

A CULTURAL PROGRAMME FOR THE GAMES



Previous Commonwealth Games and major sporting events have already shown us that when sport and culture come together, they achieve more than the sum of their parts. From unforgettable ceremonies that reflect our time and place, to street-side carnivals that drive athletes on to victory, to celebrating the landmark cultural venues that make tourists out of spectators, the power of art and creativity in the context of sporting moments is unquestionable and unbeatable.

A cultural programme has always been part of the vision for a successful Birmingham Commonwealth Games 'offer'. The Culture Team are responsible for the following Games assets:

- Live Sites
- Welcome Ceremonies
- Cultural Programme

Through months of conversation and collaboration with the region's artists and creatives, we believe the best way to achieve real change for the arts and cultural sector and ensure true legacy, is through a 6-month long arts festival.

Our vision

To present an ambitious arts festival that will harness a once in a lifetime opportunity to positively disrupt the region's cultural sector and inspire lasting change.

Collaborative and original work by artists and communities will connect people, time and place, as we host the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

Audacious, playful and inclusive, over 6 months it will entertain, engage and embrace at least 2.5million people, setting Birmingham and the West Midlands in a new creative light.

In 2022 we welcome the world to Birmingham and the West Midlands region with a global sporting event like no other, as we host the XXII Commonwealth Games.

The festival will aim to double the reach of the sporting events of the Games themselves - engaging at least 2.5million audiences and participants. For many residents of Birmingham and the West Midlands, an encounter with the arts festival will be their 'Games moment'.

Artworks ranging from the playful to provocative will occupy the highstreets, neighbourhoods, parks, waterways, venues and civic spaces of the West Midlands, across traditional art forms and more experimental mediums. It will encourage people to explore and play in public spaces, to discover our region's heritage and offer opportunities for all ages to find the 'common ground' in Commonwealth, especially children & young people. Creativity will grow out of urban communities, improving well-being and contributing to placemaking¹.

Our approach

From March to September 2022, a 6-month arts festival will encapsulate and explore the spirit of the Games, and finally give Birmingham its moment in the spotlight. It will reach artists and audiences across the West Midlands region, as defined by the Combined Authority and three Local Enterprise Partnerships.

Our approach is focused on creativity, collaboration and equity in the way we develop relationships with artists from other Commonwealth nations. Three simple curatorial lines invite and embolden artists to make artworks for this specific context and moment in time. They represent a starting point – as threads that interweave and overlap, with each informing the other. They are:

- **Our place in the Commonwealth**
- **The present moment**
- **Stories of Birmingham and the West Midlands**

We want to see creative risk taking and ambition, with inclusion, representation and collaboration at the heart of each artistic idea. It is essential that the festival is created with, not just for, local residents, so that people can recognise themselves and the uniqueness of our region in the work. We will look for and promote new work that recognises the region's intersectional artistic and cultural practices – sensory concerts, runners' club art tours, building 'takeovers', contemporary carnival, Drag bingo and community-led architectural 'pavilions' – the festival will draw on all of this and more.

A skilled producing team will curate the festival through a flexible programming model that enables the diverse voices of artists and communities in the West Midlands to be part of this incredible moment. The festival will be programmed through a series of mechanisms including:

- direct commissions
- open calls for new artistic works on specific themes
- a grants programme for communities
- an aligned programme of planned work that 'turns to face' the festival

¹ Placemaking is the act or movement of making better places for people to live, often focussed on public spaces. It is a collaborative process by which public spaces are reimaged and reinvented as shared spaces at the heart of communities.

- actively devolving curation and producing to the sector

We will embrace the digital agenda and 5G investment, and hope artists will find new ways of storytelling through digital means, breaking new ground. Participation, access and inclusion will be core pillars of what artists will create – including opportunities for extensive ‘mass cast’ participation where up to 1000 people will be offered the chance to perform across the games in all contexts – from the opening ceremony to live site venues.

In a first for a Commonwealth Games Organising Committee, Birmingham 2022 has brought together all its key cultural ‘assets’ into one team (division) held by a Chief Creative Officer, choosing not to outsource or situate them in other OC divisions. For example, the Medal design competition, Live Sites and Welcome Ceremonies will be led by those leading the arts festival, and local talent and ideas are flowing into the team from multiple channels creating a porous curatorial system.

From the incredible journey of the Queens Baton Relay, to participation in the opening & closing ceremonies, to a Learning programme that will connect children and young people across the world, this cross fertilisation will ensure artists and their ideas will engage as many people as possible in incredible games experiences, as well as maximising the range of platforms and distribution channels for art created for the festival.

Reach & Impact

From an estimated audience of 2.5million, our largest audience (c70%) will be people who call Birmingham and the West Midlands home, and we will curate a festival that looks and feels like the people it represents - made with them, rather than for them.

A key desired outcome of the festival will be an increase in the percentage of the local and regional population who regularly engage in arts activity, as audiences and as participants. To achieve this, we will work collaboratively with the sector and key stakeholders to build a programme that has an ease of audience engagement at its heart, through presenting in public spaces, outside of city centres and making events free at the point of access. We will lay the foundations of audience development that our external colleagues and partners can build upon beyond the Games.

Representation & Inclusion

We know that the world is in a moment of tremendous change, as we all tackle the devastating impact of COVID 19. Now, more than ever, art and creativity have a role to play in how we envisage and shape our future, and we intend for the festival to play an important role in supporting the recovery of the cultural sector, and in bringing communities back together. It also provides a platform to hold difficult conversations in safe spaces to explore and challenge the Commonwealth as a legacy of colonialism, against the current context of the Black Lives Matter movement, creating a pledge for change.

One of our key aspirations for legacy is to see a sustained commitment to a diverse and representative audience for culture, and for this to be mirrored and reflected in the cultural workforce and leadership itself. Long term, we hope that this will lead to systemic change and directly influence representative leadership across the cultural sector.

We also hope to see a significant step change in access and inclusion – including the closing of the disability employment gap, and the foregrounding of disabled artists in the region as part of an internationally regarded cultural offer.

Sustainability

Birmingham 2022 seeks to be the most sustainable Games ever. This ambition creates a compelling framework for the arts festival to set high standards for sustainability and reducing carbon emissions, particularly across its commissioned programme. The curatorial lens of ‘the present moment’ will also stimulate artists and audiences to reflect on the action we need to take to combat the climate crisis.

Transformation & Recognition

Just as UK and European City of Culture programmes have transformed the perception of Liverpool and Hull, the Cultural Olympiad of 2012 transformed the cultural landscape of London, and the 2014 Glasgow Games showcased Scotland’s second city as the undersold option for culture, this is a milestone ‘line in the sand’ moment for the Birmingham and the West Midlands. It is critical that the festival acts as a catalyst for real change in the cultural sector, in a way that has never been possible (nor permissible) before.

Our aspiration is that the festival becomes a transformational moment for the sector – leading to a collaborative strategic approach to create and deliver a new 10-year cultural strategy that is region wide. This will be another first that will test the commitment, generosity and vision of our councils, funders agencies, arts organisations and arts professionals.

We also want to see a revolution in the perception and status of the West Midlands, moving towards international recognition for its arts and creativity through increased tourism, altered perceptions, increased investment and new cultural manifestations – such as a new international festival for the city. This will create real lasting change, long after the last medal is won.

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