

Report of the Scrutiny Review Task Group on the Review of Venues

Epsom Playhouse

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report forms Part 2 of the Audit, Crime & Disorder and Scrutiny Committee Review of Venues, placed in the Committee's work programme in November 2015. The investigation into Epsom Playhouse commenced in January 2017 following the conclusion of Part 1 of the review which looked at Bourne Hall and Hook Road Arena.

2. Aim of the Review

- 2.1 The Review of Venues was intended to contribute to the development of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy by ensuring services provided were fit for purpose, met the needs of local residents and were cost effective to provide. Proposals were to be developed for improving the efficiency of the service including an analysis of the customer base.

3. Review Objectives

- 3.1 Six objectives were included within the review Terms of Reference.
- To outline the current service provided by the above named venue including (but not limited to)
 - Services delivered
 - Method of providing the current services
 - Detailed budget for the last three years including revenue and capital expenditure
 - Provision of performance data and comparison with others (where possible)
 - To measure and assess the effectiveness of the present service, including staff, to identify the best use of resources.
 - To identify key issues that affect the service in the day to day operation of supplying the service.
 - To understand the needs of the customer base and how the service could be developed to generate further income or reduce costs.
 - To identify alternative ways to deliver the service including the do nothing option.
 - To evaluate the different options put forward (including but not limited to)
 - Service delivery outputs
 - Financial implications including any invest to save investment required
 - Key risks and how they can be mitigated
 - Timeline for implementation.

4. Review Methodology

- 4.1 The Scrutiny Review Task Group appointed in February 2016 to undertake the Review of Venues (Councillors Reeve, Bridger, Smitheram and Teasdale) completed all investigative work. The Task Group held site visits and meetings with numerous Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) officers and members. It met with an officer from another district authority with responsibility for its Council owned theatre, and issued an extensive survey to, amongst others, users of Epsom Playhouse. The dates of all information gathering exercises of the Task Group are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Task Group Activities Undertaken

	Scrutiny Review Task Group Activity	Date
1.	Meeting with outgoing Senior Accountant	5 January 2017
2.	Meeting of Task Group	12 January 2017
3.	Meeting with Head of Legal & Democratic Services and Head of Property	12 January 2017
4.	Site Visit	19 January 2017
5.	Meeting with Head of Venues and Facilities, Business Development Manager, Playhouse Manager and Technical Production Manager	19 January 2017
6.	Meeting of Task Group	2 February 2017
7.	Meeting with Assistant Marketing Manager, House Manager and Box Office Receptionist	2 February 2017
8.	Meeting with Head of Venues and Facilities, Playhouse Manager and Senior Accountant	31 March 2017
9.	Meeting with District Authority	21 April 2017
10.	Meeting of the Task Group	13 June 2017
11.	Consultation	10 – 28 July 2017
11.	Meeting with Community & Wellbeing Chairman and Vice Chairman, and Town Centre Ward Councillors	7 September 2017
12.	Meeting of the Task Group	8 September 2017
13.	Meeting of the Task Group	19 October 2017

- 4.2 The survey ran for 3 weeks from 10 to 28 July. The aim of the survey was to discover the views of local residents and visitors to Epsom Playhouse. It was hoped that these findings would help the Task Group identify whether any specific areas were performing above or below expectations, and whether there was any potential for development. A copy of the report 'Epsom Playhouse Survey 2017' is attached at **Appendix 1**.
- 4.3 The survey was made available both electronically and in paper format. As well as making the survey available on the Council's website, copies were sent to Epsom Playhouse mail shot subscribers and Citizens Panel members. Hard copies were made available in the Playhouse foyer. A total of 1256 survey responses were received.

5. Key Findings

- 5.1 The key findings of the Task Group are discussed below. The findings have been set out according to relevance to each of the six review objectives.

Objective 1: To outline the current service provided by the Epsom Playhouse including (but not limited to)

- ***Services delivered***
- ***Method of providing the current services***
- ***Detailed budget for the last three years including revenue and capital expenditure***
- ***Provision of performance data and comparison with others (where possible)***

Services Delivered

- 5.2 Epsom Playhouse is a theatre owned by EEBC, situated at the junction of Ashley Avenue and South Street in Epsom. Epsom Playhouse was opened formally on 24 January 1984 and so is now over 30 years old. Part of its current focus is to develop and maintain a friendly and welcoming atmosphere at the venue that is of benefit to the Borough.
- 5.3 Epsom Playhouse is a receiving house (as opposed to a production house). It creates a programme from acts and companies that wish to perform at the theatre, both professional and community. These shows are performed to local residents as well as visitors from outside the borough. The Epsom Playhouse is able to offer the following for performers: 5 dressing rooms; specialised theatre equipment and technical expertise; a Box Office for ticket sales and different marketing options to support the promotion of events and performances. A bar and a Members' bar are provided for theatre goers, members and other visitors. One of the main attractions to Epsom Playhouse over the course of a year is the Christmas pantomime.
- 5.4 Epsom Playhouse also offers room hire for meetings, conferences and training events etc. (See paragraphs 5.14 to 5.20 below.)

Method of Providing the Current Services

Staff

- 5.5 Epsom Playhouse is currently run by a team of 12 permanent staff. A staff organogram is attached at **Appendix 2**. Overall responsibility for the theatre lies with the Head of Venues & Facilities. Two members of staff report directly to the Head of Venues & Facilities, the Technical Production Manager and the Business Development Manager (both roles are discussed below). It is, however, the Theatre Manager that is responsible for Epsom Playhouse on a day to day basis.
- 5.6 The Theatre Manager has a critically important role, being responsible for the development of a varied programme of shows at the theatre across the year and for the smooth day to day running of Epsom Playhouse. Development of the Epsom Playhouse programme is an art. Consideration needs to be given to, amongst others, the nature of the show, anticipated popularity, show saturation, and reputational benefit. The success of Epsom Playhouse is dependent upon its programme. In addition, the Theatre Manager is responsible for the box office,

house management, bar and catering operations at the Theatre, as well as carrying out all hire and company negotiations, financial management and invoicing.

- 5.7 The Technical Production Manager is assisted by 2 technicians. Together they are responsible for the provision of technical support at Epsom Playhouse to both professional and community productions/events and for the maintenance of all theatre-specific equipment. The Technical Production Manager also has a number of additional technical responsibilities beyond Epsom Playhouse, such as the provision of technical advice at other EEBC venues, including advice and fault-finding at Bourne Hall, and the provision of lighting and sound for the annual Christmas Lights Switch on. All technicians are multi-skilled, capable in lighting, sound and stage, both in the ability to run shows and in connecting/interfaces visiting companies' equipment, assembling sets etc.
- 5.8 The Technical Team has a pool of casual staff to call upon when needed. In the main, casual staff undertake supplementary work, for example, complete stage format changes. They do occasionally fill in for a permanent member of staff when a staff member is on leave, or whenever there is a greater than usual demand for technicians – arises whenever an event in the Myers Studio clashes with a large-crew show in the Main Auditorium.
- 5.9 As mentioned above, the Playhouse Technical Department is responsible for the maintenance of all the theatre-specific equipment within the building. This includes both loose equipment such as lights, control systems and speakers, and installed equipment such as dimmers (excluding electrical supplies), motorised winches, and the manual-flying system. In the main, first-line maintenance is carried out by the Playhouse Technical Team with further repairs or other requirements such as inspections/certifications undertaken by contractors or suppliers.
- 5.10 Epsom Playhouse's flying system is maintained and inspected annually by its manufacturer/installer. Certification issued to the theatre is kept by the Technical Team. The tallescope (aluminium alloy ladder with platform used within the theatre profession for gaining access to high rigging etc.) is inspected by its manufacturer; certification is kept on display in the load dock. Production lighting installation (dimmers etc.) are maintained and inspected annually by an electronic engineer; certification is not required. PAT testing of production lighting equipment is performed in-house on an annual rolling basis. There are a number of other inspections and certifications which take place in and around the building in accordance with various requirements, not least general fire safety and fire extinguishers. Fire risk assessments of Epsom Playhouse are undertaken (Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005).
- 5.11 The theatre shuts down in August to enable essential maintenance, inspections, cleaning and redecoration, and any major improvement works to take place. A rolling schedule for backstage redecoration is operated during which the back stage corridors, kitchen, dressing rooms as well as the Myers Studio are re-painted; this work is undertaken by the Playhouse Technical Team.
- 5.12 The Business Development Manager's responsibilities relate to development of the commercial success of Epsom Playhouse (and other EEBC venues). Included within this is a responsibility for marketing the venue for which he is supported by the Assistant Marketing Manager. The Assistant Marketing Manager has the additional

responsibility to promote individual shows depending on the wishes of the professional artist or community hirer.

- 5.13 The remaining staff at Epsom Playhouse include 2 part time House Managers, 2 part time Box Office receptionists and from 1 April 2017, a full time Bar Manager, all of whom report direct to the Theatre Manager. The House Managers are supported by 43 volunteer stewards (discussed in paragraphs 5.56 and 5.57 below), together they support shows performed at Epsom Playhouse, managing/assisting the audience and ensuring that health and safety policies are adhered to. The Box Office staff and Bar Manager are assisted by casual staff as and when needed.

- 5.14 The Main Auditorium, Myers Studio and other rooms at Epsom Playhouse
Shows are performed in the Main Auditorium and the Myers Studio. The Main Auditorium, accessed directly from the foyer and first floor, is a raked auditorium seating 450. As highlighted above, it is hired by professional artists, for example, Des O'Connor and Paul Zerdin have both visited Epsom Playhouse, community groups such as resident drama school classes, music and dance groups, as well as companies and other organisations for meetings and training events. Currently the Playhouse programme for the auditorium is weighted 60% professional and 40% community. The Main Auditorium has a full programme across the year and rarely has any spare capacity to schedule any further shows. The least likely day for a professional performance to be scheduled in the Main Auditorium is a Monday.
- 5.15 Film seasons were once held in the Main Auditorium at Epsom Playhouse. These film seasons have now ceased. Reasons behind this decision highlighted to the Scrutiny Review Task Group include: lack of financial viability; need for a digital projector for the auditorium (estimated costs start at £25k plus maintenance costs – the current equipment is obsolete as the majority is over 25 years old). There is also the inability to offer sufficient theatre time (only able to offer supplier ad hoc dates as opposed to a run of dates) which restricts showings to second releases only; local competition and accessibility of films on line. All the above areas have been considered thoroughly, it was felt that this option is not financially viable when staffing, ticketing and ancillary services required for the events are also taken into consideration for a minimal return.
- 5.16 In comparison, the Myers Studio, accessed directly from the foyer at ground floor level, is a much smaller hall, seating just 80. It lends itself to the smaller performance such as magic and jazz shows as well as meetings, presentations and small conferences. The Myers Studio has greater spare capacity - 9.30am to 4.30pm most days apart from August, December and term time Saturday mornings.
- 5.17 Technical provision is well established in both the Main Auditorium and the Myers Studio. It is professional, but is on a smaller scale in comparison to the larger theatres. Technical hire charges exist for the different technical packages/elements although professional show contracts will usually address the technical requirement of a production including any associated costs.
- 5.18 The Playhouse bar, also available to hire for meetings or workshops etc., is located on the ground floor and is accessed towards the rear of the foyer just to the left of the Box Office. It is located (together with the Myers Studio) in an area known colloquially as 'the cottages' (the façade onto South Street takes the appearance of three cottages). The cottages are leased by the Council. The current lease remains

in place until 2022. The bar was operated by an independent company, but was brought in house on 1 April 2017. The bar offers pre show snacks as well as drinks. Interval drinks can be ordered in advance by use of an order form. The Members' Bar is located on the first floor. Unfortunately, this room has restricted access; the Members' bar can only be accessed via stairs from the foyer, no lift is available. The room is used sparingly for meetings, functions and other such bookings.

