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Ref.: TC/1987

07 August 2023

Mr Rob Cooper
Planning Services
Sefton Council
Magdalen House
30 Trinity Road
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By e-mail: planning.department@sefton.gov.uk

Application: DC/2023/00888 & DC/2023/00889

Site: Former Garrick Theatre Garrick Parade Lord Street Southport PR8 1RN

Proposal: Proposed change of use to mixed use classes including: 11 No. residential units (C3), a hotel providing 137 No. rooms (C1) including a terrace and pool at 4th floor, various commercial units comprising: a gym and spa/day spa (E(d)), event kiosk/box office(E(a)), a bar and restaurant (Sui Generis); with the refurbishment of the existing event auditorium (Sui Generis), the erection of a lift to the rear, a roof top extension to the existing fly-tower to provide 3 No. additional floors, and the erection of a canopy to the front elevation with associated works

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

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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 consulting Theatres Trust on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at the former Garrick Theatre. They seek change of use from a bingo hall (Sui Generis) to a mix of uses including a hotel, gym/spa facility, bar and restaurant and residential units along with refurbishment of the auditorium for use as an events space. There will be extensions to the building, particularly around the fly tower, and a number of alterations within the building.

We do not object to the overall principle of the applicant's plans for the site. However, in order for us to be able to support the granting of planning permission and listed building consent we have identified a number of amendments as well as a need for further detail and information to be submitted which would make development acceptable. This is explained and outlined subsequently within these comments.

Background

Following vacancy due to withdrawal of the previous bingo operator, and in light of its historic, architectural, cultural and theatrical significance, the Garrick was placed on Theatres Trust's Theatres at Risk register in 2022. We met with the applicant and officers from the Council in February 2023, at which time we were also given a tour of the building and its surrounding area.

The Garrick is a highly significant theatre building and heritage asset for Southport, and one which we consider could easily have been reverted back to large-scale theatre use. We had urged the Council to consider the Garrick as an option for that purpose, but development is now proceeding on the new Southport Theatre and Convention Centre which includes a 1,500 seat auditorium thus meeting the town's needs in that respect. Southport also supports two further smaller theatres, The Atkinson and Southport Little Theatre, both of which have capacities of around 400 seats. It is not believed that there is the market demand for a further large-scale theatre. The priority within that context is to secure a sensitive alternative use for the Garrick in order for it to return to active use and for its significance to be conserved.

That is the primary basis on which we make no overall objection to the principle of this development. The highly significant auditorium would be retained for some degree of performance use, and other front of house spaces including the upper bar would also be restored and re-opened. This is welcomed. Similarly, we recognise that in some areas the building is in need of repair and this being undertaken is

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essential for the Garrick's ongoing conservation.

However, it is essential that plans are viable and deliverable and will not compromise or cause unnecessary harm to the Garrick's most sensitive fabric and features. Given the level of interventions, alterations and losses of fabric it is also necessary that proposed works are properly described and justified from a heritage perspective. On those points we have concerns and consider there to be need for the submission of additional information and detail. There are some areas where it may be beneficial for current plans to be revised, not just on heritage grounds but to ensure the proposed venue and wider development can operate effectively and will be viable.

History and significance

The Garrick was designed by local architect George Tonge on the site of the Opera House, which had been destroyed by fire, and is said to be the finest of his works. It was built to rival the 'atmospheric' cinemas popular at the time, opening in 1932. It was equipped with a large stage with full flying facilities and a number of dressing rooms intended to accommodate large-scale touring drama, musicals, opera and ballet. It was advertised as the most beautiful theatre in Europe on its opening and was an important regional large-scale theatre which received West End transfers. It had good front of house audience facilities including a large external colonnade above the first floor with an open promenade for audiences to use for pre-performance and interval drinks, which was unusual. The Lord Street elevation contained ground-floor retail units.

Its elegant exterior is executed in brown brick with Portland stone dressings and punctuated by long window frames with deep stilted and tapered heads, the glazing ornamented with bands of an Art Deco chevron design. The site itself is accessible on all four sides with the two main elevations on Lord Street and Kingsway joined by a curved corner featuring fluted stone pilasters behind which are generous foyers and the main staircase. The auditorium remains largely intact with the original decorative proscenium arch with an open-work design.

