

Ref.: TC/1227

6 August 2024

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By e-mail: planning.control@telford.gov.uk

Application: TWC/2024/0521

Site: The Place, Limes Walk, Oakengates, Telford, Shropshire, TF2 6EP

Proposal: Partial demolition of theatre and construction of a new main theatre auditorium, secondary studio, concourse and back of house facilities in addition to the refurbishment of the retained wing of the building to form extension to the theatre with new restaurant and bar and external works comprising landscaping and reconfiguration of the theatre car park

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 **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

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Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Jon Morgan

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

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Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission, which seeks redevelopment of Telford Theatre. We met with the project team in 2022, providing a letter of support at that time for the approach and principles of development.

Telford Theatre opened as Oakengates Town Hall in 1968. It was originally built as a hall which hosted a number of concerts as well as Council meetings and other larger events. After construction of the current auditorium it was renamed to the Oakengates Theatre in 1989, and then to The Place in 2005 following a large refurbishment project and expansion of its supporting facilities. The current name was adopted in 2022.

The main auditorium is flat-floored with bleacher seating at the rear. It has a capacity 600 seats. The side walls are of simple design with wooden beams and acoustic panelling. The stage is flat with limited flying capabilities. Its back of house provides four dressing rooms, a green room and band room. It hosts a mid-scale programme of received theatre, music and comedy alongside local community productions. It is an important arts and cultural facility for Telford and its wider catchment. Paragraph 97 of the NPPF (2023) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

This project will significantly expand the theatre. It will increase capacity within the main auditorium to around 750, add a small studio theatre with around 100 seats and community arts and creative spaces, expand front of house provision and modernise its back of house and technical facilities. The overall principle is to create a cultural hub for Telford. This intention and investment into the theatre is welcomed and supported.

Our feedback on individual elements is set out below.

Main auditorium

The increase in capacity to 750 seats will potentially make the venue more attractive to a wider range of producers and shows, which might otherwise be unviable at the current scale. There is also flexibility in format, enabling this auditorium to be utilised for a broad range of functions beyond live performance for example for wrestling and banqueting/conferences as shown on the indicative layout plans within the Design and Access Statement. It is stated consideration has been given to the location of

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stored seating, but it is not clear from the plans whether this will be under the stage or at the rear beneath the balcony level.

A reputable theatre consultant has been engaged which is welcomed. We assume that sightlines from flat floor rows of seating and from the slip seats at the balcony/upper gallery level have been assessed as being acceptable as they look potentially awkward on the floorplans. The slip seats if fixed to look centrally rather than towards the stage may not be desirable and will likely be harder to sell, although this is less an issue for indicative wrestling format. A recently completed project at Hertford Theatre delivered forward-facing slip seating and we would encourage that such a solution is considered here unless there is a compelling commercial rationale for the current layout.

At stalls level all of the wheelchair places are indicated on the proposed plan to be on the rear row. Companion seating must also be considered, but also there should be a range of positions offered. The plan within the Design and Access Statement does show a greater range of positions with one each side at the front and around the middle so this should be clarified.

When in flat-floor mode the majority of entries appear to be from the lobby to stage right. The stage left doors lead to stairs and a lift up to the WCs but looks as though it could be liable to getting congested particularly in intervals. This would need careful management and clear wayfinding to spread audiences across routes on both sides. If there is unnecessary queuing this will have a negative impact on vital bar income and the overall audience experience.

Studio theatre

This is a new addition, which will add to the theatre's offer and further expand the range of performances and functions it can host. It could facilitate much smaller touring shows, new and emerging acts and local groups.

There is no direct access between the studio and back of house areas meaning performers (and transfer of sets and equipment) must move through and across public areas. Whilst not the optimum approach we acknowledge there are site constraints and that providing a prominent means of entry to the Boulevard from the external Plaza has been prioritised. There is no clear storage space or area for performers not on stage to wait, other than the corridor behind the stage. If that were to be utilised for such purpose it would ideally need to be wider to provide more comfort without blocking it.

