

Statement to B&NES Council, 12th September 2013

David Metcalfe, Co-Chair of the Cultural Forum for the Bath Area

The Cultural Forum for the Bath Area champions the interests of around 80 diverse cultural sector enterprises operating in the city of Bath and the surrounding districts. We're one of the Council's key partners implementing B&NES' Cultural Strategy and, among other things, deliver, under contract with the Council, a programme of activity to improve the capacity and connectivity of the area's cultural sector.

The Cultural Forum applauds the withdrawal of the draft Arts Development Strategy 2014-2017 from its intended consideration by the Cabinet yesterday. In our view the document was narrowly focused, not in the best interests of the arts sector as a whole, and didn't make enough of what the arts offers in terms of economic impact and social benefit. Consequently, we're excited by the proposed development of a wider 'Place Strategy' to embrace economic development, destination management, tourism, events and the arts; and we look forward to contributing to the development of this wider, joined-up strategic approach in due course.

What we're really concerned about now, though, is the interim Arts Development Business Plan 2014-2015 – so I'd like to make a few key points about it on behalf of our members as a whole.

- It's great that the Council is continuing to invest in arts activity, through grants, contracts and commissions under the Business Plan; but we're concerned that the far-reaching implications of implementing the Plan have not been fully discussed at Cabinet.
- We're very worried that the radically different and unilaterally introduced commissioning process will prove divisive among our members, damaging to the existing vibrant arts ecology, and seriously strain the more cooperative and connected way of partnership working the arts sector now enjoys and which the Cultural Forum has championed. This isn't because we disagree with commissioning in principle: it's because we're concerned about the nature of the short-term business plan that's driving it, and because the new process is being introduced in a rush.

- We're extremely concerned that, if there are major cuts to key arts organisations resulting from this new approach, there is a real risk that the arts sector in B&NES will lose major funding from the Arts Council England and the potential for cultural funding from the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership.

So, what we'd like to ask for is:

- Time – say a year – to develop a better procedure (to introduce once the wider 'Place Strategy' has been developed) which would be more soundly-based and expertly advised on – not to mention less onerous in terms of administrative overheads for both our member organisations and the B&NES Arts Development Team.
- That this should be a partnership process, with a Steering Group bringing in expertise from the Arts Council England, the Local Enterprise Partnership, the University of Bath and Bath Spa University.
- That, in the meantime, the contracts and commissions element set out in the new Business Plan is either suspended or operated in practice to take account of the concerns mentioned above.

We therefore look to you to decide to modify the implementation of the Arts Development Business Plan 2014-15 as requested to ensure B&NES benefits from a visionary and vibrant arts policy.

Thank you for listening.