

Statement about Arts Cuts in B&NES by Luke John Emmett – July 2017

Firstly, please accept my apologies for not being in attendance tonight. Being self-employed and working professionally within the arts I do not have the luxury, given the current climate here in B&NES of being able to turn down work – a point that I will come back to later.

Arts and culture are an important aspect of the economic and business life of B&NES, but more important than that they are the beating heart that pumps life-blood around the veins of the city. Cultural tourism provides employment in the city and builds on our international reputation as a destination city. In individual communities, arts and culture benefit thousands of people becoming the glue which bonds individuals and communities together.

Participation in arts and culture allows people to grow, learn, think, engage and debate. They create a strong sense of identity, promote diversity and inclusion, sow the seeds of friendship and help build confidence.

Culture is as much about what we have in common as what makes us different.

Currently, in B&NES there is a real lack of ambition and vision with regards to culture. There seems to be a damaging notion that the arts are not important and that investment in them is not economically viable. It is proving incredibly damaging to arts organisations within the city and further afield on a national level. The damaged relationship between B&NES Council and funding bodies such as the Arts Council has had a massively detrimental effect to the City, highlighted once again last week by the announcement of the Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations. In the entirety of B&NES there is only one – Creativity Works in Midsomer Norton. This is due in no small part to B&NES Council's lack of support for the arts. We are now at a stage where the disregard for the arts is costing local organisations investment from funding bodies which could ultimately lead to job losses. The failings have to be placed firmly at the door of our Council cabinet. They have failed the cultural institutes which are the linchpins of our society and are quickly relegating Bath to be a city without ambition – a graveyard for the arts.

The decision to vote through an arts budget cut of £433,000 was incredibly short-sighted and narrow-visioned. The arts budget was never huge, and whereas I fully appreciate some damage was already done by the previous administration when a lot of local organisations lost their regular funding – for this council to cut the entire arts budget by 2019 is a shocking disregard to those of us who are trying to work in the creative industries in Bath.

There have been many failings with the current Council Cabinet. Arts organisations want to be part of the process – we want to help you understand how we work and what we do. We've had little to no chance of doing this. Work with us and it benefits everyone.

Financial decisions by the Council Cabinet do not add up. The arts budget is a relatively small amount of money when you consider the £5mil quoted cost to relocate Bath Central Library, the £3.3mil already wasted on the East of Bath Park and Ride. Recently the Council funded the Bath Bike Tour – which was a one day event and cost £150,000 from Council reserves. There was no cost benefit analysis carried out on this event. No business case. Instead the Council spent £150,000 of tax payers money for something which was over and gone in about 20 seconds. This is not acceptable and in fact is incredibly insulting. Even a third of that money invested in arts and cultural organisations in the city would have benefitted many more people and bought a real return on investment that lasted much longer than a single day.

We are not asking for millions of pounds. We are simply asking you to invest in us and help us to really have an impact and benefit the communities throughout B&NES. The money is there if you really choose to find it.

I was recently at a review meeting for the Cultural and Creative Strategy. It was incredibly clear that much of the strategy had yet to be achieved and is very unlikely to be achieved without proper investment. We were then sent an email pretty much saying it was up to us, the cultural organisations to make it happen. We cannot do this without some form of investment and genuine buy in from the Council.

I ask you once more to reconsider your damaging cuts to arts and culture in Bath. Work with us to help make Bath the centre of culture and creativity it deserves to be. Or let the arts wither and die and allow Bath to become a barren wasteland of missed opportunities.

My first question for the Cabinet members is this:

Will you reconsider cutting the entire arts budget and work with us to find a feasible way forwards?