for teachers, priority access to arts residencies and a variety of learning resources. SAW commissioned film maker, Sean Harris, to work produce a film inspired by the RSPB Great Crane Project. This was shown in All Saints Church during the Langport festival, <https://cranesandcommunities.wordpress.com/>

Somerset Film

Somerset Film provides support for local community groups and individuals, professional and amateur, in the use of digital media. Based in Bridgwater but serving the whole of Somerset they offer:

- Drop-in access to equipment, on line resources and training
- Production and training opportunities and facilities
- Advice, support and information to a wide range of film and digital media makers, from absolute beginners to high level professionals
- Project and outreach work – specialising in working with community groups and individuals who want to get started with film

Recent achievements in South Somerset include:

- Continuation of Ignite 2.0 – second year of a three year programme that supports professional artists in the use of digital media. 7 x SSDC based artists received one to one surgeries through year.
- BFI Film Academy - a programme of master-classes, screenings and film-making for 16- 19 year olds that offers bursary and travel support. 7 x SSDC residents have registered onto the programme.
- Launch of Polish Voice TV on 28 Feb 2017 in association with Phoenix School of Languages (Yeovil) and Yeovil Advice Centre. Polish Voice TV encourages understanding between Somerset communities, demystifies national stereotypes, provides a space to share ideas and to promote collective endeavour – training course supported by SSL to follow x 15 adults.

In addition to the work of these arts organisations, the Arts Development Officer continues to support voluntary and professional groups and individuals in South Somerset, in developing their own projects at a grass roots level.

We are working with Somerset Film in the development of the “Holman Hub” film resource in South Cadbury. Based at Chapel Cross Tea Rooms, in conjunction with Tea Room Arts, a video production and editing facility will be available for pre-booked community use. Some initial training will be available and we will work with Tea Room Arts and Somerset Film to develop future projects in response to local aspirations.

The Arts Service has given support to Wassail Theatre Company, a local group that brings creative performance into non-traditional settings and specialises on themes that resonate with our communities. One of their latest shows, Rex the King, the story of a Somerset darts champion who ruled the world, but lost it all will be performed in some of our local pubs, including those in Huish Episcopi and South Petherton.

The Somerset Charabanc offered audiences an unusual theatre experience on a horse drawn cart, driven in around the Langport; the aim was to promote the local heritage in the Langport and Muchelney area. They are now working on a piece that gives narrative to the 2013/14 floods.

Somerset based arts organisation, Theatre Melange, has been working in partnership with the library service with a project that celebrates life in the unique landscape surrounding the River Parrett in Somerset. The wider aim of the project is to explore how libraries can be used in new ways. SSDC has supported the project which was delivered locally in Martock, Langport and South Petherton libraries with a small amount of seed funding and by helping to run a workshop for library staff on developing arts based projects.

To commemorate the 800th birthday of St Martin, the church in Kingsbury Episcopi, commissioned of a new piece of music by composer Ronald Corp, We contributed funding to the work which was performed by a mixed choir of adults and children from the village and surrounding area and was the highlight of an arts focussed community day in May. We also worked with the Kingsbury Episcopi Time Travellers with their arts and heritage project which celebrated women from the village in a poetry anthology and photographic display.

Children from Kingsbury Episcopi and Ash Primary schools had great fun making pop up bugs with renowned illustrator, Paul Stickland. The tour of eight schools across South Somerset were part of the lead up to Super Saturday in Yeovil, encouraging the children and their families to join in with this local event. We also supported the Jemima Layzell Trust to deliver creative writing workshops, Castle Primary in Stoke sub Hamdon was one of the two schools in South Somerset that took part.

We have supported ACE Arts in Somerton; our funding helped to kick start a very successful life drawing class once a month, their first artist in residence and we are currently developing a project that brings together traditional folk music and crafts.

The folk festival in South Petherton is now in its fifth year and is a popular local event. While it generally covers its costs, because of increased fees and limited resources ahead of the event the team was unsure whether it would go ahead this year. We helped secure a lottery grant of over £3,000 to cover upfront costs; this should provide a buffer for years to come. The David Hall is trying to develop the range of performance they offer to develop a wider audience. We have subsidised a pilot project, engaging four theatre companies for shows in early 2018.

Langfest 17 was Langport's successful community and arts festival. A small grant from Arts Development contributed towards the event and supported an exhibition of work created by older people in the community, including residents from the three care homes.

We are in the process of developing the third South Somerset Arts Directory, which publicises cultural and creative activities across the district and encourages participation at a local level. The Arts Development Service continues to programme the exhibitions at the Octagon Theatre, showcasing the work of local artists.

Financial Implications

No new financial implications stem from this report.

Corporate Priority Implications

The Arts & Entertainment Service is primarily linked to Theme 3: Improve the housing, health and well-being of our citizens:

"We consider that decent, affordable housing is vital to the overall health of our citizens. We want to ensure that all of the community has access to sport, leisure and arts and heritage opportunities"
Specific priorities associated to the service are 3.31 Increase engagement in the Arts.

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

The Arts & Entertainment Service contributes to SSDC targets of Reducing Carbon Emissions by adopting a culture where this is considered in everyday decision-making. The service has appointed a Carbon Champion who encourages staff to save energy, recycle, and adopt more environmentally friendly ways of delivering our service. Audiences at The Octagon Theatre are benefiting from improved comfort cooling following a major upgrade of facilities that has seen Moducel's FAN WALL Technology™ units replace the air handling system. The new technology is also making significant energy cost savings for the Service.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The Arts & Entertainment Service strives to make the service and those offered by its partners accessible to everyone. We ensure that all our partners hold an Equality and Diversity Policy and that equality is one of the core principles of the organisation. Our programme of performances and projects aims to offer a diverse range of events which inspire, educate, enlighten and entertain whilst bringing the community together.
