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Hands up who wants to run The Colston Hall? A new dawn beckons for music and performance in Bristol (pictured: rehearsals for the Hall's Bristol South 3 Music Festival in June)



Colston Hall goes independent

Eugene Byrne reports on a new management structure – and future – for Bristol's historical multi-purpose venue

Bristol City Council plans to give up running the Colston Hall and pass its management over to an independent trust early next year.

The same trust is also expected to promote and develop music in Bristol in the coming years.

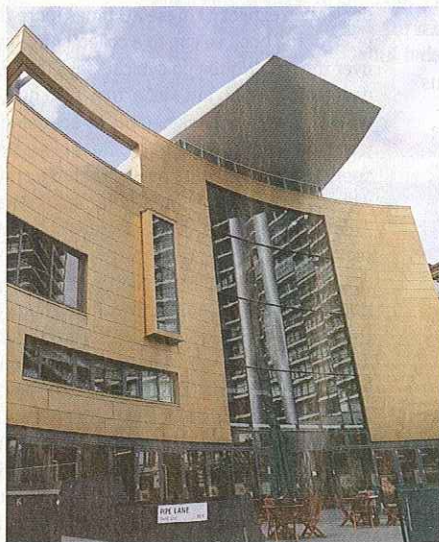
The council will soon be advertising for ten people to join the 12-member board of Bristol Music Trust (BMT). The remaining two positions are likely to be occupied by council officers or councillors.

It is hoped that BMT will be established and running the Colston Hall by the spring or early summer of 2011. Existing staff and management would be moved to the new employer with no loss of pay or conditions. The council would still own the building, but the new board would be responsible for some or all of its upkeep.

The thinking behind the move is that a management team independent of the council could broaden the appeal of the venue, although it already hosts a wide range of entertainment. In the longer run, the hope is that it will prove more profitable. As the council document recommending the move says, "Bristol, even with the advantages of a uniquely fertile musical landscape, has to operate with the least funding for music of any major UK city."

BMT, as a charitable trust, may well also be able to attract funding from a wider range of bodies than a council-owned venue, although this is by no means certain given current financial uncertainties.

The existing funding that the council puts into the Colston Hall – £900,000 a year – will continue to be paid to BMT for its first three years. Under the provisional plan, the trust would be expected to make a return of



£100,000 to the council at the end of the second year, and £200,000 at the end of the third.

The council wants to recruit trustees for BMT from among musical and cultural communities of Bristol and surrounding areas. Trustees will not be paid anything except expenses.

As the council sees it, one of the attractions for people interested in joining will be in the opportunities BMT will have to shape the wider musical future of Bristol.

Paul Barnett, Bristol City Council's Cultural Change Manager told Venue: "The decision by the council, having looked at all the options, was to set up Bristol Music Trust with a very wide remit to support music development across the city, working with existing organisations to complement what's there rather than to compete with it. That's very different from just creating an organisation specifically to run Colston Hall."

While it's expected that BMT would do little other than run the Hall for its first year or two, it would be expected to broaden its scope quite dramatically after that.

"We're looking for trustees who've got a real interest in the widest strategic aspects of music across the city," says Barnett. "It's about promoting the city through the music industry, and, for example, supporting music education so it's more co-ordinated and joined up so that it thrives and reaches all young people in the city. The mission statement is to put music at the heart of Bristol life."

BMT would have full management responsibility for the running of the Colston Hall, which, famously, Massive Attack refused to perform at because it is named in memory of a slave trader. Privately, some council officers and even councillors consider the name an embarrassment, and would love to change it, though such a move would prove controversial.

BMT raises the intriguing possibility that, subject to the small print of the final service level agreement, BMT could change the venue's name. If they wanted to. "I'd be surprised if there were any restrictions on what they are or aren't allowed to do," says Barnett.

If BMT succeeds in running the Hall effectively, it is possible that the council may use or adopt the model to other cultural services, museums for example.

Barnett says: "The council needs to see how this goes first. I've been looking around the country at what other cities have done, and there have been a lot of successes in England and Scotland with cultural trusts of different types, but there have also been failures.

"What we're trying to do here is create something that's right for Bristol... I suspect that the council will look at it again in a year's time, and if they say 'this is a model we like' they'll maybe look at using it for other services."

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