



SOUTH  
KESTEVEN  
DISTRICT  
COUNCIL



# Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee

30 November 2023

Report of Councillor Paul Stokes,  
Portfolio Holder for Culture and Leisure

## Council-Funded Arts Venues Operation and Performance

### Report Author

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### Purpose of Report

To provide an update on the current performance of the Council's Arts Venues.

### Recommendation

**The Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to:**

- 1. Examine the information provided in the report relating to the current operating and performance of the Council's three arts venues.**
- 2. Support an application to Arts Council England for a project grant to undertake an audience development project.**

## Decision Information

Does the report contain any exempt or confidential information not for publication? No

What are the relevant corporate priorities? Healthy and strong communities

Which wards are impacted? Bourne, Grantham and Stamford Wards

## 1. Implications

Taking into consideration implications relating to finance and procurement, legal and governance, risk and mitigation, health and safety, diversity and inclusion, safeguarding, staffing, community safety, mental health and wellbeing and the impact on the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency, the following implications have been identified:

### ***Finance and Procurement***

- 1.1 The Council's provision of Arts and Cultural activity is a discretionary service and represents a significant annual cost for the Council. It is therefore important that the service can demonstrate value for money whilst delivering the outcomes the Council are seeking.
- 1.2 Given the Council's challenging financial outlook, external funding sources are welcomed to support and improve the Council's arts venues and the services offered. If the Council are successful in attracting external funding, it will be important to ensure that the grant conditions are not onerous and support the Council's wider ambitions.

**Completed by: Richard Wyles, Deputy Chief Executive and s151 Officer.**

### ***Legal and Governance***

- 1.3 There are no significant legal or governance implications arising from this report which are not already referenced in the body of the report.

**Completed by: Graham Watts, Assistant Director (Governance and Public Protection), and Monitoring Officer.**

## 2. Background to the Report

- 2.1 The Council's Corporate Plan (2020 to 2023) sets out the Council's ambition to be the best district in which to work, live and visit, with a key objective of building and celebrating the rich heritage and culture of South Kesteven. A strategic priority

contained within the Corporate Plan is to improve and invest in local arts and cultural venues.

- 2.2 At a meeting of the Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13 June 2023, the Members present considered a draft Cultural Strategy for the district and recommended to Cabinet this be adopted to underpin the Council's corporate priority. The Cultural Strategy (2023 to 2026) was subsequently formally adopted at a meeting of Cabinet held on 11 July 2023.
- 2.3 As part of the service provided, the Council is responsible for three cultural venues within the district, these being the Guildhall Arts Centre in Grantham, Stamford Arts Centre, and the Bourne Corn Exchange. At the meeting of the Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 September 2023, it was requested Officers present a report to a future meeting, providing an update on the current operation and performance of the three Council owned venues.

### **Engagement in Cultural Activity**

- 2.4 Nationally it is widely accepted that the extended period of closure because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated recovery period, has changed the behaviour of cultural audiences. According to Arts Council England (ACE) Audience Finder survey, nationally audiences are down by around 26% when compared to pre-COVID levels.
- 2.5 Other significant findings from the Audience Finder survey are that:
  - 61% of people surveyed reported that the cost of living is preventing them from attending as many events as they would like to
  - 40% reported that they now book tickets closer to performances whilst previously they would have booked further in advance
  - A third of respondents reported their spend on arts, culture and heritage was less than pre-pandemic levels.

- 2.6 Despite this information the three Council-owned venues are continuing to recover well, and programming of events is now returning to pre-pandemic levels.

### **Guildhall Arts Centre, Grantham**

- 2.7 The Guildhall Arts Centre is a community centred venue on St Peter's Hill in Grantham and hosts a wide range of events and activities, including professional touring shows and an extremely successful Christmas pantomime. Several local amateur groups hire the theatre for community shows and events and the venue is a hub for cultural activity, hosting workshops for all ages. The Arts Centre has a

suite of meeting rooms which are hired for internal and external meetings, fairs, conferences, parties, and weddings.

