

*Creating a flagship cultural venue
for the arts and entertainment
in Yeovil, Somerset -*

The Octagon Theatre



Creating Somerset's Flagship Arts Venue

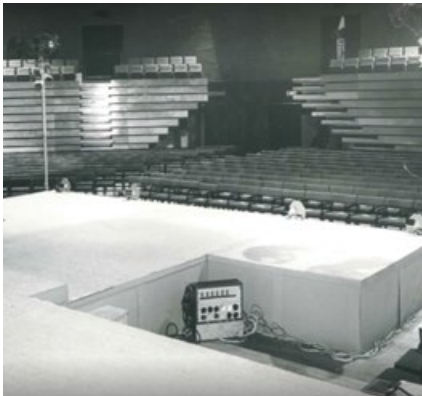
We are delighted to share with you an update on the redevelopment plans for the Octagon Theatre that will see the current building transformed into a flagship venue for the arts and entertainment. This project will transform the theatre into a creative hub that will ensure residents across Somerset can enjoy amazing performances and opportunities to benefit from the creative arts and attract visitors from outside of Somerset to visit our beautiful county.

The Octagon Theatre closed at the end of April 2023 for invasive survey works to take place ahead of a planned £29m development of the theatre. Sadly, and just weeks away from construction work due to begin, the project was deemed “unviable” due to inflation impacting borrowing and the construction industry by Somerset Council who had also declared a “financial emergency” at the new unitary

authority. Yeovil Town Council arranged a public meeting on the future of the theatre with members voting to support the development of the Octagon Theatre. Working in partnership with Somerset Council, Yeovil Town Council voted to offer, in principle, capital funding to the development of the Octagon Theatre to secure the venues future for the town and to seek to keep the £10m of government funding for the development. We are pleased to share with you our plans, vision and ambitions for this exciting development that will help to secure the future of the Octagon Theatre for generations to come.



Images from our history - The Octagon Theatre opened as The Johnson Hall in 1974.



“The Octagon Theatre has played a hugely important role in the life of Yeovil Town for 50 years. Many of our residents have grown up with visits to the Octagon being an important part of their lives and at key milestones through their life from their first visit, trips with school and with family, performing with local groups, graduation and seeing their favourite performers come to the town. The Octagon brings people from the surrounding area into our town, providing an economic boost for our businesses and being a place that bring us together for great entertainment. The town is proud of our Octagon Theatre and it is vital for Yeovil.”

Cllr Andy Soughton, Leader of Yeovil Town Council



The stage is set...

