



Stories of Change in Amateur Theatre

Research Findings from Amateur Theatre in England
and Wales in Partnership with the Little Theatre Guild

Dr Cara Gray, Professor Anne-marie Greene, Professor Helen Nicholson

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Foreword

Nick Morley, Chair, Little Theatre Guild. It's a real privilege to be Chair of the LTG and be able to provide a foreword to this report. I know our theatres are continually busy putting on or rehearsing productions independently. Yet at least twice a year all our members can get together, nationally or regionally, to network and review best practice. Thanks to all who filled in the survey and/or became case studies for this report showing the importance of local theatre. There is lots to take out of this report and I'd like to dwell on just two.

First, accessibility needs to be at the heart of everything we do in our theatres. This means not just for audiences but for our members, on-stage and off, too. Step-free access is difficult enough front-of-house and can look impossible backstage. Yet many of our theatres are addressing their issues, often getting grant funding to help. The LTG is proud to have set up a monthly Neurodiversity workshop which is growing membership. And many of our theatres put on relaxed, captioned and/or signed performances of their plays/musicals.

Second, festivals and new writing are nowadays often going hand-in-hand. I was at the NDFA (National Drama Festivals Association) event recently in July 2026. This festival features high-scoring one act and full length plays from other regional and national festivals. Looking through the selection there, about half were unpublished plays or by writers from within the group. The LTG is also currently supporting New Writing, having run an event in the South and planning an event in the North.

Finally, I'd like to thank Cara, Anne-marie and Helen for their work on this report. A lot of work and travel has gone into getting the findings so please do read it thoroughly.

Jo Matthews, Youth Festival Organiser 2026 I was privileged to organise a festival of our Youth Theatre work for our Annual Conference in May 2026. This event is outlined on page 38 of this Report. All our LTG members are based around a season of full-length plays and asking them to add to their workload is a big ask. I am delighted and grateful that eight of our theatres with Youth Groups came forward and took on the challenge of choosing suitable material, rehearsing and taking a party of young people across the country for an intensive day of theatre. The range of ages and plays presented made it an especially unique event. LTG is very proud of its promotion of young people through our 80 years and the Festival demonstrated how much we value their contribution to theatre-making.

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the *Local Theatres: Participation, Inclusion, Imagination* research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. While the research focuses on the amateur theatre sector through a partnership with the Little Theatre Guild (LTG), its insights have direct relevance for the professional, commercial, and community theatre sectors. LTG member theatres are independent, self-governing, and building-based, and operate with sophisticated structures and technical capabilities that mirror many professional presenting houses, making them vital benchmarks for place-based cultural policy.

LTG Theatres as Drivers of Change

Dynamic Programming and New Writing: Contrary to stereotypes, LTG theatres are not ‘playing it safe’, they are crucial shapers of the national repertoire. Analysis shows that over the last twenty five years, between 27% and 54% of plays produced were written within the last decade. LTG venues thus provide vital second productions for professional playwrights and champion work by women at rates often higher than the professional sector. They also foster new writing by supporting the work of members and local playwrights in multiple ways.

Strategic Inclusion: While representation remains an ongoing challenge, the 2020s have seen a visible increase in the staging of works by global majority and female-identifying playwrights compared to twenty years ago. Proactive Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies have led to growth in membership and increased audience diversity.

The Theatre as a Community Hub: Many LTG theatres are moving beyond traditional production models to become community hubs, hosting festivals and other creative events outside of usual production of plays. These events create multiple entry points for local populations with a range of backgrounds through music, spoken word, and workshops.

Youth Leadership: Youth theatres, newly established Youth Boards and young people’s theatre companies are catalysts for organisational change, ensuring long-term sustainability by giving the next generation genuine creative agency.

Critical Obstacles and Challenges

Infrastructural Barriers: Many theatres operate in historical and sometimes listed buildings, where structural improvements for accessibility are legally complex and prohibitively expensive.

Operational Strain and Financial Risk: Diversifying programming through festivals or new writing often stretches volunteer teams. Furthermore, inclusive financial models (e.g., lower ticket prices or profit-sharing with artists) often result in narrower profit margins compared to traditional plays.

Cultural Resistance: Modernisation frequently encounters ‘organisational culture friction’, requiring leadership to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of long-standing members who may be resistant to new production modes or demographic shifts.

Persistent Representation Gaps: Despite progress, global majority writers still account for only a small single-digit percentage of total productions, and female-identifying writers represent only 15–20% of the repertoire.

The ‘Stories of Change’ documented in this report reveal a sector that is thriving with renewed purpose and artistic ambition. Far from being invisible, these local amateur theatres are vital powerhouses of creativity, successfully transforming historic spaces into transparent, accessible, and high-tech community anchors. Through the energy of thousands of volunteers and the visionary leadership of young theatre-makers, the sector is proving its enduring resilience and relevance. These theatres stand today as extraordinary success stories, demonstrating that when a community-led venue embraces inclusion and imagination, it becomes an indispensable, celebratory, and vibrant home for the stories of the future.

Cara Gray, Anne-marie Greene and Helen Nicholson

Contact details:

Email anne-marie.greene@york.ac.uk and h.nicholson@rhul.ac.uk

Section One. The Research Project

This report forms part of a larger academic research project *Local Theatres: Participation, Inclusion, Imagination* funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This research project involving four universities was the first major study of local theatres, investigating the value of theatres to their local communities, the barriers to participating in theatre, and how theatres and theatre companies are telling stories that reimagine local identities and local life.

Why this research, why now?

In England, place-based cultural policies have responded to successive government initiatives to increase local decision-making, address regional inequalities, boost local enterprise, and revitalise town centres. But local cultures can also be inhospitable, exclusionary, and inward-looking; populist politicians invoke an imaginary of local life to stir social division, and far-right groups turn to racialised ideas of 'locals' to fuel hate crime. Theatres are widely regarded as beacons of hope, equity, and civic pride, but sustained engagement with local people is largely hidden from view, found in youth theatres, participatory programmes, and amateur companies.

The aim of the wider research project was to investigate the value of theatres to local communities, and to understand how theatres -both amateur and professional -can become increasingly inclusive and representative of residents in their local areas. Findings and practical outcomes of the different work packages of the wider project can be found on our [website](#)¹.

A Focus on Amateur Theatre and our Partnership with the Little Theatre Guild (LTG)

This report is concerned with analysis emerging from two work packages of the research project which concentrate specifically on the amateur theatre sector and collaborations with LTG theatres, with the LTG as a formal research project partner.

The amateur theatre sector in the UK is huge, although exact data is scarce, often because the sector is ignored within industry surveys. In 2018, Nicholson et al stated that there were over 2,300 drama and musical theatre companies in England, affiliated to amateur theatre organisations, and more than 3,000 smaller-scale youth and unaffiliated societies, together staging over 10,000 productions a year². Alternative recent estimates are of 9,000 amateur theatre groups, collectively contributing around £180 million to the UK economy (NODA, 2024)³. The amateur theatre sector is diverse, ranging from small community groups producing in village halls, to established companies in theatre buildings which would look very similar to many small and medium sized professional theatres. However, despite the significance of the amateur theatre sector:

Amateur theatre is frequently unrecognised as part of the cultural ecology of contemporary theatre, largely invisible in the academy and, in professional theatre and popular culture, amateurs have been at best largely ignored and at worst derided. (Nicholson et al, 2018: 3⁴)

We have specifically been concerned with amateur theatre in those more established buildings-based companies. Partnering with the LTG deliberately connects the research project with that part of the amateur theatre sector which is arguably most similar to professional presenting and producing houses.

¹ <https://localtheatres.wordpress.com/>

² Nicholson, H. Holdsworth, N and Milling, J. (2018) *Amateur Theatre: Policy Briefing*, Available at https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/theatre/research/impact/amateurtheatre/rh206_amateur_theatre_policy_briefing_8pp.pdf (Accessed 29 April 2026)

³ <https://www.noda.org.uk/news/so-what-does-the-future-hold> (Accessed 29 April 2026)

⁴ Nicholson, H., Holdsworth, N. and Milling, J. 'Ecologies of Amateur Theatre' Chapter 1 in H. Nicholson, N. Holdsworth and J. Milling (eds.) *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp1-22.

LTG Theatres

The theatre companies which are part of the LTG membership are independent amateur companies who own or lease their own buildings, growing from the original four theatres in 1946⁵ to 126 organisations by its 80th anniversary in 2026. Additional membership criteria include the production of a regular programme of stage plays and the requirement to operate non-commercially and be self-governing. LTG theatres are 'thus a local community asset, with seating capacities ranging from 48 to over 450 and where 'a large proportion have been established and in existence since the 1930s, some occupying historic buildings such as 13th-century churches, ancient corn exchanges, railway arches, and purpose-built theatres' (LTG, 2026)⁶. LTG theatres are situated all over England and Wales from the largest cities to the smallest hamlets.

Most LTG theatres have sophisticated structures, policies and processes, some owning and running multiple spaces (e.g. main auditorium, studio spaces) or even multiple venues. Some only produce in-house productions, but most have some visiting professional and amateur productions and acts, while the programming of some LTG theatres is predominantly external hires. While some are large and complex enough to require some paid staff, all rely on large numbers of active volunteers to run theatre operations covering all the usual departments of a theatre business. Walking into most LTG theatres, a visitor would be hard-pressed to distinguish it as amateur.

The LTG acts as an umbrella organisation and a community. Each member theatre appoints an LTG Representative acting as liaison between the theatre and the LTG. Contact is maintained and strengthened through an annual national conference and three regional conferences, plus an annual Yearbook (discussed below).

The research project aims connect closely with the current LTG priority areas:

- Supporting new writing
- Sharing inclusive approaches to rehearsal and theatre-making, including youth theatre.
- Exploring approaches to producing and programming that attract a wider local demographic to the theatres
- Understanding how theatre buildings are and can be used in ways that are welcoming and inclusive.

Sources of Research Data

This report draws on three sources of data:

- Survey to LTG Members
- Case studies of 11 LTG Theatres
- Analysis of the LTG Yearbook

Survey to LTG members

An invitation to complete a Google Form survey was sent out to all LTG theatres by email by the National LTG Secretary in September 2025. Our aim with this survey was to collect information from as many LTG theatres as possible describing the activities being undertaken around identified areas of possible change. This survey also asked for the rationale behind and objectives of any change initiatives.

We received completed entries from 30 theatres, representing a 24% response rate. Within this sample there is representation of a good spread of geographical locations (both North, Central and South; and Town/City, Coastal and Rural) plus different sized theatres (capacity under 100, 100-300 and over 300). The findings of this survey thus reflect the broad range of LTG theatres. We believe that readers can feel confident that there are responses from 'a theatre like mine' within its analysis.

5 Shipley, M. (2016) *Little Theatre Guild: A Brief History 1946-2016* <https://littletheatreguild.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/LTG-A-Brief-History-1946-2016.pdf>

6 <https://littletheatreguild.org/about/history/> (Accessed 29 April 2026).

Case Studies

We also have conducted case studies of individual LTG theatres. In particular, we were interested in exploring how theatres were including and attracting new local people (theatre-makers, volunteers and audiences). This could be anything - from hosting or running festivals to refurbishing buildings; from working with other local groups to creating new partnerships; from youth drama groups to outdoor performance, to changing the repertoire and supporting new writing etc.

The case study sample was constructed through a mix of approaches:

- In-depth case studies at the Stables Theatre, Hastings and the Criterion Theatre, Coventry were part of the wider research project.
- Targeted approaches to individual theatres because we knew or had been informed of change activities going on there.
- A general call out for interested participants. Following a presentation at the LTG National Conference in Sunderland in 2025, a call was placed on the LTG website for stories of change.

In-depth Case Studies

Members of the research team conducted in-depth case studies at the two LTG theatres over an extended period of time. This most recent piece of research has allowed us to understand how these local partnerships have developed.

Criterion Theatre

The Criterion Theatre has been a member of the LTG since 1968. The Criterion Players were established in 1955, with the theatre building purchased in 1961, in a former Methodist Chapel located in the heart of Earlsdon, Southwest of the city of Coventry. The Criterion Theatre is now a charitable organisation. The auditorium seats 122, with totally flexible seating allowing for various configurations including in the round. Since 2019, it has had a dedicated mission to improve diversity and inclusion within the theatre, establishing an EDI Strategy and Action Plan.

This practice-based case study focused specifically on their Springboard Festival 2025, which took place from May 10th to 17th, and involved investigating how amateurs might attract audiences that represent the city's diverse communities. Research took place in the pre-production, production and post-production phases of the festival. Methods utilised were:

- Participant Observation: at Board meetings, planning and organising meetings for the festival, rehearsals, meetings with artists and producers, performances on the week of the festival. Investigation focused on definitions of the 'local', attention to diversity and inclusion in the programming, perceptions and views of stakeholders.
- Documentary Data: Thematic analysis of the programme (in terms of diversity, representation of local stories, demographic data of artists and performers) and comparison with what programming exists in the wider amateur sector. Thematic analysis of emails and progress reports relating to the festival organisation.
- Survey and Interviews: Surveys and interviews with audience members regarding views of the festival.
- Wider consideration of relevant policies and practices at the theatre, including historical archives, facilitated by the fact that one of the research team holds a position as Artistic Director and Trustee.

Stables Theatre

The Stables Theatre has been a member of the LTG since 1981. The Stables is a volunteer-led, 126-seat venue in Hastings Old Town, which has been running since 1959 when local amateur theatre groups renovated a neglected Georgian stable block into a theatre. The Stables produces at least 10 of their own productions a year alongside hosting a busy programme of work by local and touring theatre-makers, local festivals (including their own, Scene and Heard Festival), and other creative and community activities.

Research with the Stables Theatre (October 2024 -present) has involved:

- Ongoing participant observation and ethnography -following the changes, activities and productions happening in the building.
- Rehearsal and performance attendance.
- Programme analysis.
- In-depth and multiple interviews with members, along with local theatre makers/companies who have performed, rehearsed or partnered with the theatre in some way.

It has also involved collaborating with the Stables Theatre and Neil Sellman (Stables Chair) on their new annual Scene & Heard Festival, which took place in June 2026. The theme for Scene and Heard 2026 was 'Making Local Stories'. The festival hosted work made by local theatre makers who responded to our research project's call –for small stories that uncover, explore, and inspire new imaginaries of life on the coast and in Hastings.

This research builds on previous research with the Stables Theatre that took place between 2021-2022 as part of the AHRC funded project *Civic Theatres: A Place for Towns*. This piece of research followed a moment of change for the Stables as they were rethinking their role as a local theatre, connecting to the town and local community in different ways. Some of the ways they were experimenting with this included supporting theatre making outside of their own shows-opening up their theatre space to local theatre makers and companies for R&D, workshops, and work in progress performances, and becoming a venue for performances attached to local festivals.⁷

Mini Case-Studies

Other case studies involved less in-depth methods. At each theatre, an interview with at least one representative of the theatre was conducted in person or online. These interviews were either recorded and transcribed, or detailed notes taken during the interview. The written report was sent back to the interviewee as a sense check and to confirm accuracy. In most cases, we were also able to visit the theatre and look around the space. Relevant images and documents were provided by the interview participants to accompany the written report that was produced.

Our case study sample included 9 theatres:

- The Stables Theatre, Hastings
- Criterion Theatre, Coventry
- Chesil Theatre, Winchester
- Guide Bridge Theatre, Ashton-under-Lyne, Manchester
- Joseph Rowntree Theatre, York
- New Venture Theatre, Brighton
- The Wharf Theatre, Devizes.
- Wokingham Theatre
- Bromley Little Theatre

⁷ Gray, C. (2023) 'Volunteer-Led Theatres: Meshworks of a Coastal Town' in *Theatre in Towns*. Routledge. Available to read for free here: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003308058-4/volunteer-led-theatres-cara-gray>

Yearbook Data Analysis

The LTG Yearbook is a treasure trove of information and data, collected on an annual basis from all member theatres. It records data on personnel/governance structures, seating capacity, youth groups, types and names of productions and audience figures. The most recent data available is from 2024-2025, published in the *2025-2026 Yearbook*. Since 2016, some of this data has been collected and collated electronically, making analysis easier, however for older data, the research team had to engage in a manual data entry process. Our sample included data from the last four years, plus two yearbooks from 2015-2016 and 2001-2002 (selected on the basis of access to hard copies). This gives us a general overview across the last 25 years.

Section Two. Programming

In this section we are concerned with the programming of plays (both published and unpublished), rather than more general activity and events programming, which is dealt with in other sections (Community Hubs and Partnerships; New Work and New Writing, Young People).

A key argument of Milling et al. (2018: 67)⁸ is the way that amateur theatre is ‘a dynamic shaper of the national repertoire’ in the UK. Amateur theatres are important in the production of new plays, regularly performing second productions of new writing premiered in the subsidised theatre sector. Milling et al (2018: 72) also demonstrate the way that amateur theatres are important in supporting professional playwrights and their new plays after their short professional runs are over. Amateur theatres are also championing work of women writers, indeed the British Theatre Repertoire Report 2013 (Brownlee et al., 2015: 26⁹) reported that 42% of the new plays produced by amateurs in that survey were written by women, a much higher proportion than in professional theatre. It is a shame that subsequent iterations of this report have excluded amateur theatres, so we are unable to provide a more recent comparison.

Through the LTG Yearbook data, we are able to find out a lot of information about the plays that are produced within LTG theatres. What our analysis reveals supports the findings of Milling et al (2018) and their assessment both of the value of amateur theatre in contributing to the national theatre repertoire, and also of its championing of new and challenging work. This often runs counter to a common view of amateur theatres ‘playing it safe’ and being primarily concerned with plays that will guarantee ‘bums on seats’. In their study, many amateur companies were found to produce far more challenging material than the societal stereotype of traditional amateur fare would have us believe (Milling et al, 2018: 87). Our analysis confirms this, evidencing varied and challenging programming by LTG theatres, encompassing more traditional productions as well as featuring new plays, often by emerging contemporary playwrights.

