

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/2269

29 March 2023

Planning Services
C/O The Town Hall
Crossley Street
Halifax
HX1 1UJ

By e-mail: consultsandreps@calderdale.gov.uk

Application: 23/00139/LAA & 23/00164/LBC

Site: The Victoria Theatre Fountain Street Halifax Calderdale HX1 1BP

Proposal: Expansion of Theatre (Sui Generis) into two existing (Class E (a)) retail units to extend front of house facilities and accommodate passenger lift

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 on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at the Victoria Theatre. They seek to undertake internal front of house alterations and integrate neighbouring retail units into the theatre. We were engaged by the Council at pre-application stage and undertook a site visit in January 2023.

The Victoria is a Grade II listed heritage asset. It was originally built as a concert hall and was called the Victoria Hall, opening in 1901, although it was intended for occasional theatre use and had a stage set behind a permanent proscenium frame. The auditorium was flat-floored and decorated in the style of a European opera house with a semi-circular rear wall and two semi-circular balconies. Its ceiling is panelled with an enriched cove. The foyer was elaborately decorated with a grand staircase and stained glass dome above. Cinema use was introduced in 1939. The Council purchased it in the early 1960s and built a fully-equipped fly tower, re-naming it the Civic Theatre. It was later re-named again in 1993, returning to its original Victoria title. The Victoria has a mixed programme of touring theatre, comedy, live music and speakers. It is a significant venue for Halifax, serving the cultural needs of local people as well as attracting

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

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visitors from its wider catchment into the town. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

Like many older theatres, the Victoria lacks the front of house provision and standards of accessibility expected by modern audiences. The Council has been in receipt of an award from the Future High Streets Fund and is utilising part of that funding to invest in the Victoria. Their immediate objectives are to improve accessibility and increase visits and use of the building throughout the day by upgrading front of house provision. We welcome the principle of these interventions and the investment being made into the theatre. We are aware the Council has wider ambitions for development of the theatre to more fully address shortcomings, should future funding become available, and this is also indicated within the Design & Access Statement.

There are a number of benefits for theatres from developing an enhanced food and beverage offer, and there have been many such applications of this nature in recent years. It helps to optimise use of buildings and improve their community and social value by making them active for greater periods, bringing people in who may not otherwise have visited and engaged. It also encourages audiences to dwell longer within the theatre. This helps generate additional income to support the core cultural offer and upkeep of the building.

The new café/bar will be located within the area of the main entrance and foyer. Currently this consists of a central set of doors leading into a narrow lobby and then a main foyer with circulation to elsewhere in the building including the grand staircase. The main entrance is flanked by the current box office on one side and a vacant retail unit on the other. Both of those units have further divisions beyond for back-office or storage functions. These plans would see new openings from the box office into the main foyer and between the smaller inner foyer and the former Shoemiths retail unit. This will open out the inner lobby to provide the café/bar at the front of the building, enabling movement between the three spaces. The counter will be to the rear of the current box office with food prep kitchen in the back office space behind (which will also be unified through removal of a partition. Whilst we understand the rationale for these changes and agree with the applicant in principle that enhancing the theatre's function and front of house provision can constitute a public benefit, there is limited individual investigation and appraisal of these interventions. Given the high significance of these areas, acknowledged within the Conservation Management Plan, we suggest revision of the Heritage Statement to provide further detail and recording. Ultimately this will also benefit the applicant's case by helping decision makers to better understand proposed alterations and to justify any harm or loss.

Externally to this area the current entrance to the former retail unit will be replaced with a window, and ventilation grilles will be inserted. The door is a later addition, and the grilles will be designed to sit above the windows and historic awning boxes. We consider new and replacement insertions to be sensitive to the building's significance. We also welcome that should original features be uncovered through these works they will be retained.

Another area of particular change is within a second former retail unit, which will see a replacement box office along with a lift to the first floor (Circle level) and back of house areas.

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This will serve as a secondary entrance for those requiring lift access. There will be substantial internal alteration to facilitate this. Whilst best practice is for all audiences and users to enter through the same means, we accept that other constraints and need to protect the most significant historic character, fabric and features makes access to upper levels impractical from the main foyer. It is nonetheless welcomed that wheelchair access to upper levels will be provided, and this constitutes a significant public benefit to offset harm within this area.

Elsewhere, within the stalls bar an existing internal door and partition are to be removed, as is an internal window further back. This will increase space and enable level access. Current platform lifts to the adjacent stairs are to be removed with a replacement provided coming in through the area of the removed internal window. This is an area of lower significance, and the intervention will remove obstacles to the stairs which limit audience flow resulting in better movement and a more modern and functional lift which overcomes the substantial level change.

In the front bar to the upper foyer there will be demolition of a small partition to the bottle store and the kitchen fit-out is to be removed for replacement. This area is of low significance being a more modern intervention. A small food lift will also be inserted within this area.

We are keen for the Council to utilise its funds effectively and for there to be a long-term and sustainable documented masterplan for the theatre to guide future development options and ensure these proposed interventions will deliver value and longevity. We recommend such work is undertaken as soon as possible. Nonetheless, we acknowledge the limitations of the funding available and that it needs to be utilised within a short timescale. We also recognise these proposals go some way towards improving accessibility and that overall they should not preclude future development. We have identified a need to provide further detail in relation to the impact of alterations within the highly significant foyer area but otherwise in principle we can support the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

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

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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