MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

Capital Programmes & Procurement, Growth & Development Directorate

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CPP Ref: OT46329

HERITAGE IMPACT ASSESSMENT:
Temporary Christmas Market Installations in Albert Square



PREFACE

Type of Application –

Full Planning Application

Location of Proposed Development – Albert Square, Manchester

Description of Proposed Development – the temporary change of use of public open space for the purpose of a Christmas Market

Date of Preparation –

October 2026

Date of Any Amendments –

Applicant –

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Introduction

This Heritage Impact Assessment has been written to support full planning application referenced PLA-2026-001701 for the temporary change of use of public open space for the purpose of a Christmas Market for a period of 59 days at Albert Square, Manchester.

The Heritage Impact Assessment evaluates the temporary impact of installing a big wheel, and temporary market chalets in Albert Square, Manchester. These installations are proposed for seasonal events and will be temporary in nature. The assessment draws on the Our Town Hall Heritage Impact Assessment dated November 2019 and considers visual, spatial, and experiential impacts on surrounding heritage assets.

Context

Albert Square is a key civic space within Manchester's historic core, framed by Grade I and II listed buildings including the Manchester Town Hall and the Albert Memorial. The square lies within the Albert Square Conservation Area, noted for its civic grandeur and commemorative character, and contributes significantly to the setting of surrounding heritage assets (2019 Heritage Impact Assessment, Section 3.4, p.20–22).

Proposed Temporary Installations

- Big Wheel: A large, illuminated structure offering elevated views.
- Market Buildings: Temporary stalls for seasonal markets.

Visual Impact

The installations will introduce vertical and colorful elements that contrast with the architectural character of the surrounding heritage buildings. The Albert Memorial, for example, is a highly expressive Gothic structure designed by Thomas Worthington, with high aesthetic and communal value (Heritage Statement, Section 3.5.1, p.23–25). While the big wheel may temporarily dominate views, it will not physically alter or obscure key heritage features.

Spatial Impact

The layout of market buildings will temporarily alter pedestrian movement. However, care will be taken to preserve key sightlines to heritage assets such as the Town Hall façade and commemorative statues (Heritage Statement, Section 4.9, p.57).

Experiential Impact

Albert Square has long served as a space for civic celebration and public engagement. The Heritage Statement highlights its communal value as a place of collective memory and civic pride (Section 3.4, p.21; Section 3.7.3, p.31). Temporary installations will enhance public interaction with space, consistent with its historic use.

Sensitivity of the Location

Albert Square is a highly sensitive heritage location due to:

- Its position within the designated Albert Square Conservation Area.
- Its role as the principal setting of the Grade I listed Manchester Town Hall, where the preservation of key views and appreciation of the building's architectural quality are important considerations.
- The presence of numerous listed monuments and heritage features within and around the square.
- Its significance as Manchester's foremost civic space and a highly visible public realm of city-wide importance.
- The recently enhanced public realm works, which were specifically designed to improve views, accessibility, and the setting of the Town Hall while creating a flexible events space.

As a result, any intervention within the square has the potential to affect the appreciation of designated heritage assets through impacts on views, spatial character, setting, circulation patterns, and the experience of the historic environment.

Impact on Heritage Significance

The installation of a Christmas Market constitutes a temporary and reversible use of the square and is consistent with the historic function of Albert Square as a venue for public events and civic gatherings. The use therefore aligns with the established communal and cultural role of the space.

Nevertheless, careful consideration must be given to:

- The siting and scale of market stalls.
- The protection of historic paving, monuments and street furniture.
- Avoidance of physical attachment to listed structures.
- Maintenance of key views toward Manchester Town Hall and surrounding heritage assets.
- Appropriate management of lighting, signage, generators, servicing and crowding.

Provided these measures are incorporated, the Christmas Market would result in only a temporary and limited impact upon the setting of heritage assets, with no permanent alteration to the historic fabric or character of the square. The event would also continue the long-established tradition of civic and cultural activity within Albert Square, which forms part of its significance as a public and ceremonial space.

