



27th July 2023

Dear Sirs

Colchester City Centre Masterplan Response from Headgate Theatre

This is a response to the Masterplan Consultation, submitted by the deadline of 31 July 2023.

The Headgate has not been aware of any previous opportunity to participate and would request that we are included in appropriate consultations as the proposals are developed further, including the development and implementation of the Cultural Strategy.

The Headgate is strongly supportive of the ambition, direction and positive drive of the Masterplan proposals but has some points that we wish to register in response.

What the Headgate is and what it does for the community in Colchester City centre

The Headgate is administered by Theatre Arts Action Trust, a registered charity founded in 2002 and supported by Colchester City Council. It is volunteer run and led, with a very small, part-time, paid staff. Although a small theatre (max seating capacity 85), we have two associated studio and rehearsal spaces.

During 2022 (our last full year for data post covid) The Headgate

- Hosted 97 different productions or events in our auditorium, giving 262 performances attended by 10, 628 patrons, and involving 5 local amateur performing groups as well as other hires.
- Expanded the youth drama group established in the previous autumn, which went on to win the North Essex Theatre Guild award for Best Production

- Organised termly drama based workshops for older people, regularly attended by 69 different participants
- Hosted ballet classes provided movement sessions for older people, regularly attended by 64 different participants
- Worked in partnership with 5 schools (primary and secondary) to host or support events involving 245 young people
- Held lectures associated with productions
- Accommodated 46 musicians with disability from Colne Endeavour Band and supported them in celebrating their 50 year anniversary
- Worked collaboratively with the Colchester Fringe organisers since the inception of the event in 2021. In 2022, we hosted 17 Fringe productions with an associated footfall of 1,650 people, and apart from The Mercury, acted as ticket agency for the Fringe organisers. This is separate to the figures quoted above.
- Provided space for hire to accommodate two well-being or dance classes generating approximately 7,390 attendances
- Hosted team workshop days for CBC and other local organisations.

Given the amount of high quality performances and theatre-related activity consistently delivered through the Headgate, by and for local people over twenty years, we feel that our buildings should be marked on the map on page 18 of the Masterplan showing Creative and cultural facilities. Please address this.

How The Masterplan will affect the Headgate

The Headgate Theatre lies within the Masterplan area on the north side of Southway. It occupies 12 and 14 Chapel Street North; 14 is a Listed building. The Headgate is directly and positively affected by the Masterplan proposals, in particular the proposals for Southway and St John's Street:

Page 70 points:

2. At-grade signalled pedestrian and cycle crossings between Chapel Street North and South. This could include removing the turn lanes for vehicles turning into Chapel Street South, increasing footway width.

3. Improvement to public realm outside Headgate Theatre and up to St John's Street.

9. St John's multistorey and ground floor retail: Upgrade to form best-in-class parking facility with attractive entrances and street frontage allowing 24 / 7 secure and attractive access for all. Reallocate space, including ground floor units, to include micromobility hire; car club spaces; electric car charging; drop-off and pick-up; parcel pickup; waiting areas for delivery drivers.

Together, when implemented, these proposals will hopefully transform the public realm around the Headgate, making it welcoming, accessible to all, safe and attractive. Inside, our buildings are accessible to people with disabilities; but outside the approach is a barrier. Level access is down the side of the theatre by a side door because the pavement needs to be altered to enable ramped access to the main entrance.

At present the Headgate is at the far end of a depressing, run-down cul de sac, with roadway and pavements in poor condition. There is no cycle parking and access for cyclists is difficult. There is no designated disabled parking for our patrons or users. The open waste management area associated with the Playhouse is visually off-putting and encourages inappropriate use/fly tipping. After dark, we worry about young and vulnerable older people approaching the Headgate.

The closure of St John's car park from 7pm is a serious deterrent to our audiences, particularly older and disabled patrons. All this has a severe adverse effect on delivery of our work, and achieving our aim to be more inclusive of people with particular needs.

Request from the Headgate/ Theatre Arts Action Trust

1. We ask that the improvement of the public realm outside the Headgate up to St John's Street is given high priority as a "quick win" for the Masterplan.
2. Improvements to St John's car park and the proposed pedestrian crossing linking Chapel Street North and South are also very important to us.
3. We would welcome a visit from Councillors and Officers from the City and the County to see our work and the difference implementation of the Masterplan will have on the Headgate and to include us in any further progression of the Cultural Strategy.

We wish the Masterplan well.

Yours sincerely,

Ben Wills

Ben Wills (Chair, Trustees)
On behalf of The Headgate Theatre

The Headgate Theatre is administered by Theatre Arts Action Trust
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Registered in England and Wales – Company Number 3737107 – Charity Number 1076399