

CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL	Cabinet 18 October 2023
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Report title	'Event City': a new five-year event strategy for Wolverhampton	
Decision designation	AMBER	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Bhupinder Gakhal Visitor City	
Key decision	Yes	
In forward plan	Yes	
Wards affected	All Wards	
Accountable Director	Ian Fegan, Director of Communications and Visitor Experience	
Originating service	Communications and Visitor Experience	
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Report to be/has been considered by	Core Services	14 June / 13 September 2023
	Strategic Executive Board	20 June / 19 September 2023
	Economy and Growth	27 September 2023
	Scrutiny Panel	

Recommendations for decision:

The Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Endorse the strategic aim to use city events as a place-shaping tool to make the City of Wolverhampton a 'destination of choice' for visitors with the vision that: *by 2028, we want people to think differently about the city... as a place where things happen, as a place they visit, maybe as a place they might look to relocate*.*
2. Endorse the five-year operational events growth plan, recommended by consultants IPW, which will deliver a commercially focused programme aimed at boosting footfall, increasing economic and social benefit and transforming the reputation of the city.

*IPW Report 2023

Recommendation for noting:

The Cabinet is asked to note:

1. That additional investment of £399,000 is required to underwrite the delivery of this ambitious strategy. Funding will be considered as part of the 2024-2025 budget-setting process and medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) planning. Whilst this is not yet assumed in the working assumptions, work is being undertaken to determine an optimum funding strategy which may in the short term utilise appropriate reserves. Wherever possible, the aim will be, as the strategy sets out, to offset this expenditure through income from commercial events and external grant-funding as well as indirect benefit to the local economy.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to set out the importance of developing an exciting and sustainable five-year event strategy for the City of Wolverhampton, as recommended by independent specialist consultants IPW.
- 1.2 This report is part of wider plans to secure the city's status and reputation regionally and nationally as a 'destination of choice' for visitors and to seek Cabinet's endorsement to deliver this strategy.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Transforming the City of Wolverhampton, with a clear vision and plan - and maximising both public and private investment to do this - is a key part of the City of Wolverhampton Council's *Our City: Our Plan*.
- 2.2 In recent years, the Council has invested in, or secured investment for, over £100 million pounds-worth of key visitor economy infrastructure projects. This includes investment in a state-of-the-art transport hub at Interchange, next to a new commercial district, The Halls Wolverhampton, a new Box Space entertainment zone, new public realm and improvements to the city's Art Gallery.
- 2.3 Building on this, further investment is being planned as part of the first phase of the delivery of the Wolverhampton Investment Prospectus after Cabinet approved in March 2023 the proposed approach towards the development and implementation of three schemes: City Centre West, St George's and the Accelerated Sites Programme. ([Wolverhampton Investment Prospectus First Phase Delivery Plan.pdf](#) (moderngov.co.uk)).
- 2.4 All of the points detailed above at 2.2 and 2.3 are part of the Council's wider 'place-shaping' vision to turn the city into a 'destination of choice' where people visit and spend money in the local economy – supporting jobs and growth and growing the Wolverhampton Pound.
- 2.5 The importance of this is set out in *Our City: Our Plan*, where a vibrant visitor economy has the potential to contribute to all priorities but especially the thriving economy strand. Evidence to support investment and growth in this area is further supported by the city's Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) which identifies that the visitor, cultural and events sector is a key potential growth area for jobs and investment.
- 2.6 Tourism, arts, culture and events play a key part in the wider 'city marketing mix' and visitor economy infrastructure / eco-system.
- 2.7 In recent years, the Council has made a significant contribution to the city's visitor numbers and vibrancy through an active and diverse programme of events across a number of council-owned or run venues.

2.8 In the 2022-2023 financial year, this Council-led programme delivered the following:

1	450,000 visitors to the city
2.	Estimated £14.8 million to the local economy*
3	Return on investment of 800% when measuring <i>indirect economic benefit</i> **

* based on figures identified for the West Midlands in the 2015 Great Britain Day Visits Survey

** (ROI in 2022-2023 financial year = gain from investment of £14.8 million minus £1.6 million cost of the investment / £1.635m x 100%). Although this is not a cashable gain to the local authority, it represents a significant gain to the local economy.