Heritage Assets and Their Significance

Grade I Listed

- Manchester Town Hall
  Significance: Exceptional civic architecture by Alfred Waterhouse; landmark status; contributes strongly to the historic character of Albert Square.
  Setting: Dominates Albert Square; axial views from Princess Street and Cross Street reinforce its prominence.

Grade II*

- Town Hall Extension
  Significance: Neo-Gothic civic building forming a cohesive ensemble with Town Hall.
  Setting: Shares spatial relationship with Albert Square and Princess Street.

- Memorial Hall, 1 Southmill Street
  Significance: High-quality Victorian architecture; cultural associations.
  Setting: Contributes to the historic enclosure of Albert Square.

Grade II Listed Buildings

- St Andrews Chambers
- Carlton House (17 Albert Square)
- Albert Chambers (16 Albert Square)
- 1 Albert Square
- Northern Assurance Building (8 Clarence Street)
- 31 Princess Street
  Significance: Collectively form the historic perimeter of Albert Square; strong group value.
  Setting: Their façades and rooflines define the square's character and visual containment.

Grade II Listed Statues

- Gladstone, John Bright, Oliver Heywood, James Fraser
  Significance: Commemorative monuments integral to civic identity; focal points within Albert Square.
  Setting: Require open views and visual prominence within the square.

Grade II Listed Fountain

- The Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain
  Significance: Fountain was introduced in 1897 to celebrate Queen Victorias Diamond Jubilee, to the designs of Percy Scott Worthington.
  Setting: Contributes to the historic enclosure of Albert Square.

Assessment of Impact on Setting

The proposed development will be assessed against:

- Scale and massing: Does it compete with or overshadow the Town Hall or its ensemble?
- Materiality and detailing: Does it harmonise with the historic palette?
- Views and vistas: Are key axial views preserved?

- Public realm experience: Does the proposal maintain the statues' prominence and the square's civic character?

Potential Harm:

- If the development introduces excessive height or bulk, it may cause *Harm, whether from work to the asset itself or from development within its* setting of the Town Hall, Albert Square and associated assets under NPPF definitions.
- Harm must be weighed against public benefits per Policy HE5 (2).

Mitigation Measures:

- Limit building height to respect Town Hall dominance.
- Use sympathetic materials and detailing.
- Retain key sightlines to statues and façades.
- Enhance public realm with landscaping and interpretation.

Planning Policy Context

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies for England and provides the basis for both plan-making and decision-taking. Central to the Framework is the objective of achieving sustainable development, which seeks to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable development is achieved through the balanced pursuit of three overarching objectives: economic growth, social well-being and environmental protection. In the context of the historic environment, the environmental objective includes the conservation and enhancement of heritage assets and their contribution to the character and significance of places.

This Heritage Impact Assessment has been compiled to form part of the required documentation for the current application for Planning Permission, in line with good conservation practice and due regard to Chapter 20 of the National Planning Policy Framework, including reference to HE5, HE6, HE9. This should be read in conjunction with the accompanying application documents.

Mitigation Measures

- Installations will be designed to respect key views and architectural features.
- Lighting and signage will be controlled to avoid visual clutter.
- All structures will be removed promptly after the event period, restoring the square to its refurbished state.

Conclusion

Albert Square is a heritage asset of exceptional significance, deriving value from its historic, architectural, civic and communal importance and from its relationship with the Grade I listed Manchester Town Hall. The square is therefore highly sensitive to change. However, a carefully managed, temporary Christmas Market that preserves key views, protects historic fabric and respects the character of the conservation area would be compatible with the square's established role as Manchester's principal civic events space and would be expected to result in less than substantial harm, if any, to the significance of the heritage assets affected.

References

1. Our Town Hall Manchester City Council Heritage Impact Assessment: Public Realm OTH-PUR-XX-XX-RPT-A-0071 November 2019 (Purcell Architecture Ltd)
2. National Planning Policy Framework August 2026 (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government)
3. National Planning Policy Framework, Chapter 20: Conserving and enhancing the historic environment (HE1–10)