

Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda Inquiry

Theatres Trust Evidence

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Theatres Trust

Theatres Trust is the National Advisory Public Body for theatres. Our remit encompasses all theatre buildings in the UK and we are a statutory consultee in the planning system.

We champion the future of live performance, by protecting and supporting excellent theatre buildings which meet the needs of their communities.

We do this by providing advice on the design, planning, development and sustainability of theatres, campaigning on behalf of theatres old and new and offering financial assistance through grants.

We promote the quality and design of existing and new theatres and protect important historic theatres so that they can be used as theatres in the future. The Trust also advises to ensure theatre buildings meet the current needs and demands of the theatre industry and the audiences they serve.

How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?

With struggles of high street retail, the cultural offer is one of the key drivers of foot fall to town centres, enabling local hospitality businesses to continue to operate and diversify the night time economy. When the new arts centre, Chester Storyhouse opened in 2017, city centre footfall increased 15%¹.

Theatres bring an additional visitor spend from outside the immediate area. With the levelling up agenda, this visitor spend keeps the value within the local economy and avoids the extraction of value to other places. Reopened theatres at Bradford Odeon and Stockton Globe are estimated to bring an additional £10m-£18m in economic impact each year. This impact is not limited to large venues, Spilsby Sessions House, a

¹ Storyhouse, Chester, Case Study, Local Government Association, 2019

small rural theatre in Lincolnshire identified benefits of approximately £500k per year in additional visitor spending to its local area and an additional £80k in additional employment².

Arts organisations can inhabit disused spaces to reanimate empty retail uses and bring activity back to high streets. Theatre Absolute have operated a shop front theatre in Coventry since 2009, removing the barriers to engagement that audiences may feel entering a purpose built theatre space and providing opportunities to local creatives. Theatre Delicatessen have a model of inhabiting office and retail spaces on a meanwhile use model providing affordable creative work spaces as well as rehearsal and performance space.

How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?

Theatres Trust welcomes further devolution of decision making to a local level and additional funding for regeneration through the shared prosperity fund. Theatres are traditionally a place of community forum and discussion where the identity of a place can be debated and formed. Good cultural governance encourages representative boards which reflect the local community and so theatres are often key stakeholders in the BIDs and community fora which shape decision making.

It has been challenging for local arts organisations to have projects to the “shovel ready” stage that has been expected from recent government funding schemes. Funding is required for the scoping and viability stages of this work before full applications can be made to public or charitable funding sources. Theatres Trust would support staged funding schemes with development funding available to ensure the projects that are funded are those with the greatest impact and not just those that are ready to go at the moment that funding is announced.

Theatres Trust encourages funding at a grass roots level which does not require the forming of consortia or bureaucratic processes but allows existing arts infrastructure to be developed.

How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?

Theatres Trust welcomes the 9th mission of levelling up that “By 2030, pride in place, such as people’s satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between the top performing and other areas closing.”

It is incorrect to suggest that there are many areas in the UK that do not have any artistic infrastructure. Injecting artistic infrastructure on top of existing provision rather

² Spilsby Session House: An Economic Impact Assessment, Culver-Dodds Consultancy, 2021

than working with what already exists to develop it is unlikely to support the development of places with unique identities. Further, Theatres Trust encourages the reuse and refurbishment of existing facilities over the building of new buildings due to the sustainability benefits of this approach. All but 16 local authority areas in England have an active theatre. This infrastructure is in dire need of investment and development and capital funding should be targeted to ensure we maximize the placemaking value of the existing estate.

The operating models of these theatres are occasionally commercial but are more likely to be run by local authorities, independent trusts or amateur theatre groups. Local authorities are major funders of culture funding over £2billion a year³ This is despite theatres not being a statutory service. Local Government finance is in a perilous position following the economic shock of coronavirus and the long term reductions in their funding⁴. Local authorities are making cuts to arts funding as a result, cuts have already been announced in Guildford, Maidenhead and Bristol, and while these cuts have provoked local opposition which have resulted in a lessening of the scale of the cuts, the levels of funding have still been significantly reduced. We expect more local authority cuts will follow. The government could support the development of culture by specifically funding and rewarding local authorities for investing in culture.

Arts Council England currently includes 12% of the active theatres in England in its national portfolio. Following the lottery funded investment of the 90s and 00s there has been a sharp decline in both revenue and capital funding for theatres.

A mixed model of funding has been encouraged, with higher reliance on earned income. Revenue funding from both ACE and Local Authorities have reduced as a % of overall turnover for most theatres and while many have successfully generated other sources of income, this has put pressures on buildings and maintenance budgets resulting in under-investment.

