

Filmhouse future 'not in question' despite third advertising screen rejection

The new operators of the Edinburgh Filmhouse have said its future "is not in question" after plans to boost revenue by installing a large advertising screen outside were refused for a third time.

This is despite a warning in the latest planning application that a further setback could "throw the future of the Filmhouse into doubt".

A spokesperson for Filmhouse (Edinburgh) Ltd, the charity formed to rescue the cinema after its owners went bust two years ago, said revised plans with the LED screen removed had already been lodged.

And as planners have said the rest of the application, covering internal alterations including a complete refit and addition of a fourth small screen, is "acceptable," it's anticipated this will be approved in the coming weeks allowing work to commence.

Councillors voted 8-2 "with a heavy heart" to reject the advert display which would cover a large portion of the front of the b-listed Lothian Road building at a planning sub-committee on Wednesday, October 2.

After two previous refusals the Filmhouse altered plans to

make the screen transparent and reduce its size to 9.5m by 5.9m in a bid to get them over the line.

The latest application stated: "At the end of the day it becomes a decision of what is best for Edinburgh, approve listed building consent and consent to display an advertisement to ensure a thriving revitalised Filmhouse with an external screen to provide advertising revenue helping to secure the sustainability of the Filmhouse or refuse listed building consent and consent to display an advertisement and throw the future of the Filmhouse into doubt."

At the meeting planning officers said: "The justification for the screen has been made in respect of the funding that would be generated, so the applicant has advised that the screen needs to be big enough so that it can be used as a mechanism to raise public awareness for fundraising campaigns and this would help to secure the long-term future of the Filmhouse."

However, they added as it would cover part of the listed building including windows the installation would have a "detrimental impact" and obscure key architectural features.

Commenting, Historic Environment Scotland (HES) said while it "greatly welcomed the return of the Filmhouse" the screen "does not represent an appropriate long-term design solution commensurate with the listed building's cultural significance".

Committee convener Hal Osler said it was "unfortunate" the two elements had been combined in one application.

Chas Booth, who backed granting permission alongside Cllr Lezley Marion-Cameron, argued applicants had made a "significant effort to try and take on board the impact on the listed building".

He said: "The fact the advertising structure is transparent, I think, means that the listed building can still be visible and

still be seen through the advertising panel.

"I accept the advertising panel is extremely large . . . but I have a lot of sympathy for this applicant."

Councillor Jo Mowat said: "Whether the screen is transparent, it won't be transparent when it's in use. This is to drive financial benefit for the preservation of the Filmhouse, which of course is something we all have great sympathy for."

She added: "I don't think this is a particularly complicated decision, I think it's just an unpleasant one that we have to make."

Councillor Alex Staniforth said it was "with a heavy heart" he agreed with planning officials the application should be refused. "I would prefer to support the Filmhouse in any way we can," he added, "but looking at the reports I do think the officers are correct in their reasons for refusal and I don't see a way of interpreting it differently."

A spokesperson for Filmhouse (Edinburgh) Ltd said following the decision: "For clarity, the Filmhouse renovation project is not in question because of the outcome at the Development Management sub Committee; the essential internal works Listed Building Consent is covered in a separate application submitted on 17th September which was a contingency, in case the combined application was refused, and we hope the Planning Officers can deal with that application as soon as the process allows.

"We thanks the City Council for their support in getting Filmhouse up and running again."

Cinema operators say they are aiming to open the doors again in March next year.

The Filmhouse has been boarded up since October 2022, after a drop in the number of cinemagoers and a "perfect storm" of

financial difficulties led to the collapse of previous owners, the Centre for the Moving Image (CMI).

The new charity formed by former Filmhouse colleagues has raised over £2m so far for the re-opening and secured a 25-year lease from new owners, Caledonian Heritable.

One of its directors, Rod White, told councillors last month at a licensing meeting where the cinema's bar licence was reinstated that the group now also had possession of "all the technical equipment that makes the Filmhouse the unique".

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter