

Report to: Cabinet
Date of meeting: 23 July 2014
Report of: Section Head – Culture and Play
Title: Big Events Programme

1.0 **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report illustrates the background and context of the BIG Events programme. It is the biggest cultural events programme ever staged in Watford and is designed so that there is something for everyone to enjoy.
- 1.2 The newly formed event spaces at the top of the town will be transformed with new activities increasing the numbers of people visiting this area of the town and regeneration of the Parade area as businesses benefit from increased trading opportunities.
- 1.3 As agreed during the budget setting for 2014/15 the events programme is currently subsidised from council reserves for a period of three years and this report outlines what is required to support the programme once this initial funding expires.
- 1.4 Finally, throughout the report the importance of culture and the role it can play is evident in helping to transform, inspire and provide a sense of pride and well being in our town

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 To note the events programme objectives (Appendix 1)
- 2.2 To endorse and support the continued development of the Big Events programme (Appendix 2) and the use of the new events spaces as opportunities for cultural activities.
- 2.3 To note the selection of Stage Electrics to provide the ice rink as an exemption under the Council's Procurement Code.

Contact Officer:

For further information on this report please contact: Gary Oliver – Section Head Culture and Play Telephone extension: 8251 email: gary.oliver@watford.gov.uk

Report approved by: Alan Gough, Head of Customer and Community Services and Manny Lewis Managing Director

3.0 DETAILED PROPOSAL

Background

- 3.1 The magnitude of Watford's economic regeneration programme is likely to be the envy of many towns across the UK. In recent times our two leisure centres; theatre and entertainment venues have been subject to significant capital investment resulting in brand new facilities or major refurbishment. The parks investment programme has seen a steady programme of extensive improvements and the award of the Heritage Lottery Fund recently will transform the facilities in Cassiobury Park.
- 3.2 The agreement to proceed with the Croxley Rail Link will vastly improve the transport infrastructure enabling greater access in and out of London.
- 3.3 The proposed redevelopment of Charter Place and the public realm improvements to the top of the town have and will continue to transform the look and feel of the High Street.
- 3.4 In general, high streets are very important as identified in the Portas Review 2011 which was an independent study into the future of the high streets across Britain. In summary, the review sets out what has led to the decline of high streets. It sets out a vision as to what may need to happen to create new sustainable high streets of the future buzzing with innovation and creativity. It further adds that high streets can be dynamic, lively exciting social places to be and this links into the objectives of the BIG Events programme.
- 3.5 The Portas Review further states that once we invest in and create social capital in the heart of our communities, the economic capital will follow. One of its recommendations is to put in place a "Town Team": a visionary, strategic and strong operational management team for high streets.
- 3.6 So with this in mind, and key to the resurgence of the town centre and unlocking the economic capital, the council set up a town centre co-ordinating group and Cultural Leaders Group. The aim was to help drive forward the town centre strategy to create a balanced, vibrant town centre, encouraging more visitors to stay longer in a safe well maintained environment where businesses are thriving

- 3.7 Following this a Town Centre Partnership has also been formed and a Town Centre Manager appointed to support the ongoing development of this partnership. All of this underpins one of the key aims of the adopted Local Plan Core Strategy, which is to ensure that Watford has a vibrant and vital town centre and maintains its position within the retail hierarchy.

Watford Cultural Leaders

- 3.8 The work of the Watford Cultural Leaders is critical in creating and promoting the vibrancy in our town centre as identified in the town centre strategy. This work involves the commissioning and arranging of exciting cultural performances and events which will in turn attract increased footfall into the town centre. This will enable and present further business trading opportunities and a platform for businesses to thrive in the future.
- 3.9 In November 2013, the Watford Cultural Leaders Group was tasked with developing an events programme for the newly created events space in the town centre. This programme is to be supported by council reserves over a period of 3 years, the available funds reducing each year of the programme. In year 1 the programme is supported by £180,000, year 2 £120,000 and year 3 £60,000 of council reserves.
- 3.10 We are fortunate to have such a strong cultural platform in Watford and as a testimony to this the Cultural Leaders Group developed the BIG Events programme and this was endorsed and launched to stakeholders in March 2014. The first events commenced in and around the events space on the Parade in June 2014 and were officially opened by Elected Mayor Dorothy Thornhill MBE and Mary Portas who said, 'I am delighted to be opening Watford's Big Events. Our high streets are our heartbeats; they form part of the most important social fabric of our community and the way we live.'

