

Project Statement:

The Royal



Securing a Cultural, Heritage, Community and Economic Asset for Plymouth

Royal Cinema (including the former Reel Cinema, Gala Bingo and Lorenzo's)
25 Derry's Cross
Plymouth, PL1 2SW

Version 2 March 2026

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Context

The potential reinvigoration of The Royal represents a now-or-never opportunity to create a community-owned cultural venue in the heart of Plymouth city centre. Reopening and repurposing the building will restore a landmark heritage destination where people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds can come together for film, live performance, learning, food and community events. Flexible, affordable rooms will host local groups, rehearsals, workshops and specialist screenings, supporting everything from youth projects to older people's activities, and providing a welcoming space for people who may feel excluded from larger commercial venues.

Creating a new independent, community-owned cultural hub at The Royal will inject energy into the city's cultural scene and ignite local pride. It will consolidate the efforts of partner organisations towards a shared goal and provide a bricks-and-mortar emblem of the community's ability to positively reshape their city. The purchase and refurbishment of this highly visible flagship will give the local community a project to get behind - an opportunity to show pride and belief in a building that they love.

The timing of the restoration also offers a unique opportunity to deliver a flagship showpiece coinciding with Plymouth's City of Culture bid. A truly inclusive, citizen-owned, cultural destination that will showcase and celebrate the very best of the city's creative talents across a range of artistic media: from film and photography to drama and dance, chamber music to heavy metal, all housed in a beautifully crafted heritage venue that generations of locals love.

Overview

This Planning Statement is presented by Plymouth Royal Cinema Community Benefit Society (CBS). The CBS was formed to develop an alternative, economically viable and culturally beneficial vision for the Plymouth's Royal Cinema (formerly trading as Reel Cinema, Gala Bingo and Lorenzo's), demonstrating that demolition and redevelopment is by no means inevitable or necessary. Further to this the CBS is in open discussions with the leaseholder following the triggering of the Asset of Community Value moratorium in 2025 and intends to submit a bid to purchase the long lease as soon as is feasible.

The Royal Cinema was designed by WR Glen, the in-house architect of the ABC chain, and opened in 1938. It originally sat 2,404 people and was fitted with what may have been the best Compton Organ installed in any cinema. In the 1950s the ABC chain introduced live performances and the cinema saw many headline acts including two visits by the Beatles. In the 1970s the building was subdivided, reopening with three screens located above the foyer and in the former circle, while the stalls and stage were converted into a bingo hall. Having been purpose-built for an audience of 2,400, The Royal Cinema is a capacious building, which includes a large amount of space that was under-used or indeed, unused in the years prior to closure. In addition to the existing 3-screen cinema, restaurant and bingo-hall, the building provides a stage and organ pit, back-of-house dressing rooms, offices, storage and plant rooms that are suitable for reinvention as productive spaces which can serve Plymouth's cultural and community needs.

This report outlines plans for retaining the building as a three screen cinema and visual arts hub, restaurant, café, bar, seated venue with a capacity of 250-300 and a standing music venue with an 800 capacity, with associated administration and ancillary facilities. In the reinvigorated form proposed here, The Royal serves the growth market for vintage cinema, facilitates the reopening of an independent restaurant in a popular

location, provides valuable educational facilities in an unrivalled building, and serves as a key node in a regional and nationally important music and performance ecosystem.

The proposal aligns with key strategic policies in the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan, reflects the ambitions outlined in The Culture Plan Plymouth and aligns with the proposed Performance Cluster in Plymouth Rising: The Creative Industries in Britain's Ocean City. The Royal will serve the cultural and leisure needs of Plymouth citizens, drawing visitors to the city centre and strengthening an inclusive local economy that maintains and improves the circulation of money within the city and region. The project will help to achieve a step-change in the live performance eco-system for the city, connect with partners in the education, community and performance sectors, and create jobs in the city.

Project vision

The Royal- A vintage cinema

“Local cinemas play a crucial part in fostering a “sense of place” for their communities as key venues with a community focus. They provide a strong social function as a meeting place and centre in which to socialise.” The Impact of Local Cinema, BFI/Film London/EM Media, 2005

The past ten years have witnessed an evolution in cinema in response to online competition in the entertainment marketplace. Our vision for the future of the Royal Cinema responds to this established direction of travel by providing customers with a unique, immersive, cultural experience from the moment they walk in the door. Like the most successful prototypes for the new trend in vintage cinema-going (particularly the Electric and Everyman brands), The Royal will capitalise on the glamorous associations of the Hollywood movie heyday, employing classic graphics, décor, staffing and service, to attract a wide age demographic, and offer ‘Insta’ glamour and luxury².



Typical Everyman Cinema, and Totnes independent Cinema’s vintage graphics

This vision responds to a highly competitive marketplace in which online-streaming services and multiplex cinemas both offer alternative, but distinctly different ways of serving the film consumer. With the advent in recent years of reliable on-demand entertainment streaming, the film industry in general and cinemas in particular have been forced to address their business model. For the price of a monthly online subscription costing less than a single cinema ticket, audiences can now view recent movie releases or complete TV boxsets in the hassle-free comfort of their own home. Whilst the multiplexes are focusing on their core market of 16-24 year olds and increasing revenue through leaner staffing, food and drink revenues, and 2-tier seat pricing, independent and community-owned cinemas are building on their strengths to provide innovation in the cinema-going experience.

This focus has a broader market appeal – attracting customers outside the 16-24 age group – and, in combination with an independent ownership structure, allows the flexibility to engage in positive social change. By offering bespoke screenings for groups who are arguably under-served by the multiplexes, such as dementia- and autism-friendly, older people, and parent & baby screenings, independent cinemas promote inclusion and cohesion, providing a hub for diverse communities while strengthening a sense of local identity and pride.

² See Independent Cinema Office, Understanding Audiences, <https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/advice-support/how-to-start-a-cinema/understanding-audiences>



Curzon, Brunswick Centre

Genesis Mile End

Our proposal for the reinvention of The Royal adapts the market-leading direction and proven commercial performance of exemplary UK independent cinema models to the unique opportunity offered by the building and local conditions. With its authentic architectural and cultural heritage and flexible interior spaces, the building can readily serve an appetite for a vintage cinema-viewing-experience alongside a sophisticated in-house bar and café/restaurant, whilst catering to the needs of diverse communities in Plymouth. Our partner brings an established model and expertise, a proven track record both commercially and with funders, and access to a classic back catalogue, latest releases and arts and niche programming.

The Royal – A place to meet, eat, and drink

Alongside the film viewing experience, and the revival of the independent bar/restaurant on the corner of the building, The Royal will offer food and drink in two exciting new spaces. A café and exhibition space will replace the current Screen 3, providing a more sociable space to sit before and after films, that will incorporate a gallery showing work by local artists.

The Projection Room, a rooftop cocktail bar, will repurpose currently unused spaces above the projection room, transforming a series of external roof terraces into a unique high-quality city centre destination.



Rooftop bar experience, image credit Trip Advisor

Food and drink will be locally sourced from local food and beverage producers, growers and sustainable suppliers. The Royal will be a positive example of a responsible business in Plymouth supporting local businesses and social enterprises and ensuring that as much of the income generated is spent locally and as such the Plymouth Royal Cinema CBS has signed up to the Plymouth Charter.

The Royal – A live performance venue

'Music makes cities, towns and places better. Music makes cities wealthier. Music makes cities more vibrant. Music creates jobs and skills. Music promotes social inclusion, and music is everywhere'

Shain Shapiro, founder of the Sound Diplomacy consultancy

Having been purpose-built for an audience of 2,404, The Royal Cinema is a complex building providing a large amount of space that was under-used or indeed, unused prior to closure. Following sub-division from one to three screens, the original stage, organ pit, dressing rooms and back of house facilities were closed off in the 1970s and have lain dormant ever since. Our proposal brings these spaces back into use, reviving both their historic uses and giving them new purpose, while reconfiguring the existing ground floor bingo hall into a live music venue, two cinema screens and hospitality spaces.



Audience for The Beatles live at the ABC in Plymouth, 13 November 1963 Image credit The Guardian / Carol Cuffe.

