

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/9006287

14 December 2018

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

Application: 18/03558/FULL

Site: 137 London Road Southborough Royal Tunbridge Wells TN4 0ND

Proposal: Demolition of existing building and erection of a new, mixed use Community Hub building comprising a community hall, library, town council offices, medical centre with associated storage, toilets and plant room space, a retail unit, new town square and the erection of a new sports pavilion and depot with associated parking and landscaping

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:

We were not consulted by the Council regarding this application despite our statutory remit as described above, our detailed engagement on this scheme and us having reminded the Council of our role after not being directly consulted previously. Please ensure the Council consults with the Trust regarding this or any other proposal concerning theatres.

The Trust **objects** to this proposal. The proposed Southborough Hub is a mixed-use community building containing a theatre amongst other community facilities, and is a replacement for the former Royal Victoria Hall on whose site the development is located. In our responses to the previous application (16/06081/HYBRID) and engagement with the applicants we have consistently raised concern at the lack of clarity for the function, role and operation of the new space and that its ongoing management had not been appropriately considered. This advice has still not been addressed.

Theatres Trust

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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

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

Moreover, the Trust only supported the replacement of the Royal Victoria Hall rather than its retention on the basis of the new theatre providing improved facilities and a better outcome for Southborough. We do not consider that condition to have been met. On that basis, the proposal is in contravention of paragraph 92 of the NPPF (2018) as the decline in quality and functionality of the site's theatre provision represents an unnecessary loss of a valued facility. Neither does it accord with aim 2 (Community buildings) of the Local Plan (2006) or Policy CS6.

For the avoidance of doubt, the Trust welcomes and supports the principle of this development as it brings together a range of cultural and community facilities. This is consistent with our previous representations. There are examples of theatres and other social infrastructure coming together and successfully co-existing elsewhere such as Chester Storyhouse. However, revisions since the original iteration of the scheme presented to us have resulted in increasingly reduced facilities, standards and ancillary space for the theatre. We now consider that the scheme will not provide a viable and sustainable theatre, and more fundamentally for Southborough neither will it provide the benefits for the local community they expected. Unless our advice is taken on board we believe Southborough will be left with a 'white elephant' rather than the beneficial facility this site could be. Although we acknowledge budgetary constraints, it is counterproductive to value engineer a scheme down to a level whereby it does not actually fulfil its required function.

We feel there is little need to offer further advice or comment in this representation on individual design matters because to date this has not been acted upon. We would however note that the plans and sections submitted are still inadequate to properly assess the auditorium in terms of capacity, sightlines and disabled provision. Most fundamentally, there is no space given over to a cafe/bar which will be necessary for the theatre's viability. Neither is there sufficient changing room provision.

We are concerned that the development is proceeding without a decision on who and how either the Hub as a whole or the theatre will be operated. Current proposals indicate that all front of house and back of house support facilities for the theatre are to be shared with other parts of the building necessitating either single ownership or a robust operational management plan. As per our previous advice, we strongly recommend the various parties involved in this project make that decision now and involve an operator as part of the design phase rather than trying to secure an operator retrospectively.

In conclusion, despite our support for the principle of this development at present we do not consider it to be a satisfactory replacement of the previous Royal Victoria Hall and have significant concerns regarding its design, sustainability and viability. Therefore it does not meet policy requirements of the Local Plan or NPPF and **we recommend the refusal of planning permission.**

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or if you wish to discuss this representation in greater detail.

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Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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