



## Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission, 11 February 2021

### Item : Impact of Covid-19 on Cultural Services and the digital divide

prepared by Lucy McMenemy, Cultural Development Manager, 25 January 2021.

#### 1. The impact of Covid-19 on the Council's Cultural Services

##### 1.1 Cultural Development Team

The work of the Cultural Development Team is underpinned by the Arts and Cultural Strategy 2019-2022.

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/12p5tTwJwr7EH\\_7Q9EwO0\\_P8GuzWkpA/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/12p5tTwJwr7EH_7Q9EwO0_P8GuzWkpA/view?usp=sharing)

The strategy is currently being reviewed in light of the pandemic, to consider the ongoing relevance of the objectives and how they are delivered. Whilst there may be few changes to the strategy's objectives, it is expected that a wholesale review of delivery methods will be needed to make them Covid-safe. All changes will be published as an Appendix to the main document before the end of March 2021.

##### 1.2 Facilitation of on-going dialogue with the sector

A key function of the team at this time has been its ongoing liaison with the arts and cultural sector, which has been very adversely affected by the pandemic. The team has facilitated support from a range of council services, supported their efforts to fundraise and advocated on their behalf to the government for more support.

(See the paper on **Covid 19 Impact and Recovery Plan for Culture** for further details.)

It is anticipated that the various cultural business forums that have been initiated as a result of the pandemic will become lasting assets in terms of our strategic partnership working with the sector.

##### 1.3 Online delivery of existing annual programmes

The Cultural Development Team delivers an annual programme of inclusive and relevant cultural activities designed to deliver community cohesion, educational opportunities, employment opportunities and health and wellbeing initiatives - the five themes in the Arts and Cultural Strategy.

During 2020, we aimed to keep as many of these activities going as possible, in new, mainly online formats, with the aim of connecting communities and mitigating the loss of significant cultural events. The following initiatives took place:

### 1.3.1 Discover Young Hackney, youth arts festival

This is a year-round programme of cultural activities delivered for and by young people aged 11 - 24. Every year, a wide range of arts and cultural organisations are commissioned to create accessible and exciting opportunities for young people to engage in culture, and to highlight pathways to further training and employment.

In 2020 the programme was delivered through a combination of online and face to face activity, when allowed. Forthcoming highlights include the Alter Ego talent show, hosted by Hackney Empire, and a 'Digital Mural' project involving a series of projections in the Hackney Central area.

### 1.3.2 Windrush Generations Festival

The Windrush Generations Festival celebrates the contributions of Hackney's Windrush generation with events, educational resources and activities for all ages. The programme honours the important contributions of the Windrush community in Hackney. Typically the programme involves events that bring people together to celebrate and remember.

In 2020 the programme was delivered entirely online, on LoveHackney.com. Highlights included original songs written by Windrush seniors, access to historic/heritage collections revealed by Hackney Archives and Hackney Museum, and a live DJ music event.

### 1.3.3 Hackney Carnival

Please see the separate paper on the Hackney Carnival in 2020.

### 1.3.4 Black History Season

Hackney's Black History programme typically spans a season of activities from October to December, and aims to make Hackney even more inclusive, representative and celebratory of its rich migration story of African and Caribbean communities settling in Hackney and beyond. This was particularly important in 2020 in the context of Hackney's Black Lives Matter motion and the Council's commitments towards ensuring we are an anti-racist borough.

In 2020 the programme was intended to be a mix of online and face to face events, but due to the on-going restrictions, the face to face events were postponed, including a series of guided Black History walks, the Windrush Portrait Photography project, and a Windrush Jazz event.

The online programme featured a Black History poster map, a Windrush Cricket Callout, an 'Archiving your history project with Hackney Archives, an Afrikan Heritage Writers Zoom call that paid homage to the Windrush generation, and a collection of poetry and artwork celebrating the essence of Windrush led by Friends of Woodberry Down community club.

### 1.3.5 Christmas and Chanukkah celebrations

Hackney Council usually organises a Christmas Lights event and a separate Chanukkah Ceremony in December, held in the Town Hall Square, involving performances by a diversity of artists.

In 2020, these events were cancelled and instead the Culture team created an online video called Hackney's Festive Spirit, posted on Hackney's Youtube account. In addition to acknowledging these important festivals, the video also provided an opportunity to reflect on the past year and what was lost to Hackney, how Hackney's community stepped up to volunteer support and to share hope for the future. The video involved the Mayor, the Speaker and faith leaders from both the Christian and Orthodox Jewish communities as well as NHS workers, volunteers at the food hubs, staff from the Waste team and performances and artwork by local schools.

### 1.3.6 Hackney Circle, for over 55s

Hackney Circle is the council's free membership scheme that connects Hackney's older residents to the borough's creative and cultural businesses. In normal times, the Hackney Circle offers face to face opportunities for its 350 members to socialise and engage in the borough's world class cultural activities.

During the pandemic, the Hackney Circle has shared links to the various online opportunities to keep fit and engage in culture. We have also worked closely with Mortar, a key community and business partner, to deliver pilot 'Learn to weave with Make Town' workshops, comprising deliveries of bags of craft materials to participants homes' plus online interaction to enable communal making sessions to take place.

### 1.3.7 Hackney Pride 365 Festival

The Council launched its Hackney Pride 365 festival to celebrate the borough's historic, diverse and boundary-breaking LGBTQIA+ community in 2017. The festival typically runs all year, with community-led events at Hackney's venues and outdoor spaces.

In 2020, the full scale Hackney Pride 365 festival wasn't possible to deliver partly due to the redeployment of the relevant Cultural Development Manager to another service within the council. However, two LGBTQI+ projects were supported by the Cultural Development Team; one of which involved supporting fundraising for an online project by Faggamuffin, a group of soundsystem stakeholders, and another was a commission for an LGBTQI+ young people's project, as part of Discover Young Hackney.

## **1.4 Initiatives that have not gone ahead**

### 1.4.1 Dalston Children's Festival

The festival partners were unable to deliver the festival, either as socially distanced experiences or online. This was because some key individuals in the Dalston Children's Network were furloughed, other partners had changed priorities, and it was felt that there would be little value in developing a digital alternative. This will be revisited with the partners with a view to resuming activity in autumn 2021 or summer 2022.

## **1.5 Equalities-focused work**

In addition to maintaining as much of the regular programme of activity as possible, the Culture team has led on initiatives responding to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and the racial inequalities that have been recently been revealed, through two cultural projects:

### **1.5.1 Mayor's review of the naming of landmarks, streets and public spaces**

The review was established in June to listen to the views of residents about how to tackle public space names associated with the slave trade. Central to this is a steering group made up of local cultural historians, community leaders, young people and other residents. The group has developed a series of recommendations on the decision making and renaming of contentious sites across the borough.

The steering group's recommendations have started to be delivered; Cassland Road Gardens, named after Sir John Cass, a Director of the Royal African Company, had its existing signage removed in December 2020 and will be renamed.

Hackney Council is inviting members of the public to submit ideas for names of future roads, buildings, parks and other public spaces on the new Hackney Naming Hub, to crowdsource names to make the borough's spaces more inclusive.

The Council is playing a key role in the capital towards achieving greater diversity of representation across the public realm.

### **1.5.2 The announcement of two new permanent public artworks to pay tribute to the Windrush Generation**

Artists Thomas J Price and Veronica Ryan have been commissioned to create two new individual public artworks celebrating and honouring Hackney's Windrush Generation, the first permanent public sculptures to do so in the UK.

The Culture team is currently fundraising for the works, which will be installed in two different locations at the heart of civic and community life in the borough, including outside Hackney Town Hall. The works will serve as a permanent expression of solidarity with the Windrush Generation, a recognition of the hugely significant contribution they have made to life in Hackney and the UK, and will symbolise the ongoing commitment from the borough to provide refuge and welcome to worldwide migrants.

## **1.6 Working outdoors**

There has been a significant increase in interest from artists and cultural organisations in bringing arts and culture outdoors.

There was a strong interest from the theatre sector in delivering outdoor theatre performances during the first lockdown. The Council was unable to support these requests due to the government restrictions at the time.

More recently, there have been a number of requests to assist artists in finding locations for the display of artworks in the public realm and we envisage that this trend will continue. The Culture team is working closely with the Regeneration and the Leisure and Green Spaces teams to respond to the enquiries and facilitate where possible.

In addition to the the above requests for temporary projects, and in addition to the two Windrush art commissions mentioned in 1.5.2, the Culture team has worked closely with the Leisure and Green Spaces team during 2020 to develop a series of permanent / semi permanent artworks in Hackney's public realm:

### **1.6.1 Stik artwork in Hoxton Square**

A popular new artwork donated by the artist Stik entitled 'Holding Hands' was installed in Hoxton Square after years of development and planning.

### **1.6.3 Stik Artwork Commissioning fund**

The artist Stik has donated £220,000 to Hackney Council to enable a programme of future commissions for other artists. A commissioning framework is currently being developed.

### **1.6.2 Abney Park Cemetery**

The chapel in Abney Park Cemetery is currently being restored, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Artists will be commissioned to create artwork for the stained glass windows of the chapel.

In the context of the above activity, a new public art policy is being developed for the borough.

