

Ref.: TC/2756

7 April 2025

Jon Sharp
Northumberland County Council
Development Management
County Hall
Morpeth
NE61 2EF

By e-mail: planningcomments@northumberland.gov.uk

Application: 25/00792/CCD

Site: The Maltings Theatre And Cinema Eastern Lane Berwick-Upon-Tweed
Northumberland TD15 1AJ

Proposal: Part demolition, alterations and extension to existing theatre and other ancillary 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:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission at The Maltings. It seeks to redevelop and extend the building at its upper level along substantial internal alteration, reorganisation and refurbishment to expand the

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Joshua McTaggart

Trustees Vicky Browning OBE, Anna Collins, James Dacre, Suba Das, Liam Evans-Ford, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson OBE, Tracy Ann Oberman, Lucy Osborne, Saratha Rajeswaran, Truda Spruyt, Michèle Taylor MBE, Katie Town

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theatre's facilities. The project brief seeks the addition of two cinema screens, a more flexible main theatre space, improved front and back of house facilities, a new rehearsal studio and further community/cultural spaces.

We were engaged on this project at pre-application stage, having met with the project team and provided feedback on their plans. We welcome the investment being made into developing this venue and expanding its cultural offer to local people.

The Maltings is an important theatre and cultural facility for Berwick and its surrounding catchment. It opened in 1990 following development within the remains of a 19th century granary which was destroyed by fire in 1984. It has a main auditorium with a capacity of over 300 and a secondary studio with a capacity of up to 120. The venue is built into a hillside, with its main entrance, foyer, café and studio theatre being within a modern building on its top floor which is accessed from a large car park on Eastern Lane. The auditorium is on the levels below that, working down to the ground floor which is at the street level of Bridge Street with an access through Shoe Lane. This arrangement with multiple levels presents some constraints including on programming due to the additional challenges associated with bringing in and removing stage sets and equipment. It also provides opportunities because the theatre's elevated position affords views from its cafe over the town and the River Tweed which helps bring in additional users and income.

Those constraints, along with the remaining external fabric of the original building being of local heritage significance, present a challenge for the Maltings to be able to expand.

The proposal therefore is for the modern upper level to be redeveloped to provide an additional one storey above, with extra height above the new studio/rehearsal space to give the volume needed as well as a raised parapet around the rest of the building which will conceal necessary plant and equipment.

Overall we consider that the new development sits well within the built landscape and skyline. Whilst of different form to the pitch of many of the surrounding buildings the flat-roof/parapet design is functionally effective and is reflective of the industrial history of this site. There is a need to build upwards to be able to incorporate the additional facilities needed, both due to the constraints of the site and to avoid wider harm to remaining historic fabric.

To the front elevation we consider the increased height gives the Maltings a stronger presence with better visibility and identity, and this is a catalyst for improved public realm and public space within an area currently dominated by car parking. To the

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southern elevation we consider that the massing which is broken into smaller articulated volumes of differing heights and materials and palettes including brick of a tone similar to surrounding townscape gives the theatre a distinct presence and identity in the townscape and skyline when viewed from that side of town and from across the Tweed.

In terms of setting we consider the impact of the redevelopment to constitute less than substantial harm, but within the overall planning and heritage balance there are substantial public benefits delivered by the scheme. Namely, these include new and enhanced social and cultural facilities for local people and a strengthened Maltings venue which provides wider economic benefits for the town centre through increased footfall and linked trips and spend within local businesses. We welcome that much of the remaining external fabric of the original granary will be retained but with improved thermal performance.

Whilst the objections of some other consultees with regards to high level signage to the southern elevation are noted, we support this addition because it helps identify and promote the theatre as an important asset and landmark within the town.

Internally, the main entrance level will be rearranged with an enhanced café/bar offer and a main cinema screen. The addition of cinema will mean greater usage of the building with potential for showings throughout the day every day, bringing in more visitors and promoting greater engagement with the Malting's cultural offer. The new rehearsal studio will be located on the top floor alongside office space, a meeting room, a foyer and an external terrace offering expansive views to the south. The terrace could be particularly attractive for attracting meetings, events and other hires which could help generate supplementary income to support the venue's wider arts offer.

The main auditorium will be refurbished and altered to provide a greater capacity and extended balcony level. This will help to make the venue more attractive as somewhere for touring acts to perform because increased sales will improve viability, and to accommodate additional audiences for existing shows which sell well such as the annual pantomime.

To the ground floor there will be a secondary cinema screen, which is also anticipated to act as a small-scale performance or events space. There will be a secondary entrance and foyer from Shoe Lane which can be closed off from the rest of the building which will provide flexibility, for example isolating it as a private hire space or avoiding the burden of keeping the rest of the building open if not in use.

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The levels will be connected by an open cascading staircase providing visibility and we welcome our pre-application comments on this informed the submitted scheme.

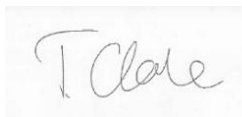
As well as additional facilities the scheme will provide improved accessibility, with wheelchair positions either side of the auditorium and the flexibility for additional positions at the front of the auditorium if required. There will be a dedicated editing and audio description room with a view to the stage, accessible WCs at every level and provision of a changing places facility. For performers there will be an accessible dressing room and step-free access to the stage. A new stage lift also functions as a back of house passenger lift. This is welcomed and will enhance the Malting's inclusivity.

This scheme provides a number of operational benefits, for example the theatre space will be more flexible in accommodating different staging and seating formats, better audience comfort and better access into technical areas. The relocation of staff offices to the top floor will provide a good environment promoting wellbeing with natural daylight and views. However, the new get-in lift is smaller than the current model although as referenced within the Design & Access Statement its final design and specification will be determined at the next stage of design. We recommend the lift car door opening is fitted as wide as possible for ease of get-in. As noted in our pre-application comments, the routes and timings for food and beverage and other general deliveries will need operational consideration to avoid conflict with audiences during busier times. Nonetheless, both of those matters can be managed and considered further during final design and operation. They are not material to the determination of this application.

Paragraph 98 of the NPPF (2024) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature. Policy INF2 of the Northumberland Local Plan 2016-2036 (2022) supports improvement in the quality of community services and facilities. We consider that this project delivers on its brief within the constraints provided by the site's topography and footprint. It will provide a more flexible venue with expanded facilities which is better able to programme different content concurrently and optimise its value as a community and cultural asset.

We therefore support the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.



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Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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