

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/9006120

09 February 2018

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Mount Pleasant Road
Royal Tunbridge Wells
Kent
TN1 1RS

By e-mail: planning@tunbridgewells.gov.uk

Application: 18/00076/FUL

Site: Civic Development Site Mount Pleasant Avenue Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent

Proposal: Full planning permission for the redevelopment of the site to include the demolition of existing buildings (the Great Hall car park, the dental surgery in Calverley Grounds and the toilet block in Calverley Grounds) and provision of new offices (including Council offices, Council Chamber and commercial office space), theatre, underground car parking, and associated landscaping, infrastructure and associated works, including temporary site compound.

Remit:

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. 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 in England 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'.

Comment:

The Trust actively encourages local authorities and developers to place culture at the heart of place making and to develop cultural facilities as a catalyst for wider regeneration. We therefore welcome and support this proposal for the provision of a modern purpose built theatre as part of a wider redevelopment scheme. We are aware of the Council's vision for Tunbridge Wells to be recognised nationally for its vibrant cultural provision, and that it is seeking to provide a theatre to meet the needs of modern touring 'West-End standard' productions. We understand the new theatre will have a seating capacity of around 1,200 which is the minimum seating capacity that would be required for the productions that are envisaged. This is an increase of around 200 seats compared to the existing Assembly Hall Theatre. The new theatre will also provide an ancillary office as well as café/bar spaces which could potentially be used for private hire.

Overall we consider that the new theatre will enable Tunbridge Wells to expand its theatre provision for the benefit of the local community, and attract a greater range of modern touring productions that the existing theatre cannot adequately stage. We acknowledge the constraints arising from the complexity of this site, such as the need to minimise footprint so as not to unacceptably reduce levels of open space within the designated historic park/garden/important open space and to overcome level differences. There is also the

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Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, David Blyth, Pam Bone, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Ruth Eastwood, David Ian, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Dara Ó Briain, Simon Ricketts, Peter Roberts, Ann Skippers, Anna Stapleton

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need to balance the theatre building with that of the adjacent new civic offices and the new public square. On the whole, the proposal appears to meet its objectives.

In terms of specific design comments, we recommend though that the applicants give further consideration to:

- Improving the prominence of the main entrance to better integrate with the scale of the building and the journey once inside. The documents show landscaping of the new approach and public square which is in effect the gateway to theatre, but the main entry to the theatre appears understated. We would advise that some further thought may need to be given to how the new public square will be utilised, including potentially increasing external signage to the theatre;
- Splitting disabled seating across the auditorium to provide choice rather than focusing it to the rear of the stalls and circle. Consideration should be given to building places in at different locations;
- Ensure the seating is adjustable to achieve the best possible sight-lines from the seating within the slips on the circle and upper circle;
- Providing a backstage cross-over at stage level – we note one is available by moving downstairs under the stage but this is not necessarily ideal or practical for some costumed performances. If there is an opportunity to increase ceiling height at that level it would be beneficial;
- Ensuring there is sufficient wing and fly space, although we note the large backstage areas appears sufficient for the storage of equipment. However, this is only accessible from one side of the stage;
- Ensuring there are facilities for disabled changing next to the stage should it be required;
- We would appreciate it if the follow spot positions were accessible, but accept this is not always possible;
- Providing a lockable front of house office/safe storage may be necessary for operation reasons including the provision of safe cash handling as this does not appear to be shown within the plans;
- Providing a props kitchen, as none appears to be shown;

Additionally, we note an intention for the café/deli to be open all day which could be beneficial to the viability of the theatre by way of providing an additional source of income, particularly as it appears accessible from the neighbouring open space. The kitchen appears to be of ample size, and there is sufficient goods access and servicing.

The Trust would point out that the Assembly Hall Theatre can be used in flat-floor mode whereas this will not be possible within the new theatre as it is not considered to be

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required for the proposed new programming. We therefore consider there may be an ongoing role for the Assembly Hall. Whatever, these type of venues are often particularly difficult to convert to other uses without harming their special architectural or historic interest and request that we are consulted at an early stage when proposals for the Assembly Hall come forward.

The Trust's advice reflects guidance in paragraph 70 of the NPPF which provides clear guidance on the importance of safeguarding cultural facilities and states that in 'promoting healthy communities', planning decisions should 'plan positively for cultural buildings' and 'guard against the loss of cultural facilities and services'.

Overall this scheme will improve and potentially expand theatre provision in Tunbridge Wells, providing valuable cultural assets for local people. We appreciate that such a prominent site has been identified for theatre use and believe it will positively contribute to the vitality of the wider town centre. The Trust would therefore recommend approval of this development.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance.

Tom Clarke
National Planning Adviser

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