Full use needs be made of all the available space within the building to ensure viability, and integral to this is the reinstatement of access at the rear of the building, the opening up of the bricked up windows to the former chorus dressing rooms, and the re-use of the further six dressing rooms located at the back of the building. The existing rear entrances will be used for access to the venue and to other spaces including boutique Bed & Breakfast rooms, bringing the south face of the building opening onto Athenaeum Place back into daily use which will help to improve the security of both The Royal and its neighbours.

Plymouth has a proud history of live performance, attracting big names, headline acts and rising stars to venues including The Crowne Plaza, Fiesta Suite and Majestic Ballroom, The Van Dike club, as well as the Royal Cinema itself, which hosted The Beatles on two occasions at the height of their fame. Morecambe & Wise were the last live act to perform on stage before the 1976 conversion, and the cinema organ and organist Dudley Savage became well known thanks to regular BBC radio broadcasts from 1948 until into the 1970s,

with a number of album releases showing his popularity. We are negotiating the return of the Compton organ with the Cinema Organ Society and aim to return it to its former home so that it can once again delight visitors.

Reflecting that long heritage our proposal will revive live performance at The Royal in the form of a (maximum) 800 capacity venue with its own dedicated entrance, full-size stage, Green Room, dressing room and ancillary facilities. We have identified the original stalls entrance at the south-west corner as our preferred access to the venue, with a separate accessible entrance on Princess Way giving level access to a raised viewing area and quiet room. The venue will have a flexible configuration for mid-sized audiences, that will significantly improve the city's ability to host touring acts – a capacity that has been seriously compromised in recent years due to the gradual decline in mid and large sized venues and nightclubs.

Following multiple nightclub closures in the early 2000s, and the loss in more recent years of the Coopage (capacity 450), White Rabbit (capacity 350), and The Hub (capacity 450), the city's live- performance ecosystem has been significantly undermined. A number of pubs and small venues still provide live music in small-scale intimate settings in the city, (The Nowhere Inn, The Underground, The Junction), but from there the capacity jumps to 800 at The Depo (foremost a successful nightclub but with the ability to host live acts), with the next step up being the 4,000 capacity Pavilions.

Plymouth lacks the gradual progression in venue sizes needed to foster a vibrant and sustainable live music scene. The most successful cities rely on an ecosystem of venues catering to a broad range of audience sizes including: 100-150, 450-800, 1000, then 2,000+ and without this progression in scale promoters are unwilling to risk booking acts, as they are unable to either move them up or down the venue scale subject to ticket sales. Many popular acts now bypass Plymouth altogether on their way from Exeter with the Great Hall at 1,800 capacity and Phoenix at 510 capacity, to Truro and the Hall for Cornwall at 969 capacity. Breakfree Promotions, dBs, Music Venue Trust, Live Sound Promotions, and PG Promotions all agree with this analysis.



The Damned, playing at Plymouth University Hall, 2017

Following the withdrawal of dBs from the city following the closure of The Hub there has been a lack of training in live sound management and related disciplines, though City College is currently expanding their provision. The Hub/dBs Live manager, Ian Johnson of Breakfree Promotions described the loss of the Hub as having

‘a devastating effect on the Plymouth music scene. No other venue in the city offers a similar capacity or similar level of professional sound production and engineering. It would mean a huge drop in the number of national and international bands and DJ’s performing in the city... The resulting negative impact on the city’s music scene will almost certainly also have a knock on effect on how favourably the university students of tomorrow view the city. If the city has no mid-size music venue this will make it a far less appealing destination to move to study.’

The venue within the Royal will form part of a revitalised live performance eco-system that is required to ensure that Plymouth does not miss out on the significant cultural, educational, and economic benefits of the touring music circuit. We are in discussion with live venue partners and stakeholders (including Plymouth Arts Cinema, Plymouth Athenaeum, The Depo, Nudge Community Builders and others) to develop a new live venue network that will collectively secure a thriving live music scene for the city. The potential impact of this ecosystem in the city is illustrated by research carried out by UK Live Music Census (2018), with projected figures for the city giving Gross Value Added (GVA) and Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs.

City	Population	No of venues	Ratio of Venue to population	GVA	FTE Jobs
Bristol (2015)	459,000	94	1:4,882	£45 million	927
Glasgow (2018)	593,245	241	1:2,462	£36.5 million	2,450
Newcastle-upon-Tyne (2018)	480,400	137	1:3,507	£19.9 million	1,620
Oxford (2018)	151,900	110	1:1,381	£4.8 million	350
Plymouth projected figures				GVA	FTE Jobs
		Average		£15,001,976	763
Based on population of:	258,000	Worst Case (Oxford/Bristol)		£8,152,732	521
		Best Case (Bristol/Glasgow)		£25,294,118	1065

The Royal – A place for community, learning, & employment

The restoration of The Royal into a cultural hub would fill a much needed gap created by Plymouth’s lack of a centrally located medium sized theatrical venue. It would serve many of the City’s prestigious Amateur Theatrical Companies who desperately need an economically affordable medium-sized theatre for staging their productions.

The Royal would also serve to bring Plymouth’s cultural communities closer together due to its’ proposed diversity of use. Students using the venue during the day would have ideal opportunities to hone their creative skills further by joining any number of the cultural groups who would be using the building in the evenings.

Leigh Jarman, Vice Chairman, Sounds Musical Theatre Company

The Royal Cinema has served the community of Plymouth for the last 80 years, being a much-loved anchor of local identity and pride. This will continue, and be significantly enhanced, by ensuring that the local community feel welcome in the building, that it provides a place that serves local needs, and that it provides opportunities for learning, for entertainment and for employment.

Plymouth Royal Cinema CBS has signed up to the Plymouth Charter and is fully committed to the concept of inclusive growth. While we have identified and are developing our proposals with a number of key partners, it is a firm expectation that the building will be open to community groups and local residents, that it will have spaces which will meet exemplary standards for accessibility, and that it will contribute both to the local economy and to the local community.

The Royal is committed to hosting and nurturing specialist interest groups and emerging talent. Community stakeholders include Red Velvet Cinema, a community cinema providing films, conversation and companionship to older people who are lonely and socially isolated and Mondo Monday, an established cult film night which began more than ago five years. We are discussing with local amateur theatre groups including Sounds Musical Theatre Company, having had a lack of suitable facilities highlighted by them, and community choirs. A 250-300 capacity seated venue is regarded as a ‘sweet spot’ for local theatre groups, large enough to allow the profitability on which these companies depend to continue.

“...cinemas play an important social inclusion role, particularly for elderly people who would otherwise not have the opportunity to watch films “for them” in an easily accessible “traditional” environment, and for other excluded groups such as young parents with babies.”

The Impact of Local Cinema,

BFI/Film London/EM Media, 2005



£4
INCLUDING REFRESHMENTS

RED VELVET CINEMA
presents

TEA & CAKE

MEMORIES OF THE MOVIES

DO YOU REMEMBER
DEVONPORT FORUM, THE ELECTRIC
AND THE HIPPODROME?

JOIN US FOR A TRIP DOWN
MEMORY LANE AND
WATCH CLASSIC FILMS

Opening with
CASABLANCA

10.15 AM
DEVONPORT LIVE CAFE

EVERY OTHER TUESDAY
7TH MARCH & 21ST MARCH
4TH APRIL & 18TH APRIL
2ND MAY & 16TH MAY

VITAL SPARKS PLYMOUTH PLYMOUTH CULTURE

DEVONPORT'S COMMUNITY CINEMA FOR SENIORS
DEVONPORT LIVE CAFE, GEORGE STREET 01752 675843

Two of our partners are involved with education- with a CIC providing opportunities for photography and media training and the other providing both further and higher education within the city. These partnerships, by bringing students into a central location, will have a positive effect on the city centre by increasing daytime footfall and will help us to maximise the use of The Royal throughout the week. We anticipate that at least 100 students and staff will use the cinema daily as their base for learning and training.

