

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref: TC

25 April 2019

Emma Barral
Planning,
East Cambridgeshire District Council,
The Grange,
Nutholt Lane,
Ely,
CB7 4EE

By e-mail: plservices@eastcambs.gov.uk

Applications: 19/00505/FUL

Site: Spencer Mill Mereside Soham Ely Cambridgeshire CB7 5EE

Proposals: Full Refurbishment plus extensions to the existing Mill to create a theatre and cultural/community hub, multi use auditorium/ event space, bar/cafe/social area and stage area, with associated works and parking. Also change of use from B2 to D1, D2 and A3 uses

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 been brought to the attention of the Trust as it includes the creation of a new theatre.

We welcome this proposal which will provide a new theatre space for Soham and surrounding communities alongside new social and community space. It will be operated by Viva Arts & Community Group which is a small community theatre and arts group run by volunteers. Community facilities including cultural uses such as this are recognised by the NPPF (2019) as being beneficial to the sustainability of communities, for which policies and decisions should plan positively. They help improve social and cultural well-being, provide opportunities for people to come together, reduce isolation and help to attract and retain people within the local area. The proposal also contributes towards the Soham strategic objectives set out in the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan (2015), and accords with Policy COM 4.

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

In terms of design and layout while there are positive aspects such as wheelchair accessibility to all floors we have a number of concerns and would urge the applicant to take our comments into account to ensure the long-term sustainability and operational effectiveness of the facility. We would as a minimum strongly encourage that a specialist and experienced theatre consultant is engaged to help refine this proposal. We would be keen to provide advice and guidance to the applicant, and indeed to the Council given the specialist nature of theatre proposals.

Currently there is very limited front of house space and no obvious reception/box office space and bar/café despite A3 falling into the mix of uses proposed (we would suggest change of use to Sui Generis would be more appropriate given the mix of uses and that theatre appears to be the primary use). Although the second floor could be used for this purpose, it has less visibility and is therefore not the optimal location. This is important as compromised pre-show and interval bar sales could impact on the theatre's viability. Also, the kitchen area currently shown at second floor level is too small to be used practically for any volume of preparation which could also undermine other functions held by Viva Arts such as weddings.

Within the auditorium, sections suggest there is a great deal of volume above the indicative seating which could be used more effectively. This is compounded by a large flat floor area between the seating and the stage (which is also flat). We would suggest this could result in poor sightlines from some seats and that a solution of raising and extending the tiered bleacher seating would be more practical. With the large volume we would encourage sufficient modelling of acoustics, and it should be ensured the auditorium and stage have sufficient sound and light locks.

To the back of house area are four green rooms which we assume would actually be a mixture of a green room and dressing rooms. While this affords good flexibility given safeguarding considerations arising from the likelihood of young people performing, the small scale of the theatre and constraints mean it may be more effective to have two larger rooms and give space over for a shower and accessible WC for performers. Plans suggest the current backstage entrance might be tight for performers/staff with wheelchairs so this should be checked for compliance.

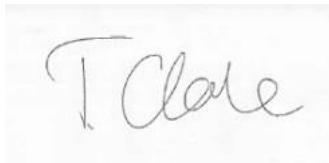
As a more fundamental alternative to the above, we would suggest some thought might be given to switching the layout of the building; there may be merit in the currently proposed auditorium within the original mill becoming the foyer/café/bar and the proposed stage area and back of house within the new extension becoming the theatre space (with enlarged extension to the north for which there seems to be ample land providing back of house facilities). Altering the layout in the manner may provide other benefits which reinforce the building's viability and function as a community asset. For example a larger foyer and café/bar space at ground floor level within the mill would enable the provision of more of an all-day offer which could bring people in outside of performances and hires, aiding viability and enhancing the role of the building as a community asset. It would also be more conducive to allowing use and hire of the second floor space for regular and one-off hires alongside performances, and could provide a

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more attractive space for weddings and discos as accompanying documents suggest are held at Viva Arts' current premises. The Transport Statement refers to ten seats and a servery at first floor level neither of which are shown on the submitted plans, so we assume that other design options have been considered.

In conclusion, despite our significant concerns regarding the design and layout of the building we are very supportive of the applicant's intentions and the principle of the development. We consider it would greatly benefit Soham and the wider area and contribute towards enhancing the social and cultural well-being of local people, restoring and bringing back to positive use an undesignated heritage asset. We therefore **recommend the granting of planning permission** to establish the acceptability of the proposed landuse and the principle of extending the building, although we strongly encourage plans to be revised before the project is taken forward.

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



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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