

Arts and Entertainment Service
Annual review 2020/21



Welcome...

In a year that has changed our world and brought so much turmoil it can be painful to consider looking back. However, there remains much to celebrate and to be proud of that our Arts & Entertainment Service at South Somerset District Council have delivered throughout the financial year, from the 1st April 2020 to the 31st March 2021. Whilst for the most part, we have missed enjoying being together with friends and family at performances, classes, exhibitions and events, it has brought home how important these things are to us and how much we are looking forward to being back in our favourite venues very soon.

In times of difficulty we turn to the arts – music, dance, comedy, drama and visual arts to lift our spirits. In times of adversity creativity is essential and we have found new ways to reach and connect to our audiences. My thanks go to the superb artists in South Somerset who have brought so much joy and moments of happiness when we have needed it most.

As part of South Somerset District Council our Arts & Entertainment Service makes a significant contribution to our vision for South Somerset: a place where businesses flourish, communities are safe, vibrant and healthy; where residents enjoy good housing and cultural, leisure and sporting activities.

During this period the staff at SSSDC have been incredible in stepping up to support colleagues across the authority, looking after our most vulnerable residents with the Well Being Hub and aiding our recovery by supporting Covid-19 testing and vaccine rollouts. When the time came they played their parts superbly. I hope you will share my pride in this wonderful team.

As we look forward to our venues reopening you are sure to be met with a warm welcome and I, like so many, cannot wait to enjoy the thrill of live performance once more. Theatre and Live Entertainment has been one of the most affected sectors as a result of the pandemic but this has not diminished our ambition or plans to ensure all of our residents have access to the very best live entertainment, that their lives will be enriched by cultural opportunities and for culture to play a key part in the economic development of the district. We are embarking on an exciting £23million development of The Octagon Theatre that will transform the theatre. Our ambition and vision has already been rewarded with the national government investing £10million into the project. The future of arts and entertainment in South Somerset is incredibly exciting and we will emerge stronger and more vibrant than ever.

Cllr. Mike Best

*Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing,
South Somerset District Council*



The past year has been somewhat of a rollercoaster in the dark with many highs and lows, twists and turns that I am sure left many of us asking “can we get off now?” The pandemic has brought so much disruption to our daily lives and the plans and hopes we had for the year – hundreds of performances and events postponed, thousands of classes cancelled. Taking inspiration from an old adage “the show must go on!” we have done our very best to be there for our audiences, to provide entertainment and ways to experience culture, both online and in person. We have also done our best to support and serve our communities, preserve our organisation and maintain and look after our beloved venues.

Throughout this dreadful time we have felt supported and important; supported by our colleagues throughout SSSDC, with staff redeployment having brought us closer together. Supported by our funders, with successful awards from the cultural recovery fund, and supported by our customers, who have shown they are ready to be entertained with the precious performances and events we were able to stage, to their generosity in donations and kind messages. The Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment Venue are so fortunate to have such loyal and enthusiastic supporters and this loyalty is something we promise to repay with our commitment to bringing you a brighter tomorrow, full of superb entertainment and arts events.

We felt so lucky to be able to present film screenings, and live performances from Paul Zerdin, Yeovil Literary Festival, Castaways Christmas Spectacular and Nurse Nellie Saves Panto! The joy of hearing a live audience enjoying themselves was all we needed to reaffirm our belief that live entertainment is an essential part of being human. Whilst the venues have been closed we have been busy looking after and maintaining our venues, while many of our staff have been redeployed, some multiple times, to help wherever they were needed.

We are proud that the Well Being Hub for South Somerset was based at Westlands Entertainment Venue and that our staff worked here, throughout the council, and are now playing their part in supporting the vaccine and testing work to aid the recovery. I am also proud of how we have worked to deliver a huge amount of activity online bringing the entertainment right to you! We will continue to do so to make our work as accessible as possible.

While we have a way to go before our venues return to normal, we know there are amazing performances and experiences lined up that we cannot wait to share with you. Even more exciting are the plans to redevelop The Octagon Theatre. This will create a ‘cultural hub’ and a centre of excellence for the creative arts. The possibilities and opportunities are vast and I hope you enjoy finding out more about this exciting project. We have come through the last year stronger, a little wiser and appreciating what matters to us more – live performance is not a luxury – it is essential to leading a happy, healthy life, together with the people we love most.

Adam Burgan

Arts and Entertainment Venues Manager, South Somerset District Council

2020/2021 – Key Achievements

Facts and Figures

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-21	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Attendance (Total number of tickets sold)	78,546	88,334	93,519	90,149	101,634	119,366
No. Of Performances	260	239	244	235	242	259
Gross Box Office Income (£)	1,098,093	1,233,074	1,362,419	1,335,182	1,549,590	1,844,455
Annual Income – Excluding Box Office (£)	359,367	344,452	364,735	410,600	477,181	560,951

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Attendance (Total number of tickets sold)	123,399	133,295	116,227 (O) 24,937 (W) 141,164 (T)	116,927 (O) 35,133 (W) 152,060 (T)	125,331 (O) 36,612 (W) 161,943 (T)	3,617 (O) 6,218 (W) 9,835 (T)
No. Of Performances	264	290	248 (O) 42 (W) 290 (T)	242 (O) 49 (W) 291 (T)	259 (O) 55 (W) 314 (T)	27 (O) 15 (W) 42 (T)
No. Of Screenings (Westlands)	-	-	74	204	277	363
Gross Box Office Income (£)	1,843,064	2,196,389	1,888,223 (O) 354,501 (W) 2,242,724 (T)	1,986,342 (O) 500,754 (W) 2,487,096 (T)	2,776,610 (T)	119,418 (T)
Annual Income – Excluding Box Office and Government Grants (£)	610,876	770,627	710,629 (O) 510,623 (W) 1,221,252 (T)	666,276 (O) 850,298 (W) 1,516,574 (T)	£739,536 (O) £751,432 (W) 1,490,968 (T)	15,053 (O) 172,990 (W) 188,043 (T)

O = Octagon, W = Westlands, T = Total,

2020/2021 – Key Achievements

Facts and Figures *continued*

Despite being closed for the majority of the year our venues have welcomed 9835 patrons into our venues for a Show, Literary Festival Event or Screening over the last year.

While many of our staff have been redeployed and our income is reduced, due to closure, we have sought alternative sources of income to protect and maintain our venues.

We are delighted to have secured national government funding for our venues to protect jobs, maintain our buildings and deliver activity online and in person.

We have successfully applied for and received:

£298,687

Arts Council England: Culture Recovery Fund

£33,133

BFI: Culture Recovery Fund
Business Sustainability

£5,793

BFI: Culture Recovery Fund
Safety Grant

£5,000

BFI FAN: Covid-19 Resilience Fund

£1,000

BFI: Film Feels Connected

£35,000

Arts Council England: Emergency Fund

£29,025

Arts Council England: Project Grants



**WE WILL
BE BACK
SOON!**

“ I would just like to say that your manager gave a fantastic speech to the cast last night. As a parent of one of the performers, I must commend the theatre for its handling of this unprecedented situation. We look forward to attending many more shows at this wonderful venue. I wish all of your colleagues the very best during this difficult time! They should all take a bow!! ”

Greg Hissey



Playing our part

Throughout the year the staff at The Octagon Theatre and Westlands Entertainment Venue have continued to play their part in supporting our local community. Some staff have been maintaining our venues whilst others have been redeployed, some multiple times into different roles.

Our staff have joined colleagues in SSDC to provide food packages for those shielding, vulnerable or facing hardship through the Well Being Hub at Westlands Entertainment Venue. Our chefs have prepared hot meals and lunches for homeless people while other team members have been answering calls in the Customer Connect department.

We have supported efforts to keep our district tidy and beautiful in Street Scene and Horticulture, whilst also supporting our team at Yeovil Crematorium. Our staff have also supported local businesses by processing grant applications, and more recently working at the vaccination and testing sites. We hope you will share our pride in the amazing work delivered by our brilliant team over the year.



“ I was vaccinating at the Gateway on Wednesday & met one of your lovely staff. They are such a big help. ”

Becky Garnett



New ways of entertaining...

Throughout the pandemic and the closure of our venues we have worked to continue delivering arts and entertainment for our audiences. We were pleased to move activity online where we have streamed over 130 online Octagon Academy classes directly into homes across the country. We hosted 9 online theatre themed Quiz Nights receiving over 1,900 views, released 4 'In The Spotlight' talks with film industry professionals online, and produced a series of Online Summer Tutorials in Song making, Art, Film and Musical Theatre.

Our annual celebration of local talent 'SHiNE' could not take place at the theatre so we produced 'Let's SHiNE Together', a community music and dance video, which has been viewed over 1,500 times online. We had over 150 people of all ages and abilities taking part, including pupils from 5 local schools, key workers from Yeovil District Hospital and South Somerset District Council.

During the pandemic, our Octagon Academy classes moved online, where we streamed 8 weekly online dance, music and drama classes via the Octagon & Westlands YouTube Channel, free to watch on-demand. In total, our online classes received over 3,600 views and supported 7 freelance teachers.

Once we were able to return to in-person classes we continued to support access to participation, offering the first class back free to participants, and subsidising the cost of room hire whilst capacity remained limited.



The Gallery at the Octagon continues to focus on local talent from the surrounding areas, promoting groups & artists whose main motive is to share the pleasure of art.

This year we were due to host a total of 9 exhibitions, displaying the artwork of over 50 local artists. Whilst the pandemic may have put a stop to this, we continued to show our support by promoting online galleries and artworks via the Octagon's social media accounts.

During December when the Octagon reopened to stage our socially distanced pantomime, local photographer, Len Copland, displayed his 'Dancers in Lockdown' exhibition, which captured young dancers carrying on their passion for dance in their homes around South Somerset.





Adventures on the Big Screen

In July 2020 we were able to reopen Westlands Entertainment Venue for film screening events.

4,449 guests joined us for a screening where we enjoyed the best of Hollywood and mainstream cinema, British and independent films, family films, the best of the National Theatre with NT Live, West End shows with *'Kinky Boots'*, *'42nd Street'* and *'The King and I'*. We also looked back at the history of The Octagon Theatre with a special presentation of our 40th Anniversary film – *'And the Show Goes On'*.

“ We went to Westlands yesterday afternoon to see the 25th anniversary tour of River Dance and just wanted to thank you for all the precautions you have taken there. We went into self-isolation only because of our ages and haven't been anywhere so this was our first outing. Being apprehensive beforehand, you couldn't have done more. It has given us confidence to look at future performances. Thank you ”

Peter & Barbara Taylor

The Show Must Go On!



After 6 months with no live performances we were delighted that Paul Zerdin brought live performances back to our venues in October with his 'mini Yeovil residency' of six performances. Paul has great affection for Yeovil, and our venues, having appeared in one of our early pantomimes. We knew then what an incredible talent he was and the amazing success he would go on to achieve, including winning 'Americas Got Talent'. Paul headlines The London Palladium pantomime and holds a Las Vegas residency at the legendary Planet Hollywood. Whilst touring the globe and playing the world's leading theatres Paul has always supported us and included The Octagon Theatre on his tours. He is the patron of our 'Name A Seat' campaign and we are incredibly grateful to him for returning in our time of need to bring live entertainment back and giving our audiences a brilliant evening of LIVE entertainment. It was wonderful and quite emotional to hear audiences laughing and enjoying live entertainment at our venues once more.

After the November lockdown we were pleased that we could reopen and that Castaways Theatre Group were able to present their 'Christmas Spectacular' at Westlands. It was fantastic to see the stage filled with local talent and Castaways very kindly donated all the ticket income to support our venues through the pandemic.



Photos by Len Copland

“ What a fantastic night thank you Westlands! Very well organised, loved the sofa set up and Paul Zerdin was absolutely brilliant. ”

Sara Barry

Yeovil Literary Festival

Working with Waterstones Yeovil, Somerset Libraries and Yeovil Community Arts Association we were very pleased to present the Yeovil Literary Festival at Westlands Entertainment Venue.

Enlightening, inspiring and entertaining talks were the order for three days that also provided some much needed escapism. Audiences enjoyed talks from Rachel Joyce, Lucy Worsley, Raynor Winn, Abir Mukerjee, Vaseem Khan, Carrie Hope Fletcher, Jenni Murray, Hamish De Bretton-Gordon, Katherine May and Jonathan Coe. We are grateful to Battens Solicitors for sponsoring the festival.



Can I just say how much I enjoyed coming to the recent screenings of "Some Like it Hot", "23 Walks" and to see Lucy Worsley, Vaseem Khan and Abir Mukherjee as part of the Literary festival this past week. It is very sad that we will now be back in Lockdown, but I am grateful that you and everyone concerned with the entertainment at Westlands Entertainment Venue did it all so well - I felt it was a safe environment, the films were excellent and you worked hard to make it attractive and welcoming. Thank you.

Jean Hill



“We’ll have to do it again then won’t we?”

It wouldn't be Christmas without The Octagon panto!

