

UU Riverside Theatre	14th June 2016
To: Leisure and Development Committee For Decision	

Linkage to Council Strategy (2015-19)	
Strategic Theme	Resilient, Healthy & Engaged Communities
Outcome	Council will work to develop and promote stable and cohesive communities across the Borough
Lead Officer	Julie Welsh - Head of Community & Culture Margaret Edgar –Cultural Services Manager
Cost: (If applicable)	£107,500

The purpose of the report is to seek Council’s approval to review the legacy partnership arrangement with The Ulster University’s Riverside Theatre and provide options moving forward.

Background

The Riverside Theatre, owned and managed by the University of Ulster, has been operational from the 1977 and is the oldest professional theatre operating outside of Belfast. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland provided annual revenue funding for Riverside for over the first twenty five years of its operation, but withdrew this funding in 2007.

Current funding for the operation of the Riverside is provided via a shared arrangement with Council and supplemented by occasional grants for specific projects. The management of the Riverside Theatre is comprised of three representatives from the University and three from the Council (two Elected Members and one Officer), with an additional member of the committee from the University, the Provost, acting as chairperson.

Additional reviews

The legacy Coleraine Borough Council carried out a ‘value for money’ service review in 2011 which included consideration of the Riverside Theatre contribution in the context of service improvement and reliance on subsidy. The report stated that

‘Council contribution represents good value for money as it currently supports the running of a regionally significant theatre – which is an important component of the cultural offer’

Resources & Activities

There are currently 4.5 staff employed by Riverside including a Theatre manager, supported by 3.5 full time equivalent staff. For the financial year ended 31st July 2015, the Theatre reported funding of £248,100, surplus on core activity of £43,896 (£291,996), expenditure of £287,260, with a net surplus of £4,736. 69 productions were hosted within the Theatre in the 14/15 period.

For the period 2015/16, The University reported levels of activity which have been mapped against Council facility provision including Flowerfield, Roe Valley Arts & Cultural Centre, Ballymoney Arts:

Riverside Theatre

Description of activity	Number	% provision	Total
Public Events - ticketed & non ticketed	59	32%	
Exhibitions including launches.	5	12%	
Workshops /workshop participants	32/1190	21%/41%	
External Room Hire/no of participants	22/1611	11%/11%	

The Theatre & Council provision

Council currently uses three of its venues for the purposes of arts based activity. Riverside Theatre is owned and managed by the Ulster University and is located in Coleraine. Data showing service provision within Council is attached in **Annex A**. Riverside Theatre accounts for an average of 51% of the total number of arts centre based activities funded by Council through its own venues and through the funding it provides to the theatre. Similar activities are provided in terms of external hires, music events, drama, dance, talks and literary events, however Riverside has been specifically designed and marketed as the only operating professional theatre venue within the Borough, seating up to 360. The theatre can facilitate an orchestra pit in the centre of the auditorium, for up to twenty players.

The unique nature of the Riverside theatre facility is described by the University as *'The Riverside is unique, in a Northern Ireland context, by having both a totally variable stage and seating facility..... Overall, Riverside's main auditorium can be configured and used in up to six different ways - hence our claim to uniqueness in an NI context.'*

In contrast, Council's facilities are designed as multi- functional spaces and do not have the same capacity in terms of design and available formatting. Roe Valley Arts & Cultural Centre uses a 238 seat auditorium for a variety of activities, however its stage is limited in terms of capacity. Flowerfield has a 150 seater auditorium and specialises in musical provision. Ballymoney Town hall's auditorium is 350 capacity multi- function civic space with raised staging.

Contractual terms

In terms of Council involvement, records show the Council's contributions from March 2001 until December 2015 totalling £1,535,770.

Following the demise of Arts Council funding in 2007, a 'Cost Sharing Agreement' was put in place between Coleraine Borough Council and the University of Ulster in 2008. Each party agreed liability for 50% of the actual costs incurred by the 'joint initiative' up to a maximum amount per year, as stated within the contract. The agreement that had been in place was valid until 31st July 2011 (to reflect the University's accounting periods) with the recommendation to review and extend. No further agreement was drawn up following this period, however Council continued to fund at a rate of £115,000 pa, effective from August 2011 on a rolling basis.

In terms of the contract, Council's legal advisors have confirmed that although no current written agreement is in place, it would be reasonable for the University to expect the continuation of support until such times as notice to terminate existing arrangements is provided (with reasonable notice periods). Should Council wish to continue to support the

Theatre, an alternative service based contract would be put in place with deliverables associated with outputs and outcomes as contained within the Cultural Strategy.

Moving forward

Officers have carried out an initial assessment in terms of options moving forward for Council consideration. The indicative budget available for such activity for 2016/17 is £107,500, representing a cut of 6.5% reduction on the budget that had been in place since August 2011 by the legacy Council.

Option 1 – Retain the status quo

This options involves the continuation of a Cost Sharing agreement, in which Council is liable for 50% of the actual costs incurred by Riverside Theatre. This option would include the provision of a new agreement, for an agreed period with Council. Council is represented on the management grouping and working groups, however the Riverside continues to be in the ownership and overall management of the University. In terms of compliance with how Council supports external organisations, this includes the provision of resources to third parties under grant programmes or via commercial contract. There are no large scale cultural services grant programmes within Council that such a service of this scale could make application to. Discussion with Council's legal advisors have also advised that a service based contract is preferable to the current Cost sharing arrangement.

Option 2 – Continued support through a service contract with the University at £107,500, representing a cut of 6.5% reduction on the budget that had been in place since August 2011.

This option includes the provision of a service based contract, subject to annual review, through single tender action with the University as the sole provider, in order to manage the operation of the only professional/bespoke theatre venue, within the Borough. The contract would include the following key elements:

- The delivery of a range of music events, drama, dance, talks and literary events, including professional productions, schools' and educational productions and community/amateur presentations.
- Participation in joint programming working groups with Cultural Services staff to ensure alignment of provision across the Council area, ensure complementarity.
- Development of joint marketing materials to maximise the promotion of arts provision across the Borough.

Option 3 - Cease support

This option involves termination of the contract, with sufficient notice. The Riverside programmes up to 12 months in advance and therefore should Council wish to proceed with this option, it is recommended that sufficient resources are put in place to enable the provision of planned activity for those activities scheduled for the forthcoming season.

Recommendation

The Riverside Theatre has been operational from 1977 supporting both professional and community arts provision in the local area. It is the oldest professional theatre operating outside of Belfast and the only venue specifically designed to host large scale theatre activity within the Borough. In 2015/16 the theatre accounted for over 51% of the total arts centre based activities funded by Council, including internal Council activity and is therefore

contributes significantly to both the infrastructure and to the cultural product on offer. The recommendation to Council is to progress with Option 2, subject to a review after year 1.

Annex A

Baseline Audit of Cultural Services Activities in 2015/16

	Description of activity	No of Events	No of tickets sold
1	Public Events - ticketed & non ticketed		
	Ballymoney Arts	17	1487
	Flowerfield	40	2668
	RVACC	68	5997
	UU RIVERSIDE	59	10671
		184	20823

	Exhibitions including launches.	No of Exhibitions	No of visitors
3			
	Ballymoney Arts	5	
	Flowerfield	14	12,500
	RVACC	16	9300
	UU RIVERSIDE	5	
		40	21800

	Workshops	No of workshops	No of participants
4			
	Ballymoney Arts	51	682
	Flowerfield	33	346
	RVACC	33	712
	UU RIVERSIDE	32	1190
		149	2930

	External Room Hires	No of hires	No of sessions	No of participants
12				
	Flowerfield	118	182	2832
	RVACC	70	317	11500
	UU RIVERSIDE	22		1611
		188	499	14332