

Agenda item: ☐

Title of meeting: Culture Leisure & Sport Decision Meeting

Date of meeting: 6 February 2015

Subject: Bookfest

Report by: Head of City Development and Cultural Services

Wards affected: All

Key decision: No

Full Council decision: No

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To inform the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Sport, about the 2014 Portsmouth BookFest and to make plans and recommendations for the future development of the festival.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the festival is moved to take place in February/March, starting at February half term and ending in World Book Day week in the first week of March. This change would begin in 2016.
- 2.2. That BookFest seeks to engage with venue partners and cultural organisations in the city to programme and deliver events jointly.
- 2.3 That BookFest retains its programme of local author events and involves authors individually and as groups directly in the planning of the festival.
- 2.4 That BookFest retains and develops online ticket sales, retains in person sales in libraries and removes telephone sales.
- 2.5 That Bookfest continues to actively seek external funding and sponsorship from commercial sources

3. Background

3.1 Aims:

BookFest started in 2010 with its original aims of promoting reading for pleasure and book ownership. These aims were developed further in 2012:

“Developing Portsmouth as a great literary city by promoting reading for pleasure and inspiring new audiences”

This will be achieved by:

- Increasing use of libraries and other cultural service providers in the city.
- Supporting the visitor economy with a promotional campaign to regenerate the city as a destination
- Hosting mass appeal events to engage Portsmouth readers and visitors and support book ownership and lifelong learning
- Targeted events planned, promoted, delivered and evaluated by local community groups.
- Using a wide range of accessible venues across the city

3.2 Audience geography (Statistics extracted from completed audience evaluation forms):

2014's BookFest was notable in that it attracted mostly local residents to events. 84% of audiences who returned evaluation forms came from the PO area. This reflects the more local nature of this year's festival which saw more events for small children and more events in local libraries. Crime events (CSI Portsmouth and Graham Hurley) had a wider appeal because of the fame of the authors involved with audiences coming from London, Guildford and even as far away as Exeter. BookFest certainly wishes to continue to appeal to local residents. If it is to attract visitors to the city and support the visitor economy then investment needs to be found to market the festival further afield.

3.3 Audience numbers (Statistics from ticket sales):

- 3.3.1 The big successes in terms of audience numbers were the early year's events. We have discovered there is a real demand for these events in the city. 120 children attended early years events, which were the three Gruffalo tea parties (at Cosham, North End and Southsea Libraries) and the Dino event at Central Library. We heard anecdotally that nursery groups and families had been disappointed to find tickets were sold out. BookFest will continue to build on this interest in the next festival.
- 3.3.2 CSI Portsmouth continues to be popular and easily reaches audiences of a hundred. Authors connected to Portsmouth were also very popular- Sarah Quail, Portsmouth Writers' Hub and Graham Hurley. It proved more challenging to sell some events. Ticket prices for adult events were kept low at £4 to £7 so ticket price was unlikely to be a deterrent. Possible explanations are that people were reluctant to come out to venues in the dark evenings; that the authors simply did not appeal enough; publicity was not visible enough or that the location of venues was wrong.

3.4 Audience ages:

It was a challenge to gather statistical data on ages of audiences attending events as this is not a question we ask when they order tickets. We do know that 120 children attended the Gruffalo and Dino early years activities so the 0-5 age group was well represented at BookFest this year. Of the other events, the only data we have comes from completed evaluation forms. From these we could see that the 51-70 age group continues to be highly represented, although this year there was a pleasing number in the 30-50 age group, less represented in previous years. Teenagers were poorly represented this year. It is always a challenge to secure big name authors for teens. Currently popular authors for this age group such as John Green are based in the U.S. Early pitching for these authors will be necessary for future festivals.

