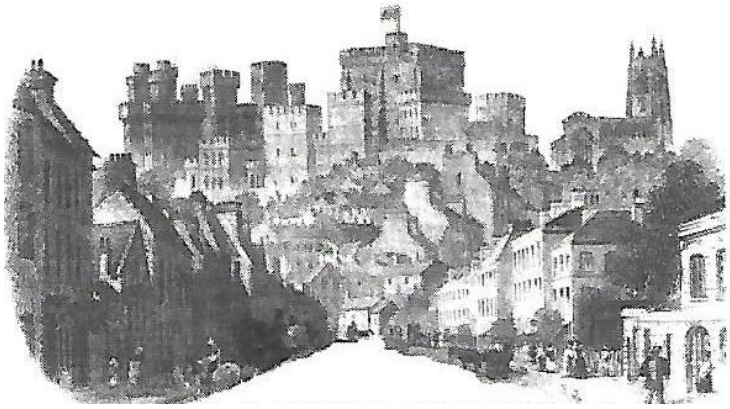


Lancaster Civic Society

Address to Lancaster City Council Extraordinary Meeting - 25th August 2021

The decision before the Council this evening is one of the most far reaching that has ever been taken.

Lancaster Civic Society are extremely disappointed about the lack of public consultation over the far-reaching implications of signing the legally binding Partnership Agreement. There has been a failure on the part of the City Council to provide sufficient opportunity for proper and meaningful engagement with the local community on this most important matter.

We fully appreciate the choice that the Council faces is an extremely complex and difficult one and that the resolution of many long-standing transportation issues depend on the receipt of this funding. We also understand that a failure to guarantee the provision of these transport improvements, particularly the works to Junction 33, is likely to render the Garden Village undeliverable, wrecking the Council's projected housing delivery numbers.

A properly managed public consultation exercise would have provided an opportunity for the City Council to clearly articulate this dilemma and to properly explain to people the trade-offs involved. A failure to do so has meant that only a relatively small percentage of citizens are fully aware of what is at stake tonight.

We believe that in the absence of a proper public engagement exercise it would be wrong for the Council to take a decision either way tonight. Your job as our elected representatives is to do what is in the best interests of the community overall. How can you possibly discharge this responsibility in the absence of an understanding of what the entire community of Lancaster think, not just the limited numbers you have engaged to date?

In our Open Statement, which has been sent to all councillors, we set out our concerns at length. I assume that you have taken the time to read our Open Statement and do not intend to repeat all of these points. However, I do want to make a few other observations.

We have been advised that elected members did not become aware until March of the details of the HIF bid. As this matter was reported to Cabinet on the 8th June we cannot understand why it took until August for the City Council to undertake the most rudimentary consultation. To date the only opportunity for public engagement with the City Council on this critical issue has been two Teams sessions, the first lasting 70 minutes, the second an hour. At both sessions there were significant numbers of questions from the public that could not be addressed in the time available.

This is too little too late.

Since the publication of our Open Statement we have heard a number of reasons cited for this lack of adequate consultation, none of which we find convincing. It is particularly disappointing that a Council, that has previously made such vocal commitments to meaningful community engagement should act in this way.

The Cabinet report of 8th June provided an important opportunity for the City Council to properly articulate, in a public document, the arguments for and against signing the legally binding Partnership Agreement, particularly with regard to the obligation to facilitate over 9000 new homes. Incredibly the public report was silent on this matter. The Options Appraisal contained in the public report was in our view superficial for an issue of this magnitude. We hope that the exempt appendix contained a more robust analysis for Cabinet members to consider

Had the public report to Cabinet dealt with this issue there would have been ample time to consult on the matter before making a final decision prior to the deadline of 31st August. We do not understand why the Council did not do this. The manner in which this issue has been dealt with falls very short of the City Council's previous commitment to "meaningful engagement and discussion".

We appreciate that the Council has been advised that it must sign the legally binding Partnership Agreement by 31st August. However, we understand that the County Council has agreed with Homes England that it has until 2027 to spent the HIF grant. We therefore cannot understand what possible impediment there is to Homes England and the County Council agreeing a short extension to the current deadline of 30th August, to allow time for meaningful consultation.

As I said earlier we believe that in the absence of a proper public engagement exercise it would be wrong for the Council to take a decision either way tonight.
It is critical that the decision is postponed so that your actions are informed by a proper understanding of what the entire community of Lancaster think, not just the limited numbers you have engaged to date. Surely this is what local democracy is all about.

We would therefore urge the City Council to defer taking a decision tonight to allow time for a public consultation exercise commensurate with the magnitude of this matter to the future of our city.

Thank you for listening.

Lancaster Civic Society 25th August 2021