

Report on the 'Survey on the Future of the Garrison Theatre'

Presented by the Garrison Theatre Steering Group

November 2016

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of a survey conducted by the Garrison Theatre Steering Group (GTSG) to gather the public's views on the future of the Garrison Theatre.
- 1.2 The report and associated recommendations will be presented to the boards of Shetland Charitable Trust and Shetland Arts in November 2016.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Garrison Theatre Steering Group (GTSG) was formed in early 2016, comprising representatives of regular users including Islesburgh Drama Group, Shetland County Drama Festival Committee, Open Door Drama and Shetland Country Music Club, as well as Shetland Charitable Trust, which owns the building, and Shetland Arts, who manage it.
- 2.2 The purpose of the GTSG is to explore options for the theatre amid significant funding constraints.
- 2.3 As part of this process the GTSG elected to conduct a survey to gauge opinion and seek input from the community.

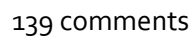
3 Methodology

- 3.1 The survey was conducted by providing positive statements and inviting responses using a Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) and comments for each statement were invited.
- 3.2 The survey was available online from 5 to 24 October and a 'cut out' paper version was included in the Shetland Times on 7th October.
- 3.3 740 respondents completed the online survey and 64 respondents submitted a paper copy

4 Results

- 4.1 Quantitative data for each statement is displayed as bar graphs
- 4.2 Qualitative data (comments) for each statement are displayed using a Wordcloud of the 100 most frequently used words (excluding the dominant words 'Garrison', 'Theatre' and 'Shetland' for the sake of clarity), with more frequently used words displayed as larger text.
- 4.3 The GTSG also selected individual comments which they felt were indicative of the majority of comments

803 responses



3

away Garrison Theatre the ability for young people to express themselves on stage would be limited and the experience of the Shetland community when it comes to drama would be insufficient.

Only such facility available in Shetland. Mareel and the Garrison complement each other and both are needed. Garrison is ideal venue for drama, dance, comedy and variety concerts, whilst Mareel is more suitable for musical events.

It played a vital and key role in the past, but the future may not need it.

We all need a form of entertainment no matter what. But the locals have to support it because it is for the islanders that every form of entertainment is put on

The central location within Shetland is important. Without the Garrison groups which currently perform in the Garrison would be forced to attempt performances in small cramped and ill-equipped "stages" in country or community halls. many of these venues are not accessible in the evenings by public transport which limits potential audience numbers.

The Garrison seems to be far from an ideal venue in many ways, however as things currently stand there is unlikely to be an increase in available funding and so the chances of building/developing a suitable facility are limited. Given that it is an old building and probably expensive to maintain, it seems quite likely that the Garrison, while providing a suitable venue for drama will on the one hand support the development of the performing arts in Shetland and play a part in creating opportunity and on the other hand simultaneously limit development and opportunity as it will tie up money that could, potentially be invested in other ways.

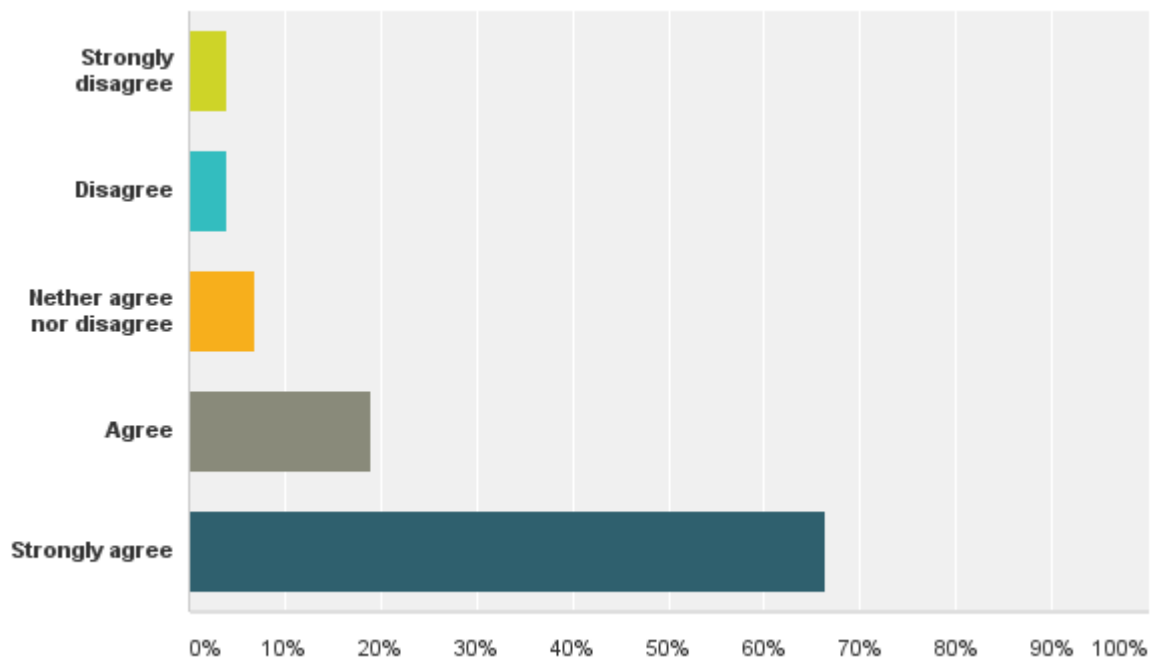
There have been some incredible and creative performances using non - traditional spaces instead of theatre. The Garrison isn't truly fit for purpose from an audience perspective, having uncomfortable seats and not enough of a rake to get a decent view of the stage without it being blocked by heads of the people in front.

It has a long history of nurturing raw talent and consequently has been the starting point for many young creative Shetlanders. For them it has provided an insight into theatre and the performing arts in general that they could not have got at another venue .It has provided the local population with a real taste of a night at the theatre which would only be available on the Scottish mainland without it.

The Garrison Theatre is a vital community asset with a long and proud social history as important to Shetland and Scotland as many of Shetland's historic sites. As a living theatre space the linkage to multiple generations of performance is a reflection of a strong creative community. [edited]

Statement 2: The Garrison Theatre is the only facility in Shetland suitable for traditional theatre productions

799 responses



138 comments



Indicative summary of comments

You can make do with some other places but nothing comes near the standards of the Garrison for sound, lighting, size, wings, storage, trained staff to help. We can do Drama in most local halls, you may have no wings, no main curtain, the sound can be terrible, most don't have any lighting, no changing rooms, most don't have any tabs, often low seating capacity less than 100. No tiered seating so you can't see. Plus many other factors not given above. A local hall is the poor man's choice.

Other spaces are perhaps available for amateur productions, but not professional. Not everyone is fortunate enough to see live performances south.

I fear for how groups like Open Door, Shetland Youth Theatre and others will be able to continue without such an asset. I understand an argument can be made that you can 'do drama' elsewhere but not all groups want to 'do drama' in creative spaces. We must retain the Garrison to provide the next generation with the basic foundation skills of performing in a Theatre.

It is definitely more suitable than Mareel for traditional theatre as that is its original purpose, whereas Mareel is more suited to modern performances without scenery changes etc.

Mareel does not have wing space, etc. However, theatre and the performance arts can and should happen in lots of different places. The theatre is important and should be a focal point which feeds, supports and develops. E.g. Lyceum Youth, Traverse new writing support, etc. If it is just a venue close the doors.

Other venues are suitable for Drama performances but traditional theatre - plays, pantos, musicals etc requires wing space. Touring drama productions can work in community halls but they would be severely restricted from what is currently possible. There is currently no other identified venue suitable. Mareel is a great performance venue, but you have to consider the suitability of the stage (lack of wings and backstage area) the seating (can it be set up as an auditorium like the cinema area?) and also the impact on other Mareel activities when the auditorium is fully blocked out for over 3 weeks at a time for a play. Trying to squeeze traditional theatre productions into an already busy and developing schedule at Mareel will result in either music or drama losing out. Surely this is a back step and the very reason a suitable music venue was needed in the first place? Instead I would like to see local amateur groups supported to put in productions in the theatre, utilisation of the upstairs area and an education programme being put in place.

Absolutely true, it is THE only theatre in Shetland with a proscenium arch, a cross over space behind and wing space vital for putting on drama and ballet/dance productions and the floor is highly suitable for dancing on.

More experimental productions could be well/better suited to other venues. Traditional theatre thrives in a traditional space. That space is the Garrison Theatre.

800 answered



7

A vital piece of Shetland's creative arts that should not be lost because of lack of funding

I would like to see Shetland Arts work with the community to consider how income could be maximised from the Garrison whilst reducing costs. Mareel have a number of music / film educational programmes running from Mareel. Why can't this not be achieved with a range of drama courses - acting / costume design / stage management etc. This could be offered at different ages and stages - N4/5, Higher, NC, HNC level or higher. Another example could be use of the meeting room and having key holder operated from a volunteers group. Shetland Arts has commissioned a number of their own festivals at Mareel celebrating music and film. Could this not be done for drama in the Garrison?

