



How Local Authorities Can Help Theatres at Risk

Summary

This advice note looks at different ways that local authorities can help their local theatres whether on our Theatres at Risk list or providing positive action now to protect a local theatre for the future. 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 local authority culture and planning teams who are working with campaign groups / local organisations to save or revive a theatre in their area.

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How local authorities can support local theatres

We appreciate that local authorities face financial challenges but supporting a local theatre doesn't always have to involve huge capital outlay or an ongoing revenue funding commitment. There are alternative ways, whether practical and pragmatic considerations or through embracing and developing creative partnerships that can help secure new lives for theatre buildings whose futures are threatened. These are listed below:

1. Economic and social benefits

There have been numerous studies on the social, economic and broader placemaking impact of theatres and other cultural buildings, which demonstrate that theatres stimulate regeneration, attract businesses and employees to a town or city and contribute significantly to the night time economy. We therefore recommend that council's review the economic and social benefit of a theatre and the opportunity that that building provides to its local area when making any decision about its future.

One method of determining this is through an economic impact assessment. This determines the direct affect and benefit of a building on its surrounding area, taking into account the impact on surrounding businesses, increase in employment and job opportunities, stimulation in local growth and the regenerative effect of a building on its area etc. To provide a recent example, an economic impact assessment on the benefit of a restored and reopened Walthamstow Granada on its local area estimated that it could add between £34m and £52m to the local economy over a 10-year period.

A further example is that of the Bradford Odeon, which when restored and reopened will attract around 300,000 visitors each year from its 200+ events and is expected to benefit the local economy by up to £10m annually through the subsequent increase in footfall, increased local spend, creation of new jobs and investment etc.

While the above two examples are estimates, a Local Government Association review of Chester Storyhouse (a mixed use cultural building containing a theatre, cinema and library) a year after its opening indicated the following impact:

- 15 per cent increase in footfall in Chester city centre attributed to Storyhouse opening
- One million visitors recorded within one year of opening
- 100 jobs directly supported – including c. 40 full-time, 30 part-time and 30 casual/seasonal staff members.

The report also noted that community has also benefitted with the Storyhouse being regularly used as a venue or meeting place by over 150 community groups in the area.

2. Inclusion of culture within local plans

In 2012 Theatres Trust successfully lobbied for culture to be included within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This now includes extensive directions on the importance of safeguarding cultural assets to benefit local communities.

However, local authorities can additionally help protect theatres and arts buildings by ensuring the inclusion of culture within local plans. This can positively promote and encourage new venues and protect and support existing buildings for the benefit of local

people and communities. Commentary on local plans forms a part of the Theatres Trust's statutory remit and we can support you to think about how to build robust culture policies into your local plan.

An example where culture has been incorporated successfully into local policy is in Peterborough. The city council's cultural strategy identifies the need for a permanent theatre and its local plan also provides protection and support for culture. Both of these helped support the case to turn down an application to redevelop the Broadway Theatre as housing. The venue has since reopened under the management of Selladoor Worldwide as the New Theatre providing Peterborough with a 1,100 seat venue fitting of the scale required by the area and as identified in the council's planning policy.

For further detail about how planning policy can help protect and promote theatres and cultural venues this refer to advice note [Promoting theatres within planning](#)

3. Providing support to community groups

Support to community groups campaigning to get buildings back into use needn't be financial. The offer can be as simple as support through planning, or opposing schemes that will be detrimental to the operation of an existing theatre. Likewise putting council support behind funding bids has a substantial impact with visible, consistent and high profile support from the council giving funders such as Arts Council England, National Lottery Heritage Fund etc. the confidence to invest in your local theatre.

To provide an examples of each:

In Wallingford, the council opposed a scheme for new build residential units adjacent to the Corn Exchange which, if approved, would have been detrimental to the operation of the theatre.

In Bradford, the council supported Bradford Live in their bid for Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership (LEP) funding for a package of works to help restore the Odeon, a large cine-variety house that has been empty since 2000, as a large scale music venue. The bid was successful and the grant has since funded enabling works – the first phase in a larger restoration project.

This first phase of funding was to prove critical to future bids and subsequent to this the LEP Board announced the Odeon as its preferred project to receive a share of up to £4m from the Government's Northern Cultural Regeneration Fund – a bid which was also successful.

4. Intervention

Councils can make important and necessary interventions to prevent deterioration of listed buildings through ensuring that owners are aware of their responsibilities and, where necessary, through enforcement notices. This is particularly relevant to those listed theatres in private ownership many of which are lying vacant and highly vulnerable to deterioration. Simple intervention such as regularly visiting these buildings to check the condition and engaging the owners in discussion regarding necessary and essential repair works can have a major and significant impact.

For example, Doncaster Council undertakes six monthly internal inspections on the vacant Grade II listed Grand Theatre to ensure that the building continues to be weathertight. Any

concerns are brought to the owner's attention and the necessary repair works agreed. This has resulted in substantially reducing any deterioration of the building and the theatre remaining in a relatively stable condition.

