Prestigious arts centre celebrates a £1.12 million HLF award.

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One of Northern Ireland's most prestigious arts centres is celebrating the news of a £1.12 million award from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) it was announced today. The award is a major boost in the plans for the refurbishment of the Artillery Street site and is the culmination of many months of hard work.

The Playhouse, which enjoyed national fame when it reached the finals of BBC's Restoration project, has been in dire need of restoration work for many years. The theatre occupies one of the oldest sites in Derry which was originally home to two schools. The schools, St Mary & St Joseph's were originally intended to be schools for homeless girls; however both were changed to schools for girls before they opened. When the schools closed in the 1980s, the buildings fell into disrepair and caught the eye of the demolishers. The Playhouse came to the rescue and reinvented the old classrooms into space for a theatre, workshops, dance studio and a home for independent theatre companies. The Playhouse has since gone from strength to strength in spite of the ongoing deterioration of the buildings.

The award will enable the refurbishment of the B1 listed buildings and help the Playhouse to build a new extension in the rear courtyard to house much needed new facilities. The money will also allow the creation of an exciting new education and learning programme for children, adults and the community at large.

Today's announcement is for a Stage One pass. Before any work can begin, the team will need to finalise several details including detailed plans to demonstrate the conservation of the historic buildings. Once complete, HLF's committee will meet again to discuss the additional details in the hope they can award a Stage Two Pass and give the green light for the start of the project.

Commenting on the award, HLF's Manager Kevin Baird said, "The Playhouse strives to make arts accessible to all. This award will help them achieve this aim. Not only will the buildings be preserved for future generations, but a new and creative programme of events and workshops will encourage people from all walks of life and age groups to get involved and learn about the importance of arts and heritage.

A dedicated co-ordinator will be employed as part of the project. Their role will be to concentrate on the education and learning aspect of the project. Proposed activities include story telling sessions for primary school children and a 'before and after' project which will see youth groups charting the restoration project using pictures and drawings and examining the history of the buildings from 1910 to the current day.

Pauline Ross, Founder and Director of the Playhouse said, "We are over the moon with the news. It's a huge investment not only in The Playhouse and Community Arts and culture but it is also a great economic boost for the city centre and in our local build heritage. We have £3.1 million to raise altogether, and this £1.12 million award from The Heritage lottery Fund added to the £1million award from The Arts Council of Northern Ireland, which we received news of just before Christmas, leaves us now with just under another £1 million to raise. We have a number of other funding applications in the pipeline, and we are confident that this should be in place before the end of the year. Once again our Board of Management and all our staff and dedicated volunteers would like to thank everyone for voting so vigorously in our BBC Restoration Campaign. We may not have won the final but the heightened national media coverage of our

work and community service and our tired and dilapidated beautiful buildings certainly has aided us in all our fund raising activities.

"Detailed architectural plans for the building have already been produced, and will have their official public launch soon by The Mayor of Derry City. We would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for this amazing award and look forward to using it for the restoration and conservation of our beautiful buildings, the former St. Joseph's and St. Mary's Convent of Mercy Schools."

Notes to Editors
A 'Stage One Pass' means that money has been earmarked by the Heritage Lottery Fund for the project in question. Competition at this stage is tough, and while a Stage One Pass does not guarantee funding, it is an indication of positive support, and money for the scheme is set aside. The applicant can then progress to Stage Two and submit a further, fully developed application to secure the full grant. On occasion, at Stage One, funding will also be awarded towards the development of the scheme.

FURTHER INFORMATION
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