

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 16 November 2023

Wards: All

Subject: London Borough of Culture Bid Progress Report

Lead Director: Dan Jones – Executive Director of Environment, Civic Pride and Climate Department

Lead member: Councillor Eleanor Stringer – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Contact officer: Anthony Hopkins – Head of Library, Heritage and Adult Education Service

Recommendations:

- A. That Cabinet note the progress in developing the bid for Merton to become the London Borough of Culture in 2027.
 - B. That Cabinet review the emerging themes and agree the direction of travel for the bid to be submitted to the Greater London Authority (GLA) by 30 November 2023 deadline.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The London Borough of Merton is bidding to become the London Borough of Culture (LBOC) in 2027. Feeding into the three key Council objectives of Civic Pride, Sustainable Futures and Borough of Sport the borough intends to submit an inclusive and inspirational bid celebrating its cultural infrastructure whilst creating new and innovative programmes for residents to engage in.
- 1.2. A key strategic objective for the council is to be the Borough of Sport by 2026 and a strong theme of sport will run through the LBOC bid. By 2027 Merton will be known as the Borough of Sport and Culture, maximising on existing sporting infrastructure and heritage that is leading to the Borough of Sport. We will build on that as a model - using existing cultural infrastructure and heritage to become LBOC. The two will be inextricably linked in 2027, similar to the Cultural Olympiad that accompanied the London 2012 Olympics.
- 1.3. The programme will deliver high quality arts and cultural events and activities in the heart of our communities and will use innovative techniques to engage and develop new audiences. It will tell the history of the borough's rich cultural heritage to develop greater understanding of our collective past and create a better understanding of present and future cultural opportunities. The legacy will be an established and coordinated programme of events and activities and an increased engagement with arts and culture amongst all parts of the borough. Key to the success of the bid will be in further strengthening our partnerships across the cultural sector to deliver this new vision for culture in the borough.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. Established in 2017 the LBOC was initiated by the Mayor of London as a competitive bidding process to increase inclusivity and engagement in the arts amongst London boroughs. The process is similarly aligned to the national City of Culture programme. There have been 4 LBOC's so far with the London Borough of Croydon currently midway through its delivery year. Further details on the timetable for the bid and the funding available are included in sections 6 and 7.
- 2.2. Below the main award, which is worth in the region of £1.85 million, Cultural Impact Awards are also awarded to boroughs to deliver some of the programmes in their main bid if they are not the chosen borough. Merton was the recipient of a Cultural Impact Award of £40,000 for its 'Film Merton' project in 2019.
- 2.3. Merton launched its bid to become LBOC in August 2023 and has commissioned consultancy firm Always Possible to provide the resource for the bid writing and stakeholder and community engagement. Through September and October a number of events have taken place to gather views on what should be in the bid and what we recognise as our culture and heritage. Further details on the consultation are included in section 5.
- 2.4. A working group and steering group have been formed and have provided expert input into the bid development. Representatives from across the cultural sector have fed into these groups.
- 2.5. The GLA has provided an arts consultant to advise on bid development and will provide feedback on the first draft after 30 October 2023.
- 2.6. The draft bid outline summarises the main strategic aims and how the bid addresses the LBOC judging criteria of Making an Impact and Celebrating Creativity in which the application will make its main creative case.

3 DRAFT BID OUTLINE

- 3.1. **Working Title: MERTON UNITED.**
- 3.2. The bid will explore the core theme of "connections" and "connectedness". There are 7 strategic strands under which to organise activity and set objectives for the programme:
- 3.3. **CONNECTED TO CULTURE.** Aim: A greater proportion of residents taking part in culture. Outcome: A programme that delivers art and culture's social benefits for all.
- 3.4. **CONNECTED BY CULTURE.** Aim: Greater social cohesion. Outcome: A programme that explores Merton's common purpose. It will celebrate the full range of diversity in the borough, in particular highlighting the significant cultural changes of the last 50 years.
- 3.5. **CONNECTED THROUGH CULTURE.** Aim: To be a council that is brave in using culture to nurture civic pride. Outcome: Testing new collaborative approaches to working with residents.

