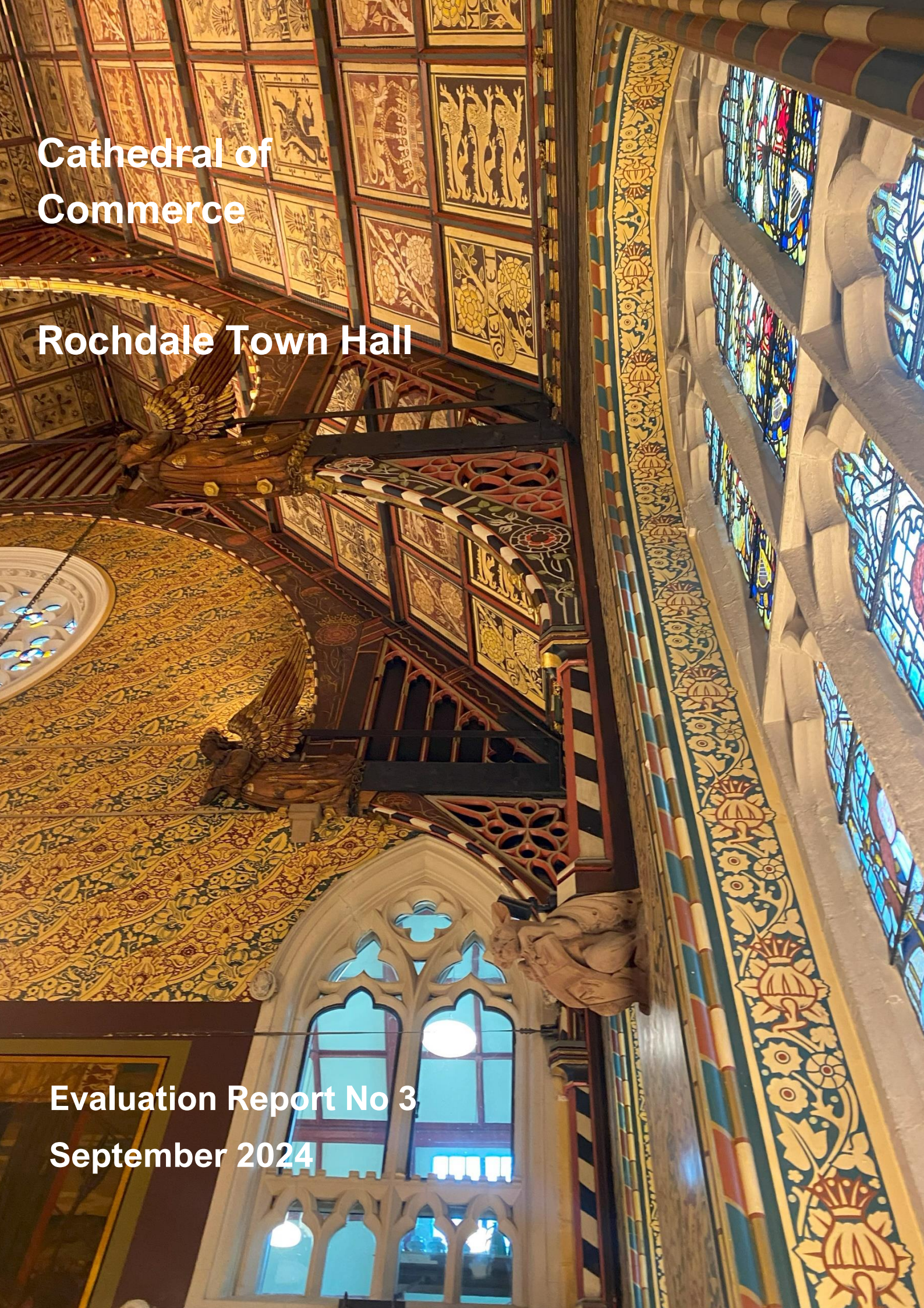

Cathedral of Commerce

Rochdale Town Hall

Evaluation Report No 3

September 2024

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1. Introduction

1.1. The purpose of this report

This report is the third of a series of five evaluation reports produced for the Cathedral of Commerce - Rochdale Town Hall project.

The evaluation measures extent to which the project is meeting its intended outcomes for heritage, people and communities; and assesses how the project is being delivered, capturing organisational learning along the way, and sharing recommendations, where appropriate, that might strengthen project outcomes.

The first interim report (April 2022) focused on process, including early project design and governance. The second report (April 2023) explored delivery of the Activity Plan and community engagement.

This report provides an overview of progress against seven key objectives set out by the Project Team as part of their R2 application. The focus of the report is on initial public responses to the reopened Town Hall, drawing upon over 1,000 visitor postcards completed since the building reopened, and a more in-depth online survey completed by 50 people.

A fourth interim report (March 2025) will provide a focused review of how the business plan and operations are working a year on. The final summative report will be produced in September 2025.

1.2. The project – where we are now.

The 'Cathedral of Commerce' project, via funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (Heritage Fund) aims to transform Rochdale Town Hall into a community asset which celebrates the building's extraordinary design and craftsmanship, fully opening it up for public use. It is being delivered in partnership between Rochdale Development Agency (RDA) and Rochdale Borough Council (RBC).

Since our last interim report, the building has opened to the public (March 2024), with a new visitor offer of interpreted historical spaces, artists' installations, guided tours, and café. The building is available for private hire at selected times, and some areas are available for hire and community use throughout the week.

A public programme of events includes festivals, family theatre and family events. Schools are beginning to visit on self-guided visits, and the team have piloted school workshops.

A new team of staff are in place to support the operation, including hospitality, security and events, led by a Strategy and Operations Manager (previously the Heritage Engagement Manager). The Volunteer and Community Manager and Heritage Engagement Manager continue to deliver the Activity Plan, and lead a team of volunteers. The Conservation Studio has begun work, and a team of staff have recently been recruited.

The West Wing of the building is under renovation (this is not funded by the Heritage Fund) and due for completion December 2024. The Slopes project to landscape the area behind the Town Hall is also underway.

1.3. Recommendations

- The vision for the project was to create a community asset that would bring civic pride, support local jobs and skills development, and provide a place for people to come together. Visitor response to the building has been extremely positive, and evidences the impact the project has had on civic pride, community wellbeing, and confidence in the council. Rochdale Town Hall is already having a significant impact on its local community, and this vision needs to be maintained to ensure that it continues to be a place that local people feel is their own.
- Visitors are 'wowed' by the building, and many have come out of curiosity – to see the restored building and spaces that have not been open to the public previously. However, it will be important to give them reasons to visit regularly. The public programme will be an important mechanism in encouraging people to return. The guided tour has been enthusiastically received, and there may be opportunities to offer different tours to focus on different topics. The café will also play an important part in providing a space for people to relax and socialise – getting the pricing structure for this right will be critical in providing income generation without pricing out local people.
- While funds have been ringfenced for ongoing maintenance, the Town Hall will still need to generate income. It will be important for all budget holders and decision makers to recognise that income generation is a means to supporting the Town Hall as a community asset. Decisions around opening times, pricing structures etc, will need to take a long view around what will enable the best provision for the local community.
- The delivery of the project and opening of the building have taken significant time, capacity and resource, with the team needing to focus on the day to day needs of the building and visitors, adapting to new processes and uses of the building, and building and recruiting the operational team. This reactive approach is normal when operating a new venture. However, six months in, it will be important for the team to carve out time to pause and reflect, and to think ahead to the next phase of the building's operation. Getting the staffing structure right, with all key posts recruited, will be an important next step so that the team can start to think more strategically.
- The team have taken a flexible approach to delivering the Activity Plan, and it will be important to continue to listen to community needs, and adapt activities to provide the best impact for local people and for target audiences.
- The Activity Plan has been successful in reaching new visitors and recruiting a team of dedicated and passionate volunteers. The team are keen to reach a more diverse range of people through the Activity Plan in the next phase of the project.



Restoring and protecting heritage for future generations

2. Restoring, conserving and protecting a historic asset for future generations

2.1. What the project set out to do

Supporting Heritage Fund Outcomes:

Heritage will be in better condition

Heritage will be better managed

The project set out to restore and conserve the Town Hall with a new management model to protect its heritage for the future – including a sinking fund, new staff roles, and increased skills and capacity amongst staff and volunteers.

Prior to the project, there was no public access, the building was a difficult to navigate warren of cellular dark unloved rooms and corridors where splendid great halls were turned into a series of partitions obliterating the internal spaces as designed, and destroying the beauty. False ceilings and stud walls and electrical and digital cabling littered the entire building. A large car park overshadowed the external approach to the building. Only the council used or had access to the building and meanwhile, its potential as a national, regional, local and community asset was there.

2.2. What the project has delivered

Since the last report, Phase 2 capital works were completed, with the building opening to the public in March 2024. A third phase (not funded by the Heritage Fund), will provide back of house facilities and infrastructure. This phase is still underway and includes a changing places toilet funded by the Heritage Fund.

Repairs included new roofs, restored fleche, masonry repairs, improved maintenance access and screened servicing provision. Windows were upgraded where appropriate, with replacement casements designed to match the traditional appearance of originals. The rationalising of the floor plan went back to the original architect's original intentions.

The project's architect is particularly proud of the glazing of the external Porte Cochère which sits in front of the main doors, enhancing the entrance and provide a professional visitor welcome. These new enclosures use large panels of specialist glass and metal framing designed specifically to limit impact on the surrounding stone, and to be as transparent as possible. A new terrace was also constructed to the rear and sides of the building, allowing better and equal access for wheelchair users.

Internally, a lift shaft and staircase were installed within the clocktower, and conservation work took place throughout the building to restore and reinstate historic interiors including murals, stained glass, painted surfaces, marble pillars and stonework in the Welcome Gallery, Mayor's Suite, Great Hall and Bright Hall.

New mechanical and electrical systems have been installed throughout, with historic radiators being restored and reused. A large proportion of light fittings recovered from the building were also restored and reused, for example the Great Hall pendants, which along with other pendant lights were converted to LED and rehung. The system is controlled centrally, and areas can

be zoned for different events. Automatic switches are in place in corridors, bathrooms and offices to ensure they are off when not in use.

Working with community artists, new graphics for the ceiling panels in the Bright Hall were created, complementing the decoration throughout the rest of the building. Cleaning in the Mayor's Parlour revealed pained walls that were heavily damaged by varnish and nicotine. This work had to cease to prevent further damage and decay. Similarly, the floor in the old council chamber was very dark and had to be stripped back to bare wood rather than restored to original colour. Some areas of conservation have been left as part of a rolling programme.

Extensive and complex scaffolding had to be constructed internally and externally to the Great Hall enable access to the ceiling and eaves. The fleche was repaired and redecorated including the removal of the original leadwork, flashings and cover moulds / plinths. Whilst key structural elements were repaired in-situ, other sections were taken to the workshop for repair or replication. Decorative ceiling panels and angels were restored and cleaned. Timber repairs also took place, with leadwork re-instated and timberwork redecorated.

A number of challenges were faced during the renovation of the Great Hall. Serious structural issues were discovered with the 350 decorative ceiling panels, the condition of plaster being much worse than assumed. A methodology for repair was put in place and following negotiations with Historic England over the use of netting, an extension of time was agreed, and repairs were completed end of 2023.

In addition, decorative schemes to the timber beams were found to be much more extensive than originally assumed. Removal of some of the varnish revealed intricate designs and patterning. The design team secured additional funding from the Council to thoroughly clean and restore the beams. Eight art and design students from a local college were recruited for around 16 weeks to support the conservators, with four continuing on until the end of the project, and one becoming permanently employed.

A comprehensive description of the full range of capital works can be found in RDA's Pre-Opening Report (RTH Final Pre-Opening Report, January 2024).

2.3. The difference this is making

Public recognition of the restoration works

The quality of the restoration works has been widely recognised by professionals in the field, and by members of the public filing in comments cards and surveys.

> 'Rochdale Town Hall is probably one of the finest examples of neo-gothic architecture in the country, but like many buildings this old, it was showing its age. Now, after four years of painstaking work, it looks incredible, just as it would have done when it first opened its doors well over a century ago.' Neil Emmott, leader of Rochdale Borough Council

When asked what they think of what they saw during their visit to the Town Hall, over 95% of visitor responses were positive. Over half specifically referenced the renovations.

Visitors commented on the craftsmanship and expertise that are evident throughout the renovations and feel that the work carried out is sensitive to the original architecture while achieving what it needed to.

> ‘Such craftsmanship and expertise in this sensitive restoration.’
>
> ‘The restorers have done a magnificent job; it is great to see specialist trades still exist.’

Visitors were asked what the most memorable part of their visit was. The Great Hall and staircase were the most frequently mentioned, and the ceilings and stained glass windows.

