

1. REASON FOR REPORT

A Trustee of The Alexandra Theatre Newton Abbot Charitable Community Benefit Society is also a Council Member.

2. RECOMMENDATION

Consent be granted subject to conditions addressing the following matters, the precise number and form of which shall be delegated to the Head of Development Management:

1. Standard three year time limit for commencement
2. Development to proceed in accordance with the approved drawings
3. Any works in association with or construction of the atrium extension shall not commence until a phasing plan for the development has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The development to proceed only in accordance with the agreed phasing approach. The phased approach must secure the restoration of the single theatre/auditorium prior to or alongside the construction of the atrium-style southern extension.
4. Demolition to take place by hand (to protect the listed building)
5. Scheme for protection of existing listed building features during works
6. Proposed internal elevation drawings
7. Detailed stage extension drawings
8. Retention and repair of the balcony structure
9. Details of rooflights and requirement to lie flush as indicated on elevation drawings
10. Slate sample
11. Eaves details and rain water goods specifications
12. External new windows and doors specifications
13. Brick plinth sample
14. Programme of works to increase public understanding of Frank Matcham, prominent theatre architect from Newton Abbot. Details of which to be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority and thereafter implemented.

3. SUMMARY OF UPDATES FOLLOWING COMMITTEE DEFERRAL

- 3.1. Members will recall that these two linked planning and listed building consent applications were deferred from March 2024's Planning Committee owing to the submission of late business case information by the applicant.
- 3.2. Following the Committee, further business case information has also been submitted (dated April 2024) as well as revised drawings, which removed the northern loading bay that was proposed. As a result of the additional information, the recommended reason for refusal previously put to Members which related to the lack of public benefit justification for the heritage harm deriving from the proposed design is no longer considered necessary. The recommendation is therefore, now one of approval subject to conditions.
- 3.3. Upon examination the business case information submitted just prior to March's Committee did not relate directly to the proposed development scheme. It related to an alternative scheme which would not entail the restoration of the theatre but instead involved the retention of the dual-screen cinema 'as is'. The Case Officer identified to the applicant the difficulty of using this business case information to assess the proposed application (which is specifically for the theatre restoration), and invited the submission of revised business case information, which has been received and is dated April 2024.
- 3.4. A summary of the latest April 2024 Business Case is as follows:
 - Two development and operational models are presented as 'Plan A' and 'Plan B'
 - Plan A: as long as there is no other cinema in Newton Abbot, the Community Benefit Society (CBS), the applicant, wish to operate the Alexandra in its current two-auditoria configuration with 'Screen 2' showing films throughout the year and the main auditorium showing films and staging live performances. The atrium extension would also be constructed. As a result, it is proposed to only partially implement the hypothetical planning and listed building consents (ie only implement the atrium extension and not restore the theatre).
 - Plan B: to both restore the single theatre/auditorium and construct the atrium extension.
 - It is the applicant's wish/intention (this is explicit within the Business Case) not to proceed with Plan B and therefore never to implement the single theatre restoration.
 - However, the April 2024 Business Case does provide evidence that Plan B would be viable, subject to the applicant securing capital or grant funding to complete the building works to both restore the theatre and build the atrium-style southern extension.
 - It is evidenced that the atrium extension is necessary to support the viability of both Plan A and Plan B.
 - The single stage could be operated as either a cinema or live entertainment space. The cinema programme would be run by, and the Business Case has been informed by, the Independent Cinema Office.

- The Business Case document also notes that the applicant has had early discussions with Teignbridge District Council and Scott Cinemas about the proposals for the building.
- The Business Case document notes that in 2022 The Alexandra Theatre Newton Abbot Community Benefit Society (the applicant) was granted development funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund.
- The Business Case is based on assumptions of:
 - A peppercorn rent
 - Annual programme of 184 events
 - Mixture of employed and volunteer staff
 - Estimates of food/drinks sales per visit
 - Overheads taken from similar venues including Teignmouth Pavilions
- A list of organisations is given which would be approached for further investment and the capital/grant funding necessary to undertake the building works

3.5. On the basis of the further April 2024 Business Case, Officers consider that it is possible to recommend approval of the scheme subject to conditions. The applicant has demonstrated the importance of the atrium-style southern extension to the overall operation of the mixed-used venue in financial terms. Critically, the applications are now only acceptable subject to recommended condition 3 (amongst the others) – this condition would secure phasing of the works such that the atrium extension could only be built once, or alongside, the restoration of the single theatre/auditorium.

