

Regional Theatres: Reflections on Resilience and Community Engagement

Resilient Theatres: Resilient Communities



Made possible with

Heritage
Fund

Pilgrim
Trust

SWIRE
CHARITABLE
TRUST

Host and chair

Claire Appleby

Head of Theatre Buildings

Theatres Trust

Resilience by the Sea: Rebuilding the Gorleston Pavilion Theatre

Alex Youngs

Chief Executive

Gorleston Pavilion Trust / Pavilion Theatre, Norfolk

Where we started



Where we started



Seaside theatre at the end of its golden era

- 123-year-old Edwardian theatre on the Norfolk coast
- Privately owned since 1994, trust owned since 2024
- Ageing building and legacy systems
- Limited community engagement, but strong loyalty
- No clear sense of purpose or direction
- Team of 1 permanent staff and 15 casuals
- Seasonal economy and lumpy income patterns

The turning point

Carrying the weight of a legacy

- Passing of the previous leaseholder
- Deep sense of responsibility for keeping the lights on and securing the future
- Trust leadership's desire for change and a new era
- Noticeable downward trends following COVID and audience decline
- Recognition that long-term resilience required a charitable model to attract funding



The review



Taking stock: our first 18 months

- Full operational, financial and artistic review
- Programming, staffing, finances, governance, building operations, and community activity
- Identified strengths and risks to survival
- Cautious transition period and desire for continuity
- Heavy financial and operational challenges: urgent roof repair, small team burnout and staff sensitivities to change

What we found

Fragility and why resilience became essential

- Operational processes dependent on legacy systems and goodwill no long-term sustainability
- Maintenance backlog greater than resources, threatening building viability
- Programming had become stale, with limited community impact or audience renewal
- Seasonal income and rising costs creating financial instability
- Team capacity overstretched, no structures or accountability
- Little scope for innovation, growth, or deeper community connection

What we changed



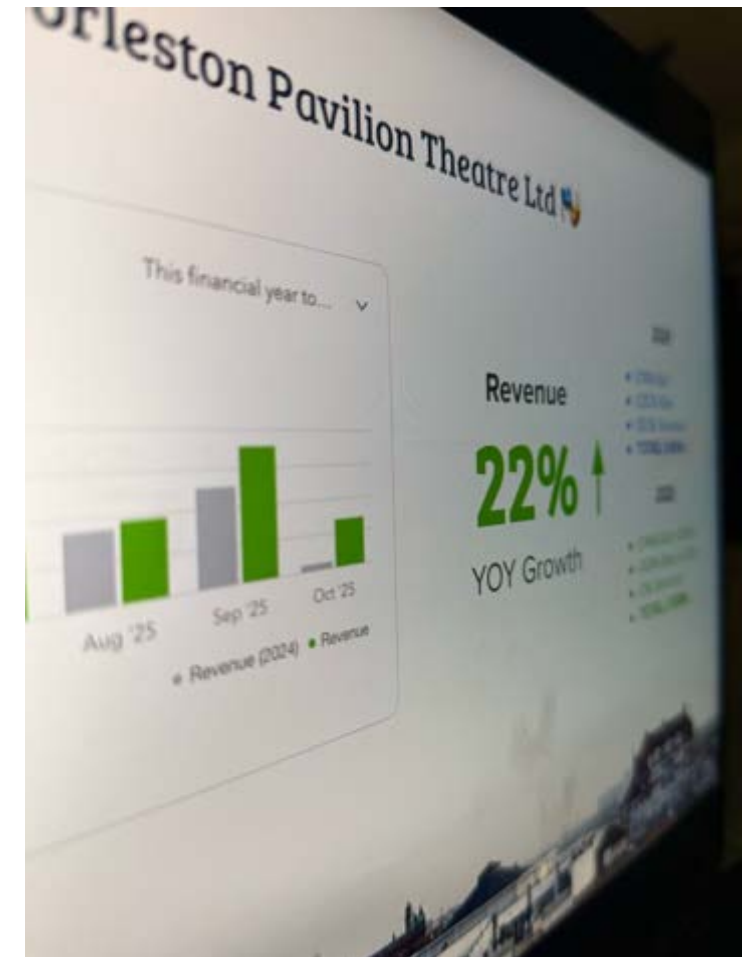
Laying the groundwork for resilience

- Urgent building works and improvements
- Rebuilt operational systems and accountability structures
- Introduced a clear staff framework: 7 permanent roles, 15 casuals and 40 volunteers
- Balanced programme between commercial income and community value
- Formalised governance, financial planning, and reporting
- Improved internal communication and staff wellbeing
- Strengthened community relationships through new initiatives and visibility