The Royal will also contribute towards the economic regeneration of the area and the city as a whole. Once complete, the facility will create at least 8 FTE jobs, as well as supporting significant growth, resilience, and capacity-building opportunities for our community, music and education partners. As part of a strengthened performance quarter, The Royal will support the city's evening and daytime economy, bringing vital additional footfall to food and retail businesses at the western end of the city. According to the Impact of Local Cinema study local cinemas spend between 42% and 62% of their annual expenditure (after taxes, rates, depreciation, staff NI, and pension contributions) locally, thus contributing significantly to the local economy.

“[Local cinemas have] a positive knock-on effect for other traders in the vicinity. The cinemas encourage footfall, particularly in the evening, and make the local area feel safer.”

The Impact of Local Cinema, BFI/Film London/EM Media, 2005

Construction work on the project will create in the order of 20 jobs and professional service contracts over a 48 month period. To ensure that the project is cost effective and community based we will be leveraging local volunteer skills where possible, and where we do need to employ construction or design teams we will aim to do this locally. In addition, working with partners such as City College and Kier Construction, The Royal will create valuable ongoing training opportunities for local people in key areas including building maintenance and heritage conservation. This approach will provide significant benefits to the project; it will reduce costs; help to train and re-skill local people and – in those individuals – create a greater sense of ownership and investment in The Royal.

Proposals for the Building



Introduction

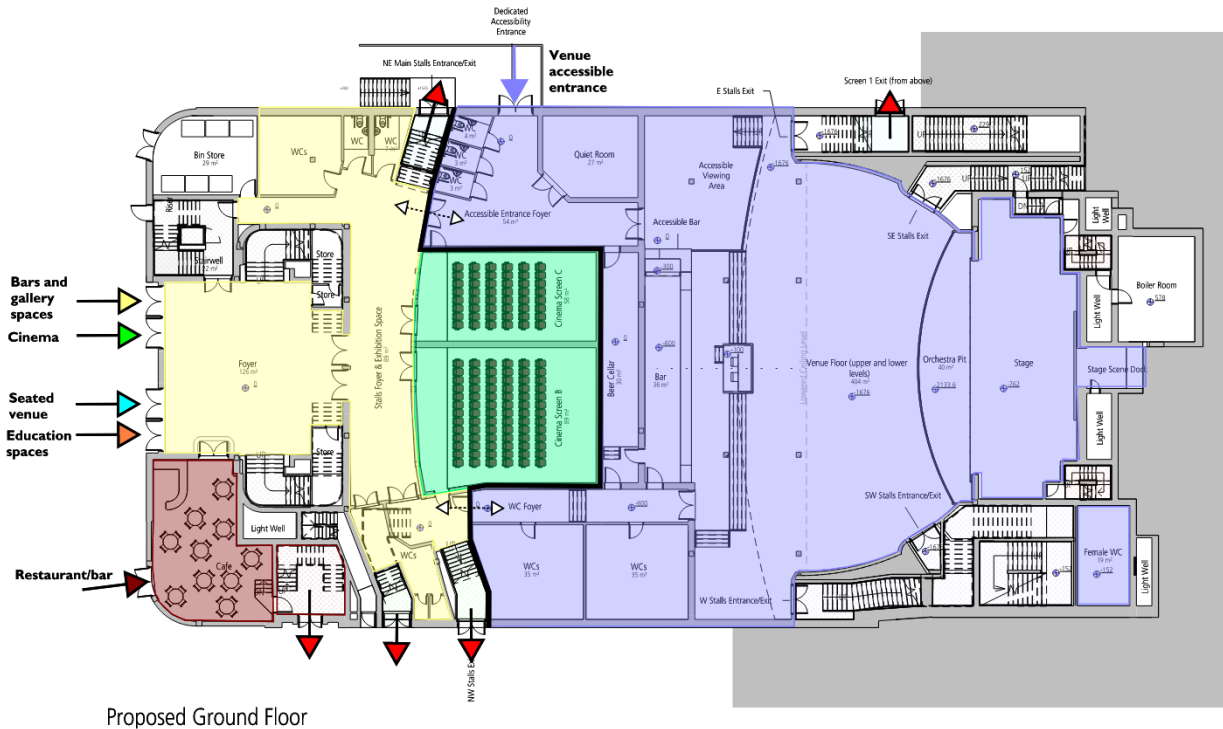
With a complex series of levels and areas, but with logical and well designed vertical and horizontal access/ exit routes, the Royal has huge potential to house a broad variety of users in suitably sized flexible spaces. The original cinema entrance served the REEL Cinema, with 3 screens operating in what was the original Circle, which has been divided into two screens and the third screen was placed over the entrance foyer on a floor which was inserted in 1976.

The Stalls have been converted into what until 2018 was a bingo hall. A dedicated entrance for this opens out to the left hand side of the building onto the corner of Derry's Cross and Princess Way. The stage end of the auditorium is several metres below street level, providing natural sound containment for the stage/screen of the cinema. A full height fly tower and scenery dock to the rear facilitated live performances prior to the bingo hall conversion.

Our proposals for the building are two-fold:

- 1: To fully utilise the spaces available in the building for a community, arts and education spaces, and
- 2: To utilise the original architectural features, restoring these where possible for visual appeal and to nurture positive visitor relationships with the spaces within the building, acting as custodians of the built heritage

Ground Floor: The Venue and Media Arts Centre



The venue

The former bingo hall comprises the original stalls and stage area. With the seating removed (as shown below), the potential for the space to be utilised as a live performance venue is clear. A level floor at the original stage height has been inserted, but this is a simple timber construction and the original raked floor still exists below. This will be reinstated to provide excellent views of the stage. In its current form this area could offer a potential standing capacity of between 1,500 and 2,000, however we believe that a venue of 800 capacity is the most appropriate, both in terms of viability and critically in not providing competition to other planned live venues (Guildhall and Millenium). It is our intention to complement existing and planned provision, not supplant it. Furthermore, this capacity has been identified by The Music Venues Trust and local promoters as being of critical importance.



View from the stage of the former bingo hall area

In addition we have begun negotiations to facilitate the return of the Compton organ, which will be re-installed in its original location, with the console where the raised box is in the image above and seen in situ in the left hand image below, in the raised position. Much of the highly appealing original decorative plasterwork is preserved behind false ceilings and lightweight partitions, and all surviving 1930s decoration will be retained.



L: A view of the original stage area from the circle

R: Current condition original stage features hidden behind bingo hall ceiling



Visualisation of the restored stage and stalls: A new and much needed mid-size venue for the city

Main entrance & Media arts centre

The original cinema entrance with its 4 sets of doors will be used as the main way in and out of the cinema and media arts centre, including the seated performance space and education spaces. The 1930s terrazzo floor in the main foyer and the beautiful decorative plasterwork of both the stalls and circle foyers will bring a touch of glamour with comfortable seating letting visitors enjoy the atmosphere in comfort, with a bar and café at the top of the stairs encouraging people to linger. The spaces will also be used as a gallery, with ample wall areas for displays.



A view of the original entrance foyer ceiling

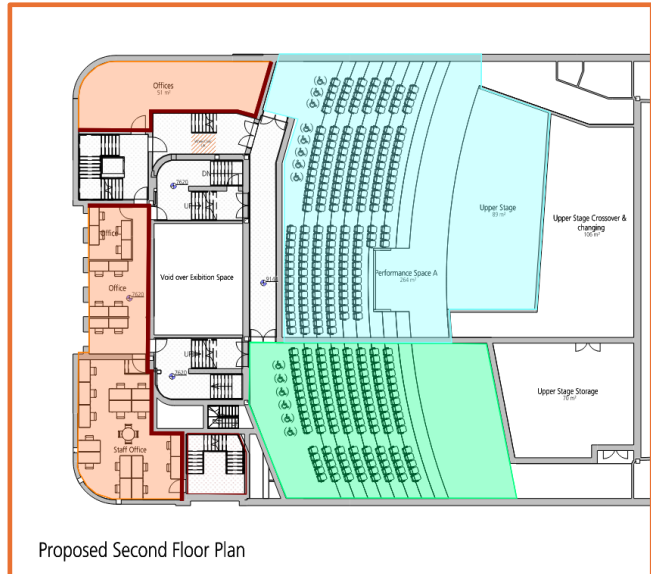
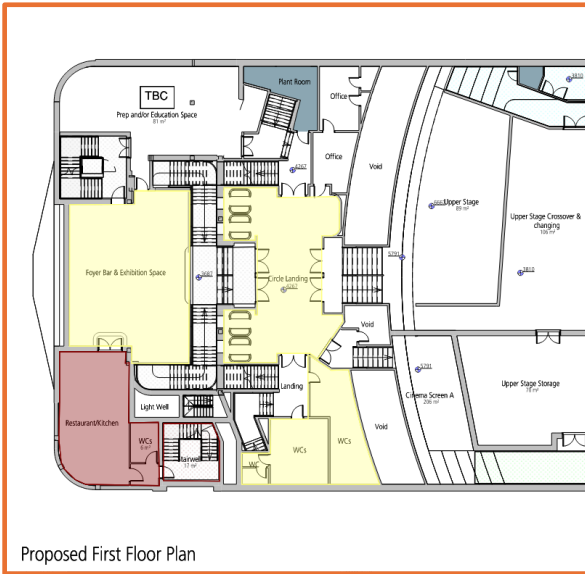


