

# Theatres fit for the **future**



Ref.: TC/377

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Les Greenwood  
Malvern Hills District Council  
PO BOX 2036  
Persnore  
WR10 9EH

By e-mail: [les.greenwood@malvern hills.gov.uk](mailto:les.greenwood@malvern hills.gov.uk)

**Application:** M/24/01203/FUL

**Site:** The Malvern Theatres Grange Road Malvern WR14 3HB

**Proposal:** Part demolition, refurbishment and extension of Malvern Theatres building to form a new studio theatre, workshop space, lift, entrance, back of house accommodation with ancillary office floorspace, an external amphitheatre and all associated 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'.

## **Theatres Trust**

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

**Telephone** 020 7836 8591 **Email** [info@theatrestrust.org.uk](mailto:info@theatrestrust.org.uk) **Website** [theatrestrust.org.uk](http://theatrestrust.org.uk) **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

**Facebook** @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

**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 at Malvern Theatres. It seeks to extend and expand the theatre by adding a new studio theatre and flexible studios as well as alter its back of house and get-in arrangements and provide an external amphitheatre with revised landscaping.

Malvern Theatres started in 1885 as part of the Winter Gardens complex which contained a Great Hall and Assembly Rooms. Later it became the Festival Theatre through conversion works in 1928 and this hosted a number of original productions. In the late 1990s there was significant redevelopment to provide a complex containing the 850-seat Festival Theatre, a smaller flexible theatre called the Forum Theatre, a 400-seat cinema along with a bar and restaurant. A well-equipped fly tower was built to serve the Festival Theatre and its auditorium was altered by removing its boxes and extending the slips to provide a more spacious feel. This has become a significant arts and cultural venue which both provides for local audiences and brings visitors in from further afield. There has recently been further expansion with development of a 100-seat studio theatre and works to improve accessibility.

Malvern Theatres does not have statutory listing but parts of it can be considered a non-designated heritage asset and it is located within the Great Malvern Conservation Area to which we consider the theatre complex makes a positive contribution. The theatre complex opens onto Priory Park and many audiences and visitors are likely to approach from that direction.

This scheme is a further substantial expansion of Malvern Theatres. It will provide an additional flexible studio theatre with a maximum capacity of around 250 people, which can also be utilised for rehearsals, workshops and other events. This will complement and broaden Malvern Theatre's offer, facilitating additional performance types including those by smaller-scale and emerging artists.

On the level below this will be two small flexible studios for classes and workshops which can be merged to form a larger single space. There are relatively low ceiling heights for these and so as indicated in the Design & Access Statement use for performances is less likely. This states they can also be utilised for additional dressing room space if required, and we assume this is why there are WCs with showers opening into these spaces. However we suggest there may be greater flexibility if the WCs were accessed from the corridor instead as is the case for the accessible and other general WC.

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The existing dressing room block will be replaced and the replacement dressing rooms will serve the Forum Theatre and the new studio theatre. The Forum will have level access to the stage for the first time which is welcomed as it makes the venue more inclusive. Proposals for revised seating arrangements in the Forum are supported.

There will be revision to the layout of the park entrance, with the existing ramp removed, the external terrace/seating area extended and an amphitheatre created which can be utilised for outdoor performances. The new studio entrance being created next to this will provide lift access to the upper level and terrace. We suggest that for greater inclusivity and for all users to have the same means of entry there should be thought given to installing an external lift. Operationally this would mean that the Studio 2 entrance would not need to be kept open. The proposed route for wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility would take them into the studio entrance, up in the lift, through the upper foyer around to the main lobby and back outside again. An external lift would be more direct. At the amphitheatre there is a lower wheelchair place indicated which appears isolated and enclosed from the rest of the audience and we suggest there may be a more inclusive location for this. This position is illustrated on page 30 of the Design and Access Statement. We do however acknowledge that there are wider issues of accessibility around this entrance currently and in the wider park and proposed works are addressing some of these.

The theatre complex has evolved architecturally over time with its various rounds of expansion. This development will further enclose the original theatre but its readability has already been eroded by previous development. We consider the design of this proposal broadly responds positively to its location within Priory Park, with the amphitheatre and treatment at lower levels and feature windows mitigating the largely solid façade of the new studio theatre. It is possible that trees and vegetation within the park may also help obscure this from more distant points.

Whilst we have noted some points for further consideration, these can be managed and addressed if necessary at the next stage of design. We welcome this scheme and the further development and expansion of this important theatre. Paragraph 97 of the NPPF seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

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

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these comments in further detail.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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