



Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 15 May 2025

Report of Councillor Paul Stokes,
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member
for Leisure and Culture

Performance of the Council's Arts Venues

Report Author

Jade Porter, Arts and Cultural Services Manager

 jade.porter@southkesteven.gov.uk

Purpose of Report

To provide information and updates regarding the Guildhall Arts Centre, Stamford Arts Centre and Bourne Corn Exchange.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to note the contents of this report.

Decision Information

Does the report contain any exempt or confidential information not for publication?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

What are the relevant corporate priorities? **Connecting communities**

Which wards are impacted? **All 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 budget for the Council's Arts and Cultural Service is set by the Council annually. Financial performance of the individual venues is regularly monitored and forms part of the Council's budget monitoring processes.

Completed by: David Scott – Assistant Director of Finance (deputy s151 officer)

Legal and Governance

- 1.2 It is within the remit of the Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee to monitor and assess the performance of the Council's Arts and Cultural Service. There are no significant legal or governance implications arising from this report.

Completed by: James Welbourn, Democratic Services Manager

Health and Safety

- 1.3 There are robust health and safety procedures in place across all three artistic venues to ensure that all activities are suitably assessed, risk mitigations are identified and are sufficient to manage the risks, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Completed by: Phil Swinton - Emergency Planning and Health & Safety Lead

2. Background to the Report

- 2.1. The Council's Corporate Plan (2024-2027) contains a key priority of Connecting Communities with an ambition to deliver and facilitate a sustainable leisure and cultural offer and to celebrate and promote the strong heritage and rich culture of South Kesteven.
- 2.2. There are a number of key roles which operate across both Stamford Arts Centre and the Guildhall Arts Centre. These roles include the Marketing Officer, Marketing and Events Officer, Programmer, Administrative Assistant, and Senior Technician and this integrated approach has enabled a more streamlined,

coordinated, and consistent delivery of theatre programming and operations across both venues.

- 2.3. The Guildhall Arts Centre offers a well-rounded theatre programme that includes both arts centre programmed events and externally hired performances. Hires generally consist of single-day bookings which are predominantly music and talks, as well as week-long residencies by local amateur theatre companies.
- 2.4. In addition to its theatre programme, the Guildhall Arts Centre offers a range of flexible spaces for hire. These include the historic ballroom which is suitable for events which require less technical support, weddings, parties, talks, and meetings. The Newton Room and some smaller studio spaces are also available for hire and accommodate a wide variety of community and private functions.
- 2.5. Stamford Arts Centre's theatre primarily hosts programmed events. More recently, the venue has begun to accommodate a small number of external hires and has welcomed the return of Toletorpe Youth Drama to its programme.
- 2.6. The Stamford Arts Centre theatre space also acts as the cinema, boasting a programme of films that includes blockbusters and independent films. The film programme also includes 'Event Cinema screenings' including The Royal Ballet and Opera House and National Theatre productions.
- 2.7. Stamford Arts Centre also has a Ballroom where music events are programmed, along with interactive family shows. The Cellar Bar at Stamford hosts a programmed series of Jazz concerts and is also available to hire for events. Stamford Arts Centre also has other rooms available to hire including an art room and gallery.
- 2.8. Bourne Corn Exchange is a community facility featuring a large hall with a stage and basic technical equipment and is a perfect space to hire for music events. The venue regularly has a number of hires including parties, celebrations and meetings and has a select number of programmed events throughout the year to compliment the hires.
- 2.9. The Guildhall and Stamford Arts Centre produce three live 'What's on Guides' a year in Spring, Summer and Autumn. These contain events programmed by the venues as well as hires. Stamford Arts Centre also produces a cinema flyer once a month to promote the film showings.

A) Venue Performance Overview

- 2.10. The table below shows comparative performance figures for the venues for financial year 2023-2024 and 2024-2025.

