

Protecting theatres  
for **everyone**



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**Application:** FUL/351543/23

**Site:** Former Post Office, Old Museum And Former Friends Meeting House 84  
Union Street Oldham OL1 1DL

**Proposal:** Creation of a new theatre auditorium (sui generis) and ancillary uses including offices, community/ education space and a cafe-bar. The development includes the conversion and refurbishment of the former post office and Friends' meeting house, demolition of former museum building and construction of a central infill building.

### **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 **Website** theatrestrust.org.uk **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

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**Chair** Dave Moutrey OBE

**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 consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission, which seeks to deliver a new theatre for Oldham. We have been engaged in pre-application discussions for this scheme. The town is currently without a professional theatre since the recent closure of the Coliseum.

There have been plans for a new theatre at this site for a number of years as part of a 'Cultural Quarter' concept focused on the town's former Library. This was to address functional challenges and constraints with the existing Coliseum which would have been difficult to resolve. Whilst acknowledging the Coliseum has some historic charm and character with strong local support as a venue, Theatres Trust has supported new-build/conversion plans on an alternative site in the past. We commented on previous applications from 2014 and 2017, the latter scheme subsequently being withdrawn in 2018.

With the recent closure of the Coliseum this has made re-provision critical as the town is currently without a professional alternative of similar scale or capability. This gap has a negative impact on the social and cultural well-being of local people, but also on the local economy and town centre businesses because Oldham is both missing out on incoming visitors and losing resident audiences to other locations. The only current theatre provision is the 100-seat Lyceum Theatre which is well-regarded but limited to an amateur programme consisting of around five runs of shows annually. Therefore, the principal of a new theatre is again supported.

These proposals are on a different site to the previous schemes, slightly to the south-west utilising the former Post Office and museum. It will also be solely a theatre with associated ancillary functions, whereas previously it was to be a shared facility with a heritage centre which we had raised some concerns about due to potential conflict in needs. Operationally this model would be easier to manage. The scheme would deliver a main auditorium with flexible stage configuration, a secondary studio which can hold smaller-scale productions, educational/community space, and a café/bar which opens onto the Civic Gardens.

Overall, we are supportive of the design approach and the way in which the site has been optimised. It is positive to see the sustainability ambition incorporated into the design. The indications are for a low carbon design targeting low operational energy and possibly to be one of the lowest operational energy theatres in the UK.

Embodied carbon design is also targeted to be low through the reuse of two existing

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heritage assets (one designated and one non-designated) bookending the new build theatre, with fabric upgrades intended to the existing buildings. Provision of heating, cooling and hot water is to be via air source heat pumps negating the need for fossil fuel and in-built flexibility will provide the potential for the building to be connected to future local renewable power generation.

The design allows for all levels of the different buildings to be accessible. This includes the technical walkway above the auditorium space which will allow opportunity for all to engage with the technical aspects of theatre. Although under current regulations there is probably no obligation to provide a Changing Places facility, it would be within the ethos of the project and we would encourage that consideration is given to identifying where one might be accommodated. Whilst the identified capacity of the main auditorium is around 270 seats, it is possible that cumulatively the building may accommodate more than 500 people if its other facilities are in use simultaneously.

The foyer and public areas offer space and volume, and the café with its position onto the neighbouring Civic Gardens appears conducive to attracting additional visitors throughout the day the income from which can help support and sustain the wider arts and cultural function. It is important that this scheme and works to the Gardens are co-ordinated so that the respective spaces work together. It will also need to be ensured that these spaces are prevented from overheating through sufficient screening. This is also the case for the workshop, which may also require some internal screening should activities be taking place within that are not for public viewing.

There is good access for get-ins to the main auditorium as this is straight onto the stage from Greaves Street, similarly there is a secondary general delivery area which links through to back of house areas and has lift access to each floor.

We have some concern about sightlines in the main auditorium as in particular these will be quite restricted from the slips, except in configurations such as in-the-round. This may lower the realistic maximum capacity for many shows. Similarly the wheelchair positions to the Balcony may only be usable in particular configurations. This may need further study and refinement.

Other points to consider are that the Green Room is quite far removed from other back of house spaces, likewise the costume making area and store. The acoustics of the WCs neighbouring the auditorium will need to be managed to ensure performances are not disturbed by hand dryers, flushing and pipes. There may be

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merit in re-orienting layout. In terms of escape, at upper ground floor one of the routes is through back of house areas so it will need to be ensured these are kept clear and managed to prevent obstructions. In terms of visibility and wayfinding particularly from the east, there will need to be sufficient signage due to the set-back of the main entrance and the potential for it to be concealed by trees and vegetation. We note from the Design & Access Statement there will be 'high visibility' signage, and CGIs also show lower level signage on Union Street.

We understand that many performances at the Coliseum were under-capacity and this has to some extent driven design of this scheme to maximise occupancy levels. However, this will also affect the ability to attract touring shows which require larger capacities to be financially viable as well as the annual run of pantomime. Furthermore, this scheme has more limited technical capabilities than the Coliseum, notably a lack of flying. Consideration will need to be given to how existing audiences can be retained. We would also note that the wider community value of the new facility in terms of its educational role and work with the local college may also be diminished as the full breadth of technical skills could not be applied. This will need to be acknowledged and mitigated, as there is otherwise a risk that important activity and revenue-generation may be lost elsewhere.

Overall however we are supportive of this scheme, and are keen for theatre provision in Oldham to be replaced. This is an accessible town centre site within an allocated 'Cultural Quarter' and Saved Policy TC1.2 of the Unitary Development Plan seeks a theatre within it, along with complementary uses. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this. Whilst these comments have raised some matters for further consideration this can be managed through subsequent refinements to design and do not affect our overall advice.

We recommend the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss this representation in greater detail.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'T Clarke'.

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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