2.8 The programme at the Guildhall Arts Centre has gone from strength to strength since it reopened following the lifting of COVID restrictions. **Table One** below provides a review of the programme for the period April 2023 to October 2023 when compared to the same period of April 2019 to October 2019, demonstrating audiences and income from tickets have in fact grown.

<b>Table One: Comparison of 2023 performance with pre-pandemic levels</b>		
<b>Guildhall Arts Centre</b>	<b>April 2019 – October 2019</b>	<b>April 2023 – October 2023</b>
Number of Events	104	102
Value of tickets sold	£85000	£112000
Percentage of Capacity Filled	53%	57%
Average Ticket Price	£8.68	£11.99

2.9 The coffee shop at the Guildhall Arts Centre is leased to a private operator under the name Digby's Café and opened in May 2022. The coffee shop has proved popular, providing a selection of hot drinks and cakes, together with a lunch and breakfast menu. Digby's provide the bar service which is open when there are events and performances.

2.10 The Guildhall Arts Centre is a Grade II listed building, which does present some challenges in terms of repairs and maintenance and energy efficiency. Currently works are being undertaken to repair the roof to both ensure the building is watertight and alleviate the periodic rainwater leaks which are experienced.

2.11 In addition, it is planned to replace the current boiler system which is old and ineffective. It is anticipated this will improve the energy efficiency of the building and ensure it remains attractive to users.

2.12 A proportion of the Guildhall Arts Centre is currently hired out to Lincolnshire County Council who host their St John's adult day care provision from the facility. In addition, the Arts Centre currently hosts the Council's Customer Services team until a permanent venue for the service is secured.

### **Stamford Arts Centre**

2.13 Stamford Arts Centre is located on St Mary's Street in Stamford and provides opportunities to experience and participate in a wide selection of art forms including theatre, cinema, music and poetry, sculpture, dance, painting, and drawing.

2.14 As well as hosting professional theatre touring companies, Shoestring Theatre Company are the Centre's resident company and provide additional performances. A range of concerts are hosted in the Ballroom, together with dances and

workshops. Stamford Arts Centre has a range of meeting rooms which are used for meetings, fairs, conferences, parties, and weddings.

- 2.15 The Cellar Bar is a more intimate setting, hosting a range of smaller performances, including music and comedy, as well as being available for hire for events and gatherings.
- 2.16 The main gallery within the centre accommodates a varied programme of contemporary exhibitions from local and international artists including photography, painting, textile, drawing and sculpture.
- 2.17 The coffee shop in Stamford Arts Centre has recently been leased and operates as the Grounded Coffee Shop. Already this is proving popular with customers and serves a selection of hot drinks and cakes. The menu is gradually expanding to include breakfast items, together with filled croissants and bagels.
- 2.18 The Gallery Bar is managed by the Council and provides a bar service to complement events and performances.
- 2.19 The programme at Stamford Arts Centre is returning to pre-COVID levels. **Table Two** below provides a review of the programme for the period April 2023 to October 2023 when compared to the same period of April 2019 to October 2019.

**Table Two: Comparison of 2023 performance with pre-pandemic levels**

Stamford	April 2019 – October 2019	April 2023 – October 2023
Number of Events	287	163
Value of tickets sold	£115009	£90650
Percentage of Capacity Filled	56.47%	50.51%
Average Ticket Price	£11.97	£13.75

- 2.20 There are several factors why the number of events has reduced in 2023, in particular, as a result of a review of the service, the opening hours were assessed and the number of events which did not generate an income accordingly reduced. In addition, due to ongoing roofing works, it has not been possible to host matinee cinema showings due to the noise and disruption encountered whilst the works are ongoing. Despite this, it is pleasing to note, although the number of events has reduced by 43%, the centre has achieved 78% of the previous income level. The programme is kept under constant review and is something the team will continue to work on.
- 2.21 In line with the national picture, there remains a major challenge in attracting audiences for the film programme at Stamford Arts Centre. The introduction of more film streaming services has seen cinema audiences decline nationally and less films have been available as film production was halted during the COVID pandemic. Over the coming months, the recently appointed Stamford Arts Centre Manager will

be re-establishing a brand for the cinema, ensuring this is attractive to customers and that film audiences continue to grow.

