

Deputations

Finance and Resources Committee

10.00 am Thursday, 3rd December, 2020

Virtual Meeting - via Microsoft Teams

Deputations

Contacts

Email: rachel.gentleman@edinburgh.gov.uk / sarah.stirling@edinburgh.gov.uk

Tel: 0131 529 4107 / 0131 529 3009

Andrew Kerr

Chief Executive

This page is intentionally left blank

November 27th 2020

The future of the Tron

This sets out the supporting arguments for the financial requests which will be made on December 3rd to the City of Edinburgh Council F&R Committee concerning the Tron.

This building has been a concern to the city since 1961 when the council placed a preservation order on the Tron in response to plans from a developer for its demolition. Almost 60 years later, we believe we have a creative and viable solution for the building which has widespread support and broad appeal. As we start to emerge from the period of the pandemic, we believe we need to once again start planning for the future. This will involve some degree of City of Edinburgh Council financial support if we are to make our vision a reality. We have worked hard to make this request as manageable as possible, and to structure our funding plan so that limited financial resource can be used to open the door with a range of major private and public funders. We therefore believe that our approach is the most cost effective and efficient way of solving a major conservation challenge for the city.

Short term lease

Thanks to the support of City of Edinburgh Council, and many individuals on this committee, Edinburgh World Heritage was able to take over a short-term lease of the Tron in June 2018. Overall, we are delighted with the results and would like to thank you all for the confidence you placed in Edinburgh World Heritage. To date, we have invested almost £300,000 in the building. The prototype exhibition, which presents all of Scotland's World Heritage Sites together for the first time, has been visited by over 600,000 people to date. Encouragingly, in a large-scale survey of visitors to the Tron, 95% agreed with the proposal to use the building as a centre for Scotland's World Heritage Sites. We have 3 retail partners in the building, and while sales are below expectations, we have invaluable learnings on the commercial realities of operating in this building.

A vision for the Tron

During the period of our short-term occupancy, we have developed and agreed a vision for a longer-term refurbishment of the building. This was developed jointly with partners at Historic Environment Scotland and City of Edinburgh Council, and has now been formally approved by the Board of Edinburgh World Heritage.

Our vision is that the Tron becomes an inspiring place where the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh, as well as Scotland's other World Heritage Sites, can be explained, promoted and celebrated. As a team, we believe this will deliver four important outcomes for the city:

- People from all backgrounds will become engaged in our heritage. This will be achieved through an inspiring programme of permanent and temporary exhibitions, which tell Edinburgh's stories through the voices and perspectives of local people as well as through enhanced education activities so that every child in Edinburgh forms a life-long attachment with the city's historic centre.
- Communities will also be strengthened. Our plan is to reconnect people to their roots - for example with the local community at Moredun and Gilmerton, where the Tron's congregation moved in the 1950's – as well as supporting the residents of both the Old and New Towns.

- The local environment will be transformed through the construction of a sensitive extension into Hunter Square, agreed in principle with HES, together with a range of appropriate public realm improvements.
- A much-loved landmark will be conserved to the highest possible standard, with the help of the people of Edinburgh. Over 2,000 people have already got involved in helping to shape the best approach to conserving the building. We will build on this work through workshops, apprenticeships, hard-hat tours, and hands-on training for volunteers.

Previous asks to the Finance and Resources Committee

At the March 5th 2020 meeting of the F&R committee, the following requests were made:

A reduction of the rent from £20,000 per annum to zero, and a contribution of £15,000/PA towards the running costs of the building to help us cover the considerable costs of running this building. In response to this, the amendment from the meeting ‘agrees that officers further work with Old Town Projects on a revenue solution’ and ‘agrees to delegate to the Executive Director of Resources, the approval of a revenue solution, using discounted rent’.

In subsequent conversations with Stephen Moir, we agreed that we will now ask the F&R committee meeting of December 3rd 2020 for a reduction of our rent to £1,000 per annum. This will allow us to help reduce the losses incurred over the first 18 months of the lease, and to continue investing in engagement and community outreach activities.

Capital Costs

At the March meeting, a contribution of around 10% of building costs was requested – amounting to about £500,000 - £600,000, which would likely be required during the 2024/25 fiscal year. In response to this request, the amendment ‘notes the options and agrees to explore the council’s involvement in helping to fund the capital allocation of the public square improvements at Hunter Square’. While this is a positive step, it falls short of the commitment in principle that will be required by other funders, such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), given the building is owned by the city.

In a recent meeting with the Roads Services department, we were informed that public realm improvements to Hunter Square and Blair Street will be required within the Roads Renewal programme over the proposed time period in any case. It was noted that partnering with the Tron project represented ‘good value’ for City of Edinburgh Council, given the enhancements and additional design expertise that the project would bring, and would help resolve a number of factors in this culturally significant location which currently encourage anti-social behaviour. Additionally, the Road Department stressed that this was also an opportunity to improve the pedestrian experience and safety around the highly congested crossroads, as well as better implement active travel routes across the Old Town.

Our second request is therefore that a note be agreed in which City of Edinburgh Council ‘commits to exploring various options to fund the capital works, the lead solution being within the Roads Services budgets’. While this is still not a formal commitment ‘in principle’ to the funding, we believe it would be sufficient expression of support to proceed with the NLHF Expression of Interest application which is now scheduled for 2021. Before the full Development Stage application is submitted in 2022, a more formal commitment in principle to capital funding will need to be given by the council.

COVID-19 – additional perspective

While recognising the financial constraints that the council is under, we feel compelled to proceed with this recommendation as it represents excellent value for the city – in effect a ‘sprat to catch a mackerel’. Through rent reduction and a commitment to explore solutions to the capital budget, we will be able to proceed with other funders in the knowledge that the city is committed to this project. It should be noted that the Scottish Government views our UNESCO designations as a highly valuable asset and has recently confirmed significant funding for a ‘UNESCO trail for Scotland’ – as an initiative to help sustainably rebuild the country’s visitor economy post the pandemic.

Given the building has lacked a sustainable use for almost 60 years, it’s fair to say that alternative short and long-term uses for the building have been in short supply, and that this is even more the case now. The building in its current state, despite significant investment, is not fit for use, and is barely wind and watertight. Alternative commercial uses will be hard to find, and may be inappropriate for a building of this age and cultural significance. Clearly the current market rental value would be very low indeed, and most commercial projects would struggle to justify the £10 million+ investment required to create a viable use.

Edinburgh World Heritage is a proven partner to the City of Edinburgh Council, through good times and bad. We have a track record of delivering projects for the city such as ‘Twelve Monuments’, Well Court, the conservation of historic tenements on the Canongate, as well as support for projects such as St. Cecilia’s Hall and the City Observatory. The Tron would be our largest project to date, but we have the conservation expertise, deep roots into Edinburgh’s communities, and a vision for the building which has broad support.

Next steps

Assuming the F&R Committee agree to our requests today, we will proceed with our plan to reopen the building in time for the 2021 season while in tandem activating our programme for the larger refurbishment project which will include working with all our key funding partners.

Finally, agreement to this proposal would be an important good news for the city. When the Old and New Towns became a World Heritage Site in 1995, the vision was always that we would have a central point from which we could tell the inspiring story of the city. This is an obligation we have under the World Heritage Convention. We now have an opportunity to make this vision a reality.



Christina Sinclair
Director – Edinburgh World Heritage

This page is intentionally left blank