3.6. It is incumbent upon the Local Planning Authority to consider if developments can be made acceptable through the use of planning conditions. If planning conditions can be used to make developments acceptable, applications should be recommended for approval. In this case, Officers consider the use of this phasing condition, alongside the other conditions, will allow a recommendation of approval to be made and for the works to proceed in a manner which will bring about the benefits of the restoration alongside the atrium extension which has been shown to be necessary for the viability of the theatre's operation. Were the phasing condition not imposed, the developer could proceed to build the southern extension (the harmful element of the scheme) without ever restoring the theatre (the acceptable part of the development). This would be unacceptable in planning terms.

4. DESCRIPTION

Site Description

4.1. The Alexandra Theatre is located within the centre of Newton Abbot. It forms the western part of the Market Hall building to the immediate south of Market Street and Sherborne Road.

4.2. The key planning constraints of relevance to the site and listed building consent proposal are as follows:

- The Alexandra Theatre is a grade II listed building; and,

- It is located in close proximity to other grade II listed buildings, notably those along Market Street.

- 4.3. The building was originally constructed in the late 1860s under the architect John Chudleigh. It was constructed together with the Market Hall in locally-dressed limestone in the Italianate style. The west end of the building was originally occupied as a corn exchange but soon after completion it became a public hall, opened in 1871. In 1883 a stage was installed.
- 4.4. The theatre's balcony level was added in the 1920s to facilitate the growing demand for films. The rendered brick extensions seen from the front elevation were added at this time and allowed space for new staircase access to the balcony level and access to the new projection room. This second tier of seating was 'boxed-in' in 1998 to form the second cinema screen.
- 4.5. Since the 1970s, a cinema has occupied the building alongside use by local theatre and performance groups, including the applicants for this proposal.
- 4.6. The building was listed at grade II in 1972.
- 4.7. The Local Planning Authority understands that the terms of the lease with the Council, the land owner, currently permit only three weeks of theatre use per year. For the rest of the year the building is in use as a cinema.

Relevant Planning History

- 4.8. 95/03185/LBC - Build sound-proof internal wall to form 2nd auditorium & convert pt of foyer to project – Approved 1996
- 4.9. 22/01129/MAJ and 22/01130/LBC - Demolition of existing buildings, erection of four screen cinema building on upper levels with two Class E(a, b) units on the ground floor, associated ancillary accommodation and external works – Withdrawn
- 4.10. 24/00319/FUL Installation of a new boiler flue and new ventilation louvre to be fitted in existing window opening and 24/00320/LBC Internal alterations to form two internal plant rooms, installation of a new boiler flue and new ventilation louvre to be fitted in existing window opening – both under consideration
- 4.11. Linked application for planning permission:

22/01597/FUL Restoration of single theatre auditorium, atrium extension to the south and associated alterations – Under consideration

Proposed Development

- 4.12. There are two main elements to the proposals:
 - Restore a single theatre/auditorium space within the existing two-screen cinema/theatre; and,
 - Build an atrium-style extension to the southern side of the building for use as a bar/café.

Other elements include:

- Additional storage and toilet facilities in the entrance foyer;
- An extended stage;
- Level access for disabled users via the southern extension;
- New kitchen and office in the existing single-storey southern projection; and
- Opening up of existing balcony (boxed-in to form second cinema screen) to form second seating tier.

It should be noted that changes to the exterior of the listed building, such as works to form the new loading bay, are unlikely to require listed building consent.

- 4.13. The applicant has amended the scheme during the determination period. When originally submitted, the proposal related to the full extent of the listed building and included changes to the market hall itself. The red line extent of the application site was subsequently reduced to comprise only the theatre and revised drawings were supplied.

