

Protecting theatres
for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/2823

26 July 2023

Mr S Davis
Arun District Council
Arun Civic Centre
Maltravers Road
Littlehampton
West Sussex
BN17 5LF

By e-mail: planning.responses@arun.gov.uk

Application: BR/142/23/PL

Site: Regis Centre and adjoining land Belmont Street Bognor Regis PO21 1BL

Proposal: Application under Regulation 3 of the Town & Country Planning Act (General Regulations) 1992 for partial demolition of existing theatre and erection of extension to provide new studio/performance space, cafe/bar/restaurant, foyer, back of house space, outside seating area, new and replacement landscaping and new plant on roof space. This application may affect the setting of listed buildings and is in CIL Zone 4 (Zero Rated) as other development.

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'.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

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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

Comment:

Thank you consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission at the Regis Centre, which contains the Alexandra Theatre. It seeks to partially demolish and extend the building to provide a new studio space along with enhanced front and back of house facilities for the theatre. We have been engaged on this scheme at pre-application stage, and visited the theatre in 2018. We also held a meeting with the applicant's consultant after having been consulted on this application in order to clarify and better understand some of the design approaches and functions of the proposal.

The Regis Centre occupies the site of the former Kursaal and Theatre Royal, an Edwardian entertainment complex which had included a main auditorium along with two additional performance spaces, a club area, skating rink, shops and a tea room. It took up the Theatre Royal name in 1919 when it went over to live theatre use. In 1941 it was converted to a cinema and then in 1947 it became the Rex Entertainment Centre. In the 1960s part-time bingo was introduced before a return to full-time cinema briefly between 1974 and 1975. It was then demolished and replaced by the current Regis Centre which opened in 1980. This contained the current Alexandra Theatre along with a 'Royal Hall', bar and club room. The lease was taken over by Whitbread's in 1996 at which point the theatre lost its access to the promenade, with the front bar being operated independently. We understand the Council now has control of the building, and the pub/restaurant has recently vacated.

The Alexandra Theatre is a valued arts and cultural venue for Bognor Regis. It is run by Arun Arts which is a registered charity. It has a mixed programme including local and touring theatre productions, comedy and live music, and is technically well equipped. It provides community outreach activities and a youth theatre group. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

Although the theatre is well regarded, we consider there is scope for enhancement particularly with regards to front of house and ancillary cultural provision as well as the overall prominence and visibility of the theatre within the town. These principles are broadly reflected within a project brief for the site developed in 2012, which has informed these plans and the successful application to the Levelling Up Fund which is supporting delivery of this project along with additional Council funding. We welcome this investment and commitment to the Alexandra, and of how it will help support and develop arts and culture in the local area.

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We consider the overall scheme to be well planned and the project objectives are being met, and feel that it has benefitted from the appointment of a specialist theatre consultant as we had previously recommended. After reviewing this submission we had a number of queries and identified potential challenges, but having met with the project's consultant much of this has been clarified. This was partly as a result of unclear or missing information. For example, the Design & Access Statement has been scanned to the application portal and in some areas text and images are blurred. The roof plans are not clear making it hard to ascertain what is being retained or replaced (there are currently a number of awkward junctions, although we understand the design approach and ongoing access for maintenance will be satisfactory), and there are no views shown of the development from the seafront. It may be helpful for these to be addressed.

Currently the pub/restaurant (Brewer's Fayre) part of the building sits outside the scope of this application, although we understand this is now vacant. We also understand that redevelopment will come forward in due course, and we would suggest there would be great merit in undertaking the works in one package both so there is less disruption to the theatre at a later date and so that there can be better integration and coherence of design of the two elements.

Visibility and prominence of the theatre will be much improved through this scheme, with high-level signage and glazing providing a more inviting environment with better sightlines into the building and the activities and offer taking place. This will help further generate increased visitors and engagement, and in turn improve potential for income generation. This will support overall viability and financial sustainability of the venue and its cultural programme and improve organisational resilience. Furthermore, improved insulation and energy efficiency will minimise operating costs.

The biggest transformation internally will be to front of house facilities. The auditorium and back of house functions will be broadly similar to existing (some areas see no change) but within front of house there will be an expanded café/bar, better circulation and a net gain of two studio spaces. The studio spaces will also provide better flexibility for the theatre where it hosts events and shows with larger casts as we understand from discussions that Studios 1 and 5 can be divided to provide supplementary dressing room space or breakout space. Studio 5 will also have a doorway directly into the back of house area. Studios 2, 3 and 4 will have production facilities which again will broaden function for the arts. Importantly the scheme will include better WCs and a Changing Places facility, improved general wheelchair accessibility and a lift to upper levels. This will improve inclusivity.

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Whilst the works to front of house areas and facilities are more transformational, appear to function well and will be appealing to users, we would strongly encourage some additional investment and refurbishment in back of house areas. Not only is this important for ensuring the theatre's direct needs are met, but the venue also needs to meet the requirements of performers and to make itself attractive as a venue to encourage acts to tour to it.

Public realm improvement and landscaping works have recently been completed at Place Saint-Maur on the western side of the Regis Centre and this proposal has optimised the opportunity presented, for example the theatre café/bar opening onto the square with outdoor seating. We understand there are additional funds budgeted for the planting shown in the proposed views and it will be beneficial for this to come forward to help reduce the impact of overheating within the glazed areas. Some degree of shading at ground floor level will also be offered through the building's overhang and canopy. We understand the building will be naturally ventilated, and with the orientation of glazing overheating is a risk. We recommend insertion of blinds (automatically operated given the height) to provide protection; within the studio these may in any case be included to provide blackout conditions if required).

In terms of other operational and ongoing management considerations, the service route appears to be generally adequate but this will rely on back of house routes being kept clear of obstructions. In particular there may be health and safety implications of moving equipment through the workshop and this will need to be carefully managed. Whilst the works are being carried out it will be beneficial to consider how a theatre programme can be maintained within the local area to ensure that audiences are not lost and that cultural needs are catered for.

To conclude, whilst we have identified some matters for further consideration we are supportive of this project and recommend the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance, and continue to engage with Theatres Trust should plans be amended.

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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