

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/621

05 October 2021

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By e-mail: development.control@dudley.gov.uk

Application: P21/1505

Site: Former Hippodrome and adjacent land and buildings, Castle Hill, Dudley

Proposal: Demolition of existing buildings and redevelopment for a higher education facility together with associated access, car parking 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:

Thank you for further consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission for the demolition of the Hippodrome following submission of further information from the applicant.

It is clear from the points made within the cover letter from Delta Planning in response to the comments of the Trust and Twentieth Century Society that significant disagreement between our respective parties remains with regards to heritage matters. Neither does the additional marketing information sufficiently evidence the Hippodrome's redundancy as a social and cultural facility.

The information relating to the leasing of the Hippodrome for a five year period from December 2019 by Black Country Hippodrome Ltd (BCHL) is selective in its content. It fails to mention that a five-year lease period is too short a timescale for a restoration project particularly in relation to fundraising as most capital funders will require the security of at least twenty years for a lease. Efforts to identify funding opportunities were undermined by the council seeking to demolish the

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Interim Chair Paddy Dillon Director Jon Morgan

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building with a planning application having been submitted at the time. Political support is essential for the success of major capital works projects of this nature and funding successes. The plans for demolition were not only contrary to the leasing of the building but would have adversely affected any funding discussions that the BCHL were having. The application to demolish was withdrawn only after objection from Theatres Trust and BCHL. In addition, the lease also contained onerous key milestones for the BCHL linked to break clauses. Factors outside the control of the community group surrounding the discovery of asbestos and a subsequent Council decision to disallow the group entry to the building brought additional problems in meeting already difficult targets which ultimately resulted in the termination of the lease.

It must be noted that the above action by the Council contrasts with the support offered to the Driverless Vehicle Consortium in 2018, whereby twelve months was offered (subsequently further extended) to work up its business plan and fundraising strategy with officer support provided to help develop the proposals.

Theatres Trust has met with the Council several times over the last few years to discuss both the Hippodrome and the wider issue of culture within Dudley. We have strongly encouraged the Council on all occasions to consider the opportunities provided by the Hippodrome. At a meeting earlier this year the topic of venues that offer a mix of music, comedy, theatre and other events such as conferencing, sports events and the emerging e-sports market was discussed. Examples of other vacant historic venues that had been restored back to such uses, for example Stockton Globe, were provided. We highlighted our contact with a national operator regarding the Hippodrome who had suggested that they may be interested in the venue for a similar multi-purpose use. It is disappointing the Council does not appear to have sought to progress such discussions or proactively engaged with other compatible operators, or undertaken a feasibility or viability study.

We understand that an offer of carrying out a viability study had been committed to by the Council's leader but with award of Towns Fund investment this offer was withdrawn without having been commenced. Such a study would have been able to substantiate the Council's position if correct that no compatible viable use can be found for the building, disproving our contentions regarding the merits and opportunities of retaining the Hippodrome and making it appropriate for our objections on those grounds to be withdrawn. As it stands the additional information provided does nothing to address the points from our previous letter with regards to evidence; activities undertaken by the Council referenced within the additional submission are largely now out-of-date. We maintain our position that there is potentially a compatible and viable opportunity to return the Hippodrome to performance use and this is evidenced by recent Council-supported schemes across England.

We again highlight that demolition creates significant conflict with the Council's Declaration of a Climate Emergency for Dudley.

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In conclusion we maintain our strong object to this application and continue to recommend that planning permission is refused.

Please continue to engage with us should plans be revised or if further information is submitted.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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