

Protecting theatres  
for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/1806

09 January 2024

Planning and Building Control  
Harlow Council  
Civic Centre  
The Water Gardens  
Harlow  
Essex  
CM20 1WG

By e-mail: [planning.services@harlow.gov.uk](mailto:planning.services@harlow.gov.uk)

**Application:** HW/FUL/23/00488

**Site:** Redevelopment Of Land To The West Of Harlow Playhouse College Gate  
Harlow Essex

**Proposal:** Redevelopment of land to the west of Harlow Playhouse, including Occasio House, to provide a 2 no. storey detached extension to Harlow Playhouse to provide creative studios and performing arts space, music school and recording studio, cafe, changing rooms and booking office (Sui Generis); and an additional part 6 no. and part 5 no. storey building to provide flexible commercial and community floorspace at ground floor level (Use Class E and Use Class F.1/F.2) with residential flats above (Use Class C); together with landscaping, public realm improvements, improvement works to the Haydens Road subway, re-direction of College Gate and re-location of the taxi rank; and associated access and parking 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

**Theatres Trust**

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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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

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

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planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

### **Comment:**

This application for planning permission has come to the attention of Theatres Trust through press reports because it is seeking to construct an extension to the Harlow Playhouse alongside other development to create an 'Arts and Cultural Quarter'. We have not been directly notified.

The Harlow Playhouse opened in 1971 following a campaign by local people who felt a town of Harlow's size required a theatre and that there was demand for one. At the time a number of theatre and performing arts groups had been active but lacked an appropriate venue in which to perform. The Playhouse was equipped with a 400-seat main auditorium with fly tower and ten dressing rooms, a smaller 120-seat studio theatre, dance/rehearsal studios and a cafe and bar. Its programme consists of a mixture of the Playhouse's own productions along with touring shows, comedians and live music. The Playhouse remains a valued cultural asset for the town and its surrounding catchment. Paragraph 97 of the NPPF (2023) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

This proposed extension to the Playhouse will sit adjacent to the existing theatre adjoining the Harvey Centre which is immediately to the north-east of the proposed site. It will contain a number of ancillary performance and creative spaces, therefore enhancing the theatre's offer and versatility and contributing to the overall vision of creating an Arts and Cultural Quarter in this part of the town centre. This principle is welcomed and supported, as is the investment being made into theatre and the arts in Harlow. Whilst having two separate buildings can increase operational complexity, it can also potentially provide greater flexibility as it reduces conflict between different uses when programmed simultaneously and avoids the need to open and operate one part if only part of it is being used (the new building itself can also be opened only in part as the creative arts and flexible performance areas have different entrances).

We suggest that the internal layout of the ground floor level of the extension could be further reviewed and refined to optimise function and accessibility particularly if the flexible performance space is in use. In particular we note there is no direct access to the WCs without passing through that space, which is a particular issue for those requiring the accessible WC. We suggest that it may be better to provide an

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accessible WC and dressing/changing room where changing rooms 1 and 2 are currently located. Potentially this could also enable full back of house circulation through to the deliveries area and on to the corridor to the WCs and kitchen, improving operational function. The first floor in contrast has clear and rational circulation across the facility.

The flexible performance area with what appears to be sub-dividable areas and the ability to spill outside onto the square outside does lend itself to a range of purposes and functions, and we consider this will be a beneficial addition to the theatre in terms of diversifying its offer and potential to generate income.

This application also covers the development of Occasio House (south-west of the theatre) for a residential-led development with commercial or community floorspace at ground floor level. As this falls outside of our remit and direct interest we make no comment on this element of the application. As the rear service access to the theatre appears to be largely unaffected by development we similarly make no comment on re-location of the taxi rank and matters of access and parking provision, although we do support landscaping and public realm works around the current theatre and proposed extension. We consider this will enhance the area and make it a more attractive place to visit, in turn providing new opportunities for the theatre to utilise this space as is one of the stated objectives.

Although we have raised matters for further consideration, these relate to internal layouts and can be revised at the next stage of design. They do not impact on the overall principle and function of development which we welcome. On that basis, reiterating our comments relate only to the theatre element of the scheme, we support 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.

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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