

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/9004205

19 August 2022

East Herts Council
Wallfields
Pegs Lane
Hertford
SG13 8EQ

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

Application: 3/22/1506/FUL

Site: The Little Theatre Balfour Street Hertford Hertfordshire SG14 3AX

Proposal: Construction of a single storey extension to provide an enlarged foyer, new and improved sanitary accommodation, additional backstage facilities, and improved access and facilities for disabled persons

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 the Little Theatre, Hertford. It seeks an extension to the building. We met with the applicant earlier this year to discuss their plans.

The Little Theatre is a valued arts and cultural facility which is owned and operated by a local group The Company of Players and its members. It is within a converted former schoolhouse that was built in 1868 and is a non-designated heritage asset within the Hertford Conservation Area. It was purchased in 1972 following the money being put up by a donor and converted utilising profits from housing which was built adjacent. The theatre has a capacity of 63 with a small foyer, workshop and back of house facilities. It runs around five of its own productions each year and is also utilised for rehearsals and other society activities with some external shows and events. Facilities such as this are important for the social and cultural wellbeing of local people, enabling access and participation in the arts and providing opportunities for people to meet, volunteer and learn new skills. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2022) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
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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Like other small amateur and community run theatres it has constraints and does not always meet modern standards or the requirements of audiences, for example it has very limited wheelchair accessibility, it has insufficient dressing rooms which means on safeguarding grounds children are change and there remains a lack of WCs and foyer space for audiences even despite a previous extension. Currently the venue's role as a social and cultural asset for the community is being undermined by its lack of inclusivity. This is driving the need and rationale for the project, articulated within the Design & Access Statement. Efforts to develop additional facilities are to be welcomed and will support the theatre's ongoing success and sustainability.

The proposed plans would appear to meet the project brief. The foyer would be substantially increased which means not only would there be greater room and comfort for audiences and circulation when towards show capacity but it would be more conducive for use for rehearsals, social functions and possibly some additional external hire which could further generate income. This area would be directly served by WCs including an accessible WC. Back of house would be made accessible including provision of what appears to be an accessible WC. The workshop area would be increased and the back of house can be reached without crossing over the auditorium.

Although not shown on the plans we assume that there will be dividers in back of house areas and flexibility as to how some spaces such as storage areas are utilised in order to enable different dressing rooms to be created to meet safeguarding requirements. This is mentioned within paragraph 3.01 of the applicant's statement but not directly shown, although this is an internal arrangement matter that would not impact on the granting of planning permission.

In terms of design, we welcome the applicant's approach. We consider the extension to be sensitive to the existing building's character and its wider setting within the conservation area. The project would see the removal of poor quality later 'temporary' additions. As the applicant notes, the degree of harm arising from alteration is mitigated by the substantial public benefits that would be generated through improving the theatre's accessibility, function and flexibility to meet the needs of the community. Policy CFLR7.III of the East Herts District Plan (2018) supports proposals for enhanced community facilities.

Therefore we are supportive of the granting of planning permission.

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

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "T Clarke".

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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