2019 view of the ceiling seen in the left hand image

Two cinema screens will occupy the back of the stalls, with the original decorative plasterwork of the ceiling exposed and restored. These will seat 50 and 30 people and will include wheelchair spaces. By locating 2 cinema screens on the ground floor of the building this provides an opportunity to repurpose the area which was formerly Screen 3, opening it up to the stairs to allow it to function as a bar/café and gallery space with the original decorated ceiling exposed to rekindle the sense of glamour and occasion that the foyer originally possessed. This was also the aim of the current leaseholder who has begun stripping-out works to this effect. A food preparation area adjacent to the current screen 3 will serve both the bar/café space and the cinema & seated performance space when required.

Access through to the venue which occupies the rest of the ground floor will normally be restricted, but the design allows the building to function as one for special events. A new stair-core including a lift will provide access to all floors of the building, bringing accessibility to all levels. This stair-core will be accessed from the main foyer, which will aid supervision but also avoids the lift being hidden away. In what was the circle the two current spaces are retained, and the new lift will allow access to the rear of these auditoria for wheelchairs and other patrons with limited mobility.

First & Second Floor: Media Arts Centre and seated venue



In the former screen two the screen is moved forwards and widened which will improve the experience for patrons while giving a capacity of 150 with increased acoustic separation between the cinema screen and live music venue and storage space for the seated performance space. With the original plasterwork restored and with the potential for lounge seating in part to provide a boutique experience this will provide a unique and appealing cinema auditorium for the city.

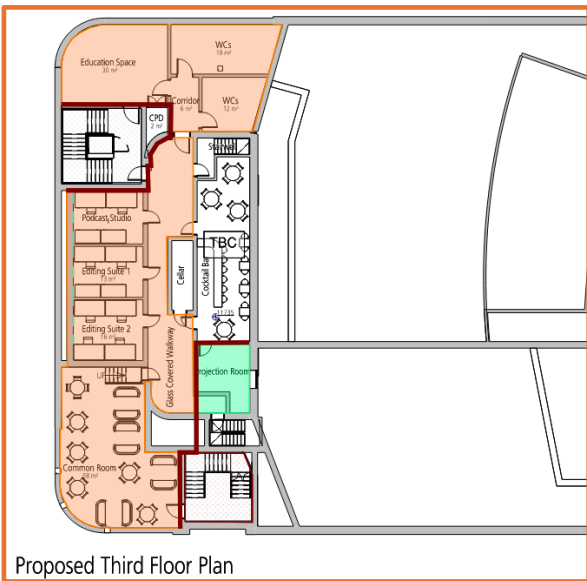
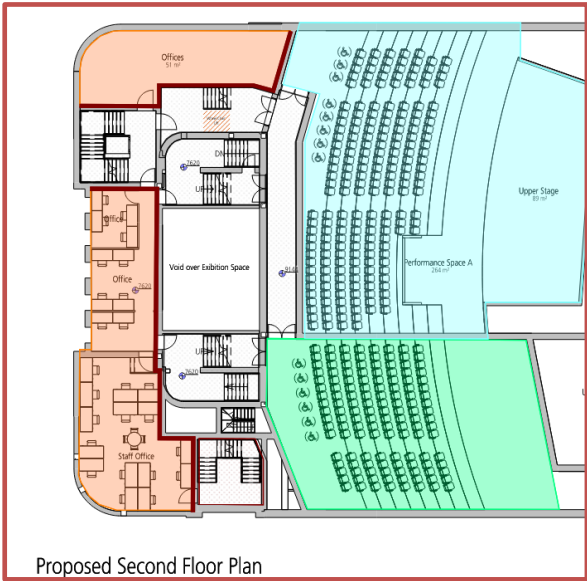
The former screen one forms a seated performance space with a provisional capacity of 250, with a stage and a backstage area including dressing rooms which again increases acoustic separation from the live music venue. As with the former screen 2 the original plasterwork will be restored.



Visualisation of former Screen 1: A new 250 capacity performance space for the city

Second & Third Floor (N): Media Arts Centre, seated venue, education spaces

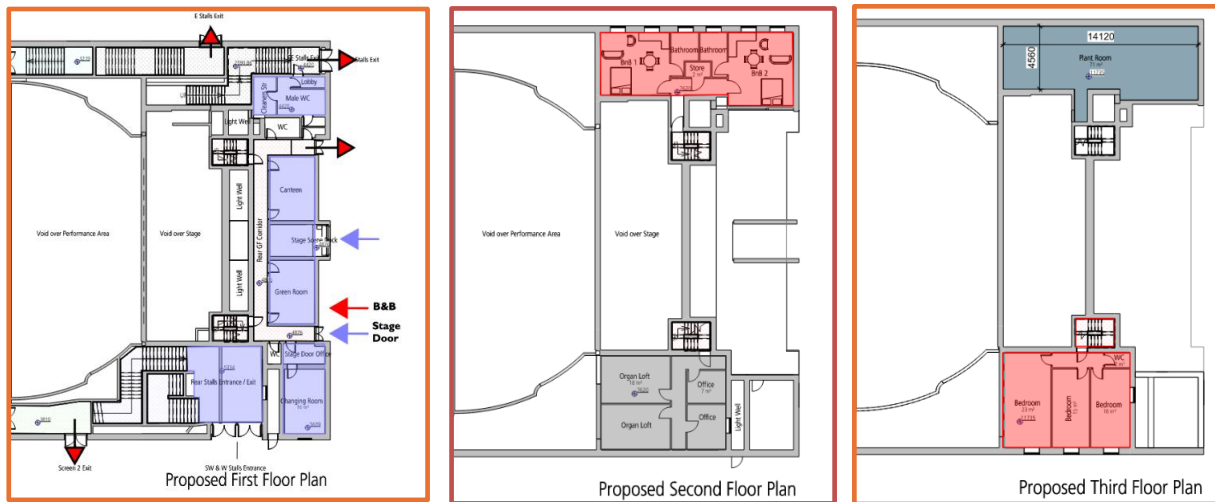
A series of spaces will be used for education, providing offices, common rooms and teaching areas, along with specialist facilities for media production and editing. These spaces will be spread across two floors and will make use of unused rooms at the front of the building on the second floor and the suite of rooms which were formerly part of the cinema projection suite, reinventing spaces like the ‘Rectifier Room’ and creating a link between the long history of the building with new generations and newer technologies.



The flat roofs above these spaces will be brought into use as a rooftop cocktail bar, providing a new and genuinely unique destination in the city centre. This part of the proposal is currently being developed and is not illustrated in this report, other than in the illustration below indicating the area under consideration. The tall perimeter walls and flat roof areas provide an excellent basis for any development of this area. Our proposal for the area indicated in yellow is currently being developed but will bring significant benefit to the streetscape by ‘finishing’ the north east corner of the building.