Financial resilience

Fixing cashflow, structure and sustainability

- Year 1: inherited deficit and urgent repairs
- Year 2: stabilisation and improved oversight
- Year 3: balanced position with sustainable systems
- Rebuilt payment discipline, improving invoice terms
- Implemented clear management charging between Trust and Theatre
- Introduced regular forecasting and board scrutiny
- Diversified income through hires, bar improvements, and educational activity



Community and trust



Rebuilding relationships and confidence

- Open communication with audiences, suppliers and partners
- Clearer public identity: a community-led, professional seaside theatre
- Strengthened local partnerships and visibility
- Volunteers reintroduced as part of a structured, valued team
- Improved staff morale through openness and shared purpose
- Growing reputation for activity and collaboration
- Funding awards for community hub

Lessons learnt



What resilience really looks like in practice

- Resilience isn't about bouncing back, it's about staying steady through change
- Transparency builds trust faster than perfection
- Systems and structure protect creativity, they don't restrict it
- Financial stability is slow, patient work
- Community belief is as valuable as funding
- Progress is built on people, not just plans

Lessons learnt



Thank you for listening

Alex Youngs

Chief Executive

Gorleston Pavilion Trust / Pavilion Theatre, Norfolk

pavtheatre.com

Facebook and Instagram: [@gorlestonpav](#)

From the Ground Up: Building a Theatre for the Community

Clare O'Hara and Vanessa Managhan

Head of Community / Take Part Director

The Theatre, Chipping Norton

THE THEATRE CHIPPING NORTON





Residents of the town gave £1 each and The Theatre was launched in an old Salvation Army Citadel, with *Beauty & the Beast*





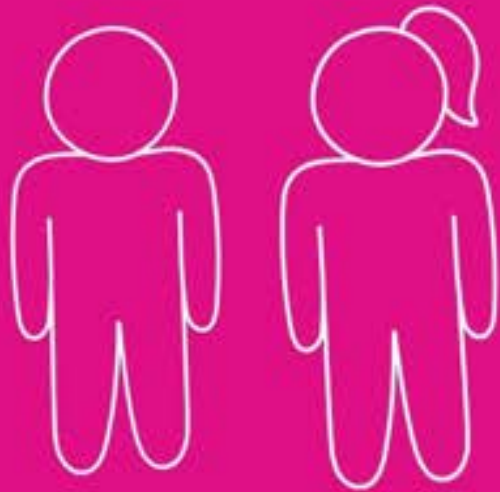
**10% most
deprived
nationally for
Education,
Skills and
Training**

**42% of parents in
our area report
child mental health
needs within past
12 months**

**20% most
deprived
nationally for
child poverty**

Community

THE THEATRE
CHIPPING NORTON



Changing the view



In 2020...

11 youth theatre groups
3 youth musical theatre
1 Adult Drama
1 Great Company
3 Creative Writing
2 Dance 50
Holiday Programmes