	Financial year 23-24	Financial year 24-25	Increase	Overall Ticket Profit for 24-25
Stamford Arts Centre Programme Ticket Income	£96,891	£140,190	+44%	£44,970
Stamford Cinema and Event Cinema Programme	£117,826	£145,298	+23%	£68,318
Stamford Room Hire Income	£74,228	£84,370	+13%	-
Guildhall Arts Centre Programme Ticket Income	£184,668	£217,360	+17%	£64,011
Guildhall Arts Centre Room Hire	£86,913	£99,350	+14%	-
Bourne Corn Exchange Ticket Sales	£6,418	£7,352	+14%	£3,344
Bourne Corn Exchange Room Hire Income	£37,008	£38,204	+3%	-

- 2.11. Room hire income across all three venues is performing particularly well, showing an increase in income from the previous financial year.
- 2.12. The combination of a strong programme of events in each venue together with improved marketing has proven to be successful, demonstrating an increase in sales from the previous financial year.

B) Events

- 2.13. Programmed and hired events are planned at the venues to complement each other, and prevent direct competition with other local venues.
- 2.14. In some cases events are programmed across both theatres (Guildhall and Stamford), this creates opportunities for improved payment terms and attracts shows that would not normally accept a booking for just one show.
- 2.15. Examples of joint programming opportunities that have been booked across venues include:
 - **Hotbuckle Productions** with their tour of Pride and Prejudice .
 - Children's immersive workshop '**The Wonderdome**'
 - **Is it Hot in Here!** - The debut tour of a Menopausal Drama by Zeph Churchill
 - **Sherlock Holmes: The Last Act**
 - **Frankenstein** with local theatre company Lamphouse Theatre from Peterborough
 - **The Little Prince** programmed consecutive dates across Stamford and Guildhall Arts Centres

2.16. Programming across two venues also allows for new events to be trialled and rebooked at the other venue should audience feedback and sales be positive. Examples of shows that have consequently been booked for the other venue include:

- **'Nature Elly'** by Barmpot Theatre – this originated in Stamford Arts Centre and later toured to Grantham. Free rehearsal space was provided for the company in Grantham in return for free post show workshops. Following a successful UKSPF bid Bourne Corn Exchange subsequently hosted the same performance and benefitted for a workshop both of which were free to attend.
- **'Museum of Marvellous Things'** was a family show starting in Stamford, which was re-booked for Grantham due to strong sales and positive audience feedback. This sold out in both venues and the same company are returning with their latest tour in 25/26.
- **Dickens Theatre Company** sold well to public and school audiences with 'Macbeth', they have consequently been programmed in Stamford and Guildhall Arts Centre for 2025 to build this audience base.

2.17. Below are some notable events for the Guildhall Arts Centre programme:

- **Harry Hill Live** - This was a standout booking for the venue selling out months before the performance date. The tour went on to perform in much larger venues and was a highlight booking for the venue.
- Shows including **Tina Live**, **Abba Sensation** and **Paul Jones** far exceeded ticket sale predictions.
- The Guildhall Programme continues to boast more popular names and has a thriving Drag audience. The programme features Drag Bingo events and most recently Ru Paul Drag Race Winner **Danny Beard** and **Baga Chipz** performed at the venue.

2.18. Notable programming events for Stamford Arts Centre include:

- Jazz concerts which sell out every month after a refreshed marketing strategy.
- **Clare Teal** is a world renowned Jazz Artist and brought a sell out show to Stamford in February 2025.
- **Dean Friedman** touring from the USA sold out in May 2024 and a return date has been programmed for 2026.
- Dutch, Gypsy Jazz star **Tim Kliphuis** performed at the venue in March 2025.
- Poet Laureate **Simon Armitage** exceeded expected sales in June 2024.
- Drama as a genre has increased in ticket sales, with sell out performances of **A Christmas Carol** in December.
- Stamford had a total of 14 sell out shows from January to March 2025 highlighting the success of the programmed events and aligned marketing activity.