The Garrick was purchased by Essoldo Cinemas in early 1957 but attempts to run it as a dedicated cinema were unsuccessful. It was converted to a bingo hall in 1963. The bingo years saw typical limited alterations and lightweight easily reversible insertions. The interior remains almost intact, the exterior is largely unchanged and the stage house is understood to be complete. It was given Grade II listed status in the early 1990s. Bingo remained in operation until forced closure in March 2020 due

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to Covid regulations. In April 2021, its operator announced that along with several other venues in the chain it would not reopen upon the lifting of restrictions.

Change of use & heritage considerations

In terms of change of use, it was articulated to the applicant during our visit that evidence would need to be provided demonstrating why this proposal constitutes the optimum viable use to demonstrate that loss and harm to fabric and heritage significance is necessary. This has not been provided. For the reasons outlined in our introductory comments we consider that need for large-scale theatre provision in Southport is being met through the Theatre and Convention Centre scheme. Therefore re-use of the Garrick in the foreseeable future for such purpose is unlikely. However, the level and nature of intervention away from the auditorium and particularly within the fly tower make development irreversible in terms of future opportunity for a return to large-scale theatre use. Guidance on the Historic environment (2014, updated 2019) is clear that the optimum viable use is “the one likely to cause the least harm to the significance of the asset”, and may not be the most economically viable one. Therefore to meet ordinarily expected policy requirements it would be beneficial to the applicant’s case for them to demonstrate why other potentially more sensitive proposals (such as an events space within the auditorium which maintains its original stage and back of house provision, or development within the fly tower which is reversible) could not be taken forward and why this proposal is the most viable in heritage terms.

The Heritage Statement places a lot of focus on the impact of development externally and on the wider setting of the Lord Street Conservation Area, but has little detail on internal significance. For example, there is no assessment of original/existing and proposed plans to ascertain what level of harm will arise through the proposed works and no assessment or justification where fabric and features will be lost or altered. Particular areas where analysis needs to be carried out include the fly tower which internally will see total loss as well as new upwards extension, the front and back of house spaces where there is to be significant alteration and insertions, and the decorative windows where (it is to be assumed) residential and hotel units will create new floor levels behind them. Avoiding some degree of harm and interruption to the historic frontage will be a challenge. It is clear this proposal would result in total loss and substantial harm to elements of the building and its features, therefore clear and convincing justification should be provided as set out in paragraph 200 of the NPPF (2021). Paragraph 201 states that local authorities should refuse consent unless it is

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demonstrated substantial harm or loss is necessary to achieve the benefits which outweigh that loss. Currently this application fails to meet those tests, so we urge re-submission of an appropriately detailed Heritage Statement. We would be keen to review and provide feedback on a revised document prior to it being re-submitted to the Council to avoid further delay.

In turn, the Planning Statement is very brief with only simplistic application of the Heritage Statement's limited findings. There is little reference to repair works and treatment of interior fabric and features, for which work would need to be on a like-for-like basis unless there is suitable and compelling evidence otherwise.

Accessibility

There needs to be further consideration of accessibility, particularly for the events venue. There is ramped access into the foyer but beyond that there appears to be no step-free access and there is no accessible WC. There is a new lift being added along the north-west elevation but plans show there to be no step-free access at any level from the lift. With the level of alteration and development being proposed there must be efforts to achieve modern levels of accessibility and inclusivity.

