

Derby Arts and Theatre Association (DATA)

Registered Charity Number 517836

www.derbyartsandtheatre.org.uk

2 October 2017

Councillor Martin Rawson
Cabinet Member for Regeneration and the Economy
Derby City Council
The Council House
Derby

Dear Councillor Rawson

PROPOSALS FOR A NEW MUSIC AND PERFORMANCE VENUE IN DERBY

I am writing on behalf of the Derby Arts and Theatre Association (DATA) to express our serious concerns over the above proposals to be considered by the Derby City Council Cabinet on 4 October 2017.

DATA represents over 40 amateur theatre and music organisations based in Derby and the local area. The total number of members and supporters of these organisations runs into thousands. There is also a great deal of experience and expertise, both on and off-stage, within these groups with regard to the performing arts scene in Derby. In particular, we understand what is needed to attract audiences to come and see performances. Fundamentally, it boils down to the quality of the production and the quality of the venue.

Our objections to the Council's proposals are two-fold:

1. Lack of Consultation Over the Proposal

DATA's sister organisation – Derby New Theatre Association (DNTA) – has been trying for nearly two years to get the Council to undertake meaningful consultation with the amateur theatre community over major arts developments in the city, including the future of the Assembly Rooms site. Indeed, one of our committee members, Tom Banks, asked you a question on this at the July Council meeting and was given an assurance by you that we would be consulted over the design of the new facility. Tom has emailed you twice to ask when this consultation will take place and has not received a reply. And the first I, as Chair, heard about the proposed decision was when I was contacted by a BBC Radio Derby reporter on the day of the announcement! However, I am gratified that, albeit late in the day, you have now given me your personal assurance, and that of your senior officers, that DATA will be consulted over the design of whatever facility is eventually provided on the Assembly Rooms site.

After several requests, I was provided by a Council officer with a copy of the Executive Summary of the report by consultants Cushman and Wakefield dated June 2016. That report states that there was 'stakeholder engagement' in coming up with the options. There was no contact whatsoever with the amateur performing arts community by these consultants. Had DATA/DNTA been consulted at the early stages, we could have made a positive contribution to their research. Unfortunately we were ignored completely. The Cabinet report indicates that the consultants were paid £380,000 for their work, and we

have never seen the full report!

2. The Preferred Option

Quite simply, we think you have picked the wrong option and, in the following paragraphs, we say why we take that view.

On 9 November 2017, it will be the 40th anniversary of the opening of the Assembly Rooms. It was heralded as a state-of-the-art, multifunctional, entertainment complex providing for concerts (from symphony to pop), theatre performances and other events. It turned out to be a compromise which failed to meet any of those purposes properly. The deletion of a fly tower from the original design made theatrical productions very difficult; the acoustics were poor for orchestral and choral concerts; audience sight lines were awkward; and there were dead sound spots. It lacked atmosphere and warmth. It quite soon acquired derisive epithets such as “that big, expensive snooker hall (or wrestling ring)”.

The adoption of Option 1 – the Music and Performance Venue – will amount to history repeating itself. The declared aim is to create a “3,000 capacity (mix of seating and standing) auditorium capable of holding a range of events including music concerts, sports events, comedy events, theatrical performances (that do not require a fly tower, orchestra pit and such bespoke theatre facilities), conferences and exhibitions.” To provide for all of these uses in one large performance space will inevitably lead to compromise. There is no indication of the facilities to be provided in the separate smaller events space, but one cannot help but recall the Darwin Suite which also lacked adequate facilities and had a cold atmosphere.

The absence of a fly tower and orchestra pit will seriously limit the range of theatrical performances capable of being staged at the venue and will detrimentally affect the audience experience. Why should a promoter organising a national tour of a West End show bother with Derby, where they will have to make all sorts of adjustments, when they have bespoke theatres with the right facilities in Nottingham, Leicester and Stoke? Yes, we have the Derby Theatre, which is doing a brilliant job, but it's audience capacity is only about 530 and it's in the middle of a shopping centre. The provision of a Lyric-style theatre, with an audience capacity of 1,500, will attract the top West End shows going on tour, as it will be commercially more attractive than the Theatre Royal, Nottingham which holds 1,186, and Leicester's Curve Theatre which has a seating capacity of 902.

A similar argument applies to orchestral and choral concerts. If the new venue is geared towards rock concerts and comedy shows, how will it be possible to provide the right acoustics, layout and audience experience for top orchestras and choirs? One of Derby's principal amateur choirs, with a national reputation, is now unable to perform large concerts in Derby because of the lack of an acceptable concert venue. A good concert hall will not only attract the best amateur and professional orchestras and choirs, but provide a fitting home for our own Sinfonia Viva.

The focus on big-name rock concerts and comedy shows seems illogical as the Council already has the Derby Arena for this purpose. The proposed venue will be unlikely to compete with the facilities available in Nottingham.

We feel that the closure of the Assembly Rooms, and to some extent the dark period of the former Derby Playhouse, have had the effect of causing the theatre and concert-going

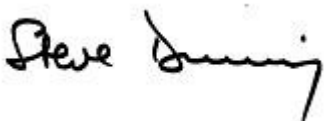
public in this area to look to other cities for their live entertainment. They are out of the habit of coming into Derby and this can only be reversed by the building of high standard theatre and concert hall that will attract them. In our opinion, your proposed Music and Performance Venue will not achieve that aim.

A carefully and attractively designed Hybrid Venue, incorporating a 1,500 seat Lyric-style theatre and dedicated concert hall, would put Derby on the cultural map and bring in audiences from a wide area. This will also benefit other entertainment providers – e.g. Quad, Deda, Derby Theatre and amateur theatre and music groups – as the richness of the cultural offer improves. The economic regeneration benefits of this additional footfall for hotels, shops, restaurants would be potentially enormous. This project could be the catalyst for the regeneration and revitalisation of the whole of the Cathedral Quarter of the city.

Of course, we understand that the challenges in raising the capital funds necessary are daunting, particularly in the Council's current financial circumstances. But that should not prevent the Council and its partners from aiming high. The Council must work with partners, funding bodies, entrepreneurs etc to try to raise the money needed. This is once in a generation opportunity to get it right. As a former Leader of the Council once said - "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!"

We appeal to you Councillor Rawson, and indeed the whole Council, to abandon the currently preferred option and to undertake further work on making a Hybrid Venue viable. We also call on the whole city to get behind the project and create a city centre that this and future generations of Derbeans can be proud of.

Yours sincerely



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cc All Derby City Councillors
Paul Robinson, Chief Executive