

# Restoration plans for Leith Custom House can now move ahead with council approval

The City of Edinburgh Council has approved the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust (SHBT) proposals for Leith Custom House to create a mixed-use community, creative and heritage hub in a £15 million project.

SHBT will now move ahead with [plans](#) to restore the building to good repair, and improve its energy efficiency using renewable sources where possible. The council own the building having bought it with £650,000 from the Common Good fund in 2015, and will lease it to SHBT for an extended period to 2025, followed by a 99-year lease when funds have been raised.

The council's Museums and Galleries Service will assist in the heritage parts of the project allowing the trust to concentrate on obtaining planning permission and to run a major fundraising campaign, but otherwise the council will not commit any further funding to the project. The costs of renovation will be raised from other external bodies.

The plan is to make the entrance to Custom House a welcoming and inclusive space with heritage displays throughout, and include flexible accommodation for community groups and creative businesses. This will produce an income to secure the future of the 19th century building which a standalone museum

could not have done.

Custom House has been used in a variety of ways since the council purchased it, mainly as a creative hub, but also as a home for Leith Market.

The plans to use the building solely as a museum for Leith were described as challenging and unsustainable, requiring third party funding or subsidy. The council is not in a position to operate another single use museum, and no other operator has been identified, but items from the Leith Collection will be used and displayed at Custom House following completion of the multi-million pounds refurbishment.

Chair of Scottish Historic Buildings Trust Maggie Wright said: "We welcome the committee's decision to continue its relationships with Scottish Historic Buildings Trust as we move forward to secure the long term future of Leith Custom House, which has had a significant role within Leith since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a huge vote of confidence in the expertise of our Trust, following on from our successful restoration of Riddle's Court in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town. Our proposals will give the building a sustainable future as well as creating a legacy for the community of Leith and beyond for generations to come."

Cron Mackay of the Leith Civic Trust said: "The community of Leith is delighted and relieved to see the plans for Leith Custom House get the go-ahead. We have been involved with the consultations on the future of the building, and it is wonderful that the project can now move forward. The Custom House will provide a space to tell the many different stories of Leith, in a rejuvenated building that serves the community of Leith and visitors alike."

Council Leader Cammy Day said: "This is great news for Custom House and the Leith community. The lease to SHBT makes sure

this venue has a bright future as community, creative and heritage hub for the area and I very much look forward to the opportunities this space will bring.”

The building was constructed in 1812 and was used as a customs house until 1980 when it was used as a museum store. The council approached [SHBT](#), the charity which renovates buildings which have fallen into disrepair, and which has proved itself in the refurbishment of Riddle’s Court on the Lawnmarket which is now used for weddings and Fringe events. The Chief Executive of SHBT who made a short presentation to the council’s Culture and Community committee on Tuesday invited any councillors to visit Riddle’s Court to view one of their completed projects. The organisation was also involved in the renovation of St Ninian’s Manse and Quayside Mills in Leith.

## **WARD COUNCILLORS**

During the council’s deliberations ahead of approving the way ahead, ward councillors and other members of the committee had the opportunity to comment.

Cllr Katrina Faccenda said: ““I do think it’s important looking back at the purchase of the building with money from the common good fund in 2014 that this eventual project isn’t exactly what the community of Leith envisaged at the time of purchase, and that the original hopes that were for a museum dedicated to the story and people of Leith, is slightly different from what we are looking at now.

“There are, as many people here will know, many unique aspects to the story of Leith whether it’s golf, shipping or flourishing migrant communities and there are many spaces where stories of wealthy and powerful people are told, so the idea of having a space where every day stories of working people’s lives can be told is a great contribution to our city’s cultural landscape, as well as functioning as a community hub.

“I do appreciate a lot of work has been done before I was elected as a councillor which concluded that a city run single use museum of local history was not a viable option. I have to acknowledge that with disappointment. I do feel that not only financial constraints but a general loss of confidence in the capacity of our council to deliver ambitious publicly run projects and to make them work for the people of Edinburgh and actually to create a more advantageous – and by that I mean profitable – impact on the high levels of tourism in Edinburgh and directly channel that towards our cultural institutions.