- 2.9 Major events included Vaisakhi (23,000 visitors), the Commonwealth Games Time Trial (20,000 visitors), the annual city Fireworks display (17,000), Christmas Lights events (nearly 40,000) alongside very many smaller events in parks that attract 50 to 100 people.
- 2.10 More recently, Wolverhampton Pride 2023 in June brought 5,000 people into the city centre. Just over 300 ticket buyers responded to a post event survey highlighting that the average spend on the day in the city centre was £34.42 (contributing £170,000 to the local economy) and that Wolverhampton was, they felt, a 'welcoming' city. The event also raised £6,500 for city LGBT+ charities and there are plans to grow it in 2024. The reopening of The Halls in the same month has also seen visitors from across the country coming to the city. Figures from The Halls show that around 50,000 visitors came to the city in its opening season and whilst one-in-five had a Wolverhampton postcode, four-out-of-five visited from the wider region and elsewhere. This contributes indirect economic benefit to the city centre and direct benefit to the Council.
- 2.11 Clearly, the Council does not operate in isolation which is why it commissioned independent consultants IPW to carry out a review of the city's events eco-system, city governance and the Council's operational approach to event delivery with a brief to recommend how these could be improved to better benefit the local economy and benefit city's reputation.
- 2.12 The city has strong foundations to build on in boosting its visitor economy from great indoor venues (Grand Theatre, The Civic and Wulfrun Halls) and terrific outdoor spaces (West Park, Racecourse), to flexible leisure spaces (Aldersley and Molineux Stadium) and strong community venues (Bilston Town Hall, church halls etc), as well as urban spaces and green spaces, the University's increasingly diverse provision (Screen School, Arena Theatre) and heritage venues like Wightwick Manor and Moseley Old Hall.
- 2.13 Given the huge potential of the city and the Council's ambitions to increase visitor numbers further to raise the profile and reputation of the city and deliver even greater economic and social value for local people and businesses, the Council's Strategic Executive Board (SEB) requested a new, longer-term framework for events.
- 2.14 To action this and to seek independent advice and validation of the city's approach, the Council commissioned IPW in late summer 2022, to research and prepare a new five-year Events Strategy for Wolverhampton.

3.0 Progress, options, discussion: The way forward: developing a new business plan and investment in growth

- 3.1 Consultants IPW were procured by the Council to research and prepare a new Events Strategy for Wolverhampton. The brief for this work recognised three principles:
- The strategy is for the city, not CWC
 - 'Our City - Our Plan' outlines the city's ambition to be an Event City
 - Develop an underlying business case and planning process for a five-year events strategy and plan.
- 3.2 IPW's recommendations for an ambitious five-year events strategy identify the need for investment to grow a vibrant city events programme and deliver the required socio-economic benefits, this in turn needs to be underpinned by a robust business plan.
- 3.3 They acknowledged that in developing an 'Event City' strategy, the city is starting from a position of strength and already has an events ecology with over 1,000 events taking place every year at different scales and locations, and with a range of different promoters – independent, community, private/commercial and the Council.
- 3.4 The strategy recommended by IPW is set out at **Appendix One** but the key points for development and improvement are summarised below:
- The city needs a clear vision, five-year plan and targets
 - The events strategy needs to be driven by three primary objectives: changing perceptions of the city; increasing direct and indirect economic benefit and increasing social benefit and value
 - The city operates in a competitive environment and needs to be clear about its offer to the public and promoters
 - City collaboration is essential – the city has some strong brands in this space and these need to be maximised e.g. AEG/ASM, Grand Theatre. WWFC
 - The city needs to invest in a formal Destination Management Partnership (DMP) to deliver effective, joined-up governance and strategic planning
 - The ambition by 2028 is to be a place that hosts events of national profile
 - Events need to be integrated into wider place-shaping plans on regeneration, economy, well-being and the environment
 - Opportunities to coordinate and support local skills, volunteers and artists need to be maximised – given the opportunities in the city with some fantastic employers – potentially through a new 'Skills Academy'
 - The programme needs to be driven by data and place informatics including visitor and market trends
 - The city centre environment is a priority in the first instance
 - The customer and promoter journey needs to be mapped and constantly kept under review to ensure it is competitive with other places
 - The council's various teams that facilitate and support events need to have efficient processes and fantastic customer service to keep promoters in the city

- The events / tourism programme is a driver for private investment in food and beverage and hospitality / accommodation
- Marketing activities need to be joined up and coordinated and include the city's wider offer – this includes improving the city's digital presence
- A single box office and promoters gateway needs to be established
- The three cities initiative has the potential to create further opportunities
- Local businesses should be better engaged in local events support and delivery to maximise benefits
- The programme needs to focus on retaining families in the city centre, keeping big national live sporting tournaments and growing this, supporting the cities diverse communities and maximising the 'Wolverhampton Welcome'
- The programme would benefit from a 'blocks and tentpole' approach to grow it organically.
- Stakeholders need to view the programme from the perspective of 2028 and what is an achievable vision (see **Appendix Two**)

3.5 IPW's business plan recommends 'pump-priming' investment at the front end of the events programme to allow key events to grow and to become self-sustainable. They have based their thinking on the following assumptions:

- by Year 5/6 CWC's net expenditure will be similar to Year 1
- that a level of additional investment will be made available, primarily in years 2, 3 and 4, to develop new initiatives and infrastructure
- additional investment will be sought primarily from external sources already identified, and through increased income generation
- increased staffing resource should be covered by self-generated income by Year 5/6
- the private and community events / markets will be stimulated to produce events at neutral cost to CWC.