- 2.19. Bourne Corn Exchange has had particular success with music events, a highlight from last year being **Ultra 90s vs 2000s**, which was programmed on a split and sold over £4000 in ticket sales.
- 2.20. The Guildhall Arts Centre has a high number of hired musical theatre events. This is due to the large number of amateur performance groups within the local area and audience demand.
- 2.21. Music is also successful at the Guildhall Arts Centre and this is carefully balanced between programmed and hired events, with the Programming Officer ensuring music goes beyond tribute bands and includes Folk, Sea Shanties, Swing and Jazz.
- 2.22. The annual pantomime at the Guildhall Arts Centre historically sells very well. December 2024 was the best-selling pantomime to date, with performances of Aladdin running from 30th November 2024 to 5th January 2025 which achieved ticket sales totalling over £150,000. This included just over 2400 schools tickets across 15 performances.
- 2.23. Stamford Arts Centres live programme also features a range of music events, with hired music events predominantly being held in the ballroom. Stamford Arts Centre features both classical music and jazz programmes.
- 2.24. December 2024 saw the reintroduction of an in-house pantomime produced by Venue Manager Phil Norton. Mother Goose was the chosen title and was written specifically for Stamford, with many references to local places in the script and set. Local artist Karen Neale designed the set which featured Burghley House and the Meadows.
- 2.25. Over a run of 12 shows finishing on Christmas Eve, a total of £25,903 tickets were sold, which equates to 92% of capacity.
- 2.26. This significantly increased footfall and income across December at Stamford Arts Centre and took part alongside sell out shows such as 'A Christmas Carol' and an improved film programme. December 2024 totalled £55,946 in ticket income compared to December 2023 when a total income of £16,929 was achieved.
- 2.27. Bourne Corn Exchange largely features music events, due to the large space and technical equipment lending itself well to this type of event. Looking forwards, the Corn Exchange will look to programme some children's workshops and events to broaden its audience base.
- 2.28. The programmed events help to raise the profile of the Corn Exchange, and a number of room bookings have been made as a direct result of attending other events within the venue.

2.29. Programming different genres is important to offer a well-rounded programme of events and ensure residents have the option to experience different forms of arts and culture. One of the recent strategies implemented is using more accessible ticket pricing for performances that are more culturally challenging.. With this strategy, potential audience members are attracted with a cheaper ticket price, encouraging them to take a risk on this new event. For children's performances, this is also branded as an 'introduction' to theatre.

C) Marketing

2.30. Across the venues' social media pages the marketing team have established a friendly and welcoming tone that not only informs customers about events, but celebrates the achievements of the venues and gives a more personal feel.

2.31. There is noticeable higher interaction on posts that concentrate on engagement rather than posts pushing ticket sales. Focussing on this allows the venues to build relationships with potential customers that translate into ticket sales. More recently the team have created reels for 'The Whale', posted photos visiting other local establishments, and posted in line with national dates such as 'National Pet Day'.

2.32. The Bourne Corn Exchange website is now live and able to promote and showcase the venue. Hirers of the Corn Exchange are encouraged to sell their tickets through the venue. This allows data to be collected from customers and the creation of mailing lists for customers to encourage repeat visits.

2.33. Alongside targeted email marketing, Bourne's Facebook page has been successful in engaging customers and driving ticket sales. The Facebook page currently has a following of 2.2K.

2.34. Work has been undertaken over the last year to improve opening figures of the Eshots for customers that have signed up to receive marketing emails. A marketing schedule is put in place per season to send regular updates to customers based on their previous bookings. This has contributed to the increase in ticket sales.

D) Room Hire and Venue Activities

Bourne Corn Exchange

- 2.35. The hire of the Bourne Corn Exchange main hall is particularly popular, with numerous bookings coming off the back of other events with many acts returning on an annual basis.
- 2.36. *Northern Soul Movement* regularly return to the Corn Exchange due to the high standard the dance floor.
- 2.37. *South Kesteven Acting and Musical Players* (SKAMP) continue to use the Corn Exchange for their yearly pantomimes. As part of this one performance is arranged for 'Little Miracles' which is free for them and family members.
- 2.38. The Sunday carvery continues to sell out bringing in regular income for the venue.
- 2.39. New signage has been installed on the front of the Corn Exchange information boards on the outside for each service residing there. This includes the Library, Customer Services, Bourne Town Council and the Registry Office.
- 2.40. The Bourne Corn Exchange diary is already filling up for 2026 and room hire income continues to increase.

