

WARWICK DISTRICT COUNCIL
ARTS SECTION PEER CHALLENGE
POSITION STATEMENT

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Situated within Warwickshire in the West Midlands, Warwick District includes the towns of Warwick, Royal Leamington Spa and Kenilworth. The current population is approximately 140,000 and a large proportion lives in the District's villages and rural areas. The population is expected to grow rapidly over the next 5 – 10 years as the recently adopted Local Plan has allocated sites for 16,700 new homes, designed in part to address the overspill from neighbouring Coventry.

In 2017 Royal Leamington Spa was voted as the 'Happiest Place to Live' in a national survey conducted by Rightmove. The district is a largely affluent area with a well-educated demographic and house prices higher than the national average. However, in contrast there are also pockets of deep deprivation in both Leamington Spa and Warwick.

The **Warwick District Council** (WDC) headquarters are sited in Royal Leamington Spa. It employs more than 479 officers and deals with issues such as waste management, the collection of council tax, economic development, bereavement, car parking, parks and green spaces, planning/building regulations, benefits, community safety, council housing and council house repairs. The Council's Cultural Services team manage a wide range of assets including an athletics track, pavilions and pitches, leisure centres (through our external partner Everyone Active), an art gallery and museum, a theatre and Leamington Town Hall.

The council is currently controlled by the Conservative group, who hold 31 of the 46 seats (Labour 9, Whitnash Residents Association 3, Liberal Democrats 2, Green Party 1). In the 2017 general election the Labour Party candidate, Matt Western, was elected as the Member of Parliament for Warwick & Leamington, winning a seat which had been held by the Conservative Party for many years.

Warwick District Council's mission statement is '*To make Warwick District a great place to live, work and visit*'. The Council's corporate strategy is '**Fit for the Future**' which highlights its key internal and outward facing priorities through the three strands of '*People, Service, Money*'.

OVERVIEW OF CULTURE IN THE DISTRICT

Warwick District neighbours Stratford-Upon-Avon and is a founding partner of the destination management organisation **Shakespeare's England** which seeks to increase tourism across the region (primarily by capitalising on the area's connection to Shakespeare).

Two of the most well-known tourist attractions in the district are Warwick Castle and Kenilworth Castle. Warwick Racecourse also hosts televised meetings

several times a year and the national lawn bowls championships take place in Victoria Park, Leamington annually (run in partnership between Bowls England and WDC). Leamington Spa will also be the site of the bowls competition for Birmingham's Commonwealth Games in 2022. Warwick (and to some extent, Kenilworth) is promoted widely to visitors as '**Historic Warwick**' because of its medieval history and architecture. **Leamington Spa** is promoted as a Regency spa town with independent shops, quirky cafes and beautiful manicured public gardens.

All three of the district's towns have their own amateur theatres including the Talisman and the Priory (Kenilworth), the Loft Theatre Company (Leamington), and The Bridge House Theatre (Warwick School). There is a flourishing, highly engaged and well supported community arts sector.

The area also has a high concentration of visual artists, many of whom are represented by **Warwickshire Open Studios** or **Leamington Studio Artists**.

The area capitalises on its high quality open spaces and parks (the most well-known being Leamington's Jephson Gardens and Warwick's St Nicholas Park) and many successful outdoor festivals and events take place throughout the year including **Warwick Folk Festival, Art In The Park, Warwickshire Pride, Warwick Words History Festival**, Warwick Thai Festival, **Kenilworth Arts Festival**, and Leamington **Food and Drink Festival**.

A separate, top tier authority, Warwickshire County Council (WCC), is responsible for the county's library service (although Leamington library is a tenant of WDC, being located within the Pump Rooms). Its **Heritage & Culture** team are also responsible for the Market Hall Museum, St John's Museum and the County Record Office (all in Warwick). It also includes the County's archaeology and cultural education teams. WCC has previously investigated the feasibility of outsourcing its heritage / arts activity to a charitable trust (to which WDC's arts assets could feasibly have been added). However, the finances of the business plan did not prove to be sustainable and so the service will continue in-house with the prospect of significant budget cuts and a reduction of activity.

THE ARTS TEAM

The Council's Cultural Services team is divided into the sections of Sports & Leisure, Programme Management and the Arts.

The Arts team supports a variety of professional and community arts organisations based in the district through advice, advocacy and grant funding. Key Clients include **Playbox Theatre Company** based in Warwick, which works specifically with young people, **Heartbreak Productions** which run a programme of outdoor theatre events, mainly in the summer months. **Armonico Consort**, based in Warwick, specialise in baroque choral productions and also have a strong youth programme. The international touring contemporary dance company **Motionhouse** (an NPO) is also based in Leamington. National rural touring promoter **Live and Local** (also an NPO) has its base in Warwick. The

area has a successful programme of chamber music and music education delivered through **Leamington Music**.

As well as supporting the district's cultural infrastructure through **Arts Development** the Council owns and operates several key cultural facilities including the **Royal Spa Centre** which is the district's only professional theatre. A medium size receiving house, it delivers a programme of theatre, drama, comedy, film and community events in its 667-seat main house and 188-seat studio theatre/ cinema. The **Royal Pump Rooms** in Leamington is a cultural and tourist attraction with services including Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum. The Arts team are also responsible for **Leamington Town Hall**, which has a mixture of tenants and has hireable spaces for community events.

THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

A report by Kate Organ Associates, 'Warwick District Council & The Arts' commissioned by WDC in 2015, identified that Warwick District has a lively, diverse and high quality local arts scene and a population that is one of the UK's most actively engaged in the Arts as practitioners or audiences. This is a measurable and distinctive characteristic of the area.

A report by the Audience Agency, commissioned by WDC in 2016, also identified that Warwick District has an unusually high proportion of culturally engaged residents - comparable to the typical demographic of a large city. 40% of the District's population are 'highly engaged' with the Arts and regularly attend cultural events. Only 12% of the population of Warwick District are classified as typically 'hard to engage', who rarely engage in cultural activity - which is well below the national average.

It is estimated that 40% of Warwickshire's creative businesses are located in Warwick District. Leamington Spa, in particular, has a high concentration of creative firms and employment, especially the sub-sectors of Design, the Performing Arts, Advertising and Software. This reflects the national trend and is not particularly unique, as most cities have also found that the creative sub-sectors of Design, Software and Advertising are growing much faster than others. However, it is unusual to find such a strong creative sector flourishing outside of a city environment.

In July 2016 a report by NESTA, **The Geography of Creativity In The UK**, identified Leamington Spa as one of 47 'Creative Clusters' in the UK, with a high concentration and growth of creative industries. It estimated that 1,504 creative businesses employed an estimated 7,033 people, which equated to 4.6% the town's total employment and 6.5% of its GVA. The recent emphasis and attention has understandably been on the creative sub-sector of software and digital game design - as it makes up approximately 50% of the area's total creative industries GVA and is a major strength of the District. The Council's Economic Development team have long nurtured the digital gaming sector and invested heavily in it - creating the brand '**Silicon Spa**'.

Against the National creative economic profile, Leamington is not unusual. There is a disproportionately high concentration of similar creative activity in the South East of England. Regionally, Oxford, Cheltenham and Northampton also exhibit a high concentration and growth of creative businesses. However, regionally there is a significant lack of significant creative growth elsewhere in the West Midlands. (Surprisingly, given its size and the amount of recent public investment into creative businesses, Birmingham did not meet the indicators required to be considered a 'creative cluster'.) In this context Warwick District is 'punching above its weight' and has a diverse, thriving creative economy. Until recently, this has not been widely understood and the potential has perhaps not yet been fully realised by WDC. The challenge will be to maintain and grow that digital strength moving forward and to fend off competition from other 'digital hubs'. Given the district's strength across the whole of the creative industries it is perhaps also uniquely placed to capitalise on the national '**Culture is Digital**' initiative and bring the various sub-sectors together.

The City of Coventry recently successfully bid to become the UK's City of Culture in 2021. Although WDC is already a member of the associated 'club' of surrounding local authorities it remains to be seen what impact this will have on Warwick District – whether it will be an opportunity for increased tourism, development and growth or if it will weaken its own cultural infrastructure. At the time of writing Coventry City is also part of the West Midlands combined bid to relocate Channel 4's headquarters to the region (WDC also submitted a bid for Leamington Spa, but was unsuccessful – being the only town of its size to bid).

The Council has recently appointed a commercial developer, Complex Development Projects (CDP), to partner with the Council in the development of a **Creative Quarter** in the south of Leamington Spa. This is a 10 year agreement, during which time the developer will create a masterplan for the area and begin to develop sites with a cultural focus. This project is led by the Deputy Chief Executive and the Business Officer from Development Services. CDP is currently consulting with the wider community and has been tasked with creating a Masterplan for the project by the end of 2018. There is also the potential for the project to involve Council assets, such as the Royal Pump Rooms.

THE CURRENT POSITION

Like most local authorities, Warwick District Council has faced some difficult financial challenges over the past 10 years. The Council's financial planning has proven to be very effective and our Member's commitment to continuing to deliver all services whilst making necessary savings has largely been met through efficiencies and increased income generation. Whilst there remains a degree of uncertainty around the future financial model of the Council and its assets, Warwick District is in a comparatively strong position. There is strong political support for arts and culture within the Council and an understanding of its inherent, social and economic benefits to the district.

Once under imminent threat of closure, the Royal Spa Centre has greatly improved its offering and financial position over the past five years. Increased income from box office sales and hires and a tight control on expenditure has meant that the annual operational cost of delivering the service has fallen to approximately £215k from over £500k in 2013. It is the eventual aim for the venue to become cost neutral by building upon this success.

The Art Gallery & Museum has successfully gained funding in the past for specific, one-off exhibitions and educational activity (primarily from the ACE and the V&A Museums in Schools project). Therefore, it has been possible to deliver a very high standard of exhibitions and events. However, without this external funding it would prove challenging to sustain the current level of activity as the service's own budgets for exhibitions and educational activity are limited. It is expected that any growth in activity would have to be funded through increased income – either via commercial means or additional grant aid.

