Edinburgh councillor blogs – Councillor Claire Miller

Picardy Place, to the east of the city centre, has become a focal point for a debate about transport in our city in the future. Green councillor Claire Miller highlights some lessons she believes ought to be learned.

Claire Miller Green Group

"The council has responded to calls from the community, who have been asking for a longer and fuller consultation on the designs for Picardy Place than was initially offered. This week I attended a two hour workshop where different stakeholder groups had been invited to participate, following the publication of a revised design on 17 November.

"While I was pleased that the consultation and workshop were taking place, I was struck by some important ways in which it could have been better. I'll therefore be feeding back on both the topic at hand – the designs at Picardy Place – and on the process that we have been offering to stakeholders – so that we respond better in the future to a widespread desire for input and consultation.

"For now I want to focus on what makes a good consultation:

• It should be clear what is in scope for consultation and feedback, versus what is already fixed and cannot be changed via consultation – or if you prefer, the parameters for the consultation

• The timescales of a consultation need to be set in such a way that feedback can always be incorporated, even if the feedback challenges the previous work in a way that requires lots of rework but would achieve a better outcome

• Consultations are best if they are framed rather than left open-ended, but they do need to allow stakeholders to shape the topics they want to cover, and should ensure that questions are framed in a way that enables freedom during the process to ensure all stakeholders views' are able to come through

• Stakeholders need to feel a sense that they have been heard and understood through the process, which is lost if for example the views expressed are dismissed or if there is not enough "room" in the process for their views, either virtually or in the way a face-to-face discussion is facilitated

"And linked to that, what makes a good workshop?

• All stakeholders should be invited to attend if you're going to hold a workshop where the interaction between people is a key component

• A good workshop would allow stakeholders attending to get to know each other and understand one another's view point before getting stuck into difficult problems where they are likely to disagree or have divergent views

• All the information needed by stakeholders should be available in advance, and also at the workshop, so that those who prefer or need to prepare can do so, and any questions coming up on the day can be answered — this might mean experts being on hand as well as preparing written or multimedia materials

• Stakeholders should have a chance to challenge the assumptions and, before getting into problem solving, a set of assumptions should be finalised and articulated in terms so that everyone understands the intended meaning, in a way that isn't open to varying interpretations

• And likewise, an articulation of the required outcome should also be agreed up front by all the stakeholders, so that it's

clear when the process ends that the solution answers the problem that was set

• Workshops are places for *doing* – they are a place to bring together stakeholders to take part in an activity, and if the activity is as simple as "discuss" then a suitable amount of time needs to be given rather than only allowing time for participants to state their views without full discussion

"I fully appreciate that many consultations are carried out in less than perfect conditions but I believe it's important to keep looking for improvement, especially on a subject where so many different members of the community are asking to be consulted. "