



# GREAT TORRINGTON TOWN COUNCIL

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Town Clerk: Karen Chapman

The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport  
100 Parliament Street  
London  
SW1A 2BQ

Date: 29<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

## **The Plough Arts Centre**

I am writing on behalf of Great Torrington Town Council in support of our local Drama and Arts Centre, The Plough Arts Centre. At the beginning of this year, the centre fought hard to attract additional funding to continue in the longer-term with its' vibrant and varied programmes; only to be hit by the over-night closure due to the Covid19 pandemic at the end of March 2020.

In the past couple of weeks, the Plough Arts Centre has published the necessity to issue redundancy notices to employees as the furlough scheme finishes on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2020. There has been no opportunity to realise income through the box office which is its' greatest source of income and there is no date on the horizon of when this might be possible in the future. The Plough Arts Centre receives very little income from local government sources, 3%, which leaves a huge variable of 97%.

We are aware that a grant from the Arts Council has helped expenditure on fixed costs during the past 4 months, however, this does not negate the problem of paying staff wages and fixed costs once this grant runs out.

Prior to the initial lockdown attendance for activities and shows etc has seen a 55% increase in people over the past 5 years with the Plough currently hosting across 17 venues in Northern Devon. Last year they sold over 41,000 tickets for films and live events. Thousands more visited the galleries or came for workshops, community activities and the cafe. Total footfall is in excess of 70,000 per year.

The Town Council cannot emphasise enough how important this facility is for the local community and beyond. As set out above, there have been significant increases in attendance and the number of activities and venues in recent years. The Plough is unique in many ways and some examples are set out below;

- There are few Art Centres left in Devon and Cornwall and the only other Multi-Arts Centre is the Phoenix in Exeter.
- The Plough provides for multi genres of art & crafts, media, exhibitions, workshops and music and numbers attending these events have increased significantly over recent years.
- The Plough offers options for all sections of society; in addition to the general public the Plough works with and supports schools (for example, film screenings, a “real” theatre venue for GTS pupils to perform) and special need groups.
- The Plough is a central hub for all local and far reaching artists as well as the local craft industry.
- The Plough is a significant facility which brings people from near and far into the town centre which has an impact on footfall and impact on the retail businesses as well as cafes in the town centre.
- The Plough works in 17 other venues across Devon and for example, have brought St Anne’s in Barnstaple alive and transformed it into a successful venue.
- The Plough Arts Centre is a key employer in the locality.
- Local Estate Agents sponsor events as they recognise the value of the Plough in relation to encouraging people to move into the area.
- The Plough is the hub for the Torrington 100 project providing alternative options for social prescribing for an area of 100 square miles around Great Torrington which is working to improve wellbeing for the people and communities of North Devon and Torridge.

In addition to the above, the Plough is also a key player in a project being spearheaded by Torridge District Council, the renovation and improvement plan for the Globe Hotel situated next door to the Plough Arts Centre. A major part of the long-term business plan for this project is the development of the work currently undertaken by the Plough and for it to extend into space within the Globe; particularly around the use of the ballroom for a cinema. In addition, the plan includes the need for accommodation linked to visitors to the Plough.

In return, this project offers the opportunity for expansion plans for the Plough which in itself, would help towards maintaining long-term sustainability.

The Town Council has also been nurturing the concept of Great Torrington’s identity being strongly linked with the town’s heritage, natural beauty and culture. A key factor for the cultural development of Great Torrington rests with the Plough Arts Centre.

The Plough Arts Centre is the least-funded multi-functioning Arts Centre in Britain that still works.

I am sure you will agree that the Plough Arts Centre is not only a significant facility for Great Torrington and the Torridge district but for the whole of Devon. Great Torrington Town Council fully supports efforts to ensure the long-term prospects of this facility.

Great Torrington Town Council has provided an unconditional grant of £9,000 for the past 5 years and has agreed £10,000.00 this year and for the next two years.

The Town Council is aware of the government's commitment to the Arts and Culture sector and the recent announcement which confirmed a sum of £1.57billion throughout the country to protect them following the huge negative impact of Covid 19. We would therefore, implore you to formally consider provision of grant funding for The Plough Arts Centre to enable sustainability throughout the period of being closed to the public, so that they are ready to get "back to business" at the appropriate time. As you can see from above, investment now would secure the longer-term project and the positive impact ramifications across the local area, Devon as a whole and further beyond.

Thanking you in advance for your consideration of this request.

Yours sincerely

Karen Chapman  
Town Clerk for Great Torrington

CC  
Richard Wolfenden-Brown and John Eeles: The Plough Arts Centre  
Leader and Interim Chief Executive of Torridge District Council