

**Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Subject: Final Report of the Bonington Theatre Working Group**

**Date: 25 April 2016**

**Author: Councillor Gary Gregory**

**Working Group Members: Councillors Gregory (Chair), Paling, Andrews and S Barnes**

**Members from the Gedling Youth Council: Ashlea Pringle, Florence Orchard, Miles Kirk.**

## **1. Purpose of the Report**

To present the final report and recommendations of the Bonington Theatre Scrutiny working group.

## **2. Background**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a working group to undertake a short scrutiny review to examine the Bonington Theatre's current offer and to consider what can be done to further develop the theatre into an established arts venue that the community values and uses. This review was not intended to provide a full detailed analysis of the management and administration of the theatre but had one principal aim: to explore the potential for increasing use of, and visits to, the theatre and to consider ways of improving community take up and participation.

The working group had two evidence gathering meetings and received briefings from the Service Manager Leisure, the Theatre Manager and Gedling Borough Council Communications Manager.

## **3. Findings**

The Bonington Theatre has a unique offer. It provides an alternative to theatres and cinemas in the city and is available for use by the community, for the community, providing a venue for a wide range of amateur and professional events. The theatre aims to provide a variety of arts and entertainment events encompassing many

aspects of performing arts and associated educational activity. The number of theatre productions, shows and events is increasing steadily year on year. It has forged strong community links and is used by local amateur and visiting theatre companies, the Nottingham Organ Society, theatre and dance schools and has a regular programme of jazz concerts. The theatre programme includes a range of productions attracting acclaim from audiences however, lack of profile and the need to attract new hirers and audiences, particularly of first time bookers, needs to be addressed. In the daytime the theatre is used for exercise classes provided by the leisure centre and attendance numbers are attributed to their statistics.

The theatre has a number of strengths; it is a well-equipped small scale theatre with a loyal customer base. However lack of profile in the local community and the challenges presented of raising awareness locally impacts on the use of and audience attendance at the theatre. There is a need to increase the profile of the theatre and the developing cinema programme particularly in Arnold, but also in the whole of the borough and wider; the question is how to do this.

Currently a brochure is published every six months encapsulating the theatre programme; this uses a similar format to that of the commercial theatres in Nottingham. The brochure promotes performances for organisations that hire the venue and is seen as a positive gesture for the groups who use the facility. The brochure is distributed to libraries and other venues in addition to being mailed out to over 2,000 people on the database. Members appreciated the quality, concept and production of the programme as a mechanism to establish the Bonington Theatre 'brand', emulating the marketing undertaken by the larger commercial venues, but were unsure if this was the most cost effective way of promoting the programme. Mailing the brochure out to people who had previously attended the theatre is an effective way to inform people who already are aware of the venue, but does little to inform new potential audiences. 'Keep Me Posted' emails are sent out fortnightly to people on the database and social media (Facebook and Twitter) are also used. The theatre has now registered its own web domain but issues around obtaining quality images provided by hirers or visiting artists presents problems. The website design is seen as satisfactory but the link to online booking is protracted and keeping the website up to date can present problems. Bookings can be made online but as the system is linked to the leisure centre computer booking system this is a lengthy process. This is currently under examination to see how it can be improved or whether an alternative system can be installed.

Members considered that a targeted marketing strategy needed to be developed which focused on new users with a particular emphasis on increasing the age range currently attending. Members learnt that attendance for both the theatre and the cinema is predominantly at the older end of the age spectrum. Publicity needs to be designed that appeals to younger age groups and the genre of films modified to appeal to specific age ranges, including children and young people. The best publicity is word of mouth and a free screening for young people to advertise the

venue and programme is currently being considered. Members thought that in order to increase the number of people attending the cinema age appropriate and special interest and themed films should be trialled, including those for mothers and preschool children. The use of family tickets, cinema parties relaxed performances and teen screenings could also be introduced. This is currently being addressed and the cinema programme reflects this; the summer schedule will include daytime children's film screenings. Members recognised that the Theatre Manager had limited time and inadequate resources to develop a comprehensive targeted strategy and members felt that this was an area that needed addressing if audiences were to grow and the input of more resources could in the long term lead to an increase in revenue. Additional leaflet distribution, targeted mail outs, improved website design and use of social media all require additional resources both monetary and in staff time and the theatre requires additional long term support to fully develop strategies if it is to increase its audience. Members suggested the production of a poster that could be displayed in a variety of locations could prove to be useful, and this could be distributed through a range of different channels including via schools using representatives from the Youth Council and by Members to groups and organisations they felt were appropriate. Members considered that it was important to establish the theatre's identity locally and suggested the use of free newspapers like the Calverton Echo, Neighbourhood News and NG5. Members concluded that although there were a number of channels currently used to advertise the theatre and cinema programme, consideration should be given to advertising in a range of local papers.

### **Recommendations**

- **An A4 poster displaying the cinema and theatre programme is produced monthly for distribution to local groups.**
- **The free cinema screening for young people is progressed.**
- **Use of local papers for advertising is fully explored.**

Installation of new cinema projection equipment has enabled the development of a new cinema programme comprising of current films and this also provides the potential for live broadcasts. The Theatre Manager worked diligently to get the cinema equipment installed and a programme developed and will continue to take other improvements forward and further develop a marketing plan. Timing, pricing and advertising of films were all considered when developing the cinema programme and at £5.00 for adults and £4.50 for concessions prices were very favourable when compared to commercial cinemas. The impetus for this programme came from the Theatre Manager and a great deal of effort was put into negotiating the rights with film distributors to screen current films. 25% of box office revenue has to be paid to film suppliers for use of the film and in the future there may be a possibility of additional income from film advertising. There is scope to show films on virtually all

non- theatre evenings as well as matinee screenings during school holidays. The success of this venture is dependent on the theatre's ability to attract audiences and ultimately this again rests on the success of the marketing and publicity strategy and the ability to target local people. There has already been a noticeable increase in cinema attendance and the success of the cinema programme has to be balanced with the need to maintain the theatre's community engagement role and remit to encourage and facilitate a range of arts performances. The two elements of the programme need to work together to promote and increase awareness of the venue's facilities and grow the audience. Increased use of the venue both in terms of theatre and cinema should in itself lead to an increase in revenue. This, however, has to be balanced with limitations on the staffing available and the need to employ additional staff or the development of an effective volunteer scheme to act as front of house staff. Members appreciated the improvements made to establish the theatre's unique offer and the work currently undertaken to create a vibrant and interesting cinema programme. They concluded that there is a limit to what can be done within the current budget and that additional investment would support the theatre to grow and establish a 'brand'.

### **Recommendation**

- **Revenue from increased ticket sales/hires and increased film screenings should be reinvested in publicity and marketing to reach a wider audience.**

One of the principal assets of the theatre is an experienced Theatre Manager, however currently because of staffing issues it is not always possible to make the best use of his skills and knowledge. The Theatre Manager has to undertake a multitude of roles, not just theatre management, but also day to day activities like selling programmes, making coffee and moving furniture, in addition to writing and creating a marketing strategy and developing a programme of performing arts. The reliance of the theatre on one member of staff is seen as a break on the progress of the theatre and there were concerns about the resilience of the theatre should he leave.

Limited staffing arrangements exist whereby technicians and bar staff are employed on a casual basis with additional support for the reception and box office provided by leisure centre staff, as a consequence this does not always present a professional and welcoming experience. Customer care training has been introduced across Leisure Services and recent staff changes should result in some improvement. There are no specific resources available for the staffing of the box office but every effort is made to do this before and after every show and film screening, recruitment of a casual box office assistant will ensure Saturday evenings are covered. The bar is open at times to complement and enhance the theatre experience. To further increase the 'brand' of the theatre, identification of theatre staff would be valuable.

Identification of theatre staff by the display of photos in reception and a uniform would assist with this.

### **Recommendation**

- **The theatre brand is reinforced by the identification of theatre staff.**

Whilst acknowledging the improvements made by the establishment of the Theatre Manager post Members considered that the staffing structure does not currently meet the needs of the venue, and that the specialised skills of the Theatre Manager are underutilised as he is required to undertake routine tasks to enable the theatre to open. The development of a team of volunteers to assist with some of these tasks freeing up some of the Theatre Manager's time would help, although to establish a scheme would again impinge on the manager's time. Members acknowledged the excellent work done by the Theatre Manager but concluded that his time could be better utilised using his specialist skills and knowledge rather than some of the more routine roles he has to undertake to ensure the theatre functions. To ensure that the best use of his expertise is identified appropriate staffing should be put in place and consideration should be given to securing an apprentice/intern student who could assist with the marketing, web and theatre management in addition to helping with the theatre's routine tasks.

### **Recommendations**

- **That a staffing structure be implemented that reflects the needs of the venue.**
- **The feasibility of appointing an apprentice or intern, particularly one with marketing, graphic design or social media skills, should be fully explored.**

There are a number of weaknesses which hold back the theatre's potential. The construction and configuration plus the location in the swimming pool building limit the capacity of the theatre to stage some productions. No lift facilities and lack of adequate dressing room space can deter potential hirers, and the absence of air conditioning can deter audiences in the summer months.

Members considered the location of the reception in the leisure centre needed to be more evident and publicity for forthcoming events more visible. Leisure centre reception staff require flyers to distribute and adequate information to help assist prospective customers. Posters in the reception displaying the theatre and cinema programme should be prominently sited and better use made of the screens in leisure centres and the Civic Centre. These issues are currently under consideration but the production of large scale ever-changing posters is expensive and there is a limit on the number of images that can be displayed on the digital screens. Issues relating to the positioning of the theatre entrance are currently being addressed by

the installation of new internal signage and modular displays by the front doors. New signage outside the theatre is currently being installed, and the exterior of the building which is poorly lit and has weed and litter problems is being monitored, improvements are planned. Increased use of the facility will inevitably in itself have a cost element. In order to maintain the equipment, fixtures and fittings to a standard that the public would expect from a local authority maintained venue requires continuous improvement and maintenance. The venue has to at the very least maintain its current standard particularly as it now faces competition for hirers of performing arts spaces available from academies.

### **Recommendation**

- **Additional external advertising is displayed particularly in the area around the leisure centre.**

Members appreciated the progress that has been made to raise the profile of the theatre and the new developments that the Theatre Manager is progressing. They acknowledge the new cinema programme, and developing marketing and publicity strategies will take time to mature but consider that the theatres future is being thoughtfully prepared and will be successful.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

1. **An A4 poster displaying the cinema and theatre programme is produced monthly for distribution to local groups.**
2. **The free cinema screening for young people is progressed.**
3. **Use of local papers for advertising is fully explored.**
4. **Revenue from increased ticket sales/hires and increased film screenings should be reinvested in publicity and marketing to reach a wider audience.**
5. **The theatre brand is reinforced by the identification of theatre staff**
6. **That a staffing structure be implemented that reflects the needs of the venue.**
7. **The feasibility of appointing an apprentice or intern, particularly one with marketing, graphic design or social media skills, should be fully explored.**
8. **Additional external advertising is displayed particularly in the area around the leisure centre.**

## **Overview and Scrutiny Review Scoping Report**

**Review Title:** The Bonington Theatre

**Chair of the review group:** Councillor Gary Gregory

**Working Group members:** Cllrs. S Barnes, M Paling and B Andrews.

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr. H Wheeler

**Director:**

**Lead Officer:** Helen Lee

**Reason for the review**

To evaluate the Bonington Theatres current offer and consider what can be done to further develop the theatre into a flagship arts venue that the community values and uses.

**Specific focus of the review**

Review the scope for further income generating activities, to examine ways of improving community engagement with the theatre, to assess the success of the current film programme, evaluate the 2015/16 Action Plan and the progress of the recruitment of casual and volunteer staff.

**What we hope to achieve?**

To make recommendations that impact on the use of and improve community engagement with the theatre.

**Information required from whom.**

Theatre Manager  
Service Manager  
Members of the Youth Council  
Communications  
Friends of the Bonington Theatre

**How we will get the information.**

Briefings from relevant officers and organisations

**Public Involvement.**

**Equalities issues.**

There should be no adverse effect on the groups which fall within the protected categories as defined in the Equalities Act 2010.

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Timescales for the review

Action		Date
Approval from O & S	The formal process prior to commencing the review	
Drafting the scoping document		10 November 2015
Meeting and evidence gathering meetings		19 <sup>th</sup> January 2016 23 March 2016
Drafting the recommendations and report		
Report to Overview Committee		25 April 2016
Report to Cabinet		
Response to Overview (within 28 days)		
Six month update		