

Ref.: TC/3856

1 February 2024

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By e-mail: planning@eastssuffolk.gov.uk

Application: DC/23/4865/FUL

Site: The Bethel Battery Green Road Lowestoft Suffolk NR32 1DH

Proposal: Demolition of side extension and construction of replacement two storey side extension including changes to front elevation and new access ramp

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:

This application has come to the attention of Theatres Trust because it is seeking to undertake development works at the Players Theatre, specifically provide an extension to the theatre.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

Telephone 020 7836 8591 **Email** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **Website** theatrestrust.org.uk **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

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Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Jon Morgan

Trustees James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Lucy Osborne, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

Players Theatre operates within the former Seaman's and Fisherman's Bethel, a non-conformist chapel which opened in 1899. After closure in 2008 it was purchased by Lowestoft Players who refurbished the building and converted it into a 200-seat theatre; performance venues are common uses for these type of buildings. The theatre hosts the Player's annual productions along with a mixed programme of other community and smaller-scale productions, comedy, live music and private hires. It is also used for the Player's meetings and rehearsals. The theatre is a valued community, cultural and social asset for Lowestoft and its surrounding area, providing opportunities for participation and engagement in theatre and the arts. Paragraph 97 of the NPPF (2023) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

As a converted space the existing building has some limitations and compromises, but this is common amongst other older and small community-run venues. In particular it has limited foyer and other ancillary front of house spaces and facilities, it does not have any specific dressing rooms and there is insufficient space for storage and other activities such as rehearsals. This project seeks to address some of those issues, and this is welcomed. It will also help enhance the social and community value of the facility by broadening its offer which will enhance the theatre's ability to generate revenue which supports the building's operations.

The proposed plans will see the side element of the existing building demolished. Currently this area contains the small entry area with foyer behind, WCs, small studio and green room. In its place will be a two-storey replacement building. This will offer a much larger single foyer space with a bar and box office. There will be a substantial uplift in WC provision; the quantum of facilities within the male block meets the relevant standards for places of entertainment and while the named female block has a shortfall of one there are two additional WCs available on the upper level. However, current numbers are insufficient so this additional provision will reduce queueing and enhance the experience of audiences. We would note that currently there is a WC and accessible WC serving back of house areas, whereas within the proposed plans both are general WCs. We suggest there may be an opportunity to extend the right-hand cubicle next to Studio 5 to make this an accessible WC avoiding the need for performers with additional access needs to come to front of house. There are new steps being inserted from the green room to the stage, we also suggest a platform lift might be installed alongside to make the stage fully accessible.

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The upper level will contain four studios. Three of these will be sub-dividable enabling them to be used as a single larger space if required, offering greater flexibility. There will be lift access to this level, ensuring all facilities are accessible.

The theatre currently has no dressing rooms, and this will still be a shortcoming following this project. The studios could potentially be used for that purpose, although we wonder whether Studio 5 could be made to be sub-dividable or whether it could be re-purposed as formal and equipped dressing rooms.

With reference to heritage implications arising from partial demolition, and paragraph 209 of the NPPF (2023), we consider that harm is justified in this instance through the substantial public benefits this proposal will generate through enhancing the function and offer of this important community theatre. We also consider the proposed extension to be sensitively designed.

Whilst we have raised some matters for further consideration by the applicant, these are related to internal functions and if necessary can be revised at the next stage of design. They do not affect our overall recommendations for this scheme.

We welcome these plans and support the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss this representation in greater detail.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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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