“These are debates for maybe another time and another place, but something isn’t working when one of the world’s major tourist destinations struggles to keep museums open. There certainly is money, but it’s not ending up in the right places.”

Cllr Chas Booth asked for some small amendments to clarify what is covered by the ongoing community stakeholder engagement which will be continued by SHBT, and to set a timeline for the next stages including the council’s involvement in the heritage element of the project.



Back left Chair of SHBT, John Campbell, KC, Cllrs Richard Lewis, Adam McVey and Gordon Munro on the back row, with Cllr Chas Booth Lord provost Donald Wilson and Cllr Lesley Hinds in the front row at Customs House in 2015. PHOTO ©The Edinburgh Reporter

**Cllr Booth said that he welcomed the report and recognised the work by former ward councillor Gordon Munro. He said: “Without his suggestion that this asset be bought using the Common Good Fund we would not be where we are today.”**

He also cautioned against anyone on the committee supporting the Conservative amendment which he described as a “wrecking amendment”. The Tories first asked for more exploration of the

way that more of the building could be used as a museum, and asked that the lease restricts the use of the building to the purposes for which the common good fund monies were used to buy it, and to restrict any sub leases. The group had made a third suggestion of a back up plan to sell the building and so reduce budget expenditure. As to the first two Cllr Booth said these were already accomplished by the work that had been done to bring the report to committee.

Cllr Booth also suggested that the option of selling the building was what the Conservative Group really wanted. He said: "They really want it to be sold off and turned into a Wetherspoon's or something worse. That would set Leith back eight years. It would be really bad for the community of Leith."

Cllr Max Mitchell introduced the Conservative amendment saying that it was a pity that what was originally envisaged is not what the community of Leith had originally envisaged. He said: "The original point of purchasing this building was to deliver a museum and something of historical importance to the people of Leith, and indeed to the people of Edinburgh who have an interest. I suggest it might be worth considering going back to look at how better these plans could utilise it as a much more museum and heritage focused venue, whilst also still trying to be able to be self sufficient.

"As to the third point in our amendment, perhaps the first six words should not be included. With the state of local government finances and what The Scottish Government is doing to the council and indeed councils across Scotland, I think no option should be taken off the table unfortunately. Desperate times unfortunately call for desperate measures."

Cllr Staniforth wanted an assurance about the amount of the building which would be used for heritage purposes which Una Richards of SHBT answered. She confirmed that within Custom House 34% of the ground floor and 28% of the first floor would

be used in this way and that 36% of the Custom House building is zoned "orange". The orange zone is a flexible area which might be used for community purposes or to stage exhibitions with pieces from the national collection that require security or better environmental conditions.

Cllr McNeese Mechan, who represents the Leith Walk ward, and is the former Culture convener, was most supportive of the plans.

Cllr Hal Osler said this is a good example of a matter which the council has worked hard on to get it right, and she encouraged the committee to visit the building and perhaps also Riddle's Court. She also urged action saying "we need to progress and move on".

The committee approved the move forward to allow SHBT to develop plans to refurbish the building by 9 votes to 2.

## **HISTORY OF THE BUILDING**

The Custom House, Leith is the oldest Custom House in Scotland, designed by Robert Reid in a neo-classical style, it was constructed between 1810 and 12 and had later alterations in 1825 by William Burns. Leith is located on the shore of the Firth of Forth and has been a seaport since at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is a place where people have arrived and departed over the centuries including significant historical figures such as Mary Queen of Scots and George IV. Leith has a longstanding maritime tradition and today it is a vibrant district with a creative culture.

Since taking over the building, the local community have been welcomed and encouraged to visit and make use of the building. This has resulted in more than 14,000 people joining in with open days, tours and public events. Informal and formal consultation has taken place with members of the community at a number of open days as well as specific events

to canvas opinions on the longer-term vision for the building.  
The plan is to begin construction in 2025 and reopen to the public in 2028.



Custom House Open Day, June 14, 2015.  
Photo credit: Sheila Masson





