

# **Birmingham's Festivals Strategy 2008 – 2012**

A feasibility study for festivals and large-scale arts events

## **Executive Summary**

A report by Paul Gudgin, Nick Dodds and James Waters  
Commissioned by Birmingham City Council and Arts Council England West Midlands

June 2008

## **The Vision**

Birmingham is perfectly placed to develop festivals and large scale arts events at the very highest international level, bringing the clarity of long term strategic planning it has applied to the physical regeneration of the city centre to the promotion of its substantial cultural assets. This is the moment of opportunity for Birmingham to become a major Festival City generating considerable profile and economic benefits to the City and the West Midlands.

## **Background**

Festivals and Events International (FEI) was commissioned by Birmingham City Council and Arts Council England West Midlands working alongside Advantage West Midlands, Marketing Birmingham and Culture West Midlands (the Stakeholders) in March 2008 to produce this Festivals Strategy for Birmingham 2008-2012. Its purpose is to suggest a sustainable model for developing arts festivals and large-scale arts events in the city in line with the stakeholders' strategic priorities and to explore a joint investment plan for the period and beyond.

The Stakeholders wished to determine those events, either existing or newly proposed, which have the greatest potential to raise the national and international profile of the city, to attract additional visitors and ultimately to deliver positive economic impact. It is important to note that festivals exist for many reasons and that there are a number of excellent festivals in Birmingham that, while not having the potential to meet these criteria, are worthwhile and should be supported.

The report is informed by extensive desk research, interviews with stakeholders and the arts and festival community of the City, combined with the authors' considerable experience of the international festivals and events sector.

## **Strategic framework and stakeholder priorities**

Birmingham has a very clear sense of long term strategic direction. It is important that any proposals for new festivals or initiatives to develop existing festivals are entirely compatible with the various strategies and priorities of the stakeholders. We undertook a review of all the major strategy documents by the Stakeholders from the Big City Plan to the Regional Visitor Economic Strategy and plans for the Cultural Olympiad. In addition we considered the feasibility studies of the new International Dance Festival and the Digital Film Event and looked at a number of City Event Strategies. Our work on this Festivals Strategy should be considered as part of these wider events strategies in the City and the Region, particularly in the broader context of culture and sport.

## **Current context**

As part of this study we took a detailed look at the current festival and cultural activity in Birmingham. During the course of our consultations the following characteristics emerged:

- The city is very ambitious. It has delivered major physical and cultural regeneration in the past and is keen to build on that success, this time promoting its significant cultural strengths to the wider world.
- Birmingham's cultural infrastructure is second only to London and should be nurtured as a major asset with any festival proposals needing to build on existing strengths.
- There are a range of emerging, niche and community festivals which play an important role locally and regionally but are not currently of national or international significance. While there are exceptions, in the main they do not have the capacity to meet the stakeholders' objectives for profile, visitors and economic benefit.
- The city has considerable infrastructure advantages by virtue of its strong exhibition and conference tradition and therefore has the capacity to support major festival events.
- There are a large number of agencies/departments involved in festivals and events in the city which generate a number of strategies and initiatives that sometimes overlap and militate against maximizing impact.
- There is clear understanding that direct economic benefit will follow on from a festival which has a significant international profile and that this will require long-term strategic investment.

## **Birmingham's potential as a festival city**

During the course of our study we have become increasingly convinced that Birmingham has the potential to become a major festival city of international standing. Its strengths include a first class cultural infrastructure, a real spirit of collaboration within the city's arts organisations which reflects the nature of the city itself, a dynamic programme of regeneration within the city and an expanding number of small-scale festivals proving that Birmingham is a fertile festival environment.

The largest gap in current provision, and probably the principal reason why Birmingham is not currently regarded externally as a festival destination, is the absence of a single, large-scale event of recognised international stature. Many of the cities offered for comparison play host to a large number of festivals but all of them can boast at least one event of international significance.

There are already a number of successful arts festivals and events in Birmingham and a few which have the potential to grow significantly. However we do not feel that any of the existing festivals alone is capable of the kind of expansion in the short term that would achieve the Stakeholders' clearly expressed objectives.

Based on our consultations and knowledge of the sector, we considered three possible scenarios for future development of festivals in Birmingham. Following discussion with the stakeholders our recommendation is to develop the following two proposals, under working titles, which have the best potential to achieve their stated objectives.

### ***Birmingham Autumn***

A new 12 week, annual, multi-artform festival of international significance, based in outline on the model of Festival D'Automne, Paris, that makes the most of Birmingham's cultural jewels. Uniquely, it would involve inviting a creative artist of international reputation, selected and appointed by the city's major producing arts organisations, to curate a single festival.