The Royal Spa Centre currently has an annual footfall of approximately 95,000 and the Royal Pump rooms 455,000 (134,000 of which visit the Art Gallery & Museum, 29% of the building's total footfall). The Town Hall has an annual footfall of approximately 84,000 and is primarily used for WDC committee meetings, as well as being hired to the public for functions and events. The long term future of the Town Hall remains uncertain as it is the Council's intention to withdraw from the building once the new WDC headquarters are built and the public/ committee meetings are relocated there.

WDC's Cultural Services department has undergone a great deal of change during the last 18 months. The Events Team was absorbed into the Council's Economic Development / Town Centre Management team. The management of the District's leisure centres was outsourced to **Everyone Active** (Sports and Leisure Management Ltd) in the summer of 2017 after a lengthy procurement and investment planning process. This radically reduced the size of the Sports & Leisure team directly employed by the Council from several hundred to a handful of officers. The focus of this team is now on the management of key contracts and sports development – taking a more strategic approach to the District's sports and leisure provision, rather than direct delivery. The team are currently focused on planning investment into Kenilworth's leisure facilities, as well as planning for the Commonwealth Games and the construction of a new community stadium.

In addition, a lengthy review of its arts teams concluded in February of last year, the outcome of which was to amalgamate the (previously separately managed) Royal Pump Rooms, Royal Spa Centre, Town Hall and arts development services into one, joined up Arts team. The aim of this internal restructuring was to align the priorities of the service, to be more efficient and effective and to begin the process of commercialisation. All staff now work across all venues and the management team are readjusting the focus of the service to be more strategic

and outward looking, using its influence to lead the local arts community, rather than concentrating solely on the delivery of its own services from venues.

The purpose of the Arts Section of Cultural Services is to make Warwick District 'a great place to live, work and visit' by providing:

"Inspiration & Opportunity for All"

The section is focused on its priorities:

- Creating best value by reducing costs and increasing income
- Increasing attendance and participation
- Improving the quality and impact of its activities

The Arts section also recently took on responsibility for face-to-face tourism provision in Leamington Spa by absorbing the Visitor Information Centre, located at the front of the Royal Pump Rooms. This service was combined with the box office and gallery team in order to create a joint function, with a focus on income generation and the promotion of cultural events. Over a year later the changes are still bedding in and the various teams continue to adjust to the new way of working.

ISSUES FOR THE PEER REVIEW TO EXPLORE

After a period of such significant change it is believed that the Arts section of Cultural Services would benefit greatly from an independent assessment of how we are performing against our priorities and to get some practical advice and suggestions of how we might improve in the future. The three areas for the Peer Challenge team to focus on are:

a) Is the Council getting the best value from its cultural assets? What are the possible commercial opportunities, including alternative delivery models, for the Arts team that would help ensure sustainability over the longer term and enable us to better meet our priorities?

There is an ongoing expectation from elected Members and the Council's senior management team that the Arts section will continue to reduce the cost of delivering its services (primarily through increased income). The district will also experience a surge in population growth over the next ten years and the Arts section must plan for how it will continue to grow and meet the increase in demand for its services. Have we clarity in our strategic vision for the Arts section and have we fully considered all the options for delivering the service? What examples of best practice are there?

b) How could the Arts team better contribute to the cross cutting agendas of other Services within WDC?

It is the ambition to raise culture and the creative industries up the agenda of Warwick District Council's senior leadership team and our Councillors. While elected Members and the Executive generally support the Arts and have a good understanding of its value to the District, there is a perceived lack of awareness of the opportunities the creative industries as a whole can offer.

There is a desire within the Arts section to strengthen strategic links between Cultural Services and other council services, particularly:

- Development Services – which is responsible for many cross cutting agendas including economic development and tourism, planning and Section 106 agreements, the town centre 'vision' for Leamington Spa, the delivery of outside events and festivals, the Creative Quarter Project, and Enterprise which acts as landlord to several of the Arts sections 'Key Clients'.
- Community Partnership team (part of Health & Community Protection) which is responsible for addressing priorities around health and wellbeing and community cohesion such as male suicide, an ageing population and mental health. The Arts team have made little advances into this area previously.

c) What is the role of Warwick District Council and the Arts team within the context of the local creative sector?

If the Arts team wishes to meet its objectives it cannot do so alone as we do not have the necessary resources available. It is the belief that the Arts team must be more 'outward looking' and seek to form stronger partnerships with the local arts community.

Frustrations expressed by the local creative community have indicated that what they want from WDC is for it to:

- publically promote and support creativity and the arts as a priority
- deliver on its sense of anticipation and high aspirations
- understand the creative industries as a whole rather than just 'arts' or 'digital'
- move development forward at a faster pace
- enable exciting new things to happen and reduce 'red tape'
- make better use of physical spaces and places, people and organisations (including 'unlocking' its own cultural assets for use by the community)
- increase direct financial support through grants / funding / business rates or rental aid
- provide affordable spaces for creatives to work
- act as a facilitator to bring the creative community together drawing in a spectrum of stakeholders, and not relying on the impetus and resources of the Council alone

Additional Documents Supplied:

A Warwick District Council & The Arts 2015 – Kate Organ Associates

B Arts Section Operational Plan 2018/19

C Warwick District Profiling Report 2017 - Audience Agency

[Link to the Royal Spa Centre current brochure](#)

[Link to the Art Gallery & Museum current brochure](#)

[Link to Collections & Development Policy 2012 - 2017](#)

[Link to Warwick District Council Arts Strategy 2009 – 2013](#)

Cultural Services Peer Challenge **Warwick District Council**

9 – 10 July 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Warwick District Council (WDC) Arts Service (AS) was awarded a Cultural Peer Challenge (one of only three such awards in 2018) funded by Arts Council England (ACE) and Local Government Association (LGA). The AS asked the peer challenge team to consider three questions. These are:

- is the council getting best value from its cultural assets and are there further commercial opportunities for it to assess?
- what is the contribution that the arts make to the cross cutting agendas of other WDC services?
- what is the role of the arts services and WDC in supporting the local creative sector?

This executive summary provides an overview of the peer team's feedback.

Warwick District Council Cultural Services Arts Section has been through a period of structural change recently. The AS supports the district's cultural infrastructure through an Arts Development officer. The main focus of activity is the in-house operation of several key facilities in Leamington. These are: the Royal Spa Centre (RSC), a 667 seat professional theatre and 188 seat studio/cinema; and the Royal Pump Rooms (RPR), which includes an art gallery, museum and the Warwickshire County Council library. Both of these facilities appear to be well maintained and equipped, with continuing investment in the fabric of both buildings from the council's capital programme. Recent improvements to the visitor offer have resulted in increased attendances and income and it is intended to make the operation of the RSC cost neutral in the medium term.

A lengthy review of the arts teams concluded in February 2017. This resulted in the amalgamation of the previously separately managed RSC, RPR, and Leamington Town Hall staff teams and arts development services into one unified arts team. The aim of the restructure was to align the priorities of the service, to become more efficient and to move to a more commercial focus. The majority of AS staff work across all venues. The intention is that this will allow the focus of the service to become more strategic and outward looking thereby using its influence to lead and work in partnership with the local arts community, rather than concentrating solely on its own service delivery. This objective remains aspirational, as the restructure is still bedding in and would benefit from some further fine tuning and benchmarking against a clear set of performance indicators. The desire to become more strategic will require further capacity to enable it happen. Although the peer team were pleased to meet excellent, technically competent staff, it may require some additional skills, such as marketing, to achieve a more outward focused and strategic role in the arts for the council. We do not advocate a review of alternative service delivery models for the AS at this stage. In saying this, the peer team are suggesting that you consider advice from CIPFA, contained in their guidance

document entitled “Insights: alternative service delivery models for local government”, that states “What is critical is that ‘form must follow function’. Do not start with the ‘model’ and make the service fit this.

There are other arts activities delivered from within the economic development and community partnership sections of the council. However, this work is not joined up in a strategic way with the AS, and this results in a confused response by the wider arts community. A number of examples of assistance sought from the council by arts organisations resulted in frustration about the fragmented approach and perceived lack of support.

There is evidence of effective working across the council departments, but this seems to be based on personal relationships between officers without a strategic imperative or framework to encourage cross service working. This situation is likely to improve after the AS revisits its strategy and clarifies its role as an influencer of arts leadership, collaboration and coordination.

The positive support, for the AS, from senior management and the politicians is evident. The district is spending in excess of £2.1 million revenue a year primarily on its building based operations in Leamington. In addition capital may be made available for refurbishment, currently £100,000 for the RPR gallery and £110,000 for sound desk and lighting in the RSC.

However, if the service is to become more strategic and outwardly focused we would advocate that a discussion about the benefits and value of the arts, and how the AS can better help to deliver the council’s priorities, takes place at an executive level in the council. This would be in the context of the potential for the arts to contribute to the delivery of the council’s and other partner organisation’s priorities. The manager’s forum may be a suitable place for this to happen.

The district has an enviable array of arts/cultural opportunities to consider. Within the district, these include:

- WDC HQ relocation
- Kenilworth development
- Green Spaces (Victoria Park, Newbold Comyn, Pump Room Gardens, Tachbrook Country Park)
- Community Stadium
- Leamington Creative Quarter
- Population growth and up to 16,700 New Homes, with associated services and facilities.

and regionally these are:

- Cultural Tourism
- Coventry City of Culture 2021
- Commonwealth Games 2022
- Population and housing growth
- JLR & Warwick University
- HS2.

The council should consider a mechanism to assess the relative merits of these opportunities and projects in relation to the potential that the arts can contribute. The current approach appears to be inconsistent. For example, the council has a dedicated resource to work on the sports element of the Commonwealth Games, but no similar resource allocated to Coventry City of Culture which is happening a year earlier.

The AS is clear that it intends to work more commercially and is demonstrating results in terms of improved visitor numbers and income generation. To make further significant improvements the peer team suggest that external professional marketing expertise will help make the desired step change.

Warwick district has a strong creative economy – one of the most significant digital clusters nationally, and the AS should consider how to improve links to local private creative businesses. The creative sector employs over 7000 people in the district. (Ref: The Geography of Creativity in the UK – NESTA July 2016). Without a clearly articulated plan for engaging with and optimising the growth of this sector, and for linking it to other agendas in the district, the opportunity to sustain and develop this significant sector of the local economy may be missed. WDC may wish to consider the establishment of a Warwick district cultural forum as a vehicle for better collaboration and partnership working both with and between the cultural and creative sectors.

The AS through the council should consider how to best communicate a clear message about the future of arts provision in the district and to clarify the WDC role in championing this. The development of a five year strategy and delivery plan, in collaboration with other creative and cultural organisations in Warwick would make a good starting point for this. This should provide the opportunity for more strategic engagement with some of the key client arts organisations based in Warwick (Arts in the Park, Playbox Theatre Company, Motionhouse and Live and Local).

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- 1. The Arts Section (AS) should gather evidence of the impact of the sector, both current and potential.** AS has the opportunity to gather evidence, in the form of an impact study, to demonstrate the benefits and value of arts and the contribution that the sector is making to the achievement of WDC corporate objectives and those of other related cultural organisations, using agreed performance indicators. AS could adopt a strategic approach by researching and mapping activity, analysing the environments within which it works, being more outcomes focused and develop new partnerships and collaborations. The collation of this evidence could be done digitally and would usefully form the basis for writing up a draft cultural plan.
- 2. The time is right to engage stakeholders internally and externally in developing the arts strategy (vision) and agree a delivery plan for action.** The peer challenge team were impressed by the range of artists and creative organisations in the district. There is an expectation that the council arts service will lead the sector in creating a plan for the future of arts in Warwick. The proposed Warwick district arts forum could be a key vehicle to take this work forward.
- 3. Recognise, prioritise and resource the emerging opportunities.** The district has identified an impressive number of opportunities and projects to further enhance the arts infrastructure in Warwick and to develop the arts to serve the district's growing population. The range and uniqueness of these are rare for a district, as Warwick has been identified by NESTA as the only non - urban creative cluster in the UK. However there needs to be consideration given to the management of these opportunities. The approach to date appears to be inconsistent. For example with some dedicated officer resource for the Commonwealth Games (2022) but no one tasked with working on the potential of the Coventry City of Culture legacy (2021).
- 4. Develop a five year plan for culture in the district, which provides cases for investment.** A number of the opportunities will require investment to help in their development. Future investment, for example that which is linked to the Industrial Strategy, CWLEP or a Tourism Zone, is likely to require the development of business cases demonstrating a clear impact on the local economy, skills and jobs. A single arts/cultural plan would benefit all parties to ensure that investment is coordinated, and that external bodies understand the

coherence of a well-considered and mutually owned plan. The plan needs to be strategic and endorsed politically.

5. **We recommend that the AS does not need to look at alternative service models currently.** The peer team had been asked to consider alternative service delivery models for the AS. Our view is that form should follow function. The service has recently been restructured and the benefits of this are now becoming evident. The current structure appears to support the building based services in Leamington well. Further consideration of the role of the arts across Warwick, and agreement of strategic priorities through a cultural plan may lead to a future review of the role of the council in supporting the arts. If a significant change is envisaged then that will be the time to look at alternative service delivery models again.
6. **Increase focus on commercialisation and marketing.** The key arts buildings in Leamington have benefited from the council's capital investment resulting in increased numbers of visitors and improved income generation. Further incremental improvements may occur. However the offer is not coherent and does not join up with the other benefits of visiting/living/studying in Warwick. There is no consistent view about what a commercial arts service would look like. There is no marketing plan and no strategic marketing post. The district has a number of significant cultural assets that could be jointly promoted, and the impact could be even greater through collaboration with the neighbouring cultural offers. Links with the private sector seem limited, but provide opportunities to consider joint marketing and ticketing. One idea, mentioned to the peer team, is to form links with Warwick Castle to explore this kind of joint activity. In addition, the four towns in the district could be positioned in terms of their distinctive offer (see (9) below). We recommend that the council considers securing some commercial and marketing expertise to maximise the current opportunities.
7. **Celebrate and communicate partnership success.** There are a significant number of well-regarded cultural organisations based in Warwick. They seem to exist with very little support from the council. Despite this they appear willing to work collaboratively with the council and for the benefit of Warwick residents. The council should consider official recognition of these organisations contribution to its corporate objectives. Consultees expressed some frustration over the inconsistent approach by the council to their work. A framework agreement setting out the support for the arts, by the council, would help improve the situation. This is an area where a Warwick district arts forum may prove beneficial.
8. **Review feedback and refine structures.** The reorganised AS has been in place for a year. It would be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of the new structure and to fine tune some of the initial teething problems that remain

unresolved. There are some staff communication issues that require management time. Although this is difficult and time consuming, with so many part time staff, working in different locations and varying shifts it is important that they are kept informed of issues that affect them and that they feel that they are being listened to. The peer team were pleased to meet with a range of WDC staff, who appear very motivated, committed and engaged in and understand the need for change, and want to continue to contribute to the continuous improvement that is being achieved by AS.

