

REFLECTING ON THE LAST 12 MONTHS

Annual Review of the Octagon Theatre,
Westlands Entertainment Venue and our
Arts Engagement & Outreach Service 2023-24

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 OCTAGON
THEATRE
YEOVIL

 WESTLANDS
YEOVIL



WELCOME...

2023 marked a new chapter for Somerset, and for The Octagon Theatre & Westlands Entertainment Venue, as we embarked on our journey as one of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations, and of Somerset Council.

It is a pleasure to present the wonderful achievements we have since seen, including the smooth transition of The Octagon Theatre's programme to Westlands Entertainment Venue, and transformation of our Arts Engagement & Outreach Service for the 2023-24 financial year.

Over the year, we witnessed a truly unforgettable moment when The Octagon Theatre was gracefully "put to sleep" by a vibrant community cast of over 300 people, marking its closure at the end of April 2023 for an exciting redevelopment. It was a powerful celebration of the theatre's legacy, and I was delighted to experience it. Although the journey to transform The Octagon Theatre has faced its challenges, I'm pleased to report we're making progress (turn to page 11 for more details).

The year saw Westlands Entertainment Venue become a hub of activity, hosting the Yeovil Literary Festival and delivering festive cheer with the Christmas pantomime; The Octagon Theatre announced to lead the Music Hub for Somerset & Dorset from September 2024, bringing top-tier music education to the region; the growth of our Arts Engagement & Outreach programme with activities, events and performances delivered across the county that empower lives, reduce isolation and enhance wellbeing.

At Somerset Council we are passionate about nurturing the talents of our young people, embracing our rich heritage, and forging creative partnerships to secure a sustainable and vibrant cultural life in Somerset. We know our beautiful county is a great place to live, but we recognise the challenges our communities face, from rural isolation and areas of disadvantage to challenges around mental health and an ageing population. Culture has the power to connect our communities and positively contribute to and alleviate these issues, to make Somerset a better place to live, work and visit. The Octagon Theatre & Westlands Entertainment Venue continue to provide opportunities for residents to engage with creative arts from within our venues and in community spaces throughout the county.

We've been working hard to secure the future of services across our county, and that's meant finding new partners and ways to ensure their future success. Such as the devolution of Westlands Entertainment Venue to Yeovil Town Council in August 2024. We continue to work closely with our partners to ensure our residents have access to arts and culture and the many benefits they bring.

As you read through the achievements of the past 12 months, I hope you'll be inspired by how our Arts & Entertainment Service continues to enrich the lives of our residents through a diverse programme of performances, events, and activities. These shared experiences unite us all and offer something for everyone to enjoy and benefit from.

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts

Chair of Octagon Arts Engagement & Outreach Board
Lead member for Housing, Communities and Culture
Somerset Council

OUR VALUES

WE ARE PASSIONATE

about the power of the creative and performing arts.

WE ARE DEDICATED

to enriching the lives of people living in Somerset, bringing a diverse range of quality arts experiences to the South West.

WE CREATE OPPORTUNITIES

for everyone to enjoy, learn, engage and participate in the arts, contributing to their health, wellbeing and happiness.

WE WORK

to ensure that our venues—Octagon and Westlands—along with any other locations where we present arts experiences, are welcoming and accessible to all.

WE RECOGNISE

that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not, so we seek out, nurture and celebrate emerging talent within our community, as well as supporting professional artists to develop.

WE ENSURE

that our actions are ethical, environmentally sustainable, financially sound, offer value for money and contribute to a kinder and fairer society.

Our aim is to unleash creativity, connect our communities, improve access to the arts and nurture talent here in Somerset and across the South West.





WHERE DO OUR CUSTOMERS COME FROM

SPARKING CREATIVITY, LEADING CHANGE

I am delighted to share with you some of the wonderful work our team at The Octagon Theatre & Westlands Entertainment Venue have delivered over the past 12 months. In the last year, we have entertained audiences, inspired children & young people, boosted the wellbeing of our participants, empowered our community, and brought people together where they live.

This review looks back on an exciting year and highlights the positive impact the arts and culture play in enriching our lives and in making Somerset a better place to live, work, visit and enjoy! It has also been a huge year of change, turbulent at times, especially with the challenges around the development of The Octagon Theatre. I am proud that we faced these challenges with calm pragmatism and optimism, working creatively with our partners to keep moving forward.

