



Report of the Strategic Director of Place to the meeting of Regeneration and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held on Tuesday 5th December 2023.

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Subject:

Bradford Theatres

Summary statement:

The purpose of this report is to update members on the theatres service, current challenges, and opportunities as we work towards City of Culture 2025.

EQUALITY & DIVERSITY:

Bradford Theatres takes pride in its commitment to equality and diversity. We present a rich and diverse program that reflects the vibrant tapestry of our community. We strive to be inclusive, ensuring that all residents and visitors to the district feel welcome and represented, regardless of their background or identity.

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Portfolio:

Healthy People and Places

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Overview & Scrutiny Area:

Regeneration and Environment

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to update members regarding progress made in the theatres service following reopening after the forced closure caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The report aims to give an overview of the issues faced since reopening and the response to challenges ahead, as well as the opportunities that City of Culture 2025 will bring.
- 1.2. Bradford Council owns and runs four theatre venues: the Alhambra Theatre, the Alhambra Studio, St George's Hall (all city centre) and the King's Hall & Winter Gardens in Ilkley.
- 1.3. The venues are managed by Adam Renton, Theatres General Manager, reporting to Phil Barker, Assistant Director, Sport and Culture and David Shepherd, Director of Environment and Sport.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Bradford Theatres provides a wide-ranging theatre provision within the allocated financial resources available with the following aims:

- To provide a rich, well balanced theatre programme which gives a wide variety of product reflecting the needs and expectations of the local community.
- To raise the regional and national profile of Bradford as a City of Culture, enhancing tourism and attracting visitors.
- To develop and serve audiences of the future.
- To contribute to the artistic and social development of the district's communities.
- To build relationships with practitioners, theatre companies, agents and producers to become a first choice on the touring circuit.
- To provide and maintain an infrastructure of performance spaces which are available for hire.

The Alhambra Theatre has a capacity of 1395 seats and is one of Bradford's principal visitor attractions and is renowned throughout the region for bringing the biggest touring productions to Yorkshire, such as The Lion King, Aladdin, Jersey Boys, Wicked, Hamilton and Mary Poppins amongst others. The theatre has a varied programme which also includes international dance, ballet, comedy, drama from the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company and Yorkshire's biggest annual pantomime (by both scale of inventory and by production budget).

The Alhambra Studio is a versatile 200 seat small theatre / rehearsal space adjacent to the Alhambra main house. It has a wide range of uses including small scale theatre, music and comedy performances, rehearsals, meetings, conferences, and exhibitions. It is also used for workshops and educational activity and to facilitate ballet / dance and the large scale, long running productions in the Alhambra Theatre main house, which require an additional space.

St George's Hall is a traditional shoe box shaped Victorian venue with a flexible capacity of 1335 seated and 1534 standing. It was the first public building to be commissioned in what was to become Bradford City Centre and one of the oldest

purpose-built concert halls in Europe. The venue closed its doors in 2016 for major work to restore it to its former glory and make it fit for the future. The refurbishment was made possible with funding from Bradford Council and the National Lottery Heritage Fund reopening three years later in 2019.

The King's Hall and Winter Garden in Ilkley comprises a 472 capacity traditional theatre with an adjacent glass-roofed spa hall. The King's Hall and Winter Gardens host a wide range of events and community provision, from local amateur dramatic and performing arts companies, weddings and parties to lifestyle fairs and community events. The venue opened in 1908 and has had significant improvement work in the last decade, supported by the local fundraising group The Friends of Kings Hall.

2.2 Covid 19 Venue Closures

On the 18th of March 2020 Bradford Theatres issued a press release regarding the closure of our venues in response to Government advise on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some short periods of social distanced performances were permitted in parts of the UK, however as Bradford's covid 19 rates remained high (scale 3) venues were not permitted to open for performances.

Instead, Bradford Theatres staff were outsourced to other Council departments (social services, waste management, the Covid team) and the venues were used for socially distanced alternative purposes, including an official enquiry (the Studio), Council meetings (St George's Hall and the Alhambra Theatre) and a Covid LFT centre (St George's Hall.)

2.3 Re-opening Post Covid

Theatres were permitted by central government to reopen from 17 May 2021 with social distancing and from 19 July 2021 with full seating capacities.

St Georges Hall opened with some socially distanced shows including 'Billy Pearce' on the 18th June 2021. The Alhambra Theatre was not financially viable to run with socially distanced seating and could not reopen until the week commencing 6th September 2021 with a performance of the musical '9 to 5'.

2.4 Post Covid Recovery and Current Challenges

The national picture for Theatres and performance venues has been challenging since re-opening post Covid 19, especially taking into account new challenges such as the cost of living crisis, fuel and travel price increases and high inflation.