But who **isn't a part of that picture?**

Finance

Travel

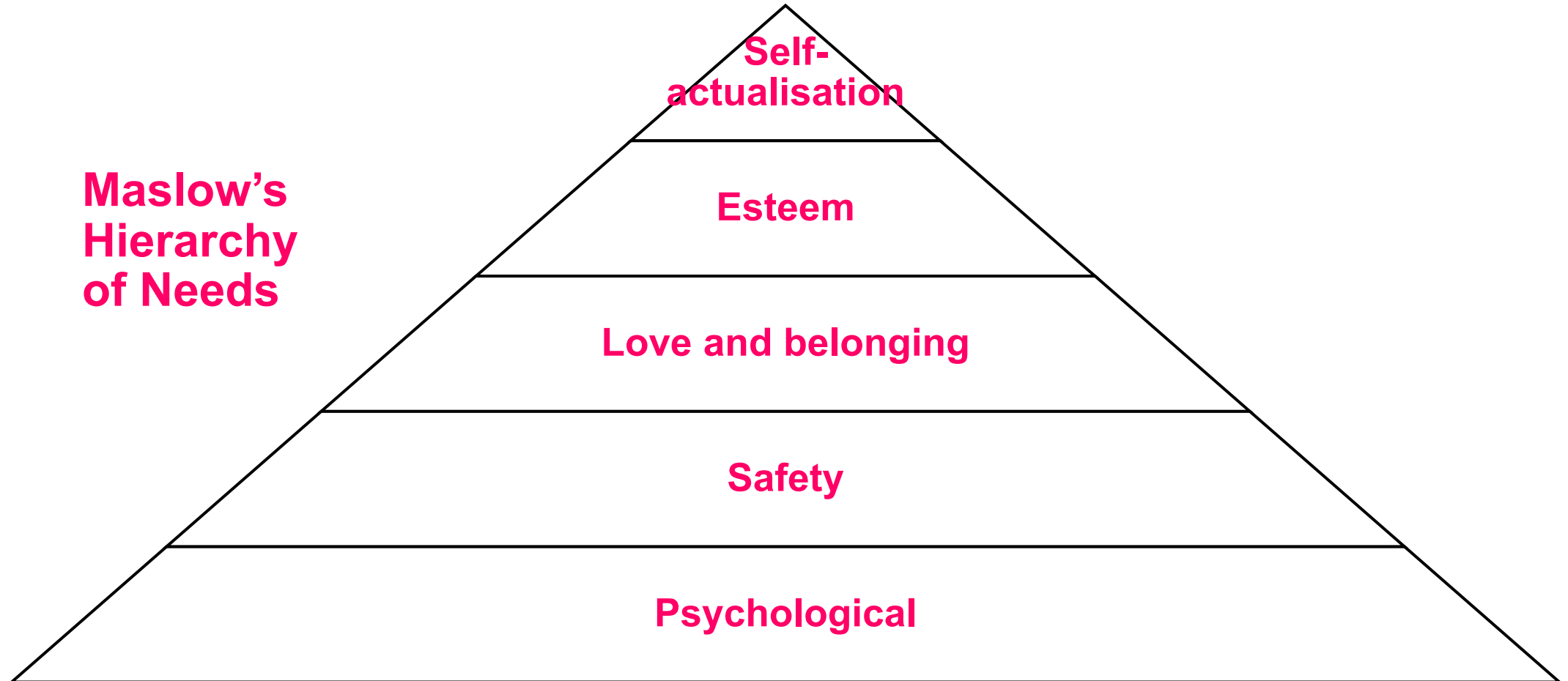
Social

Cultural

& more

Needs first

**Maslow's
Hierarchy
of Needs**



Community partners



What are
the Needs?

Who is
meeting
them?

How can
we join in?

Holding our nerve



**Taking a
Risk**

**Trust
from
Leaders**

**Building
Relations
hips**

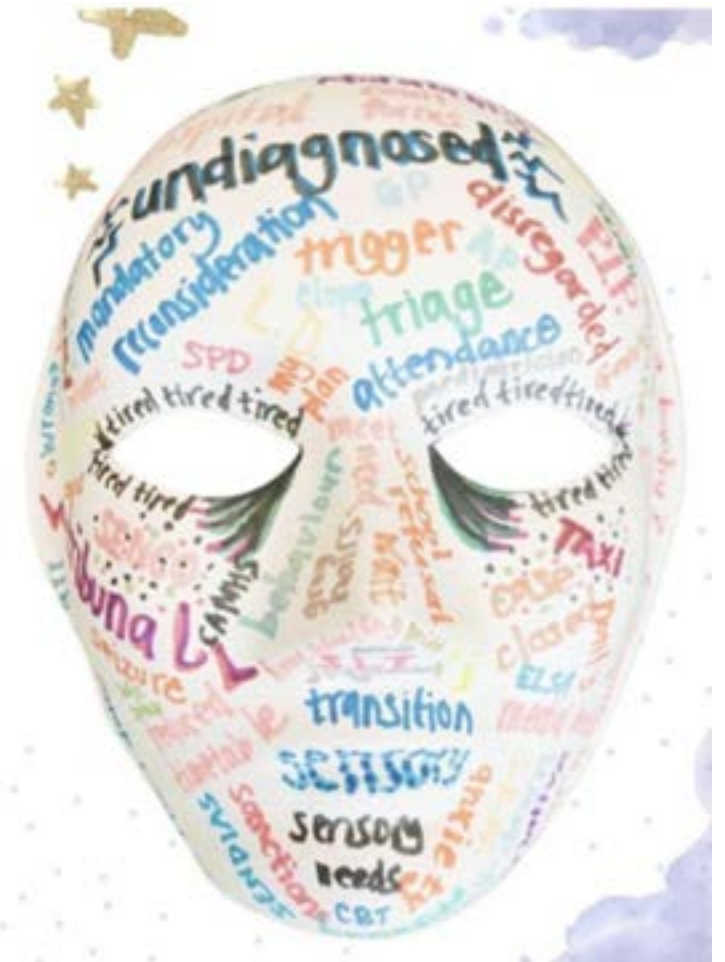
**Art will
change
Lives**

Responding to need



Food Need →
Free School Meals
programme

CAMHS waiting list → Mental Health Schools Programme



The art



Slowly, slowly...