2023 was a monumental year for the Octagon & Westlands as we became an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) and became a part of Somerset Council.

From April 2023 to March 2024, we hosted hundreds of memorable performances, inspiring screenings, and fantastic participation classes. We also expanded our reach by delivering events and activities in community settings, parks, and town centres across South Somerset, with our team growing in step with the development of our Arts Engagement & Outreach programme.

None of this would have been possible without the dedication of our staff, board members, volunteers, partners, and the generosity of our supporters, all of whom continue to contribute to making our activities, events, and services a source of joy, education, and inspiration for our communities and visitors.

I am immensely proud of everything we have achieved over the past year and look forward to seeing what the next 12 months hold. I hope looking back at our achievements inspires you to join us, in whatever capacity, and be part of something truly special.

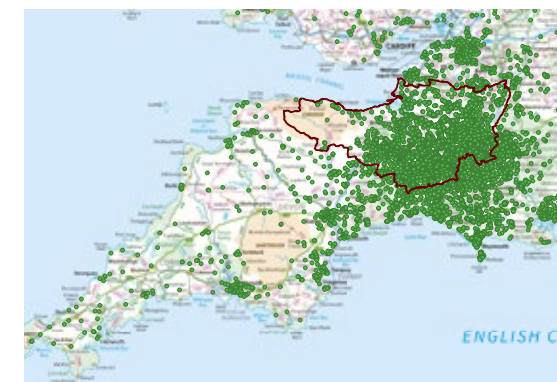
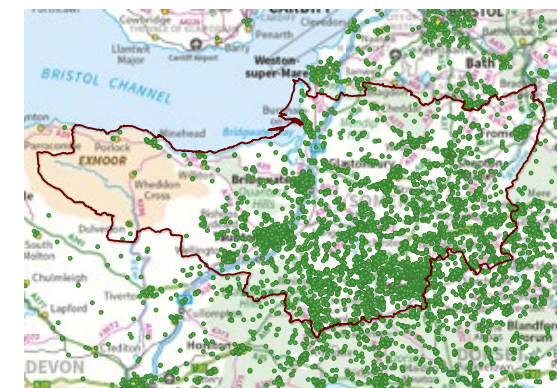
Adam Burgan

Arts & Entertainment Venues Manager
Octagon Theatre & Westlands Entertainment Venue

These maps illustrate where our audiences visit us from. Each dot represents a person who bought a ticket for a show at The Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment Venue from 1 April 2022 - 31 March 2023.

In addition, there will have been tens of thousands of guests attending conferences, meetings, events, participation classes, banquets, or simply stopping by our venues for coffee and cake, that are not represented on this map.

It also does not represent the number of tickets they bought or the number of times they visited.



OUR ACHIEVEMENTS

From April 2023 to March 2024 we...

ENGAGED
6,184
participants

SAW
12,688
participations
(where participants took part
on more than one occasion)

ENTERTAINED
101,491
audience members

DELIVERED
999
classes, workshops
& activities

PROGRAMMED
16
performances by
world-class companies in
10 community locations
across Somerset

INVITED
2,574
local performers to
perform on our stages

STAGED
231
performances

SHOWCASED
237
cinema
screenings

RECEIVED
5,220
hours of volunteer support

BOX OFFICE

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Attendance (Total number of tickets sold)	125,331 (O) 36,612 (W) 161,943 (T)	3,617 (O) 6,218 (W) 9,835 (T)	63,042 (O) 25,193 (W) 88,235 (T)	(O) 108,377 (W) 49,422 (T) 157,799	9,180 (O) 80,918 (W) 90,098 (T)
Number of performances	259 (O) 55 (W) 314 (T)	27 (O) 15 (W) 42 (T)	188 (O) 44 (W) 232 (T)	(O) 195 (W) 68 (T) 263	21 (O) 210 (W) 231 (T)
Number of Screenings (Westlands)	277	363	183	346	237
Gross Box Office income	£2,776,610	£119,418	£1,610,213	£2,926,312	£1,952,792
Annual income – Excluding Box Office	£739,536 (O) £751,432 (W) £1,490,968 (T)	£15,053 (O) £172,990 (W) £188,043 (T)	£622,287 (O) £473,233 (W) £1,095,520 (T)	£1,416,481	

Key: (O) Octagon, (W) Westlands, (T) Total


Since the Covid pandemic, we have seen a recovery in our programme and growth in our audience numbers. The closure of The Octagon at the end of April 2023 has impacted the overall number of performances we have been able to stage. However, by moving our programme to the Octagon's sister venue, Westlands Entertainment Venue, we've experienced an increase in visitors to Westlands.

