

Councillor raised concerns about Christmas market months ago

A city centre councillor raised concerns about controversial Christmas market plans with a senior council official months ago – and now fears public trust is being damaged by the fiasco.

On Tuesday, councillors demanded an emergency report to be drawn up after it was revealed Edinburgh City Council's director of place Paul Lawrence, in discussion with culture convener, Cllr Donald Wilson and his deputy, Cllr Amy McNeese-Mechan, agreed to hand Underbelly a two-year contract extension for the Princes Street Gardens Christmas market without the input of councillors.

A Conservative councillor is now calling for an independent investigation into the fiasco, potentially led by Audit Scotland, to take place.

This year's event has faced a public backlash over a controversial platform being put up in the gardens, which does not yet have planning permission. The investigation will also probe why councillors were not shown the design and size of this year's proposals before a decision was taken. Council rules state that if a decision is regarded as politically controversial, ward councillors should be consulted before it is signed off.

Green Cllr Claire Miller told the council's director of place, Paul Lawrence, that discussions between officials and Underbelly behind closed doors, which had been "going on for

months” was “not entirely correct”.



Claire Miller Green Group councillor

Cllr Miller has highlighted a meeting she had with Mr Lawrence on 12 June, the week before the controversial decision was taken and reported retrospectively to the authority’s Culture and Communities committee.

She said: “I did discuss with the Director of Place quite openly that I felt that was far too late to come to an elected ward member. The discussion that the council had been having between officers of this council and Underbelly about the arrangements, had been going on for months.

“The detailed conversations about structural engineering, the finances that Underbelly themselves were going to be looking at in terms of the profitability of the market, placement of the market and all the different complex factors in play, had been taking place under delegated authority.”

She added: “I did express to him at that time that I did not feel that that was entirely correct. I felt that there was political controversy already in Princes Street Gardens due to the removal of trees and the planning processes had been quite a surprise to residents. Because of that background, even if all of the work officers were undertaking was absolutely correct, having more transparency over that would be the right thing to do.

“All that happens to us is it raises questions of trust. That is something that we work extremely hard to build with our residents and at a stroke that can be undermined.”

Underbelly intend to submit a planning application retrospectively for the structure.



Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

Labour Cllr Scott Arthur said: “It’s frankly unbelievable that Underbelly can find the time to design and procure the colossal structure we see in East Princes Street Gardens, but are too busy to submit a simple planning application.

“I’m proud that Edinburgh is the UK’s greenest city, but what is happening in East Princes Street Gardens is completely unsustainable.”

Council Leader, Cllr Adam McVey, said: “Following the motion agreed at the Governance, Risk and Best Value committee, we’ll now be taking a closer look at this at the forthcoming policy and sustainability committee.

“In addition, we’ll be looking at what scope the current contract gives us to address any issues identified in future years.”