- Stickers
- Art packs
- Creative art packs
- Foyer workshops
- Childcare theatre workshops
- Youth Theatre taster
- 48 year-round bursaries!



48
year-round
bursary
participants

Audience

11,000

free school holiday lunches

866

free tickets to family films and theatre

650

mental health art parcels

965

holiday art and craft packs for children from low-income families

56

mental health sessions delivered in local schools for young people

45

free holiday workshop places for children on free school meals



**Nearly 1,000
targeted tickets
per year**



The Theatre family

The
Theatre
as a
HOME

The whole
Family is
welcome

Staff, Board &
Participants
Together



**Art
Changes
Lives**



**Life
Changes
Art**

On stage

Barn
Dance by
Mike
Bartlett



“Working on, and seeing, Barn Dance at the Chipping Norton Theatre was a wonderful experience. The play is about a community forming memories and meaning over time - from the point of view of locals, and visitors – and it felt like that was what was happening in the production itself. The combination of amateur actors from the community, with professional actors lead to what seemed like a hugely enriching experience for everyone. A community or hybrid production is certainly different from a fully professional one but it is not in any way less valid or meaningful. In this case it felt like it brought the play closer to the audience, with actors they knew, places they recognised and a depiction of themes and issues they were living themselves. I feel that this kind of work can be particularly important in a rural context, which can sometimes feel left out in a cultural scene that originates in cities. Here it was a specific story, in a specific context - a community depicted both from within and seen from outside. It was hugely memorable for me as well as, it seemed, the participants, and the audiences.”

Mike Bartlett

Thank you for listening

Clare O'Hara and Vanessa Managhan

Head of Community / Take Part Director
The Theatre, Chipping Norton

chippingnortontheatre.com

Facebook and Instagram: @chippytheatre

A Community Owned Theatre

Neil Gwynne

Chair

Romsey Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society
(RAODS), owners and managers of The Plaza Theatre



Major works in 2024 to stage house



400-seat Plaza Cinema (built 1931) converted to a 246-seat theatre in 1983. Reduced to 231 seats in 1989 re accessibility



Main auditorium, now 231 seats, plan for 249

Phases of ownership

Year	Phase	Shows	Seats	Volunteers	£k	Quotes
1982-91	NEW	6 / 6	246	400	<100k	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maybe up to 6 shows a year • When we don't use it, for the community
92-2006	BECALMED	7 / 8	231	300	100k-150k	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Romsey Theatre for Romsey people • We don't earn much, so we can't spend much • Technically & physically impossible to do more than 7 shows a year
2007-25	GROWTH	12 / 36	231 (249)	350	320k+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be acknowledged as one of Hampshire's very best groups • Be seen as a key Hampshire venue • Maintain the theatre as an asset for Romsey

Community engagement #1



- Invited audiences for preview performances
- Offer low-cost meeting room hire to local charities



- Provide free tickets as prizes to local fetes, school fund raisers, etc.

- Have a youth section and invest time in it

- Collections for local charities during our annual pantomime

- Letters/items to local papers and key social media



Community engagement #2

- Open days every 18 months
- Use local suppliers and services, and advertise that fact
- Build relationship with local council(s)
- Involvement with Mayor's shows in Abbey and theatre, plus Christmas lights switch on. And invite local Mayor(s) and MP to every RAODS show
- Make (and keep) the outside of the theatre as attractive as possible



Thank you for listening

Neil Gwynne

Chair of Romsey Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (RAODS)

The Plaza Theatre, Romsey
Plazatheatre.com



PlazaTheatreRomsey



@plazatheatre.com



Plaza Theatre

Exploring Resilience

Bill Hamblett

Artistic Director

Small World Theatre / Theatr Byd Bach, Cardigan

Theatr Byd Bach | Small World Theatre



Resilience



Main space



Reproductive rights play



Recycled grasshopper 2.8metres



Abergele 2.3 metres



Be more Jemima



Resillliennnnnce



There is no leader who is not a bridge



Resilience needs maintaining



Thank you for listening

Bill Hamblett

Artistic Director

Small World Theatre / Theatr Byd Bach, Cardigan

smallworld.org.uk

Facebook and Instagram: @smallworldbydbach

Audience Q&A

Host

Claire Appleby Head of Theatre Buildings, Theatres Trust

Speakers

Alex Youngs Chief Executive, Gorleston Pavilion Trust / Pavilion Theatre, Norfolk

Clare O'Hara and Vanessa Managhan

Head of Community / Take Part Director, The Theatre, Chipping Norton

Neil Gwynne Chair of Romsey Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (RAODS)

Bill Hamblett Artistic Director, Small World Theatre / Theatr Byd Bach, Cardigan