

## Report to CABINET

# Investing in a New Theatre for Oldham

### Portfolio Holder:

Councillor Amanda Chadderton, Leader of Oldham Council and portfolio holder for Regeneration and Housing

### Officer Contact:

Emma Barton, Executive Director, Place and Economic Growth  
Katrina Stephens, Director of Public Health (with responsibility for Culture)  
Shelley Kipling, Assistant Chief Executive

**27 February 2023**

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### Reason for Decision

Oldham Council is committed to the delivery of a new theatre in Oldham Town Centre.

The planned new theatre building was successful in gaining Towns Deal funding from central government in June 2021 and work has progressed significantly with detailed plans well advanced. It is proposed that the new theatre be progressed through a further consultation ahead of submitting a planning application, and funding arrangements confirmed, including the use of Towns Deal.

Alongside this, Oldham has been offered access to £1.845 million of Arts Council funding to provide performance, arts and culture across the borough over the next three-years. In order to access this funding, Oldham Council has a requirement to indicate its acceptance of this funding and to recommit to the development of a new theatre for the borough.

### Recommendations

Cabinet are asked to:

- Formally approve Oldham Council's intention to accept £1.845 million Arts Council England funding to provide cultural activity for the borough for the years 2023-2026
- Recommit to the development of a new theatre for Oldham, and approve funding arrangements and progression of the new theatre on Union Street to planning stage.

**Investing in a new theatre for Oldham****1 Background - the need for a new theatre**

- 1.1 Oldham Coliseum began as a circus on Henshaw Street dating back to 1885, known then as the Colosseum. Built in 1887, the current theatre building based on Fairbottom Street, off Yorkshire Street, in Oldham Town Centre, had been used as a music hall and a cinema, before reopening in 1938, as the Oldham Repertory Theatre. The Oldham Rep lasted until 1978 when it was reconstituted as the Oldham Coliseum Theatre.
- 1.2 The current Fairbottom Street building, the adjacent office building and car park are leased by the Coliseum from the Council on a rent-free arrangement.
- 1.3 In 2012 Oldham Council invested £2 million into the Fairbottom Street theatre, upgrading audience areas, replacing seating, improving heating and updating ventilation. However, even with this level of investment, both the Coliseum Board and Management Team, and Oldham Council agreed that the current building could not meet the long-term needs of the theatre: it's performers, staff and its audiences deserved better.
- 1.4 Problems with accessibility, a lack of quality back-stage and front of house facilities and a growing list of maintenance issues common to old buildings were evident (including asbestos and lack of provision for disabled performers and visitors). A full building survey, undertaken at the time (2012), gave the building a ten-year lifespan.
- 1.5 The scale of the issues found and Oldham Coliseum's requirement for better facilities meant that renovating, refurbishing, repurposing or re-investing in the building was not possible. In addition, the size and topography of the site meant that rebuilding on the current site would be restrictive and very expensive as a result. In 2012, both Oldham Coliseum and Oldham Council agreed that a new theatre building on a new site was required.
- 1.6 Since this time, the Council has continued to undertake and pay for structural maintenance required to the building (c.£20k per year for the last ten years) as the internal maintenance, repairs and building H&S compliance falls to the Coliseum management team for up-keep.
- 1.7 With the ongoing issues with the building itself, work has continued between Oldham Council, Arts Council England and Oldham Coliseum Board and management team (three organisations also referenced as "the partnership" in this report) to find and create a new home for the Coliseum, and a new space for arts and performance in the town.
- 1.8 Over the last ten years, the partnership has developed plans for two different theatre projects, but challenges of design and layout, plus the need for a sustainable business model for the Coliseum as the future operator of the site, have meant these projects were not deliverable.
- 1.9 However, the development of a new theatre has remained a priority given the acknowledged issues with the current building, and this agreed approach with the partnership was central in the development of Oldham's Cultural Strategy which recognised how important arts and performance were to the town and the wider area.
- 1.10 In 2019/20 Oldham Council, the Arts Council and Oldham Coliseum (the partnership) jointly reviewed options once again for a new theatre – existing site and others in the town

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centre - and bringing back-to-life the heritage buildings (the Old Post Office and former Quaker Meeting House) on Union Street was the preferred location / site. This site is at the heart of Oldham's growing cultural quarter, close to Oldham Gallery and Library and next door to the Old Library, which is currently being redeveloped following consultation with local communities and feedback to bring empty heritage buildings back into use as part of the Council's Creating a Better Place Strategy.

- 1.11 Linked to the new Cultural Strategy for Oldham, in August 2020 the ongoing partnership between the Coliseum, Arts Council England and Oldham Council saw the development of a new performance venue. **The Oldham Making Space for Live Performance Feasibility report** and **Making Space Vision** provided the basis for the current project design and subsequent successful application for a Towns Fund grant to support the delivery of this important new building.
- 1.12 In late 2022, following some issues with the walls at the back of the stage, a further full building survey was commissioned. This survey, completed in January 2023, found that the building needed numerous urgent health and safety compliance works. The Coliseum have been given this report (appended to Part B report) and they have been asked to urgently action the works to ensure compliance while the doors are open till the end of March. This survey confirms the conclusion of the 2012 survey that the building is beyond its expected lifespan.
- 1.13 The plan, agreed by all parties, and acknowledging the life-span of the current building was always that Oldham Coliseum would leave the Fairbottom Street theatre building. However, the Coliseum would continue to perform in a range of different venues across the borough – building new audiences in anticipation and readiness for the new theatre opening in 2025/26.

## **2 A new theatre for Oldham**

- 2.1 The proposals in this report are for a new £24.5 million theatre at the Union Street site: they have been developed by the partnership to provide a modern, accessible venue for audiences from Oldham and beyond.
- 2.2 The new theatre will provide a more modern, accessible venue for performers and audiences from Oldham and beyond. The proposals include a new 300-350 seat auditorium and more intimate 120 seat studio for performance space, together with enhanced back-stage facilities, additional education, event and rehearsal space and better front-of house facilities including bar and café areas, for audiences to enjoy. The new theatre will revitalize Oldham's cultural offer and create additional jobs, both in the venue and from the surrounding area.
- 2.3 The space is being designed, not only as a home for Oldham Coliseum, but for use by other local arts and community organisations for both local and visiting audiences. The plans are at an advanced stage and have been developed by members of the current Oldham Coliseum Board and other cultural organisations with support from the Arts Council.
- 2.4 Research and dialogue with external theatre specialists has confirmed that a producing theatre can be successful in the proposed new theatre for Oldham, with a new business model, as there are many examples of other producing theatres that have been used as a benchmark - such as Contact Theatre (300), Stockport Garrick (151), Bolton Octagon (300-390), Hope Mill Theatre (120), Watermill Theatre (220), Southwark Playhouse (310), Hampstead Theatre (325).

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- 2.5 In summer 2021, Oldham was successful in gaining a £24.4 million Towns Deal funding bid to fund four key development projects across the town. £6 million of this funding was allocated to support the delivery of Oldham’s new theatre on top of the Council’s capital funding commitment. To meet the requirements of the Town Deal funding and to meet our proposed opening date, work on the theatre must progress to planning stage by Summer 2023: subject to Cabinet approval, the project is on track to meet this requirement.
- 2.6 The new theatre plans were shared as part of the Big Town Centre consultation event and following feedback from the Coliseum, Arts Council, wider culture partners in the borough, and importantly with views from local residents and communities, partners and local businesses, the design team have progressed work on the proposals and the current plans are appended to this document.
- 2.7 Subject to Cabinet approving the recommendations in this report, the next stage of the theatre project involves further consultation on the emerging plans to help inform and shape the planning application due for submission in Summer. This pre-planning application consultation activity will take place to share the plans for the new theatre with local communities, partners, and performing arts stakeholders. The plans will also be shared with other external specialists to ensure the plans and proposals have continued due diligence and alignment with producing theatre requirements.

### **3 Oldham Coliseum Theatre (the Organisation)**

- 3.1 The Oldham Coliseum has benefited from Arts Council funding as one of its National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) over a number of years. This funding accounts for around a third of their income alongside grants from other organisations and revenue from their successful productions.
- 3.2 Oldham Coliseum is provided with annual cultural funding from Oldham Council of £138,000 per year. Alongside this the Coliseum is also provided with rent-free use of the current theatre building, office space and car park: they also lease separate storage facilities from the Council. In addition, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has provided annual funding to Oldham Coliseum of c.£100,000 per year through the GM Culture Fund (2020-23).
- 3.3 In 2022 the Oldham Coliseum submitted a bid to retain its National Portfolio Organisation status and funding for the period 2023-2026. In November 2022, the Arts Council announced that this bid had been unsuccessful deeming it ‘high risk’ and referencing concerns about the theatre’s financial management, leadership and governance.
- 3.4 Following the Arts Council funding announcements in November, the Chief Executive of Oldham Coliseum left the organisation and, shortly after, the Chair of the Board resigned followed by the Vice-Chair. Chris Lawson, previously the Coliseum’s Artistic Director, stepped up as Interim Chief Executive and an Interim Chair and Vice-Chair were appointed to the Board.
- 3.5 Oldham Council have worked with the Arts Council since November to support the Coliseum as they worked to make changes to their programme, their organisation and sought to meet the challenges they were facing. Unfortunately, in February 2023, acknowledging the significant financial challenges they were facing, Oldham Coliseum announced its intention to close its doors stating “the current financial situation is not sustainable for the running of a full-time theatre”.

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## **4 Arts Council Funding for Oldham**

- 4.1 Despite being unable to include the Oldham Coliseum among its National Portfolio organisations, the Arts Council, acknowledging both Oldham's designation as a levelling up place for culture and our commitment to investing in new cultural offers for the town, have ringfenced £1.845 million over three years to support the delivery of local arts and culture.
- 4.2 In November 2022, at the time that the outcome of the Coliseum's funding bid was announced, Oldham Council were informed by the Arts Council that this ringfenced funding would be made available. Since then, the Arts Council have provided further information on the purpose and means of access for these funds, including that the funding must be used to:
- Engage with communities and stakeholders in the development and delivery of a new theatre for Oldham
  - Develop an appropriate leadership and governance structure for the new theatre
  - Create a programme of performance that tests new approaches to programming, creative learning, talent development and audience development
  - Meet the outcomes and principles of the Arts Council's 'Let's Create' strategy
- 4.3 To access this funding, Oldham Council has been asked by the Arts Council to provide a detailed plan for its proposed programme of activity and confirmation that the council intends to progress with plans for the new theatre.

## **5 The future for the Oldham Coliseum**

- 5.1 Oldham's new theatre was always intended to be the future home of the Oldham Coliseum with work already underway to develop a new operating and production model for the new theatre. The Council and Arts Council remain confident in the ability to form a strong operating and business model for a producing theatre without the Coliseum should that be required.
- 5.2 The timings for the new theatre continue to be supported by the Arts Council and the Coliseum, and it was always the plan for the Coliseum to move out of its current home (in line with the expected life-span of the Fairbottom Street site) and to produce and perform works elsewhere in other venues across the borough, and wider areas, for a period while the new theatre was built. This would allow them to continue providing art for local audiences and, importantly, build new audiences in anticipation and readiness for the new theatre.
- 5.3 As part of these discussions, and, recognising the love and loyalty that theatre goers have for the Oldham Coliseum name and history, Oldham Council are continuing conversations with the Coliseum Board to try and retain some of the artistic legacy.

## **6 Options/Alternatives**

- 6.1 Cabinet members may recall being formally briefed on the different options considered over the past decade, with a summary included earlier in this report, relating to:
- The future of the Coliseum building;
  - The location, size, and requirements for a theatre building in Oldham;
  - The funding arrangements and receipt of external grant support (Council Capital Strategy and Town Deal); and
  - The emerging business case and detailed project plans (Town Deal).

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- 6.2 Cabinet members are asked to approve the recommendations in this report, noting requirements for existing maintenance works to the current building(s), planning activity for the ACE funding allocation, and project delivery timelines, and budgets for the new theatre as set out earlier in this report.

## **7 Consultation**

- 7.1 Extensive consultation has taken place throughout the development of the new theatre space including the community consultation in the town centre, with youth voices, and with disability groups as part of the Big Town Centre Conversation. Further dedicated consultations and engagements took place with communities and local businesses, linked to the requirements of the Towns Fund application process.
- 7.2 Consultation and engagement work took place with stakeholders, partners, Council teams and services, elected members, public sector organisations and different voices from our local communities to help define the ambitions for the new theatre.
- 7.3 Portfolio Holders have been consulted on the feasibility work and development of the design. Both staff and elected members have been engaged throughout this process to allow ideas and suggestions to be fed into the preferred solutions.
- 7.4 Ongoing dialogue continues with both the Coliseum Board and Management Team and Arts Council England.
- 7.5 Further consultation and engagement will take place in conjunction with standard practice for project development / planning application considerations as proposed earlier in this report.
- 7.6 Key stakeholder have provided the following statements in direct support of the proposals in this report:

### **7.6.1 Chris Lawson, Interim Chief Executive of Oldham Coliseum Theatre**

*“We continue to support the development of a new theatre for Oldham, which we had hoped could be a new home for Oldham Coliseum. Oldham deserves a good quality theatre that produces and presents new work for local and visiting audiences. The current theatre building does not offer the space or facilities needed for a modern theatre.*”

*“ We also welcome Oldham Council’s proposal to accept the Arts Council’s ringfenced funding for the town. While we remain disappointed that this funding could not be given to the Coliseum to continue our work directly, we know how much performance means to local people and support the need for ongoing investment in the arts while a new theatre is developed.*”

*“We continue to hope that there is a place in Oldham for the Coliseum and that we can find a way to remain part of Oldham’s cultural offer while overcoming our current challenges.”*

### **7.6.2 Arts Council England**

*“Arts Council England is committed to continued investment for culture in Oldham, which hugely benefits the local community. We’ve ringfenced £1.845 million for the town so that people don’t miss out on creative activities.*”



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*“We are working constructively with Oldham Council on how this investment should be used to support the future of performing arts in Oldham and we are fully supporting plans for a performance space for the town.*

*“We have earmarked our £1.845 million investment against a proposal which we are expecting Oldham Council to develop which will be for a programme of theatre and talent development for communities right across the borough over the next three years, to make sure that there is still a strong cultural programme. That will go in tandem with the Council’s plans to develop the new performance space.*

*“We invested some money to develop a vision for the new performance space and we are working hand-in-hand with the Council to ensure that this new space, which will be comfortable both for modern audiences and for performers, really gives a strong future for theatre in the town”.*

**7.7.3 Fiona Gasper, Independent Chair of Performance Space Partnership Board -**  
(previously Joint CEO of the Royal Exchange Theatre and Director of Transition for Manchester International Festival with responsibility for building the capacity of the company to move into The Factory, including its operational readiness)

*“The Partnership Board has met regularly since the beginning of 2020. It’s purpose is to bring together the key partners involved in funding, planning, and delivering the new performance space to enable the collective overview and understanding needed to monitor and support the progress of key strategic workstreams. These include funding and delivery of the capital project and business planning including operational readiness. It also provides a forum to drive the project forward by facilitating debate allowing for consensual decision making where required.*

*“Key partners are Oldham Council, Arts Council England, and the Coliseum and more recently representatives of locally based arts organisations with a stake in the development of the new performance space have also been attending: these include Oldham Theatre Workshop and Peshkar.*

*“The main business of each Partnership board has focused on updating partners on key developments of the capital project and its funding (led by Oldham Council) and Business planning and operational readiness (led by the Coliseum), ensuring that the new performance space will be fit for purpose.”*

**8 Financial Implications**

8.1 Financial comments are provided in the part B report. (James Postle, Finance Manager)

**9 Legal Services Comments**

9.1 Legal comments are provided in the part B report. (Rebecca Boyle, Group Solicitor)

**8. Co-operative Agenda**

8.1 A new theatre in Oldham’s Cultural Quarter will help improve Oldham’s cultural offer, attract more people to the town centre and create training and employment opportunities, which are key priorities in both the Corporate and Oldham Plan  
(Mahmuda Khanom, Policy Support Officer).

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9 **Human Resources Comments**

9.1 No HR implications. (Catherine Pearson, Strategic HR Lead)

10 **Risk Assessments**

10.1 Legal comments are provided in the part B report. (Mark Stenson, Assistant Director)

11 **IT Implications**

11.1 None applicable

12 **Property Implications**

12.1 Property comments are within the body of this report, with further details within the part b report. (Katy Webster – Assistant Director for Property and Projects)

13 **Procurement Implications**

13.1 Procurement comments are provided in the part B report. (Dan Cheetham, Procurement)

14 **Environmental and Health & Safety Implications**

14.1 Env Health comments are provided in the part B report. (Neil Crabtree – Head of Public Protection)

15 **Equality, community cohesion and crime implications**

15.1 None

16 **Equality Impact Assessment Completed?**

16.1 There has been a detailed Equality Impact Assessment completed for the Creating a Better Place programme. This will be reviewed and the new Council EIA applied once planning approval is obtained, to inform the next stage of design and the operational business model.

17 **Key Decision**

17.1 Yes

18 **Key Decision Reference**

18.1 In response to the public announcements from Oldham Coliseum Theatre, and the support from the local communities – the Council has fast-tracked this report for urgent consideration under Rule 14 the Constitution Access to information Procedure Rules, following sought agreement by the Chair of the Policy, Overview and Scrutiny Committee



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19     **Background Papers**

19.1   None

20     **Appendices**

      A: Layout Plans

**APPENDIX A: Layout Plans for New Theatre**  
*(Images provided by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios)*

**Feilden  
Clegg  
Bradley  
Studios**



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EXTERNAL VISUAL  
UNION STREET MAIN ENTRANCE



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## THE AUDITORIUM

