

MEETING: 02/05/2018

Ref: 14516

ASSESSMENT CATEGORY - Making London More Inclusive

Polka Children's Theatre Limited

Adv: Shegufta Rahman

Base: Merton

Amount requested: £100,000

Benefit: Merton

Amount recommended: £100,000

The Applicant

Polka Children's Theatre Limited (PCTL), a charitable company, has created work for and with children for 50 years. With year-round programmes of new work, visiting shows and creative learning activities for largely disadvantaged 0-12 year olds, the charity is a pioneer in developing children's theatre, nurturing talent in the sector and maintaining an international reputation.

The Application

Since moving to its current location in Wimbledon in 1979 there has been no significant capital investment in the charity. Now in a poor state of repair, PCTL is seeking funding to provide audiences and artists with facilities expected of a leading international theatre, as well as ensuring children of all backgrounds and abilities can experience the magic of live theatre. Funding is requested for the accessible elements of this capital project, as identified in the access audit your Committee funded previously.

The Recommendation

The charity has demonstrated a strong track record as the UK's first dedicated children's theatre. Championing children's theatre as an integrated, immersive experience in a child-centred environment, the charity led on programmes such as relaxed performances for children with autism; a model that continues to be replicated across venues today. Having secured full planning permission, PCTL has 60% of the £6.5m required for this significant capital project, including £2.5m from the Arts Council and investment from Merton Borough Council. Your funding would enable the charity to leverage the additional balance required for the whole project.

£100,000 for disabled access works at Polka Children's Theatre.

Funding History

Meeting Date	Decision
28/01/2015	£2,940 for the costs of an independent access audit.
14/10/2010	£68,000 over three years (£21,000; £23,000; £24,000) for programmes of autism-friendly and shadow-signed performances.
10/09/2009	Application withdrawn.

Background and detail of proposal

The charity started as a touring puppet theatre company in 1968. By 1983 it had developed programmes creating shows for the under-fives in its Adventure Theatre in addition to the main theatre. In 1994 it went on to win the Vivien Duffield Theatre Award to establish *Curtain-Up!* To this day it still offers free tickets to 2,500 school children who would otherwise not experience live theatre. The annual *Freefalling*

programme for Merton children at risk of exclusion was presented as a model of good practice in the House of Lords.

The current premises do not reflect the quality of the charity's work. The Creative Learning team operates out of a dilapidated annexe. The independent access audit highlighted the idiosyncratic configuration of the venue which means the organisation is unable to fully exploit opportunities for income generation, nor optimise operational savings. Customer feedback has highlighted that audiences find aspects of the buildings unsatisfactory and uncomfortable. Audience expectations have changed significantly considering improvements made by other arts venues, and the charity needs to offer a visitor experience that matches the quality of its work. The capital project will incorporate improvements to reduce PCTL's carbon footprint and energy consumption. The charity has a group of young advisors aged 8-13 who make up its Young Voices Panel. This group has insisted on placing a reduction in the theatre's carbon footprint as high priority as part of the redevelopment.

PCTL currently has over 90,000 visitors each year. Of this, it estimates 1.6% of tickets issued are access tickets. Following the redevelopment, it is expected that visitors will increase to 98,000 by 2022, with 2% of tickets issues being access tickets. On-site creating learning participants will increase by almost 50% to over 5,000 per year, and the creative learning programme overall (including off-site) will benefit over 20,000 individuals after the works are complete. This includes increases in attendances for adapted shows for children with needs and increased engagement with special needs schools and units across South London.

Financial Information

The significant increase in income and expenditure in 2018 along with the rising costs of raising funds all relate to the capital project. The charity's reserves policy is to hold three months' core operating expenditure which is defined as administration, overheads and core staff costs.

Year end as at 31 March	2017 Audited Accounts £	2018 Forecast £	2019 Budget £
Income & expenditure:			
Income	2,096,043	2,616,501	7,223,277
- % of income confirmed as at 20/03/2018	n/a	95%	55%
Expenditure	(2,169,620)	(2,516,415)	(7,224,499)
Total surplus/(deficit)	(73,577)	100,086	(1,222)
Split between:			
- Restricted surplus/(deficit)	(125,543)	100,000	0
- Unrestricted surplus/(deficit)	51,966	86	(1,222)
	(73,577)	100,086	(1,222)
Cost of Raising Funds	61,059	163,981	266,387
- % of income	2.9%	6.3%	3.7%
Operating expenditure (unrestricted funds)	1,865,401	1,929,165	1,812,413
Free unrestricted reserves:			
Free unrestricted reserves held at year end	273,239	273,325	272,103
No of months of operating expenditure	1.8	1.7	1.8
Reserves policy target	250,000	255,000	248,000
No of months of operating expenditure	1.6	1.6	1.6
Free reserves over/(under) target	23,239	18,325	24,103