

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC

31 October 2022

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**Application:** SDNP/22/02351/FUL

**Site:** Petersfield Town Council Festival Hall 24 Heath Road Petersfield Hampshire GU31 4EA

**Proposal:** The renovation (including partial demolition) and extension of Petersfield Festival Hall and Town Hall building.

## **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:**

Thus application for planning permission has been brought to the attention of the Trust by the applicant. We have not been directly notified despite this development falling within our statutory remit outlined above, and having contacted the Council to request consultation.

The Festival Hall was built in 1936 after funds were raised to construct a larger facility for the town's annual Petersfield Musical Festival. This was a notable and successful event held every March and until that time had been held at the Drill Hall. The festival still runs today, and the Festival Hall also provided the town with a venue that could also be utilised for other performances and events. Its current advertised programme other than the festival includes two runs of shows by local amateur theatre groups, a pantomime, an orchestral performance, a beer festival with live music, an antiques fair and a craft fair. It is available for hire and has further spaces beyond its main hall for smaller functions and meetings. This makes the Festival Hall an important community and cultural facility for local people, providing access to the arts and enabling participation in cultural activity. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

## **Theatres Trust**

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL  
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**Chair** Dave Moutrey **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

The Festival Hall's operator, the local Petersfield Town Council, have been exploring options for the building to bring it up to modern standards, to attempt to diversify its live programme through actively programming shows, and improve its offer and facilities for hirers, and to enhance its environmental and financial sustainability. We welcome their ambition and investment into this valued facility.

The key elements of the proposals are the refurbishment and alteration of internal spaces (which do not require planning permission), two storey extensions to the east and west wings, alterations to the north wing, external landscaping works and re-cladding of the building for greater environmental efficiency.

With regards to the external works and treatment through over-cladding and extension, this will mark a substantial departure from current appearance. Given its age the Festival Hall can be considered a non-designated heritage asset and is within the Petersfield Conservation Area. It is also considered a 'Focal Building' within the Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan (2017). However we have images of original design intentions for the building which were more ambitious than what was built out. It has some external interest as an inter-war building typical of civic architecture of the time but as the Heritage Statement notes there are more significant civic performance buildings of this period such as the Tunbridge Wells Assembly Rooms and Civic Hall in Wolverhampton. We therefore consider there is scope for sensitive alteration and that these proposals meet that test, giving the Festival Hall greater visibility and prominence as a venue whilst maintaining existing profile and proportions. With reference to paragraph 203 of the NPPF this change must also be considered in the context of the substantial public benefits of the scheme such as significant reduction in energy consumption and emissions. Paragraph 134.b of the NPPF states that significant weight should be given to designs promoting high levels of sustainability.

In terms of the Festival Hall's main hall and provision of theatre and performance, these plans will add additional facilities such as new and upgraded dressing rooms and rehearsal spaces which will better support both local amateur groups and professional touring artists and productions. Expansion of front of house space will enhance the Festival Hall's role as a community facility, bringing more people into the building at different times of day. This is welcomed.

Internally the proposed layout appears to function well at ground floor level. Presently the foyer to the main hall is quite small with a series of smaller rooms off of it. These proposals will open that area up which will provide a greater sense of arrival, provide better circulation and improve the overall audience and visitor experience. The provision of a bar/café will facilitate use of this space as an all-day venue which can spill out onto the landscaped terrace outside which is currently used as parking spaces. We would however highlight that the plans show a shallower wall between the bar store and stage than for surrounding areas so if this is the case it will need to be ensured it offers suitable acoustic protection to avoid performances being disrupted.

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The re-located WCs provide increased provision which will help reduce queueing and congestion at peak times such as intervals, again improving the audience experience and flow of people around the building. We welcome provision of a changing places facility.

Back of house, the loading bay and get-in works better and more efficiently. There is an accessible back of house WC, but the only accessible dressing room is to the first floor. Whilst we appreciate and support the desire for provision as part of the main dressing room block so that members of the cast do not feel isolated, it would be optimal for there to be flexibility for provision at the stage/ground floor level in the event that performers cannot use a lift or it is otherwise unavailable. There is potential for first floor community/meeting rooms to be used for additional dressing rooms if needed for larger productions and orchestral concerts so equipment to facilitate this would be beneficial. Similarly the larger community room could be utilised as a rehearsal space so we suggest this might be fitted out accordingly such as having good soundproofing.

We understand that at first floor level the balcony seating is accessed when the stalls are in bleacher seating mode as otherwise a sub-optimal route from the upper foyer through back of house corridors is required. It might be the case that wheelchair users must take this route to balcony seating positions, in which case we suggest that an alternative route might be considered perhaps through the position of the proposed accessible WC which could in turn be relocated into the neighbouring back of house store. It appears that such a route would also be required to reach the first floor accessible WC.

We acknowledge the location of the crew room/technical office may be a result of limited back of house footprint but to have it so far from the backstage areas is not ideal. We would encourage consideration of alternative locations. To the other end of the first floor we would also suggest installation of a door between the Green Room and 'Multi Purpose Community Room 02' so that the backstage area can be kept secure. The meeting room with gallery space has an entrance from the internal corridor whereas there is an opportunity for it to be accessed from the upper foyer.

The points we have raised for further consideration can be addressed at the next stage of design. Overall we consider this project to meet its objectives as it will deliver an enhanced Festival Hall with better and more flexible and inclusive facilities for its users. Therefore we are supportive of the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI  
National Planning Adviser

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