

## **Submission from Arts Access Aotearoa on the Dunedin City Council 9 Year Plan 2025-2034**

May 2025

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## Submission in support of a new purpose-built Performing Arts venue in Dunedin

May 2025

Tēnā koutou,

I am writing to express strong support for the inclusion of funding for a new, purpose-built performing arts centre in Dunedin within the Dunedin City Council's 2025–2034 9-Year Plan.

I wish to particularly endorse the advocacy and vision of Stage South and their work to provide an accessible performance venue that will benefit the entire Ōtepoti arts community.

### **Arts Access Aotearoa: who we are and what we do**

Arts Access Aotearoa is recognised as the lead organisation advocating for increased access to the arts for all people who experience barriers to participation, whether as artists, audience members or visitors. Our vision is that all people in Aotearoa can access and participate in the arts. We work to progress equity, inclusion, participation, and best practice standards across communities.

Our vision, supported by our enduring values of mōhiotanga, rangatiratanga, whanaungatanga, kotahitanga and kaitiakitanga, is that all people in Aotearoa can access and participate in the arts. In our key strategic documents and our day-to-day work, we actively seek to honour and uphold the culture and rights of Tāngata Turi and Tāngata Whaikaha Māori as enshrined in te Tiriti o Waitangi.

We have four main programme areas:

- **Taha Hotu**, a Deaf and disabled artists' initiative supporting artists to create work, develop their creative practice and advocate for their right to access the arts.
- **Arts For All Network**, which provides support and advice to arts organisations working to improve their accessibility.
- **Arts in Corrections**, where we advise Te Ara Poutama Department of Corrections on its arts programmes and activities, and advocate for the arts as a tool to support the rehabilitative process of prisoners and their reintegration back into the community.
- **Creative Spaces Network**, where we support and connect a range of arts organisations working in local communities to provide access to creative opportunities for people who face barriers to inclusion.

We also provide a national advisory and advocacy service, providing information, resources and research about access to the arts.

## The need for an accessible Performing Arts venue

Since the closure of the Fortune Theatre in 2018, Dunedin has lacked a professional mid-size theatre suitable for local productions and national tours. This has severely impacted the city's ability to sustain a vibrant, professional performing arts community. Touring companies now often bypass Dunedin, and local theatre groups are restricted by the inadequacy of existing venues — many of which are inaccessible, too small, outdated, or not consistently available.

In 2018, a Council-commissioned feasibility study acknowledged this need, leading to the inclusion of \$17.1 million in the 2021–31 10-Year Plan. It is deeply disappointing that this commitment has been removed from the current draft 9-Year Plan, despite continued engagement and submissions by Stage South and community stakeholders.

## Stage South's Vision

Stage South has done vital groundwork to realise a new venue, including commissioning adapted architectural plans based on [Te Raukura ki Kāpiti](#), a practical, cost-effective performing arts centre successfully serving the Kāpiti community. Their proposed venue offers two dedicated performance spaces, integrated 21st-century technology, and fully accessible facilities — all essential for fostering a professional and inclusive arts environment in Dunedin.

The proposed venue would serve as a home for professional theatre, community and school productions, music, dance, opera, and touring work — a true community asset that reflects Dunedin's identity as a UNESCO City of Literature and its proud arts heritage.

## Accessibility and inclusion: the perspective of Arts Access Aotearoa

A new build is not just an opportunity for functionality; it is an opportunity to **embed accessibility and inclusion from the ground up**.

Any new performing arts venue must meet best practice accessibility and universal design standards, enabling:

- **Street-to-seat and street-to-stage access** for wheelchair users and those with limited mobility
- **Accessible seating, backstage areas, and green rooms**
- **Hearing loops and captioning options** for Deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons
- **Sensory-friendly performances** and calm spaces
- **Māori and Pasifika cultural design principles** to ensure the space feels welcoming to all and reflects the cultural significance of the Ōtepoti region.

- **Financial and geographical accessibility** through community hire options and outreach

This is not just a matter of compliance, but one of equity, dignity, and creative opportunity for all.

### **A strategic and cultural imperative**

Ōtepoti's cultural future depends on bold and strategic investment. A purpose-built venue will create jobs, retain local talent, attract national and international touring works, and restore a professional hub for theatre and performing arts. With Stage South's experience, architectural planning in place, and a strong collaborative ethos, now is the time for Council to act and reinstate its commitment.

We urge Dunedin City Council to:

1. **Reinstate funding** for a performing arts venue into the 2025–2034 9-Year Plan
2. **Collaborate actively** with Stage South and the arts sector to ensure the venue is designed for the needs of our diverse communities
3. **Ensure accessibility and inclusion** are core design and operational priorities

Thank you for considering this submission in support of a vital cultural asset for Dunedin's future.

Nāku noa, nā  
Richard Bengé  
Executive Director  
Arts Access Aotearoa