

Stuart Langhorn,
14 Whernside Grove,
Carnforth,
Lancashire.
LA5 9XH
stuart.langhorn@sky.com
07919 927467
3rd January 2014

Dear Councillor,

Grand Theatre Lancaster

I am writing to you in my capacity as a board member of the Grand Theatre, Lancaster. My purpose is to inform you about the proposed development of the theatre and to request your help in supporting its future.

The Grand Theatre, situated on St Leonardsgate, Lancaster is the second oldest theatre in operation outside of London. It is run by volunteers and is a registered charity. As a venue it is used by professional acts as well as many local amateur groups including LADOS, Morecambe Warblers, Red Rose and Footlights who provide most of the volunteers for the running of the theatre. Unlike other venues in the district, the Grand currently receives no grant support from Lancaster City Council. The theatre has been successfully managed and its budget has broken even for many years. This year the theatre, in common with most venues, has seen a slight down turn in its audience numbers as a result of the recession.

The Grand is planning to expand the theatre by adding a two storey extension to the side of the theatre. This will provide much needed front of house space for the audience, further bar facilities and access to the box office. In turn this will mean the venue will continue to be attractive for professional acts and the theatre's financial future can be assured. Members have already raised a significant amount of money and are seeking grants to allow the completion of the project.

This brings me to our request from the council. The Grand currently rents part of its car park from Lancaster City Council. If you are familiar with the theatre this is the gravelled part of the car park at the side of the theatre (the tarmac area belongs to the theatre and this is where the extension will go). It is used by visiting acts and volunteers. The theatre pays £3500 a year to the City Council for the rental of this area, and has maintained the area at its own cost. We are now requesting that the council rent this area at a peppercorn rent to the theatre – recognising its significant role in the arts provision in the city. We would remind the council that when there is a production on at the theatre the car parks around St Leonardsgate are full with charge paying public. The council also charged the ITV production team for the rental of the lower car park during the filming of Panto and claimed it as a success in its corporate plan. It would not seem unreasonable that the council shows its support of the theatre and recognises its importance by granting the car park to the theatre rather than charging the charity for it.

The board of the Grand have already entered into discussions with officers from the council regarding this. However, the officers have been unable support the request we have made due to the financial restrictions placed upon them. This is why I am writing to you directly. As a councillor you have the power to authorise this pepper corn rent – or, alternatively, to recommend a grant for the rent during the budget process. This is why the board is writing to you now.

A related issue is that of the long term future of the land around the theatre as part of the potential re-development of the site. We have been very pleased with discussions with officers concerning the building at the rear of the theatre (currently the musician’s co-op.) The plan was for the council to have sold this building to the developers who would then renovate it and lease it to the Grand for storage and rehearsal space. The building cannot be knocked down as this would undermine the fly tower of the theatre. The Board have recommended that the council cede the building directly to the Grand instead officers are happy with this proposal.

It was during these discussions that it was revealed that the council intend to dispose of the car park at the front of the Grand as part of the proposed development. It will then become public open space. In addition Lodge Street, which runs down the side of the theatre, will be closed off. The theatre has not been consulted on this idea. We would wish to draw to your attention our concerns about these proposals and the impact they will have on the financial future of the theatre. The loss of the car park at the front will mean the professional acts will have no where to deliver to the theatre, volunteers will have no where to park and the proposed development of the theatre will be put at risk. The closure of Lodge Street means there is no access to the stage door of the theatre for sets and props. Officers tell us that access will be through the development – but will not be 24 hour access and certainly not during ‘shop’ hours. Clearly, a theatre needs 24 hour access. For example visiting acts arrive during the day and need to set up for the evening show – when the shops shut is too late. The Grand would be unable to support any development that would jeopardise its business by restricting access to the theatre during the day.

For this reason we would recommend that the council cedes the piece of land at the front of the theatre to the Grand instead of including it in the redevelopment scheme. We also recommend Lodge Street is not closed off down the side of the theatre. These simple actions will help to support the long term future of the theatre.

In summary we are making the following requests:

Recommendation	Cost to LCC	Advantages	Risks
Peppercorn rent of gravelled land at front of	£3500 per year	Supports theatre during recession.	None. A successful theatre

Grand Theatre as part of 2014-15 budget		Recognises that LCC provides no other support to the theatre. Acknowledges contribution to Arts	enhances night time economy and income to LCC car parks in area.
Grant of gravelled land to theatre	£3500 per year (if peppercorn rent refused)	Supports long term future of theatre and access for acts and volunteers. Shows support for the proposed extension to the theatre adjacent to this land.	None - Does not effect the development of the area as the space is designated as open space.
Grant of half of building (Musicians Co-op) to theatre	None	Supports long term future of theatre. Will mean the theatre does not have to rent space elsewhere which it does at the moment at a cost of over £5000 per annum. The building cannot be removed due to the impact its demolition will have on the fly tower. Places the building in the charities ownership instead of having the theatre rent it from a private developer.	None- the building cannot be demolished.
Lodge Street to remain open down side of the theatre	None	Supports long term future of theatre and access for acts and volunteers. Shows support for the proposed extension to the	Lodge Street could be blocked off nearer to Edward Street – this will need to be discussed with the developer.

		theatre adjacent to this land.	
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We hope that you will be able to support these proposals and look forward to hearing from you within the next week or so. A copy of this letter has been sent to each group leader on Lancaster City Council as well as each councillor so you may wish to respond as a group or as individual councillors. Should you be unfamiliar with the theatre or just wish to have a look around for yourself we extend an invitation to you to come and visit us. We will be more than happy to show you around and discuss the issues and our plans in greater depth.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart Langhorn on behalf of Lancaster Footlights Board