

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON
CULTURAL ACTIVITIES
AND FACILITIES**

INTERIM REPORT

PERFORMING ARTS FACILITIES

OCTOBER 1990

Select Committee on Cultural Activities and Facilities

Committee membership:

Mr B Wood (Presiding Member)

Mr C Duby ⁽¹⁾

Mr G Humphries ⁽¹⁾

Dr H Kinloch ⁽²⁾

Mr M Moore ⁽¹⁾

Mr W Stefaniak ⁽²⁾

Mr D Stevenson ⁽²⁾⁽³⁾

Secretary:

Mr R Owens

¹ Discharged from attendance 14 December 1898

² Appointed 14 December 1989

³ Discharged from attendance 29 March 1990

TERMS OF REFERENCE

A select committee be appointed to inquire into and report on cultural activity in the ACT with particular reference to:

- (a) the range and adequacy of existing facilities for the preparation, performance or display of cultural works;
- (b) the extent to which library facilities meet the needs of the community;
- (c) priorities for determining the nature, size, funding and use of future cultural facilities, including the facilities proposed for Section 19, taking into account the level of activity and needs of the ACT cultural community;
- (d) Commonwealth financial assistance for those facilities which fulfil national functions; and
- (e) such other matters relating to cultural facilities within the ACT which the committee considers should be drawn to the attention of the Assembly ⁽⁴⁾

⁴ MoP, No. 18, 23 August 1989, p. 69.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Assembly appointed a Select Committee on Cultural Activities and Facilities on 23 August 1989⁽⁵⁾, fixing its report date as the first sitting day after 30 April 1990.

1.2 On 26 April 1990 the reporting date of the committee was altered to 25 October 1990.⁽⁶⁾

1.3 At the request of the committee, the Assembly, on 7 June 1990, authorised the committee to submit an interim report on Performing Arts Facilities.⁽⁷⁾

1.4 The committee made this request of the Assembly because it was concerned that decisions with respect to the section 19 development might be made without input from the committee. Informal advice given to the committee suggested that a decision on this important development would be made before the committee's final report.

1.5 The committee has chosen specifically to report on performing arts spaces at this time because any development of section 19, should it proceed, entails –

- (i) the demolition of the Playhouse Theatre and Link with severe consequences for performing arts spaces in the Territory; and
- (ii) the allocation to performing arts spaces of at least part of the premium that might be obtained from the commercial leases of section 19.

1.6 This interim report deals specifically with the provision of performing arts spaces in the Territory. Other matters affecting performing arts spaces, including funding, will be addressed in the committee's final report.

1.7 The premium from any development on section 19 is to be directed to cultural facilities on that section. Whilst aware of this, the committee has made its decisions about the range of facilities on its assessment of the needs of the Canberra community and of the community's ability to use those facilities adequately. The committee cannot recommend any new facilities which would be little used.

⁵ MoP, No. 18.

⁶ MoP, No. 55.

⁷ MoP, No. 64.

1.8 The committee will also address the provision of other 'State' cultural facilities, including an art gallery, a museum and a Territorial library, in its final report.

1.9 With respect to the provision of cultural facilities within a cultural precinct on section 19 the committee has adopted the following philosophy:

As in every other jurisdiction in Australia, a State Art Gallery, a State Museum, a State Theatre and a State Library are, as of right, community facilities. As such they should be provided by the State irrespective of any financial benefit that might or might not be gained from any premium accruing from a commercial lease on section 19.

1.10 The committee, in determining the priorities for the development of the cultural precinct on section 19, will, in its final report, be recommending that the immediate cultural facilities to be provided will comprise a Territory Library, a Territory Gallery and a Territorial Museum.

2. Inquiry

Background

2.1 The first reference to the provision of cultural facilities in exchange for the right to build a gambling casino in the ACT was in 1976 when the possibility of constructing a concert hall by a casino developer was mooted by the then Commonwealth Minister for the Capital Territory.

2.2 In 1987 the then Commonwealth Minister for the ACT, the Hon J Brown MP proposed that a major hotel development planned for section 19 be widened to include, amongst other things, a casino and that some community facilities, including a lyric theatre and a Territory library, could be funded from the premium paid for the commercial site.

2.3 The Commonwealth Government, in December 1987, agreed in principle to the establishment of a casino in the ACT, and in late 1988 the Casino Control Ordinance 1988 was made (now the *Casino Control Act 1988*).