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We suggest signage and wayfinding for the studio will need to be prominent. We also suggest a movable kiosk is considered to directly serve the studio when in use.

Front of house

The bar/restaurant to the ground floor entrance looks to be a good space which could provide an all-day offer to bring people into the venue and help to improve engagement with the venue's offer. We suggest that thought must be given to the building's security and preventing unauthorised access when the auditorium and studio are not in use. The gallery is a large space any may benefit with some removable seating.

Most of the WCs are located to the side of the main auditorium. Whilst there appears to be a good number of them they will need to take all audiences and users of the bar/restaurant. The area around them could become very congested. We suggest thought is given to providing alternative locations for additional WCs to relieve pressure on one area. We welcome that provision is being made for a changing places and family WC. There is no cloakroom indicated so this might be considered if there is deemed to be need.

The Boulevard provides a large double-height space, but it is not clear whether it will be used to its potential as currently it appears to be just a large means of access. As noted above, this could serve the studio with an additional bar space and seating as well as for high-capacity events within the main space to relieve pressure on the main bar. Thought should be given as to how this area will be activated.

Additional thought should also be given to the library and its function. We consider it might be better integrated with the gallery and bar/restaurant as was achieved at Chester Storyhouse which combines theatre, cinema, library and café.

At first floor level there is a community and rehearsal space. This appears to be quite small which will constrain its usefulness. For rehearsals its space should ideally match that of the main auditorium's stage and it would also benefit from storage facilities, for example to hold tables and chairs so the space can easily be adapted for different users. There is a small bar/breakout space behind a retractable wall, this will need to be properly sound-proofed to avoid disruption when the main auditorium is in use. We would encourage that options are considered to enlarge this space.

Back of house

The fit-out of dressing rooms might consider providing longer hanging rails and to consider personal storage in addition to costumes. We also suggest adjusting the

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locations as the star dressing room is closest to the studio, but this might be better to be used for studio performers.

Whilst there is an addition of one dressing room compared to current provision, the venue would benefit from further additional dressing rooms particularly if the studio and main auditorium are in use simultaneously. As well as that broader back of house functions would be beneficial, for example there is no crew room, lighting store or maintenance area. A wardrobe with washing facilities is mentioned on the requirements but not shown on the plan. We suggest thought is given to adding an additional storey above the back of house area which could provide everything required. The WCs and showers for back of house back onto the stage so the acoustics from pipes and services will need to be considered.

The plant room by the scene dock creates an awkward corner and we suggest if possible the plant could be reduced.

Emergency egress for wheelchair users should be considered and managed as it appears there is a need to carry down a half-flight of steps.

The stage house has insufficient height for flying. Whilst this is as per the design brief it must be acknowledged it will restrict the touring products able to be accepted, which may counteract the benefits of having a larger auditorium. There is no grid indicated on the section drawing but the Design and Access Statement suggests there is a loft with walk-on grid. We also query whether the stage will have a safety curtain as the height and structural zone of the fly loft appears insufficient to allow one to be raised.

Concluding comments

Whilst we welcome the principle and ambition of this scheme, from the proposed plans and information within the Design and Access Statement it is not clear whether it is meeting the initial brief set out. It would be helpful to understand what the anticipated programme is for the venue and for us to understand the rationale for the design of this scheme, to give confidence it can deliver what is intended and be viable and sustainable into the future.

Much of our comments relate to internal matters of function and layout which could be addressed at the next stage of design, although depending on the ambition for the theatre there may be need for a more fundamental re-design of individual elements for example affording sufficient height to the stage house and expanding back of house facilities.

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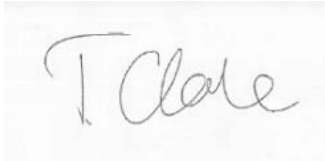
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Theatres fit for the **future**

We can however support the granting of planning permission in its current form, assuming the scheme's limitations are understood.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail, and please continue to engage with us should plans be further revised.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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