Vital! I would like to see Shetland Arts increase their presence and profile within the Garrison. It must have the same level of support than the other facilities in their estate. I would guess that the majority of productions / events staged in the Garrison is operated by community groups, with very little commissioned by Shetland Arts. This will be in contrast to Mareel where Shetland Arts sustains its viability by commissioning its own projects / events / festivals.

I can't see it paying for itself but I guess Shetlanders have to decide if it is important enough to them to warrant SCT monies on an ongoing basis. Many things in Shetland can't sustain themselves, that is why we have the SCT is it not...?

Investment of money in theatre skills, drama, dance classes is a better use. The venue is irrelevant.

I would be happy for funding to continue but groups and users would be expected to utilise the resource.

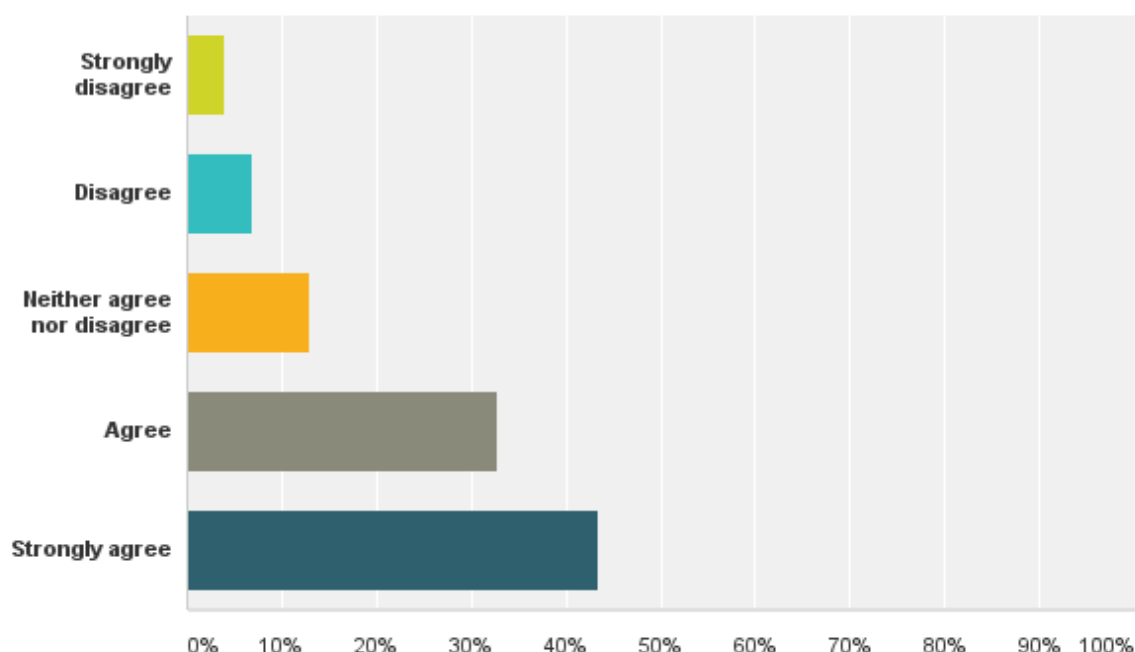
[edited] If they could improve the experience for the audience then definitely. Better rake, better seating. That's unlikely as the investment needed would be significant.

[edited] investment from Shetland Arts funds is not a good use of resources. It should be run like any other community facility in Shetland and financed by fundraising.

I know many people who's lives have been positively impacted thanks to their involvement in drama, and I also know many people who now do acting as a career thanks to facilities like the Garrison and the thriving drama community in Shetland. I cannot stress this enough. The drama scene in Shetland would be damaged and much less thriving of the theatre did not exist.

Statement 4: The Garrison Theatre hosts a varied programme of events and productions that cater for my tastes.

800 responses



108 comments



Indicative summary of comments

Over the last few years, I've seen several pantomimes, a couple of musicals and even an opera at the Garrison Theatre. That's a pretty varied programme of events. More touring theatrical productions would be welcome.

I, along with my family, friends and community go to the Garrison each year for the Theatre Production in December, and we love it. I would be more than happy to go to more events and productions and think that more advertising should be done when such things are upcoming.

