



Outline Strategic Plan 2022-26

The Acorn Theatre

*A life enhancing, vibrant, creative centre for live arts in
Penzance, West Cornwall and beyond.*

THE ACORN

The Cornwall Theatre Company

Overview

The Acorn's Mission is

To provide a diverse range of live performance arts that are exciting, inspiring, of high quality for local people at affordable prices and, in so doing, support and encourage the development of local artistic talent in people of all ages”.

The Cornwall Theatre Company is a registered charity whose overall charitable objective is to promote and advance education and the arts. It owns and runs the Acorn Theatre in central Penzance. It plays a major role in the local community, through its provision of live events, volunteering, and is an attraction for visitors to the area from all over the UK. It makes a significant contribution to Cornwall's growing reputation as a high-class cultural locality.

Over the next four years, the Acorn will focus its attention on re-securing its financial position after Covid, hosting exciting live arts events and establishing a sustainable and creative staff team, including its volunteers and Board of Trustees. A major focus will be to increase paid staff time to support administration, community outreach projects and house management.

Recent History

In 2019, the Acorn, a former Methodist chapel, celebrated 50 years as a theatre. Our vice chair, Claire Belsham, drafted a booklet which we published charting the theatre's course over the years. During that time, the Acorn has had several different incarnations, from amateur playhouse to a stage for music from around the world, and its popularity waxed and waned. Today, as a professionally run receiving house with an eclectic programming strategy, it has more people coming through our doors than ever before.

In 2016, the Acorn was teetering on the edge of non-viability. Three years of deficits had wiped out the reserves, leaving around £5k in the bank, while putting on only 80 events a year and with the theatre and equipment in pressing need of refurbishment.

The new Board set to work with clarity of purpose and determination, raising grant funding, increasing the number of events hosted and generally spreading the word. In 2017-18, we appointed a new manager, with a business background.

By 2019, the last full year of trading before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Acorn theatre was in the middle of an incremental refurbishment programme and hosted 185 events making a surplus of over £20k to begin to rebuild reserves. It was rapidly evolving into a robust and profitable charitable organisation, thanks to our excellent theatre manager, a large group of Volunteers, support from Cornwall and Penzance Town Councils and a strategic partnership with an external fundraiser.

There was, of course, still plenty of room for growth and improvement, but we found ourselves in a strong position. In particular, we had:

- a large, varied and profitable programme of events
- a good local reputation with strong local support
- a highly successful Christmas Panto co-production
- a committed group of enthusiastic volunteers
- a stable board of trustees, with some skills gaps
- a PR and marketing strategy in development
- a range of regular classes for local people offering opportunities for learning and participation

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Then, along came Covid. During the two years of the pandemic the Theatre was forced to close as the nation went into a series of Lockdowns over the next two years. Our short-term strategy switched into survival and securing the charity's future. We had two specific goals:

- i. To secure capital and revenue grants to continue the refurbishment, now including ventilation and air filtration systems.
- ii. To open the theatre and programme events, within the strict public health guidelines for client safety, whenever we were allowed to do so. Although we knew that we would not cover our costs operating at 45% capacity, we did so as a service to local people and performers to improve morale during extremely difficult times.

Our excellent theatre manager was central to this success, but as our success grew, it has become clear that we need more paid staff to create greater sustainability and resilience and to further our ambitions.

As a result of the pandemic, the theatre faced a huge challenge. However, through the securing of grants, led by our fundraising strategic partner, Two Green Magpies, and local support we have survived well and emerged in good shape. We were able to retain our staff and volunteers, maintain a reasonable level of financial reserves and improve the fabric of the building.

Post pandemic?

With Covid now endemic, the Acorn faces continuing challenges due to the continuing instability caused by the virus and economic uncertainty in the UK. However, during

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these times, we feel that it is more important than ever to have a vibrant community theatre which offers life enhancing experiences for local people and visitors alike.

And so, we move forward having learned from our previous achievements and challenges, facing the future with optimism and confidence in our ability as a team – staff, volunteers and trustees.

This document is the result of a staff and trustees awayday in October 2021.

It sets out our priorities and will shape our work into 2026. It reflects our views on our vision for the charity in the context of the current challenges being faced by live performance venues and community organisations around the UK.

The strategy describes how we will:

- secure the continued success of The Acorn
- develop its role further in our community
- respond to the challenges and new opportunities as they emerge.

Increased post-covid challenges on small arts venues, together with a tough economic environment means that we will need to

- be innovative
- work with other organisations in the community
- support local artists
- build on our reputation and standing
- secure greater and varied financial support.

Six Strategic Objectives

These strategic objectives will determine our programme of work and priorities over the next five years. They will provide a framework by which we can judge our success. Each goal is supported by a series of outcomes measures which specify the changes we want to see.

1. As a receiving house, produce and deliver a varied, dynamic and vibrant programme of events that people want to come and see and to get involved with.
2. Achieve & maintain financial stability again post Covid
3. Maintain & extend a flexible, sustainable and resilient staff team

4. Develop strong branding and a wider approach to fundraising (see Fundraising Strategy)
5. When objectives 1 to 3 are achieved, secure funding to establish an 'Acorn Awenek' arm, for community-arts projects in partnership with others,
6. Maintain and improve our building, facilities and infrastructure. embracing digital technology as appropriate

Objective 1 - A Varied Programme of Events

Key Actions

- Effective Event Programming by the Theatre Manager within the Broad parameters set by the Board, e.g., 35% Cornish performers; maximum 70% of events being music; etc
- Promoting the space for after school activities and adult classes/workshops
- Greater engagement with audience, creating ways to reward loyalty and Friends
- Networking by board and staff members to promote greater visibility for the public as well as an increased local presence in Penzance.
- Developing and extending our youth engagement programme

Outcome Measures

- Number of sell out / 80%+ attendance events
- Retention and growth of our current audience demographic
- Increase in the number of people under 40 visiting the events.
- The implementation of a young people's engagement programme
- Increasing number of class attendees
- Growing demographic and geographic diversity of our audiences

Objective 2 - Financial Stability

Key Actions

- Continued forecasting of income & expenditure based on programmed events, reviewing at Board and intervening as necessary.
- Reviewing our cost base regularly in relation to income

- Create a realistic balance between artists that draw an audience and so create profit and support for emerging local talent.
- Continued Use of Two Green Magpies to source and apply for grants and additional revenue streams/opportunities
- Building business sponsorship and legacy programme
- Securing continued support from Cornwall & Penzance Councils
- Occasional use of community funding (Crowdfunder) for specific projects
- Securing support for specific arts projects (including Acorn Awenek) from the Arts Council et al.
- Exploring the opportunities that digital media present for creating value, (whether generating income or strengthening key relationships)

Outcome Measures

- Monthly surpluses of income over costs
- Healthy bank balances with reserves of c£30,000
- The growing success of Fundraising Strategy as it is implemented
- The number of successful bids for grant funding made by Two Green Magpies

Objective 3 – A resilient workforce

Key Actions

- Sourcing the funding to employ a Theatre Administrator
- A Trustees' skills assessment and gap analysis
- Continued recruitment of volunteers and of suitably skilled Trustees
- Actively building a harmonious and supportive culture with healthy challenge
- Building team rapport with regular Volunteer Meetings and hosting occasional gatherings with volunteers and Trustees
- Creating a management review programme
- Annual away day

- Regular review of the strategic plan and annual business priorities at board meetings

Outcome Measures

- Good teamwork and smooth running of the theatre
- A strong, diverse and effective Board of Trustees
- The comfortable coverage of house management and bar staff for all events.
- More volunteers coming forward for events than we need.

Objective 4 – A strong brand

Key Actions

- Maximise use of social media
- Highlight the number of Cornish acts that we showcase
- Appointment of a Trustee with marketing and branding experience who can share their expertise.
- Ensuring we have a presence on appropriate and significant committees/projects within our locality; not only to participate but also promote and support.

Outcome Measures

- Increased audience numbers, class participants and supporters.
- Increase of a positive reputation
- Increased presence in the town.
- Increased invites onto relevant community projects

Objective 5 – Acorn Awenek

Key Actions:

- Targeted networking with artistic partners and community groups to develop a project proposal
- Securing ACE grants to take forward projects

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Outcome Measures

- The successful participation in community projects
- The employment of a part time / fixed-term worker(s) to manage the project(s)

Objective 6 - Facilities & Infrastructure

Key Actions

- Establishing a Maintenance Programme, which includes a prioritised list of building and equipment improvements for fundraising
- Planning ahead where possible, to source funding, grants, etc for improvements and projects
- Improve the space in ways that develop revenue including digital/technical equipment.
- Ensuring the safety and comfort of patrons
- Ensuring the safety and welfare of staff and performers
- Upgrading technical equipment when replacement is required

Outcome Measures

- Re-opening the refurbished Cabaret Bar after flooding (insurance claim)
- Improvements undertaken from maintenance and refurbishments schedule
- Excellent customer & performer feedback
- No complaints incidents / near misses

General Strategic Risks & Challenges (see Risk Register for mitigations and monitoring)

- Reduced audience numbers because of wider economic problems
- Staffing shortages due to lack of financial resources
- Less available funding and grants
- Money and support going elsewhere e.g., Town Centre Redevelopment.
- Too few Trustees and volunteers

- Destabilisation by Covid - cancellations, staff sickness, etc
- Cost of Accommodation in Penzance area for touring performers
- Environmental concerns?
- Poor PR / marketing

The Strategic Staircase

