

# Theatre chiefs say reduced opening protects venue

1 day ago

**Jim Scott**

BBC News, North East and Cumbria



The Empire recently saw £470,000 spent on essential roof repairs

Cutting the opening hours at a theatre and cinema will protect the venue's "long-term future" and ensure public money is not wasted, a council has said.

The Empire in Consett will trade one day fewer each week under proposals from Durham County Council.

Customers and opposition councillors have criticised the plan, pointing out £470,000 was spent last year on roof repairs and describing the venue as "an asset, not a problem".

But Liberal Democrat councillor Elizabeth Scott said increases to national insurance and a "very low take up" for some shows meant changes were needed.

As well as being a theatre, the 500-seat venue shows new films with the nearest alternative being 12 miles (19.3km) away in Gateshead.

The cinema and café currently opens from Tuesday to Saturday between 10:00 and 15:00, but under the council's proposals it would shut completely on Tuesdays and open for an hour less on the other days.



Theatre-goers say the Consett Empire is "always busy" during performances

Empire customers Janice and William Ringer, from New Kyo, Stanley, said they feared reduced opening was a step towards a complete closure.

Mr Ringer said: "Think of the money they've just spent doing it up and they [the council] go and do tricks like this... it's criminal."

Ms Ringer said the venue was "always busy" as it was currently able to show "some really good shows".

She added: "It's disappointing because if it does close, it's something lost from the area."

## 'No-one visits'

Scott, a cabinet member on the authority run jointly by independents, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, said the council had "invested hundreds of thousands of pounds to make sure that we can continue to offer a fantastic programme of shows and cinema at The Empire".

"We've actually just had the most successful pantomime ever at Consett Empire".

She claimed "most theatres" in smaller towns were not open every day, but blamed "massive hikes" in national insurance under the Labour government and low audience numbers for some events on the decision.

"We are doing the right thing to protect the long-term future of the theatre and ensure the council isn't wasting taxpayers' money opening the venue on days when no-one visits."



Councillor Kevin Earley fears the changes will lower visitor numbers

Labour's Kevin Earley said the council should "look for different ideas" and explore all options to "make it viable" instead of reducing its hours.

"It's a much loved, cracking little theatre for the community and it has a very good reputation," the opposition councillor for Benfieldside said.

"If it starts getting less people going through the doors it becomes more difficult to justify what you're spending keeping it open.

"The budget issue doesn't mean just give up and cut, you have to look at this and say this is an asset, not a problem."

*Follow BBC North East on [X](#), [Facebook](#), [Nextdoor](#) and [Instagram](#).*

---

## More on this story

[Fears over theatre's future as new hours planned](#)  
[Town's theatre to shut for more roof repairs](#)  
[Theatre shuts for five months for £500k revamp](#)

---

## Related internet links

## Empire Consett Durham County Council

Theatre

Film

Durham County Council

Consett

### Related

#### Theatre could close after funding cut - councillor

35 mins ago | Northamptonshire

#### New roof to protect 'much-loved' theatre

23 hrs ago | Lincolnshire

#### Plan to remove theatre sign causes controversy

1 day ago | Devon

### More

3 hrs ago

#### Structural issues halt 'funding gap' venue build

The firm behind the Bishop Auckland Stack venture say they "remain fully committed" to opening it.



3 hrs ago | England

3 hrs ago

#### 12 things we spotted in the Oscars class photo

Cynthia Erivo, Ariana Grande, Demi Moore and Timothée Chalamet were among the actors smiling for the camera.



3 hrs ago | Culture

7 hrs ago

#### Redevelopment of military museum progressing

The construction is expected to finish in late 2025, with the venue opening in spring 2026.



7 hrs ago | England

7 hrs ago

#### Islanders' films show life in the 1970s

The films were part of a project aimed at capturing every day life in the Western Isles.



7 hrs ago | Scotland

7 hrs ago

#### Island life of the 1970s brought back on screen

An experiment in capturing people's experiences living in the Western Isles in the 1970s is now online.



7 hrs ago | Highlands & Islands

B B C

[Home](#) [News](#) [Sport](#) [Business](#) [Innovation](#) [Culture](#) [Arts](#) [Travel](#) [Earth](#) [Audio](#) [Video](#) [Live](#) [Weather](#) [BBC Shop](#)

BBC in other languages ▾

Follow BBC on: [X](#) [f](#) [o](#) [tiktok](#) [in](#) [y](#)

[Terms of Use](#) [About the BBC](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility Help](#) [Contact the BBC](#) [Advertise with us](#) [Do not share or sell my info](#)

Contact technical support

Copyright 2025 BBC. All rights reserved. The BBC is *not responsible for the content of external sites*. [Read about our approach to external linking](#).