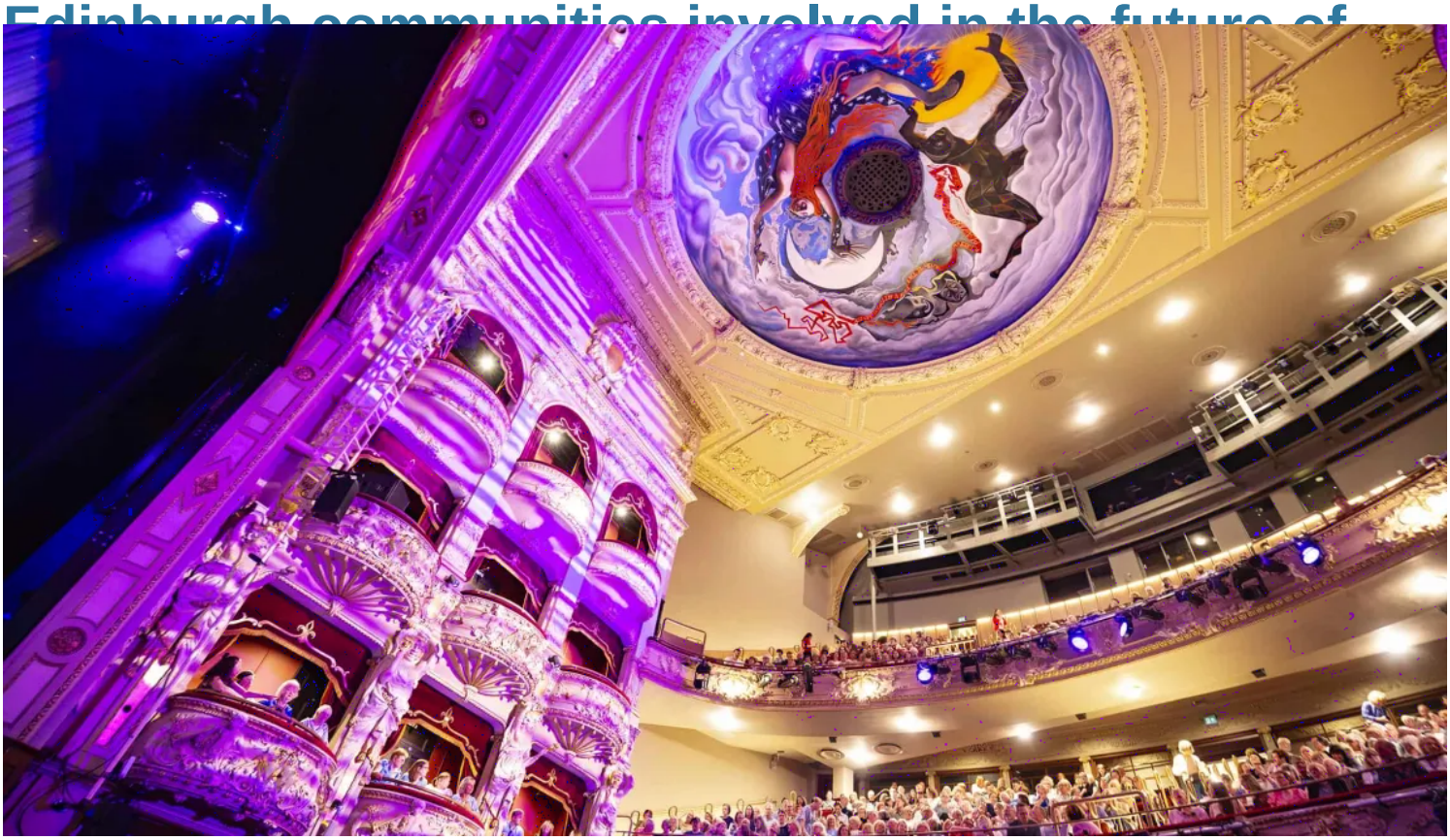
Edinburgh communities involved in the future of



For 120 years this 1,125 seat venue has been at the heart of Edinburgh’s cultural scene. Credit: Anneleen Lindsay.

While one of Scotland’s oldest theatres was being redeveloped, local people shaped the project’s extensive community activity programme.

Last weekend audiences returned to the King’s Theatre, a Grade A listed venue which is famously home to the Edinburgh Christmas pantomime. We’re supporting its redevelopment with grants totalling £5.5million.

The project meant the theatre was closed for four years. Hannah Web, Heritage Engagement Manager says it created a challenge to keep the community engaged without access to the building. Unexpected success came from taking events out to other local spaces instead.

