



# ***Now, Next and Beyond***

## **The Headgate Strategy 2026-2029**

Version 7

First approved by trustees on 8 June 2026, with proposed amendments

Updated 5 September for trustees' approval on 14 September 2026.

Produced originally in May 2026 by a strategy core group comprising:

- Sallie Mills Lewis, TAAT Vice-Chair and trustee lead for *Now, Next and Beyond*
- Cameron Abbot-Betts, Headgate Director
- Pat Gaudin, TAAT Vice-Chair
- Wendy Smith, Adviser to the Board

### **Contents**

|                                                                          |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Where we are now</b>                                                  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Vision</b>                                                            | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Mission</b>                                                           | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Values</b>                                                            | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Objectives and goals</b>                                              | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Implementation in 2026/27</b>                                         | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Appendix 1 – Background and engagement that led to this strategy</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Appendix 2 – Stakeholders</b>                                         | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Appendix 3 – Specific strategies within this overarching strategy</b> | <b>17</b> |

### **Where we are now**

The Headgate is a successful theatre for local community productions and visiting professional companies.

### **Baseline facts and figures**

#### **Activity in 2025**

- 7 Headgate theatre productions attracting 2,342 people, which is 83% capacity.

- 53 community and professional shows attracting 6,508 people, which is 80% capacity.
- The Headgate was the flagship venue for Colchester Fringe Festival, presenting 66 shows, performed by 23 companies over the 10 day festival. This included artists from India, Japan, Spain and Mexico, alongside national and local companies. The Fringe attracted 2,189 people.
- 25-30 young people participated in Headgate Young Company (HYC).
- An average of 34 people attended each of the 36 Act V sessions.
- At the North Essex Theatre Guild (NETG) awards for 2024/25, Headgate Theatre Productions (HTP) was nominated in 20 categories and won 5 awards.
- Headgate activities (HTP, HYC, ACT V and workshops) contributed £25k net to Headgate funds.
- The Headgate earned £33k in revenue from professional shows (via venue hire charge or box office split).
- The Headgate earned £48k in revenue from hiring its spaces to organisations and community groups for their use.
- Income in 2025 from public funding amounted to a £15k rent grant from Colchester City Council CCC and a community grant of £937.

### **Financial health and sustainability**

Theatre Arts Action Trust (TAAT) is a registered charity that oversees the running of the Headgate Theatre. TAAT generates income mainly from theatre activities. The only regular public funding it receives annually is a grant from Colchester City Council to cover the rental cost of the Headgate theatre building.

At the end of 2025, TAAT had reserves (cash and deposit) of £222k. The trust's fixed assets are now fully written down and have little, or no residual value. The budget for 2026 predicts a loss, or reduction in the Trust's funds of £41k. The significant expense headings are employment costs and premises costs, including rent, utilities, cleaning and repair.

**If this loss continues, then cash reserves will be exhausted in 5-6 years.**

Other potential risks to a sustainable future for the Headgate include:

- ongoing viable programme of performance groups and performances
- reduced support for the venue as a 'hireable' space
- support for Headgate administered activities (HTP, HYC, Act V)

- availability of volunteers to cover the Headgate’s obligations during a public performance
- unexpected liability arising from TAAT responsibility as a tenant
- investment by TAAT which has no certainty of return.

## **Stakeholder views**

During 2025, Theatre Arts Action Trust (TAAT) engaged staff, volunteers, hirers and theatre-goers in discussions about the Headgate’s future. The most striking theme was a sense of community, about which people were passionate. People want the Headgate to continue for years to come, and they want to be part of its development.

*See appendix 1 for further background.*

In this spirit, people highlighted a number of areas for improvement that were consistent in all discussions:

- External communications, marketing and publicity
- Diversity and inclusion, including a diverse programme of shows and opportunities
- Internal communications, information and transparency
- Accessibility for audiences and participants
- Training and maintaining a technical team and technical upgrades
- Affordable pricing
- Nurturing talent and skills
- Rewards and development pathways for volunteers
- Collaboration with other theatres
- Comfortable seating

## **A cultural hub**

Among many ideas for growth, the vision of the Headgate as a cultural hub was the “golden thread”. Currently, the Headgate does not truly fit the picture of a “cultural hub”. The building doesn’t invite people to meet up and collaborate. It doesn’t inspire creativity compared with other small theatres. Examples include Sheringham Little Theatre and Camden People’s Theatre, where local artists meet and work in the theatre café.

Within the cultural hub idea, there was an emerging view that the emphasis should shift from the Headgate as the “home of amateur theatre” to becoming a centre for professional and community artists to come together, with an expanded scope for diverse social and creative activities.

