



Historic England

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Dear Mr Atkinson-Smith

Arrangements for Handling Heritage Applications Direction 2021

ROCHDALE TOWN HALL, THE ESPLANADE, ROCHDALE, OL16 1AZ Application No. 25/00846/LBC

Thank you for your letter of 10 September 2025 regarding the above application for listed building consent. On the basis of the information available to date, we offer the following advice to assist your authority in determining the application.

Historic England Advice

Significance

Rochdale Town Hall is a grade I listed flamboyant and striking Gothic building. It is an exceptional example of Victorian civic architecture, and makes an important contribution to the character of Rochdale.

The building was completed in 1871 to the design of the architect WH Crossland, and occupies a prominent location within the centre of Rochdale. The building exhibits a high level of architectural and aesthetic interest both inside and out, which it derives from the intricacy of the design, and the quality of the craftsmanship. This is evident in the busy, extravagant and arresting character of the exterior of the building, as well as in the highly ornate decorative schemes internally. The interiors showcase a lavish Gothic Revival style, featuring ambitious elements like a hammer-beam roof with carved angels in the Great Hall, internationally important stained glass, and the Zodiac Room's unique ceiling depicting astrological symbols, illustrating the Victorian interest in astrology.

The building has historic interest deriving from its connections with several prominent individuals and firms, who were commissioned to design and furnish the building. These included the sculptor Thomas Earp, the Minton Tile Company and the architect Alfred Waterhouse. Its significance also derives from the fact that it is a prominent display of civic pride, reflecting the power and wealth of the borough, giving it



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considerable value to the local community.

Impacts

The proposals seek to install a plastic hanging track system for displaying artworks in some of the rooms of the town hall. The system allows for easier interchanging of artworks so displays can be rotated without new fixing being installed each time.

The track would have a physical impact on the fabric of the building as it would need to be permanently attached to the walls with load-bearing screws at 300mm intervals. Its visual impact would be mitigated by it being painted with colour-matched paint and by placing it close up to cornicing or in unobtrusive locations high on the walls, however in some rooms it would be more visually prominent than others.

Policy

National policy relating to the conservation and enhancement of the historic environment is articulated in section 16 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2024). These policies state that assets should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance (para. 202) and that applicants should describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting, to a level sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance (para. 207).

When considering the impact of a proposed development, great weight should be given to an asset's conservation, and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be (para. 212). Any harm to significance requires clear and convincing justification (para. 213).

In practice that means that less harmful alternative solutions should be explored through the pre-application and application processes. Para. 215 instructs that the Council should eventually weigh harm against the public benefits of proposals in judging the planning balance.

Position

Rochdale Town Hall is a grade I listed building of exceptional importance. The outstanding interiors of the building contribute hugely to its significance, and the introduction of a plastic hanging track system into some of these spaces would be harmful to that significance. This harm would result primarily from the track system being visually distracting.



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We have concerns about the installation of the track in areas where it would not sit neatly against the cornice or top of the wall; for example in the Mayor's Entrance and the corridor outside the Zodiac Bar, as it would potentially introduce distracting clutter to these rooms.

Also we have concerns about the impact of the track in the high status space of the Zodiac room because of how it would interact with the cornice here. The cornice is an integral part of the decorative scheme of this room and we are concerned about how the track would look when positioned against the projecting beading at the base of the cornice.

We do not have specific concerns about the installation of the track in the second floor activity suite or lobby, or in the corridor outside the magistrates court.

Recommendation

Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds. We consider that the issues and safeguards outlined in our advice need to be addressed in order for the application to meet the requirements of paragraphs 202 and 212 of the NPPF.

In determining this application you should bear in mind the statutory duty of section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to have special regard to the desirability of preserving listed buildings or their setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess.

Your authority should take these representations into account and seek amendments, safeguards or further information as set out in our advice. If there are any material changes to the proposals, or you would like further advice, please contact us.

Yours sincerely

Louise Davies

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

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