First Second & Third Floor (S): Backstage areas and boutique bed and breakfast



The six former dressing rooms located at the back of the building still retain their mirrors and dressing tables in most cases and these will be converted into 6 boutique bed and breakfast rooms. 4 will be double bedrooms and two will be family rooms. These will be available to the public but can also be offered to visiting bands. These will give a unique chance to stay in a room where a host of famous names have prepared to go on stage, and thanks to the incredibly robust construction of the building will be peaceful havens no matter what events are on.



The Walker Brothers at the ABC



2019 view of one of the dressing rooms

The organ loft has stood empty for twenty years, but we're aiming to return the magnificent Compton to its former home. It was carefully removed and has been in storage since 2006 and will be returned to the building and reinstalled. The lift mechanism in front of the stage will be rebuilt to allow the console to rise up once again and delight audiences.

By re-opening previously bricked up windows, by making use of areas which have been un-used for many years, and by carefully considering how spaces are accessed and used we're going to be bringing the building back to life, improving security in doing so and making the streets around The Royal more welcoming spaces.



Scene dock, accessed from Athenaeum Place

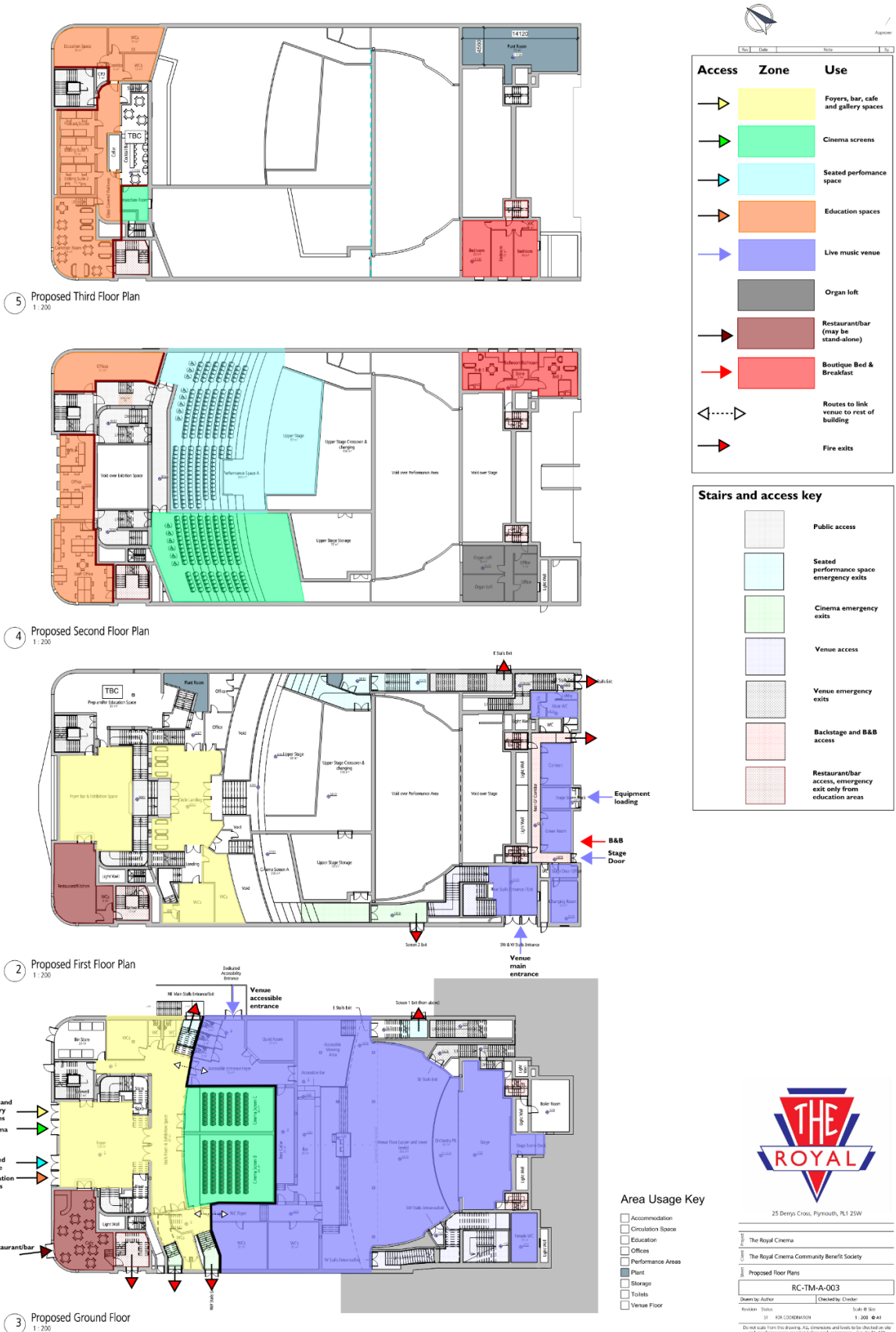


Original backstage signage



Visualisation: Bringing Athenaeum Place back to life

Indicative proposed floorplans



25 Derry's Cross, Plymouth, PL1 2SW

Client	The Royal Cinema
Client	The Royal Cinema Community Benefit Society
Project	Proposed Floor Plans
Reference	RC-TM-A-003
Drawn by: Author	Checked by: Checker
Revised: None	Scale: As Shown
Date: 01/10/2023	1: 200
Do not scale from this drawing. All dimensions and levels to be checked on site and any discrepancies reported to the architect immediately.	

Policy Context

“Using the historic environment as an asset, and giving it new life, has been one of the cornerstones of the economic and social revival of our towns and cities.”

(Deloitte 2017) Quoted in Heritage and the Economy 2018

Plymouth & South West Devon Joint Local Plan

The Royal proposal has been developed with reference to the Plymouth & South West Devon Joint Local Plan (JLP) which was adopted in 2019. This section quotes relevant policy text in italics with the following paragraphs elaborating on how the reinvention of The Royal will respond to and implement JLP policies.

The Royal - A heritage asset



Policies DEV20, SO3(PP).4, PLY6.2, SPT1.2.iii and SPT1.3.v

The Royal is a high quality building and a rare survivor, not only locally as a legacy of pre-war Plymouth, but nationally as a model cinema of its type, size and design. Of the 67 ABC cinemas designed by the ABC house architect WR Glen, only 22 remain, with at least three soon to be demolished. The Royal is unique in that it operated continuously for over 80 years since being built, barring the national cinema closures in September 1939, a short period for bomb damage repairs in 1941 and during the 1976/7 conversion to 3 screens & bingo hall. A high quality Portland stone facade characterises the front of the cinema, and inside, the circle foyer and Screens 1 & 2 retain much of their original character, with further original detail in the form of the proscenium arch, grilles and bas-relief figurines now revealed following the removal of the suspended ceiling in the former bingo hall.

In a submission to Historic England, The Cinema Theatre Association advised that they ‘would emphasise the rarity of this cinema nationally as well (as) the very scarce number of surviving original examples built for the Associated British Cinemas circuit during the 1930s’. In 1996, Richard Gray of The Cinema Theatre Association identified nine WR Glen cinemas as worthy of attention, with The Royal being one of them, but three of those nine have since been demolished. Cinema expert Allen Eyles stated that thirteen cinemas built in 1938 ‘represent much of Glen’s best work’ (Eyles, 1993, p43),

but of those thirteen eight have already been demolished. Two of the survivors are Listed. Eyles has described the Royal Cinema as ‘Glen on top form’ (ibid, p44).

As is widely documented, the pre-war city centre suffered greatly during the Blitz, and The Royal Cinema is one of the only three survivors of the pre-war city in the immediate area. The other two are: Derrys Clock (1862), and The Bank (1889) which are both listed buildings. Together with the cinema, these three record the location of George Street, a major thoroughfare almost entirely erased by the postwar redevelopment of the city. In that redevelopment the Royal Cinema formed the centrepiece of the theatre district and an integral part of the Abercrombie plan, and the cinema being unusual in that it is identified by name in the Plan for Plymouth. In a submission in support of the local listing of the Cinema, the Twentieth Century Society noted that the Royal ‘*should be acknowledged as an asset of the city’s historic environment based on its importance and quality as a rare example of 1930s architecture in Plymouth. Historic England have already recognised the local importance of the building in their assessment for national designation, and describe the building as having ‘high local interest for its attractive façade and surviving internal decoration.’*”

The 2022 City Centre Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan (CAAMP) includes The Royal and the adjacent Athenaeum within the boundary of the Conservation Area. The role of both buildings in the entertainment precinct is highlighted, and both the Athenaeum and Royal Cinema are identified as Non Designated Heritage Assets (NHDAs). ‘*NHDAs are of local importance and significance and as such are protected through local planning policies within the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan 2014-2034’.* (Plymouth CAAMP 2022, p61).

