



Forming a theatre campaign group

Summary

This advice note looks at how to build support for a campaign and put in place the right structures to suit the campaign's aims. This is one of a series of advice notes – others can be found on our website at theatrestrust.org.uk/how-we-help/advice/advice-notes and we'll be adding more to this over the coming months.

Who is this note for?

This advice note is intended for community / volunteer groups who are working to save or revive a theatre in their area.

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Thanks to our funders

These advice notes are part funded by Historic England, The Pilgrim Trust and Swire Charitable Trust, and individuals donors.

When groups first form to support a theatre, it is often a reaction to an immediate threat of loss or closure of the building. In these situations groups must form quickly and don't always go through the processes to properly constitute the group. While an unincorporated association is a perfectly acceptable model for the early stages of a campaign, when you are beginning to commission reports and studies or look to take on the building, you may need to create a more formal structure.

Campaign groups form for a wide range of purposes:

- Raise awareness of the theatre
- Keep a theatre open
- Prevent demolition or redevelopment
- Prepare a bid to run the theatre as a community venture
- Repair and upgrade the theatre building for a future operator
- To support fundraising for an existing operator

Growing awareness and membership

Often the best route for attracting like-minded group members is through an online petition. Ensure you use positive language in the writing of your petition that includes people who may have interest in the theatre for a broad variety of different perspectives. Talk to the local press – they will be interested in personal stories of the theatre and what it has brought the community in the past.

Contact the Theatres Trust at an early stage to let us know if the building is under threat. While we closely monitor cases we are aware of, the information from local groups is essential for us.

Following the initial momentum of a petition campaign it is useful to hold a public meeting to allow people interested in saving or protecting the theatre to assemble to discuss the campaign as well as highlighting the potential of the venue to other stakeholders. Narrowing the focus too early can remove viable options for the saving of the building. While returning to professional theatre use is an attractive prospect, you may need to consider other uses to make the business case for the building.

While emotions run high in cases where a valued community building is at risk, keeping the key local stakeholders on side is essential. Local authorities, landowners and the press are valuable allies and while it may seem that you have divergent aims at this stage, a focus of your campaign should be to bring them around to your group's perspective.

One of the valuable benefits of a champion on the local council is that they can convene stakeholder meetings where you can meet everyone who has an interest in the building. Ensure that information about your campaign reaches both councillors and officers of the council with culture and regeneration portfolios.

You should cast the net wide for anyone with an investment in the building and the regeneration of the local area including current and potential users of the building such as further and higher education providers, major employers even the local football club can be a valuable partner.

Recruiting trustees / directors

It is important that the leadership of your organisation has the right mix of skills to deliver your project. Consider recruiting trustees with financial, legal and marketing experience as well as people who are used to working with local authorities and property.

Guidance on how to recruit trustees can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/finding-new-trustees-cc30>

While the trustees / directors hold the legal responsibility of delivering for the beneficiaries or shareholders, it is important to keep all members of the campaign group engaged with specific roles to perform and regular updates. It is common that one trustee / director ends up carrying too much of the burden of the project's work and this can damage the chances of success.

Constituting your group

A group with rules and members is an unincorporated association without the need to register with any regulators. However, this model of working has drawbacks when it comes to fundraising and organising events. Individual members have unlimited liability for the contracts signed on behalf of the group, some funding bodies will not consider applications from individuals and it may be difficult to arrange banking for the group.

There are a number of common organisational structures taken by theatre campaign groups. The route you take will depend on

- whether you are hoping to make a return on any investment put into the building
- the speed you need to be established
- the levels of fundraising you will require
- the anticipated scale of the organisation

To be approved as a charity, your group will need to have a charitable purpose that will benefit society – a purely building focused approach is unlikely to meet this requirement. Consider whether the project will allow local people to better appreciate arts and heritage. If you do not have a charitable purpose but do have community interest, you can form a Community Interest Company (CIC instead). Theatres Trust has found that most groups opt for a charitable status wherever possible.

If you are intending to take a salary for running the organisation then a charitable structure is probably inappropriate. Charity trusteeships are traditionally voluntary. A CIC allows the payment of directors but there are additional checks in place to ensure the payment is reasonable. The benefit of a CIC over a company limited by shares is that as the assets within the company cannot be distributed to the members so external funders may be more willing to offer grants to this than a company with shareholders.

Companies are the fastest to incorporate of these common models and where the standard memorandum and articles from the Companies House is adopted, it is common for registration to take less than one week.

Once constituted there will be an obligation to submit reports at least annually to the appropriate regulator(s), the format of the reports will depend on the form your organisation takes and may require accounts prepared to a certain standard.

Table: Common campaign group structures

	Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) / Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO)	Charitable Company (Limited by guarantee)	Community Interest Company (CIC)	Company limited by shares
Regulator	Charities Commission/ Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator	Charities Commission/ Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator Companies House	CIC Regulator	Companies House
Limited Liability	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Asset Lock	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Fundraising opportunities	As a charity, this organisation would be eligible for many voluntary and statutory funding bodies. CIO is a relatively new model and some funders may not be very familiar.	As a charity, this organisation would be eligible for many voluntary and statutory funding bodies. The organisation can only register with the charities commission when passing a turnover threshold.	Not a charity but still eligible for some grants due to the asset lock preventing the distribution of profits.	Limited sources for funding and may require investors or loan financing.
Can pay directors	Not usually	Not usually	Yes but rules apply	Yes
Guidance	https://www.gov.uk/set-up-a-charity https://www.oscr.org.uk/media/3113/cscios_a_guide.pdf	https://www.gov.uk/set-up-a-charity	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-interest-companies-business-activities	https://www.gov.uk/set-up-business

Above is a table of the structures most frequently taken by theatre campaign groups. However, the specifics of your organisation and campaign may necessitate other models. You should seek independent legal advice if you are unclear about the roles and responsibilities involved in setting up an organisation.

The role of the Theatres Trust

Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres and are a statutory consultee on theatres in the planning system. We provide a free advice service for anyone looking to save, restore or revive theatres. We campaign for great protection for theatres and raise the profile of those most under threat through our Theatres at Risk Register.

Contact us at advice@theatrust.org.uk with information about your theatre and how we can help.