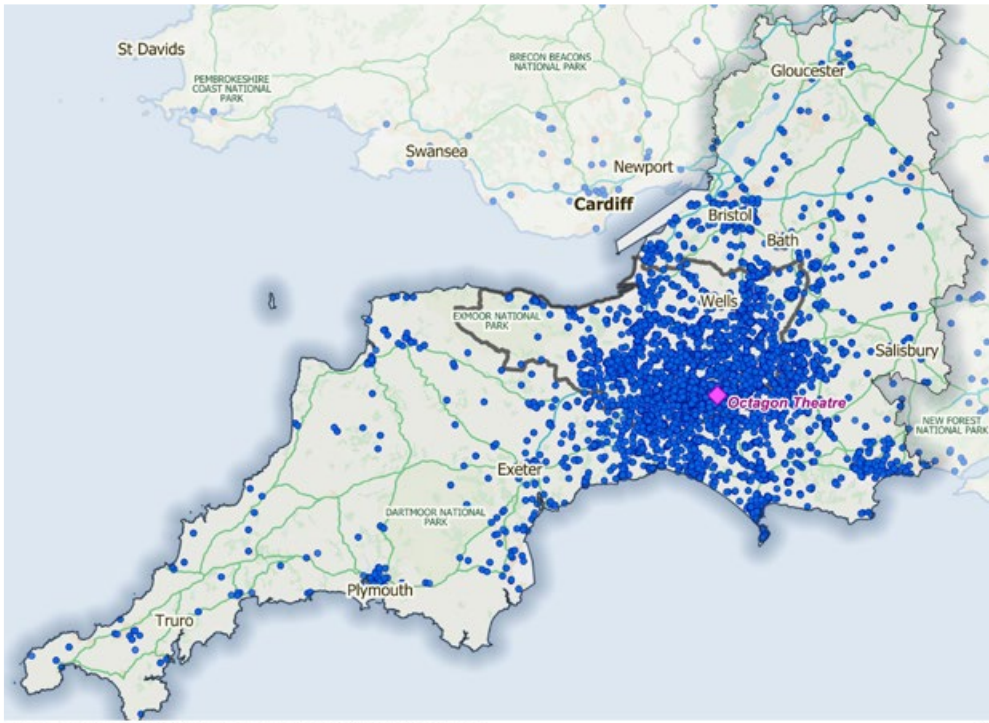
The Octagon Theatre is the largest and principle theatre venue in Somerset having opened in 1974 (then known as The Johnson Hall). Millions of people have been entertained in our theatre and each year we present a diverse range of artists and events, from big name comedians, classical music and opera to rock and folk music, the very best in variety as well as superb plays and ballets, and not forgetting our yearly blockbuster pantomime. The Octagon Theatre plays a significant role in the life of the community, home to a thriving amateur scene, whereby local community groups have become a hub for participation in the creative arts.

Each year around 125,000 people purchase a ticket for an event at the Octagon Theatre, attracting audiences from across the South West and beyond. The Octagon Theatre has been regularly achieving an average of 83% capacity throughout the years with upwards of 250 performances staged annually, significantly above the industry average of 50-60% capacity. In addition, thousands of people take part each month in one of our weekly classes as part of our Octagon Academy participatory programme. As a result, the high usage has taken its toll on the 50-year-old building.

Whilst the front of house areas were extended and seating refurbished in 2003, there is no disabled access backstage for visitors, staff, artists or volunteers and we currently only have one accessible toilet situated front of house. The front of house areas have begun to look tired, dated and often feel cramped. The popular and profitable café bar is hampered by being wrapped around the auditorium with diners' meals interrupted by the arrival of audience members. The kitchen is small and inadequate for the size of the restaurant and the front of house areas lack air conditioning. The popular Octagon Academy classes take place in a small studio obstructed by a supporting pillar in the

middle of the room, with no windows or air cooling and a lack of ceiling height for dance classes. The Octagon Theatre remains one of the most popular theatres in the South West with a loyal and enthusiastic audience, a passionate volunteer base in The Foyer Club and talented team who are devoted to the venue. A feasibility study was commissioned in 2019 to explore how the venue could be developed to address these issues, and to look at the wider Somerset and South West area that the theatre serves and considered what opportunities and needs within the area were not being met.

Yeovil and the wider Somerset deserves a better venue and the Octagon Theatre is well placed geographically to serve the region with the organisation, under the management and support of Yeovil Town Council, having the financial track record and robust plan to develop the theatre for the next 50 years and beyond.



Each dot on the map represents a customer who purchased a ticket for our venues (Octagon Theatre & Westlands Entertainment Venue) between 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024. It does not capture how many tickets they purchased (or information for accompanying guests) or how many times they purchased tickets that year.





"The arts make life better, and I am passionate that all our residents in Yeovil should have opportunities to experience and take part in them as part of a broad offer of culture, leisure, sports and green spaces. Yeovil Town Council now runs Westlands Entertainment Venue, Yeovil Rec, South Somerset Heritage Collection and Yeovil Country Park. We are proud to provide a range of facilities for our residents to enjoy. The cultural sector contributes billions of pounds a year to the UK economy. It supports local businesses and a wide range of other sectors; from hospitality to retail, transport to tourism. The arts can cultivate our creativity, driving greater innovation and entrepreneurship, driving skills and employment opportunities."

