

How a community grants programme protected



Leith Theatre was removed from the Theatres at Risk Register in 2026. Credit: Theatres Trust.

Over three years, a package of support strengthened the theatre sector and helped groups and organisations find a way forward for their historic spaces.

Theatres have a rich history of inspiring communities through creativity and live performance. But many are at risk.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, 10 theatres were added to the Theatres at Risk Register, bringing the total to 41 buildings in 2022.

We spoke to Michelle Carwardine-Palmer, Head of Theatre Management at the Theatres Trust. She shares how the Resilient Theatres: Resilient Communities project – which we awarded £249,900 in 2022 – made these historic spaces fit for the future.

Making a difference in the sector

Over three years, Theatres Trust awarded over £175,000 through community grants to 21 groups looking after, or considering taking over, historic theatre buildings. The funding supported projects focused on strategic and organisational development, skills and long-term viability.



The Mechanics' Institute in Swindon was built as a social and community centre for Victorian railway workers. Credit: Theatres Trust.

Michelle says: "We were concerned that a high number of theatres were at risk of closing.

"Voluntary groups trying to save their heritage theatres often do not have sufficient resources, capacity, skills and direction to progress their theatre project on their own. These groups can be time-poor, so we needed to think about how we could create a simplified, but diligent, process.

"Funders can also be reluctant to support these early-stage concept works as they are deemed high risk. But as soon as we came on board and helped with small pots of funding, it unlocked significant progress. It endorsed those groups and lowered the risk."

What the community grants made possible

Leith Theatre received £7,000 for an oral history and memory archive project, helping the team listen to its community and informing audience development and longer-term heritage plans. Memories stretched back to the Second World War and highlighted what the building has meant to communities over time. The project also provided evidence for future funding applications and allowed the team to develop new skills around interviewing and working with digital systems.



Situated in a former sessions house and gaol, Spilsby Sessions House is the only venue for dedicated arts and community activity in the town. Credit: Ian Grundy.

Spilsby Sessions House was navigating capital development, business planning, governance and fundraising. Its £8,500 community grant provided access to consultants who understood the project, the local context and the organisation's dual structure. Trustees took part in governance and finance training, while webinars and peer learning helped them learn from others facing similar challenges.

Michelle says some of the grants also supported theatres to commission studies that would help with future grant bids, but which often aren't covered by traditional funders. For example:

- **The Mechanics' Institute in Swindon** received £10,000 for a viability study into repurposing the building as a community hub.
- **Theatr Ardudwy in Harlech**, a Brutalist Grade II* listed building, used its £8,000 grant for a condition survey to assess the work required to bring the theatre up to modern standards.

See all the historic buildings supported on the [Theatres Trust website](#).

Sharing training and knowledge across theatres

It wasn't only a community grants programme that supported these groups. As part of an earlier pilot, the Theatres Trust identified what skills were most needed in the sector and used our funding to create an additional package of support.



A series of free webinars open to all theatres supported knowledge sharing and developing expertise across the sector. Credit: Theatres Trust.

Michelle says: “The need was for robust monitoring and evaluation, specialist advisors from a wide range of disciplines and responding to the sector’s appetite for training.”

The support included:

- a cohort of in-person training for 18 theatre groups from the Theatres at Risk Register
- free webinars open to all theatres across the UK, with over 460 organisations attending
- a bank of specialist consultants to provide mentoring advice and troubleshooting support

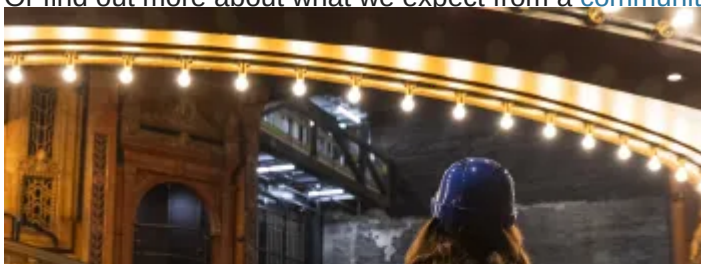
“What’s gone really well is the long-term support for individuals and groups to help them through challenging processes. Knowing whether you’re making the right decisions can be quite a burden for voluntary groups.”

Explore the resources, on topics from community engagement to fundraising for capital works, on the [Theatres Trust website](#).

Thinking of running a community grants project?

Explore some of the other projects we’ve funded, like [Voices Gloucester](#), who used small grants to share community culture and heritage.

Or find out more about what we expect from a [community grants scheme](#).



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[Improvements have been made to the theatre's facilities, front of house and behind the scenes. Photo: Eoin Carey.](#)



[Lowry's historic Citizens Theatre reopens](#)

[Lowry recorded and presented the stories of those who have seen and been part of Salford's cultural regeneration. Photo: Lowry.](#)



[from running a community grants scheme](#)

[The Mary Rose was built in 1510-11 at the start of Henry VIII's reign and was one of his favourite ships until it sank in 1545. Credit: Hufton and Crow.](#)

[How our grant 'turbocharged' the Mary Rose Museum's resilience](#)