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LOOK! St Albans our community voice on design

"In the spirit of community-led neighbourhood planning our ethos is to be transparent, proactive, respectful, collaborative, open, diverse, explorative and community-rooted."

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14th May 2020

Dear Councillor Donald and Tony

I hope you are both well.

I have thought long and hard about writing this open letter after listening to what people have communicated to me through Look! St Albans about the competition.

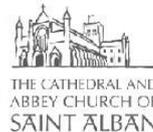
I have copied in the leaders of other political parties for the sake of transparency. As I said at the recent Planning Overview and Scrutiny Committee what I say I say as a critical friend to the council.

Meeting in January

- Firstly thank you for meeting us and giving so generously of your time on the 12th February where, as Mel Hilbrow said in his letter in the Herts Ad https://www.lookstalbens.org/uploads/2/7/7/4/27749191/mels_letter_20th_feb_2020.pdf we were pleased to put right "a lot of misapprehension about what Look! St Albans is, what it is trying to achieve, and what its involvement in the project has been." Including a suggestion we had held secret meetings with BDP to shape the design of the scheme prior to May last year. To make it abundantly clear, we did not.
- We now know that indeed the Civic Society committee did have meetings with the architects only for another committee within the Civic Society to reject it after the planning application had been submitted.
- It was unfortunate that our meeting with you came too late for us, as you already had the designs back from the architect to obtain what we had asked for at the cabinet meeting in January. We had requested for the community co-authored design codes to be included in the brief for the architects.
- However as Mel said in his letter we encouraged people to take part in the competition, but "Look! would strongly urge the council to return to meaningful community



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engagement for the development of the CCOS site.” That remains the view of many of those who support Look!

CCOS South Decision at Cabinet

- At the recent cabinet meeting, based on the papers available at the time, the cabinet agreed to appoint the successful architectural company from the design competition for CCOS South. It was revealed at the meeting the cost of the project was going to be between £60.1m and £68m.
- Therefore as the decision has been taken I or Look! St Albans supporters cannot be criticised for trying to undermine that process.

Comments and Questions of the Design Competition

- Working with The Prince’s Foundation for Building Community in 2012 the community learned how important it was to reach as wide a cross section of the community, by giving the community plenty of notice of the engagement, to be as transparent about the process as possible and keep good records of the outcome.
- As many will know we did write to our supporters, unasked, ahead of the start of the competition on Saturday 29th February, before there was even a council press release on the council website. This appeared on the first day of the competition going live on Monday 2nd March.
- Unfortunately for this most important site no forward publicity was available. The first ‘road show’ took place on the Tuesday before the advert appeared in the Herts Ad on the following Thursday, when many would first become aware of it.
- Were records kept of how many people attended the various displays of the plans? These would be helpful to record in your planning application. Were any comments recorded? Again these would be useful in demonstrating your community involvement.
- I understand no voting took place at these events. People could only vote online.
- With regard to the online web page I did inform the council team, as soon as I was made aware, that the drawings and the numbering on two of the designs did not match and was informed that the issue was rectified within a day. This unfortunate mix up could have confused early voters.
- It was extremely unfortunate that as the competition progressed people were becoming more and more distracted by the developing national emergency of the Covid19 pandemic and I suspect many who would have voted didn’t. The planned public meeting had to be sadly hastily cancelled. One colleague has commented as to why the presentations by the architects were not available in a video format, as these might have been easier for the layman to have understood. In view of the rapidly worsening national situation would it not have been sensible to extend the consultation at the very least? This would have given time to the architects to have made such videos.



