

# ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

## REPORT TO AND DECISION OF ECONOMY COMMITTEE ON 19 JANUARY 2022

**SUBJECT: Grant to Arun Arts, Alexandra Theatre, Bognor Regis**

**REPORT AUTHOR:** Denise Vine – Group Head of Economy  
**DATE:** October 2021  
**EXTN:** 01903 737846  
**AREA:** Directorate of Place

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

This report is requesting that a grant of £15,000 per annum for two years (22/23 & 23/24 FY) is made to Arun Arts to support the continued provision of a community theatre serving Bognor Regis and the immediate region.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is recommended that:

The Committee approve the provision of a grant of £15,000 per annum for two years to Arun Arts in 22/23 & 23/24 financial years.

### **BACKGROUND**

Arun Arts manages and operates the Alexandra Theatre at the Regis Centre, Bognor Regis, as a community theatre serving Bognor Regis and the immediate region and delivering a range of high-quality entertainment.

The vision going forward is for the Regis Centre to remain a community theatre and to be part of the regeneration plans for the seafront providing a year-round programme of arts and events for both residents and visitors to Bognor Regis.

A previous study and review (ARUP 2012) concluded that the theatre plays a key role in its community providing professional entertainment, facilities for local amateur performers and a flourishing partnership with the University of Chichester.

It also said there was a need for upgrading the facilities, such as additional studio/rehearsal space, improved café and bar facilities, and that a modest increase in the seating capacity to no more than 450 seats would maximise income, particularly from the pantomime. The Council's recent and successful bid to the Levelling Up Fund reflected these recommendations.

The theatre has a continuous improvement plan to increase income and its programme. Recent investments have been:

- the introduction of a marketing post to promote the programme and digitise sales.
- a new box office system was installed giving the theatre the ability to research its audiences, encourage repeat bookings, facilitate on-line booking etc.
- increasing rehearsal space (former charity shop and bar areas) in response to high demand from local groups.
- relocate the Charity Shop of the theatre to new retail premises at Place St Maur.

The theatre is also working with the Arts Council England on the best way to develop professional touring drama. The theatre management continues to develop a relationship with Chichester Theatre and also grow the range of family events in the programme particularly during the school breaks.

The theatre has a large and dedicated group of volunteers that support the running of the venue and all the supporting activities. They are fundamental to the successful running of the theatre.

In 2019, the theatre presented 85 different shows, 234 performances and 45,817 tickets were sold. This generated £614,051 of sales and maintained the record-breaking 2018 sales figures. There was further income from studio hires, café and bar sales. The theatre has gone from strength to strength in recent years. 94% of visitors were either very satisfied or satisfied with their visit. The theatre is now successfully using social media to promote its shows and an average of 53% of tickets are booked online.

The stage with its traditional proscenium arch, the orchestra pit, the auditorium and the backstage areas are ideal for a theatre of this scale, and it is perhaps not surprising that there is growing demand for hires from amateur drama and musical theatre groups from Littlehampton, Chichester and Worthing, as well as from Bognor itself.

A customer survey of The Regis Centre was undertaken in 2016 and it was clear that the audiences have a strong affection for the theatre:

- 'All the productions we have seen over the past few years would not have disgraced a West End stage. Well done to all those involved.'
- 'This is a fabulous little theatre - we love it so much.'
- 'Overall a very friendly theatre, everyone is always helpful. All the shows I've seen have been brilliant too, no complaints!!'
- 'I always enjoy coming to the Regis Centre. The size of the venue means that you get a good view from any seat; the FOH staff are cheerful and helpful; and the programme is varied with something for everyone throughout the season.'

## **REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE**

It is recognised that due to the age and condition of the building the Regis Centre needs significant investment. The new Levelling Up Fund grant will be used to improve, extend and extensively refurbish the building. The Trust has in recent years implemented a continuous programme of repairs and improvements and have completed:

- in 2019 the refurbishment of the café area (including replacement of fridges, dishwasher & coffee machine etc.)
- refurbishment of the toilets backstage and front of house.
- new flooring backstage and in Studio 1 costing £11,000.
- new LED lighting system for the stage.
- new sound system to replace obsolete equipment.
- in 2016/17 many areas of the inside and outside of the building were repainted and new furniture purchased for the foyer.
- a new glass roof (to replace the leaking roof) in the foyer was installed and the roof above the fly tower repaired. These roof repair costs of £70,000 were met by the trust.
- because of the buildings age it has required continuous roof repairs and c £206,000 has been raised from grants and a 'Raise the Roof' funding campaign.
- over £40,000 has been spent replacing/renewing theatre equipment to ensure the theatre continues to operate a professional theatre space.
- in 2016 a new box office system was installed. This allows 'print at home tickets' to be used and multimedia access. People can now book online and on their mobile phones which has increased tickets sales.