Hannah says: “It’s brought us to new audiences we didn’t have before, and brought people who have a love for the King’s all together. It's kept the excitement bubbling even when there's been delays, even when we've not been on site.”

> I hope that the King's Theatre will continue to play an active part in its local, national and international community.
>
> *Bridget, community panel member*

Community panels directly involve local people in shaping engagement

While organisations often consult with their community, the King's Theatre team went the extra mile to involve people by working with four different panels and groups. Each had the impact of making the King's more welcoming and appealing to a wide range of audiences.

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access

Lifts now serve every public floor at the King's, wheelchair spaces in the auditorium have been increased, and a Changing Places toilet has been installed. Credit: Anneleen Lindsay.

Input from the heritage opportunities panel shaped a programme of activities for older people and those living with dementia. Hannah says: "They will be supporting the creative ageing events as they continue being delivered, which is fantastic because they've had such an impact on shaping them."

Hannah continues: "The youth panel were instrumental in devising one of our pilots: a young theatre-goers group. It was a grassroots effort which brought together young people from local schools. It was really successful."

What the King's Theatre means to local people

People who live and work locally have made their voices heard through the community panel. They recently co-created a community pop-up exhibition with the King's team of their memories of the local neighbourhood and hopes for the future.

Bridge n its local, r

Bridget, a community panel member, has many memories of working at the King's Theatre: "At the old King's the audio-description took place from a space at the back of the top of the theatre, which wasn't much bigger than a cupboard. We used to call it the broom cupboard!" Credit: Anneleen Lindsay.

Listening to feedback and working in partnership helped groups feel at home in the theatre

Hannah's proud of another successful pilot activity with LGBT Youth Scotland, which created a new partnership. Taster sessions explored materials in the King's Theatre archive, and were adapted to the young people's feedback.

As trust between both organisations and the young people grew, so did opportunities to find and creatively interpret stories from the theatre's past. These included how the construction work paralleled the young people's thoughts about change, identity and creative expression. They created artwork in response which is now part of a well-received community exhibition in the theatre.

Hannah says: "A lot of the young people had never been to the theatre before. They didn't feel it was a safe space for them. We were able to invite them along to a show and they really felt some ownership of the building. We're excited for them to come back to the King's and hopefully see some shows, and feel they have a place in the theatre's community."

The key to engaging people with heritage after a project finishes

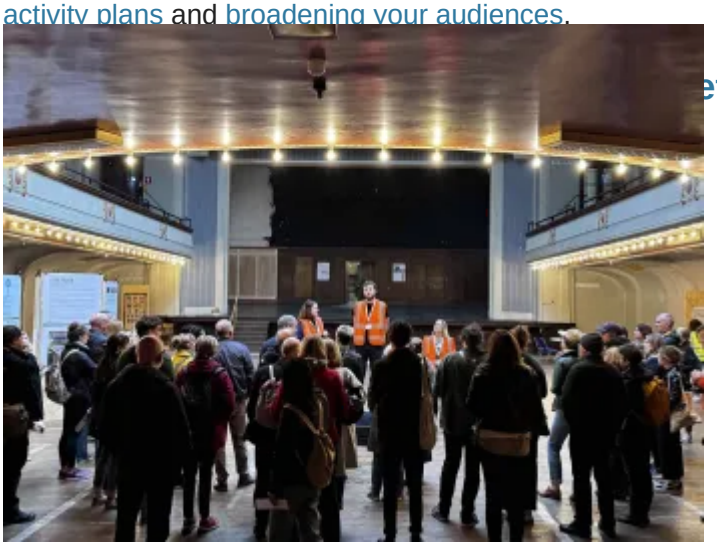
Strong partnerships, a committed volunteer base and creating a digital theatre archive has set the team up for continuing to engage people with the theatre's heritage long after the King's reopens.

Hannah says: "A lot of our work has been embedding heritage principles and skills throughout the organisation. It's really improved how we speak about heritage.

"Setting up long-lasting relationships with local organisations, such as Edinburgh City Archives, has created a legacy for staff, other organisations and the public to continue using the theatre's archive for creative inspiration."

Read our resources on planning community engagement

We've created guides to help you plan how you reach and involve people with your heritage project, including creating activity plans and broadening your audiences.



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

ed theatres at risk

The Beyond Labels exhibition brings together stories and experiences of disabled people in Suffolk. Credit: Simon Lee Photography.

ing community co-creation

Bradford-based dancers representing a mix of cultures come together to mark the opening of Bradford Arts Centre. Credit: Guzelian.

Grantee Q&A: how small organisations can rise to the challenge of a large capital project