- 5.19 The Box Office, which is located at the rear of the foyer, is normally open from 10am until 8pm Mondays through to Saturdays. On Sundays and public holidays it is open 1 hour prior to curtain up whenever there is a performance. Outside these times messages can be left on a 24 hour answer phone. Occasionally, the theatre may close earlier if there is no evening performance. Over the last few years box office hours have reduced; between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2016 they were reduced by 460.5 hours. All shows can now be booked online via the Playhouse website. Epsom Playhouse Box Office currently provides box office services for 2 external shows (Wings and Wheels, and Epsom Fireworks Display and Funfair).
- 5.20 The remaining public facilities at Epsom Playhouse that should be mentioned are the toilets. The male and female toilets are located both sides of the main entrance, on the ground floor, and on the first floor. A disabled toilet is provided on the ground floor.

Hirer Categories

- 5.21 Epsom Playhouse recognises different categories of hirer. The different hire rates are shown on the Epsom Playhouse website. In relation to the Main Auditorium, 3 categories of hirer are recognised:

- Commercial - person or organisation who hires for commercial gain
- Standard - voluntary organisations based outside Epsom & Ewell, or private parties, dance exercise classes and staff training for Epsom and Ewell based companies
- Community – Epsom and Ewell based voluntary organisations whose activities are held within the borough.

For the Myers Studio there are just 2 categories of hirer: standard and community.

- 5.22 When hiring the Main Auditorium or Myers Studio, a hirer may choose to take up the additional services on offer at Epsom Playhouse, that is, Box Office services, and/or technical and marketing packages. Professional hirers will draw up a contract with the Epsom Playhouse Manager to cover these and other relevant matters.
- 5.23 Various types of contract with receiving houses can be sought by the promoter or agent of the professional artist or company. The amount of income that a theatre can secure from an agreement (excludes additional sources of income such as ice cream sales etc.) is dependent upon the type of agreement secured. The different forms of agreement comprise:
- Percentage – ticket sales are split between the theatre and the professional company/artist according to an agreed percentage
 - Guarantee – a fee is fixed between the professional company/artist and the theatre, this amount is paid to the company/artist whatever ticket sales are made.

- Guarantee then percentage – as for guarantee a figure is agreed between the company/artist and theatre. Any ticket sales made above this figure are then divided according to an agreed percentage split
- First Call – company/artist receives all the ticket sales up to an agreed first call, any additional ticket sales are kept by the theatre
- First Call v percentage – ticket sales up to an agreed amount belong to the company/artist, or if the amount works out greater, the company/artist will take the agreed percentage split.

Examples of how the different forms of agreement are applied have been set out at **Appendix 3**.

- 5.24 Guarantee agreements expose a theatre to an element of risk; any individual guarantee agreement could result in a loss for a theatre. In the 10 years between 2006 and 2016, the Epsom Playhouse budget for guarantee fees has reduced by approximately 97 %. First call agreements are of lower risk for a theatre. Although first call agreements can generate zero income for a theatre, they will not result in a loss for a theatre.

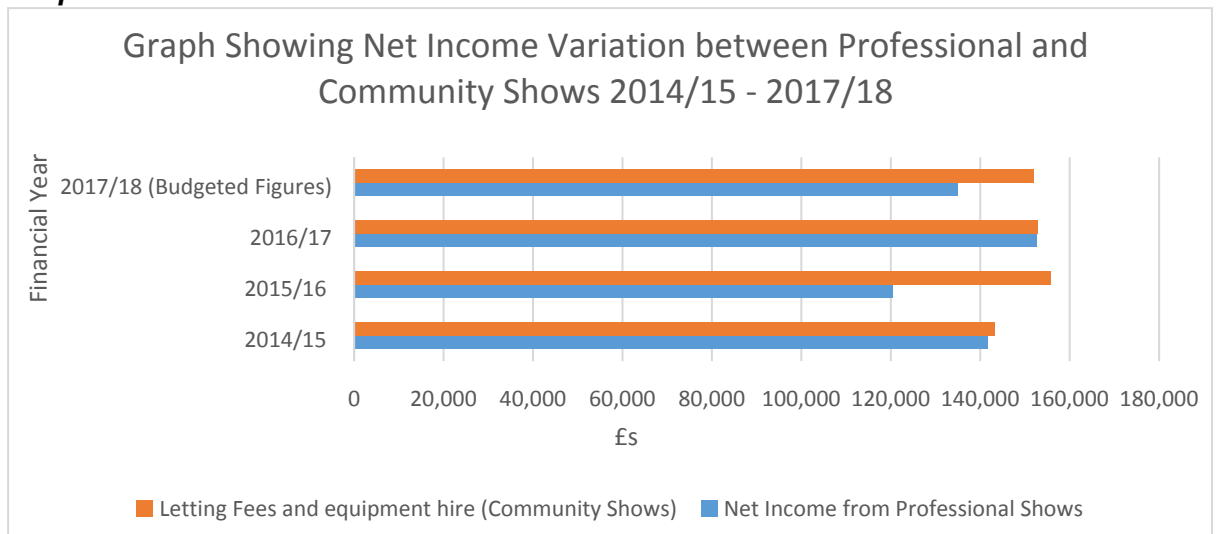
Detailed Budget for the last three years including revenue and capital expenditure.

Revenue

- 5.25 The Epsom Playhouse budgets together with end of year actuals for the three year period 2014/15 to 2016/17 are set out at **Appendix 4**. Also included are 2017/18 budget figures and the 2017/18 quarter 2 forecast.
- 5.26 The data at Appendix 4 is separated into two tables. The top table shows the surplus and deficit made on Epsom Playhouse activities. The second table sets out Epsom Playhouse non direct costs including building costs, capital expenditure, and other additional costs (indirect employee costs, central charges and asset rents). The overall subsidy met by the Council for each of the three years concerned is set out in bold at the bottom of the page.
- 5.27 Comments made to the review stated that the Playhouse budget is best viewed over a 3 year period due to variations arising year to year. Some years would see net income from professional shows outperforming net income from community performances/other events and vice versa. Professional shows, although they do often return to Epsom Playhouse, would not normally return year on year due to show saturation. Depending on the community hirer, community shows might be held on an annual or longer basis.
- 5.28 Analysis of the Playhouse Actuals 2014/15 – 2016/17 and the 2017/18 budget highlights a number of points which have been set out in the bullet points below and illustrated in Graph 1 below.
- Net income (including equipment) generated from community hires:
Improved by approximately £12.5k between 2014/15 and 2015/16.
Remained fairly constant between 2015/16 and 2016/17
Is planned to remain fairly constant between 2016/17 and 2017/18.
 - Net income generated from professional shows:
Fell between 2014/15 and 2015/16 by just over £21k.

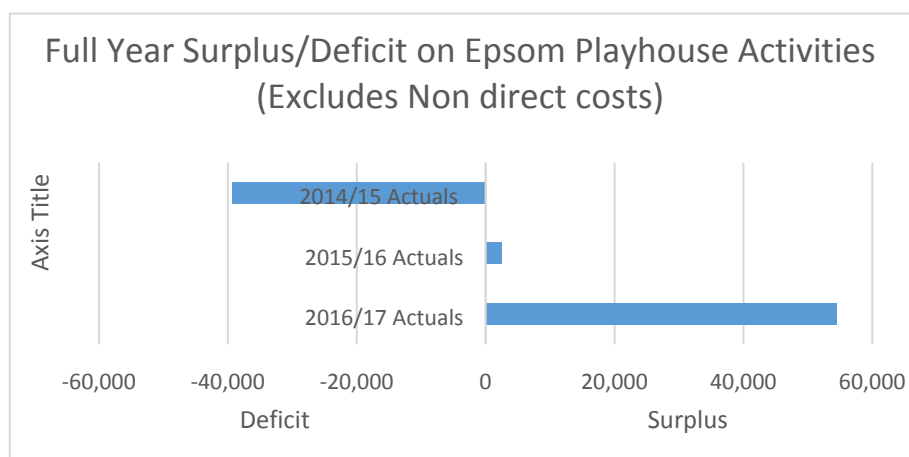
- Improved by over £32k between 2015/16 and 2016/17.
- Is planned to reduce by over £17k between 2016/17 and 2017/18.
- Net income generated by professional shows was fairly constant with that generated from community hires (excluding commission) in 2014/15 and 2016/17.
- Community hires outperformed professional shows by over £35k in 2015/16.
- Net income generated from community hires (excluding commission) is budgeted to outperform that generated by professional shows in 2017/18.

Graph 1



- 5.29 Over the 3 year period 2014/15 – 2016/17, actual figures show an overall improved position of over £90k on Epsom Playhouse direct activities (top table at Appendix 4 and Graph 2 below) despite increases in direct employee costs and the cost of utilities. Current service running costs have reduced from 2014/15 levels, although they are budgeted to increase this year (2017/18) in comparison to last year. Income from sales of programmes, confectionary, ice cream etc. has seen fairly constant uptake. However, membership levels have been reducing since 2014/15 and as such income generated from membership has reduced (see paragraph 5.54 below).

Graph 2



- 5.30 During the three year period 2014/15 – 2016/17 the Playhouse Bar was outsourced. The Council received a set income from this contract irrespective of how well the bar performed (included within Contract receipts, advertising income). Exclusivity clauses restricted the production of food and drink at Epsom Playhouse to the external company alone. On 1 April 2017, the Epsom Playhouse Bar was brought in house. Staff plan to increase income generated from the bar by developing the bar's operations in house. (Bar expenditure and income have been included at Appendix 4 as from 2017/18.)
- 5.31 At the end of Q1 2017/18 the income for drinks and snacks etc. was broadly on target and in line with profiled estimates. However, since then, expenditure on staffing and provisions have increased beyond budget placing some pressure on the net income figure which is reflected in the Q2 figures at Appendix 4. The full position will not be clear until after the busy Pantomime season.
- 5.32 Epsom Playhouse non direct costs, business rates and insurance have increased over the last few years. However, in comparison, costs associated with cleaning and maintenance as well as indirect employee costs have reduced. Asset rents reflect accounting entries relating to assets used by services. The most common charge is for depreciation, but in 2016/17 accounts there was a credit relating to a notional revaluation, resulting in a charge lower than budget. No further revaluations are anticipated over the next few years.

Capital

- 5.33 During the 3 year period 2014/15 – 2016/17 capital expenditure was used to meet the cost of essential roof repairs. The Scrutiny Review Task Group understands that this current year 2 capital bids have been made. Further details are set out at paragraph 5.63 below.

Other Financial Considerations

- 5.34 The potential for Epsom Playhouse to influence the economic prosperity of Epsom Town Centre was raised during the review. Questions in the survey were developed to try and understand what affect, if any, Epsom Playhouse visitors had on the Town Centre. Respondents to the survey were asked 'On your most recent visit to Epsom Playhouse, did you also:
- Go shopping?
 - Have a meal in a local restaurant/pub?
 - Have a drink in a local restaurant/pub?
- 5.35 The responses received are set out in Table 2 below. Those respondents who stated that they had visited a local restaurant/pub/café highlighted a variety of establishments (see Appendix 1 for details).

Table 2 – Responses to survey questions

<i>On your most recent visit to Epsom Playhouse, did you also:</i>	Yes	No
Go shopping?	16% (n=151)	84% (n=787)
Have a meal in a local restaurant/pub?	40% (n=431)	60% (n=652)
Have a drink in a local restaurant/pub?	28% (n=277)	72% (n=706)

