

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1383

03 August 2022

Teignbridge District Council
Forde House
Brunel Road
Newton Abbot
Devon
TQ12 4XX

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

Application: 22/01129/MAJ

Site: 17-19 Market Walk Newton Abbot Devon TQ12 2RX

Proposal: Demolition of existing buildings, erection of four screen cinema building on upper levels with two Class E(a, b) units on the ground floor, associated ancillary accommodation and external works

Remit:

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 planning permission has come to her attention of the Trust because it is seeking demolition of existing structures and construction of a new cinema immediately adjacent to the Alexandra Theatre.

The Alexandra is a Grade II listed heritage asset which opened in 1871 as the Corn Exchange, providing a venue for entertainment and lectures. It was later converted to full theatre use in 1900 with proscenium arch, stage and three dressing rooms. In 1920 there were further alterations with its windows being bricked to accommodate films, then in 1927 a balcony was added and in the 1930s the entrance was re-modelled to provide a box office and foyer. In 1996 the balcony was converted to a smaller second screen but the stalls, stage and back of house were retained. Theatre continued to be offered for a three week period each year, including an annual pantomime, under an agreement. Architecturally the Alexandra is constructed in Devonian limestone with a tower to the front. To the rear it adjoins the Market Hall. Internally within the auditorium the balcony-fronts are decorated with plaster garlands and the walls are

Theatres Trust

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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

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draped with soft furnishings and lighting.

Under widely publicised plans the Alexandra has been part of a Future High Streets Fund bid which would see it converted and integrated into the market behind. There would be a purpose-built cinema on a different site as a replacement, which is the subject of this application, and theatre provision within the town would be lost. We have significant concerns about those plans as we believe there is need and demand for a venue for theatre, live performance and other such events within the town. Furthermore we do not consider there to have been sufficient appraisal and justification to date of the substantial harm to a designated heritage asset that would arise from part-demolition, substantial alteration and change of use. This has been articulated to the Council and we have since held positive discussions with the project team. We are also aware of community opposition and local groups have also been in contact with us. We note that it appears from the meeting of Full Council on 26th July 2022 that plans for the Alexandra are being delayed for re-consideration of options. This is welcomed and we hope the Council will continue to engage with us in the coming months.

In terms of this application specifically it falls within our interest on two points; what it means for future theatre provision in Newton Abbot through the cinema offer of the Alexandra vacating, and the impact the cinema development will have on the Alexandra and its setting.

We have no objection to the principle of a dedicated cinema within Newton Abbot or to redevelopment on this site. However, as cited above, in this instance the cinema and theatre are currently co-located so the departure of one, particularly being the dominant use, compromises continued availability of the other. Whilst current theatre provision is low due to the restrictive duration under the current agreement we believe there is realistic opportunity for it to be expanded and that this would have positive impact on the offer and vitality of the town centre and for the social and cultural wellbeing of local people. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to guard against the loss of valued facilities and services. Therefore we urge the Council to continue to engage positively and to explore alternative opportunities for the Alexandra as indicated at the recent meeting of Full Council.

Following demolition the new development would see the introduction of a pedestrian link along the outside of the Alexandra into Market Walk. On the premise of the Alexandra remaining in performance and community use into the future we would be supportive of this approach as it will enhance connectivity and footfall from the south which will benefit the Alexandra. It would also appear to reinstate some degree of historic access as shown on a plan from 1890 within the Heritage Statement.

We are however concerned that the design and massing of the new cinema has a negative impact on the significance and setting of the Alexandra as a heritage asset. Whilst its north-east elevation reads well with the neighbouring retail units it is out of proportion with the Alexandra. From the south, the main entrance to the theatre, the massing and bold design of the new cinema will dominate the Alexandra. The proximity of the overhanging upper box element of the new building to the theatre and its lower, more delicately sloping roofline is of particular concern.

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We do not believe there to be a case made demonstrating clear and convincing justification for this harm to significance as sought by paragraph 200 of the NPPF (2018).

We believe that there is a real opportunity for the new cinema to respond more sympathetically to the listed building and for the two buildings to work together to create a new and welcoming public realm to the south that will be inviting to audience members to both buildings. We therefore urge review of the design of the cinema to ensure the setting and significance of the Alexandra is conserved and that the architectural response takes into account and responds to the ambition for the Alexandra to continue in cultural use as a theatre, and realises the positive opportunity that the buildings together can create with regards new external space.

In conclusion we do not object to this development in principle, but urge a positive strategy for retention of live performance and associated activities at the Alexandra and for re-consideration of design to ensure it better responds to the historic and architectural significance of the neighbouring Alexandra as a heritage asset.

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

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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