



Top Tips for Campaign Groups

Summary

This advice note provides 10 top tips to help campaign groups get their project off the ground and move onto the next stages in saving their local theatre.

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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Top 10 Tips for Campaign Groups

While passion, drive and determination are all necessary attributes for campaigning to save your local theatre, there are some key early steps that will help you on the journey to securing its future.

1. Hearts and minds

Your ambition may be to fully restore and return your local theatre to live performance use, but it is important to think more widely about the final use and how this fits with local demand and need. Having the support of your local community, council and wider stakeholders behind your project is invaluable – involve them in the journey. Simple ways of doing this can be:

- Discussing with your community and key stakeholders what this building could be and explore all models, both for use and operation - remember, there are many different ways to run a theatre or community building.
- Focussing on the positive benefits of restoring / reopening your building and the opportunities that this will provide to your local area.
- Understanding what is it about your building that makes it important to the local community, such as historical importance both social and architectural.
- Looking at how your building can contribute to the local area – eg is it an area in need of regeneration and can you building play a part in this.
- Being positive in your messaging.

2. Organisational set-up

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. Forming of a charitable organisation will enable you to access public funding and also provide a vehicle for future ownership. However, setting up a company or charity comes with responsibilities and you should make sure you understand your duties as a trustee or director. It will also be important to ensure that you have a bank account linked to the organisation.

For further information relating to this refer to our advice note [Forming a Theatre Campaign Group](#).

3. Viability

A viability study is often the first stage in the process of saving or reviving a theatre building. It is a crucial early step and will help evidence that there is both market demand and a viable business plan for your proposal. It will also be an important tool in garnering local and political support for your project and when applying for funding.

For further information refer to our advice note [Writing a Viability Study Brief](#)

Once the viability of the proposal has been determined business planning and feasibility studies can be commissioned to look in a greater level of detail about the financial and architectural proposals.

All of these are important documents that will help prove the credibility of your proposals – and of you as a group – to the local authority / funders and other key organisations.

4. Ongoing community engagement

Continued engagement with your local community is crucial. Expand the interest in the project beyond the members of the group. Theatres are at the heart of communities and it is likely people will have interesting stories of the theatre's past. Collect the memories and testimonials of local people. The local press will often be interested in these personal stories of the theatre and what it has brought the community and this will help raise awareness of your campaign.

Look at different ways of engaging with your community – it may be useful to hold a public meeting to allow people interested in saving or protecting the theatre to come together to discuss the campaign as well as highlighting the potential of the venue to other stakeholders. Consider also how your group may be able to be represented at local events such as fairs and other local fund raising events.

5. Positive engagement with your local authority

Engage with your local authority as early as possible. This will help establish your interest in the building with them and also help you to understand their position. Look to work together positively for the benefit of the building. A collaborative approach is always more beneficial than a combative one. Likewise positive messaging – about what can be done and what is possible to achieve – will be more helpful than being negative.

Understand how the building fits into your local authority's planning policy, identify if it falls within a town centre master plan, is identified as a site for development, if the local plan offers special protections to local buildings or fits into the council's cultural policy – [see our advice on supporting theatres through the planning system](#). If the building is vacant and deteriorating are local authority willing to look at repairs notice or s215 to help secure the building and prevent further deterioration – [see our advice note on repairs notices](#).

Having supporting evidence such as viability studies, professional business plans and feasibility work will help your credibility with the council. It will show them that you are more than just vocal advocates of a building, and that you have an understanding of the processes involved in tackling what can be complex and long term projects.

6. Building ownership

Understand the current situation with regards ownership. A [land registry search](#) can help you determine this if it is not already known. Does the current owner have plans for the property? Are they keen to engage with you to find a solution for the building or to open to discussions over possible acquisition? Will they give you permission to carry out a viability study on the

building – this is important if you are looking for public funding for your viability study as most funders will require a letter of support from the building owner.

If in council ownership, is the council open to discussions regarding leasing the building / asset transfer? If the site is proposed for development, what is the local authority's position?

It is useful to understand the valuation of the property as a cultural venue – both for lease and acquisition purposes. Remember that the site will be more valuable as a commercial venture or if brought into residential use. Being able to evidence the value of the building to the local community and its role in the local area is therefore important (see earlier point about community support). If returning to use as a theatre, establishing the economic impact of this use will be important – see point 10.

7. Building condition

Understand the current condition of your building – structural survey, conditions survey, asbestos survey etc may be necessary. The information may be currently available or you may have to organise the surveys yourself. This will help you moving forward with obtaining more accurate costings for the restoration works and in understanding the conservation deficit on the building. It will also help mitigate risk.

The survey works will also help you formulate a health and safety plan for the building which will highlight any areas that should not be accessed / can only be accessed with appropriate safety equipment etc.

Where buildings have been lying vacant and deteriorating undertaking early survey work will help determine priorities – i.e. which areas of the building need the most urgent attention. For example, asbestos can often be an invisible but current risk and it may be necessary to remove as a first action to make the building safe before other works start.

8. Campaigning

Ensure that your website is kept up to date with current information. You may also want to set up a Facebook page and Twitter profile as a way of connecting with other local people and businesses, as well as other groups working on similar projects.

A petition is a good way of raising the profile of your project and finding people to join your campaign group. How can those who wish to get involved help out? Local press are also often important to help publicise your cause. Speak to local councillors about the benefits of your project and its importance to the community.

9. Fundraising

Fundraising is a thread that will run throughout the project, from funding for early stage viability studies / business planning through to the capital works project itself.

A clear understanding of what is achievable in terms of fundraising is an important step, particularly as the public funding that is available is getting increasingly stretched. If

commissioning a viability study, is one of the areas that this work should cover. Potential stakeholders and funders will want to see a realistic fundraising strategy before they determine their support.

Consider the mix of funding – public, trusts and foundations, and private individuals - and what may be achievable from each. Is loan funding – either via a Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) from the council or through other public funders e.g. the Architectural Heritage Fund possible / feasible.

Whatever your strategy it is important to start engaging with funding bodies early and keep them aware of your project and plans. Most funders will also want to see local authority support for the project – see also point 4 above.

[See our advice note on fundraising for more information.](#)

10. Economic Impact

Performance venues can have a major impact on the local economy, driving footfall in a town centre and helping boost local business revenue. Consider commissioning an economic impact study to indicate the potential benefit of your project, both in terms of financial impact and job creation. In addition, the restoration and reopening of an historic building can also serve as a catalyst for the regeneration of an area. For example the reopening of Bradford Odeon is expected to bring an additional £10.4m per annum into the local economy.

And a bonus tip – get in touch with Theatres Trust as we have a wealth of experience helping groups in similar situations.

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 or undertake a capital project in an existing theatre, including fundraising advice. Contact us at advice@theatrust.org.uk with information about your theatre and how we can help.