



Report of the Chief Libraries, Arts and Heritage Officer

Executive Board

Date: 11th September 2007

**Subject: The Potential of Leeds Town Hall to become a First Class Concert Hall:
Outcomes of feasibility study**

<p>Electoral Wards Affected:</p> <p>All</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Ward Members consulted (referred to in report)</p>	<p>Specific Implications For:</p> <p>Equality and Diversity <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Community Cohesion <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Narrowing the Gap <input type="checkbox"/></p>
<p>Eligible for Call In <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Not Eligible for Call In (Details contained in the report) <input type="checkbox"/></p>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2006 Executive Board commissioned a study into the feasibility of Leeds Town Hall becoming a first class concert hall. This followed the PMP report on music venues in the city. The study started with an assessment of concert halls across the world, defined as the best by audiences, performers and conductors. Leeds Town Hall has many of the basic elements of these halls: shape, capacity, location, basic acoustics but currently compares unfavourably in the extent and level of refinement particularly of the following:

- Visitor facilities – circulation, bars refreshments and restrooms
- Performer facilities – privacy, get in, changing facilities and green rooms
- Performance issues – stage size, acoustics, sightlines, external noise, air management
- Programme issues – no unifying artistic vision with a wide range of activities.

The study progressed to investigate how possible it would be to tackle these problems and where that would position Leeds Town Hall in relation to other halls. The feasibility study demonstrates ways in which the visitor experience can be vastly upgraded with for example, new crush bars, circulation and restrooms. For performers improved changing facilities, and better access to the stage can be provided, amongst many other developments. In the Victoria Hall: the stage can be enlarged; the seats realigned and part tiered to improve sightlines and comfort and the balcony can be redesigned. External noise bleed can be reduced by a number of measures. The acoustics have been tested and compare well with the best halls but there are still issues to resolve all of which are achievable. A second performance space could also be provided for smaller recitals and would provide the added benefit of heritage restoration, important to some potential investors.

It is clear from the feasibility study that Leeds Town Hall can be upgraded to provide a range of facilities found in the best venues across the world. It already has many of the characteristics of the best concert halls built at the same time and in the same configuration.

However, there is no allocation currently within the Capital Programme and the funding required is approximately £20 million. Therefore the next step is to assess the potential of developing a mixed funding package particularly in light of reducing national funding streams and significant changes to the Heritage Lottery Fund from 2008.

1.0 Purpose of the report

1.1 To outline the findings of the study into the feasibility of developing Leeds Town Hall into an first class concert hall and to identify next steps.

2.0 Background Information

2.1 In 2004 Leeds City Council and Yorkshire Forward (on behalf of Leeds Cultural Facilities Task Group) commissioned PMP to investigate the level of demand for new and existing music and conferencing facilities. The study identified the potential of Leeds Town Hall as 'A centre for the arts with an international reputation'. The conclusions of the study were that:

- A remodeled Leeds Town Hall provides the best, most appropriate and affordable classical music facility for the city

2.2 The Cultural Facilities Task Group, as a result of the report, recommended;

"The City Council, with public and private sector partners, seek substantial further investment to remodel Leeds Town Hall to a symphonic music venue of International standing." Leeds City Council commissioned the feasibility study as the first step.

3.0 Feasibility Study

3.1 Introduction

In the UK there are now a number of first rate late 20th and 21st Century concert halls. Leeds Town Hall is unique in that it offers a historical cultural environment similar to that found in the first class Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Musikverein and the Boston Symphony Hall.

'Great 19th Century halls are a rarity throughout the world and my own view is that Leeds should continue to provide this world class resource.'¹

Leeds Town Hall is a much-loved venue² in the heart of the city. Opened in 1858 as a symbol of the city's success and prosperity, it was built as a multi-use venue. It originally included chambers, courts, police cells, public spaces and a significant 'ceremonial hall'. Today the use has changed but it is still a successful, bustling multi-purpose centre for an astonishing range of activity: organ recitals, opera, orchestral concerts, conferences, meetings, rock and pop concerts, light entertainment, fine dining, club nights, registration of births, deaths and marriages and the election count for the city.

