

Formal talks begin about new Fringe Festival hub

Plans for a new Edinburgh Fringe 'hub' have taken a step forward as the council enters formal discussions with festival bosses about leasing out a city centre building.

The Old Town's [South Bridge Resource Centre](#) is set to be repurposed as a "year-round Fringe community hub" for artists using £7 million awarded by the UK Government's capital investment fund.

The former school – which comes with a "considerable repair bill" – will undergo a major refurbishment using the funds, if plans are progressed further, and the council said arrangements would be made to accommodate groups who currently use the centre.

A decision to enter "formal and more detailed discussions" about the project with the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society was taken by the council's finance committee on Tuesday (April 25) however a report said a "considerable amount of work" is still required before a long lease can be signed. This includes the council relocating adult education services which are currently provided there and the Fringe Society (EFFS) drawing up a business plan and financial feasibility study.

There is some controversy over the substantial funding being ring-fenced for the hub project, with some arguing that part

of the funds should be available to support struggling Fringe companies and venues. The Fringe Society CE Shona McCarthy has recently warned about the “existential threat” to the festival caused by rising costs.

The Scottish Government’s Culture Minister Christina McKelvie, said [in response to a question](#) from Conservative MSP Jamie Green that “although such funding is welcome, the UK Government needs to engage with us in advance to ensure that support is aligned and its impact maximised.”

Work will now commence to assess what changes are needed to “maximise the space” and make it more accessible and sustainable. Its use as a resource centre and Fringe venue during the summer will not be interrupted during this initial phase.

[EFFS said](#) the Infirmary Street building had been identified as the ideal location for the new arts base due for “a variety of reasons” with a key consideration being its “proximity to the existing footprint of the Fringe”.

Canongate Youth, which supports and runs activities for youngsters at the centre, would remain a tenant, EFFS said, adding: “Other small arts and cultural organisations may also be offered the opportunity to co-exist there, creating a vibrant, mixed-use community space for all and a hub for the Fringe Society’s services and team during August and year-round.”

Senior estates officer Graeme McGartland told the finance committee the South Bridge Resource Centre has a “considerable repair bill”. The report said the minimum amount required to get it up to scratch was estimated at £1.13m in 2019 and that “this will have increased in the intervening period”.

The establishment of a “space for artists and creatives across the Fringe landscape” was first mooted in 2017 and became a reality after funding was announced in Chancellor Jeremy

Hunt's spring budget.

The Fringe Society said this came following meetings with ministers and officials where they "advocated for a range of support across several key areas".

However money for the community hub has been ring-fenced, meaning it can't be spend on anything else – and there has been "no indication" that part of the investment could go to other areas of the Fringe "in crucial need of support".

Edinburgh Greens co-convenor Alys Mumford said at the meeting the Fringe has "positive and negative" impacts on the city and that the grant did not address financial pressures faced by artists and lack of sustainable and affordable accommodation for performers during the festival.

She said: "Time and time again we see that large organisations like the Fringe talk about broadening their aims and working with communities and often that ignores the brilliant community work which is already happening, whether supported by council-funded organisations or voluntary, grass routes community groups."

Shona McCarthy, chief executive of the Fringe Society, said: "The conversion of this space into a year-round Fringe community hub will allow local cultural organisations, artists and our community partners the opportunity to utilise this space too.

"In the long-term it will allow a permanent home for our August participants' hub, known as Fringe Central, which artists, arts industry, media and international delegates access each summer for a range of workshops, networking and industry events."

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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