- 5.36 Epsom Playhouse is currently working in partnership with Bill's Restaurant. A scheme has been agreed whereby customers who buy tickets for Epsom Playhouse are given a Bill's voucher. This voucher entitles the bearer to 20% off the total bill if they eat at the restaurant between the hours of 4pm and 7pm. The scheme is designed to be mutually beneficial to both Epsom Playhouse and Bill's Restaurant.
- 5.37 Respondents to the survey were asked whether they thought Epsom Town Centre benefitted from Epsom Playhouse. 95% of respondents to this question (n=1055) stated yes. In response to a separate question which asked respondents whether they thought that the Borough benefitted from Epsom Playhouse, 95% of these respondents (n=1057) stated yes.
- 5.38 In addition to the above, the Task Group looked to see whether Epsom Playhouse generated any 'other' income, that is, income not attributed to Epsom Playhouse accounts. For example, respondents to the survey that stated they travelled by car to the Epsom Playhouse were asked where they parked their car. 89% (n=887) of those that responded to this question stated that they parked in the Ashley Centre multi-storey car park.
- 5.39 Although there is no precise way of knowing whether a car park user of the Ashley Centre car park has visited Epsom Playhouse or not, the number of car park users leaving the car park between 9pm and midnight on show nights was gathered and compared with that of non-show nights. The average income taken by the pay machines after 9pm on these dates was also compared. Figures for the whole of 2016/17 showed that on average across the year, an additional £182.70 is taken on a show night in comparison to a non-show night. This equates to £34,164.26 additional income for the year.
- 5.40 It should be noted that the above calculation is very rough and is intended only to provide a picture of the wider impact of Epsom Playhouse. It does not take into account the pantomime and shows/events held during the day. In addition, it should be highlighted that there are additional costs to running the Ashley Centre car park arising from Epsom Playhouse, in particular, those related to ensuring users are provided with an efficient and safe service across all relevant hours.

Provision of performance data and comparison with others (where possible)

- 5.41 A number of other theatres are located in the areas surrounding Epsom Playhouse. These include:
- Leatherhead Theatre - a Grade II Listed theatre run by the Leatherhead Revival Trust since 2001. It receives no funding from the local authority and is dependent upon its ticket sales, venue hire, coffee shop, bar and donations. It shows live performances, the latest film releases, and other screenings such as the Royal Shakespeare Company Live.
 - Croydon Fairfield Halls – this venue is currently closed for refurbishment, forming part of a £30million redevelopment of the area into a cultural quarter for Croydon. The venue is due to reopen in 2018.
 - Dorking Halls – this venue is owned by Mole Valley District Authority. It currently shows live performances, the latest films and other event screenings. It is home to a regular antiques fair, organises trips to West End shows and runs a Comedy Club with Comedy and Curry nights.
 - The Harlequin Theatre and Cinema, Redhill – this is a Reigate and Banstead Borough Council venue. Shows are held in the Auditorium (seating 422 - 764) and include live performances such as drama and music. The latest film releases are shown in the Waller Cinema (100 seat cinema). It has its own Harlequin café open Monday to Saturday serving light bites and hot food from 12 noon to 2pm.
 - Rose Theatre, Kingston – largest producing theatre in South West London, seats up to 900 people in the main auditorium, two other spaces and the café are available for hire.
- 5.42 The circumstances relating to two theatres located in the London Borough of Sutton, the Secombe Theatre and the Charles Cryer Studio Theatre, were viewed with interest. The operation of all theatre related services at these two theatres were transferred by Sutton Council to the Sutton Theatre Trust in June 2015. The Council remained as landlord to both properties. Unfortunately the Trust went into liquidation on 11 August 2016; the theatre buildings were handed back to the Council in October 2016. Minutes of a meeting of the Environment and Neighbourhood Committee at Sutton Council held on 26 January 2017, record that a 'failure to attract audiences and a lack of financial sustainability were given as reasons behind the recent closure of Sutton Theatres Trust'. The minutes went on to record that '...any new proposal needed to cover maintenance and repair costs in addition to means of income generation'.
- 5.43 The Chairman of the Task Group visited a council owned theatre with the Head of Venues & Facilities to view how it operated and to identify any examples of good practice. The theatre, which was comparable to Epsom Playhouse, started in 1965; it was refurbished in 2014. The theatre was of a similar size, was a receiving house, and had the same 60% / 40% split of professional shows to community hires. The professional shows were, however, limited to Thursday through to Sunday in the main. The theatre offered rooms for hire and was licensed to hold weddings. The seating in the main auditorium could be retracted which enabled that area to be used in different ways, for example a series of comedy curry nights. The seats themselves were refurbished, the cost of which is being met by means of a levy of £1 on each ticket sold. This levy is openly highlighted to customers.

- 5.44 The theatre produces its own pantomime, purchasing a script and hiring a director to organise the show. In addition to holding professional and community shows/events, the theatre screens performances of the National Theatre Live and also has a very successful children's theme party organiser. The theatre organises a 2/3 day open-air music festival with tribute bands, but this has not always proved as successful as hoped as it is weather dependent. Like Epsom Playhouse, the theatre has taken its bar back in-house, although catering is brought in as needed. Diversification into providing meals did not prove successful. Unlike the Epsom Playhouse, volunteer stewards were not utilised at the theatre.
- 5.45 The Council concerned has previously looked at the potential of moving management of the theatre to a Trust, but this was rejected. The Council has also looked at paying a management fee to a production company; this was rejected for financial reasons. The theatre is currently subsidised by its relevant council to a greater extent than the Epsom Playhouse.

Objective 2: To measure and assess the effectiveness of the present service, including staff, to identify the best use of resources.

Epsom Playhouse Consultation

- 5.46 The findings of the survey provide one means by which the effectiveness of the service at the Epsom Playhouse can be measured. An overview of the survey's more relevant findings are set out below.
- 5.47 Overall, the results to the survey were positive with respondents generally registering favourable feedback. 50% (n= 592) of respondents stated that they had visited Epsom Playhouse within the six months immediately preceding the survey. A very small percentage stated that they had never visited Epsom Playhouse (4%, n= 50). When these respondents were asked what would make them interested in visiting Epsom Playhouse more often, the majority of respondents commented on the quality of the shows (52%, n=22). Respondents commented that they wanted 'interesting plays', 'Better quality productions such as touring rep plays', 'Shakespeare and opera' and 'Bigger stars and bigger shows'.
- 5.48 Out of all those respondents who had visited Epsom Playhouse, the purpose of their most recent visit was to attend a show/event in the Main Auditorium (93%, n=1108). 82% (n=935) of respondents stated that they made, on average, one to three visits per year. Unfortunately it was not possible from these results to see how many of these respondents actually made return visits to Epsom Playhouse. This would have provided some understanding of how many respondents chose to return to Epsom Playhouse and therefore evidence a perceived level of satisfaction. Respondents were, however, asked to rate satisfaction levels with various aspects of the theatre, in relation to the quality of the show/event, 90% (n=1092) provided favourable responses, only 3% (n=34) reported an unfavourable response.
- 5.49 Satisfaction levels associated with other aspects of Epsom Playhouse evidenced a positive response. In particular, the following favourable responses were recorded:
- Ease of booking - 90% (n=1004)
 - Box Office – 86% (n=998)
 - Politeness and friendliness of staff – 91% (n=1064)

- Availability of staff – 80% (n=923).