With heritage playing a vital part of the South West economy there are clear economic benefits to conserving and reinvigorating a unique heritage asset such as The Royal. Historic England report that 83% of all adults visited a heritage site at least once in a 12 month period, the highest rate of any region, with heritage being a strong pull for overseas visitors who account for 23% of visits to heritage sites³. The return of the nationally significant Compton Organ will provide an additional element to the heritage benefit of our proposal. JLP policies DEV20, SO3(PP).4, PLY6.2, SPT1.2.iii and SPT1.3.v all support the community-led preservation and re-use of a heritage asset on grounds of protecting local distinctiveness, enhancing sense of place and character, and delivering locally embedded, sustainable growth.

DEV20 - Place shaping and the quality of the built environment

Development proposals will be required to meet good standards of design, contributing positively to both townscape and landscape, and protect and improve the quality of the built environment through:

- 3. Achieving a good quality sense of place and character through good utilisation of existing assets such as quality buildings, heritage assets, trees and landscape features and attention to the design details of the scheme.*

³ <https://content.historicengland.org.uk/content/heritage-counts/pub/2017/sw-regional-report-2017.pdf>

SO3 (PP) - Delivering the international city

To enhance Plymouth's profile as an international city where the city projects itself to people who might invest, study or visit the city; to encourage and support Plymouth's businesses to engage in trading terms in an increasingly global market place; and to ensure the city fulfils its potential as a distinctive, dynamic, cultural centre of international renown. This will be achieved by:

Establishing Plymouth as a distinctive, vibrant, cultural city known on the international stage for its rich heritage, creative industries and unparalleled natural setting, having an equally strong appeal for residents, visitors and investors.

PLY6 - Improving Plymouth's city centre

Plymouth City Centre will be renewed and enhanced through a combination of major new developments, proactive management of change and support for community and trader led initiatives. This will deliver a modern, high quality, vibrant, accessible and adaptable centre that reflects its status alongside the waterfront as the showcase of Plymouth. This will be achieved through making sure that development and change:

2. Respects and celebrates the centre's mid-twentieth century built heritage, including preserving and enhancing the Beaux Arts grid of the 1943 Abercrombie Plan.

SPT1 - Delivering sustainable development

A sustainable society where:

iii. Important cultural and heritage assets are protected for the benefit of current and future generations.

A sustainable environment where:

v. Local distinctiveness and sense of place is respected, maintained and strengthened through high standards of design.

The Royal - A cultural asset

“We recommend that any local authority cultural policy recognises the economic and cultural value of live music and live music venues to the local region, and that planning and economic policies take account of the actual and potential contribution of live music.”

Valuing live music: The UK Live Music Census 2017 report

Policies SO3.3, SO3.7, SO2(PP).4, SO3(PP).5, SO3(PP).10, PLY2, PLY6.7, PLY22, INT3(PP)

The Royal Cinema sits within an area defined within ‘Plymouth Rising- The Creative Industries in Britain’s Ocean City’, as The Performance Cluster, a music and performance zone which geographically includes the Guildhall, TRP, The Royal Cinema, the Athenaeum and Millenium. The Royal Cinema forms a critical part of this cluster, and it’s reinvention will help to strengthen the cultural offer, with cinema and other visual media, live music and performing arts also drawing footfall to the city’s west end restaurants and retail.

In doing so, it will reinforce Patrick Abercrombie’s vision of this “theatre district” for Plymouth (see images above for 1943 Abercrombie concept and the situation today). The Royal will work collaboratively with all local arts, drama, entertainment and music organisations to ensure a joined-up approach to cultural programming that is attractive to a diverse range of audiences.

“It’s very exciting to see a project like this taking shape and any plans to save such an iconic and important part of Plymouth’s cinema history should be encouraged. This could become another wonderful part of Plymouth’s growing cultural landscape and economy.” Anna Navas, Film Programmer, Plymouth Arts Centre

JLP policies SO3.3, SO3.7, SO2(PP).4, SO3(PP).5, SO3(PP).10, PLY2, PLY6.7, PLY22, INT3(PP) support the development of a cultural hub and the strengthening of the cultural offer for locals and visitors alike.

SO3 (PP) - Delivering the international city

To enhance Plymouth’s profile as an international city where the city projects itself to people who might invest, study or visit the city; to encourage and support Plymouth’s businesses to engage in trading terms in an increasingly global market place; and to ensure the city fulfils its potential as a distinctive, dynamic, cultural centre of international renown. This will be achieved by:

Establishing Plymouth as a distinctive, vibrant, cultural city known on the international stage for its rich heritage, creative industries and unparalleled natural setting, having an equally strong appeal for residents, visitors and investors.

Delivering a strong, diverse and dynamic city that welcomes new residents, students and visitors and that celebrates cultural diversity

PLY2 - Unlocking Plymouth’s regional growth potential

Para. 4.98. Developing a distinctive and dynamic cultural sector in Plymouth that will unlock the potential of the city’s arts, creative sector and cultural heritage will help raise the profile of Plymouth and support the visitor economy. It will also provide opportunities for local communities and attract those seeking to relocate for business offering a lifestyle that cannot be found elsewhere, with arts, music, drama, comedy and entertainment forming a unique city identity that supports growth.

PLY6 - Improving Plymouth’s city centre

Plymouth City Centre will be renewed and enhanced through a combination of major new developments, proactive management of change and support for community and trader led initiatives. This will deliver a modern, high quality, vibrant, accessible and adaptable centre that reflects its status alongside the waterfront as the showcase of Plymouth. This will be achieved through making sure that development and change:

7. Supports a diverse and active evening and night time economy catering for a wide cross section of the public.

PLY22 - Cultural quarters & INT4 (PP) - Delivering a distinctive, dynamic cultural centre of regional, national and international renown

The city will support a thriving arts and cultural sector and promote Plymouth’s reputation at a national and international level by:

2. Establishing three cultural hubs in the following general locations:

Royal Parade, The Hoe and historic waterfront (to include Royal William Yard, Millbay and The Barbican/ Sutton Harbour)

5. Developing and providing more music venues for local and underground talent, and seeking to build on opportunities to stimulate further cultural opportunities across the city.

Investing in the delivery of major new cultural assets, including the Plymouth History Centre, Ocean Studios and The House and identifying priorities for new future cultural assets.

Developing a coherent and structured offer to nurture new creative talent within the city to grow creative industries and increase graduate retention.

INT3 (PP) - Positioning Plymouth as a major UK destination

The city will support and secure additional investment in its visitor economy, with programmes and actions to enhance Plymouth as a destination for all seasons, to market the city effectively, and support business tourism and tourist related business development. This will include:

4. Maintaining and delivering a vibrant mix of attractions and destinations to support the visitor economy, including in the cultural, arts, leisure, heritage and retail sectors, as provided for by other policies of this plan.

Furthermore, the reinvigoration of The Royal also responds to policy PLY21, proving that there is a viable and policy compliant alternative to the demolition and redevelopment of the site that has been suggested at various times over the last ten years.

PLY21 - Supporting the visitor economy

1. Development proposals which result in the loss of important facilities for the visitor economy, including visitor accommodation, will not be permitted unless: there are over-riding sustainability and regeneration benefits from the proposal; the existing use is demonstrated to be unviable and with no reasonable prospect of becoming viable.

The Royal – An asset for community and economic growth

Policies SPT1.1, GR01(PP), GR02(PP), SO2(PP), and HEA4(PP)

In 2020 Locality, the national network supporting community organisations, published a report entitled Place and Spaces: the future of community asset ownership that called for a bold new programme of support for community asset ownership⁴. The report acknowledged the valuable social, economic, and cultural benefits that accrue when local assets are taken into community control.

