

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1695

24 February 2023

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Staffordshire County Council
2 Staffordshire Place
Stafford
ST16 2DH

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

Application: 22/36444/OUT

Site: Stafford Snooker Club Ltd 25 Sandon Road Stafford Staffordshire ST16

Proposal: Demolition of existing buildings. Redevelopment for affordable housing including parking new access and associated works. (Access, scale and layout unreserved)

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 outline planning permission has come to the attention of the Trust because it is seeking demolition of the Sandonia Theatre. We have not been formally notified despite this application falling within our statutory remit as described above.

The Sandonia opened as a theatre in 1920 but by 1923 was predominantly a cinema with some live performances continuing. In common with many other theatres and cinemas across the country it was converted to bingo use in the 1960s. By 1991 the stalls were utilised as a snooker hall during which time a false ceiling was inserted between the stalls and the circle above, splitting the auditorium. The building is long and narrow with a grand white stone façade with semi-circular arch and circular windows either side with a garland and figure above each. Historic England guidance on listing selection for Culture and Entertainment Buildings (2017) notes that theatres built after 1914 were "deliberately limited (in) their decoration" so the elaborate frontage of the Sandonia makes it unusual. To each side of the foyer were small shops.

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

It was a well-equipped theatre with fly tower and eight dressing rooms. The auditorium had a long barrel-vaulted ceiling with parallel ribs which in later years was masked above the false ceiling. The proscenium arch was decorated with a large plaster motif depicting two female figures and the circle front showed Staffordshire knots. This type of design reflects early purpose-built cinemas of the few years preceding World War I, so the Sandonia is also unusual in that respect having been apparently purposed foremost as a theatre demonstrated by its significant theatrical infrastructure and early programme. Furthermore it was a time of little money for new theatre projects, especially of a larger scale and outside of London.

The snooker hall closed around twenty years ago and the Sandonia has been vacant and in an increasingly deteriorating state since. This has been exacerbated by the illegal commencement of demolition works in 2021 which left parts of the building including the proscenium open to the elements. Images available of the proscenium also help emphasise how unusually narrow the building was considering its large capacity of 1,200. The Sandonia's front façade remains largely intact. It is a positive contributor to local townscape and character and is well regarded by local people, demonstrated by the high numbers of objections to the previous application. It is a non-designated heritage asset which would be worthy of inclusion on a local heritage list were the Council to draft one.

Like the previous 2021 application this proposal seeks the complete loss of the Sandonia for which no justification or evidence of attempts to consider re-use of at least the more significant foyer block are provided. Paragraph 194 of the NPPF requires applicants to describe the significance of heritage assets affected by development including contribution to their setting. This is reflected within Policy N9 of the Plan for Stafford Borough (2014). The applicant again fails on this test as only very brief information has been provided which makes no reference or assessment of heritage matters, other than an archaeological report. In this instance we contend that NPPF paragraph 196 should also be a material consideration because the illegal actions of the applicant have resulted in deliberate damage to the building which has impacted remaining features of significance and reduced options for full retention of the building.

The Sandonia was built as a theatre and although such use was only dominant for a relatively limited period after opening it remained in social and cultural use right up until its closure. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF guards against the loss of facilities. Evidence should also be provided to demonstrate that efforts to identify potential social, cultural and community use of this site have failed, particularly as we are aware of community interest in this building. Even if redevelopment for alternative uses is demonstrably the only realistic option for this site there is compelling merit in retaining at least the front façade of this building. This must be explored further and alternative options for this site put forward before a decision is made on any irreversible demolition works.

In conclusion we again strongly object to these proposals and urge the refusal of planning permission.

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If the Council is minded to grant permission for demolition, we request a detailed written and photographic recording condition for which Theatres Trust and other relevant consultees are consulted prior to discharge.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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