

Protecting theatres
for **everyone**



Ref.: TC

19 May 2023

Sukhjeevan Bains
Planning Department
Place & Economy Directorate
West Northamptonshire Council
Northampton Area Office
Guildhall
St Giles Square
Northampton
NN1 1DE

By e-mail: planning.nbc@westnorthants.gov.uk

Application: WNN/2023/0375

Site: 110 WHITWORTH ROAD, NORTHAMPTON, NN1 4HJ

Proposal: CONVERSION FROM DANCE HALL (SUI GENERIS) TO 7NO
RESIDENTIAL APARTMENTS (USE CLASS C3)

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:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on this planning application. It seeks conversion and change of use of Open Stage Performing Arts to residential use.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

Telephone 020 7836 8591 **Email** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **Website** theatrestrust.org.uk **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

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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Open Stage Performing Arts occupies a hall to the rear of 110 Whitworth Road. The hall appears to date from the end of the nineteenth century and was originally the Conservative Working Men's Club, marked within the decorative relief to the front gable end. Internally we understand the building to be equipped with a raked stage and other features dating to the early part of the twentieth century. There is not currently a Local Heritage List within Northampton, but we consider this building worthy of inclusion and it would nonetheless constitute a non-designated heritage asset.

Open Stage is a performing arts company which offers classes and workshops across a range of dance and theatre disciplines for children and adults. It also has wider community provision, and the building is available to hire for events. Importantly in terms of our remit, the building also functions as a theatre. The recent programme has included the operator's own productions, live events and some external touring shows.

As such this building constitutes a community and cultural facility, for which paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) states planning decisions should plan positively and for and guard against unnecessary loss. Policy RC2 of the West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy Local Plan (Part 1) (2014) resists loss of existing community facilities unless it can be demonstrated there is evidence that improvements can be made through provision of a replacement facility or equal or better quality or the proposal brings about community benefits which outweigh the loss. Policy CRC5.B of the Northampton Local Plan Part 2 2011 – 2029 (2023) further expands on this, stating loss of a community facility which is well used and valued will only be acceptable where adequate alternative provision exists within 800m walking distance and all reasonable efforts have been made to preserve the facility but retention would not be viable or feasible.

This facility is clearly well-used and valued by local people, indicated not just by the demonstrable activity which occurs within the building but that Theatres Trust was contacted prior to the Council's formal notification to us for comment. There do not appear to have been any efforts to preserve this facility and no justification or evidence is provided to support its loss. Therefore it is contrary to local and national policy on protection of facilities.

This is further compounded by the nature of housing proposed which is largely single-aspect (two units have roof-lights only) studios. These fall outside of the assessed need for Northampton outlined within the West Northamptonshire Housing Market Evidence 2017, which informed the very recently adopted Local Plan, and are

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below the total room requirements for one-bedroom properties. With reference to the second criteria of Policy RC2, even if the applicant were to argue that provision of housing constitutes a community benefit this proposal fails because it is of a type for which there is no demonstrable requirement and would not deliver optimum living conditions for occupants.

Paragraph 203 of the NPPF seeks the effect on significance of a non-designated heritage asset to be taken into account. We contend this proposal causes some harm to the asset, not least what appears from the proposed elevation drawings to be an insensitive removal and bricking up of the current main entrance which would unnecessarily obscure the arch. It is to be assumed most and possibly all internal historic features would be lost, but this cannot be ascertained because the applicant has provided no information in this regard. We would encourage retention where practical, but the applicant's approach should be explained and justified so that significance can be better understood. If the Council is minded to grant permission for this scheme, we urge inclusion of a recording condition so that the building and its features can be documented.

In conclusion this proposal would result in the loss of a valued community and cultural facility and would cause harm to a non-designated heritage asset, all without justification and evidence. Therefore it is contrary to relevant policy. We object to the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss this representation in greater detail.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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