

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC

27 January 2023

Dale Jones
Planning
Worcester City Council
The Guildhall
High Street
Worcester
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By e-mail: planning@worcester.gov.uk

Application: 22/01095/FUL

Site: Former Scala Theatre and Corn Exchange, Angel Street, Public Conveniences, Angel Place
WORCESTER WR1 3QT

Proposal: External refurbishment and extension of the former Scala theatre, including the partial demolition of the existing Public Conveniences on Angel Place and the erection of three-storey block, connected to the performance arts centre at first floor level, and conversion of the public conveniences to back of house performance arts centre space in connection with the renovated performance arts centre; Change of use of the Corn Exchange from Use Class E to Sui Generis (performance arts centre, including bar, café, event and gallery space with public conveniences).

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 the Scala and Corn Exchange, which will see the former cinema returned to use and linked to the Corn Exchange to provide a new theatre and arts centre for Worcester to complement its existing offer at the smaller Swan Theatre and Huntingdon Hall. There is a corresponding listed building consent for the Corn Exchange to which we have provided comments under separate cover. This project has come forward as part of a wider project following the award of Future High Streets Fund. We have been engaged on this proposal at pre-application stage.

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
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The Scala was built in 1922 as a cinema with seating across stalls and circle levels. It was the first cinema in Worcester to have been installed with a CinemaScope screen. It closed in 1973 and was converted to a leisure/gaming centre at which point much of its internal fabric and character was stripped. Despite this and internal sub-division its general plan form remains readable. It is currently vacant. Architecturally it occupies a curved corner plot with terracotta frontage and high level Savoy Theatre lettering. It is a non-designated heritage asset which is included on the Council's register of locally listed heritage assets and is a positive contributor to the Conservation Area.

The Corn Exchange is a Grade II listed heritage asset. It has not previously been in performance use; it has served a range of functions including an auction room, boxing arena, retail and most recently a restaurant. It neighbours the Scala with a passageway separating them. We understand that the Corn Exchange has been extensively altered previously; our interest in this building is entirely in relation to its proposed integration with the Scala under a single use class.

We welcome the Council's desire to expand and diversify its theatre and live performance provision and for the investment it is directing into culture and the arts. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature. The Worcester City Centre Masterplan (2019) set out to achieve an improved city centre cultural offer. Policy SWDP 37 of the South Worcestershire Development Plan (2016) permits provision of new community facilities, with supporting text confirming this includes theatres. This proposal meets those policy objectives. The existing Swan Theatre and Huntingdon Hall are both valued cultural assets but the range and scale of shows and artists they can host and receive are limited by their respective capacities. The Scala will offer a capacity of around 500 seats which will help attract further shows which would not be viable below that level. This will further enhance the social and cultural wellbeing of local people and attract additional visitors which will benefit other town centre businesses.

It is quite common for theatres and cinemas to have converted between those uses. An arts centre or theatre scheme represents a sensitive and compatible re-use for the Scala consistent with its ongoing retention and conservation. The building is in poor condition internally so its return to active use, restoration and refurbishment is to be welcomed. The auditorium as a single volume will be reinstated which is a further heritage benefit. The change of use of this part of the scheme is therefore supported.

The extension above the existing public toilets we consider to be a sensitive addition which will also help positively contribute to the streetscape and character of the conservation area. With its upper-level circular window it is reflective of the character of the original Scala building.

As set out in our comments on the corresponding listed building consent for the Corn Exchange, we consider that proposed alterations can be justified through the public benefits they generate. With the Scala having been built as a dedicated cinema it lacks the ancillary and supporting facilities that would be required of a theatre or performance venue such as dressing rooms, wing space/storage or a substantial foyer. These are necessary to provide the facilities demanded by

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audiences, to be able to handle the shows the venue could potentially receive, and more broadly to optimise the community, cultural and social value of the Scala by increasing its flexibility and offer throughout the day. In turn this supports the financial sustainability of the venue. The Corn Exchange meets these needs and also offers potential for future development in line with the project's initial brief should funding become available; supporting documents outline facilities that can't currently be taken forward due to budgetary limitations. We similarly support change of use of the Corn Exchange.

Given some of the constraints of these buildings arising from their age, condition and separation by Crown Passage we appreciate some compromise is necessary with internal function and design. For example, there is very limited office/staff space and we understand that dressing rooms for example can be used flexibly for other purposes such as that. Nevertheless we have some comments which the applicant may wish to consider further to help ensure the future success of this venture.

Within the basement level there are a number of WCs but very few are specifically female WCs. Within the main larger block we would suggest provision of further female WCs which could be achieved through swapping the large central gender neutral block with the smaller female block, and/or extending the female block further back into the plant room area assuming there are no constraints preventing this. A mitigation for loss of the existing public toilets is to open venue toilets to the public but this could present issues with audience management if the public are given access during performances and other peak periods.

Likewise the ground floor bar is intended for public and audience use. There would be merit in ensuring there are additional service points to ensure audiences can be served in a timely manner particularly during short intervals. There is a small kitchen which can provide some catering offer but this would be limited. We suggest that this is planned to allow for future enlargement to allow provision for larger hires and functions.

Plans indicate that there should be a broader spread of wheelchair places within the auditorium and additional positions, and it is welcomed that back of house accessible to some degree. We would highlight there is wheelchair access into the mezzanine bar in the Corn Exchange but no accessible WC at that level so opportunities should be sought to provide one. More generally there is improved accessibility compared to the current layout for both front and back of house but we accept there are constraints due to the nature of the buildings.

The passage to Angel Place has a right of access for the neighbouring pub and is used for waste storage, collection and other such functions. This gives rise to potential acoustic issues which could disrupt performances therefore we would encourage careful management and agreement to avoid such conflict. There are also health and safety issues if a get-in is occurring and a careful management strategy will be required.

The Scala and Corn Exchange are split at ground floor level by Crown Passage which is under separate ownership and a public right of way. Should control of Crown Passage become

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available in the future this would be beneficial for rectifying some of the broader challenges of this scheme we have identified by giving options for better accessibility and movement between different parts of the buildings.

Similarly, we strongly encourage surrounding public realm works to Angel Street which are subject to separate funding, to come forward. These are essential to allow level access to the Scala and provide the improved accessibility identified within this proposal

We note that the height of the get-in appears to be low which could constrain the types of sets which can come in and we would welcome a further conversation on this.

The auditorium design with soft proscenium will allow good flexibility of space and a greater range of stage and seating formats, including accommodating shows and users requiring a larger stage such as operettas, plus the added facility of an orchestra pit. It is good to see flexibility in this regard to meet the needs of different users.

Whilst we have identified some areas for further consideration, these can be managed at a later stage as the scheme is further refined. As set out previously, we welcome this scheme and believe it will deliver significant benefits for Worcester. To conclude, we support the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss this representation further and continue to engage with us should plans be further amended.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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