



Belfast City Council

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| Report to: | Development Committee |
| Subject: | Ulster Hall Capital Works Programme |
| Date: | 12 August 2009 |
| Reporting Officer: | Marie Thérèse McGivern, Director of Development ext. 3470 |
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Relevant Background Information

The second phase of refurbishment of the Ulster Hall began in June 2007 with the Grand Hall reopening on the 6th March 2009 with a month long festival of performances including a Civic Gala performance with the Ulster Orchestra. Since the opening concert and up to the end of June the Grand Hall has hosted over eighty concerts and other events. The café and other areas of the building have also been heavily used. The Ulster Orchestra moved into their new administration offices on the 1st June and have expressed satisfaction with their new accommodation. The key stakeholders in the project have also intimated that they are very pleased with the use by which has been made of the building since it opened, including its education and community access programme.

Building Work

Members will be aware that building works, particularly in refurbishment and conservation projects, always carry the risk of unforeseen, but necessary, works arising during construction. While contingency allowances are made in the programme for such eventualities this can only be notional and the Ulster Hall building works were actually completed later than programmed.

The original expected date for practical completion was set for the end of December 2009 with the intention of having a two month period for finishing and completing other elements of work, in order to enable a scheduled move back into the building, so that the management team could become familiar with the new systems in the building.

However, some unforeseen work became necessary and practical completion of the auditorium and front of house areas did not take place until 6th March 2009 (the actual day for re-opening to the public) and the new five storey administration office block at

the rear of the building was not formally handed over until 23 May 2009. The delay was caused by the following main issues:

- Problems with piled foundations for the new build areas resulted in the cracking of the old walls, and work scheduled had to be stopped while remedial repairs were carried out. Additional structural work was also required at high level to strengthen walls;
- When the old roof was removed, wet rot was discovered in some of the timber trusses and the rotten timber had to be replaced, with additional temporary supports;
- An issue arose around the design of the ventilation and grills for the main auditorium. This work was subcontracted to a specialist supplier, and it took some time for the ductwork and grills to be designed, manufactured and tested to ensure that not only the correct room temperatures were achievable, but also that the noise levels created by air flowing through the grills conformed to strict criteria – necessary for both recording purposes and the enjoyment of the music. This caused delays in the work in the roof space and on the heating and ventilation system.

The overall result of the delays in these works was that the building was handed over later than scheduled and this had a major knock on impact on remaining completion work. The management team worked closely with the main contractor over the last few months of the project, in order to ensure the opening date was achieved. However, the item which suffered most as a result of the project delays and restricted access was the Mulholland Organ, with the result that the dates scheduled for testing and commissioning the organ were lost, and which subsequently have now been planned for a later date.

Key Issues

Issues Arising

A number of issues which have been raised previously by the committee, are as outlined below:

Dampness

Prior to the recent refurbishment works some of the walls of the building were historically extremely damp for the following reasons:

- The previous use of inappropriate cement pointing on the external face which has trapped moisture in the walls leading to deterioration of the brickwork and further damp penetration;
- Defective roof coverings and guttering leading to significant water ingress at high level

As part of the current works, the external walls were repaired; brick replacement was carried out as necessary and the entire walls were re-pointed using an appropriate lime mortar. In addition, the roof was re-configured to provide an accessible working platform for maintenance from the flat parapet gutter and the roof covering was renewed. The rainwater goods have been replaced and the new rainwater drainage system is working well.

Having completed the above repairs, all of the inherent design and maintenance

problems have now been addressed. However, as the walls of the building have been absorbing water for many years, they will require a considerable time to dry out (possibly up to a year in some areas due to their thickness) and in the meantime the dampness will exhibit as patches. The building team has made allowances for periodic minor redecoration, as required, until a final decoration takes place is undertaken when the walls have fully dried out. In addition, a number of notices have now been installed throughout the building, which explain well the context of the situation to members of the public.

Side Aisles/Length of rows

In relation to the issue of a perceived removal of the side aisles at ground floor level of the Main Hall, the previous seating layout in this space did incorporate a very narrow, albeit not approved, access space, at each side of the room. The space, not technically an aisle space, simply existed as the previous seats had traditional legs which could not be placed on top of the existing floor grilles along the edge of the hall. The new seating arrangement consists of a removable, stackable 'Matrix' system comprising groups of 2 or 3 seating banks on detachable legs – providing great flexibility for the wide variety of events held within this space. There does exist the option to remove a bank of 2 seats on each row at each side of the hall, thus providing side aisles. However, this would result in a total loss of 108 seats on the ground floor, thereby reducing the capacity at this level from 786 to 678 – which would in turn cause a significant reduction in potential revenue, a concern which has been voiced by the orchestra and other commercial promoters.

In addition, the row widths and lengths of the new seating arrangement are designed to comply with current legislative standards and best practice guidelines, and have all been approved by Building Control.

The Mulholland Organ

During the almost two year phase of building work, the Mulholland Organ remained in the building, protected by two layers of polythene sheet and a horizontal timber screen to prevent damage. A maintenance contract, separate from the main building contract, was entered into with an independent specialist organ contractor who carried out some repair work, deemed necessary following an earlier inspection of the instrument. The building contract required the main works contractor to employ the specialist organ contractor to protect the organ, and to allow him to be on site when any electrical work was undertaken inside the organ. This procedure appeared to work satisfactorily until near completion of the project, when the organ maintenance contractor discovered water lying in some sections of the organ. It has not been possible to establish the source of the water, but in order to allay fears of any permanent damage to the instrument, a further independent inspection was commissioned. This inspection was carried out by an independent specialist organ adviser from England, recommended by the City Organist, Mr Colm Carey. The adviser concluded that while some minor damage had been incurred it could easily be remedied at minor expense. He did however highlight that it has been over 30 years since the organ has had a major overhaul and so made a further recommendation that such works should be considered for the near future, as it would take time to plan and execute.

The current position is that the remedial work required, as identified by the adviser, to reinstate the organ to its pre-building work condition and concert performance standard, will be scheduled in the months ahead. It is estimated that it will take a minimum of five consecutive days to fine tune the instrument and the Ulster Hall management team are presently trying to create diary space to allow this to take place. The additional cost is expected to be minimal, and will be funded from the existing capital contingency budget

allocated to the project.

Awards

To date the building project has been nominated for the following awards:

1. The Construction News Quality Awards 2009 – achieved a top seven position but did not win overall.
2. CEF Construction Excellence Awards 2009 – to be assessed on 28 July 2009.

Resource Implications

Financial

Funding: The project is currently within the amount approved in the Capital Programme as follows:

| FUNDER | AMOUNT RECEIVED TO DATE | AMOUNT OUTSTANDING | TOTAL EXPECTED |
|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| DCAL | £2,000,000.00 | NIL | £2,000,000 |
| ACNI | £ 666,747.93 | £ 20,621.07 | £ 687,369 |
| EHS | £ 192,998.00 | £ 44,372.00 | £ 237,370 |
| HLF | £ 486,621.53 | £508,378.47 | £ 995,000 |
| BCC Contribution | | | £4,655,261 |
| TOTALS | £3,346,367.46 | £573,371.54 | £8,575,000 |
| | | <i>Total project cost</i> | <i>£8,575,000</i> |

Recommendations

Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

Key to Abbreviations

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| DCAL | Department of Culture Arts and Leisure |
| ACNI | Arts Council of Northern Ireland |
| HLF | Heritage Lottery Fund |
| NIEA | Northern Ireland Environment Agency |