“On behalf of Q The Quo and my team, we all thank you and all your staff, especially the tech crew, who were exceptional throughout the set up, sound check and from then until the end of the concert and breaking down the stage, everything was flawless. Westlands won the group's vote on the best venue that they have ever played.”

Company Manager

OUR HIGHLIGHTS




 The Octagon and Westlands have delivered a year packed with unforgettable moments, featuring extraordinary performances that entertained, inspired, and filled our audiences with joy. The stage has come alive with creativity, leaving lasting impressions on everyone who attended.



Throughout the year we have been entertained by Rumours of Fleetwood Mac, Ukrainian National Opera, Zog, Armonico Consort; laughed out loud with Rhod Gilbert, Tim Vine, Chris McCausland and Al Murray; sung along with Peter Andre, Whitney Queen of the Night, That'll Be The Day; partied to sets from DJ Judge Jules; been mesmerised by James Wilton Dance, Keith Brymer Jones, Rhythm of The Dance; and enthralled by Kate Rusby, Ben Fogle, Ministry of Science, and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.



YEOVIL LITERARY FESTIVAL

Chapter 11

In 2023, we celebrated our eleventh year of Yeovil Literary Festival, with a stellar lineup of acclaimed authors, comedians, and celebrities, with the chance for audiences to discover new and emerging writers too.

Audiences were treated to captivating talks from household names like Sarah Beeny, Matt Lucas, Tommy Jessop, Deborah Meaden, Vaseem Khan, Michael Ball, and Alfie Boe. As a not-for-profit partnership between The Octagon Theatre, Westlands Entertainment Venue, Yeovil Waterstones, Yeovil Community Arts Association, and Somerset Libraries, the festival continues to be a cultural gem.

5,403 tickets were sold for 39 engaging events, making it a resounding success!



THE OCTAGON THEATRE UPDATE

The development of The Octagon Theatre continues to move forward with in principle funding from Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Yeovil Town Council, our existing and ongoing fundraising, and other sources. Somerset Council remains responsible for managing and delivering the project, providing a contribution as support in kind.

A revised Outline Business Case for the Octagon Theatre has been submitted to DCMS. The new case outlines a £15 million development project. The Project Team, led by Somerset Council, are in the process of appointing architects and a design team to take the revised project forward. The planned scheme includes a full refurbishment of The Octagon Theatre, ensuring we are fit to welcome future generations. Improvements will enhance accessibility both backstage and front of house, create a more environmentally sustainable operation, and upgrade the theatre's technical capabilities.

Throughout the year, we have continued to raise funds to support the redevelopment of our much-loved theatre through community productions, bucket collections, and 24-hour dance-a-thon's. Further contributions, including those raised by the Foyer Club Charity, grant funding, sponsorships, and donations, will be sought to help fund the project and bring this vision to life.



OUR CHRISTMAS PANTOMIME



“The Yeovil Pantomime is as Magical as Ever!”

Yeovil Press

“A Triumph!”

The Fine Times Recorder

The festive season is always the busiest and most magical time for our service, as friends and families come together to celebrate and create unforgettable memories with us.

While The Octagon Theatre usually dazzles with its biggest production of the year, Westlands Entertainment Venue plays host to a flurry of Christmas parties. Determined not to let the year go by without a Christmas celebration, our incredible staff and volunteers pulled out all the stops last December. We hosted the sold-out Castaways Christmas Spectacular, a vibrant Back to the 80s Christmas Party, and numerous other holiday celebrations all while finding a way to stage panto too. It truly is the most “wonderful time of the year!”

Cinderella stole the hearts of our audiences over Christmas 2023.

The “legendary” Octagon Theatre pantomime saw Cinderella go to the Ball...room at Westlands Entertainment Venue, with performances staged at Westlands whilst the Octagon remains closed for redevelopment.

Cinderella, proved to be a massive hit! Over 22, 000 people attended the 36 performances, all of which received rave reviews!

Panto will be back this December with the legendary tale of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, promising to be packed with music, laughter and magic!



