

A CREATIVE GRAVESHAM

An Arts and Cultural Strategy for Gravesham 2020 - 2025

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Introduction by Councillor Shane Mochrie-Cox,
Cabinet Member for Community & Leisure



The role of the arts and culture in building strong, cohesive communities has long been recognised. Cultural activity brings together communities, promotes social cohesion, and encourages greater civic participation fostering a spirit of cooperation and support. We have a diverse community in Gravesham across many different cultures, socio economic backgrounds, ages and philosophical outlooks. In a Borough with such diverse communities, the arts and culture have a vital role to play in drawing us together.

Gravesham Borough Council recognises the importance of arts and culture in creating a Borough that people are proud to call home and has a long-standing commitment to supporting the sector and this Administration made a commitment to the people of Gravesham to support and develop our arts and culture and showcase the very best of Gravesham's creative and cultural talent.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown hit the arts and culture community particularly hard nationwide and has left question marks over the future of theatres, galleries, arts projects and community groups as they struggle to recover from the financial impact.

Gravesham is home to many artists and arts organisations and Gravesham Borough Council recognises the value they bring to our Borough and is committed to supporting this sector at this time and working with them to bring great arts and culture to Gravesham in the future.

This strategy will play an important role in helping the sector in the Borough not just to recover but to develop and thrive with some exciting new initiatives planned and reaffirms the council's unstinting support for all those individuals and organisations contributing to what has always been a vibrant and vital part of life in Gravesham

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shane Mochrie-Cox'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

**Councillor Shane Mochrie-Cox
Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure**

INTRODUCTION AND VISION

Arts and Culture in Gravesham have held a central space in the borough for many years. Annually the area has a multitude of regular festivals and events attracting a large number of residents and, indeed visitors from well beyond the borough lines. These activities are as diverse as the Riverside music festival, St George's day celebrations, Eid, Diwali and Chinese New Year. Recently the Fringe Festival and Estuary festivals have begun to make their way into the firmament of Gravesham's cultural offer.

In addition to the landmark activities there are organisations developing and presenting work throughout the year. Regular events at the council's flagship venue, The Woodville, range from comedy club to pantomime, music events to award winning contemporary drama and they attract a strong audience. The cinema audiences have been amongst the first to return after the pandemic lockdown in 2020 and patrons have been enthusiastic to experience outdoor work whilst the venues have been closed. The outdoor venues represent an important part of the recovery process for the borough beyond Covid.

Cultural activity is not limited to the large venues, partner organisations such as the lightship LV21 (moored at St Andrews Quay), Northfleet Big Local, The Gr@nd Healthy Living Centre and NPO's such as Cohesion + are creating important and popular events in Gravesham throughout the year. In addition the Borough Market is also developing a strand of arts programming. The creation of Gravesham Arts Salon (GAS) in 2016 has brought together many of the artists and creative organisations working in the borough. This is a flexible constituted network that has developed sufficiently to submit successful funding bids and is an intrinsic part of the delivery of this strategy.

Whilst it is true that the umbrella term of 'Arts and Culture' can be used to describe these activities, and many more enjoyable aspects of living in Gravesham, most of those attending are just enjoying the buzz of living in a borough that is fun and adventurous and where there is always something happening.

The prevailing intention of all of Gravesham's activities has been to work with and for the community - a community which is rich and diverse. This strategy will not swerve from that intention, rather it will take the building blocks of the last 5 years in which over 500,000 people engaged in cultural activities and develop a thriving cultural infrastructure for all residents and visitors to enjoy.

Build on the strong legacy of community events and support creativity and cultural cohesion within the borough.

Resident comment

It will recognise the strong foundations that have been laid and build a sustainable creative future for Gravesham firmly establishing its position as a cultural lynchpin on the North Kent coast. This aim is firmly embedded in the council's corporate plan.

This strategy is a plan for the next five years until 2025 and outlines how the aims identified can be achieved with strong leadership and aspiration and partnerships

with key organisations in our borough. The strategy is ambitious but realistic and must be a living document that can adapt and grow with the times.

To ensure that this strategy remains relevant and focused it will be reviewed regularly, action plans will be drawn up annually and the reporting of results will be part of the council's annual review.

Make it in Gravesham has been developed consulting with our residents and visitors, our artists and our creative partners, our businesses and community organisations and we will continue to consult and work with them throughout the life of this strategy to keep it vibrant and relevant in the coming decade.

VISION

This strategy has been developed in consultation with residents, partners, local business and the wider cultural sector. The vision and priorities have been identified through surveys and steering groups and are embedded within the council's corporate plan and other relevant strategies.

'Gravesham will be the cultural and artistic hub of North Kent. Defined by a thriving artistic community and a diverse, innovative and accessible programme of events for residents and visitors to enjoy.'

CONTEXT

To develop and deliver a strategy during a period of turmoil and upheaval is to be given the opportunity to see the world anew, to recognise our strengths and our abilities and to emerge with a flexible and visionary plan for our future. In order to ensure that we are aligned across the borough, the nation and the sector we have created the arts and culture strategy paying particular attention to the strategies that surround it and the responses of our residents and partners.

