

COUNCIL BRIEFING

On 28 October, Cllr Dr Scott Arthur reproduced the text of a Council briefing he had received on the situation in East Princes Street Gardens.

We have not seen the briefing, but here reproduce unedited Cllr Arthur's transcription of it.

Background

As at April 2019, the Council was in year three of a three-year contract with Underbelly to deliver Edinburgh's Christmas and Hogmanay, with an option to extend for up to three further years, subject to agreed performance indicators.

The redevelopment of the Scottish National Gallery and the landscaping changes to East Princes Street Gardens required a solution to deliver the Christmas Market and to protect the new landscaping. Underbelly proposed a significant capital investment in a scaffold structure to protect the new landscaping in the gardens, significantly increase circulation space after concerns from previous years, and create a deliverable layout. The new structure also serves to increase the accessibility of the Christmas markets with more ramps and flat sections for those with a mobility or sensory impairment.

Underbelly agreed to meet these capital costs but sought the agreement of a two-year extension to the contract to allow them time to recover the capital investment. The Executive Director of Place, in consultation with the Convener and Vice-Convener of Culture and Communities Committee, agreed to a two-year extension under delegated authority due to time constraints. This decision was then reported to Culture and Communities Committee on 18 June 2019. It is acknowledged that the detailed design was not included in the Committee report.

From June onwards, the Council's engineers assessed the structure to be built in Princes Street Gardens. This was to double-check the calculations and proposals made by Underbelly's own engineers and to ensure that the structure was safe and would not cause any significant or structural damage to the new landscaping in the gardens. This process was completed on 12 October 2019.

The redevelopment of the Gardens by National Galleries of Scotland has faced several delays. This has resulted in some areas being incomplete when the Gardens were due to be occupied by Underbelly for Christmas. One of the worst affected areas was a steep bank close to the top path in the Gardens.

Due to the lack of completion of some sections of the works, Underbelly requested to move a section of the market from this steeper area to the area of the Gardens south of the railway line. This would allow this section a full growing season, the best chance to establish and increase crowd flow across the site as a whole.

After consultation with the Convener and Vice-Convener of Culture & Communities Committee, it was agreed to move elements of the market that were to be sited in this steepest section to an area on the south of the railway. This area had been used in previous years but only for storing generators and other plant.

The overall number of stalls has increased in the Gardens with the move to the south section. However, the area of useable, open circulation space has increased significantly, allowing visitors a more comfortable experience during busier periods.

Planning Permission and Building Warrants

Underbelly met with officers from Planning and Building Standards on 30 August to discuss permissions required for the structures and their respective layout in East Princes Street Gardens. A determination of what was warrantable was reached and accepted by all parties. Underbelly agreed to submit a Building Warrant application for all warrantable works within the Christmas Markets.

Planning permission was also discussed at that meeting as the existing permission had expired. Underbelly were told that they needed to apply for this. Underbelly stated that they would be making an application but would not be able to meet the timescales required for a full application to be in place before commencing their build on 18 October because, at that stage, there was no final layout plan as engineers from the Council and Underbelly were still concluding their final assessments of the scaffolding structure and any necessary amendments. This was concluded on 12 October and a planning application is now expected. The application will be assessed in line with the Planning Acts.

It is therefore appropriate to request a retrospective planning application. Underbelly have contacted the Council's Planning Service to update on progress. In the meantime, an enforcement file has been opened by officers, who will monitor the situation.

Waverley Bridge

The Christmas Market has been a very popular attraction and getting busier every year; weekend attendance to the market regularly exceeds 100,000 per day (highest attendance last year was c. 124,000).

As a result of this popularity, special measures (additional stewards) had to be put in place at the crossing at the top of Waverley Bridge to manage the crowds at weekends last year to stop the public coming into conflict with live traffic.

Ongoing discussions are taking place between the Council, Underbelly and other partners over how best to ensure public safety whilst minimising disruption. This matter will be discussed with City Centre Councillors later this week.

Old Town/High Street – Edinburgh's Hogmanay

There have been some issues with wider communications from Underbelly regarding the use of the Old Town and residents' access. Underbelly have been reminded of the need for early and clear communication. For clarity, the High Street and Royal Mile are not being used for Hogmanay; it is only West Parliament Square, outside St Giles' Cathedral. The High Street will remain open throughout and no residents or businesses on the Royal Mile will require passes to access their properties. There is a well-established protocol for access to property within the street party arena and Underbelly will be contacting those properties very shortly.