The lowest satisfaction rate recorded related to the bar service. Although fairly high neutral (19%, n=220) and 'Don't know' (20%, n=233) responses were received, unfavourable responses were recorded at 8% (n=82). Other areas recorded unfavourable responses of no greater than 3%. Comments received to explain an unfavourable response include 'Bar service is very, very slow', 'Slow service' and 'Very long queue for drinks at the interval'. Other general comments received include 'The bar area and seating looks old, tatty run down and extremely tired. It is the worst bar area of all theatres', 'The place could really do with some renovation. The toilets were terrible', and 'There are 2 rows with restricted leg room'.

- 5.50 Cleanliness levels across Epsom Playhouse were on the whole fairly high. The best satisfaction levels for cleanliness related to the entrance area (92% n=1077), Main Auditorium (91% n=1054) and toilets (79% n=924). The Myers Studio only recorded a favourable response of 28% (n=303) regarding its cleanliness levels, but its 'Don't know' responses were recorded at 61% (n=655).
- 5.51 A number of comments were received from respondents to the survey highlighting areas that they considered needed to be changed or improved at Epsom Playhouse. Similar themes permeated through these comments including: variety / quality of shows (n=188), bar/restaurant (n=62), décor/updating/maintenance (n=51), seating (n=50), toilets (n=33), films (n=21), accessibility / lift (n=18), and foyer (n=6). A full list of comments is included at Appendix 1. However, it is also worth noting that 94% of respondents (n=1092) stated that Epsom Playhouse offered good value for money. In addition, 95% of respondents (n=1057) stated that they would recommend Epsom Playhouse.
- Ticket Sale Performance
- 5.52 Table 3 below shows the number of Epsom Playhouse tickets which were sold for the years 2014/15 and 2015/16, total annual subsidies and subsidy per ticket. Please note that in column 2, the number of tickets issued does not include those ticket sales made via an independent ticket agent nor those made via a community hirer's own box office.

Table 3 – Annual subsidy per ticket figures

Year	Number of Tickets Issued*	Total Subsidy (£s)	Subsidy per Ticket (£s)
2014/15	71,115	418,197	5.88
2015/16	76,071	396,141 (excludes capital costs)	5.21 (excludes capital costs)

- 5.53 Figures on the number of ticket sales made according to postcodes were viewed in order to try and establish the sale of tickets to customers living within and outside the borough (postcodes are not known for all ticket sales made). However, this information has not been used in this report as the reliability of the data was queried - some postcodes attributed to being outside the borough were known to cross both sides of the borough boundary. It is perhaps worth noting however, that 72% of respondents (n=835) to the Epsom Playhouse survey stated that they were a resident of the borough.

Pass card Membership

- 5.54 Over the last 3 years, membership of Epsom Playhouse has fallen. This is illustrated by the amount of income generated each year under membership fees. In 2014/15, £2010 was generated; in 2015/16, £1547 was generated and in 2016/17, £1,345 was generated. The decline is expected to continue in 2017/18 - membership fees for 2017/18 are budgeted to generate £1000 in income, a reduction of 50% in comparison to 2014/15 figures.

- 5.55 Just 10% (n=104) of the respondents to the survey stated that they were a current member of the Epsom Playhouse pass card. Staff are aware of this decline in membership and have started to design a new scheme.

Use of Volunteer Stewards

- 5.56 Epsom Playhouse has a team of 43 volunteer stewards. The review has heard evidence that Epsom Playhouse would not be able to operate as it does without these volunteers, some of whom have been supporting Epsom Playhouse for a long time. The majority of current volunteers have been stewarding for over 20 years, the longest serving volunteer has been stewarding for 31 years.

- 5.57 Most volunteer stewards provide support to a minimum of 3 performances during the course of a month. This commitment fluctuates according to the number of performances scheduled, it peaks during the Christmas period when volunteers can support 3 or more performances a week. A list of volunteer steward duties is attached at **Appendix 5**. As highlighted in paragraph 5.49 above, although not specific to volunteer stewards, 91% (n= 1064) of respondents to the survey reported a favourable response when asked to rate the politeness and friendliness of Epsom Playhouse staff.

Objective 3: To identify key issues that affect the service in the day to day operation of supplying the service.

- 5.58 During the course of the review a number of issues, all of which impact the service provided to varying degrees, have become apparent. Some of these issues have been highlighted through first-hand experience of Task Group members, others through meetings and lastly others through the Epsom Playhouse Consultation.
- 5.59 The first key issue relates to the technical equipment. The production equipment at Epsom Playhouse is generally professional, theatre specific equipment. A lot is original to the building, installed back in 1984. As the equipment has aged, maintenance and repairs have proved more difficult to undertake in relation to some items.
- 5.60 General theatre lights are simple to maintain and are long-lived. Although now surpassed technically by newer equipment, the theatre lighting at Epsom Playhouse remains maintained and serviceable. In comparison, technical equipment such as mounted lights and sound controls, are more-short lived. The lighting desk is kept current by software updates; this will continue until the hardware is obsolete. Likewise, the analogue sound desk is still fully functional but it is starting to fall behind the latest digital technologies; being a high value item it will remain in service until uneconomical to maintain. Other examples of technical equipment include the

radio mics which, due to the nature of the item, are prone to damage, and intercom headsets which have high levels of wear and tear.