- 2.22 Stamford Arts Centre is also a Grade II listed building. During the period March 2023 to October 2023, re-roofing works have taken place to ensure the building is watertight. This has been a significant undertaking and costly due to the specialist nature of the Collyweston slate roofing tiles. Although the Centre was able to remain open for the period the works were taking place, usage was significantly restricted during the daytime.
- 2.23 Other works which have been undertaken recently include a refurbished foyer area with the introduction of a customer contact hub (providing telephone and on-line services for customers) and a full refurbishment of the customer toilets.

### **Bourne Corn Exchange**

- 2.24 Bourne Corn Exchange is situated on Abbey Road in Bourne and is more of a community venue, rather than a traditional theatre. A range of services and activities are provided from the Corn Exchange, these include live events and an annual pantomime. The facility offers meeting spaces for a range of community events, including dinner dances, talks, meetings and a regular Sunday carvery.
- 2.25 Co-located within Bourne Corn Exchange are the offices for Bourne Town Council and the Community Access Point. This began operation in 2013, bringing together the services offered by South Kesteven District Council and Lincolnshire County Council (LCC). These services include the public library and Registry Office services and, in addition, a proportion of the upstairs office space is leased to LCC as drop down office space. The remainder of the upstairs office space is available for South Kesteven District Council Officers and has been added to the desk booking system.
- 2.26 Programmed performances at Bourne Corn Exchange are nearly back to pre-COVID levels. A particular recent success was the 'Ultra 1990s vs 2000s' show which was held on 7 October 2023 and achieved sales of over 300 tickets in just two weeks.
- 2.27 The Sunday carvery remains extremely popular and serves between 80 and 100 customers fortnightly. Other organisations using the Corn Exchange include the Organ Club, South Kesteven Musical Players, Taekwondo, Dementia Support, and the Blood Donation Service.
- 2.28 Work is being undertaken to integrate the ticketing for events at Bourne Corn Exchange into the Council's ticket system, Spektrix. This integration would allow the Council to sell tickets on behalf of organisations who hire the Corn Exchange, thereby generating additional income by way of commission on ticket sales.

## Customer Behaviours

2.29 In line with the national trend identified, customers of the Council's arts venues are choosing to book much closer to events, when compared to pre-COVID data. In addition to this, the way customers book tickets have changed. The arts centres are seeing a move away from in-person and telephone bookings to online bookings. An average of 70% of bookings are now being made online, compared to 41% in January 2019.

2.30 Following an active campaign to encourage customers to register to a mailing list to receive What's on Guides and regular updates on forthcoming performances, the number of subscribers has risen significantly as detailed in **Table Three** below:

<b>Table Three</b> – Comparison of Mailing List Subscribers			
	<b>January 2019</b>	<b>September 2023</b>	<b>Increase</b>
Grantham Arts Centre	6,145	10,172	+4,027
Stamford Arts Centre	8,751	13,381	+4,630

2.31 As well as being available to download online and being distributed to the mailing list, What's on Guides are available in the arts centres. This shift to digital programmes is in line with industry best practice and has saved the Council over £10,000 in postage costs alone. The number of printed copies produced has also been reduced, providing an additional saving of £38,700.

## Outreach Activity

2.32 Guildhall Arts Centre and Stamford Arts Centre are both active partners in the Lincolnshire One Venues (LOV) network, a collaboration of mainly public funded arts providers in Lincolnshire.

2.33 As part of this network the Guildhall Arts Centre and Stamford Arts Centre each held a 'LOV Your Venue' event in March. A wide range of activities took place, featuring local groups and performers, as well as professional companies. The activities included street performers, Samba drumming, digital graffiti, virtual reality headset experiences, including providing a marketplace for people to sell their artwork.

2.34 Leading up to the events, community pieces of art were created in free workshops in collaboration with schools and community groups, the resulting artwork being on display for each celebration event.

