

Our Ref.: MP/132

01 March 2010

For the attention of Mr Alan Moorhouse

Ms Heather Cheesbrough  
Head of Planning & Building Control  
St Albans City & District Council  
Civic Centre  
St Peters Street  
St Albans AL1 3JE

Dear Ms Cheesbrough,

**Westminster Lodge Leisure Centre, Holywell Hill, St Albans AL1 2DL**  
**Application Ref.: 5/2010/0259**

The Theatres Trust has been alerted to the above application for the erection of a two/three storey leisure facility and associated plant, demolition of existing superintendent's house together with new external hard and soft landscaping, parking and associated access and service road incorporating car parking and loading for *Abbey Theatre*. The Theatres Trust's remit relates directly to the proposals which involve the *Abbey Theatre* and we **strongly object** to the application for the reasons set out below.

**Remit:** The Theatres Trust is The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres, established by The Theatres Trust Act 1976 '*to promote the better protection of theatres*'. The Town & Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995, Article 10, Para (v) requires the Trust to be consulted on planning applications which include '*development involving any land on which there is a theatre*.' This applies to all theatre buildings, old and new, in current use, in other uses, or disused. As such, there is absolutely no doubt the application falls within our remit and therefore should have been referred to us for our expert advice.

**Advice/comment:** The Trust strongly objects to the application because of the adverse affect it would appear to have on the practical functioning and the future development of the *Abbey Theatre*. We are not opposed to the plans in principle because it will provide an enhanced landscape for the *Abbey Theatre* as well as the general upgrading of leisure and cultural facilities and environmental improvements to the area but we would need to be satisfied that the theatre is not compromised in any way by the proposed development either during or after construction and to ensure that the overall scheme delivers real benefits for the theatre.

Specifically, the Trust is concerned about the new access road being proposed to service the leisure centre. The *Abbey Theatre* currently benefits from exclusive unhampered access to its rear yard for parking and access for deliveries and get-in but under the current planning application the service access road (as well as being landscaped) is extended to service the leisure centre. However, from our interpretations of the plans, the extension of the access road could involve and create serious problems for the *Abbey Theatre* by preventing large vehicles from accessing the get-in.

## Protecting theatres for everyone

**Director** Mhora Samuel **Chairman** Rob Dickins CBE  
**Trustees** Jason Barnes, Phil Clark, Marilyn Cutts, Venu Dhupa, Tim Foster, Penelope Keith CBE DL,  
Dr Pauleen Lane CBE, Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall, Anne McReynolds, Matthew Rooke,  
Chris Shepley CBE, Sam Shrouder, Ben Twist

As productions change, the show which is ending has a 'get out' and the new show a 'get in' which may involve a quick turnaround and the delivery, movement, storage or taking away of large pieces of sets and equipment. For these reasons, clear access at the relevant times is extremely important to the get-in access and none of this can be prearranged. Our concern is that now access is also required for the leisure centre services there will be congestion within this tight space and obstructions would be inevitable. We are therefore seriously concerned about these proposals that appear to jeopardise the efficient functioning of the theatre and its sustainability.

With regards to the proposed 'outdoor performance space', whilst this may be a worthwhile and fun concept, the space between the two buildings is really too small for such a facility. And facilities of this kind require considerable contingency funding for maintenance and programming. Furthermore, it is important that the *Abbey Theatre* remains accessible. In the Trust's opinion it may be worth omitting the outdoor performance space concept and providing more robust and enhanced landscaping.

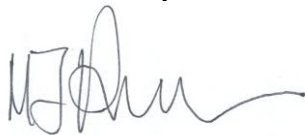
In terms of the phasing and construction, a Construction Management Plan should be required to be submitted as part of the planning application in consultation with the *Abbey Theatre* management. Working hours will need to be agreed, as these will be different to those in the standard Code of Construction Practice. The Construction Management Plan should be carefully worded to ensure that access to the get-in is available at all times. It should also consider the issues of noise and vibration. Outside noise around any theatre can make live dramatic use impossible. To put all this at its most basic, how can an actor perform a speech against the noise of construction work? This should not be left to reserve matters as it would then difficult to control once planning permission has been given.

Performing arts venues such as this are required elements of a sustainable community, providing social, cultural, environmental and economic benefits as well as regeneration. They make a major contribution to the vitality of town centres and are a significant element of your local authority's cultural infrastructure. The potential development will have a huge impact on the effective running of the theatre business and although the Trust understands that discussions have taken place between the local authority and the theatre management The Theatres Trust would need to be certain that the works proposed do not have a negative impact for theatre.

**The Theatres Trust is therefore opposed to the application until the issues stated above are resolved. I would of course be happy to attend a meeting to discuss alternative plans and mitigation measures.**

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Mark J Price MRTPI, IHBC  
Planning and Heritage Adviser

cc Daniel Goodwin, Chief Executive, St Albans City & District Council  
S&P Architects  
Nicola Paddick, Leisure Development & Arts Officer, St Albans City & District Council  
Paul Davidson, Chairman, Abbey Theatre Trust