‘The community ownership of assets is an opportunity to empower citizens, regenerate local economies and democratise resources. It can also provide a sustainable income base for community organisations, affording some stability at a time of increasing financial uncertainty, while often generating profits to reinvest in other community activities and services’⁵.

However, despite important advances in recent years, most notably in the Community Rights to Bid and to Build, the implementation of community asset ownership through the powers introduced by the Localism Act 2012 has been slow to take off. In their report, Locality argue for a number of central government measures to help address this situation, but outside of Westminster, local authorities also have to power to help foster positive change in their areas.

The former Reel Cinema is one of just seven Assets of Community Value to have been successfully nominated in Plymouth. It offers an opportunity for the city to support an exemplary community-owned redevelopment set in motion through the powers of the Localism Act. As well as being an exciting cultural attraction in itself, this exemplar could provide an important PR asset for the city, complementing and underscoring other forward-thinking initiatives implemented by the civic authority such as the innovative Social Enterprise Investment Fund and the Plymouth Octopus Project, and could provide a boost to the City of Culture bid.

According to the OECD (2015), inclusive growth is "economic growth that creates opportunities for all segments of the population and distributes the dividends of increased prosperity, both in monetary and non-monetary terms, fairly across society". Inclusive growth enables the widest range of people and businesses to both contribute to, and benefit from economic success. It addresses social, economic, environmental and health inequalities by looking at different ways of achieving growth that benefits society as a whole. Plymouth Royal Cinema CBS have signed up to the Plymouth Charter, which promotes inclusive growth in a number of ways including buying local, upskilling, creating activities which improve quality of life, working collaboratively and using fair working practices.

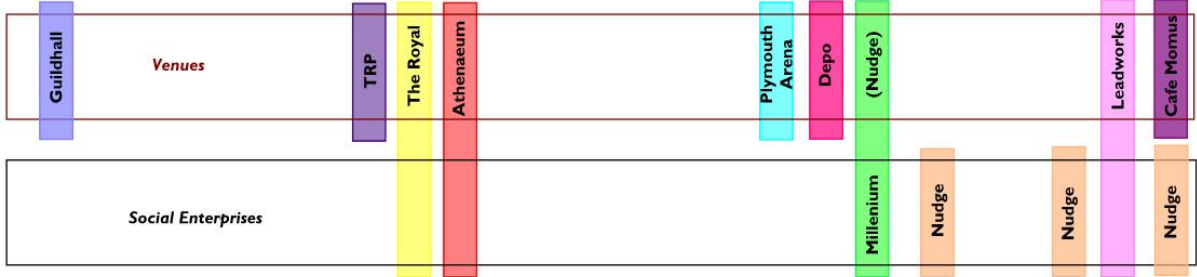
⁴ <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Locality-Places-and-spaces-report-final.pdf>

⁵ Ibid, p2.

In line with the Plymouth Culture Plan 2021-2030 The Royal will deliver community and economic benefits in a number of areas including:

- supporting the development of a strong local identity and pride in the city;
- contributing to the development of a healthier, more sustainable live venue eco-system, supporting Plymouth’s
- re-inclusion on the national touring circuit;
- partnering with the city’s learning and education providers to offer skills and training opportunities, including
- in construction and maintenance;
- supporting local economies of food production through the cafe and bar supply chain;
- supporting services and capacity building for specialist community groups (eg. dementia and autism friendly
- screenings);
- supporting Plymouth’s student offer and graduate retention.

The Royal, identified in Plymouth Rising: The Creative Industries in Britain’s Ocean City as part of the performance cluster, is shown below with other venues either active now or currently being planned. Along with the focus on social enterprises focused on Union St and also shown below, this locality stretching from the Guildhall to the Octagon and beyond will be strengthened by securing The Royal as a community asset, and along with the other venues and social enterprises can help form focus for vibrant and sustainable economic growth.



These community and economic benefits address JLP policies SPT1.1, GR01(PP), GR02(PP), SO2(PP), and HEA4(PP).

*“The Cultural and Creative Industries make a significant contribution to the British economy and are the fastest growing industry in the UK. The Gross Value Added (GVA) of the sector was estimated by DCMS at a global £76.9bn in 2013, representing 5.0% of the UK economy.”
Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth; The Warwick Commission; 2015*

SPT1 - Delivering sustainable development

1 A sustainable economy where:

- i Opportunities for business growth are both encouraged and supported.*
- iii Important local economic assets are protected for the purpose of economic activity.*

GRO1 (PP) - Creating the conditions for economic growth

The city will create the conditions for a transformed and rebalanced economy, attracting inward investment in knowledge-based industries including the marine and advanced manufacturing sectors and supporting new and existing city business, through the following measures:

3 Empowering people, communities and institutions to develop social enterprise initiatives to drive their own economic success.

- a. Providing targeted support to social enterprises across the city, building on Plymouth’s status as a Social Enterprise City.*
- b. Empowering communities to develop new economic opportunities, including through the transfer of community based assets and the growth of social enterprises and the voluntary and community sector.*
- c. Boosting levels of local procurement and connecting residents to opportunities arising from major developments and inward investments.*

GRO2 (PP) - Delivering skills and talent development

The city will provide an accessible environment for high quality lifelong learning so that all of its residents have the opportunity to access learning to develop their skills and talents in order to progress in their working lives, contributing to the realisation of Plymouth’s economic potential. In particular:

1 Skills will be matched with demand by:

- a. Strengthening partnerships between the city’s education institutions, communities and employers to match skill levels with demand.*

2 Enterprise and innovation will be driven by:

b. Supporting the removal of barriers to innovative development, training, growth and expansion, business start-up and advice.

4. Learning environments will be provided that equip people with the skills they need by:

d. Using planning powers to help address skills deficiencies and training needs, particularly (but not exclusively) in the construction industry.

SO2 (PP) - Delivering a growing city

To create the conditions for high quality and sustainable growth, which meets the present and future needs of Plymouth residents and businesses and transforms the city into a prosperous place to live; and to empower people to equip themselves with the skills and to find the opportunities to take advantage of that prosperity. This will be achieved by:

4. Creating an environment to harness the aspiration and talent of the city's population and attract new talent, ideas and innovation to the city.

HEA4 (PP) - Playing an active role in the community

The city will enable engaged and supportive communities by:

2. Supporting communities that wish to improve their local areas by:

c. Providing guidance and support to those communities who want to protect local services, own assets or run services in the city.

4. Ensuring that as a city we understand and recognise the social value and impact that the voluntary and community sector make and that there is a joined up approach to attracting investment.

Plymouth Royal Cinema Community Benefit Society

Community Benefit Societies are incorporated under the provisions of the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014, which requires a community benefit society to “carry on a business, industry or trade” that is “being, or intended to be, conducted for the benefit of the community” and be able to show that:

- the business must be run primarily for the benefit of people who are not members of the society and must be in the interests of the community at large
- the rules of the society must not allow distribution of profits or assets to the members: profits should be ploughed back into the business
- there is a ‘lock’ on any assets. For example, on dissolution the assets of the society must pass to some other body with similar objects, not to the members.

Due to their structure Community Benefit Societies are popular incorporations where the community ownership of particular local assets have meaning and importance for the whole community, such as The Royal Cinema.

About the Community Benefit Society

The Board consists of a committed and dynamic team with a broad range of complementary expertise. Individual Board members have professional backgrounds in: architecture and planning, PR and media, health and youth work, writing and publishing, live music and performance.



The objects of the Society shall be for the public benefit:

- (a) To promote, maintain, improve, encourage and provide public education in the arts including the arts of cinematography, music, singing, drama, the visual arts, and crafts.
- (b) To provide facilities in the interests of social welfare for the recreation and leisure time occupation of the public, particularly in Plymouth and the surrounding district and region, without distinction of sex, political, religious or other opinions and with the object of improving their conditions of life.
- (c) To preserve, protect and improve for the benefit of the public the Royal Cinema Plymouth, and promote the heritage of the building.

