

Ref.: TC

6 August 2025

Dean Gibson
Planning Department
Lewisham Council
Laurence House
Catford Road
London SE6 4RU

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

Application: DC/25/140146

Site: 11-21 LONDON ROAD, LONDON, SE23 3TW

Proposal: Change of use of currently vacant building (most recently/lawfully used as a public house at ground and first floor level) to a children's indoor play centre, incorporating alterations required to facilitate that use, and ancillary residential accommodation at 11-21 London Road SE23

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'.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

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Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

CEO Joshua McTaggart

Trustees Vicky Browning OBE, Anna Collins, James Dacre, 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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Comment:

This application for planning permission was brought to the attention of Theatres Trust because it seeks change of use with associated alterations at the former Capitol in Forest Hill, to utilise the building as an indoor play centre.

The Capitol opened in 1929 and was designed by esteemed cinema and theatre architect John Stanley Beard. It is a Grade II listed heritage asset. It was equipped with a stage and dressing rooms allowing it to host variety shows but it was mostly used as a cinema. It was taken over by ABC in 1933 but was renamed much later in 1968. It closed in 1973 and reopened as a bingo hall five years later. When its operator collapsed in 1996 it again fell vacant until conversion to a pub in 2001. The pub closed in 2023 as part of a suite of disposals by its operator and has been vacant since then.

We are keen to see this important asset returned to active use, both to ensure its future conservation and to contribute to the strength and vitality of the designated town centre. The best use for historic buildings is for their original purpose, nonetheless the previous bingo and pub uses have constituted sensitive re-purposing. These have also been common uses for former theatre and cinema buildings. We also consider that in principle indoor play centres are similarly appropriate functions for buildings of this type, and there have been previous examples of this.

As the building was most recently in use as a pub, Policy EC19 of the Lewisham Local Plan (2025) has a presumption in favour of retention and requires robust evidence to support loss. This includes demonstrating there is no reasonable prospect of retaining an alternative community use. In this instance the site is not a traditional or community-scale pub, and is of a size and form which would be more challenging to re-let. The applicant has stated they have provided some evidence of lack of interest, although this is not available to view. Nonetheless, in this instance we consider that that nature and historic significance of this building justifies departure from full policy compliance. Our priority is to support an appropriate re-use which minimises harm in heritage terms to this asset and maintains potential reversibility to cinema or performance use. We suggest this should carry weight in the overall planning balance. What has come forward is potentially an optimum viable use. We suggest that as a mitigation to protect community/cultural provision a planning condition might be considered to restrict permission to the proposed use

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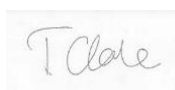
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thereby guarding against future movement within Class E/commercial use classes or future equivalents.

We have submitted comments on the corresponding application for listed building consent under separate cover, they deal with internal matters focused on alterations to facilitate the proposed use.

We are supportive of the granting of planning permission.

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



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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