Table 1 Yearbook Data Analysis

	2024-2025	2023-2024	2021-2022	2020-2021	2015-2016	2001-2002
Number of LTG Theatres	127	129	128	120	110	90
Total Number of Plays Produced	644	621	630	239	624	543
Number of Plays Written Within 10 Years	174	160	224	130	160	265
Percentage of Total Plays Written Within 10 Years	27%	41%	36%	54%	26%	49%
Number of Plays Written Within 5 Years	60	95	57	55	120	108
Percentage of Total Plays Written Within 5 Years	9%	26%	9%	23%	19%	20%

8 Milling, J., Holdsworth, N. and Nicholson, H. (2018) ‘Amateur Repertoires’, Chapter 3 in H. Nicholson, N. Holdsworth and J. Milling (eds.) *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre*, Palgrave Macmillan, p67-108.

9 Brownlee, D., Edgar, D. and Rebellato, D. (2015) *British Theatre Repertoire 2013*, Report by the British Theatre Consortium, UK Theatre, and the Society of London Theatre, Available at: https://www.britishtheatrerепertoirereports.co.uk/_files/ugd/83e0f9_024393ba8fcc444b9207355ea8460831.pdf (Accessed 27 August 2026).

Staging New Plays

Table 1 reveals that LTG theatres regularly produce newer plays varying from around a quarter to over half of plays in our selected years being one to ten years old, while between nearly 10% and a quarter is even newer, from within the last five years. Within our survey data, 61% of theatres responded that they actively sought to produce plays that had been written in the last five years, with the same proportion seeking to put on amateur premieres. For example, Chester Little Theatre reported producing the first amateur production of *Sheila's Island* by Tim Firth in 2023, while Somerseate Players produced the world premiere of Martin Roche's *Larry* in 2025.

The search for new plays to produce has been a priority over the 25 years of our study and indeed has appeared as a central aim of the LTG historically. Shipley's (2016) LTG history discusses how 'finding a new script worthy of production was as difficult in 1953 as it is today'. In 1960 it was reported that the 24 members of the LTG had in that season between them presented 'nine new plays, organised two original play competitions, and one New Play Festival'.

Production of New Plays as the Foundation of The Criterion Theatre

In their archive, this history of the founding of the Criterion Players features in a local publication.. It sets out a founding aim of being able to produce cutting edge, challenging contemporary plays. It should be noted that in 1955, Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* was only three years old.

"In 1955 a group of friends, all members of Warwick Road Church Players, decided to break away and form a new amateur dramatic group. They wanted more freedom to choose the type of play performed and were especially determined to hold to the integrity of the author. The culmination of their action was the setting up of the Criterion Players. This action came about due to objections raised at the choice of Terrence Rattigan's play 'The Deep Blue Sea' for their next production. They were young and ambitious and thought this would be a challenging play by a controversial writer. At the time it was a well-known play and a successful film, starring Kenneth More. However, the authorities at the church did not consider it a suitable choice and tried to persuade the young people not to proceed. Eight leading members decided to break away from the church players to allow them the independence to choose the plays they wished to produce. Despite the pressure put upon them they stuck together and maintained their stand.

The original core of members... met to choose a name for their newly formed group and discuss their plans. They poured over one of the national daily papers to review the listing of London theatres, considering that they needed a name that was already associated with the theatre world and would describe their ethics. Scanning down the list they came upon the Criterion, a name they considered embodied all that they believed in. The dictionary definition of the word is 'a standard by which something can be judged or decided'. Perfect. They toasted their choice in Ribena, as that was all they had at the time".

From 'The Criterion Theatre' in 'Leisure and Pleasure: A Medley of Spare Time Pursuits' (2009) by The Women's Research Group First Edition, p. 76.

Table 2 presents data from the LTG Yearbook indicating the most popular plays amongst LTG theatres for each year-more recent editions have provided a regular feature of the 'Top 15 Plays'. Our analysis sought to identify those plays that had been produced by at least five theatres in any one year, but most popular plays were produced by many more. In some years there is more coalescence around a small number of plays, whilst other years see a widespread. Some plays have had stellar years, for example 22 theatres producing *The Ladykillers* and 15 producing *The 39 Steps* in 2015-16, and 15 producing *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* in 2024-5.

Table 2: Top Produced Plays (by at least 5 theatres in any one year)

Ranking	2024-25	2023-2024	2021-2022	2020-2021	2015-2016	2001-2002
1	<i>Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime</i> , Simon Stephens, 2012		<i>A Bunch of Amateurs</i> , Newman and Hislop, 2014	<i>A Christmas Carol</i> , Dickens	<i>The Ladykillers</i> , Graham Linehan, 2011	<i>Sand Castles</i> , Bob Larbey, 2000
2	<i>A Bunch of Amateurs</i> , Newman and Hislop, 2014	<i>Home I'm Darling</i> , Laura Wade, 2018	<i>The Girl on the Train</i> , Wagstaff and Abel, 2018	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , William Shakespeare	<i>The 39 Steps</i> , Patrick Barlow, 2005	<i>The Herbal Bed</i> , Peter Whelan, 1996
3	<i>A Christmas Carol</i> , Dickens	<i>Constellations</i> , Nick Payne, 2012	<i>The Railway Children</i> , Nesbitt, Kenny, Simpson, 2008	<i>Queers</i> , Mark Gatiss, 2017	<i>The Accrington Pals</i> , Peter Whelan, 1981	<i>Blithe Spirit</i> , Noel Coward, 1941
4	<i>Educating Rita</i> , Willy Russell, 1980	<i>Things I Know To Be True</i> , Andrew Howell, 2016	<i>Twelfth Night</i> , William Shakespeare	<i>September in the Rain</i> , John Godber, 1983	<i>The Thrill of Love</i> , Amanda Whittington, 2013	<i>Habaeus Corpus</i> , Alan Bennett, 1973
5	<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> , Mary Elliot Nelson, 2014	<i>Sheila's Island</i> , Tim Firth, 2022	<i>Blithe Spirit</i> , Noel Coward, 1941	<i>The Children</i> , Lucy Kirkwood, 2016	<i>Noises Off</i> , Michael Frayn, 1982	<i>Journey's End</i> , RC Sheriff, 1928
6	<i>Sheila's Island</i> , Tim Firth, 2022	<i>The Hound of the Baskervilles</i> , Arthur Conan Doyle, Steve Canny & John Nicholson, 2007	<i>Calendar Girls</i> , Tim Firth, 2015	<i>The Wind in the Willows</i> , Alan Bennett, 1990	<i>Entertaining Angels</i> , Richard Everett, 2006	<i>Present Laughter</i> , Noel Coward, 1942
7	<i>The Importance of being Earnest</i> , Oscar Wilde, 1895	<i>A Christmas Carol</i> , Charles Dickens, various	<i>Shakespeare in Love</i> , Lee Hall, Marc Norman, Tom Stoppard, 2014		<i>My Boy Jack</i> , David Haig, 1997	<i>The Wind in the Willows</i> , Kenneth Grahame ad. Alan Bennett, 1990
8	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , William Shakespeare	<i>Abigail's Party</i> , Mike Leigh, 1977	<i>The 39 Steps</i> , Patrick Barlow, 2005		<i>Yes Prime Minister</i> , Jay & Lynn, 2010	
9	<i>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</i> , Tom Basden, 2022	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , William Shakespeare			<i>Quartet</i> , Ronald Harwood, 1999	
10	<i>Bleak Expectations</i> , Mark Evans, 2022	<i>Ladies Unleashed</i> , Amanda Whittington, 2018				
11	<i>Home, I'm Darling</i> , Laura Wade, 2018	<i>Macbeth</i> , William Shakespeare				
12	<i>Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons</i> , Sam Steiner, 2015					
13	<i>Macbeth</i> , William Shakespeare					
14	<i>The Girl on the Train</i> , Wagstaff and Abel, 2018					
15	<i>The Unexpected Guest</i> , Agatha Christie, 1958					

Particular national targeted promotions can guide selections of plays, for example in 2001-2, *Sand Castles* by Bob Larbey was produced by 17 LTG theatres. The script was specially commissioned by British Telecom (The BT Biennial), with the intention that the play was to be performed, initially, solely by amateur groups. About ninety amateur societies in the UK were invited to participate in giving this play its world premiere on Saturday, 14th October 2000. This initiative captured within our Yearbook analysis reflects longer involvement in national new writing initiatives, for example Shipley (2016) reports the pivotal role of the LTG in the BT Biennial scheme:

1991 was the year of the first BT Biennial. This was an exclusively LTG achievement – from getting the sponsorship from BT in the first place to encouraging the various member theatres to participate. What was created was The Biggest World Premiere in Theatrical History, with 50 theatres presenting John Godber’s newest play specially commissioned by BT, *Happy Families*, between 12th and 28th October.

Many of the most popular plays in any one year have coincided with the release (often long-awaited) of amateur rights, meaning that some are fairly old when it becomes possible to produce them. The importance of amateur theatres putting on new professional plays has been recently acknowledged, leading to a call for releasing amateur rights as soon as possible rather than holding back:

Rather than diminishing the professional productions, releasing those amateur rights while enthusiasm, momentum and recognition are still high has extended the conversation around those plays and enabled hundreds more companies to become part of their stories. The playwright earns royalties long after opening night. Amateur groups get to perform contemporary writing that their audiences are genuinely excited to see. Communities get to gather to tell stories together. Most importantly, more people get to make – and to experience – theatre. (Applewhite, 2026).¹⁰

Much of the list in Table 2 is what might be considered fairly traditional amateur repertoire: we can see the enduring popularity of the most well-known and accessible Shakespeare plays; alongside plays by Noel Coward, Charles Dickens, Alan Bennett and Agatha Christie. However, there is also a fair spread of newer plays or new adaptations. We have highlighted those produced within 10 years of writing in blue and within 5 years of writing in green.

Diversity in Representation

There is also an EDI intention behind programming choices of some LTG theatres, tying into later analysis in Section 7. Looking at the Yearbook data from the early 2000s to mid-2020s shows a clear shift in representation of women and global majority playwrights, moving from more isolated commercial hits to deliberate, structurally diverse programming and local new-writing initiatives.

While male playwrights still claim the majority (owing to the sheer volume of classical revivals like Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and mid-century fixtures like Alan Ayckbourn), the contemporary repertoire of LTG theatres is much more highly populated by women and gender-diverse writers. This includes a strong presence of acclaimed contemporary female writers Katy Brand, Lucy Kirkwood, Lulu Raczka, Ella Hickson, Jessica Swales and Caryl Churchill and acclaimed non-binary writer and poet Kae Tempest. Historic feminist milestone pieces like Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* and Helene Hanff’s *84 Charing Cross Road* continue to hold firm ground alongside Agatha Christie’s perennial thrillers.

In 2001, the representation of plays by global majority writers was nearly non-existent (a notable exception being Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea Stories* at the Lace Market Theatre). By 2015, there was more diversification with the introduction of major West End/commercial crossover hits into amateur licensing (for example Ayub Khan Din’s *East is East*, Lolita Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet*, and Yasmina Reza’s *Art*). Most recently, in the mid-2020s, the data shows moves to incorporate international allegories (*White Rabbit*, *Red Rabbit* by Iranian playwright Nassim Soleimanpour) and local studio platforms dedicated to elevating Black voices, such as *2037: The Burden* by Rukiat Ashawe, staged at The Tower Theatre, London as part of their *Ain’t I A Woman?* Festival – a dedicated platform and local new-writing initiative specifically designed to showcase and amplify the voices of local Black female writers.

10 Applewhite, M (2026), ‘When professional and amateur theatre work together, everyone wins’, *The Stage*, August 26th.

Overall, while traditional works still form the statistical core of the data, the 2020s demonstrate a much wider acceptance of intersectional and global narratives within amateur programming and a significantly more balanced landscape than earlier years. In the early 2000s, the focus was heavily concentrated on a tight circle of white, male, British mid-century dramatists. By 2015, contemporary women playwrights writing complex roles for women had successfully broken through. By the 2020s, the definition of a standard season has visibly widened to actively integrate international experimental work, non-binary perspectives, and dedicated platforms for local global majority writers. However, representation remains quite low overall, with global majority writers still making up a very small single-digit percentage of the hundreds of productions listed, and women writers accounting from between 15 and 20% of the complete listing.

Section Three. Disability Access and Inclusion

Latest government data indicates that 16.8 million people in the UK had a disability in 2024 representing 25% of the total population (Family Resources Survey, 2025¹¹). For these disabled people, access to theatre is particularly problematic, indeed 48% of disabled people say that going to the theatre, cinema, or arts is the activity they have most frequently been unable to take part in due to difficulty accessing public buildings (UK Disability Survey, 2021¹²). While there has been some improvement over the last decade, the latest State of Theatre Access report (2023¹³) confirms the access problems still faced by disabled people with many different kinds of impairments.

Data on the number of disabled people involved in the amateur theatre sector or being in its audience is not available, amateur theatres being routinely excluded from national surveys and studies. However, we can assume that the national disabled population statistics can be extrapolated to the amateur sector, so LTG theatres are likely to be catering to a potential disabled audience of one in four.

A useful way of thinking about the barriers to access is to categorise them: *environmental* -including attitudinal, architectural, and ecological factors; and *interactive* barriers relating to skill challenge incongruities and communication barriers associated with each individual's level of physical, psychological, or cognitive function¹⁴.

LTG Theatres and Accessibility

Our survey had a section of questions specifically on disability access. Only one theatre indicated that accessible facilities or performance modes were not of importance indicating that this issue is on the agenda of most LTG theatres.

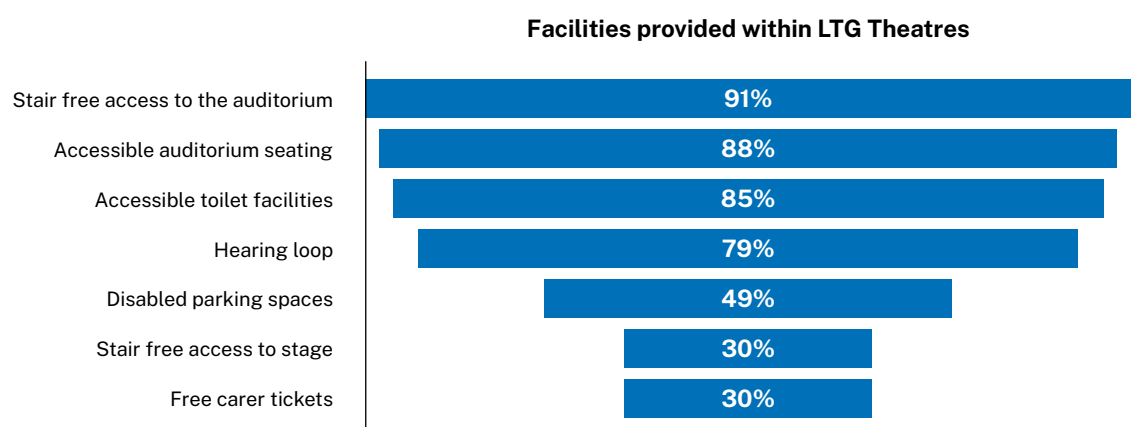


Figure 1 Accessible facilities provided

11 Family Resources Survey: Financial year 2024 to 2025 Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2024-to-2025/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2024-to-2025> (Accessed 30 April 2026)

12 UK Disability Survey 2021 Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-disability-survey-research-report-june-2021/uk-disability-survey-research-report-june-2021> (Accessed 30 April 2026)

13 State of Theatre Access 2023 by VocalEyes, Stagertext and Centre for Accessible Environments, Arts Council England. <https://vocaleyes.co.uk/research/state-of-theatre-access-2023/>

14 State of Theatre Access 2023 p7

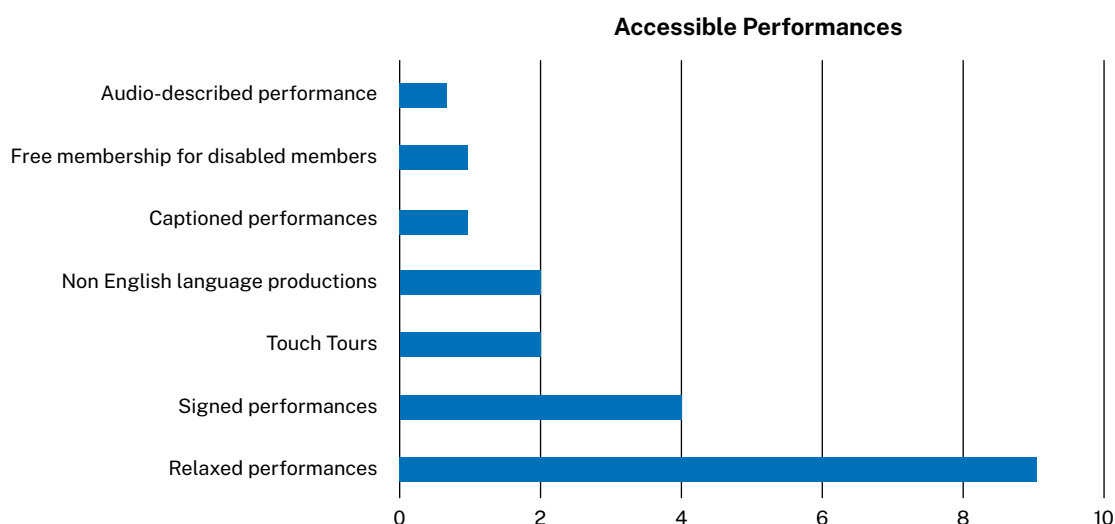


Figure 2 Accessible performances provided

Addressing Environmental Barriers

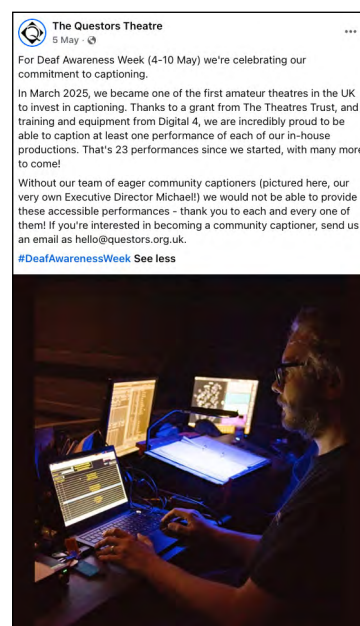
Figure 1 illustrates that in terms of customer-facing parts of buildings, most LTG theatres had some basic physical adaptations including stair-free access to the auditorium, accessible seating and accessible toilet facilities. In addition, a third of theatres offered free carer tickets, facilitating the attendance of a disabled audience member.