9. **Capitalise on local strengths - collaboration not competition.** The district benefits from a rich arts infrastructure. Consideration should be given as to the AS role in further encouraging collaboration between the different organisations. The potential of a Warwick district arts forum was suggested by a number of consultees.
10. **AS should free up staff to explore best practice models and learning opportunities.** Staff are keen to develop their own ideas to further improve the service, and this is paying benefits in the RSC, where experimentation with programming is maintaining interest and encouraging new customers to visit the facility. (Daily artist/ latest exhibition developed by a curator). Staff seem keen to learn from other appropriate cultural organisations and this will encourage their own development and bring ideas for further improvement into the district. Examples of best practice are at Appendix 1.
11. **Use the local creative capacity – e.g. develop AR/VR offer in AGM, develop culture portal, media.** The district is home to many creative businesses and students which could help to bring a new dimension to some of the traditional cultural offer, such as the Art Gallery. The idea of a cultural portal could be developed whereby cultural information could be accessed in one place. This provides an opportunity to engage with students and business in the development of this idea.
12. **The council should tap into the local private creative sector for support.** NESTA, has identified Leamington as one of the 47 creative clusters in the UK, because of its concentration of creative organisations. The growth of this sector is linked to recruitment and retention of talent, which is influenced by a thriving cultural life and a strong independent creative sector. This approach could assist in reinforcing the district's reputation as a place to live, work and visit. The development of a Creative Quarter in South Leamington may be a vehicle by which these organisations can become more involved. It could also be an opportunity for people living in the neighbourhood, as this is an area high in deprivation. Linking local people with opportunities in the creative industries through cultural activity, training and business support is an approach which is being taken in other areas and might be of interest. This is deserving of a

dedicated strategy, aligned to a cultural/arts strategy. See the report The Geography of Creative Clusters at [NESTA Creative Clusters](#).

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Warwick District Council were:

- Val Birchall - Assistant Director (Culture, Tourism and Sport), Brighton and Hove City Council
- Councillor Martin Veal – Bath and North East Somerset District Council, LGA Member Peer
- Neil Anderson – LGA Peer
- Mark Harrison – LGA Peer Review Manager.

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following three questions:

1. Is the council getting best value from its cultural assets and are there commercial opportunities for it to assess?
2. What is the contribution that the arts make to the cross cutting agendas of other WDC services?
3. What is the role of the arts services and WDC in supporting the local creative sector?

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent two days onsite at Warwick District Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 45 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 17 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 100 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than three weeks in Warwick District Council.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit 9 – 10 July 2018. In presenting feedback to you, the peer team have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

Is the council getting best value from its cultural assets and are there commercial opportunities?

The council is getting better value from its cultural assets. Performance is improving with increased attendances at the RSC (95,000 a year) and RPR (445,000 including 134,000 visits to the gallery and museum). An improvement plan was put in place in 2012 – 13. This has successfully helped reduce the net operational cost of delivering the RSC has been reduced by £300,000 to £288,000 in the current year. The gross box office income has increased significantly over the last 5 years and last year saw a 45% increase on 2012/13. It is intended to make the RSC operation cost neutral in the medium term.

As the bottom line improves the council will need to consider if it wishes to use the freed up resource to support increased capacity for the AS to pursue the strategic objective to use its influence to lead the local arts community. However we are aware of the cost pressures facing councils and understand that the council may wish to allocate these resources to another area of the council or to assist in balancing its budget.

There are further commercial opportunities for the AS and district. The secondary spend at the venues could be improved, hire charges and fee income should be reviewed. At a more strategic level the council can take a view of the benefits of the arts and related areas such as tourism, growth, economic development and health and wellbeing to the economy. To fully explore these opportunities we think that professional marketing and commercial advice should be sought. The LGA offers a range of commercial skills training and support, visit www.local.gov.uk/commercialisation to find out more.

The council continues to make significant investment in arts buildings and equipment. The refurbishment and redesign of the entrance to the RPR is being skilfully managed with an enterprising approach to ensure that the programmed activities are exciting and relevant. The focus on Leamington does raise the question about provision for the rest of the district. The district is rich in terms of arts organisations and businesses and this is compensating for the current WDC focus of building based activities being located in one town. It highlights the desirability of the AS rebalancing its commitment to outreach, arts development and supporting other non-council arts organisations to work within an agreed framework. This adjustment of direction will help ensure that there is access for all to opportunities to engage in the arts.

The potential to look at alternative service delivery models remains a possibility for the future. The recent restructure appears to be working well, and would

benefit from some management time spent with staff to consider some fine tuning and celebrating progress made to date. The staff can be reassured of their role and contribution to the AS objectives. It will be interesting to see how the recently externalised leisure operation develops, and a mechanism for learning about their approach to commercialisation may be of use. Many councils have explored alternative service delivery models with varying degrees of success. We think that you may wish to consider what type of arts service the council wants to deliver in the future before any consideration of implementing a different service delivery model.

There are clear, yet underdeveloped links between the AS and wider WDC priorities. In order to realise the full potential value of taking a more strategic view of the arts it will be necessary for the arts to set out its plan, to include its vision, relation to council objectives and its potential capacity to collaborate and work in partnership. We would expect that the AS would be informing the development of some of the council's key projects, in particular the Cultural Quarter in South Leamington. Further links will need to be explored with new built development, health and well-being, economic development and community partnerships. Externally we would expect to see consideration given to collaboration with key arts organisations, Warwick CC, Warwick University, Warwick Castle and other significant visitor destinations, developing internationally significant events such as Commonwealth Games 2022 and Coventry City of Culture 2021. These opportunities will require additional capacity to enable appropriate input from AS.