If it was not for the work of the local Drama, Dance, Charity concerts and Country music events there would be almost nothing on at the Garrison. Shetland Arts arrange very little, its main focus a few years ago was on Youth Theatre, but the money was only kept to fund the Shetland Arts Youth Drama. More was spent on one Youth Productions than the all the other rural drama groups put together.

You can see productions of all kinds at the Garrison. At the moment, this is largely because of committed individuals and groups who are willing to give time to do so. It would be nice if there was more on offer through the year - if professional shows could be brought up now and again - but this would require subsidy from SADA/The Charitable Trust or the council.

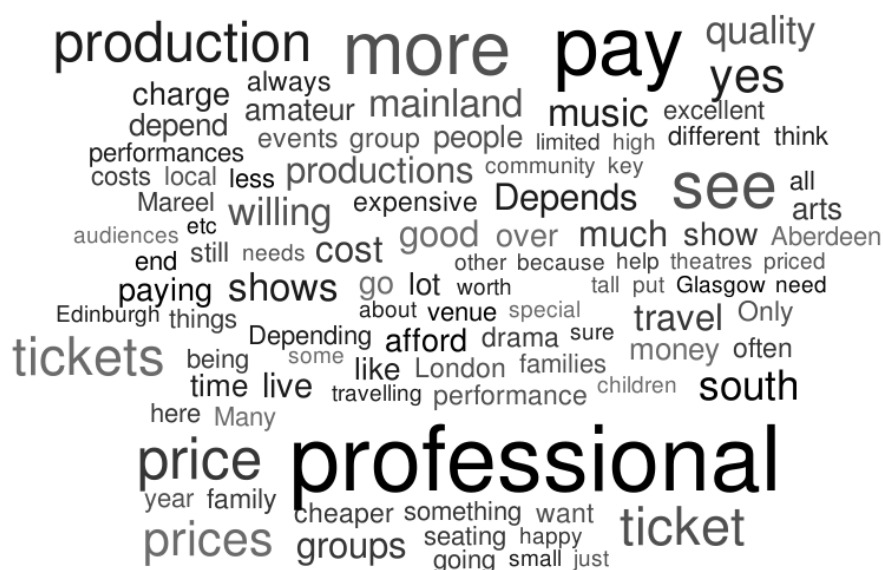
The views of professionals working in theatre should be gathered alongside this survey. They will know what works / the types of programmes that are successful and how best to use available resources.

Plenty of local produced and community commissioned work. What about events and projects from Shetland Arts?

There is always a need to develop and maintain a strong programme which has to be varied and diverse to cater for everyone's taste. It has to move with the times as well as covering more traditional events.

We have had everything from opera to farce performed in the Garrison, variety shows, pantomimes, music performances, drama festivals, with scope for more. We need regular programming of this space to keep bringing people in. It could do with a bar, as well. Take over the building next door if necessary, but improve what we have to bring it seriously up to date.

799 responses



The ticket price needs to be pegged at a level that provides a sustainable income for the theatre. If that means that ticket prices rise then so be it. Just make sure that it is clearly explained to the public why the price rise is needed.

For live professional theatre I would be willing to pay £20 or more, however there must be a line between amateur groups and professional groups - though I love watching both. Though I do think that £20 for live professional theatre would be amazing because looking at things like Broadway you would be paying hundreds or pounds for a good seat.

I have had no hesitation in paying that sort of money to see a theatre production down south, and would happily pay that to have an entertaining evening at the Garrison - particularly if some of the money (say a pound a ticket) was used to maintain the upkeep of the theatre, or help bring in shows from down south.

If that is the cost of bringing professionals to Shetland who earn their living through the arts, then they must be supported.

For a small venue like the Garrison the level of staging is not what you would get from a professional show in a large theatre on the mainland and this should be reflected in the price.

I would personally but I do not think that this should be a condition for its continued operation. Many families could not afford anything like that. Variety is the key - Islesburgh Drama Group has always funded most of its productions during the year from its sales of pantomime tickets. Ticket prices should vary and family shows should not be overpriced so that attendance is maximised and access not limited to those who can afford tickets. Popular events can be used to help fund those aimed at more specialised events or those whose appeal is less widespread.

Ticket prices for professional shows at Edinburgh/ Glasgow/ Aberdeen not to mention London are well in excess of £20. Many Shetlanders travel to these cities to attend shows and plays. With travel expenses on top of the cost of their theatre tickets there should be no problem selling tickets priced at £20+ for professional shows at the Garrison.

We pay that for Mareel at the moment anyway, and theatre on the mainland.

