

ARTS NETWORK FOR THE GREATER BRISTOL AREA

A discussion document submitted by North Somerset Arts

RESEARCH

As a pilot project provide financial support to research and create a database of the many local arts organisations and studio based arts educators in the greater Bristol area.

BUILDING ON EXISTING RESOURCES

There is an extensive and diverse range of small arts organisations throughout the Bristol area. These organisations seek to provide artists at all levels with exhibiting opportunities, from annual exhibitions to open studio and arts week events. They also seek to keep their artists informed about events, educational opportunities, residencies, grants and commission possibilities. Many use digital media, Facebook, Twitter, e-newsletters etc. The bigger ones are resourced with varying degrees of expert administration help, others rely on dedicated artist members and friends.

A CONNECTED NETWORK

The richness of this regional arts scene is something that can be developed to provide a high standard of visual arts for local audiences, if it were better resourced and more connected.

The aim would be to build a creative arts network for the greater Bristol area. This network would be able to form informal alliances and share resources to provide better and more frequent opportunities for artists, to exhibit and share knowledge, also attract artists with a national profile to give talks and exhibit alongside local groups. Hopefully, this would have the benefit of nurturing the next generation of artists and really involving and engaging local audiences for the arts. Creating something living, constantly changing, embracing the needs of all its participants, whilst challenging perceptions and raising expectations.

WHO COULD DO THIS WORK?

Some key organisations could be resourced to carry out this work together. The RWA could have a pivotal role, other area organisations with existing administrative help such as North Somerset Arts would be essential to provide the necessary balance. Arts educators such as Weston College, South Gloucestershire College, City of Bristol College and UWE could be invited to give some input. It would be advisable for a key group to draw up a comprehensive brief and maybe create a three-year post for a project leader. The first step being to research existing provision and create a database of interested organisations. Later work would concentrate on development and delivery.

WHY IS SUPPORT NEEDED?

Arts Trails and Open Studio events provide an easy entrance point for emerging artists and makers who have just completed an art degree or other qualification, they also support older artists returning to their first love after years of work. They are well supported by the local population who may never have visited a gallery, or have any intention to do so. They can provide a platform for self-taught artists and street artists.

The organisations who run these events are most likely to be headed up by talented, motivated artists who wish to further their practice. Organising events puts a great strain on their creative energies. Chasing small grants and sponsors in order to pay for everything that's needed is a nail biting process. If arts groups can work together they can do more ambitious projects like pop up galleries, perhaps in an empty warehouse with a scaffolding rig and planks. Or take short term lets on empty shops. Today's economic climate means that exhibition spaces to hire are very difficult to find and small Art Galleries are no longer felt to be a viable prospect in Bristol. North Somerset has never had a major arts centre to serve its population, local history and culture suffer greatly in these circumstances.

The result is, that all too often, Art Trails and Open Studios do not lead to artists developing their work and moving both it and their audience on to a different level. However, if the local art scene were better connected, many more opportunities may become available. In particular out of this a strategy could be formulated to assist and support young emerging artists.

WHO WILL BENEFIT?

In the same way that City of Culture status can revitalise a whole area, by restoring pride in its varied history and culture, then demonstrating respect for the local arts scene by giving it official support would allow it to grow and connect, acting as a stimulus for the arts and allowing talent which may otherwise be stultified to emerge. This collaborative approach would provide a melting pot for ideas, which could bring diverse communities together and challenge long held stereotypes both about art and different cultures.

This would be in line with and support North Somerset Arts future strategic aim to create a Major Arts/Cultural Centre within the region available to all.

It has to be an experiment worth taking.

CONCLUSION

Local artists and artisans scratch a small living by relying on their network organisations to provide regular exhibiting opportunities. They have also become key educators in their particular media, by offering studio based classes, often passing on knowledge and skills that would otherwise be lost, because current art education no longer covers their media. What they do enhances the lives of many people. They provide culture, history and knowledge at a very local level and as such are much valued by their communities.

There are plenty of local arts clubs throughout the Greater Bristol area. How much better would it be if they could work together to enrich regional culture, rather than be set up to compete with each other?

**TJFK /North Somerset Arts
14/11/17**