There is a recognition that there could be more professional marketing of the arts offer. The arts marketing team are doing a good job and some professional expertise would help raise the profile of the arts exponentially, both within the council and the wider district. To date there is no marketing plan for the AS. Overall we think that there could be better co-ordination of arts activities across Warwick. The potential of a Warwick Cultural Portal provides an opportunity to share information in an accessible and manageable format. We think it might be fruitful to engage the local digital media sector in the development of this work.

There exists further potential development of cultural assets for commercial income generation. In particular the development of the Creative Quarter and its relationship with the RSC. The council owns land adjacent to the RSC that could be used to develop a conference centre, which could link successfully to the high growth businesses in the local area. Additional income could be applied to the development of outreach arts activities, increase voluntary sector support and to enhance the capacity of the AS to help deliver on its aspirations.

The optimisation of secondary spend as a result of developing a more joined-up visitor offer could be beneficial for the district. From joint ticketing, joint promotions, events and developing to sharing a digital platform, the marketing of the district (e.g. events, castles, museums, arts centres, architecture, and

proximity to other areas) for extended stays would help provide a coherent rationale for visiting the district as a whole.

As a part of the fine tuning of the AS, post restructure, we suggest that customer feedback is used to further enhance the service. For example we received the opinion that the RSC does not feel open for business, this could be remedied through better signage and web presence.

What is the contribution that the arts make to the cross cutting agendas of other WDC services?

The AS is contributing to the cross cutting agendas of other WDC services and could do even more, when it makes its own rationale clear. The development of a five year strategy and delivery plan will help position the AS within the council and with private and public sector partner organisations.

The new unified art service appears to have risen to the challenge of integrating cultures. Some officers are working well with other council teams, but more could be done in this area. It is a leadership issue, to be addressed at a senior level in the council, to encourage collaborative working and the creation of multi-disciplinary teams to manage the big opportunities that are presenting in WDC.

To maximise the potential benefits of shared opportunities over the next five years, the council needs to consider the capacity it requires to develop and manage a process that enables it to assess the return on investment that these key projects can deliver. The AS, with improved capacity, would be in a position to make an appropriate contribution to multi-disciplinary teams working on these projects.

In order to effectively advocate the value and impact of the arts the AS needs to consider how it will move from a building based arts delivery service to a more strategic and outward looking influencer for the arts in the district. The AS has considerable work to do to achieve this aspiration. There is no plan to take the AS from where it is now to where it says it wants to be. It is uncertain as to the alignment between the AS objectives and those of the council corporate objectives. A further challenge will be to establish confidence that the council is acting in the best interests of the wider arts constituency. This frustration was particularly expressed in consultee's views about how the council works in a very disparate way in its support for arts events. The council's events teams seem from the outside to have very little contact with the AS. This would seem to be a big missed opportunity as arts events can play a significant role in promoting and raising the profile of the district. External arts organisations expressed frustration around the council's role in supporting the arts. They expect the council to exercise its leadership role and to move away from its focus from building based

service delivery to a more strategic supporter and influencer for the arts in the district and to apply its resources accordingly.

A starting point for this work could be to initiate a WDC Managers' Forum discussion to start to work up a draft cultural vision and to identify cross-sector opportunities. The next step will be to use the draft vision to engage with the wider arts constituency, in a cultural forum that would contribute to a cultural strategy for the district. Thereby moving away from the perception that the council mainly invests in arts buildings in Leamington and, to a certain extent takes, other arts organisations for granted. A five year planning horizon would enable the strategy to take account of the rapid growth and changing context of the district.

What is the role of the arts services and WDC in supporting the local creative sector?

The role of the AS team, has rightly been focused on successfully aligning the work of the new staff team with the objective to improve the operational effectiveness of the RSC, RPR and Warwick Town Hall. This task has taken much time and energy and appears to be paying dividends. The time is approaching when the AS will need to reconsider its role and contribution to the achievement of WDC corporate priorities, and its role in supporting the vibrant local creative and cultural sector.

Despite the presence of a large number of creative businesses and arts practitioners in the district, there is limited active partnership working with the council. It appears that the AS has focussed its efforts on fixing the performance of its arts buildings in Leamington. The local creative sector expects that the council will adopt a more strategic outward focus in supporting the arts. The issue is that the council has limited capacity to do this and no plan to help the delivery of this new focus. The arts development team appears to be one officer who is overstretched. If the council is to review its support for the arts it will require additional capacity to work out what needs to be done. At the same time, other service areas (Economic Development and Community Development) have stepped into this space and are programming some events. There needs to be clarity about the leadership of the Council's arts strategy to avoid duplication of effort.

Notwithstanding the above the peer team was pleased to see that other arts organisations are ready, willing and capable of assisting in a new collaborative arts and culture partnership. It is incumbent on the AS/Council to convene a dialogue with the cultural sector. The peer team felt the time is right for this to happen. It will be important to establish common ground and identify a vision and some key areas of commonality in order to move a mutual agenda forward. Greater pro-active support, by the council, to some key arts events that take

place in the district could be a way of demonstrating a commitment to this new way of working

It will be necessary to develop a clear narrative for the cultural sector. There are many cultural plans available on line that may assist your thinking. They appear to have common features, setting out the vision, a plan for high level tasks, some key deliverables, and a description of what success would look like whilst retaining the ability to continuously update the plan and for it to remain flexible. A relevant plan might be the one that Coventry used to support its successful city of culture bid, see [Coventry](#). However, the starting point would be an audit of current arts activity in Warwick the place. Much of this data already exists from previous consultations, and could be updated digitally through the Warwick Cultural Portal.

