

Ref.: TC/2775

24 July 2025

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Planning Group
Town Hall and Civic Offices
Westoe Road
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NE33 2RL

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

Application: 250379

Site: The Customs House Mill Dam South Shields NE33 1ES

Proposal: Internal alterations and refurbishment of The Customs House and Daltons Lane Workshops, erection of central glazed atrium, double storey extension to the Daltons Lane workshop and adjoining store room to the theatre, along 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

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:

This application for planning permission was brought to the attention of Theatres Trust because it is seeking to undertake development at Customs House, including refurbishment and extension. We note that we were formally notified, but this was sent to another organisation and was not received by us.

Customs House was originally built in 1864. It is a Grade II listed heritage asset within the Mill Dam conservation area. It fell vacant with the decline of the local shipping industry and by the 1970s it was derelict. It was later purchased, restored and extended to provide a theatre and arts centre which opened in 1994. Adjacent workshops were repurposed for offices, rehearsal and community space for the venue. The building is designed in classical style with white brick and ashlar stone with an imposing three bay front and a rusticated basement with recessed segmental arches. The rear extension is in a contrasting modern style. The main auditorium has a capacity of around 400 and there is a smaller studio theatre that can seat 145. There is also a gallery space. This is a valued cultural facility which provides a mixed theatre and arts programme as well as being an important space for local groups. Paragraph 98 of the NPPF (2024) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

Nonetheless, as is common with older theatres and those operating with converted spaces (as is the case here) there are constraints and scope for enhancement. Customs House has particular challenge arising from operating out of two separate buildings which are only connected at first floor level, meaning users of the ground floor spaces within the former workshops must go outside to access them. There is some access between the two levels in the workshop building but only for staff as the route to the staircase is through the office. There are multiple entrances, but in some cases there is a lack of prominence and animation. Within the main building circulation routes are constrained. Whilst there is a reasonable food and drink offer, it could be further expanded to better meet the needs of audiences and encourage greater visitors.

The overall objectives of this project are to expand the offer of Customs House, to improve its facilities and to optimise use of the building through making it more of an all-day destination. These principles are welcomed and supported, and reflect on current deficiencies which are noted by the applicant themselves. This will be achieved through reorganising internal layouts and functions within both parts of the building including by removing partitions and creating new openings, better unifying

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both parts of the building through the addition of a glazed atrium between them, constructing an extension to the Daltons Lane elevation, and enhancing surrounding landscaping and public realm.

In terms of specifics, the existing secondary foyer/lobby from the quayside has a bar on one side and a function room on the other, with a staircase up to the gallery and back of house/administrative areas. This area is being opened up to create a single café/bar with seating to both sides. A lift is being installed alongside the retained staircase which improves accessibility in this part of the building up to the cinema. This creates a more welcoming and inclusive means of entry which will contribute to one of the core aims of enhancing attractiveness as an all-day venue, particularly useful in this area as it is to be assumed the cinema has a more frequent programme than the main theatre auditorium. It will also give potential to better activate this part of the quayside which will have wider placemaking benefits.

This is similarly the case for the corresponding first floor area above, where opening up will provide a restaurant and secondary smaller bar. By encouraging more people to visit Customs House and generating greater and diversified spend this will help improve the venue's financial sustainability, support its wider social and cultural offer and increase engagement.

In the area at ground floor level beyond the café/bar towards the main north-east entrance the existing kitchen and store will be removed to provide relocated WCs. This provides a net gain of an additional female cubicle which will be beneficial, with availability of sufficient WCs being a common challenge for theatres and other such venues and something appraised for addressing within the Design & Access Statement.

A significant change arises from the creation of the atrium. This will see a further main entrance added from the south-east, providing direct access into the building for users utilising the car park or otherwise arriving at the site from surrounding areas in that direction. It provides an additional small bar and bar space, which spills outside and further acts to bring people in. By retaining internal doors into the original building there would be flexibility to operate different parts of the building independently, either to minimise operating costs or to provide separation between different users and functions for example if there was a private hire.

Within the warehouse building, there is further rearrangement of layouts which we consider will optimise use of this space and improve flexibility. Along with an extension there is a net gain of an additional multi-function space, with the proposed

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plans showing different potential layouts. Again this enhances the offer of Customs House and the range of users and hirers it can facilitate. There is a further small extension to back of house (stage left) which will provide a store.

We are supportive of these plans. We consider the design of the respective extensions and infill, particularly around the former workshops, to be sensitive to the character and significance of the original building as a designated heritage asset. When considering paragraph 215 of the NPPF (2024), we consider enhancing the offer, facilities and accessibility of Customs House to be a substantial public benefit which helps mitigate less than substantial harm. The proposed signage strategy helps add visual interest and increases prominence, in line with some of the overall objectives. The internal design of new and refurbished spaces will help make this an attractive venue for audiences, other users and visitors.

We have some minor comments on internal function for the applicant to consider further, but this can be addressed at the next stage of design evolution and does not impact our overall recommendation. We would note that at first floor level the route to the accessible WC within the original building is problematic and possibly of limited use from the restaurant and meeting rooms because it requires crossing the cinema and using a platform lift. If it is possible to do so some of the kitchen/store space could be given over to an accessible WC. In that scenario the other first floor accessible WC may not be required because there is a further one across the bridge link within the first floor of the former warehouses.

At ground floor level within the new atrium is a very small box office. We suggest that the atrium bar could serve as an agile ticketing point, enabling the box office to be given over to another purpose such as an additional WC, staff changing area or storage.

In conclusion we welcome this project, and the enhancements and improvements it would bring to this important venue and heritage asset. We are therefore supportive of the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss this further.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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