

‘ROTHERHAM IS BRUISED AND ARTS ARE A WAY OUT OF THAT’

Chase reporter **ANTHONY CLAY** meets the woman in charge of an organisation determined to add to the artistic life of Rotherham

SHARON Gill would like a 60 foot high glass pyramid to be built in Rotherham. Yes, really.

The chief executive of ROAR — that’s Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance — thinks it will attract interest and draw people in, which will revitalise the town centre.

Sharon wants art to play a vital role in rejuvenating Rotherham and spearheads ROAR’s attempts to achieve that laudable aim.

She has been in charge of the group, based at Westgate Chambers on Westgate, Rotherham, for nine years and believes that it is vital to encourage local artists to do their thing.



Art is a very emotive word for many people. Being able to express yourself and be able to communicate is important. It gives the individual a sense of well-being from the act of being creative.

And ROAR is part of big projects which — funding willing — will bring vital money into Rotherham to boost its cultural offer.

But many people may wonder why money should be given to the arts at a time of cutbacks, food banks and other social problems.

Sharon says that a society with a sense of culture and art is one which can be better for all.

“The world would be grey if we did not have art. Human beings make pretty things out of rocks and leaves and things,” said Sharon.

“We are driven to express ourselves.

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“Being able to express yourself and be able to communicate is important. It gives the individual a sense of well-being from the act of being creative.”

That there is a thriving artistic community across Rotherham will come as no surprise to regular readers of Chase who have been given the chance to learn about different users of ROAR.

Sharon believes it is important to encourage local artists, for the good of the area’s regrowth.

Indeed, nurturing this artistic talent was the reason for the creation of ROAR in the first place.

“Around ten years ago, my understanding is that there were artists in Rotherham who were conversing. They felt there was a skills drain,” said Sharon.

RCAT — or Rotherham College of Art and Technology — had a “fine reputation” for developing artistic talent and there were plans at the time to move the arts centre to where the new Tesco superstore now stands. But when this art centre did not develop, there was “no infrastructure” to continue the development of the arts in the town.





“There was a need locally for a one-stop shop or some arts centre,” said Sharon.

“That was the rationale around ROAR.”

The organisation began life in Rotherham’s Unity Centre but with the growth in its profile it secured space inside the Imperial Buildings via a Channel 4 public vote which saw it as a runner-up in a competition.

ROAR then got its current site on Westgate which was at the time owned by Rotherham Borough Council and the now defunct Yorkshire Forward.

Sharon took over at ROAR in 2011.

“It was a case of getting my feet under the table,” said Sharon.

She had undertaken various jobs in the arts in Sheffield and so was an experienced hand at finding funding and opportunities for artists.

Sharon recalled that it was a busy time: “In my first year here, I was trying to run the Diversity Festival and Arts in the Garden.

“I think the biggest surprise was that there had not been a huge amount of investment in the visual arts.”

Sharon said that there is a good poetry tradition in Rotherham but other areas of the arts have struggled to gain a foothold.

“There is stuff going on but there is a massive problem with capital investment so for our visual artists there is a limited option as to where you can take that,” said Sharon.

She said that the lack of an art gallery in the town and events spaces being thin on



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the ground has proved a challenge.

ROAR now offers working and teaching space for artists and the organisation works with 19 local and national partners.

It has an impressive membership of 117 currently. ROAR members have to live or work in Rotherham, the opportunity to join being via an informal chat. “Our members have to have a creative side,” said Sharon.

Members include painters, musicians, sound artists, playwrights, actors and

actresses, and more.

Sharon said that many creatives may have mutual interests but are not necessarily driven by a commercial ambition.

“What we are trying to do is get people to expand their skills base and develop their ambition,” said Sharon.

On an individual level, Sharon — a Fine Art graduate with an interest in sculpture and textiles — said that developing a creative talent is very important to people.

“There are a lot of people who find it very difficult to express themselves verbally or through the written word and art is good at expressing ways,” said Sharon.

She said that developing a talent can be good for a person, particularly if dealing with problems such as mental illness or pain. It offers a “holistic approach to a well-rounded life experience”.

But for Rotherham as a whole, she feels that the arts can be a lifeline to the redevelopment plans for the area over the next few years.

Development isn’t just about creating jobs and more shops, it is about nurturing the cultural side of an area which has been through the mill in recent years and now wants a new start.

“I think it’s a challenge for small towns, especially areas eclipsed by a big city,” said Sharon.

“I think Rotherham is very bruised and arts are a way out of that.

Continued on following page.



Continued from previous page.

"Social art is about the role of the artist in the community in the widest sense, not just an artist in a garret.

"There is a whole move in the workplace towards emotional intelligence, treating people as human beings.

"I think art has a really important role to play in innovations and reflecting concerns."

Sharon said that giving artistic opportunities to the borough is vital and a significant element of achieving social justice, as well as creating an attractive environment for people to live and work in.

ROAR is currently pushing the Flux Capacitor project which will help develop Rotherham town centre. The ten year vision aims to gain funding for various projects for four years.

There are also other projects seeking monetary backing.

Sharon said that Rotherham would not survive solely as a retail destination and needs to also become a place offering experiences. This in turn, she believes, will bring in more retail opportunities.

If the arts are a significant part of Rotherham's regrowth strategy, she said, then "people have to come back".

Sharon said that Rotherham is rich in volunteers and community centres and has got lots of established networks through its huge number of voluntary organisations so arts initiatives could be disseminated in that way.

