

Ref.: TC/2960

15 June 2026

Joanna Delaney
Enterprise And Communities
Lorna Bowden
Planning And Place Manager
Ground Floor Civic Centre
Windmillhill Street
Motherwell
ML1 1AB

Application: 26/00574/FUL

Site: Motherwell Concert Hall And Theatre Windmillhill Street Motherwell ML1 1AB

Proposal: Demolition of Motherwell concert hall and theatre to form car park including associated landscaping works and external alterations

Remit:

Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1978 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in Scotland through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (Scotland) Regulation 2013, 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. It seeks to demolish the Motherwell Concert Hall and Theatre and replace it with a car park alongside associated landscaping and works.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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CEO Joshua McTaggart

Trustees Vicky Browning OBE, Anna Collins, James Dacre, Liam Evans-Ford, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson OBE, Louisa Harris, Mark Johnston, Adam Knight, Tracy Ann Oberman MBE, Lucy Osborne, Saratha Rajeswaran, Michèle Taylor MBE, Katie Town

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Whilst we sympathise with the situation the council are in with regards to necessity of closure of the venue for reasons of safety, the complexity of works required for a return to use and costs of doing so, we are currently unconvinced that full demolition is the optimum outcome or sole option. We therefore object to this application for reasons set out within these comments. We do however have a meeting scheduled with relevant officers in the near future which will enable a fuller understanding of the background of this case. We may choose to revise our position and comments following that meeting.

Background and significance

Motherwell Concert Hall and Theatre is a priority building for Theatres Trust, with it being on our Theatres at Risk Register. This list identifies the theatres across the UK at greatest risk of permanent loss, whether through direct immediate threats such as demolition or due to poor and deteriorating condition or other external challenges including withdrawal of funding and insensitive neighbouring developments. Buildings are added to the register based on a combination of immediacy and type of risk, the theatrical and/or architectural significance of the building and the importance to their communities.

This theatre was added on the basis of meeting all criteria; it is an important cultural venue for the town and its local communities, it is a significant landmark building within Motherwell with architectural quality reflected by its Category B listing by Historic Environment Scotland, and self-evidently it is at immediate threat from permanent loss.

The Concert Hall and Theatre opened in 1970 as part of a new Civic Centre complex which replaced a previous late-1800s Town Hall. The building was subject to an international architecture competition for its design, overseen by A. G. Sheppard Fiddler, Vice President of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The theatre has a capacity of around 400 with the concert hall accommodating up to 1,000 people depending on format. The venues are located on the lower ground level to the west of the complex, positioned back-to-back and sharing back of house facilities. The roof of the two-story building sweeps up to express the form of the fly tower.

The venues were substantially refurbished in 2011 at a cost of £6m. At that time metal canopies were installed above both entrances and lifts were installed. Internally both the theatre and concert hall feature shaped-timber panelled ceilings, lighting fixtures and projecting brick baffles to modulate the acoustics.

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Current situation

The Concert Hall and Theatre closed on 12 September 2023 due to the discovery of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). The planks were found to comprise most of the roof structure. The building has remained closed ever since; the remainder of the Civic Centre is unaffected and remains open. Until closure this continued to be a popular venue with a busy programme accommodating a mixture of professional touring productions and artists, amateur companies and other functions and events.

The immediate impact of closure is that people within Motherwell including local groups which performed at the venue have lost access to the theatre and live performance provision previously offered. This will have an impact on social and cultural well-being, but there will also be a wider economic impact because Motherwell's town centre and local businesses will be losing footfall and spend. Moreover, there will be further leakage of local audiences to other centres to attend events elsewhere.

There has been relocation of events where possible, but to illustrate that point they have been outside of the town at Airdrie Town Hall and the Ravenscraig Regional Sports Facility. Whilst we appreciate these efforts which provide some mitigation, they are not necessarily as accessible (particularly by public transport) and may therefore exclude certain audiences. The Town Hall is broadly of the same capacity as the theatre, but there is not currently a replacement for the Concert Hall.

We are keen therefore to see this venue repaired and retained, or for there to be firm commitment and identification of a replacement facility to ensure existing provision is maintained and this cultural offer is not permanently lost.

Theatres Trust's position and response to this application

This application is purely for demolition and permanent loss of the Concert Hall and Theatre. Re-use of this land would be for a car park. There is not currently a proposal for a replacement facility.

National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) policy on 'Culture and creativity' is clear in its intent that culture and creative industries in Scotland are supported, with outcomes to create locally distinctive places reflecting the diversity of communities, to support regeneration and town centre vibrancy, to expand cultural and creative industries and that communities have access to cultural and creative activities. Evidence to the

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contrary notwithstanding, the premise of the application in its current state conflicts with that strategic objective because the outcomes of demolition result in the opposite of those promoted and sought.

