

# Protecting theatres for **everyone**



Ref.: RA/2257

6 September 2017

For the attention of Mr Martin Mansell

Planning Control  
Bolton Council  
Town Hall  
Bolton BL1 1RU

Dear Mr Mansell,

**Octagon Theatre, Howell Croft South, Bolton, BL1 1SB**

Application Ref.: 17/00391/FULL

I write regarding the above planning application for the alteration, extension and refurbishment of the Octagon Theatre. The Theatres Trust supports the application. Please see our advice below.

**Remit:** The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We champion the past, present and future of live theatre, by protecting the buildings and what goes on inside. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, requiring the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

**Advice:** The Trust actively encourages theatre operators to invest in their buildings to ensure they meet current building standards and the expectations of modern audiences, staff, performers and the local community. We therefore support this scheme to rebuild the studio theatre and support block, improve access, and provide new and upgraded back and front of house facilities to sustain and support the ongoing viability of the Octagon Theatre in to the future.

The Octagon Theatre opened in 1967, and was one of the first fully-flexible professional and producing theatres to be built in the north of England, and has an extensive learning and engagement programme with the local community. After nearly 50 years of almost continuous activity, the theatre is in need of major renovation in order to secure its future.

The Trust has been closely involved in the development of this renewal scheme, having facilitated an independent peer-based Advisory Review of the proposal with a panel of theatre design and operation experts in July 2015. The purpose of the Advisory Review was to consider the way the building functions as a theatre and how to make the theatre fit for purpose in the digital age, and how the proposed scheme may improve income generation for the theatre. We

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**Chair** Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

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The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund co-operates with Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697

are pleased the feedback provided by our Advisory Review Panel has largely been considered and incorporated into the submitted plans.

We recognise the theatre is constrained by the surrounding buildings and street pattern, with little opportunity to expand significantly, and it has been necessary to maximise the efficient use of the space available, while maintaining and upgrading the main auditorium. We particularly welcome the reorganisation and extension of the back of house areas. The get in and delivery area is vastly improved and will allow for the much more efficient loading and unloading of sets and props. The extension creates much needed additional staff and performer facilities, including additional dressing rooms and more office space, which is required to support a theatre of this nature with two auditoria. It also provides better back of house linkages to improve circulation around the building and improve the connectivity between the two performance spaces and the public front of house areas.

The Trust also welcomes the relocation of the main entry to the proposed corner location to make the theatre more visible as the audience arrives from different directions. This includes the efforts made to activate each street frontage with views into and out of the theatre foyers, and to provide the theatre with a new and modern image within the streetscape. The relocation of the office and plant space to the rebuilt studio extension also allows for the creation of additional front of house and public space and we support the extension of the ground floor foyer and lobby into Ashburner Street to make better use of these otherwise 'dead' spaces to properly connect the studio to the main theatre entry.

We do raise the following operational issues for further consideration by the applicant.

- Though subject to a further application, it is unclear from the plans how theatre signage will be incorporated with the new elevations, other than the theatre name signage proposed on the corner parapet. Show and name signage on each frontage will be essential to support and promote the theatre, and this needs further consideration.
- The entrance foyer would benefit from the provision of a draught lobby during winter months, though we recognise there is very little room to include this without relocating the box office.
- Consider reversing Stair 3 to further improve circulation so that the audience flow directly from the entrance foyer to the bar on level one without having to negotiate the tight turn at the top of the stair and minimise congestion with the adjacent door to the auditorium.
- Other than the accessible toilets provided on the ground floor, all public toilets are located on the first and second levels on the north side of the auditorium, and this is a considerable distance for the studio audience. We recommend investigating whether additional public facilities can be located nearer to the studio.
- The two escapes to the rear gated lane are both stepped and a ramp should be installed on at least one to provide an alternative exit for wheel chair users, other than the main entry (though a ramp is indicated on the plan in the Design and Access Statement).

Overall, the Theatres Trust supports the proposed works and alterations and agrees with the

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rationale and justifications provided in the Design and Access Statement. We therefore recommend granting planning consent.

This advice reflects guidance in Paragraph 70 of the NPPF which states that in 'promoting healthy communities', planning decisions should 'plan positively for cultural buildings' and ensure that such facilities 'are able to develop and modernise in a way that is sustainable, and retained for the benefit of the community'.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Ross Anthony  
Planning Adviser

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