Amanda Card, Chief Executive, Yeovil Town Council



Curtain up on Somerset’s new flagship cultural centre...

The Octagon Theatre will be developed, refurbished and renewed to secure the theatre for future generations.

The auditorium will be refurbished with new seating, carpets and some adjustments to layout whilst maintaining our excellent leg room, comfort, sightlines and intimacy.

A Participatory Studio which will become the new home for our popular Octagon Academy and be the perfect place for classes in dance, music, drama, theatre and creative art. A home for our popular choirs, dance and theatre groups, and arts and craft workshops.

A greatly improved Cafe Bar area offering food and drink throughout the day for the public and patrons to enjoy and relax. The new entrance to the theatre will create a better first impression and welcome to the theatre.

Improved front of house and customer facilities with a large increase in toilet provision with toilets on each level, more accessible toilets, gender neutral toilets and a Changing Places facility for those with additional needs. Accessibility is improved throughout the venue, both front of house and backstage with accessible toilets and showers backstage, and lift access throughout the venue.

Improvements to the stage house and backstage area will significantly improve the technical aspects of our productions. Raising the roof will enable us to fly cloths out and a backstage crossover will support the ambitions of our programme and our talented local community groups.

Enhancements may go unnoticed but will ensure “the show must go on” making the necessary improvements to secure the future of the Octagon for future generations. This work creates a more sustainable venue, reduces our carbon footprint, ensures staff and guest facilities are up to date and your enjoyment is uninterrupted.



“Our plans for the Octagon are to create a flagship centre for the creative arts that will provide amazing opportunities for our residents and bring world class artists to Somerset. The plans see the Octagon Theatre transformed into a centre of excellence that will spark economic regeneration for the area and so many opportunities for residents to improve their well-being. The development of the venue will mean less trips out of the county to access brilliant shows, activities and entertainment with superb events right on your doorstep and unleashing creativity across Somerset and beyond.”

Adam Burgan-Davies, Director of Culture, Events and Promotions for Yeovil Town Council, Arts and Entertainment Venues Manager for Somerset Council



Artist impression of the proposed external ground floor entrance to the venue

A creative spark for change...

As we move forward to raise aspirations and provide residents with a flagship cultural venue that will be the catalyst for a significant renaissance within the county, we will see the theatre attract and bring new artists and companies to Somerset with exciting new opportunities for residents to engage. In recent years the UK has seen an increase in the use of cultural initiatives to address socioeconomic problems, ranging from major capital projects to local participatory initiatives. The use of culture to refresh neighbourhoods, improve the physical environment, offering places to go and things to do, increasing local pride, and building stronger communities has been taking place for many years. Capital projects have shown that cultural buildings and facilities can contribute to the economy as well as the physical, social and cultural regeneration of an area, which in time will attract new and increased investment, creating jobs and opportunities for local people.

Our commitment to create a flagship cultural hub for Somerset has already been a catalyst for change in attracting greater levels of national funding into Somerset. The project has been awarded £10m towards the construction costs from the government Department of Culture Media & Sport (DCMS). The Octagon Theatre was made an Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in April 2023 with an award of £760,000 over three years to bring the creative arts to our communities. This award sees the development of our Arts Engagement & Outreach department using our venues as creative hubs to deliver work across Somerset working in the areas of:

- **Learning and Participation** for people of all ages and backgrounds to have opportunities to take part, learn and experience the creative arts.
- **Arts for Health & Wellbeing:** Working with NHS trusts and voluntary services, we will develop creative activities that deliver emotional and physical support to people with mental and long-term health conditions.
- **Children and young people** will benefit from programmes and projects in and out of school that will raise their ambitions, support their learning and personal development, gain confidence and new skills through the creative arts.
- **Diversifying our audience** and programme of activity ensuring that events and activities are relevant and reflective of Somersets increasingly diverse communities.
- **Provide opportunities** for everyone to benefit from the creative arts, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who may not have previously been able to access the arts, for whatever reason.
- **Talent development** for artists, practitioners and those working in the creative arts with training, development and networking opportunities.

Our Octagon Theatre team led the consortium bid, on behalf of Somerset Council and Dorset Council to become the Music Hub Lead Organisation for the two counties. The successful bid means the Octagon Music Hub is the lead organisation for music education across the two counties. Our position on the Somerset / Dorset border, passion and expertise for music and arts education is an exciting development that sees us commissioning and partnering with incredible music teachers, practitioners, artists and arts organisations to ensure children and young people across Somerset and Dorset have excellent music education and their lives enriched by the power of music.



"I am passionate about the arts and the way they can benefit and transform people's lives. Our residents deserve to have the very best in arts and entertainment without having to travel outside of Somerset to do so. The development of a flagship cultural venue has already proven to be a catalyst for change with the Octagon Theatre becoming an Arts Council NPO, Music Hub for Somerset and Dorset and the development will bring benefits across Somerset alongside attracting further national funding and investment into the county. I cannot wait to see how the development will make a significant contribution to improving the lives of our residents."

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts, Executive Member for Communities, Somerset Council

A world of entertainment on your doorstep...

What would you like to experience today? The Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment Venue will act as “sister venues” programmed to complement each other and leave you spoilt for choice. How about a brilliant show on the main stage at the Octagon? The latest film on the big screen at Westlands from a comfy sofa? Take part in a class with your choice of singing with a choir, dance, pilates, drama or arts and crafts? Or how about catching up with friends for coffee (and possibly a cake), or finding a quiet corner to curl up with a good book? You will be spoilt for choice when it comes to how to spend your time at our venues.

We have always prided ourselves on the diversity of our programme and we will continue to bring your favourite shows and performers along with the opportunity to discover a wider selection of the best plays, musicals, ballets and artists touring the UK.



“The Arts Council is pleased to support the Octagon’s redevelopment, a project sure to benefit the residents of Yeovil and communities across Somerset for many years to come. This ambitious capital project will provide audiences with a vibrant new space for entertainment and creativity, along with a tailored programme of family activities and talent opportunities. It’s great to see them already working with publicly funded organisations like Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra to engage children and young people in local schools. Our 10-year strategy, Let’s Create, sets out a vision where everyone can access high-quality arts and culture, whatever their background. This investment is a real step towards making that vision a reality, and I’m excited to see the impact it will have.”

Phil Gibby, South West Area Director, Arts Council England



LIVE MUSIC

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

COMEDY

PLAYS & DRAMA

MUSICALS

DANCE

FAMILY SHOWS

BALLET

PANTOMIME

COMMUNITY &
AMATEUR SHOWS

SPOKEN WORD
AND AUDIENCE
WITH EVENTS

FILM

CLASSES AND
WORKSHOPS

FESTIVALS

A stage for world-class artists...

Since the announcement of the capital development, the first major artistic partnership to be announced is with the internationally renowned Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (BSO) that sees the Octagon Theatre become BSO's "home in Somerset" when it reopens. As the Octagon's resident orchestra, local audiences will have access to more symphonic performances by BSO and their world-leading conductors, soloists and talented musicians, alongside a greater number of family-friendly 'BSO On Your Doorstep' chamber-scale concerts, workshops and events.

The partnership will see a regular concert series at the venue from the Orchestra, alongside an exciting and ambitious education and outreach programme designed to bring world-class musical opportunities to residents and visitors of Somerset.

This is the first partnership to be announced. The Octagon Theatre plans to develop a number of creative partnerships with leading arts organisations. These partnerships are intended to create greater opportunities for audiences to have access to, be enriched and inspired by world-class artists here in Somerset.



"We're thrilled that our partners at the Octagon Theatre share our passion for the empowering impact of live music. We're looking forward to deepening our relationship with communities in Somerset, with even more live concerts from the full Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, plus family-friendly 'BSO On Your Doorstep' chamber-scale concerts, workshops and events. Bringing music into people's lives is why we exist, and we remain committed to reaching people who need our music, now more than ever."

Dougie Scarfe OBE, Chief Executive, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra



The Auditorium Reimagined...

The enhanced auditorium will retain the Octagon's best features, whilst replacing seats and carpets will improve comfort. Retaining excellent sight lines, generous leg room and air cooling will ensure you can sit back, relax and be ready to be entertained. A well-equipped stage, with improved flying facilities will support a wider range of arts and entertainment events. The improved technical facilities will open up some new companies and events to our programme, from leading theatre companies, classical music and opera, ballet and dance to offering a much-improved experience for existing popular shows and our thriving amateur and community companies. Our Octagon stage will be accessible both front of house and backstage to welcome everyone.



"I love the Octagon Theatre and it has been a huge part of my life for so many years with countless happy memories spent watching shows, on stage and backstage particular with Castaways Theatre Group. In many ways the Octagon Theatre feels like a "second home". I am so excited to see the transformation of the theatre and the opportunities it will bring for local groups staging their productions at the theatre. I cannot wait!"

Lynn Lee Brown, Director, Castaways Theatre Group



Artist impression of the proposed ground floor lobby area

Space To Create...

The Studio

Our popular participatory programme 'The Octagon Academy' will have a new home within our Studio. The Studio is a large fully equipped multi-purpose dance studio, suitable for a variety of classes. The Studio will become a creative hub for dance in the region. Perfect for all dance classes and as a rehearsal space, our Studio will be the place where local dancers of all ages learn new skills, develop their talents and prepare for performances on stage.

The Studio also offers an alternative space for additional classes and rehearsals including our popular choir, theatre groups and arts and craft workshops. Our participatory programme brings communities together in forging new friendships and improving the health and wellbeing of local residents. They are also key to our engagement programme where workshops can be delivered by the companies performing in the main auditorium.



Artists impression of the Octagon Dance studio area



"I believe passionately that dance is for everyone and everybody. Whether it is for fun, for exercise, at a social event, professionally or simply to feel the joy of dance and movement – dance is essential. I've been lucky to perform at the Octagon countless times and I know the important role theatres like the Octagon play for all young people wishing to embark on a career in the creative arts. Having a purpose-built dance studio will make a significant development to the opportunities for people of all ages and be a place of joy for so many."

James Bamford, Director, Project Dance



Be Our Guest...

Front Of House & Other Facilities

Front of house will offer attractive foyers for use throughout the day with excellent supporting bars and eating opportunities. Customers will enter on the first floor, level with Petters Way Car Park, with no need to use the sloped path or steps. The front of house areas will have accessible toilets on every level and an adult changing facility. There is also an increase in toilet provision meaning less time spent in the queue during the interval and more time to enjoy an ice cream or refreshing drink!

On the first floor, directly in front of the main entrance and at the 'heart' of the new venue will be our relaxed and cosy café bar. Open throughout the day, this will be the perfect place to meet friends and family whether you are attending a performance, a class, or just finding a quiet corner to read your book.

Our new venue will be accessible to everyone, addressing and resolving the current access inadequacies and transforming the venue to offer a warm welcome to everyone with improved facilities for those with physical disabilities including visual and audio impairments. The development will give the opportunity to architecturally mark the gateway to Yeovil Country Park and create a more attractive building that is sympathetic to the surrounding area.



Artists impression of the proposed Café Bar area



"I see every day the power of the creative arts to transform people's lives and improve their health and well-being. Seeing a performance, taking part in a workshop or attending creative classes bring huge benefits for everyone to lead healthy lives or support recovery from illness. The development of the Octagon Theatre and the associated investment from Arts Council brings huge opportunities to support the health and well-being of residents in Somerset and working together we can support the work of the NHS and clinical commissioning groups with innovative projects"

Caroline Barnes, Creative Health Coordinator,
Somerset NHS Foundation Trust



Funding The Project...