These issues have had an impact on product availability, especially for the large-scale weekly events at the Alhambra Theatre and has resulted in less shows available which in turn has increased the cost of the shows from the producers. Certain product strands (such as orchestral music) have also been slower to recover, with lower audience numbers both locally and across the UK.

Reluctance for ticket bookers to commit in advance has been felt, with booking patterns shifting closer to the event date and fewer advance sales (which has the knock on effect of reduced producer confidence and programming risk). Theatres have mitigated this with the introduction of good value ticket insurance for online sales, which gives a no quibble refund in the event of cancellation for illness (including Covid 19) and for a range of other reasons (such as disrupted travel).

However there have also been many positives over the recovery period. Overall ticketed attendance is nearly back to pre-Covid levels, thanks to strong attendance at productions such as The Lion King, and with high profile productions (including regionally exclusive dates) in the pipeline.

For shows in the 2022-23 season, 24,379 children attended on either child or schools' tickets – however the actual number for children's attendance will be greater due to concessions not being available on all shows.

For shows in the 2022-23 season 14,284 patrons attended on either a disabled ticket, wheelchair user ticket or one of our access assisted performances and we gained 1,770 new access and carers scheme members.

The ticketed attendance at the venues over the past 5 years is as follows:

	Total Attendance	Alhambra	Studio	St Georges	Kings Hall
18/19	346,310	316,628	1,994	8,915 *	18,773
19/20	406,050	301,954	2,948	76,730	15,418
20/21	0	0	0	0	0
21/22 **	250,257	167,565	2,844	66,780	13,068
22/23	380,024	280,476	2,946	80,375	16,227

* There was limited trading at St Georges Hall in 2018-19 due to the refurbishment closure, the first event being the 15th February 2019 and 16 events only that year.

** 21/22 was a partial trading year after reopening post the COVID-19 pandemic

The following information was highlighted in a recent survey by The Audience Agency which analysed sales figures from 6 organisations across the Yorkshire district for a period of time from the 1st February 2022 – 1st January 2023.

Organisations	Bookers 2022/23	Bookers 2019
Bradford Theatres	80,552	85,616
Cast	17,225	19,048
Hull New Theatre	55,773	52,632
Hull Truck	12,841	17,632
Leeds Playhouse	27,080	21,709
Sheffield Theatres	71,989	73,503
Total	249,356	253,094

2.5 Current Challenges

The Cities Heat-pump works and transforming cities work surrounding the city centre venues are causing some challenges, particularly for disabled audiences.

Theatres are liaising closely with Council and colleagues and contractors to minimise disruption and ensure correct messaging reaches customers. However in the short-term this work could be creating a drop in audience numbers.

The long-awaited opening of Bradford Live is expected to have programming impact on St George's Hall (with some product expected to shift into the larger scale commercially operated venue.) Other programme strands and community events suitable for the 1200 seat auditorium is being developed but an initial income generation impact is expected.

Bradford Live will also bring large numbers of audience attendance to the West side of town, especially at peak arrival and closure times. Pressure for car parking facilities is expected and increased demands for late evening / night time public transport.

2.6 Bradford 2025 City of Culture

Theatres have embedded into our programming the opportunities brought by the award of City of Culture 2025. The Alhambra Theatre is almost fully programmed throughout the year, with a regional exclusive run of Hamilton announced and due to go on sale in the New Year. A number of other show announcements will be made in early 2024.

St George's Hall is proud to be hosting the finals of Leeds International Piano Competition in autumn 2024, including live broadcasts and legacy events for 2025.

A range of other showcase, broadcast and educational / participatory events are being planned across Bradford Theatres venues and will be announced in coordination with the 2025 team.

2.7 Education, Outreach and Inclusivity

Theatres run several education and outreach schemes with minimum core base budget. These are available free of charge to participants, including strands for schools, young people, older people, and diverse audiences.

Heritage Centre Stage is a National Heritage Lottery funded project focussing on the history of the city centre venues, the Alhambra Theatre and St George's Hall. Recent activities have included:

- The Big Sing, a Black History month participation project for Bradford primary schools, culminating with 1,100 children attending an event at the Hall to perform with a Gospel Band and hear a presentation from historian Joe Williams, with a VIP invite to African-Caribbean Elders;
- Reminiscence workshops with Asian Elders, working with Champak Kumar to provide arts and events participatory memory sessions;
- Come and Play with the Halle, a joint venture with the music service for 2,000 Bradford children to experience and participate with a full orchestral performance;
- 'Oh No It Isn't / Oh Yes It Is' Pantomime themed schools workshops at the Alhambra Theatre;

- A visual arts project with the Stroke Recovery Group;
- Venue tours and 'go and see' ticket opportunities for asylum seekers and refugee groups;
- Heritage Open Day event celebrating St George's Hall's 170th birthday (650 participants).