Alongside this ACE capital grant budgets have reduced from an average of £57.3million per annum for 2012-2018 to £18.5million per annum from 2018-2022. ACE's entire capital budget for 2021-2024 is a mere £20million across all cultural facilities. Without the leverage of arts council investment, theatres will not be able to raise match funding for vital capital projects and our envied theatre estate will fall further into disrepair. If theatre infrastructure is left to deteriorate then the impact on the safe operation of these theatre building could reduce access to culture and impact on the economic sustainability of town centres. Public support is urgently needed to sustain the UK's theatre infrastructure.

The Culture Recovery Fund has been a significant injection of funds into the sector but the purpose and conditions on that funding only prevented the loss of theatres in the

³ LGA – Councils one of the top investors in culture, sport and leisure. LGA (2020)

⁴ LGF0002 - Written evidence submitted by Theatres Trust COVID-19: Local Government finance Call for Evidence (2021)

immediate response to the crisis. It shouldn't obscure the reality that all theatre buildings stand in need of significant capital investment:

- Their building fabric and services systems are life-expired
- They are environmentally unsustainable (and costly to run)
- They are inaccessible (even while population and audiences age)
- Their front of house facilities are unable to maximise audiences and revenue
- They lack facilities to reach new generations and audiences

Theatres Trust estimates a need of over £1billion in the next 5 years to maintain and improve the theatre infrastructure and while a mixed funding model will be essential to deliver this, free reserves in theatre organisations have been used to survive the crisis and charitable funders are struggling with multiple draws on their resources and economic uncertainty impacting their ability to meet the capital need.

It is important to note that around 25% of theatres in the UK are run by amateur dramatics associations. These little theatres produce their own productions fully staffed by volunteer actors, technicians, designers, directors and producers. They generate skills and wellbeing in local communities and offer opportunities for artistic creation beyond the conventionally funded models. Until the pandemic most of these theatres had received no public funding. If arts in the community is a pillar of levelling up then the contribution of these bastions of local culture should not be overlooked.

How might changes to the UK's broadcasting landscape affect investment in cultural production outside the capital, and what could the consequences be for artists and communities?

Theatres Trust would like to see more coverage of the extraordinary theatre produced across the UK but has no substantive response to this query.

How should Government build on existing schemes, such as the UK City of Culture, to level up funding for arts and culture?

City of Culture

The City of Culture often serves as a catalyst for investment in cultural infrastructure. The legacy project of Hull's bid was the Bonus Arena in Hull diversifying the arts offering in the city. Capital projects are not a natural fit for festival models of funding with an emphasis on delivering events within the year itself but given the challenges of capital fundraising have worked their way into these bids.

Local schemes such as London Borough of Culture have shown similar legacy schemes with the Waltham Forest Council reopening the Walthamstow Granada and Lewisham Council undertaking significant improvements to Catford Broadway during their tenures of London Boroughs of Culture.

Theatre Trust welcomes the City of Culture and similar schemes but we would like to see separate and focused work on the maintenance and improvement deficit of the existing cultural infrastructure.

Potential for Theatres to Contribute to Net Zero

Theatres were not eligible to apply for support from the £1 billion Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund which was a missed opportunity to ensure some of our largest and most prominent public buildings are beacons in the achievement of net zero. We very much hope that some of the £3.9 billion to decarbonise buildings which was announced in the autumn spending review will be allocated to our nation's theatres. Theatre Trust has worked in partnership with the theatre sector to create sound guidance on sustainable theatre buildings available at theatregreenbook.com.

Community Asset Transfer

Theatre Trust expects to see an increasing number of smaller theatres leaving local authority control and have already seen an increase in vacant theatres in private ownership being marketed. The Community Ownership Fund's current value limits restrict purchases to properties up to £250k and football grounds up to £1,000,000. This excludes many of the theatres in town centres where large town centre sites mean land value often exceeds the lower limit. Theatre Trust would like to see the limit increased in line with the football ground level for all properties. If theatre buildings are sold and converted for non theatre use it is likely that they will not be replaceable and theatre provision permanently lost in communities due to the cost of a replacement site.

Due to the increase in expected community asset transfers, Theatre Trust are concerned that groups without expertise and experience will be left to manage complex buildings. We would hope that the Community Ownership Fund could extend eligible costs to include skills development and to encourage good governance from community buyers. Theatres also require working capital to establish audiences and programming and support with the viability stages of capital improvements.