2.35 The arts team are now busy preparing what can be achieved next year at a similar event along with other community outreach opportunities. Although in the early stages of planning, it is proposed to deliver a community outreach project in Bourne and The Deepings which will culminate in a piece of art, sculpture, or a mural to

reflect the local area's residents, industry or a landmark. Workshops to develop the artwork would be run by a professional artist and available for people of all ages.

### **Music in Quiet Places**

2.36 The arts team run a very successful outreach programme called 'Music in Quiet Places'. These events take classical music to churches in rural villages in South Kesteven. During 2023 four events were held at the following locations:

- St Vincent's Church in Caythorpe
- The Priory Church in Deeping St James
- St Michael and All Angels Church in Uffington
- St Andrew's Church in Billingborough

2.37 A total of 355 tickets were sold across these events and the feedback received was overwhelmingly positive.

### **Rural Touring – Live and Local Scheme**

2.38 South Kesteven make a financial contribution to Live and Local which is a rural touring scheme. Live and Local are funded by Arts Council England (ACE) and are responsible for taking high-quality live performances into rural spaces.

2.39 Performances available include family shows, drama, music and interactive experiences. Local communities apply for the shows, the cost of which are then subsidised by the Council's contribution. In the current financial year, the Council has contributed just over £3,500 into the scheme which has provided a total of 17 performances in village halls and other locations.

### **Arts Council Funding**

2.40 The Guildhall Arts Centre and Stamford Arts Centre were previously part of a consortium which received National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) from ACE. The consortium also included the South Holland Centre in Spalding and Louth Riverhead Theatre.

2.41 Unfortunately the consortium was unsuccessful in their application for NPO support for 2023 – 2026 and therefore the funding came to an end in March 2023. However, a successful application was made for 'transition' funding which was established by ACE to help organisations assess future opportunities and how they could adapt without the funding.

2.42 The Council were the lead applicant for the successful application for transition funding and received £53,950 for the two venues in Grantham and Stamford. The funding has been used to provide a series of diverse events and performances

which otherwise could not have been secured, including Sarah and Duck - a high profile Cbeebies show and The Mozartists who are a nationally renowned orchestra.

- 2.43 The funding also provided a free family fun day in each venue which featured drumming sessions, graffiti, a mobile planetarium, storytelling and arts and crafts. The days were free to attend and generated hundreds of people through the doors of each venue which may not otherwise have visited.
- 2.44 An element of the funding secured consultancy support from Amy Dalton-Hardy to identify areas the Council's arts service should focus on to ensure it remains attractive and serves its local communities. In addition, the work is identifying appropriate funding streams to support the Council's longer term aspirations.

### **Future Funding Opportunities**

- 2.45 The Arts team are currently discussing alternative funding opportunities through ACE and are pulling together a funding bid for a project grant of over £30,000 which will focus on audience development including researching the audience base, identifying people who currently do not attend, and how audience numbers can be increased. This work is important to help the venues adapt after a period of significant change, especially taking into account audience behaviour and spending habits.
- 2.46 If successful, the funding bid will provide a series of 'tester events' to gauge audience responses and influence the programmes at the venues and future aspirations. It is also proposed to develop a board of local and national professional arts practitioners to share ideas and act as critical friends.

### **Pay It Forward Scheme**

- 2.47 Following the meeting of Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 5 September 2023, the Pay it Forward scheme was launched. This has been well-received and extremely successful and having only been in operation for just over two months, has received donations totalling £1300.
- 2.48 Already this funding has provided tickets to the pantomime for Harrowby Infants School pupils. Harrowby School have provided the following feedback to the Council:

*"We are a deprived school with refugee children, children in care and families accessing the food bank provision. This will be a once in a lifetime opportunity for some of our children."*

### **3. Key Considerations**

3.1 This report provides an update on the performance of the Council's arts venues as requested at a meeting of the Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 September 2023.

### **4. Reasons for the Recommendations**

4.1 The reasons for the recommendations are aimed at examining how well the Arts Service delivers across a range of cultural, social and economic agendas.

4.2 The report provides Members with information on a potential funding source available to support the delivery of the Arts Service, if successful this will identify lessons learnt which could help improve the service in the future.