

Protecting theatres
for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/302

20 December 2023

Somerset Planning - North Team
Bridgwater House
King Square
Bridgwater
Somerset
TA6 3AR

By e-mail: PlanningNorth@somerset.gov.uk

Application: 08/23/00326

Site: The Town Hall, 36-44 High Street, Bridgwater, Somerset, TA6 3AS

Proposal: Internal refurbishment of Town Hall theatre and dressing rooms.

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 listed building consent has come to the attention of Theatres Trust because it is seeking internal alteration at the Town Hall Theatre.

The Town Hall was built in 1823 and extended in 1865. It is a Grade II listed heritage asset. The theatre is within the 1865 extension. It has a balcony to three sides. Its

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

Protecting theatres for everyone



current stage and proscenium date from the 1950s. As well as hosting theatre and other live events it is also utilised for functions, markets, meetings and private hires.

The Statement of Need within the Design & Access Statement sets out the venue's shortcomings and we welcome that the Town Council as the building's operator have sought to address those and invest in the building and its facilities to optimise its potential, meet the needs of its users and help secure the longer-term conservation of the venue. The former Sedgemoor District Council has been successful in being awarded Town Deal funding to invest in eleven public projects across the town of which refurbishment of the Town Hall including its theatre is one.

This project seeks to upgrade the auditorium with improved technical infrastructure, more flexible seating to increase capacity to attract a broader range of shows, reinstating natural light through the building's ceiling lanterns to promote greater daytime use, adding a platform lift to offer level access from back of house to the stage, improvement of ventilation, and redecoration of the auditorium and back of house areas. In principle these interventions are supported.

The increase in potential capacity is partly achieved through infill of the orchestra pit and removal of forestage. Whilst this results in the loss of potential function, it appears that it has in any case been surplus to requirements for the shows the theatre has been hosting. This was a later addition as part of the 1950s works but could be reinstated in future if required so constitutes a reversible change. A further mitigation in heritage terms is the benefits for the venue through increasing seated capacity and usable floorspace which as the applicant notes will help attract a broader range of artists and shows.

To the rear of the stage will be a new opening. This will facilitate the insertion of the platform lift making the stage accessible to wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility from back of house areas. This will make the theatre more inclusive so is supported.

We are unclear as to how the raised sound/control desk will function as it is not shown on the proposed floorplans, only on the section drawings where it appears to interrupt views to the columns at the rear of the stalls level/ground floor and thus could be an insensitive addition which causes harm to visual and decorative significance. We also question whether this desk will be accessible to staff with additional needs. There may be scope to consider the position and function of this element further, or at least for plans to be made clearer and heritage harm to be better justified.

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

Protecting theatres for **everyone**



We are supportive of proposals for improved lighting and whilst upgrading requires some new fittings there is a need for the theatre to be able to meet the technical needs of modern shows as well as comply with current standards.

Similarly we support the redecoration of the auditorium for which we consider the design and palette to be sympathetic to the venue's form and significance. This includes reinstatement of ceiling lanterns to allow in greater natural light as this will help broaden the venue's flexibility and attractiveness to hirers. In turn this will support its ongoing financial sustainability.

These proposals focus on the auditorium, stage and related back of house functions and as such that is all that the proposed plans show. As a general comment it would be useful for the wider site plans to be made available so that the overall audience journey and how the venue is serviced can be understood. This would better inform the advice we can provide.

These proposals will result in interruption to historic fabric, however broadly we consider that harm from a heritage perspective is mitigated through the public benefits of improving the function and flexibility of the theatre and improving accessibility. We do however urge further clarification and thought on the function of the sound/control desk. Subject to that we are supportive of the granting of listed building consent.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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