Summary of round table event on the future of The Electric Theatre- 17th January 2026

Guildford Borough Council (GBC) own the premises of The Electric Theatre . Having directly run it from 1997 to 2017, and then leased the building out to an external operator from 2017 to 2025 (at which point the lease was returned), the Council is now in the process of determining the future use of the Theatre.

On 17th January 2026 GBC held a day long round table event to bring together key stakeholders to help inform the Council of the best direction forward. The key objectives of the day was to work together to shape ideas and develop shared values for the theatre's next chapter, while being clear about what is possible within financial and operational constraints.

The round table was attended by 22 representatives from a range of stakeholders and supported by GBC officers and the Leader of the Council. The organisations represented at the roundtable are included as an Annex. The day was facilitated by Dawn Hart an independent facilitator.

Attendees were welcomed by Cllr Julia McShane, Leader of the Council, who stated the importance of the Electric Theatre as a key part of the town's cultural life and set the day's intention for the Council to listen to the views of the stakeholders.

This was followed by a presentation by Council officers sharing the findings of recent questionnaire and the current parameters and process as far as it is known.

Stakeholders were then invited to participate in a visioning exercise using Lego Serious Play. This is a facilitated methodology using a specifically designed set of Lego bricks for creative problem-solving, communication, and strategy development in business, education, and team-building, based on the idea of "thinking with your hands" to unlock deeper insights and innovation. Participants build 3D models of ideas, challenges, or concepts with bricks, figures, animals and a range of other objects and then share the stories behind their models, allowing for more inclusive participation and shared understanding than traditional meetings.

This was conducted in 2 groups. And here are the models they built:

Group 1's model

Group 2's model

The models were very different between each group but there was a large cross over in meaning. Each group was asked to debrief the meaning contained in their model.

Group 1

- There should be growth, joy, development & flexibility
- People need to be at the centre
- Transparency is required
- There needs to be investment & financial sustainability
- We should all be taking steps towards a common goal with realistic expectations
- There needs to be a clearly established safety net
- The theatre should be championing community arts
- There is the potential for a catering offer on the riverside site – diversifying income, driving footfall. However, this is a very different skill set that that needed to run a theatre
- The process to get it back up and running will be slow

- There is the potential reconfiguration of the building, looking at the sq. footage and who wants access and why
    - The upper floors currently inaccessible for people with access needs
    - The theatre could be made into a distinct space
    - Repurpose the outdoor spaces to make them more attractive and accessible and address current issues of anti-social behaviour.
    - By zoning the building it could open up different income streams, help commercialise and subsidise auditorium space for community use
- The importance of the outside space came through clearly, consideration of flood defences required.

Group 2

- The Electric Theatre should be a cultural and artistic beacon of the town.
- The train station is close by and can bring people into town - i.e. a wider audience reach
- There is a need to work with the community and those around the location of the theatre.
- The Council were viewed as separate -they can be viewed as providing a guiding hand but also an obstruction not constructive. They are looking on with caution -ant to help but cautious and have a financial shield.
- There needs to be reassurance piece with the future operator that things are done as agreed.
- The history of the space is important.
- It needs to bring together all walks of life.
- It will need to generate extra money maybe via food and drinks
- There needs to be bridges built to link the Council to the theatre and also bridges between the theatre and the wider town.
- The new operator will have to deal with big things that are unexpected e.g. flood defences, pandemic. There are things beyond our control. Broadly speaking – running a venue in 2026 is hard e.g. VAT pressures. We can try to keep these at bay with assurances, agreements and clarity.
- We hope it will be award winning and financially sustainable.
- People feel optimistic and positive about its future potential

Key points which were common between the two groups were:

- Growth
- Aspiration
- Awareness of challenges

- We can't rewind to 1997 – there needs to be new a vision reflecting financial challenges of today. We should also aspire to growth.
- Community must be at the centre
- A reminder that it is not just about the money, it's about audiences and the changing nature of the arts
- Financial resilience is key
- We can't solely rely on grants
- It needs to be self-sustaining
- How do you get to a financially sustainable position without excluding the community?
- The town is missing a venue like this, people are currently going out of town for the theatre
- Could the Council have built their own model -there needs to be ongoing and open dialogue

After attendees had toured the theatre to fully appreciate its current state they were invited to take part in a small group exercise to establish the core values which should be at the centre of any future tender. These can be summarised as:

The Electric Theatre should:

- Be maintained as an artistic space.
- Be integrated into Guildford cultural space.
- Be a positive space for young people
- Be transformed into a place to be proud of -a destination space and a space where people like to meet up.
- Be financially sustainable and commercially viable.
- Build a regular audience by having a clear identity through programming.
- Bring shows in that people want to see – but a variety of 'new audiences ' whose home it is. (The Youth Theatre and Guildford Opera Company are currently without a home). But there needs to be a balance between this and developing new artists.
- Be informed by a wider community voice (eg young people)
- A space to perform in across a range of disciplines.
    - Theatre
    - Music
    - Wrestling
    - Dance
    - Comedy

    - General hub for community
    - Huge space for multi-use
    - Anything that requires an auditorium!
- The building should be bright and inviting
- Independent/thriving/proud
- Tie into the local economic development strategy, local skills improvement programme / Industrial programme.
- Explore how to meet the education gap across the arts due to schools not delivering drama and theatre as much as previously

Considerations for GBC - from facilitator

- There is a need to ensure the Theatre is both economically viable and able to provide a broad programme including community use.
- The arts scene in the UK in general has been challenging financially for several years now and covid had a considerable negative impact. Although lessons can be learned from the previous lease, it is vital to set future commissioning in the here and now context.
- The local arts sector has a vibrant membership of people and organisations - this should be embraced moving forward.
- GBC to continue proactive engagement with attendees of the round table (even if the news is there is no news!) to build on this engagement and establish closer working relationships and transparency
- GBC to recognise that getting the building back up and running with a full and diverse programme and active audience engagement will be a gradual process.
- Support and the creation of opportunities for local young people is considered important by all parties.
- GBC should build upon and expand their consultation process to include the views of young people and wider communities who may not have accessed the questionnaire. These groups may not engage with a questionnaire format and as such focus groups may be more appropriate
- Once the initial works have been done to ensure the safety of the Electric Theatre, GBC could issue a temporary lease without prejudice until the full procurement process has been completed. This would allow for activities for this groups who do not currently have a home and will increase the safety of the building (from antisocial behaviour) and from further deterioration
- The topic of local government reorganisation was raised on a number of occasions throughout the day. With this due to come into effect in April 2027, at which point GBC will become part of the West Surrey Council. It was noted that this represented both an opportunity (with a wider set of expertise within the new council) and a challenge (given the scale of work and challenges that the new unitary will inherit).

Annex – list of organisations represented at the roundtable

ACM

Cranleigh Arts

G Live

Guildburys Theatre Company

Guildford Amateur Theatre Association

Guildford Opera Company

Guildford Theatre School

JSD Theatre Company and JSD School of Dance

OVO

Pranksters Theatre Company

Princess Hall Theatre

Surrey Arts

The Boileroom

The Herald Players

The Theatres Trust

Wysch Productions

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre