

Member Briefing

Cultural Improvement Partnership East Midlands

So You've Got Culture in Your Portfolio? Guidance for new Cabinet or Executive Members

Overview

The Executive portfolio for cultural services could be a job in its own right, but is usually part of a wider remit with a different name. Whatever your understanding of your role as a portfolio holder for cultural services, the job probably gives you a bigger influence over people's well-being than that of any of your colleagues. This briefing encourages you to make good use of it.

Why it Matters

According to DCMS, local authorities spend £3.2 billion on culture each year. Cultural services have an enormous influence over the effectiveness of a council's services and in particular the public perception of that authority. Surprisingly, given the importance of the sector, the statutory responsibilities for culture within local authorities are relatively few. They are:

- Public library service (County and Unitary councils).
- Protection of the historic environment, through the planning process.
- Licensing Act 2003 makes unitary and district/borough councils responsible for licensing premises.
- Gambling Act 2005 gives the same authorities responsibility for licensing gambling premises.

Key Messages

- **Cultural services may be discretionary, but they have a high public profile and account for much of the council's contribution to residents' satisfaction.**
- **Perhaps more than any other portfolio holder, you will need to engage with voluntary and community organisations.**
- **There are a range of support agencies at regional level which would be pleased to provide you and your authority with advice and support.**

Background

Every local authority will have a portfolio holder for cultural services, but the role often forms part of a wider brief. The portfolio is likely to include the following:

- Monitoring performance and leading service improvement.
- Forming close working relationships with key partners and providers.
- Ensuring that the contribution of culture is considered in all local authority functions e.g. housing, planning, transport, education and social services – as well as wider objectives, such as regeneration and social inclusion.
- Championing the contribution of culture in wider local partnerships, particularly the Local Strategic Partnership, and integrative strategies such as the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and Sustainable Community Strategy. This might be through the voluntary, as well as the public, sector.

The portfolio holder is responsible for leading cultural services at a political level. The managers of your council's cultural services will ensure that services are provided effectively, efficiently and economically. Together the portfolio holder and senior managers share responsibility for driving change and innovation in line with the aims of the political administration as a whole.

Forming a strong working relationship, particularly with the director or head of service responsible for these services, is the surest way of fulfilling a council's cultural ambitions.

The Cabinet or Executive is held to account by a Scrutiny Committee. Larger authorities will have scrutiny panels for different functions. The role of scrutiny is to act as a critical friend, and it is one that no portfolio holder can afford to be without.

In addition, the voluntary and community sectors are essential partners for every local authority in the provision of cultural services. Working closely alongside voluntary and community groups is crucial since it is often considered to be the role of the culture portfolio holder to promote volunteering and effective partnership working.



Case Study: Cultural Leadership

Cllr Alan Graves, portfolio holder at Derby City Council, gives a personal view of his experience holding the culture brief.

“My first job in post was to make a life or death decision about one of our sports centres, Lancaster. To close this loved sports centre was not why I came into politics. But sometimes difficult decisions need making.

“Working with the media was ultra important, even though my party and I were not seen in a good light for most of the time. An opposition Member one full council meeting said to me ‘What’s it like being the most hated man in Derby?’

“My honest approach, however, came good when the local gymnastics club asked to take it over. You have to appreciate that all this took place at the same time as we were trying to launch the B-Active campaign against child obesity.”



Photo: Derby City Council

Your next steps

- **Ask your local Champion for Culture Improvement Partnership East Midlands (CIPEM) about opportunities for Councillor development.**
- **Meet with your local voluntary sector forum(s) and key cultural organisations.**
- **Find out what plans there are for scrutiny reviews at your authority to consider cultural services, or issues on which culture can make a contribution.**



**Cultural Improvement Partnership
East Midlands**

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