> ‘The building was absolutely incredible inside and out. The great hall was as one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen. So much more to the building though there was just so much detail and pattern and, in every corner, everything was just stunning. The staff were also all friendly and welcoming. 10/10 experience all round.’
>
> ‘Just amazing. The stained glass windows look wonderful.’
>
> ‘The stained glass windows were magnificent – such detail and history.’

Visitors also mentioned the transformation of the outside space and the new visitor routes allowing access to previously unseen rooms.

> ‘Extraordinary building which can be very well appreciated after the restoration effort. It is great to be able to access it all.’
>
> ‘Beautifully organised visitor routes.’
>
> ‘Love the area outside.’

Management and maintenance of the building

A new Heritage Skills Studio enables important work still needed beyond the project lifespan to be carried out, such as painting and repairing stained glass. The studio is supported by three members of staff – a stained-glass conservator, painted surface conservator and timber conservator.

The studio will continue with non-essential conservation works that were not completed during the closure period, and is beginning a schedule of maintenance and repair of historic elements now that the building in is use. It will also offer public conservation workshops.

A budgeted Management Maintenance Plan is in place, with an additional 20% contingency acting as a sinking fund.

Improved building performance

The renovations carried out to the Town Hall building addressed issues of heat loss from roofs, ceilings and glazing. This has resulted in the building operating more in line with that of modern constructions.

The glazed Porte Cochère allows the main public doors to be open while retaining heat in the building. New and improved heating and lighting systems have led to lower energy consumption, and the addition of an externally funded heat pump and new power supply has reduced the dependence on gas, leading to a reported 55% reduction in carbon emissions. The building now has the infrastructure required to deliver a fully electric, net zero carbon building in the future.

2.4. Success factors and lessons learnt

The client teams pre-opening report includes a detailed analysis of the challenges and lessons learnt from the capital project. We have also drawn out additional lessons learnt from interviews with the Design Team and contractors, and include an appendix to this report focusing on cost management.

Key success factors and lessons learnt relating to the restoration include:

- **Procurement:** The team selected a small, local contractor to deliver the main contract, recognising that it had the potential to upskill and grow through the project. While the contractor had not taken on a project of this scale and complexity before, it had been the contractor for the Slopes Project enabling works package, meaning staff already knew some of the intricacies and difficulties of the Town Hall project. Furthermore, the contractor was committed to this project, knowing that it would be a prestigious project and important for its profile. The client, architect and QS all acknowledge the fit of the contractor HHSmith as the right one for the project who delivered with a dedicated team.
- **Managing the design process:** design changes were requested at late stages in the project by RBC. For example, loading of the pavers outside the building had to be readdressed after the completion of the capital programme, as it was identified that the area would need to host festivals. While RBC were issued with reports and invited to meetings, it is possible that they did not fully understand the implications of decisions and sign offs at each stage, and did not put the requisite time aside to scrutinise the brief and resultant designs. Earlier input would have mitigated the risk of abortive work.
- **Anticipating the unknown:** Unlike a new build, there will always be a raft of 'unknowns' at RIBA 4 in a historic building, and some details can only be resolved on site. For example, it would have been difficult to finalise the M&E design before lifting the floorboards. The team allowed plenty of time in the programme, and a healthy contingency budget to respond to outstanding queries and to work collaboratively with the contractor to finalise designs.
- **Cost management:** the costs for this project have been extremely complex and very well managed through the contribution of all members of the team. Approaches to cost management are explored in an appendix to this report. Setting the design philosophy with the entire team right at its outset was critical to costs management.

'The level of collaboration between architect, engineers, client and contractors was the closest I have ever experienced and key to the success, the level of care and attention to detail have delivered a building that is probably closer to the original brief that it ever has been in its 150-year life.' Iain Shaw, Director MEP Engineering

Creating a safe and communal venue for everyone



3. Creating a safe communal venue for everyone

3.1. What the project set out to do

The project set out to provide an inclusive, accessible, safe space for all citizens of the borough of Rochdale, where residents feel represented and included, and target audiences would feel less isolated.

The project would celebrate the Town Hall's significance as a 'cathedral of commerce', and what it means to be Rochdalian in a way that would bring the community together, helping to build tolerance, understanding and cohesion. Schoolchildren would be encouraged to reflect on citizenship and British values.

Supporting Heritage Fund Outcomes:

A wider range of people will have engaged with heritage

People will have learnt about heritage

People will have changed attitudes and behaviour

People will have an enjoyable time

3.1.1. The difference the project is making - a new community asset for Rochdale

The restoration works have allowed the building to be accessible to the public for the first time. Visitors are able to access the building daily, with new internal routes enabling them to see previously unseen areas of the building for the first time. They can come in to visit the restored rooms independently, go on a guided tour, use the café, or join one of the activities that have been programmed. The new glazed Porte Cochère allows people to see the building before entering, reducing the risk of 'threshold fear.'

Wheelchair users are now able to enter the building from all areas opposed to the selected ramped routes previously in place. The terrace is noted by the architect as a particular area of success.

The Town Hall attracted on average 7,800 visitors per month in the first 4 months after reopening. Postcode analysis shows that the majority of visitors (60%) have come from Oldham postcodes, with others coming from Greater Manchester, Yorkshire, Lancashire and London, and some overseas visitors from France, Australia and USA. Some had heard of the restoration in local and national press, including the London Metro Newspaper, Radio 4, Rochdale Online and a television feature.

A review of visitor postcard comments, and a visitor survey has identified the following recurring themes.

The project has built a sense of anticipation.

The majority of visitors had gone to the Town Hall specifically to see the changes and experience the restoration for themselves.

> 'We have been waiting for the opening so couldn't miss it'

> 'Fulfilling a long-held ambition to visit an iconic landmark!'

The restoration is enhancing civic pride.

Visitors feel welcome in the Town Hall and see it as a symbol of civic pride and a building for the people of Rochdale.

> ‘It's exquisite, it’s absolutely exquisite. It definitely is an asset for Rochdale, and a testament to everybody who's been involved.’

> ‘A fantastic resource for the whole community!’

We return to the subject of civic pride and placemaking in Section 2.6 ‘Providing a civic heritage hub.

Visitors have a strong emotional response to the building.

Many respondents expressed a strong emotional response to their experience of the building.

> ‘Overawed... it is exquisite. ‘

> ‘Beyond my powers to describe - awe inspiring and very moving.’



Many had personal memories of the building before it closed for renovations and were overwhelmed to revisit a place of such personal importance many years later.

> ‘We wanted to see the Great Hall, where we used to attend a weekly tea dance’

> ‘I am Rochdale born + bred and have lots of happy memories of Rochdale Town Hall, so was excited to see it at its reopening’

> ‘We are now both 88 and we used to dance here when we were 20 yrs old.’