3.5 Use of libraries and venues:

In 2014 library venues were used more for events. The Menuhin Theatre in the Central worked well as audiences find it easily accessible. Local libraries were very popular for early years events as they are also easily accessible. The main advantage of using libraries as event spaces is that geographically there is a wide spread across the city. Some of the rooms at Central Library need some updating. The Square Tower continues to be a popular venue for the Writers' Hub and provides atmosphere for historical or ghost story events. Milton Village Hall was used for the first time this year. The main hall proved a good size and the Hall has the advantage of being placed in the heart of a central community. Some commented that they found the seating uncomfortable.

3.6 Local authors

- 3.6.1 Local writing talent was given much prominence in the festival this year and this reaped rewards. The Portsmouth Writers' Hub put a lot of energy into their events - the launch event evenings of Portsmouth Fairytales and the evening of ghost tales 'Day of the Dead' at the Square Tower- and both of these events attracted high audience numbers as the Hub are very proactive in publicising their events and have good connections in the city.
- 3.6.2 Local writer and poet Denise Bennett gave a poetry reading at Central Library which gathered positive feedback and also provided an element of poetry to the festival.
- 3.6.3 We also gave space to three local authors in Southsea Library over the three Saturdays of the festival which gave them the opportunity to promote and sell their work in the library's busiest periods. This has mixed results with the authors putting lots of energy into publicising their appearances making the most book sales on the day.

3.7 Online booking:

2014 was the first year that tickets were available to buy online. An online ticketing company was used, Eventbrite, as this had been used successfully by other festivals such as Bristol CrimeFest. Online booking was an outstanding success with approx. 75% of attendees ordering their tickets online themselves. Tickets were also sold in all libraries and then administered through Eventbrite and this was very useful as it meant that there was only one central point for all recorded ticket sales which could be checked at any time. The effect of the online ticket option meant that telephone sales were virtually zero, which eased pressure on the City Development and Cultural Services admin team, who in previous years have spent a great deal of time in taking telephone bookings. The admin team did still have an important role in administering tickets sold in libraries by putting them on to the Eventbrite system. The financial implication of using an online ticketing company is that they charge fees so this impacts on ticket income.

3.8 Publicity:

BookFest does not have a publicity budget (we recoup any publicity costs through ticket sales) so there is a potent need to sell enough tickets to meet our costs. A BookFest leaflet was produced with the full programme and a 'Coming Soon' poster as well as in house individual event posters. Two banners were also displayed on Eastern Road and Commercial Road for the duration of one week. Publicity costs remain our highest cost and it can be difficult to find budget for any further publicity other than the leaflets. This can have a negative impact on ticket sales.

3.9 Funding:

BookFest is self-funding, so any publicity, author fees, venue hires and travel costs have to be covered by ticket sales. This can put a constraint on delivery as the committee has to be confident that an event will attract an audience large enough to meet the event costs. CSI Portsmouth has been sponsored for the past two years by the publisher Bello, which has helped with the considerable costs of putting on a whole day panel event. There are also staffing constraints in that the Service Development Manager organises BookFest in addition to her other responsibilities in the Library Service. The Learning and Engagement is also involved in planning events and again this is in addition to his other responsibilities.

4. Reasons for recommendations

4.1 Since its creation, BookFest has always started in October half term and finished in early-mid-November. At the beginning this was deemed to be a good time of year for a book festival for several reasons.

4.1.1 Firstly the autumn is traditionally a time of year when publishers are looking to promote their authors' work for the pre-Christmas market. In the last two years the committee has found that pre-Christmas book tours have not led to easier securing of authors. There are now a vast number of book festivals happening in the country and to secure authors takes a good deal of time, tenacity and occasionally money.

When pitching for authors, publishers need to be confident that a large audience can be expected and that high book sales will be generated at the event. They also want to ensure their authors will be well looked after and although they will be willing to send authors without a fee if there is a new book to promote, increasingly fees are expected as the authors are giving precious time.

