

Community and Wellbeing Committee
16 November 2020

VENUES UPDATE

Head of Service:	Mark Shephard, Head of Property and Regeneration
Wards affected:	(All Wards);
Urgent Decision?(yes/no)	No
If yes, reason urgent decision required:	
Appendices (attached):	None

Summary

This report updates Committee on the challenges facing the Council's Venues operating in a Covid-19 socially distanced environment.

Recommendation (s)

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) **Agree the Playhouse remains closed for the remainder of the financial year (31 March 2021);**
- (2) **Agree to Ewell Court House remaining closed until further notice;**
- (3) **Agree to Bourne Hall Café remaining closed until further notice.**

1 Reason for Recommendation

- 1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the Council's Venues. The recommendations are necessary to maintain the effective operation of the Council in line with ever changing Government guidelines.

2 Background

- 2.1 Following Government guidance, the Council's Venues temporarily closed to the public just prior to the UK entering lockdown on 23 March 2020.
- 2.2 The Epsom Playhouse and Ewell Court House have remained closed due to operational challenges imposed by meeting social distancing requirements.

Community and Wellbeing Committee

16 November 2020

2.3 Bourne Hall has remained operational; initially to support the Council's Meals at Home service and more recently, to support Ewell Library and local hirers.

2.4 An update for each venue and actions required are considered below.

3 Epsom Playhouse

3.1 The Playhouse is a successful but relatively small 450 seat capacity theatre.

3.2 It is termed a "presenting theatre" (otherwise known as a "receiving house") where it hosts visiting production companies touring to a number of venues. The Council receives a percentage share of the ticket sales.

3.3 Since closing, existing productions have been rescheduled on a three monthly basis to ensure the Playhouse could swiftly re-open when the easing of social distancing requirements allowed.

3.4 Due to its size, the Playhouse is disproportionately affected by social distancing requirements and the ability to offer a Covid-19 secure, socially distanced theatre. It is only partially dependent on the size of the main auditorium, and influenced to a much greater extent by the ancillary accommodation as outlined below by considering the three main theatre areas at 2m social distancing:-

- **Auditorium capacity** – reduced from 450 to 87.
- **Dressing room capacity** – reduced from 78 to 13 people. This prevents the majority of the larger professional shows, amateur societies and dance schools from using the theatre.
- **Foyer capacity** – reduced to 15 people compounded by the front of house male and female toilets being reduced to a capacity of 2. This would lead to queues quickly forming in the foyer thereby reducing its capacity. To ensure compliance with social distancing, staff would be required to manage the queues reducing its capacity still further.

3.5 Offering a Covid-19 secure and safe theatre would require enhanced cleaning between each production company visiting backstage and between each performance. This would reduce the number of performances that are possible on any given day.

3.6 Operating within social distancing requirements is not financially viable for the production company or the theatre. The theatre's main production promoters have all confirmed that the reduced auditorium capacity of the Playhouse is financially unworkable.

Community and Wellbeing Committee

16 November 2020

- 3.7 In light of the above, it is recommended that the Playhouse remains closed for the remainder of the financial year (31 March 2021). This will align the Playhouse with the majority of theatres in the UK and provide a specific date to prepare the theatre for a relaunch.
- 3.8 During its continued closure, the Playhouse will require modest staff resources to carry out daily administration, maintain contact with promoters and hirers (rescheduling existing shows and booking new dates), processing refunds and ticket sales and backstage equipment maintenance. For the remainder of their time, staff will continue to be redeployed to support the Council's Covid-19 response and assist enforcement and regulatory activities.

4 Ewell Court House

- 4.1 Ewell Court House is an important hospitality venue and location for business meetings as well as a valued space for local community groups.
- 4.2 In contrast to a modern, open plan venue, the Grade II listed building does not lend itself to meeting social distancing requirements. It is served by a relatively small foyer and would share similar toilet queuing difficulties as the Playhouse.
- 4.3 Pre-pandemic, over two thirds of its income was generated from larger events including weddings, parties and business meetings. As these can no longer be accommodated in a safe, socially distanced environment, the building's ability to generate income is severely restricted.
- 4.4 To open the building would require increased on-site staffing to ensure social distancing is observed and significantly increased cleaning requirements. It would be difficult to justify increased operational costs in the absence of the building's attraction to its main hire base and consequent reduced income generating potential.
- 4.5 It is recommended that any hiring opportunities are accommodated at Bourne Hall (wherever possible) in the interim, while Ewell Court House remains closed until further notice.

5 Bourne Hall Café

- 5.1 During lockdown, Bourne Hall remained partially operational to support the increased demand for the Council's Meals at Home service. Its kitchen facility provided additional capacity and resilience with all Bourne Hall staff benefiting from food preparation training.
- 5.2 Since lockdown, Bourne Hall has gradually reopened to the public to support the Library and phased return of those regular hirers capable of operating under social distancing requirements. Hirers currently using Bourne Hall range from physio and pilates classes to performing arts and community church use.

Community and Wellbeing Committee

16 November 2020

- 5.3 Whilst Bourne Hall has reopened in compliance with social distancing requirements, it does so in a significantly restricted capacity with considerably reduced footfall.
- 5.4 The reduced footfall renders the café financially unviable at this time and so it is recommended the Café remains closed until further notice.

6 Risk Assessment

Legal or other duties

6.1 Impact Assessment

- 6.1.1 The hospitality sector has been impacted disproportionately by the pandemic and supporting the sector is vital for local jobs and household income.

6.2 Crime & Disorder

- 6.2.1 None arising from this report.

6.3 Safeguarding

- 6.3.1 None arising from this report.

6.4 Dependencies

- 6.4.1 The hospitality sector is dependent on the course of the pandemic and continuing social distancing requirements.

6.5 Other

- 6.5.1 None

7 Financial Implications

- 7.1 The actions proposed in this paper will assist the Council respond to the financial challenges of the ongoing pandemic.
- 7.2 **Section 151 Officer's comments:** In the current environment, the Playhouse, Ewell Court House and Bourne Hall Café are unable to operate in a way that would generate sufficient income to meet their budgeted income targets and cover operational costs. As such, it is recommended that these venues remain temporarily closed, as proposed in the report.

8 Legal Implications

- 8.1 There are no direct legal implications as bookings are being refunded and staff are being redeployed.

Community and Wellbeing Committee

16 November 2020

8.2 **Monitoring Officer's comments:** None arising from the contents of this report.

9 Policies, Plans & Partnerships

9.1 **Council's Key Priorities:** The following Key Priorities are engaged: Opportunity and Prosperity, Effective Council.

9.2 **Service Plans:** The matter is included within the current Service Delivery Plan.

9.3 **Climate & Environmental Impact of recommendations:** None

9.4 **Sustainability Policy & Community Safety Implications:** None

9.5 **Partnerships:** None

10 Background papers

10.1 The documents referred to in compiling this report are as follows:

Previous reports:

- None

Other papers:

- None