Heritage Impact

- 4.14. In coming to this decision the Council must be mindful of the duty as set out in section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to have special regard to the desirability of preserving the listed building, its setting and features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses, and have given it considerable importance and weight in the planning balance.
- 4.15. The significance of the Alexandra Theatre is considered to derive from its design, decoration and craftsmanship. It was and still is an important civic building and part of the Market Square. It is a good example of late 19th Neo-classical architecture in the Italianate style. It has a pure but simple form, with a series of arched window features. Its simple form and massing are part of its significance.
- 4.16. The Conservation Officer does not raise concern with the internal changes, namely the proposed single auditorium/theatre space including the restoration of the second seating tier and associated works. Officers support these changes as they will reinstate the 1920s works to enlarge the capacity of the theatre. It is expected that the original balcony remains in place and can be restored through the proposal. Furthermore, the changes to allow disabled access are welcomed. The internal works are therefore not considered to amount to harm to the asset.
- 4.17. The Conservation Officer has set out that the proposed southern extension amounts to substantial harm to the significance of the asset. Substantial harm is an unusually high degree of harm. Harm occurs on a spectrum, but the NPPF specifically provides two categories of harm which Local Planning Authorities should use: 'less than substantial' and 'substantial', with policy flowing on from a conclusion of either category of harm. Planning Officers have reviewed the Conservation Officer's comments as well as those from external advisory bodies and consider that the proposal amounts to harm which occurs at the higher end of the less than substantial category.
- 4.18. The Conservation Officer has advised that the harm arises in this case from the southern atrium extension. This harm derives from:

- The atrium extension will remove a fundamental component of the original design: the symmetry of the building;
- The atrium will cocoon the original elevation of the host building and the large new roof form will prevent an understanding of the original listed structure;
- The simple form and massing of the building will be lost, overwhelming the existing relatively modest structure; and,
- The atrium extension will partially remove the historic fabric of the semi-circular arched windows on the southern elevation, both an irreplaceable resource and an important feature of the original 1871 design.

4.19. Planning Officers agree with this assessment of harm but consider the overall impact of the extension is less than substantially harmful due to the glazed nature of the proposed atrium elevations, which will continue to allow views of the listed fabric enclosed within the extension. Furthermore, whilst the roof form is unduly large and bulky, the building will primarily be experienced from ground floor level where the roof form would not be viewed head on.

4.20. The changes to the building are shown on the proposed elevation drawings as follows:



Figure 1: Extract of the proposed southern elevation drawing ref. 22.20_PL_201 REV.C



Figure 2: Extract of the existing southern elevation drawing ref. 22.20_PL_007 REV.C

- 4.21. In their consultation responses both the Victorian Society and the Theatres Trust have raised concern with the design atrium extension and consider it amounts to less than substantial harm to the significance of the building. The Theatres Trust suggested an amendment to alter the roof pitch such that it would better preserve the symmetry of the building.
- 4.22. The NPPF (2023) advises that ‘great weight’ should be given by the decision maker to any heritage asset’s conservation.
- 4.23. In cases of harm, paragraph 206 of the NPPF requires that: ‘[a]ny harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification.’
- 4.24. In cases of harm, paragraph 206 of the NPPF requires that: ‘any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification.’
- 4.25. Paragraph 208 provides further policy on how decision makers should act where less than substantial harm is identified:

208. Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.

An assessment of public benefits is undertaken below.

- 4.26. Policy EN5 of the adopted Teignbridge Local Plan requires that proposals ‘protect and enhance the area’s heritage...take account of the significance’ of any affected

heritage asset. This proposal is considered to conflict with this Local Plan Policy because it will obscure and reduce understanding of the significance of the asset.

- 4.27. For the same reasons as those identified above, the proposal is considered to conflict with emerging Policy EN17: Heritage Assets.
- 4.28. There are other grade II listed buildings located along Market Street: the Adult Education Centre and Library, the Liberal Club, 7 Market Street and 9 and 11 Market Street. This proposal could be considered to fall within the settings of these buildings. However, the Conservation Officer has not identified any harm would arise to these buildings, and the location of the body of works to the southern side of the Alexandra Theatre will largely obscure views of the extension from these listed buildings. Therefore, it is considered that the proposal would have a neutral impact on their significance.

