

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/3746

16 November 2022

Debbie Redding
South Somerset District Council
Brympton Way
Yeovil
BA20 2HT

By e-mail: debbie.redding@southsomerset.gov.uk

Application: 22/02486/FUL

Site: Octagon Theatre Hendford Yeovil Somerset BA20 1UX

Proposal: Partial demolition, renovation and extension of Octagon Theatre, Yeovil. Expansion of main auditorium from 622 to 900 seats, construction of 2no. new cinemas, dance studio and expanded foyers. Construction of new theatrical fly-tower and expanded backstage provision.

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:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission at Octagon Theatre. It is seeking a major development project which will expand the theatre's capacity and add to and improve its front and back of house facilities. We have recently met with the theatre to discuss these proposals.

The Octagon originally opened as the Johnson Hall in 1974 as a multi-purpose event hall for concerts, exhibitions, dances, boxing and other such functions. In 1985 it was renamed to the Octagon and it subsequently underwent works to install fixed tiered seating and an improved stage area so it could function as a theatre, its most popular use. Our database notes the Octagon to be well-equipped with a wide stage, orchestra pit, excellent servicing arrangements and good back of house facilities. Architecturally it is quite plain with a functional exterior and interior. The building is set within an area of open space.

The theatre has a busy programme of touring productions, live music, comedy and other events. It is an important cultural facility which both serves the needs of local people as well as drawing

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

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

Protecting theatres for everyone



people into the town from a wider catchment. Having met with the theatre we understand that the theatre is performing well and could be capable of handling some larger shows and audiences than is currently possible, and has identified other gaps which would enable more people to engage with it. As is common with older venues, general accessibility could be improved as could the building's energy efficiency.

These plans will see the current auditorium retained with the foyer and café replaced by a new replacement building which will be larger and contain new facilities including two cinema screens, two studios, meeting/hire space and an enhanced all-day café/bar. The roof of the auditorium will be raised to facilitate a new circle/balcony level providing additional audience capacity of around 280 seats. To the rear of the stage a new flytower will be constructed with associated back of house rearrangement and refurbishment.

We welcome these proposals and the investment that is being made to further develop the Octagon. This will improve its social and cultural offer for local people, and enhance and diversify the cultural provision within Yeovil as well as support greater inclusivity. For example, the cinema offer would complement that of the existing multiplex and will help bring additional visitors to the Octagon and optimise usage of the building outside of existing performance times. Better energy efficiency will minimise operating costs and environmental impact. Collectively these plans would help support the venue's longer-term financial sustainability. Policy EP15 of the South Somerset Local Plan (2015) supports provision of new facilities, which this scheme would deliver. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

As alluded to in our overview of the Octagon, we do not consider the existing building to be architecturally significant. Environmental impacts of demolition notwithstanding, we do not object to the principle of significant alteration or loss. We consider the external design of this scheme to respond positively to its setting, potentially becoming more of a landmark with greater prominence and better reflective of the Octagon's importance within Yeovil.

In terms of internal layout and function, we welcome provision of additional WCs including further accessible WCs across different areas of the building as well as a Changing Places facility. Similarly having two front of house lifts will better enable users with additional mobility needs to move around the building, and gives better resilience should one be out of operation. Back of house we welcome that an accessible dressing room is provided at stage level, along with further accessible WCs and showers serving further dressing room blocks at both basement and first floor levels. There is good storage and servicing provision to both front and back of house.

We would note the location of the box office lacks prominence as it is does not appear visible from the main entrances, these may merit further consideration or for sufficient wayfinding. The Design & Access Statement references usage of the two cinema screens for Yeovil's Literary Festival and potentially these and the studios could also be utilised for other small-scale performances and events. There may be merit in providing a dressing room to serve these for

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

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

Protecting theatres for **everyone**



additional flexibility and to provide separation from back of house facilities in use for shows in the main auditorium.

The points we have noted for further consideration are minor and can be addressed at a subsequent phase of design if deemed necessary. They do not impact our overall advice which is to welcome these proposals and the investment being made into the Octagon.

We are supportive of the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail, and continue to engage with us should plans be amended.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke".

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

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