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Theatre Porto takes a bow: Ellesmere Port cultural venue for children and families wins two major planning awards

A landmark cultural regeneration project in Whitby Park, Ellesmere Port has received top honours at the **RTPI (Royal Town Planning Institute) North West Awards for Planning Excellence 2025**, winning **Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Culture** and the overall title of **Best Project and Best in Region**.

The project has seen **Whitby Hall**, a locally listed Victorian building, transformed into the vibrant home of **Theatre Porto**, the only specialist arts venue for children and young people in Cheshire and Merseyside. The transformation has not only revitalised the building, but also expanded the impact and reach of the organisation providing a state-of-the-art venue to match the quality and ambition of Theatre Porto's work as a national leader in children and young people's theatre.

The project was delivered through a bold and collaborative partnership between **Cheshire West and Chester Council, Theatre Porto, Equans, Bennetts Associates, and Lambert Smith Hampton, with additional funding from Arts Council England**.

Councillor Louise Gittins, Leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council said: *"This feels just like the Oscars, and in true Oscars tradition, these awards wouldn't have been possible without so many people who all contributed great vision, brilliant collaboration and truly worked in partnership.*

Theatre Porto is a flagship for Ellesmere Port, and these awards are thanks to the Theatre Porto team, our arts development team, architects, planners and planning team, capital delivery team and construction partners, Graham Lister and everyone else involved who played their part. But this welcoming and accessible building is brought to life by the performers and of course the audience, making it a delightful space for all.

If you haven't visited Theatre Porto, drop in, say hello and see what's going on in the heart of Whitby Park and Ellesmere Port."

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Nina Hajianni, CEO and Artistic Director of Theatre Porto said: *"I'm incredibly proud that Theatre Porto has been recognised in these prestigious awards. The transformation of our venue was the result of many years of visioning and careful planning.*

Working collaboratively enabled us to create an ambitious and truly unique theatre and cultural space, centred around children and wider communities – from local families to international artists"

Caz Brader, Executive Director, Theatre Porto, added: *"The impact of our new building has been extraordinary, for children and young people, for families, for artists. These awards are a tribute to what's possible when bold, brilliant partnerships come together to make a shared vision real."*

The once well-used but run down Whitby Hall is now an inspiring and, welcoming, space for creativity that features a new purpose-built auditorium and flexible creative facilities designed for a range of activities including theatre, dance, film, and performance

The venue includes a naturally ventilated auditorium, reused solar PV panels, and low-carbon design choices throughout, in line with the Council's climate commitments and Theatre Porto's environmental ambitions

Since reopening in 2022, Theatre Porto now welcomes over **60,000 visitors annually**, compared to just 15,000 annually before the redevelopment. The venue delivers **6,000 free participation opportunities** a year for children and young people, with 30 per cent of participants having SEND, and many projects reporting a 99 per cent improvement in wellbeing among those engaged.

The **RTPI** North West judging panel praised the project in glowing terms: "The judges were blown away by this submission, especially having seen it completed and in use.

The extension to the locally listed Whitby Hall was bold yet respectful, with careful material choices and colour use. The internal space reinforced the inclusive, community-focused aims of Theatre Porto. The project clearly builds upon the incredible work that was already being undertaken on the site and has enabled the reach of that work to be extended and the benefits further reaching. A huge congratulations from all the judges.

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Young actor Maddie, a regular at Theatre Porto, sums it up: ***"OMG – it's made an incredibly massive positive difference. Our town needed more creative culture, and this gives families a place to experience the arts together. Without it, the Port wouldn't have anything exciting going on."***

Theatre Porto is part of **Arts Council England's National Portfolio** and the only specialist children's theatre venue in Cheshire and on Merseyside

The company was also **recently awarded Theatre of Sanctuary status**, the first children's theatre to be recognised for its inclusive work with refugees and asylum seekers.

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About Theatre Porto

Formerly known as Action Transport Theatre, Theatre Porto has been creating professional theatre for, by, and with children and young people for nearly 40 years. Following a £2.8 million redevelopment, it now operates from a state-of-the-art venue in Whitby Park, Ellesmere Port, offering performances, workshops, and cultural events that inspire creativity and community engagement

<https://theatreporto.org/>

For media enquiries, please contact:

Sam Hutchinson (he/him)

Communications Manager - Part-Time

www.TheatrePorto.org | sam@TheatrePorto.org | 0151 357 2120

Theatre Porto, Whitby Park, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, CH65 6QY

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