## **1.7 Additional projects for 2021/22**

### **1.7.1 Arts and Health**

The council is preparing to establish a new Arts and Health Network for Hackney and also the City, aligning with the work of the City and Hackney CCG. The network will capitalise upon and potentially coordinate some of the excellent work that the sector already delivers to support local residents' health and wellbeing. The network will focus on the following areas:

- Social prescribing
- Older residents and the negative effects of isolation
- Mental health in children and young people

The network will meet quarterly (in person or online) with a programme of presentations, discussions and projects to work on together, aligned with Hackney's Arts and Cultural Strategy, Ageing Well Strategy, JSNA for the City and Hackney CCG and other strategies relating to the City / Culture Mile.

The council has already formed a partnership that has submitted an application to Arts Council England's Thriving Communities Fund. The project aims to develop a strategic approach to social prescribing in the City and Hackney. There are many arts and cultural organisations with huge amounts of expertise to offer but they are not currently connecting with the health sector, who are in vital need of support during the pandemic. If the bid is successful, a foundational training programme will demystify social prescribing; provide a space to connect sectors, establish a common language, and expand GPs and link workers' knowledge of community projects available for their patients.

#### 1.7.2 NCIL commissioning pot

The council is planning to release a significant investment into the arts and cultural sector through the Neighbourhood CIL Planning gain. The launch of this fund has been delayed due to the impact of the cyberattack.

The fund will be used to commission projects that facilitate community engagement in a creative activity and relate to the objectives of the Arts and Cultural Strategy

Consulted organisations have advised the council that they would value having funding to experiment and to find new ways of working; this has informed the development of the fund's commissioning criteria, currently being devised by the Planning service.

Examples of potential proposals discussed so far with the cultural business forums to date include:

##### Employment

Music venues are interested in developing new learning programmes that enable young people to be upskilled in videography, media, sound recording etc. This is in response to a predicted high demand for technical roles relating to streaming.

##### Education

Heritage and visual arts organisations are keen to find new, Covid-safe ways to deliver activities for school groups.

##### Health and wellbeing

Members of Hackney's Discover Young Hackney Network have expressed interest in developing cultural programmes that support the mental health of young people as they transition back into their everyday school and educational environments.

A range of organisations, including the Dementia Friendly Community, that have previously delivered regular programmes for older residents are interested in sustaining their engagement, to support those most at risk from the negative impact of social isolation.

### Community Cohesion

Theatres who have established connections with vulnerable groups have articulated a desire to deliver cultural programmes to enable communities to reconnect after the crisis in safe spaces, and overcome entrenched experiences of isolation.

## **2. How the service areas are addressing the digital divide to ensure the residents who are digitally excluded can get access to support and services.**

The drive to digitise cultural programmes has brought new opportunities that can be capitalised upon in the future, but equally, it risks exacerbating inequalities without accompanying measures.

There are two arts-led pilot projects that have addressed this in relation to Hackney's older residents, many of whom have no access to digital devices, or lack confidence in using them. These pilot projects provide templates for further engagement.

### 2.1 Hackney Social Radio

The Cultural Development Team has supported the development of Hackney Social Radio, led by Immediate Theatre in response to the digital isolation experienced by older residents during the pandemic.

The programme addresses digital isolation amongst older people by “creating a sense of community through the airwaves”. Listeners can tune in using non-digital devices, and the programmes are broadcast on Resonance 104.4FM.

Broadcasting weekly on Wednesdays, programmes feature music requests, audience phone-ins, stories from the community, features from local artists, interviews and advice from experts with regular up-to-date information about where to access help and support.

### 2.2 Hackney Circle

As outlined in 1.3.6, the Hackney Circle is the council-led free membership scheme that connects Hackney's older residents to the borough's creative and cultural businesses.

During the pandemic, letters have been sent to those members without email addresses to keep them informed and connected - the most recent mailout included a flier to Hackney Social Radio.

15 members of the Hackney Circle were the first cohort of older residents to take part in the council's Digital Buddies Scheme, led by the Digital Inclusion Team, whereby older residents are teamed up with a local secondary school pupil who supports them to develop new digital skills.

The Digital Inclusion Team has also worked closely with Hackney Circle members to test out new video tutorials for the 'Improve Your Digital Skills' page of the council's website.

A pilot project developed with Mortar Studios, a key community and business partner, delivered pilot 'Learn to weave with Make Town' workshops, comprising deliveries of bags of craft materials to participants' homes. Participants told us that this project decreased loneliness by 62%.

In partnership with Mortar Studios, we are now exploring how the pilot 'craft bag' project template can be shared with other partners, such as Hackney's Housing service and other housing associations in Hackney.

One potential housing partner is already in the process of establishing a Sparko TV community (which doesn't require WiFi, users can access the service using their landline phones). The Hackney Circle can potentially provide high quality craft activities for those Hackney-based Sparko viewers.