“What a fantastic production from the actors (especially the ugly sisters) to the scenery, costumes, make-up, lighting and sound. Your staff are amazing, always friendly and inviting. The venue is fantastic, clean, spacious and brilliant for wheelchair users (my husband is a paraplegic and finds the venue easy to use). I also attended the 80’s Christmas Party which was a great night too. Please let your staff know that they do an amazing job.”

Customer



PRODUCTIONS & EVENTS

To reach audiences outside our venues we programme an exciting range of free-to-watch performances by world-class national touring companies across the county each year.

Bringing live performance to our community's doorsteps

- Live performances in **7** different community settings throughout the year.
- **2** enchanting outdoor theatre productions, **3** classical music concerts captivating parents & their babies, families and adults with dementia, **2** spellbinding walkabout and static dance performances, as well as our mesmerizing Piano Nights.
- Over **4,130 audience members** from across the county watching live performance where they live.
- **Positive economic impact** in locations where events and productions were staged.

We are proud that our venues are at the 'heart' of the community in South Somerset. Many local groups and societies stage performances and events including Castaways Theatre Group, Motiv8 Productions, Yeovil Amateur Operatic Society, University College Yeovil (Graduation), Helen Laxton School of Dance, Keri Hill Dance, Eminence Dance, Miss Natasha School of Dance, Yeovil Amateur Pantomime Society, Project Play, Project Dance and many more.

Yeovil's Super Saturday

In 2023, Yeovil's Super Saturday event featured a show-stopping spectacle - a colossal 13-foot puppet that left audiences in awe! Autin Dance Theatre performed their enchanting production, *Out of the Deep Blue*, three times throughout the day, captivating families and shoppers in the heart of Yeovil's Town Centre.

The impact was undeniable - Quedam Shopping Centre reported a **23% increase in footfall** compared to the previous year, with **over 14,000 visitors** in town. Local businesses thrived, with The Works celebrating "their **busiest day since before Covid.**" The performance created a vibrant energy in the town, showing how we can entertain, inspire, and connect with audiences beyond our venues.



"It is so lovely to see the town so busy and buzzing! Can this happen every weekend? It is so lovely to see the town so full and people coming out. The dance group and puppet were amazing. It's like something you see in a city and Yeovil are doing it - my kids loved it as well - thank you!"

Attendee of Yeovil's Super Saturday 2023

PARTICIPATE

Throughout the year we offer an exciting range of participation classes, workshops, summer schools and projects working alongside brilliant national touring companies and talented local artists.

From dance to arts and crafts we've got it covered, with opportunities for all ages and abilities to get involved across the county.

Unleashing creativity, connecting communities and nurturing talent across South Somerset

- Over **7,000 participations** across our regular Octagon Academy Classes, with **18 weekly classes** for participants aged 2 – 90.
- Over **220 children & young people** taking part in creative activities during the school holidays.
- Over **500 participants** from across the county took part in our community platforms, performing as part of A Festival of Song and SHiNE.



“It was a wonderful opportunity for both of our children. They were really engaged & said it was the best part of the summer. It was also lovely to have an event that was inclusive & provided the necessary support. Thank you so much. The show at the end was an ideal opportunity for the children to show everything they have learnt.”

Parent of Summer School participants



ARTS FOR HEALTH & WELLBEING

Creative activities that provide emotional and physical support to individuals with mental health and long-term health conditions, delivered in partnership with NHS trusts, community organisations, and voluntary services.

Projects include:

- **Parkinson's Dance** in Langport, a movement & dance project designed specifically to address the symptoms of Parkinson's.
- **Movement Through Cancer** in Yeovil, a creative movement & dance project designed specifically for people living with or at any point of their cancer journey.
- **Time Together** in Wincanton, a music-making project aimed at parents feeling low after the birth of their child.
- **Somerset Wellbeing Orchestra** in Chard, a music-making project aimed at adults who have reported mental health challenges or would like extra support.

Enriching lives and supporting health & wellbeing

- **57** specialist support-led **Health & Wellbeing sessions** delivered in community settings.
- **ALL participants** say the projects have positively impacted their lives.
- **Improving health care** professional's understanding of how creative arts can benefit the health and wellbeing of their patients.
- **2 local practitioners** supported with training and mentorship in arts for health & wellbeing practices.



SCAN ME

Watch our **Movement Through Cancer** film and listen as our brilliant practitioners discuss the benefits

SCAN ME

Hear from participants of our **Parkinson's Dance** project in this short film created last year



"I haven't smiled that much in so long! I forget everything else going on in my life and I can be free, be me... these classes make me feel alive."

Movement Through Cancer participant



CREATIVE LEARNING & EDUCATION

Somerset schools are offered the opportunity to learn from, and collaborate with, world-class performance companies from across the UK. Our programme involves CPD for teachers, free in-school workshops for pupils, the opportunity to watch a performance by the company, and perform on The Octagon or Westlands stage.

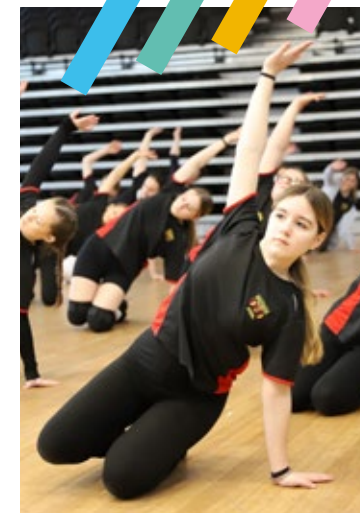
Creative learning raising aspirations and building creative confidence in teachers

- **8 Somerset primary & secondary schools**, delivering dance, theatre and music programmes with Wise Children, Motionhouse Dance, and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (BSO).
- **200 students** inspired by, and working alongside, world-class touring companies.
- **50 teachers** supported to upskill.
- **2,600 students** watched live professional performances.



“Having the opportunity for our students to work with inspirational artists is invaluable in professionalising our young people. Not only is it great to give them new experiences, but for them to collaborate and play with [national companies] helps skill them up for their GCSE’s as well as offer careers experience. Thank you for leading on such a great programme!”

Head of Performing Arts at Stanchester Academy



Increased uptake in Drama GCSE

This year, one of our partnership schools, Preston School, a Business and Enterprise Academy, worked with Wise Children Theatre company and took part in their workshops and teacher training opportunities. Students were able to use the devising skills they developed in these sessions in their preparation for the practical elements of their Drama GCSE. The Head of Department was also keen to get Year 9 students involved in the workshops and as a result of the high-quality teaching and opportunities from this partnership, the uptake in students taking GCSE Drama for the next academic year has increased.



TALENT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

To support talent development and inspire the next generation, we have designed a programme of activity to help young people find their path into the Creative Industries. We make career options within our venues visible (including Front of House, Box Office, Technical Theatre, Marketing, Programming, Events, and Arts Engagement & Outreach work) and nurture emerging artists.

Leading young people into the Creative Industries

- **60 year 7-9 students** got to be producers, directors, performers, stage managers, lighting and sound designers for the day at our Creative Careers Event.
- **Over 150 primary & secondary school students** learnt about different jobs in the Creative Industries.
- **15 work experience students** got hands-on experience and insight into running a receiving venue.

“I have learnt so much about different parts of the industry I wasn’t aware of. It’s been a really great week.”

Work Experience Student

ARTIST SUPPORT

To support young people, emerging and established artists fulfil their potential and sustain creative careers here in Somerset, we offer a range of sector support with mentoring opportunities, apprenticeship schemes, training and networking events.

Nurturing & enabling artists to sustain creative careers in Somerset

- **86 hours** of free studio hire for artists to create, rehearse and develop new work
- **40 artists** receiving mentoring support and advice
- **6 Creative Commissions** awarded to local artists & organisations to develop original work to reach people living in Somerset
- **3 Artist Blogs** showcasing Somerset’s creative & cultural practitioners
- **1 Technical Theatre Apprenticeship**

“The funding and support from The Octagon & Westlands has been the key ingredient that has enabled us to bring Listen Dance from dream to reality. This ambitious project desperately needed a venue to believe in it and The Octagon & Westlands have been the perfect partner.”

Little Bulb Theatre Company





ENVIRONMENT

We recognise that the climate and ecological crises will be among the most significant challenges facing all of us over the coming decades. In response to the climate emergency, we are working to ensure sustainability is at the heart of decision-making and embedded within our everyday operations through training and localising our activity across South Somerset.

We have switched to renewable sources of energy and reduced our energy consumption by...