## Vision

The Headgate is a welcoming home for bold and inclusive theatre.

We champion exciting work from diverse voices, nurture artists at every stage of their journey, and produce community-led and professional productions that connect our local audiences with stories that matter.

Rooted in Colchester and open to the world, we celebrate creativity that uplifts, challenges and excites our audiences.



## The chosen destination

We envisage the Headgate as a community theatre for Colchester and the east of England's leading fringe venue for national and international touring artists.

For its vibrant atmosphere and supportive welcome, the Headgate will be the chosen destination of artists and theatre-goers from all walks of life. We see the Headgate as a place of opportunity, a cultural hub, where people can grow, whether as part of an audience sharing an experience or leading a creative team.

It is our explicit aim to ensure a balance between professional and community activities, ensuring that they are in harmony, not in competition, and able to exploit mutual benefits.

## Our developing identity

**This strategy takes a direction of travel from a theatre created by community groups and supported by a small staff, to a renowned professional venue, supported by volunteers, showcasing diverse professional and community talent.**

It is realistic to aim to make our mark, not just in the city of Colchester, but nationally and internationally. We already serve as the flagship venue for the growing Colchester Fringe Festival, and it is within our reach to build our reputation as a creative springboard for artists working towards London, Edinburgh and international tours. This is an exciting benefit for our local creative community as much as for visiting artists, and great promotion for the city of Colchester.

## Financial sustainability

While the journey over the next three years and beyond will require significant investment, our strategic growth will secure financial sustainability by attracting more funding, higher ticket sales, and greater diversity in our sources of income.

### Mission

Our mission is in three parts:

#### 1. People

To enrich the lives of all participants with entertainment, education and creative opportunity.

#### 2. Programme

To present in-house and visiting productions, events, workshops and development opportunities for our local creative community, the residents of Colchester and the local area.

#### 3. Place

To provide the space, the technology and the people to host theatre performances and a cultural hub for local and visiting clients and companies.

## Why the Headgate is needed

Not everyone knows about the Headgate, but it is embedded within the community nonetheless and part of the city's infrastructure.

We know from the last 24 years, that people need our theatre. What we see at the Headgate is reflected in national research. A recent UK Theatre report<sup>1</sup> states that:

*"Attendance spans the full range of occupational groups... Theatre is not a niche pursuit for a narrow demographic. It is a genuinely national habit."*

Performers and theatre-makers keep coming because they are passionate about telling stories. Audiences want to hear them with a real-time emotional connection in an intimate setting.

---

<sup>1</sup> Theatre in the UK 2026. Society of London Theatre & UK Theatre March 2026 <https://uktheatre.org/theatre-in-the-uk-2026/>

Theatre is a place where we can safely examine and learn about all aspects of humanity. It offers connection, a basic human need as essential to survival as food, water and shelter. This is at the root of our public value and the driver of our ambition. The Headgate has the potential to build skills, support well-being and strengthen our city's social value.

## Values

- **Equality, diversity and inclusion** - opportunities to create, participate in and enjoy performing arts must be accessible to all.
- **High-quality** - we strive for excellence in all aspects of our work.
- **Open and supportive** - we nurture and inspire creative and technical achievement.
- **Community** - we support our city and value our place in it.

## Objectives and goals

### Long-term objective (5-10 years)

1. **To secure the best possible venue for community-led and professional productions that offers a creative channel for local people and development for visiting companies.**

**Goal:** A major redevelopment of the current building and/or a move to a new location.

Our current facilities limit our potential to become a buzzing cultural hub, which then limits our sustainability. The auditorium is dated in style and inflexible artistically, with poor sight lines. The building as a whole requires a redesign for diverse activities that would expand creative opportunities and increase the number of people coming through its doors.

The benefits of a new location could include:

- Better and more performance space
- Better seating
- Better access for people with disabilities
- More space for rehearsals
- Space for community activities
- Better access to car parking

While this is a long term goal, there is no harm in an early exploration with the City Council, local developers and estate agents to look at the local property market, in parallel with achievable improvements to the current building.

## Where we are heading and potential projects

An enthusiastic group met last year to review potential improvements to the performance space:

- **In the short term**, improvements could be made to the audience rostra that would increase the rake and improve sight lines. We could purchase new chairs to improve comfort. We could make changes to the rehearsal room to create a better performance space and redecorate all public areas to modernise the look and feel of the building.
- **In the medium term**, we could invite quotations from theatre suppliers for a full replacement of our auditorium seating. We could work with architects to investigate the potential reconfiguration and re-use of current space.
- **In the long term**, we could explore the possibilities of a radical overhaul and /or a potential move to a new location.

## Medium-term objectives (3-5 years)

### 2. To establish a local, national and international reputation for bold and inclusive theatre

#### Goals:

- To establish a high-quality, bold and diverse programme, which may be measured by the following:
  - A 20% increase in audience and participant numbers
  - Demonstrable improvements in public and industry opinion e.g. with awards, recognition and positive media coverage, including in social media
  - Benchmark standards of accessibility in performing arts
  - A measurable increase in participation from local actors and theatre-makers
  - A growing demand from leading fringe theatre artists and companies.
  - Increased investment from public funding.

### 3. To establish a thriving participation programme of events and activities, including off-site events and collaborations with partners

#### Goals:

- A cultural hub that is well-attended informally and with popular events and social activities
- At least two off-site events per year that carries the Headgate brand to wider audiences
- At least one notable production transfer or tour per year that carries the Headgate brand into national and international circles.

**4. To make the most of the current building with a redesign that can be funded and achieved in phases that would minimise disruption.**

Feedback from stakeholders in 2025 showed there was a popular view that a café / bar / workspace is central to developing a cultural hub. The idea is not impossible. We know from our networks that there are caterers who would be interested in the venue and it should be possible to include a kitchen facility within the lease.

In terms of the auditorium, there has already been some consideration of a redesign that we should revisit, including contacts with local architects, who would be happy to offer free consultation.

**Goals:**

- Redesign performance space and bar / café areas
- Expand access to rehearsal / workshop / event space
- Update and improve technical facilities
- Improve disability access to and throughout the building.

**5. To improve financial performance and sustainability**

**Goals:**

- New opportunities to increase revenue, including:
  - increased programming, making the most of all available spaces
  - new regular hirers of spaces
  - continual review of charging for performance and hire
  - new sources of funding, sponsorship and subsidy
  - new initiatives for membership
- Review of mark-up for trading activity (bar and ices)
- Increase in the number and productivity of volunteers, which is critical to our ability to increase revenue
- Reduction in costs.

**Short-term objectives (1-3 years)**

**6. To develop a programme that will make maximum use of the current building, increase audiences and participants, offer diversity and improve financial sustainability.**

**Goals:**

- Demonstrably diverse and inclusive programme
- Increased audiences and participants, including a 15% increase in visiting companies
- Increase our revenue by 20% with:
  - Increased ticket sales from diverse activities
  - Increased income-generating activities and events
  - Increased income from café / event space
  - Increased income from public funding and sponsorship

- Secure the management and performance of in-house productions and group activities, as measured by:
  - Increase in participants and volunteers
  - Measurable positive outcomes for participants
  - Continuing high level of ticket sales.

**7. To make decorative and some structural changes that will improve our audience experience and help realise our vision of a cultural hub, with increased activity, diversity and financial sustainability.**

Advice, support and funding is available to theatres, for example from the Theatres Trust, the national advisory public body for theatres. <https://www.theatrust.org.uk/>.

We are also aware of theatre seating suppliers that would be willing to assess and quote for new seating.

**Goals:**

- Secure capital funding for redecoration and redesign
- Redesign existing spaces to create a café/work/event space
- Secure an arrangement with a cafe provider
- Redecorate all public areas, including auditorium
- Improve audience seating and rake
- Complete inventory of theatre equipment, facilities, materials and props and review for updates
- Secure adequate office and meeting space.

**8. To make a major step change in our market identity and external communications**

**Goals:**

- Develop the Headgate brand, including:
  - New improved visual identity
  - Redesigned website – our shop window
  - Improved communications protocols and digital media to reach wider audiences and with greater effect.

**9. To inspire and sustain our resource of effective volunteers**

**Goals:**

- Increase the number of active volunteers by 20%
- Increase the pool of trained duty managers by 20%
- Show measurable positive outcomes for volunteers
- Establish a system of reward and development pathways for volunteers.

## Implementation in 2026/27

Our workstreams for year one of this strategy are proposed below, adopting the three parts of the Headgate's mission – "People, Programme and Place".

For 2026/27, In addition to actions that could achieve "quick wins", the strategy programme will involve set up and initiation of projects and preliminary work on mid and long term objectives.

Projects within each workstream will start by looking at:

- Options
- Pros and cons
- Costs and any potential gains
- Practical implications
- Potential funding sources

## People

Implementing our strategy requires engagement at all levels as follows:

1. **Trustee oversight** – Theatre Arts Action Trustees set strategy, receive updates at each board meeting and give approvals where required for specific projects.

Lead trustee for *Now, Next and Beyond* – Sallie Mills Lewis, TAAT Vice-Chair.