- 3.6. **CONNECTED UP CULTURE.** Aim: A growing creative economy that makes Merton a destination for culture. Outcome: More strategic and planned opportunities for local creative professionals to have their say about the future of culture within the borough. Mapping and promoting cultural resources and developing new spaces for creating and presenting arts.
- 3.7. **CONNECTED AROUND CULTURE.** Aim: To have a more visible and vibrant cultural sector in the east of Merton, with improved collaborative links between organisations in the east and west of the borough. Outcome: New programmes celebrating urban culture throughout Merton. Arts and cultural assets in the west delivering more work in the east.
- 3.8. **CONNECTED TOWARDS CULTURE.** Aim: To empower young people to have a voice in the future of the borough. Outcome: Culture-led programmes that enable children and young people to design a future they want for the borough and the council to commit to action from this.
- 3.9. **CONNECTED "OUTSIDE" CULTURE.** Aim: Sports and culture combine in a rich, well linked up local offer. Merton is known as the Borough of Sport & Culture in 2027. Outcome: A programme that uses the outdoor and active spaces throughout Merton for significant cultural activity, encouraging culturally rich, active lives for residents.
- 3.10. **MAKING AN IMPACT. What is special about Merton that will be celebrated? What are the social issues facing the borough?**
- 3.11. The borough has strong identities in its different neighbourhoods and town centres. Merton has unique character in the way its neighbourhoods connect and come together. There is a lot that residents are proud of in the civic sphere. The voluntary sector is strong and buoyant. The libraries, schools and children's services are outstanding. There is a strong sense of pride in the existing cultural and heritage spaces. As the borough with the second most green outdoor space in London, parks, and commons matter, especially when used to bring people together as a community. Merton is connected by a wide range of transport options and whilst they don't always fully cater for the needs of residents, they are an important part of the borough's heritage.
- 3.12. While Merton has a long history, there is an appetite to use its recent history to tell bigger stories: focusing on the vibrant social changes of the last 50 years as a throughline. The aim will be to make the bid dynamic and forward-looking. It will be about seizing opportunities, recognising potential, and asking "What's next?" for the borough.
- 3.13. There are a range of international communities with important stories to tell that have contributed to what Merton is today and will be celebrated. These include (but are not limited to): The Ghanaian Community in Pollards Hill; World War One refugees from Belgium and France; British Bangladeshi Women; The Korean community; The Nepalese Gurkha community in Morden; Nigerian Osun-Osogbo Festival in Morden; The Polish and Tamil communities in the east of the borough; Europe's largest mosque in Morden; and the comparatively large number of Ukrainian refugees hosted in the borough.

- 3.14. Health, economic and social inequalities play out across the borough between the more affluent west and more socially deprived east. This is particularly apparent in the reduced cultural offering and poorer transport links in the east of the borough. LBOC work will explore this and deliver new cultural activity in areas of high priority.
- 3.15. Providing a range of new and enhanced cultural activities for the east of the borough is high on the agenda for all stakeholders. There is a desire for a successful LBOC to raise the visibility of the active, energetic creative organisations doing great work across the borough, and create more opportunities to connect with each other and reach new audiences.
- 3.16. The bid has identified links with a range of borough and city-wide strategies to complement and connect with.
- 3.17. **CELEBRATING CREATIVITY: What will the outline programme look like?**
- 3.18. The GLA advises that a bid for 2027 would not have a complete programme, but should put forward a strong framework through which it will be developed with examples of the type of activity that might take place. Programme ideas that have been identified in conjunction with partners so far include:
- 3.19. Wimbledon Bookfest – extending this festival’s scope and reach to use two outdoor sites and generate new opportunities to take part in creative writing and live literature in the east of the borough.
- 3.20. Merton United Trail – A mixed media outdoor trail including a range of performance and activities that celebrate local geography. It will also install Merton’s cultural icon “stars” as part of a legacy heritage trail.
- 3.21. Tuned In - Five week-long residencies in each town centre. Music and wellbeing sessions with local residents that culminate in a public performance at the end of each week and a legacy recording project in collaboration with Cherry Red Records.
- 3.22. Headline music and theatre festival – Large scale events taking place at iconic venues in the borough (e.g. Wimbledon Tennis Championships, AFC Wimbledon Stadium, New Wimbledon Theatre, Canons House and Grounds).
- 3.23. A touring virtual reality and creative programme designed by Wimbledon College of Art and delivered in community venues. In conjunction with a skills, employability and mentoring programme.
- 3.24. Connected Towards Culture: a project for young people to design a future use for Merton’s public realm.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

4.1 Bid for year 2025 LBOC

- 4.2. Merton is in the process of an ambitious plan to become the London Borough of Sport by 2026. This timeline works well and supports the ground work that needs to be put in place for a successful bid in 2027. It also gives the borough more time to develop its partnership base.