However, only 30% of respondents had stair-free access to the stage and only one respondent theatre had stair-free access to technical facilities. Lack of backstage access is therefore still a significant prohibiting issue for people with impairments affecting mobility in the vast majority of theatres.

While some theatres indicated that they have adequate facilities or no plans at present, many theatres have major plans for improving building accessibility and facilities, including structural improvements, such as the installation of lifts to upper floors, the creation of accessible toilets, improved general layout and easier access to backstage and on stage. Other planned upgrades include installing hearing systems and replacing seating to better accommodate wheelchairs. Others are actively reviewing options, have engaged specialist officers (e.g. Accessibility, Equality and Diversity Coordinator) in making recommendations, or indicating that they will address accessibility once their capital campaign/extension development plans are complete. The historic status of many LTG theatre buildings, including being Grade II listed, or within conservation zones, can make structural accessibility redevelopments more challenging. In addition, many LTG theatres are conversions of buildings (e.g. cinemas, schools, warehouses, factories), which also makes installation of more accessible theatre-specific facilities and structures more difficult.

Addressing Interactive Barriers

Looking at Figures 1 and 2, in terms of physical infrastructure, the majority of LTG theatres have a hearing loop installed (79%) facilitating the increased accessibility of those with hearing impairments. However, the provision of accessible forms of performance was fairly low. The most common form was a relaxed performance, although this was offered by less than a third of theatres. A very small minority offered some captioned performances, with Questors committing to caption at least one performance of every in-house show, while two theatres offered touch tours (Criterion and Chesil). A particular and unusual innovation at Lancaster Grand is the provision of an audio version of their theatre brochure, which is only provided by a very small number of theatres in the commercial sector¹⁵.



Questors Theatre Facebook post on Deaf Awareness Week 2026

¹⁵ As examples: <https://www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk/your-visit/access-facilities/audio-described-flyers> ; <https://www.wiltshirecreative.co.uk/audio-described-performances>

Our New Season Brochure (Sept - Dec 2026) Is Here!

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Pick up your free copy on your next visit, or browse the digital brochure and audio version online. **Start planning your next theatre trip and book your favourites today!**

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Open Our Audio Player

MP3 Download:

Right-click to download Audio

Download Digital Brochure:

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Online Season Leaflet. Source: <https://lancastergrand.co.uk/>

Several theatres indicated that they were planning or exploring the introduction of accessible performance modes, primarily focused on relaxed performances. The strong desire to offer signed performances was noted, though high costs are currently prohibitive. Questors is exploring Programme Notes (10-15 minute audio recordings) to assist visually impaired audience members. The Criterion has just recruited an Access Coordinator volunteer who will oversee provision for disabled members and act as a liaison for every production. In 2025, the LTG national organisation announced the launch of a brand-new initiative designed exclusively for neurodivergent members of the LTG community: the LTG Neurodivergent Network. This is a monthly online space offering neurodivergent theatre-makers a dedicated place to connect and collaborate and share their creative voices without barriers.

NEURODIVERSITY NETWORK



Within the Little Theatre Guild and its member theatres, we take a positive and pro-active approach to neurodiversity.

To that end LTG has set up a series of one-hour Neurodiversity meetings which will take place on the third Tuesday of every month from 19:00 - 20:00.

The meeting will be on Teams and the link will be sent once you register.

LTG Neurodiversity Network. Source: <https://littletheatreguild.org/members-dashboard/neurodiversity-network/>

It was also interesting to understand the difference that ownership models meant to the ability of theatres to engage in different types of performance. Whereas member-owned buildings had considerable freedom, those theatres whose buildings were leased from public authorities often found the burden of risk assessment paperwork militated against engaging in initiatives such as relaxed performances which were deemed to be riskier.

CASE STUDY

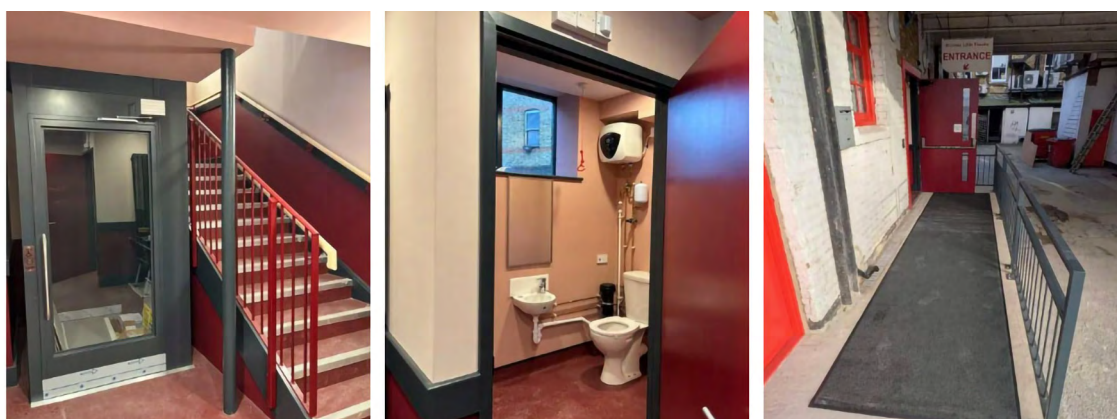
Bromley Little Theatre

Bromley Little Theatre (BLT) has been an LTG member since 1981 with the theatre established in 1938. Nestled in North Bromley behind the Railway Pub, BLT faces the distinct physical challenges common to many LTG Theatres. Housed in a converted Victorian bakery spanning two floors, the theatre features a 108-seat main auditorium and a flexible 40-odd-seat bar space on the first floor. Historically, navigating this layout was difficult. Driven by a desire to integrate the theatre deeply within its community and support its diversity and inclusion initiatives, BLT recently embarked on Phase 3 of a major capital project to overhaul its accessibility infrastructure.

Enhancing Venue Access

Completed in March 2026, Phase 3 of the project has dramatically enhanced the audience experience. BLT completely relocated its main entrance to a new section of the courtyard, closing off a historic, near-vertical staircase that had long proved treacherous for elderly and those with mobility issues. Visitors now enter a beautifully lit, modern foyer featuring a three-tier staircase, alongside newly installed ambulant and fully accessible toilets. Central to this transformation is a brand-new lift that transports patrons to the first-floor performance spaces. The response from the theatre community has been overwhelmingly emotional. As BLT Chair Bruce Wallace highlights:

People have actually hugged me in the last few weeks... and they say, "Bruce, I can't believe it. It's absolutely stunning. It's completely different. It's beautiful."



Lift, accessible toilet and accessible entrance ramp at BLT, Source: <https://bromleylittletheatre.org/rebuilt-campaign/>

BLT takes its accessibility facilities seriously. Beyond structural access, BLT accommodates wheelchair users in its main auditorium by removing front-row seats upon advanced booking, giving staff notice to coordinate front-of-house support. The theatre also provides a functioning hearing loop to ensure auditory access. These physical improvements directly fuel BLT's community outreach, enabling local charities - such as the autism society CASPA - to use the creative spaces entirely free of charge.

The Accessibility Rationale

The driving motivation behind this massive building project extended far beyond basic regulatory compliance; it was directly tied to the theatre's developing cultural identity. Bruce succinctly outlines the core accessibility rationale behind the capital works:

The rationale for the building work was that we wanted to make the theatre more accessible to get in and to get around... It was important to us... particularly in the context of our community outreach and our diversity and inclusion work.

True community inclusion was physically impossible when the limitations of the building itself made it very challenging for people with mobility issues. By eliminating physical gatekeeping, the infrastructure project serves as the foundation for their community partnerships. This ensures that everyone in the local community can genuinely inhabit the space.

Mobilising the Community

A cornerstone of the project's financial success was an intensive supporter campaign run throughout 2024 by one of the board directors, which raised over £90,000. Backed by a brilliant marketing and communications strategy, the theatre introduced distinct branding for the campaign and publicised it across local podcasts, radio, social media, email, and word of mouth. The campaign succeeded by deploying a diverse, highly engaging programme of events and donation avenues:

- **Ticket Add-Ons and Direct Donations:** Standard booking channels were optimised by giving audience members the explicit option to add an extra donation amount directly onto their ticket purchases.
- **Performance-Linked Appeals:** Some productions were leveraged for fundraising. For example, at the end of a demanding, marathon run of *Nicholas Nickleby* (Parts 1 and 2), Bruce took to the stage after every show to pitch directly to the audience. This transparency celebrated specific fundraising milestones, motivating patrons and members to chip in lump sums amounting to several thousands of pounds which secured 10-15% of the campaign's total in the final few weeks alone.
- **Special Event Programming:** The theatre curated a bustling schedule of at least twenty distinct fundraising events. These included quizzes, comedy nights featuring aspiring local comedians who performed for free to practice new routines, and actors putting on new writing workshops. To maximise profit margins, all event prizes were donated by supporters.
- **Sponsored Community Challenges:** The fundraising spirit extended beyond the theatre walls, with community members launching their own micro-campaigns, such as a sponsored long-distance swim undertaken by the bar manager's daughter to gather extra donations.

Navigating the Obstacles

Despite the successful outcome, the capital journey had some complex challenges. Financed via a combination of a £75,000 Veolia Environmental Trust grant, £20,000 from the National Lottery Communities Fund, and an intensive £90,000-plus community supporter campaign, the project's budget was initially set at £225,000. However, unforeseen building complications caused costs to increase significantly, with the final figure landing just under £360,000, impacting significantly on the theatre's financial reserves.

The construction timeline doubled from three months to six. Crucially, BLT chose to remain open throughout the works to protect performance momentum and revenue streams. This meant audiences had to pick their way through a building site in the courtyard, and while this could have been an obstacle, it was embraced as a way to connect audiences with the building project and allow them to see development as it progressed.

Managing human resources around the project also presented distinct operational learning curves. BLT initially hired and paid their own tradespeople directly to save on contractor margins, but found it hindered efficiency. Bruce reflects on the lessons learned:

In reality, it would've probably been easier and a more efficient process if we just got the contractor... to basically do and manage the works.

Relying heavily on highly skilled volunteers, including a retired structural engineer, an electrician, an architect, and a retired set builder, saved the theatre tens of thousands of pounds but meant working around personal schedules, causing further delays. After engaging in a 'lessons learnt' exercise after the project completed, a blueprint of how to manage capital projects in the future has been developed. Contractor tradespeople will be utilised while future budgets will also factor in the nominal costs of volunteer labour to prevent "an unrealistically low view of what the real costs are."

Future Horizons

Bruce views the accessibility outcomes as "ninety percent there." Minor accessibility gaps remain; a bridge separating the bar and the main auditorium currently relies on a portable ramp, though plans are underway to install an independent platform lift. Access to backstage and some technical areas remains restricted by stairs, which BLT acknowledges as a long-term project rather than an immediate priority. Looking ahead, the theatre is taking a brief fundraising intermission before confronting Phase 4: a major re-roofing project.

BLT's journey stands as a powerful blueprint for how independent theatres can successfully modernise historic infrastructure through community backing.

Section Four. Festivals

One way in which theatres can increase their engagement with the local community is through the production of festivals. Festivals can play an important role in constructing meanings of places and contributing to the social, cultural, political and economic activities of places, particularly in urban locations (Lynch and Quinn, 2022: 242)¹⁶. In addition, festivals encompass a wide variety of cultural practices which, over time, can enhance and broadly define the cultural expressions and traditions of place (Duxbury et al., 2011: 114¹⁷).

What is a festival? What is a theatre festival?... Anthropologically, every festival is based on the principles of representation and spectatorship... Regarded in such a way, all festivals from everywhere display the same, clear commonality. *They all invite individuals and communities to be together*, by either acting, watching or both.¹⁸ (italics added)

Amongst LTG theatres, festivals are still a minority area of programming, accounting for only about a third of theatres in our survey. Where they do take place, they are hugely varied, encompassing a variety of creative arts, not just theatre (See Table 3).

Festivals feature diverse entertainment, including short one-act plays, poetry/spoken word, music, film, literary discussions, and visual art. A number of festivals also include support for new writing, an activity that we discuss in greater detail in Section 8 of this report. There are also specific events focusing on literary arts, such as Ilkley PlayHouse hosting the Ilkley Literary Festival or visual arts, for example Questors hosts 17 artists for the Borough of Ealing Art Trail (BEAT). Others are dedicated to one-act play festivals, including competitive drama such as Il England Theatre Festival (AETF) regional rounds and those adjudicated by Guild of Drama Adjudicators (GODA). Film, visual art, and poetry are also represented, while other more unusual activities include yoga and meditation and props and costume sales. Some are showcases for a mixture of different creative arts in one space, for example Rugby Theatre's Fringe Week hold a week long arts festival featuring one act plays, workshops, music, outside hires, magic acts, and other theatre groups using their stage. There are also thematic events, with festivals changing annually, for example Stables Theatre's Scene and Heard Festival which has had recent themes of 'Led by Women' and 'Making Local Stories'. Finally, as you can see below in one of our case studies, festivals also include skills workshops of different kinds.

Table 3: Types of Festivals

Category of Creative Arts	LTG Example
Music/Singing	Choirs Festival (Joseph Rowntree)
New writing	Fresh Voices (Guide Bridge)
Visual Art	The Borough of Ealing Art Trail (Questors)
Drama	Drama Festival GODA (Corn Exchange Wallingford) Somerset One Act Play Drama Festival (Warehouse) Cheshire Drama Festival AETF (Nantwich Players)
Literature	Ilkley Literature Festival (Ilkley Playhouse)
Mixed creative arts	The Community Festival (Questors) Springboard Festival (Criterion) Fringe (Rugby) Scene and Heard Festival (Stables)

The majority of these festivals are held annually, with the general duration ranging from short events of two days or a week up to festivals lasting two to three weeks.

¹⁶ Lynch, D., & Quinn, B. (2022). Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 242-261.

¹⁷ Duxbury, N., Campbell, H., & Keurvorst, E. (2011). Developing and revitalizing rural communities through arts and culture. *Small Cities Imprint*, 3(1), 111-122. <https://smallcities.tru.ca/index.php/cura/article/view/39/75>

¹⁸ Saiu, O. (2023). Carnavalesque Theatricality, Cultural Literacy and the Wonders of the Human Spirit: Sibiu International Theatre Festival at Thirty. *The IATC journal/Revue de l'ACT*, December, Issue 28, Available at: <https://www.critical-stages.org/28/carnavalesque-theatricality-cultural-literacy-and-the-wonders-of-the-human-spirit-sibiu-international-theatre-festival-at-thirty/#::-:text=Alternatively%2C%20another%20explanation%20finds%20its,either%20acting%2C%20watching%20or%20both.> (Accessed 5 May 2026)

In our survey we asked for respondents to tell us their rationale for putting on a festival. The most common answer was support for local creatives, connecting the theatre with the local creative community and showcasing local artists. In addition, festivals were seen as a key way to raise the profile of the theatre locally, attracting new audiences and advertising the theatre's activities. One festival specifically served as a launch for the autumn season and where attendees were offered special booking offers for later performances. In addition, festivals provided chances to expand the company, both in terms of people and experience, offering a platform for new directors, developing playwriting and poetry/spoken word skills within the company, and receiving guidance from competitive drama adjudicators. Others talked about the critical role of a festival in supporting new writing, and others acknowledged that this was also an opportunity to experiment with more challenging drama through new writing. Festivals bring new groups into the building, provide performance opportunities for groups lacking facilities, allow people to hire space who typically cannot afford it.

Questors Theatre - Borough of Ealing Arts Festival

BEAT is well placed to be a launch of our autumn season -we do a special offer for those who book on the days of the festival for performances later in the season. It also brings a whole new group into the building. Many of the taster sessions were run by companies who hire our spaces in the daytime. We also tried out different genres of music. We ran it like a fringe venue so there were multiple performances in a day -this allowed people to hire the space who would not usually be able to afford it. (Quote from survey respondent).

