

Ref.: TC/2164

25 July 2024

Lucy Smith
Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk
King's Court
Chapel Street
King's Lynn
Wisbech
PE30 1EX

By e-mail: borough.planning@west-norfolk.gov.uk

Application: 24/01188/F & 24/01189/LB

Site: Guildhall of St George 1 St Georges Courtyard And 29 King Street King's Lynn Norfolk PE30 1EU

Proposal: Internal and external restoration and refurbishment works to existing buildings, including internal and external demolition, reconfiguration and rebuilding, minor extension(s), part change of use, associated plant and enclosures and hard and soft landscape 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

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 Vicky Browning OBE, Anna Collins, James Dacre, Suba Das, Liam Evans-Ford, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Tracy Ann Oberman, Lucy Osborne, Saratha Rajeswaran, Truda Spruyt, Michèle Taylor MBE, Katie Town

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Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at St George's Guildhall. They seek to undertake a significant programme of restorations, alterations and refurbishments, along with partial change of use and landscaping works.

The Guildhall of St George is a Grade I listed heritage asset, although its wider complex contains a number of other structures some of which are Grade II listed or non-designated heritage assets.

The Guildhall was originally constructed between 1410 and 1420 and is the largest in England. The interest of Theatres Trust is on the basis of it containing a theatre. Theatre use at this site is historically and culturally important; it commenced in 1445 which possibly makes this the oldest theatre in the UK. Furthermore, it is also claimed to be the only remaining theatre at which William Shakespeare performed. The development of a specific theatre space ('playhouse') came about in 1766, and its success resulted in the 1814 construction of King's Lynn's larger original Theatre Royal (subsequently destroyed by fire and rebuilt). The Guildhall was then used for warehousing, with theatre returning in the 1950s to the original theatre space.

We have been aware of aspirations to invest in and develop the Guildhall for some time, having been in contact with the local authority, the Shakespeare Guildhall Trust and stakeholders and other local individuals over the previous ten years. We were engaged during the drafting of the recent Conservation Management Plan. We are keen to see the theatre utilised to its full potential, enhancing the local arts and cultural offer in King's Lynn for local people and visitors. We recognise that the current theatre space has limitations, not least a lack of accessibility.

Therefore, the principle of alteration and improvement to make sure the theatre can function effectively and sustainably, and meet the needs of audiences and producers, is supported. Similarly, whilst it is not appropriate for us to comment in detail on elements of the scheme not directly related to the theatre, we do support the overall vision for the Guildhall as a creative hub. The proposed mix of uses are complementary to the theatre, and in turn the theatre has the potential to attract audiences and visitors who will support the wider offer.

The theatre is within its original space from 1766 but the current arrangement and fit-out largely dates from interventions in the 1950s and 1960s following its return to use. There is surviving medieval flooring underneath the 1950s auditorium floor and

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there is evidence of the galleries from the Georgian-era design. The relative lack of significance of the current installations affords greater potential for re-design and alteration than may otherwise have been the case. This is beneficial, because currently the theatre is constrained in terms of what it can host and is inaccessible to wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility. Furthermore, its seating layout and sightlines are sub-optimal.

We support the overall design approach to the theatre, which is heritage-led having taken been informed by evidence and research of the building's past. In doing so, we consider that this scheme will deliver a much better theatre. For example, the gallery reinstatement will create a greater sense of enclosure and intimacy between the audience and performers whilst having a practical purpose of maintaining maximum capacity of around 300 people due to necessary rearrangement of stalls seating. There is much greater flexibility in format, facilitating a broader range of productions.

Generally we consider the interventions within the theatre to constitute heritage benefits, as the proposed form is influenced by original design. For example, traces of the medieval archway and infilled Tudor window within the new foyer will be exposed. Replacing the tie bars in the roof space will provide a more sympathetic structural approach.

Alterations and adaptations to the building to facilitate lift and improved service access to the theatre and back of house areas generate less than substantial harm, but we consider this to be acceptable in light of the public benefit of the venue being made accessible and being able to accommodate and more efficiently handle a wider range of shows. The insertion of a wooden screen to bring forward the stage enhances function, and new beams will support the theatre galleries. The stripping out of outdated stage tech infrastructure allows for replacement with more sympathetic fittings. These generate some degree of less than substantial harm, but can be reversible and for the beams specifically are necessary for the gallery structure. As already cited, the galleries are an interpretation of an original feature but also create in our view a better theatre space and increases the venue's capacity which will make it more financially sustainable. With reference to paragraph 208 of the NPPF (2023), these can also be considered as public benefits.

More broadly, the proposals for the wider site offer flexibility and the potential to better use other parts of the building for small-scale and informal performances as well as rehearsals and other related theatre functions. We welcome the treatment of

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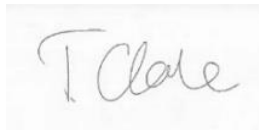
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the front elevation as this will help draw visitors in, and movement and accessibility through the site will be enhanced. This will enable more people to engage with the theatre. We also support the approach to environmental sustainability.

In conclusion, we are supportive of the interventions and alterations in relation to the theatre element of this scheme. We consider this to be a well-designed scheme which will deliver a good theatre meeting the needs and expectations of audiences, performers and producers, supported by the necessary infrastructure and accessibility both front and back of house. We consider it to be sensitive to the heritage and cultural significance of this space, meeting the project brief.

On that basis, for the theatre element specifically, we are supportive of the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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