BIG Events

- 3.11 Watford Palace Theatre has been commissioned to manage and deliver the programme of BIG Events with the Section Head for Culture and Play overseeing the programme with a virtual events team consisting of external partners and a wide range of council officers. Overall, there are twelve BIG Events which are mostly free to the public, the ice rink being the only chargeable event, as is usual practice and will generate income to help offset the costs.
- 3.12 A separate report to the Elected Mayor approved the underwriting of the costs (£70k) required to procure the ice rink given the timeframes, market situation and specific requirements in order to make the firm arrangements in time. This was done by delegated executive decision dated 4 June 2014 and is listed in the background documents to this report. The ice rink is proposed to run for a period of 6 weeks from December 2014 through to January 2015 and is planned as part of the first year of the events programme. The Palace Theatre has conducted a value for money exercise reviewing three quotes and have selected Stage Electrics, a market leader in the field, to supply the rink. The details of the VFM review by the Palace Theatre were documented in the report to the Mayor and the Cabinet, in accordance with the Council's procurement rules, is asked to note the exemption from full procurement in this case.

- 3.13 The BIG Events programme is in essence a series of 12 spectacular events showcasing a range of cultural genres, arts, dance, music, sport. Visually stunning programmes which are designed to bring the newly transformed town centre and infrastructure to life.
- 3.14 Venues and spaces come to life and artists weave their magic along the High Street thrilling crowds along the Parade and providing a talking point in the heartbeat of our town.
- 3.15 The future delivery of the event objectives clearly has a significant impact in the town centre but most importantly will inspire people, provide opportunities for minds and hearts to grow, increase employment opportunities, footfall and dwell times all adding to the unlocking of economic capital.
- 3.16 The programme is designed around a kaleidoscope of all art forms, a mix of sound, light, movement, colour, comedy and drama which is designed to create those memories that families will talk about in years to come; such is the power of culture.
- 3.17 The BIG Events programme is designed for all to come and enjoy, to be free and accessible and will create inspiring visual, very individual displays, and an intimate display of street theatre. This pulse of activity happening every month will create a stimulating tide of activities all year round.

Summary work to date

- 3.18 The work to date of the Cultural Leaders Events Programme Group has been intense and working within some very tight timescales the team has developed a marketing plan which has used a wide ranging use of media channels. A BIG Events website has been developed (<http://www.watfordbigevents.co.uk/>), with regional and London advertising in bus stops, train stations. The About Watford wrap went out to all residents. A bright and colourful range of professionally produced posters and flyers has been produced, regional and local magazines and newspapers have been targeted. Use of Social Media such as face book, and twitter has ensured a constant stream of positive and targeted advertising.
- 3.19 Finally on Friday the 20th June the Big Events programme was officially opened by Watford's Elected Mayor, Dorothy Thornhill MBE and TV's Mary Portas who wrote the Portas Review, challenging the government back in 2011 to think about our high streets in the future. It was a real success, well attended and had some really positive feedback.
- 3.20 In addition, the Cultural Leaders Group have worked with a wide variety of partners and partnerships. Over 40 organisations are involved in the Big Events production including some of our local arts and sports organisations and clubs. Veolia, SLM and Watford Colosseum some of our major contractual partners have and continue to contribute in supporting the programme.
- 3.21 Key to the success of the overall events programme in town centre is the relationship and support we have with the businesses and retail outlets in the town centre. The newly formed Town Centre Partnership has been engaged with the vision and concept

of the events programme and has given its full support. The Town Centre Manager is a key influence in developing this relationship further and continuing to be an advocate of the events programme. Some of the work will involve encouraging businesses to provide concessions, to actively get engaged in promoting, following a theme and generally providing a menu of ideas and activities that can support the programme.

- 3.22 Each event is taken to the Safety Advisory Group (SAG) meeting once per month. The SAG is a group of officers representing the Police, Fire, Ambulance, WBC Environmental Health and Licensing, Emergency Planning, Herts. County Council Highways. Event safety plans are considered and advice is offered to the events organisers to ensure the events are planned and carried out minimizing risks to people attending and implementing the event plan. There has been a positive contribution from our partners and we are continuing to work very closely with them. Some examples include working with the Police and licensed premises on an alcohol management policy during events days.
- 3.23 Now that the Parade works are finished our licensed premises and businesses are beginning to see the great opportunity for increasing trade. There are currently 25 pavement licences which allow traders to sell alcohol and food within those areas. The pavement Licence create the continental and relaxed look and feel of the town centre which is vital in changing perceptions and attracting increased footfall at the top of the town

Works progressing

- 3.24 It is widely recognised and documented that cultural events and activities can help in unlocking some economic capital. The more activities planned the more it will draw people into an area where they can also spend on secondary activities or use the services on offer. A survey that is available on line and is handed out at each event to help measure the economic impact and marketing effectiveness of the events. This information will be reported back to a variety of audiences including the Cultural Leaders Group and the Town Centre Partnership.
- 3.25 Supporting the overall town offer is the Watford For You partnership and brand and we will be working to help further develop business opportunities through advertising the businesses special offers, vouchers and menu of ideas as the partnership matures and they become integrated into the overall programme.
- 3.26 Furthermore, a project to introduce footfall counters has been secured and these will be placed at strategic sites around the town centre to capture essential information, not just for the events programme, but for monitoring footfall and dwell times in our town centre. We are also currently exploring the possibilities of town centre WiFi which again will bring much needed improvements and enhanced services for people visiting our town.
- 3.27 The new market is scheduled to open in the Autumn and already we have begun to foster the concept of them becoming more involved in the events programme. They have positively accepted that they will be participating and a major partner on the Valentine Food fair. This relationship will further develop as we move into more specialist street markets and providing opportunities for our local market to benefit

from the overall programme.

