

Meeting notes from house Network Day at Farnham Maltings (Jan 2026)

The Question: How can we work together to build a strong, brave and vibrant theatre presence in the South East?

Thank you for coming to this event. The day was led using an Open Space framework, led by Katy Potter with all attendees (listed at back of notes) contributing and free to join in all discussion groups.

Below are the entire compiled notes, the recommendations from each discussion and the original ideas and topics jotted on post-its to form our agenda.

Key points raised and agreed by the group are highlighted through the notes.

A post-it stating 'TAKE RISKS' written by Stewart Fairthorne was displayed for all to consider through their discussions.

Please note that where a number of dots are mentioned in the document e.g. (2 dots) – this refers to stickers added to each of the post-its by individual network members to indicate which they felt were a priority, so for example 2 dots means two network members identified this as a priority.

AUDIENCES

Recommendations:

- **Using 'theatre programming gateways' such as NT Live, Family Fringe etc. (4 dots)**
- Artists – Have conversations and see if work can be created to bridge the gap (1 dot)
- Rebrand – Frame venues not just as entertainment venues. It's a 'theatre' space. (None)
- Youth theatres + drama clubs for working with artists. (3 dots)

Original post it notes topics and questions for discussion:

- Working together on marketing to develop new audiences for strong brave and vibrant theatre (Maria R)
- Challenging audiences without isolating them (Gina Thorley)
- Audience (Development/Growth) Trust → to take a risk and loyalty (Anna S)
- The development of more 'feel good' theatre productions to suit small to mid-scale venues. (Gemma)
- Brave + vibrant can mean different things depending on venue/area? (Mandy H)
- How do we encourage audiences to take a risk on work? (Sue W)
- Ideas on making vibrant theatre *accessible* to low income/ deprived communities (Caroline)
- How do we retain the values (we share and are important in our sector) whilst responding to change and innovation?
- Can we make theatre feel more relevant to young people? How? (Ron M)
- How can marketing and programming departments work more closely together? (Lils)

How can we work together to build a strong, brave and vibrant theatre presence in the South East?

Key points of discussion.

- 'Popular' programming v. Drama
- Artists don't go to the theatre
- Building relationships
- Does the venue get stuck in a 'tribute' rut – audiences will go to alternative venues
- For tribute read Easy Access Entertainment
- Value of having youth theatre – brings in exciting performers and facilitators
- Becky mentioned 'THUNDER ROADS'
- Young people have an interactivity focus
- Risks parents will take for their kids don't translate into their choices.
- Conversation with artists to make work that bridges the gap between 'entertainment' and new/challenging work.
- Theatre club for older adults to develop work and stories
- Trying to make venues – 'our place'
- N1 Line does grow audiences for other work.
- Film is often the gateway.
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COMMUNICATION/TRUST

Recommendations

- **Supporting the translation from Competition to Collaboration (8 dots)**
- What is the next step to look forward?
- How is collaboration supported digitally → trust is built in person (2 dots)
- It needs to be easy
- How do we share knowledge/success and failures? (3 dots)
- Who is/and how do we share audience goals → Values and ambitions sharing to find collaborators.
- Chatham house rules → support trust and honesty
- Supported by values
- Mentoring
- How is the organisation permissive for not just leaders

Original post it notes:

- Creating good working relationships with other venues and sustain them (Rachel J)
- More effective at working together (getting past the day job!) (Jess)
- Communication between companies/organisations working together – what does that look like practically? (Laura)

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- Seasonal venue maps to share programme intelligence (Caroline and below)
- Co-commissioning/co-programming to share risk and enable joint marketing initiatives
- Anti-clash system
- Trust and working together. How do we foster this (Adam)
- Making time to openly share knowledge and resources with one another. (Alie)
- Communicating using technology as a group/sector (Stewart F)
- Communication, collaboration, sharing, co-producing, collective tours (LR)
- Online forum – for booking shows/tours (Bex and below)
 - Cross-comms for funding opps, co-commissioning and access to money!
 - Regular meetings – teams

Key points of discussion:

- Being brave is being honest!
- What does success look like?
- Success can be targeted success.
- Those that come, not everyone at everything... But Consistency (with a big C!)
- Knowing each-other → strategy and taking risks together
- Geography is a challenge → in-person is key!
- Organisation churn and change is a difficulty
- Long standing relationships – can combat relationships
- Time is precious... ‘taking time out of work!’ → go outside of desk!
- It takes time... long term goals but short-term perspective
- Locality collaboration may look like community collab rather than cultural.
- How do we combat the scarcity mindset.
- Honesty is key! → we are always spinning the success story for stakeholders
- How do we support conversation and comms → stem burnout
- How is it not extra – in light of capacity
- Communication doesn’t have to be driven by the leader.
- Venue buddying? Big network can feel broad – is there something around skillset sharing for less experienced colleagues! Building trust and collaboration.
- What do colleagues need in ‘making the case’ to go → being permissive for organisation process meeting.
- How do we share the touring internally ‘sharing reviews’ for these who go see shows from across the organisation
- Go-see budgets feel like they have been cut – have they or is there a messaging issue?
- Time and capacity just as tidy as money.

BALANCE

Recommendations:

How can we work together to build a strong, brave and vibrant theatre presence in the South East?

- **Identify venues that specifically speak to the same needs/challenges in programming – venue size/ demographics/audience motivations etc. (13 dots)**
- Venues and theatre makers to work together to adapt marketing assets that speak to different venue audiences without compromising artistic vision (4 dots)
- Connecting artists wanting to upscale from small to mid with venues that want to accommodate this growth. (6 dots)

Original post it notes:

- Valuing sharing knowledge and resources (Harriet Bolwell)
- Who are we working with? (Sally and below)
- How do we balance the artistic remit of our organisations whilst maintaining audiences and supporting new work and artists
- How can we be better with peer support and bringing people into the industry (and keeping them!) (Gemma C)

Key points of discussion:

- Meeting ALL audiences
- Identify where work to take and challenge on
- Relationship between programmers and AD or Board or Trustees – trust and shared vision
- Funded work vs. creativity
- Brave to programme work that won't make money
- Adaptability of marketing to speak to different venue's audiences
 - o Without compromising artistic vision
- Upscaling small to mid
- Learning between venues and artists.
- Identifying venues that specifically speak to the same needs/challenges that have similar programming

ADVOCACY/ IMPACT/IDENTITY

Recommendations:

- **Someone (house?) to explore possibility of commissioning study in multiple venues' financial impact on wider community to create data and support advocacy. (10 dots)**
- Support Arts orgs articulate their identity, work and place within wider community. (1 dot)

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- Discuss the benefit of Creative Enterprise Zones within towns/cities or counties and wider communities. (4 dots)
- To enable a collective voice from the theatre industry to advocate for our place in an uncertain environment. (None)

Original post it notes:

- How does house build the solidarity to be 'strong, brave and vibrant' with theatre it presents and tours, in response to regressive political shifts (Pete G)
- Creative enterprise zones (and city-wide venue collab and SE/ London hit) (Harriet M)
- Emphasising the importance of arts funding, especially to those with money (Alex)

Key points of discussion:

- Studies that show more people engage with arts venues than sport.
- Creative Enterprise Zones – could that be wider?
- Arts orgs within towns/cities working together more
- Programming between venues = small local tours between neighbouring venues
 - This will hopefully lead to:
- Financial benefit of theatre to wider local economy
- Tools for collecting data on economic impact
- Strategic impact support – studies/consultations
- Larger impact on arts funding

FINANCE MODELS AND FUTUREPROOFING

Recommendations

- **To explore connecting venue buddies based on similarities. Having a buddy scheme. (20 dots)**
- Sharing resources to save time and money such as HR, Legal etc. (4 dots)
- Technicians and SMs are hard to find – booking them collectively finding them and sharing contacts (2 dots)
- Mapping venues based on similar infrastructure e.g. LA/s/size etc. (1 dot)
- Explore shared marketing/comms/advocacy campaigns (1 dot)
- Sign up to 'support your local independent theatre' using larger venues like RSC etc. with clout and actors to advocate for local venues across region. (1 dot)

Original post it notes:

- How do we continue to do more with less (and remain ambitious) (Alex)
- Sharing the costs: sharing the risk. (Maria R)

Key points of discussion:

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- Horton independent, no opportunity to apply to ACE opening arts depot NPO.
- Sharing of knowledge outgoing and income = financial model
- Choices of very limited without funding – can't take risk
- Artsdepot, perception challenge to artists, community
- State of cultural infrastructure – expectation that they can give away free space or resource
- Challenges around communicating the realities of working in a funded arts version
- Sharing costs? How to do this to save money and time?
- Visiting local arts centres – PR
- PR across whole tour
- Challenging to get through the noise and which publications exist. Targeting one audience
- house model – programming
- They have a menu of programming and deals that unlocks programming
- Replicating model as this works well
- Someone to ask about tech specs – what might work in this venue?
- Equipment? Projectors etc. Restricts ability to take a piece of work
- SHARED RESOURCES
- HR, Legal, Evaluations
- Could be using the sharing contract templates across network (ITC ones)
- Cost saving and income generation measure
- Central campaign – marketing young people
- Advocacy
- Power of advocacy in large venues – London
- Actors and large orgs
- How do we as a collective raise our voice? The local is as important as the National.
- Talking to venues: Who Needs What?
- Mapping venues with similar needs
- Venue buddies
- Having comparable venues buddy together especially around programming
- Purposeful buddying
- Like they are pen pals – if there is a lack of geographical competition just like a singles ad – 'would you like to meet?' to another venue
- Economies
- house, ACE touring work
- Excited about continuing to programme theatre
- Ambition to reach new audiences
- Pooling elements of what we do such as technicians which are challenging to find.

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ARTISTS

Recommendations

- **The most popular one was for house to spotlight what venues are programming, what's selling, what's missing. Show the gap for them to fill – 3 dots**
- **The other popular one was: Collective commissioning models to be explored. How can house facilitate learning here - 11 dots**
- Update house directory so artists know who commissions / co produces and what resources organisations have – 1 dot
- 'Good touring rules': venues to commit to baseline welcoming behaviour for artists coming into their venue – 2 dots

Original post it notes:

- Co-produce / Reciprocal Marketing / Awareness of core audience across the network / Share resources (Ross)
- Long term development to nurture SE based performance companies, to enable them to make & tour work (Dawn)
- Better understanding of cross-scale touring status and opportunity (Dawn)
- Collective support for artists (Harriet B)
- Can we co-producer the work of 'difficult second album' artists? (Mary)
- How can social media be used to identify talent? (Lillian)
- Producing new work as a group to reduce risk (Stewart)
- What does brave look like and who are we learning from? (Katie)
- A commitment to how we prioritise artists to be supported financially, with a space for growth and to be nurtured (Ellie)

Key points of discussion:

- Sub-commissions or co-producing groups around location / form / genre.
- Skills support for venues in how to approach producing / commissioning and generally what is takes to make work.
- What is the artist experience like in your venue? How do we ensure, collectively, that they have a great time once they're through the door? 'Good Touring Rider/Rules'. What are the consequences for bad experiences?
- Definition of the network and what is and isn't being motored forwarded by house, so other organisations/venues/individuals can be active in moving things forward themselves.
- Invitation to communicate/ask/talk more.
- What artists are in my area? What's the invitation? What are the resources you're able to offer them, and how are you being open/accessible about this?
- Subsidised artist development in multiple locations, with a communal scratch performance bringing everyone together into once venue to collectively see the work.

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- Update the house directory so artists know who commissions, co-producers, has rehearsal space etc.

List of attendees:

Reeves, Maria	Horton Arts
Burse, Katie	JW3
Curtis, Gemma	Worthing Theatres and Museum
Hare, Mandy	Creek Creative
Twiselton, Gemma	Corn Exchange Newbury
Badland, Dawn	Applause
Williams, Alex	artsdepot
Deletant, Monique	artsdepot
Aiton, Laura	Brighton Fringe
Latus, Jo	Arun Arts
Caroline Bennett	Arun Arts
Shaw, Becky	The Exchange, Twickenham
Thorley, Gina	Farnham Maltings
Drury, Ross	Spun Glass Theatre
Wolton, Liz	The Point
Valentine, Jason	Broadway Theatre Letchworth
Morris, Rebecca	Old Fire Station
Taylor, Adam	The Garage
Morris, Harriet	Nutshell
Astley, Tim	Princes Hall, Aldershot
Fairthorne, Stewart	Old Town Hall
Swan, Mary	Proteus Theatre
Jackson, Rachel	Phoenix Theatre
Stolli, Anna	BIGG Theatre
Suri, Caroline	Activate Performing Arts
Sue Wareham	Farnham Maltings
Jones, Sally	New Wolsey Theatre
Bolwell, Harriet	house southeast theatre network
Glanville, Peter	Farnham Maltings
Makin, Mark	house southeast theatre network
Potter, Katy	Farnham Maltings
Waddington, Lillian	Farnham Maltings
Russell, Ellie	house southeast theatre network
McAllister, Ron	Kenton Theatre

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