2.4 Both the Commonwealth and the former ACT Governments had indicated that a theatre, a library and a refurbished Civic Square could be provided from the available premium. The present ACT Government has continued with the development proposal.

2.5 It is also important to note the concern expressed by the Assembly's Select Committee on the Establishment of a Casino (the Casino Committee) in its report about the provision of cultural facilities on section 19:

The Committee notes, however, the careful wording of the Government's commitment, which states that:

the Government is committed to using the premium obtained from the commercial site for the funding of facilities which could include a Theatre complex, Territorial Library and/or other community facilities

This apparent qualification in explanation is the cause for some concern. (emphasis added)⁽⁸⁾

Theatre spaces

2.6 At present the major live theatre spaces in the Territory are to be found in the following

⁸ Paragraph 1.16, Casino Committee Report, July 1989.

locations:

ANU Arts Centre (400 seats);
 Canberra Theatre (1189 seats);
 Childers Street (150 seats approximately);
 Erindale Centre (425 seats);
 Gorman House –
 Bogong Theatre (110 seats);
 Canberra Youth Theatre (100 seats); and
 Ralph Wilson Theatre (110 seats);
 Playhouse Theatre (310 seats); and
 Theatre 3 (200 seats).

The committee also notes the existence of other performing arts centres, including Llewellyn Hall, the Theatre Royal and the Bruce Stadium.

Evidence

2.7 In considering the question of performing arts space in the Territory the committee received submissions from , and heard evidence given by, the following groups:

ACT Cultural Industries Council;
 ANU Arts Centre;
 Canberra City Opera;
 Canberra Repertory;
 Canberra Symphony Orchestra;
 Canberra Theatre Company;
 Canberra Theatre Trust;
 Canberra Youth Orchestra;
 Canberra Youth Theatre;
 Department of Health, Education and the Arts;
 Jigsaw Theatre Company;
 Office of Industry and Development;
 Skylark Mask and Puppet Theatre; and
 Stage Systems Pty Ltd.

2.8 The committee also considered three major reports concerning the development of a large lyric theatre on the Canberra theatre site. These reports were:

Assessment of the need for an additional public performance centre in the ACT. ERU Research Service, December 1987 (*The ERU Report*);

Assessment of the need for an additional public performance centre in the ACT – Summary of issues and recommendations for new facilities. Tom Brown and Associates, June 1988 (*The Tom Brown Report*); and

Consultancy on Civic Square redevelopment theatre proposals for the Civic Square Project Group. Murray Edmonds Management, May 1988 (*The Murray Edmonds Report*).

2.9 In May and June of this year the committee visited State theatre complexes in the following cities:

Adelaide;
 Brisbane;
 Hobart; and
 Melbourne

2.10 The chairman and the committee's secretary visited the regional theatre complex in Geelong, Victoria, and the committee also visited the Wollongong Theatre complex.

2.11 In addition to these visits the committee also made several inspections of the Canberra Theatre and the Playhouse Theatre, and visited the Childers Street complex.

2.12 Bearing in mind the limitations placed on the facilities to be funded by the premium to be paid for the lease on section 19 (*see* paragraphs 2.4 and 2.5 above) it was of interest to the committee that many submissions advocated a large performing arts complex for the Canberra Theatre site. The complex advocated was to include a 2000 seat lyric theatre, a 600 – 800 seat drama theatre, a studio space of some 350 seats, rehearsal space and commercial activities.

3. A Lyric Theatre

Evidence for

3.1 The major thrust of the evidence placed before the committee concerning a proposal for a lyric theatre addressed two significant issues –

- (i) the perceived inadequacies of the current Canberra Theatre; and
- (ii) the demonstrable need for a large (2000 seat) theatre.

3.2 The Canberra Theatre Trust, in its submission to the committee, identified the following eight technical limitations of the current theatre:

- (i) low flytower;
- (ii) low proscenium arch opening;
- (iii) orchestra pit limitations;
- (iv) acoustic limitations;
- (v) inadequate outside access to backstage;
- (vi) inadequate foyer space and bar facilities;
- (vii) substandard patron comfort; and
- (viii) inadequate heating and cooling.

3.3 In addition to these technical limitations the Trust contends

"... the theatre has a major limitation when it comes to assessing the viability of touring productions or the scale of local productions. With a seating capacity of 1189 the Canberra Theatre is too small to return the costs of presentation of even the smaller musicals available on tour."⁽⁹⁾

3.4 Both in evidence given before the committee and in its submission the Trust argued strongly that to remain viable and to meet the perceived aspirations of its audience population a lyric theatre of 2000 seats was necessary. According to the Trust a theatre of this size would attract large scale productions to the Territory and would establish an economically viable marketplace for this type of product.

3.5 Evidence in support of this view is to be found in the three reports mentioned earlier, ie

⁹ Submission, p. 4.

the ERU Report, the Tom Brown Report and the Murray Edmonds Report.

3.6 In summary Murray Edmonds believed a lyric theatre could be used as follows:

<u>Arts form</u>	<u>Weeks per annum</u>
Ballet and dance	4 – 5
Opera and music theatre	5 – 6
Light entertainment	4 – 5
Drama	1 – 2
Total	14 – 18

When likely usage by local companies was taken into account the total annual occupancy rates became 25 – 33 weeks.⁽¹⁰⁾

3.7 During its visit to Melbourne the committee held discussions with senior officials from the Victorian Arts Centre, which as part of its complex has a 2000 seat lyric theatre. The committee was informed that, through an aggressive marketing strategy based on a metropolitan population of 3.5 millions, the theatres in the centre were in use some 360 days a year, but still required some subsidy from government.

3.8 The committee, however, has not been convinced by the arguments put forward in favour of the building of a 2000 seat lyric theatre in Canberra with a population base of 275,000.

Evidence against

3.9 Evidence given before the committee by local companies, those who according to Murray Edmonds would make use of a lyric theatre for 11 – 15 weeks of the year, strongly suggests that –

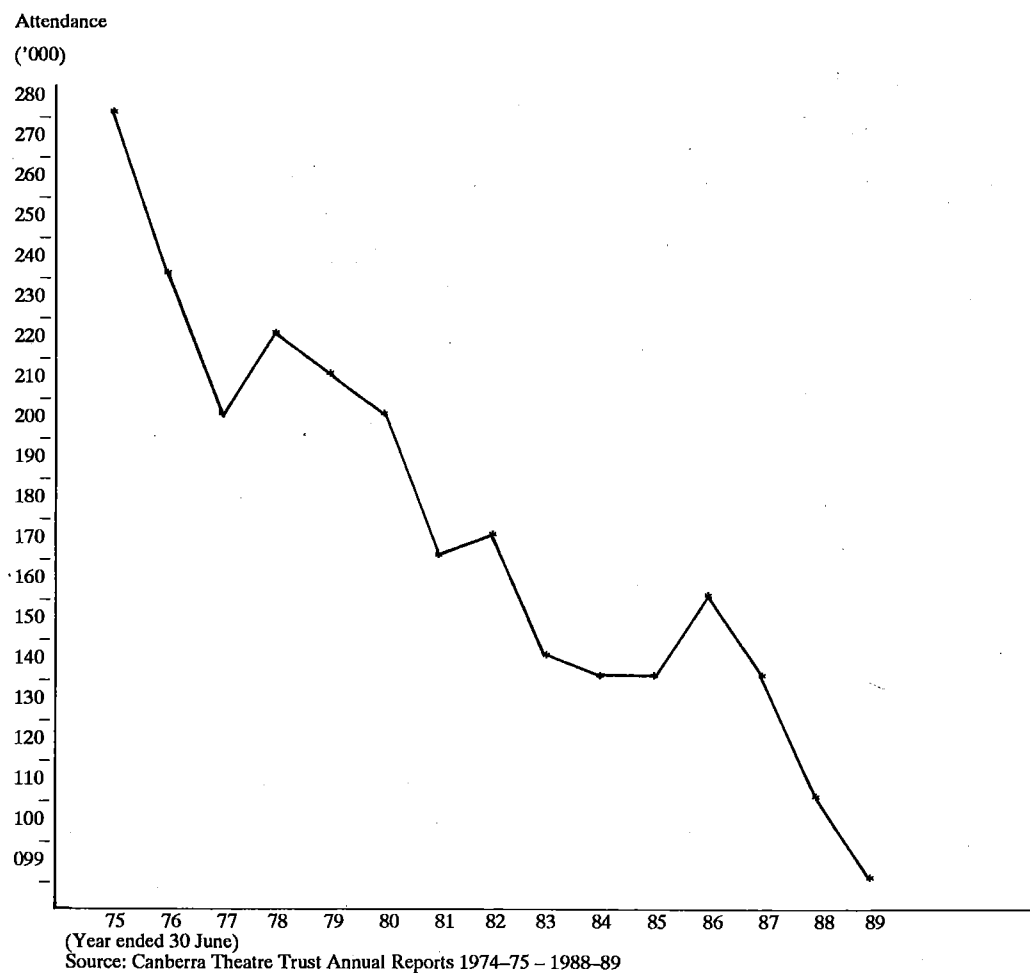
- (a) they could not afford the hire of such a large venue; and
- (b) such a large venue would not be appropriate to their kind of theatre.

