

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1383

02 November 2022

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Application: 22/01597/FUL & 22/01598/LBC

Site: Alexandra Cinema Market Street Newton Abbot Devon TQ12 2RB

Proposal: Internal alterations and atrium extension for the Alexandra Theatre. Additional works to form a mezzanine and associated access within the Market Hall; and

Atrium entrance to south side, and first-floor eatery and food hall as a mezzanine and disabled access and associated works

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:

These applications for planning permission and listed building consent have come to the attention of the Trust because they are seeking alterations and extensions at the Alexandra. We have not been directly notified despite this building falling within our statutory remit outlined above.

The Alexandra is a Grade II listed heritage asset which opened in 1871 as the Corn Exchange, providing a venue for entertainment and lectures. It was later converted to full theatre use in 1900 with proscenium arch, stage and three dressing rooms. In 1920 there were further alterations with its windows being bricked to accommodate films, then in 1927 a balcony was added and in the 1930s the entrance was re-modelled to provide a box office and foyer. In 1996 the balcony was converted to a smaller second screen but the stalls, stage and back of house

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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

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were retained. Theatre continued to be offered for a three week period each year, including an annual pantomime, under an agreement. Architecturally the Alexandra is constructed in Devonian limestone with a tower to the front. To the rear it adjoins the Market Hall. Internally within the auditorium the balcony-fronts are decorated with plaster garlands and the walls are draped with soft furnishings and lighting.

The Alexandra has been part of a Future High Streets Fund award which would have seen it converted and integrated into the market behind with a purpose-built expanded cinema provided on the neighbouring site. Theatre provision within the town would have been lost. We had significant concerns about those plans as we believe there is need and demand for a venue for theatre, live performance and other such events within Newton Abbot. Furthermore we did not consider there to have been sufficient appraisal and justification of the substantial harm to a designated heritage asset that would have arisen from part-demolition, substantial alteration and change of use. We articulated this to the Council and subsequently held positive discussions with the project team. We had already been aware of community opposition and local groups had contacted us for advice. We understand the Council are now minded not to proceed with the original scheme which is welcomed and we remain keen to work positively with them.

This scheme has been brought forward by a local community group and is intended to be illustrative of how the Alexander could be re-modelled to retain theatre and live performance use alongside wider social and community use. These comments are drafted in that spirit, providing feedback to inform any future revisions as we acknowledge a final scheme may be different.

In terms of landuse this would constitute a different Sui Generis function than the existing cinema. It is however an alternative cultural and community use, and in heritage terms can be considered a compatible and potentially viable use which is closer to the building's original function. It would add further strength and diversity to the town centre's offer and there would be net gain of cultural provision because cinema is being re-provided. Therefore we can support change of use.

Currently, as noted above, the auditorium has been sub-divided with the larger cinema screen and stage in the stalls and a second smaller screen on the balcony. Part of the rear of the stalls has also been converted into extended foyer space. This has been a common change within older cinema and theatre buildings, and such interventions are overwhelmingly lightweight insertions which are easily reversible. This proposal would see the balcony reintegrated with the stalls and volume of the auditorium. The seating configuration would be altered so that raked seating would rise from the front of the stalls and merge into the existing balcony level. Underneath the rake the foyer would be further extended into the auditorium space to provide a flexible 'exhibition' area which could also be utilised as a smaller performance space, for events and for additional café/bar space. A side extension would provide a café/bar opening onto the proposed pedestrian route which forms part of the wider town centre project plus a route into the market hall. Additional WCs would be provided, along with lift access to the first floor.

Again, in principle we support this aspiration. It would deliver a theatre for the town with an

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indicative capacity of around 270 seats with wheelchair places. Currently theatre provision in Newton Abbot is limited by the restriction on use of the Alexandra, whereas the applicant has provided an indication of wider need and demand for a year-round facility. This in itself would positively enhance and diversify the town's cultural offer, and in addition to this there would be a secondary space capable of hosting smaller/'grass roots' events. Availability of a café/bar with prominence and good visibility would help bring more people into the venue and generate additional income to support its cultural programme and overall financial sustainability.

Having reviewed the plans, we have some comments which we would encourage the applicant or future party to review to help ensure the full community benefit and potential of the Alexandra can be realised in a manner most sensitive to its historic significance.

Whilst the rationale of integrating the foyer with the market hall is understood and we acknowledge this presents benefits for the respective schemes, it also presents drawbacks in terms of the potential to enhance and optimise back of house provision particularly in relation to access. We assume that currently sets and equipment are brought into the auditorium through the fire exit to the Market Street service road and then lifted onto the stage. This seems to remain the route through (although potentially this may become more challenging because of the pedestrianisation proposals) but this is not an efficient means especially if there is a fuller year-round programme. A potential solution would be to switch the WCs on the north side with the dressing room and rehearsal room and utilise that as a route directly onto the stage. This would also require provision of a parking bay for loading where there are currently double-yellow lines for which engagement with the Council's highways team would be recommended.

We welcome that upper levels are accessible but lift access from the route into the market hall isn't ideal, although we acknowledge there may be constraints preventing it from being located elsewhere. Similarly a platform lift is shown back of house to the upper dressing rooms, but there does not appear to be level access into the dressing rooms as steps are indicated. There should be provision of wheelchair places at the ground floor level within the auditorium in addition to the gallery space to meet best practice of offering a variety of positions across the auditorium. We suggest that a more general review of the seating arrangement would be advisable at the next design stage to ensure there is the right balance between front of house/community space and audience comfort and capacity within the theatre space.

On external design we broadly consider these plans to be sensitive to the building's form and significance, although we suggest the new roof might be expressed as a separate pitch to better maintain the building's symmetry. Final plans for the Alexandra should also correspond with those of the market hall, and vice versa, and we encourage engagement between the respective parties.

Overall we welcome these proposal and are supportive of plans. Policy S14.j of the Teignbridge Local Plan 2013-2033 (2014) supports proposals which reinforce Newton Abbot's role as a focus for entertainment and cultural provision. Part d. of Policy NA8 seeks delivery of a broader evening economy. These proposals would help achieve those aims. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF

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(2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature. In terms of heritage these plans necessitate internal and external alterations including a side extension. Some of those alterations will reverse later changes and thus constitute heritage benefits, and in other cases will support the site's use and function as a theatre and community facility and enable its retention in such use rather than a more harmful and wholesale change as originally envisaged within the Future High Street plans. We consider the side extension constitutes less than substantial harm. With reference to paragraph 202 of the NPPF, overall that harm as well as those arising from internal alterations is mitigated by the public benefits of this scheme and the delivery of its original and likely optimum viable use.

Therefore we are supportive of the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

We recommend that the applicant, the Council and any other stakeholders engage further with the Trust as plans for the Alexandra are taken forward. We are a source of advice and support and we are keen to see a sustainable and viable plan for the Alexandra and the retention and expansion of theatre provision within the town.

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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