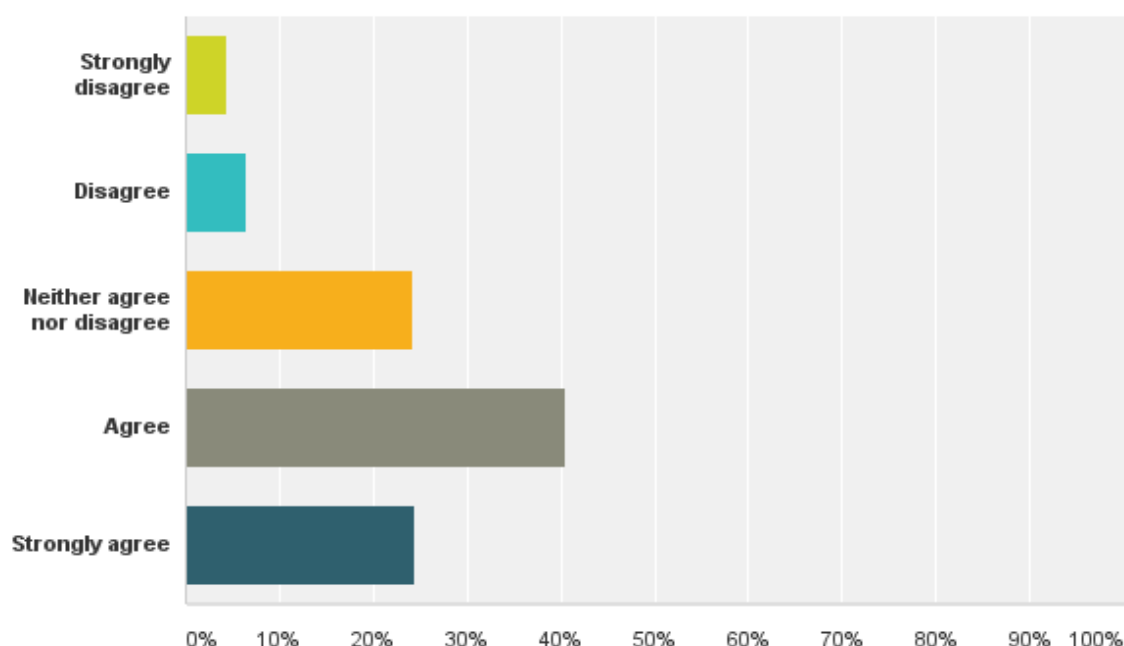
If increasing the ticket prices helps to keep the theatre open then so be it, but concessions for the children they are the future.

Shetland's prices are always on the low side and the public need to change their way of thinking and not be handed things on a plate.

Difficult to price tickets over £20 for family shows, fine for an individual but significantly marginalising the community and further contributing to social exclusion for those on low income.

Statement 6: The Garrison Theatre could be managed by a voluntary group or trust.

796 responses



114 comments



Indicative summary of comments

Having the Garrison run by its own trust would be time consuming and it may be difficult to attract quality trustees. I'd prefer to see that very much as a last resort, in the event of Shetland Arts pulling out of running the theatre, for example.

It would be great if this could happen but I know from being on a voluntary hall committee that it is always the same people who do everything, no one seems to have time to commit to this.

Surely we should leave it to those qualified and have the expertise within Shetland Arts to run the Garrison. I would be in agreement to a user group being established to help run events and reduce costs through volunteers.

As long as there is a good committee it could be run independently with a little support from the Arts Trust.

Difficult to answer without knowing more about the running of the theatre. Volunteers have always been a big part of productions over the years so I am sure a well organised committee with financial backing from various places locally & nationally like lottery funding bids etc could well keep the theatre going.

I would be deeply concerned about this. Local drama and music groups are already run by volunteers. They do not have the capacity to run a theatre without affecting their role in ensuring productions are brought to the stage.

Think this would be difficult - responsibilities, health and safety, time commitments - it could work, but invites more uncertainty.

Yes it could but there is already a significant load on the third sector in Shetland. Surely having it managed by Shetland Arts who are funded by SCT (the people's money) is a good way of continuing. However there could be some volunteer involvement in operations perhaps.

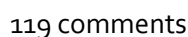
It would need a lot more organisation & commitment than a voluntary group/trust could give.

Voluntary groups have enough issues in maintaining their own committees and activities but perhaps they would be a good sounding board for the Shetland Arts to bounce ideas to for discussion.

