



Council 1 March 2011

CABINET MEMBER REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

Written report by Cllr Lynsey Alexander, Culture & Sport Portfolio

Portfolio includes:

- Sport;
- Public Halls;
- Arts Development;
- Festivals and Events;
- Heritage;
- Parks and green spaces; and
- Cemeteries.

1. Parks and Cemeteries

- 1.1 During the cold period before Christmas, Ranger staff noticed a number of masonry falls beneath the Abbey Gate in Bury St Edmunds. The problem is believed to be as a result of the extreme cold and frost shattering breaking down the stonework. Although the Borough Council owns the Abbey Gate and the gardens, it is English Heritage who are the guardians with ultimate responsibility for the 'built fabric'. However, the Council as owners of the site have a duty of care to visitors to the gardens and, to ensure visitor safety and enable the Gate to remain open, a scaffolding tunnel has been installed. English Heritage are currently carrying out investigations into the damage and will action the necessary repairs as quickly as they can.
- 1.2 In December 2010 the '*Santa in the Park*' event held at Nowton Country Park proved to be extremely popular, so much so that an additional day was needed to meet demand. The experience involved a horse and carriage ride from the car-park up Lime Avenue into the Nursery area where Santa was located in his grotto and handed out presents to those who had been good.
- 1.3 The inaugural meeting of the '*Friends of Aeroplane Park*' in Haverhill has been held and a committee was formed. One of the group's first actions was to submit a bid for lottery funding to improve the play ground and they are now awaiting the outcome. Plans are also in place to promote a '*Friends of Abbey Gardens*' and the first meeting of this group is scheduled to take place later this month.

- 1.4 On 15 January 2011, 130 personnel of 1 Squadron RAF Regiment, based at RAF Honington, were given a rousing welcome home by the people of Bury St Edmunds at a parade to celebrate their homecoming from a 6 month tour at Camp Bastion in Afghanistan. As is now traditional, the parade started in the Abbey Gardens and ended with a sponsored reception in one of the Council's public halls and on this occasion it was The Apex.
- 1.5 On 27 January 2011 the Mayor, Canon Matthew Vernon, children from two Bury St Edmunds schools and representatives from a number of faiths and organisations observed Holocaust Memorial Day at a special service in the Abbey Gardens. It was a very moving ceremony culminating with the children planting snowdrops in the flower beds near the memorial. This year's event also had a greater emphasis on the Rwandan genocide, reflecting our growing links with the country through the forthcoming Olympic Games.
- 1.6 During January 2011 five bids were received to tender for the chance to construct the new play area in the Abbey Gardens. After evaluation T Loughman & Co were appointed to undertake the bulk of the construction and they are looking to complete this exciting programme during May 2011, ready for the summer.

2. Sport

- 2.1 On 31 January 2011 I was pleased to attend a media launch for the Sport for Rwanda initiative which highlighted all the events taking place up to the Olympics including the Cycle to Rwanda project. There was a lot of great coverage in the media, which has provoked a fantastic response from businesses and the public. I hope all Members will join me in supporting the cyclists, including Peter White from our Planning Service, on this amazing journey that will help many children in Rwanda and be an inspiration for our community to get involved with the Olympic Games.
- 2.2 During the week commencing 7 February 2011 a Rwanda week was also held in King Edward VI Upper School and involved schools from all round Bury St Edmunds. Many different activities took place, which included a number of charity sports matches, presentations from charities working in Rwanda, poetry and dance exhibitions and the launch of a charity CD. The week was also supported by members of the Rwandan embassy who joined in some of the activities.

3. Heritage

- 3.1 In January 2011, Moyse's Hall began displaying a white-tailed Sea Eagle, which was shot in Rushbrooke in the 19th Century, after being driven down from Scotland by the great storm of December 1891. The Sea Eagle is Britain's largest bird with a wing span of over eight feet, and has recently been sighted again in Suffolk.
- 3.2 On 6 January 2011 the opening of the '*Haverhill 1000 years*' exhibition from Haverhill Local History Group was held in the Arts Centre Bistro. The well attended event was popular as it showed how important it is that the Local History Group had recorded the changes to the town over the years; as it helped residents better appreciate the place where they lived.
- 3.3 One of the little known treasures of the Borough's collection was utilised by Professor Peter Holtslag, of the Royal Academy of Music, who visited the Collections Building at West Stow in order to study and, briefly, play the rare 'voice flute' made around 1700 by Pierre Bressan. Professor Holtslag was most thankful of the opportunity to play the flute and hopes to organise an ensemble of musicians to play other instruments from this period.

