



Executive – 5th March 2008

Brewhouse Theatre Feasibility Study

Report of Strategic Director – Joy Wishlade

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor R Lees

Executive Summary

A feasibility exercise looking at the future for the Brewhouse was commissioned by Project Taunton in October 2007. The brief was written and agreed by the relevant stakeholders of the Brewhouse i.e. TDBC, SCC, Project Taunton, the Arts Council England SW and the Brewhouse itself. The final report and its recommendations were received in February 2008 and all the stakeholders now seek their organisation's endorsement to these recommendations.

1. Background

1.1 Since the publication of the Terence O'Rourke Taunton Vision masterplan there have been many questions about the future location and size of a theatre in Taunton. Also, since that time, the Brewhouse has not only undergone a change of management and trustees and with this, a change of direction but also seen its annual grant income reduced. It was therefore felt by all of the relevant stakeholders, as well as the Brewhouse itself, that it was timely to commission a piece of work to answer a number of questions and to agree a way forward that all stakeholders could sign up to. The brief identified the questions as:

- What are the requirements that will enable this new theatre to thrive in the 21st century within a growing Taunton and within the context of Somerset and the South West?
- What are the Provisional requirements for a new venue?
- What are the financial constraints? (to include financial forecasts on the options to establish core costs and potential income streams).
- What would be the most effective physical model that generates maximum income through the box office and other services for the minimum core overhead and staff costs?
- Where should the theatre be located?

- 1.2 The outcome of the study was to make recommendations on the location, size, technical requirements and physical specifications of a new theatre in Taunton and to identify capital and revenue costs, funding partners and income streams which might enable the construction and sustainable operation of such a venue in the long term.

Following a competitive process, Artservice where the consultants appointed to undertake the research.

2. Executive summary of key findings

- 2.1 The study concludes that Taunton does require a flagship 21st century arts and entertainment facility: capable of presenting high quality professional theatre, dance and music for Taunton and its surrounding areas; accommodating local amateur and community performances and exhibitions; presenting film and professional exhibitions; with artists support facilities and workspace for the creation and production of new work in the performing and visual arts; and as a centre for participatory and educational activities. This range of functions (based on the existing Brewhouse multi-purpose model) addresses the priorities of its key stakeholders, and will reach out to engage a wide variety of people.
- 2.2 That the current Brewhouse site is the ideal location for such a facility with its excellent riverside location and proximity and relationship to the Town Centre and cultural quarter. There is considerable potential for developing new facilities on this site, and for maximising its attractive location for commercial purposes, with riverside restaurants and bars integrated into the theatre complex. This would also respond to the County Cricket Ground re-development and open up new opportunities for partnership, in conferencing for instance.
- 2.3 The study confirms that there is a large potential catchment audience for theatre in Taunton and scope for expanding the scale of theatre facilities, particularly in view of the planned growth in population. A theatre seating between 600 and 750 should be able to attract sufficient audiences to support a programme of professional and amateur work across the range of art forms.

A larger theatre, possibly seating in excess of 1,000, would need a different kind of operational model with a more commercial focus, and would still require substantial revenue funding. It would not meet the all of the aspirations of the stakeholders.

- 2.4 Taking into account the current lack of major capital funding sufficient to build a new theatre (which would be likely to cost in excess of £25m), the preferred option is for a phased re-development of the Brewhouse site, possibly retaining some existing facilities, but with the aim of creating, through phased developments, a larger main auditorium; enhanced exhibition and studio facilities; additional production and participatory facilities; more flexible spaces to support arts activity and accommodate meetings and other hired activities; and improved bar and catering facilities.