4.3. **Do not bid**

4.4. This would mean that the borough will not have an opportunity to draw in significant funds to develop cultural opportunities in the borough and no new programmes or strengthening of existing projects will take place.

5 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

5.1. To consult and engage with a wide variety of stakeholders the London Borough of Merton worked with Always Possible to conduct in-person events, online events and surveys which would enable community feedback and engagement with the bid.

5.2. In-person resident engagement was through a community engagement exercise held at the Big Sports Day on 24 September 2023. 185 residents took part. Residents were also invited to complete an online survey.

5.3. Sector and stakeholder consultation was through 2 in-person events, 2 online events, 12 1:1 interviews and a combined survey/expression of interest (EOI). 33 stakeholders have so far contributed to the consultation and have 150 organisations have been contacted.

5.4. The GLA encourages drawing on existing and prior relevant consultation. In addition to the work above, Mitcham Matters, a council consultation with residents from August 2023, was reviewed and analysed.

5.5. The consultation has provided an evidence basis from which to draw out the key themes that are going into the bid, the stories to tell about the borough, and the type of events and activity that the borough is expressing a need for.

5.6. Four key themes and priorities emerged from the data. These themes have been instrumental in developing the structure of the bid so far.

1. The theme of “connectedness” was prominent in feedback from both residents and arts, cultural, and community leaders. The ideas of physical connections, interpersonal connections, and professional connections have provided the basis for the bid structure.
2. “Outdoor spaces” were identified as an area of civic pride and a unique selling point of the borough. Making the most of these spaces, highlighting them through cultural and heritage events was a very popular idea.
3. “Sports, culture and heritage” often came up in conjunction as interlinking themes. The sporting history of the borough, although problematic in respects to fair access, is seen to be intrinsically linked to its sense of place. For example, when a wide definition of “sport” was used: with walking and skateboarding sitting alongside tennis and football.
4. Diversity and multiculturalism. When asked to summarise what culture looked like in Merton in 2023, the common definitions drew on the diversity of the population living in the borough and emphasis on the significant cultural changes of the last 50 years.

A range of community stories have been highlighted to tell as part of the borough of culture.

- 5.7. The consultation was also used to measure which types of events and activities residents and stakeholders thought should contribute to a borough of culture programme, helping to identify a focus for the outline programme with a sense of need behind it.

6 TIMETABLE

Activity	Completion Date
Completion of public consultation	27 October 2023
Stakeholder Engagement Event	8 November 2023
Submission of bid to the GLA	30 November 2023
Assessment of bid	December 2023 – January 2024
Interviews and final decision making	February 2024
Winners announced	March 2024
Delivery of Title Award	April 2027 – March 2028

7 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. The main award grant if successful is £1.35 million from the Greater London authority and a further £500,000 from the National Heritage Lottery Fund. Additional grants can be applied for via Arts Council England and other LBOC partners.
- 7.2. Match funding of at least 30% is required in bids and officers are working on a range of options to develop this including sponsorship and other grant opportunities.

8 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. None identified for the purpose of this report.

9 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. A successful London Borough of Culture bid could have a lasting positive impact on our communities and help to improve the social, economic and health outcomes of residents. The bid being designed will be an inclusive one that focuses on addressing inequalities in the borough and developing new cultural opportunities for all residents.

10 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. None identified for the purpose of this report.

11 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1. A separate risk register is being maintained for this project. No health and safety implications identified at this stage.

12 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- None included.

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

13.1. None included.

Department Approval	Name of Officer	Date of Comments
Legal	Fabiola Hickson	25/10/2023
Finance	Marsha Walker	25/10/2023
Executive Director	Dan Jones	25/10/2023
Cabinet Member	Councillor Eleanor Stringer	25/10/2023

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