"We want to live in a place which has a rich cultural offer even if you don't partake in it," said Sharon.



"I think that is being expressed in the town's creative strategy."

Sharon believes that Flux Capacitor will be a way to help local people to help themselves artistically, particularly young people.

In a decade's time, she believes that ROAR will have expanded and have more than one base and will be supplying art to hundreds of people.

Sharon said: "There is a more positive view of the arts now than 50 years ago. Social media has helped people as have smartphones, which offer more exposure to influences.

"People are artists and don't know it. They don't know their Facebook post is a work of art."

Sharon said that art needs to be seen as important to people's lives and ROAR is happy to encourage this view. People can, for instance, join workshops at ROAR and see exhibitions in its lobby.

She sees herself as a "facilitator" creating opportunities for artists to do their work in Rotherham, as well as making the public see that they need it.

"The problem is how you create the want," she said.

So why would Sharon like to see a 60 foot glass pyramid?

It would attract people to the town, like the Angel of the North, and if the town is redeveloped properly there will be plenty of other attractions to keep people interested and coming back time and time again. It is a bold vision for Rotherham — but one where the arts are central to a brighter future for everyone.

'THERE'S A REAL SENSE OF POSSIBILITY'

ADELE FORREST caught up with Arts Council chief executive Darren Henley when he visited the town to find out what's to come for 2020 and more about his role.

"I SPEND half the week not sitting behind a desk in London," said Darren. "I visit towns and cities up and down the country.

"I've visited Rotherham quite a few times in the last five years that I have been doing it.

"What's exciting about Rotherham is there's a real sense of possibility. There's a great team of people here as well — from leadership in the council, to artists and organisations."

Darren cites Polly Hamilton, Rotherham Council's assistant director for culture, sport and leisure, as an important figure who can bring investment into the borough.

"And Cllr Sarah Allen, (cabinet member for cleaner, greener communities), is someone in the council who very much sees culture at the heart of what they do — it's not an add-on, it's really important for people that live and study here."

Organisations like Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR), Grimm and Co and Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR) are also hugely important to the town, he said.

The groups came together last year to present their successful bid for the £2 million Arts Council funding in a unique and creative way — pulling up at the Leeds HQ in a Back to the Future-style Flux Capacitor DeLorean car.

The Flux Capacitor project has taken its name from the hit 1980s film — and the stunt also saw VAR's Julie Adamson don a white radiation suit, echoing time-travelling teen Marty McFly.

Darren said how the money would be spent in the town would not be a decision for the Arts Council — but for residents.

"It's about people co-curating — it's not done to the people, it's done with them," he said.

Rotherham was one of 12 places awarded funds by the Arts Council through the National Lottery Creative People and Places programme.

The four-year project, which began in November, is at the start of its six-month development stage and a director of funding was appointed in January.

The director will be responsible for managing the funding — but the community will be responsible for deciding where it goes.

Currently, only a small amount of the money has been released to the consortium of organisations — the rest will be released in stages.

Darren said: "We'll start seeing progress next year but we always tell people; 'Don't rush into it'.

"We are hearing what the plans are but that's for them to unveil, I think they will be very exciting and will make a real difference to people's lives here."

Since 2010, the Arts Council has invested approximately £6.6 million in Rotherham, which is generated from the Government and the National Lottery.

"We invest to make people's lives better,

said Darren. "I believe art has the ability to change people's lives."

Asked about the threat to libraries up and down the country, Darren said the Arts Council was working with libraries and was interested in "spaces that really connect with communities".

"It's about putting on different activities, it's really important it's not just about books," he said.

The chief executive stressed the importance of music and art in schools — but this has also come under threat by academies setting their own curriculum.

"School governors and headteachers will be making these decisions in academies," he said.

"Some of the top schools in this country market themselves on their arts and drama. That should be available to everybody, whatever their background — there's a moral reason why that should happen."

Two places in the borough that Darren holds in high regard are children's literacy charity Grimm and Co, and Wentworth Woodhouse.

"Grimm are just amazing," he said. "They are absolutely unique, one of the most special places — possibly people in Rotherham don't know how lucky they are to have it."

He cites Grimm founder Deborah Bullivant as a "really inspirational figure", adding: "She's someone I admire greatly and I'm really excited about their new home."

Grimm, who are set to move to Talbot Lane Methodist Church, became part of the Arts Council's national portfolio in 2018, joining around 900 organisations who are deemed to be of "national significance".

Darren added: "Wentworth Woodhouse — what an amazing asset to have. You have great leadership there with Sarah McLeod.

"It's really interesting you have that asset and, again, for me it's almost as if you have a stately home reclaimed by the people — you don't see that model."

Darren believes Rotherham has a "real sense of ambition" for its arts and culture, strong leaders who can make it a reality and a "forward-looking story" as the council bids to become the world's first-ever children's capital of culture in 2025.

"It's not a story that's dwelling in the past, he said. "The idea is that you are going to be a town that young people reclaim — that's really exciting, no-one else is doing that. "What's brilliant is you are uniquely Rotherham and that's a really good thing, playing to your strengths.

Big changes are ahead, said Darren, as Rotherham's city of culture bid will be based around children and young people.

But in the meantime, artists working in town can go direct to the Arts Council for support.

"We have a programme to help artists' creative practice, we can invest £10,000 in them — anyone can come and make a bid.

"We are real people and real human beings based in Leeds and want to help people and invest in individuals," he added.



Arts Council chief executive Darren Henley