

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC

29 April 2022

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By e-mail: planning.applications@kent.gov.uk

Application: KCC/DO/0062/2022

Site: Dover Discovery Centre, Market Square, Dover, Kent CT16 1PH

Proposal: Proposed refurbishment and upgrading of Dover Discovery Centre including internal alterations, new external access ramp and entrance, replacement of the conservatory roofs with solid panels, new windows in the rotunda, additional glazing to the ground floor and repairs to curtain walling, roof repairs and louvre screens to new roof plant and railings

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 consulting Theatres Trust regarding this application for planning permission at Dover Discovery Centre for various internal and external alterations. We have been consulted because this site includes the Roundhouse Theatre, which would be lost for conversion to office space for the Council's children's services department.

The Roundhouse is on the Trust's national Theatres at Risk register having been added this year. This is due to immediate threat arising from the plans of Kent County Council and Dover District Council to relocate other services into the building and terminate the informal lease held by the theatre's operator Blackfish Academy. This is such a high priority case for us because apart from it leaving the operator homeless, it will leave Dover without a theatre. The theatre is a designated Asset of Community Value (ACV) signifying its importance to the social and cultural

Theatres Trust

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

Chair Dave Moutrey **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Paul Cartwright, James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Lucy Osborne, 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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wellbeing of local people. There is a strong desire to see it retained.

The Discovery Centre was built in the late 1980s as a multi-purpose civic centre including library, registry office, museum and adult education service. The Roundhouse occupies the rotunda to its north-west end at first to third floor levels. The theatre has 100 seats and since 2005 has been home to the Black Fish Academy for the Performing Arts as well as other regular users including local amateur and youth groups. As well as producing theatre Black Fish is also a professional training organisation for the performing arts. As such the theatre was well used and played an important role as a facility for the community, demonstrated by its ACV nomination and widely-signed petition against redevelopment. As a theatre it is technically well-equipped.

Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) guards against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities. It is clear that there is need and demand for the theatre. We disagree with the assertion within paragraph 2.6 of the Planning Statement that the theatre is underutilised. The absence of a formal leasehold agreement noted within paragraph 6.18 should be disregarded as justification for loss as it is not relevant and fully within the control of the applicant; it can be alternatively argued a more secure lease would afford greater certainty for operators which would result in longer-term programming and investment. Whilst relocation of Council staff may provide some operational benefits for the Council, when measured against the loss of a valued facility and function this cannot be considered as a public benefit. Therefore we are opposed to this scheme.

Although the Roundhouse is a valued cultural facility we note the Council's comments that the space has limitations and is not ideal as a theatre as it lacks facilities such as foyers and dedicated front of house areas. While these are issues that could potentially be resolved in the internal re-planning of the building this could only be achieved though taking space from other users of the building. We therefore would be receptive to an alternative approach whereby a suitable replacement facility is identified and provided within Dover prior to commencement of works at the existing site. This solution is alluded to within the Planning Statement whereby it is stated, "Kent County Council are supporting the Theatre groups who have used the Roundhouse Theatre, to try and identify a more suitable alternative venue for their future use to enable more effective use of this space". However this provides no secured commitment and any gap in provision would still be detrimental to local groups and users of the Roundhouse. We have seen similar examples elsewhere which have resulted in groups disbanding and audiences being lost. This is detrimental to social and cultural well-being. Furthermore the economic merits of theatres and other such performance and cultural facilities in supporting the mix and vitality of town centres is increasingly being recognised. There is strategic advantage for the Council in retaining theatre function.

In conclusion we **object** to this application. We would only be able to support loss of the Roundhouse Theatre if alternative provision within Dover of sufficient standard is secured by condition. We are keen to engage positively with the Council to find a way forward.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments further.

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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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