

Edinburgh's Christmas – root and branch review will follow this year's events

Cllr Staniforth, one of the Green Group, asked today that the council considered moving Edinburgh's Christmas to a hardstanding site (even though building is almost complete in Princes Street Gardens).

His request was denied, but it gave councillors their second opportunity of the day to talk about our Christmas events, particularly those in Princes Street Gardens, which will begin with Light Night this weekend and which are run by Underbelly.

The Conservative amendment which was approved recognised that it was probably too late to tear down the market and move it elsewhere in the city. Apart from any legal consequences which might ensue, there simply is not enough time. In addition the councillors recognised that their own Building Standards teams will carry out all appropriate safety checks before the market opens.

Convener Donald Wilson pointed out that it was the council's idea earlier in the summer to have a root and branch consultation into future winter festivals when the contract was extended with Underbelly. This will look at what Edinburgh people want during Christmas and Hogmanay.

Cllr Wilson insisted : "This consultation must do that. We won't start from a blank sheet of paper if we get a full report as is requested here from the Director of Place. We

need to give people options and that report will confirm what is possible.

“I would like to make it clear that I don't agree with devolved decision making. I don't think it's a good idea and I don't like it. I think it should be used as seldom as possible. This will be a real consultation and take everything into account.”

The contract with Underbelly was extended under powers delegated to the Executive Director of Place, Paul Lawrence earlier this year and brought to the committee as a fait accompli.

Vice-Convener McNeese-Mechan is keen that the public consultation agreed at the June meeting will be really in depth and allow the council to learn lessons.

Cllr Staniforth acknowledged that it might prove physically impossible to cancel the market within the time available, and that the council could not legally insist on the market being moved.

But he continued: “I think it sends a very clear message that we will not put up with this behaviour. I think we should send a hard message to Underbelly that frankly they have been treating this committee, this council, this city and its people with contempt. They evaded our questions earlier and you could not fail to see the contempt. The people should decide what happens in Princes Street Gardens. As their representatives we should be further consulted on what happens there.

“We should not have this sprung on us – a sudden extension of the Christmas market that none of us knew about before it was all over Twitter. That is unacceptable behaviour from a contractor.”

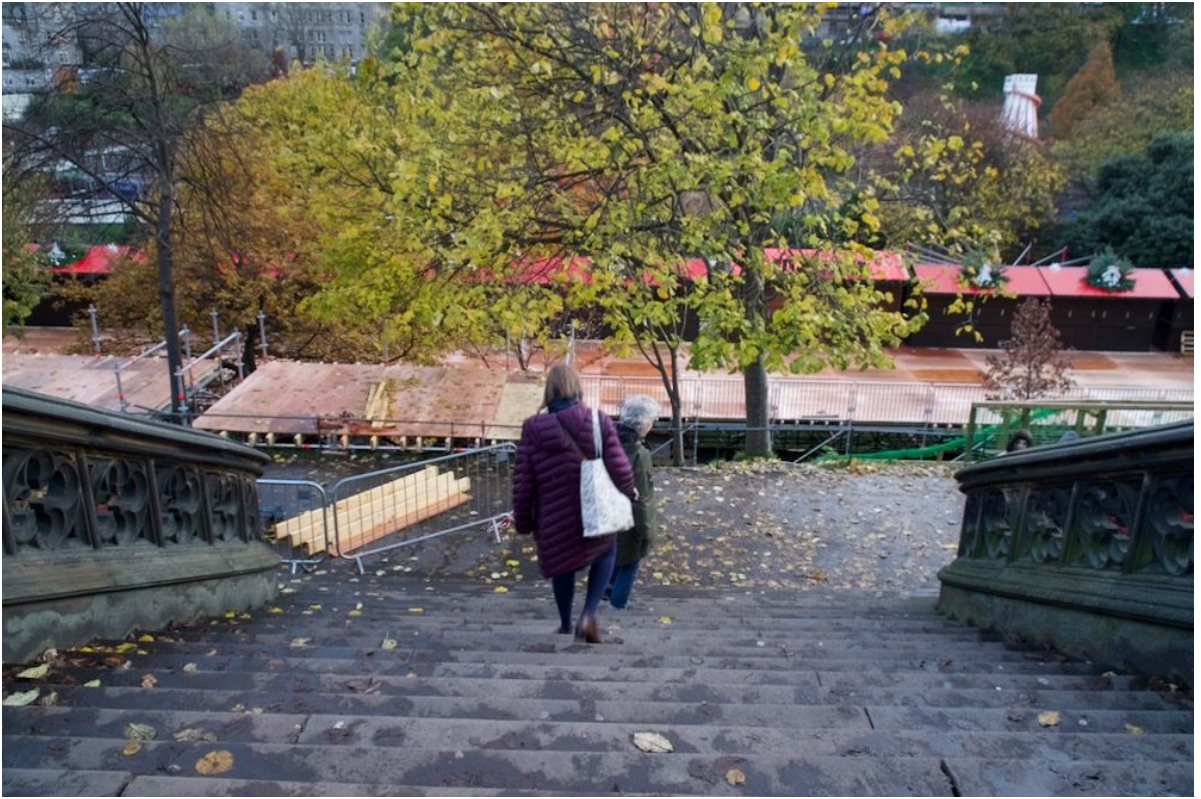
Susan Rae, a fellow Green councillor, seconded the motion

saying : “Given that we met with Underbelly this morning and the subsequent exchanges that we had, I find it remarkable that they have failed to acknowledge the feeling in the city. I feel they disrespected us and the city. The city feels that too. It’s not difficult to discern that. People are extremely upset by this. It is not Underbelly’s city to own and operate as they wish.”