The Public Benefit Argument

- 4.29. Given the NPPF makes provision for the decision maker to allow less than substantial harm to occur to listed buildings in some circumstances, it is necessary to consider if such circumstances, or clear and convincing justification, is available in the case of this application.
- 4.30. Given the importance of this justification to the likelihood of a recommendation of approval, the applicant was provided with an opportunity to set out this justification to the Local Planning Authority. The applicant's agent provided an email dated 28th July 2023 and a further statement in January 2024 which sought to justify the extension. The unexpected submission of a Business Case was then made to the Local Planning Authority one working day prior to the Planning Committee date. To allow full consideration of this document, the items were postponed. As set out above, the Case Officer identified concerns with the relevance of the Business Case information to the proposal (the single theatre restoration was explicitly set out to not be the intention of the applicant and did not feature in the Business Case, whilst that is both a key component of the scheme as well as heritage benefit of the proposal). As set out above in Section 3, the applicant was therefore invited to reconsider the Business Plan, and an amended document was submitted in April.
- 4.31. The key arguments presented by the applicant and agent are considered as follows.
- 4.32. The first is that the southern extension is critical to support the commercial viability of the Theatre and enhance its overall offering to members of the public. It is stated that there is insufficient space in the foyer within the existing listed building to provide a revenue-generating facility and therefore an extension must be built.
- 4.33. There was no evidence to substantiate this argument originally submitted. However, the applicant has now supplied the April 2024 Business Case which does demonstrate that the café and bar would assist with revenue generation to the point that the additional floorspace would be critical to the operation of both a single or dual performance space. It is important to note that the Business Case does not evidence that the single stage restoration can be undertaken through the revenue generation of the additional floorspace in the extension. Instead, it is only the operational period (once the extension has hypothetically been constructed) which is shown to break even with the extension. External funding sources would

need to be pursued to obtain the capital necessary to both build the extension and restore the single theatre.

- 4.34. If achievable, the restoration of a year-round theatre would complement Local and Neighbourhood Plan policies for development in the Town Centre. For example, Policy NA8 supports the delivery of a broader evening economy through encouraging mixed-use developments and leisure schemes. Policy S12 would lend support in principle for an enhancement of the visitor offering, as would EC9 Developments in Town Centres and it is a requirement of S14 Newton Abbot to 'support proposals that reinforce the town's role as a focus for entertainment and cultural provision'. The Neighbourhood Plan's Policy NANDP5 - Provision of Community Facilities and Policy NANDP8 - Town Centre Regeneration would equally support such a scheme.
- 4.35. There have been a large number of public representations submitted in support. For a full breakdown of these comments please refer to Section 7. Public representations have commented on the benefits of the proposal in terms of reinstating the theatre, the formation of a cultural 'hub' for Newton Abbot, the potential for the theatre to take on a regional focus for entertainment and cultural provision, as well as the potential for wider benefits to arise for the town centre, such as additional visitor spend and enhanced status for the town. Officers recognise and agree with these public benefits. They are important factors to be taken into account.
- 4.36. The Design and Access Statement makes reference to the potential for the redeveloped space to offer a tribute to Frank Matcham, born in Newton Abbot in 1854 and a celebrated theatre architect. There is no information provided on how the proposals would achieve this aim but Officers would welcome this as a potential public benefit of the scheme. A condition is recommended to secure this benefit.
- 4.37. A further argument has been made by the applicant that the atrium extension will provide a positive urban design feature by drawing pedestrians through the new proposed pedestrian link through to the Market Square and adding 'active frontage'. This pedestrian link is not part of this application but is something which has been put forward as part of applications 22/01129/MAJ and 22/01130/LBC for a new cinema structure, which were withdrawn, and has featured in the early stages of public consultation on proposals put forward by the Council under the Future High Streets Fund (for which no planning applications have yet been submitted). Officers agree that the southern glazed extension could provide an attractive feature for pedestrians, drawing them through the new hypothetical route. Unfortunately, however, there is no guarantee such a route will ever be pursued, and there is no permission in place for its installation. Members must therefore consider the proposal in the context that there is no guarantee such an urban design benefit could be realised.
- 4.38. A final argument made by the applicant is that the proposal will facilitate improved disabled access to the theatre. Such an improvement would clearly represent a public benefit of the scheme. However, it is not clear that the atrium extension is essential to the disabled access provision and that other changes to the building could not be made to provide level access. This point was raised by the Conservation Officer.