- We now know that there were 604 visits to the website but only 429 voted. That means 28% of those who viewed the plans for one reason or another did not vote. As Mel said in his letter he hoped that people could reject any of the plans if they wanted to. This unfortunately was not an option for those who took part in the online survey. The online survey disadvantaged those who do not have access to the internet, but also gave the potential for abuse. Although voting was limited to one ISP many have access to multiple devices and therefore could have easily voted more than once.
- Why were the public not advised until after the event that their votes counted for only 50% of the result? It is very unclear how the other 50% was arrived at and by whom. Though you did say in the press release that other factors would be taken into consideration. Nonetheless the sheer amount of other factors had the potential to distort the outcome of the public vote.
- The most concerning aspect of the survey was that at no point were the voting public asked if they lived within the district of St Albans. At the beginning of the Survey Monkey it would have been quite easy to insert an explanation that the voter post code would be required, the reason for this and that the data would be stored securely. This is a fundamental prerequisite of community consultation, to ensure a reduced chance of those with a vested interest, or indeed for any other reason interfering with the vote. We always at all our events ask for a participant's postcode. We have managed that data securely and were adhering to this long before we formally adopted our privacy policy. https://www.lookstalbans.org/uploads/2/7/7/4/27749191/look_st_albans_privacy_policy_may_2018.pdf This covers holding such information as postcodes. If we at Look! can do it safely why can't the council?
- I suggest all the comments from the survey monkey should be transcribed and available for all to see and form part of your planning application, not just a couple as a flavour.
- Unfortunately this and other aspects will always cloud the outcome of the competition for this multimillion pound scheme, together with the lack of transparency on any aspect of the brief save that of what the Civic Society wrote in the Herts Ad on March 12th. *Copy attached.*

Selection of Architects

- Indeed we, the public, have no idea of the process for the selection of the three architectural firms. I am somewhat surprised that the Civic Society which boasts of having several architects amongst their membership that they did not recommend to the council using RIBA <https://www.architecture.com/awards-and-competitions-landing-page/competitions-landing-page/why-hold-an-riba-competition#> As they say on their website *"Our long experience in managing design competitions will ensure your competition is managed to best practice standards to fulfil your requirements and attract high quality design responses. It will send a clear signal to contestants (and I might add residents) that you have a commitment to design excellence, fairness and impartiality."*



Planning Application

- I do worry that the course you have undertaken does go against the prevailing wind in planning guidance and legislation as indicated in our meeting. Last October, in the government's <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/design> to be read in conjunction with the NPPF Look! St Albans methodology is being encouraged and embraced. However as you have indicated to us at our meeting this is not your preferred method.
- As the Masterplanning charrette Look! St Albans hosted has been disparaged from within the administration, not, as you pointed out personally by you, for which we are indeed grateful, we do not therefore expect to see any reference to this in the new planning application. To do so, we feel would be inconsistent and confusing to say the least for the community.

Conclusions

- I do hope that now we have finally been able to meet, you now know Look! are sincere in wishing to work in collaboration with the council and all political parties. After all we do share the same desire to do what is best for St Albans district now and that our generation leaves a worthy legacy for the future.
- I and Look! St Albans are anxious not to be, or be seen as in some ways rival community groups with the Civic Society. It would be undignified and undermine our ethos, aims and objectives. Each has its remit and work in a totally different way. We, Look! are community led, we never claim to speak on behalf of others (the Reps Group is there to see to the day to day running of the group) and the Civic Society are committee (or perhaps better expressed as committees) led which speak on behalf of their memberships. As Mel Hilbrow, Vice Chair of Look! has said, the Civic Society has a voice that should rightfully be heard, but it is not the only voice in St Albans. Indeed in today's world through many mediums community members are well able to express their views, what we aim to do is harness these into a structured informed and collaborative method for the purposes of community engagement on matters pertaining to planning.
- I hope I have given some useful suggestions, as well as I hope some constructive criticism, and indeed food for thought. Especially as you have indicated this is your intention to emulate this for CCOS north.

Kind regards

Vanessa Gregory

Chair Look! St Albans

PS For Clarification and Transparency As this issue seems to be a persistent area for speculation, re the (nationally and regionally recognised as planning in excellence by the Royal Town Planning Institute) CCOS masterplanning charrette, I approached The Prince's Foundation for Building Community (not to be confused with The Princes Trust) in the first



instance after being requested to host the charrette by the then partnership to be facilitators for this charrette. They have led and been involved in community engagement for in excess of 25 years and have a wealth of experience which they pass on to each community they work with. The reason being I well understood beforehand how contentious anything to do with CCOS could be. For operational reasons I believe they could not become involved at that level, but did recommend Angela Koch of ImaginePlaces to be lead facilitator. Some may recall The Foundation did support the community at the 'scene setting' session but considered, as it was being well run, it did not see the need to support at all four elements of the charrette. I trust this issue can now be put to bed once and for all. Together with the grossly inaccurate and derogatory term that it is 'design by committee'.