Strategic Position

Gravesham Borough Council Corporate Plan

The arts and culture have been established as aims within the council's corporate plan. The vision of the overall plan is to 'deliver a Gravesham to be proud of' with 3 overarching objectives – People, Place and Progress . The Place objective identifies the council's commitments to arts and culture.

Place – Gravesham has a proud heritage and benefits from a strong, diverse local community. The plan has committed to a connected community with the following cultural assurances.

- Enhancing the borough's cultural offer.
- Promoting Gravesham's arts and heritage.

Gravesham is a borough of significant cultural heritage with a strong sense of community, something that the council commits to nurture in delivering a place where people want to live, work and enjoy. The council recognizes that it has the opportunity to bring people together, helping to consult, educate and celebrate in building a cohesive community. This identity extends to the cultural sector and the council understands the fundamental role that arts and culture will play in shaping a Gravesham for the future. These commitments are brought together to embed a responsibility to further develop the borough's physical heritage and strong arts offer.

In addition to the direct references to enhancing the borough's arts, culture and heritage offer the council are driving forward an ambitious town centre regeneration agenda that includes the creation of new outdoor spaces as well as a performance venue including a 500 seat theatre, cinema and studio space.

The arts and culture strategy will be delivered as part of a large volume of strategic work being undertaken by the council including the heritage and tourism strategy and the Gravesham Borough Market strategy

Arts Council England (ACE)

In recent years we have worked with ACE to further enhance the arts and cultural offer in our borough. We have had success with funding for one off projects such as Gravesham Riverside Fringe and we enjoy an open dialogue with the arts council. We have created the arts and culture strategy with the new Arts Council plan – Let's Create 2020 – 2030. We have recognised where we have the opportunity to work with our community and ACE to develop our arts and culture offer responding to the outcomes identified in Let's Create

- Creative People
- Cultural Communities
- A Creative and cultural country

A town where people from outside the borough would recognise Gravesend as a town that is defined in a large part by its inclusive and vibrant creative and cultural identity.

Resident comment

Kent County Council

Kent County Council published their 10 year cultural ambition for Kent in 2017 with the vision that 'by 2027 Kent will be a confident, vibrant county, where extraordinary cultural activity is available that enriches and transforms the lives of everyone'

KCC have identified three key actions to support this vision

- Create – supporting and enabling the presentation of excellent art and the growth of world class creative productivity
- Innovate – developing original and creative ideas, encouraging creative leadership and supporting skills and learning
- Sustain – delivering access to finance, support for businesses, smarter ways of working, and empowering entrepreneurship.

Culture for any age promoting creativity, alternative art/music and the town itself.

Resident comment

Arts Partners and Colleagues

Gravesham is home to many exciting artists and creatives and we have been very active in recent years in developing our relationships with our arts partners. The arts and cultural strategy has been formed in consultation with those colleagues to ensure that we can deliver a holistic and realistic plan for the next five years with partner and community involvement at its core.

Gravesham is home to 39 creative businesses including the Panic Rooms, a cluster of escape rooms representing the largest in the country. The London Resort is also in development which has the potential to bring more creative business into the area.

Gravesham [could be] a place where multicultural artists across all genres are supported to make , develop and show their work and where the cultural offer for audiences and participants is always exciting and varied.

Partner comment

Response to context

Make it in Gravesham, the arts and culture strategy has responded the context of our world in 2020 and developed the following key priorities.

- Growing a cultural and creative community
- Supporting and developing artists and creatives
- Developing a vibrant and aspirational arts and cultural events programme
- Enhancing and promoting our assets and heritage
- Developing our children and young people creatively.

In developing these priorities we have listened to our residents and partners through the engagement we have undertaken and recognised the synergy with relevant strategies We believe that they represent aims that are achievable and sustainable and we look forward to delivering them with our partners and our community.

PRIORITIES

The council is committed to ensuring that the cultural offer of the borough reflects its diversity and vibrancy. This strategy is the first step towards achieving this and the priorities that have been identified are as a result of our engagement with our residents and our artists community.

Delivering on those priorities with a detailed plan and time frame throughout the life of this strategy will support the cultural assurances within the corporate plan.

Growing a cultural and creative community

Gravesham is home to some incredible artists and arts organisations who, in turn are working with our communities to expand our offer making it accessible, vibrant and interesting and makes everyone feel included. We will work with our regeneration partners to establish arts and culture in our built environment. We will embed our cultural vision in our policies and develop our community through in the following ways.

