

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/3099

12 May 2021

Marc Pullen
South Oxfordshire District Council
135 Eastern Avenue
Milton Park
Abingdon
OX14 4SB

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

Application: P21/S1298/FUL

Site: The Mill at Sonning (Theatre) Ltd Sonning Eye RG4 6TY

Proposal: Replacement of existing rehearsal/accommodation building to form two dwellings

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 seeks development at The Mill, seeking to convert part of the building used for rehearsals into residential units.

The Mill is a unique theatre as it was set up as the only 'dinner theatre' in the UK whereby tickets included a meal, and that concept remains today. It is a producing theatre and provides opportunities for local people to gain experience in theatre. It is a valued cultural and social asset, and due to the nature of its offer it also draws visitors into the area. Paragraph 92 of the NPPF (2019) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for this type of facility.

It is proposed that the theatre's rehearsal block will be converted to residential accommodation, providing two dwellings. This is in effect enabling development which will support the theatre's primary function as a cultural venue. Whilst in principle this is something that can be supported, we are generally cautious where residential uses are proposed alongside existing theatres and other such noise-generating venues. Paragraph 182 of the NPPF emphasises the need for development to protect existing uses.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

T 020 7836 8591 **E** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **W** theatrestrust.org.uk

Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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

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In this case the theatre's workshop provides a buffer between the theatre and the new dwellings, therefore disturbance from performances (and servicing such as delivery/removal of sets and equipment) is less a concern. Potentially there could be disruption to future occupants from activities within the workshop given it is likely to have the characteristics of an industrial use, although these are perhaps less likely to occur outside of 'normal' working hours (although there is potential for some evening and weekend working, especially if there is involvement of volunteers). The applicant notes that acoustic measures will exceed 'standard requirements' and we suggest this is conditioned to safeguard the theatre's activities into the future and protect it from complaints and restrictions being imposed on it.

Although sympathetic to the theatre's need to review its options to ensure it will be sustained into the future, particularly given the extreme challenges arising from the pandemic, it must be careful not to undermine its future viability. The rehearsal space constitutes part of the theatre's cultural and social offer and this will be lost; it is also potentially a source of income for the theatre if open to outside groups. It is stated in the Planning Statement that all rehearsals take place on the premises and that new accommodation for visiting artists will be found in the local area and that rehearsal space will need to be found in other halls and venues. Although presented as a benefit for the local economy, this will add cost and complexity to the theatre's operation and reduce its flexibility. Therefore its business plan must be robust and give satisfaction that the overall financial receipts from the new dwellings will sufficiently offset future costs and operational limitations. The Trust can provide free advice to the theatre on matters such as business development and fundraising.

In conclusion we do not object to this proposal and note there has been a previous lapsed consent. We are keen to see The Mill continue to thrive as Covid-19 restrictions are eased but urge the theatre to carefully consider the potential implications we have identified.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss this representation further.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke".

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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