

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1195

21 February 2020

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By e-mail: planning.northern@shropshire.gov.uk

Applications: 20/00376/COU

Site: Wightman Hall 14A The Square Shrewsbury SY1 1LH

Proposals: Change of use of ground floor to B1 from D2 (Theatre/venue hire)

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 as it involves change of use from a theatre. We have not been directly consulted despite this application falling within our remit as a statutory consultee.

According to our records Wightman Hall opened as The Working Men's Hall in 1863. It was described as an assembly hall providing a lecture hall and restaurant. It was converted to a repertory theatre from the 1940s and was the home to Shrewsbury Repertory Company, although it appears performance use substantially pre-dated that as it was described as being used for "entertainment purposes" until the mid-1930s. In 1993 the Trust was consulted by the former Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council on a change of use from "redundant theatre to antiques market". Concern was expressed at the loss of the building as a theatre, particularly the removal of the stage as it was considered this could have been retained and used by the

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, 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

applicant. Nonetheless with the building not listed there was nothing to prevent such alteration.

Theatre use returned in 2015 with the site becoming The Wightman Theatre. It had a capacity of about 180 seats. The venue appears to have been well received and supported. However it closed in late July 2019 reportedly due to ill health of its operator.

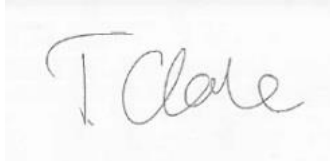
Strategic Objective 12 of the Shropshire Local Development Framework: Adopted Core Strategy (2011) seeks to improve the quantity, quality and accessibility of cultural facilities to provide opportunities for people of all ages to enjoy cultural activities. Policy CS8 seeks to protect existing facilities. Paragraph 92 of the NPPF (2019) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for community facilities including cultural buildings and to guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities. Therefore to accord with those policies we would expect demonstration that the site is surplus to requirements for theatre or other cultural use, for example through submission of marketing information.

There is no such information submitted with this application. The capacity of the theatre is lower than that of Theatre Severn's smaller auditorium the Walker Theatre and the Ashton Theatre at Shrewsbury School. As such it could meet a need catering to smaller productions and local groups. Furthermore continued theatre/performance use would contribute towards the diversity of uses within the town centre, helping support its overall function. The importance of cultural facilities in bringing people into town centres and supporting other businesses is increasingly being recognised.

The principle of office (B1) use in this space could potentially offer scope for future return to cultural use, but we would be unable to support this proposal unless evidence is provided demonstrating continued theatre/cultural use is no longer required.

Therefore at present we **object** to this proposal and **recommend that change of use is refused**.

Please contact the Trust if you wish to discuss this representation in more detail.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T'.

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser