

The Equal People Performing Arts
Feasibility Study

Our charity, Equal People, aims to promote the social and therapeutic benefits of the performing arts whilst providing an environment away from the pressures of everyday life. We place emphasis on the building of teamwork and awareness, alongside helping the individual development of ones expression and self esteem. We aim to provide a safe and happy environment for our students and volunteers, but furthermore a fully inclusive performing arts company.

To enable the expansion of our work with students with disabilities we need to build a purpose-built theatre and performance area, which could cater for all. It would be built to local authority specification and would provide the community with a fully inclusive performing arts area.

Current theatre and performance spaces are unfortunately not fully accessible and are therefore unsuitable for our current students to use. None of our local theatres provide backstage toilets or dressing rooms, which are adapted to cater for individuals with disabilities, and most backstage doors and stage entrances are far too narrow for wheelchairs to pass through. Consequently our wheelchair dependant students are faced with many barriers when performing and therefore it makes it virtually impossible for our company to perform together comfortably.

For health and safety reasons we are unable to perform at The Palace Theatre, Westcliff- on- Sea due to an exceptionally steep rake, and we are unable to perform at The New Empire Theatre, Southend- on- Sea as the theatre's wings are far too narrow. Due to this the only way to get wheelchairs onto the stage is to dismantle them and carry their users onto the stage.

Both The Cliffs Pavilion, Southend- on-Sea and The Palace Theatre, Westcliff-on-Sea advertise on their website www.thecliffspavilion.co.uk that they offer facilities for 'visitors with Special Needs' but make no mention of the availability of such facilities for performers. Nevertheless despite the advertised facilities available, there is an overriding concern with both theatres with regards to parking. The Palace Theatre lacks neither a private car park nor any immediate street parking. Disabled performers

and spectators are forced (and actually encouraged by the theatres) to be ‘dropped off’ at the bus stop. Not only is this extremely dangerous and impractical but in reality is also extremely difficult.

“ The closest Pay & Display car park to the Palace Theatre is approximately 5 - 10 minutes walk away on the corner of London Road and Hamlet Court Road. An alternative car park is also located in Ceylon Road. We recommend that drivers with disabled passengers drop them off at the bus stop immediately outside the main entrance before finding alternative parking within the areas detailed above.”

(http://www.thecliffspavilion.co.uk/palace/how_to_find_us.cfm, accessed 17/05/2008)

As a result of these problems, it is essential that we build a theatre that can cater for all. We envisage that this theatre would provide a pleasant environment that would essentially become an important part of the local community. Due to the lack of other adapted arts facilities in the area, our catchment area would be for the South East of Essex.

Due to the ethos of our charity, we hope to promote the advantages of the performing arts to individuals who are often restricted from exploring them. Therefore our potential user groups (although by no means restricted) would be disabled individuals, young people, and young adults and children from un-stable environments.

The Mushroom Theatre Company, local schools, local organisations and theatre groups could use the building, and we would hope that the links we have with local schools would provide a large scope for such co- operation. We would like to provide a space that could be enjoyed by mother and toddler groups, local artists, pensioners, ‘born again teenagers,’ Amateur dramatic groups and local dancing schools.

In order to cater for all our potential users needs we need a space that is completely wheelchair accessible for performers and spectators, a space that has hearing loops fitted, and Braille. As well as this we aim to make the building eco-friendly in many ways, by using Solar Energy and recycled materials as much as possible.

A theatre such as this would help the community, as it would provide many jobs, and due to the full disabled access, we could provide jobs for individuals who struggle to find jobs due to their disabilities. Examples of the jobs on offer would be- caretakers, front of house staff, coffee shop staff, receptionists, crew members and cleaners.

We believe that the South East of Essex is in need of a fully accessible theatre and have carried out extensive research into whether the community would make use of the theatre. Within the Boroughs of Southend-on-Sea, Castle Point, and Rochford and Basildon there are ten Special schools that could all benefit from a fully accessible theatre and performance area. Local Special schools and Mainstream schools were contacted regarding our plans and were asked to answer a questionnaire, which essentially questioned how important a theatre such as ours is and whether they would make use of it.

The response that we had from all the returned questionnaires was extremely positive. All believed that there is a need for a fully accessible theatre in South East Essex and thought that the community would welcome and use our theatre. Although many of the responses felt that current local performance spaces and theatres were adequate they generally felt that their facilities were not.

Within our questionnaires we asked whether they would be interested in any performance workshops offered by ourselves and in the accompanying letter we explained the ethos of our company and how the workshops we offer are very beneficial to young people regardless of ability. All of the responses said that they would be interested in our workshops and one Headmistress commented on the work that we currently do.

“ Penni and the girls have done some fantastic work with our young people in the past few years...She succeeds in encouraging both dance and drama in the very least able, the most disaffected and the least obviously talented adolescent and they do well. Her work is a great asset to the school both educationally and to support our emotional and behavioural development work. Thank you Penni.”

