SOCIETY OF LONDON THEATRE
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UK THEATRE
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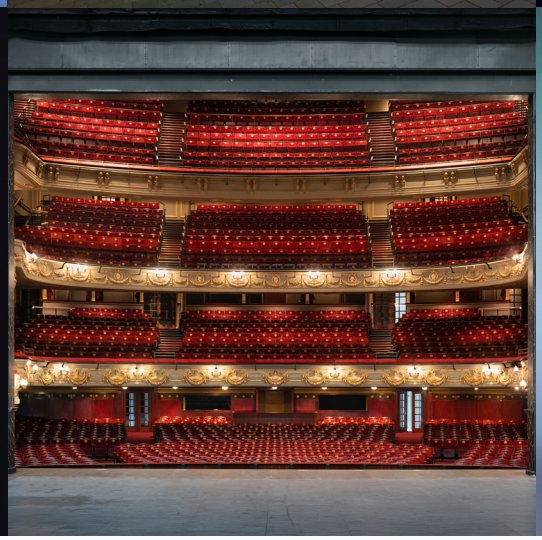

Theatre in the UK 2026

Society of London Theatre & UK Theatre
March 2026

Note on Timing of Data and Analysis

The data for this report was collected and the analysis completed prior to the most recent escalation of conflict in the Middle East.

The findings therefore reflect the economic and operating conditions facing UK theatre at the time of writing. Should instability continue for a sustained period, the challenges identified in this report are likely to intensify. Higher energy costs, broader inflationary pressures, and potential reductions in both domestic and international tourism would all place further strain on theatre organisations across the UK.

While the scale and duration of these wider economic impacts remain uncertain, they underline the importance of the policy measures outlined in this report to support a resilient and sustainable theatre sector.

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Foreword

In the past twelve months, we have visited members across the UK. We have seen sold-out houses, ambitious new commissions, and education programmes transforming young lives. We have also heard the same message, repeatedly: the work has never been better, and it has never been harder to make the numbers add up.

Claire Walker & Hannah Essex, Co-CEOs

That tension runs through our second annual Theatre in the UK report, which draws on deeper data and wider membership engagement than last year. The picture it reveals is not of a sector in decline. It depicts a sector being asked to do more, for more people, with less financial headroom than at any point in recent memory.

Our members are not waiting for permission to adapt. They are forming touring alliances, opening export pathways, pioneering inclusive design, and investing in their buildings out of their own reserves. Producers and venue operators are showing extraordinary resilience and ingenuity. But resilience has limits. When margins erode year after year, the first things cut are often the ones that matter most over time: new commissions, development programmes, regional touring, and early-career opportunities.

We are encouraged by recent policy developments. The permanent higher rate of Theatre Tax Relief, a commitment to the restoration of arts education as a curriculum entitlement, and the £425 million Arts Everywhere Fund are significant steps our sector campaigned hard for. They demonstrate that government recognises the value of what theatre delivers. We now need that recognition to translate into sustained, inflation-aware investment across the full theatre ecology.

This report makes the case with evidence. It shows a sector that entertains millions, employs hundreds of thousands, trains talent that leads globally, and anchors communities from Plymouth to Pitlochry. It also challenges a persistent myth: theatre audiences look far more like Britain than critics suggest. It also shows a sector where production costs have doubled in a decade, where more than a third of organisations expect to run a deficit this year, and where the buildings that house this extraordinary activity are ageing faster than they are being renewed.

We present this report to policymakers, funders, and partners with a simple argument: UK theatre is one of the country's greatest assets. It repays investment many times over. The decisions taken now will shape what it can deliver for the next generation.

Claire Walker & Hannah Essex,
Co-Chief Executives, Society of London Theatre & UK Theatre

Executive Summary

British theatre enters 2026 with strong demand and global reach, but under sustained financial pressure.

Audiences continue to choose live performance at scale. More than 37 million people attended SOLT and UK Theatre member venues in 2025. The West End alone drew a record 17.64 million people, generating £1.08 billion in revenue. In a market saturated with digital entertainment, audiences continue to prioritise shared, in-person experiences. That is not nostalgia. It is proof of relevance.

Theatre functions as civic infrastructure, creative R&D, skills training, an export engine, and a social connector in one. It supports over 100,000 FTE jobs, and generates intellectual property that feeds film, television, and the wider creative industries. Every £1 spent on a ticket generates a further £1.40 in local economic activity.

It is also deeply embedded in the life of its communities. 95% of venues deliver programmes contributing to social good. 86% run workshops with local schools. Every respondent operates free or discounted ticket schemes.

Theatres partner with NHS trusts, deliver dementia-friendly and relaxed performances, and function as trusted civic spaces in towns where they are often the primary point of access to culture. This is not peripheral activity. It is structural public value, delivered at national scale.

The audiences theatres attract reflect that commitment. Attendance spans the full range of occupational groups and extends well beyond major urban centres. Theatre is not a niche pursuit for a narrow demographic. It is a genuinely national habit.

Yet strong demand does not automatically translate into financial resilience. Real-terms ticket prices have fallen since 2019: theatres have absorbed inflation rather than pass it on fully, sustaining access at the cost of margins. Staffing, energy, maintenance, and employment tax costs continue to rise. More than a third of organisations forecast operating deficits this year, rising to over half among subsidised theatres where pricing flexibility is most limited and public funding has not kept pace with inflation.

This is not a crisis of popularity. It is a structural squeeze. Theatre is labour-intensive and place based, dependent on skilled people working together in real time. These are jobs that cannot be automated, outsourced, or replaced by AI. When theatre contracts, communities lose a valuable civic asset as well as an economic one, and the wider creative economy feels the effect years later.

There is, however, cause for optimism. Higher Theatre Tax Relief rates have already enabled hundreds of productions and thousands of jobs. The Arts Everywhere Fund represents the most significant investment in cultural buildings in a generation. The Curriculum and Assessment Review could restore arts education as an entitlement. And the Arts Council England review has proposed touring Theatre Tax Relief reform, less bureaucracy, and stronger philanthropic incentives.

The sector continues to adapt, forming touring alliances, building international partnerships, and investing in sustainable production and inclusive design. The policy environment is moving in the right direction. Yet margin erosion limits experimentation, touring, commissioning, and skills development, particularly outside London and in subsidised organisations that sustain the talent pipeline. Resilience alone does not create financial headroom. Innovation requires it.

Targeted interventions would stabilise the system and enable growth:

- **Business rates reform**, recognising theatres as fixed, place-based civic assets, that drive footfall and local economic spillover.
- **Enhanced Theatre Tax Relief for touring,** to correct structural disincentives that currently limit geographic reach.
- **Inflation-aware public funding settlements,** restoring planning certainty for organisations that commission new work, deliver social impact, and sustain talent pipelines.
- **Stronger philanthropic incentives** and investment in developing fundraising capacity, crowding in private giving at scale, particularly for development and regional growth.

These are not blanket subsidies. They are strategic adjustments to secure a proven growth sector. Nor are they one-size-fits-all solutions. The ecology is mixed, commercial and subsidised, producing and presenting, metropolitan and regional. Different pressures require different tools.

Demand is strong. Talent is abundant. What is at stake is scale, access, and long-term resilience. With the right policies and investment, theatre can continue to operate nationally across all regions, invest in the next generation of work and workforce, and sustain the civic spaces communities depend on.

The decisions taken now will determine which future prevails.

Part I: Theatre Sector Outlook

British theatre matters. It entertains millions, employs hundreds of thousands, trains talent that powers the UK's globally admired screen industries, and anchors communities from the West End to coastal towns across the country. It is a source of national pride, soft power, and significant economic return.

Audiences attend in strong numbers. International appetite for UK work remains high. Creative ambition is undiminished. Across the country, theatres are selling tickets, filling seats, and delivering work of extraordinary quality and range.

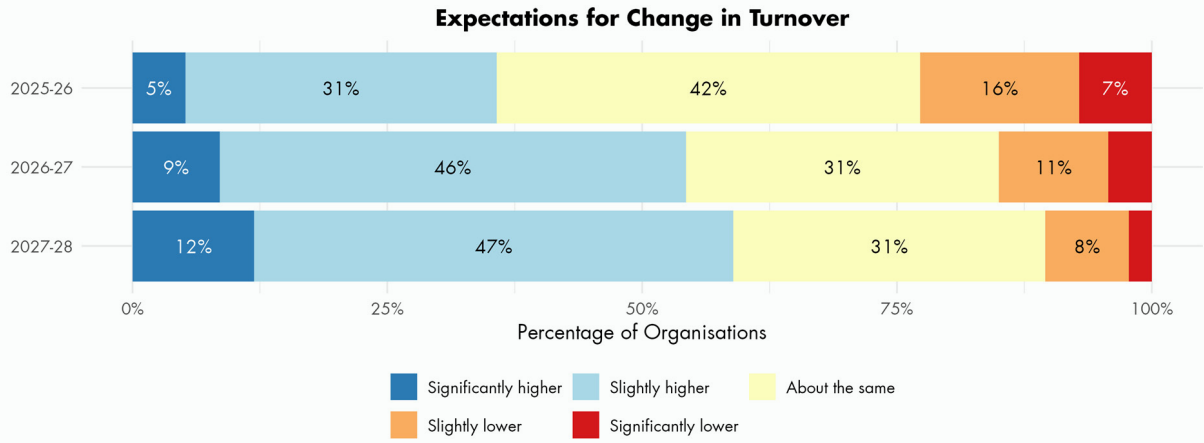
Yet the underlying economics have tightened further over the past twelve months. The sector faces sustained margin compression: costs rising faster than income, public funding falling in real terms, and limited scope to raise ticket prices without pricing out the audience theatres exist to serve.

These cost pressures are common across the economy, but theatre's structural constraints – fixed buildings, labour-intensive operations, capped capacity, and a commitment to accessible pricing – mean they hit with disproportionate force.

1. Turnover, Deficits, and Sentiment

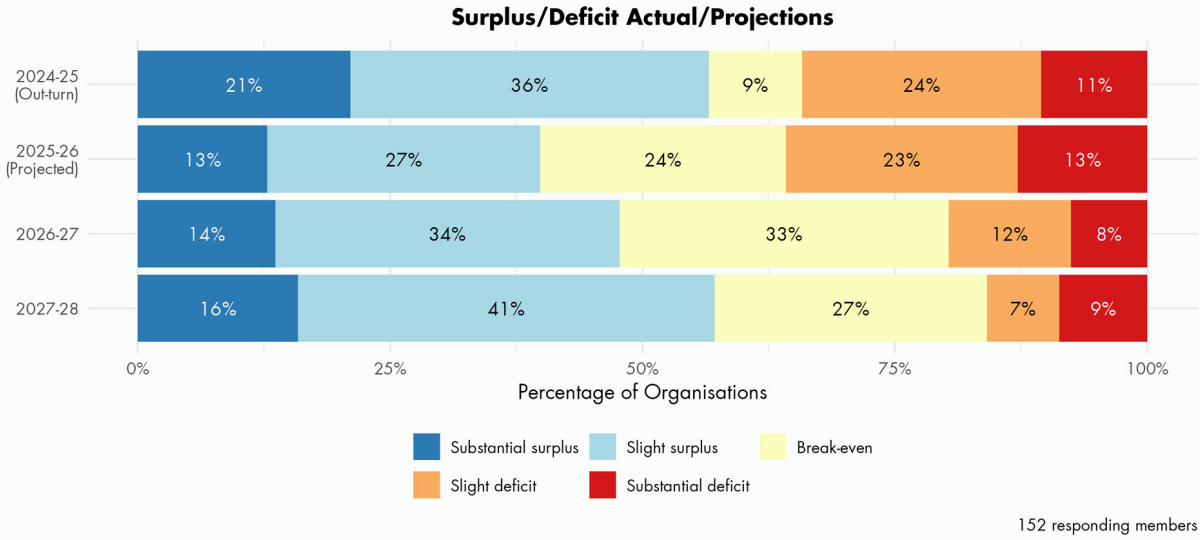
The latest SOLT & UK Theatre Annual Membership Survey shows a marked deterioration in sector confidence.

Confidence in income growth has fallen particularly sharply. Only 36% of organisations expect turnover to increase in 2025–26, down from 60% the previous year. 23% anticipate contraction, including 7% forecasting significant declines.



154 responding organisations

The financial outlook has also worsened. 36% of organisations project a deficit in 2025–26, and 13% expect those shortfalls to be substantial.

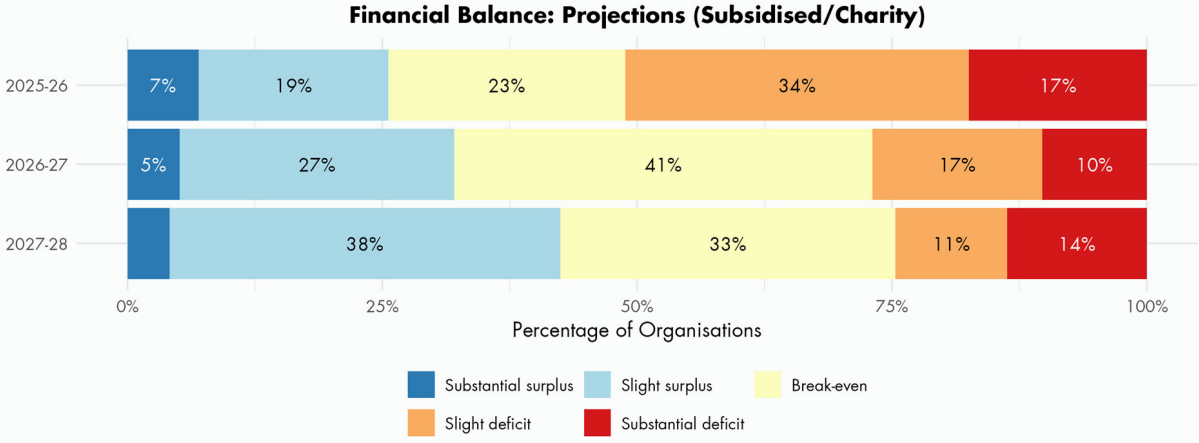


152 responding members

Subsidised and charitable organisations face the most acute pressure. 51% expect to operate in deficit, and 17% forecast substantial shortfalls, reflecting disproportionate exposure to rising fixed costs, constrained public funding, and limited pricing flexibility.

Looking ahead, the headline numbers suggest improvement, but the underlying picture remains fragile. By 2027–28, 57% of organisations expect to return to surplus and the proportion forecasting substantial deficits falls to 9%. On paper, that looks like recovery.

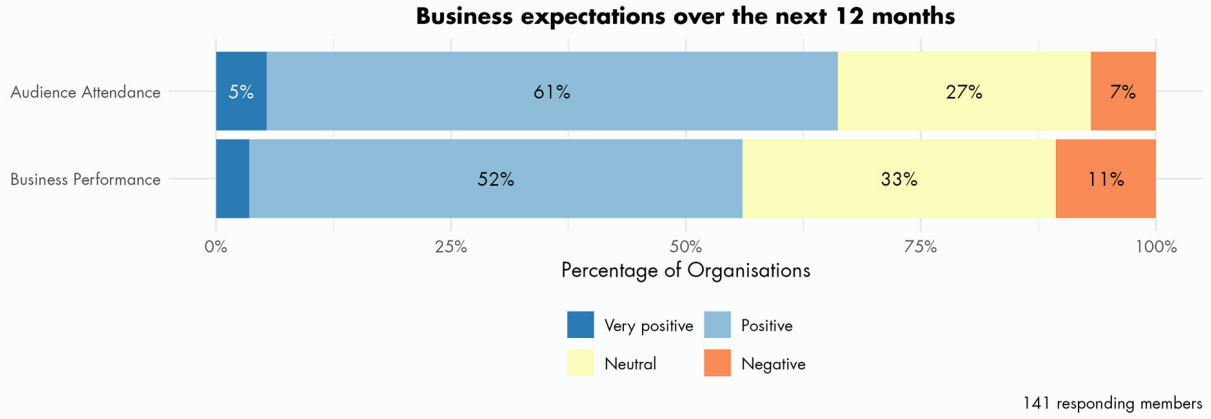
Yet beneath that aggregate sits a more uneven reality. Among subsidised organisations, 25% still expect to be in deficit, and 14% continue to forecast substantial shortfalls. For this part of the sector, the next three years are about managing continued instability, not rebuilding reserves.



Respondents: 86 Subsidised organisations/Non-subsidised charities

The year-on-year comparison is also concerning. In the 2025 survey, 48% expected a surplus in 2025–26 and only 5% anticipated a substantial deficit. One year on, only 40% anticipate a surplus, with 13% now expecting a substantial deficit. The sector has repeatedly underestimated the depth and duration of cost pressure. Each successive deficit year erodes reserves further, leaving organisations less resilient to external shocks and less able to take the creative and commercial risks on which future growth depends.

Sentiment tells the same story. The proportion describing their business expectations as positive or very positive has fallen from 67% to 56%. Audience expectations remain comparatively resilient, with 66% still positive about attendance, but strong houses are no longer enough to offset structural cost growth.

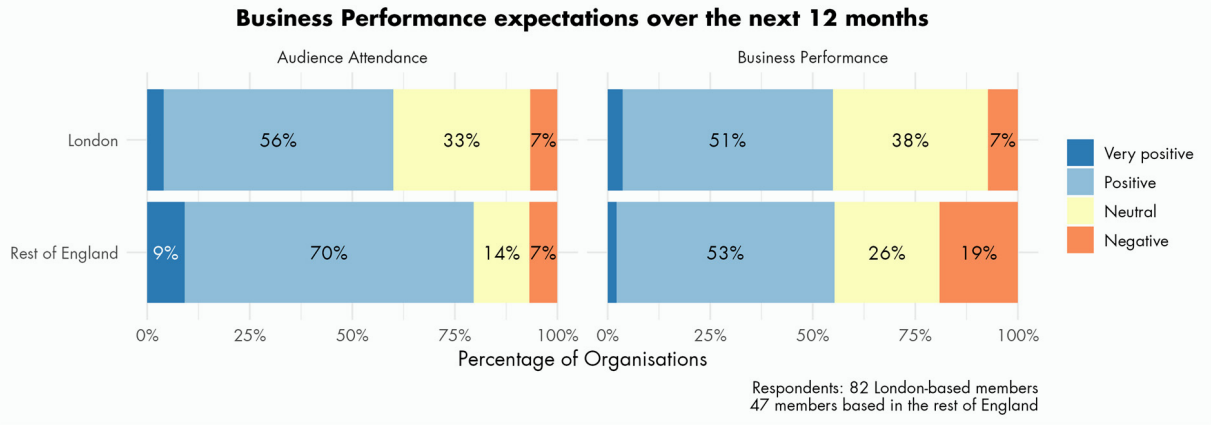


This is not a cyclical wobble. It reflects diminishing headroom, where success in one part of the market increasingly masks vulnerability in another.

2. Regional and Scale Pressures

The geographic picture adds further texture. Organisations in England outside London report greater optimism about audience attendance. This likely reflects continuing post-pandemic audience rebuilding in some regional markets, alongside the impact of major touring productions.

On overall business performance, however, the picture reverses: 19% of organisations in the rest of England hold negative views, compared with 7% in London.



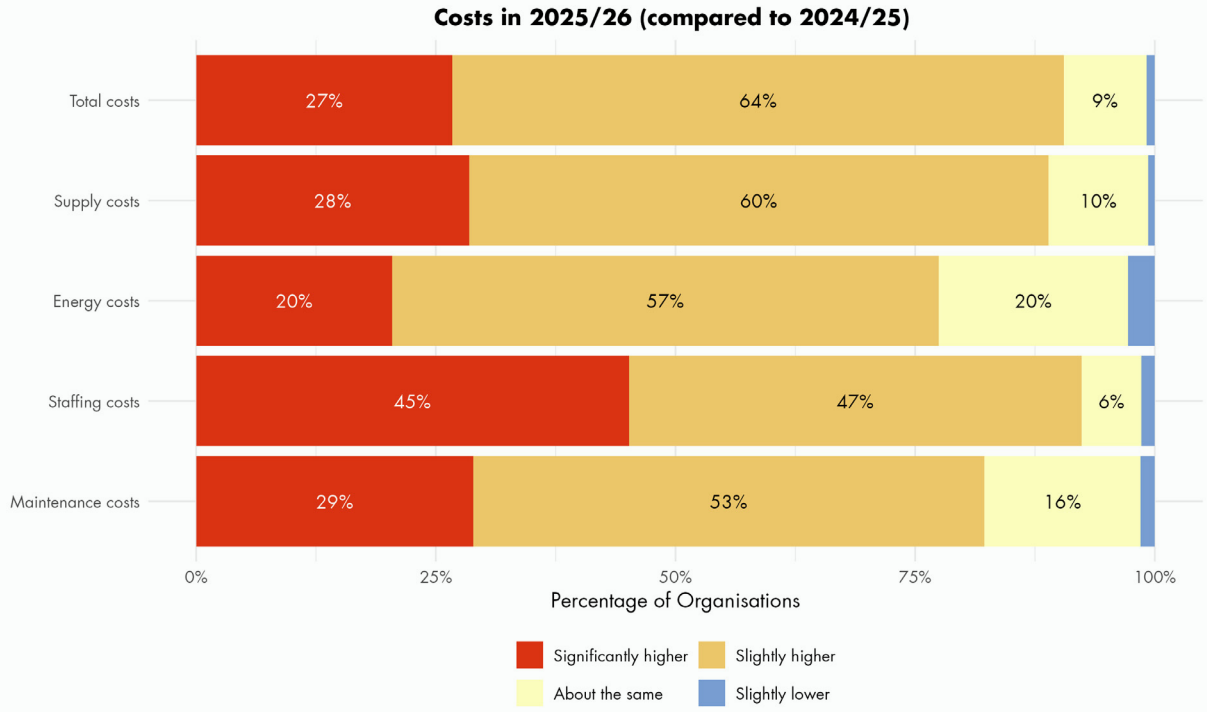
However, pressure is not evenly distributed. Smaller organisations face the sharpest strain. Larger institutions, particularly in major population centres, remain comparatively buoyant. They benefit from deeper philanthropic networks, diversified trading income, stronger pricing power, and larger reserves. Smaller organisations lack those buffers, so risk escalates faster.

Audience demand still provides confidence. The problem is not a lack of interest. It is that the financial model that underpins the sector is under sustained pressure, and it will not rebalance on its own without deliberate intervention.

3. Escalating Cost Drivers

Cost escalation remains the defining structural pressure. Over the past decade, production costs have doubled, driven by cumulative rises across labour, materials, energy, insurance, and building maintenance. That trajectory shows no signs of easing.

91% of organisations expect total costs to rise in 2025–26. Staffing is the most acute driver: 92% anticipate increases, with 45% expecting increases to be significant. Beyond staffing, 88% expect supply costs to increase, 77% foresee higher energy costs, and 82% anticipate rising maintenance expenditure, the latter being particularly acute for older and listed venues.



The Rising Financial Floor of Production

In 2021, the Royal Shakespeare Company and Playful Productions brought *The Mirror and the Light* to the West End. It featured 24 actors, full period costume, a large technical team, and substantial physical production.

In 2025, the same producers mounted *Born with Teeth*. It was a markedly smaller production in cast size (featuring just two actors), staging, and physical scale.

Yet both productions cost broadly the same to produce and operate on a weekly basis, despite lower salary costs reflecting the smaller acting company and technical team. Mounted today, *The Mirror and the Light* would require materially higher capital and weekly costs.

This is structural cost inflation in action. Labour, materials, energy, insurance, and core overheads have all increased. The financial floor of producing theatre has risen sharply, and with it the barrier to scale and risk.

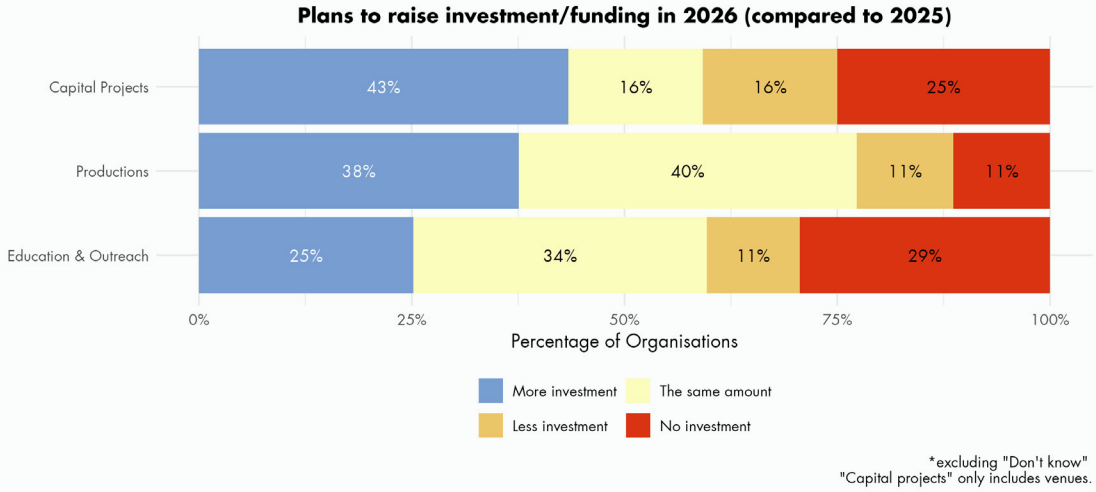
The Mirror and the Light production photos, directed by Jeremy Herrin, Gielgud Theatre, London. Taken in the first dress rehearsal, 22 September 2021. Photo: Marc Brenner (c) RSC

Born With Teeth production images, directed by Daniel Evans, designed by Joanna Scotcher. Taken in the Wyndham's Theatre, London, August 2025. Photo: (c) Johan Persson

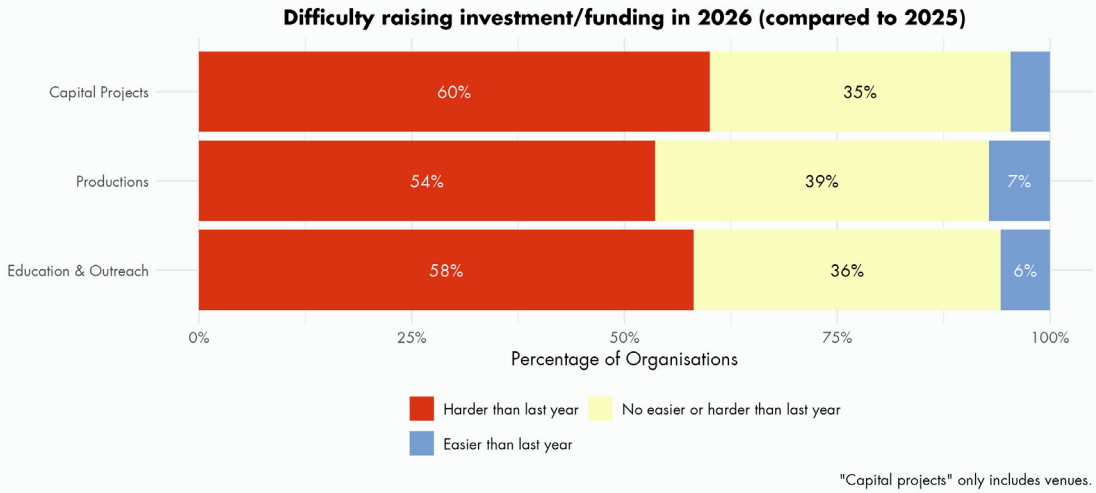
4. Investment Barriers and Capital Backlog

Even under sustained financial strain, organisations continue to invest to stimulate demand and build long-term resilience. This investment drives supply chains, supports skilled employment, and generates wider economic activity in towns and city centres.

More than a third of respondents plan to increase production investment, sustaining freelance employment and creative supply chains. 43% intend to expand capital investment in buildings and infrastructure, work that supports construction, technical, and environmental retrofit jobs while strengthening high streets and visitor economies. A further 25% expect to grow education and community engagement, recognising its central role as a force for social good, in audience development, and building skills pathways.



However, more than half report that these plans will be harder to deliver than last year. Reduced reserves and increased risk sensitivity mean fewer projects meet viability thresholds. While venue owners have continued to invest in their estates, much of the not-for-profit and publicly owned theatre infrastructure lacks the same access to capital and affordable finance available to commercial owners.



5. Income Mix Under Strain

Theatre finances rely on a mixed-income model. Commercial producers depend predominantly on box office income. Not-for-profit theatres combine earned income with philanthropy, sponsorship, and, in some cases, public subsidy. Venue operators supplement programming revenue with catering, hires, and other trading activity. Financial resilience depends on the interaction of these streams rather than any single source.

In principle, this diversification provides stability. In practice, several strands are under simultaneous pressure.

For subsidised organisations, earned income now accounts for 58% of total income, compared with just 17% from contributed sources, including Government grant (Arts Council England ***Private Investment in Culture Survey 2025***). Organisations therefore carry significant exposure to fluctuations in ticket sales and wider audience demand.

Philanthropic giving remains fragile. Growth has stalled, and competition for support has intensified. Even larger, high-profile organisations are struggling to secure multi-year commitments at scale. Smaller organisations, particularly outside major cities, face sharper barriers. They lack development capacity, national profile, and access to established networks.

At the same time, some cultural organisations and productions have become targets of protest or boycotts. This has created a chilling effect among corporate sponsors. Support for cultural organisations, once seen as reputationally positive is now, in some cases, viewed as a potential risk. When that income falls away, the impact reaches beyond artistic programmes to access, education, and community engagement programmes.

This comes as public funding continues to erode in real terms. The recent 5% uplift in funding for National Portfolio Organisations, though welcome, does not match cumulative inflation across the 2023–28 period. The **2025 Spending Review** confirmed a 1.8% real-terms reduction in DCMS resource budgets to 2028–29, reinforcing the downward trajectory.

The mixed model only works when its parts remain in balance. Organisations can absorb shocks temporarily, but sustained imbalance erodes capacity, output, and long-term resilience.

6. Local Authority Funding and Civic Fragility

Local authorities have **historically** been the UK's largest single public funder of culture. However, council finances have tightened sharply as budgets have been redirected towards statutory duties, particularly adult social care and SEND.

In England, real-terms local authority spending per person on culture **fell by around 48%** between 2009/10 and 2022/23. This contraction matters because cultural provision is discretionary. Councils must provide a comprehensive library service, but there is no equivalent statutory requirement to fund theatres. This is why Dame Margaret Hodge's **Arts Council England Review** recommendation on mandatory culture strategies carries weight.

The planning system compounds the problem. Without a consistent duty to plan for cultural infrastructure, culture is treated as optional in growth and regeneration. Venues are left exposed as land values rise and development pressures intensify. Whilst we welcome the strengthened Agent of Change principle in the National Planning Policy Framework, **current proposals risk weakening the UK's theatre ecosystem**.

For many regional theatres, education, health partnerships, and placemaking are not additional obligations but central to their mission. As other parts of civic infrastructure have come under strain, theatres have stepped in: delivering cultural education, social prescribing, youth engagement, and community space. They do so willingly, and with impact.

However, the scale and reporting requirements of this work have grown significantly, while the resources to deliver it have not kept pace. Reduced local authority support has widened the gap between what theatres are expected to deliver and what they can sustainably afford.

7. Macroeconomic Context

The wider economic environment constrains both organisations and audiences. Inflation has eased, but theatres continue to face persistent increases in labour, materials, energy, insurance, and maintenance. Household budgets remain stretched, heightening sensitivity to discretionary spending.

From April 2026, higher Employer National Insurance and lower thresholds will add recurring costs running into tens of millions of pounds annually across the sector. Staffing is the largest cost line for most theatres and productions. Post-Covid, member data shows that wage costs have risen by more than double the rate of inflation, leaving no meaningful headroom to absorb further tax increases.

Fixed building costs compound the strain. Theatres are place-based civic assets. They cannot relocate or digitise their core activity. Business rates remain a disproportionate burden, particularly in high-value urban locations. The Valuation Office Agency estimates average theatre rateable values will rise by 28% between 2023 and 2026, with member modelling indicating increases of up to 88% between 2026 and 2029.

These pressures are structural, not cyclical. If left unaddressed, they will reduce output, constrain innovation, and narrow the sector's geographic and social reach.

Part II: Audiences, Demand, and a Commitment to Access

Live performance continues to command audiences at national scale. In 2025, SOLT and UK Theatre members welcomed more than 37 million attendances across the UK, sustaining year-on-year growth and exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

No other UK cultural sector has matched this trajectory. UK cinema attendance has fallen 30% since before the pandemic and declined a further 2.4% in 2025; cinema revenue remains 21% below its pre-pandemic benchmark.

The West End attracts more than two million more people each year than the entire Premier League, and nearly three million more than Broadway. In a market saturated with digital choice, audiences continue to opt for the shared, in-person experience.

Crucially, this growth has not been fuelled by price escalation. Nationwide, the median ticket price was £41, with 41% of tickets sold at £35 or below. Fewer than 6% of tickets exceeded £100.

This reflects a sustained commitment to affordability, but also tight operating margins. With limited premium yield, there is little capacity to absorb rising costs. Growth has come from volume and pricing discipline, not escalation.

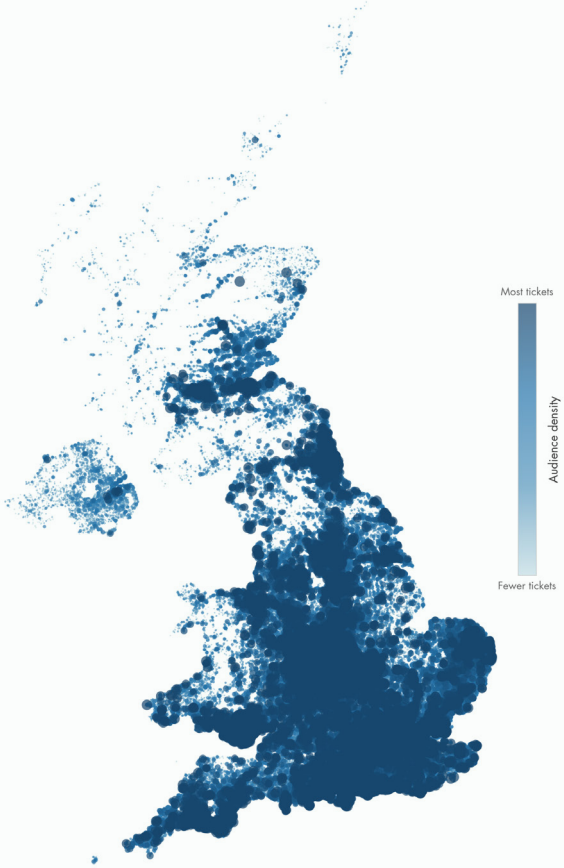
Nonetheless, access is embedded in the model. Every respondent offers free or discounted ticket schemes, 95% provide targeted group discounts, and many work with schools and community partners to reduce practical and cultural barriers to attendance.

National Reach, National Impact

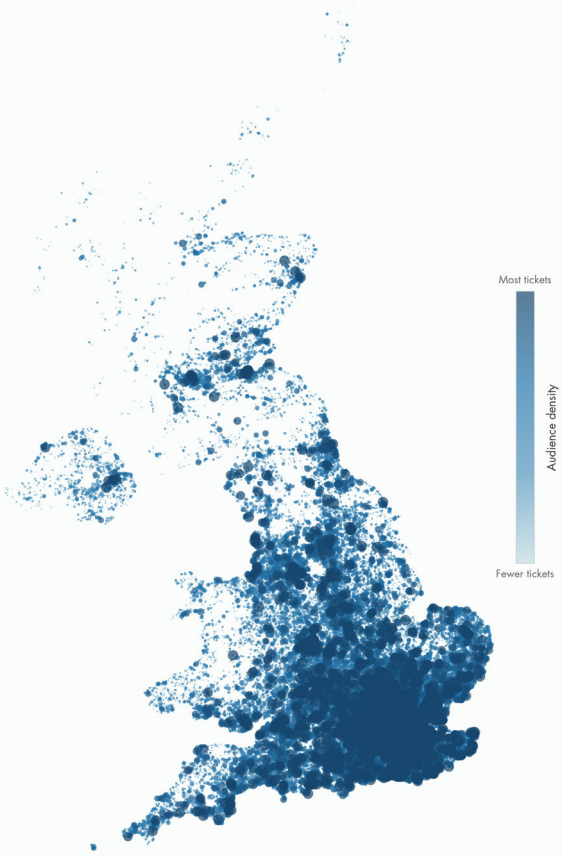
Theatre is not a metropolitan habit. Audiences from every part of the UK attend theatre, from the Scottish Highlands and Northern Ireland to the tip of Cornwall. While attendance is naturally concentrated in urban centres, its reach extends far beyond them.

This is a genuinely national audience, not a city-centre one.

National Audience Reach of SOLT and UK Theatre Venues



National Audience Reach of SOLT Venues



London theatre illustrates the national draw particularly clearly, attracting audiences from across the whole UK. People travel from Wales, the North, Scotland, and Northern Ireland to attend productions in the capital. London theatre is not simply a local resource: it functions as a national cultural amenity, accessed by audiences from every region.

1. West End Performance: Resilient with Warning Signs

The West End generated record revenue of £1.084 billion in 2025 (up 4.1%) with 17.64 million attendances (up 3.16%). However, the number of performances grew slightly faster, rising by 3.26%.

In other words, more shows were staged, but the audience fell behind to a small degree. As a result, average occupancy eased slightly to 84%. With UK CPI at 3.4%, revenue growth was therefore marginal, both in absolute terms and once inflation is taken into account.

Average ticket prices rose by 0.92%, which amounts to a real-terms fall of around 2.5%. This continues a longer trend. Since 2019, real-terms ticket prices have declined by 8.9%, even as production, staffing, and building costs have risen sharply.

The pricing profile also challenges common assumptions. The majority of tickets were sold at £56 or below, with more than a quarter under £35. Notably, those thresholds are unchanged from 2024. In nominal terms they are flat. In real terms, they represent a fall.

Fewer than 4% of tickets were priced above £150, and only 0.38% exceeded £250. Premium prices exist, but they form a very small proportion of total sales and underpin broader access rather than defining the market.

The year was also uneven. A buoyant first quarter, with double-digit revenue growth and attendances up 8.5%, gave way to a more fragile middle period. The final quarter softened further, with attendances slightly down year-on-year as households constrained discretionary spending.

The West End sustained volume, but not yield. Growth came from additional performances and disciplined pricing rather than stronger real-terms income or fuller houses.

Capital at Risk: The Financial Anatomy of a West End Production

A West End play typically requires £1–2 million in upfront capital, with fixed weekly running costs of £120,000–£200,000 before royalties.

A West End musical may cost £3–10 million or more, with fixed weekly costs of £300,000–£400,000, and employ over 150 people across cast, orchestra, technical, wardrobe, front-of-house, management, and marketing.

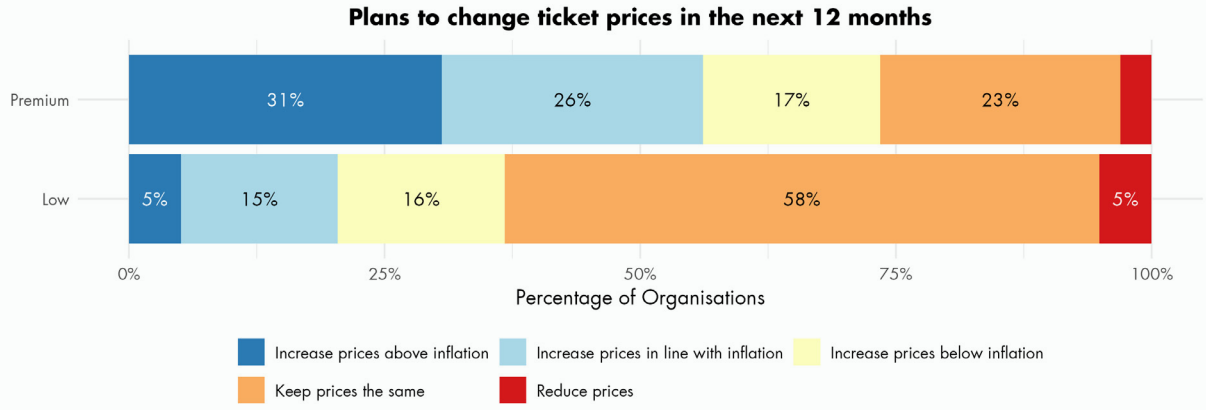
Productions do not retain the full ticket price. After VAT, restoration levies, booking fees, and commissions, a production typically receives 70–81% of face value, and close to 60% where tickets are sold through third-party agents.

A large musical may therefore need to gross £500,000 or more per week simply to break even. Even successful plays often recoup only late in their run, if at all.

2. Affordability, Access, and Barriers to Participation

Ticket prices have fallen in real terms, and producers intend to keep it that way. 63% plan to freeze or reduce their lowest-priced tickets, and a further 16% expect to make real-terms cuts with increases below inflation.

Only 31% expect to raise prices exclusively at the premium end, segmenting the market to protect access while preserving some yield.

