

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Executive – 15 September 2010

Policy to protect the future use of the Gaumont Theatre building, Corporation Street, Taunton

Report of the Strategy Manager

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Norman Cavill)

1. Executive Summary

1.1 The Gaumont Theatre Building (currently the Mecca Bingo Hall) has been identified as a potential building in the future for expanding Taunton's cultural offer as a Centre for Arts and Entertainment, including use as a Theatre, by offering an excellent site as a live performing and touring venue. The Council is therefore recommending it states these cultural ambitions in its Cultural Strategy, Town Centre Area Action Plan (when reviewed) and Core Strategy to add weight to future planning decisions, were this opportunity to arise.

2 Background

2.1 A presentation was made to members by the 'Project Gaumont' group at Community Scrutiny on 2 March 2010 to explore the prospects of one day returning the Gaumont Theatre building back into use as a Centre for Arts and Entertainment. The aspiration was also supported by representatives from The Theatres Trust and the Cinema Theatre Association.

2.2 The building is currently owned by Rank and is used as the Mecca Bingo Hall, a popular venue in Taunton, serving a local community membership of around 1,300 people per week.

2.3 Representatives at the meeting stated that the Listing Building status did not afford the building adequate protection from future re-development and that additional policies were needed to provide further protection.

2.4 The 'Project Gaumont' group described the cultural and economic advantages that bringing the building into use as a Centre for Arts and Entertainment could bring to the town and they suggested that both the Brewhouse Theatre and the Gaumont Theatre could be run concurrently.

2.5 The recommendation of the Community Scrutiny Committee was:
"Resolved that the Executive be recommended to support the long term use

of the Gaumont Theatre for performance and to take any steps that it could to support its long term use for performance, through planning policy.”

3 Existing Planning Status

3.1 The current use for this building is D2 – “Assembly and Leisure’ (includes Cinema, Concert Hall, Bingo Hall, Dance Hall, Swimming Bath, Skating Rink, Gymnasium, or area for indoor or outdoor sports and recreation, not involving motor vehicles or firearms”. This provides significant planning protection to ensure that the building is only used for D2 purposes. Any change to the established use of the building would require a planning application and the required justification for that change of use. The recommendations of this report are that the case for its future use as a Centre for Arts and Entertainment / Theatre is strengthened by policy statements from the Council, stating this as a Council aspiration for the building.

3.2 Planning Policy Statement 4 (PPS4) ‘Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth’ encourages a diverse range of cultural, leisure and recreation facilities in appropriate existing centres where sites or buildings for conversion are or are likely to become available within the plan period. This can be applied to the Gaumont Theatre adding further weight for this building to continue to be used in future for D2 purposes and ideally as a Centre for Arts and Entertainment or as a Theatre.

3.3 The building already has significant protection of its exterior and interior due to its listed status. Any physical changes to the building that affects its special architectural significance will require Listed Building Consent. This provides further protection from changes including subdivision.

3.4 The Council can only provide a policy steer and describe its cultural aspirations for the Gaumont Theatre. This would then be considered during any future sale of the building or planning application.

4 Proposals to strengthen policies on the building

4.1 That the Council should publicly declare its cultural ambitions by updating its Cultural Strategy to include reference to the continued use of the Gaumont Theatre as a Class D2 building and its ambition to protect and promote the building as a Centre for Entertainment and Arts with potential future use as a theatre. Proposed wording for this is shown in Appendix A.

4.2 The aspirations for the Gaumont Theatre building be formalised in the Town Centre Area Action Plan when this is reviewed in 2012.

4.3 To include a statement in the Council’s Core Strategy reinforcing our cultural ambitions and the wish to support theatres in Taunton and Taunton Deane

and to identify and support suitable buildings. The Core Strategy is a high level strategic document and it would not be appropriate to include a single building policy.

5 Finance Comments

5.1 The proposals of this report are policy proposals only and have no financial impact on the Council.

6 Other Comments

6.1 The Strategy Manager sent a copy of this draft report with a letter asking for comments, to the following organisations:

- Davina Warden, Manager of Taunton Mecca Bingo Hall
- Tony Robinson, Rank Director of Property
- Mark Price, Planning and Heritage Adviser, The Theatres Trust
- Paul Birch, Chair of Brewhouse Theatre
- Ian Franklin, Project Taunton

Comments have been attached as Appendix B

7 Links to Corporate Aims

7.1 Protection of this building will ensure cultural entertainment remains in the town and will make a major contribution to the vitality of the town centre, supporting growth and regeneration.

8 Equalities Impact

8.1 Any future change of use to the building would be required to consider equalities and access legislation.

9 Recommendations

9.1 The Executive is requested to approve the proposed policy measures identified in paragraphs 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3.

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Appendix A

Proposed wording to include in Council's Cultural Strategy:

“The Council has considered the long-term future of the Gaumont Theatre, currently used as a bingo hall (Class D2). It is an ambition and strategic objective of the Council to protect and promote the building for Entertainment and cultural use and potentially as a theatre.”

