

Scoping Document: Local Theatre Touring Alliance (formerly Theatres in Towns Initiative)

1. Executive Summary

Theatres in towns and smaller cities across the UK face a growing crisis. Disinvestment, rising costs, specialist skills shortages, ageing infrastructure, and inconsistent access to high-quality touring productions are all threatening the sustainability of vital venues. These theatres play a crucial role in their communities, enriching cultural life, bringing diverse groups together in a safe space, supporting local economies, and providing platforms for touring productions. If these challenges remain unaddressed, the consequences could be severe: theatre closures, the collapse of viable touring models, a reduction in audience engagement, challenges to community cohesion and the loss of skilled industry professionals.

This initiative seeks to tackle these challenges through collaboration, advocacy, and the development of new ways of working. By bringing together key stakeholders - including venues, production companies, policymakers, funders, trade associations, service organisations, and academics - we aim to secure the future of these essential cultural institutions. Our shared values of trust, transparency, collaboration, and respect will guide our efforts as we work towards a more viable, diverse, and resilient touring sector.

Through a series of meetings, engaged organisations have begun identifying practical solutions to the issues facing mid-scale theatres. We invite all those who share our values and concerns to contribute to this urgent and vital initiative.

2. Background and Context

The Problem

Theatres in towns and smaller cities face multiple interconnected challenges, including:

- **Disinvestment:** Ongoing cuts in public funding have left many theatres financially vulnerable.
- **Rising costs:** Increased operational expenses, including energy costs and artist fees, are making it harder for theatres to remain viable.
- **Lack of access to high-quality productions:** Touring models are increasingly unsustainable, limiting theatres' ability to present work that consistently attracts audiences.
- **Skills shortages:** Recruitment and retention challenges in key technical, managerial, and artistic roles are undermining capacity.

- **Ageing infrastructure:** Many buildings require urgent maintenance and upgrades but lack the necessary investment.
- **Inability to sustain audiences:** Without regular access to compelling productions, audience engagement is declining, threatening long-term viability.
- **Squeezed resources for civic role:** Many venues find it increasingly difficult to fund learning and participation programmes and other community engagement work.
- **Uncertainty and change:** while the political landscape varies around the UK, in some areas planned devolution and restructuring of local government brings both threats and potential opportunities for theatres in towns and smaller cities.

The Impact

If these challenges are not addressed, the repercussions will be significant:

- A diminished cultural life in towns and smaller cities.
- Closure of theatres, removing a vital civic and social amenity.
- Further decline in viable touring models, reducing opportunities for both venues and production companies.
- Negative impact on the evening economy, affecting hospitality and local businesses.
- A reduction in the talent pipeline of emerging creatives and other theatre professionals.
- Reduced contribution to the quality of life of local communities and reduced community cohesion.
- Loss of industry talent as professionals leave the sector for more stable employment.

3. Objectives

The initiative aims to:

- Improve the financial sustainability of theatres in towns and smaller cities.
- Foster collaboration between venues, producers, policymakers, and funders.
- Champion new ways of working, including innovative touring and business models.
- Advocate for policy changes that support mid-scale venues and touring.

- Enhance audience engagement, ensuring theatre remains relevant and accessible.

We are not looking to reinvent the wheel or duplicate efforts already underway elsewhere and have no aspirations to develop a membership organisation or any other kind of industry body. Instead, this initiative seeks to build on existing knowledge, collaborate with aligned efforts, and adapt proven solutions to the specific challenges faced by theatres in towns and smaller cities across the UK.

While our commitment is strong, our resources are limited. We will establish an achievable number of SMART outcomes for the programme. These may include:

- Development of new, collaborative touring models.
- Identification of new funding opportunities to sustain venues and productions.
- Stabilisation and growth of venues, ensuring they remain secure and thriving.
- A diverse and resilient touring sector, supporting a range of artistic work.
- Growth in audience numbers and frequency of attendance.

4. Scope

Focus Areas:

- **Theatres:** Professionally managed venues that present touring productions with seating capacities of 300-800 (or that programme productions that are being presented by other venues of this size).
- **Geography:** Towns and smaller cities across the UK, outside the major metropolitan centres.
- **Stakeholders:**
 - Venues and venue operators.
 - Production companies and touring organisations.
 - Policymakers and arts funders.
 - Trade associations and service organisations.
 - Academics and researchers studying cultural policy and audience development.

All stakeholders who share the initiative's values are welcome to participate.

5. Key Values

Key themes at the inaugural meeting of the initiative included the need to build on successful existing and past initiatives in the sector and to ensure that venues and producers could work together productively and sustainably to further the aims of the initiative.

Four values were identified as being critical to the success of the initiative:

- **Trust:** A commitment to open and honest dialogue.
- **Transparency:** Sharing information and decision-making processes.
- **Collaboration:** Working together to create long-term solutions.
- **Respect:** Valuing the contributions of all stakeholders.

6. Key Activities

To achieve its objectives, the initiative will undertake the following activities:

- **Workshops and knowledge-sharing sessions:** Bringing together stakeholders to exchange ideas and best practices.
- **Pilot programmes:** Testing new models for collaboration, touring, and funding.
- **Communications and public awareness campaigns:** Raising the profile of the issues and solutions.
- **Advocacy and policy engagement:** We will support existing industry bodies to effectively work with policymakers to influence funding and arts strategy.

7. Governance and Structure

The initiative will explore governance models. It aims to work with and support existing sector organisations.

Decision-making and communication structures will be developed in consultation with participating organisations.

Working groups will be established to drive each of the Key Activities as well as monitoring and evaluation.

Blackpool Grand will be managing the mailing list, with Data Culture Change supporting as a data processor to ensure everything runs smoothly.

8. Funding and Resources

Funding will be sought from a range of sources, including:

- **Arts grants**
- **Sponsorship**
- **Partnerships** with key industry stakeholders.
- **Contributions from participating organisations** (cash or in-kind support).
- **Academic research funding**, where applicable.

Resource needs include both financial contributions and in-kind support, such as staff time, expertise, and venue space for meetings and events.

9. Timeline

- **November 2024:** Inaugural meeting
- **January 2025:** Follow-up virtual meeting to refine scope and next steps.
- **February 2025:** Agreement on the initiative's structure, formation of working groups, and prioritisation of key actions.
- **Q2 2025:** Launch of a pilot programme testing new approaches to touring and venue financial sustainability.

10. Evaluation and Monitoring

A system for ongoing monitoring and adaptation will be developed to ensure the initiative remains responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities.

A number of measures will be agreed to track progress and impact. These may include:

- The number of participating organisations and engagement levels.
- The number of venue closures (with the goal of minimising or preventing them).
- The success of collaborative touring models in expanding the range of available productions.
- Growth in sector confidence and resilience.
- Audience trends, with a focus on increasing attendance and engagement.
- Trends in balance of programming (one-nighters, split weeks, weekly runs).

11. Call to Action

To build on this work, stakeholders are encouraged to:

- **Provide input** on priority areas and next steps.
- Commit time to **working groups** to help shape and deliver specific actions.
- **Offer resources** (financial or in-kind) to support the initiative.

To stay engaged, participants can:

- **Join the initiative's mailing list** for updates and opportunities.
- **Attend regular Zoom meetings** to discuss progress.
- **Participate in online themed events** focusing on key challenges and solutions.

12. Contact Information

For further details or to get involved, please contact:

theatresintowns@blackpoolgrand.co.uk

Public version 1.6. 24 April 2025