(Mrs Gill Houghton, St Nicolas Secondary Special School)

Mrs Houghton's comment essentially implies that what The Equal People charity works towards achieving within the performing arts is not just a success, but a worthwhile success, as the performing arts really can be helpful in developing individuals' self esteem and awareness.

If we had the funding and facilities to broaden the number of schools that we work with through our performance workshops and outreach projects, then we believe we would be giving more young people, who are often excluded from traditional performing arts schools, the opportunity to explore the arts and to gain from what they can offer. Essex County Council and its District Councils are constantly striving towards improving attendance and attainment levels at schools and colleges, and we believe that these levels could be improved with the help of our workshops. In September 2007, Essex County Council revised an action plan to raise attainment and achievement of children with SEN and additional needs and to build and maintain effective partnership working with other agencies to support and deliver improved outcomes for children.

(http://www.essexcc.gov.uk/vip8/ecc/ECCWebsite/content/binaries/documents/Draft_Action_Plan_V1.30.08.doc, accessed 18/05/2008)

Our recent outreach projects had a 75% attendance rate, and those that were invited to attend were all young people who had low attendance rates at school, had found themselves in trouble with the police, and who generally appeared to lack self-esteem. Most of the young people who attended the workshop said that if the situation arose they would come again and we were left with extremely positive feedback from both the children who attended and Essex County Council.

Another strong element of the feedback we received was that many respondents were keen to advise contacts such as BOSP (Brighter Opportunities for Special People) and the youth services. Also, people offered their own ideas on what we could aim for, such as extending our target audience and reach out to even more groups than we had envisaged, such as the Ethnic Minorities and those recovering from mental illnesses. Therefore it is evident that individuals within the local community did understand what Equal People Performing Arts stands for and what it is that we are trying to achieve.

Furthermore, we have gained interest from Rochford District Council's Arts Development Officer and several Rochford District Council members who all support our idea and pledge their support. Southend Arts Council have offered to promote our events, and John Bull, the executive consultant for Chickenshed, has offered to meet with us to offer guidance.

Another aim of our questionnaire was to find out whether groups, schools and individuals locally would consider fundraising or sponsoring us. Although many were unable to commit to this due their own financial situations, the Deputy Head at The Fitzwimarc High School, Rayleigh suggested that we contact the school's Council for Funding as each year they identify certain charities to fundraise for. The Deputy Head seemed very positive towards our plans, as did the Head of Drama at The Deanes School, Thundersley, and both were interested in the workshops offered by Equal People.

Emily Malcolm, our local Arts Development Officer, was certainly very positive regarding our plans for the theatre. Not only has she pledged her support and advice, but also she has advised us that our role within the local arts scene is exceedingly important and with the necessary funding could be extremely successful. In the Autumn 2007 edition of (newspaper?) an interview with Emily Malcolm stated that "Arts activity has been growing steadily in Rochford District," and that Emily is certainly incredibly keen for it to develop further. The article advertises, on behalf of the council, a variety of events to try and encourage people from an array of backgrounds to participate. None of the current arts activities available would conflict with what we are aiming towards, and therefore Equal People would certainly be a step towards developing performing arts within the local community.

In 2007 The Arts Council published *Informing change. Taking part in the arts: survey findings from the first 12 months*. Within this study they note that although participation rates in the arts is relatively high it is certainly correct that individuals with disabilities are less involved.

“The good news is that the arts already play a major role in our national life – over three-quarters of the adult population engaged with the arts in some way over the last twelve months...however, there are real inequalities in the level and nature of engagement across different parts of society...people with limiting illnesses or disabilities are less likely both to have attended arts events and to have participated in arts activities than those without. Fifty-four per cent of those with a limiting illness or disability attended in the last year compared with 70% of those without... for participatory activity: 47% and 55% respectively.”

(Arts Council England (2007), *Informing change. Taking part in the arts: survey findings from the first 12 months*, www.artscouncil.org.uk, accessed 18/05/08)

Just like Rochford District Council, The Arts Council is extremely keen to encourage more participation. On The Arts Council website they write that they are currently working towards improving attendance and participation rates by “Implementing an action plan and campaign strategy” and intend on giving particular priority “to ensure access and opportunity are improved for disabled people, people from the Black and minority ethnic population and those who are economically disadvantaged.” Through this action plan they intend on increasing “attendance by 3%, and participation by 2%, by adults from Black and minority ethnic, disabled and economically disadvantaged social groups.” (http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/taking_part.php, accessed 18/05/2008)

From compiling the research for this feasibility study it is palpable that the idea of a fully accessible theatre is an idea shared by many within the sector, and it is possible to conclude that a facility such as this is feasible. As well as helping us achieve our aim of equality within the arts, it would deliver an improved level of engagement figures within the performing arts- something at the forefront of the Art Councils policies.

Therefore, supporting Equal People would mean helping to fulfil the ambitions of the many who wish to further the performing arts. However most of all it would mean helping to reach out to those who unfortunately struggle to engage with society, in a way that provides countless benefits for all involved and, quite simply, is fun!