Stamford Arts Centre

- 2.41. Stamford Arts Centre continues to hire out multiple spaces hosting Wildcats (Youth Drama), Stamford Schools of Dance, yoga, art classes and craft fairs. Last year also saw school groups utilise the venue for a film showing, a class workshop, and a small performance in the ballroom.
- 2.42. There have been notable accessibility improvements to cinema at Stamford Arts centre thanks to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This has included the installation of Audio Description Equipment and 'Watch Word' Systems.
- 2.43. Audio description equipment allows customers who are blind or partially to hear the action within the film described through a set of personal headphones.
- 2.44. Stamford Arts Centre are only the 10th venue worldwide to have installed Watchword, improving accessibility for audience members that are deaf or hard of hearing. WatchWord technology uses smart glasses and a touch screen controller, allowing users to watch films with fully customisable captions at a screening time that suits them. Viewers can adjust the size, colour, position, brightness and focus of the captions on any film, ensuring a comfortable and accessible experience without being limited to specific subtitled screenings.
- 2.45. Stamford Arts Centre continues to support a thriving poetry scene, with the new Poet Laureate recently being chosen in April 2025. This event was picked up by BBC Lincolnshire for online and radio coverage.

- 2.46. The Gallery at the arts centre has competitive hire rates, with a full diary of exhibitions for 2025. One of the most recent successes was Rosemary Tolkien's paintings combining Stamford scenery with fantasy creatures. The exhibition was picked up by media outlets across Lincolnshire putting the venue on the map. The exhibitions are also now featured in our What's Guides and via the website giving them good publicity.
- 2.47. Stamford Arts Centre cinema sales have improved due to improved programming and marketing. Working with the Independent Cinema Office (ICO) has enabled films to be shown in week 3 of release rather than weeks 5 or 6 as in previous years.
- 2.48. Cinema screening times are available directly from Google event listings, which has significantly helped with the venue's visibility as a cinema.
- 2.49. Due to the ICO's extensive contacts they were able to arrange for a preview screening for Stamford Art's Centre's 30 Years of Cinema Celebrations. The screening of Conclave was supported by two security guards for the evening and was shown the day before the film was released in America, and one month before the UK release.

Guildhall Arts Centre

- 2.50. The Guildhall Arts Centre Pantomime has several shows that are for people with access needs. The relaxed performance is specifically sensitive to audience members who may benefit from a more relaxed environment, including (but not limited to) those with autistic spectrum conditions, people living with dementia, parents with very young children on their first trip to the theatre, anyone with sensory and communication disorders, or people with learning disabilities. As part of the extensive run of shows, there is also a British Sign Language interpreted performance scheduled yearly. Before the official first performance, the 'Young Carers' group are invited to watch the performance free of charge, opening up opportunities to attend the theatre to those who might not have otherwise been able to.
- 2.51. Kesteven and Grantham Girls School's Performing Arts Sixth Form class have visited the venue for a tour and a question-and-answer session with staff and touring theatre company Hotbuckle. This took place last year in conjunction with Lincolnshire County Council's Careers and Enterprise Officer, and gave the students an insight into running a venue as well as being part of a touring theatre company.
- 2.52. Tours of the theatre have been arranged for a local Scouts group and the special educational needs school, Eslan. Both groups had a tour of the theatre led by the Senior Technician which allowed them to step onto the stage, see inside the technical box and the dressing rooms to understand how a theatre works.

- 2.53. The Guildhall has recently expanded opportunities for local artists who are now able to showcase and sell their work through the display cabinets, creating new avenues for exposure and income. There is also a significant increase in café exhibition interest which has been driven by a social media promotion, leading to a full calendar of artists eager to display their work.
- 2.54. A wider range of LGBT+ friendly events have successfully been introduced, attracting attendees from beyond the local area and helping build a more inclusive cultural programme.