3.10 Should the local companies not use the lyric theatre then its usage would fall to 14 – 18 weeks a year. In other words, on Edmonds' figures, the lyric theatre would be 'dark' for in excess of 50% of the year.

¹⁰ Edmonds Report p. 42.

3.11 During its visit to Brisbane the committee inspected the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, which also has a magnificent 2000 seat lyric theatre. In discussions with the manager of the centre the committee was informed that, with a metropolitan population base of 1.25 millions, the lyric theatre was 'dark' for approximately 30% of the year.

Figure 1 - Theatre attendance (exclusive of cinema) 1975 - 1989



3.12 As a result of this sort of evidence, the committee is not convinced that the projected usage of a 2000 seat lyric theatre, based on a metropolitan population of 300,000⁽¹¹⁾, justifies either the large capital outlay required to build such a theatre or the substantial ongoing subsidy

¹¹ Including Queanbeyan.

that would be required to keep such a theatre open.

3.13 Although the committee heard much evidence implying that a lyric theatre was required to attract the big shows to Canberra the committee again was not convinced. The committee has the same concerns as those expressed in the report of the Casino Committee:

"... Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth with population each about 4 times that of Canberra have theatre facilities comparable with those proposed for the Section 19 development and still could not attract large budget shows such as *Cats* and *Les Miserables* because their population base was not large enough. ... it was not the lack of a large theatre in Canberra which prevented these shows from opening in the City, but the fact that the population is not large enough to fill the theatre often enough to justify the investment of large capital sums." (emphasis added)⁽¹²⁾

3.14 The committee believes this point of view is support by the attendance figures at the Canberra Theatre. Over the last 15 years attendance figures have declined at an average annual rate of 6.75% from a high of 275,000 in 1975 to a low of 96,000 in 1989 (see figure 1).

3.15 A further difficulty in attracting shows to Canberra is the policy of major publicly funded and private companies that require the Canberra Theatre Trust to underwrite any ventures. The Trust is in no position to accept such risks.

3.16 The committee recognises the quality of the work of the Trust and the continuing efforts of its management to attract high class productions to the ACT. The outstanding success of the first Australian Theatre Festival exemplifies the initiative and determination of the Trust.

3.17 The committee recommends:

That a 2000 seat lyric theatre not be built.

Planning needs

3.18 The committee, however, does support the views expressed by the Manager of the Canberra Theatre, in evidence before the committee, that one of this committee's tasks is to set the parameters for a blueprint for future theatre development in the Territory.

3.19 The manager informed the committee that "the complex as a whole has to be planned and it can be planned in a certain way to be staged". This is certainly the view the committee supports (see paragraph 6.3).

¹² Paragraph 4.10, Casino Committee report, July 1989.

3.20 Although it is the committee's firm view that a large lyric theatre cannot be sustained by the Territory at this point of the Territory's development, this does not preclude the Government from making a serious long term commitment to a lyric theatre, nor does it prevent some important planning decisions being made now. There are, however, not only local but also national needs that need to be addressed.

3.21 The committee has given some detailed consideration to the National aspects of performing arts venues in the Territory. The committee was surprised to learn that Canberra is one of the few National Capitals not to have a National performing arts venue of some kind.

3.22 The committee is concerned about this lack of a National venue and believes the Territory Government should approach the Commonwealth Government concerning the construction and maintenance of National lyric theatre in the Territory. This would provide the National performing arts venue that is currently lacking from the Australian cultural scene; a facility for all Australians, particularly the one million tourists that visit the National Capital each year.

3.23 The committee recommends:

- . **That the Government ask the Commonwealth Government to construct and maintain a National lyric theatre.**
- . **That the Government encourage any proposal to elicit national or local support for the development of a National lyric theatre.**

4. Current Theatre Space – Section 19

The Canberra Theatre

4.1 The committee is well aware of the current shortcomings of the Canberra Theatre, and is concerned that they should be addressed as far as possible without major restructuring.

4.2 Advice given the committee suggests that with prudent and intelligent planning some of the major limitations identified in chapter 3 can be overcome. The committee believes it is possible to make adjustment to the fly tower and the proscenium arch opening, either along the lines suggested in the Tom Brown Report or by other innovative design proposals.

4.3 The committee believes plans are in hand to solve the heating and cooling problems following the replacement of the outdated boiler currently located in the Playhouse Theatre.

4.4 Like the Theatre Trust the committee is concerned at the substandard patron facilities and the inadequate foyer space and bar facilities which could be exacerbated to an unacceptable degree should the Link be demolished.

4.5 The committee, however, believes, on the basis of evidence given before it by Stage Systems Pty Ltd., these problems can be alleviated with proper planning and adequate funding. In the opinion of the committee it will be necessary to have a proper report on the state of the theatre, but that report must be commissioned in the context of rectification and improvement.

4.6 The committee recommends:

- . **That a report be commissioned to identify rectifiable shortcomings at the Canberra Theatre.**
- . **That funds be made available from the premium to be realised for the commercial lease of section 19 to rectify the identified faults.**

The Playhouse Theatre

4.7 It is the committee's understanding that as part of the development of section 19 the Playhouse Theatre is to be demolished. Should this be the case then the theatre will have to be replaced as a matter of priority.

4.8 It is the opinion of the committee that the demolition of the Playhouse Theatre (and the North Building) will impose a cost to the ACT Government that would negate substantially the benefits of the premium to be realised from the commercial lease of section 19.

4.9 The loss of the Playhouse will leave a substantial gap in the range of venues available for performing arts in the Territory.

4.10 Evidence given by some witnesses before the committee suggested that the Playhouse had reached the end of its useful life. Criticisms of its current state included:

lack of wing space;
no fly tower;
inappropriate sight lines;
dilapidated seating;
substandard foyer facilities;
old and unserviceable plant and equipment; and
inadequate dressing room accommodation.

4.11 Other witnesses, however, found the theatre ideally suited to their form of theatre. And actors, such as Amanda Muggleton, have high praise for the theatre as a working venue.

4.12 The committee is concerned at what it considers to be an undue emphasis some have placed on the 'technical' limitations of the theatre, and would draw to their attention the opinion of Mr Richard Pilborough, one of the world's leading theatre consultants, that some of the best theatres in the world did not start life as theatres. ⁽¹³⁾ A point reiterated in a different way by the manager of the Canberra Theatre Company, 'theatre is an illusion after all'. ⁽¹⁴⁾

¹³ Transcript pp. 181-82

¹⁴ Transcript p. 30.

4.13 The committee is convinced that the Playhouse Theatre has an integral role to play in the performing arts of the Territory and should not be demolished.

4.14 As with the Canberra Theatre many of the physical deficiencies of the Playhouse can be rectified with adequate funding. It is the committee's belief that this funding should come from the premium for section 19.

4.15 The committee recommends:

- **That the Playhouse Theatre be retained.**
- **That the Playhouse Theatre be fully refurbished.**
- **That the funding for the refurbishment of the Playhouse Theatre be appropriated from the premium to be paid for the commercial lease of section 19.**
- **That should the Playhouse Theatre be demolished it be replaced as a matter of first priority.**

The Link

4.16 In recommending the retention of the Playhouse Theatre the committee axiomatically recommends the retention of the Link. The committee would, however, like to bring to the attention of the Assembly a number of reasons why, of itself, the Link should be retained.

4.17 The Link provides a function area for the theatre and as such it generates income. In evidence before the committee the Theatre Manager intimated:

"If we lose the Link, we then lose our function area, which is our big growth area, in actual fact, as far as income potential is concerned." ⁽¹⁵⁾

4.18 The Link also provides other services. It is, of course, the box office for the whole complex and it is also used by the theatre as a space which is accessible to local artists for exhibitions.

¹⁵ Transcript p. 530.

4.19 The Link quite obviously provides a number of public services that ought not to be terminated which, with the recommendation to retain the Playhouse, would justify the retention of the Link. Should the proposed development on section 19 necessitate the demolition of the Playhouse Theatre, the committee is still firmly of the opinion that the Link should be retained.

4.20 The committee recommends:

That the Link be retained.

5. Childers Street Theatre

5.1 The committee is aware that options are being prepared concerning the future of the Childers Street Theatre, and feels that this is an appropriate time to comment.

