



Media Release

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THE ROYAL HALL – NEXT PHASE

The initial findings of the two-stage supplementary study on what could be achieved with the £8m currently on the table for the partial restoration of Harrogate's historic Royal Hall suggest that the building can be repaired and returned to some public use as early as 2007. Although these findings need to be worked up in more detail and a full risk evaluation undertaken to ensure that in proceeding the council does not expose itself to unaffordable cost overruns.

Council leaders are hopeful that a scheme which is designed to deliver this within the £8m budget will be sufficient to persuade the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to fully approve their £6m grant which, together with the council's contribution of £2m, would finally see the Royal Hall brought back to life.

It was originally recognised in the officers' report in March this year that a scheme which secured the level of public access, which was sought by the HLF, could not be achieved with the available funds.

On welcoming the findings of the study, Councillor Mike Gardner, Leader of the Council, said: "In all the furore surrounding the restoration of the Royal Hall, some people seem to have lost sight of the fact that the Heritage Lottery Fund has to provide what they see as long term 'value for money' for their grant and this has to include public access to the building. Although the proposed scheme will allow public access, it will be more limited than in the original proposals. However, we hope it will be sufficient for the HLF to give it the go-ahead.

If we get that in late January when the HLF Trustees are expected to meet to discuss this, we then will need to rely very much on organisations like the Restoration Trust to develop fundraising initiatives for those items which the revised scheme is unable to deal with, like redecoration of the auditorium, fitting out of the bar, purchase of new drapes. Also key to a successful scheme will be an interpretive heritage display, which will trace the development and use of the Hall over the last 100 years and provide users and visitors with an appreciation of the building. This particular initiative I hope can be the subject of a joint initiative with the Restoration Trust and the local schools and colleges

"We now have a strategy for delivering a partial restoration of the building, which the HLF officers and their advisers believe is encouraging. But this does not commit the

HLF to a grant award, the final decision will be taken by the Trustees and we won't know the outcome until after they have considered our revised submission. So, we're not there yet, and there is still much detailed work to do particularly on risk and ensuring a satisfactory level of public access, but I am hopeful we can progress successfully with HLF's help."

The key components of the strategy devised for the delivery of a partial restoration of the Royal Hall with community use, which has been developed by the Design Team and the council's Study Management Group, are based around four criteria:

- carrying out essential structural repairs and waterproofing;
- maximising public access and usage;
- providing a basis for further restoration work as and when funds become available;
- containing risk and the possibility of costs over-running.

Although the scheme is still subject to further detailed design and costings analysis and is by no means firm, works are likely to include repairs to the structure across all of the building including the front entrance and the rear ambulatory area; weatherproofing; a basic level of heating and ventilation; works to the rear of the stage to allow it to be used again for performances; improved access for those with disabilities; improved toilets and first aid accommodation; new seats in the Grand Hall and Grand Circle; decorative repairs only throughout front-of-house areas.

However, Councillor Gardner warned that the works will not allow any access to the upper circle which means the capacity of the Hall will be reduced to about 800 and will not at this stage include authentic redecoration of the auditorium and other front of house areas.

He added: "There is also no possibility of an enlarged stage house – and securing this later would be extremely difficult and costly. However, we believe that those members of the community who miss the Royal Hall as a local venue will be pleased with the amount of public use which we hope can be achieved.

"The authentic redecoration and introduction of period seating could form part of a further restoration project as and when funds become available. We also need to do some further work on mitigating the very real risks which are attached to this sort of project, especially with regard to the fact that there is a definite limit to the funding available for this stage. This is very necessary before we turn the proposals into a realistic second stage submission to the HLF."

Councillor Geoff Webber, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group said: "I am delighted with the news and hope that this signals the first stage of a full restoration."

The council is holding informal discussions with interested parties – including community groups who have used the Royal Hall. The final draft proposals will be considered by the study management group in November before final proposals are put before the council late in December for approval to make the submission to the HLF in late December.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Councillor Mike Gardner and Councillor Geoff Webber are available for comment on 01423 816774 and 504035 respectively. Further technical information is available from Mr Stuart Quin, Deputy Director of Harrogate International Conference Centre.