

News Release

Steering Group seeks views on future of Garrison Theatre

A major survey has been launched to gather the public's views on the future of the Garrison Theatre.

Earlier this year a steering group was formed, comprising representatives of regular users including Islesburgh Drama Group, Shetland County Drama Festival Committee, Open Door Drama and Shetland Country Music Club, as well as Shetland Charitable Trust, which owns the building, and Shetland Arts, who manage it.

The purpose of the group is to explore options for the 112-year-old theatre amid significant funding constraints.

It is due to report its initial findings to the boards of Shetland Charitable Trust and Shetland Arts in October.

The survey, which will inform this report, asks the public questions on a range of issues, including how important the theatre is to them; whether the programme of events caters for their tastes; if they would be prepared to pay higher prices to attend events; and whether they would be willing to volunteer to help out with productions.

Izzy Swanson, President of the Shetland Country Drama Festival Committee, said: "I would appeal to everyone to take a few moments to complete the survey about the Garrison, which to me and hopefully many others is a fundamental part of cultural life in Shetland.

“We have a shared pride in the theatre and all that we have been able to do on the stage, and now need to draw on that to maintain our strong tradition of drama.”

David Grieve, Vice President of Islesburgh Drama Group said: “There is no other space in Shetland with the backstage facilities and wing space to put on a major show – panto, musicals, bigger plays, so it’s vital that we find ways to keep the Garrison going.”

Bryan Peterson, Head of Creative Opportunities at Shetland Arts added: “A survey we carried out in 2015 highlighted that, together with continued support for youth drama activities, a well run, well maintained theatre space was the top priority for respondents.

“Financial pressures mean we are having to think how best to achieve that, and the steering group is hoping to be able to galvanise members of the community into helping us find a way forward. This survey is just the start of that process.”

The building was opened in 1904 as an army drill hall but was converted into a theatre in 1942. Repairs and refurbishment were carried out in 1989 and then again in 1995/6.

Activity in the theatre has reduced in recent years with film screenings moving to Mareel and a reduction in touring theatre productions coming to Shetland due to the high cost of travel and accommodation. Increasing operating and maintenance costs together with

decreasing public funding are also major challenges for the future.

Shetland Charitable Trust commissioned a recent report which indicated that the building is in relatively good condition with no major structural issues.

However, a building of this age requires significant ongoing maintenance, without taking into account refurbishments or improvements. The cost of operating the building is in excess of the hire and ticket income, and the balance is met from Shetland Arts' annual budget. Shetland Arts grant income from Shetland Charitable Trust will reduce from £695,000 in 2016-17 to £603,000 in 2019-20.

Hire charges are relatively cheap when compared to other similar theatres on the mainland. The Garrison works out at £240 per day to hire compared (including rehearsal time) to An Lanntair in Stornoway at £300 per day and the Gardyne Theatre in Dundee at £450 per day.

Usage of the building by local and national groups has remained fairly consistent for the past four years with an average of 36 events with 180 attendances at each, totalling an average of 6,480 attendances per year.

The Future of the Garrison Theatre online survey can be found at - www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/FutureGarrison

The results from the 2015 survey on the Future of Theatre in Shetland can be found at -

http://issuu.com/shetlandarts/docs/future_in_theatre_survey

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Garrison Theatre Steering Group

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