

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/

01 July 2021

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

Application: CB/21/02657/LB

Site: 36 High Street, Biggleswade, SG18 0JL

Proposal: Listed Building: removal of partition, glass upstands, clock mechanism boxing, stair platform and treads to lower level. Install new front and back bar, drop floor and door for new toilet, block up openings, alignment of front door and remodel treads. Remove kitchen and install new partitioning and doors. Remove toilet cubicles and partitioning and alter layout with new toilet and partitioning to first floor toilet area.

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 for listed building consent has come to the attention of the Trust through a newspaper story as it is proposing to convert the building to theatre use.

The unit is currently vacant since the departure of Pizza Express in 2020. Town centres across the UK have faced increasing challenge in recent years, exacerbated by the pandemic which has seen further high-profile failures and a number of chains in the retail and hospitality sectors have closed branches. Smaller town centres such as Biggleswade have been particularly vulnerable to retrenchment, though centres of all sizes have varying levels of vacancy. Vacancy can instigate a cycle of further decline because if centres fail to meet the needs of their populations and users the less footfall is generated which undermines further businesses.

Theatres Trust

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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

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Cultural facilities such as theatres are increasingly being recognised as vital for arresting decline and encouraging activity within town centres because they generate footfall and spend in other businesses. Some local authorities have placed theatres as central to their town centre regeneration and development projects.

Therefore this proposal is to be welcomed, particularly as Biggleswade currently has no theatre or cinema. The proposed capacity is realistic for a town of Biggleswade's size and the stated intention to provide a varied programme across plays, live music, comedy and cinema would ensure the facility catered to a wide section of the local community. Cultural facilities are recognised as being beneficial for social and cultural well-being, allowing people to come together and engage and participate in the arts. The relatively low capacity is likely to cater well to local amateur groups and new producers and works.

It is stated within the supporting documentation that the alterations subject to this application relate to more recent interventions and do not harm the building's special character. Aside from bringing this heritage asset back into active use there are in any case public benefits associated with this proposal and we would suggest that as a former Town Hall a theatre represents an alternative viable use, potentially the optimum viable use.

Therefore we are supportive of the granting of listed building consent.

Consent for change of use to a theatre or arts centre (both Sui Generis) would also be required and would be beneficial for the applicant, and would be supported by the Trust. There does not currently appear to be such an application. Advertisement consent may also be required. The Trust is a source of free advice for theatres including prospective operators and the applicant is welcome to contact us should they require any assistance.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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