Other methods open to councils include repairs notices and section 215 notices – [more information on this can be found in our advice note](#).

5. Viability

Local authorities can provide vital assistance to groups in supporting them to investigate the viability of their theatre and to help them develop proposals.

One of the examples of this would be help in undertaking a viability study. One of the biggest challenges for voluntary campaign groups trying to save their local theatre, who rarely have any funding at the start, is demonstrating that it has a viable future. For the relatively modest cost of a viability study the local authority could help identify different potential operating models to secure the theatre's future. Where funding is not possible, councils can provide vital support through supporting funding bids etc (see also above). This is particularly crucial in cases where campaign groups do not own their building and where some funders will want to see council engagement in the project before committing funds.

For example, in Burnley, the council committed £5,000 to support a viability study by campaign group Burnley Empire Trust to determine if there was a viable and sustainable future for the theatre. This helped the group secure additional funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund. The campaign group also raised match funding. The council was also represented on the steering group leading the study which has proved beneficial to all parties. Increasingly public funding requires consortium bids between local authorities, charities and companies, by having a partnership approach the council and campaign group are better prepared to submit bids when funding becomes available. The local authority also brings an overview of local priorities and can identify where future options for the theatre can fill gaps in night time economy, wellbeing or placemaking policies.

Swindon Borough Council has shown its support to campaign group Mechanics' Institution Trust, through representation on the steering group leading the viability study on the Mechanics Institute. The council are also devoting officer time to project manage a conditions survey on the building which is being grant funded through Historic England. In addition to this work, the council and Mechanics' Institution Trust were co-signatories on a bid to Historic England for the area surrounding the Mechanics' Institute to become a Heritage Action Zone. The bid was successful and the area is now benefitting from funding and specialist support from Historic England over a five-year period.

6. Tenure

Offering theatre campaign and community groups leases with a reasonable length and conditions will help enable them to secure funding from other partners

Where theatres require significant capital work for them to either remain in or return to viable use – for example repairing damage or dilapidation or upgrading technical and front of house facilities to meet modern standards and expectations - funding bodies such as Arts Council and National Lottery Heritage Fund want to see security of tenure before committing capital

funding and generally will not support applications where the operator only has a short term lease.

If leases are conditional on achieving milestones of fundraising, business planning or completion of repair works, local authorities should allow additional time beyond what it would take the authority to complete given that most campaign groups are voluntary organisations without paid staff. Offering campaign groups a short lease can allow vital surveys to take place, business plans to be developed and repairs to begin but for large fundraising campaigns longer leases will be required.

For example, when the Kings Head Theatre was negotiating its lease agreement with the developer constructing the new development that the theatre was moving into, Islington Council helped the theatre agree a longer lease than was originally offered and a peppercorn rent agreement – see also below.

7. Rental agreements

Offering affordable rents to operators that want to develop the theatres as future performance spaces / retain them for performance use is a further way that councils can help support and protect cultural venues.

While larger scale venues can often return a profit and therefore pay a commercial rent, the vast majority of smaller scale venues in the UK depend upon a peppercorn rent from the landlord. In many cases that landlord is a local authority. In these cases we would urge local authorities to take a realistic approach when setting rental expectations and to consider the wider community and economic benefits of a viable theatre in their town. A council can also provide support for theatre operators negotiating with lease agreements in new developments.

In Conwy the council has tendered for Expressions of Interest for the Conwy Civic Hall, a cultural facility that contained a theatre (closed in 2014) and a library. While there are community groups that would be keen to take on operation of the building, the council is looking for a commercial return on the property and has put the building on the market with the aim to achieve this.

While theatre buildings may not be able to secure as high a return for local authorities as other uses, local authorities should consider the wider social and economic benefits when trying to achieve best value for their assets.

8. Grants

Where possible, councils can help by offering capital grants and / or loans to support capital works projects

Councils are able to borrow capital at low rates through the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) and this can be used to help support local theatres through offering loans at these preferential rates. Councils should work with theatre organisations to develop business models for the repayment but the rates the council can offer may be the key to achieving a viable route to restoration and reopening. At Bradford, the council executive agreed 'in principle' to provide a £12m loan to Bradford Live towards the anticipated £20m restoration costs for the Bradford Odeon.

Summary

Local authorities can provide opportunities, both practical and innovative, and which needn't be financial, that can pave the way for campaign groups and theatre operators to succeed in breathing long life back to the theatres which are under threat. These reawakened theatres can serve as vital community hubs, drive footfall to high streets and once again bring arts and entertainment to the local area.

The role of 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. We would encourage any local authorities to get in touch with us to find out how they can best support their local theatres – whether it is supporting a Theatres at Risk or acting now to protect a local theatre for the future. Contact us at advice@theatrestrust.org.uk