“The Gaumont Theatre has been identified as a suitable building for expanding Taunton's cultural offer as a live performance and large touring venue to accompany the Brewhouse. A large touring venue such as this along with the Brewhouse, meet the Council's cultural aspirations and provide an environment for a sustainable community, offering social, cultural, environmental and economic benefits as well as regeneration. These buildings would make a major contribution to the vitality of town centres, helping attract and retain well-qualified people and businesses and with visiting audiences providing regular custom for local bars and restaurants outside normal working and shopping hours. This is only possible if potential sites are identified and become available, which is why the Council has declared its support for the Gaumont Theatre as such a site.”

Website link for Cultural Strategy:

http://sومersetcultureonline.co.uk/Local_Authorities/Taunton_Deane

Appendix B

Comments received from stakeholders

The following organizations were written to with a copy of this draft report and a request for their comments. Letters were sent on the 30th July 2010, with reminder letters sent on 24th August.

1. Manager of Mecca Bingo Hall, Taunton
2. Director of property, Rank
3. The Theatres Trust
4. Chair of Brewhouse Theatre
5. Project Taunton

Responses Received:

Mecca Bingo Hall

No response received

Rank

No response received

The Theatres Trust

“Thank you for sending the Trust a copy of the report. I think it is very well written and I am pleased that Taunton Deane Borough Council is taking this approach with the protection and promotion of the Gaumont.”

Brewhouse Theatre

“The Board of Trustees of the Brewhouse Theatre and Arts Centre support any and all moves to expand and enhance the provision of culture in Taunton. The Gaumont Theatre building offers the potential of a venue that would be able to host arts and entertainments that no other venue in Taunton can. Since the building has a capacity many times that of the Brewhouse it would complement the Brewhouse, whether in our existing 350 seat or in an expanded state. So far as we know Rank have no plans to vacate the building but we welcome the notion of protecting the site should they choose to do so in the future. There are some structural limitations to the building and there are some concerns over the business viability of operating such a large venue at a profit in a regional market. That said, we would offer our full support to anyone choosing to try.”

Project Taunton

Ian Franklin responded with the following observations:

“A study has been carried out to see how feasible it would be to convert the building into a theatre to replace the Brewhouse. As a result of the listing both inside and out it would be almost impossible to split it into smaller performance

space and the 1600 seat capacity is just too big for a theatre or a multiplex cinema. The basement floods quite badly and the Theatre Development Study shows the cost of conversion into even an inappropriate theatre would be prohibitive.

Our view is that the existing use is not making the best of the building. We will probably need to re-house the library when the retail scheme goes ahead and we like the idea of investigating a free standing structure in this building which could provide library and other public space, and this could incorporate a gallery, without compromising the interior listing.

This is such a difficult building to redevelop or refurbish that I would not recommend being over protective of its future.”

Project Taunton also sent an extract from the Taunton Theatre Development Study which looked at the feasibility of developing the Gaumont building into a theatre to replace the Brewhouse Theatre.

Extract from TAUNTON THEATRE DEVELOPMENT STUDY, Options Appraisal and Feasibility Study January 2008. Produced by Alun Bond of Artservice.

5.3 Option 3 Development of Another Building

This option depends on the existence and availability of an alternative building and, in particular, the former Gaumont Cinema (now a Mecca bingo hall). No other buildings of suitable scale or location have been identified. Our research has revealed that the building is currently leased by Mecca (which sold it to a commercial owner about 18 months ago) until 2021 and there are no firm plans to replace the building, despite local management being keen to re-locate to another site.

Furthermore, the bingo market is experiencing a downturn and Mecca would be reluctant to invest £3.5m, the cost of setting up a new bingo hall, in a replacement facility at present. It is not impossible that Mecca might surrender the lease if an attractive commercial deal could be arranged, though this might require a major payment to the company.

The Gaumont is a Grade II listed building and was a 1725 seat entertainment and cinema venue and retains many of its original features. Stage width is 74 ft with a depth of 21 feet (which is too shallow for major touring shows, musicals, opera etc). It also has a fly tower (this may not be full height). It is estimated that up to £10m would need to be invested in the building to return it to its role as a live venue. Despite this there would be commercial interest in such a venture given the seating capacity. We have already spoken to the three main regional commercial theatre operators, two of whom were interested in the venue in principle.

In our view the Gaumont would not be a suitable replacement for the Brewhouse. Its main auditorium is too large for the range of programme currently presented and is most suitable for rock and pop music events and other types of large-scale commercial entertainment. The auditorium is listed and in our view conversion into separate smaller spaces would be inappropriate and unlikely to achieved planning permission.

The Gaumont should therefore be viewed as a potential distinct and separate scheme to be taken forward in partnership with the private sector. This might be considered in the context of other developments and opportunities in the Castle Green area and in relation to the adjacent Michael Paul House (currently occupied by the Inland Revenue).