



Theatres in Towns

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hughes, J., Edwards, G., Nicholson, H., & Gray, C. (2023). *Theatres in Towns: Why they matter*. <https://creativetownsresearch.wordpress.com/>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.





Theatres in Towns: Why they Matter

Theatres in Towns:

Why they Matter

Researchers

Professor Jenny Hughes and **Dr Gemma Edwards**
University of Manchester

Professor Helen Nicholson and **Dr Cara Gray**
Royal Holloway, University of London

Contents

Section 1:

Researching Theatre in England's Towns

Section 2:

Summary of Findings: Local theatres; Theatres and civic regeneration;
Volunteer-led Theatres: Partnerships

Section 3:

Future Conversations and Acknowledgements

Cover image:

The Den, Leigh. Photographer, Dan Carty

Below:

Spinners Mill, Leigh. Photographer, Mark Nightingale, Image Village



SECTION ONE

Researching Theatre in England's Towns

“I never ever say I run an arts organisation or a theatre organisation, if anyone asks me in the town I say I’m here to improve the quality of our lives – that seems more connected and more relevant ... We have to ask ourselves over and over again, are we being useful to our community?”

Gavin Stride, Farnham Maltings ‘The Future of Theatre in Towns’ January 2022

“Growing up on a Council estate, I didn’t really feel that acting, and painting, and poetry, belonged to me. What Oldham Coliseum did was to kind of argue against that. It was a beacon for people like me. It said, ‘this does belong to you’. You could see plays with your own accent, you could see plays by local writers, and you felt you had something to contribute. Oldham Coliseum also unifies the community ... it’s not just what you see on stage. At a time of great division, it’s a kind of community hub that brings people together. Oldham Coliseum responds to its local audiences’ needs and creates this great mix – dance, brass bands, panto, serious drama, and new plays written about the town.”

Christopher Eccleston, interviewed on BBC Breakfast, 1st April 2023, on the closure of Oldham Coliseum on 31st March after 135 years of theatre in the town

This briefing paper reports on research on theatre in towns undertaken between 2021 and 2022. When the research began in March 2021, the long-term effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic on theatres, town centres, and the cultural life of towns was only just coming into focus. By 31st March 2023, one of the most iconic of town theatres, Oldham Coliseum, had closed its doors for the last time. This closure throws a spotlight on the value of theatres in towns for local employment, audiences, artists, and communities.

Our research identifies the positive contribution theatres make to towns across England. Where theatres are supported and thrive, they bring a range of social benefits and creative opportunities to communities and townspeople. The research also shows the risks and challenges theatres face, and what would be lost if theatres in towns close.

Why theatre in towns?

There are over 1,000 towns in England and over half the population lives in towns.¹ The Theatres Trust lists over 280 building-based theatres in English towns, but this represents only part of the scale of theatre-making in towns.² Theatre companies without buildings work in towns, theatre is found in touring programmes, festivals, schools, prisons, hospitals, faith groups and other community organisations. The amateur association NODA lists over 1600 local theatre companies, many sustained in towns across all English regions.³

Yet despite this lively grassroots commitment to theatre-making, there is a prevailing sense that theatres in towns have been overlooked, particularly where there is little connection to London or other major cities. Most

researchers are city-based, and policy debates about theatres in towns tend to invoke a deficit model – what is not happening in towns – rather than understanding how theatres in towns operate within their own cultural ecosystems. Our research aimed to redress this balance by investigating the significance of theatres for townspeople.

Our aims and approach

We aimed to initiate a national conversation about the cultural value of theatres in towns across England. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council,⁴ the research involved a wide range of amateur, professional and community theatre-makers and other townspeople in this conversation, and included over 23 post-industrial towns, market towns, coastal towns, and commuter towns across England. Towns are dissimilar, with different histories, economies, demographics, and cultures. To delve deeper, we undertook detailed case studies in Hastings, Leigh, Slough, Wallingford, and Wigan. By visiting archives, witnessing rehearsals, attending performances, conducting interviews, facilitating focus groups, and joining a wide range of creative events we were able to hear about theatres from people who live in towns, to learn from townspeople about their distinctive qualities, to reflect on legacies from the past, and to understand today’s opportunities and future challenges.

Our research investigated the imprint of historical injustices on towns, including deep-rooted legacies of colonialism and empire that continue to resonate in cultural and civic life today. We also examined the legacy of towns as places of social experiment and places to create alternative ways of life. Towns founded on the principles of the co-operative and garden city movements in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries continue to thrive, and ways of life have been reimagined in response to the twenty-first century's climate emergency and other challenges, including the Transition Towns network.

We learned that theatres have long been central to a vision of town life, serving as beacons of hope for townspeople seeking artistic creativity, friendship and community, local inspiration and aspiration, leisure activities, and employment.

Our research findings are summarised in this briefing paper, and will particularly interest theatres and theatre-makers, local authorities and civic leaders, and funders. The outputs of our research also include an animation which condenses our key messages about why theatres in towns matter, and it can be viewed here: creativetownsresearch.wordpress.com Our book, *Theatre in Towns*, offers a detailed investigation of the rich and diverse ways theatres in towns serve their locality, negotiate their civic role, participate in networks of mutual aid and exchange, and connect with audiences beyond their geographical borders. It is free to download here: [Theatre in Towns \(open.org\)](https://theatreintowns.org)

Summary of findings

Our research analysed the implications of contemporary challenges on theatres and theatre-making in towns. Recent policy trends favour place-based approaches to the arts and culture and emphasise creative opportunities. We noted that the following policy shifts have impacted on theatres in towns:

1. Increased local decision-making, formalised by the Localism Acts of 2011 and 2012.⁵
2. Increased understanding of the role of arts and culture in urban regeneration particularly in areas of socioeconomic deprivation (Heritage Action Zones and High Street Heritage Action Zones, Historic England; Levelling Up for Culture Places, Arts Council England)⁶
3. Renewed incentives for major city-based arts organisations to extend their civic work in towns (Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper 2022; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, *The Civic Role of Arts Organisations*)⁷
4. Increased support for life-long creativity and locally-based, sustainable creative opportunities (Arts Council England's Strategy Let's Create; Creative Lives)⁸

This briefing is divided into four themes: Local theatres; Theatres and civic regeneration; Volunteer-led Theatres; Partnerships. Our key findings cut across these themes, and are summarised here:

Theatre buildings are beacons that connect and communicate a town's cultural life.

- Theatre buildings are part of the storying and storytelling of towns. Many beautiful theatres are created from disused and converted local landmarks, including town halls, banks, stables, mills, factories, and are part of the heritage and biographies of towns and townspeople.
- The scale of towns makes theatres visible to local people. They bring together networks of people from different walks of life and different parts of the cultural and social economies (amateur, professional, community).
- Community ownership and/or involvement in running theatres, whether as paid employees or volunteers, increases feelings of attachment to theatres as a valued cultural asset for the town.
- Beautiful, well cared for theatres with inclusive programmes and welcoming atmospheres raise aspiration in towns.
- Theatre buildings serve as focal points for town centres, attracting investment, reviving night-time economies, and creating feelings of hope and regeneration.
- Repertoires of theatres in towns are often co-designed with local people and respond to their interests, needs, and tastes. Programmes are mixed, including film nights, Pride events, experimental theatre, galas, amateur performance, dance, comedy, fine art and heritage exhibitions, tribute bands, and new plays by local playwrights.
- Theatres are sociable spaces providing good nights out for local audiences as well as visitors. Many theatres offer warm and convivial places to meet in the day, contributing to community resilience and wellbeing.
- Theatre buildings are expensive to run. As public funding becomes less reliable, theatres in towns are increasingly reliant on the gift economy, philanthropy, commercial income, local business sponsorship, local donations as well benefiting from some local authority and Arts Council England funding, particularly in towns designated as priority places.

Theatres in towns provide opportunities for local people to sustain creative lives.

- Theatres in towns provide a range of creative activities designed for, with, and by local people at all stages of life. Many townspeople maintain a life-long commitment to their local theatre, and the range of creative opportunities for theatre-makers (including actors, directors, designers, set-builders, lighting and sound technicians, box office staff) means that their contribution can change over time.

- Many theatres in towns are sustained by co-operation between amateur, community, and professional theatre-makers. Sharing resources and recycling, repurposing, and re-making supports the local cultural ecosystem and creative economy.
- Enhancing cooperation between volunteer-led and professional theatres strengthens opportunities for local artists and theatre-makers to develop their work in volunteer-run theatres with mutual benefit. Collaboration between the town's creative communities and theatres in the Little Theatre Guild, for example, reimagines amateur theatres as places of creative experimentation, apprenticeships, and spaces for Research and Development.
- Theatres provide inspirational and creative places that, at best, include both residents with long-standing and active interests in theatre and with people who have felt that theatre is not for them.
- Theatres in towns provide employment and enable talented young people to develop skills and build sustainable careers in the creative industries without having to leave their hometowns for cities.
- Reciprocally, a thriving theatre culture in towns attracts local people to move back to their hometowns, bringing a wealth of experience from careers in cities to towns they care about and where they have roots.
- Touring productions can provide valuable opportunities for townspeople to encounter new performance work and artists. New models that make the most of translating touring performances into creative development opportunities for home-grown artists can enrich regional and national cultural economy.
- Commercial touring and acts on tour (e.g. tribute bands, large-scale commercial shows, hit musicals, and comedy) have a place in towns as part of a popular mixed ecology for tourists and local audiences. Profits from commercial shows may benefit local theatres and businesses, but there is scope for more sustainable models of profit sharing between commercial and not-for-profit theatres.
- There are still barriers to creating inclusive approaches to creative participation. Where theatres have been run by the same townspeople or local decision-makers for many years, there can be resistance to change or a lack of skill in attracting a wider demographic to take part in creative



Dohl Collective, Slough Shopping Centre. Photographer, Mike Swift

work. Arts Council England's funded programmes and partnership-models are effective in introducing new ways of working and new art forms to towns.

- Partnerships between regional and/or city-based theatres with theatres in towns can be mutually enriching, particularly when initiatives are co-created and co-produced.

Theatres are civic spaces that build on the past and provide space to reflect on challenges of histories.

- Theatres and theatre cultures in towns are not the same; each reflect their town's local histories and heritage. How they operate today is informed by their relationship to historical local industries and economies, systems of governance, and civic cultures.
- The history of many theatres in towns is associated with volunteering, philanthropy and self-improvement, and mutual aid, active community life, and participatory programmes are encouraged today. Theatres in towns today are often sustained by the generous labour of volunteers, contributing to their sense of wellbeing, and enabling them to shape the theatre for themselves. Less positively, this may also mean that the cultural value of theatres can be associated with a particular demographic and interest groups.
- Theatre-makers who are deeply connected with their towns find inspiration in its histories and heritage. Theatres have long been places to reflect on problems and challenges, including problematic histories, and remain a place to imagine better futures.
- Some theatres are taking opportunities to remake their civic cultures in ways that reflect their broader demography and new residents and prioritise more equitable access and representation.