The artists to be invited would be of the highest profile and stature. The report suggests a number of artists, from different disciplines, for consideration including a number of high profile film directors who also create striking new work in live performance media. Examples include Sam Mendes (*American Beauty*), William Friedkin (*The Exorcist*), Baz Luhrmann (*Strictly Ballroom* and *Moulin Rouge*), and Francois Girard (*The Red Violin*).

The curator concerned would be resident in Birmingham for a substantial period of time and each festival would open with an exciting new large-scale commission involving more than one of the city's major performing organisations. The rest of the programme would be a mix of invited international work and a programme created by Birmingham's own organisations and fitted within the direction set by the curator.

The overall festival would be facilitated by an experienced producer running a lean festival management organisation. The producer would lead an independent organisation and work with the producing arts organisations to target appropriate curators. S/he would then be responsible for all aspects of the delivery of the programme including ensuring that it met the objectives of the Stakeholders on a continuing basis.

Part of the vision for *Birmingham Autumn* is that the guest curators would be encouraged to make the widest possible use of Birmingham's arts organisations as part of their programming vision. Equally there would be a clear responsibility on the festival producer and the collaborating arts organisations to make sure that each programme addressed Birmingham's very distinct demography with work reaching a wide range of constituencies.

This festival would build on Birmingham's strong arts infrastructure and create a unique international model that could involve guest curators of the very highest international standing. This would bring the event immediate credibility and the assurance of a high profile launch each year and substantial ongoing international media impact.

### ***Birmingham Festivals Unit***

Birmingham already has range of emerging, niche and community festivals which play an important role locally and regionally but they need enhanced support to flourish and develop. A new independent unit, along the lines of Rotterdam Festivals Ltd. could be created to develop Birmingham's key festivals. Working to an overarching strategy created by the Stakeholders, it would take their resources and make independent investment decisions, following clearly defined criteria, on which festivals to support to meet the Stakeholder's objectives. It would also directly supply a range of support and advice services to the festivals, such as logistics, fundraising and, working with others, enhanced marketing. For this reason we would suggest that consideration is given to locating the unit within the offices of Marketing Birmingham or Audiences Central.

It would result in a smaller number of better supported festivals, benefiting from shared resources. This would help Birmingham build 'strength in depth' for its festival offer and build on the Urban Fusion legacy, creating a year-round programme of festival activity based on the city's existing creative infrastructure. It would ensure important community festivals are maintained whilst providing a development environment to help produce the next generation of festivals.

### **Critical success factors**

Crucial to both these proposals is the need for real artistic vision, improved marketing, long term planning and sustained investment. They will also need to address the economic impact, gross visitors and national and international profile.

Birmingham's success in the festival sphere will principally be determined by its ability to present excellent and distinctive programmes of genuine international significance which attract local and, in particular, visiting audiences. There also needs to be a commitment to long term planning on the part of the festivals and their stakeholders. The most successful festival cities have nurtured their reputations over a considerable period and as a result generate annual audiences on a par with the world's biggest sporting occasions, with the associated profile raising and economic benefits.

### **Levels of investment and returns**

For Birmingham to reap the benefits of becoming a major festival city it will need to invest appropriately and most importantly over the long-term. The public sector investment required for each of our proposals is in the region of £5m per annum. The proportionate split of this investment between the different agencies, based on other national benchmarks, will need to be agreed as early as possible. The agencies should be prepared to commit to this investment for an initial period of five years. This will provide a platform for generating significant levels of sponsorship and earned income.

In our view, Birmingham should expect to double its festival visitors by 2012 to one million and look to its festivals to be generating £75 million in economic benefit for the city annually. We believe our proposals offer excellent return on investment and value for money as they provide the opportunity for Birmingham to make a substantial national and international impact in a relatively short time. If further evidence of this economic

potential is required to support investment decisions we would recommend that a detailed economic impact evaluation study is undertaken.

### **Timescale and next steps**

Whilst there would be advantages to launching new initiatives in 2010 we believe that the need for long term planning and the timeframe required to achieve a balanced funding package would suggest a three year lead in, with the first *Birmingham Autumn* being staged in September 2011 and annually thereafter. This would establish the event as a major part of the Cultural Olympiad and ensure a substantial Olympic legacy.

We would recommend that, given the uncertainty of the current funding of some existing festivals, it would be appropriate to set up the *Birmingham Festivals Unit* in 2009/10, even if a full funding package cannot be completed until 2011.

Clearly achieving high-level support for these proposals in all of the stakeholder organisations is going to be vital if there is to be any chance of success. Once this has been achieved we would suggest that a senior officer from one of the Stakeholders is appointed to act as Champion for the project for 6 months to take it to the stage of being able to recruit dedicated executives to take forward the plans.

Paul Gudgin, Nick Dodds and James Waters  
June 2008