

Protecting theatres for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/9006204

21 August 2018

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

Applications: 5/2018/0157

Site: Harpenden Sports Centre Rothamsted Park Leyton Road Harpenden AL5 2HU

Proposal: Extension and alterations to existing swimming pool building to provide new learner pool, additional sports, fitness and associated facilities. Extension, alterations and change of use of existing sports centre to cultural centre, replacement depot build

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:

This application has just come to the attention of the Trust as we noticed through reviewing the St Albans City and District Council Draft Brownfield Land Register currently open for consultation that the Harpenden Public Halls had been included for potential development, which caused us concern. Further investigation led us to find the Council's intention is to provide a replacement facility on this site. As the national advisory public body for theatres and a statutory consultee within the planning system, we are disappointed that the Council has not engaged us at any stage of the development of this proposal. Although this site in isolation does not technically fall within our statutory remit because it does not already contain a theatre, we consider that it would have represented best practice to have notified us of this application given the implications on the existing facility.

The Public Halls is a facility valued by local people, and one that helps to draw people into Harpenden from a wider area which benefits other local businesses. The three pillars of sustainable development outlined in the NPPF (2018) include a social objective of supporting strong, vibrant and healthy communities, providing accessible services which help support social and cultural wellbeing. Plans should make sufficient provision for cultural infrastructure (paragraph 20), and paragraph 92 states that policies and decisions should provide the social and cultural facilities the community needs, including planning positively for the use of community facilities such as cultural buildings, and guard against unnecessary loss. Policy

Theatres Trust

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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

Intention 22 of the states that it is intention of the Council to maintain and improve entertainment and cultural facilities. It is therefore essential that if the existing Public Halls is to be lost to redevelopment, its function is adequately re-provided by this new facility.

We consider that this proposal does in large provide a suitable and enhanced replacement of the main hall. We are also generally satisfied with the overall design and layout of the new cultural centre. However, we have some comments that we recommend are addressed as set out below.

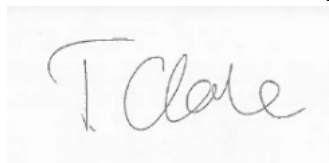
Our primary concern relates to the possible loss of the existing smaller space (around 70 seats or 100 standing) as a performance venue. Such a space would have a very different offer and purpose to the main auditorium, likely catering more to small community and amateur groups. The new facility will provide three function rooms which we welcome, and will help enhance the overall sustainability of the cultural centre by bringing in people and income at different times of day. We would recommend that at least one of those spaces, ideally 'Function Room 1' on level 1, is fitted out to be utilised as an additional performance/studio space.

It must be ensured that the auditorium complies with Part M of the Building Regulations in terms of providing sufficient wheelchair spaces as these currently aren't shown on the plans. In full seating mode there should be at least six permanent wheelchair positions but none are explicitly shown on the plans, although we assume the spaces at the front of each balcony are for wheelchairs. There are accessible dressing rooms and disabled toilets and showers for performers, but it appears the only wheelchair access to the stage is via a platform lift which has the potential to disturb performances.

We have no comment to make regarding the leisure centre aspect of this application as it is beyond our remit, although we welcome efforts to provide an attractive public space between the two buildings which helps tie them together and that general pedestrian accessibility to and through the area is being improved.

In terms of the cultural centre **we recommend the granting of planning permission**, although this is on the basis of it being completed and operational before closure of the existing Public Halls and our comments above being addressed.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or if you wish to discuss these comments.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser