

Protecting theatres for everyone



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13 June 2022

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Application: P2017/0800/FUL & P20170888/LBC

Site: Kings Head Public House and Former North London Mail Centre 115 & 116-118 Upper Street London N1 1AE

Proposal: RECONSULTATION: Changes to the theatre within the Islington Square, additional information relating to fire safety and updates to the internal layout of the Kings Head. REVISED DESCRIPTION: The provision of a theatre consisting of up to 250 seats in Block B of the Islington Square development at ground, first and basement levels; a new entrance lobby courtyard between the east elevation of Block B in Islington Square and the rear of 115 Upper Street; variation to retail unit G1 in Islington Square to facilitate access to the proposed KHT entrance; formation of a canopy over the new entrance; the use of all of the Kings Head Theatre space at 115 Upper Street as a public house on relocation of the Kings Head Theatre; the demolition of the lean-to dressing room at the rear of 115 Upper Street; erection of a first floor extension to the Kings Head; installation of new plant to the rear; works to the first floor roof terrace; reinstatement of a rooflight to ground floor rear room. Listed building Application Ref Number P20170888/LBC also submitted.

Remit:

The 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
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

Chair Dave Moutrey **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Paul Cartwright, James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Lucy Osborne, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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Comment:

Thank you for re-consulting Theatres Trust on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent following submission of revised plans. The previous scheme was conditionally granted in early 2018 but the associated Section 106 agreement was not signed.

For our purposes there are two key elements to this proposal; change of use and alterations to theatre spaces within the existing theatre at the King's Head pub and provision of a new theatre within Block B of the Islington Square development to provide a replacement facility for the King's Head Theatre.

With regards to the existing site we have no objection to the change of use of the theatre space which will bring the whole building into pub use and neither do we object to the listing building consent element of the proposal for internal alterations, first floor extension and demolition of the lean-to at the rear which has provided a dressing room. However, our position is entirely conditional upon delivery of the replacement facility and its occupation and commencement of operation by the King's Head Theatre. This must be secured by condition and Section 106 agreement. Failure to secure continual operation of the theatre would instead trigger our objection to loss of the current site.

Compared to the previous scheme the replacement site within these plans occupies broadly the same location although there have been some internal changes and subsequent loss of footprint following the loss of a studio space. Whilst this change assists with audience flow which was one of our previous concerns the lack of the studio will impact on the financial viability of the project and will diminish the role and value of the theatre as a facility for the community. This could in turn compromise fundraising potential for the theatre.

As before we would comment this is not the most prominent part of the Islington Square development and lacks the visibility and footfall of the theatre's existing site, with just a small entrance foyer which is essentially just access to the stairs and lift. In turn this will impact the theatre's ability to attract additional audiences and its revenue potential, further compounded by there being little scope for meaningful ancillary food and beverage provision which could help support its financial sustainability. Therefore it must be ensured that the theatre is provided with sufficient signage and wayfinding elsewhere around the development and we would also urge external space around the theatre to be brought into the theatre's demise so that it provides opportunity for activation and to draw people in.

In terms of the theatre space and its internal layout we raised concerns in our comments on the original application and whilst some of these have been addressed such as the better audience flow and changeover (although this is met through reduction to a single performance space), and the main performance space now being more flexible allowing different formats and layouts, we consider there are still grounds for plans to be refined and improved.

Above the entry foyer is an office space. This is not accessible as there is no lift access to this level which does not represent best practice for a new-build scheme and should be addressed.

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As space given to the theatre is limited more generally this will inevitably mean that other staff areas such as bar/servery will also be small and could raise challenges for making them inclusive. With the accessible WC being the only WC at auditorium level there is a high risk this will be used by other audience members but also performers given it is next to the dressing room and there is no other facility. The WC opens straight into the lower foyer so need to have good ventilation. The location of the dressing room and it being the only one is also not ideal as this will limit the range and scale of productions the theatre can host, similarly it is problematic the dressing room has no shower or WC of its own.

Otherwise the WCs for audiences, staff and potentially performers are in effect public facilities shared with the shopping centre. This could create issues related to management and safety particularly late at night, and could conflict with the theatre's licensing requirements. Without a regular cleaning regime and oversight these may not be of the standards expected by audiences. There will need to be appropriate agreements in relation to cleaning and what costs are attributable to the theatre.

The space, layout and usage of the lower foyer areas may also present a challenge. At basement -1 this area is limited in size and is essentially circulation space linking to the WCs. Use of it as a bar may be problematic for these reasons, also that it is away from the auditorium three levels up. Its subterranean position further restricts prospects of it being utilised as an all-day venue compounding the challenges of the theatre's location cited above. The foyer outside the auditorium is similarly constrained given it will need to act as a means of escape. The plans show no bar or seating in this area, although locations for either may be restricted. If there are plans for a mobile bar the storage of products and space for waste and drainage will also need to be considered.

There will also need to be consideration given as to how the box-in-box construction of the auditorium will be accommodated given the space available and need for ventilation, also for ducting, services and ventilation to other parts of the theatre as these are not shown on the plans. As escape stairs will be shared there will need to be access control to ensure persons cannot enter from other parts of the building. With regards to evacuation, whilst the Fire Strategy states there is appropriate means of escape for most audience members refuge will need to be provided for wheelchair users but none appear to be shown on the plans. It must be ensured there is a proper evacuation strategy and facilities for wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility because evacuation chairs are not practical for climb of this length and would require the theatre to continually have available a sufficient number of trained and capable staff. Alternatively the lift must be designed an evacuation lift. Further advice on this matter should be sought.

It is important that a get-in route (for sets, props and equipment) is safeguarded should there be subsequent amendments to commercial units and access routes.

The King's Head Theatre is a long established and valued theatre which has provided a space for the development of new works and performers. It is essential the theatre is able to continue viably into the future, and planning policy at national, London and local level is clear that loss of

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cultural facilities should be avoided. On that basis we welcome that a new space for the King's Head is being provided and have no objection in principle. However, as set out many of our concerns articulated previously remain with regards to the location and layout of this scheme. It is also vital that the ongoing sustainability and viability of the King's Head is not undermined by the costs associated with delivering this replacement facility, given added complexity by its basement location, or costs associated with restrictions by the freeholder. This would include for example not introducing barriers to the theatre obtaining late licence or being able to operate at night, for example preventing the use of any outside space.

Therefore should planning permission be granted there will need to be suitable and robust conditions and obligations put in place. We would encourage the Council and applicant to engage with the Trust as these are drawn up. It is of paramount importance that loss of the existing theatre space does not occur until completion and occupation of the new space. The previous twenty-year peppercorn rent must be maintained or extended further. We would also strongly encourage there to be an obligation for the applicant to substantially meet the costs of fit-out as we understand to have previously been the case. Opportunities for design amendments to address our operational concerns should be considered. We would be keen to meet with the applicant, the theatre and the Council to discuss these matters further.

In conclusion our willingness to support the granting of planning permission would be highly conditional. We have no objection to the granting of listed building consent, but this is also dependent on delivery and occupation of the new facility.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments further.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke".

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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