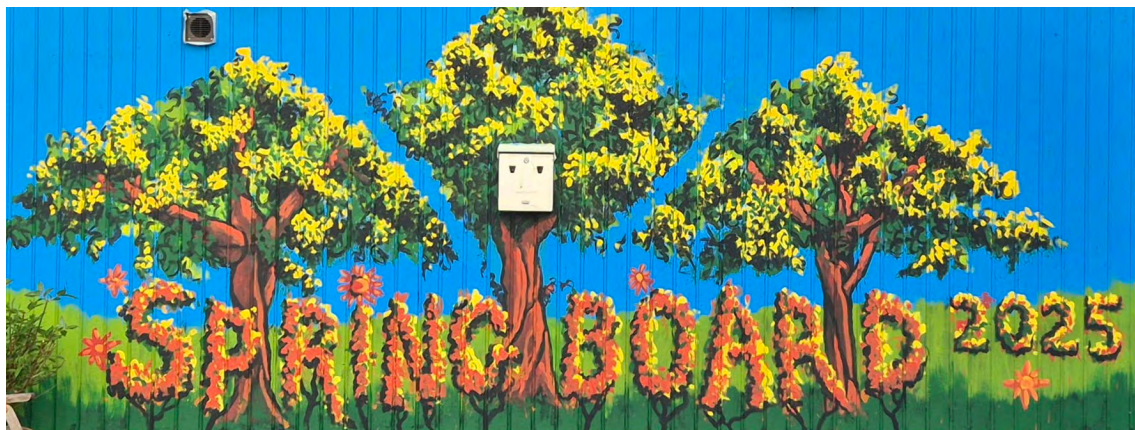
CASE STUDY

Springboard Festival – Criterion Theatre

The Springboard Festival celebrates its fourth year in 2026 and serves as a primary case study for how amateur theatres can bridge the gap between their traditional bases and the diverse communities they inhabit.

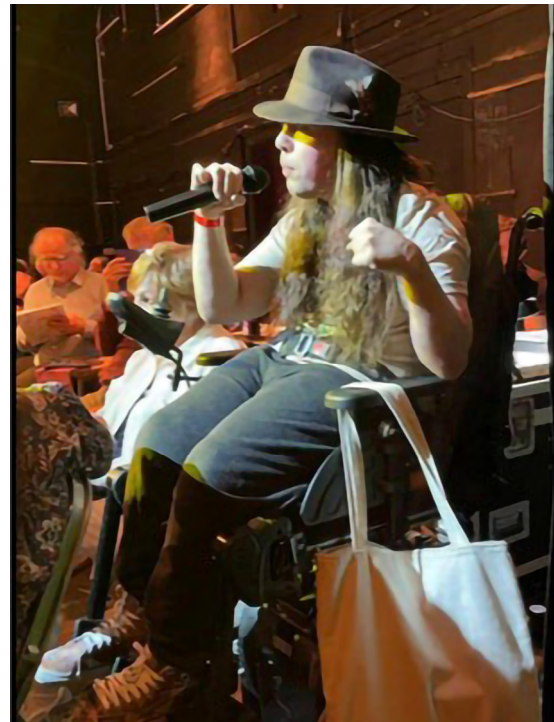
The festival was the brainchild of a company member, musician and playwright Andrew Sharpe who over a number of years in discussions with Anne-marie Greene as Artistic Director, had lamented the paucity of connections and collaborations between the theatre and artists of its surrounding community. This coalesced with the EDI strategy and action plan, spearheaded by Anne-marie during Covid lockdown and medium term plans were made for a future event. In 2023, there happened to be an unforeseen gap in the season and an idea for the Springboard Festival was sown. The whole festival was pulled together in under three months drawing on mutual contacts and reaching out to groups in the city and region. The concept was a week-long celebration designed to break down barriers between amateur and professional artists, and support new and emerging talent from the Coventry and Warwickshire region -providing a 'springboard' for new collaborations and performances. The 2023 festival was such a success that it was agreed by the Board that this should form a regular part of the annual season of productions at the Criterion going forward.

The research project included an in-depth practice-based case study of the festival in 2025, from which the findings below draw upon.



Mural painted on outside of Criterion Theatre, Photographer: Anne-marie Greene

The format of the Springboard Festival is to present a varied programme of performing arts. The pattern honed over previous years is that each night's programme includes a mixture of theatre plays, spoken word/poetry, music, and visual arts with additional literary and film acts where available. Five or six inhouse Criterion company plays provide the architecture of the week's programme. These range in length from 5 minutes to a maximum of 45 minutes and are repeat-performed three times on different evenings across the week. These can be published scripts or new original writing, although the aspirational trajectory is to move to completely new writing. Around this basic architecture is then programmed music acts, spoken word/poetry performances, film, and literary presentations. Some of these will be in-house, but most are external artists and groups. A compere coordinates the evening and visual art is exhibited in the bar and foyer. There is also a resident poet, live reflecting on the festival throughout the week and posting material online and on stage.



Poet George Bastow performing at Springboard 2025, Photographer: Paul Chokran



Selection of sketches of Springboard 2025 performers by Resident Artist Paul Chokran.

Strategic Successes and Representation

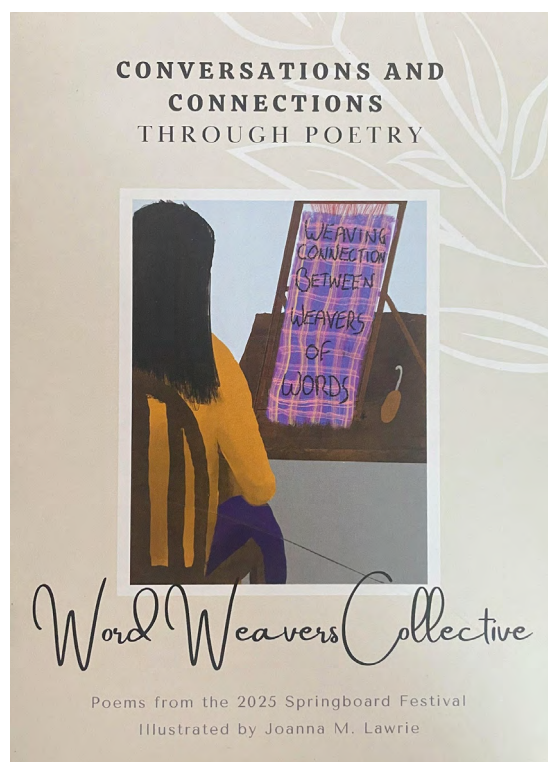
A central strategic aim of Springboard is to raise the profile of the Criterion in the city and region and bring new people into the theatre connected to an explicit EDI aim. With its varied programme, the festival creates multiple entry points for a broader local audience, who might not immediately be attracted by theatre productions. It has been highly successful in increasing diversity both on-stage and the audience. In 2025, the event featured over 70 performers, yet only 12 were existing company members; notably, over 40% of participants were completely new to the theatre. Demographic representation also showed significant progress compared to regular season productions, with 34% of artists at Springboard identifying as global majority and 16% as disabled, while 10% of the audience was under 25, doubling the theatre's usual average.

The cultivation of partnerships with local community organisations such as CovLitFest, Fire and Dust Poets, HillzFM, Side by Side Theatre and the Coventry Vision Hub were important ways to connect the theatre with its local area. These collaborations, alongside a focus on local talent (predominantly from the CV postcode), ensured that the stories told resonated deeply with local identity, be that city of Coventry or wider Warwickshire region. Themes explored included:

- Coventry's status as a city of sanctuary for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Local landmarks like the ring road, Cathedral and the Lady Godiva statue.
- Social issues such as youth knife crime, migration, social care and trans and queer identities.

Feedback from surveys and vox-pop interviews indicates that efforts to foster an inclusive environment reflective of the local community were successful. 95% of audience members felt they saw themselves and their community reflected in the work, while 97% believed the festival offered a platform to voices often underrepresented on mainstream stages in the area. One attendee noted, "I think it is important to share stories celebrating being culturally and linguistically diverse".

The festival also acted as a crucible for new writing, with six out of seven dramatic performances originating from local writers. This has been supported by a shift toward longer creative development models, such as a poets' group, which began in the first year of the festival in 2023 and has continued ever since, in 2025 naming themselves 'The Word Weavers' Collective'. This group brings together new and emerging local poets in workshops over six months facilitated by the Coventry Poet Laureate, producing work for performance at Springboard. External funding has been achieved in some years to support this. Each year has a brand new cohort. Graduates from the group have gone onto perform widely in the local poetry scene, but more importantly have also become members of the company, acting in productions, and also writing short plays which have been performed at subsequent festivals. The success of this development model has been a model for further initiatives, such as the setting up of a new playwright's group in the summer of 2025, working with a group of 12 emerging playwrights to produce short plays for consideration for performance in the 2026 festival.



Published book of poems produced by the poets' group for Springboard 2025, Photographer: Anne-marie Greene

Operational and Cultural Challenges

Despite these achievements, Springboard stretches the theatre's organisational capacity to its maximum. The logistical complexity of managing 50 performances over one week creates a particularly heavy workload for the technical, box office, and front-of-house teams. One significant learning point from 2025 was the need for a highly competent, in-house festival producer.

The model of a festival is also a challenge to the usual pattern of the week-long run of a single play, which audience and company members are used to. Despite the creative interest in theatre and arts broadly within the company, Springboard attracts rather limited engagement from regular company members, with only a small proportion attending as audience and increased reticence to being involved as a volunteer during the week.

In survey feedback, there was also some evidence of organisational culture friction. Welcoming large numbers of new and diverse people into the theatre as performers also means that there has to be less tolerance of what might be described as more 'difficult' or 'grumpy' attitudes and behaviours that might well be usually accepted amongst the company membership because of familiarity and friendship. In a festival environment, where there are lots of external artists, everyone has to be acting as the best ambassador for the theatre. Feedback from artists in 2025 revealed the existence of some behaviours that proved counter-productive to the mission of welcoming new people with 19% of artists reporting

not being made to feel welcome all the time. This highlights a need for clearer communication regarding the strategic importance of diversity and inclusion to the wider company and also ensuring that relevant theatre teams feel a genuine part of the festival and that their concerns and needs are considered in the organisation of what is an unusual format event. (It should be noted that all of these concerns have been proactively and successfully taken on board by all teams in subsequent iterations of the festival).

In addition, those considering a festival may need to ensure there is financial headroom as the financial model of a festival like Springboard prioritises accessibility over profit. Utilising a low price point of £20 for a season ticket, the festival achieved a 67% audience capacity, considerably lower than the theatre's circa 80% average for conventional play runs. An additional cost was the unique profit-share model whereby 50% of net box office was divided between 14 nominated artists in recognition of their financial precarity. However, it is important to note that the event remained financially viable, generating a sufficient profit.

A huge thank you to the organisers for amplifying creative voices across such diverse art forms. Your commitment to showcasing different perspectives and talents truly enriches the cultural landscape and creates meaningful opportunities for artists and audiences alike. (Visiting Artist in Feedback Form for Springboard 2025)

Legacy and Insights

The legacy of Springboard is evident in its long-term impact - it has enhanced the Criterion's reputation as an inclusive organisation and created a trickle of new talent into the permanent company. The Springboard model suggests that success lies in investing in community relationships outside the theatre before programming and ensuring robust support structures are in place to guide new community partners through the tacit knowledge of theatre operations. There also has to be dedicated work to win the hearts and minds of the company membership for a new production model.

CASE STUDY

Scene and Heard Festival - Stables Theatre

After becoming a host venue for performances attached to local festivals - including Hastings Theatre Festival, Hastings Theatre Fringe Festival, Hastings Storytelling Festival, Hastings Pride and Hastings Trans Pride - in 2025 The Stables Theatre established their own annual theatre festival: Scene and Heard.

The inaugural theme was 'Led by Women' and brought together an inclusive programme of work 'centred around stories driven by women'. This comprised an array of industry-based workshops, hosted at the Stables by local artists/practitioners, in areas including scriptwriting, poetry, improvisation, themed storytelling, art, songwriting, voice, dance, drama, and clowning; and a photography exhibition of nominated 'local women heroes' that ran throughout the festival. Alongside all of this were a number of in-house productions: *The Cagebirds* by David Compton and *White Lead* by Jessica Sian (both Stables Theatre productions). Together with a programme of visiting productions including a rehearsed reading of *Refuge* by Katie Duncan - a performance inspired by the writer's time spent working inside a women's refuge as a family support worker; *Walking Each Other Home*, a performance experiment by Stacy Makishi, and part of Giddy Up - a performance programme bringing daring performance from LGBTQ+ artists to the stages of Hastings; and *Behind the Washing Line*, a night of songs, stories and interviews from Bev Lee Harling's solo show, *Ploughing The Salt Sea*, which was developed at the Stables Theatre, and which draws on the lived experiences of the overlooked women in Harling's centuries old fishing family roots in Hastings. All nine of the workshops sold out and performances had a good rate of attendance at between 75-100%. Audience and attendee feedback from the festival included:

The festival is a great way of linking with the local community

The Stables is becoming a go to place for local people

[the Stables] is a great community hub

The ambition is for Scene and Heard to continue each year, showcasing work by, for and with local people - with an ever evolving configuration of performances, music and workshops inspired by changing themes. Scene and Heard 2026 saw work from local theatre makers and companies that explored local life in Hastings under the theme: 'Making Local Stories'. In collaboration with, and supported by the Local Theatres project, three nights of performance were developed including: *The Kids Are Alright* - a new play by Niall Whitehead, developed with local young people and performed by 1066 Youth Theatre (the Stables' youth theatre programme) - that follows a school coach trip to the seaside, drawing on local history to explore the challenges faced by teenagers across generations; an interactive and immersive evening of dance, poetry, songs, music, and talks that took audiences into the magical world of Morris dancing by the Molly Winklers, a newly formed progressive Hastings-based Morris side brought together by Bev Lee Harling; and a scratch night of new writing by four local theatre-makers, hosted by Hastings Theatre Project (HTP), a local theatre organisation who regularly run artist development programmes alongside their own creative work. HTP also ran a free workshop on making theatre locally, as part of the festival. It covered fundraising, building audiences, and thinking, producing and making strategically with local partners and networks.

Scene and Heard was also an opportunity for a group of young people to gain work experience in technician roles. This was supported by the Mike Boakes Fund, a memorial fund left to the Stables by the family of Mike Boakes (a drama teacher and member of the Stables for 40 years), to develop youth skills within theatre, including technical, management or performance skills. Meanwhile, young people (who had taken part in theatre workshops run by 1066 Youth Theatre and conceived by the Stables Youth Board) were invited to watch the dress rehearsal of *The Kids Are Alright* for free, and tickets were given to Citadel - a volunteer-led homelessness prevention project which supports people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness - to watch the night of new writing by HTP.

As well as two 100% capacity nights, the festival brought in new audiences and helped to develop connections and strong working ties between professional grassroots companies and makers and a volunteer-led theatre in Hastings.



Scene and Heard Festival. *The Kids Are Alright* and Molly Winklers. Photographer: Peter Mould

Section Five. Community Hub and Partnerships

Researchers have highlighted how the ‘amateur turn’ provides alternative avenues for artistic expression and place identity markers. Being an amateur offers a specialised space where participation is legitimised not merely by aesthetic values, but by how effectively it marks and preserves national or community identity (Holdsworth et al., 2017¹⁹). Amateur theatre groups are primarily founded from communities of interest and their activity helps forge communities.

LTG theatres provide valuable venues for theatre productions in the local community. Indeed, fourteen theatres considered themselves as a community hub. For some, this was because they were the only centre for performance in the local area.

While five theatres in our sample only produce in-house productions (Nantwich Players, Brighton Little Theatre, Edward Alderton, The Green Room, New Venture Theatre), most also provide a venue for external productions outside of the internal company. The average here is 4:1 (internal: external) or 80%, although there are a couple of outliers who produce much larger percentages of external productions (Joseph Rowntree 95% and Lancaster Grand 92%, both of which produce over 60 productions annually).

Many different activities outside of in-house company productions take place in the majority of theatres (see Figure 3). The most common involved music and theatre performances, while 73% of respondent theatres produced youth drama productions. Other creative arts also feature including film, creative writing, improvisation and comedy. In addition, 38% of respondents have community groups regularly meeting in their theatre spaces. Non-performance activities also featured such as film showings, craft fairs, wedding receptions, parties, monthly cafes, and study groups, placing the theatres at the heart of community activities.

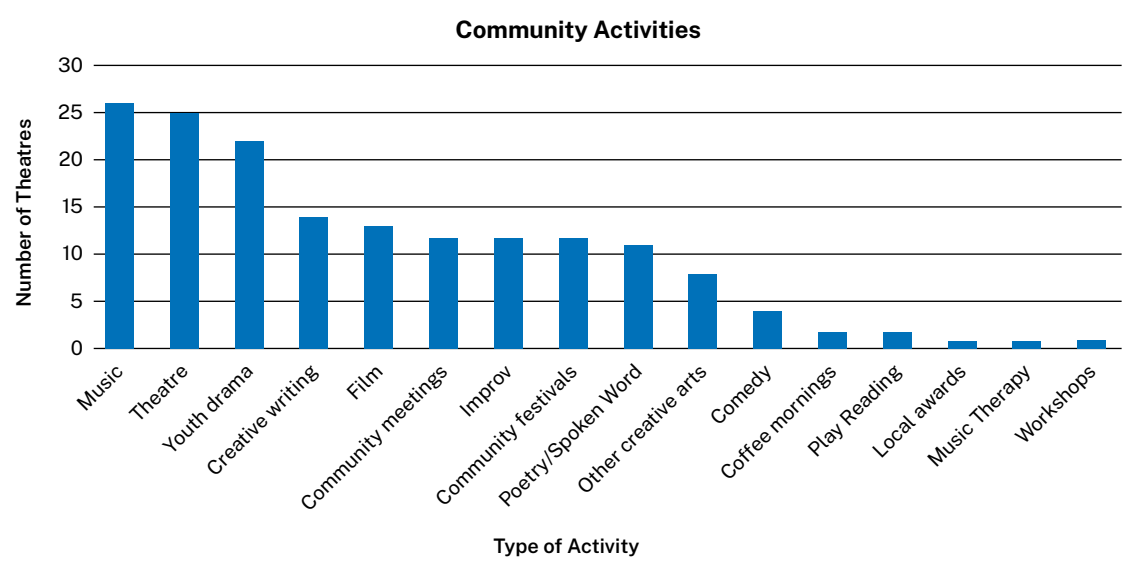


Figure 3: Community activities taking place

66% of theatres are a venue for visiting theatre productions, predominantly amateur/community companies in the local and regional area. There are also numerous examples of the use of the space by professional companies, mostly independent and local companies with connection to the specific LTG theatre. However, there were also some notable national and international external bookings including National Theatre of Wales (Theatr Fach) and Australian company NUWORKs (Macclesfield Amateur Drama). 43% of respondents had staged work in locations external to their building including open air productions in local parks and abbey ruins, historic houses, other local theatres and studio spaces (including fellow LTG theatres), the Minack Theatre in Cornwall, and local community venues.

19 Holdsworth, N., Milling, J., and Nicholson, H. (2017). Theatre, Performance, and the Amateur Turn. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27(1), 4–17.

Over half of respondent theatres had worked with other groups and theatre-makers in the local area or created local partnerships. These included partnerships with Stagecoach, local schools, the local council, universities, museums, festivals, local community interest companies and a wide variety of local theatre-makers, playwrights, theatre companies and creative organisations. For example, the Questors Theatre is the lead organisation for the local area's Cultural Education Partnership. Meanwhile, partnerships with local theatre companies, makers, and organisations at the Stables Theatre have become so commonplace that they have recently set out new guidelines on bringing work into the theatre. Alongside the more straightforward 'In-House Productions' and 'Hire the theatre' options, they have added 'Co-Productions' and 'Supported Productions' - offering varying levels of collaboration, box office splits, and resources and support including costume, props, rehearsal space, marketing and technicians.²⁰

Guide Bridge Theatre As a Community Asset

Guide Bridge Theatre acts as a local base for many socially engaged community groups involved in the creative arts - across all generations and abilities - and has also been recognised as a 'valuable community asset' by the local authority. GBT hosts The Johnny Barlow Theatre Company, the longest-running group nationally for adults with mental health issues. The Johnny Barlow Theatre Company - started by GBT member Johnny Barlow in the 1990s - is now run by Made by Mortals who continue to use music and drama to boost well-being but also to impact public services, particularly health and social care, for the better. Made by Mortals is a Greater Manchester-based participatory arts organisation that co-creates immersive theatre, audio, film, and interactive experiences with people from diverse communities (community groups, researchers, professional artists, health and social care charities). GBT also partners with them on Hearts and Minds, a free programme for older people to meet and - by working alongside professional artists and musicians - transform their life experiences into original musical theatre for children through intergenerational co-productions in schools and community spaces.²¹

The majority of theatres (84%) hire out their theatre space to external stakeholders. Almost 60% of this is to other amateur or community groups. Outside of this, the spaces are hired for private events, by local businesses, by public bodies and on the odd occasion by radio and TV production companies. For example, for the Netflix drama 'Joy', the Look North TV Studio scenes were filmed in the Questors auditorium. The Criterion Theatre hired their car park to the production company of BBC Three comedy 'Man Like Mobeen'.

However, it should also be noted that some theatres were prevented from being able to offer their space to external groups because of the nature of their theatre building or their ownership model. For example, Wickham Theatre Centre reported that their building is an ex-rugby clubhouse, and each production requires that both stage and seating rostra have to be erected and struck and stored, so that the building can be used for other purposes. This need to effectively take the building out of commission for three weeks every time they have a production restricts availability for other community groups especially those needing regular bookings. Terms of leasehold arrangements could also impact ability to offer space more widely to the community, as was the case for the Edward Alderton Theatre or the Wharf Theatre, where risk assessments required by the leasehold owners could act as a prohibitive factor.

²⁰ See stablestheatre.co.uk for Policy and Procedures: 'Bringing Productions to the Stables'.

²¹ <https://www.madebymortals.org/about-us/>

Ilkley Playhouse and Community Activities

In their survey response, the following activities were listed: Ilkley Literature Festival - Word Up North, Festival venue for 3 weekends; Stand-up comedy nights; Music events - tribute bands, folk bands, rock groups; University of the Third Age (U3A) for travel and environment meeting; Ilkley Film Society; courses and seminars on Poetry, History of Art, Improv, Vintage fairs.

Sixty percent of respondent LTG Theatres also take their own in-house productions to other venues. This includes other theatres in the local area or region, to other local theatres' fringe festivals and to amateur drama festivals (NDFA and AETF). In addition, LTG theatres have regularly taken shows to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and to the Minack Theatre.

Why do theatres engage in community activities?

There was no dominant answer from those who responded to the question 'What is the rationale behind your theatre being a community hub?'

Some saw community activities as raising the profile of their theatre, maximising usage of their building, increasing audience reach, and promoting wide-ranging volunteering opportunities in their own space.

Another rationale involved provision of an open, inclusive, and welcoming space for the local community to access drama, performance, and arts activities. Importantly, this was specifically in order to support local groups and societies, with many LTG theatres serving as venues for groups that would not exist without the space. Some specifically offer facilities for hire at a deliberately lower cost than other local spaces.

For some, being a community hub was an aspirational goal, sometimes connected to the objectives of their charitable status.

Reasons to Engage with Local Communities

To bring people together. To promote the theatre space and encourage the community to attend performances. (Warehouse Theatre)

To create an environment that fosters an inclusive and welcoming community which encourages creative excellence, celebrating the shared experience of live entertainment. (Stables Theatre)

To offer space to any arts-based organisation... at lower cost than other local spaces. Each organisation introduces new people to the space and all of the other activities that happen in the space. (Wickham Theatre Trust)

We aim to be an open, inclusive and welcoming community-based space offering diverse programming...all part of Ilkley's thriving arts scene. (Ilkley Playhouse)

(Selection of quotes from survey respondents)

CASE STUDY

The Wharf Theatre, Devizes

An LTG member since 1988, The Wharf Theatre is situated on the banks of the Kennet and Avon Canal. Once an impressive 19th century warehouse, the building became a 96 seat theatre in 1979, becoming the home of the Devizes and District Amateur Dramatic Society. This small theatre serves as a vital arts venue for its local community.

Despite the physical limitations of its Grade 2 listed building, the theatre has developed an organic model of community engagement that extends far beyond traditional theatrical productions. The Wharf Theatre does not operate in isolation; it functions as a central node in a network of local activities, with Ali Warren, the LTG Rep stating that the approach to community engagement “started organically” and then developed overtime rather than as a strategic intention. The Board did not necessarily have a corporate strategy on community engagement, but its place as a ‘community amenity’ has come about from responding to local needs.



Beer and Cider Festival, The Wharf, Courtesy of Sam Burrows, Publicity Officer

Community engagement manifests in several ways:

Providing A Venue for Major Town Events: The theatre provides a venue for a number of high profile annual events. It serves as the starting point for the Devizes to London Canal Race and acts as the administrative headquarters for the town's Beer and Cider festival.

Filling A Cultural Void: The Wharf provides the only theatre venue and location where theatre can be seen in East Wiltshire. The nearest theatres are in Bath or Swindon, both around twenty miles away. In addition, in a town with no commercial cinema, The Wharf fills a vital role in hosting a film club that screens predominantly art house films. This has had ancillary benefits for the theatre in funding technical upgrades like a new projector screen and sound system.

Engaging in Collaborative Programming: The theatre takes the opportunity to try and integrate itself into town-wide festivals, for example, showing the film *Babette's Feast* in the auditorium for the Devizes Food and Drink Festival. Given that the theatre building was taken over for the Beer and Cider festival, the opportunity was taken to host local bands in the auditorium.

Innovative Programming: The theatre also balances a season of seven in-house productions with professional hires, including the hugely popular 'Magic of Science' children's shows. With regard to their in-house shows, while Ali shares a view common to many LTG theatres that “success breeds success” with sell-out runs of classic plays like *The Importance of Being Earnest* or works by Agatha Christie, the company continues to take artistic risks with more obscure Shakespearean works like *Two Noble Kinsmen* and new writing such as *Stalin in Siberia* by Lewis Cowen, a Wharf company member. This seems particularly important in terms of the theatre repertoire offer in a region where it is the only dedicated theatre venue.

The Wharf has deliberately reached out to get involved in community events unconnected to theatre, however in so doing has been able to place itself as an indispensable part of the Devizes community fabric.

Case Study: Joseph Rowntree Theatre, York



Front of the Joseph Rowntree Theatre, Courtesy of JRT Theatre

The Joseph Rowntree Theatre (JRT) in York has only been a member of the LTG since 2021. However, the building has been a dedicated theatre space since 1935 when it was opened by Rowntree and Company for the use and enjoyment of Rowntree employees, their families and the local community. It has therefore had community purpose at its heart right from its founding. The theatre's modern identity began in 2001 when Nestle, the successors to Rowntree and Company, moved away from managing social and philanthropic spaces. In response, the community stepped forward to ensure the venue remained a public asset, first managing it through a charitable organisation, before purchasing the freehold in 2017.

Today, the theatre operates as a 365-seat venue with a remarkably dense production schedule, hosting approximately 60 productions and over 150 performances annually. The theatre's model of community engagement balances financial stability with deep social roots. Rather than concentrating on producing its own work, the theatre operates as a receiving house for approximately 35 different local musical and dramatic societies (almost exclusively amateur). This strategy effectively decentralises the theatre's community engagement, as each visiting company brings its own dedicated audience.

The JRT operates on what could be classified as a 'facilitative model' of community engagement. Rather than acting solely as a gatekeeper, the theatre provides the infrastructure, including lighting, sound, and stage management, to enable local amateur and professional groups to stage their own work. This model relies on a robust volunteer workforce of approximately 160 to 200 active individuals. While visiting companies bring their own cast and costume teams, JRT provides volunteer stage managers and front-of-house staff for every show. By acting as a host rather than a producer, the theatre arguably avoids competing with its users. As the Chair of Trustees Dan Shrimpton notes, the theatre's role is to 'provide the space and the facilities' so that 'all these different groups can thrive'. This high frequency of use fosters a theatre-going habit within the York community, where audiences feel a personal connection to the venue regardless of which society is performing. This model creates a symbiotic relationship where the fees paid by groups allow for continued investment in the building.



Auditorium at Joseph Rowntree Theatre, Courtesy of JRT Theatre

Beyond the visiting shows, the JRT serves as a broader cultural hub by hosting events such as:

- **Choir Festival:** A week-long annual event held in March featuring up to nine performances that bring together diverse vocal groups from across York.
- **Youth Engagement:** Partnerships with local stage schools that use the venue for summer schools and 'play in a week' projects.
- **Fundraising Events:** Creative community events such as 'Chocolate Birthday Parties' and a teddy bear zip-wire down the auditorium.

Despite its success, the JRT faces some hurdles. First, recruiting and consistently activating the necessary number of volunteers for so many productions can be a challenge. In addition, while the volunteer base is large, it skews toward retirees. The theatre struggles to recruit younger people – as Dan commented: “‘we want to ensure that when younger people get involved, they see others that look like them and they stay’.

Second, financially, the theatre must navigate unpredictable gaps in the schedule. While the venue is rarely dark, unexpected cancellations can create ‘quiet times’ that threaten the revenue stream. The theatre has recently appointed a Creative Director to specifically develop more JRT in-house productions. This initiative aims to fill schedule gaps and increase revenue while maintaining the theatre’s core mission as a space for the community.

The JRT serves as a compelling example of how a volunteer-led organisation can provide a professional-grade platform for a wide variety of local creative groups. It demonstrates that a community-run model can be both artistically diverse and financially resilient. By positioning itself as a facilitator for others’ creativity, it has secured a strong place in York’s cultural landscape.

Section Six. Local Stories

A common characteristic of writing by amateurs for amateurs is a desire to write for and about local communities (Milling et al, 2018: 101) in which a key concern is to forge links with audiences in particular places (p103). Local stories have their own joyous appeal that can simultaneously draw in a wider local audience but can also conversely exclude those who do not feel a legitimate part of that locality. The raucous laughter that accompanied a parody poem of Alfred Noyle’s *After the Highwayman* entitled *The Ringroad Man* by local poet Phil Dean at the Springboard Festival 2025 at the Criterion Theatre tapped into that local cultural knowledge of difficulty with a road that only a Coventrian could truly resonate with.

But what is ‘the local’? As can be seen in Figure 4, for the majority of respondent theatres in our survey, the city or town, and the wider county were considered to represent the local, with a small number extending this to the wider region. Well over a third also considered their members to be the local constituency, regardless of where they lived.

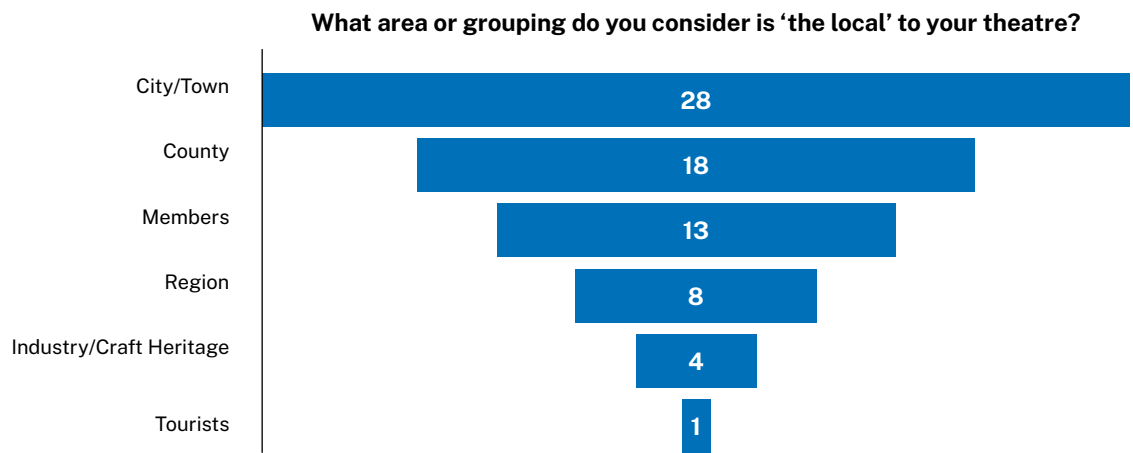


Figure 4. Categorisation of ‘the local’

The representation of local stories within the programming repertoire of LTG theatres was of interest to us, as a way of drawing in a wider audience base. Around a third of respondent theatres indicated that they put on productions and/or events that included stories about their local area, however over three-quarters thought that local stories were interesting to their audiences.

Examples of inhouse plays dealing with stories from the local area include:

- Theatr Fach’s 2025 production of *Stamp* by Catrin Jones Hughes, a stage adaptation of the life of Noel Thomas, a local former postmaster who was wrongfully imprisoned as part of the Horizon Scandal.
- Bolton Little Theatre reported a new play such as the 2014 *Sunlight on the Moors* by local Kevin Ogden focusing on five years in the life of Bolton-born soap tycoon Lord Leverhulme, through to their 2025 revival of the story of the Pendle witches *Sabatt* by Richard Shannon.
- In 2026, the Oasthouse Theatre, Rainham staged a new run of Pauline Holmes’ play *The Lion Queen* telling the story of 16-year-old Ellen Blight, a local resident famous for taming and exhibiting the big cats.
- Ilkley Playhouse reported staging *Beryl* by Maxine Peake in 2022, the story of Beryl Bainbridge, Yorkshire woman cyclist; *The Incident Room* by Olivia Hurst and David Byrne in 2023, a play set in Leeds dealing with the hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper; and *Bronte* by Polly Teale, which was part of their Bronte project with Bradford City of Culture 2025 and Haworth Parsonage Museum.
- Guide Bridge Theatre report that many of their inhouse written plays are dedicated to their immediate area of Tameside and Manchester generally.

Several theatres have hosted events and productions based on local community stories, history, or specific events. Examples include Stables Theatre in Hastings hosting *Ploughing the Salt Sea* in 2025, a performance project by local musician, composer and theatre maker Bev Lee Harling, featuring music and stories inspired by her rich heritage of centuries old, fishing family roots in Hastings. Chesil Theatre noted that they were exploring a future collaboration with a local external company for a production about the Swing Riots in Winchester. Questors Theatre collaborates with Reminiscence

Roadshow theatre group who perform plays collected from stories from the local community. The latest project is collecting stories from the first Equal Pay Strike in the UK at a local factory.

New writing initiatives and festivals can be rich sources of local stories material. While not necessarily pitched as events designed around local stories, theatres acknowledged that deliberately targeting local artists meant that such stories naturally emerged. New Venture Theatre noted that their short plays event in 2019 featured content influenced by the local environment, an evening of ghost stories in 2025 contained at least a local ghost story, while one of the New Writers' Short Players that they staged was set in nearby Hove Lagoon Cafe. The Springboard festival at the Criterion Theatre regularly features local interest stories and issues exactly because of the deliberate recruitment of artists from the local area (See Section 4 for the case study).

Questors – PlayBack and the Reminiscence Roadshow

A particular innovation can be found in the Questors' PlayBack team which creates compelling community theatre from the memories of local people. For over 35 years, the team have been putting on performances of reminiscence plays at The Questors Theatre or creating shorter presentations to tour around community venues in the area. In 2001 PlayBack started the Reminiscence Roadshow initiative visiting voluntary and community groups in west London. These are informal presentations that use reminiscences tailored to a specific theme. A small team of performers bring the memories alive through readings, songs and little sketches. Each show lasts about 35–45 minutes, although their length and content can be tailored to suit a particular audience. After the show they chat with audience members to get feedback and hear their own reminiscences.