The Alhambra Theatre is an Associate Regional Theatre with the Royal Shakespeare Company and runs several outreach and education strands in association with them:

- The Associate Schools Programme, which promotes teaching Shakespeare on its feet in schools, with high literacy and confidence results for participants, offering INSET training, performance opportunities and theatre visits to primary and secondary schools / Bradford College;
- Shakespeare Nation, a participatory community project for adults which includes workshops, development and performance opportunities.
- 37 Plays, a new playwrighting scheme to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's first folio, which included script development workshops and will lead to two script in hand performances of commissioned works in the Alhambra Studio this autumn;
- First Encounters Shakespeare performances, specially developed as an introduction for young people aged 7-13 and their families;
- Main house theatre partner for regional touring.

The Alhambra Theatre is one of the leading venues in the country for the provision of access assisted performances for deaf and visually impaired theatre goers. The majority of main house productions offer signed, captioned and audio described performances and touch tours. Since 2015, a relaxed Performance for people with sensory and learning disabilities and their families has been offered each season at the pantomime. Lights are maintained on in the auditorium throughout the show and patrons may move around should they wish to; plus additional support is provided such as quiet areas and storyboard pre-show information.

For over 15 years, Theatres has worked with local volunteers to provide a community hub for older people, Open House. Reduced price catering is offered free room hire and self-funded fitness activities. This scheme is aimed at reducing isolation and loneliness and offering training services suitable to the over 60's, it also a welcoming 'warm space' during winter months and the warm space initiative is in operation at Kings Hall / Winter Gardens in Ilkley.

Bradford Theatres is a member of the Dance Consortium, bringing exclusive dates with high quality international dance companies to Bradford, and also works closely with the highly acclaimed Matthew Bourne / New Adventures dance company. This includes the provision of free post show Q&A events and participation events in the venue with the visiting companies, including workshops and open rehearsals.

2.8 Marketing, Digital and New Website

Bradford Theatres delivers a strong positive PR presence for Bradford and Bradford Council, running one of the most visited websites in the Yorkshire region, with more than 1.4 million site visits per year. Post Covid customer booking patterns have

dramatically changed to on average 79% online – with this in mind the website has been re-developed over the last 12 months to keep up to date with customer needs, security, platform stability across all devices (PC, tablet and mobile) and enhanced audio-visual features.

www.bradford-theatres.co.uk.

Recent figures from October 2023 show that 77% of website traffic is now via mobile devices and as little as 3% from a desktop. Traffic figures for October 2023 are shown below.

Website	<i>10-22 October 2023</i>
<i>(New site launched 10th October)</i>	
Traffic Analytics	
Users	205,004
Sessions	240,360
Engagement rate	52.48%
Page views	318,179

Adapting to the changes in the marketing industry we have recruited a new digital marketing officer, working on further developing and enhancing our social media presence, statistical reporting, tracking and analysis of spend and customer demographics.

Monthly social media stats as at 22 October are:

		Facebook	Instagram	X	YouTube
Followers	Total	40,705	4,143	13,222	5,332
Reach	Total	592,541	48,748	/	33.4k
	Profile visits	13,883	1,647	/	54 secs
	Impressions	/	157,395	114.2k	9.7%
Engagement (Posts)	Total	131,517	1,753	3k	

2.9 Theatres Initiatives & Partnership Working

At Bradford Theatres, we're deeply involved in diverse initiatives. We have in house-Wellbeing Champions, prioritising mental and emotional welfare, fostering a caring environment. As RESPECT Allies, we combat discrimination, promoting equality. Dementia Awareness efforts ensure a welcoming space for affected individuals. As Disability Confident advocates, we remove barriers for inclusivity. Our commitment to Neurodiversity Awareness celebrates unique strengths. These initiatives embody our mission: making theatre accessible to all, fostering respect, empathy, and diversity celebration.

Our key external partners include the West Yorkshire Police, WYAS (West Yorkshire Archive Service), Bradford BID (Business Improvement District), and Bradford at

Night. Collaborating closely with these entities enhances community safety. Internally, we value partnerships with Highways, Built Environment, Legal & Licensing, Emergency Planning, OSU (Operational Support Unit), OH & WB (Occupational Health & Wellbeing), and Procurement. This internal network ensures coordination, compliance, and efficiency in delivering our services.