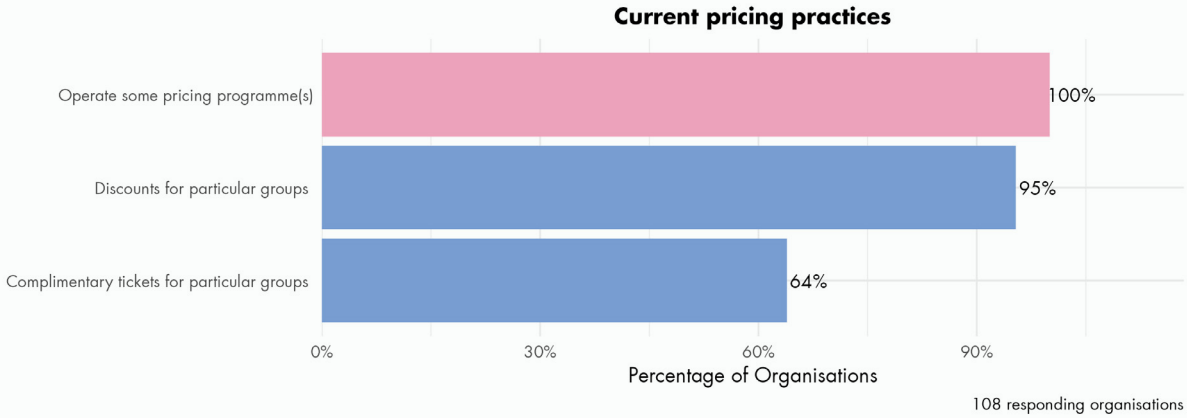


This is rational market behaviour. Household budgets remain under pressure, and producers cannot afford to price out the audiences they rebuilt after the pandemic. But restraint has consequences: audiences are being shielded from inflation, while balance sheets are not.

Access Programmes

Nonetheless, commitment to access remains universal. Every respondent operates free or discounted ticket schemes. 95% offer targeted group discounts. 64% provide complimentary tickets for specific groups.

Kids Week, run by **OfficialLondonTheatre.com** every summer holidays, offers children aged 17 and under free entry to any participating show when accompanied by a full-paying adult. It is one of the longest-running audience development initiatives in British theatre, and has introduced more than 2.5 million young people to the magic of live theatre.



Evidence from recent West End productions demonstrates how this works in practice. During its 10-week run, James Graham's play, ***Punch***, was seen by over 54,000 people, with 10% of audiences made up of school groups from 171 schools. More than 2,000 young people attended through community and charity partnerships, many experiencing theatre for the first time. 21% of tickets were sold at under £25, and partnerships with 11 charities ensured that access was structured, not incidental.

This model depends on cross-subsidy. Premium pricing plays a direct enabling role. Higher-priced tickets underwrite lower-cost access, school engagement, and community partnerships. Pricing discipline and premium yield are not in tension with widening participation; they make it possible.

Access, therefore, is not a peripheral activity. It is embedded in the commercial model itself. The question is not whether theatre prioritises access. It is whether the wider economic environment allows that cross-subsidy model to remain viable at scale.

The Total Cost of Participation

Ticket price, however, is only one component of affordability. In London, a night out requires discretionary income for rail or Tube fares, hospitality, and often childcare. In regional settings, ticket prices are typically lower, but dispersed populations face proportionally higher transport costs.

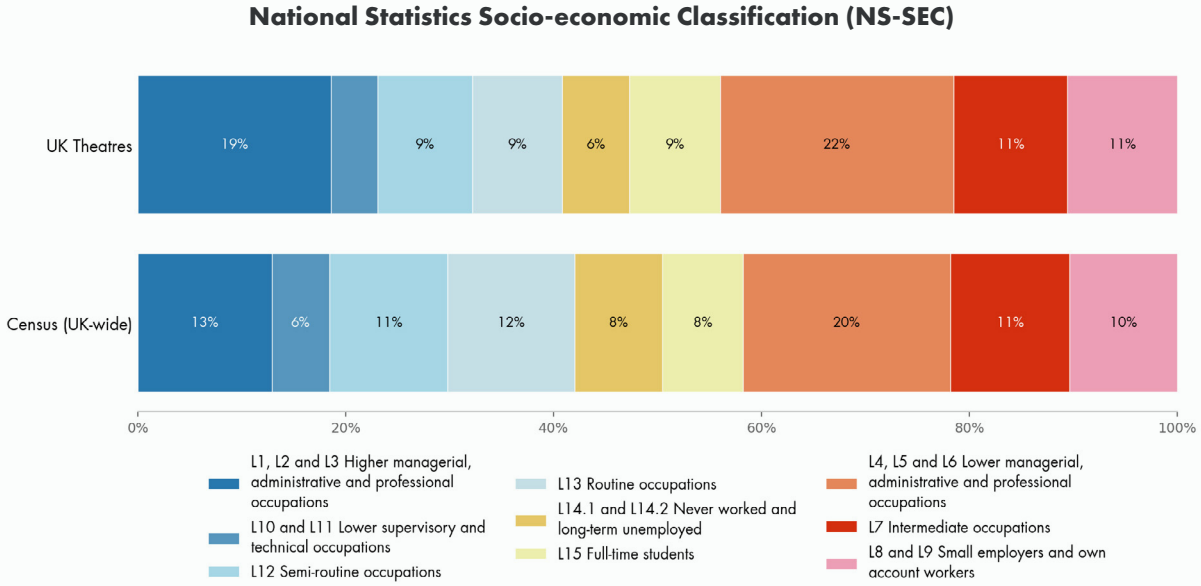
Pricing discipline can protect access at the box office. It cannot offset these wider economic pressures.

Cultural and Social Barriers

Cost is not the only barrier to participation. Cultural confidence, familiarity, and perceived relevance matter just as much.

71% of organisations report that their programming reflects the diversity of their communities. They support this through targeted outreach, partnerships with schools and community groups, and sustained investment in diversifying their workforce. Programming and people must align with the communities theatres serve.

Socioeconomic data confirms that theatre's audience is far more representative of British society than is often assumed. Mapping ticket data against the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification shows that theatre attracts audiences right across the occupational spectrum, from higher professionals to small business owners, intermediate workers, and those in routine and semi-routine employment. In most categories, the proportions closely mirror the census population.



Where gaps remain, they are the focus of sustained access work, not evidence of indifference to inclusion. The task is to remove the remaining barriers, such as cost, transport, and familiarity, that prevent attendance from fully reflecting the population. Maintaining the financial headroom to do so is central to the access argument throughout this report.

The sector also recognises that the experience of attending can feel unfamiliar. Theatres now invest in venue tours and backstage insights, pre-show talks, social media engagement, and clear communication about what to expect. This work demystifies attendance and lowers the threshold for first-time audiences. For many people, the barrier is not price, but uncertainty about whether the space is for them.

Our members have developed resources to support this shift. The **Theatre Trip Toolkit** provides a structured framework to help producing and touring companies, and receiving venues, build sustainable relationships with schools. It supports partnership working, clarifies logistical requirements, and helps theatres respond to the practical pressures schools face.

Hippodrome Unlocked

Birmingham Hippodrome has a long history of engaging young people across the West Midlands, from schools programmes to its Young Advocates scheme. In 2024, the venue partnered with Cameron Mackintosh Ltd. on Hippodrome Unlocked, a programme offering **special performances** of major musicals to young people facing significant barriers to attending live theatre.

Cameron Mackintosh Ltd. generously subsidised ticket costs, enabling Birmingham Hippodrome to invite groups from across its Hippodrome Education Network and wider community engagement programmes to dedicated performances of *Hamilton* (2024) and *Mary Poppins* (2025).

The result was transformative: over a fifth of *Hamilton* attendees had never been to a theatre before, and 86% of the *Mary Poppins* audience came from areas with the highest child poverty rates in the UK.

Recognising that many attendees were first-time theatregoers, the venue designed a wraparound welcome experience: complimentary programmes, individual hosts from the Visitor Services team, and pre-show welcome emails. Each performance was followed by an exclusive behind-the-scenes session, including demonstrations of scene changes and costumes, plus a Q&A with the cast, giving young audiences a rare glimpse behind the curtain and into the breadth of skills required to stage a world-class production.

The response was extraordinary. Across both shows, 99% of attendees said they wanted to see more theatre, 88% wanted to take part in more theatre activities, and 80% reported an interest in a future career in the sector. As audiences spilled out of the theatre, the excitement was palpable. One attendee described seeing *Hamilton* as her "*biggest wish*," adding: "*What a magical experience. I couldn't stop smiling the whole time*."

Hippodrome Unlocked demonstrates the power of partnership between independent venues and commercial producers. By combining generously subsidised tickets with a carefully designed welcome experience, Cameron Mackintosh and Birmingham Hippodrome addressed not just financial barriers but cultural ones. In doing so, they are cultivating not only the next generation of theatregoers but potentially the sector's future workforce. As one student shared in their post-show survey, "*It's my dream to perform on a large stage like Birmingham Hippodrome and inspire people as everyone has done today for me*."

Birmingham Hippodrome auditorium ready for the *Hamilton Unlocked* performance with a free programme on every seat. Photo: Ryan Allen-Rose

Part III: Theatre as Civic Anchors

Theatre is social infrastructure as well as a creative industry. Across all parts of the UK, theatres operate as anchor institutions in metropolitan centres, regional cities, market towns, and rural communities. In many of these places, the local theatre is the primary point of access to culture. 71% of respondents say their programming reflects the community they work in, and 65% say their audiences do too, reinforcing the degree to which theatres are shaped by, and accountable to, the places they serve.

They convene festivals and civic events, partner in town-centre regeneration, train skilled local workforces, and drive footfall that sustains surrounding hospitality and retail. Place-based regeneration evidence consistently shows that investment in cultural infrastructure strengthens high streets, boosts business confidence, and builds local pride. Theatres underpin this activity through regular, repeat visitation and year-round community engagement.

Sheffield Theatres: Civic Infrastructure, International Impact

Sheffield Theatres is the largest producing theatre complex outside London, reaching around 400,000 people each year across four venues: the Crucible, renowned for bold original work; the Lyceum, a cornerstone of the UK touring circuit; the Tanya Moiseiwitsch Playhouse; and The Montgomery, an arts centre with a longstanding commitment to children's creativity, which joined the complex in 2025.

Its producing record speaks for itself. Work originating in Sheffield has transferred to the West End and beyond, with *Life of Pi*, *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*, and *KENREX* all reaching international audiences. The Crucible's role as the spiritual home of the World Snooker Championship reinforces, rather than competes with, this ambition. Both position Sheffield on the world stage.

The Crucible and Lyceum Theatre in Sheffield. Photo: Smart Banda

Yet its impact is civic as well as commercial. Sheffield Theatres sustains youth theatre, community ensembles, dementia-friendly performances, and creative learning at scale. It works across the Sheffield City Region, building a pipeline from first experience to professional career. That continuum, participation, skills, employment, and cultural pride, underpins the city's wider economy.

This is a civic anchor in practice. Sheffield Theatres generates cultural capital, local employment, and international visibility from one integrated estate. Public investment here does not subsidise a building. It secures infrastructure that drives opportunity, identity, and long-term regional growth.

1. Touring & Geographic Equity

Touring remains central to theatre's social contract with the public. It is the mechanism through which high-quality work reaches communities, particularly those without producing houses, and it sustains skills and employment across the country. For audiences in smaller towns and rural areas, touring is often the only route to professional live performance. Without it, geographic inequality in cultural access widens by default.

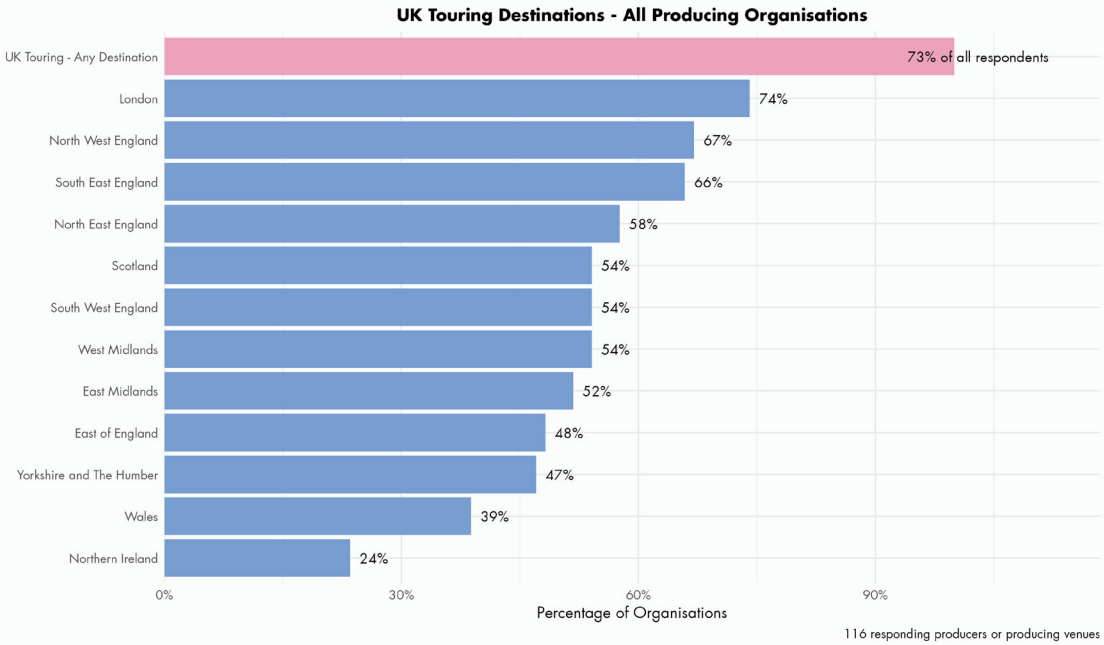
The economics of touring, particularly to smaller towns and cities, have deteriorated sharply. Evidence from the Arts Council England's forthcoming Touring Review is stark. Figures show that nearly three quarters of respondents describe the state of touring as Poor or Very Poor, and almost four in five say it has become significantly harder in recent years. Of 571 touring organisations analysed, more than half recorded losses in 2023.[1]

Large, brand-led musicals continue to fill major receiving houses, but only a limited number of productions can operate at that scale.

