

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1917

09 August 2022

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By e-mail: planning.department@sefton.gov.uk

Applications: DC/2022/01391

Site: Southport Theatre & Convention Centre Floral Hall Promenade Southport PR9 0DZ

Proposals: Demolition of existing buildings/structures on site; remediation works; foundation/piling works; and other associated engineering works to accommodate the development of a Theatre/Events Auditorium (Sui Generis) and Exhibition/Convention Centre (Sui Generis/Use Class F1e) with integral offices and production facilities (Use Class Eg(i)), meeting rooms, ticket office/retail concessions (Use Class Ea), cafe and restaurant (Class Eb), and food & drink concessions (internal/external) (Class Eb/Sui Generis); External Water & Light Show (with associated engineering works/installation of permanent infrastructure) within Marine Lake; and infrastructure works including: electric substation and associated utilities works, storage/servicing yard area, external concourse/public realm areas, amended vehicular/pedestrian access (including new ramp access) and circulation areas, amended vehicle parking layout (external at grade), ecological mitigation and hard and soft landscaping. An Environmental Statement has been submitted with the application under the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017.

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'.

Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust regarding this application for planning permission, which seeks demolition of the existing Southport Theatre and Convention Centre which includes Floral

Theatres Trust

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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

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund co-operates with the Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697

Hall and construction of a new building containing a replacement Southport Theatre and Convention Centre.

The operator of Southport Theatre went into liquidation in May 2020 and the theatre has been closed since the commencement of Covid restrictions in March 2020. The theatre was the largest operational in the borough of Sefton with a capacity of over 1,600. It was part of the Floral Hall complex with the current theatre, which was added in 1973, also serving as a concert hall and conference centre. Although built with good stage facilities the Trust's assessment of Southport Theatre in its database is that it had shortcomings such as inadequate sightlines, distance between stage and the audience and utilitarian interior. Deficiencies are also cited with the Design & Access Statement. Nonetheless it was an important cultural facility for Southport, its wider catchment and its tourism offer attracting major touring shows, comedians and live music. We are keen to see this type of provision reinstated within the town.

Floral Hall was also a theatre and performance venue. It was built in 1930 in Art Deco style and was a multi-purpose venue with box office, sprung floor to allow dancing and other functions, full stage facilities, dressing room and a band room. This part of the building is also within our remit and interest. Much of the observable form of Floral Hall has been lost to later additions and amalgamation with the current theatre and conference centre although its north-west elevation to Marine Lake and Lower Promenade remains containing Art Deco detailing and character. This can be considered as a non-designated heritage asset.

This project seeks to deliver a replacement theatre with a capacity of around 1,500, an event/conference hall with capacity for up to around 2,400 people with the capability to be subdivided into three smaller halls along with a VIP/function lounge, café/restaurant opening to the promenade and meeting rooms. Externally there will be new landscaping, a terrace and improved pedestrian routes around the site.

In terms of the impact of demolition of existing structures, notwithstanding the environmental sustainability implications of demolition and reconstruction we have no objections in principle to loss of the existing Southport Theatre; it is the use and function we are keen to see retained within Southport rather than the building itself. As a non-designated heritage asset the loss of remaining areas of Floral Hall which have historic interest is regrettable. Its frontage to Lower Promenade provides a visual reminder to the history of this area and internally its auditorium is quite intact including its highly decorative glass dome, ventilation grilles and other decorative features. However due to the level of general alteration and its surrounding context having undergone significant change since original construction we have no objection in principle to complete loss as this is mitigated by the public benefits of potentially delivering an improved theatre offer and in a wider sense helping to improve access, permeability and the environment around this site. The asset has been comprehensively described within the accompanying Heritage Statement.

The stated rationale for development includes for the theatre to accommodate a "wide range of entertainment, cultural and theatre events". Given the capacity we assume the aspiration is for

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the theatre to be a 'number one' touring venue receiving touring West End shows and larger comedians and live music acts. The proposed layout plans and rake show there will be quite some distance between seating towards the rear and the stage. We suggest an opportunity may be being missed to better tailor the design of the auditorium around the needs of 'number one' shows and that the lack of intimacy may result in it offering a sub-optimal experience for performers and audiences. We would query whether a study has been carried out to ensure that sightlines are appropriate from all positions and that the new theatre does not replicate shortcomings of the existing one.

Looking at accessibility whilst the seating plan shows wheelchair positions to both levels and in sufficient numbers these are just to the sides. As a new-build venue this should be achieving relevant standards and best practice by having positions across the auditorium so opportunities should be found to offer more central positions. It should also be ensured there are appropriate evacuation procedures from upper levels. To the back of house there is good accessibility including two lifts which can be used and full access to the understage and orchestra pit. However there should be an accessible dressing room at the lower (stage) level so we would encourage rearrangement of functions within the rooms behind the stage to provide a dressing room along with the accessible WC. There do not appear to be any WCs for performers shown (only for staff in the staff area) so this could put pressure on the accessible WC or see performers and supporting cast having to utilise WCs in front of house areas.

There are a good range of front of house spaces. This includes a large café area which can function as an all-day space which will help bring people into the venue and encourage greater engagement with the theatre's offer, similarly other spaces such as the VIP lounge could be used for a broad range of purposes to optimise use of the theatre as a cultural asset for the community. There are also a good number of WCs, although further thought could be given to the locations of the accessible and female WCs behind the bar to the upper level as there is potential for queueing and congestion for either facility to obstruct entry to the other.

We have no specific comments on the layout and function of the conference centre as this falls outside of our particular specialism. However taken as a whole we raise no objection to the overall external design concept which is a bold addition to the promenade and Marine Lake. It should be ensured that the implications of the front glazed panels have been considered and that it will not create issues with regards to overheating.

Whilst we appreciate and recognise the merits of the theatre and conference centre continuing to be co-located it is regretful that it appears no consideration has been given to delivering a replacement theatre within the currently vacant former Mecca Bingo, originally the Garrick. This building is on the Trust's Theatres at Risk register. It could have brought this important designated heritage asset back to active use for its original function offering a capacity broadly in line with requirements and the opportunity to utilise its front of house spaces and lounge for ancillary revenue-generating purposes. The Garrick was designed to receive West End transfers and its historic character would likely be valued by both audiences and performers, particularly as it would have a more 'intimate' feel than the proposed design of the proposed venue. It is

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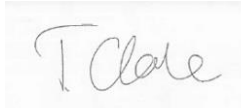
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possible the cost of conversion may be significantly lower than the cost of new development given our understanding the Garrick is in reasonable condition having been vacant only for a relatively brief period. We would strongly encourage the Council to give consideration to this option and the advantages to the town that it could deliver alongside a conference centre at the proposed location.

Nonetheless on the basis of the proposed scheme being the one that is taken forward we raise no objections to the granting of planning permission. Most of the matters we have raised for further consideration can be addressed through subsequent refinement and are not material to the principle of development. We do however see it as critical that there is a return to larger-scale theatre use and provision in Southport so would recommend re-provision being made a condition of development to be discharged before the conference facility is operational. We would encourage engagement between the Council and the Trust on any future amendments.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser