

'The future for community theatres is fizzing'

Jo Caird previews the Theatres Trust's upcoming annual conference later this month, set to focus on vital legal and practical issues that will impact hugely on local venues

It's been just over two years since the Localism Act (2011) came into force, but in the heat of the debate around arts funding in recent years, the potential of this crucially important piece of legislation has been left largely unexamined by the UK's theatre community. It's a state of affairs that the Theatres Trust's eighth annual conference, held at the City Varieties Music Hall in Leeds on April 28, will be seeking to rectify.

The trust, the UK's national advisory body for theatres, is this year bringing together delegates from across the country to discuss 'community theatres' – and the opportunities opened up by the various community rights enshrined in law by the Localism Act will make up a significant part of that discussion.

Sophie Michelena of Locality, a nationwide network of community-led organisations that advises on these issues, will introduce some of the measures available to community groups seeking to safeguard their local theatre buildings for the future. Representatives from the Little Theatre Guild, the Brampton Arts Centre and the Civic Group will also share their experiences of harnessing the new community-rights agenda. John Caldwell, the Civic Group's chair, will describe the "massively challenging experience" of taking over the running of the Civic Hall, a multi-use space in Stourport-on-Severn, outside Kidderminster, through a community asset transfer.

The Theatres Trust

"The structures and the forms of engagement we're moving towards are hybridised," says Stark. "The old dichotomies aren't helpful anymore."

Representatives from Doncaster's new performance venue Cast, the Hampshire-based touring company Forest Forge, Taunton's Tacchi-Morris Arts Centre and the Stockport Plaza Trust will then discuss their organisations' experiences of engaging with local communities, showcasing some of the different routes available.

One of the conference sessions will be dedicated to the issue of funding, with Peter Bazalgette speaking on the role of Arts Council England in funding community theatres and Ben Greener from the Heritage Lottery Fund introducing its new Heritage Enterprise capital grants.

Questions around the governance and ownership of community theatres will no doubt be raised here too, as Bill Graham, chair of the Clifton Community Arts Centre, describes the Midlands venue's efforts to fund-raise via a community share offer, a route open only to co-operatives and community benefit societies.

The day will conclude with a look to the future capital plans of four community theatres: the West Yorkshire Playhouse; North Yorkshire's Saltburn Arts; Ovalhouse in London;

“Because we were one of the first ones to go down this route, there’s no template, there’s no guideline,” Caldwell says. “We really hope that we can be used as an example – it can be achieved.”

Before delegates are introduced to the practical details of this legislation, however, the conference will seek to address the more fundamental issue of how we define ‘community theatres’ in the first place. Questions of who owns, runs and manages these spaces, whom they serve and in what way are all pertinent to the debate, as is the relationship between the professional and the amateur in these contexts.

In his keynote speech, Peter Stark, chair of the Voluntary Arts network, will touch upon this relationship, describing the increasingly important role played by “creative citizens” – locals who participate and organise local arts activities, some of whom may volunteer their time and expertise for free, some of whom may receive payment in some form.

and Paines Plough, whose Roundabout touring auditorium will enable the company to play in a wider range of community settings.

Deborah Bestwick, Ovalhouse’s director, will describe how the theatre’s planned new venue will be part of a new local authority-supported development – complete with housing, shops and enterprise organisations – that will “ensure that the complete needs of that community are met”.

“Lots of the things that are going to need to be discussed as society changes and comes under pressure are very much state-of-the-local-community as much as state-of-the-nation,” she says. “The future for theatres with a strong relationship to their locality and community is fizzing and crackling.”

For more on the Theatres Trust conference, www.theatrestrust.org.uk/events/conference-14/welcome.

*Jo Caird’s report from the conference will appear in the May 8 edition of *The Stage**