

PRESS RELEASE
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Growing confidence for Northumberland live performance venues

There is a light at the end of tunnel and growing confidence for Northumberland live performance venues to reopen safely in November following the latest Government announcement of a pilot scheme to test social distancing in selected theatres from August 1st.

The Northumberland theatres have been communicating regularly to make tentative plans towards the re-opening of all venues. The latest Government pilot scheme will be monitored with great interest enabling venues to implement successful social-distancing measures which have been tried and tested on selected audiences. However there is no 'one size fits all' in terms of social distancing for a theatre; a lot depends on the physical layout of the building, such as how wide and how many entrances, exits, staircases and toilets the building has but all the venues agree that it is a move in the right direction.

"It is good news that the Government is planning to test social-distancing in theatres through a few pilot projects. We will observe the results and continue with our plans for the safe re-opening to our communities." **Jo Potts, Alnwick Playhouse Manager**

Northumberland benefits from four mid-scale arts centres, The Maltings, Berwick and Queen Hall Arts, Hexham, are both recognised by Arts Council England as National Portfolio Organisations (NPO), Alnwick Playhouse and the Phoenix at Blyth. Alnwick Playhouse has recently just reopened after a £2.5 million investment from Northumberland County Council with the Playhouse independently raising £800,000 to refurbish its auditorium, bar and café areas.

Covid-19 is having a huge impact on the theatre industry with most of the Autumn's touring dance, theatre and music productions already being cancelled or transferred to next year. This is the reason the Northumberland venues are planning together a special Christmas project for audiences to reflect on the challenges of the past year and celebrate looking forward to the next.

The venues will remain closed in the Summer season; historically in the Theatre Industry this has always been the dark period with low audience engagement, especially noticeable in Northumberland which is the jewel in the crown of the North East Coast attracting thousands of visitors to enjoy the beautiful scenery and great outdoors. The venues are looking at November to reopen with social-distancing and a range of other safety measures in place.

Daily headlines about theatres facing closure with huge staff redundancies have been common in the recent news. However the Northumberland venues are confident about getting through this crisis without staffing casualties. The success is mainly due to the fact that all these venues operate with huge community support and a small, dedicated, core staff team performing multiple roles, working alongside an incredible group of volunteers. In normal circumstances this model of operation can be tough and limit capacity on delivery of activities

however during the current crisis, this model of operation has helped to secure their survival and coming back. Venues have also been able to take advantage of the government furlough scheme designed to safeguard jobs which runs until the end of October. Despite operating on a reduced team working from home, they have continued to connect with their local communities, offering a range of things for people to do and see at home during lockdown.

The Government recently announced £1.57 billion investment to protect Britain's world-class cultural, arts and heritage institutions. The investment into the sector offers hope to many individuals and organisations who have been working since lockdown to lobby the Government for crucial financial support. Arts Council England issued guidance on how organisations can apply on 29 July. The Northumberland venues are now reviewing the detailed guidance and considering all available options in the wake of this latest development.

“Queen’s Hall Hexham is the creative heart of the community, and during lockdown we have continued to connect with our community, offering things for people to do and see at home such as our Creative Age quilting project for people aged 50+, and online writing courses for Young People in partnership with the Hexham Book Festival. We are also planning some refurbishment work while the building is closed to create a new flexible performance and workshop space, and to make all of our spaces and backstage areas more accessible and welcoming when we reopen.” **Katy Taylor, QHA Artistic Director**

“For the Playhouse in Alnwick to close the doors so soon after such a successful re-opening in January was extremely disappointing however the closure has provided an opportunity for the building work to be completed without interruption from the busy Playhouse programme. And in response to the closure the Playhouse Gallery was able to move its exhibition programme online, launching it’s own Playhouse Gallery’s Facebook page to help support artists during these difficult times. We are working towards the second re-opening of our fabulous new building which is very exciting.” **Jo Potts, Alnwick Playhouse Manager**

“The Maltings is taking tentative steps towards a phased reopening from August with a short exhibition in Berwick’s Granary Gallery, running in parallel with an online version of our Autumn Exhibition Glasgow Boys and Girls. We also hope to trial the reopening of our Café Bar. We’re very grateful for the public’s support over the last four months, and look forward more than ever to reopening fully as a venue later in the year.” **Ros Lamont, The Maltings Executive Director**

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For more information or interviews regarding QHA, please contact helen.fussell@gmail.com / 07801 369 778

Queen’s Hall Arts Centre, Beaumont Street, Hexham, NE46 3LS.
www.queenshall.co.uk

About Queen’s Hall Arts

- Based in the heart of Hexham, Queen’s Hall Arts (QHA) is a registered charity and multipurpose arts centre. We develop and deliver a vibrant arts programme offering a

wide range of shows, exhibitions, concerts and special events, support professional and aspiring artists, provide opportunities for our community to take part in the arts and offer a valuable creative resource to our local area. Through the arts we make life better, having positive impacts on our community and the individuals who live and work within it.

- Queen's Hall Arts (QHA) is the company that manages the Queen's Hall Arts Centre venue within the Queen's Hall, Hexham.
- The Queen's Hall building is a magnificent early Victorian building which faces Hexham Abbey (dating from 647AD). From its christening as an arts centre in 1983 until the hand over to the charitable organisation, Queens Hall Arts, in 2001 the building was under local authority control.
- Queen's Hall Arts Centre boasts a 350-seat theatre and two galleries managed by Queen's Hall Arts. Queen's Hall has established itself as a strong base for an extensive range of artistic activity, attracting the best international and national artists from music, drama, dance and national touring comedy to non professional shows put on by local community groups.
- In addition to activity in the building, QHA delivers an extensive outreach programme bringing workshops and performances to communities throughout Northumberland.