The total project is budgeted to cost £15m which includes contingency and allowances for inflation. The project is being managed by Somerset Council who will deliver the project and upon completion, the Octagon Theatre will be transferred to Yeovil Town Council who will operate the theatre as a 'sister' venue to Westlands Entertainment Venue (already operated by Yeovil Town Council).

Fundraising can also be fun! Castaways Theatre Group joined some of our staff for a sponsored 24- hour sleepover at the venue and we welcomed comedian, ventriloquist and winner of America's Got Talent! Paul Zerdin for a performance, with all ticket proceeds being donated to our Name A Seat campaign. Paul is a patron of our Name A Seat initiative and all money from the campaign is going towards the development of the theatre.

You too can get involved with our 'Name A Seat' campaign. From £150, you can have a personalised plaque on a seat within our new auditorium. Contributing now means that you will be placed on our priority list and contacted to choose a seat for your plaque once the seating plan has been designed.

The development of the Octagon Theatre will provide an economic boost for Yeovil and the surrounding area. On reopening the Octagon will generate £9m of economic activity annually and support 160 jobs throughout the economy.

Whilst the economic basis for development is compelling, this project is also about improving the health and wellbeing of everyone living within our county and beyond. We passionately believe that everyone should have access to the arts and that they have the ability to transform people's lives.



You can support our work and the redevelopment of the theatre by making a donation to help the arts thrive in Somerset. Scan our QR code and make a donation online.

Government Funding (DCMS)	£10,000,000
Yeovil Town Council	£3,750,000*
Ticket Levy - Existing funding generated by users of The Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment Venue	£541,000
Fundraising and other grants	£444,000
Somerset Council	£265,000
Total	£15,000,000

**funding from Yeovil Town Council is proposed to be a combination of funding from reserves and borrowing, a proportion of which would be repaid via the Ticket Levy. This funding is subject to a public consultation with Yeovil Town Council residents.*



"The development will enable more opportunities for employment and have a significant impact on the local economy. Increasing the size and revamping the dance studio will enable students to better learn from their Academy Class teachers and create a better environment for all. The building itself will be transformed, including backstage, to remove physical barriers for disabled people or those with mobility needs. I am excited by the development of the programme of performances and activity that promises to showcase and appeal to many different communities."

Chhavi Gautam, Octagon Academy Bollywood Dance Instructor



Artists impression of the Octagon Theatre lobby

Current Timeline...

The design project team has been led by experienced theatre architects, Burrell Foley Fischer and we have completed Stage 2 RIBA designs.

April 2023

The Octagon Theatre was “put to sleep” with a special performance from local dancer Davina Derrick from Helen Laxton Dance Company, as the finale to our big community celebration “SHiNE”. Work was then undertaken to clear the theatre of all the equipment, furniture and fittings along with more invasive survey work.

October 2023

Somerset Council declares a “financial emergency” and proposals to develop the Octagon Theatre are deemed unviable due to increased interest rates and inflation impacting the construction sector.

November 2023

Yeovil Town Council offers to work in partnership with Somerset Council to secure the future of the Octagon Theatre with members voting in principle to provide a financial grant of £3.75m.

2024

Through 2024 Somerset Council (against the backdrop of a financial emergency) and Yeovil Town Council work in partnership with Arts Council England and DCMS to establish a new scope for development of the Octagon Theatre. Procurement exercises take place to appoint a new design team, Project Managers and Cost Consultants.

Burrell Foley Fisher are appointed to lead the architect-led design team.

Working with the Octagon team, the scope for the development is completed exploring what can be achieved with the finances available.

2025

June RIBA 2 (Concept Design) has been completed and approved by both authorities.

Yeovil Town Council will undertake consultation with residents of Yeovil Town on funding for the Octagon development.

RIBA 3 (Spatial Coordination) begins with more technical drawings and a deeper level of detail and information. This stage will be completed in October 2025 and planning permission will be submitted.

2026

Planning Permission is secured.

RIBA 4 (Technical Design) is undertaken and completed.

A contractor is appointed and mobilised with building work starting towards the end of the year.

2027/28

Construction work will take place and the development of the Octagon takes place with key construction milestones.

2028/29

Construction work is completed and the building is decorated, with furniture and equipment installed. There is a period of commissioning, snagging and training as staff move back into the theatre, which is currently anticipated to reopen in winter.



Artists impression of the Octagon Theatre lobby

Questions

Could the money be spent on something else?

The £10m of government funding was allocated specifically to the development of the Octagon Theatre. There are a number of approval gateways to be met before the funding is confirmed and released prior to construction. If the funding were to be withdrawn or the development were not to go ahead and the funding was declined, it would return to the treasury and could not be allocated to another project in Yeovil or Somerset. The grant of £3.75m from Yeovil Town Council would be made specifically for the Octagon a portion of this funding will also be repaid by users of the theatre via the ticket levy. Other fundraising was given specifically for the development of the Octagon Theatre and cannot be used for other projects.

Why can't you reopen the Octagon until building works start?

When the Octagon was closed all equipment was taken out of the theatre and invasive survey works took place. There would be significant costs and work needed to make repairs and get the theatre ready to operate once more. Programming for shows and tours takes place 6-18 months in advance. The number of staff working across both venues was also reduced and it would take time to recruit and train staff. Development of the Octagon Theatre would see the theatre close again in 2026.

Why not just leave the Octagon as it was? Does it really need development?

We all miss the Octagon Theatre very much. The theatre is 50 years old and was not originally built as a theatre. There are a number of issues with the theatre in its current form; access backstage is very poor, access front of house is poor, there is a lack of toilet provision, the theatre is dated, tired and in need of development. While we all want to see the Octagon back open, we believe the chance to develop the theatre and secure its long-term future is worth the wait. We are also unlikely to see £10m of national funding for the Octagon again in our lifetime and believe it would be a shame to miss out on this opportunity.

Is there a risk the project will overrun on time and budget?

Large scale capital projects are complicated and we were very disappointed that the previous scheme was not able to be delivered. We have therefore built greater levels of contingency into the project in terms of budget and timescales. The project is being carefully managed and all of the partners involved have their own processes for managing risk, scrutiny, accountability and ensuring value for money for public funding. The team are focussed on delivering the very best outcome and seeing the Octagon back open and developed and secured for future generations.



What will happen to the Octagon if Yeovil Town residents do not support the project or the project does not go ahead?

The development project would not be viable without the funding from Yeovil Town Council (unless another funder were to come forward). It is likely that the £10m from government would therefore not be awarded and the theatre would remain closed.

The creation of a Flagship Cultural Hub for Somerset has been many years in the making so we would like to thank everyone who has supported our journey so far and helped us to reach this exciting moment. You can follow the progress of the project at our website octagon-theatre.co.uk



“Our officers, members and project team are working incredibly hard to create a flagship cultural venue that the whole of Somerset can be proud of and that will bring so much joy to our residents and countless benefits. It is one of the most significant projects and investments being made by Somerset Council and I look forward to seeing the transformational effects this project will bring for the communities we serve.”

Cllr Mike Best, Chairman, Somerset Council and Octagon Project Board



Contact Us...

We invite you to be part of the conversation and thank you for taking the time to read this information. We hope you found it interesting, exciting and helpful. You can contact us in the following ways:

Email us:
octagontheatre@yeovil.gov.uk

Write to us:
The Octagon Theatre, Hendford, Yeovil, Somerset BA20 1UX

Engage with us via social media:

-  /TheOctagonTheatre
-  @OctagonYeovil
-  @OctagonYeovil
-  @OctagonYeovil

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Credit and our thanks to **Len Copland** who has supplied many of the photos taken in this document.



Artists impression of the Octagon Theatre lobby area



Somerset
Council



Yeovil Town Council



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