- 3.28 This year's focus has been very much around making sure we opened the Parade space and delivered a Big Events programme to showcase the ambition and potential for the spaces created. Work is underway for a detailed town wide events policy and procedures which help to support the overall marketing of the product we have now. The concept of being able to fully host and attract national event organisers and sponsors as well as developing our local 'home grown' community brand such as Watford Live so our programme is enriched and develops into a year long programme of activities is an exciting one.
- 3.29 **Longer term**
- 3.30 The current level of funding given to the programme decreases each year. The ambition and desire is to maintain the existing level of the programme and in the future grow but to look at ways of leveraging in income to help support this. This could be in the form of external funding if applicable, sponsorship or financial support from the local traders and businesses along the Parade.
- 3.31 The Town Centre Partnership may have a vital role going forward as the concept of a Business Improvement District takes shape. The possibility of them working alongside the cultural leaders to help develop and shape a programme to suit their needs is a strong one.
- 3.32 Watford has a solid base from which to go forward. There are significant opportunities here. The range of cultural assets across Watford would be the envy of a much bigger town or Borough. We have a wide ranging and strong 'arts community' with up to 100 local organisations and small groups who collectively make a difference in the town and going forward provide us with a strong opportunity to showcase local 'home grown' talent. All the elements exist to make it a great place for culture such as location, transport links, cultural attractions, excellent educational offer, strong communities, good and developing shopping offer, vibrant sports clubs and buzzing night time economy.
- 3.33 The BIG Events programme draws on that cocktail and culture starts to become the 'glue' that helps to harness communities, developers, business, so that the connections are made and maximised.
- 3.34 The link with Business and planners is essential as across the town there are significant developments whereby at the outset events and cultural activities play their part e.g. helping to launch the new market, creating a look and feel in the town that people are proud of, artwork which celebrates the vision of Watford in the future. In addition a review of empty shops at the top of the Town is taking place to develop a positive strategy to engage landlords to bring them into use. A further report on this initiative will follow.
- 3.35 Events and activities in the town centre can provide a framework for transforming the appeal, attraction, movement, place of our night time economy. Giving people a wider choice and changing the perception of what is the cultural offer. In fact the whole infrastructure from the Watford Museum to the West Herts. College can be brought to life through a cultural activities events offer that catapults us forward over time.

Opening up this cultural infrastructure offering the opportunity for diverse live street theatre in places which are accessible provides different communities a sense of ownership and pride.

3.36 This balance of social and economic capital interweave and embrace each other in creating a town that thrives and builds a reputation and identity of increasing cultural significance.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial

4.1.1 The programme currently has funding contained within the existing approved budget. Any increases in the Big Events programme beyond this will require approval as part of the annual budget approval process.

4.2 Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)

4.2.1 There are no legal implications in this report

4.3 Equalities

4.3.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, public bodies are expected to foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not. The diversity of the programming in the Big Events and the role the initiative plays in bringing the community together means that it does support the fostering of good relations across the Watford community.

4.4 Potential Risks

	Potential Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall score
<i>E.g.</i>	Lack of ongoing funding	2	4	8
	Businesses not engaging in the programme	2	4	8
	Poor Marketing Communications campaign	1	4	4
	Attendance figures are low	1	2	3
	Complaints from town centre residents regarding noise and disturbance	2	2	4
<p><i>Those risks scoring 9 or above are considered significant and will need specific attention in project management. They will also be added to the service's Risk Register.</i></p>				

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4.5 **Staffing**

4.5.1 Currently there are no staffing implications contained in this report however as the programme potentially gains more of a significance, scope and size this will need to be reviewed.

4.6 **Accommodation**

4.6.1 None identified in this report.

4.7 **Community Safety**

4.7.1 Each event has an event safety plan that is taken to the Safety Advisory Group for support and advice on maintaining a safe event. Events are designed to be enjoyed by all and are family orientated, it is not intended that there are any concerns over community safety as a result of running events and we continue to work closely with our Police colleagues to ensure the risk to any public disorder is minimised.

4.8 **Sustainability**

4.8.1 The long term financial sustainability of events will rely on a trio of factors including external funding, sponsorship and advertising, business and retail contributions.

Appendix 1 - Watford Town Centre Events Programme Objectives

Appendix 2 – Big Events leaflet

Background Papers

Ice Rink Report – June 4 2014 – Mayor’s Executive Decision

File Reference

None