I think the issue here is whether the Garrison is adequately funded. Of course it could be managed by a voluntary group or trust, provided they were able to obtain adequate funding to do so.

Shetland has a venerable tradition of volunteer-driven enterprises. Unfortunately it also has a bad case of grant and subsidy dependency, with a (badly misguided) assumption that everything must be publicly funded to some extent or another. This structure works in other venues around Scotland - no reason it can't at the Garrison too!

772 responses



I already do. But I'm aware of how much we depend on the trained, skilled technical staff to make a show work. I fear we would lose that if the theatre was largely left to be run by volunteers.

It would depend entirely on the personality of the person organising the events. If it was lightsome company I'd volunteer more times but if they were too pushy & bossy I'd dort & stay away.

Evening events are a problem for those who do not live on the Shetland Mainland - attendance involves booking late ferries and is almost impossible without a car.

Geographically distant, but with you in spirit!

Over the past thirty-five years I have spent more hours than I can count working with youth and adult groups towards productions in the theatre. I would continue to do this.

I have volunteered for Shetland Arts at several venues in front of house and merchandise selling roles. These are suitable roles for volunteers.

I would like to say yes but have no time at the moment, though would be happy to help in productions where my children were involved.

Subject to health and fitness.

I work backstage at many productions in the theatre

I don't mind getting involved in setting up or with working the lights for the events I think I would enjoy it.

Never thought about it before and perhaps there could be something I could do, although I am not 'arty'!

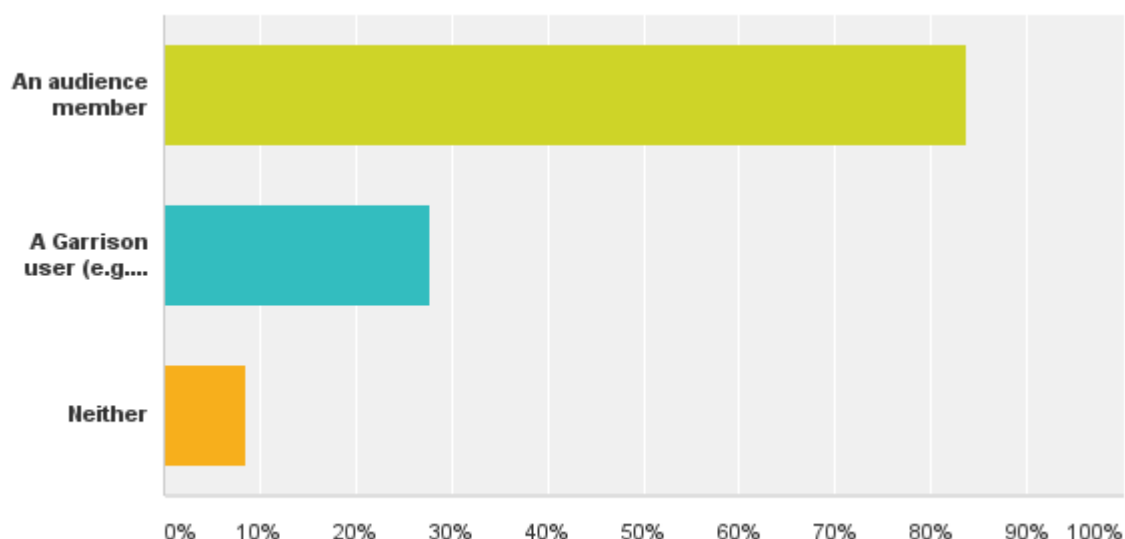
With my time being limited, I would rather be in the audience.

There should be a way of group members becoming Shetland Arts volunteers in order to staff their own productions, particularly for the front of house team. A good avenue for Shetland Arts to develop and increase their volunteering/work experience programmes.

