

# Policy Committee

13 April 2026



**Reading**  
Borough Council  
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<b>Title</b>	Hexagon Theatre
<b>Purpose of the report</b>	To make a key decision
<b>Report status</b>	Public report
<b>Executive Director/ Statutory Officer Commissioning Report</b>	Emma Gee
<b>Report author</b>	Donna Pentelow
<b>Lead Councillor</b>	Cllr Adele Barnett Ward, Lead Councillor for Leisure & Culture
<b>Council priority</b>	Secure Reading's economic & cultural success
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. If the Arts Council England bid is successful for £2,068,000 of grant funding with match funding of £230,500, that Committee grants spend approval and delegates authority to the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services in consultation with the Director of Legal &amp; Governance and the Director of Finance to enter into all necessary contracts to deliver the outputs of the bid.</li><li>2. If the Arts Council England grant is unsuccessful, that Committee provide spend approval for £564,000 to replace the arena and stall seating at the Hexagon and delegate authority to the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services in consultation with the Director of Legal &amp; Governance and the Director of Finance to enter into all necessary contracts to supply and install new arena and stall seating in the Hexagon main auditorium.</li></ol>

## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Council has applied to Arts Council England's (ACE) Creative Foundations Fund for £2,068,000 of grant funding with match funding of £230,500 being provided by the Council (consisting of: £109,000 in-kind contribution, £71,500 fundraising and £50,000 capital funding). The bid seeks funding to make improvements to the Hexagon Theatre seating, drainage, fire stopping and fire door remedial works.
- 1.2. If successful, the Director of Culture, Leisure and Skills will accept the grant offer and, the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services in consultation with the Director of Legal and Governance and the Director of Finance, progress the procurement and enter into the necessary contracts to carry out the works.
- 1.3. In order to coordinate these works with those of the Studio Theatre and the extended summer closure of the Hexagon in summer 2026 a decision is required in the event the Council's grant application is unsuccessful. Arts Council England (ACE) expect to have made a decision by 31 March 2026.

- 1.4. This report seeks approval for a capital supplementary budget of £564,000 to be approved in the event of the Arts Council England (ACE) bid being unsuccessful to replace the stall and arena seating in the Hexagon Theatre's main auditorium and for the costs of this investment to be met through revenue savings of £18,800 per year.
- 1.5. If the ACE grant is unsuccessful, the scope of the seating improvements would be reduced to only the basic arena and stalls seating. This is due to cost and timing as the replacement of the arena and stall seating can be completed in summer 2026.
- 1.6. If unsuccessful with the ACE bid, the drainage, fire stopping and fire door remedial work remain unfunded and will either require funding through existing budgets or require a Capital Bid submitted via the usual budget setting process.
- 1.7. If agreed, work to replace the arena and stall seating will take place in summer 2026 and coincide with the extended summer closure that has been programmed to facilitate the studio theatre works. The revenue impacts of the extended summer closure have already been factored into the budget planning process.
- 1.8. General Fund capital programme schemes are usually only be added to or removed from the Capital Programme as part of the annual budget setting process. Schemes that arise during the year may be added to the Capital Programme with Policy Committee approval if:
  - The scheme is fully funded by grants or contributions, or
  - The Chief Finance Officer confirms that the expenditure is affordable.
- 1.9. In this instance, the Director of Finance has confirmed that revenue savings will be generated to fund the capital financing costs of the scheme.

## **2. Policy Context**

- 2.1. The Hexagon is Reading's cultural flagship venue, the largest in the region, welcoming over 150,000 visitors annually and hosting more than 160 performances and 80 community events. It plays a central role in Reading's cultural life, driving footfall, supporting the local economy, and providing a vital platform for community engagement. The venue is currently undergoing transformation, supported by a funded decarbonisation programme and a multi-million Levelling Up Fund award to deliver a new studio theatre. Together, these projects will create a multi-space arts campus at the heart of a broader regeneration scheme.
- 2.2. The original 50-year-old retractable seating system is obsolete, requiring intensive manual operation and ongoing maintenance. The deteriorating concrete base means the seats are increasingly unstable, with over 400 complaints annually citing discomfort, poor accessibility, and inadequate sightlines - posing a risk to audience retention and future income.
- 2.3. On 23 July 2025, Capital Programme Board approved the submission of an expression of interest (EOI) to the Arts Council England (ACE) Creative Foundations Fund.
- 2.4. Aims of ACE Creative Foundations Fund:
  - increase the economic sustainability of cultural and creative organisations through improving existing cultural buildings and equipment;
  - decrease the risk and financial impact of abandoned or cancelled performances, exhibitions, or events caused by equipment or infrastructure failure;
  - grow audience engagement and access by underserved communities to high-quality creative work and cultural infrastructure.
- 2.5. The bid matches the aims of the funding and is focused on improvements to the Hexagon Theatre seating, drainage, fire stopping and fire door remedial works.

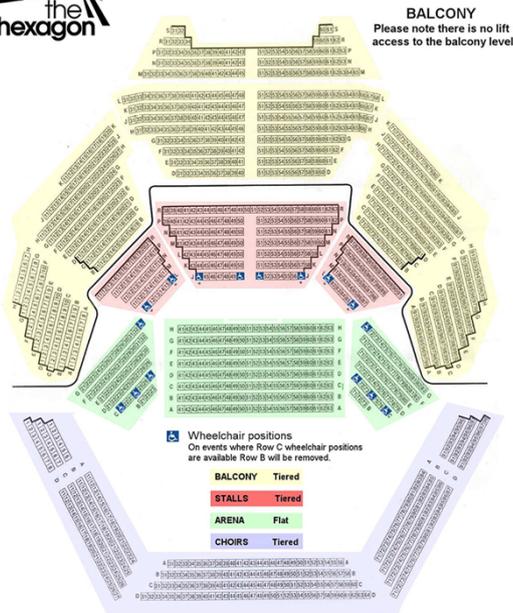
- 2.6. The Council has applied to Arts Council England's Creative Foundations Fund for £2,068,000 ACE of grant funding with match funding of £230,500 being provided by the Council (consisting of: £109,000 in-kind contribution, £71,500 fundraising and £50,000 capital funding).
- 2.7. The EOI was accepted by ACE on 27 August 2025, and a more detailed bid was submitted by 27 October 2025 deadline. The bid passed the initial ACE review with a final decision now awaited by 31 March 2026.

### **3. The Proposal**

- 3.1. If the ACE grant is successful, officers will implement the works as outlined in the bid submission.
- 3.2. If the ACE grant is unsuccessful, then an alternative funding route is required for the seating improvements. Without immediate investment in these essential infrastructure elements, the Hexagon is at risk of becoming non-operational—undermining substantial public investment and the venue's position as a cultural anchor in Reading's regeneration strategy. These seats are the most critical as the ageing seating and associated infrastructure failures are generating significant and escalating reactive maintenance costs, including:
  - £15,173 in emergency and reactive repairs (2024/25) (welding/ professional recovering / repairs to seats)
  - Ongoing emergency interventions to maintain safe operation
  - Increasing difficulty sourcing spare parts for obsolete systems – retractable system original to the 1970s venue
- 3.3. The failing seating system places substantial additional burden on technical, facilities, and front-of-house teams, resulting in:
  - £15,800 in additional staffing costs (2024/25) due to reactive measures
  - Increased manual handling requirements
  - Greater risk of staff fatigue and operational error
- 3.4. It's proposed, if the ACE grant is unsuccessful, that the seating improvements would be limited to the arena and stalls seating (highlighted green and red in the image below). This is due to cost and timing as the replacement of the arena and stall seating can be completed in summer 2026. Replacing the balcony seats is a far larger and costly project due to the significant redecoration and re-instatement required as the balcony seats are fixed into the concrete floor. The arena and stalls seating (514) represent less than half the total seats available (1,200), but they are the most used, being on sale for all seated shows.



## THE HEXAGON SEATING PLAN



- 3.5. It's proposed that the funding would be on condition of the Hexagon meeting the annual revenue impacts of the capital borrowing costs for the works from reduced expenditure on maintenance of the current ageing and failing seat system.
- 3.6. If agreed, the replacement of the seating would take place summer 2026 to coincide with the summer shutdown period. By aligning this with the ongoing Studio Theatre build, economies of scale can be achieved through shared design teams, contractors, and delivery timelines—ensuring efficiency and value for money.
- 3.7. If the decision was delayed until the Arts Council grant outcome is known, the opportunity to carry out the works and coincide with the summer shut down will be lost. There will be delays to the contract extension and placing orders for the manufacture of the seats, which have a long lead in time. This would mean having to delay the reopening of the theatre in September 2026 and the loss of associated income. Or it would mean having to delay the works until summer 2027 resulting in an extended closure with associated revenue implications that have not been planned for and new procurement requirements as the studio theatre works will have been completed.
- 3.8. These options have been considered and dismissed due to their financial implications.
- 3.9. The fire door and fire stopping works are estimated at £500,000 and are currently unfunded. If the ACE grant is unsuccessful, a capital bid will need to be submitted via the usual budget setting process or the works funded via existing budgets, to ensure the mandatory, statutory compliance works are carried out.

