



Maidstone Community Mela Evaluation Report

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Background

We had the great pleasure of delivering the 18th Maidstone Community Mela this year in Mote Park. This is an event we have been involved in since its inception and were proud to be commissioned by the **Maidstone Cultural Group** to produce this diverse community arts celebration in the County Town of Kent. We are also very grateful to **Maidstone Borough Council, Kent Equality Cohesion Council** and **Arts Council England** for their funding support.

I am really pleased that the Community Mela has re-established itself in Mote Park following a three year hiatus in Whatman Park. The support from elected members cannot be underestimated in this regard.

This year's Mela was already going to be extra poignant due to the fact that it fell on September 11th, the anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York which motivated the creation of the Mela in 2003 by the then Mayor, the late Cllr Morel D'Souza. However, with the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II mere days before, the Mela took on a new meaning for those in attendance.

This year underlined the key role the Mela plays in the Maidstone calendar, with diverse communities coming together, standing shoulder to shoulder as we celebrated the life of Her Majesty the Queen and the positive contribution made by the Commonwealth through arts and culture.

It is important the credit is paid to Maidstone Cultural Group and the members of the Mela Advisory Group who worked closely with us both in the build up to the Mela and the frantic few days following the death of Her Majesty when the events around the rest of the country were being cancelled.

Gurvinder Sandher MBE – Cohesion Plus



Marketing and Community Engagement

There was a comprehensive marketing plan in place for the event with a series of online posts, including paid adverts targeting the local community in Maidstone. This included posting in local neighbourhood Facebook groups. In the build-up the promotional videos had over 8,657 views online locally.

This was supplemented by articles which appeared in the local press and media, promotional videos which were shared online and via WhatsApp and flyers which were distributed door to door in the area surrounding Mote Park. There were also banners placed strategically around the event site to ensure maximum exposure.

In addition our partners Maidstone Cultural Group as well as the Maidstone Advisory Group, made up of local business owners, community groups and residents, shared leaflets, publicity and information via their vast networks which included schools and business networks.

Furthermore, publicity was also promoted out by organisations who were attending the Mela with information stands such Kent Adult Education, Unison, and The Blind Association to name a few.

Post event, Cohesion Plus shared a number of short films across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. In the first week post event, the event films had had over 211,079 views.

In addition the Mela and the sensitive way we celebrated the life of Her Majesty was the headline story on the BBC One regional news.

The Event

After much discussion and advice from both local and national partners, against the backdrop of the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the decision was taken to go ahead with the Mela and use it as an opportunity to celebrate the life of Queen Elizabeth II and her selfless contribution to the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth.

The Mela started with the National Anthem performed by Phase 5 Steel Band and then a minute of silence which was impeccably observed by all in attendance. It had been agreed with Maidstone Borough Council beforehand that the Mela would be used as an overspill site for The Proclamation of King Charles III which was then live streamed from Jubilee Square in between the acts on stage.



Throughout the day images of the Queen's life were shown on a big screen along with tributes from Civic Leaders from the borough.

There was a programme of entertainment both on and off stage reflecting the best of British and Commonwealth arts and culture, with the majority of the acts from Maidstone and other areas of Kent. Highlights included Square Pegs, Maidstone Nepalese Community Group, Kerala Cultural Association, and Maidstone Malayalee Group. They were joined by Kits Cotey Morris, Phase 5 Steel Band and the Kings of Dhol. The Community Mela also saw performances both on and off stage by the Rajasthan Heritage Band as part of their UK tour before flying back to India and the Midnight Soul Sisters who had everyone up and dancing.



The Chief Guest was Deputy Lieutenant Bill Cockcroft who was representing the Lord Lieutenant the Monarch's personal representative in the County of Kent. He spoke about Her Majesty's life of service to the nation and the Commonwealth.

The non-musical entertainment available was just as dynamic with a stilt walker parading and taking selfies with the public, the Chinese Lions who interacted with audience as well as a roaming brass band. There was also food from around the world on offer as well as ice cream and a bar all of whom, enjoyed a full day of trade. There were also free interactive musical storytelling sessions for 0-5-year olds and their parents/guardians.

Feedback

On the day, event staff spoke to members of the public to capture feedback. In total 138 face to face evaluations were completed and the feedback was as follows:



76% of respondents said that the quality of the Maidstone Community Mela was very good.

80% said that the Mela was very good value for money.

74% said that the whole experience was very good.

83% strongly agreed that the Mela encouraged participation in community life and events.

85% felt that events like the Mela enhanced the sense of community.

85% felt the work delivered by Cohesion Plus is good for the image of Kent

82% felt that events like the Mela contribute to bringing communities together promoting cohesion and understanding.

Comments captured included:

"We love coming to the Mela every year, there's not many that we've missed and I took the opportunity to personally thank the organisers who I follow on social media. It's a great day out for all the family and I'm glad it comes back every year."

"We had such a great time all day. Of course, things are sad with the passing of the Queen but I really think everyone should be celebrating her life like the Mela is doing rather than shutting down. She would have wanted her life to be recognised in such a way and I'm glad I came out to mark this moment. Good decision to carry on"

"Really lovely event, we had a lot of fun. It was lovely to enjoy the last of the summer this way despite everything that's going on."

"Lovely entertainment with a killer headline act, we stayed all day! For a free event we can't fault it all and we're really grateful to the organisers for sticking to their guns."

"It would have been really sad for the Mela not to happen this year, especially as there was a break due to Covid. Glad we got to come out and celebrate."

"We loved the idea of coming to the Mela to celebrate the Queen's life, she meant a lot to us so we are grateful we got to commemorate her life and service in a lovely and happy way."

"As a member of the Maidstone Cultural Group we are always so proud to work in partnership to deliver Mela. It's a fantastic event that really deserves a lot of recognition. There're not many other events that showcase talent that all communities can enjoy. Just looking at the demographics of the audience should tell you what you need to know about how important the Mela is in bringing people from all walks of life together."

"I had a great day, my highlights were the bhangra dancers and the Motown act at the end, so fantastic! We were up and dancing the whole time."

"So glad we brought the kids out, they loved every minute. Especially wonderful that entrance is free. Saves a lot of money for us as a family of 5."

"Food and entertainment were great, really lovely to see so much multiculturalism."

"Day was incredible, we were able to celebrate not just our community but also the life of the Queen."

"We were afraid that it wasn't going to go ahead but so glad it did. My daughter has been looking forward to coming since we got the leaflet."

"Lovely day out, we had a great time. Thank you to all for putting it on."

"The kids loved it, we loved it, what's not to love!"

"Really lovely event, we enjoyed ourselves and made a lot of memories. Would happily come again if it happens next year."

"Would totally come again!"

"We're new to the area so its really heartening to know that events like these are happening on our doorstep and that they are free to attend!"



Next Steps

While the Mela is a well-attended and popular event in the calendar, we never want to get complacent. We will look to continue working with the Maidstone Cultural Group and local residents, business owners, charities and community groups, working together to make sure the Mela is a well-rounded, inclusive event that the communities of Maidstone have a genuine stake in. The Mela is a great example of the Arts Council England **Lets Create Strategy** in action with communities coming together through a collaborative approach to culture, regardless of age or background, working for the wider benefit. Next year will be the 20th anniversary of the first Mela and building upon the experiences of this year and lessons learnt, the Mela Advisory Group will start early dialogue with key stake holders such as Maidstone Borough Council to ensure that the event can be produced which is worthy of this important anniversary.