Conservative councillor Max Mitchell proposed the Conservative amendment demanding the report from the Executive Director of Place to the next Culture and Communities committee detailing proposals and options for next year, Christmas 2020.

He said that the demand to move Christmas to another site was practically unachievable. He continued : “What I have tried to do is to achieve a similar but more practical outcome. From the briefing note which came out when this controversy kicked off, we are all aware that there is already going to be a planned consultation about the use of the gardens and how Christmas and Hogmanay is staged in future beyond the term of this contract agreed under delegated authority. I think the consultation will open up a good opportunity to look into this.”

He also called for all safety checks to be carried out however. He concluded : “I think we all know that if this is not safe then it cannot open. It is not best practice, but lessons must be learned by the council, senior officers and the council’s partner, Underbelly. The decision was taken by someone who is not accountable to the electorate as we are. I do not condone the lack of planning permission, and we have to make sure this does not happen again.”













Conservative councillor Phil Doggart seconded the amendment and said there were two things to look at, one looking backwards and the other forwards.

He remarked that the council finds itself in a wholly unsatisfactory position and commented on the use of delegated powers, saying : "We must note two things under the Scheme of Delegation. It should be referred to elected members if there is any reputational risk to the council. I think it is safe to say what we have seen in newspaper columns or on social media suggests that the reputation of the council has been severely damaged. In addition to that, if there's a significant impact on a particular ward then ward councillors should be informed. As far as I'm aware Ward councillors were not informed. In a sense we are not here to judge what has happened before. That is for others to look at.

"However in the briefing that was issued to councillors last month at my request, what was clear in that is that the information regarding the footprint that Underbelly was planning was known in advance because it said in the briefing

that it was not shared with members of this committee. So it had to have been known. If that is not the case then the wording within the briefing is wrong, which is not helpful.

“Let’s start looking forward. We are not going to stop it no matter what we think because of the realities of the situation we are in. So let’s start looking to next year. We need to make sure that the mistakes which have taken place and how this has been handled, how it’s been communicated to the councillors, how it’s been communicated to the residents particularly in the city centre, but not just them must be reviewed.

“We need a full breakdown, a full understanding and if this has to be a standing item on our agenda until we have full plans for next year, then so be it. I am not prepared to be played for a fool by Underbelly or anyone else.

“The responses we got this morning – actually we didn’t get responses – it was evasion, distraction, a glossy brochure designed to try and put us off asking difficult questions. The people of this city deserve better than that.”



PHOTO Princes Street Gardens 7 November 2019 ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

Cllr Osler said this matter is not just Underbelly's fault, but she said that the council needs to be clearer in dealing with arms length and other bodies when it comes to reporting back to the council.

Cllr Doran who represents the City Centre ward said that the use of Princes Street Gardens was raised as a problem every year, and that it had been brought to her attention so many times she had lost count. She said however it would be impractical to tear down the structure in the gardens but welcomes the planned consultation.

She concluded : "Princes Street Gardens should be accessible to everyone at all times."



Building in Princes Street Gardens 27 October 2019. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

Questions were asked of UNDERBELLY directors earlier in the day

The first opportunity to discuss this matter came when the two directors of Underbelly, Ed Bartlam and Charlie Wood, appeared before the committee to present their report on last year's events. This was a scheduled report to present their figures.

Councillors took the opportunity at that stage to ask forthright questions about this year's Christmas Market in Princes Street Gardens. None of them appeared happy with the replies they got.

[This story began](#) a couple of weeks ago with the Cockburn Association making enquiries of the council as to whether there was planning permission in place for the Christmas structure. There is none, even now.

A building warrant was only applied for last week by Underbelly who are contracted to run both the Christmas and Hogmanay events for the council.

Underbelly's Charlie Wood explained today (and this is reflected in an earlier briefing note to the council) that they could not apply for planning permission until such time as they knew what was to be built. They only knew that on 12 October.

National Galleries of Scotland have been busy in the gardens constructing new paths and felling trees to improve access and views of their building.

That work finished a little later than anticipated, and Underbelly said they wanted to ensure that the structure they put up to house the market would not be to the detriment of the Galleries' work. The scaffolding which has been constructed is the result of some serious engineering work, but it has also been closely inspected by passers-by who have tweeted photos of areas they consider questionable.

There is now a scaffold with 163 market stalls on it, a carousel and other rides. The Christmas Wheel is in its usual place next to the Scott Monument.

Today, all of the Remembrance Garden, the planted poppies and the PoppyScotland memory trees are being removed from Princes Street Gardens after the Remembrance Service held there only yesterday.

We know they are, as we saw the trees being taken through the city centre earlier this afternoon on the back of a pick up truck....



Princes Street Gardens 25 October 2019