

Ref.: TC

23 June 2021

Robert Morrell
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Riverside House
Main Street
Rotherham
S60 1AE

By email: planning@rotherham.gov.uk

Application: RB2021/0981

Site: Mecca Bingo Corporation Street Rotherham Town Centre 9999

Proposal: Demolition of existing building and erection of a 5-storey building with 3 No. ground floor commercial units (use class E(a)) and 45 No. apartments above with ancillary works

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 through press reports. The site is a former cine-variety theatre currently in bingo use but vacant following Mecca withdrawing after enforced closure by Covid-19 restrictions and having sold the building. It is proposed that it is demolished and redeveloped for a residential-led scheme. We have not been formally notified.

The site opened as the Regal in 1934. It was equipped with a stage, dressing rooms and a restaurant which later became a ballroom. It had a capacity of 1,825 seats. It was renamed to the Odeon in 1946 and then the Scala in 1975. Organ recitals took place throughout and there were occasional live shows, particularly towards the end of the 1970s. Cinema use ceased in 1983 after which it switched to bingo use as was common with cinemas and theatres. Such conversions also tended to be sensitive to original character and function with minimal alteration and potential for future reversibility. The organ has since been removed and more recently acquired by a trust. Bingo use ceased in March 2020; the building did not re-open when full Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed but this is not unusual as many cultural and leisure facilities have remained closed or only with very limited opening throughout the pandemic.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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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

Bingo halls are community and cultural facilities which means there is an onus on applicants to demonstrate they are surplus to requirements before change of use can occur; paragraph 92 of the NPPF (2019) guards against unnecessary loss. This is notwithstanding any heritage implications.

Policy SP62 of the Local Plan Sites and Policies (2018) safeguards community facilities, which includes cultural facilities such as bingo halls. It only permits loss where there is satisfaction alternative provision has been made or where there is overriding public benefit resulting from the loss of the facility. Neither of these would seem to apply. Lack of viability must therefore be demonstrated which includes twelve months of satisfactory marketing effort at an appropriate value with attractive terms; with the building having been acquired recently insufficient time has passed for such effort to have been undertaken (parts d, f and g.). Neither has it been demonstrated that opportunities to re-let under alternative community management have been undertaken (part e). Therefore change of use and loss of this facility is contrary to local and national policy.

Further, this site is a non-designated heritage asset directly adjacent to the Rotherham Conservation Area. We believe the building to be in good condition with original features and decoration retained and this is reflected by the applicant's Heritage Statement. Consistent with the Policy SP62 need to consider alternative options, Policy CS23.a.v encourages suitable new uses for vacant and under-used historic buildings. The Core Strategy (2014) seeks new entertainment, leisure and cultural uses. If bingo use is no longer required a purpose-built site would seem to be an opportunity to meet such needs, particularly given the environmental sustainability implications of demolition and reconstruction.

Policy SP41 has a presumption in favour of retention of buildings which make a positive contribution and states permission for demolition will not be granted unless there is no realistic prospect of continuation of current or suitable alternative use or the building is in poor condition. Clearly the building is not in a poor condition and alternative use has not been tested as per our comments above. The final part of the Policy SP41, part iii, gives some flexibility where a redevelopment proposal would preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. It is not clear how the proposed development would achieve this over and above the existing building. Therefore neither does this proposal accord with local or national policy on heritage, with particular reference to NPPF paragraph 192 a. and b. and paragraph 197.

As a town centre site, it must be acknowledged this site is in a sustainable location for housing. However the overarching objectives of sustainable development laid out within the NPPF also include economic and social objectives. Taking a holistic view of the town centre and its future vitality it is clear that social, cultural and leisure facilities that will play an increasingly important role in bringing people into centres and sustaining footfall for the benefit of other businesses and the wider economy. This is reflected by the openness to and promotion of such uses within the adopted plan. It is also important that current and future needs for accessible services are met

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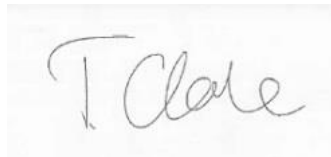
which support social and cultural well-being. Once a venue of this size and volume is lost it is challenging and costly to re-provide an alternative. With there being a number of vacancies within the town centre there is questionable merit in providing further smaller units as a replacement for a large cultural space. Paragraph 2.3 of the Planning Statement sets out that residential conversion of the existing building has been deemed not viable, but there is no substantiation of this or that alternative options for alternative use retaining the building have been explored. This is repeated within the Design & Access Statement.

Whilst this building saw limited live performance use, it was nonetheless an active community and cultural facility up until Covid-19 restrictions were introduced. There are many venues across the country that have yet to re-open; some have not been allowed to, for others it is not sustainable with limitations and some have been left vacant by the withdrawal or collapse of their operators as is the case here. That does not mean need and demand for those venues has been extinguished and extreme caution must be taken before allowing them to be permanently lost. The Ministerial Statement of 14th July 2020 was restricted by its wording to theatres, concert halls and live music venues but the premise is consistent with this proposal and other similar uses. The bingo hall was forcibly closed and there is no evidence it is no longer required. Neither is there any evidence that effort has been made to seek alternative community, cultural or social use or to retain the building as a non-designated heritage asset. We would note that across the UK a number of leisure uses have been coming forward within town centres which could potentially utilise a building of this scale, across both chains and independent operators, so it is unclear why there is no appraisal or attempt to consider such options.

Therefore due to the loss of a cultural facility without evidence, complete loss of a non-designated heritage asset without proper substantiation and conflict with relevant policy we currently object to this proposal and recommend that planning permission is refused. We suggest that a robust marketing exercise for the appropriate period is undertaken to make certain the building is surplus to requirements for community/cultural or other compatible use, and proper explanation is given to explain why retention of the existing building is not viable. Should the Council be minded to grant permission we urge inclusion of a recording condition as the applicant's Heritage Statement suggests.

Given the building's substantial cinema use we would also urge that Cinema Theatre Association are consulted on this application.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments in more detail.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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