

BVL12016

7 January 2011

Birmingham and the arts

Dear Councillors Whitby and Mullaney,

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on the Council's budget planning. I would like to share some observations and suggestions.

1. Birmingham and the arts

- a. Birmingham's Coat of Arms depicts two figures representing on one side, industry and on the other the Arts or Creativity, as we might say in our times. Since the 19th century Birmingham has been an originator, an inventor, in the arts. Over the last twenty five years or so it has set a national example with Symphony Hall, the Ikon Gallery, the Hippodrome, Think Tank, Gas Hall and Water Hall, the restoration of Town Hall, the MAC refurbishment and so on. More importantly, these places – more than buildings – are home to major arts companies, cultural institutions, collections and events. They provide inspiring experiences, image-changing promotions and economic regenerators.
- b. Over this time and building on its past record the city has excelled in music, performance, dance and ballet, fine art and contemporary arts and creativity of all kinds, for local communities and city visitors. It is the first city to have its own Poet Laureate. Pride!

2. The current situation

- a. Currently there is only one new major cultural venture taking shape in which the council is the lead or main player. The Library of Birmingham's rich potential for literature, drama, local and world heritage is incomparable. Its future will be not only to house collections but to be a place of fantastic live programmes for learning and discovery and online innovative creativity. It must also specifically engage the diverse communities of its dynamic city. As the most democratic space for promoting information and learning, knowledge and understanding, it is the doorway to the arts for all future creators and performers.
- b. Crucially, it is connected to the Rep. This puts the shared LOB/REP vision centre stage in cultural regeneration in the UK, if not Europe and beyond. However, this will only make the city famous and draw more and new visitors if exciting and innovative programmes of events and activities emerge as they are intended to. This requires a revenue fund – City Council, business and philanthropy – and a funded management capacity to make it happen.
- c. There has been a recent announcement of a new contemporary art gallery in Eastside through a project led by the Ikon. This fills a

huge gap in the city's provision in the visual arts. To be done well it has to be part of a bigger strategy for the arts in Birmingham and there is presently no obvious place to go for that vision.

- d. Other than these developments, for some years now, evidence of city council leadership in the arts has been lacking. In contrast to that rich 19th and 20th century legacy, nothing new, other than the Library of Birmingham, has captured national headlines. Birmingham is rarely featured in any reviews or arts coverage in the national media; the local press is vastly reduced in scale so there is precious little local coverage.
- e. This is also in contrast to other cities – Newcastle, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, Bristol – which are to varying degrees featured often and therefore benefit from the increased profile and status.
- f. This demands a new approach to action and communications.

3. Moving forward ...

- a. **The Council's role is important.** It is well known that, regardless of diverse funding sources, it is the local authority in any one area, that must play the leading role in any regeneration and growth programmes. It is democratically elected and partners with everyone. This has been the case in Birmingham in the past but the City Council is not currently fulfilling this role.
- b. **Strategic approach to budgeting.** Birmingham City Council will, no doubt, have to make cuts in all areas of funding. What Birmingham must not do is arbitrarily cut across the board. There is an urgent need for an innovative strategy and new thinking in the city – in general and, specifically, in the arts – which only the council can lead as it has the resources, people and central position to orchestrate a wise approach.
- c. **Don't try to do it on your own; involve people.** The City Council should bring together the artists and arts organisations of the city and lead them in a process of interactive thinking and planning. The West Midlands office of Arts Council England – actually here in on our doorstep – should be a key player in this as funder of major institutions, ongoing programmes and new projects. It also possesses enormous skill and experience of how the arts are managed, access to key regional and national partners; it understands what the arts achieve for people, communities and the economy.
- d. **Involve Birmingham people.** The Council must involve citizens in the discussion. There has been little or nothing in Birmingham's sparse media that enables the people of Birmingham to have a say about arts funding. Arts strategy and funding were

- i. not explored at all at the public consultation meetings and
- ii. were hardly mentioned, if at all, in the budget consultation documents

This is a serious failing and should be remedied promptly, preferably in a discussion about the future of the arts in the city and arts investment, as well as specific budgets.

- e. **Promote the city of Birmingham.** Birmingham needs to boost its work – *its thinking, strategy and effort rather than, necessarily, its funding* – in marketing and promoting the city. National media coverage and review of the arts in Birmingham is almost non-existent. I would guess that audiences are traditional, largely the same people coming to events for years. The city needs to nurture new participation bringing young people and those who haven't been before to traditional successful ventures while investing in new contemporary experiences for new and more diverse audiences.
- f. **Communicate now!** The city must get serious about the active use of social networking. It appears – true or not – that the city Council is not exploiting the rich opportunities of web 2.0 interactive technologies. It is tragically detrimental to a major city, any longer, to avoid or restrict participation through the web. Relishing the past does not mean living in the past; move on; it is absolutely urgent that this is remedied. This is where both audiences and creators are to be found, now, and increasingly, in the future.

4. Invest in the best of the legacy, local innovation, brilliant partnerships worldwide. For the arts to be outstanding in Birmingham you must work on three fronts:

- a. **Cooperating with artists, arts bodies** and institutions not just in giving more or less funding. While the arts organisations themselves have huge experience in funding, fundraising and management, the City Council should invest in a support infrastructure to help them especially the smaller arts bodies which may lack capacity. Work with ACE West Midlands to organise this.
- b. **Actively help them** manage their funding challenges; work with them beyond merely handing over a grant to support them in coping with whatever their current budget may be.
- c. **Actively seek additional and external funding** for the arts. A key Government policy – and the City Council's politics mirror those of national Government – is to secure external funding to support the arts. This is common practice for one-off projects and big national arts bodies. Local smaller organisations however, may be less well equipped in both time and experience, to undertake this onerous work. The city council should work with the industry, business and service sectors to lead and support in this area.

5. Core policy: *Maintain our legacy; Make our future*

- a. The City Council's decisions will inform and equip the arts landscape of the city so its decisions are crucial.
- b. Birmingham has a rich past in the arts and it should do everything to maintain that. It is invidious, at this stage to name specific arts organisations or providers but in terms of the city's heritage they are self-evident.
- c. Birmingham has a diverse and young and vibrant community. This community can both create its own arts experiences as well as enjoy the experiences provided by local and major arts organisations. Importantly these are all mutually dependent. It is through rich arts experiences in childhood and in youth that people become active and creative citizens. This in turn ensures a city of harmonious communities and a growing economy.
- d. To build an external image of the city that nurtures local pride and draws national and international attention, the City Council must refresh its promotional offer and get the city "on the map". The current invisibility is driving the city into the ground, as a central national destination. In addition to the LOB/REP development, the City Council must maximise the benefits to everyone that come from a highly visible arts profile.
- e. The city seems better placed to promote its sports offer. Some of that experience needs to rub off so that programmes of international scale and quality are more visible and more associated with Birmingham. There are the most fantastic opportunities, in Music, Dance – both classical and contemporary – the Visual Arts and literature / storytelling and poetry performance. These are under-promoted nationally and should be raised up to create a national presence for the city.

Cuts are no excuse; they are the reason for innovation. Play on!

Your faithfully,