For two weeks in December we were able to share 'Nurse Nellie Saves Panto' with 3,617 of our panto fans. Working with our producing partners at Evolution Productions this specially written 'bite-sized' panto was a love letter to live theatre and the magic of panto with all the 'best bits' crammed into a 70minute show performed by a socially distanced cast of 5. With Somerset in 'Tier 2' up until Christmas Eve we were one of a few theatres around the country who were able to present our panto for audiences. While the production was cut short by the third national lockdown we were delighted to keep the magic of panto alive and bring some Christmas cheer and entertainment to families in our community.



The Evolution of Arts and Entertainment in South Somerset

On Thursday 25th of March, members of South Somerset's District Council voted unanimously in favour of the redevelopment of The Octagon Theatre which will see the theatre transformed into a flagship venue for the arts and entertainment in Somerset. The pivotal vote to proceed with the development followed the Government's Budget announcement on the 5th of March which featured a major boost for the project, with £10 million being pledged to help fund the refurbishment of the venue.

"The team at The Octagon and I are delighted that the project has been approved and we can now move forward in refining the plans for the development of our theatre. We know how much The Octagon means to our audiences and artists and we can also see the huge potential for developing the theatre to bring bigger and better shows and provide opportunities for everyone to benefit from the arts and entertainment. After what has been a very bleak time for theatre and live entertainment the future looks very bright and incredibly exciting." Adam Burgan, Arts and Entertainment Venues Manager

The project, set to cost in the region of £23 million excluding VAT, will see the theatre add a fly tower and circle that will take the seating from 622 to 900 - this will mean big advances in productions that will attend our venue including touring plays and musicals. Work will also see the venue become fully accessible throughout, add two

additional spaces - a cinema/studio, plus an additional cinema. The venue would also see purpose built studios created with an improved community Café Hub and separate restaurants areas.

The Council's unanimous decision to proceed with the development will allow the project to progress through to the next stages of planning, with work continuing to form a timescale and refine plans.

“ Thank you for having had the vision to sanction the development of the Octagon into a fantastic regional Arts Centre. How genuinely uplifting this project is going to be; especially at a time when the pandemic has wreaked such havoc with people's lives. This, I'm sure, will have brought a ray of sunshine for everyone. Good luck and thank you once again. ”

Dennis Liles



The Evolution of Arts and Entertainment in South Somerset *continued*

During the coming months the plans for The Octagon Theatre will be put to public consultation, where the public will be able to find out more about the plans for the venue, ask questions and voice opinions.

This project has been in development for some time now, pre-Covid, and although the pandemic has affected the way we operate, it has not slowed down our ambitious plans to invest for the future. Whilst it is important to be prudent it is also important to have hope and optimism for the future. We know our audiences are keen to return when it is safe to do so and the uncertainty we currently all face is temporary. When it is over we will need music, theatre and arts to bring us all back together. Those places that bring friends and families together to feel joy will be more important than ever and we will appreciate them even more.

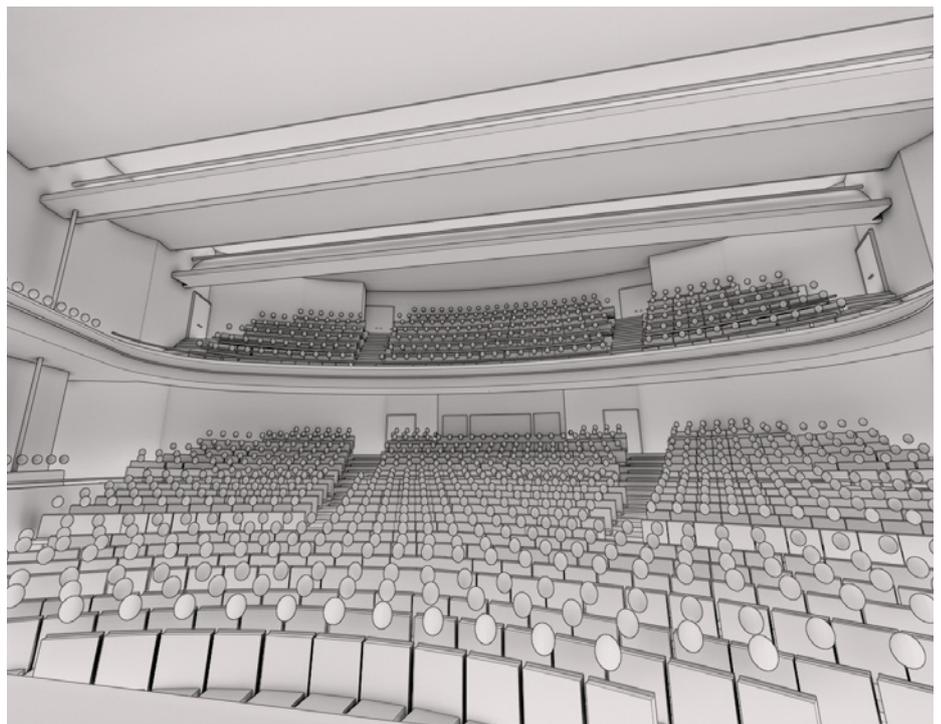
During times of economic downturn and instability theatre, arts and cinemas tend to perform very well and often show an increase in attendance. This was the case in the financial crisis when our audience continued to grow. It is understood that this is because people will spend their money on things that 'cheer them up' and experiences that families and friends can do together, a trip to the pantomime for