Urgent repairs are also now needed:

- another roof leak that has appeared and will cost £4000 to repair.
- stage hems/bars now need replacing to electronic systems @ £24K each.

## **FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The pandemic and lock down restrictions meant the theatre closed for 16 months from March 2020. £118,426 of tickets sales had to be refunded due to cancelled performances. The loss of income created strains on the Trust's finances, but some grants and financial support were available which enabled the theatre to keep its head above water. Paid staff were furloughed.

It opened its doors again, in a limited way, in July 2021 and has started its new programme of productions and tickets sales are starting to recover. The full programme is expected to be in place by December. Ticket sales have been slow to pick up and this is the same across the country as the public begin to regain confidence about using public places. The theatre is mindful of the need to continue to take precautions, a fogging machine sanitises every room after use, all staff wear face coverings and the public are also encouraged to do so, although this is not obligatory.

The theatres aim is to be financially independent but still however relies on grants and financial support from other partners to make it viable. The theatres current income streams are box office sales, room hires, the café, small income from the charity shop and local authority grant funding support.

To help secure the financial future of the theatre, additional commercial income is required. This can, in part, be from bar and catering sales. The relaxation in 2018, from the restriction in the theatre's Whitbread lease which prevented it from running its own bar, has helped increase this income and is a vital part of the revenue mix.

As part of the wider regeneration proposals for the site, the council is currently developing the strategic outline business case to reacquire the Regis Centre building (long lease interest) from Whitbread and propose new hotel accommodation on the south eastern corner of the Regis Centre car park. This proposal will not affect Arun Arts tenancy of the building which the council will continue to support.

The increased size and sitting capacity of the auditorium in the new proposals and the additional studio, café and potential conference facility will increase the theatres income and financial sustainability.

Major improvements to the public realm in Place St Maur, the site adjoining the theatre, started in October 2021 and will further enhance the environment around the theatre.

Leading up to 2020 the theatre was developing a strong and loyal audience base. The mixed programme and high-quality pantomime generated a reliable income stream.

Arun Arts collaboration with Chichester Theatre and the House network should result in the development of new touring partners and a more varied programme which could include Arts Council funded organisations.

Before the Pandemic lockdown the financial stability of the theatre was improving year on year. The number of performances had increased as had audience figures and new income streams from room hires and increased sales of food and beverages.

This grant will be used to strengthen the offer of the theatre and continue with essential maintenance of the building to ensure it is safe and suitable for the public to use.

**2. PROPOSAL(S):**

The proposal is to offer a grant of £15,000 per annum to Arun Arts for two years (22/23 & 23/24 FY) to support the activities of the theatre, ensure it remains open to provide a service to the community and works towards securing its longer-term financial sustainability.

**3. OPTIONS:**

1. The grant is given to Arun Arts – this will help to enable the trust to continue to provide theatre provision in Bognor Regis and maintain the building.
2. The grant is not provided to Arun Arts – the theatre will struggle to find other income, the theatre could close or the building may not be well maintained

**4. CONSULTATION:**

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		No
Relevant District Ward Councillors		No
Other groups/persons (please specify) The Leader of the Council and the Chair of the Economic Committee	Yes	

<b>5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Financial	Yes	
Legal	Yes	
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		No
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		No
Sustainability		No
Asset Management/Property/Land	Yes	
Technology		No
Other (please explain)		

**6. IMPLICATIONS:**

1. The refurbishment of the Regis Centre and Alexandra Theatre forms part of the Levelling Up Fund regeneration proposals for Bognor Regis. To achieve continuity and a successful transition to the new facility it is important that in the meantime the existing provision continues to be supported and is working towards financial independence.
2. Financial  
The current funding arrangement for Arun Arts is due to cease on 31 March 2022. If no action is taken, the grant would cease resulting in a saving to the Council. The request is growth of £15,000 and will be considered along with other requests. The funding request is for 2022/23 and 2023/24. Funding beyond this will be subject to further Member consideration.

**7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:**

This decision will support the wider regeneration intentions for this area.

It will ensure the continuance of a popular, successful and well used community provision

**8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

None