

Address to Lancaster City Council Meeting 18th July 2018 – Desna Mackenzie

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening. I'm here to talk about the proposed development of the 'Canal Quarter' in Lancaster.

I've been a resident of Bulk Ward for over ten years, living close to the canal and the Northern part of the site. Any development that takes place there will affect the quality of mine and my family's lives. If there's going to be increased noise, dust and traffic due to construction, I want it to be for something that is genuinely valuable to our community.

I attended the Council meeting on 11th April 2018 and was pleased by the decisions to end the agreement with British Land, to engage with the public and to talk to Winchester Council about their Central Winchester Regeneration project. However, I felt that there was reluctance on the part of some Councillors, and that there was some confusion as to what good quality consultation would look like.

Because of my interest in what happens in this area I joined the Canal Quarter Action Group – a community group set up to champion public engagement in the decision making about the site. Many members have backgrounds in community development or engagement work and are familiar with the benefits of these ways of working as well as the challenges.

Our initial meeting on 22nd April 2018 was attended by 27 people, aged between 13 and 60+. The group discussed what they like about Lancaster, and provided over 150 individual ideas for the development of the area.

We've also held three market stalls in the City Centre in order to talk about the development with local people, and engaged with approximately 120 people in total.

We're in the process of conducting an online and paper survey to assess the extent to which local people want to be involved in further consultation regarding the Canal Quarter, and what methods they'd prefer.

On 15th June 2018 we held an event exploring two different community engagement methodologies which focus on making community strengths visible and stepping outside the usual 'tick box survey' format which often afflicts consultations.

As a result of all this I can tell you: **people do want to talk about what happens in the Canal Quarter and want to be engaged with, and involved in, the process, and there are people who want to support the Council to conduct a quality public engagement process.**

We've achieved this with very little in the way of financial resources, so I wonder what could be achieved with the resources that the council has: paid staff, access to meeting spaces, a marketing budget, and more.

Well, I thought I would find that out when the Council recently conducted an online survey about 'nine principles' for the Canal Quarter development - I believe you're due to hear the results of the survey this evening. And do you know what? I was pretty excited! Actual public engagement!

But when I opened the survey up to respond, my heart fell. I know the text was written with good intentions, but there are two huge problems with this approach at the start of a consultation:

1. Who decided the nine principles? I had a chat to friends and none of us could remember the Council talking to us about this, and I checked the minutes of the Council and Cabinet meetings available online, and couldn't see the principles agreed there. Whoever decided them didn't talk to the public. A key plank of good quality community engagement in a case like this would be to develop such principles **in partnership** with the local community.
2. Each principle was accompanied by text explaining what it meant. But these interpretations were extremely narrow, focussing almost entirely on student accommodation, business, and the 'cultural offer'. There isn't time this evening to give a blow-by-blow deconstruction of each of the 'principles' – but each attempt to define 'what does it mean?' served to close down discussion rather than open it up.

The countdown is on for the May 2019 local elections. I can see that it would be helpful, from a political perspective, for a sitting Council to be seen to have built something on this site before then. But I would urge all Councillors to see that pressure as counter-productive.

Don't rush into something thinking it will be a vote winner before May 2019, because people will remember a mistake made for cheap political gain for a long time. **But, they will remember a positive involvement in the development of the area for even longer.**

You have a chance to do something creative with the Canal Quarter, that has lasting impact down generations, and I urge the following:

- Genuinely learn from the Central Winchester Regeneration project – their public engagement model is excellent. Those principles that they have? **They developed them in partnership with the community.**
- Include community organisations, such as the Canal Quarter Action Group, in your Cabinet Liaison Group, as promised by Janice Hanson at the meeting of 11th April 2018.

Do this, and you can achieve meaningful engagement with your constituents and end up with a redevelopment of the area that meets the needs of the community, and will be an inspiration to others.

Thank you.