Theatres fit for the **future**

Theatres Trust

Ref.: TC

4 November 2026

Development Management
Causeway House
Bocking End
Braintree
Essex
CM7 9HB

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

Application: 26/02235/FUL

Site: Empire Theatre Butler Road Halstead Essex CO9 1LL

Proposal: Demolition of existing car wash, storage areas and theatre extension; erection of an extension to the existing theatre to provide a Community Arts Centre, installation of solar panels and associated 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 planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

Comment:

This application for planning permission came to the attention of Theatres Trust because it is seeking partial demolition and extension to the Empire Theatre. We met

Theatres Trust
22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
Telephone 020 7836 8591 **Email** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **Website** theatrestrust.org.uk
X @TheatresTrust **Facebook** @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

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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with the applicant at pre-application stage.

The Empire first opened in 1915 as a cinema but was altered to facilitate theatre shows shortly after. There was refurbishment in the 1930s and the current scheme dates from a further refurbishment in 1951. It closed in 1971 but was reopened eight years later under the operation of a local trust, who reinstated live shows. The current programme consists of theatre shows by local groups and some touring productions, comedy, live music, film screenings and other events. It also has a studio/rehearsal room which can be used by local groups. The Empire is an important social and cultural facility for the town. It can also be considered a non-designated heritage asset.

Given the age of the Empire and the incremental development which has occurred over time, there are challenges and deficiencies which are commonly found in venues of that era. These are outlined within the site analysis in the Design & Access Statement, including inadequate accessibility by modern standards, insufficient front of house facilities (both lack of bar/foyer space and WCs), poor internal soundproofing which disrupts performances, a lack of back of house facilities such as no specific dressing rooms, and inefficient and constrained circulation.

We welcome investment into the Empire and are supportive of expanding and enhancing the venue's facilities, particularly improving its accessibility and inclusivity. This will be achieved through demolishing the later additions and expanding the theatre by constructing an extension to its southern elevation across land currently occupied by a car wash. Policy HC4.1a of the NPPF (2026) gives substantial weight to the benefits of new and improved facilities. Policy LPP61 of the Braintree District Local Plan 2013-2033 (2022) supports enhanced facilities.

The extension enables provision of a significantly larger foyer and bar which will provide a more attractive and functional space for audiences to dwell, including possibility of external tables and chairs. This will open the possibility of the venue operating an all-day offer which would help increase engagement with the Empire and its offer. There will also be an expanded and more flexible dance studio and multi-purpose space which could be utilised for smaller-scale performances. There will be two meeting rooms, which again could be made available for external hire. The existing foyer will become an exhibition area/gallery. Together these expand the Empire's cultural and community offer.

Importantly, the extension makes most of the venue accessible. All audience

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members and other users can utilise the same main entrance and once inside there is level access across the new element and into the auditorium and exhibition/gallery area. The stage will also become accessible with installation of a platform lift.

Whereas there was previously a shortfall of WCs, the number within this scheme exceeds the minimum set out within Technical Standards for Places of Entertainment ('yellow book'). There may be a need for wayfinding or audience management to make sure there is awareness of availability of the block adjacent to the existing foyer (and the new block), to avoid unnecessary queueing and congestion in either location.

There remain no dressing rooms within this scheme. As there is a large store area proposed at ground floor, in addition to two smaller stores on the first floor, we suggest that consideration is given to making the upper-level stores dressing rooms instead and providing a ground floor dressing room (which is accessible) within part of the ground floor storage area. Providing dressing rooms would improve the attractiveness of this venue to producers and touring artists, as well as enhance back of house provision generally.

We welcome the installation of PV panels to the roof which will improve the venue's energy efficiency and sustainability. Policy CC2.2 of the NPPF gives substantial weight to improving energy efficiency of existing buildings including through the installation of solar panels.

We are also supportive of the design approach for the extension; we consider it to be subservient and positively responds to the character of the existing building allowing its original form to be read. There is overhang along the southern elevation which will provide some shading for the glazed area and provides shelter for external seating in the event of inclement weather. It should nonetheless be ensured there is adequate ventilation and that the glass sufficiently protects the building from overheating. The later additions to the Empire are of little architectural merit and detract from the building's character. We note the council's historic buildings and conservation advice with regards to loss of the horn chamber, currently used for storage. Whilst this has some historic significance as it dates from the refurbishment of the 1930s and reflects evolution of cinema, its retention would add cost and complexity to the scheme and would compromise delivery of much-needed additional facilities which support the venue's operation. Where there is harm to the significance of a non-designated heritage asset Policy HE7.2 of the NPPF seeks this to be weighed

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against the public benefits of the scheme. This includes a balanced judgement having regard to the scale of harm or loss and the significance of the non-designated heritage asset. We contend that there are significant public benefits associated with this expansion of the Empire including broadening the venue's arts and cultural offer and making it more accessible and inclusive. It is regretful that the horn chamber would be lost, however it has already undergone alteration and we understand there to be better and more complete examples elsewhere.

Although we have raised some points for further consideration in terms of internal layout and function, this is for guidance and can be addressed at a subsequent stage of design refinement. We are supportive of these plans.

We therefore 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 Manager

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