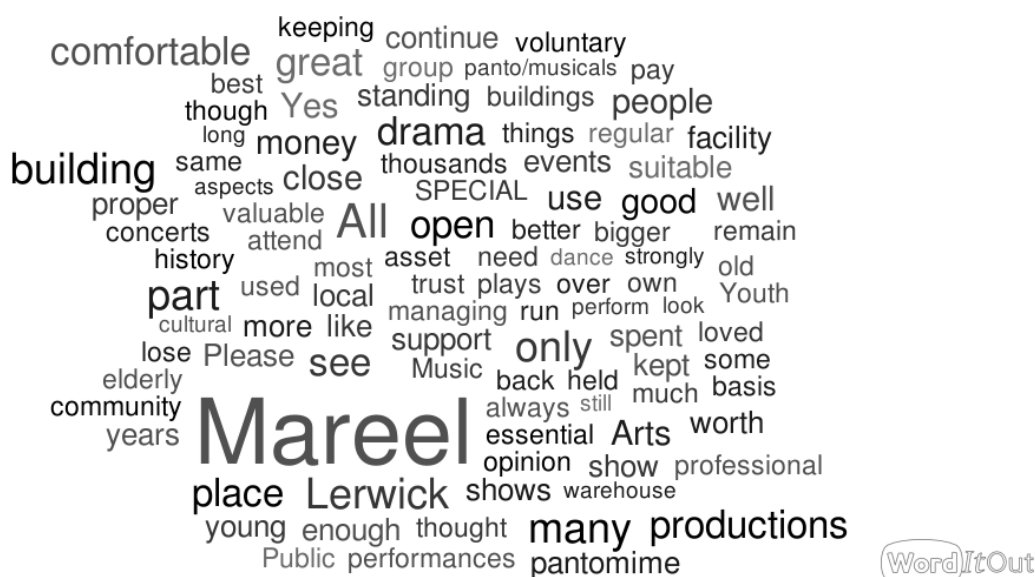
I already volunteer for other areas of life as do many other people in Shetland. It comes to a point where this is unsustainable for an island of our population size.

I already help out Islesburgh Drama Group, either on the door or in the kitchen upstairs. I would be more than willing to do this for other groups on a voluntary basis.

804 responses



39 comments



The theatre is a most important aspect to Shetland. If this stops there will be no more productions of the same level – ie panto/musicals. Although Mareel is good it does not have facilities in the style of wings/tabs etc.

I find it hard to believe that Mareel cannot put on plays, and especially the pantomime (sold out every year) with all the money that was spent on the building you would have thought it would have been essential to have included all aspects of entertainment!!

All theatre in Lerwick could be under the same mantle with the paid staff at Mareel managing the Garrison Theatre as well as Mareel. If this means subsidising the Garrison Theatre when such a venue is more suitable for certain acts or performances then so be it.

You can have shows in the Garrison you can't do in Mareel. I've been to lots of things in the Garrison, haven't been to one at Mareel.

The Garrison Theatre has always been a special place in Lerwick and is a valuable asset to the community. It is the only theatre in Lerwick and Mareel could never be a replacement. There have been many superb productions and concerts over the years and every time I am there, I have memories flooding back – great to look back on and share.

For anyone growing up in the 50s, 60s and 70s the Garrison was the place to see local drama, concerts, visiting artists etc... To my mind that is still the case today. The theatre at Mareel is inadequate to provide that range of performances. The Garrison Theatre is part of Shetland's cultural heritage and history and should remain so.

5 Summary

5.1 Importance of the Garrison Theatre

- The majority of respondents agree (15.4%) or strongly agree (74.7%) with the statement "The Garrison Theatre is important to the future of the performing arts in Shetland."
- The survey identified a strong theme of the historical importance of the Garrison Theatre in the performing arts and wider culture of Shetland, and a significant percentage of the community regularly attend productions.
- The positive community benefits of productions that involve and appeal to a wide age range of participants and audiences was a strong theme in support of the activities in the theatre.

5.2 Facilities

- The majority of respondents agree (18.9%) or strongly agree (66.3%) with the statement "The Garrison Theatre is the only facility in Shetland suitable for traditional theatre productions."
- Comments indicated that respondents believe there is no current alternative to the production facilities in the Garrison Theatre in terms of backstage, sprung floor and wing space.
- Moving current productions from the Garrison Theatre to other venues could present significant programming challenges (e.g. the Pantomime producers needs to block book a venue for a month).

5.3 Investment

- The majority of respondents agree (24.6%) or strongly agree (62.8%) the statement "Continued investment in the Garrison Theatre is a good use of resources."
- The Steering Group recognizes the financial challenges of operating the Garrison Theatre in the face of reduced funding.
- There is incomplete and in some instances inaccurate information in circulation relating to the Garrison Theatre (and Mareel), particularly around funding and building maintenance.

5.4 Programme

- The majority of respondents agree (32.9%) or strongly agree (43.4%) with the statement "The Garrison Theatre hosts a varied programme of events and productions that cater for my tastes."

- The majority of respondents agree (40.3%) or strongly agree (36.3%) with the statement “I would be willing to pay £20 or more for tickets to see live professional theatre.”
- Requests for more touring productions was a theme in the comments.

5.5 Community Involvement

- The majority of respondents agree (40.5%) with the statement “The Garrison Theatre could be managed by a voluntary group or trust.”
- A common theme in the comments was that any such group or trust would still need the support of Shetland Charitable Trust and/or Shetland Arts.
- The majority of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed (33.7%) with the statement “I would be willing to volunteer some of my time to helping out with events and productions in the Garrison Theatre.”
- However, a large number of individuals agreed (28.5% = 220 people) or strongly agreed (17.34% = 134 people).
- Many respondents already volunteer their time as performers or backstage operatives.
- Existing time commitments would prevent many other respondents from volunteering.

6 Recommended Requests to SCT/SADA Boards

- 6.1 The current model of maintenance and operational support be committed to by the owners (SCT) and operators (SADA) until 2019/20 to coincide with SCT budget cycle.
- 6.2 To establish a forum for a continued dialogue between the owners (SCT), the operators (SADA) and the users. The purpose of this group would be to:
 - 6.2.1 Explore ownership and funding models to secure the long term future of The Garrison Theatre.
 - 6.2.2 Work with Shetland Arts to provide and train a voluntary workforce to help bring down the variable costs of running events.
 - 6.2.3 Act as a sounding board for new pricing models for the hire of The Garrison Theatre that will enable Shetland Arts to invest in the development of drama for the benefit of the whole of Shetland.
 - 6.2.4 Develop a strategy for expanding and diversifying the use of The Garrison Theatre.

7 Appendix

7.1 Media release published on October 5th 2016

A major survey has been launched to gather the public’s views on the future of the Garrison Theatre.

Earlier this year a steering group was formed, comprising representatives of regular users including Islesburgh Drama Group, Shetland County Drama Festival Committee, Open Door Drama and Shetland Country Music Club, as well as Shetland Charitable Trust, which owns the building, and Shetland Arts, who manage it.

The purpose of the group is to explore options for the 112-year-old theatre amid significant funding constraints.

It is due to report its initial findings to the boards of Shetland Charitable Trust and Shetland Arts in October.

The survey, which will inform this report, asks the public questions on a range of issues, including how important the theatre is to them; whether the programme of events caters for their tastes; if they would be prepared to pay higher prices to attend events; and whether they would be willing to volunteer to help out with productions.

The survey will be included this week's Shetland Times and an online version is available here - > www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/FutureGarrison

Izzy Swanson, President of the Shetland Country Drama Festival Committee, said: "I would appeal to everyone to take a few moments to complete the survey about the Garrison, which to me and hopefully many others is a fundamental part of cultural life in Shetland.

"We have a shared pride in the theatre and all that we have been able to do on the stage, and now need to draw on that to maintain our strong tradition of drama."

David Grieve, Vice President of Islesburgh Drama Group said: "There is no other space in Shetland with the backstage facilities and wing space to put on a major show – panto, musicals, bigger plays, so it's vital that we find ways to keep the Garrison going."

Bryan Peterson, Head of Creative Opportunities at Shetland Arts added: "A survey we carried out in 2015 highlighted that, together with continued support for youth drama activities, a well run, well maintained theatre space was the top priority for respondents.

"Financial pressures mean we are having to think how best to achieve that, and the steering group is hoping to be able to galvanise members of the community into helping us find a way forward. This survey is just the start of that process."

The building was opened in 1904 as an army drill hall but was converted into a theatre in 1942. Repairs and refurbishment were carried out in 1989 and then again in 1995/6.

Activity in the theatre has reduced in recent years with film screenings moving to Mareel and a reduction in touring theatre productions coming to Shetland due to the high cost of travel and accommodation. Increasing operating and maintenance costs together with decreasing public funding are also major challenges for the future.

Shetland Charitable Trust commissioned a recent report which indicated that the building is in relatively good condition with no major structural issues.

However, a building of this age requires significant ongoing maintenance, without taking into account refurbishments or improvements. The cost of operating the building is in excess of the hire and ticket income, and the balance is met from Shetland Arts' annual budget. Shetland Arts grant income from Shetland Charitable Trust will reduce from £695,000 in 2016-17 to £603,000 in 2019-20.

Hire charges are relatively cheap when compared to other similar theatres on the mainland. The Garrison works out at £240 per day to hire compared (including rehearsal time) to An Lanntair in Stornoway at £300 per day and the Gardyne Theatre in Dundee at £450 per day.

Usage of the building by local and national groups has remained fairly consistent for the past four years with an average of 36 events with 180 attendances at each, totalling an average of 6,480 attendances per year.