To date there have been eleven roadshows created:

- And the wheels went round...: stories of cycling, home and away, plus romance and races in the 1930s and 40s
- Reading, Writing & 'rithmetic: true tales from the classroom, in the early years of kindergarten and primary school
- A Night at the Cinema: going to the "pictures" in the past - and some special memories from those who worked inside Ealing Studios
- Yesterday's Children At War: reminiscences of growing up in west London during the Second World War
- Brentford Home & Away: life in Brentford as it was, seen through the eyes of Brentford FC supporters.
- The Four Seasons of Ealing: remembering special occasions across the year, in & around the borough of Ealing
- Down Our High Street: reminiscences of shops and shopping, before the arrival of supermarkets and shopping centres
- A Life on Soapsud Island: the life of a real laundry "Missus", when Acton's Soapsud Island was the laundry centre of west London
- On the Allotment: stories of life on the allotments of west London, as told by the people who work and enjoy them
- 'Tis the Season to be Jolly: remembering Christmases of the past, including festive songs and carols
- Those Happy Days: memories of children's fun, games and family life in the 1930s and '40

Section Seven. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

A prevailing stereotype of the amateur theatre community is that it is white, middle-aged and middle class (Holdsworth et al, 2018: 219²²), however their study found that contrary to this, amateur theatre is 'often populated by a broad social demographic and one of the most striking aspects is its intergenerational constituency' (p233). Over the last decade, the lack of wider representational diversity within LTG theatres has become a prominent issue and subject of discussion at numerous LTG conferences as well as within individual theatres. In particular, the lack of ethnic diversity has become a particular focus and one which is not exclusive to amateur theatre, it also being an important agenda within the professional sector.

The majority (77%) of respondent LTG theatres had an EDI agenda. As can be seen in Figure 5, this EDI agenda was demonstrated mostly by engaging in activities or aspirations aiming to improve diversity of casts, programmed playwrights, backstage teams, front of house teams and committees and boards. Fourteen theatres had an EDI policy, accounting for 59%, so notably this did not include all theatres who indicated that they had an EDI agenda and only three theatres stated that they had an EDI Action Plan.

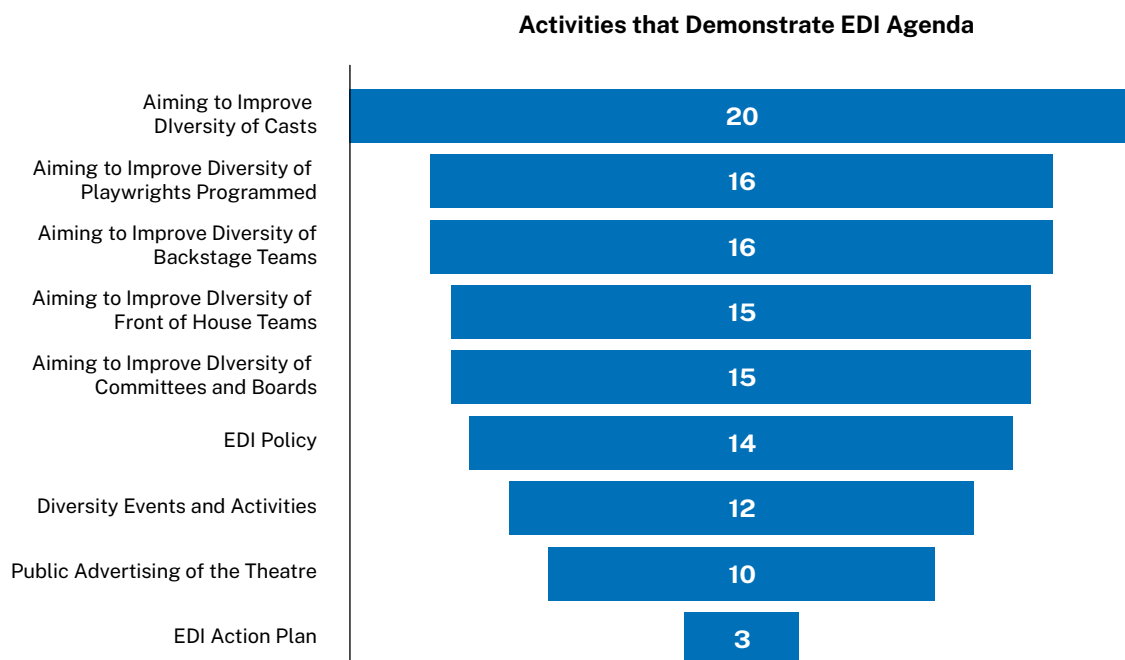


Figure 5: Activities that demonstrate the EDI agenda

In response to the question about the rationale for having an EDI agenda, this coalesced around key issues:

- **Local Community Representation and Inclusion:** The most commonly cited rationale is the desire to reflect the local community and be more representative. Many respondents wanted to make their theatres as inclusive, open, and welcoming as possible, ensuring that all people feel they belong.
- **Organisational Vitality and Growth:** Increasing diversity and inclusion is viewed by many theatres as necessary for organisational growth and improved profits through extending the audience base.
- **Moral/Ethical Obligation and Best Practice:** Many respondents saw EDI as the morally right thing to do, good practice, and a necessity in today's society, along with being aware of legislative obligations.
- **Creative Innovation:** Increasing diversity and inclusion is also seen as a way to make theatres more creative and interesting, helping the organisation to avoid missing out on talent and audience members.

22 Holdsworth, N., Milling, J. and Nicholson, H. (2018) 'Making Amateur Theatre', Chapter 6 in H. Nicholson, N. Holdsworth and J. Milling (eds.) *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp 191-235.

Why EDI Is Important

Representation matters. The theatre should reflect the population of the local area. West Yorkshire is a culturally diverse area, and the theatre needs to offer opportunities for all as audience, artists and decision makers. We miss out on a lot of talent and audience members if we fail to make ALL people feel our theatre is a place where they are welcome and belong. (Ilkley Playhouse, Ilkley, West Yorkshire)

Being a community theatre in the heart of the diverse and cosmopolitan city of Brighton we want to reflect the many ethnic, cultural and social groups that surround us, as well as the rich source of minority groups and those who might find accessing and involvement in a theatre a particular challenge. (New Venture Theatre, Brighton).

Attention to EDI issues has led to some significant success stories for individual theatres. For example, Kelvin Players attributed their membership and audience growth specifically to their EDI activities:

We have carried out a great deal of work over the last five years to improve the makeup of our membership and audiences. We recognise that to claim to represent the city of Bristol, we must reflect that city. Our demographic five years ago was older, whiter and more middle-class. There was very little diversity. Membership was shrinking, which was impacting the vitality of the club. Over the last five years, we have increased membership from around 120, to more than 270. The diversity of our membership has played a big part in that. And this is reflected in our choice of shows and the diversity of our audiences. Productions regularly sell out and profits are going up... We haven't finished, and we know there is much more that we need to do—and this is an ongoing challenge. But clubs grow by being ready to change and meet that challenge, not by standing still. Our youngest member is 18 and the eldest is 86. There is a strong sense of 'Belonging' for all in the Club. (Quote from survey respondent)

At the Criterion Theatre, Coventry, a specific strategy to increase ethnic diversity on stage has seen significant improvements. While there was no global majority actor in a production in 2017 this has improved to almost a third of people on stage in 2024 (the theatre was closed for much of 2025). This has been achieved through a deliberate strategy of programming different plays (for example *The Gift* by Janice Okoh in 2022 and *'Tituba'* by Winsome Pinnock in 2024), paying attention to the ethnicity of playwrights, widening audition advertisement outside usual circles, and through producing a festival focused on bringing local artists into the theatre (see Section 4 of this report). This has been part of a wider EDI strategy over a number of diversity strands which has been widely promoted through the theatre, on its website and operationalised through an EDI Action Plan. For example, every play now has a published EDI Assessment setting out demographic/identity requirements of casting for transparency purposes (see Figure 6).

EDI Assessment	EDI Assessment
In line with our EDI policy, we undertake an EDI impact assessment of all our artistic programming. 'The Gift' by Janice Okoh has a central diversity message notably an exploration of what it means to be of African heritage in Britain and forms of historical and contemporary racism. The playwright specifies the race/ethnicity of particular roles as crucial to the narrative of the story.	In line with our EDI policy, we undertake an EDI impact assessment of all our artistic programming. 'Midsummer' by David Greig and Gordon McIntyre has no central diversity message. It can be cast completely neutrally of race/ethnicity. The central story means that the characters should be ideally be playing ages around 30s/40s. The play is written for a heterosexual couple but there could be flexibility around this.

Figure 6 Example of EDI Assessment of Plays at the Criterion Theatre, Coventry²³

At Theatr Fach in Wales, they have achieved significant diversity of representation within their management team, indeed of the ten members: six are under 30 years old and none are over 65; four are LTBTQ+; and one person is disabled.

While some theatres have made significant progress over the last five years, others acknowledge that their EDI policy is in its infancy or is an area they are keen to develop further in the future. Of those theatres who do not yet have an EDI agenda, only four theatres indicated they would be considering it in the future, while others indicated more ambivalence.

²³ <https://www.criteriontheatre.co.uk>

CASE STUDY

Wokingham Theatre

Wokingham Theatre, founded in 1947, stages eight major productions a year, alongside Youth Theatre productions, short runs of experimental productions, community events, and some theatrical skills training and workshops, that take place in their 165-seat theatre in Wokingham. Wokingham Theatre aims to present high quality productions that are thought-provoking, challenging, fulfilling and entertaining and, in addition, they aspire to enhance their strong local reputation by becoming, in their words, 'a powerhouse for community theatre in the region'.

The theatre has a strong commitment to being a diverse and open organisation, and this policy is clearly articulated on their website and via an active social media presence. Each invitation to audition, for example, is welcoming: 'Auditions are open to anyone, regardless of background or experience, and we particularly welcome those who have been traditionally under-represented in theatre'. Although there is always more to achieve, this openness has encouraged an increasing number of younger members, some of whom have taken leadership roles in the theatre. Some were members of the Youth Theatre who have continued their association, some work in the professional theatre and/or have received professional training as actors or directors. Their expertise and energy, supported by the theatre's Board and an active membership, is introducing a gentle culture change in the theatre. Wokingham theatre is values-led and future-focused, and the theatre's strategy aims to sustain the theatre by increasing local engagement with their membership, their audiences, their community, and with the building. Claire Lawrence, the theatre's inspiring Chair, recognises that creating a strong local community is as important as making theatre. There are practical changes planned that reflect both the theatre's location and strategic ambition to become increasingly artistically adventurous and to engage more local people.

Planning permission has been granted to build a new 50-60-seat Studio Theatre on the site, funded largely by the theatre's substantial reserves. When built, this second space will provide new opportunities for creative experimentation and risk-taking, and there are plans to strengthen their approach to inclusive programming. As a commuter town with significant new housing, the theatre seeks to attract new residents who work in London by introducing some shows with an 8.30pm start and a club night atmosphere in the bar. Programming is evolving to tell stories that reflect a wide range of tastes, identities, and interests; the first season of the new Artistic Director Thomas Atkinson-Joy announced in April 2026 includes *Hansard* by Simon Woods, *The Welkin* by Lucy Kirkwood, *Till The Stars Come Down* by Beth Stee, and the first amateur productions of *More Life* by Lauren Mooney and James Yeatman, and *The Swell* by Isley Lyn. These new plays are programmed alongside more familiar shows such as *One Man, Two Guvnors*, and *Noises Off*.

One of the challenges is to attract new members, particularly from black and global majority communities, who are under-represented in Wokingham as a town and in the theatre. Wokingham Theatre is keen to maintain the loyalty and interests of long-standing members and loyal audiences, and to ensure that everyone shares a sense of belonging to the theatre as it becomes an increasingly important part of the local cultural ecology.

Section Eight. New Work and New Writing

In 1957, just over ten years after the Little Theatre Guild was established - producer and director Peter Cotes published *A Handbook for the Amateur Theatre*, a practical guide for the amateur theatre-maker.²⁴ He observed that amateur theatre in Britain was expanding quickly at this time and believed the movement could make a major contribution to the wider theatre sector. It could bring theatre to parts of the country that were 'theatre-less', provide a perfect space for apprenticeships and actor training, and importantly - support new writing and writers. He argued that amateur theatre groups could offer opportunities for emerging and experimental playwrights whose work might struggle to be staged in commercial theatres. By providing a space for new ideas to be tested and developed, amateur companies could help nurture the next generation playwrights.²⁵

Our research has found that LTG theatres continue to play an important role in supporting new writing and writers. From developing new writing within their memberships to staging new writing from local playwrights as part of their seasonal programming. In our survey, over half of member theatres said they actively try to put on plays which are new (published in the last 5 years), and just over 70% of theatres told us they have an interest in new writing (plays that are unpublished). Support for new writing in these theatres takes on multiple forms:

The ways in which new writing is supported:

- Playwriting competitions -22%
- Playwriting workshops/groups -48%
- Producing in house plays -61%
- Producing in house adaptations -391%
- Commissioning new plays -17%
- Programming plays by local playwrights -22%
- Collaborations with local playwrights -35%
- Scratch nights -17%
- Playwriting festivals -22%
- Play reading nights -44%
- Supporting writing by members of your theatre -13%

(Quotes from survey respondents)

The Kelvin Players prioritise in house new writing for their entries to local one act play competitions. The Questors have staged devised work as well as writing their own pantomime for the last three years. New writing initiatives led by the Little Theatre Guild have recently included a new writing workshop, held at the Corn Exchange, home of the Sinodun Players. The day workshop invited writers and theatre makers to share their industry experiences with everyone from beginners to experienced writers. Facilitated sessions explored writing exercises and development, how to adapt stories for performance, and ways to direct new writing; and were led by: Jennifer Farmer, a lecturer, participatory theatre-maker and facilitator whose work centres underrepresented narratives by collaborating with marginalised communities; interdisciplinary artist Masha Kevinovna Maroutitch who is Artistic Director of OPIA Collective, an associate company of National Youth Theatre; and Ali Warren, LTG National Committee member and member of the Wharf Writers Group, who has worked with National Theatre to promote writing with and for young people. In 2025, Ali Warren wrote an article for *Drama & Theatre* titled 'Amateur Theatre and its Possibilities', highlighting the ambitious programming of LTG theatres. The article explored the range of activities happening in LTG theatres including new writing groups, participation in the National Theatre Connections Festival through youth theatre programmes, and productions being staged at fringe festivals, including the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.²⁶

Respondents to our survey cited that supporting new writing was also a way of supporting, encouraging and giving opportunities to their members, alongside local or visiting/touring playwrights to develop and stage their work. Other theatres told us how they were interested in finding new, interesting and sometimes challenging material to perform/programme, and attracting new audiences whilst offering current audiences an opportunity to see something completely new.

²⁴ Cotes, P (1957) *A Handbook for the Amateur Theatre*. London: Oldbourne Press.

²⁵ Gray, C. (2025). Making Your Own: Amateur Theatre 1950-2000. In C. Cochrane, L. Goddard, C. Hindson, & T. Reid (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth Century British Theatre and Performance Volume Two: 1950-2000*

²⁶ Warren, A (2025) 'Amateur theatre and its possibilities', *Drama & Theatre*. <https://www.dramaandtheatre.co.uk/content/features/amateur-theatre-and-its-possibilities>

Why New Writing is Viewed as Important

Macclesfield Amateur Dramatic Society: *'We like to encourage new writing by our members by staging performances of their plays in our studio space. We staged two pieces of new writing last year, and will be doing another in February 2026'*

Bolton Little Theatre: *'To encourage talent'*

Progress Theatre: *'To encourage new writers and creativity'*

Kelvin Players: *'We feel there are lots of members with writing talent which we are keen to encourage. The Writing group is inclusive and so anyone can attend and all are welcome. It is fun for the members to be part of original work. Many of the Rehearsed Readings are of new writing by members.'*

Criterion: *'Change programming, develop talent, challenging work for company, to differentiate from other amateur companies'*

Ilkley Playhouse: *'To discover, develop and produce new writing. Finding new, exciting material for the season is important to us.'*

Guide Bridge: *'It offers our audience and members the opportunity to experience new genres [...] It's a good way to attract new audiences and other creative talent [...] Providing opportunities for new writers to see their written work come to life onstage with an audience invited to provide feedback'*

Summerseat Players at the Theatre Royal: *'Theatre must progress. Introducing an audience to new writing allows them to see something they haven't seen before and in doing so breeds an appetite for forwarding the art form'*

Green Room Theatre Club: *'The challenge and excitement of presenting untested work'*

Stables Theatre: *'to support new and local talent'*

(Quotes from survey respondents)

Other reasons behind an interest in new writing included financial, both the Wharf and the Chesil noted that they welcomed cheaper and licence-free material. Meanwhile several LTG theatres highlighted that the scale of their venue influenced their willingness to programme new work and new writing. While the Oasthouse Theatre in Rainham, Kent, with an intimate 72 seat auditorium noted: 'we are a small venue and ideal for showing new plays', the Lancaster Grand in Lancaster, explained that, whilst they thought it was good to support new work, their 457 seat auditorium meant that putting on 'a large number of unknown works' was too much of a risk. Theatres including the Stables Theatre in Hastings, East Sussex have recently built, or renovated existing spaces into studio spaces to make programming new writing, scratch nights and more experimental work more flexible and less of a risk financially. See additional commentary on this in Section 10 looking at Buildings.