Christmas, or a concert to escape becomes an affordable treat. The construction of the development and larger operation will create and establish jobs. It is estimated that the developed Octagon Theatre will create an additional £9.2million that would be retained locally every year. Visitors to The Octagon Theatre support our 'night-time economy' including hotels, restaurants, car parks, and shops in the area. Businesses will also

be more attracted to an area with a stronger cultural offering.

This project offers a compelling economic case and significant improvements for the health and well-being of our residents.

For further information and to keep up to date with the project please visit our dedicated pages on the Octagon website – octagon-theatre.co.uk



“ I would like to congratulate you on the presentation of the proposed re-development of the Octagon. It sounds so exciting and gives such positive signals that life does go on and we can look forward to a bigger and better theatre experience. With all the spins off, the future looks bright for Yeovil. I do hope that the project is successful for you and for Yeovil, It will enrich all our lives.

Felicity Larner

”

Arts Engagement & Outreach in South Somerset

A key part of the Arts & Entertainment Service is to develop opportunities for community engagement across the district and offer cultural experiences for all ages and abilities. Our aim is to create, develop and fund creative projects that make the arts more accessible and provide activities in towns and villages across South Somerset.

To achieve this we work with individual artists, art groups and organisations from both the professional and voluntary sectors. The ambition this year has been to provide support and employment for emerging and established artists to create projects that will offer access to the arts for residents whilst at home.

Over the year, we have extended supported to...



Wassail Theatre Company: Somerset Emergency Theatre

We collaborated with Wassail to commission 3 emerging artists to create a project that would connect our community whilst at home during the pandemic. The projects commissioned included, Roxana Bartle's *'Plays Over The Phone'* a performance which took place with 13 shielding residents, Jacob Alcroft's *'Paint the Town'* which toured to 11 households in Langport & Huish Episcopi, and Lucy Hobman's *'Creative Dance Podcast'* which received over 150 plays.

Od Arts Festival: Lockdown Pottery

OSR Projects have delivered remote pottery workshops to 141 young people from schools across South Somerset (including East Coker, Fairmead, North Cadbury, Milborne Port, Barwick & Stowford and Perrot Hill).



Angela Blackwell: Blind Painter Project

The Blind Painter Project supports the development and transition of Angela Blackwell, a visual artist adjusting to sight loss, whilst increasing wider understanding of Retinal Dystrophy and sight loss in general.



Outreach projects we have developed with and for our community include...



Dance Development Project

Focuses on developing dance within our region, improving access to dance across South Somerset, supporting emerging artists, and diversifying the Octagon's dance offer. As part of the project we have commissioned South West choreographer, James Wilton, to produce a dance film and we have also been working on developing career opportunities for local dance graduates.



TalentEd Academy – Digital Work Experience

Online 'TalentEd Academies' provide young people with an insight into a career in the arts and the different roles involved in running an arts organisation.

These projects celebrate the achievements of local artists, bringing communities together where they live and putting South Somerset on the map for high quality arts and culture.

Arts Engagement & Outreach in South Somerset *continued*

To enable us to extend our reach within the community we continue to fund four key arts organisations, Take Art, Somerset Art Works, Somerset Film and Actiontrack, who help us to deliver a cross section of art projects to our communities.



Take Art
takeart.org

Take Art is an arts development agency serving Somerset. Its purpose is to promote performance and participation in the arts in Somerset, supporting professional artists and arts in the community. Take Art have had to transform their offer over the last year, to reach communities at home.

Take Art's rural performance scheme, which brings professional, high quality music, theatre, dance and performance to village halls, churches & pubs across Somerset, adapted to an online platform. In total 9 performances were streamed online reaching an audience of 320 people across the country.

In August and September when restrictions eased, Take Art were able to programme performances in 3 locations, including Curry Mallet, Norton-Sub-Hamdon and Coombe St Nicholas. The Rural Touring scheme plays a vital role in uniting communities and keeping villages' alive, the scheme allows people living in rural areas access to live art at an affordable price.



Somerset Film
somersetfilm.com

somersetfilm

Somerset Film are dedicated to empowering individuals and communities through the use of film and digital technology. Somerset Film offer a programme of outreach activity and projects that encourage and facilitate the use of digital media by all sectors of the community. They provide learning opportunities through schools based projects, bursary schemes and training for all abilities.

Over the past year, Somerset Film moved the delivery of their regular BFI Film Academy for 16-19 year olds online, so they can continue to engage young people looking to work in the film and media industry. Participants were able to learn from industry professionals who have worked on the Harry Potter films and at Festival De Cannes, a fantastic opportunity for anyone aspiring to work in film!





Somerset Art Works
somersetartworks.org.uk



Somerset Art Works aim to develop opportunities for artists to work here in Somerset and for the community to experience high quality visual arts at a local level.

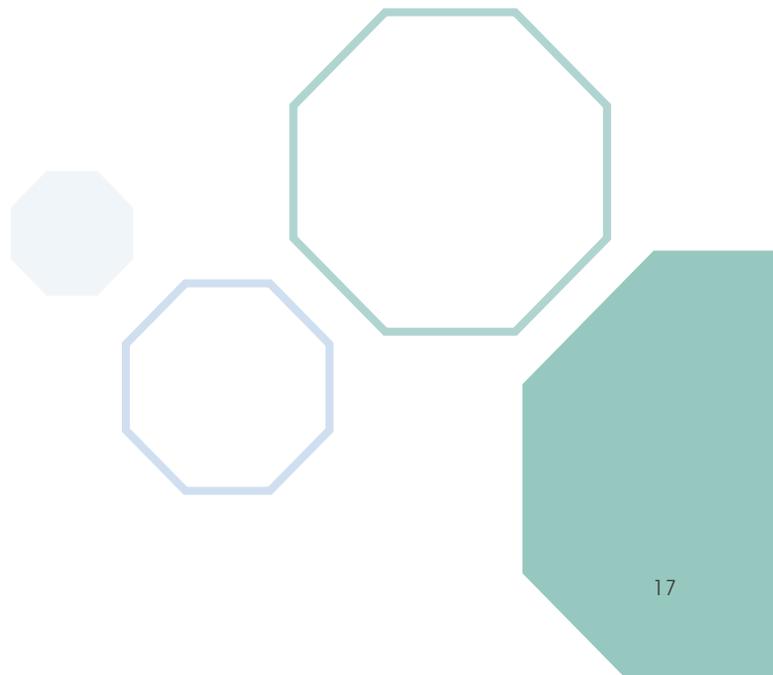
In 2020, Somerset Art Works delivered their annual Somerset wide exhibition, Somerset Art Weeks, albeit on a smaller scale as a result of the closure of many spaces due to the pandemic. For 2020, Somerset Art Weeks took place both online and in-person, for the first time, with 200 artists displaying their artwork. In total, Somerset venues received 2240 visitors during the exhibition and 2862 viewers accessed the online platforms.



ActionTrack
actiontrackperformance.co.uk

This year Actiontrack have been operating remotely, working on an outreach basis across Somerset, delivering opportunities for individuals and groups to access practical involvement in music, drama, dance and the visual arts. The organisation develops and delivers wholly accessible projects, predominantly with children and young people and with marginalized groups. Work takes place in centres across the county and in Actiontrack's recording studio, ranging from instrumental tuition, through to group playing and song-writing, recording and even instrument making.

Due to the limitations on face-to-face delivery over the past year, Actiontrack developed online activity with Pupil Referral Units, the NEET sector and young music-makers so to maintain contact and elements of delivery with these participants. A positive by-product of this is they were able to develop new models of working that will become integrated into their ongoing delivery once restrictions are lifted.





The Octagon Theatre is owned managed and funded by South Somerset District Council.

Westlands Entertainment Venue is managed and funded by South Somerset District Council with support from:

Leonardos | Yeovil Town Council | Yeovil Without Parish Council



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



South Somerset District Council