The Town Hall has been the scene for significant moments in many people’s lives, including weddings and wakes. Several visitors mentioned their own weddings, or weddings that they had attended.

For some, it is a place with past family connections

> A connection with my family history - they would have witnessed the events described on the tour - it makes them, and the history of Rochdale feel very real.

Visitors see Rochdale Town Hall as an inclusive space.

Visitors agree that the Town Hall successfully reflects the wide variety of people and cultures in Rochdale Borough.

> 'Love the way it is open to all'

> 'A magnificent building built by a proud council for Rochdale people. It is for and by the people.'

Group visitors are enjoying their experience.

Several independent groups have visited the Town Hall since reopening, including:

- Children's University Graduations
- U3A Stockport, U3A Littleborough, U3A Oldham
- Women's Institute
- Carders Court Care Home, Linden House
- Rochdale Trefail Guide
- Education outing for a group of young people with Autism
- Rochdale Mind social café group
- Great Howarth School
- Manchester and Salford Ramblers
- Hopwood Hall College
- Lancaster Friendship Centre
- Cragg Vale Historical Society

U3A members from Stockport, Littleborough and Oldham found the tours very enjoyable, informative, and almost all said they would visit the Town Hall again.

> 'A very deserving beneficiary of funding'

Members of Rochdale Trefoil Guild visited the Town Hall on a self-guided visit. Having heard about the renovations they decided that one of their meetings should be to see for themselves.

> 'The restoration is magnificent. We remember the Town Hall well from before as we often brought groups of brownies and guides for guided tours. My town. It represents both the past and an ongoing timeline to the future. It makes us a special and recognised town.'

3.2. The difference the project is making - activities to build a community

By the time of our previous interim report in April 2023, the Activity Plan had engaged over 400 people through the artists programme including school children. The Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator, and the Heritage Engagement Manager, had engaged with schools and community groups from across the borough, introducing them to the Town Hall and

brokering new partnerships to support a range of activities. Press reach was local and included ITV news and Manchester Evening News.

Since the reopening of the building, the Activity Plan has focused on large scale public events to raise the profile of the building and draw in new visitors.

3.2.1. Opening programme

The Town Hall partnered with a number of other Rochdale-based charities, organisations and community groups to deliver a programme of events and activities in March and April 2024 to celebrate the opening of the building.

Rochdale Borough Council delivered a 6-day **'Festival of Ideas'** event comprised of arts, music, live performances, talks and installations. The event took place at venues across Rochdale but with the Town Hall at the centre.

The Town Hall also hosted **'Rochdale Science Extravaganza'** in partnership with Rochdale Science Initiative – a local community interest company who work to break down barriers in STEM. The event took over The Exchange, The Great Hall and the Bright Hall with stalls, workshops and activities. Colourscape Music Festival installed an inflatable walk-through sculpture of colour and light 'Moonaromi' in The Town Hall Square, and an interactive Creative Sensory Room in The Old Chamber. The installations were accompanied by theatrical performances, hands-on activities, scientific demonstrations, live animal experiences and opportunities to meet STEM researchers, artists and professionals. The Town Hall team also delivered music and visual arts sensory workshops with SEN students from a local primary school which was followed by a performance to parents and visitors in the Creative Sensory Room.

A **'Womanhood Celebration'** event for International Womens' Day was held at the Town Hall in partnership with Caring and Sharing – a local charity working with asylum seekers, refugees and other marginalised individuals. The event brought women from across the borough together for networking, talks, interactive games and an opportunity to celebrate the power, resilience, and achievements of women.

A free family event '**Reduce Waste Rochdale'** marked National Earth Day with family-friendly activities including art installations, puppet shows and museum collection displays.

The Town Hall Square also hosted **The Rochdale Street Eats Festival** in June.

3.2.2. Family programme

In April 2024 Rochdale Town Hall launched a **family events programme** with theatre groups Goofus Theatre and M6 delivering performances which were well attended by families from across the Borough.

> 'This is the best thing I've ever seen, it's better than the cinema, I liked watching it in a cool building'- Alana aged 8
>
> 'My children were transfixed, we're so lucky to have opportunities like this in such an inspiring setting'- Greta (parent)

Circus skills workshops and a Family Rave were held in The Great Hall.

A free family fun day was held with lots of events and activities including storytelling, circus skills, arts and crafts, dancing and music. A number of local organisations were involved in the delivery of the event including education and entertainment organisation Paris Bubbles, Fireground Rochdale, Touchstones Rochdale, Culture Co-op, Co-operative Heritage Trust, Skylight Circus Arts, Rochdale Library, and social enterprise Artful.

3.2.3. Cultural programme

A programme of internally delivered activity has taken place since re-opening.

A series of **artist led workshops** exploring the urban environment around the Rochdale Town Hall were held in from April to June with local artist Len Grant.

The building has hosted a range of events delivered by external organisations.

The BBC Philharmonic Orchestra held a Musical Storyland event at The Town Hall.

A South Asian Music Festival took place in August to mark South Asian Heritage Month. Visitors enjoyed traditional music and dance and discovered traditional arts and crafts. The event was delivered in partnership with a number of other local organisations.

September also saw the first solo organ concert since the reopening of the Town Hall.

Monthly tea dances were launched in September. Delivered by an external company Prima Dance, and held in The Great Hall, this chargeable event lasts 2 hours and includes tea, coffee and biscuits.

3.3. Success factors and lessons learnt

- Partnership activity has helped to provide a varied programme, with activities for adults and families.
- New spaces are available for community group use, either for free, or at a discounted fee. It will be important to continue to evaluate their experience, and also to ensure that community groups are not experiencing barriers to use of the Town Hall.
- Now that the building has been open for 6 months, and a full staff team is being recruited, the Heritage Fund staff members should have the time and capacity to focus on community and heritage engagement, with less time on the daily building operations.

Facilitating and engaging insight



4. Facilitated and engaging insight

4.1. What the project set out to do

The project set out to fully interpret the building for the first time, with interpretation and activities celebrating, reigniting and enhancing civic pride.

Local people would see themselves in stories and exhibits that reflect their connection with the building and the Borough. People would learn about the heritage of the Town Hall, and this would lead to an increased sense of ownership for the building and its stories.

Stories about the people involved in the history of the Town Hall would encourage visitors to feel that they are part of that history. Stories about Rochdale's place in the world would encourage people to celebrate its diversity today.

