

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Our Ref.: TC

12 September 2019

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**Application:** DM/19/3138

**Site:** Royal British Legion Hall 30 Cyprus Road Burgess Hill West Sussex RH15 8DX

**Proposal:** Demolition of the existing Royal British Legion Club and erection of an entertainment and community venue, to include a 237-seat theatre, a multi-purpose dance/rehearsal studio, meeting rooms and dressing room/support spaces. The flexible front-of-house foyer spaces will incorporate an associated café/bar operation to support the auditorium function. There will be re-landscaping works to the north and south of the new building and to the alleyway to the east (alongside Cyprus Hall).

## **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 development which will provide a new theatre and community/cultural venue for Burgess Hill, effectively replacing the former Martlets Hall which was demolished in 2015. The site is in an accessible edge-of-centre location and within the Civic and Cultural Quarter designated within the Burgess Hill Neighbourhood Plan (2015). Policy TC1 within that document supports new community resources including an arts centre/theatre. Similarly, Policy DP7 of the

### **Theatres Trust**

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**T** 020 7836 8591 **E** [info@theatrestrust.org.uk](mailto:info@theatrestrust.org.uk) **W** [theatrestrust.org.uk](http://theatrestrust.org.uk)

**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, Ann Skippers, Anna Stapleton

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

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

Mid Sussex District Plan 2014-2031 (2018) supports new and improved community and cultural facilities within Burgess Hill and Policy DP24 is supportive more generally of development which provides new or enhanced leisure and cultural activities. Furthermore theatres and other community/cultural uses are recognised by the NPPF (2019) as being beneficial to the sustainability of communities for which policies and decisions should plan positively. Therefore we consider the principle of this proposal at this location to be policy compliant; it would help meet Strategic Objective 15 of the Mid Sussex District Plan 2014-2031 and Core Objective 3 of the Burgess Hill Neighbourhood Plan.

In terms of the design and layout of the proposed venue we are appreciative that the site is constrained by virtue of its relatively limited footprint. The capacity of the theatre – 237 seats – reflects that it will be used predominantly for small-scale, community and amateur productions and events. As such it is in any case unlikely to require significant front-of-house or backstage provision or the ability to handle large goods vehicles. Nonetheless, we consider there are matters related to function and design the applicant may wish to consider in order to enhance the future viability and sustainability of this facility and to maximise its benefits for local people.

The plans show there to be a number of wheelchair positions within the auditorium to the lower and upper ground floor and this is welcomed. However, these are single positions with no companion seating. We note that seating is flexible and removable but this could become an issue where performances are likely to be full to capacity such as pantomimes; being placed alone could undermine the enjoyment of audiences with wheelchairs and therefore make them less likely to return. Also, there is no accessible WC to the upper ground floor (this level also contains the bar/coffee shop) so a journey to the lower ground is required. This does not represent best practice. For performers there is no wheelchair access to the stage door (although backstage is accessible through the get-in) but more fundamentally the only means of accessing the backstage WC/shower is via the front-of-house lift. We would recommend that the storage space indicated on the plan is given over to a further dressing room and accessible WC/shower. Given the space afforded by the large car park to the rear we suggest there might be an opportunity to create a stand-alone storage area, or to come to agreement with the neighbouring Constitutional Club or Cyprus Hall regarding utilising space within their buildings.

On a similar note, given there are some synergies between the community function of this proposal and of Cyprus Hall we suggest some thought could be given to the sharing of facilities, for example infilling the alleyway between to create an atrium through which both could be accessed. This would have the benefit of affording greater space for toilets to all levels and to provide clearer and easier entrance and exit whether arriving from Cyprus Road or the car park to the rear. This would also avoid the need for audiences to exit through the wing and get-in, which would require careful management and monitoring from a practical and health and safety perspective as this area could be obstructed by equipment and props. At present the building's limited footprint squeezes toilets into the lower ground floor area which in turn reduces the space available to the café/bar; the whole audience would have to use the relatively limited space to the upper ground. Pre-show and interval café bar sales will be a major source of income for the facility, therefore overall viability could be undermined if the time available for audiences to purchase and consume is constrained by congestion and queues.

We would note there is also limited space for staff, for example there is just one small office.

## Protecting theatres for **everyone**



Again it might be the case that some further provision would be beneficial should the site area be increased or if facilities were shared with the neighbouring building. It should also be ensured there is sufficient acoustic control between different uses within the building.

We welcome public realm improvements including planting indicated to the front of both this building and Cyprus Hall (although we appreciate these don't form part of this application) as this will help make the area more inviting and make it appear more active when approaching along Cyprus Road. Similarly, on the basis of the current submitted proposal the improvement of the alley leading to the car park to the rear will help improve perception of safety and discourage anti-social behaviour. The potential for the café/bar to provide an 'all-day' offer outside of performance times will also help support the viability of this facility by drawing more people in and therefore improve awareness of upcoming performances and activities.

In conclusion **we support this proposal and recommend the granting of planning permission** although we would encourage the applicant to consider our comments. We would welcome further engagement as this development progresses, particularly should plans be amended.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI  
National Planning Adviser

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