Theatres are places of hope where townspeople can re-imagine their towns for the future.

- Theatres in towns are centres of making, creating, imagining and can help engender a sense of future and what is possible.
- As places to tell stories, theatre-makers can challenge conventional narratives of the town and invite audiences to see their towns in new ways.
- Theatre and performance-makers can animate public spaces outside theatres, expanding and redefining how they might be seen and used and contributing to the town's regeneration and cultural life.
- The scale of towns means that people involved in theatres are often part of multiple local networks, enabling ideas generated in theatres to take root across different local organisations.
- Reciprocally, local networks can support the sustainability of theatres as townspeople share their knowledge, skills, and expertise to creating theatres fit for the future.
- Although hopeful visions are not always realised in practice, theatres bring a sense of potential and an orientation towards the future, showing what can happen when people create together.

Notes

- 1 Office for National Statistics. [Understanding towns in England and Wales: population and demography - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#). Accessed 16 June 2023
- 2 The Theatres Trust. [Search | Theatres Trust](#) Accessed 16 June 2023
- 3 NODA <https://www.noda.org.uk/>. Accessed 16 June 2023
- 4 AHRC grant number AH/T012609/1
- 5 [Localism Act 2011: overview - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#). Accessed 28 June 2023
- 6 [Heritage Action Zones | Historic England; Priority Places and Levelling Up for Culture Places | Arts Council England](#). Accessed 28 June 2023
- 7 [Levelling Up the United Kingdom - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#); [The Civic Role of Arts Organisations - Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation — UK Branch](#). Accessed 28 June 2023
- 8 [Let's Create | Arts Council England; Creative Lives \(creative-lives.org\)](#).

SECTION TWO

Local theatres: how theatres in towns contribute to local life

Theatres in towns have responded to increased opportunities to contribute to local decision-making, formalised by The Localism Act of 2011 designed to strengthen the community voice. Place-based cultural policies, such as Arts Council England's investment in priority places and Historic England's Heritage Action Zones, are designed to support economic, community, and cultural recovery. Green and environmental agendas - particularly promoted by The Theatres Trust - emphasis local engagement as a route to reducing carbon footprint in towns, and many theatres are embracing sustainable ways of working.⁹

In practice these policies often intersect. We found that the ecosystem of towns means that they are profoundly responsive to locality. Theatres contribute to how people feel about living locally, enabling townspeople to feel connected to their communities. The need for local resilience was amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, and although theatres in towns had been unable to stage performances, almost all had responded by working in their local communities in other ways including offering creative activities online that increased wellbeing, managing foodbanks and community fridges, and organising local services in their buildings. Many theatre workers became closer to their Local Authority counterparts and local charities through this work, leaving a legacy of increased visibility for the contribution theatres make to local life beyond their shows.

We found that the renewed emphasis on localism invoked a range of responses in towns, all of which were represented in theatres. The Demos report *Future of Towns (2020)*¹⁰ noted two recurring trends in response to local expansion and in-migration; some townspeople valued the prospect of newcomers to their towns, whereas others regard it as a threat. We encountered both attitudes on our research on theatres in towns. Some theatres in towns were forward-thinking and hopeful, committed to embracing new approaches to cultural life, whereas others looked to the past with a nostalgic pride in town's heritage and local identity, leading to cultural conservatism and resistance to change. Local theatres operate within this spectrum, and theatres have a role to play in supporting community cohesion as demographics change.

Summary

1. Local theatres offer creative spaces for townspeople, with amateur, professionals, community theatre-makers frequently working together.
2. Local talent is supported and nurtured by theatres in towns, providing safe spaces to experiment and repertoires that reflect local interests. But opportunities for sustained creative careers are limited in many towns, and there is concern about local people leaving their hometowns for cities.
3. Local theatres contribute to sustainable living, benefiting local night-time economies, limiting car journeys, and increasing local resilience and community wellbeing.
4. Local landmark buildings are frequently re-purposed as theatres, which not only responds to green agendas but also creates visible cultural hubs in towns.
5. Local theatres can animate town centres, contributing to an alternative vision of what a town might be and how it might be experienced.
6. Local decision-making is valued, but there is a risk that decisions are made by established networks may be inward-looking, creating barriers to social change and cultural innovation.
7. Local pride and increase sense of place can open new creative opportunities for towns, but new residents can feel excluded if they are expected fit in to existing cultural norms and existing patterns of social life of towns.



Barnsley Library in Regenerated Town Centre.
 Photographer, Helen Nicholson

Eldon Street is in the middle of Barnsley town centre, but its glamour had faded when we visited. The beautiful late-19th century Civic Theatre is on Eldon Street, and tells the history of local cultural life. It was opened in 1877 as the Barnsley Mechanic and Institute Public Hall and turned into a theatre in the 1960s before closing in the 1980s. By 2009 it had been reopened, and The Civic's revitalised place as part of the Heritage Action Zone is breathing new life into the area – and our visit coincided with Teenage Wildlife, a community project that shared stories of Barnsley's teenagers over the last 70 years, with stories of Valentine's Day particular favourites. Funds to restore the theatre were secured in 2023, and this inspirational local landmark will provide creative and cultural experiences for this market town.

Slough is a town that is much-loved by its residents. There are over 155 languages spoken in Slough, and its industrial history has attracted migrants seeking work and new opportunities. Culturally and artistically, the town has benefitted from funding from Arts Council England who have designated Slough a priority place for investment. The town centre has suffered during the pandemic, but local arts organisations are finding ways to tell Slough's stories in new ways. The Love Slough Festival, which took place on Slough's streets, was warmly supported by many townspeople.



Love Slough Festival.
 Photographer, Mike Swift

This Oxfordshire town supports The Corn Exchange, a venue which is owned, run, and programmed by volunteers. A derelict building in the early 1970s, a local amateur theatre company bought The Corn Exchange at a knock-down price and set about fund-raising and transforming the building with their own hands. Their local patron, Agatha Christie, did not approve. But her doubts were ill-founded, and on each visit we found a vibrant mix of comedy, film and theatre programmes for local audiences, with plans afoot to encourage new residents from Wallingford's expansion to make the Corn Exchange their local art house, and to further support to the town's green agendas.



Wallingford Corn Exchange.
 Photographer, Helen Nicholson

Theatre and civic regeneration

Theatres animate civic life in towns. They are spaces that bring people together, to share stories and create memories. Theatre buildings are hubs for creative activity, and theatre projects beyond buildings create relationships that enrich and knit together the social fabric of a place.

‘Civic life’ refers to the web of businesses, social organisations, local authorities, charities, voluntary groups – including arts and cultural organisations – that create and sustain the public culture of a town. This web creates a town’s distinctive identity, providing the resources important to a town’s capacity to navigate twenty-first century challenges. ‘Civic culture’ is a wide-ranging term that includes the formal operations of local government, for example, education and health provision, through to the public realm, and all kinds of leisure and cultural activity. It includes physical assets such as theatres, hospitals, and museums, but also intangible assets such as a sense of identity and feeling of belonging and connectedness. Theatres play a role in civic culture, as part of civic institutions and networks, but also as part of more informal activities of community, amateur and activist networks in a place.

There was a resurgence of progressive ideas of civic culture in debates about arts and culture in the UK at the time of our research, and these were providing new terms and concepts for arts and cultural organisations to articulate their social value. But it is also important to consider how civic culture can reproduce inequities and exclusions in places, including cultural institutions. Many artists and communities in towns have started to debate the ways in which their civic infrastructure, including tangible cultural assets such as art galleries, museums and local libraries, are part of our colonial history. As the collaborating organisation in our research, Tribe Arts, asked – in the title of an event that they facilitated – ‘Decolonising the Civic: Reclaim, Redefine or Relegate?’ This event debated how civic cultural spaces can exclude people and asked participants to think about what a ‘new civic culture’ might look like in towns.

Summary

Theatres in towns animate civic life and can be important to enabling towns and townspeople to navigate 21st century challenges.

In providing a seat at the table for their town’s theatre, local authorities can integrate creative and cultural activity into cross-sectoral approaches to addressing local priorities, including reviving town centres, and devising new approaches to enhancing well-being.

Local authorities can play a key role in brokering partnerships between different components of civic life in towns. Co-location – where cultural assets are in close proximity or share a site – can have wide benefits. Co-location of theatres, cultural and social organisations in town centres bring different working cultures together and can lead to cross-pollination. Co-location can be part of a long-term strategy to develop and expand repertoires, skills and capacity, methodologies and artistic risk taking. This is all the more important in towns where over a decade of austerity, followed by Brexit and the pandemic, has created significant capacity gaps.

Theatres in towns that receive public subsidy have to meet challenging income-raising targets in order to be sustainable. This can sometimes produce ‘safe’ artistic decision-making that can limit the range of stories told on stage. Funders are encouraged to consider more imaginative financial instruments to guarantee against loss and support artistic risk-taking.

The cultural infrastructure of many English towns was built from profits generated by our country’s colonial history, and this can be part of what makes cultural institutions feel unwelcoming. Theatres in towns can be part of a broad-based community effort to research, consider and respond to these histories, and in ways that benefit the town and its townspeople over the long-term.



Newark Palace Theatre, Newark-on-Trent.

Theatres animate town centres

The Palace Theatre in Newark is part of a civic organisation that includes the theatre, museum and twelfth century castle and gardens. Townspeople see the theatre as part of their history - even though the castle is much older, it doesn't benefit from the same

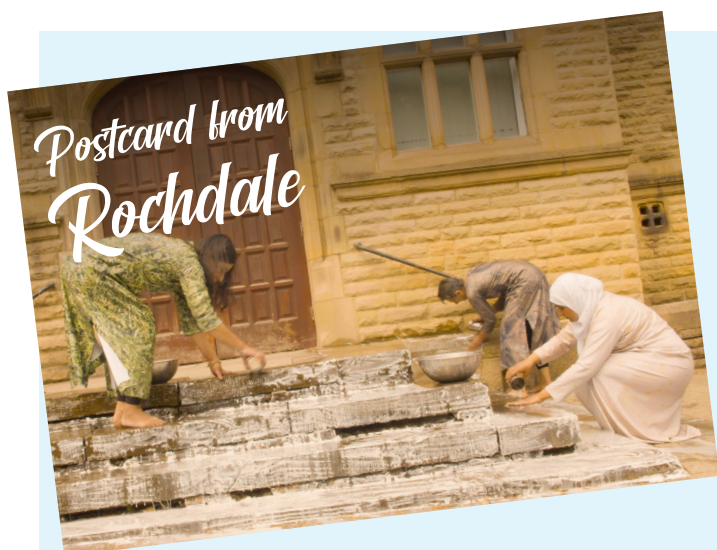
intergenerational memory bank and in the recent past, townspeople have come together to prevent the theatre's closure. Built by local entrepreneur, Emily Blagg, in 1920, the art-deco theatre is council-owned and, in common with many council-owned theatres nationally, operates as a commercial concern. There is no in-house programme - the theatre works as a receiving house for commercial production, with tribute bands and the annual pantomime popular with townspeople. The co-location of theatre, museum and castle means that the museum benefits from access to the daytime café in the theatre, and the theatre was able to programme a range of events in the grounds of the castle when reopening following the pandemic, helping to reach new audiences. Contact with the museum's education team provides the theatre with opportunities to expand its civic role. So, for example, girls from the local travelling community participating in an education project at the museum, were treated to free tickets to the pantomime. As the programme manager, Laura Linsey, states, this 'gets us out to some children who wouldn't be able to access the theatre because of the price barrier' creating 'a memory that sticks with them'.

Postcard from Bolton

How to open? | Animating theatre buildings

Octagon Theatre in Bolton was on the point of reopening following a major capital build when Covid struck. The pause created an opportunity to engage in a period of reflection - in CEO Roddy Gauld's terms - to have 'an existential conversation' about the role of the theatre in the town. The team reflected on the theatre's original mission to become a public amenity - a community theatre that served the town in multiple ways, with its in-the-round stage allowing more democratic, direct and intimate encounters between performers and

townspeople. In common with producing theatres in towns nationally, around 70% of the theatre's income is generated from box office, and this means the theatre has to balance their public service role with meeting challenging financial targets. Theatres in towns tend to have smaller capacity and grants than theatres in cities, with fixed costs of production broadly the same. The Octagon's approach is to make smart commercial decisions alongside sustaining a strong commitment to its civic role. The way forward involves co-productions with other theatres, a commitment to providing support for local artists, and small-scale touring to neighbourhood venues across the many townships that make up the borough of Bolton. Main-stage programming is being re-thought to include a broader range of voices, experiences, and stories, and programming decisions employ a 'lite touch' form of co-creation, supported by community meetings where groups are asked 'what stories do we need to be telling?'



Gut Feelings Meri Jaan (film still), 2021, Jasleen Kaur

(Re)-animating the town story

Rochdale is a town without a state-funded producing theatre, and it has turned to performance to animate cultural spaces and a regenerated public realm. Some of this work has opened up the town's story in ways that provide spaces for difficult conversations about colonial legacies. Touchstones Art Gallery and Museum is situated at one end of the town's new cultural quarter and includes a local history museum and local studies centre, exhibition space, and multi-functional studio. Staff

recognised that the gallery and museum was often telling the 'same story, and that this was a very white story of the town', which, given the diversity of Rochdale's population, 'doesn't sit well' (Lisa Allen, former Co-Artistic Director of Touchstones). Visual artist Jasleen Kaur worked with women and gender non-conforming people from Bengali, Pakistani, Punjabi backgrounds in the town, spending time in the local studies archive - finding the voices of Black and Global Majority townspeople marginalised there - and researching connections between gallery and museum space and histories of racism and colonialism. The resulting work, *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*, explored archive, knowledge and memory, culminating in a series of collectively performed acts that were filmed and exhibited in the gallery. One of these performances saw the group wash the worn steps of the gallery, a building bound up in empire, with Pakeeza yoghurt from a local factory. Here, as noted in the exhibition programme, a 'living culture ... the same thick, tart, dhai served alongside biryani that has the properties to heal the gut brain, where intergenerational trauma is stored' was literally applied to cleanse the civic architecture of the town. The women, bare footed, dressed in kameezes, engaged in a quiet, repetitive act of cleaning, drawing attention to cross-generational trauma embedded in the town's civic history, its creation of bad feelings (in the gut), whilst offering a hopeful gesture of recovery.

Volunteer-led and integrated theatres: how theatres contribute to cultural ecologies and economies in towns

"If I leave tomorrow, they will replace me. If the volunteers leave, they would have to close the theatre."

Richie Cawley, Theatre Manager at The Acorn Theatre, Penzance, Cornwall. 22nd December 2021

Volunteering is an important, enjoyable, social and creative part of life for people who take part. According to The Community Life Survey 2020/21, approximately 28 million people in England participated in some form of voluntary activity during the 12-month period.¹¹ Volunteers play a vital role in keeping many arts and cultural institutions and events in our towns running, including our theatres. In towns, volunteering in theatres is widely valued as a positive contribution to town life. Volunteers enjoy supporting paid members of staff in front of house roles, where contribution

of time, enthusiasm and commitment is recognised in exchange for tangible (discounted or free tickets) and intangible benefits such as increased sociability and skills development.

Many theatres across England are completely volunteer-led - owned, managed, and run by amateur theatre companies who make theatre through voluntary effort. The Little Theatre Guild (LTG) - an umbrella organisation that assists with the development of amateur theatre companies who own or lease their own theatres - highlights this in its over 100 active members across the UK and beyond.¹² Many LTG theatres have deep roots in their towns and were established by local people (often amateur theatre companies) who voluntarily campaigned, fundraised and sometimes helped to build or renovate old buildings to create their own theatres.

Today, volunteer theatre-makers continue to act as custodians and stewards of these theatres, as well as sustaining the theatre that is made and performed within them - from fundraising and programming, to designing sets, lighting the stage and performing. This speaks to wider initiatives for amateur and everyday creativity,

including Creative Lives (formally Voluntary Arts), a charity that champions and supports amateur, community and grassroots creative groups by offering advice on funding, creating and promoting networks and speaking to policy makers on their behalf; as well as the ambitions of Arts Council England's *Let's Create* - a 10 year strategy that aims to improve access and create more creative and cultural opportunities for people across England.¹³ So, while volunteers perform valuable functions in supporting the wider arts and cultural sector, our research highlighted how volunteering can also be creative in itself.

Summary

- Volunteer-led theatres are supported by the creativity, knowledges and skills of volunteers who bring a wealth of experience from all parts of life - work, education and related hobbies.
- In some towns, volunteer-led theatres are the only theatres that exist - providing affordable entertainment to residents, while also creating creative opportunities for townspeople to take part and make theatre themselves (amateur and youth theatre groups, new writing competitions and open calls).
- Volunteer-led theatres provide local spaces of care and sociability, while also facilitating mutual learning and exchange, creative experimentation and the development of creative and social skills.
- Volunteer-led theatres sit within wider networks of creative voluntarism in towns - we found examples of volunteer-led newspapers, gardens, galleries, and festivals.
- Volunteer theatres act as important hubs in their communities, outside of performance times. We encountered theatres hosting youth theatre groups; yoga sessions; painting and circus classes; craft, writing and acting workshops; dementia and repair cafes; 'men's sheds'; farmers markets; inclusive dance groups; gigs and pre-school and toddler mornings. Income earned from renting out their spaces is an important resource for theatres, helping to support their day-to-day running.
- Volunteer-led theatres also sit within cultures of care and networks of the wider Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, where locally led groups are tackling and solving local issues (health, environmental, housing crisis) through grassroots initiatives. We found examples of this in community land trusts and commons that develop land and buildings (homes, pubs, gardens, retail) on behalf of their communities through community ownership models - protecting community assets in perpetuity. These specific examples spoke to how many theatre buildings across England were built and/or are still run by volunteers and amateur theatre-makers.
- Through their ongoing commitment, volunteers act as important custodians and stewards of both their theatre companies (theatre-making, administration, programming) and their buildings (maintenance, fundraising).
- Volunteer-led theatres can also support multiple forms of theatre making and repertoire: through in-house productions, as receiving houses, and supporting established local theatre makers by offering space to rehearse, workshop and perform new work.
- Volunteer-led theatres are an important part of the mixed cultural economies of towns. Our research explored volunteer-led theatres in English coastal towns, who are increasingly being encouraged to brand themselves as creative destinations through cultural and arts-led regeneration strategies (e.g. establishing art galleries).



The Little Theatre at the Letchworth Settlement Adult Education Centre, Letchworth Garden City. Photographer, Cara Gray

Volunteer Networks

The Settlement Players are an amateur theatre company who have been part of their town's theatre scene since 1923, taking their name from Letchworth Settlement,

an independent adult education centre, where the group first formed. Today the Settlement runs a varied programme of classes across arts, crafts, languages, history, and creative writing, alongside being home to the Players who meet, make, rehearse, and perform in the centre's multi-purpose hall - transformed into the 'Little Theatre' on performance nights. In 2020, the Settlement faced an uncertain future due to financial difficulties. News of its potential closure was met by local support in the form of money, time, and ideas. While a crowdfunding campaign 'Save our Settlement' raised money through donations, innovative ideas about how to save the centre were offered through a newly formed (and now ongoing) partnership with the Letchworth Arts and Leisure Group (LALG) - a volunteer led, non-profit local organisation that promotes, supports, and connects people with local arts and leisure groups in the town - who worked with the Settlement to organise a series of concerts by young musicians, with ticket sales and performance fees acting as donations. These efforts successfully helped to save the Settlement from closure, and with that secured a certain future for the Settlement Players' Little Theatre.

Space of Mixed Cultural Economies

The Stables Theatre is a volunteer-led theatre and arts centre in Hastings, East Sussex. Established in 1959, everyone who works at the Stables - from serving drinks at the bar to constructing sets for the stage - is a volunteer. Every year the Stables produces 10 of its own amateur productions. But it has increasingly become a venue for local and touring, professional and amateur companies and makers to stage performances (through varying percentage of box office splits), as well as a space for local theatre makers to rehearse, workshop and try out new work. In recent years it has hosted many of the town's festivals including Hastings Theatre Festival, Hastings Fringe and Hastings Pride as a performance venue. It has also become a space that encourages and supports new writers and new work to be made and staged in the town through the Stables New Writing Competition. Acting, stage management and painting workshops, music, art exhibitions, film screenings, toddler groups and theatrical makeup demonstrations from local college students are just a handful of the activities that take place in the building around performances.



The Stables Theatre, Hastings. Photographer, Peter Mould

This new integrated model has also encouraged moments of collaborative making where amateur/volunteer and professional makers not only share space, but sometimes experiment with making theatre together - complicating the formal distinctions between amateur and professional theatre and theatres.

Partnerships: working together

The word ‘partnership’ has been central to our research, cropping up time and time again in a number of different contexts. Found between people and places, partnerships define the cultural ecologies of towns where relationships are brokered between a range of organisations to make things happen. We have seen theatre and performance thrive under partnerships made from organisations of different kinds – including arts companies, heritage organisations, local governments, schools, big corporations, and humanitarian charities – and these span across different geographic remits, forming alliances within towns, between towns, from towns to cities, and from towns to villages.

As change in England’s towns is being brought about by a range of different initiatives which are both policy-led and grassroots (Heritage Action Zones and High Street Heritage Action Zones, Historic England; Creative People Places, Arts Council England; Priority Places and Levelling Up for Culture Places, Arts Council England modelled on the Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper 2022; community wealth building initiatives such as the Deal 2030 in Wigan), a critical focus is needed on the nature of these partnerships. The current drive to ‘level up’ the UK (Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper 2022) and the proposed push to devolve powers to local government (Labour’s Safe and Secure Communities 2023)¹⁴ means that it is now more important than ever that partners pay attention to the complexities that already exist within communities to ensure that city-based culture is not imposed on towns and that their own distinctive cultural ecosystems are preserved.

Summary

The language of networks, sharing, and alliance is important when considering the partnerships that make theatre and culture in towns. These relationships demand care and sensitivity to the particularities of towns and the people that inhabit them. This need to find and innovate new ways of working together poses a number of challenges, including – but not limited to:

- **Place** – while partnerships are designed to bring change and new ideas, it is often a challenge to do this while preserving the character of a place and respecting the cultural offer that already exists.
- **Power** – it is important to reflect on the terms of the partnership, and the power dynamic that underpins it. Careful consideration is needed on how these relationships are brokered, maintained, and (if it comes to it) closed. If asymmetries exist, it is worth reflecting on how these are acknowledged and addressed.
- **Care** – reflection is also needed on how partners care for the people and places in which they are working. This includes addressing how difficult experiences and complex needs are managed. While ‘partnership’ implies a legal relationship and terms like ‘consortium’ evoke a similar formal arrangement, we propose that partnerships have the potential to model a care-full relationship. Friendship might be a methodology here in which partnerships work with the same affective charge and trust as personal relationships to avoid poor hospitality where partners figure as ‘bad guests’.

What follows is a cluster of examples from towns in England which demonstrate various ways of addressing these challenges.

Postcard from Wigan and Medway

Moving Roots is an organisation that was initially set up by Battersea Arts Centre in London, with partners in a number of sites across the UK, including the towns of Wigan in the North West of England and Medway in the

South East. As with the Royal Exchange Theatre’s Local Exchange, the programme runs for three years. Moving Roots draws on models of co-creation, enabling local artists to produce the kind of work that they think will resonate in their hometown. While the towns follow a scaffolded production in the first two years (Darren Pritchard’s Rent Party and Kid Carpet’s Epic Fail) which provides a dramaturgical frame for showcasing local talent, artists are granted full autonomy in the final year of delivery. The Circles of Care report is an output of the programme which reflects on the ethics of these partnerships, including questions of access, equitability, saviour roles, and privilege.



The Den, Leigh.
Photographer, Dan Carty.

The Royal Exchange Theatre's Local Exchange programme models a city-town partnership and Leigh, a post-industrial town in the North West of England,

is one of a range of other neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester that is part of this programme. The shape of Local Exchange embeds the idea that this partnership will never be completed or finished: it cycles back and continues to build with stakeholders in the community. In this sense, the Royal Exchange Theatre enact a care-full approach: relationships are maintained over time and this longevity is part of the programme's structure. The programme also has a group of 'Ambassadors' – who are from the town – which ensures that the cultural exchange is fairly represented by townspeople and those who work for this city organisation. Focusing on young people – by training up young creatives, offering workshops to schoolchildren, and championing young playwrights – the programme chimes with the emphasis on children and teenagers in ACE's Creative People and Places programme (2012–2022). Local Exchange also made use of the Den – an environmentally friendly pop-up theatre made of bamboo – and embraced online platforms which marks a move towards the kinds of environmentally sustainable arts practice outlined in recent cultural policies.

Postcard from Buxton

Partnerships in towns can be international in scale. Buxton – a spa town in the heart of the Peak District National Park – is home to an international cultural infrastructure. While the town benefits from the daily footfall of walkers and visitors to the Peak District, it is home to several international cultural events each

year. These include: Buxton International Festival (set up in 1979) at the Opera House which includes opera, music, and literature; Buxton Festival Fringe which is a pilot for Edinburgh Fringe; and the International Gilbert and Sullivan Festival (founded in 1994). The town's prominence on the international circuit enables an injection of investment into the local theatre societies, ensuring that a care for the town and local focus remains. As a result, the town has a strong Community and Education Programme geared towards young people which includes two young companies, a community choir, a contemporary youth dance company, and strong links with local schools.

Notes

- 9 <https://theatregreenbook.com/>. Accessed 28 June 2023
- 10 <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-future-of-towns/>. Accessed 28 June 2023
- 11 www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021. Accessed 28 June 2023
- 12 <https://littletheatreguild.org/>. Accessed 28 June 2023
- 13 [Let's Create | Arts Council England](https://www.arts-council.org/); [Creative Lives \(creative-lives.org\)](https://www.creative-lives.org/). Accessed 28 June 2023
- 14 [What is The Deal? \(wigan.gov.uk\)](https://www.wigan.gov.uk/); [Levelling Up the United Kingdom - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/); [Safe and secure communities - The Labour Party](https://www.labour.gov.uk/). Accessed 18 June 2023

SECTION THREE

Future conversations

Our aim in this research was to initiate a national conversation about theatres in towns, and why they matter. The conversation has only begun. Further discussions will take this research forward, benefitting theatres in towns and cultural and creative lives of people living in towns. There is much good practice to be shared, and there are also areas that can be improved or developed for the future.

We have found that although towns are often well-networked, there is rarely an opportunity for different stakeholders and townspeople to come together to make decisions about the future of their theatres. Sometimes a crisis in funding or local development that threatens the

town's theatre brings people together, but this is sometimes too late. Conversations that enable local people from different parts of the town to reach a shared understanding of the cultural, social, and economic value of a thriving local theatre is important and can shape a vision for the future.

This briefing ends with an invitation to continue the conversation. Please contact us to keep the dialogue going:

Professor Helen Nicholson, Royal Holloway,
University of London. h.nicholson@rhul.ac.uk.

Professor Jenny Hughes, University of Manchester.
jenny.hughes@manchester.co.uk

Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to this research, and we are grateful to everyone who generously who took part. We would like to thank the following people to whom we are particularly indebted.

Acorn Theatre, Penzance

Richie Cawley

Breaking Barriers

Parvez Qadir

Buxton Opera House

Jonathan Thompson

Champness Hall, Rochdale

Barry Worrall

Chesham Library:

Sally Walters

Corn Exchange Wallingford:

Gloria Wright, Martin Parr
and trustees past and present.

Curtain Theatre, Rochdale

Mal Fidler, and members
of the company

Farnham Maltings

Katy Potter and Gavin Stride

Green Room Creative Productions, Wigan

Martin Green

Home Slough CPP

Hannah Dix, Ruth Melville, Andy Kumar

Immersive Computing Labs, Slough

Jay Younes

Jasleen Kaur

artist

**Local Exchange, Royal Exchange Theatre (Manchester)
and Spinners Mill, Leigh**

Artists and partners Kieran Knowles, playwright: Dave Maloney, Fred Longworth High School, Leigh; Janet Madden Bedford High School, Leigh; The Local Exchange Ambassadors; LocalTale Winners; Tom Bowtell, KIT Theatre; Piers Black-Hawkins and Ali Michael, Ransack Theatre; St Joseph's Players, Leigh; Will Travis, A Will and A Way; Spoken Word artists Afshan D'souza-Lodhi, Amina Beg and Tom Stocks; Gary Longden and Jayne Williams, Fly Half; Elizabeth Costello, Leigh Film Society; The cast, crew and producing team of The Den in Leigh; Farai Nhakaniso, Everything Human Rights, Leigh; Lee Robert McStein, Monument Men, Leigh; Lisa Michelle, Heart Communities, Leigh; Jo Platt, Peter Rowlinson, Leigh Spinners Mill; Jonny Davenport, Jess O'Neill, Old Courts, Wigan; Darren Pritchard, artist

M6 Theatre, Rochdale

Gilly Baskeyfield and members of the company

Marie Klimi

artist

Morecambe Winter Gardens

Vanessa Toulmin

Newark Palace Theatre

Carys Coulton-Jones and Laura Linsey

Octagon Theatre, Bolton

Roddy Gauld

Old Courts, Wigan

The cast and crew of Rent Party

Oglesby Charitable Trust

Louise Magill

Playhouse Theatre Whitstable

members of Lindley Players

Rifco Theatre Company

Pravesh Kumar

Rochdale Council

Darren Grice, Strategic Development Lead:
Culture & Visitor Economy

Rochdale Musical Theatre Company

Dan Killeen and Leandra Jane Rawlinson

Royal Exchange Theatre (Manchester)

Inga Hirst, Carys Williams

Settlement Players, Letchworth Garden City

Pat Baskerville, John Baskerville, Stephen Charles

Slough Borough Council

Ketan Ghandi

Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough

Amy Fisher

Sterts Theatre and Arts Centre, Liskeard Cornwall**The Civic, Barnsley**

Jason White

The Little Theatre Guild

Jo Matthews, Anne Gilmour, and many member theatres
across England.

The National Theatre

Alice King-Farlow

The Sinodun Players, Wallingford

Nick Morley and members of the company

The Stables Theatre, Hastings

Neil Sellman and all members of the Stables Theatre,
Michael Punter, playwright, Patrick Kealey (Theatre Nation),
Dominique Gerrard, director and acting coach, David
Charles Manners, writer

Theatres Trust

Claire Appleby

Touchstones, Rochdale

Lisa Allen, former Co-Artistic Director

Tribe Arts

Tajpal Rathore and Samran Rathore

Trowbridge Town Hall

Alan Wright, Tessa Slack.

WigLe Dance, Leigh

Amy Burdon

List of Towns visited for the research

Amphill

Hastings

Maidenhead

Trowbridge

Barnsley

High Wycombe

Newark-on-Trent

Wallingford

Bolton

Leigh

Penzance

Welwyn Garden City

Buxton

Letchworth Garden City

Rochdale

Whitstable

Chesham

Liskeard

Slough

Wigan

Farnham

Margate

Southport

