

**Ann Cullis**  
**B&NES Council**

**22 July 2010**

**Dear Ann,**

**B&NES COUNCIL CULTURAL STRATEGY: REVISE AND REFRESH**

Thank you for consulting FoBRA on your Cultural Strategy refresh. Our comments are set out below.

Best wishes,

**Yours sincerely,**

**Henry Brown, Chairman**

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**General comments**

Culture is an important issue in B&NES, not just in the traditional sense of 'the arts' in Bath, but in the mining and other historical heritage of other parts of the district. The document rightly emphasises the need to support the whole picture, and to do so in a joined-up cross-disciplinary fashion.

We accept that 'the Council can't do everything', particularly with public spending cuts looming. But culture is a vital contributor to the B&NES economy – the historic heritage and cultural events bring most visitors to Bath - and the Council must make an effort to see that it continues to flourish within whatever financial constraints are imposed by central Government.

The document subject to consultation is very strategic, to the extent that it says very little about specific cultural issues. We recognise the need for coordination with other strategies and with other stakeholders, but we should still have expected the document to discuss the specifics. We think it would be better to have a shorter document which cut out all the non-culture related references and concentrated on cultural development in B&NES: what is happening now, what more is needed, and how do we get there.

We quote examples from Bath because we are based here, but we are sure that other stakeholders could quote examples in other parts of the district:

- For decades people have called for Bath to have a proper concert hall. We think the Cultural Strategy should say whether the Council agrees with this and, if it does, how such a facility could be brought about. Is a project

**PROMOTING RESIDENTS' INTERESTS IN BATH**

possible at the Forum or not? Can there be collaboration with the new Music Centre at Monkton Combe School?

- Similarly, there has been much talk of new conference facilities, which would encourage business tourism, in the context of a new rugby stadium. Is the Council encouraging this?
- Festivals are an important part of Bath's culture, and although the document refers to them generically, not one is mentioned specifically.
- Similarly, there is no reference to our Universities and the contribution they can make to the city's culture.
- The document could encourage learning from World Heritage Sites and other beautiful cities abroad. Despite some recent progress, there is a pressing need to address the dirty and dilapidated state of the streets and pavements.
- There should be an agreed policy on use of the most important public spaces, eg the Abbey churchyard, the rectangle of grass below Royal Crescent and Queen Square. These often seem to be used for low-grade events, which do not enhance the standing of the city. The new public spaces at Southgate should be considered in the same way.
- There is a tendency to over-commercialise the city. The principal reason for visitors to come here is to see the Georgian architecture. They do not expect to find it festooned with advertising banners and the streets cluttered with A-boards. The Council should promote a much more subtle standard of advertising, as used in heritage cities elsewhere.
- Respect for the World Heritage Site should be integrated into planning and traffic policies. To give one local example, the beautiful sweep of Oldfield Park round the hedged greensward which used to be playing fields is being degraded by the new development at Hayesfield School.

## Specific comments

### 1.1. Introduction

We assume that 'our aim' is that of the Tourism, Leisure and Culture Division, rather than that of the Cultural Strategy. Can this be clarified?

It seems inappropriate to say that the Division's services, at least those relevant to culture, should **respond to** the Economic Development and Enterprise priorities. This suggests that business is driving culture. Wouldn't it be better to say that the service **contributes to** the priorities?

### **1.3. Role of the Council**

We think there is a misunderstanding in the first paragraph. This should indicate that visitors come to **share our culture**.

The bullet points should include:

- strengthen the cultural heritage of the district.

### **1.4 The role of Future Bath Plus**

The arrangement whereby the Council's divisional director has also become chief executive of Future Bath Plus suggests that there has been a cutback in senior resources, and a blurring of responsibilities in this area.

### **1.5 Sustainable Community Strategy**

As a member of the Local Strategic Partnership, FoBRA has taken an interest throughout the development of the Sustainable Community Strategy. This is an important document but it seems to be overstressing the position to say that the scope of the Cultural Strategy **must be determined by** the SCS.

### **2.1 Defining 'culture'**

From here onwards in the document, there is some uncertainty as to whether the Cultural Strategy is meant to encompass sport. We realise that the Division is also responsible for Leisure and Sport, but suggest that culture poses enough challenges to need its own strategy.

### **2.3. Our three aspirations for culture**

Sport is mentioned again here.

### **3.1. Drivers for change**

Many issues are referred to here which are important in their own context, but are not strictly relevant to culture:

- Life expectancy gaps
- Local food
- Sustainable, local energy
- Knowledge of public services
- Social care for vulnerable adults

We think the document could concentrate on the more relevant drivers.

### **3.2. How will cultural planning need to respond?**

'1. Urban/rural' could do with a better description of the Bath/B&NES divide. We suggest:

"We must balance the needs and priorities of the city of Bath – a major tourist destination, home to half the district's population and most of its key cultural organisations and venues – with the needs of the towns and villages of North East Somerset, which have a distinct cultural heritage of their own. Throughout the district, cost and poor public transport limit access to cultural activities."

'1. Urban/rural' and '2. Equality of Access' could better refer to cultural activity 'taking place' rather than 'is delivered' since much culture is locally generated.

**'3. Developing our heritage'** rightly states that 'we must manage the special responsibility of the World Heritage Site in a sensitive manner.' Unfortunately this is something which the Council appears to take very much for granted. Although it accepts a responsibility to 'champion' the heritage, it is really not clear what this championing consists of. This is not just a matter of 'respecting the WHS', as if this can be preserved in aspic, it does require a degree of positive management and indeed development, eg by finding new uses for old buildings and helping people to understand the history and heritage better. We suggest that Response should include another bullet point:

- Manage and develop the heritage positively.

**'5. Planning for significant population growth'** needs some amendment. With the abolition of the Regional Spatial Strategy, the Council is not now expecting that 'new urban and outlying settlements will be built'.

**'9. Social trends'** is a bit overoptimistic about the demise of box offices. They may play a smaller role in future, but booking online is not always as simple as IT enthusiasts might think.

**'12. Visitors and residents'**. The reference to promoting local businesses and neighbourhood shopping centres has little to do with culture.

**'14. The Olympics legacy'**. Some clarification is needed here. The Cultural Olympiad does feature major cultural events, but it is not clear whether it will have any impact in this district. Whilst we shall have an involvement in the Olympic Games, they are not a cultural event.