

Ref.: TC

31 January 2024

Dale Jones
Planning
Worcester City Council
The Guildhall
High Street
Worcester
WR1 2EY

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

Application: 24/00006/FUL

Site: Former Scala Theatre and Corn Exchange, Angel Street, Public Conveniences, Angel Place WORCESTER WR1 3QT

Proposal: Proposed external refurbishment of the former Scala theatre (including new balustrades and plant screens), change of use from Sui Generis (amusement arcade) to Sui Generis (arts centre, including bar, café, event and gallery space); change of use of the Corn Exchange from Use class E to Sui Generis (arts centre bar, café, event and gallery space with public conveniences

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 James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Lucy Osborne, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on this new application for planning permission at the Scala and Corn Exchange, which will see the former cinema returned to use and linked to the Corn Exchange to provide a new arts centre. There is a corresponding listed building consent for the Corn Exchange to which we have provided comments under separate cover. This project has come forward as part of a wider project following the award of Future High Streets Fund. There is an existing permission for a more comprehensive project to which we provided comments of support in 2023, but the project has had to be revised due to budgetary constraints.

The Scala was built in 1922 as a cinema with seating across stalls and circle levels. It was the first cinema in Worcester to have been installed with a CinemaScope screen. It closed in 1973 and was converted to a leisure/gaming centre at which point much of its internal fabric and character was stripped. Despite this and internal subdivision its general plan form remains readable. Architecturally it occupies a curved corner plot with terracotta frontage and high level Savoy Theatre lettering. It is a non-designated heritage asset which is included on the Council's register of locally listed heritage assets and is a positive contributor to the Conservation Area. It is currently vacant, and therefore efforts to sensitively return it to use are to be welcomed.

The Corn Exchange is a Grade II listed heritage asset. It has not previously been in performance use; it has served a range of functions including an auction room, boxing arena, retail and most recently a restaurant. It neighbours the Scala with a passageway separating them. We understand that the Corn Exchange has been extensively altered previously; our interest in this building is entirely in relation to its proposed integration with the Scala under a single use class.

As set out previously we welcome the Council's desire to expand and diversify its theatre and live performance provision, and support that it is directing investment into culture and the arts. Paragraph 97 of the NPPF (2023) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature. The Worcester City Centre Masterplan (2019) sets out to achieve an improved city centre cultural offer. Policy SWDP 37 of the South Worcestershire Development Plan (2016) permits provision of new community facilities, with supporting text confirming this includes theatres. This proposal meets those policy objectives.

The previous scheme was to deliver a main auditorium within the Scala offering a capacity of around 500 seats. This scheme is much-reduced in terms of maximum single capacity, now offering three flexible studio spaces which are capable of being

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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

programmed and operated simultaneously. Two of these are within the ground floor/stalls with the third at second floor level offering tiered seating for around 60 people and flexible flat floor. We consider the proposed range of uses for those spaces to be realistic, and whilst back of house provision is now more limited it appears to be adequate for these studios. We welcome that there will be an accessible ground floor dressing room as well as additional flexible spaces the level above which could serve as additional dressing rooms if required. Similarly we welcome inclusion of a Changing Places facility and separate baby changing area which will help make this an inclusive venue for the community. The Scala will also contain office space and hot-desking for creative organisations. The Corn Exchange will contain an all-day café/bar but there will be less integration of the two elements compared than previously.

Given the range of uses, acoustic separation between the spaces will need to be a priority which could be a challenge when working within an existing building into which new spaces have been inserted. This is particularly critical between Studio 2 and 3 where the void could result in transfer of noise and vibrations. External acoustic issues might also arise from the bin route for the neighbouring Wetherspoons pub which runs past the get-in door for the Stage studio. This might be mitigated by an operating agreement with Wetherspoons, which restricts use of that route to specific hours.

We have some concerns that the number of toilets (especially female) within the Scala are insufficient to meet the needs of audiences/users if all spaces are in operation and starts and intervals clash. If there are not opportunities to include further numbers careful programming will be needed. There are additional toilets within the Corn Exchange, but as the two buildings are now more separate they are less likely to be used by audiences in the Scala and potentially the Corn Exchange could itself be utilised for events which would make them unavailable.

We also note that the Design and Access Statement suggests technical equipment, projectors and stage lighting will be shared between the three studios. Whilst in some cases this may be reasonable we would advise that moving and re-rigging equipment may not always be efficient as it would require additional staff time and reduce the availability of the studios. We also believe there to be limited storage space for seating and other equipment so this should be considered further.

Nonetheless, whilst we have raised some concerns and matters for further consideration these can be managed at the next stage of design and do not affect our overall support for this scheme. We understand that the revised project has been

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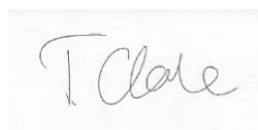
collaboratively formed with a new consortium, the Worcester Collective, which includes representatives from many Worcester and local arts groups. It responds to their ambitions and needs. We welcome this approach.

In terms of heritage considerations, the Scala as noted is a non-designated heritage asset. It is quite common for theatres and cinemas to have converted between those uses and we consider this proposal to be a compatible re-use. Whilst previous heritage benefits are reduced because this scheme will no longer re-instate the auditorium as a single volume it is nonetheless potentially reversible and with the building's deteriorating condition a restoration and return to active use is to be welcomed.

We also consider that proposed alterations to the Corn Exchange can be justified through the public benefits they generate. It will be important to ensure that development within this building, which is also more limited than previous, will not compromise potential for future development in line with the project's initial brief should funding later become available.

In conclusion we support the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss this representation further and continue to engage with us should plans be further revised.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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