- 5.61 The Technical Department does have a general maintenance/equipment budget, currently this is set at £18,200. All current update/upgrade projects plus the rolling programme of backstage building redecorations are funded from within this budget. There is no set provision for upgrades or replacement of high-value items. Where major projects are identified, staff have applied for capital funds from the Council. Some applications have been granted, others not.
- 5.62 The Scrutiny Review Task Group was provided with a list of all technical equipment at Epsom Playhouse. This list sets out the age of the equipment, its future life expectancy and current renewal costs. The Technical Manager was asked to identify from the equipment list that equipment which will be at 'end of life' within the next 5 years. Three items were highlighted as being in most need of replacement, these are set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Epsom Playhouse Technical Renewals – 5 Year Assessment

Technical Renewal Identified as being required within 5 years	Stage Floor (lino) and Substructure (High Priority)	Stage Lighting Dimmers 86 Rank Permuss dimmers (80 x 2.4kW, 6x4.8kW) 48 Rank PIPS dimmers (48 x 2.4kW)	Stage Lights 13 Sil 30 1kW 16 Sil 25 1kW 8 Harmony 22/40
Current Age	17 - 22 years	20 – 30 years	32 years
Comments	The stage floor has reached the end of its effective life and hence is requiring repeated maintenance.	186 dimmers are installed in the Main Auditorium, 86 are original to the building, and a further 48 are over 20 years old. Although maintained regularly, they have been obsolete for over 10 years. Current contractor is still supporting these units but this will not continue indefinitely.	Although some stage lights have been replaced, others (the same age as the building) are still being used despite being obsolete. Spare parts are in short supply. New units are more efficient and effective therefore in order to maintain consistent lighting, as a minimum, identical units need to be replaced in batches of 4.
Renewal Cost (at 2017) (£s)	15,000 (approximate value - stage covering only)	20,000 10,000	6,500 8,000 4,000

- 5.63 This current year staff have submitted 2 applications for capital funds in relation to Epsom Playhouse as set out below:
- Replacement of stage (cost £36k), the stage flooring has reached the end of its effective life and requires repeated maintenance.
 - Refurbishment of existing first floor dressing rooms (cost £30k)
- 5.64 Previously, Epsom Playhouse has paid into a repairs and renewals reserve. However, in 2015/16 these funds were put towards roof repairs. Payments into the repairs and renewal fund are budgeted at £3k per annum from 2017/18 but the fund is starting from a nil position.
- 5.65 A second issue identified during the review relates to the seating in the Main Auditorium. The seats, which are the same age as the building, can be restrictive to some in both size and leg room. Only four spaces on either side of the auditorium are available for customers with wheel chairs. These spaces are limited when large speakers are in use for a particular show. In addition, the front 2 rows of seats need to be adjusted whenever the orchestra pit is required. In response to a question in the Epsom Playhouse Consultation which asked whether there was anything respondents would like to see improved at Epsom Playhouse, 8% (n=50) of respondents to this question commented on the seating. Examples of comments made include 'Cramped seating', 'The seating is very squashed. Although I am short I feel very confined and have no leg room' and 'I find the leg room very limited and I am only 5 feet tall'.
- 5.66 Other issues identified relate to the building itself. General accessibility issues for customers in wheel chairs exist. Access to space for wheelchairs in the Main Auditorium (far side from the foyer) require visitors to go back outside the theatre and gain access through an emergency exit. The Members' Bar has accessibility issues, being accessible only by means of stairs from the foyer. This limits the ability to hire out this room.
- 5.67 The size of the foyer was raised. At busy times the foyer can become very tight for customers and staff. Six respondents to the Epsom Playhouse survey commented on the foyer as being an area for change or improvement. Comments made include 'The foyer is rather small' and 'A bigger foyer area'. The current location of the Box Office was also raised during the review (protruding into foyer). Noise from the foyer can be distracting for Box Office staff, especially at busy times.
- 5.68 The number and condition of the toilets was highlighted as an issue. During performance intervals a large queue for the ladies toilets can develop, impacting on an already tight foyer area. Respondents to the Epsom Playhouse survey (n=33) commented that better toilet facilities were needed, that there were insufficient toilets especially during intervals and that the toilets were old and not nice to use.
- 5.69 Lastly, issues surrounding the Epsom Playhouse bar were identified. As mentioned earlier in this report, the Playhouse Bar was, prior to 1 April 2017, contracted out to an external company. This contract provided exclusivity rights to that company which impacted on the ability of Epsom Playhouse staff to develop the potential of this particular resource. Since 1 April 2017 the Playhouse Bar has been operated by the Council. Issues surrounding its layout, accessibility and the kitchen have been discussed. A particular issue which has been raised relates to the pre-ordering and

collection of interval drinks. Queues at the bar during performance intervals can be long and impact negatively on a visitor's enjoyment of interval drinks/social time (see also paragraph 5.49 above).

Objective 4: To understand the needs of the customer base and how the service could be developed to generate further income or reduce costs.