2. **Programme management** – a core group currently including the Headgate director, vice-chair and adviser to the board:

- a. advises the trustees on strategy, including draft documents and reports for approval
- b. oversees the development and implementation of the strategic programme, *Now, Next and Beyond*, and receives reports from sub-groups and project leads.
- c. Provides leadership for each workstream (see next section), initiating projects and setting goals.

Chair of the core group – Sallie Mills Lewis, TAAT Vice-Chair.

3. **Project leads and sub-groups** – groups of volunteers and advisers take on responsibility for feasibility studies and implementation, to include options, pros and cons, costs and potential gains, and practical implications. The groups report to the workstream lead who is a member of the core group managing the overall programme.

Project leads and participants to be recruited in May/June 2026 and throughout the programme.

**4. Supporters and stakeholders** – We made a commitment in January 2025 to involve people in strategic plans. Actions could include:

- a. “We asked, you said, we did” report.
- b. A follow-up *Now, Next and Beyond* workshop
- c. Regular e.g. quarterly updates to those involved
- d. Encouragement for volunteers to join projects and sub-groups.

*See appendix 2 for further information on stakeholders.*

## Programme

### Workstream 1 – Ideas for trial and development

Lead – Cameron Abbot-Betts, Headgate Director

The *Now and Next* engagement in 2025 produced a list of diverse events and schemes, some of which have identified leads who could take the idea forward. These ideas would be part of developing a cultural hub, and part of realising the Headgate vision. There are overlaps with proposals from the Headgate Director, which are described in his paper to the trustees dated November 2025.

2027 marks the Headgate’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and offers an excellent opportunity to try new ideas. For example, the Headgate Director is proposing a week-long festival of events in March 2027 as part of the celebrations. Throughout 2027, we could brand events with a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

| Projects                                                                                                                                                         | Timescale         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Collaboration with Essex Book Festival                                                                                                                           | By June 2027      |
| Scratch nights                                                                                                                                                   | By August 2027    |
| Comedy nights                                                                                                                                                    | By August 2027    |
| Folk nights                                                                                                                                                      | By August 2027    |
| Talent nights                                                                                                                                                    | By August 2027    |
| Discussion events                                                                                                                                                | By August 2027    |
| Headgate theatre market – a day for artists, suppliers, hirers, Headgate Theatre Productions (HTP) e.g. selling costumes, props, crafts and theatre merchandise. | By August 2027    |
| New writers workshop to work in conjunction with Headgate Young Company (HYC), HTP and Act V.                                                                    | By September 2027 |
| Headgate on location                                                                                                                                             | By September 2027 |
| Headgate Young Technicians Programme (HYT)                                                                                                                       | By September 2027 |
| Student performances                                                                                                                                             | By October 2027   |
| Collaborations with other theatres                                                                                                                               | By December 2027  |

## Workstream 2 – Quick wins

Lead – Sallie Mills Lewis, TAAT Vice-Chair

The *Now and Next* engagement identified a number of areas for improvement, some of which were regarded as things that could be achieved relatively quickly and with minimal expense.

There is already some progress in these areas as listed below.

### a. Review of the volunteer model

| Current progress                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | More to do                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Director has reviewed with staff.</li><li>• Bar 1 and duty managers (DMs) identified as priorities for development.</li><li>• Rewards scheme now offers free tickets.</li><li>• FOH volunteers are available</li><li>• Volunteer group and “Volunteer Voice”</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recruitment and training campaign to maximise benefits of upskilling and social benefits.</li><li>• Consider pathways and mentorships</li></ul> |

### b. Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) education for staff and volunteers

| Current progress                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | More to do                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• EDI is a standing item on the TAAT board agenda</li><li>• Policy review in progress</li><li>• Improvements to wheelchair accessibility recently introduced to both the box office and auditorium</li><li>• EDI commitments included in volunteer recruitment and training</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improvements in print and web accessibility</li></ul> |

### c. Internal communications

| Current progress                                                                                                           | More to do                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Completed communications audit</li><li>• Changes made to website content</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Website to be redeveloped</li></ul> |

### d. Technical upgrades

| Current progress                                                                                                                                                                  | More to do                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reviewed with technical co-ordinators</li><li>• Investments in laptops and upgrades</li><li>• New lighting equipment purchased.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agree oversight of visiting companies</li><li>• Consider feasibility of a staff technical manager</li></ul> |

### Workstream 3 – Developing the Headgate brand

Leads – Wendy Smith, Adviser to the Board, Cameron Abbot-Betts, Headgate Director

#### Urgent and critical to strategic progress

The feedback from *Now and Next* discussions in 2025 listed external communications as number one on the list of top ten areas for development and number three on the list of ten priorities identified by stakeholders.