- Installing an air source heat pump at Westlands.
- All our house lights are LED and energy efficient.
- Installing light sensors.
- Reducing our business mileage by using local suppliers for food produce, cleaning and bar supplies.
- By delivering activity locally across South Somerset we are reducing the number of people having to travel to workshops or events which helps to lower carbon footprint.
- We have also established partnerships with ecological artists to support environmental sustainability and are programming work which raises environmental consideration.

ACCESS & INCLUSION

Our **Accessible Ticket Scheme, SHiNE Bursary Fund, Octagon Buddies, and Octagon & Westlands Inclusion Group**, supports individuals of all ages and abilities to attend, and take part in, creative participation classes, workshops, theatre shows and events, who might not be able to access the opportunity otherwise.

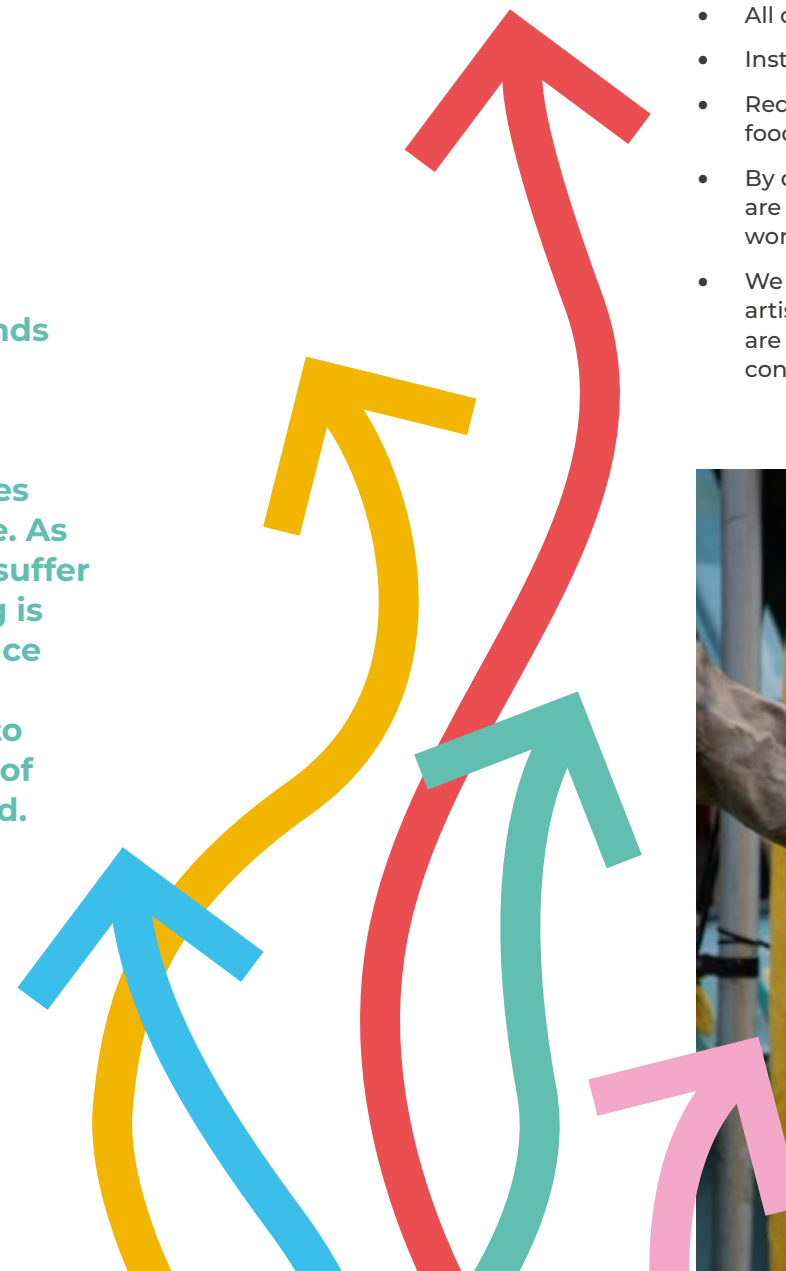
Our Access Schemes allow people within our community to flourish, be creative, feel valued and included.

Giving everyone the opportunity to experience the joy of the arts

- **Free tickets** to shows and events at our venues for low-income individuals.
- **Subsidised places to our participation programme** for anyone unable to otherwise afford the opportunity.
- **Free buddy support** for anyone who feels unable to attend shows and events on their own.
- **Making improvements to access** by directly hearing from disabled, D/deaf or neurodivergent people about the barriers they experience.