Supporting Heritage Fund Outcomes:

Heritage will be better identified and recorded

Heritage will be better interpreted and explained

People will have learnt about heritage

Stories that celebrate historic skills and innovation would encourage people to see Rochdale's potential today and in the future. Visitors would feel inspired by a sense of what people can do and achieve together.

4.2. New interpretation to facilitate and engage insight

The interpretation scheme includes a new permanent exhibition created in the space on the ground that was previously used for council meetings. The exhibition features a film celebrating people of Rochdale, which includes oral histories collected during the construction period; display cases showcasing elements of the building design headphones and digital displays giving further information; and a map of Rochdale which invites visitors to contribute their thoughts about the local area. Interactive elements include glass rubbing and a 'build your own Rochdale Town Hall.'

> 'The beautiful architecture, the rich history brought to life by being able to learn key facts - visually and by audio too'

> 'I have an interest in architecture and have been waiting for the works to be finished. Today was an opportunity to come.'

Rooms are dressed with original furniture, clothing and artefacts, with non-intrusive interpretation. Some visitors wanted more information boards, whereas others felt they distracted from the history of the rooms.

> 'Beautiful detail everywhere I looked. Particularly enjoyed the mayoral costumes, the friendly informative volunteers and the exhibits in the first room!'

Co-produced exhibitions and displays, which were developed through the artist-led programme prior to opening are now presented across the site. These were co-produced with schools and community groups representing Rochdale's diversity. Semi-permanent co-curated features include artworks in the ceiling of the Bright Hall, new stained glass roundels

in the Mayor's Reception Room, and a woollen rug in the Mayor's Parlour. Temporary exhibits included textile art, drawing on the rich history of the cotton industry in Rochdale and sculptural artworks inspired by the Big Dig archaeological finds. There were very few comments about the installations, but those given were positive.

'I loved the art installations; information panels and even bought a guide book'

A guide book (price £4.99) and a free site guides, including one designed by local schoolchildren, are available for visitors. As of July 2024, over 10,000 site guides had been distributed to visitors and potential visitors. A suite of videos has been created for digital tours.

4.3. Facilitating and engaging insights through volunteers

Volunteers have been key to unlocking the heritage of the site for visitors. Volunteers had already been closely involved in developing content to support interpretation, such as organising over 1,000 findings from the community archaeology project, uploaded to a system which can be searched and used as a resource for staff and the general public.

Volunteers are now on site daily to welcome visitors and provide more information. Visitors can speak to volunteers as they walk around the building, or pay £8 to come on a guided tour. Volunteers have delivered daily guided tours attracting approximately 450 attendees per month.

Visitors frequently commented on their interactions with volunteers, who were described repeatedly as 'informative and knowledgeable'. Visitors were impressed by the quality of information shared, and how guides were able to bring the building to life. They appreciated the welcome and personal approach that the guides took and mentioned many by name.

'My kind of guide… informative, amusing and sincere. 10/10!'

'I think the building and all the work that has gone into it was fantastic. The tour and guides were great, full of knowledge and made the experience enjoyable.'

'A veritable encyclopaedia of info provided by 'simply the best' volunteers guides. Sheer delight.'

The use of mirrors and binoculars enhanced the experience, particularly for looking up at the Great Hall ceiling.

4.4. What visitors are learning

Over half of respondents talked about Rochdale Town Hall being an important part of their local history, and a place of civic pride.

'A striking symbol and memorial to Rochdale's past'

We asked visitors what the most interesting thing was they had learnt during their visit. The majority said that they had learnt about the history of the building, including the architecture, and the local, national and international historical context. They learned about specific heritage assets such as the stained glass, and about the renovation project to restore and conserve them.

They also learned about the history of the Borough of Rochdale, and about famous links and connections to the building and the town. Several visitors commented on the wealth of Rochdale as a town and borough.

> 'I learned a lot about the history of the building and how rich and prosperous Rochdale must have been in Victorian Times'

> 'How so much of the history is intertwined with industry and working people and international trade '

Visitors were interested in how much it cost to build the original building – and how much it cost to restore it. They were also interested in people stories – the famous people who had visited the building, past mayors, and the Gracie Fields connection.

One visitor said that they would have liked to see more interpretation about the building's connections to the Atlantic slave trade more and also to colonialism.

4.5. Success factors and lessons learnt

- The appointment of museum design consultancy Redman Design to lead on interpretation took place around the same time as the reappointment of architects Donald Insall. They worked together early on to agree some principles around how the spaces were going to be used. Donald Insall were then able to focus on the building design and architectural restoration works and Redman Design could get on with developing the interpretation. Both contractors were able to make progress without holding each other up.
- Aside from defining interpretation themes, all of the content and stories around the building have been developed by communities and volunteers. As well as bringing a sense of authenticity to the interpretation, this model has provided a tremendous opportunity for skills development of volunteers.
- Skilled and knowledgeable volunteers have been critical in sharing heritage learning, and investment into their skills and wellbeing should continue. The team could consider increasing the range of guided tours to encourage repeat visits and deepened engagement.

Building capacity and skills with volunteers



5. Building capacity and skills with volunteers to help animate and engage

5.1. What the project set out to do

The project aimed to provide a rich environment for volunteering opportunities, offering training to build skills, confidence and employability. Volunteers would feel valued and stimulated by their contributions and activities, and feel an increased sense of ownership for the Town Hall. Volunteers would develop skills that will contribute towards the preservation of the Town Hall, and the welcome and activities that it offers.

Supporting Heritage Fund Outcomes:

People will have volunteered time

People will have developed skills

5.2. What has happened

While the building was closed, volunteers played a crucial role in the restoration of the building, with dedicated work on the Great Hall, and the Small Exchange, under the supervision of Lancashire Conservation Studio. Volunteers continue to work on conservation tasks now that the building has reopened. Timber restoration specialists from Lancashire Conservation Studio delivered bespoke training to conservation volunteers.

A team of welcome volunteers were trained and recruited to support the visitor experience on reopening. All volunteers received training on safeguarding, conflict resolution, first aid and fire evacuation.

Volunteer tour guides took part in tailored sessions to help develop site tours and animate rooms through interactive storytelling. Goofus Theatre worked with both volunteers and freelancers to develop a family focused storytelling offer. Volunteers now deliver daily guided tours attracting approximately 450 attendees per month.

Volunteers have regular contact with the Community Volunteer Officer through monthly check ins, and with each other through social events, celebrations, and external team visits to local museums and historical sites. The Town Hall also celebrated volunteers during National Volunteer Week, with a social media takeover showing volunteer portraits and where volunteers shared stories.