- 5.70 Some of the findings of the Epsom Playhouse survey help support an understanding of the needs of the Epsom Playhouse customer base. This information is discussed below.
- 5.71 Responses to the survey showed that the majority of respondents were within the middle three age groups specified, 45-54 (20%, n=247), 55-64 (27%, n=325) and 65-74 (29%, n=352). The younger age bands saw a collective response of 11.8% (n=147). The older age bands received a collective response of 12.5% (n=151). In total 90% of the respondents stated that they were British White (65% n=789) or English White (25% n=302). In relation to religion or beliefs, the majority of respondents stated that they were Christian (60%, n=730), this was followed by of 'no religion' (28%, n=329). Minority religions or beliefs included Buddhist (n=6), Hindu (n=5), Muslim (n=3), and Jewish (n=1). Lastly, 71% (n=840) of respondents stated that they were married or were in a civil partnership.
- 5.72 When asked which genre of show respondents were interested in seeing at the Epsom Playhouse, music gained the highest percentage with 80% (n=952). Comedy followed with 59% (n=699) and then drama with 54% (n=642). Music and comedy are currently catered for at Epsom Playhouse. However, the Scrutiny Review Task Group was informed that drama has proved unpopular with visitors to Epsom Playhouse.
- 5.73 Further analysis of these 3 particular genres (music, comedy and drama) according to age highlights some interesting facts, although the small numbers involved in some cases should be noted (details set out at Appendix 1). Music was most popular in the 55-64 age range (second largest age group represented in the survey responses). Comedy evidenced a rough general decline in popularity as the age range increased (excludes the 95+ age group). Drama evidenced greater popularity in the middle three age ranges together with the 75-84 age range (excludes the 95+ age group). Lastly, although both drama and music were most popular in the 55-64 age range, drama secured just 60% whereas music gained a 90% response.
- 5.74 Although receiving a low number of responses, examples of other genres of show which respondents stated they were interested in include talk shows/lectures (20%, n=18), film (16%, n=15), Variety/Theatre shows (7%, n=6), and Solo/Talent/Ethnic productions (7%, n=6). (Details are set out at Appendix 1.)
- 5.75 Respondents to the survey identified how they found out about the last show they attended at the Epsom Playhouse. The majority of respondents (35%, n=415) highlighted 'Leaflets/brochures/posters'. The second most popular response was the 'Epsom Playhouse website' (31%, n=367). The third most popular response was 'Epsom Playhouse's What's on Guide' (29%, n=349). Other more popular responses include, 'Local newspaper/magazine', 'E-shot/newsletter', 'Roadside banner/noticeboard', and 'In person' at the Epsom Playhouse.

- 5.76 Lastly, in relation to general room hire at Epsom Playhouse, 51% (n=584) of respondents to the survey stated that they were aware that the rooms, including the Main Auditorium, were available for hire. Only 11% (n=117) of respondents stated that they hired rooms elsewhere. Where respondents had hired rooms elsewhere, the majority were located at local community halls, churches and schools (n=29).
- 5.77 Staff at Epsom Playhouse have given consideration to different ways by which services provided at Epsom Playhouse could be developed further. Ideas highlighted include:
- Sponsorship of Epsom Playhouse by local companies
 - Development of a business balcony in the Main Auditorium
 - Increased advertising – use of banner space in quieter times
 - Arts and craft fairs
 - Development of the Members' Bar
 - Development of a new membership scheme
 - Potential for a digital advertising display outside Epsom Playhouse
 - Provision of afternoon teas when matinee shows held
 - Provision of a free standing gallery bar
 - Provision of a cash machine
 - Potential to explore utilisation of current film equipment to provide a film season in the Myer's Studio

Objective 5: To identify alternative ways to deliver the service including the do nothing option

- 5.78 During the review, five different options for the future delivery of services at Epsom Playhouse were identified and considered by the Task Group. To ensure completeness, the fifth option, closure of the venue, was included within the list. The full list of options considered is set out below.
- Do nothing, continue as is
 - Continue to deliver services as is, but explore options for further business development
 - Transfer operation of Epsom Playhouse to an external management company
 - Hand over operation of Epsom Playhouse to a trust
 - Closure of venue.

Objective 6: To evaluate the different options put forward (including but not limited to)

Service delivery outputs

Financial implications including any invest to save investment required

Key risks and how they can be mitigated

Timeline for implementation

- 5.79 Each option identified for the future delivery of services at Epsom Playhouse, set out in paragraph 5.78 above, has been evaluated. This evaluation has not included a detailed financial assessment of the different aspects of each option, but instead appraises the potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats arising from each. The full evaluation is set out at **Appendix 6**.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Overall, the Scrutiny Review Task Group consider that review investigations have shown that Epsom Playhouse is a valued Council resource. Testimonials have been received from professional artists, representatives of local community groups and from visitors to the venue; survey responses were positive. Epsom Playhouse contributes to the Council's Corporate Priorities, notably 'Supporting our Community' and 'Supporting Businesses and our Local Economy'. It provides professional support to local community music, dance and theatrical groups, health and wellbeing benefits to the local population, and economic benefits for the area, Epsom Town Centre in particular.
- 6.2 Staff and volunteers working at Epsom Playhouse are professional and committed. They are full of enthusiasm and support for the venue. They are key to the continued success of the venue.
- 6.3 The Scrutiny Review Task Group consider that Epsom Playhouse should continue to deliver its services to the community and that staff should continue their work to reduce the overall costs of running the theatre. The Scrutiny Review Task Group recognise that Epsom Playhouse is facing a number of issues, but also consider that it has potential to explore a number of new business opportunities. As such, the Scrutiny Review Task Group wishes to highlight a number of matters under 3 headings 'Income Generation', 'Equipment' and 'Building' for further exploration and consideration. The practical, legal and financial implications of each will need to be considered in line with any future town centre plans.

Income Generation

- Digital Advertising Display outside Epsom Playhouse
- Development of an Epsom Playhouse App which enables theatre seat bookings, pre and interval drinks orders, and, potentially in the future, restaurant bookings
- Naming and sponsorship of Epsom Playhouse
- Sponsorship of the Epsom Playhouse Bar
- Work on development of Epsom Playhouse membership scheme to be completed
- Concessionary priced tickets offered to social clubs of local businesses for those shows with lower uptake of seats (it is recognised that this will be dependent upon the agreement of the professional artist/community hirer)
- Possible use of theatre for themed children parties

Equipment

- Establishment of a rolling replacement/refurbishment plan for technical equipment at Epsom Playhouse
- Exploration of external funding sources, for example, the Arts Council

Building

- Use (where possible) of the Myers Studio for the collection of pre ordered drinks
- Further consideration of the best use of the Members Bar
- Refurbishment of the public toilets (number of toilets provided is controlled by the British Standard on Sanitary Installations for buildings such as theatres)
- Any potential redevelopment opportunity to provide greater space within foyer

- Potential to create theatre boxes upstairs in the Main Auditorium

7. Acknowledgments

- 7.1 The Scrutiny Review Task Group wishes to thank all those who assisted the Task Group in completing its investigations - attending meetings with the Task Group members and providing evidence to its review. The Scrutiny Review Task Group would, in particular, like to thank the Epsom Playhouse Manager and Technical Production Manager for their input.