

St Mary's Church – Business Planning

Summary of Activity - Tranche 2

In January 2009 Shea Debnam Associates reported on business planning towards the creation of a new arts facility within a shared space at St Mary's Church, Ashford. In this first tranche of reporting, programming and governance recommendations were made for operation of the venue once architectural re-ordering of the space had taken place.

Tranche 2 of the business planning process (March – April 2009) provided a process for agreeing strategic and operational relationships between Ashford Borough Council and St Mary's Church and the nature of governance of the facility following consideration by the partners, Ashford Borough Council and St Mary's Church of the Tranche 1 reporting.

Tranche 1

The business planning process undertaken in Tranche 1 recommended an artistic vision for the venue where:

- St Mary's should present high quality adventurous works of performing arts by established and newly discovered companies and artists which had received critical acclaim and which reflected the interests of Ashford audiences
- New visual arts commissions should be developed which would celebrate the town, its history and its aspirations
- The programme should engage with long-standing residents and newer communities and celebrate the diversity that everyone brings to the town
- St Mary's should offer opportunities for locally-based artists, interest groups and individuals to actively engage with the work of artists they admire and ones they haven't previously come across in order to increase their knowledge and skills in the arts and the broader new perspectives they can offer
- St Mary's Ashford should be a focus for arts development within Ashford where its programme would involve audiences in new experiences and inspire locally-based artists to try new approaches to their work and exhibit it in the venue
- The venue would offer local groups and societies a well-equipped space for discussion, presentation and performance, providing a focus for the local community to celebrate its achievements

Research with user-groups and reviews of audience data suggested that the programming elements that would best deliver the artistic vision were:

- A core programme of music, delivered in partnership with the country's key promoters of contemporary and traditional genres delivered by solo or small ensembles and which would suit the intimate surroundings of St Mary's
- The presentation of new and adapted works of theatre, in collaboration with key theatre touring companies, which fit the scale of the building and its stage.
- Opportunities for local writers to present spoken word or live literature events and encourage the development of more writing

- Annual visual arts commissions which would be temporary in nature to celebrate and enhance the local environment, bringing the work of high profile contemporary visual artists to the venue and attracting public funding
- A visual arts showing space offered as a hiring opportunity. Whilst the space would not be curated, it would still attract hirings from local professional artists such as those belonging to Ashford Visual Artists
- Use of the venue as a rehearsal space for organisations such as Ashford Youth Theatre and local colleges such as South Kent College

It was recommended that the music and theatre programme should be coordinated by a professional programmer and the visual arts commissions by a curator/ project manager funded through grant income.

It was recommended that in order to deliver this level of programming, a new charitable organisation should be constituted (in the form of a company limited by guarantee with charitable status or a Charitable Incorporated Organisation

Tranche 2

On considering the report, partners Ashford Borough Council and St Mary's concluded that the level of programming and the constituting of a separate organisation to run it was an ambitious step in the first instance and that an incremental approach to the realising of an arts programme at St Mary's should be considered.

Shea Debnam Associates undertook further research with Ashford Borough Council, St Mary's Church, the independent music promoter Melting Vinyl and set up an Awayday where partners modelled an incremental approach to development.

The Awayday and subsequent discussions concluded that:

- Programming at St Mary's in the first two years should have three strands:
 - A high quality music programme developed and delivered by an independent professional music promoter
 - An arts development programme to support the local arts community,
 - Events organised by local arts groups and community organisations
- In the first two years, St Mary's Church (supported by The Arts and Arts Development Sub Committee) would operate the shared space, alongside its use as a place of worship, as a hiring venue where it is rented on agreed terms to the music promoter, Ashford Borough Council's Arts Development Unit and local arts and community organisations respectively. In consideration of public investment into the re-ordering of the church, an agreed number of hire days would be available to Ashford Borough Council's Arts Development Unit to support the delivery of the arts development programme (agreed by the Arts and Arts Development Sub Committee on an expenses only basis, to be reviewed after the first two years of operation.
- All hirings would be coordinated by a new Shared-space coordinator post.
- The Parochial Parish Council (PCC) of St Mary's Church would provide a mechanism for the programming, delivery and future development of the arts at St Mary's by forming of an advisory group (known perhaps as The Arts and Arts Development Sub Committee) as a new sub committee of the PCC, with

Terms of Reference agreed between it, ABC and Ashford's Future, and the services of the Vicar and a new part-time post of Shared-space Coordinator.¹

- St Mary's Church would ensure that the balance of hirings in relation to the arts (for the music, arts and community programme) and broader public and worship use was in the proportion of at or around 40% to 60% respectively in the first two years of operation. This proportioning would be reviewed at the end of the first two years of operation to gauge its efficacy.
- With the support of the Arts and Arts Development Sub Committee, St Mary's Church will seek to pro-actively develop programming and audience development at St Mary's Church in the medium and long term and to review and develop as necessary the governance which attends the levels and complexity of that programme.

Shea Debnam Associates

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¹ See Draft Terms of Reference - Arts and Arts Development Sub Committee