Research volunteers have contributed to stories and content in The Welcome Gallery and other visitor rooms, as well as digital website content.

5.3. The difference this is making

22 volunteers completed a survey about their experience in summer 2024. They report taking part in a wide range of activities, including delivering guided tours, acting as room attendances, supporting events and activities, and carrying out conservation works. All volunteers rate their experience at Rochdale Town Hall as very good or excellent.

> ‘I am one of the many volunteers who have put in hundreds, if not thousands of hours on this project alongside the curators. I have done several different projects including research, documentation, the archaeological dig and then the restoration work. I was able to go up the scaffolding to help restore the wooden angels.’

Volunteers developed skills in research, communication, conservation and public speaking. They have learned how to write and deliver tours and have developed their knowledge and interest of the Rochdale Borough. Volunteers say that their social skills and confidence have greatly improved as a result of their work at the Town Hall. Some also report an improvement in memory recall.

> ‘Wonderfully rewarding and quality volunteering experience. An opportunity to give back which is personally rewarding.’

The majority of volunteers heard about the opportunities at the Town Hall through social media, with some previously working with the Council and others seeing advertisements in local press. Volunteers report a sense of achievement in their work, and pride in their town. They appreciate the opportunity to work with people from backgrounds different to their own and have made new friends.

When asked what has made their volunteering experience successful, many cite their relationship with the Volunteer and Community Manager and Heritage Engagement Manager.

> ‘They bring a great energy, ideas and encouragement to us volunteers. We feel listened to and appreciated.’

> ‘The staff immediately above the volunteers are very supportive and open to feedback.’

Volunteers would appreciate more time between tours especially on days when public and private tours are scheduled. One volunteer noted concern around the conflict between events being held and conservation work but feels this is improving as relationships develop.

5.4. Success factors and lessons learnt

- Close working relationships between volunteers and staff has resulted in high volunteer satisfaction and retention.
- Structured volunteering programmes delivered by experts have been a successful model of working, helping volunteers to directly contribute to the project, and develop conservation skills which will continue to be applied to ongoing conservation works.



Sharing the conservation needs and skills

6. Sharing the conservation needs and skills

6.1. What the project set out to do

The project provides an opportunity to harness the exceptional quality of craftsmanship and decoration in the Town Hall; offer opportunities for pupils to learn about design, engineering and construction; for people to be trained in specialist conservation skills; and for visitors to appreciate the skilled care and craftsmanship needed to conserve, clean and restore its exuberant decoration.

Supporting Heritage Fund Outcomes:

People will have volunteered time

People will have developed skills

People, including young people and schoolchildren, would understand and consider career paths and opportunities in heritage and conservation. People would develop skills in heritage and conservation, and might use them to contribute to the Town Hall's future preservation, or Rochdale's heritage more widely.

6.2. The difference the project has made to skills development

Skills development has been embedded into all aspects of the project, both through the Activity Plan, through the capital programme and through the creation of the new Heritage Skills Studio. The project has been particularly successful in using the capital programme as a catalyst for skills development.

In the last interim report, we reported on how volunteers, community groups and schoolchildren had been developing skills through conservation programmes, the artists co-production programme, and through specific projects for schools. We can now point to further examples of skills development.

6.2.1. Apprenticeship and traineeships

A three year stained glass traineeship was directly supported through the Heritage Fund Grant, via the Activity Plan, with support from Lancashire Conservation Studio. The trainee has now gone on to a full time job with H.H. Smith.

The Project Management Trainee employed by RDA has now gone on to work on The Slopes project.

The Design Team have delivered a range of apprenticeships and traineeships. The Quantity Surveyor and Architects both took on an apprentices, and the Quantity Surveyor also took on two trainees who have worked on the project over the last four years. The architectural apprentice is now a qualified architect formally employed by the firm. One of the trainees taken on by the QS has since obtained a degree, and is heavily involved in the ongoing Phase 3 works and upcoming Slopes project. He is due to sit his RICS APC later this year.

Five apprenticeships delivered by the contractor and seven by sub-contractors

6.2.2. Organisational development

The project team have used the project as a catalyst for developing organisational skills. Examples include:

Construction Skills: The building contractor, H.H. Smith, was a relatively small local firm in comparison to the size and scale of the project. However, the team saw the project as an opportunity to help them develop their skills and capacity to deliver wider projects. The strategy has been successful, and the client, architect, and QS all say on reflection that H.H. Smith was the right fit.

The Project Manager at H.H. Smith notes that at different times, the entire company's staff were working on the Town Hall and the experience has enabled them to enter a different league in heritage build work. He says that H.H. Smith now has more confidence and more skills particularly those around programming, sequencing and phasing as a result of working on this project. The RDA Project Director notes that the entire team learned from each other.

Arts and cultural skills: Artists involved in the co-curation project said that they had increased skills and that the project had allowed them to grow their practices and pitch for new work.

Design Team members also said that working on the project had enhanced the reputation of their practices.

6.2.3. Keeping conservations skills local

The Heritage Skills Studio will provide new model of working, by bringing conservation skills in house. As well as providing a necessary service to maintain the historic fabric of the building, it is hoped that the studio will provide a skills centre for Rochdale, encouraging interest in related professions. There is also potential for the studio to provide their services to other projects.

6.2.4. Developing the skills of young people and schoolchildren

Funding from the Heritage Fund project has supported two cohorts of Design, Engineering and Construction (DEC) courses for a local secondary school. Investment provided training for the lead teacher, and students have been introduced to members of the client and consultant team. A video about the design, engineering and construction skills embedded in the project has also been produced and shared with schools.

6.2.5. Peer learning

The project team have hosted a number of other projects, who are learning from their experience, most notably the Palace of Westminster.

6.2.6. Increased skills for RDA and RTH

The project team and wider team, and team of volunteers, are gaining skills in project management, operations, and visitor experience. This increase in skills development, and how it is benefiting the organisation, will be explored in more detail in the final report.

6.3. Success factors and lessons learnt

- Embedding skills development into the scope of works of the Design Team and contractors has been an important way of ensuring that they fulfil the social value aspect of their work
- The project team have developed considerable skills from working on a highly complex project. However, there is currently no skills pipeline planned to retain those skills once projects complete. RBC could consider how they might create opportunities to retain skills, for example, by developing consultancy services for other national projects.



Providing a civic heritage hub

7. Providing a civic heritage hub

7.1. What the project set out to do

The Town Hall would be a living, working building, and an exciting new destination and focal point for the Borough that complements the town's other cultural offers, and act as a welcome and orientation point and event venue for the town's newly developed cultural heritage quarter.

