

Addendum to Report to EDCL Scrutiny Panel

Since the Scrutiny Panel began considering this topic in early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis has shed new light on access to culture and leisure.

For long spells during the pandemic people's ability to engage with culture, leisure and sport was severely limited by lockdowns and social distancing restrictions. We observed during lockdown that there was a significant growth in demand both for socially distanced exercise - at times our parks and open spaces have been 200% busier than during the baseline - and also an increased demand for digital provision. We have also seen an increased interest in biodiversity, possibly inspired by observations during lockdown.

We feel that people have seen culture, leisure and sport in a different light since the pandemic, quite likely as a result of having to go without services for so long. Demand for our services has remained high after re-opening and our parks and the seafront are significantly busier than they were before the pandemic.

Visitor numbers to Portsmouth Museum and Art Gallery for the period June to December 2022 were 21,796, compared to 25,662 for the same period in 2019. Comparisons of visitor numbers are still problematic in the post-Covid climate as visitors readjust to travelling and visiting attractions but being only 15% under 2019 is positive.

The Summer Reading Challenge has increased in popularity. A total of 2,895 children signed up to take part in the Challenge in 2022, either in a physical library or online and 1,393 children went on to complete the Challenge. This is an increase of just over 10% from last year's total of 1,266.

Cultural organisations have faced significant challenges during the past few years, through lengthy closures and the resultant loss of income, and the cost of living crisis leading to potential audiences having less disposable income. Many cultural organisations in the city have also been affected by the reduction in foreign travel, and whilst this is recovering it will still take time to return to pre-pandemic levels. The increase in energy prices recently has had a very serious effect on cultural organisations across the country. This is particularly so for organisations that are running buildings, and especially so for buildings which are less energy efficient. This inevitably has an impact on organisation's business models, which include money generated from admissions, sales and other income.

A number of schemes have been implemented in the past few years to address challenges faced by residents and communities. The HAF scheme - Holiday Activities and Food - has supported hundreds of children and families in the city. The Warm Places initiative has seen many of our sites and services providing warm and dry places for people to spend time during the winter, whether to keep warm or to reduce their energy bills.

The cost of living crisis has highlighted the importance of addressing barriers to engagement. Chiefly our long-term policy has been to make our PCC cultural services either free or as cheap as possible to access for residents so that they are able to enjoy the social and economic benefits of engaging with culture. Five of our six museums are free, and we removed fines and reservation fees from our libraries some years ago. All of the events that our PCC Events team organise are free to attend.

We believe that the past few years have shown that culture, leisure and sport are early intervention services that offer cost effective ways of improving peoples mental and physical health and wellbeing and developing their life opportunities.