



Title	Studio Theatre at the Hexagon
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report status	Public report
Executive Director/ Statutory Officer Commissioning Report	Emma Gee, Executive Director Economic Growth & Neighbourhood Services
Report author	John Luther, Artistic Director. Donna Pentelow, Assistant Director of Culture
Lead Councillor	Cllr Adele Barnett-Ward
Council priority	Secure Reading's economic & cultural success
Recommendations	To note the progress of the new Studio Theatre at the Hexagon, scheduled to open in spring 2027.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Work is progressing in earnest on the new Studio Theatre at the Hexagon in accordance with the construction programme. The Studio Theatre is expected to open to the public in spring 2027.
- 1.2. Over the summer, the back of house was demolished and a new temporary back of house was installed. Work is happening to provide a new kitchen that will serve the Hexagon as well as the Studio Theatre, and this is anticipated to open in autumn this year.
- 1.3. The operational and business planning to programme the Hexagon and Studio Theatre from 2027 as complementary venues will start in the coming months.
- 1.4. The proposed Studio Theatre will be state of the art and is anticipated to provide a circa 200 seat flexible theatre (circa 300 standing) with step free access, accessible toilets on all floors, hearing loops, bar and catering facilities. The Studio Theatre will be easily accessible from town centre transport links, offering a better customer experience and an improved operational environment for visiting companies, with state of the art facilities and logistics.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. At Policy Committee on 11 July 2022, the Council approved its vision for the “*Culture and Community at Minster Quarter*” and resolved to submit a bid to Round 2 of the Levelling Up Fund (LUF).
- 2.2. The vision was to regenerate the Minster Quarter area into ‘a high quality, sustainable and inclusive location that has Reading people, businesses and arts, culture, and community at its heart. The regeneration will offer new opportunities for urban living and create a new urban quarter which offers a mix of tenures alongside a commercial, arts and cultural offer that will re-invigorate the public realm and breathe new life into this historic quarter of the town.’

- 2.3. The LUF bid "*Culture and Community at Minster Quarter*" focused on the cultural regeneration of the Minster Quarter and Bridge Street area through the: provision of discovery and learning in an accessible and central location in Reading; investment in the enhancement of the cultural offer at the Hexagon Theatre through the provision of a new studio theatre (the subject of this report); and, the provision of a new library which will be located in the current Civic Offices site in Bridge Street.
- 2.4. The LUF bid was submitted in July 2022 and confirmation of the award of funding was received in January 2023. In February 2023, Policy Committee approved the LUF budget for the Hexagon Studio Theatre project.
- 2.5. The bid highlighted the economic, social and cultural benefits of having a studio theatre attached to the Hexagon. Throughout the latter design stages additional benefits were identified including redesigning the back of house and main theatre "get in" for shows off the IDR to provide better access to the Hexagon for articulated vehicles; and, providing level step free access to The Hexagon from the podium of Queens Walk, improving both access to and visibility of the Hexagon, thus benefitting audiences that currently find access difficult.
- 2.6. The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28, one of which is to Secure Reading's economic and cultural success. Delivering the new Studio Theatre at the Hexagon aims to deliver against this priority.

3. The Studio Theatre at the Hexagon

Planning and Procurement

- 3.1. Following the award of funding in January 2023, work began to appoint a multi-disciplinary team. In July 2023 Equals Consulting were appointed as project managers and Haworth Tomkins as Lead Architect.
- 3.2. Planning consent was achieved in March 2024. In summer 2024 it became apparent that the approved plans were not deliverable due to significantly increased costs associated with materials and inflation. As a result, the plans were revisited and the revised plans for the Studio Theatre and community space were approved by the planning applications committee in January 2025.
- 3.3. Procurement for a new contractor happened in spring 2025 and, in early summer, Feltham Construction Ltd were appointed as the main contractor. During August 2025 once the Hexagon closed for its annual summer recess, the back of house was demolished to make way for the new studio theatre. Temporary back of house units were installed to provide backstage facilities for visiting artists. Work also started on building a new kitchen to serve both the Hexagon and Studio Theatre and will open in the autumn. Throughout the build, the Hexagon will remain open and fully operational. The new Studio Theatre is anticipated to open to the public in spring 2027.

Outputs and Design

- 3.4. The design and location of the Studio Theatre will provide:
 - easy access from the town centre transport links with better customer experience and an improved operational environment for visiting companies, with state of the art facilities and improved logistics
 - circa 200 seat flexible theatre (circa 300 standing) with step free access, accessible toilets on all floors, hearing loops, bar and catering facilities.
 - connectivity to The Hexagon and with the footfall that provides in the central location of Reading will deliver a strategic objective of the Council of being a key cultural anchor of the Broad St Mall and Minster Quarter developments as well as the town centre.