- 4.1.2 Incorporating half term is useful in that it allows greater flexibility in planning children's events.
- 4.2 As the festival has developed we have started to find that consideration needs to be given to moving the festival for the following reasons:
 - 4.2.1 We have found that two other local book festivals run in the autumn- Havant and Isle of Wight. Isle of Wight's festival has grown significantly in the last year with substantial sponsorship making it strong competition for BookFest and potentially diluting our audience. Their sponsorship has allowed them to secure celebrity names. Havant is also geographically close.
 - 4.2.2 We have also received some verbal feedback from authors that in the autumn there are many competing events happening with both Halloween and Bonfire Night occurring during BookFest. It was also commented that perhaps people would be reluctant to attend events on cold, dark nights.
 - 4.2.3 With these considerations in mind, the committee met to discuss potential alternative times. March was felt to be a good month. World Book Day always falls on the first Thursday of March making it an apt time of year to present book events. The evenings are also becoming lighter and the potential for warmer days increased making marquee style venues more practical. In order to incorporate a school holiday, we could start the festival in February half term and end it on World Book Day.
- 4.3 Last year a number of city venues presented book related events, often with high profile celebrities such as Dawn French and Michael Palin. This led to the committee considering whether it would be more useful for all to work together on book related events under the umbrella of BookFest. So for example if a city venue was planning book events for the next year, they planned them for the Bookfest period. This would then mean that the events could be promoted in the BookFest leaflet and alternately that the venues would use their own marketing mechanisms to promote BookFest.
- 4.4 2014's partnership with local authors was particularly fruitful. There is a lot of positive energy in groups such as the Portsmouth Writers' Hub, who helped organise the BookFest launch event and also ran their own event to great success. BookFest could build on this energy by working more closely with the Hub and other local writers to build a substantial local element to the festival and thus promote local writing talent. BookFest's staffing capacity is also limited in that the Service Development Manager organises the festival in addition to her other responsibilities in the Library Service.

Engagement from local authors and other cultural partnerships in the city would create a wider commitment and ownership of the festival, with more events programmed.

- 4.5 The use of online ticketing in 2014 meant that telephone sales were no longer necessary. The online ticketing function allowed far greater access to sales as it was available 24/7. There were no reported issues or complaints with the service and it was an effective means of managing ticket sales. With this in mind for the next festival we would like to drop telephone sales to simplify the booking process for the public. We would retain the option to buy tickets in all libraries as a number of people still prefer to come in to a library and pay for tickets with cash. This model also serves to retain the link between the Library Service and the Festival.
- 4.6 As mentioned in the report, the costs for BookFest events and publicity have to be met by ticket income. This can put constraints on the programming of the festival as the committee has to be confident that an event will generate enough ticket sales to meet its costs. With additional funding and sponsorship from commercial sources, BookFest will be more able to schedule events with celebrity names who charge high fees and also present a wider variety of events. Sponsorship could also help with publicity costs, making the festival more widely advertised.

5. Equality impact assessment (EIA)

- 5.1 A Preliminary EIA has been submitted.

6. Legal comments

- 6.1 The proposal to secure external funding and sponsorship may require agreements to be drafted to reflect the arrangements between the Council and third parties. In addition, in the event that established authors are secured, it is likely that terms and conditions may be issued to the Council by agents acting on the author's behalf. Further legal advice should be sought in each case where the standard terms and conditions of the Council are not being used.

7. Head of Finance's comments

- 7.1 Expenditure for the 2014 Bookfest exceeded income by £2,500. This overspend will be funded from the library budget.
- 7.2 The overspend was primarily caused by a one off VAT payment of £2,265, due on the ticket income received since 2010.
- 7.3 It is anticipated that in 2016, sufficient income will be generated to cover the running costs of the event and a small surplus may be realised.

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Signed by:

Stephen Baily
Head of City Development and Cultural Services

Appendices: None

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/ rejected by cabinet member for Culture, Leisure and Sport on Friday 6 February 2015.

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Signed by:

Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Sport