Public consultations

The Plymouth Royal Cinema CBS and its predecessor (Plymouth Royal Cinema Trust) have amassed a significant following of supporters including both local people and celebrities. A 2017 Change.org petition to save the building attracted 5,149 signatories, and the strength of attachment to the cinema is recorded in the book *'The Last Picture House: Saving Plymouth's Last Original Cinema Building'* authored by the Trust's Treasurer, Ian Carroll.

Having operated continuously from 1938 until 2019, generations of Plymothians identify The Royal as 'their cinema' and an integral part of the city. Live performances are held in very fond regard by the thousands who attended and further enhance the significance of the building. For the local community the Royal Cinema has been a constant in a sea of change, surviving the destruction of the Blitz, postwar reconstruction of the city centre and the huge societal changes of the last 80 years. The importance of this building to so many people is evidenced by the comments shared on Facebook and with author Ian Carroll, some of which are reproduced below. At the cinema's 80th birthday celebrations in July 2018, The Trust held an informal consultation with members of the public. There was a broad age range including two groups of young people who took time to talk about their choice to go to the Reel rather than other cinemas in Plymouth. One said *'the Reel is different, it has a different feel to the bigger cinemas...you can see some of the older parts of the cinema and it gives you an idea of all its history'*. Students from Plymouth College of Art expressed frustration about the possible loss of the building and reported that it was somewhere they wanted to continue to use and were enthusiastic about helping to save it.

Many older residents shared stories about their visits over the years - often having visited as children and then with their own families; they described the cinema as somewhere local, that they treasured, that held memories for them and that they wanted to be able to continue to visit with friends and family. This social aspect of the building is important; it was described as in the heart of the area and this is something we will nurture - The Royal as a meeting place and an anchor for community identity. Comments from supporters testify to the significance of The Royal:

'I was really shocked to hear that the cinema could be demolished as there seems to be little thought given to its heritage and indeed its uniqueness. I know the cinema well as I spent a week in the building helping to remove the classic 'Compton' organ, which was taken for restoration and relocation. I truly love buildings such as this and indeed this cinema has a place in Plymouth's history and in my opinion should be preserved and more made of its wonderful history. When places like this are destroyed they can never be replaced. I think Dudley Savage (who I had the pleasure of meeting) will be turning in his grave at what is being proposed...'

Rick Wakeman (Yes / Solo – Keyboards)

'The Plymouth Theater began its life in the 1930's. It is part of the history of cinema. It must be preserved for the future.'

John Carpenter (Director – 'Halloween', 'The Thing', 'Escape From New York')

'Always sad when a building that is part of the cultural history of a city is replaced by a developer's profit.'

John Cleese (Actor – Monty Python/Fawlty Towers)

'This Art Deco cinema should be saved from demolition with a preservation order. A very good example is the one screen Rex cinema in Berkhamsted, a town of some 16,000 people. First opened in 1938, closed in 1988, it re-opened in 2004 in its original style and has been a roaring success. Good luck in trying to save it.'

Lord David Owen (Member of the House of Lords)

'This building is an important part of the city's fabric. Now it's use as a cinema is enjoyed by all. To be able to easily catch the bus into town and go to see a film is a bonus. Save this treasured building.'

Linda Davidson (Saltash, Cornwall)

'It is the most amazing place, like walking back in time and being immersed in history - even when you go to see a modern movie.'

Ruth Mielek (Ivybridge, Devon)

'We need this more than we need more student accommodation! This building is of architectural significance and should be saved.'

Sandra Williams (Plymouth)

'This cinema means so much to so many of us, we don't use the big modern cinemas as we like our small local cinema.'

Suzanne Edgar (Plymouth)

'Basically it's a lovely old building and I'm fed up with our old buildings being demolished and thrown away like rubbish! They are our history. Too many are being destroyed, so much so that we won't have any left soon. Shame on the people who give permission to have them taken away from us instead of planning around them.'

Jennifer Hobbs (Plymouth)

'I love this cinema, I go there every time a new kids movie comes out 'cos my son can't go to TheVue because it's too loud. So essentially when/if they take this place away my kids will never get to go to the cinema again!! Sad days.'

John Cooper (Plymouth)

'This building brings art, culture and entertainment to those who maybe can't afford a night out at a multiplex, in a beautiful, authentic setting. A huge part of my childhood, and should not be replaced by another bright, shiny (but sterile) new build.'

Ben Smart (Minehead)

'I believe we should hold on to as many period buildings as possible in Plymouth. We have so little pre-war architecture it would be a shame to lose this Art Deco landmark. By all means repurpose it, but save the building!'

Caroline Coon (Plymouth)

'Reel Cinema is my 'go to' place and represents a group of happy and cherished memories. It reminds me that the building has been loved by the people of Plymouth for such a long time. How does a city retain its identity if you remove its history.'

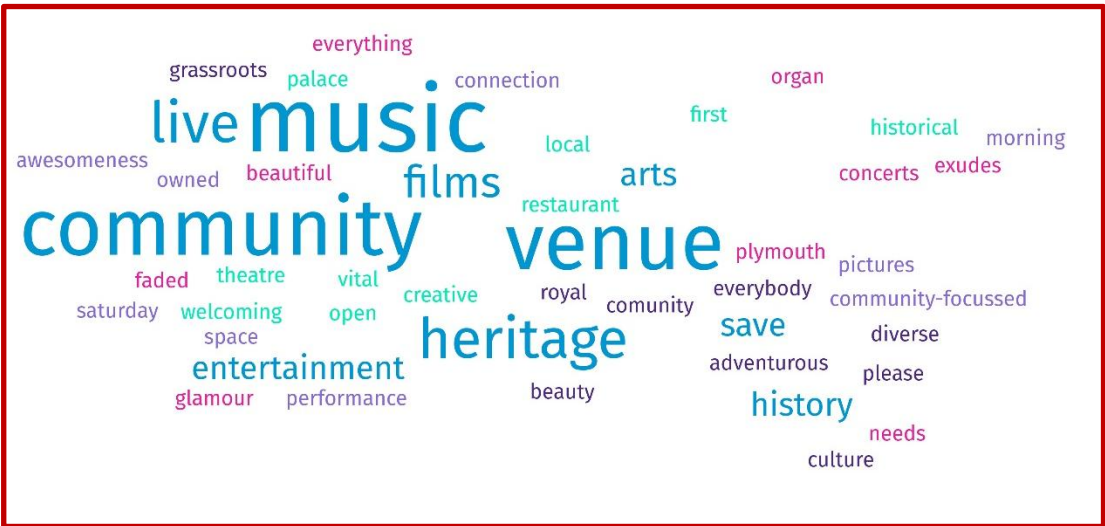
Public post on Facebook (name not supplied)

'The old "Royal" - been there many times for films, went with then girlfriend to see Cliff Richard and the Shadows with the supporting act as a young up-and-coming girl called Lulu, it was her 17th birthday, the screaming was unbelievable when Cliff was singing.'

Public post on Facebook (name not supplied)

'It is an important part of my life to be honest. I'm sure we've all been there with best friends, relatives that have passed on and not to mention first dates at the ABC/Reel. When my sister and I were in the sixth form at school we would mitch off from double afternoon PE and go to the ABC.'

Public post on Facebook (name not supplied)



Word cloud from a recent informal social media consultation: 'what 3 words describe what you want The Royal to be?'

Project Partners, Stakeholders & Consultees

Partners

We are currently working with 3 partners in developing our proposals and assembling our bid. This is commercially sensitive information at this time.

Community partners

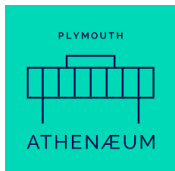


LIVE SOUND
PROMOTIONS

EST. 2008 • LIVE MUSIC PROMOTION • BOOKING • MANAGEMENT



Stakeholders



Nudge

THÊ DEPØ



Consultees

We are actively consulting with a number of statutory and non-statutory bodies, to inform our proposals and ensure that we have the support of the relevant specialists.





We're backing the bid!



The adventure
starts here

PLYMOUTH 2029 
UK CITY OF CULTURE

#GeddonPlymouth2029



Plymouth Royal Cinema Community Benefit Society

March 2025