Structure

There is no indication as to the additional structure that will be required to support the weight and loading of the proposed development, particularly the new high-level swimming pools, and the hotel rooms above the auditorium ceiling. Any new structure will potentially be very disruptive to existing fabric. For example, the roof top swimming pools are likely to require additional support through the insertion of columns/strengthening of the walls which will impact the historic fabric. Likewise, the existing structure above the fibrous plaster ceiling is unlikely to support a floor slab above. A similar development elsewhere required the insertion of girders above the auditorium which meant the entire removal of roof and ceiling, both highly costly financially and resulting in loss of significant original fabric. We also take this opportunity to remind the applicant of the necessary obligations with regards fibrous plaster ceilings as set out by Historic England within their guidance note: <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/historic-fibrous-plaster/>

Services

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It will be necessary to consider services runs (water, heating and soil pipes) from the hotel and ensuite rooms suggested within the development. Those above the auditorium and within the historic front of house areas are of particular concern due to the possible impact on the historic fabric. We have further concerns about the lack of daylight and ventilation to the hotel rooms proposed above the auditorium and the additional necessary services requirements for these rooms. Further detail as to how all these areas will be serviced including pipework and drainage runs is required.

Acoustics

There will need to be consideration of acoustic management between the respective uses, in particular relation to the residential units ensuring they can provide acceptable standards of amenity and living conditions for future occupants. Performance venues and residential uses, including short-stay accommodation, are not necessarily compatible unless there is robust mitigation to avoid disturbance from noise and vibrations. Whilst a corridor between the auditorium and the residential units along the south-east elevation and a service core to the units in the north-west corner provides some buffer there is potential for bleed of sound. This however will not prevent structure-borne vibrational transmission between the spaces. Similarly this also applies to hotel rooms, particularly those above where vibrations is likely to be an even greater issue. An acoustic report has been provided but this only deals with external sources. The report should be expanded to consider internal noise sources, and outline any mitigations which would be necessary to avoid conflict and prevent the performance venue becoming restricted in its use. This includes ascertaining servicing needs such as delivery and removal of equipment from events, which could take place late at night or early in the morning, and what disturbance this may create.

Operations

In terms of how the events venue would function operationally, we have a number of points for the applicant to consider. Our priority is ensuring this venture is successful so that the Garrick can continue to be viable and conserved as a significant theatrical heritage asset into the future.

There is no information as to what indicative programme the venue would run or whether proposals have been guided by an experienced end-user. The venue would

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have a number of limitations as a result of redevelopment of the stage house/fly tower and other surrounding back and front of house spaces. For example, the reduced-size stage has no cross-over and no direct get-in avoiding steps, and limited means of bringing any sets or equipment onto the stage. This will severely constrain the nature and scale of shows the venue could host. The stage is not accessible to wheelchair users or those with reduced mobility, as is also the case for back of house dressing rooms. Options to make these areas accessible should be prioritised. There does not appear to be any office or supporting space for venue management or staff, and infrastructure for sound and lighting is not shown. The way that bars (including those elsewhere within the development) are serviced appears challenging.

It should be ensured that proposed arrangements are acceptable to potential operators, and that there is clear thought about what the venue's programme would be, the business case for this, and how it would fit within Southport's local market as well as a wider catchment. We would strongly recommend that get-in arrangements to the stage are revised so that there is a direct and level route. We would assume that along with performances the intention for the venue is to host conferences and large events such as weddings which would also likely entail bringing in multiple and possibly large pieces of equipment. In any case, adequate access will also give the venue the flexibility that it needs to be a viable and sustainable venture. We recommend that an experienced operator is signed to manage the venue.

We would query why there appears to have been no consideration of stripping out the bingo levels within the stalls, and whether this might have provided opportunities for an improved layout and sightlines, potentially also revealing further original fabric and features.

Concluding comments

As stated at the outset, we do not in principle object to the nature of the development proposed and we appreciate the applicant's ambition to revitalise the Garrick and bring it back to active use. However, we have general concern as to deliverability given some of the constraints associated with development of this nature. We have outlined a number of areas where further information and justification should be provided to accord with policy requirements.

On that basis at the present time we would be unable to support the granting of planning permission or listed building consent, but have set out how development

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can be made acceptable and what additional detail is needed.

We are keen to engage positively with the applicant and will make efforts to meet with them to discuss these comments more fully and to better understand areas where we have outstanding queries.

Please ensure we are consulted further should further information or revisions be submitted, and contact us should you wish to discuss any of our points further.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered within a light grey rectangular box.

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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