“The support that The Octagon Theatre & Westlands Entertainment Venue have been able to give my son through attending holiday activities and weekly classes has made such a difference. As a parent seeing your child suffer anxiety because of bullying is heartbreaking, the difference in him now is amazing. He feels comfortable going into the venue and has a sense of belonging and being valued. He has his spark back.”

Parent



SUPPORTING ROLES

Volunteers

Our venues and activities are brought to life by an incredible team of 70 dedicated volunteers. They are the heart of our success, helping us deliver inspiring programmes and creating unforgettable experiences for our audiences.

Over the past 12 months, our volunteers have generously given over 5,220 hours of their time to support our work. We couldn't do it without them!

A special shout-out goes to our Foyer Club, who handle Front of House duties - everything from taking tickets and showing customers to their seats to selling ice creams, confectionery, and merchandise. As a registered charity, they also play a vital role in fundraising for our venues, helping us continue to thrive.

We are truly grateful for the passion and commitment our volunteers bring, and we're proud to have them as part of our community.

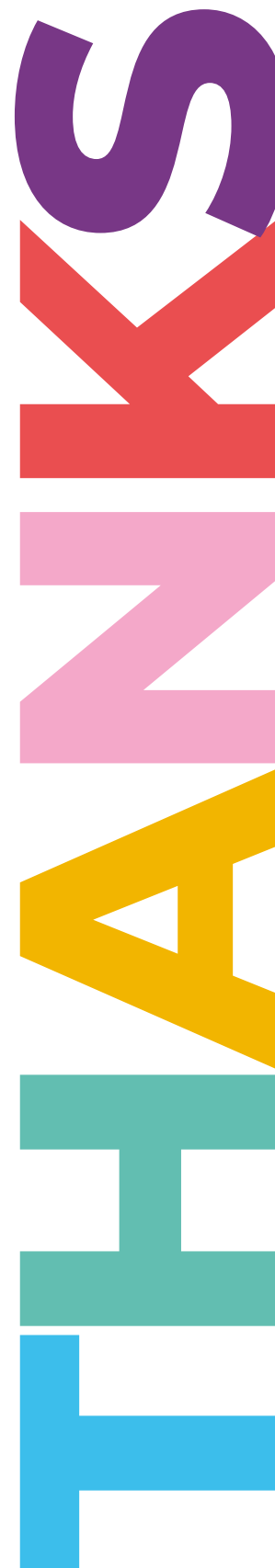
"[My friend attended the show at the weekend.] She is partially sighted and came into the foyer on a frame with her daughter. She said a member of team with a headset and radio immediately spotted her in the busy crowd and pulled her to one side, checked her ticket and admitted her swiftly ahead of everyone else so she didn't have to deal with the rush of the crowd. Once in, the Foyer Club member came and checked on her several times throughout the show and interval to make sure she had everything she needed. [My friend] said it made her night and made her feel special."

Customer

Partners

The success of our programmes is built on the strong relationships we've developed with our incredible partners. Their support has been instrumental in helping us bring creativity, culture, and joy to communities across Somerset. This year, we've been able to deliver a wide range of activities thanks to the invaluable contributions of:

Abri Housing Group
Active Learning & Skills CIC
ARK at Egwood
Armonico Consort
Alzheimer's Society
Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra
Chard WATCH CIC
Langport & Huish Youth Group
LiveWest
LOVE Yeovil
Motionhouse Dance Company
The Balsam Centre
Somerset Activity & Sports Partnership
Somerset Diverse Communities
Somerset NHS Foundation Trust
Somerset Young Carers Group
Stuff & Nonsense Theatre Company
Somerset Activity & Sports Partnership (SASP)
Wise Children Theatre Company



This has all been possible thanks to The Octagon Theatre becoming an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) and being awarded an investment of £760,000 to support arts and cultural activities in Somerset from 2023-2026.

In addition, we received support from Somerset Council, Somerset Activity & Sports Partnership (SASP), Parkinson's UK and Yeovil Town Council.



Special thanks goes to our Octagon Arts Engagement & Outreach Board:

CLlr Federica Smith-Roberts (Chair)
CLlr Nicola Clark (Vice Chair)
Amelia Thompson
Caroline Barnes
CLlr Heather Shearer
CLlr Mike Best
CLlr Val Keitch
John Clark
Lucinda Langdon
Elizabeth Dawson

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