

# A new London destination for the arts

A new arts centre for London as big as the Southbank will bring culture to local people explains Miranda Williams

The Royal Borough of Greenwich's ambitious plans to create a landmark destination for the arts in Woolwich's Royal Arsenal has moved a step closer. Planning permission was granted in August for the first phase of a sensitive multi-million pound transformation of historic military buildings, to create a 16,000 sq m heritage complex of inspiring venues for music and theatre, studios for dance, theatre, music and community use, visual arts space, with ample public access including an all-day cafe.

Our borough has a rich historical and cultural heritage, including outstanding visitor attractions such as the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site and the O2 Arena, ensuring that we continue to be London's most visited tourism and culture destination outside the city centre. Our ambition now is to use the heritage military buildings on the Arsenal to transform the economy of the east of the borough just as the heritage of the Navy has transformed Greenwich town centre and the west of the borough.

## A landmark for Woolwich

The Royal Arsenal is a landmark not only for Woolwich but for the borough as a whole. It symbolises the connection the borough has with the military, and the part that successive generations of local people have played in the armed forces, and in the science and industry that took place on the Arsenal itself.

The Creative District will preserve and develop that heritage, in a way that the development of more luxury housing could not, by

building a new centre for the arts for London and most importantly for the residents of our borough. Our discussions with prospective tenants have involved ensuring local benefits are hardwired into the leases in the form of jobs, training opportunities and outreach into schools.

## Military provenance

Developing a narrative that binds the military provenance of the Royal Arsenal site with its industrial and social heritage is essential as the site once contained 80,000 workers many of whom will have descendants still living in the borough. This military, industrial and social context will provide a rich stimulus for the creative sector and its story will be told on the fabric of the buildings.

## Our plans

The Woolwich Creative District comprises five buildings: Building 17 (The Cartridge Factory), 18 (Royal Laboratory Offices), 19 (Gun Carriage Shop), 40 (Royal Military Academy) and 41 (The Ammunition Factory), totalling some 16,000 square metres of usable space, and held by the Council on 300 year leases.

An international design team, led by Bennetts Associates, has worked together on the detailed plans since 2016. These buildings benefiting from extensive natural light and excellent acoustics for unamplified sound will be available for creative, social, community and cultural use by organisations from within Woolwich and >>>



Councillor Miranda Williams is cabinet member for culture, leisure and the third sector



>>> across London.

Work on the Creative District is planned across two phases. The first featuring temporary theatres and repair work to three of the historic buildings, to accommodate a temporary tenant who will use the spaces for immersive theatrical performances, and permanent works to the two remaining buildings. A further phase will complete the long-term upgrade for a permanent performing arts tenant.

During Phase 1 there will be:

- A versatile venue in Building 41, seating 800 – 1200 or 1800 standing capacity, linking directly to an open air courtyard capable of holding formal events for up to 500 people (or many more informally);
- Three professional studios in Building 41 (two of which can be joined to make one very large studio);
- Two community studios in Building 41;
- Three professional / education studios in Building 40;
- Two reception spaces specifically set aside for commercial use (overlooking the River Thames and the internal courtyard); and
- Generous public spaces and a café / bar.

A key development has been the discovery that the south range venue in Building 41 has high-quality acoustics for classical and non-amplified music, and will be in significant demand for rehearsal, recording and performance by professional and community users. It has all the qualities of a very good hall as well as an ambience that will bring performers and audiences together in a unique way.

The capital cost of Phase 1 will be £31 million and is fully funded by the Council. Rather than make the buildings bespoke to various tenants, we have adopted the policy of adaptive reuse

- making the buildings suitable for a wide range of future purposes.

Phase 2, which is as yet unfunded, consists of a black box performance venue (in Building 17), capable of accommodating a wide range of activities, including amplified rock and pop events, for 400 seated and 800 standing (with acoustic separation). In addition, there will be additional working spaces and at least four large studios for rehearsals by theatre, dance and music companies.

#### A centre for the arts

The development will deliver a major cultural scheme that will attract visitors to Woolwich and support the expansion and diversification of the tourism industry. It assists in developing a 'cultural quarter' within Woolwich, accommodating an exciting new arts and cultural facility and contribute towards the area's regeneration. The repurposing of the buildings also adds to the evening economy and increases economic benefits such as employment opportunities, including full-time, part-time and temporary staff.

