

Bromsgrove Arts Alive's Vision for Artrix **as a Community Arts Centre**

‘The Covid 19 crisis has raised issues around our relationship to cities and the environment, travel, home working and our offer to local communities. What we do know is the arts provide vital space for people to connect, that culture is a key part of what makes society cohere and flourish, and we should be working tirelessly to ensure they are at the heart of the new green shoots of recovery.’

The closure of the Artrix provides a unique opportunity to create a 21st Century Community Arts Centre to serve all sectors of Bromsgrove's community and this quote from Sir Nicholas Kenyon (MD of the Barbican Centre) emphasises the key role that re-opening Artrix should play in helping our community recover from the present pandemic.

The forty-nine organisations affiliated as BAA speak to you with one voice. We want to work with and support the Holding Trust and Bromsgrove District Council to find a permanent and sustainable way forward to secure this essential community asset for the future of the town.

Sadly, hindsight tells us that over the fifteen years of its existence activities at the Artrix have been largely dictated by the contractual need of HoW College's daytime educational needs. This meant that it was limited in the main to evening activity.

When the HoW College contract ended in 2016 its support funding to Artrix ended. It was difficult at that time to rapidly introduce a range of profitable daytime arts activities. Artrix's 'theatre' orientation probably did not assist.

We now set out our proposals to reopen a newly fledged Artrix as a Community Arts Centre. The concept builds on the old Artrix's reputation for quality of performance; retains a full programme for the theatre but would add a wide range of artistic and cultural opportunities throughout the day for the whole community of Bromsgrove.

Our proposals require a radical change in approach for both management and marketing. It also is a plan which will require careful costing to ensure that money raised through council tax and from private funding is money shrewdly spent.

1. The Building

Artrix is an exceptional space for any small town. Designed by the renowned architect, Glenn Howells, it has excellent acoustics. Many of the necessary re-purposing criteria to become an Arts Centre are set out in the District Council supported and Arts Council England funded 'Tell Me What You Want' (TMWYW) research project findings which have already been made available to the Council.

Its space will need to be affordable and flexible.

The large theatre space, with its built in flexible seating, has been underused. The mechanism to change the seating set up is slow and laborious and requires modernisation. Artrix also has the studio and two relatively small enclosed spaces for small group working. The key needs are alterations to allow the theatre space to be rapidly split and optimised for different activities plus improvement of the smaller spaces to accommodate daytime use by our existing wide range of arts and cultural activity.

The Arts are increasingly moving to digital forms and digital delivery – a shift that is being accelerated by the current COVID 19 restrictions. Bromsgrove has no publically accessible facility with digital capability so any new arts centre must be equipped for this.

To achieve our vision, a theatre designer/architect would be needed to produce the optimisation of the new concept and the investment required.

2. The Programme

Prior to closure the Artrix management focussed primarily on theatre and music. However, it had successfully introduced streaming of performances from venues such as The National Theatre and the showing of popular arts oriented films. This can clearly be maintained and expanded; encouragement of local amateur drama groups, operatic societies, orchestras, singers, community shows, music groups, schools and clubs can also produce better use of the theatre area.

We propose a major initiative to introduce all sorts of art forms and activities – including visual arts, dance, the spoken word, digital and film making – to make full use of the facilities from morning to evening.

BAA is currently undertaking a structured review of what is offered by other arts centres of similar size and location and an analysis of what could be offered. A preliminary analysis is attached and this can be expanded to further inform the proposal for a Community Arts Centre.

3. Outreach to the Community

Our TMWYW research identified a number of groups in Bromsgrove that should be more engaged in arts and cultural activities viz. the disengaged elderly, young people post school aged 16 to 20, parents with young children and the economically disadvantaged in certain wards. A new Community Arts Centre would play a major role in delivering tailored programmes to attract these important groups.

Existing arts organisations currently have difficulty finding affordable space in which to rehearse, perform or carry out their activities. A proactive programme from a centrally based Arts Centre to engage these groups is urgently needed.

4. Outreach to Schools and Youth Organisations

Arts activity in most schools' curricula is in serious decline. Sadly the important outreach work done by the Learning and Engagement Coordinator once employed

by the Artrix stopped several years ago. So proactive work needs to be included in our planning to encourage all local primary and secondary schools to participate. Such a targeted approach should include the disenfranchised 16-20 age group identified in our TMWYW report as part of the aim of the new Community Arts Centre. A preliminary study, perhaps with the collaboration of the Severn Arts organisation, could establish the funding requirement and how that could be met.

5. Access

As a public building, the new Community Arts Centre will need to comply with legislation regarding disability access and facilities. Given the vision for it to serve the whole community, including the disadvantaged, those issues must be taken into consideration in any remodelling of the building.

Sustainability will require current car park issues to be resolved. HoW College owns the car park. Their introduction last year of parking charges without facilities for easy public payment caused a 20% drop in attendance numbers at the Artrix with an adverse effect on its income. The payment charges may not be an issue but ease of payment is and must be corrected to ensure optimised use of the new centre.

6. Management

Although the Artrix's land and building is owned by the Council a complicated two tier arrangement was in place to manage it. A 'Holding Trust', holds ownership on trust to the Council of the land and building; an 'Operating Trust' operated the theatre. The theatre became financially unsustainable and chose to go into liquidation. It was unfortunate that the now defunct 'Operating Trust' did not proactively engage with the wider arts community in Bromsgrove particularly when serious financial issues arose from the termination of the HoW contract.

We are pleased that subsequently, with finance from the District Council, the Holding Trust has recently purchased the theatre assets from the appointed Liquidator and is now tasked with reopening the facility.

Conclusion

We believe that our vision of a Community Arts Centre can be achieved. To offset the past it is our opinion that to be successful the future overall management structure should draw volunteers/people from within the BAA community who not only represent the arts, culture and heritage in Bromsgrove but have members who possess relevant management, legal and financial skills.

May we repeat that we wish to work alongside and support the Holding Trust and Bromsgrove District Council and to find a permanent and sustainable way forward to bring our vision of this essential community project to fruition.

We hope that we can meet soon online or face to face to start that process.

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