5.2 It is the committee's belief that theatres of the genre of Childers Street play an important role in the development of theatre; they offer affordable venue for groups that might be regarded as experimental or 'cutting edge'. The committee acknowledges the excellent work of these groups, and the need for appropriate theatre spaces to support their efforts.

5.3 With the loss of TAU's theatre in Braddon, due to fire, the community has unaffordably lost just this sort of venue.

5.4 To provide more adequately for this genre of theatre the committee is of the opinion that the Childers Street Theatre should be refurbished. The committee does not envisage that a substantial amount of funds should be appropriated for this refurbishment, as the life of the building can only be medium term, and nothing should be done in the area of Childers Street that might limit or preclude some future co-ordinated development.

5.5 The committee is opposed to the renting/leasing of the theatre to a single group as it believes better use could be made of the facility by a management committee of interested theatre groups.

5.6 The committee recommends:

- That, at minimal cost, the Childers Street Theatre be refurbished.**
- That, following refurbishment, the Childers Street Theatre be made available for use by community theatre groups.**
- That the management of the Childers Street Theatre be vested in a management committee comprising members of those groups using the theatre.**
- That, as an interim measure, the Childers Street Theatre be made available immediately for use by community theatre groups, subject to appropriate fire and safety regulations and bylaws.**

6. Planning

Cultural Precinct – Section 19

6.1 In its final report the committee will be making a series of more specific recommendations concerning the cultural precinct planned for section 19, including a priority for a Territory Library, a Territory Gallery and a Territory Museum. In this interim report the committee is concerned to bring to the Assembly's attention some preliminary proposals for the planning of that precinct, particularly with reference to performing arts spaces.

6.2 In the opinion of the committee, construction of the precinct as one project will need careful consideration, and planning should be done to stage the development without compromising its total integrity.

6.3 With regard to performing arts spaces in the precinct, that planning should include a long term provision of lyric theatre of 2000 seats (*see* paragraphs 3.18 – 3.23).

6.4 It is the opinion of the committee, therefore, that a long term strategy for the development of a cultural precinct on section 19 be formulated as a matter of some priority; and that strategy should provide for a staged development of the cultural precinct.

6.5 The committee recommends

That a long term strategy for the development of a cultural precinct on section 19 be formulated as a matter of urgency.

Childers Street

6.6 The committee is also concerned with the development of a community cultural precinct within the Childers Street area. The committee will be making recommendations concerning this area in its final report.

6.7 As mentioned in chapter 5 the committee is in favour of the refurbishment of the Childers Street Theatre, but that refurbishment must not pre-empt any long development of this site as a community cultural precinct.

(Bill Wood)

Chairman

October 1990

Recommendations

- . That a 2000 seat lyric theatre not be built.
(Paragraph 3.17)
- . That the Government ask the Commonwealth Government to construct and maintain a National lyric theatre.
(Paragraph 3.23)
- . That the Government encourage any proposals to elicit national or local support for the development of a National lyric theatre.
(Paragraph 3.23)
- . That a report be commissioned to identify rectifiable shortcomings at the Canberra Theatre.
(Paragraph 4.6)
- . That funds be made available from the premium to be realised for the commercial lease of section 19 to rectify the identified faults.
(Paragraph 4.6)
- . That the Playhouse Theatre be retained.
(Paragraph 4.15)
- . That the Playhouse Theatre be fully refurbished.
(Paragraph 4.15)
- . That the funding for the refurbishment of the Playhouse Theatre be appropriated from the premium to be paid for the commercial lease of section 19.
(Paragraph 4.15)
- . That should the Playhouse Theatre be demolished it be replaced as a matter of first priority.
(Paragraph 4.15)
- . That the Link be retained.
(Paragraph 4.20)

- . That, at minimal cost, the Childers Street Theatre be refurbished.
(Paragraph 5.6)
- . That, following refurbishment, the Childers Street Theatre be made available for use by community theatre groups.
(Paragraph 5.6)
- . That the management of the Childers Street Theatre be vested in a management committee comprising members of those groups using the theatre.
(Paragraph 5.6)
- . That, as an interim measure, the Childers Street Theatre be made available immediately for use by community theatre groups, subject to appropriate fire and safety regulations and bylaws.
(Paragraph 5.6)
- . That a long term strategy for the development of a cultural precinct on section 19 be formulated as a matter of urgency.
(Paragraph 6.5)