E) Outreach and Other Projects

- 2.55. The Whale successfully toured to the Red Hall in Bourne, Jubilee Park in the Deepings and the Recreation Ground in Stamford.
- 2.56. The UKSPF funded event was a life-sized 18-meter inflatable sperm whale that hosted a children's performance inside. The performance followed the life of a sea turtle using puppets, music and engaging storytelling, to show the audience how plastic pollution affects the sea creatures and their lives.
- 2.57. These events were free to attend and performed six times a day from Friday to Sunday each location. Friday showings were attended by school groups only and were well received by teachers and students alike.
- 2.58. 55% of customers were first time bookers, highlighting the importance of taking cultural activities into communities.
- 2.59. In Bourne and Stamford, wrap around craft activities were organised, including making jellyfish and turtles from recycled materials at Bourne, and creating a magical underwater mural at Stamford. The team worked alongside Deepings Library and funded a 'Salty Sea Dog' storyteller and face painter for the day.
- 2.60. Another project funded by UKSPF was the 'Our Place, Our Art' project'. Artists applied to lead on a community engagement project to produce a piece of art to be displayed in a public place. The objectives were to:
 - Celebrate Community Identity: Reflect the unique characteristics, values, and history of the community.
 - Enhance Public Spaces: Create visually appealing and thought-provoking artworks that enhance public spaces – preferably something that creates engagement for the public to sit, touch, walk through or photograph in an interesting way.
 - Foster Community Engagement: Encourage community participation in the artistic process to ensure the artworks resonate with residents.

- Promote Inclusivity: Ensure the project is inclusive, representing the diverse voices and perspectives within our community.

2.61. Each artist held five workshops with various community groups, with at least one workshop being open to the public. The artists also organised a final event to celebrate the creation of each piece which was attended by residents involved in its curation.

2.62. The workshops gave the artists ideas, knowledge and thoughts from residents about the local area and what they might want to be featured on a piece of art to celebrate their town.

2.63. Deepings Mural created by Rose Croft reflected the river, and participants were invited to talk about notable moments and things they love regarding the water. Together, they created a 'Deepings Fairytale' based on residents stories that culminated in the final mural which also has an interactive 'Can you Find?' element.

2.64. The Bourne Mural celebrates the waterways, old and new. Emily Bowers worked alongside 'The Bourne History Guy' to explore the history of Bourne and how the waterways were part of daily life. The final mural reflects the communities' favourite bits of nature surrounding the water. It is a bright, digitally painted piece, with historical moments and memories depicted as outlines, representing the past.

2.65. Grantham artist Emilie Nunn worked with groups in and around Alma Park, including Belmont Primary School, who discussed their memories of Grantham and how things have changed from past to present. This passage of time has been depicted on the final mural, representing the communities' views on the local area.

2.66. The Stamford Mural by Imogen Joyce delves into the notable places to visit around Stamford. Working closely with the public and the Town Council, Imogen was able to use historic artifacts to guide the final piece of artwork. This includes a QR code that takes you to an interactive version where there is more information and history about each feature.

2.67. The final locations are: Bourne - Burghley Street Car Park, Stamford – The Recreation Ground Tennis Courts, Grantham – Dysart Park and Wyndham Park, The Deepings – Jubilee Park.

2.68. The 'Pay it Forward Scheme' continues to be successful now achieving over £10,000 in donations. These donations are utilised through charities and organisations to provide arts and cultural experiences to those that may not experience it otherwise. Recent activities include:

- Market Deeping Primary School attending the Guildhall Arts Centre Pantomime in December 2024.

- Practitioner Martyn Bignell led a six-week program of themed activities at Braeburn Lodge in the Deepings for residents, including those in general living and the dementia ward. The themes ranged from "A Day at the Beach" and "Health and Wellness" to creating their very own silent movie.
- In Easter Half term, Sublime Science provided sessions at Grantham, Bourne, Deepings and Stamford via Inspire+ at the Government funded Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF Camps).

3. Key Considerations

- 3.1. This report provides information about the Council's artistic venues including a summary of programming, marketing, sales and venue usage.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. This report is for noting.

5. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 5.1. The report follows a request from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to receive information on the performance of the Council's artistic venues.