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Ref.: TC/915

30 August 2023

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By e-mail: planning@eastssuffolk.gov.uk

Application: DC/23/2847/FUL

Site: Marina Theatre Marina Lowestoft Suffolk NR32 1HH

Proposal: New Link Building, wheelchair accessible lift, toilets, box office and entrance to the Marina Theatre, Lowestoft. Internal alterations to improve toilets, seat spacing and wheelchair provision.

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 at the Marina Theatre. It seeks to provide a new link building between the theatre and the more modern adjacent block which contains its box office, café, community room and offices. Alongside this will be associated internal alterations. We have been engaged by the theatre on this project at pre-application stage and attended a site visit in February 2023.

Marina Theatre is an important venue for Lowestoft and its surrounding catchment, hosting a range of touring shows as well as live music and film screenings. It has a capacity of around 750 seats. The theatre is effectively in two parts; the main theatre building dates from 1930 with elements of its 1901 predecessor, which itself was built using parts of an original building which was a Nineteenth Century skating rink adapted for theatre use in 1878. The second building utilises parts of a modern neighbouring block and contains a popular café with offices for the theatre's administrative functions. The two are currently linked via an atrium to the ground floor. The older part is not statutorily listed, but is a non-designated heritage asset and on the Council's list of locally important heritage assets.

The current Marina Theatre was designed to primarily function as a cinema. It closed in 1984 and after a period of vacancy was purchased by the Council four years later, just before being scheduled for demolition, and converted back to a theatre with provision for film screenings. Although a popular venue its cinema origins creates some shortcomings, for example it has a smaller stage than is ideal which means it cannot always accept shows that otherwise might be available. It lacks sufficient front of house space to meet the needs of audiences and its accessibility requires improvement. As is common with older buildings it has a shortage of toilets, especially female provision which is just over half what it should be under current standards. This detracts from the audience experience through additional queueing, and in turn this reduces important bar spend which helps sustain the theatre and its important outreach and community activities.

The theatre has an overall masterplan to address these matters and enhance its overall arts and cultural provision through additional facilities. We support their aspirations, and the link building proposal is an important element of that.

Currently there is a single-storey atrium between the café and the foyer of the main (older) theatre building. This contains some café seating and a corridor which can be used by audiences and visitors when shows are running but is also otherwise the

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only access for staff between the upper-level offices and the rest of the building which is an inefficient journey. These plans would see this replaced with a new link building providing access between the new and old parts at all levels. This will have significant operational benefits for the theatre, and improve its overall visibility and legibility for audiences and other users.

At ground floor there will be a clearer, wider and more visible route between the foyer and café. Relocation of the box office and servery will also increase covers which is needed as the café is well-used and provides an important additional source of income for the theatre to support its wider cultural and community role. This also helps bring more people into the building, engaging with it. A lift is being provided, making all levels of the building accessible and enabling wheelchair places to be provided within the circle level of the auditorium. Its office would also become accessible for staff. Operationally it will need to be considered whether the lift serves as an evacuation lift or whether evacuation chairs are to be utilised which will require appropriate management.

There will be much-needed additional WCs at first floor and second floor levels including accessible WCs. To the first floor this will also serve the theatre's community room, currently used by outside groups and for community provision such as baby and toddler activities.

There are also further alterations within the proposed plans which will help the theatre operationally, particularly the improved get-in arrangements which will see relocation of a ramp enabling more direct unloading of lorries and new steps being added. Although not requiring planning permission, the plans also show a revised seating layout of the auditorium which is something highlighted to us on our site visit. Presently the layout is inconsistent and inefficient. The new layout will improve overall comfort and make it function better. WCs will also be rationalised and modernised.

These proposals are doing a lot with the space that the theatre has available, significantly improving its facilities compared to what it is able to manage currently. We consider the design of the link building to be sensitive to the character of the existing theatre as a non-designated heritage asset, furthermore the improved facilities and functionality it enables constitute a significant public benefit. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

We are therefore supportive of the granting of planning permission.

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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 black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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