Our business plan is built upon the rental of rehearsal and event space with 70 per cent hired out to cultural organisations and local community groups at subsidised levels, reserving 30 per cent for commercial activity. The development will also deliver a number of benefits to the local community, not only through job creation but also through educational programmes, skills training and community outreach.

#### Restoring glory

Set within the Royal Arsenal Conservation Area the sensitive restoration will bring the existing listed buildings that are cur-

PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Aerial view of Woolwich  
Creative District

RIGHT:  
Artist's impression of foyer  
to new theatre complex

NEXT PAGE:  
Artist's impression of  
milling space between  
main performance hall and  
courtyard







rently empty, or under-used, back to life in a simple and appropriate way.

We have had positive consultations with English Heritage who wish to see the buildings revitalised and that the large sweeping spaces (particularly in the southern range of Building 41) are kept open as originally designed. Our proposals will enhance the Conservation Area and contribute to its removal from the 'Heritage at Risk' register too.

#### A catalyst for regeneration

The Woolwich Creative District will lead the transformation of Woolwich, acting as a catalyst for regeneration and support its economic and social development, attracting new visitors to the town and enhancing the lives of local residents.

Our vision extends beyond the usual model and seeks to build a creative hub that breaks down the traditional barriers between what is seen as that traditional model for cultural activities and mainstream 'mass culture'. A key objective is to ensure that the area delivers economic and social value to the local area.

We aim to do this by involving the surrounding communities through proven outreach programmes delivered by globally acclaimed figures from the worlds of dance, music and theatre. The draft lease agreements have sought to hardwire these community benefits by inserting key performance indicators for prospective cultural tenants so, for example, they deliver programmes in school and in the community as well as offering job opportunities for local people.

We want Woolwich to be a seminal example of the positive local impact that cultural and creative regeneration can have by providing a globally significant cultural offer, yet one designed sensitively for all sections of the local community, with opportunities for personal fulfilment and career opportunities.

Woolwich Creative District will bring back into mainstream use a series of historic buildings, but it is actually about deepening the physical and emotional connection between the Royal Arsenal and Woolwich Town Centre by providing active public space as well as jobs and cultural opportunities for all.

The new creative district will complement and enhance the renewal of Woolwich Town Centre, which is a key element of the

Royal Borough's strategy for growth, helping to transform prospects for long-term economic prosperity and improve life opportunities for local residents.

Some 40,000 new homes are scheduled to be built across the borough as a whole between 2010 and 2028 and 28,000 jobs are predicted to be created in the borough over the next 10 years. Heritage and culture are a crucial part of the foundations on which the borough's future prosperity is being built.

The arts and culture sector generate substantial numbers of high paid jobs in the capital and creative workers in London are 25 per cent more productive than the economic average earning £8.8m per hour. While housing and transport have understandably been at the forefront of infrastructure planning, the Mayor of London believes that there is now a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make the Thames Estuary a global hub for the next wave of growth in digital, cultural and creative industries. Woolwich and the surrounding districts of Plumstead, Abbey Wood and Thamesmead are well placed to benefit from this.

As Richard Morrison, chief music critic of *The Times*, who visited the Woolwich Creative District site said "This magnificent new London arts venue in Woolwich should be applauded... I've just looked round the site of a new arts centre for London that is as big as the Southbank, that has already appointed a resident orchestra, that will offer some of the most awe-inspiring rehearsal and performance spaces in the capital.... The buildings are already incredibly well suited to performances: huge uncluttered spaces resplendent with sturdy Victorian brickwork, enormous skylights and wrought ironwork reminiscent of Covent Garden's Floral Hall. The building designated as the new concert hall, a former ammunition factory, also has stunning natural acoustics. Now it will be used to make music, not bullets.... Not that the prime purpose of this extraordinary project is to attract the usual punters from the West End and Southbank. The main goal is to set up cultural opportunities right on the doorstep of the people (and particularly the children) of Woolwich."

We are excited that high profile local, national and international cultural and creative companies are already in advanced negotiations to make the Woolwich Creative District their full-time home. We look forward to announcing them soon! ■