¹ Andrew Jamieson, Head of UK Touring, IMG Artists

² YEP 2005

Leeds City Council worked on the feasibility study in partnership with the Strategic Design Alliance and BDP Acoustic. There were five phases to the study:

- Desk research into concert halls around the world that have achieved the status of first class, to identify any common characteristics to be used as comparators for Leeds Town Hall.
- Study of the ancillary areas of Leeds Town Hall (areas other than Victoria Hall), to identify the potential to improve the visitor and performer experience and create space for other activities.
- Acoustic study of the hall as it is now, both empty and full, to be used in comparison with other halls and to identify the potential to alter the acoustics.
- Study of Victoria Hall incorporating the findings of the acoustic testing to identify potential to improve.
- An outline business planning study to identify how the hall could be better used in future.

3.2 Phase 1 Study into the Best Concert Halls in the world

Over 100 concert halls were researched. From these it was possible to obtain clear understanding of the value of ease of access for performers and audience, good circulation space, cloakrooms, bars and meeting spaces for audiences. Performers needs centred around easy 'get in' for the orchestra, changing rooms, green rooms, easy access to the stage which is big enough to accommodate an orchestra of one hundred. While such a large study was useful it needed to focus on Halls that are of the classic style similar to Leeds Town Hall to be relevant. About twenty - five halls were subject to further scrutiny identifying, where possible; numbers of seats, acoustic issues, volume, date, fabric, stage size, acoustic additions, organ and range of use.

3.3 Phase 2 Study of the areas excluding Victoria Hall

The building was investigated from the view of the performer and the audience as they have separate needs.

There are many possibilities to improve the audience experience from arrival to departure. These include:

- Improved box office facilities, disabled access into the Victoria Hall and general circulation.
- Two new crush bars can be created by connecting the current small rooms which make up the outer parts of the building and piercing through the walls into the existing corridors. The bar areas will be able to look out onto the street and attract passers by.
- The toilets can be relocated to the areas closest to the hall on either side, improving access, numbers available and speed of flush.

Significant upgrades to the performers' access and comfort can be achieved including:

- Creating a dedicated level access for easy get-in.
- Creating new dedicated changing facilities with showers, toilets, washing facilities and lockers in the more modern cells in the basement and improved green rooms on the ground floor.
- Special provision for conductor, leader and soloist including a platform lift to the stage.
- Increasing the stage size to accommodate a full orchestra and an instrument lift.

A room that was the old Civil Court, currently occupied by Registrars could be restored and made into a 200 seat second performance space. It is a beautiful heritage space with the original gallery still intact. One of the proposed crush bars would link to it and so a self contained small venue could be created, opening when the rest of the Town Hall is closed.

3.4 Phase 3 Acoustic Tests

The acoustics of the Victoria Hall are subject to much opinion, and myth. Many orchestras who play in it have described the hall as good and even excellent, those who regularly record there have described it having a lovely warm, round sound.

There are still challenges for performers hearing each other but that is described as much improved. 50% of the audience described the sound as good or very good and 35% as average.

Technical tests were conducted by BDP in October 2006. The tests demonstrate the hall acoustic is good and well suited to a classical music programme. Reverberation measurements are consistent across the hall and not significantly impacted by the barrel-vaulted ceiling, in fact this plays a key part in achieving the balance and consistency across the hall. There is some fall off in reverberation time towards the back of the hall, most significantly under the balcony area but the height of the balcony means there is little reduction in clarity. There are many solutions to these acoustic issues.

For other types of music such as Jazz and Rock/Pop the hall needs additional treatments such as acoustic curtains and a quality speaker system. These can be easily incorporated for use when required and virtually invisible when not.

3.5 Phase 4 Victoria Hall

The stage can be extended to fit up to an hundred and ten piece classical orchestra. Any further extension will begin to impact on the seating. Changes to the stage can improve sightlines but this will need careful consideration at design stage.

The stalls seating can be replaced incorporating a removable tiered arrangement at the back of the hall however this may have a negative impact on the acoustic in these seats and needs further investigation at design stage. Seats can be staggered to improve sightlines. Replacing the seats can improve comfort as long as this is in line with acoustic advice. The current seating system causes problems of movement along a row but this can be overcome by more substantial seating. The promenade seating comfort can also be improved, the original doorways into Victoria Hall can be reinstated easing access and egress. The balcony can be redesigned improving raking, sightlines and, comfort. The acoustic impact of this will need further investigation at design stage.

Noise penetration can be reduced through replacing the roof, double glazing high-level windows and the back glass wall of the balcony and acoustic sealing of doors around the ground floor to the hall.

A new, low noise, comfort-cooling system can be installed venting through grilles in seat risers in the rakes and floor grilles for the flat stall areas.

There is a view that at 1600 seats there are too few, however Leeds is the only hall achieving a minimum capacity of 85% annually. The 1442 subscribers are also the

highest. Birmingham only averages 1600 seat sales with much higher overheads and more seats available.

3.6 Phase 5 Developing the full potential of Leeds Town Hall

Catering Offer

The recent appointment of caterers renowned for their work in events catering, the development of two crush bars and a flexible eating space in the crypt create an exciting new offer for users of Leeds Town Hall. Pre and post event dining and interval drinks can be provided. The caterers will also support fine dining, wedding receptions and conference refreshments.

Learning Venue

Leeds Town Hall has a rich tradition as a centre for creativity and this can be captured in a dynamic and inclusive learning programme. Leeds Town Hall could buzz with innovative learning opportunities. So no matter what age or expertise the visitor, there would be something for everyone to come and have a go at.

- **The music programme** - school and family concerts, FuseLeeds, pre-concert talks and an exciting programme of public workshops and classes
- **Arts and Events programme** including Breeze International Youth Festival and a number of other activities for children and families.
- **Heritage Learning Programme** – the building offers an innovative learning experience for young and old. *Crime and Punishment*, for example, is an HLF funded project - by using the old courtroom and cells.
- **Technology programme**- adding to the concert seasons website with Blogs, Podcasts of concert related material including pre concert talks.
- **Information centre** – close links to the extensive Music Library across the road to research composers, orchestras or to borrow a score or CD

Developing the Music offer

With better facilities and transparent costing plan the music offer in Leeds Town Hall could develop further. The concert season is currently subsidised, although to a much lesser degree than Symphony Hall, St David's Hall, Festival Hall or the Barbican. It needs more funding to enable it to attract the orchestras that the audience deserves. To ensure this can happen the programme of other activities needs to broaden to include light entertainment and popular music. These have a much shorter lead in time than the orchestra season so space will need to be booked into the Leeds Town Hall programme to ensure there is the opportunity available for such groups and bands to perform and for the hall to reinvest any profit into its overall programme. Acoustic treatments are required to ensure this music is enjoyed to the full

Conference Offer

The city is looking to attract a developer/operator to potentially develop a conference facility as part of the Arena scheme, but Leeds Town Hall will continue to attract events due to the uniqueness of its venue. Improvements to the breakout rooms and comfort spaces have already seen a significant increase in bookings since the building reopened in 2005. Improved catering will ensure this element of the business will go from strength to strength

3.7 Conclusions of the study

Leeds Town Hall can be improved significantly in terms of its visitor offer, the performer experience and its performance offer to become a top quality concert hall with an international reputation.

3.8 Consultation

The findings of the study have been discussed with the External Reference Group which was created out of the Cultural Facilities Task Group at the end of the PMP study. They were strongly supportive of the proposals and urged a dynamic communication plan be developed to tackle any myths and underline the true potential of this great building. This is underway and includes a communication to the Concert Season subscribers about the outcomes of the acoustic testing and an outline presentation of some of the ideas from the feasibility study on the Leeds Initiative website.

The Victorian Society has also expressed enthusiasm and support for the developments.

The architectural proposals have been discussed with English Heritage and they have expressed their support for the changes and welcomed the proposals to restore key heritage features for example the second performance space.

The Cultural Partnership has also welcomed the proposals, noting in particular the detailed work to discover the facts and investigate proper solutions. Ian Brown, West Yorkshire Playhouse, urged moving to the next stage. This is Leeds' iconic building, we need to celebrate it.

The sub group of Property Forum, which focuses on culture, was supportive, especially at the high level of research and detail undertaken by the Study. The Civic Trust have communicated the proposals in their newsletter.

Other immediate work required includes:

- To investigate a business plan which will create a sustainable multi-use hall.
- To investigate the impact on current occupants of the building
- Incorporate into the design the ability to store the emergency supplies needed for the city to enable Peace and Emergency Planning to deliver a rapid response centre to cope with a wide range of eventualities.

4.0 Resource Implications

4.1 The initial estimated costs for carrying out the work is approximately £20million. To better estimate the costs, £600k - £900k would be required for detailed design.

There is no allocation in the capital programme for this work and there are also many changes occurring to external funding streams. The Heritage Lottery Fund is changing significantly next year with maximum grants of £5 million and a different staging to its funding process. It is therefore proposed that the next step should be to assess the potential of putting together a mixed funding package and the costs of achieving this. Lessons will be learned from successful fund-raising campaigns such as the Grand Theatre

transformation which has raised over £3 million and Kelvingrove Museum which raised £6 million.

Fundraising agencies will also be investigated further potential to create the mixed funding package.

It is envisaged that the cost of fundraising will be cost neutral (taken out of the funds raised). However, to carry out this initial investigation approximately £30k will be used from the Yorkshire Forward money (Capital Scheme No 12589/TOW) granted for the Town Hall project.

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5.0 Risk Analysis

- 5.1** There are significant risks associated with working on such a key heritage building, both in discovering unexpected problems and working on estimated costs. The design stage is vital and will work towards mitigating these risks. The design work should not be started until the potential of achieving a mixed funding package is fully assessed

It is clear from the research that to create a quality concert hall requires a balancing act between acoustic solutions, seating configuration and staging. If this is studied in depth as part of this phase and designed together as a solution then many of the issues in the current hall can be resolved.

The design stage will also determine more accurately the cost of the proposed development and assess that this is a true value for money proposal.

6.0 Links to Corporate Plan

- 6.1** Council Plan 2006/7 identifies a priority of developing Leeds as a highly competitive, international city. One of the key activities is identified as “we will develop the city’s cultural infrastructure to increase the cultural opportunities available to people in Leeds and the wider region.” Under this key activity is the following action:

- The costs of transforming the Town Hall into an international concert hall will be assessed and we will decide the best way forward.

This report is the first stage of this activity.

7.0 Conclusions

- 7.1** There are significant and straightforward improvements which can be made which could transform Leeds Town Hall and its position as a key venue within the city, the region, nationally and internationally. It is recommended that potential funding streams are investigated as the first step

7.2 The Town Hall was voted by readers of the YEP ‘the best loved building in the city’ so it is important to engage people in the development so they feel they are part of, are influencing the design and own the outcome. This is particularly important as there are many different users of the hall and we need to ensure the multi use functionality if the building is to be sustainable beyond the development.

It is therefore proposed to involve and consult the public in a range of ways including focus groups at difference stages. This community involvement and ownership will be required for any external funding bids.

8.0 Recommendations

8.1 Executive Board is requested to agree that officers investigate the potential of putting together a mixed funding package to upgrade Leeds Town Hall to a first class concert hall and report back to Executive Board with the outcome of the investigations.