Theatres fit for the **future**

Theatres Trust

Ref.: TC

20 October 2026

Faye Tomlinson
Planning Applications,
Ashford Borough Council
International House
Dover Place
Ashford
Kent
TN23 1HU

By e-mail: planning.comments@ashford.gov.uk

Application: PA/2026/1718

Site: 33 High Street, Ashford, TN24 8TF

Proposal: External works to the building including new windows and doors; refurbished canopy and new curtain walling to the frontage, new external stairs and ramps, and new roof finish, plant and associated equipment and works at roof level

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, Louisa Harris, Mark Johnston, Adam Knight, Tracy Ann Oberman MBE, Lucy Osborne, Saratha Rajeswaran, Michèle Taylor MBE, Katie Town

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Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission. It seeks to undertake alterations to facilitate the restoration and return to use of the foyer and front of house areas of the former Ashford Odeon, most recently a bingo hall, to create a new arts centre. There will also be change of use to a mixed use theatre and arts venue (Sui Generis).

The Odeon first opened in 1936 with a capacity of over 1,500 seats. We understand it was built as a dedicated cinema, although this scheme brings it within our role and interest because it is creating a new theatre. Externally it is constructed with brick and stone with a decorative interior within the auditorium. It closed as a cinema in 1975 after which it was converted to bingo use. As was common with other venues of the time this involved lightweight alteration which in some cases masked rather than removed original features. The bingo hall closed in 2018 and the building has been vacant since that time. The building does not have statutory listing but can be considered a non-designated heritage asset. There were previous plans for demolition.

We welcome the council's investment in this building and the principle of a new arts centre including a theatre. Policy HC4 of the NPPF (2026) supports proposals for new and improved community facilities. We consider that this venue would positively enhance and expand Ashford's arts and cultural offer.

This project focuses on the extensive foyer and front of house, and whilst the auditorium is not within the scope of this permission, it will be safeguarded for potential future expansion or sensitive re-use. We undertook a site visit and meeting in May 2026.

Currently, the ground floor foyer retains its layout from the bingo era, with a later carpet, false ceiling and other partitions. The either side of the front of the building are separate shop units which were sub-divided from the original wider frontage. To the front of the first floor is a former dance hall which retains its original form and character including barrel-vaulted ceiling following removal of bingo-era fit-out. The rest of the first floor is back of house administrative, staff and storage areas. The frontage has been further diminished by the insertion of a replacement canopy but other than deterioration of fabric remains readable.

As this building is not listed, no permission is required for internal alterations. This consent relates to external changes only, namely new and replacement windows and

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doors, a replacement canopy, new external stairs and ramps to provide necessary means of access and egress, and works to the roof including installation of new and upgraded plant and servicing.

Alterations and repairs to the frontage are supported, because this will reinstate original character through replication of the 1930s canopy and reintegration of the shop units. This in supports the broader function of this venue because it facilitates an all-day café/bar offer which will increase engagement and activity. The eastern side will be a flexible gallery/workshop. It will help activate the frontage and provide the venue with visibility and prominence. Windows, which were observed to have deteriorated, will be sensitively replaced which will also improve acoustic and thermal insulation.

There will be relatively modest external interventions elsewhere around the building, including a new metal escape stair to the St John's Lane elevation to replace an existing brick stair which is insufficient for modern requirements. We consider this to be of low impact in design and heritage terms and necessary to support the safe operation of the venue. A new ramped get-in route is also necessary to enable efficient get-in/get-out activities (the delivery and removal of sets and equipment). This is necessary to meet the needs of touring artists, as inefficient practices would be a barrier to producers and promoters coming to the venue. There will be a new back of house entrance for performers and staff which will be accessible, again this is advantageous so artists do not need to utilise the same entrance as audiences. These are also supported.

Works to the roof include replacement covering for improved thermal performance and drainage, service hatch for maintenance access, the renewal and addition of air handling, plant and air source heat pump and the addition of an acoustic plant enclosure. There is public benefit in ensuring the ongoing conservation of this asset and its efficient operation. Policy CC2.2 of the NPPF gives substantial weight to the benefits of improving energy efficiency of existing buildings.

Whilst internal matters are not a direct matter for this application, we consider this scheme to be well-designed and makes effective use of space available. The theatre is served by three dressing rooms, one of which is accessible, which meets the minimum required for safeguarding reasons should there be shows with children and young people. Something that will need to be considered further is comfort and sightlines from the slip seats, of which there are a relatively high number.

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We support the granting of planning permission for these alterations and change of use.

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 Manager

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