

CABINET 30 JUNE 2021

MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question from:	Duncan Kerr
Subject:	Cultural Strategy
Portfolio Holder:	Cecilia Motley

According to the evidence base Shropshire Council invests some £10.6M into Cultural services. The same document goes on to say that the largest proportion of this is spent on theatres and public entertainment (£4.8M), the main centres being Theatre Severn and the Old Market Hall in Shrewsbury and the Assembly Rooms in Ludlow. The investment into these facilities has been very considerable with £3.5M just spent on the latter. The good news is that the Council operates these centres at a profit which is a credit to everyone involved. The bad news is that none of these facilities are available to the people of Oswestry, the second largest town in the County. Neither does Oswestry, nor indeed North Shropshire, contain any of the six museums operated by Shropshire Council.

In many ways the County mirrors the country. Oswestry has two wards in the 20% most deprived areas in the country. It also has higher unemployment and lower wages than Shropshire as a whole and more people reporting health limitations. On almost any deprivation matrix from car ownership to qualifications Oswestry performs worse than the County as a whole, underlining the need for major investment here.

Nationally the Government has embarked on a levelling up strategy to overcome similar historic inequalities in the provision of resources and funding recognising that investing in culture can be a great catalyst for economic and social renewal. However, I see nothing in this Cultural strategy that recognises this divide or seeks to level up the investment. There is a perfect opportunity to do this as part of the emerging Oswestry masterplan, but to date there has been no evidence that Shropshire Council is prepared to make a significant investment in the cultural assets of Oswestry. The innovation park is welcome, but without accompanying investment in the cultural life of the town we will not secure the economic regeneration that the town needs.

So rather than miss this opportunity to level up services across the county I am asking you to defer approval of this strategy to provide time to work with the Town Council and Oswestry Bid through the Future Oswestry Group and for Shropshire Council to committed to a levelling up agenda to provide the injection of resources into the cultural life of Oswestry that will go some way to rectifying years of under-funding when compared to the other major settlements of Shropshire.

The Cultural Strategy for Shropshire has been developed through and by partners and stakeholders and has been the subject of extensive consultation across the county. This report seeks formal Council support for the future development of the strategy which it is hoped will be developed and delivered by an Independent Cultural Partnership or Compact who will come together to identify how best we can work together to embed culture and cultural activities across the whole of Shropshire. Arts Council England has expressed an interest in providing independent support to assist with setting up a new Cultural Compact that will provide leadership and strategic capacity.

Major funding organisations, such as Arts Council England and the National Lottery had raised concerns in the past about the lack of strategic direction for the cultural sector in Shropshire and had called for a partnership approach to clarify priorities for the county. The Cultural Strategy now addresses this and evidences the need for further investment in cultural activities and venues, which it is intended will help secure external funding for Oswestry amongst other places, in a field which is becoming increasingly competitive.

The Compact or Partnership will be representative of the whole of Shropshire and its role will be to drive the development and implementation of a place based action plan to deliver the Cultural Strategy. The Strategy seeks to work across all of Shropshire with key partners and stakeholders, to embed the intrinsic value of culture in supporting and enriching the everyday lives of our local and regional communities. It provides a shared strategic vision upon which we can build to strengthen the positive role and impact of culture across everything we do in Shropshire. A goal of the new Partnership will be to ensure representation from across all of Shropshire, including Oswestry, and with this develop a clear action plan and delivery mechanism for the future. The Council is one of many partners who have been and will continue to work together across Shropshire to ensure this happens. Subject to Cabinet approval we look forward to working with Oswestry Town Council and many others in taking the next steps to deliver this Strategy.