Up and down the country, we have found many examples of LTG theatres encouraging and supporting new writing through a mixture of new writing groups, competitions and festivals:

- **The Stables Theatre** in Hastings, East Sussex runs an annual 'New Writers Competition' where the winning script goes on to be developed and performed at the Stables. The competition is open to local, national and international applicants, and in 2025 received 900 submissions. As well as being a host venue for local scratch nights, premieres and work in progress performances, the Stables have also started a new play reading group which brings members together to read new scripts that are sent to the Stables throughout the year. The group has also invited playwrights along to the readings so they can receive feedback, and the ambition is for the group to find new plays that can be developed or performed at the Stables.

- **Guide Bridge Theatre** in Guide Bridge, Greater Manchester, runs writing groups under their programme 'WordsmithsINK', which aims to 'grow a community of writers, giving them space to develop, and a platform to stage their work'. Split into two groups: 'Longform' acts as an ongoing support group for members wanting to write full length plays or even non-fiction books, while 'Fresh Voices' is a more condensed set of workshops, from June-December, that support playwrights to write short plays from a prompt word, share feedback, develop scripts with actors, and ultimately stage 5/6 selected pieces the following April. The plays are all a maximum of 20 minutes long, have no more than three characters and a simple set and audiences are invited to provide feedback. *Overlooked* by GBT member Jane Martin, which explored themes of homelessness and the challenges of mobility impairment was premiered at Fresh Voices before being performed at Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2023.
- In Winchester, Hampshire, the **Chesil Theatre's** 'Take Ten' is a nationwide competition that has run since 2008. Writers are invited to submit an unperformed, unpublished ten-minute play based on a specified theme and the winning ten plays receive their premiere performances at the Chesil Theatre.
- The **Ilkley Playhouse** in Ilkley, West Yorkshire runs '8x8x8', a new writing competition that takes the form of 8 plays, each lasting 8 minutes, written by 8 different authors. In 2025 the production was part of the Bradford 2025 City of Culture festival. *'Our rationale for 8x8x8 is to discover, develop and produce new writing. Finding new, exciting material for the season is important to us. This also promotes the opportunity for new, different voices to be heard, and their work to be staged.'*
- The 'Wharf Writers Group', run by the **Wharf Theatre** in Devizes, Wiltshire, is a weekly group where writers can share, critique and support each other across projects and genres - from sketches to full length scripts. Their podcast Where's the Cat? showcases many of the short plays written and performed by members of the group.
- The **Tower Theatre** in London holds a monthly session called the 'Writers' Room'. Based around writing assignments, feedback, and sometimes inviting guest facilitators and industry professionals - the Writers' Room supports a small group of writers from new playwrights to writers who have had their work produced independently. They also host evenings of new writing where script in hand readings are performed by Tower Theatre actors.
- In Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, **Hebden Bridge Little Theatre** runs 'Play Writel' a festival of new drama featuring the work of finalists, drawn from their short play competition. The competition invites playwrights based in Yorkshire and Lancashire to submit an original one act play that has never been published or performed.
- In Ramsbottom, Bury, The **Summerseat Players'** 'New Writing Festival' - set to take place in 2027 - invites emerging writers from the Northwest to submit original short plays. Six emerging writers will be paired with six established playwrights, with the two short plays presented together as part of a double bill - creating opportunities for mentorship, support and creative connection.
- **Progress Theatre's** 'Reading Playwrights' group hosts workshops, short courses, and feedback groups for 'amateur and pre-industry playwrights'; alongside their annual new writing festival 'WriteFest' which celebrates and stages new short plays (8-18 minutes) submitted by local writers - open to both members and non-members, based in and around Reading. WriteFest 2026 marks the festival's 20th anniversary.

CASE STUDY

Cultivating New Writing at the New Venture Theatre

Down on the south coast - in Brighton, East Sussex - the New Venture Theatre can be found within an old Victorian church school, which has been their home since 1958. Inside is their Studio Theatre, with flexible seating for up to 80, and the 75 seat main auditorium named the Theatre Upstairs. The NVT was founded by Arthur Graham Phillips, a trained actor who worked professionally in Brighton and wrote one act plays. Previously the Gradonic Theatre Club, then New Venture Productions and later Brighton and Hove Repertory Club - every iteration of what would become known as the New Venture Theatre sought to encourage and nurture new playwrights, whilst cultivating new and original work for audiences:

We want a Little Theatre in Brighton where...

- We can give intelligent and imaginative production to NEW PLAYS, and plays of Shakespeare, and to revivals of plays which are not considered to be of commercial value.
- AUTHORS are encouraged by a theatre where new plays of a high standard are in constant demand, and where they can learn to improve their craft by seeing their plays reach fruition.
- ACTORS are given the opportunity of working in congenial surroundings and of increasing their range by playing a variety of parts.
- THE AUDIENCE will have the opportunity of seeing plays which they cannot get elsewhere, interestingly produced with a distinguished cast.

(Taken from A History of the New Venture Theatre by Alex Epps, 2024)

Today, the NVT's activities still echo these founding ambitions. All productions at the NVT are in house, and they perform between 10 main productions a season, alongside one acts (or shorter). New work and writing can make it into the seasons in different ways. Yearly proposals put forward by directors -including new writing and published new work by members of the NVT, or proposals for plays improvised through rehearsals -are some examples of this. "I give myself two risks a season, whether that be a new piece of writing or a new director" explained Artistic Director, Katie Brownings. "Financially, I'm responsible for bringing the money in, and we only get that by bums on seats and a good reputation of professional productions". New directors are usually introduced to the theatre through a 'New Director shorts slot' at the beginning or end of a season. A recent successful double bill -consisting of *W. M. D. Woman of Mass Deception*, a new play written and directed by NVT member Strat Mastoris, alongside Simon Stephens' *Sea Wall*, directed by Frankie Knight -a first time director with the NVT -saw both of these things in one night.

For the last couple of years in her role as Artistic Director, Katie has been working on other ways to cultivate new writing at the NVT -namely through a new writers' group and a new writing night:

We used to do an evening of new shorts, but it fizzled out about 10 years ago [...] then a couple of years ago, a local writer asked me if we were still doing the shorts as she remembered writing for one. So, I said, I am open to bringing it back, but would you be prepared to run a writers' group? And she was.

The new writers' group, run by Helen Gregory, meet every month to share and develop writing with each other, with the view of having their work performed at the NVT.

They began with a couple of rehearsed reading nights -with five to six new short works -and invited actors they thought might be interested, including those involved in the NVT's weekly Monday night acting class, to read. Feedback forms were given out to the audience, asking them for one thing they really liked, and one thing they thought the writer should look at. The evenings were popular and financially successful (particularly because of bar takings), and so last year they took this format further by holding their first new writer's shorts nights. This time, eight new plays were chosen from the new writers' group's submissions. Each short play was given -at random -to a director who had put their name forward, and it was up to the director to choose their cast. The parameters were: the play must be no more than 15 minutes long, there are no built sets (just furniture and props), and the lighting has to stay the same (apart from one special effect).

Tickets were £5 each and they sold out, over four nights (including a tech and dress rehearsal). Katie made sure that all writers and directors got a free seat, every night, so that they could experience how different audiences reacted to their script and direction. The writers were also encouraged to attend the rehearsals, as Katie explained:

There are only four rehearsals, and it's a way for the writers to learn about how their stage directions are being worked out in the rehearsal room... We're growing new writers in that way. And eventually they could write a full play for the season. But we're not there just yet.

Section Nine. Young People

Young people are central to the future sustainability and success of LTG theatres and beyond. Around 66% of respondents to our survey run a youth theatre, catering to ages anywhere between 5 and 21 years. At a time when drama provision in schools has experienced a significant decline, youth theatres play an increasingly important role. As Niall Whitehead, a retired education practitioner who worked extensively with the RSC through the RSC's Teacher-Researcher Network and who runs 1066 youth theatre at the Stables Theatre, described to us:

Performing arts programmes such as this [1066 Youth Theatre] are invaluable for developing social and emotional capabilities [...] teaching them [young people] self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. While the process is invaluable in developing those life skills, it is also important that the final performance is of the highest quality. The young people involved, whether working as actors or as part of the creative team, learn that building a quality show is a serious craft. It can be a lot of fun, but it needs grit, determination and commitment.

Youth theatre can also serve as important pathways into higher education and into professional careers in theatre. Alongside this, young people can also help by 'moving the sector forward', bringing new ways of working to LTG theatres. Many may go on to become adult members of their local theatre, return to it later in life, or continue their involvement as audience members - helping to sustain local theatres across generations by nurturing the next generation of theatre-makers and advocates for the theatre. As Nicholson *et al* write:

These young people are often catalysts for new ways of working, and future leaders of theatre making that may well be defined less by the hierarchies associated with the amateur-professional divide. (Nicholson *et al*, 2018: 298²⁷)

The LTG actively supports the development of youth theatre groups, skills training, and opportunities for young people to participate both onstage and behind the scenes across its member theatres. Indeed, one of the LTG's core objectives is 'to promote and develop the involvement and interest of young people in all aspects of theatre.'²⁸

LTG Youth Theatre Festival: A National Celebration of Young Talent

In May 2026, the LTG hosted the LTG Youth Theatre Festival: A *National Celebration of Young Talent*, as part of the LTG's 80th anniversary conference. The festival brought together youth theatre groups from across the UK to perform either a full play or an extract of their own choosing. Participating groups included 8 youth theatres from all over England: Bromley Little Theatre, The Crescent Theatre, Doncaster Little Theatre, Hall Green Little Theatre, Medway Little Theatre, People's Theatre, Criterion Theatre, and Rose Theatre (The Nonentities Society). Theatretrain, a performing arts company based in Coventry, was also invited to perform. Alongside the performances, participants took part in warmups led by Ian Wainwright from the Royal Shakespeare Company. Performers ranged in age from 9-21 years and the variety of work performed was huge. This included published plays (*The Trials* by Dawn King and *The Dream Collector* by Fin Kennedy) alongside new writing from LTG members (*Chalk Jungle* by Jessica-Ann Jenner, *Ghostly Goings-on* by Barbara Upton and *Eleanor the Adventurer and the Land of Splendiferous Hats* by Becca Wilbrooke). There were also devised performances and sung, dance and physical theatre. For some performers this was their first time on a stage in front of an audience, and it was a great learning experience in terms of adapting to a new space.

27 H. Nicholson, N. Holdsworth and J. Milling (eds.) *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre*, Palgrave Macmillan

28 <https://littletheatreguild.org/about/aims-objectives-and-rules/>



Warm Up with Iain Wainwright, Royal Shakespeare Company. Photographer: Jo Matthews



Medway Theatre Youth, Photographer: Jo Matthews



Hall Green Youth Theatre, Courtesy of HGLT.

Youth Boards

In addition to youth theatres, three LTG theatres told us they have a youth board including:

- The Questors Theatre, London: *'This is quite new-so can't really say what it would be at the moment.'*
- Tower Theatre, Folkestone: *'Planning weekly sessions and deciding the youth theatre productions'*
- Stables Theatre, Hastings: *'Run by under 19's-they apply for funding and are responsible, with support, for using this funding'*

Since our survey closed, Bingley Little Theatre -founded in 1947 and who took over the running of Bingley Arts Centre from Bradford Council in 2012 -have put out a call on social media for people aged 16-25 to join their new 'Artistic Youth Panel'. Committing to a six-month panel, they will help shape arts and cultural opportunities for young people in Bingley, develop valuable skills through training, and plan and deliver a youth-led event:

This is your chance to have a real say in what happens here and to help create opportunities that you and your friends would actually want to go to. We want young people to have a proper voice, real influence and the chance to make things happen. (Bingley Arts Centre Instagram post, 1st July 2026).

And while not having a dedicated youth board, the majority of their committee at Theatr Fach is under 30 years old.

Theatres are increasingly establishing youth advisory boards and youth-led governance structures across the UK. Organisations including the Royal Shakespeare Company, Almeida Theatre, and Chichester Festival Theatre now run formal youth advisory boards that help shape programming, accessibility, and organisational strategy. While youth boards can strengthen participation and representation in theatres, there can be challenges and complexities when setting up and running youth boards, as there is no definitive model. Arts Council England guidance highlights that youth boards can be difficult to sustain because they require significant time, funding, mentoring, and organisational commitment.²⁹ These complexities were highlighted in the varied responses we received in the survey, as LTG theatres also try to work out what youth boards might look like in their own volunteer-led theatres.

Stables Youth Board

In a conversation with Wilf Truscott -who is instrumental in running the Stables' Youth Board, along with Clare Whetstone -we learned about his own ambitions for the group. Wilf, who first became involved with the Stables through 1066 Youth Theatre, a free yearly summer programme for 14-19 years olds, held at the Stables, and run by Niall Whitehead and Barbara Ward:

“The summer programme has been running for 21 years. Hundreds of children have benefitted from the programme. Some have gone on to work professionally in the industry. Many alumni come back to support the next generation. Some continue to work and perform at The Stables into adulthood. 1066 Youth Theatre is one aspect of youth work we offer at The Stables. We also run workshops for young people and are particularly targeting workshops for community groups and youth charities, thereby offering performing arts experiences for vulnerable children.” (Niall Whitehead)

Wilf explained how he wanted to create the feeling of the youth theatre all year around, with one of the ambitions of the board being to widen participation by engaging young people who might not otherwise visit the Stables -or a theatre more generally - through a programme of free workshops and other opportunities. Since it was set up in 2024, the youth board have run free skill development workshops in acting, stage design, improvisation, devising, comedy, monologues, and stage combat, as well as organising workshops with local youth services in the local area. Equally important is its aim to cultivate new audiences by encouraging more young people to attend performances at the Stables, as well as encouraging young people to see themselves as theatre-makers, and part of the wider theatre-making ensemble at the Stables. Whether this is by acting, or behind the scenes in lighting, stage or costume design, Wilf explained how the Stables could be a useful lens for young people to see themselves in future creative careers. In 2026, they established a youth playwriting competition, open to two age groups: 10-13 years and 14-18 years. All entries are read by a youth panel, and two winning submissions (one from each age group) will be developed further and performed at the Stables Theatre, as well as winning £150 in theatre vouchers.³⁰

Young Companies

Through our research we heard inspiring stories from two LTG theatres — Stables Theatre and Guide Bridge Theatre — where young people have either established, or are playing an active role in running, youth-led theatre companies based at their venues. Both the Unstable Ensemble (for 18-25 year olds) in Hastings and Bridging the Gap (for 16-25 year olds) in Greater Manchester were created in response to a recognised lack of opportunities for young people who had aged out of their theatres' youth theatre programmes.

²⁹ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030/investment-principles/investment-principles-resource-hub/youth-voice-youth-boards-and-governance>

³⁰ Listen to a podcast with Wilf here: <https://stablestheatrehastings.substack.com/p/a-young-man-with-theatre-ambition>

CASE STUDY

Unstable Ensemble: Young People at the Stables Theatre



It's The End of the World and I'm Still in the Closet, a production written and performed by The Unstable Ensemble at the Stables Theatre. Photographer: Peter Mould.

In Hastings, East Sussex, a new young creators theatre company has formed. The Unstable Ensemble, established in 2024, is made up of ex-members of the Stables Theatre's 1066 Youth Theatre. After becoming too old to take part in the youth theatre, Daisy Russell, one of the founding members of the Unstable Ensemble explained, "I had nothing to do with my summer because usually I have these two amazing, really intensive weeks with the youth theatre. So, I went and told Neil that and he said -well, do you want to put on a play?"

That summer, with a small budget, a space to rehearse, a night in the programme to perform, along with support and advice from Neil Sellman (Stables Chair) and other members of the Stables, the newly established Unstable Ensemble put on their first production: *1972: The Future of Sex*, written by The Wardrobe Ensemble. The Wardrobe Ensemble are a group of theatre artists based in Bristol who met in 2010 while training together on 'The Made in Bristol' programme at Bristol Old Vic: a free artist development training programme for 18-25 year old theatre makers based in Bristol. *1972: The Future of Sex* tells the story of couples navigating sexual liberation in an era of revolution and shifting societal norms and was first commissioned and developed in 2014 during a two-week residency in Shoreditch Town Hall. Ten years later, a group of 19-25 year olds in Hastings connected to this play and produced their own version of it. Every part of the process -from organising rehearsal space/time, marketing, music design, costume and set building, to directing and acting was undertaken by the group. They transformed the Gwen Watford Gallery -a room next to the Stables' bar and auditorium, usually used for pre-show drinks, meetings, and an adhoc rehearsal room -into a performance space. A lighting rig was built; they draped the ceiling in festoon lights, decorated the walls and floor with vinyl records, posters, rugs, wall hangings, and old dial-up telephones, and arranged seating for thirty at one end of the room.

The show sold out, and the money collected from ticket sales, along with a donation from Mike Boakes Fund was combined and put towards the next year's show. The Mike Boakes Fund is a memorial fund left to the Stables by the family of Mike Boakes (a drama teacher and member of the Stables for 40 years), to develop youth skills within theatre, including technical, management or performance skills. It allows individuals and productions (young people 25 years and younger) to apply to be supported by the fund, with any income generated, after expenses, put back into the fund -making it a sustainable resource for young theatre makers. And so, with £300, the Unstable Ensemble went on to devise and perform their own play titled *It's The End of the World and I'm Still in the Closet* in 2025, which ran for three nights. "It was super challenging and a lot more work" reflected Daisy, who also directed the play:

But we want to put on plays that connect with us as people, at least at the moment that's a big part of our agenda. So, we're doing very queer, colourful, larger than life plays [...] we're young people learning how to live.

The Unstable Ensemble -made up of 18-25 year olds -emerged as a response to a recognised lack of opportunities for this age group within the local area. Too old for youth theatre, and too young to take creative control of a whole production, as Wilf Truscott, another member of the ensemble put it. Daisy explained how one member of the group included their set design for *It's The End of the World and I'm Still in the Closet* in their portfolio when applying for a Masters degree; an example of the skills and creative development opportunities that have arisen through participation in the group. They have also inspired a new studio performance space in the Stables building. In the Stables Trust Limited annual report (2024), under 'achievements and performance', the success of the Unstable Ensemble's production of *1972: The Future of Sex* was highlighted, with a suggestion that, as it worked so well, they would now look to commission a feasibility study to turn the gallery into a permanent studio space. And so, in early 2026, the Gwen Watford Gallery -where the Unstable Ensemble rehearse and perform -was renovated into a permanent studio theatre where new writing and scratch performances have started to take place.

It's a next step from youth theatre, an older group of people doing more mature plays where they have more agency to kind of take the lead. That's how I see the Unstable Ensemble. I hope to pass on the baton to people when I leave so they have a budget, have a space to rehearse, and the guidance. And I'd hopefully be able to offer my advice from doing it for two years (Daisy Russell).

The Unstable Ensemble returned in September 2026 with their new show *Let Them Eat*, written and performed by the Unstable Ensemble.

@theunstableensemble

CASE STUDY

Bridging the Gap at the Guide Bridge Theatre

Guide Bridge Theatre, founded in 1940, have been performing in their current building in Audenshaw, Tameside, a borough of Greater Manchester, since 1972. Run entirely by volunteers, throughout the year the GBT produces around 6 plays, an annual pantomime, and a musical, alongside a free weekly youth theatre with the help of a dedicated team of volunteer theatre practitioners. The youth theatre covers two different age groups: ages 7-11 and 12-15. Recently they have established a new theatre group called Bridging the Gap, designed to give young people aged 16-25 an opportunity to take ownership of an annual show.

Bridging the Gap was founded in 2024 by GBT member and local writer, Jane Martin. Jane remembered being heavily involved in a theatre group called the Young Nomads, attached to the Nomad Theatre (LTG member) in Surrey, which was a group for young people who had aged out of the youth theatre: "when I joined at 15 it was being run by 25 and 26 year olds, I left for a bit as life got in the way but came back at 24, so I saw it from both sides." Jane saw this as a way for the next generation of theatre-makers to remain engaged in their local theatre-whether they went on to work in theatre professionally, voluntarily in their local theatre, or both. "I wanted to create that same opportunity for young people in our area. Which I think is much needed now. I grew up in an affluent area, and this is not an affluent area. There aren't the same provisions for that age group today" explained Jane. Bridging the Gap allows young people a chance to take responsibility for every aspect of a production -from writing a production, performing in main roles, directing, to set design, lighting design, and stage management.

Bridging the Gap began with a core group of 6 six members who attended a series of performance workshops. Funding initially came from a Sports England initiative called *Use Your Energy* -which aimed to engage young people in the Tameside area to become more active. The initiative worked by funding the ideas of voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise groups, and after a successful application -GBT used the funding to hire practitioners to host free workshops for young people covering physical aspects of theatre including circus skills, clowning, juggling, singing, dance, and physical combat. The first year of Bridging the Gap culminated in a performance titled *Welcome to Little Toplea Bottom*, written by Jane, which showcased all of the physical skills they had learnt through the workshops.

A year later, Bridging the Gap members Adam Carter and Fawn Saxon, 19 and 18 respectively at the time -brought a script to Jane that they had written: "And I had a look at it, and it was exactly what I wanted to happen. I wanted it to be driven by them." In 2025, the growing group performed their debut musical comedy *Rest In Cheese*, also directed by Fawn Saxon. *Rest in Cheese* told a story about a high school food tech class's trip to a cheese factory, and whilst it promised 'plenty of cheese puns' -it also explored many themes that were important to the group, including the spread of misinformation through social media, peer pressure and pressures to change to be popular, and how teenagers interpret love. It ran for one evening and a matinee and sold out.

Money earned from ticket sales go back into the theatre and allow Bridging the Gap to continue to provide year round free opportunities for young people including skills workshops -run by external artists alongside artists/practitioners connected to the theatre (e.g. GBT members who are professionally trained in clowning, fight coordinating, acting) -and annual performances. Jane explained that while the group has established itself in the theatre quicker than expected, it has not been without its challenges. One being that, within a theatre group for young people, there will always be a lot of flux -and that legacy was critical to keeping the group going. Plans for the future of Bridging the Gap include working on another musical for 2027 alongside a film making course run by a recent film graduate. "We're being taken seriously now and being accommodated into the GBT programme".

@bridgingthegapgbt



Rest in Cheese, a production written and performed by Bridging the Gap at Guide Bridge Theatre, Courtesy of Guide Bridge Theatre.

Section Ten. Buildings

Amateur theatre-makers and their buildings often share long relationships and collective histories that stretch back over decades. In the early-mid twentieth century when many old commercial theatre buildings were being demolished to make way for new developments, new theatres were springing up across the United Kingdom as many, once nomadic, amateur theatre companies were saving disused buildings and renovating or converting them into working theatres. The Little Theatre Guild is an example of this momentum. Founded in 1946 by nine building-based amateur theatre companies, the aim of the LTG was to create a forum to promote and support independent play-producing amateur theatre organisations who controlled or owned their own theatres. Their ambition was also to share knowledge and experience, to discuss problems and standards, and to 'assist in and encourage the establishment of other little theatres'. And so, many theatre buildings today exist thanks to the legacy of amateur companies of the twentieth century who found means to buy and make their own theatres - renovating neglected warehouses, engine sheds, barns, stables, pubs, churches, huts, power stations, cinemas, seaside shelters, coach garages and even theatre buildings into permanent bases to make theatre.³¹

Today, LTG theatres continue to adapt their theatre buildings to meet the changing needs of their audiences as well as their own activities. 80% of respondents told us they had engaged with redevelopment work of their theatre building in the last 10 years, and 77% have plans to redevelop their theatres in the future. The rationale behind renovation and redevelopment projects at a number of LTG theatres included the need for essential repairs, refurbishments, and the updating of ageing facilities; making their theatres more welcoming to audiences. Many theatres are also seeking to improve the environmental sustainability of their buildings - with a view to increase energy efficiency and reduce running costs.³² Alongside this, theatres are working to improve accessibility through enhanced facilities, reconfigured spaces, and clearer signage, while also addressing practical needs such as increasing storage and rehearsal spaces.

Wokingham Theatre told us about their plans for a new building that will become the official home for their youth theatre - allowing the youth theatre to meet without having to work around whatever is happening on the main stage. When not in use by the youth theatre, they plan to use it as a studio space for rehearsals, hiring out to other organisations, or taking more risks with their programming. Just over half of the respondents told us they already have, or are in the process of building, a studio theatre space in their theatres. Some respondents told us how these second spaces within their theatres are allowing them to stage smaller-scale, and more experimental/fringe productions (both company and visiting); support new writing and work in progress/scratch performances; experiment with different forms of performance e.g. improv, poetry, music; and engage audiences in more intimate settings.

- **The Warehouse Theatre:** *'It is not yet open, but we propose using it for rehearsals, private hire, smaller experimental plays, scratch nights and poetry events.'*
- **Stables Theatre:** *'To support local creatives with new untested projects.'*
- **The Tower Theatre (Folkestone):** *'To create a more intimate area for unusual plays [...] rather than commercial ones, also some musical and improv events.'*
- **Guide Bridge Theatre:** *'The bar area is being used for one act plays and immersive theatrical experiences - an ongoing experiment.'*
- **Nantwich Players:** *'NP Studio was launched in 2018 to stage innovative studio plays alongside our Main House productions.'*
- **Wokingham Theatre:** *'We are currently building a studio theatre [...] to explore many of the ideas mentioned in this survey!'*
- **Rugby Theatre:** *'We are developing it for smaller work such as our recent Burton play [Playing Burton - part of Rugby Theatre's Fringe Week] and a storytelling event for children.'*

(Quotes from survey respondents)

Ownership of buildings can cause difficulties for redevelopment opportunities. This is particularly the case if the theatre building is a leasehold. For Wickham Theatre Centre, their current lease runs only until 2042 and consequently physical improvements requiring significant investment must be carefully considered. The Wharf in Devizes is leasehold from the Council, and therefore any adaptations or improvements incur an added level of bureaucracy and planning which prohibits moving forward on some plans and innovations.

³¹ Gray, C. (2026) 'Making Your Own: Amateur Theatre 1950-2000' in Cochrane C., Goddard, L., Hindson, C. & Reid, T. (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth Century British Theatre and Performance Volume Two: 1950-2000*. London: Routledge.

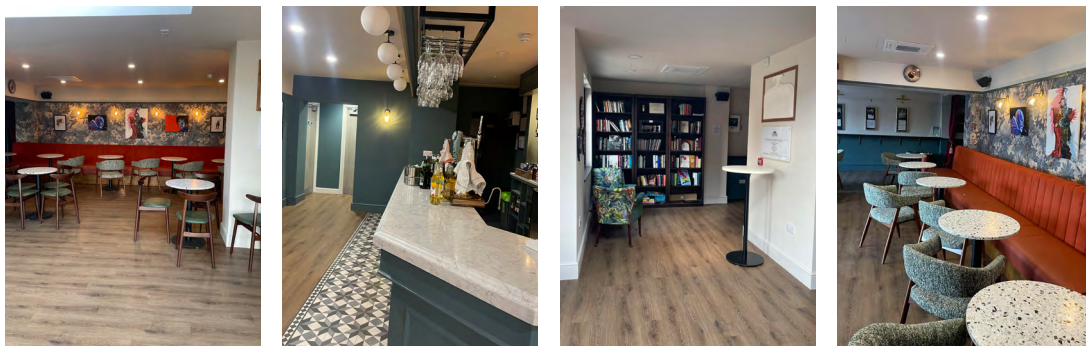
³² The Little Theatre Guild are running a free webinar series throughout 2026 on making theatre buildings more sustainable: <https://littletheatreguild.org/news/theatre-green-book-buildings-webinar-series/>

Criterion Theatre: Transforming the Inside

In 2025, the Criterion was closed for 7 months while significant redevelopment of the bar and foyer area was completed, fundamentally transforming the public-facing parts of the theatre building. The work was funded by a large legacy left by Christine Murley (nee Harris), one of the founders of the Criterion Players in 1951. The space is now contemporary, open, airy and welcoming, with top of the range toilet facilities and accessible entrance.



How building work has transformed the exterior of the Criterion from 2021 to 2025. Photographer: Anne-marie Greene.



The new interior Criterion Theatre 2025, Photographer: Anne-marie Greene

Joseph Rowntree Theatre: Transforming the Outside

The JRT has a beautiful auditorium, but until recently had no bar space, which has historically meant there has been nowhere for audience members to socialise and congregate before and after performances and during intervals - a problem especially in inclement weather. A temporary bar existed for some years running out of a caravan pitched on the drive outside the main entrance. However, in 2024, following a fundraising appeal and 'Buy a Brick' campaign, the theatre was able to invest around £140,000 into what has been named the 'Garden Room'. As well as a place to sit and have a drink, this new bar also has two additional toilets. The initial planning permission for the Garden Room is for five years, but during that time the theatre will be planning their next steps of developing and extending the building and eventually bringing the space they've created outside, inside. This also contributes to their function as a community hub (see Section 5).



New Garden Room in the grounds of the Joseph Rowntree Theatre, Photographer: Dan Shrimpton



Buy a Brick Fundraising Campaign Joseph Rowntree Theatre, Photographer: Dan Shrimpton

CASE STUDY

Creating the New Chesil Theatre: Building a Performance Centre to Inspire and Entertain the Community

Chesil Theatre is a long-established member of the Little Theatre Guild and, since 1966, its home has been the former 12th-century church of St Peter Chesil in the centre of Winchester. This medieval listed building has a 75-seat theatre, and small but well-used backstage spaces. Formed as Winchester Dramatic Society in 1863, Chesil Theatre is undertaking an ambitious building project that will provide more opportunities for local people to take part in theatre.

The inspiration for the New Chesil Theatre came from its late President Tom Williams, who was a passionate advocate for amateur and local theatre-making in Winchester, and a leading figure both at the Chesil and in the Little Theatre Guild. He initiated discussions about acquiring a plot occupied by a derelict coal yard house next to the theatre in 1998 and, by 2026, his plans to extend the Chesil Theatre are coming to fruition. The New Chesil Theatre will be a fitting legacy and a tribute to his vision for an inclusive community theatre in Winchester.

The New Chesil Theatre will increase opportunities for local people to access and take part in theatre. It will build on the success of many years as an amateur theatre company; currently, the company plays to above 95% capacity audiences, staging up to 11 shows each year, including youth theatre and the well-regarded biennial festival of new writing, Take Ten. A new initiative “Chesil Bare Stage” has also contributed to the offering with extra opportunity for actors and fundraising, where there is minimal set or technical input and the focus is on script, acting and directing. Company members also work frequently with local people who may not otherwise access the arts, including their regular engagement sessions with looked-after children and older adults who may be experiencing social isolation and loneliness. The £2.3 million extension will enable a step-change in their approach to programming and their contribution to the community. Not only will it improve audience experience and provide additional space for rehearsals and backstage work for the company, but it will also strengthen opportunities for Chesil’s Youth Theatre, support use of the building for daytime activities, and expand the theatre’s current work with local people and communities who are under-served in the area. The New Chesil Theatre will value its history and heritage, but the new extended building aims to support a transformation from a traditional amateur theatre company to a vibrant local hub that is accessible and inviting for the whole community.

The key challenge is fundraising. There has been widespread support from within Chesil’s membership and in the wider community for the extension. Stephanie Danby, who chaired the Chesil Theatre from 2022 to 2025, has led the fundraising campaign and development project since the launch of its capital campaign project in 2025 with tenacity, insight, and energy. All decisions are made by committee and aim for consensus, which is time-consuming and sometimes laborious. Members of Chesil Theatre, including Stephanie, have lent their professional expertise to the project, including social workers, builders, surveyors, architects, lawyers, PR consultants, marketing experts and technical specialists in IT and buildings. The fundraising team’s ability to communicate a coherent vision to funders has meant that funding has been secured from a wide range of sources, including a generous contribution from Winchester City Council. The company has been in surplus for the last 45 years, and detailed financial forecasting shows that the New Chesil Theatre will be secure for many years to come.

Members of the Little Theatre Guild have a history of long-term planning, and a sustainable local theatre, led by volunteers with and for amateur theatre-makers and the wider community, is at the heart of plans for the New Chesil Theatre. Aspiring to serve an increasingly inclusive local demographic as the twenty-first century progresses requires some of the theatre’s established practices and ways of working to change as the theatre evolves. The building, with its large glass frontage facing the street will be a visible symbol of transparency as an inspirational space for the community.

Final Thoughts and Reflections

The 'Stories of Change' documented throughout this report clearly highlight the role amateur theatre plays within the UK's broader cultural ecology. We have been pleasantly surprised by the breadth, depth and variety of innovations within the theatres involved in this research. Moving beyond the historic 'closed club' stereotype, LTG member theatres are increasingly positioning themselves as inclusive, sophisticated community assets that operate with a level of technical and structural complexity similar to professional presenting venues. This evolution is not merely about survival; it is a proactive shift toward becoming 'community hubs' that legitimise artistic expression through community identity rather than just commercial value.

A recurring theme in this research is the blurring of the amateur-professional divide. By acting as dynamic shapers of the national repertoire, these theatres provide a vital life-support system for new writing and playwrights, championing diverse voices at a time when professional drama provision is under pressure. The success of these venues lies in their ability to function as beacons of civic pride, transforming historic, often hidden spaces into vibrant anchors of local life. Furthermore, the research underscores that Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) is a driver of organisational vitality, not just a regulatory box to tick. Embracing change and reflecting the true demographic of their local places leads to measurable growth in membership and audience engagement.

However, this progress requires a persistent winning of 'hearts and minds' to overcome cultural inertia during transitions to more experimental or inclusive models. Looking ahead, the sustainability of the sector needs to be secured by a new generation of theatre-makers. Youth boards and ensembles need to act as catalysts for new ways of working, ensuring that these organisations remain resilient and relevant.

Ultimately, these 'stories of change' illustrate that when a local theatre commits to being a visible, transparent, and inclusive space, it ceases to be just a building and becomes an indispensable 'home' for the imagination of the entire community.

Research Team

Cara Gray is a Senior Research Fellow on the research project, *Local Theatres: Participation, Inclusion, Imagination*, based at Royal Holloway, University of London. Before this she was a postdoctoral researcher for *Civic Theatres: A Place for Towns*; co-authoring *Theatre in Towns* (2023) with Helen Nicholson, Jenny Hughes, and Gemma Edwards. She has published on amateur theatre in relation to building biographies and the creative work of backstage theatre makers.

Anne-marie Greene is Professor of Work and Diversity at the School for Business and Society, University of York. A particular research interest is critical perspectives on equality, diversity and inclusion, especially at the interface between work, life, family and community. She has published widely including the co-authored book *Clean Break Theatre Company* (2024), the fifth edition of *The Dynamics of Managing Diversity and Inclusion: A Critical Approach* (2022), and *Gender-Based Discriminations in Employment: Experiences of Black Disabled Women* (2026). Anne-marie is also Artistic Director of the Criterion Theatre, Coventry, an LTG Theatre.

Helen Nicholson is Professor of Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London and is principal investigator of the research project, *Local Theatres: Participation, Inclusion, Imagination*. She has published widely on theatre in community settings, including two co-authored books, *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018) with Nadine Holdsworth and Jane Milling, and *Theatre in Towns* (2023) with Jenny Hughes, Cara Gray and Gemma Edwards.

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