## 4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28. These priorities are:
  - Promote more equal communities in Reading;
  - Secure Reading's economic and cultural success;
  - Deliver a sustainable and healthy environment and reduce our carbon footprint;
  - Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children;
  - Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future.
- 4.2. In delivering these priorities, we will be guided by the following set of principles:
  - Putting residents first;
  - Building on strong foundations;
  - Recognising, respecting, and nurturing all our diverse communities;

- Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents;
  - Being proudly ambitious for Reading.
- 4.3. Full details of the Council Plan and the projects which will deliver these priorities are published on the Council's website - [Council plan - Reading Borough Council](#). These priorities and the Council Plan demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.
- 4.4. This proposal contributes towards the Council Plan priority to Secure Reading's economic and cultural success. The poor and deteriorating quality and comfort of the seats at the Hexagon regularly feature in customer feedback. Replacing the stalls and arena seating will contribute towards an improved customer experience and contribute towards the sustainability of the Hexagon.

## **5. Environmental and Climate Implications**

- 5.1. The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 5.2. There is a net nil impact on the environment and climate of this proposal. The old seats may be suitable for resale; however, they are end of life. The new seats should result in less energy being used as they will be less prone to failure.

## **6. Community Engagement**

- 6.1. Formal consultation is not required. However, over 400 complaints are received annually about the seats citing discomfort, poor accessibility, and inadequate sightlines posing a risk to audience retention and future income.

## **7. Equality Implications**

- 7.1. Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
  - Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
  - Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

- 7.2. The improved seating in the arena and stalls will provide improved accessibility for customers who are less mobile.

## **8. Other Relevant Considerations**

- 8.1. The new seating layout design will be added to the on-line booking system and require the theatre team to contact customers who have booked seats in the arena and stalls area for shows on sale to inform them of the new seating positions. Any e tickets/ tickets will need to be reissued where seat and row numbers have changed. Promoters / producers will need to be informed of any changes to seated capacity.

## **9. Legal Implications**

- 9.1. If the ACE bid is successful, the Director for Culture, in consultation with the Director of Finance, is authorised under paragraph 8.3.1 of the Council's Financial Procedure Rules to accept the bid and notify the next meeting of the Housing, Neighbourhood and Leisure Committee of this action.
- 9.2. A detailed procurement method statement was submitted as part of the ACE bid which was approved by senior officers at Capital Programme Board. This will be through an extension of the existing studio theatre construction contract using the direct award procurement model. This approach enables continuity of service and cost efficiency, whilst maintaining value for money, and maintaining compliance with the original

contract terms and the Council's governance framework. The original studio theatre works contract was competitively tendered, with a robust quality assurance and governance regime to support tender and supplier selection.

## **10. Financial Implications**

- 10.1. The estimated cost of replacing the arena and stall seating is £564,000. Replacing the seats provides value for money through reducing the annual spend in maintenance of the failing seating. In 2024/25 this cost £15,700 in reactive maintenance and repair and a further £15,800 in additional staffing costs.
- 10.2. The estimated asset life is 30 years given the current seating system is original to the theatre which was built in 1977. The annual MRP is estimated at £18,800 and can be covered through reduced expenditure on reactive repairs and maintenance at the Hexagon to eliminate the increase to the Council's Borrowing costs.

## **11. Timetable for Implementation**

- 11.1. The indicative timetable for implementation is below.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Key Milestones</b>
April	Council accept ACE grant or Policy Decision to approve alternate funding for seating improvements.
May	Seating works RIBA stage 4 technical design Contract extension agreed Seating orders placed for arena & stalls seating
August	Seating work starts
September	Seating work complete
27 September 2026	Hexagon reopens for Autumn programme

## **12. Background Papers**

- 12.1. There are none.