

# **Councillors did not see plans for Edinburgh's Christmas when approving decision**

**Underbelly, the company behind the Christmas market in Princes Street Gardens was given a two-year contract extension, signed off by the culture convener and his deputy – without councillors being shown the design of a controversial steel platform structure which is even yet to receive planning permission.**

It was confirmed yesterday that planning officials have opened an “enforcement file” on Underbelly’s construction of the festive market in East Princes Street Gardens as no planning application has been submitted – leaving one city centre councillor “shocked and appalled”.



Photo: Martin P. McAdam [www.martinmccadam.com](http://www.martinmccadam.com)

Last week, heritage watchdog, [The Cockburn Association](#), called for the £110 million Christmas market not to open on November 16 as intended, unless a planning application is approved or another solution found.

In a [briefing note](#) sent to councillors yesterday, Edinburgh City Council's Executive Director of Place, Paul Lawrence, confirmed that Underbelly "agreed to meet the capital costs" of the steel scaffolding which is now the subject of an outcry on social media – but "sought the agreement of a two-year extension to the contract to allow them time to recover the capital investment".

The contract extension was given the thumbs-up by Mr Lawrence in discussion with Culture and Communities convener, Cllr Donald Wilson and his deputy, Cllr Amy McNeese-Mechan, and the decision, but not the "detailed design", was then retrospectively reported to councillors in June.

Mr Lawrence revealed that due to "several delays" with the gallery development in the gardens, Underbelly "requested to

move a section of the market” to “the area of the gardens south of the railway line”, which was again approved by Cllr Wilson and Cllr McNeese-Mechan. This has meant “the overall number of stalls has increased in the gardens”, following the move.

Mr Lawrence added: “It is appropriate to request a retrospective planning application. In the meantime, an enforcement file has been opened by officers, who will monitor the situation.”

Last year, the festive events attracted more than 900,000 visitors, with post-event surveys showing an overwhelmingly positive response.

Council leader, Cllr Adam McVey, said: “The temporary structure and layout will help improve access, particularly for those with mobility issues, as well as circulation of people, reducing pressure on the busiest areas and creating a more enjoyable and welcoming atmosphere for residents and visitors taking advantage of the capital’s Christmas offer.

“With the recent works, there are clearly more circumstances complicating the events than in previous years, but I know residents want assurance that the gardens are protected and the safety and comfort of all those attending are secured. The council is working closely with Underbelly to make sure this happens and our parks officers are making daily rounds of the gardens to ensure that the trees are not damaged by any of the Christmas structures currently being erected.

“Our Christmas festival is an extremely popular event that brings together attractions and experiences for a huge melting pot of our communities. Tens of thousands of Edinburgh residents are expected to go along and enjoy the winter festivals each week. However we accept there are issues with the configuration this year. That’s why we’re already starting to think about what this looks like going forward and next

year the council will kick off a broader conversation with residents and businesses about how we want our winter celebrations to look in future.”

This year’s market will include 163 different stalls and bars erected in East Princes Street Gardens and The Mound precinct.

City centre Green Cllr Claire Miller, said: “East Princes Street Gardens is a beloved green space in the heart of the city. I am as shocked and appalled as residents are that Underbelly has built a platform across the entire park without consent, and I strongly condemn the approach taken to delivering the Christmas events this year. Especially so in the context of controversial landscaping works which took everyone by surprise last year and resulted in an outcry from locals upset by the loss of valuable trees.

“I will be holding Underbelly and the council to account over this repeated failure to look after the gardens for the benefit of all. “

Underbelly declined to comment further on the issues raised in Mr Lawrence’s briefing note.

In a statement released last week, a company spokesperson said: “Underbelly agreed with the council that it was not possible to make a planning application until the plans had been agreed with the council as the landlord of Edinburgh’s Christmas.

“Underbelly is now compiling its planning application which it will submit at the earliest possible opportunity. The scaffold currently going in allows the Christmas market to continue in the gardens while working round the ongoing changes to the landscape and also ensures we are taking every measure to protect the gardens.”

David Bol is the Local Democracy Reporter covering Edinburgh. The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) is a public

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