Our staff have undergone comprehensive training in Martyn's Law, ensuring full compliance and earning recognition as an exemplar by Emergency Planning. As active participants in the NTE Safe Space, Ask for Angela Initiative, Snoop, and Student Safe Spot, we prioritise patron safety and well-being. Complemented by a robust lost-child policy for our venues, these initiatives reflect our commitment to creating secure environments. By integrating these practices, we not only meet regulatory standards but also actively contribute to initiatives that promote safety, inclusivity, and community well-being within our venues.

3. FINANCIAL & RESOURCE APPRAISAL

3.1 Overall controllable budget outturn over the last three financial years:

2022/23

	Budget	Actual	Variance
Theatres	486,400	165,984	(320,416)
Catering	(36,100)	(86,833)	(50,733)
Total	450,300	79,151	(371,149)

2021/22

	Budget	Actual	Variance
Theatres	363,000	230,733	(132,267)
Catering	(78,700)	15,004	93,704
Total	284,300	245,737	(38,563)

2020/21

	Budget	Actual	Variance
Theatres	320,900	(426,166)	(747,066)
Catering	(89,200)	573,885	663,085
Total	231,700	147,719	(83,981)

3.2 Bradford Theatres took advantage of the additional financial support made available from central government during the Covid 19 closures, applying for Arts Council support and also was eligible for the Council Covid 19 Income Loss scheme.

2020 / 21:

Arts Council Grants	£804,981
Covid19 Income Loss Scheme	£2,076,500
Total	£2,970,923

2021 / 22:

Arts Council Grant	£355,558
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Cultural Recovery fund	£89,442
Covid19 Income Loss Scheme	£282,500
Total	£727,500

3.3 Staffing Resources across all four venues:

Theatres Casual Staff	203	
Full Time Staff	51	(70 Total Permanent)
Part Time Staff	19	
Total Staff	273	

4. RISK MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

Bradford Theatres plays a significant role within the Council's cultural offerings and infrastructure. It stands as a vital stakeholder and contributor to the Council's 'Culture is Our Plan' and the City of Culture 2025 delivery plan.

6. LEGAL APPRAISAL

There are no legal implications directly arising from this report.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

7.1 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

No implications arising from this report.

7.2 TACKLING THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY IMPLICATIONS

Bradford Theatres has a Green Book detailing climate targets for all departments and is working with external stakeholders such as Julie's Bicycle to make further industry specific improvements. Working with the council's energy unit, theatres have been included in the majority of the Council's environmental and sustainability programmes.

A programme for reducing energy usage by installing light sensors in Front of House areas is currently being planned for the Alhambra Theatre. Energy reduction achievements have also been made through replacement of both internal and external lighting to LED, including the majority of stage lighting.

Use of single use plastics are being phased out across all venues, with suitable replacements found.

We prioritize sustainability by sourcing F&B from local producers and supply chains, reducing carbon footprint and supporting the community. Emphasizing social value, our commitment extends beyond products, fostering economic growth, fair labor practices, and community well-being. This approach aligns with our mission, creating a positive impact while delivering quality experiences.

Theatres uses a commercial waste management company for recycling of waste

including glass, paper, plastics and food.

7.3 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

No implications arising from this report.

7.4 HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

No implications arising from this report.

7.5 TRADE UNION

No implications arising from this report.

7.6 WARD IMPLICATIONS

Bradford Theatres serve all Wards in the District.

7.7 AREA COMMITTEE LOCALITY PLAN IMPLICATIONS (for reports to Area Committees only)

No implications arising from this report.

7.8 IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Safeguarding for children and young people is a priority and recognised as part of the duty of all Council departments. Risk assessments are provided for school's visits. Theatres education / outreach staff are DBS checked and receive enhanced safeguarding training.

We prioritise arts access for children and young people, offering free theatre visits to care leavers and other groups as part of our commitment to education and inclusivity. Our work with looked after children, schools, and English as a Second Language (ESOL) students showcases the transformative power of the arts in young lives, fostering self-expression and personal growth. Through targeted outreach programs, we provide workshops and performances tailored to the needs and interests of looked after children, creating a safe and inspiring space for their creativity.

Furthermore, we focus on collaborating with schools, providing educational matinee performances and curriculum-aligned workshops that engage students with the performing arts, enhance their understanding of literature and drama, and cultivate a lifelong appreciation for culture. Similarly, our partnership with ESOL students offers an immersive English language experience through theatre, facilitating language skill development while immersing them in the enchantment of live performances.

7.9 ISSUES ARISING FROM PRIVACY IMPACT ASSESMENT

No implications arising from this report.

8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS

None.

9. OPTIONS

None.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are invited to consider and comment upon the content of this report.

11. APPENDICES

None.

12. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.