- Continually explore opportunities for arts and culture around the Borough
- Establishing overarching recognition of the value of arts and culture in the borough throughout council policy. Striving to reinforce the cultural agenda centrally as a vehicle for stronger place making and community cohesion.
- Develop a cluster of 'Make it' spaces for artists to make, exhibit and present work as well as develop their own artistic practice. The work on this has already begun with the St Georges and St Andrews arts centre
- Establishing a new theatre space for Gravesham that is fit for purpose and provides a cultural community hub for the borough whilst ensuring high quality accessible creative content. Part of the St Georges regeneration programme
- Developing a cultural environment that is no longer solely confined by access to buildings and venues. Responding to the pandemic to ensure our plans are resilient and flexible.
- Establish an Artist in Residence Scheme – we will establish a scheme for artists to work in Gravesham with our community developing their practice and giving our residents and visitors high quality experiences and opportunities.
- Develop the skills and diversity of our cultural workforce and that of our partners
- Create a volunteer network to support cultural events and the heritage sector and to enhance knowledge and enthusiasm for our assets.

To have a reputation as a destination for lovers of the arts, such that people will travel here for major events and be happy to visit knowing they will find something of interest on offer.

Partner comment

Supporting and developing artists and creatives

Gravesham is home to many exciting artists and creatives with many more planning to relocate to the area. We wish to make a home for artists where they are central to the place making and success of the borough.

- Establishing a grant funding programme for local artists and creatives that can make a real difference to the work that is produced. We will do this with meaningful grants for artists to make work in Gravesham that has relevance to our community.
- Supporting local artists through grants and resources to work in partnership with GBC culture to leverage in funding from other sources to support work developed in and for Gravesham. This strand of work will be to exploit the opportunities that are on offer to ensure that we are driving our cultural agenda and bringing significant additional value to the community.
- Working with our creative businesses and partners to help freelance practitioners grow their practice and take SME's to the next level supporting sustainability.
- Create a directory of assets, artists and creatives to establish joined up thinking within the sector, greater inclusivity for all groups and better understanding of the offer in the community. We will build on the Gravesham Arts Salon model to encourage our artists and creatives to work in partnership both within the borough and over the borders to bring great experiences to our community.
- Ensuring that the live experience remains central to the programme of events at our venues whilst learning from and embracing digital platforms and 'comet' thinking. This sector has been stricken exponentially with the pandemic and we are committing to identifying new ways to deliver the live experience.

Attendance by diverse vibrant communities, fun events for families/ young children, promoting trust and creativity

Resident comment

Establishing a vibrant and aspirational arts and cultural events programme.

Building on the work that has been established over a number of years we have the opportunity to create a festival town. With the pandemic making outdoor activity the most secure option for audiences we will develop that into annual festivals of events.

- Building on existing programmes to establish an annual festival of arts and culture in the summer months
- Accessing other funding streams to build in resilience and sustainability of our offer.
- Ensuring that the diversity that defines the borough is reflected in all our activities
- Encouraging and supporting the enthusiasm for accessing culture across new platforms to develop live/as live festivals
- Creating a culture card that offers residents access to cultural events and activities and embeds knowledge of the sector.
- Ensuring all events are working towards and low carbon borough

Build on the strong legacy of community events and support creativity and cultural cohesion within the borough.

Resident comment

Enhancing and promoting our assets and heritage

- Embed creative delivery and learning opportunities into our open spaces, built heritage locations and River. Creating new ways of interpreting our unique heritage
- Developing an annual series of events that showcase our unique heritage in an innovative way, becoming part of our annual festival programme.
- Enabling our built heritage locations to enhance the visitor experience by developing exciting and engaging displays, exhibitions and interpretation

Thriving. Lots of history but forward looking too. Genuine preservation and celebration of our architecture and heritage.

Residents comment

Developing our children and young people creatively

- Working with youth groups to ensure that our young people are given the chance to work effectively within the creative sector.
- Developing specific funding stream of grants for young people which can be used to leverage in funding from external organisations.
- Working with schools and young people to develop artists in all genres for the future; encouraging new working practices and including digital platforms
- Working with artists and creatives in the borough to develop an educational/learning offer within the cultural delivery programme.
- Working with schools to enable all young people to experience live/as live performance through our programmes and workshops

I would love to think there would clearly be on offer thriving examples of arts, theatre, film, learning the above, using our outside and inside spaces for all ages, possibly including work with local schools and other education establishments. For all ages and cultures in Gravesham to offer and share combined entertainment. We have so much we could learn from each other. I look forward to it.

Resident comment

DELIVERY

To ensure that this strategy remains relevant and focused it will be reviewed regularly, action plans will be drawn up annually and the reporting of results will be part of the council's annual review.

Responsibility for developing the action plans and monitoring delivery will be led by the Cultural Manager with support from the Service Manager, Customer & Theatre Services. Regular reporting of progress will be made to the Council's Management Team and to the Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure.

RESIDENT QUOTES

Cultural and creative hub of North West Kent.

A broad river based calendar of events throughout the year making Gravesham one of the top places to visit from London and the South East.

Vibrant leader with events that are known & attended from across the County & surrounding Counties

PARTNER COMMENTS

To have a reputation as a destination for lovers of the arts, such that people will travel here for major events and be happy to visit knowing they will find something of interest on offer.