Policy 31 provides more detail, stating, “Development proposals that would result in the loss of an arts or cultural venue will only supported where:

- i. there is no longer a sustainable demand for the venue and after marketing the site at a reasonable rate for at least 12 months, through relevant local and national agents and online platforms, there has been no viable interest from potential operators; or
- ii. the venue, as evidenced by consultation, no longer meets the needs of users and cannot be adapted; or
- iii. alternative provision of equal or greater standard is made available at a suitable location within the local area; and
- iv. the loss of the venue does not result in loss or damage to assets or objects of significant cultural value.”

Again, to seek demolition without replacement or without appropriate evidence to support loss would be contrary to policy.

A statement has been submitted in support of the proposal to demolish this venue. Within that is an options appraisal which suggests doing nothing, selling or transferring ownership of the venue, converting or changing use of the venue, and repairing it.

Doing nothing is clearly an option which serves nobodies interests, because the building is demonstrably not operable in its current condition. We therefore agree this to be an option which should not be taken forward.

There is no particular evidence of sale or transfer of ownership having been pursued. The options appraisal within the Report on Fabric Condition/Emergency Repairs states, “the Concert Hall building is likely to have a limited commercial appeal due to its use, configuration and physical location” although this is not tested. It is stated that the council currently provides an annual subsidy for the running of the venue but this is not explained further. The scale of this venue means that it would in principle be attractive to commercial operators, which means that ongoing subsidy may not be necessary were funds identified to undertake full repair. This could affect overall viability assumptions, especially in conjunction with wider economic benefits of an operational venue.

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With regards to repair, we acknowledge the cost estimate of £31-£35 million is high. However, this is not the only venue of significance at larger scale to have been affected and so there are comparisons by which costs can be benchmarked. That figure should be further substantiated; there is a cost breakdown as an appendix but it is not clear how those figures are reached. The cost of demolition alone is almost £3.4 million, with an additional cost of £2.1 million for delivery of the car park. Were a replacement facility to be provided that would also likely be an expensive undertaking, which together with demolition could exceed the £35 million figure. The economic benefits and returns from a retained or re-provided venue are not estimated; we contend that a new car park would be of little or no economic or social benefit to Motherwell. It is important that alongside meeting Motherwell's cultural and economic needs that the spending of public funds provides value for money. It is only fifteen years since significant investment was made into the venue and its facilities.

There are also significant heritage implications associated with demolition given the building's Category B listing. These are covered within our comments on the corresponding application for listed building consent, nonetheless they are similarly pertinent to this application given the application seeks total loss. Policy 7 of NPF4 seeks development proposals with a "potentially significant impact on historic assets or places" to be accompanied by an assessment. That should be "based on an understanding of the cultural significance of the historic asset and/or place" and "should identify the likely visual or physical impact of any proposals for change, including cumulative effects and provide a sound basis for managing the impacts of change".

This proposal has a significant impact on both historic assets and places, given that demolition results total loss in the concert hall and theatre as a Category B asset but also that it impacts on the wider significance, relationship and setting of the wider civic complex which is covered by the same listing. The application is accompanied by a detailed assessment of the asset's significance, although the justification for demolition is centred around the potentially flawed costs and options we have discussed above.

Part b. of Policy 7 affords some flexibility in exceptional circumstances but it is not clear that threshold is applicable. This is because, returning to our points on cultural provision and policy cited above, it is not clear that demolition is the most appropriate or necessary outcome. On the criteria of this policy, part i. is not relevant because the building remains of special interest and the same is true of part iv. because

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demolition for provision of a car park would not provide significant economic benefits or growth. Parts ii. and iii. (potential for repair and re-use) have not been adequately addressed.

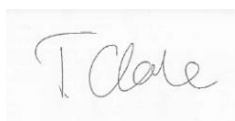
On that basis this application should be refused on heritage grounds alone. Should the application be approved, we request that a full programme of historic building recording including photographic record is undertaken prior to demolition and that this is made a condition of planning permission.

There are compelling sustainability grounds for retention, repair and return to use. Policy 9.d. of NPF4 supports retention and reuse of existing buildings and states that given the need to conserve embodied energy, demolition will be regarded as the least preferred option.

This proposal is contrary to national policy and we are not satisfied that demolition is necessary. There is no current credible option or commitment to replacement provision within the town. We would additionally note that despite our status as a statutory consultee within the planning system we have not been engaged in preparation of this proposal, and have had limited engagement with the council more generally. As noted, we are meeting with the council imminently but had we been engaged in pre-application discussions allowing for fuller understanding it may have lessened or removed need for objection at this stage.

To conclude, as stated above, we object to 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 Manager

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