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Ref.: TC/795

01 December 2023

Mrs Megan Osborn
Winchester City Council
City Offices
Colebrook Street
Winchester
SO23 9LJ

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

Application: 23/01941/FUL

Site: 14 Chesil Street Winchester Hampshire SO23 0HU

Proposal: Demolition of derelict no. 14 Chesil Street. Replace with new annexe to adjoin Chesil Theatre.

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 planning permission has come to the attention of Theatres Trust because it is seeking to undertake development at Chesil Theatre. We do not appear to have been directly notified. There is a corresponding listed building consent to which we have provided comments under separate cover.

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

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We have been aware of these plans for some time, having been engaged by the applicant on previous iterations at pre-application stage in 2017 and 2020.

Chesil Theatre is an amateur venue operated by the Winchester Dramatic Society. The group formed in 1863, moving into the former church of St Peter Chesil in 1966. The church is a Grade II* listed heritage asset and is within the Winchester Conservation Area. The theatre has a capacity of 75 seats. Its programme consists of the Society's own productions alongside youth theatre, occasional external shows and other activities. Venues such as this are particularly important for the social and cultural well-being of local people, enabling participation in theatre and the arts as well as opportunities to develop new skills. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2023) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

Although the Chesil Theatre is well-regarded, its small size and the constraints of being within an adapted heritage asset mean that it has operational challenges and lacks some of the facilities expected by modern audiences. This is a common issue for small and amateur theatres, particularly those operating within historic or converted spaces. For example, there are just two WCs for audiences and one for performers. None of them are accessible WCs. There is no foyer space with the current arrangement being for audiences to enter straight into the auditorium which means waiting outside until doors open.

The Society was able to acquire the neighbouring building, an early 20th Century former coal merchant's house. This has been out of use for a number of years and is in poor condition. This has provided the opportunity for the theatre to expand and enhance its facilities, and as set out above plans for such development have been in progress for some time. The principle of this is to be supported and welcomed.

Due to very poor condition it has been found not to be feasible to retain and restore the current building. It would therefore be demolished and replaced by a new two-storey building which will be of similar architectural form but with enlarged floorspace achieved through infill of the existing passageway between it and the current theatre, and an extension to the rear.

Within this new building will be a flexible foyer and rehearsal space to the front, a second small flexible performance space/community room and a meeting room behind. To the upper level is a dressing rooms, office and wardrobe store. There is a lift which will make this area accessible, and an addition of three WCs. These facilities will significantly improve the function and flexibility of the theatre, addressing the deficiencies we have cited. There will be a new opening into the existing building

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so that the two areas can be linked, and in terms of audience experience and comfort this means there is space to dwell before and after shows. Importantly, alongside the wider uplift in WCs there will be an accessible facility on the ground floor adjacent to the foyer.

To ensure function is optimised and the objectives of the project are met, we would highlight that it would be beneficial for the new dressing room to be made to be sub-dividable in case a further split is required. The Design & Access Statement acknowledges a need for additional dressing rooms for reasons of safeguarding but the ideal minimum is three, whereas the current dressing room and a new single space would still only provide two. One of the WCs serving the new dressing room(s) should be dedicated for children but this can be achieved through signage/management when and if required.

Similarly, because the lift exits into the wardrobe at first floor it will need to be ensured that a clear and safe route through the area is maintained at all times. Again this is an ongoing operational management issue. However, we also suggest there would be merit in relocating the lift to the area of the stairs beyond the lobby as this would provide a clearer route and could open into the circulation area at first floor level. As well as currently exiting into the wardrobe at first floor level the ground floor position appears sub-optimal because it is between a duct and the bar. Persons waiting at the bar could obstruct the lift, and removing it from this area would either allow for more waiting space or for the bar itself to be extended.

The storage room at ground floor level is currently an open space leading through from the foyer and access into the performance space and meeting room. It would be better for this to be a separately contained space which so it is not accessible to the public; it may otherwise also present issues of health and safety if not kept tidy and well managed. To ensure greater flexibility and for the performance space and meeting room to be utilised simultaneously the apparent retractable wall between the two spaces should provide acoustic separation.

We are unsure of the existing layout of the existing theatre because the plans are unlabelled but on the proposed plan it shows the existing WC to open into a kitchenette. There should be two doors between a WC and a kitchen area so this area may need some re-design if not already in place. Likewise because levels are not shown on the plans it is not possible to ascertain whether emergency egress from the new performance space to the side passage is level. Whilst overall accessibility has been improved it appears there is only stepped entry into the foyer/rehearsal space. We assume there are constraints preventing level or ramped

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entry being provided; the proposed plan references a 'hoist' at this location but it is not clear what this is. This should also be reviewed.

We would also note that the new development provides an opportunity to enhance prominence and visibility of the theatre, but it appears this potential to add additional signage is not being optimised. With the additional facilities on offer to the wider community this may be beneficial. Nonetheless, both of these matters can be considered further at a later stage and do not affect our overall advice.

Although we have raised a number of matters for further consideration or ongoing operational management, these can be addressed at the next stage of design and do not affect our overall advice. This project will enhance the theatre and expand its cultural offer and function. We are therefore supportive of the granting of planning permission.

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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