- 4.39. As was set out in the last Officer report to Committee (where a recommendation of refusal was made), that taking in to account the land ownership of the site, and the Council's land holding in the town centre, which includes the wider Market Hall and Market Square, it is not clear that a bar/café space would need to be sited directly to the south of the new theatre to cross-subsidise the theatre space. If a café/bar was instead installed within the Market Hall itself (incidentally these proposals are under consideration by the Council under the Future High Streets Fund), it could still provide synergies and cross-subsidisation of the theatre use. This land ownership arrangement has not changed since March. This is why it is essential to impose condition 3 to ensure appropriate phasing of works – should an alternative funding/operational model come forward linked to the Council's wider land holding, the single theatre restoration could still take place but the harmful southern extension may no longer be necessary.
- 4.40. A further important consideration for this proposal is the need for a renegotiation of the Theatre's lease with the land owner, Teignbridge District Council. The current terms of the lease allow only 3 weeks of use of the Theatre per year. The proposal and public representations note the public benefits of year-round performance use and indeed it is integral to the proposal that greater use be permitted. Whilst a full time theatre could provide many benefits for Newton Abbot, it is not within the scope of a planning permission, or the Local Planning Authority, to change the terms of the lease and grant increased use. The deliverability of the scheme is therefore possible but would require the applicant to overcome this further hurdle which falls outside of the control of the planning system.
- 4.41. Drawing these arguments together, and contrary to the recommendation to March's Committee, Officers consider that there are public benefits which should be given weight in the planning balance. These public benefits are considered sufficient to provide the 'clear and convincing' justification that the harmful element of the proposal (the southern extension) can be permitted. The benefits include: the potential for a commercially-viable theatre to be operated from the Alexandra building in the form of a single restored stage/auditorium, an urban design enhancement through additional active frontage on a potential new pedestrian route to Market Square, the potential for the public benefits identified in public representations and Local Plan policies to be realised, and the possible delivery of enhanced public understand of Frank Matcham, an important architect originally from Newton Abbot.
- 4.42. There are factors which are overall neutral in the public benefit considerations. These are improvements for disabled access (which have not been shown to be unachievable via another design), and the wider land holding/lease renegotiation issues, which are potential barriers to the applicant's proposals but fall outside the scope of the planning system.
- 4.43. Officers consider, overall, that these public benefits are now sufficient to justify the southern extension. 'Clear and convincing' evidence (as required by the NPPF) has been presented that the bar/café facility is necessary to support the viability of the operation of the single theatre stage. It is also important to bear in mind that the Officer recommendation is subject to conditions, notably condition 3 to secure a phasing plan. (If Members consider the phasing requirement to be unnecessary for any reason, the Officer recommendation would be required to change to one of refusal.)

4.44. **Is it possible to weigh heritage benefits against heritage harms?**

- 4.45. Given Officers consider that heritage benefit will arise from this scheme, in the form of the restoration of the single theatre/auditorium space, Members of the Planning Committee may ask if this benefit can be weighed against the conservation harm in the form of the southern extension.
- 4.46. There is relevant case law on this matter dating from 2021: *City & Country Bramshill Limited v Secretary of State* (Court of Appeal, 9 March 2021). In this judgment, it was found that it is not necessary for the decision maker to undertake a 'net harm' exercise, whereby one heritage harm is weighed against another heritage benefit, and only if 'net harm' is considered to arise is the public benefit argument then addressed.
- 4.47. Instead, the judgment sets out that it is not stipulated, or implied, in legislation or case law, that a decision-maker must undertake a 'net' or 'internal' balance of heritage-related benefits and harm as a self-contained exercise preceding a wider assessment of the kind envisaged in the NPPF. Nor is there any justification for reading such a requirement into the wording of the NPPF.
- 4.48. Therefore, in this case, the balancing exercise is one for the decision maker, taking into account all material considerations. On balance, it is advised that the overall level of harm constitutes 'less than substantial' harm, and this triggers relevant policy in the NPPF which must be followed in the decision making process.
- 4.49. **Conclusion**
- 4.50. Following the submission of the additional information and the revised drawings since March's Planning Committee, the key planning matters relating to this proposal comprise the impact of the works upon the listed building, whether the harm of such works outweighs the public benefits which could arise, and whether the use of planning conditions could allow a recommendation of approval to be made.
- 4.51. Officers support the applicant's aim to provide a commercially-viable facility which would support itself through cross-subsidisation via additional floorspace in the southern extension.
- 4.52. Officers broadly concur with the views expressed in public representations of the potential benefits of the scheme, as well as the external bodies, such as the Theatres Trust and Victorian Society, all of whom comment on the benefits of strengthening the cultural offering of the town and enhancing community involvement and performance space.
- 4.53. Officers are concerned with the applicant's stated intention within the Business Case documentation not to restore the single theatre/auditorium and instead build what is considered to be the harmful atrium extension without restoring the theatre. However, the most recent Business Case document appears to demonstrate that the theatre restoration can be viable if the southern extension is built. Therefore, subject to a phasing condition which requires the restoration of the theatre prior to, or alongside, the atrium extension, it would be possible to approve the application.

- 4.54. Taking these points together, officers recommend approval of the scheme subject to the above planning conditions.

5. POLICY DOCUMENTS

5.1. Teignbridge Local Plan 2013-2033

S1 Sustainable Development Criteria

S2 Quality Development

EN5 Heritage Assets

4.2. Newton Abbot Neighbourhood Development Plan 2016

Policy NANDP11 - Protection of Designated and Non Designated Heritage Assets

4.3. National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2023)

4.4. National Planning Policy Guidance (PPG)

4.5. Proposed Submission Local Plan 2020-2040

This is the Regulation 19 version of the Emerging Local Plan (i.e. the final draft). It is the version of the Plan which will be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for public examination. The National Planning Policy Framework sets out that decision-takers may give weight to relevant policies in emerging plans according to their stage of preparation, the extent to which there are unresolved objections to relevant policies, and their degree of consistency with policies in the National Planning Policy Framework.

6. CONSULTEES

6.1. Conservation Officer – Teignbridge District Council

Extracts of detailed/final observations 21st December 2023 (for the full consultation response please refer to the application file)

Background

This application, submitted by a local theatre group, aims to retrofit the existing two stages back into one theatre and a stage for performances as well as being a cinema. The building is adjacent to the historic Market Hall. It should be noted that schemes are also being considered concurrently on ways to invigorate the Market Square. Part of the proposal is a new pedestrian route through to the Market Square.

Design issues

The proposed scheme for the theatre retains the existing tiered balcony seating but extends this down to stage level providing a maximum capacity of 265 seats with a traditional stage arrangement. The number of seats are reduced to 240 seats when the stage is extended forward to provide an improved space for dance performances, orchestras and other community uses.

The design retains the existing stage facilities including the flying systems, the orchestra pit, the wings and six backstage changing rooms. Disabled access is provided to stage level by a platform lift and to a side gallery for performance viewing.

Beneath the tiered seating, a concourse area contains a bar and box office with links to improved toilet facilities and to the new entrance and atrium space. The atrium will also serve as a café and occasional small performance and exhibition space.

An administration office is shown adjacent to the gallery with a view into the auditorium. The auditorium will be renovated to provide a modern performance space with acoustics for a variety of uses.

Significance

In particular regard to this application, it is important to note that originally the western floor plan and elevations are clearly symmetrical. This is an important component of the 1871 classical design, with its semi-circular arched stone windows by architect John Chudleigh.

Types of Harm: When assessing what constitutes 'harm' to a heritage asset the NPPF (paragraphs 205 – 208) categorises harm into three areas: substantial harm; less than substantial harm; and no harm. Substantial harm is any impact which would seriously affect a key element of the special architectural or heritage significance of an asset (Planning Practice Guidance, 2019).

Comments

In general the concept to reinstate the original theatre inside is supported.

However, one of the reasons the building designed by Victorian architect John Chudleigh was listed is that it is considered to be of “special architectural interest”. The original features such as the row of semi-circular arched windows, and feature grey limestone tower, is why the host building was listed in the first place. The current proposal will “harm” or cover up these design features.

The proposed new additions and alterations to the southern end of the building are considered “substantial harm” and not just “less than substantial harm”, because they would have a large impact on the original design features that can be seen.

The building is of importance, because of its design, decoration or craftsmanship. It was and still is an important civic building and part of the Market Square. It is a good example of late 19th Neo-classical architecture. It has a pure but simple form, with a series semi-circular windows. Its simple form and massing are part of its significance.

The proposed extension will have a big impact on the way it is seen from the street. By adding a large entry auditorium on the side wall, it will cover up the original architectural detailing, which is one of the main reasons for listing the building. It is also proposed to add small additions to the tower, further eroding the way the building is viewed.

Conclusion

The current application is Not Supported.

Reason: The proposed exterior works would cause substantial harm (in NPPF terms) to the character and significance of the listed Alexander Theatre. It would cover significant architectural design detailing (by John Chudleigh), the architect of the original Theatre elevations.

6.2. **Conservation Officer – Teignbridge District Council**

Initial observations 15th February 2023

The Theatre was originally built as the Corn Exchange dated 1871 but altered to a Theatre by 1900.

