

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC

23 January 2020

Development Management
4 Civic Way
Ellesmere Port
CH65 0BE

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

Application: 19/04540/FUL

Site: Whitby Hall Stanney Lane Ellesmere Port CH65 6QY

Proposal: Demolition of the main auditorium and toilet block of the existing building, with replacement auditorium, ancillary cafe and associated servicing 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:

This application has come to the attention of the Trust because it relates to development at Whitby Hall and specifically the Action Transport Theatre which has operated from the site since it was vacated by the former Ellesmere Borough Council. Whitby Hall contains a small studio theatre which this proposal is seeking to demolish and replace with a new auditorium alongside associated renovations.

Action Transport Theatre is a specialist professional young people's theatre which produces its own work both for their own theatre at Whitby Hall and to tour elsewhere. It is an Arts Council 'National Portfolio Organisation', which means it receives public investment and has a responsibility to protect and develop the arts and contribute towards the goals of the Arts Council's ten-year strategy. It provides opportunities for young people to develop their skills, and as a venue provides access to theatre and the arts for local people within Ellesmere Port and the wider Cheshire area.

Policy SOC5 of the Local Plan (Part One) Strategic Policies (2015) supports proposals which strengthen the borough's cultural offer. Policy DM39 of the Local Plan (Part Two) Land Allocations and Detailed Policies (2019) also supports improved community facilities, which is

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, Ann Skippers, Truda Spruyt, Anna Stapleton

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

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consistent with paragraph 92 of the NPPF (2019) which seeks planning decisions to plan positively for community and cultural facilities. These provide strong policy justification to support this development.

This proposal will provide a significantly enhanced auditorium compared to what is currently in place. The existing auditorium is within an adapted former Council chamber, and lacks volume of space to afford the theatre better flexibility in terms of the shows it can put on or rehearse. The new seating will be retractable which will enable different layouts and also provide the opportunity to use the space for other events, functions and private hires. This will further reinforce the role of the theatre as a community asset.

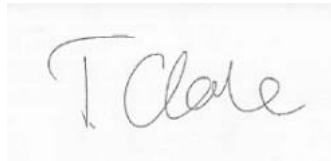
In turn the creation of an enhanced central foyer and café space alongside the auditorium will create a greater sense of arrival and help encourage more people into the building. A rearrangement of the office space will provide a secondary rehearsal studio.

Whitby Hall is itself an undesignated heritage asset which is included on the Cheshire West and Chester local list. Efforts to enhance this asset and repair existing deficiencies arising from these works are to be welcomed. Although some areas of the building will remain inaccessible to wheelchair users there is good accessibility to and through most public areas of the building and the relocation of office accommodation means that staff areas and back of house facilities will be accessible to a greater extent than is currently the case.

We also consider the overall design approach and materials to be appropriate, creating a distinctive juxtaposition between the contemporary auditorium and the historic character of Whitby Hall within the wider setting of Whitby Park. The proposal will provide wider animation and activation of its immediate surroundings such as through better use of the external terrace.

In conclusion this proposal will significantly enhance the Action Transport Theatre's facilities which in turn will support the ongoing development of the organisation and the positive work it undertakes with young people. In turn this will improve cultural provision within the area and benefit the wider setting of the park and the preservation of Whitby Hall as a locally listed heritage asset. We therefore **recommend the granting of planning permission.**

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments further.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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