

7<sup>th</sup> July 2022

Sir     The arrogance of a Council that doesn't want to listen to its public

We were present at last week's Environment and Communities Scrutiny meeting to ask questions in relation to Cambridge Market. We had registered to speak 6 days before the meeting. Although the Chair announced that priority would be given to questioners present in the chamber, the first question taken was from someone who was not; then the Chair chose to take a Councillor's questions along with a public question (as reported in "Ferris wheel contract signed under delegated powers"). The Chair did not extend the public's time to enable all members of the public present in the chamber to ask their questions. We were unable to provide our questions before the meeting because they were dependent on the first Market Square Liaison Group meeting held just the day before the Scrutiny meeting (how convenient!), and a Council Press Release issued on 28 June (the deadline day for submitting questions – again, how convenient!).

One of the issues we were going to raise was the lack of an agenda item relating to the Market Square: in particular the failure to update Councillors and the public in relation to the recently-released report of last summer's Consultations (the Council had clearly been hoping to sweep this report under the carpet). Having been denied our questions, we were unable to raise this issue in the Scrutiny meeting.

To add insult to injury, we then had to endure Exec Cllr Alex Collis claiming (in relation to another item) that "we are not a council that pays lip service to consultation... when we say that we will consult and we will honour the results of that consultation then we mean it".

It is impossible to square this statement with the Market Square consultation report's failure to provide ANY detailed analysis of the free text responses (over 800 and 400 respectively) to the open questions 13 and 18; how can Cllr Collis justify her claim if the Council don't analyse key responses to such a large and significant consultation? And consequently do not give transparent and true information regarding what the public have actually said in a consultation? There is no honour here.

Even under new delegated officer direction, the Market Square project has still not achieved RIBA Stage 1 ("Agree a brief and establish that it can be accommodated on the site"). Evolving ideas for this project need to be developed in the open, not behind closed doors. There needs to be a revised brief, brought back for public consultation and formal Committee approval.

But we fear that the Council will continue to develop the Market Square project, in private with only "key stakeholders". We fear that any decisions made by this private and delegated process will only be brought back for public consultation at the planning application stage. At this point in the decision-making process any scheme will be considered solely in terms of planning policy and legislation. This will be well past the time any scheme (or its brief) could be considered in terms of whether it meets the wishes, needs and priorities of the people of Cambridge.

We saw at the Environment Scrutiny meeting that this is exactly what has happened with the Ferris Wheel. Planning permission has been granted, but whether the Wheel (a project of such impact that it prompted 80 objections) is in the public interest of the people of Cambridge has been left to a delegated officer for decision. This delegated officer compared the Ferris Wheel to “a kiosk or a punt station”. Just look at the size and impact of the wheel: the comparison is entirely false. Cllr Collis claimed that scrutiny, in a Budget-setting meeting, of a proposal for use of parks and open spaces for generating income implied public agreement for such a substantial structure; that claim stretches credulity far beyond its limits.

Cllr Hannah Copley suggested that “best practice would be consultation with residents before major decisions are made”. We couldn’t agree more. We also could not disagree more with Paul Kirkley (“It’s a Ferris Wheel – get over it”). There are very serious issues at stake here, and the Council can’t be allowed to get away with unjustified claims of meaningful consultation.

John and Kati Preston