4.0 Evaluation of alternative options

4.1 Option one would be to make no changes to the existing approach and to continue to deliver the current programme which is primarily aimed at delivering community-level events within the city of local / regional significance and profile. This would result in a comparable level of footfall to previous years and would keep the profile, reputation and perceptions of the city at a similar level too. It would mean less direct and indirect economic benefit and fewer social value opportunities. It would certainly mean no investment in the infrastructure to build the wider strategic framework needed to create an 'event city'.

4.2 Option two would be to partially implement the recommendations of this report. This would result in slightly higher levels of footfall to previous years and would increase the profile, reputation and perceptions of the city at a similar level too. It would also mean increased direct and indirect economic benefit and fewer social value opportunities. Whilst it may mean some investment in growing some events and developing some new ones, it would also see no investment in the infrastructure to build the wider strategic framework needed to create an 'event city'.

4.3 Option three would be to implement the recommendations of this report which would see a step-change in the development of an events infrastructure and wider eco-system in the city. This would see significantly increased footfall over the five years of the strategy, greater direct and indirect economic benefit and more social value opportunities for local residents and businesses. It would also significantly improve the profile, reputation and perceptions of the city which, in turn, will help contribute to investment in the wider 'visitor experience' eco-system such as private sector funding for an enhanced food and beverage and hotel offer in the city.

5.0 Reasons for decision(s)

5.1 Option three is recommended for the reasons set out at 4.3 above.

6.0 Financial implications

6.1 The 2023-2024 net budget for City Events is £763,500.

6.2 Recommendations of the report require additional short-to-medium term investment to be implemented to grow the programme to the point that a significant part of it becomes either self-funding or net costs reduce significantly. This would either be achieved through commercial income or from securing external grant funding to deliver activity such as the Commonwealth Games Legacy Funding or UK Shared Prosperity Funding in line with financial procedure rules.

6.3 The five-year investment strategy requires growth in staffing from 2024-2025 to grow the programme to deliver a nationally significant profile and reputation. The growth in staffing of £399,000 required to underwrite the delivery of the strategy is not currently built into the budget or included in the medium term financial strategy (MTFS). Funding which may in the short term utilise appropriate reserves and/or efficiencies will need to be considered as part of future 2024-2025 budget setting processes alongside the MTFS and will be subject to future reports.

6.4 With regards to the additional investment points outlined in the report, it is proposed due to a number of factors including: a) the opportunity presented in the 2024-2025 financial year through the Commonwealth Games Major events fund and the key city priority to expedite the transformation of the city centre and night-time economy, that subject to identification of resources and necessary approvals the £399,000 budget growth would be split and allocated based on the IPW recommendations. Major events delivery support would be allocated £274,000 for staff resources to develop and expand the current events programme and deliver major events of regional and national significance; with £125,000 allocated to staff resources to develop a city-wide destination / tourism plan and governance structures to coordinate, with key city partners, the wider 'eco-system' of city events and support night-time economy development work.

[LD/05102023/D]

7.0 Legal implications

- 7.1 In growing an events programme, the Council will continue to need to be cognisant of legal requirements around safety, health, licensing and other regulatory considerations essential to event organisation.
- 7.2 The Council, when directly commissioning events, will need to secure artists, performers and acts. These will require robust contracts which protect the Council's position and minimise risk.
- 7.3 Legal services will provide advice or assist with legal agreements as and when requested in relation to any proposals and/or events which the Council proposes to meet the strategic aims.
[RR/27072023/W]

8.0 Equalities implications

- 8.1 As this report highlights, a vibrant city events programme has the potential to showcase the strengths of a place. One of the City of Wolverhampton's undoubted strengths is its diversity, inclusivity and tolerance. This is encapsulated in Our City: Our Plan which has the theme of 'inclusivity and fairness' as a golden thread.
- 8.2 The Council already organises or supports a range of events which celebrates the city's diversity and diverse communities including Wolverhampton Pride, Diwali, Eid and others. The Council works closely with the community to develop, build and sustain these key events. This strategy can build upon this and increase the number of events that are delivered.
- 8.3 There are also opportunities through recruitment to ensure that the team reflects this ambition. Events which celebrate culture and diversity help communities that here to otherwise may have felt marginalised, feel more connected. They also educate and inform, building bridges between communities and stronger community cohesion. Communities are, and continue to be, a key part in how we engage, listen and constantly improve events so that they are reflective of feedback and support local aims and priorities.

9.0 All other implications

- 9.1 There are no other direct implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

10.0 Schedule of background papers

- 10.1 Report to City Economy Scrutiny Panel, 28 September 2022 ([Public Pack](#))[Inward Investment, Visitor Experience, Culture and Leisure Offer Agenda Supplement for Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel, 28/09/2022 18:00 \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

10.2 Report to Scrutiny Board, 1 November 2022 [Microsoft PowerPoint - Visitor Experience Strategy Plan and Budget Presentation.pptx \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

10.3 Pre-decision report to Economy and Growth Scrutiny Board, 27 September 2023 [Five-year event strategy_v1.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

11.0 Appendices

11.1 Appendix 1 – IPW Review Report.

11.2 Appendix 2 - IPW aspirational look back on achievements from 2028 perspective