3.4 During the period 14 January to 11 February 2011 an exhibition was on display of work by year 11 *'Gifted and Talented'* art and textile students from King Edward VI School. The art was on show on the first floor outside the conference chamber at West Suffolk House and was called *'Here and Now'*. It featured bold and colourful work in 2 and 3 dimensions on very contemporary themes.

4 **Public Halls**

- 4.1 The *'Sound Check Season'* for The Apex is now finished and has been a great success in terms of testing the auditorium and learning how the building works for performances. The Apex hosted 29 live concerts and comedy events during the *'Sound Check Season'*, with a mix of community use, corporate hires and our own music programme. There were also another 58 bookings for dinner/dances, dance classes, rehearsals, conferences, meetings and other events. Out of 80 operational days throughout the *'Sound Check Season'* the auditorium was actually occupied for 52, representing 65% occupancy. Including concert related hires, the annual target for hire fees at The Apex was £143,500 and the *'Sound Check Season'* has delivered £25,273, which is impressive given that final building works were still taking place in the bar area.
- 4.2 In terms of audiences, the business plan identified an annual target of 42,680 tickets to be sold for events held at The Apex. We actually sold 9,286 tickets at a value of £96,824 during the three months of the *'Sound Check Season'*, representing 22% of the annual target. This is reassuring given that we are still building an audience. The business plan also estimated that we would sell an average of 284 tickets per event. We have so far realised an average of 320 sales per event, with several shows sold out. Therefore, based on the limited experience of the *'Sound Check Season'*, the original estimate of £32,000 net annual income from The Apex's own programme appears correct, although this will be kept under close review.
- 4.3 The Spektrix box office system has surpassed our expectations and we are very satisfied with the decision to install it. Building on the existing Festival information, it has helped us to establish a database of over 20,000 customers in a very short period of time. We had a mission to push online sales and currently 37% of our sales are online, representing 43% of the total value.
- 4.4 The Borough Council's Public Halls were particularly busy over the Christmas and New Year period with a succession of dinners, balls, and concerts taking place. There was a lot of positive feedback from all parties especially previous Corn Exchange users who moved their bookings to The Apex, and were charmed by the new surroundings. Bookings at the Athenaeum also remain strong and we estimate income will be £28,000 above target for the year.
- 4.5 Overall, the budget for the Council's three public halls in Bury St Edmunds in 2011/2012 will be £580,000 before any rent from the Corn Exchange is taken into account. This represents an increase of £5,000 from 2010/2011 (0.89%) and reflects the fact that the Council has had to absorb additional service charges and electricity costs. This total figure will obviously decrease significantly if a tenant is found for the Corn Exchange. As normal, individual budgets are being prepared for the three halls as part of budget-setting, but it is important to look at them together. Not only are they managed as a single entity, by the same team of staff, but rental income from the Corn Exchange was always factored into the business case for The Apex.

- 4.6 A highlight at The Apex in recent weeks was the Fillers gig on the 29 December 2010, which filled the new venue to the rafters with 700 revellers making good use of the facilities and returning by far the biggest night of revenue so far. This was followed by the Mayor's Ball on New Years Eve which meant the year ended on a tremendous high.
- 4.7 January 2011 was used as an opportunity to train the staff in all operational aspects and we are now ready to launch into our second season, which includes another fantastic mix of musical styles to attract the broadest audience. The Apex has already held its first under 18's event which will become a regular monthly feature in the programme, along with a concentration on profiling the venue as a conference centre. Now that the auditorium is performing well, we can also turn our attention to the successful operation of the foyer and bar areas.
5. **Bury St Edmunds Festival**
- 5.1 The 2011 Festival programme was officially launched on 15 February 2011 and tickets are now on sale. The programme this year has been condensed into 11 days and features the usual lively mix of contemporary and classical music, outdoor concerts, jazz, folk, film, comedy, walks, street theatre and much more. This year's festival is particularly exciting because, alongside the much-loved venues in the rest of the town, we are able to use the world-class acoustics of the Apex for some of the shows.

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