Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Ulster Hall Capital Works Programme
Date:	16 September 2009
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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 6 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 has expressed satisfaction with the new accommodation. The key stakeholders in the project have also intimated that they are very pleased with the use made of the building since it opened, including the education and community access programme.

Subsequent to this report first being considered by the Development Committee on 12 August 2009, it was agreed that a site visit for Members be made to the Ulster Hall to inspect and assess the key issues first hand and to hear from Mr Dawson Stelfox of Consarc, the consultant architect to the project. The site visit took place on Tuesday, 8 September 2009.

Building Work

Building works, particularly in refurbishment and conservation projects, 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 2008. This allowed a two month period for finishing and completing other elements of work and enabled a scheduled move back into the building, so that the management team could become familiar with the new systems in the building.

Some unforeseen work became necessary and practical completion of the auditorium and front of house areas did not take place until 6 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 have been subsequently planned for a later date.

Key Issues

Issues Arising
A number of issues have been raised by Committee

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 trapped moisture in the walls, leading to deterioration of the brickwork and further damp penetration
- Defective roof coverings and guttering lead 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 all the 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 considerable time to dry out, possibly up to a year in some areas due to their thickness. In the meantime the dampness will exhibit as patches. The building team has made allowances for periodic minor redecoration as required, until the final decoration takes place when he walls have fully dried out. In addition, a number of notices have now been installed throughout the building explaining the the situation to members of the public.

Side Aisles/Length of rows

In relation to the 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, unapproved access space at each side of the room. The space was not technically an aisle and existed only because the previous seats had traditional legs which could not be placed on top of the existing floor grilles at 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. This provides great flexibility for the wide variety of events held within this space. The option to remove a bank of 2 seats on each row at each side of the Hall to provide side aisles 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. 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 Mr Colm Carey, the City Organist. 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.

Site Visit

A site visit for Committee to inspect the work was held on Tuesday, 8 September 2009. The Committee was given a tour of the key areas affected by damp and viewed the Grand Hall's seating configuration and the Mulholland Organ. The tour was hosted by Mr Dawson Stelfox of Consarc, the consultant architect to the project, supported by relevant Council officers from the Waterfront and Ulster Halls, and the Director of Improvement representing the Project Management Unit. Also present to provide technical information in relation to the Mulholland Organ was Mr Colm Carey, the City Organist.

Members received further supporting technical information from Mr Stelfox in relation to the dampness, and heard that the drying out process, although estimated at twelve months, depending on the inherent environmental conditions, could take up to twenty-four months. However, Members were reassured that evidence of the drying out process were already being seen in various areas of the Hall. Members were also assured that any costs in relation to the future making good and redecoration of the areas affected were included within the overall capital cost of the project and were contractual obligations of the project contractor.

In relation to the Mulholland Organ, Mr Colm Carey, the City Orgainist, informed Members that with the necessary minor remedial works due to be scheduled for completion in March of next year (due to the limited nature of available dates with the Ulster Hall's events diary), the Organ would be ready for concert performances from April 2010. Members were also assured by the Consultant Architect that any costs in relation to returning the instrument back to the original concert performance quality would be met as part of the overall project capital cost. It was agreed by Members that any further discussion in relation to the Organ should be deferred until these works had been completed, and the organ ready for concert performances.

Awards

To date the Ulster Hall 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

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
		Total project cost	£8,575,000

Recommendations

Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

Decision Tracking

There is no decision tracking as this report is for notation only

Key to Abbreviations

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

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