In 1920 further alteration included blocking the windows to enable films and in 1927 a balcony was added and other foyer alterations in 1930.

The current proposals look to reinstate a single theatre from the current two screen split at the balcony point. This allows for an increased Foyer and bar area beneath the upper circle.

These alterations are supported in principle however the original balcony feature is understood to be at least still in situ and it would be preferable to incorporate and reinstate the balcony feature to the new auditorium.

There are however a number of issues with current application that are harmful to the significance of the Theatre.

The Atrium extension involves a large opening to be created in the side wall of the existing building below an existing window and a large, curved glass wall atrium extend out with a catslide continuation of the roof slope to extend over it.

The extension would unbalance a current symmetrical plan form of the building and the scale, form and enlarged roof would be overwhelming to the existing relatively modest building. The extension would also surround the existing store /access addition to the side and it is proposed to remove the roof of this structure raise the walls to underside of the new atrium roof. There are no details as to how the existing structure is to be handled and the proposed alterations including the works to the existing addition, stone walling, existing windows and door openings, and what new materials and finishes are proposed.

While the new atrium would provide access to a wheel chair access lift and gallery to the auditorium this could be accommodated without this structure and extensive alterations.

There is also no justification for the large scale extension as the alterations internally to create a large foyer bar that would include a small stage area would appear more than sufficient to support a Theatre of 270 seats.

The proposal needs a heritage statement that properly assess the buildings fabric and architectural significance of the building and a more informed approach to designing the alterations are required to achieve the appropriate conservation balance in achieving a viable use. The current designs do not sufficiently evidence

that they have been developed to respond to the Theatre's architectural significance, integrity, floor plans and fabric.

In addition, while not part of the considerations for this application the atrium would restrict the potential for a new cinema on the adjoining site and improved pedestrian links to Market Square. A more coordinated approach between the two parties could achieve a more viable Arts and Culture hub for Newton Abbot that allows for Theatre improvements, new Cinema and enhanced public spaces and access.

So while I am supportive of the principle of reinstating a single auditorium and enlarged Foyer area within the extent of the existing building there appears no justification for the atrium extension and the harmful works to the heritage asset that are proposed to achieve this contrary to the National Planning Policy Framework paragraphs 199, 200 and 202. And Local Plan Policy EN5

I consider the proposal should be withdrawn and amended to better achieve the balance between the improved use and the architectural integrity and significance of the Theatre.

6.3. Archaeology – Devon County Council

I refer to the above application and your recent consultation. Given the limited below-ground impact of the proposed extension the Historic Environment Team has no comments to make on this planning application. However, I would advise that the Planning Authority's Conservation Officer is consulted with regard to any comments they may have the scheme and the impact upon the listed building here.

6.4. Victorian Society (extract of comments – for full comments please refer to the application file)

This application envisages the continued use of the Alexandra Cinema as an entertainment venue with some alterations to the fabric to enable this. Overall, the Victorian Society in principle supports a proposal which would ensure the building's continued use as a cinema (as use which it has had for most of its life) and if this application is viewed as an alternative to 22/01129/MAJ then it is preferable as it would not harm the setting of the listed building. Some of the proposed alterations, such as the glazed extension forming a new entertainment space would cause a less than substantial level of harm to the listed building, but the Victorian Society believes this would be justified by the public benefit resulting in the preservation of the building as an entertainment venue.

The application documentation lacks some detail and if it is progress further more detail in terms of drawings and a clear idea of demolitions of the existing building will be required, with a detailed explanation of all the works proposed for the building.

6.5. Theatres Trust (extract of comments – for full comments please refer to the application file)

[i]n principle we support this aspiration. It would deliver a theatre for the town with an indicative capacity of around 270 seats with wheelchair places. Currently theatre provision in Newton Abbot is limited by the restriction on use of the

Alexandra, whereas the applicant has provided an indication of wider need and demand for a year-round facility. This in itself would positively enhance and diversify the town's cultural offer, and in addition to this there would be a secondary space capable of hosting smaller/'grass roots' events. Availability of a café/bar with prominence and good visibility would help bring more people into the venue and generate additional income to support its cultural programme and overall financial sustainability.

We assume that currently sets and equipment are brought into the auditorium through the fire exit to the Market Street service road and then lifted onto the stage. This seems to remain the route through (although potentially this may become more challenging because of the pedestrianisation proposals) but this is not an efficient means especially if there is a fuller year-round programme. A potential solution would be to switch the WCs on the north side with the dressing room and rehearsal room and utilise that as a route directly onto the stage. This would also require provision of a parking bay for loading where there are currently double-yellow lines for which engagement with the Council's highways team would be recommended.

