

Wolverhampton to shine in Black Country

Wolverhampton will come of age next year when it celebrates its 21st birthday as a city. It will also mark the beginning of a new era for the burgeoning Black Country metropolis on the back of a five-year plan by its council to make it an events city. Access investigates...

Words: Christopher Barrett

There are plenty of landmark events planned in Wolverhampton next year, including the start and finish of the Commonwealth Games road cycling time trials, the British Art Show 9, the inaugural Creation Day Festival and the re-opening of the Civic and Wulfrun Halls.

Wolverhampton has a history of spawning talent, including pop music proponents such as Slade, Beverley Knight and Kevin Rowland, along with sports stars ranging from cyclist Hugh Porter to multi-medal-winning javelin star Tessa Sanderson.

With its focus very much set on the future, City of Wolverhampton Council has a five-year plan that not only involves the city hosting major national and international events, but being able to do so with an improved infrastructure of facilities such as venues and hotels.

Following a multi-million-pound refurbishment programme, the council-owned Wolverhampton Civic Halls will re-open next year with AEG Presents managing it, supported by ASM Global.

Wolverhampton Civic Halls, which comprises the Civic Hall (cap. 3,000), Wulfran Hall (1,134) and Slade Rooms (500), was closed in 2015. Initial

plans, costing £14.4m, were due to be completed in March 2018. The scheme's budget has since escalated to more than £38m.

The city has received significant Government support, including £15.76m as part of the Future High Streets Fund, and it is set to receive a further £25m to support local economic regeneration.

Another boon for Wolverhampton has been the announcement that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will move there by 2025, taking with it 500 posts including senior civil servants. It will be the first ministerial office outside of Westminster.

City of Wolverhampton Council director of city environment Ross Cook is lead director for the council on events. He says its five-year events plan will bring in around 2 million people to the city and have a local economic impact of around £70m during the period.

Venues

As well as the Civic Halls, other key indoor venues in the city include the council-run Bilston Town Hall (1,000) and the 700-capacity Robin 2. Meanwhile, the city's much-loved Victorian public park, West Park, plays host to many of the city's major events



and the council is looking to open other facilities.

Says Cook, "Part of the funding from the Government's Future High Streets Fund will be used to deliver a new Boxpark-type concept – a new outdoor event space in the city centre with a capacity of between 1,500 to 2,000 people. The more people can see what we've got to offer, in terms of that sort of event space, the more events operators will be attracted to the city."

Festivals

Another major step for Wolverhampton will be the hosting of the city's first Creation Day Festival. Launched by City of Wolverhampton Council, Creation Management and Toura Toura Festivals, the festival's line-up is being curated by Alan McGee; the infamous boss of Creation Records who signed numerous acts, including Oasis, Primal Scream, Ride and My Bloody Valentine.

Creation Day is scheduled to take place in West Park from 28-29 May next year. It was originally planned



The 3,000-capacity Civic Hall

for 29-31 May this year with a line-up including Happy Mondays, Editors and Echo & The Bunnymen, but was postponed due to the pandemic.

McGee says that he hopes to maintain much of the line-up for the rescheduled dates and is looking to build the festival brand with events elsewhere, with one in Scotland in the pipeline.

McGee, who admits to being a big Slade fan, says, "It's a good line-up. Many of the acts are managed by Creation. I expect a few acts may pull out but it's looking pretty solid for next year."

West Park will also be the home of the start and finish of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games cycling

time trial on 4 August, with around 90 competitors expected to take part across both the men's and women's events.

Wolverhampton has strong links to road cycling, with the first mass start cycling road race being held there in 1942 and leading riders such as Hugh Porter and Percy Stallard coming from the city. More recently, Andy Tennant, who was born in Wolverhampton and still lives in the city, won silver in the Team Pursuit for Team England at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

Matt Kidson, director of Sport for Birmingham 2022, says the time trial routes will be around 40km in

length and the events will attract many thousands of fans. As a whole, organisers expect the entire Games to boost the regional economy by more than £1bn.


Asked why West Park was chosen, Kidson says, "It is a beautiful venue, it will be a great opportunity for Wolverhampton to show it off. It ticks all the boxes for us from an operational point of view; as well as the athletes, we will have a broadcast compound there, spectator areas and concessions – there was a certain minimum footprint we needed and West Park absolutely hit that spot for us.

"The location was key in that we want to attract as many people to the event as possible and the parking and public transport facilities are great. As well as attracting a huge audience to the event itself, it will be broadcast to millions of spectators around the world so we can really help get Wolverhampton firmly on the map."

While there remains some uncertainty around what is achievable in terms of audience size, the council is kicking off its events programme this year with the Relight Festival – a big top event at West Park in August.

"The big top facility in West Park will give us a capacity of up to 2,000 people, or 500 depending on restrictions," says Cook. "We will use it to stage a mix of family events as well as a comedy club."

Darrell Martin, director and booker at Just the Tonic, who has secured Jason Manford and Ed Byrne at Bilston Town Hall this year, is overseeing the comedy line-up for the Relight project.

He says, "I think it is brilliant Wolverhampton Council is being so proactive. There is a really positive spirit around this project coming out of a miserable time. I've been doing events in other places around the country for years, but nowhere have I seen such a proactive and positive push from the council." 



Matt Kidson



Alan McGee



Darrell Martin



Ross Cook