

Ref.: TC/987

9 July 2025

Edward Leigh
Planning & Economic Growth
Portsmouth City Council
Civic Offices
Guildhall Square
Portsmouth
PO1 2AU

By e-mail: planning.reps@portsmouthcc.gov.uk

Application: 25/00606/FULL

Site: Kings Theatre Albert Road Southsea PO5 2QJ

Proposal: Partial demolition of 24-28 Albert road with facade retention, construction of new foyer, bar, toilets, studio and circulation spaces. Alterations and repair works to the Grade II* listed building, including investigation works to the Portico

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

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Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

CEO Joshua McTaggart

Trustees Vicky Browning OBE, Anna Collins, James Dacre, Liam Evans-Ford, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson OBE, 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 this application for planning permission at King's Theatre. It seeks to extend the theatre by integrating neighbouring shop units to improve front of house provision and add a secondary performance space/studio, as well as to undertake associated alterations and repairs to the theatre.

We have been engaged on these proposals by the applicant; a site visit was undertaken in July 2024 and we provided detailed written feedback.

King's Theatre is a Grade II* listed cultural and heritage asset. It opened in 1907 having been designed by the renowned theatre architect Frank Matcham. Its significance derives from being an important and quite complete example of Edwardian theatre as well as being a late example of Matcham's work. In its earlier years it hosted several major productions including a number of premieres of plays by the famous novelist and playwright Ian Hay, and other premieres of shows which transferred to the West End. In 1990 King's came into the ownership of Hampshire County Council but around ten years later they sought to close it. Following public pressure the theatre was purchased by the City Council who leased it to the King's Theatre Trust, a registered charity.

Since taking on the building the Trust have undertaken a programme of restoration and refurbishment. Further to our 2024 pre-application visit we also met them on site in 2018 to discuss future plans and options. The theatre's programme contains of plays and musicals along with high-profile comedians, live music and other events. King's plays an important role in serving the cultural needs of local people but also draws visitors into the city from a wider catchment. Paragraph 98 of the NPPF (2024) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

Although an important cultural and heritage asset, as is common with older theatres King's is challenged by sub-optimal accessibility and a lack of front of house facilities to meet the needs and expectations of modern audiences. The means of audiences entering the theatre are constrained and more operationally challenging than is ideal, with a narrow corner entrance leading into the small main foyer and box office with further narrow corridors and stairways leading to the stalls, dress circle and upper circle. There is an additional entrance to the stalls along Albert Road, the other side of the shop units which form part of this application.

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We therefore welcome and are supportive of the applicant's efforts to address those issues, seeking to make the theatre more accessible and to enhance the audience experience through expansion and improvements to front of house facilities.

The shop units have long been a constraint on the theatre since its inception. It is understood that there were attempts to acquire them at the time of the theatre's construction but this was not possible, so the theatre was designed and built around them. The shop units are themselves statutorily listed (Grade II) but following some time of vacancy are in poor condition. With the theatre having obtained control of those units, they present an opportunity for reactivation into active and positive use which will address the theatre's shortcomings.

These proposals will see the original frontages of the shops retained and restored but everything behind demolished. The primary outcomes of this scheme will include a much-expanded main foyer equipped with a new bar and box office, additional WCs including an accessible WC and a lift. This will provide level access into the existing stalls/Matcham Bar and on into the stalls. This means that wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility can use a primary audience entrance for the first time, as well as access the rear of the Dress Circle. The new bar would open the possibility of serving as an all-day venue, providing an additional source of income and allowing more people to engage with the theatre and its cultural offer. A new smaller secondary performance space will be delivered, thereby further enhancing and diversifying the performance and cultural offer.

The shopfronts are significant as a reminder of the character of Southsea's Victorian street scene. We therefore welcome that these are being retained and integrated into the design of the scheme. With reference to paragraphs 214 and 215 of the NPPF (2024), whilst total loss of fabric beyond the frontages may constitute substantial or a high degree of less than substantial harm we consider that providing necessary improvements to the theatre and its facilities achieves a substantial public benefit which outweighs that harm and loss. This is supplemented by the further benefit of restoring and reactivating the frontages and bringing them back to use. The café/bar and box office going into this space is a suitable town centre function.

Furthermore, we consider the wider external design and internal functions to be sensitive to the existing heritage and significance of the theatre. The new roofscape is not visible from street level and reuses existing openings.

This scheme has reflected on comments we provided at pre-application stage, with a few revisions to plans which will help enhance function. We noted the lack of a

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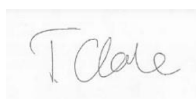
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Changing Places facility, although we acknowledge that this remains challenging for the theatre to provide given its constraints and the lack of space available to them. At the next stage of design there will need to be thought given to ensuring there is no acoustic conflict between the new performance space and existing auditorium, and equipping it with blackout facilities, but these are internal design and function matters which sit outside of the scope of the planning permission.

To conclude, we support the granting of planning permission.

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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