On external design we broadly consider these plans to be sensitive to the building's form and significance, although we suggest the new roof might be expressed as a separate pitch to better maintain the building's symmetry. Final plans for the Alexandra should also correspond with those of the market hall, and vice versa, and we encourage engagement between the respective parties.

Overall we welcome these proposal and are supportive of plans. Policy S14.j of the Teignbridge Local Plan 2013-2033 (2014) supports proposals which reinforce Newton Abbot's role as a focus for entertainment and cultural provision. Part d. of Policy NA8 seeks delivery of a broader evening economy. These proposals would help achieve those aims. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature. In terms of heritage these plans necessitate internal and external alterations including a side extension. Some of those alterations will reverse later changes and thus constitute heritage benefits, and in other cases will support the site's use and function as a theatre and community facility and enable its retention in such use rather than a more harmful and wholesale change as originally envisaged within the Future High Street plans. We consider the side extension constitutes less than substantial harm. With reference to paragraph 202 of the NPPF, overall that harm as well as those arising from internal alterations is mitigated by the public benefits of this scheme and the delivery of its original and likely optimum viable use.

7. REPRESENTATIONS

- 7.1. 92 letters of representation have been received. 62 were provided in relation to the scheme as originally submitted and 30 to the revised version (relating to the Theatre part of the building only).
- 7.2. A summary of the comments received is as follows. 86 letters were received in support, 5 in comment and 1 in objection.
 - Restoration to a single theatre auditorium will preserve the character and functionality of the building, increasing the appeal for live entertainment of all forms, combined with the ability to show films.

- Restoration to a single theatre space could allow use by the community and touring theatre groups throughout the year and establish Newton Abbot as a regional focus for entertainment and cultural provision, complementing the existing library
- JJ's Arts Academy have commented on the need for additional rehearsal and performance space in Newton Abbot
- An orchestra pit should be included
- To ensure commercial viability, there must be provision for refreshments and most importantly a bar. The Alexandra building as it stands cannot accommodate a cafe and bar. The addition of the proposed atrium will provide space for these facilities in a light and welcoming atmosphere being south facing. This atrium would be a striking addition to the Alexandra Theatre forming a elegant gateway to the Market Square.
- The extension could be used as an intimate performance space or for art exhibitions, poetry or comedy
- The atrium extension is sympathetic to the host building and will create a more unified space whilst being modern, practical and flexible
- The proposals are overbearing and unnecessary
- The alterations will improve the accessibility of the theatre for the disabled
- The proposals are likely to generate additional revenue for the wider town such as through additional spend before and after performances as well as attracting a broader range of visitors to the town centre
- This is a sustainable location in close proximity to car parking and public transport and could reduce carbon emissions associated with travel to venues in the wider region
- The Theatre is an asset for the town which should be preserved
- The cost of the project is excessive for what it will achieve; the current Theatre is ample
- With films available online people are unlikely to make a journey into town
- The comments of the Theatre Trust should be taken on-board
- The arts in general have the potential to improve people's mental health and wellbeing as well as help children's development
- The footway adjacent to the proposed new entrance appears to be quite narrow and is next to the goods entrance for this part of the town centre. This could be overcome by moving the new atrium entrance towards market square.
- The new bar area should be linked to the toilets via a ramp and not via steps as shown on the plans (to ensure disabled access)

6.3. Newton Abbot & District Civic Society expressed general support for the original proposal.

8. TOWN / PARISH COUNCIL'S COMMENTS

No Objection, Newton Abbot Town Council fully supports the application which is respectful to the important heritage of the town.

9. CARBON/CLIMATE IMPACT

No detail has been provided in relation to the carbon/climate impact of the scheme. Please refer to the planning application officer report.

9. HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

The development has been assessed against the provisions of the Human Rights Act, and in particular Article 1 of the First Protocol and Article 8 of the Act itself. This Act gives further effect to the rights included in the European Convention on Human Rights. In arriving at this recommendation, due regard has been given to the applicant's reasonable development rights and expectations which have been balanced and weighed against the wider community interests, as expressed through third party interests/the Development Plan and Central Government Guidance.

Head of Place and Commercial Services