The council may wish to reconsider how it supports the arts. The current situation is disparate and consultees advised that there are a variety of responses dependent upon which part of the council you are dealing with. One obvious improvement area, is to reflect the needs of the arts sector in council grant schemes. Arts organisations referred to their frustrations in dealing with the “paper police” of the council. In their minds this signifies control and bureaucracy rather than enabling and empowering, they want arts that are fit for the future.

The approach to arts provision could be differentiated between its four main towns. Different communities require different provision, and the arts offer should reflect the aspirations of the local residents. Partnership working with arts organisations will help ensure that the towns can provide a differentiated arts offer. This should be within the overall context of the council’s aim to make Warwick a great place to live, work and visit. The Audience Agency report of 2016, identified that the district has an unusually high proportion of culturally engaged residents who regularly attend cultural events. Therefore there is the opportunity for more meaningful engagement with residents about the future arts landscape.

The role of the WDC Cultural Services in general and AS in particular needs to be communicated to council colleagues and the wider cultural sector. The AS is a new team, and council colleagues and external stakeholders are unsure about what the changed service offer is, who delivers it and significantly are unaware of the aspirational ambition for the future of arts in Warwick.

The peer team identified some tensions between “old” and “new” arts developments within the council. There appears to be a view that the AS offers a traditional arts service, whereas other parts of the council work on the contemporary arts in developing digital and gaming. All of this work is important, as the council can benefit from the national “Culture is Digital” initiative and help bring the sub sectors together. But the fragmentation means that the overall arts

offer of the council is inconsistent and lacks coherence. This needs bringing together in a single overall vision for the Arts in Warwick district which connects to other corporate ambitions but is understood by the wider Arts community and local residents in general across the area.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Helen's contact details are: helen.murray@local.gov.uk

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

Appendix 1 – Possible best practice areas/ideas

1. A recent Arts Professional magazine survey (October 2017) revealed the strain that council cuts have put on community arts organisations. Some reported that their local authority is maintaining a commitment to the arts or finding innovative ways to support the sector while cutting spending. Amongst those singled out for praise were Hull, Manchester, Leeds and Islington.
2. The Gloucester Culture Trust aims to be a spark and a catalyst, which links up the creative and cultural sector and supports it to make things happen. This means that the council works in partnership – locally, regionally and nationally – to create, test and deliver projects which will make Gloucester a city full of culture. Gloucester City Council has provided £20k per year (2016/17 and 2017/18) to help set up Gloucester Culture Trust. Arts Council England committed £50k in 2016/17 to help set up Gloucester Culture Trust. In March 2016, Gloucester City Council was awarded £1,489,200 from the [Great Place scheme](#) to support a three-year project entitled *Gloucester – a proud past: Culture at the heart of an ambitious future*. Gloucester Culture Trust is managing this exciting project (2016-2020). See [Gloucester Culture Trust](#).
3. Lincoln BIG (BID tourism partnership) and cultural quarter is in the heart of the city centre, and is a vibrant hub. Spanning the east of the city centre and the south entrance to Lincoln's [Cathedral Quarter](#), This is the location of theatre, museums, art, music, cuisine, bars and cafes. Whether spending the afternoon in a vibrant cafe, taking in the culture of the theatre or discovering the history of the area, the Cultural Quarter has plenty to keep you interested. [Lincoln cultural quarter](#).
4. The LGA offers a range of commercial skills training and support, visit www.local.gov.uk/commercialisation to find out more.
5. Waltham Forest has used its London Olympic 2012 legacy to reaffirm its commitment to culture, develop a more strategic and outwards looking focus. As a consequence the borough will be the first to receive the Mayor's award for London borough of culture 2019. This award is to stage a programme of ambitious cultural events and initiatives, and to develop a plan to make culture an integral part of the boroughs' future - placing communities at the heart of decision-making and programming. See [Waltham Forest London borough of culture 2019](#).
6. Explore York Libraries and Archives Mutual' has a five-year contract to manage City of York Council's libraries and archives services. It was set up in 2014 as an industrial and provident society with charitable status. It is one-third owned by its staff and two-thirds by the local community: community membership is free of charge and open to local residents aged over 16.

Explore worked with the Cabinet Office mutuals support programme to 'spin out' from the council. Being part of this programme provided essential access to legal and other support. Fiona Williams, Explore's Chief Executive and Director, said: "We chose to go down the 'mutual' road because we wanted to give staff and local people more meaningful ways of being involved in our services. We have a Board of seven which includes a staff director and two community directors." There is an LGA case study at [York mutual library trust](#).

7. The Chief Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) now encourages membership by senior local council arts officers. This would provide peer support to WDC officers. CLOA works closely with the DCMS and Arts Council England to promote the benefits of culture. See [CLOA membership](#).
8. This case study about Dundee titled '*Creative Industries: Support for Growth*', highlights the challenges, strengths and activities happening in Dundee to grow the creative industries and tackle issues such as talent retention and attraction. See [Dundee creative industries](#).