

Protecting theatres
for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/2009

17 November 2023

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By e-mail: planningteamd@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Application: P/FUL/2023/06321 & P/LBC/2023/06322

Site: 11-13 Bell Street Shaftesbury Dorset SP7 8AR

Proposal: Demolish existing shop front (no.11 Bell Street) and replace and extend. Internal alterations to front of house and widen existing opening.

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:

These applications for planning permission and listed building consent have come to the attention of Theatres Trust because they are seeking front of house alterations at Shaftesbury Arts Centre.

Shaftesbury Arts Centre came into being in the early 1950s when a local group, the

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

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Shaftesbury and District Arts Club, bought the town's former Market Hall. Volunteers undertook the works needed to convert the building which took place over a few years and it opened in 1957 as the Old Market Playhouse. The auditorium had a raked floor and a capacity of 220 seats which had been acquired from the Stoll Theatre in London which had recently closed and was subsequently demolished. Further incremental improvements and works were undertaken but the building was badly damaged by fire in 1965. After restoration and re-building it again reopened in 1967. There has continued to be investment in the Arts Centre and its facilities over the years. It continues to be owned and operated by its members and is supported by volunteers. It offers a mixed programme of theatre, cinema, comedy, live music and community events. It also has an art gallery which is linked through to its foyer but also has its own entrance and shopfront. The building is a Grade II listed heritage asset and is within the Shaftesbury Conservation Area.

Venues such as this are particularly important for the social and cultural well-being of local people, providing opportunities for participation and engagement in theatre and the arts. They help bring people together and allow for the development of new skills. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2023) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

We welcome that the venue's operators continue to seek to improve and develop the Arts Centre's facilities. Under these plans there will be internal alterations within the foyer and gallery to open up and better unify these spaces. This will be achieved through removing the existing box office and bar and creating a new opening between the foyer and gallery. A new circular bar/servery will be installed around the new opening. The building line of the gallery, which is currently set back, will be extended forwards to correspond with the existing foyer entrance. This will enable the foyer to be better used as a café and to extend the potential floorspace given over to the gallery/exhibitions. The works will also level the entry into the current gallery which will improve accessibility. We consider this approach will meet the objectives of the project and will enhance the function and offer of the Arts Centre, offering greater flexibility and making it a more attractive space to visit.

We would encourage review of the proposed circular bar servery to ensure that it works for the venue operationally (including being able to accommodate necessary appliances), and that it is compliant with modern standards of accessibility for staff. From the proposed plan it appears there may be some awkward junctions to fit around and that to the bottom left there is a narrow space which could be challenging to work.

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A further area of change at ground floor level is to the current block of WCs and the Sewing Room. The latter will be removed which will provide an increase in WCs including a second accessible WC along with a flexible dressing room. This is supported as it will improve the experience of audiences and other visitors and reduce queueing at peak times such as intervals.

On the first floor there will be alterations to the Phoenix Room, the landing area to the front and to the Rutter room. The reorientation of the staircase from the foyer makes the current landing area redundant and so this will be removed to provide a double-height space over the front entrance. A further void will be opened up in the middle of the Phoenix Room over the foyer below. This will make for a more open environment which will enhance the café/gallery, although this comes at the expense of floorspace within the Phoenix Room. However, there will be enhancement and enlargement of the Rutter Room and it is being renamed to the Rutter Studio Theatre. If there is no beneficial need envisaged for additional space within the Phoenix Room overall this approach would appear to enhance the Arts Centre's cultural offer and function through provision of a second smaller performance space which can cater to a wider range of shows and hires. There are benefits to the overall attractiveness and visitor experience of the café/gallery and Phoenix Room through a more open environment.

In heritage terms these proposals largely reinstate the traditional building line, as the gallery shop unit became set back following previous works. This constitutes a heritage benefit. It also allows for more functional space within the Arts Centre and enhanced facilities, which is also a public benefit. Internally because the space has been previously altered and dates from the 1960s works this does not affect the significance of the building, and again has a wider public benefit through making the Arts Centre a more attractive place to visit which will encourage greater visitors and help sustain the venue into the future.

We therefore support the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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