Supporting Heritage Fund Outcomes:

The local area will be a better place to work, live or visit

People will have changed their attitudes or behaviour

Local people would feel civic pride and pride in the tangible and intangible values of the Town Hall as the communal and civic 'heart' of Rochdale, enhancing their sense of identity as Rochdalians. Tourists would experience a coherent and compelling offer for a day in Rochdale.

7.2. The difference this is making

The contribution the restoration has made to civic pride

There is a very clear sense of pride from local residents throughout the visitor survey responses, and a sense of gratitude that the building has been renovated by, and for, the community.

> 'This is the pride of our town and worth preserving for future residents of Rochdale. The pride of all those people years ago and the work they did to build this Hall is a testament to us all and should be enjoyed for many years to come.'

> 'A credit to the town. Very proud Rochdalian.'

Those who have past connections to the Town Hall either as someone who worked in the building in the past and live or have lived in or around Rochdale Borough mentioned feeling proud the most. They see it as an important lynchpin in the town's history, and the 'heart' of the town, which will continue into future generations.

> 'I've lived in Rochdale all my life. I was interested to see how the Town Hall has been restored. This is a historic occasion – I want my children to remember today.'

> 'It's the centre of our town. Many changes in Rochdale but the Town Hall is a constant.'

> 'It's Home. My father said after the war he came back and saw the town hall and wept.'

They also see the success of the renovation as a signal of what people from Rochdale can achieve. When we asked what Rochdale Town Hall means to people, answers included

> 'What Rochdale is capable of.'

> 'That we can deliver projects.'

> 'It stands out as something that is great about Rochdale to make us proud. The restoration has done a remarkable job of such an iconic building.'

Those who have travelled from further afield talk about how they think people from the local area should feel proud of this building, because of its history, the way it shares the history of the area and its people, and because it is a building that is open to everyone.

The reopening of this historic building for some is a catalyst for positive change and growth for the town and wider Borough of Rochdale, and a signal of the investment that the council is prepared to make in the local area.

> 'The town hall and its environs are much improved. The centre of R/D is becoming quite beautiful.'
>
> 'A town on the way back up!'
>
> 'A reason to visit the city. A landmark to refer to, a reason to call Rochdale beautiful, or worth visiting.'

Former residents are returning to see the Town Hall

A small but not insignificant number of visitors who were born in Rochdale but now live elsewhere, are returning to the town to see the Town Hall. Also, people who used to work in the Town Hall prior to its closure, ex Mayoresses, and councillors from other areas of Greater Manchester are among the visitors.

> '(we came to the Town Hall to…) discover the town where relatives from both sides of the family are from. Delighted to find Rochdale Town Hall so open and welcoming'
>
> 'I was born and raised in Rochdale, now living on the South Coast. I was told of the renovations so wanted to see them'

A new offer for day trippers and tourists

10% of visitors surveyed had travelled from outside of Rochdale. Just under half of these visitors were day trippers or on holiday in the area with no obvious previous connection to Rochdale. Some were visiting for shopping, football, or to attend events at other organisations in the town, but many were there specifically to see the reopened Town Hall. Visitors had travelled from Birmingham, Stockport and Oxford for this purpose. One visitor had read about the reopening of the building in the London Metro newspaper and had travelled to see it for themselves. Almost all say within their feedback that they intend to return.

> 'AMAZING! One of the more impressive 19C buildings ever seen in the UK. Such detail and incredible conservation work done'
>
> 'I live in Hebden Bridge so it was not known to me, but I will return and come and see events here now I have visited'
>
> 'I'm originally from Bury and had no idea this was here - I'll put some pics on Instagram and spread the word.'

A family from Australia visited the Town Hall for the first time in over 50 years in order to see the renovations.

> 'Very impressed. Rochdale should be proud of this'

Visitors from Bournemouth were '… absolutely gobsmacked…' and praised the tour guides, referring to the Town Hall as 'the architectural jewel of the North'

Around 25% of visitors were staying with friends and family in the local area and had been taken to the town hall by local residents who wanted to show off the renovations.

> ‘Relatives are very excited about the restoration and brought us to visit’
>
> ‘A place to revisit! A place to bring friends to, and to find out what else Rochdale has to offer’

Enhanced profile through press and publicity

The Town Hall has received significant press interest, both locally and nationally, including features in The Guardian, Time Out, BBC, ITV, and Manchester Evening News.

7.3. Success factors and lessons learnt

- Making the Town Hall publicly accessible has recentred the Town Hall as an important part of people’s lives.
- The project team have enabled opportunities for community involvement through the project, and throughout the construction process, through artist led co-production programme, through skills and volunteering opportunities, and through outreach. This has culminated in real community ownership and buy in for the project.



Balancing community and commercial uses

8. Balancing community and commercial uses

8.1. What the project set out to do

The project aimed to balance the needs of all users - whether commercial, community, event attendee or tourist, and that each would get a memorable heritage experience.

Supporting Heritage Fund Outcomes:

Heritage will be better managed

The organisation will be more resilient.

Commercial and community programming would be balanced so that there is an ongoing sustainable Business Plan which supports the Town Hall as a community asset.

8.2. What has happened

The Town Hall was designed as a community asset; however, income generation is critical for the ongoing legacy of the project. While money has been ring-fenced for repairs and conservation, further income will need to be raised to support future operations.

The Town Hall is generating income through the in-house café, through venue hire, and through the guided tour. Potential income streams could also come from the conservation studio.

A revised Business Plan 2024-2029 was developed in 2024, and approved by Cabinet and the Heritage Fund. The next interim report will review the success (or otherwise) of the Business Plan after the first full year of operation.

The design of the building has responded to the business needs of the Town Hall. There are now two entrances so that more than one event can take place at any one time, making the building more functional and more flexible. The installation of a lift and staircase within the clocktower have allowed for the east end of the building to be accessed separately from the main entrance, as well as facilitating dual use of the Town Hall. This has enabled the Town Hall to be accessible after hours and generate a degree of self-sustaining income. It also has an improved fire strategy so that it has capacity now for more people.

8.3. Success factors and lessons learnt

- The staffing structure was reviewed after the building reopened. There was a logic in waiting to see how the building bedded in and what was required – however, there was a lack of capacity within the team to deal with the demands of the new building, and staff report ‘firefighting.’ The employment of a younger team has meant a greater demand on existing staff in terms of change management. While the team understood that the initial period would require ‘all hands to deck’, staff whose roles are dedicated to community engagement and heritage were performing duty manager tasks. A recent recruitment drive has bolstered the team. However, we recommend a watching brief to ensure that staff capacity is maintained.

- The Town Hall didn't have all the requisite processes in place to deliver the new operations ready for opening – for example, processes to support room hire, or to sign off job descriptions for new roles. The team felt that they were trying to do too much too soon. Ideally, they would have taken time to assess the building needs and demands and made sure the right processes and staff were in place prior to opening.
- The café operation is being run in house. This means that RBC has a greater control over the way that the café is operated – however, this approach carries a greater financial risk. The success of this approach will be reviewed after the first year of operation.
- Security staff have been employed directly which has resulted in a cost saving compared to buying in externally
- End users did not always input into the designs at the appropriate time. For example, loading of the pavers outside the building had to be readdressed after the completion of the capital programme, as it was identified that the area would need to host festivals. Earlier input, and time put aside to scrutinise the brief and resultant designs, would have mitigated the risk of abortive work.



Appendices

9. Appendix A: Evaluation methods and consultees

9.1. Interviews

The following people have been consulted in the development of this report

9.1.1. Project Team

Rochdale Borough Council

Victoria Hilton, Heritage Engagement Manager

Cat Jessop, Community & Volunteer Officer

Lee Brennan, Events and Creative Programmes Producer

Gary Pilkington, Head of Service, Technical and Surveyors, Property

Rochdale Development Agency

Emma Birkett, Heritage Director

Caroline Storr, Strategy and Operations Manager

9.1.2. External Stakeholders

Francesca Chinnery, External Consultant, Schools Programme

Lisa Keys, Activity Plan Consultant

Simon Mann, Heritage Fund

Bryn Redman, Redman Design

Simon Malam, Donald Insall

Sarah-Elizabeth Geldard, Donald Insall

Andy Toohey, Price & Myers

Tomasz Lukaszewicz, Price & Myers

Chris Purkiss, HHSmith

Kate Shuttleworth, FWP

9.2. Written feedback and survey work

500 visitor postcards analysed and coded from a total of over 1,000, with 4 key questions and postcode data. All postcards have been reviewed.

Approximately 50 longer digital visitor surveys were completed over spring/summer 2024

Over 20 digital volunteer surveys were completed in summer 2024.

10. Appendix B: Cost management: review and lessons learnt

Cost management of the project was complex, with interconnected packages of work, multiple funders and value engineering exercises. Significant design / cost exercises had to be undertaken throughout the duration of the project to ensure prioritised and best value expenditure. Structural issues in the Great Hall in particular increased costs, as well other market conditions affecting all construction projects such as inflation.

> 'We have had to factor in multiple funders, RBC /RDA conditions and we have kept the team fully updated with timely cost reports, valuations, and financial statements. FWP have highlighted areas of work that needed further review and assisted with numerous VE processes and procurement strategies in order to remain within overall budgets set.' (Kate Shuttleworth, QS, FWB)

However, the team agree that costs have been well managed. The architect notes that not only were the costs per square metre lower than say the Palace of Westminster project but that they were 'massively lower.'

Success factors have included:

Keeping focused on the project vision: The architect remarked that setting the design philosophy with the entire team right at its outset was critical to costs management. The needs of the building and the needs of the people for whom it was being revitalised were paramount and there was clarity early on about aspects of the work which would require the country's top specialists such as the stained glass and, in these ways, there were clear decisions about where to spend the money and everywhere else there was extensive and rigorous value engineering.

In spite of the inevitable tension between considerable scope of works and budget available, the team as a whole was committed to ensuring proper conservation in highly significant areas including the Great Hall Ceiling which needed the country's top experts, as did the mayor's suite and stained glass restoration which had the country's top restorer specified in the contract.

Where specified, money was not to be an object over excellence: the QS notes bespoke elements significant for the project: FWP successfully incorporated the naming procedure into the main contract for specialist elements of work carried out to the stained-glass windows by York Glaziers Trust and specialist cleaning to decorations work to areas of heritage significance, carried out by Lancashire Conservation Studios. These contractors were integrated with the main contractor during the tender process and programme / costs were successfully managed throughout the post contract stages.

Robust reporting: Regarded by FWB as innovative or noteworthy was their multi-facetted monthly financial statements which had to evolve with the project as works proceeded, ensuring that QS reporting could separate out the Heritage Fund part of the main contract where other works were instructed through the main contract that were separately funded could be isolated (such as the Slopes / Salix works / client items / Great Hall ceiling and phase 3 works). Those all had to be captured on the same financial statement but on separate tabs

to assist with the separate funding arrangements whilst remaining back-to-back with the main contract.

Careful phasing of the project: Donald Insall notes that the phasing of the works was integral to the successful Heritage Lottery Fund Phase. Many risk areas had already been encountered during Phase 1, meaning that Phase 2 was derisked more than it might have been otherwise. for example, the culverts underneath the ground under the building had already been discovered.

In Phase 2 then, the prelims and contractor's contingency could be driven down owing to the detailed knowledge that the team already had about the building fabric and the degree of certainty that this gave to the works on site. Having a core consistent team meant that there was Value Engineering built in across multiple rounds and multiple aspects of the project including the doors, the windows, the lift.

The Heritage Fund Phase 2 project also benefited from funding for Phase 1 and Phase 3, such as a grant from Salix. This grant provided a heat pump in Phase 1, so that the building can now be partly heated using renewable energy, and will provide proper insulation of the roof and some use of double glazing in Phase 3.

Robust procurement practices: The architect was involved directly in the contractor procurement process in selling the project to appropriate contractors in a climate of it being unattractive in the market place. C19 impacts were significant in the tendering market prior to the works starting and the team had to ensure that the main contractor selection process rigorously covered for any ongoing C19 issues that may have impacted the project.

Regular reviews and meetings: Dedicated monthly client and design team meetings were held to ensure that funded communications and submissions were properly coordinated and issued in timely fashion precontract. Post contract, those meetings have continued to ensure the team continue to work together in response to contractor requests for information. Off the back of those meetings, dedicated progress reports were issued monthly with contributions from all design / cost consultants.

Dedicated monthly client finance meetings were held with the RBC/RDA client finance team to ensure that spend against total NLHF project funding and other funding was properly monitored and reported on. Close communication within and across teams means that any areas of concern were identified and managed to ensure budgets were not exceeded.

Skills based volunteering: building in a structured, skills based volunteer programme to support conservation cleaning reduced costs while boosting the match funding contribution. Training and supervision was provided by specialist sub-contractors Lancashire Conservation Studios. This was also an extremely successful engagement programme, which was positively received by everyone who participated.