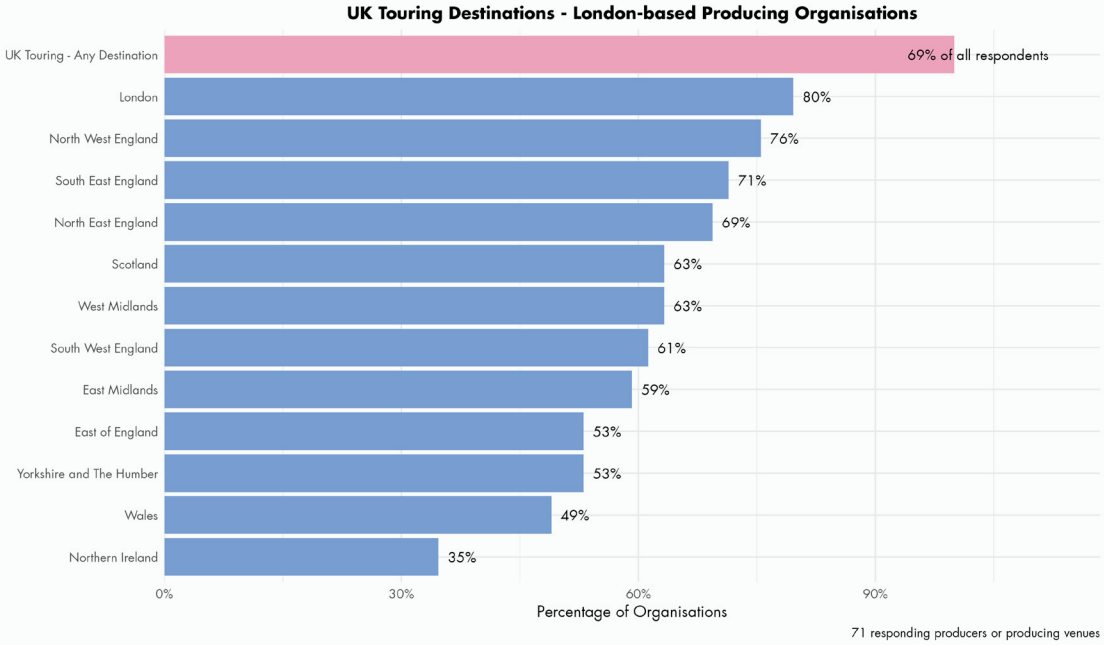
Small and mid-scale venues, particularly outside major cities, are therefore more exposed. Without intervention, companies may need to cast sizes and physical scale to contain risk. The result is a steady erosion of geographic equity.

Survey data confirms this pattern. Among all responding producers, London is the most frequent touring destination (74%), followed by North West England (67%) and South East England (66%). Touring frequency falls aware in less densely populated or distant regions: fewer than half tour to the East of England (48%), Yorkshire and the Humber (47%), or the East Midlands (52%).

1. The full findings of the Arts Council's research will be published in the next month.



The pattern holds when isolating London-based producers, though they tour more frequently overall and reach a broader spectrum of destinations.



In response, many UK Theatre members are working through the **Local Theatre Touring Alliance**, launched in May 2025, to strengthen the sustainability of touring to theatres in towns and smaller cities across the UK.

Blackpool Grand Theatre Chief Executive, Adam Knight, said, "*Theatres like ours are vital parts of their communities, yet too often they are overlooked in national conversations. The Local Theatre Touring Alliance is about bringing people together to protect and strengthen local theatre for future generations*." Executive Director of Theatre Royal Wakefield, Katie Town, added, "*Mid-scale venues are facing unprecedented challenges, but there is also huge potential if we work collaboratively*."

Making Touring Economically Viable

Arts Council England's **Incentivising Touring Scheme** is a significant and welcome intervention. The scheme demonstrates the calibre and breadth of work being produced, and the clear demand from audiences to experience it close to home. For touring to thrive, we need further sustained investment in a viable financial model that drives ambition, supports innovation, and delivers work to audiences nationwide.

However, grant programmes alone cannot resolve the structural barriers. **Theatre Tax Relief** (TTR) has delivered nearly £900 million in support since 2014, and the permanence of higher rates from April 2025 (45% for touring, 40% for non-touring) was transformative and **highly valued intervention**. It provided long-term certainty, strengthened investor confidence, and stabilised production planning across the sector.

However, TTR is structured around qualifying production costs. It does not sufficiently capture the additional distribution costs of touring, including transport, living away allowances, get-ins, and additional staffing. The tax system therefore incentivises concentrating work in one location over distributing it across the country.

A further anomaly affects large-scale opera and ballet companies, whose touring work rarely meets the 14-performance threshold for TTR's 45% touring rate. These companies transport casts, orchestras, and crews of up to 100 people across the country on the lower 40% rate, unable to claim relief on travel and living away allowance costs, creating a structural inequity that penalises precisely the organisations delivering national touring and undermining the geographic spread of cultural provision that both DCMS and Arts Council England have identified as a priority.

Two major independent reviews now support reform. Arts Council England's **Cultural Tax Reliefs Impact Review** found that "*the true cost of touring is not sufficiently covered by tax reliefs, to the detriment of communities across the country*" and modelled that expanding qualifying costs could generate more than £364 million in GVA and 3,622 full-time equivalent jobs. The Hodge Review of Arts Council England reached the same conclusion, recommending that the government amend TTR to include touring costs such as transport and accommodation, mirroring the treatment already available under Orchestra Tax Relief.

The problem is not a shortage of willing companies or enthusiastic audiences, but that the economics of production in certain communities exceeds what the current financial model can bear.

The Incentivising Touring Scheme and an expanded TTR are complementary interventions. The former reduces upfront capital risk for individual productions. The latter would reshape the underlying economics to make touring structurally viable across the sector, delivering cultural renewal and measurable economic benefits to communities across the UK.

National Theatre of Scotland: *Through the Shortbread Tin*

The **National Theatre of Scotland** (NTS) demonstrates what sustained commitment to geographic equity looks like in practice. *Through the Shortbread Tin*, written and performed by Martin O'Connor and directed by Lu Kemp, was conceived as a conversation with audiences across Scotland about cultural identity and nationhood, performed in Scots with Gaelic songs.

The tour ran from the Borders to Shetland: 20 performances across 12 venues, reaching 3,000 audience members through partnerships with Live Borders, SEALL, Shetland Arts, Live Argyll, Highlife Highland, the National Library of Scotland, Cove Park, and World Gaelic Week.

Accessibility was central to the production's design. Three audio-described performances, three captioned, and four with integrated BSL made NTS one of the few UK theatre producers working at this level of provision, celebrating four of Scotland's languages: English, Scots, Gaelic, and BSL.

Participation was addressed directly. "Theatre for a Fiver" tickets were available at eight venues for 14-to-26-year-olds and those on low-income benefits. A First Nights programme brought 81 first-time theatregoers from seven community groups to seven venues, with transport and a meal included, reaching groups from Melrose Housing Association Tenants to Hope Kitchen and University of the Highlands and Islands students.

Crucially, the tour also invested in Scotland's touring infrastructure, sharing technical skills with smaller venues and loaning equipment for their own productions. That the production revives at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2026 is a mark of its success.

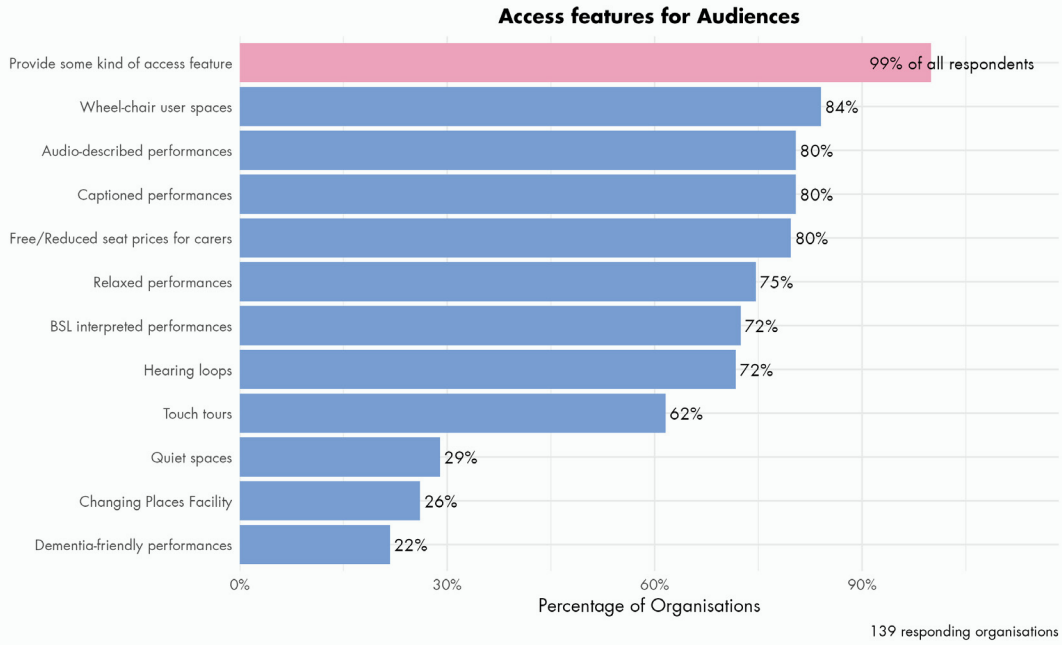
But its wider legacy depends on continued public investment. Real-terms cuts to arts funding put exactly this kind of work at risk, and the communities with least access to theatre have no alternative if it disappears.

2. Accessibility and Inclusion

Our latest research shows that 99% of respondents provide accessible performances, including captioned, audio-described, relaxed, or BSL-interpreted. This represents real progress, though frequency and coverage remain uneven.

Physical infrastructure tells a more complicated story. 84% of venues provide wheelchair spaces in auditoria, but only 72% have wheelchair-accessible stages and only 67% have accessible showers.

Without accessible stages and production facilities, disabled artists and technicians cannot fully participate in the sector. Capital investment is therefore not only about decarbonisation or maintenance. It is fundamental to workforce inclusion.



@sohoplace: A New West End Standard for Inclusive Excellence

In October 2022, **@sohoplace** opened on Charing Cross Road as the first purpose-built, flexible, and fully accessible theatre in the West End. Developed in consultation with leading UK theatre-makers, the brief was clear: create an intimate space with scale, exceptional acoustics, and flawless sightlines, without a traditional proscenium.

Accessibility and inclusivity have shaped every decision, from the building's design to its programming. Outstanding disabled artists and creators have been part of productions on stage and off from day one, inspiring others by sharing their talent on one of the most visible platforms in British theatre.

Early productions demonstrated the theatre's ambitions and capabilities. *Marvellous*, the true story of Neil Baldwin, featured actors with neurodiversity, Down's Syndrome, and Asperger's Syndrome. *As You Like It*, co-starring deaf actress Rose Ayling-Ellis, was fully captioned with a company including deaf and blind performers. *Medea*, starring Sophie Okonedo, welcomed Amy Trigg, the venue's first wheelchair-user actor.

Trigg returned for *The Little Big Things*, a new musical showcasing wheelchair-using actors performing extraordinary choreography, including flying around the auditorium. Ayling-Ellis was nominated for an Olivier Award; Trigg won one. Both achievements underscore what disabled artists can accomplish when provided the platform and opportunity.

This commitment extends beyond the stage. The fifth-floor rehearsal room is also fully accessible, and in 2024, the theatre hosted *Sensory Cinders*, the first West End production designed for audiences with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities. The venue has also supported disabled artists across disciplines, including rehearsal photographer, Shona Louise, a power wheelchair user, and hosted events such as the Variety Disability Sports Awards.

The result is a theatre where artistic excellence and genuine inclusion operate as one.

Ed Larkin (flying) and Jonny Amies in *The Little Big Things* @sohoplace 2024. Photo: Pamela Raith

3. Health, Wellbeing, and Social Partnerships

Theatres deliver measurable health and social outcomes by partnering directly with health providers and community organisations. They do not simply host wellbeing activity; they also collaborate with NHS trusts on creative health programmes tailored to local need.

Leicester Curve presents dementia-friendly and relaxed performances. **Half Moon Theatre** leads social prescribing initiatives. **Hampstead Theatre** runs participatory projects that tackle loneliness and isolation. Others provide targeted support for carers, veterans, refugees, and young people at risk.

A growing evidence base confirms that participation in the performing arts offers a credible, non-clinical route to improved health outcomes. This positions theatres not as a supplement to public health provision, but as a practical component of it.

Beyond health, theatres function as trusted civic spaces. Some operate as warm hubs during winter. Others host community forums, advice sessions, and festivals that connect diverse groups. In many places, the theatre is the most accessible public building in the community, and the most used.

These initiatives deliver tangible social value, yet most rely on short-term grants or cross-subsidy from commercial programming. The work is proven, but its funding base is not.

Hull Truck Theatre: Embedding Creativity in NHS Workforce Development

Hull Truck Theatre has developed a drama-based training programme for GPs, demonstrating how theatre's core skills can directly improve health outcomes. Working with a local healthcare provider, the theatre designed a course for doctors undertaking a three-year training programme, using performance techniques to strengthen patient communication, build confidence in complex consultations, and develop empathetic practice.

The programme combines practical drama sessions with forum theatre exercises that allow doctors to rehearse difficult real-life scenarios in a safe environment. Its success has generated related initiatives, including bespoke conflict resolution sessions with healthcare teams across the region, showing how theatres can embed themselves within public health infrastructure while creating sustainable new income streams.

Janthi Mills-Ward, Executive Director and Joint CEO at Hull Truck Theatre, said:

> "*This initiative embodies our three key values: Inclusion, Integrity, and Innovation. It demonstrates how the arts can serve as a powerful tool for professional development, bringing creativity and human connection to the forefront of medical practice while supporting the NHS's commitment to compassionate, patient-centred care. It also enables the theatre to use its core skills innovatively, generating new income to invest straight back into our work*."