Re-branding the Headgate would help to realise our strategic vision by defining who or what the Headgate is and how we communicate that to current and future stakeholders.

The anchor for all external communications is the Headgate website, our “shop window”. A complete rebuild along with training in content management would be part of the re-branding project.

Other outcomes from the re-branding project would include:

- Further engagement with stakeholders
- Review and action to expand Headgate audiences and explore new markets
- Updates for all digital media and communications protocols
- Improvements in print and web accessibility

Based on experience of similar projects, this project would require a budget in the region £10k-£20k. A fund-raising campaign is required with an initial target of £10k as a first stage. This would establish the Headgate new brand. Further fund-raising would then support later stages to include website redevelopment.

Ideally, a launch for the new brand and website would coincide with the Headgate’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.

| Action                                                                                                     | Timescale                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Proposal agreed by TAAT                                                                                    | June 2026                                                                         |
| Selection of partner company to develop brand, website and social media (subject to funding being secured) | Potential partners identified July 2026<br>On hold subject to funds being secured |
| Fund-raising campaign launch                                                                               | By October 2026                                                                   |
| Research and development with new audiences as well as current stakeholders inc. survey, focus groups      | By December 2026                                                                  |

  

|                                                                           |                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Approval of branding design (subject to funds being secured)              | By August 2027 |
| Brand launch, guidelines and protocols, including social media templates. | By August 2027 |

|                                                                         |                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Training in content management and new branded communications protocols | By August 2027   |
| Website design and build                                                | By December 2027 |

## Place

### Workstream 4 – Developing a cultural hub

Lead – Cameron Abbot-Betts, Headgate Director

| Projects                                                               | Timescale    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Preliminary investigations into major redesign of the current building | By Sept 2026 |
| Explore potential for short term improvement of audience seating       | By Oct 2026  |
| Feasibility study for café / bar / workspace                           | By May 2027  |
| Preliminary investigations into potential future locations             | By May 2027  |
| Potential for short term redecoration and refurbishment                | By Sept 2026 |

## Appendix 1 – Background and engagement that led to this strategy

In 2024/25, Theatre Arts Action Trustees (TAAT) ran an engagement exercise, called *Now and Next* to help plan the future of the Headgate. The outcome from various stakeholder discussions identified seven priorities for development and a set of conclusions and proposed areas for action.

There is some cross-over between *Now and Next* and the ten objectives set by TAAT in August 2025. There are also overlaps with observations and proposals from the Headgate Director, following his first five weeks in post.

For reference, the following key documents laid the foundations for this strategy, *Now and Next and Beyond*.

1. *Now and Next* conclusions extracted from a longer report from stakeholder engagement events: version 4, drafted initially 20/2/25 and updated 17/3/25.
2. *Now and Next* seven priorities for action extracted from a summary drafted 30/4/25
3. Report to the TAAT AGM called “*Our Headgate Community*” issued 20/7/25, which included an initial view of what a “cultural hub” would look like.
4. The ten objectives agreed by trustees in August 2025
5. Paper from the Headgate Director to the trustees issued in November 2025
6. Notes from the Chair of TAAT on setting strategy shared with the core group on 19/1/26
7. Notes from Pat Gaudin, TAAT Vice-chair entitled “Vision and Mission over time” shared with the core group on 27/1/26

Copies of all documents associated with this strategy are available on request from the TAAT Secretary [secretary@headgatetheatre.co.uk](mailto:secretary@headgatetheatre.co.uk)

## **Appendix 2 – Stakeholders**

### **Internal stakeholders**

- Theatre Arts Action Trustees
- Staff
- Volunteers

### **Creative partners**

- Regular hirers
- Other local creative organisations, including Colchester Creative Network
- Colchester Fringe Festival
- The Mercury Theatre and Mercury Creatives Network

### **Civic partners**

- Colchester City Council
- Essex County Council
- City traders and representatives
- Other local charitable organisations

### **Patrons**

- Friends of the Headgate
- Audience members on mailing lists
- Audience members via social media followers
- Local theatre-lovers via publicity channels
- All hirers

### **Press and pundits**

- Local and national press and media
- Theatre websites, reviews and listings
- City and county tourism promotional channels

### **Other stakeholder groups to be expanded**

### **Appendix 3 – Specific strategies within this overarching strategy**

As part of the ongoing work on Headgate strategy, TAAT will continue to oversee several specific strategies, such as:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)
- Communications – internal, external, publicity and marketing
- Sustainability - productions, operations and buildings
- Finance