- improved backstage facilities for performers and crews; and, an upgraded technical area and entrance, which is geared towards and expected to attract quality productions of all sizes. There will be an accessible entrance via Queen's Walk into the Studio Theatre adjacent to the Hexagon.
- a spacious foyer with a bar and an outside area for visitors to enjoy; and, designed to be flexible, the foyer will transform into a rehearsal and community space when performances are not scheduled, offering an alternative space in the local arts scene.

Programme

- 3.5. As part of the funding bid, the Studio Theatre programme will be circa 70% professional and circa 30% amateur/community, focussed on touring programme, live music, comedy, professional theatre, spoken word (talks/book launches etc) amateur theatre/music, schools' events and local arts and community groups.
- 3.6. Access is at the heart of the Studio Theatre, and the Council is keen to continue working with disabled and neurodivergent artists and audiences, who would benefit from the accessible WCs and accessible spaces and seating. The Studio Theatre design provides this opportunity with accessible space to stage work by and for under-represented groups. It also provides the opportunity to and builds on successful collaborations with local and national organisations such as Make/Sense Theatre, the Younger People With Dementia Harmony Choir (for people living with Dementia and their loved ones) and Frozen Light, who stage multi-sensory theatre for audiences with profound and multiple learning disabilities.
- 3.7. The new Studio Theatre at the Hexagon will provide more wheelchair positions at both seating levels, accessible toilets both front and back of house, and a hearing loop. Parking is available nearby at public car parks as well as dedicated disabled parking spaces and drop off.
- 3.8. The Hexagon currently suffers from lack of break out and rehearsal spaces for larger events and conferences, the linkage between the two auditoriums enables a more flexible campus for both spaces to take advantage of increased and improved bar, back of house and foyer spaces. With access to a larger space including the main Hexagon building, there is also the opportunity to explore more collaborations with other creative organisations in Reading.

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. This proposal supports the Council plan priority to Secure Reading's economic and cultural success. The new Studio Theatre will complement the Hexagon to create a brand new cultural campus at the heart of the Minster Quarter Central development.
- 4.4. 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.

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. As part of the planning process a detailed sustainability statement was completed. The new Studio theatre has been designed to Breeam Excellent standards. The scheme incorporates a decarbonisation initiative to deliver ground source heat pumps, in place of gas boilers, to reduce carbon emissions and operating costs of both the existing Hexagon and new studio theatre.

6. Community Engagement

- 6.1. Community engagement and communication about the new Studio Theatre is on going with customers, promoters and hirers. Consultation was carried out to inform the funding bid submission and formal consultation was carried out as part of the planning process.
- 6.2. In the survey distributed to all ticket bookers, we requested feedback on the proposed plans, including comments regarding the Studio Theatre. The overall sentiment is overwhelmingly positive. Almost every response supports the plans, with many saying it's long overdue, much needed, and great for Reading. There is a strong sense of excitement and anticipation.
- 6.3. In preparation for the opening of the new Studio Theatre communication and engagement with members, promoters, hirers and stakeholders will take place to provide information about the Studio Theatre and to promote the new programme. This will happen from January 2026 and will continue until the studio theatre opens in 2027, when engagement will form part of the business as usual activity.

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. As part of the planning process a detailed access statement was submitted to planning committee for consideration. There are no Equality Implications arising from this report.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1. As an information only report there are no legal implications arising.
- 8.2. Principal Lawyer for Regeneration has cleared these Legal Implications.

9. Financial Implications

- 9.1. As an information only report there are no financial implications arising.

- 9.2. The total cost of the scheme including the new studio theatre and ground source heat pump scheme is £19.4m, of which £13.5m is funded through external grants.
- 9.3. From 27/28, the revenue implications of the new Studio Theatre have been built into the Council's financial planning process.
- 9.4. The Major Project Accountant of the Council has cleared these Financial Implications.

10. Timetable for Implementation

- 10.1. The build of the Studio Theatre is progressing well. The table below shows the projected major milestones over the coming 18 months.

New temporary back of house in use and main theatre reopens.	Sept 25
Engagement with promoters, members, customers and hirers.	Ongoing
New kitchen opens	November 2025
Theatre main build	October 2025 – December 2027
Commissioning of the studio theatre	January 2027
Studio Theatre opens	Spring 2027.

11. Background Papers

- 11.1. There are none.