

Ref.: TC/3664

15 February 2024

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Application: 0/51369 & 0/51370

Site: Former library and Civic Hall Castle Street Conwy LL32 8AL

Proposal: Redevelopment of Conwy Civic Hall comprising change of use of existing building to create a mixed use development comprising commercial and tourism use in the form of a food hall with flexible community use and aparthotel together with associated works including demolition work and alterations and extensions

Remit:

Theatres Trust is the National Advisory Body for Theatres and was established by The Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres'. The Trust is a statutory consultee in the planning system and local planning authorities in Wales are required to consult the Trust on planning applications for '*development involving any land on which there is a theatre*', '*residential development within 50 metres of a theatre*' as well as for proposed theatres. The definition of theatres within the Act defines a theatre as 'any building or part of a building constructed wholly or mainly for the public performance of plays', and therefore applies to theatres, playhouses, arts centres, ciné-varieties or buildings converted for theatre use, old and new, in other uses or disused.

Comment:

Thank you for notifying Theatres Trust of these applications for planning permission

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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and listed building consent at Conwy Civic Hall, which seek change of use and redevelopment of the building.

This is a priority building for Theatres Trust, and it has featured on our Theatres at Risk register for a number of years. The register highlights theatre buildings which are under threat and at greatest risk across the UK. This includes buildings which are at threat of permanent closure or demolition, have been long-term vacant or that are in poor condition. Civic Hall is one of two entries in Wales. It is on the register because it is Conwy's only theatre, and has left local groups without a suitable space within the town to perform.

Civic Hall was originally designed in a Tudor Gothic style, but following a fire in 1966 its great hall was rebuilt in sheet concrete incorporating the remains of the buttressed foyer and tower. This development included a 240-seat studio theatre which was well used by local groups for their performances and rehearsals and also had some external shows and other events. The building is Grade II listed and is within the setting of the Castles and Town Walls of King Edward in Gwynedd World Heritage Site and within the Conwy Conservation Area.

The Council announced plans to close the venue in 2011, and a proposal by local user groups to run it through a community interest company were rejected. The venue closed in 2014. Since that time a new community centre has been developed to partially replace some of Civic Hall's wider functions, but it did not replace the theatre and the multi-purpose room within that facility has been found by former users to be too small even for rehearsals. We consider that there is realistic need and demand for theatre provision within Conwy, and that such provision would be beneficial for the mix of uses and vitality of the town centre and help enhance the cultural and social well-being of local people. There is also a demonstrable will amongst the community for retention or re-provision of theatre use in the town. Paragraph 4.3.47 of Planning Policy Wales Edition 11 (2021) highlights the role that creative and cultural uses within shared space environments can play in helping create diverse, vibrant and viable places which are attractive to unrelated businesses.

We have engaged in pre-application consultations on this building, submitting comments to the applicant. The plans have been amended since the previous stage, and will see redevelopment of the building at upper levels to provide short-stay accommodation with a food hall to the ground floor. The ground floor plan is labelled with, "opportunity for community hall and performance venue use" but this is

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otherwise undefined with just a brief reference to flexible use within the Planning Statement. The current theatre use and facilities would be lost.

The Planning Statement states that the indicative community hall and performance venue is, “in line with the general thrust of policy CFS/1 of the Conwy LDP”. That policy seeks to protect and enhance community facilities and services. Whilst the reference to such use on the proposed plan represents a slight improvement compared to the total loss of previous iterations, in practical terms there is no enforceable commitment to deliver such functions and it is in effect simply a label on a plan. There is no demonstrable consideration of what this space will be and how it would function. For example, there is no infrastructure to support any meaningful theatre and live performance offer. The existing building provides at least three dressing rooms along with further back of house spaces, a large sound booth, a stage with some wing space, and a flexible auditorium. In contrast, the footprint of the proposed space is much reduced and it is not clear how basic supporting infrastructure such as sound and lighting bars and a stage would be provided. There does not appear to be any space available for storage of chairs and other equipment. The acoustics of the space and acoustic separation from other uses would also need to be considered.

We would encourage the applicant to consider further exactly how they envisage this space to function and what its indicative programme would be not just for live performances but for wider community uses. Although a planning condition could be utilised to secure a minimum programme and availability to the wider community, proper design and infrastructure will help to ensure the success and future viability of the space. Fundamentally it would minimise and mitigate the impact of loss of existing community and cultural function arising from this development.

In terms of heritage, the applicant’s Heritage Statement suggests the building is, “widely considered harmful to the town’s OUV”. We do not agree with this position, and consider that the 1960s design of the theatre has been underappreciated. The Statement also notes the theatre’s vacancy is “highly detrimental to the enjoyment and value of the quayside and surrounding streets”, the current operation having a “Major Adverse impact on Conwy’s OUV”. Whilst we agree that vacancy is harmful, it should be noted that there was and remains will for the theatre to have remained in active operation. This should not therefore be used as justification for loss.

Nonetheless, for the purposes of the listed building consent we raise no overall objection to loss of the existing building in principle. However, this is on the basis of a redevelopment adequately re-providing a functional community and performance

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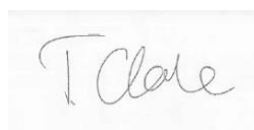
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space that meets the needs of the community. We would however suggest that a less commercial scheme with greater benefit for the wider community could be a more sensitive outcome architecturally given the site's challenging and sensitive location.

As a result of the loss of the existing theatre, and the proposed community hall and performance venue being so poorly defined, our current position is to **object to the granting of planning permission**.

In order for this objection to be overcome we would urge the applicant to engage with our comments on making the replacement venue capable of practically hosting the purposes referenced on the proposed plan, and for revised plans and information to be submitted accordingly. Availability of the facility to the community should also be defined and secured through a suitable planning condition for which we can provide further advice. The proposal is otherwise in conflict with the policy intention of Strategic Policy CFS/1 of the Conwy Local Development Plan (2013).

Please contact us should you wish to discuss this representation in greater detail, and continue to consult with us should plans be amended.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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