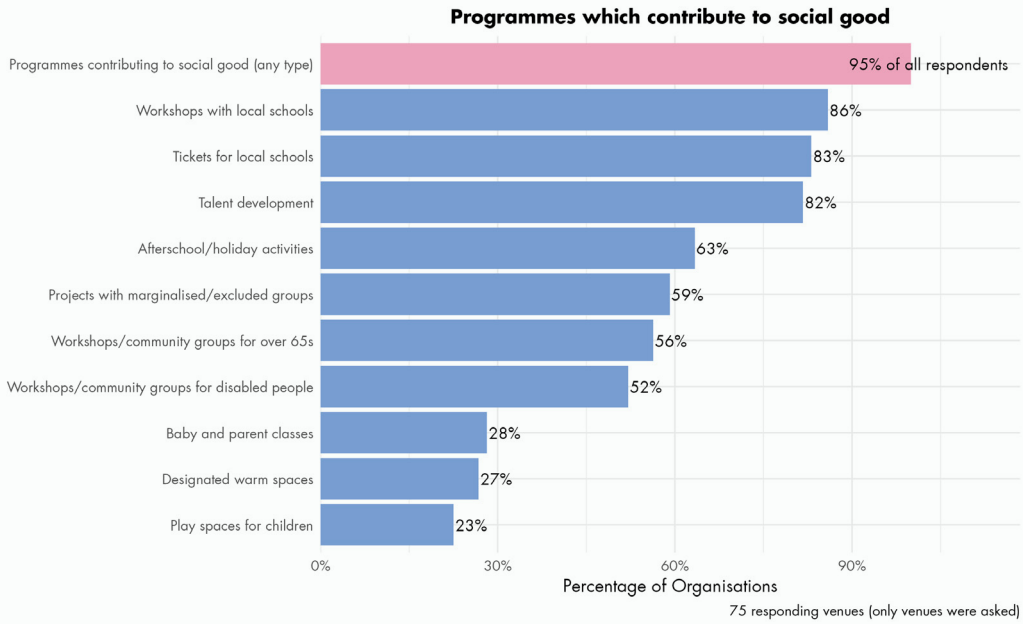
Hull Truck Theatre's Associate Director, Tom Saunders leading a GP training session.
Photo: © Tom Arran

Theatre's capacity to change institutional practice extends beyond healthcare. Suzie Miller's **Prima Facie**, which is touring the UK in 2026 with its original star Jodie Comer, is now **mandatory viewing for newly appointed judges in Northern Ireland** before they sit on sexual assault cases. A senior judge in England has subsequently **rewritten their standard directions given to juries in rape trials**, drawing directly on the play's treatment of how trauma affects witness memory. The tour also partners with the **Schools Consent Project**, extending the production's reach into education.

It is a striking example of a single piece of theatre reshaping professional practice across the justice system, from the judiciary to the classroom.

4. Education and Youth Engagement

Education and participation remain at the heart of theatre's public value. 95% of venues operate programmes contributing to social good. 86% deliver workshops with local schools. 83% provide tickets specifically for local schools.



These **programmes** span curriculum-linked workshops, youth theatre activity, technical skills training, work placements, and partnerships with further-education colleges. Research led by Durham University's **national pilot on teaching for creativity** demonstrates the transformative impact of structured creative engagement in classrooms, with theatre organisations frequently acting as delivery partners, supporting literacy, confidence, teamwork, and problem-solving.

For many young people, especially in areas of deprivation, these programmes provide their first experience of live performance. They also nurture future audiences and creative careers.

Yet youth engagement remains constrained by access, not intent. Transport cost, teacher capacity, and the uneven availability of age-appropriate productions prevent many schools from taking part, or from doing so consistently. In London, the TfL **Schools Party Travel Scheme** ends at 3:30pm, meaning the cost of return travel can fall outside its coverage and make attendance unaffordable regardless of the ticket price.

This is what the **Theatre for Every Child** campaign seeks to address: equitable, practical access for every school, not only those with the budget, proximity, and staffing to make it work. Closing the gap requires targeted support at scale, including free or subsidised travel, ringfenced access funding, and teacher support, so that participation does not depend on postcode or a headteacher's discretionary spend.

At the same time, respondents report increasing strain on existing provision. Staffing pressures and rising costs mean some community engagement programmes are being scaled back, particularly where short-term funding has ended. As access to creative education has declined in schools, theatres have picked up the slack, but may not be able to continue doing so indefinitely. 59% of organisations that plan to increase education and social impact activity anticipate hardship delivering it.

Theatre Nation Partnerships: A National Network with Local Impact

Theatre Nation Partnerships (TNP) was an eight-year programme, convened by the National Theatre and funded by Arts Council England, that embedded theatre engagement in 13 priority areas of England. Running from 2017 to 2025, the network reached over one million audiences and participants across places ranging from Sunderland to North Devon, Stoke-on-Trent to outer East London.

TNP tested and scaled models for expanding who engages with theatre and how. Its community programme, Public Acts, staged large-scale productions performed by over 100 community members alongside professional artists. Speak Up ran across 55 schools nationwide. Three midscale touring productions were seen by nearly 39,000 audience members, and three secondary school tours visited 125 schools.

The programme's independent evaluation found that TNP strengthened cross-regional partnership working, catalysed innovation, supported career development, and left a practical legacy of toolkits for the wider sector, demonstrating that sustained collaboration between a national institution and regional partners can build local capacity and deepen community engagement at scale.

5. Skills and Workforce Development

Theatre's contribution to education does not end at the classroom door. Alongside youth engagement, organisations run structured workforce and skills programmes that address barriers to entry and progression across the sector.

These initiatives provide paid placements, technical training, creative assistant roles, and structured mentoring. They are a critical bridge between participation and profession, particularly for those from backgrounds under-represented in theatre.

The **Catalyst** programme at the Donmar Warehouse demonstrates what sustained investment can achieve. Established in 2021 and funded entirely through philanthropy, Catalyst has employed 50 people from under-represented backgrounds in paid placements across the organisation. Roles include year-long training posts in departments ranging from production to administration, alongside show-specific creative assistant roles on a project basis.

The results are measurable: 84% of Catalyst alumni are now working in theatre or the wider creative industries, including film, television, and other arts institutions.

Programmes of this kind underpin the future workforce. They widen access to sustainable careers and strengthen the talent pipeline that feeds the entire creative economy. Yet when reliant on funding such as philanthropy, they remain inherently fragile and difficult to sustain, placing programmes at risk just when the sector most needs to widen access and develop new talent.

6. A Civic Ecosystem Under Pressure

The evidence shows a sector deeply embedded in its communities. Education and community engagement are widespread. Free and discounted ticket schemes are universal. Accessibility initiatives are standard practice. Touring continues, even where it generates losses.

Yet this civic ecosystem now operates with limited headroom. If left unaddressed, the effects will be uneven but predictable: smaller towns will see fewer touring visits; education and engagement activity will reduce; access improvements will stall without capital investment; workforce diversity pipelines will narrow, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who depend on funded entry routes; disabled artists will remain locked out of venues that cannot afford retrofit; and schools without budget or proximity will continue to miss out.

Theatre's public value extends far beyond box office income. It **strengthens communities**, supports wellbeing, **builds skills**, and sustains local economies. If theatre is to remain a pillar of civic life across the UK, funding frameworks, touring policy, transport provision, and local growth strategies must actively reinforce that role.

Public value is not incidental to theatre. It is structural. The question for 2026 is whether that structure can be sustained at national scale.

ATG Entertainment West End Creative Learning: Removing Barriers Through Civic Partnership in N17

"**West End in Tottenham**" is a partnership between Tottenham Hotspur and ATG Entertainment delivering free weekly performing arts sessions to young people aged 10–17 and a community theatre group for adults in the London Borough of Haringey.

Funded by the Club and delivered by ATG's Creative Learning team, the programme requires no prior experience. First piloted in 2022, it has grown to span multiple age groups and venues. In June 2025, over 80 participants performed a devised piece at the Lyceum Theatre, one of the West End's most iconic stages, drawn entirely from local stories and lived experiences of their community.

It is a clear example of theatre operating as civic infrastructure: a creative partnership rooted in place, removing barriers to participation, and giving local communities a platform and a voice.

Conor Hunt, Senior Creative Learning Manager at ATG Entertainment, said:

> "*West End in Tottenham wasn't about who had experience of being a performer. It was about who had a story to tell about where they're from. Through the partnership, we have been able to remove access barriers to spaces like the Stadium and theatres, putting their voices, stories and talent front and centre*."

Ledley King visits *West End in Tottenham* rehearsal. Photo: Alex Morton

Part IV: Theatre as a National Asset

1. The Growth Dividend of Theatre Infrastructure

The UK's theatres are productive national infrastructure. They generate employment, anchor town centres, sustain touring networks, train skilled workforces, and enable community engagement. In regional centres, theatres drive footfall that supports surrounding hospitality and retail, trigger public-realm improvements, and attract private investment.

Members report that well-maintained, modernised buildings reduce energy and maintenance costs, increase utilisation across the day, enhance audience experience and secondary spend, strengthen technical capacity for touring and complex work, and create additional flexible spaces such as studios, rehearsal rooms, and community facilities. Environmental retrofit reinforces these gains by lowering exposure to energy-price volatility and strengthening long-term operational resilience.

None of this is theoretical. Existing investment in theatre buildings already demonstrates the impact.

2. Commercial Investment as a Benchmark

Commercial theatre owners have invested tens of millions of pounds in their buildings over the past decade: upgraded HVAC systems, energy efficiency retrofits, enhanced technical infrastructure, and improved audience amenities. This reflects commercial discipline and a recognition that the theatre-going experience extends well beyond what happens on stage.

Where operators have been able to plan and fund multi-year programmes of work, the results are tangible: improved audience satisfaction, operational resilience, and building longevity. These are the outcomes the wider sector needs, but which require the kind of sustained capital commitment that publicly funded organisations cannot currently access at the same scale.

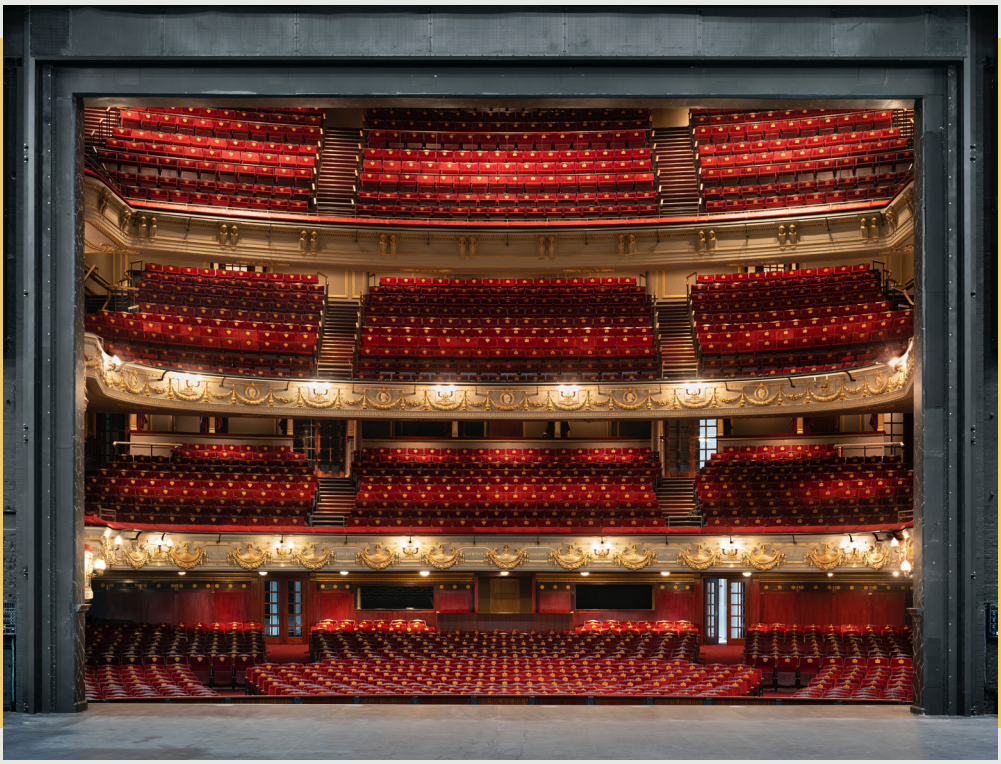
Theatre Royal Drury Lane: Private Capital, Public Value

The £60 million transformation of Theatre Royal Drury Lane demonstrates how commercial investment can combine heritage conservation with operational renewal.

Reopened in 2021 after a two-year closure, the Grade I-listed theatre was comprehensively rebuilt behind its historic façade. The auditorium was re-engineered with improved sightlines, enhanced acoustics, a new stage, upgraded technical systems, and fewer seats to increase comfort and legroom. Georgian interiors were meticulously restored.

Accessibility was a priority. A new street-level entrance, ramps, lifts, and additional wheelchair spaces across three levels significantly improved step-free access. Front-of-house spaces, including the Grand Saloon and Rotunda, were reimagined as all-day hospitality destinations, driving secondary spend and diversifying income.

The result is clear: a heritage theatre future-proofed through private capital, stronger operational resilience, and a materially improved audience experience.

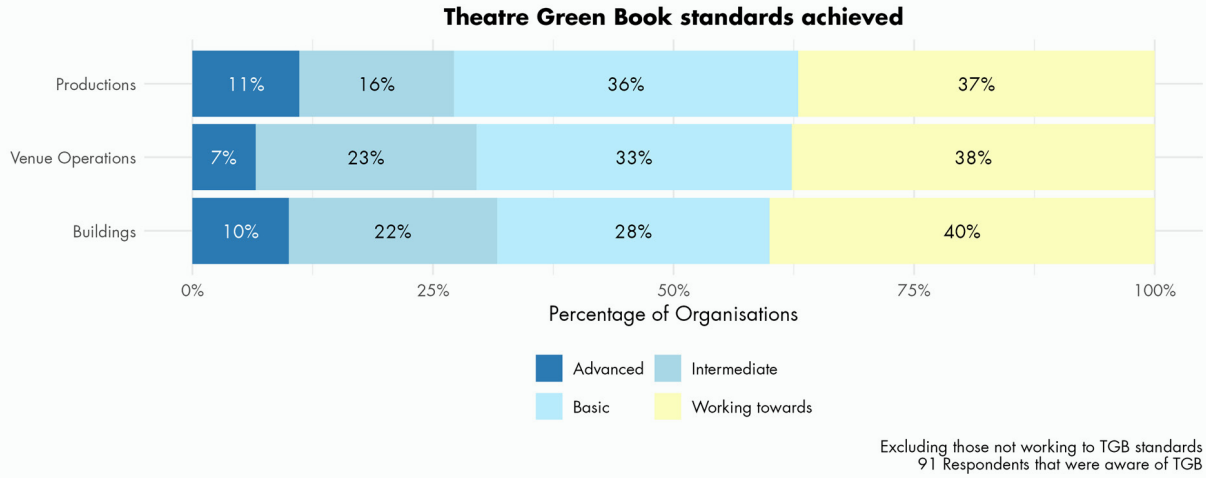


Theatre Royal Drury Lane. Photo: Philip Vile (c) LW Theatres

3. Sustainability and Decarbonisation

Environmental sustainability is now central to the case for capital investment. Theatre buildings are energy-intensive, with large auditoria, long operating hours, and heavy technical loads that expose venues to energy-price volatility and carbon risk. The necessary upgrades are well understood but capital-heavy, and beyond the reach of most organisations' revenue budgets.