- 2.5 A masterplan would be created for the site through a design study, identifying the possible development phases. A key element of the proposed re-development is the maximisation of the commercial potential of the Brewhouse location. It is proposed that a new glazed atrium is added to the front of the Brewhouse, linking to a new riverside restaurant development and enveloping the existing Georgian building and also, possibly, the existing auditorium facade.
- This would create a spacious, light internal street and foyer area providing the Brewhouse with a greatly improved façade and circulation areas and Taunton with an iconic riverside destination which would become the town's natural meeting place and cultural destination. Leasing out commercial restaurant and catering units could generate between £100,000 and £175,000 per annum.
- 2.6 Other possible phases (to be examined in detail through the design study) are: the new 600 seat flexible auditorium with sizeable stage, orchestra pit, fly tower and backstage facilities; a new block on several storeys to accommodate the studio theatre and associated facilities, media centre and film theatre, rehearsal and production facilities, meeting rooms and improved administration, education and workshop facilities; and a new gallery with supporting facilities.
- 2.7 As Somerset's premier arts facility, the Brewhouse remains committed to playing a creative role in the County, known as an arts organisation, not just as a building, with a life outside its four walls promoting work and activities in other venues and forums through site-specific projects and work presented further afield. The Brewhouse keys into wider social and economic agendas and is working to redefine what an arts centre is, and how it brings audiences and artists together. Learning is at the heart of its work. This should remain.
- 2.8 The former Gaumont cinema, now a Mecca bingo hall, was assessed as a possible replacement building, but is considered inappropriate due to its scale and the architectural integrity of the listed interior which would limit the ability to break up the large central space. However, its large seating capacity, formerly 1725, added to the fact that it has a stage and fly tower, might make the venue attractive to a commercial operator (two expressed an interest in the building as a live venue). The current operators, Mecca, have no plans to re-locate and the capital investment needs of the building (estimated at £10m), and operator's re-location costs (£3.5m) do not make a development viable at the moment.
- 2.9 Research and consultation has indicated that there is very limited capital funding likely to be available in the near future for a major theatre project in Taunton, unless it was linked to another development such as the proposed new library, which should benefit from private sector funding. This consideration is critical in determining the most appropriate development approach and, would seem to rule out the possibility of a completely new facility in the foreseeable future.

It is also evident that future revenue funding is unlikely to increase significantly in the near future. Taunton Deane Borough Council has indicated

that it does not envisage any major revenue funding increases; Arts Council England will continue to consider supporting the venue with project grants, and has earmarked additional funding for investment in Somerset, but will not be in a position to consider revenue funding over the coming three-year period; and Somerset County Council has no specific plans to increase its funding. The preferred scheme must therefore address the venue's capacity to generate income from trading and other activities, as well as enhancing the venue's creative and presentational facilities.

It is estimated that, provided the proposed riverside commercial development is included within the scheme, new income would cover additional operating and programme expenditure, making it revenue neutral. However, future revenue needs would need to be addressed and agreed by the key stakeholders, in the context of the Arts Council funded *Thrive* programme, which is exploring new ways of working in the arts in Somerset and keying into broader social and economic agendas.

- 2.10 In order for the scheme to progress it is essential that it is adopted by Taunton Deane Borough Council as the premier objective of the cultural vision for the town. While it has been given a high priority with the ambitions of Project Taunton, this will need reinforcing within the Council's own economic, social and cultural priorities and in the broader context of the County's cultural aspirations, if it is to come to fruition.
- 2.11 An effective management arrangement will be essential in taking a scheme forward. The Brewhouse Theatre management board lacks capacity to undertake such a task on its own. Furthermore the nature of the scheme, its linkage into Project Taunton and Town Centre regeneration programme, and its importance to Taunton and the County's cultural development aspirations, mean that a partnership approach will be required.
- 2.12 It is recommended therefore that the Brewhouse scheme is taken forward as a key flagship development under the framework of a wider Taunton Cultural Partnership committed to driving forward an agreed cultural agenda for the Borough and involving all of the key partners. It is proposed that a Theatre Development Partnership Board be established with responsibility for taking the scheme forward and securing the capital investment required. The Partnership Board should consist of Taunton Deane Borough Council; Somerset County Council; the Brewhouse Theatre and Arts Centre; the Taunton Cultural Consortium; Project Taunton; and Arts Council England South West.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 The report gives clear and pragmatic answers to the key questions about the future role of the Brewhouse theatre. It does not give all the answers about how this can be brought to fruition, and in particular the answers to the funding issues. However, if all partners agree to this as the way forward it gives us an evidenced based platform from where to start. It is also clear from the report that it will need all partner organisations to sign up to this and to

work together if we are going to achieve the size and type of Theatre and Arts Centre that Taunton needs and deserves.

4. Recommendations

- 1 That the Executive approve the key recommendations in 2 and in particular:
- 2 The Executive will adopt this scheme as a priority within the Council's economic, social and cultural priorities.
- 3 the Executive authorise the Strategic Director to represent the Council on the Theatre Development Partnership Board, or its equivalent.

Joy Wishlade, Strategic Director
Tel. 01823 356403
Email: j.wishlade@tauntondeane.gov.uk