The sector is nonetheless engaging. The **Theatre Green Book** is a free, industry-wide framework providing best practice guidance, shared standards, and a measurement system for sustainable production and building management. It now has 94% awareness across the sector. Achievement levels, however, reflect the difficulty of retrofitting at scale without dedicated capital: only 27% of productions, 30% of venues operations, and 32% of buildings currently working to Theatre Green Book standards achieve intermediate or advanced status.



Excluding those not working to TGB standards
91 Respondents that were aware of TGB

Nonetheless, the returns are clear. Lower energy costs, reduced maintenance burden, and improved operational resilience directly strengthen financial sustainability while building confidence among funders, audiences, and local authority partners. This is not a competing priority. It is integral to the investment case, and progress will remain modest without the funding to deliver it.

4. A Public Estate Requiring Renewal

Much of the estate operates from ageing and often listed buildings. Heritage status strengthens identity and civic value, but it also creates practical constraints: limited step-free access, tight backstage facilities, ageing technical systems, and restricted loading and storage capacity.

To protect programming and jobs, organisations frequently forced to defer non-urgent maintenance. That approach manages short-term pressure but increases long-term cost and risk. Construction-market conditions compound the challenge, with high materials prices, specialist labour shortages, longer lead times, and cost escalation between design and delivery. Listed status adds regulatory complexity, and grant support rarely meets the full cost of compliant refurbishment.

The scale of the challenge is now quantified. The DCMS-commissioned **Purcell report on England's Cultural Infrastructure**, published in January 2026, estimated the total repair, maintenance, and renewal need across publicly and third-sector owned cultural venues[2] at approximately £7bn, with £3bn classified as urgent and a current funding deficit of £2bn. Nearly 70% of buildings surveyed have needs beyond routine maintenance. The **Theatres at Risk Register** now lists 43 venues.

5. A New Framework for Capital Investment

Government has recognised the need, and acted. The **£1.5bn cultural capital package** announced by DCMS in January 2026 is the most significant intervention in cultural infrastructure in a generation, and included £425m through the Creative Foundations Fund for approximately 300 capital projects in arts venues. This builds on the **Arts Everywhere Fund** announced in February 2025. Crucially, it establishes the principle that publicly owned theatres merit capital investment on the same footing as museums and heritage assets.

Theatre infrastructure now intersects directly with national priorities: decarbonisation, inclusion, skills development, high-street renewal, and regional growth.

Building this commitment into future spending reviews would give organisations the confidence to plan multi-year programmes, leverage private and philanthropic capital, and deliver against those priorities at scale. With that sustained framework in place, theatres can become greener, more resilient, more inclusive, and more productive civic assets for decades to come.

2. Including theatres; other performing arts venues (e.g. concert halls, performing arts centres); cathedrals and churches in their role as visitor destinations; non-accredited museums and art galleries, historic houses; ruins and monuments where publicly accessible; and visitor destinations with a strong heritage aspect.

Part V: Theatre as a Crucible for Storytelling and Soft Power

UK theatre remains one of the country's strongest engines of creative content, skills, and cultural exports.

Theatre develops new work, adds to and diversifies the canon through reinterpretation, and trains creative and technical talent that flows into television, film, music, events, and the visitor economy. This creative pipeline generates long-term intellectual property value and global influence. Yet the 2026 data show a system under strain at the point where risk is highest and returns are slowest to materialise: early-stage development, touring circuits, and entry routes for new talent.

Es Devlin: Theatre as the Engine of Global Creative Leadership

Es Devlin's career proves that British theatre does not simply create productions. It creates global creative leaders. Trained in theatre design at Central Saint Martins, she won the Linbury Prize for her first professional design at the Octagon Theatre, Bolton, before honing her practice at the Bush Theatre. Rooted in spatial storytelling, technical invention, and live-performance collaboration, her early career traced the full ecosystem from regional stage to London theatre.

After making her National Theatre debut in 1998 designing the set for Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, Devlin carried theatrical thinking into arenas and stadiums, alongside landmark stage productions such as *The Lehman Trilogy*, *Dear England*, and *The Motive and the Cue*. She has also designed major stadium tours for Beyoncé, alongside work for U2, The Weeknd, and others, as well as Olympic ceremonies and public art commissions. The scale has grown. The creative DNA remains theatrical.

Her trajectory delivers a clear policy message. Investment in theatre training and early-career production pipelines does more than sustain cultural life. It supplies the creative industries with British-trained leaders who export UK creativity and generate global cultural influence.

> "*Theatre trained me to think in space, collaborate at speed, and tell stories with light, sound, and architecture. Those instincts formed at places like the Bush Theatre still drive everything I do, whether I am designing a West End show or a stadium tour.*"
>
> Es Devlin

1. Creative Output: Sustained Ambition, Rising Constraint

The 2026 membership survey shows continued commitment to creative investment, but with tighter feasibility. 35% of organisations plan increased production investment, yet 54% say it will be harder than last year.

Organisations want to commission and produce new work, but rising costs, reduced reserves, and increased financial exposure are limiting practical ambition. Common mitigation measures include fewer commissions, greater reliance on co-productions, and a higher proportion of revivals to stabilise earned income.

These approaches protect short-term viability. They also reduce the overall volume and diversity of work entering the national pipeline. Research by the **National Theatre's New Works department** quantifies the longer-term trend. Between 2014 and 2024, subsidised theatres receiving open-to-all submissions year-round declined by 70%, new writing festivals by 76%, and playwriting courses by 44%. New work on stages outside London fell by 44%, with a 30% decline in London.

The infrastructure for discovering and developing new voices is contracting at precisely the point it needs to be sustained. Fewer entry points for writers now means fewer new plays and a narrower canon in ten years' time. A generation of playwrights may simply never emerge.

2. New Work as the Foundation of the Wider Creative Economy

Theatre sits at the start of the UK's creative pipeline. Work first developed on stage becomes touring products, West End transfers, international productions and licensing, and screen adaptations. Creative work that goes through this iterative process is nurtured and well honed, meaning it stands a better chance of success and attracting commercial finance.

Recent examples illustrate the scale of this pipeline. Richard Gadd's *Baby Reindeer* began as a solo show at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival produced by independent producer, Francesca Moody. It went on to win an Olivier Award and was adapted into a Netflix series watched by tens of millions. Benedict Lombe's *Shifters*, first produced at the Bush Theatre, is being developed as a television series by See-Saw Films. Ava Pickett's ***1536***, developed through the Genesis Almeida New Playwrights programme, transfers to the West End this year and has already been commissioned as an eight-part BBC drama.

From actors to writers, directors to designers, theatre develops the talent that powers Britain's global screen success. It functions as a national R&D engine for storytelling. If that infrastructure contracts, the consequences will surface in film and television five to ten years later.

This is where theatre's long-tail value sits. The initial investment can be modest compared to downstream returns, but it requires patient capital and tolerance for uncertainty. New writing development typically takes years. Success rates remain inherently unpredictable.

Both subsidised organisations and commercial producers have historically carried this risk. Subsidised companies do so supported by core funding and cross-subsidy from commercially resilient work. Commercial producers do so with no equivalent support, and unlike other sectors, theatre has no tax incentives or R&D relief for development activity and the creation of IP.

As subsidised organisations face sustained deficits and commercial producers absorb rising costs without structural support, the sector risks a contraction in commissioning and development capacity, with implications that extend well beyond theatre.

3. Innovation and Experimentation

Respondents continue to generate new forms of IP through innovation: immersive and site-specific work, digital collaborations, hybrid productions, and interdisciplinary practice. These projects build exportable expertise in creative technology and audience experience design. They also carry higher development risk. When financial headroom tightens, organisations defer experimentation first.

This raises a strategic concern for the UK's international competitive advantage, which depends not only on scale, but on innovation and artistic leadership.

Paddington: The Musical: Innovation in Character, Craft, and Commercial Success

Paddington: The Musical, which premiered in the West End in November 2025, demonstrates how theatrical innovation can create new commercial properties with global potential.

At its centre is a dual-performer system developed over three years of workshops. Arti Shah performs Paddington's full physical embodiment inside a sophisticated costume, while James Hameed provides the voice and remotely puppeteers the bear's facial expressions in real time. As the National Theatre's **Theatre Transformed** report notes, while dual-operation techniques are established in film, achieving this degree of synchronicity in live performance, including singing, emotional nuance, and real-time responsiveness, had never been attempted.

The result is a breakthrough in character realisation built entirely through theatre craft: puppetry, performance technology, and creative collaboration refined through an iterative development process. With its run extended into 2027, *Paddington* stands as a model of how innovation, craftsmanship, and storytelling can converge to redefine family entertainment and prove the commercial viability of theatrical R&D.

4. Regional Theatre: Rooted in Communities, Powering the National Pipeline

Regional producing theatres and touring companies are, first and foremost, vital cultural institutions for the communities they serve: commissioning work that reflects local stories, providing employment, training the next generation of creative professionals, and offering audiences access to high-quality live performance. They are also where much of the UK's creative talent and exportable work originates. Writers, directors, performers, and production professionals develop their craft in regional theatres, often before work transfers to London or tours nationally.

The **Lyric Theatre Belfast**, for example, nurtured the early careers of Liam Neeson, Ciarán Hinds, Adrian Dunbar, and Michelle Fairley, all of whom went on to major international screen careers. That pattern repeats across the UK: regional stages as launchpads for global talent.

Financial pressure on these organisations therefore creates both a local and a national risk: reduced commissioning and studio-scale experimentation, fewer development runs, narrower routes to national visibility for emerging artists, and greater concentration of opportunity in a small number of centres. The long-term consequence is not only fewer shows. It is a weaker supply of exportable IP and a thinner talent base for the entire creative economy.

One aspect of domestic touring where a simple policy adjustment could pay dividends is in relation to theatre tax relief for large-scale opera and ballet tours. These currently fall between tax-relief regimes, rendering them ineligible for both the higher touring TTR rate, and the Orchestra Tax Relief, despite transporting and housing up to 100 cast and crew per production. We are therefore asking that the government update rules relating to national touring opera and ballet productions so they can access relief commensurate with their touring scale and cost.

The sector depends on specialist skills developed through training and experience, particularly in lighting, sound, video, stage management, scenic construction, automation, wardrobe, producing, and production finance. These skills are highly transferable across the wider creative industries, including events, corporate production, film, and broadcast. That transferability is a mark of the sector's quality as a training ground, but it also means that workforce capacity is sensitive to the financial health of the organisations that develop and employ these professionals.

The Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury: Fostering New Writing

The Marlowe Theatre illustrates the kind of bold strategic move members are making despite the pressures this report describes. An independent charitable trust in Kent that receives no public revenue subsidy, the Marlowe has expanded from a presenting house for major touring productions into a producing organisation, establishing Marlowe Theatre Productions to create high-quality drama for the UK's mid to large-scale touring circuit alongside small-scale family musicals commissioned from early-career creatives.

Central to this shift is its Writers' Room, which develops relationships with established writers, commissions new work, and nurtures emerging voices from the region. An annual Writers' Room Festival showcases the results: last year, 11 new plays were presented across 19 events over six days, involving 37 actors and 23 creatives. Over 800 people attended on a pay-what-you-can basis. This year's programme includes new plays by Penelope Skinner and Olivier Award-winner, Simon Stephens, alongside workshops with playwrights including David Eldridge and Yolanda Mercy.

The Marlowe's first large-scale touring production, Amy Rosenthal's *The Party Girls*, demonstrated that a regional presenting house can become a producing engine for new work. Within two years, it has established itself as the home of new writing in Kent.

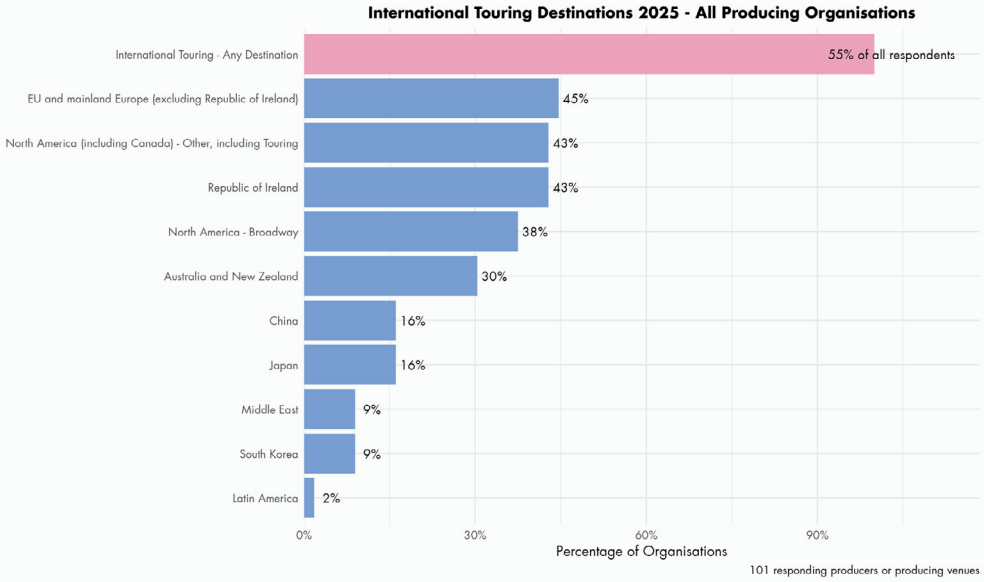
Nedum Okonyia and Oliver Alvin-Wilson in a rehearsed reading of *Shooters* by Tolu Michael Okanlawon from Writers' Room Festival 2025. Photo: Richard Lakos

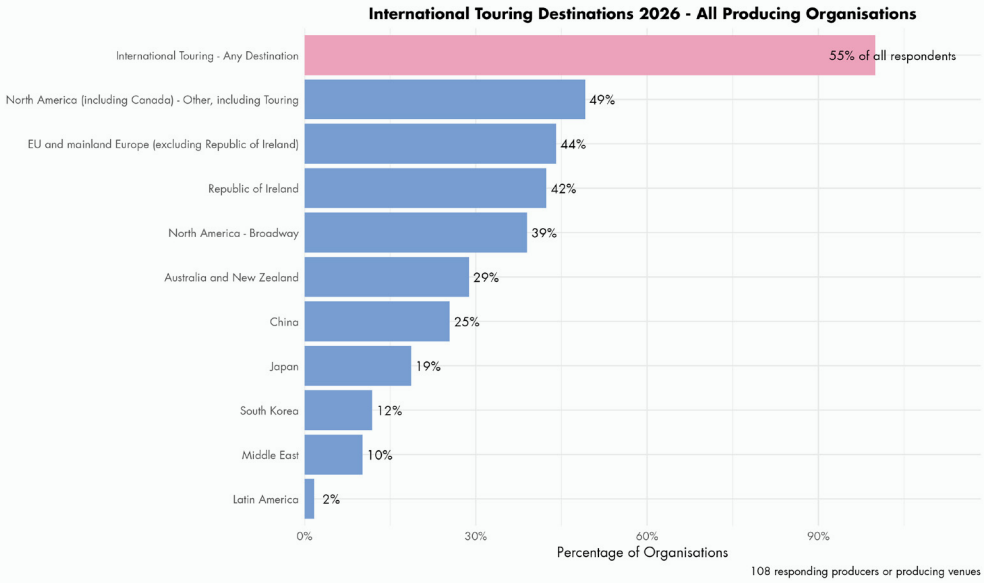
5. International Presence and Export Activity

UK theatre is a major cultural export. It generates direct revenue, supports the Government's growth and trade agenda, and projects British soft power through touring, transfers, and licensing. 55% of producing respondents tour internationally, with North America, the EU, and the Republic of Ireland the most common destinations, and growing activity in China, Japan, South Korea, and the Middle East.

This activity returns profits to the UK, funds further creative development, and reinforces the global reputation that makes British theatre a sought-after export. The commercial sector is the principal driver of export value, particularly through West End transfers, Broadway productions, and international licensing.

But international touring is also a vital revenue stream for not-for-profit producing theatres, for whom overseas income can make a material difference to annual finances. Curve Theatre, Leicester, for example, toured its production of ***A Chorus Line*** to Japan, and Regent's Park Open Air Theatre production of ***Fiddler on the Roof*** will tour Australia, demonstrating the international reach of producing houses.





However, international touring carries significant financial and logistical risk. Producers navigate growing uncertainty around international trade, including new US tariffs and currency fluctuations that affect overseas revenues. Brexit-related friction continues to deter smaller-scale touring in particular. Organisations report higher visa costs, carnet processes for equipment, specialist vehicle requirements, administrative complexity around Schengen limits, and reduced ease of collaboration with European partners. These costs disproportionately affect small- and mid-scale work, which often carries the strongest artistic development function.

Despite these challenges, British stories, skills, and productions remain in demand, sparking cross-border collaborations that cement the UK's reputation as a centre of creative excellence. Maximising that potential requires closer collaboration between DCMS, the Department for Business and Trade, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to reduce trade barriers, streamline touring logistics, and ensure that British theatre is supported as actively as other UK growth industries operating internationally.

That reputation draws, in turn, draws talent to the UK from around the world. Opera provides a case in point: the English National Opera's current production of ***Angel's Bone*** brings together Canadian librettist Royce Vavrek, Chinese-American composer Du Yun, Australian director Kip Williams, and Swiss conductor Baldur Brönnimann, each contributing a distinct artistic voice to a work that exemplifies the UK's role as a global stage.

Beyond the West End: UK Theatre as a Strategic Export to Asia

Founded in 2021, ROYO Group has rapidly positioned itself as a bridge between UK producers and Asian markets. Through its international subsidiary, RTS Entertainment, the company has since produced and financed multiple British titles across several Asian territories, including mainland China, with a growing annual turnover that reflects sustained audience demand for UK work.

ROYO focuses on practical commercial enablement. The company provides upfront financing, local regulatory navigation, venue partnerships, marketing infrastructure, and on-the-ground presentation capacity. For UK producers, this removes the operational complexity and capital risk of entering Asian markets independently, turning a high-barrier opportunity into a viable revenue stream.

RTS has financed and presented major British productions internationally, including *Murder on the Orient Express*, And *Then There Were None* (both Fiery Angel), and *Life of Pi* (Melting Pot). In each case, Asian tours generated incremental revenue beyond the original UK run, improved investor recoupment positions, and extended the commercial life of established intellectual property.

Looking ahead, RTS is financing and producing ***Peaky Blinders: The Redemption of Thomas Shelby***, created by Rambert, with performances in Asia scheduled from March 2026. The production exemplifies the kind of British theatrical work that travels well internationally: strong narrative identity, combined with music, movement, and visual impact that communicates across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Tom de Keyser, CEO of ROYO Group, states: "*UK theatre is recognised globally as a benchmark for quality, originality, and craft, and that reputation carries real export value. That value is dynamic and growing, but still under-utilised compared with other creative industries, both financially and in terms of soft power. Asia represents one of the clearest growth opportunities. With the right commercial partnerships in place, UK producers can generate meaningful export revenue while building the kind of long-term cultural relationships that strengthen Britain's position as a creative economy*."

Helen Shute, CEO of Rambert, highlights how international touring supports long-term organisational sustainability: "*Global audiences are central to Rambert's future. Not only does international touring ensure our financial viability, but it ensures our creative work develops with relevance to future-markets and partners around the world supporting the long-term future of the company*."

Hamish Greer of ROYO, Boris Cao of RTS & Tom De Keyser of ROYO. Photo: Jerry Zhang

Dance occupies a distinctive position within the UK's export activity. Its physical language transcends linguistic borders, making it inherently international. Ensuring that UK performing arts institutions can recruit globally and attract the world's most talented dancers and choreographers positions the sector as an attractive partner for international coproductions and strengthens British soft power.

Northern Ballet's *Gentleman Jack*: From Yorkshire to the World Stage

Northern Ballet's ***Gentleman Jack***, a coproduction with the **Finnish National Opera and Ballet**, demonstrates how UK dance companies create exportable work from distinctively British source material. The ballet adapts the life of Anne Lister, the pioneering Yorkshire landowner whose diaries inspired biographies and the acclaimed BBC/HBO series, into a full-length narrative work choreographed by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa and developed by a predominantly female creative team.

Northern Ballet is celebrated for its narrative technique, and *Gentleman Jack* extends that tradition by centring a real historical figure who defied the gender and societal norms of her time. The production has won the European Fedora – Van Cleef & Arpels Dance Prize, which recognises work that reimagines dance for the 21st century.

As *Gentleman Jack* tours nationally and internationally, it illustrates several strengths of the UK's performing arts export model: the ability to develop globally resonant work from local stories, the value of international coproduction in sharing cost and extending reach, and the UK's position as a progressive cultural voice on the world stage.

Dancers Gemma Coutts and Alessandra Bramante. Photo: Guy Farrow

6. Protecting the Pipeline, Protecting the Export Base

The evidence points to a single integrated ecosystem. Public investment supports early-stage development, experimentation, and talent incubation. Commercial scale supports touring, export, and long-tail IP returns. Regional theatres sustain the skills and content pipeline that powers national success.

When pressure forces contraction at the development end, the downstream effects appear later, but inevitably: fewer transferable titles, lower volume of exportable IP, reduced innovation capacity, narrower talent pathways, and less workforce diversity.

Safeguarding creativity, talent, and export requires policy and investment that reflect theatre's role as upstream infrastructure for the wider creative economy, not only as a venue-based leisure activity.

From Showcase to Broadway: The UK Development Pipeline in Action

Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York) began as a showcase piece in 2018 at BEAM, the UK's largest annual showcase for new musicals produced by **Mercury Musical Developments** and **Musical Theatre Network**. A **The MTI Stiles & Drewe Mentorship Award** gave its unknown writers structured development support and a route to production. Crucially, BEAM also attracted commercial producers Tim Johansson and Clemmie Forfar, who engaged early and championed the project through its next stages.

In 2019, the New Wolsey Theatre and Royal & Derngate co-produced the show (then titled *The Season*): a two-hander, directed by Tim Jackson, backed by two subsidised venues willing to programme untested work by unproven writers.

Johansson then led a period of creative redevelopment. The reimagined production, now retitled, opened at the Kiln Theatre in Kilburn in 2023. It sold out, extended twice, and earned five-star reviews. A West End transfer to the Criterion Theatre followed in April 2024, running beyond its scheduled close.

Following a North American premiere at the American Repertory Theater at Harvard, *Two Strangers* opened on Broadway in November 2025 to become a New York Times Critics' Pick.

The journey took seven years, each stage dependent on the one before it. Remove any, and the show never reaches the next.

Conclusion

British theatre is a proven growth sector with record audience demand, a globally admired creative reputation, and a demonstrated capacity for innovation and adaptation. It generates jobs that cannot be automated, stories that travel the world, and civic spaces that anchor communities from the West End to coastal towns.

The constraint is not ambition, talent, or demand. It is financial headroom. Sustained cost pressure, eroding public funding, and limited pricing power are narrowing the margin for risk, experimentation, and geographic reach.

The question for 2026 is not whether theatre can survive. It will. The question is at what scale, in which places, and with how much capacity to invest in the future.

Our Policy Priorities

Targeted policy interventions would stabilise the system and unlock growth:

- **Business rates reform,** recognising theatres as fixed, place-based civic assets, that drive footfall and local economic spillover.
- **Enhanced Theatre Tax Relief for touring,** to correct structural disincentives that currently limit geographic reach.
- **Inflation-aware public funding settlements,** restoring planning certainty for organisations that commission new work, deliver social impact, and sustain talent pipelines.
- **Stronger philanthropic incentives** and investment in developing fundraising capacity, crowding in private giving at scale, particularly for development and regional growth.

They are not blanket subsidy. They are strategic investments in an ecosystem that drives employment, exports, innovation, and civic life.

Our Commitment

The Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre exist to champion theatre and enable our members to thrive. We work across the full breadth of the sector to represent their interests, build partnerships, and convene the conversations required for a changing operating environment.

We connect producers, venues, and partners to unlock collaboration and co-production. We provide data, insight, and training that respond to evolving business and workforce needs. We deliver national audience campaigns that build demand and deepen engagement in every region.

And we commit to working constructively with Government to secure the conditions in which theatre can grow.

This report is not a request for rescue. It is an evidence base for partnership and practical reform. Our members are resourceful, entrepreneurial, and rooted in their communities.

With the right policy framework alongside their tenacity and creativity, theatre can operate at national scale, invest in the next generation of work and workforce, and sustain the civic spaces that anchor communities across the country.

About the Society of London Theatre & UK Theatre

The Society of London Theatre (SOLT) & UK Theatre are the membership organisations representing theatre producers, managers, owners, and operators across London and the UK. Our members span commercial and subsidised organisations, as well as independent not-for-profit charities.

While SOLT & UK Theatre each have their own members we work together as one. Our Vision, and the world we want to see, is a dynamic, sustainable and world class theatre sector. Our Mission, and what we do as an organisation, is to champion theatre and support our members to thrive.

Acknowledgements

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It was written by Patrick Gracey, Chair of the Policy, Research, and Advocacy Committee, with the assistance of Şenay Camgöz, Policy & Research Manager, Becky Gregg, Research and Insights Manager, and Kate Roche, Press and Public Affairs Manager.

It draws on the insights, data, and expertise of our SOLT & UK Theatre members, our colleagues, and partners across the sector, and we are grateful to the many members who contributed evidence through our surveys.

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BAKERRICHARDS

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Research Methodology

This second annual data report from SOLT & UK Theatre draws on multiple robust data sources to provide a comprehensive overview of the UK theatre sector:

Ticketing Data

- **UK Theatre Evidence Centre & supplementary figures**

The UK Evidence Centre provided granular, ticket-level data from 57 venues across the UK and supplementary figures were contributed by a further 22 non-London venues.

- **SOLT Box Office Data**

Complete attendance and revenue figures for all West End venues operated by SOLT members.

A majority subset of venues also provided additional ticket-level data, which was used to calculate median and quantile ticket prices.

- **Geographic reach and demography**

A subset of both UK Theatre and SOLT members provided simple, anonymised postcode data against total attendances.

This data, representing over 24M tickets, was used to model the geographic reach of theatre, and modelled against ONS Output Area Classification (OAC) and the latest UK census small-area data: Census 2021 (England & Wales – ONS; Northern Ireland – NISRA) and Scotland's Census 2022 (NRS).

Annual SOLT & UK Theatre Member Survey

Responses were received from 160 theatre leaders across the sector. Fieldwork ran from 11 November 2025 to 1 February 2026:

- **Independent Producing Organisations (46%)**

76% were based in London and 80% operated solely for commercial purposes.

- **Producing-only Venues (15%)**

Mostly charitable or subsidised; 58% were London-based.

- **Producing and Presenting Venues (27%)**

Mostly charitable or subsidised; two-thirds were based outside London.

- **Presenting-only Venues (12%)**

Equally likely to be commercial or subsidised; 42% were London-based.