

Notes from Future of City Centre Parking meeting – 13/11/2023

Note: these are not formal minutes of the meeting.

Lancaster BID organised the meeting in partnership with The Grand to give Lancaster City councilors the opportunity to briefly present their proposals for the Canal Quarter and to hear from city centre businesses regarding their significant concerns around the potential loss of parking provision.

Over 150 people attended the fact-finding meeting in the Lancaster Grand theatre on Monday 13th November to learn about the city council's Canal Quarter development plan and share their views on future proposals for city centre parking. The audience primarily comprised representatives from local businesses likely to be affected by the changes alongside members of Lancaster Footlights, the charity that owns the Grand theatre.

The panel on stage consisted of three city councillors, Cllr Jean Parr (responsible for parking), Cllr Nick Wilkinson (Canal Quarter project) and Cllr Gina Dowding (environment) alongside Phil Simpson from Lancaster Brewery and Director of Lancaster BID, Graham Cass owner of Jo & Cass hair salon, and Mark Hutton, chair of The Lancaster Footlights and Grand Theatre CIO. Former BBC TV North West Tonight reporter, Dave Guest, chaired proceedings.

The meeting was called because the City Council's Canal Quarter plan proposes that the Upper & Lower St Leonardgate, Lodge St, Edward St, Moor Lane Mills and Nelson St car parks will be built on, over the course of a several year multi-staged project, providing much-needed housing, but likely to cause great inconvenience to nearby businesses, including entertainment venues such as The Grand with audiences who are reliant on easily accessible parking.

From the council's perspective it was claimed that the city centre car parks as a whole are currently under used, though there was some discussion around how this statistic had been determined. Councillors confirmed free Christmas parking will continue at least for this year and next. A major problem the City Council has is the lack of co-operation from Lancashire County Council, who are responsible for Highways, while the City Council is responsible for the off-street car parks which it owns.

The councillors suggested that up to 600 (from 1500) existing parking spaces might be removed due to the Canal Quarter project, but there would be a travel impact assessment to see whether these needed to be replaced with alternatives. For example, it could be possible to keep the St Nic's car park open later. It was acknowledged that there was traffic congestion, especially on the one-way system, which resulted in poor air quality. There was a need for affordable housing in the city and the proposal for 9,000 new homes south of the city (Bailrigg Garden Village) had stalled, due to the cost of the necessary new link road that the County Council would have to build.

Graham Cass added "Whilst I look forward to the development of Lancaster city centre, in particular the canal corridor, this cannot be at the expense of the city centre! The reason city centres have vacant shops and out of town retail centres like Trafford Centre do not is free parking and ease of parking! To remove 700 spaces will be the death of the high street! Already at peak times people can't park. We need to make shopping in Lancaster a nice experience – this means a good bus service, good cycle ways, an affordable and reliable train service and reasonable if not free parking. Don't kill the high street by shutting down the car parks."

Phil Simpson emphasized that the majority of people in the room welcomed potential development of the Canal Quarter and recognised the need for more housing. However, development needs to be well planned as part of a wider strategy including parking to benefit the whole city.

The points made by the business representatives were that 4,000 people are employed in the city, many of whom travel in from outside Lancaster. These businesses are reliant on customers from outside, not just those living in the city. A study of box office records for two shows at the Grand revealed that 60% of patrons travel in and current alternatives, such as buses and the park-and-ride were unattractive and/or unavailable late at night when people would go home from a show or a restaurant meal.

When there is traffic congestion and difficulty parking, businesses' customers arrive late or have to set out early. Also, many employees in city centre businesses are on low wages and cannot afford the current car park charges, so are parking in residential areas, to the annoyance of the locals. The more difficult it becomes for people to drive in and park, the fewer people will shop in the city and businesses could start to close; many are already struggling financially, following Covid.

Mark Hutton reiterated the point about the majority of theatre patrons coming from outside the city and also said the theatre brought trade to other businesses, such as restaurants and shops. There was an impression that the Canal Quarter project was being done *to* us, rather than *with* us.

Mark then referred to the City Council's own Parking Strategy report (by Systra), which has yet to be agreed at cabinet and pointed out that whilst it showed some excess capacity using average occupancy figures, it appeared to be a snapshot based on November 2022. It did not appear to reflect actual utilisation by time of day, day of week, month of year. It did not reflect the impact on specific businesses or charities. It was based on average occupancies not peak demand. The two car parks identified to pick up the slack when the Canal Quarter is built (St Nics and Castle) are themselves also identified as being in need of re-development. The report also identified the need to consider a new 400 car multistorey as near to Canal Quarter site as possible. Finally, the strategy suggested the need for case-by-case analysis of those most impacted. Mark asked for reassurance that, when finalising the delivery action plan from the latest parking strategy, council cabinet would specifically consider two of the recommended actions in the report, as these were particularly relevant to the Canal Quarter land and subsequent impact on the theatre:

1. Undertaking case-by-case assessment for closure of/changes to individual car parks in terms of future displaced demand for car parking particularly in light of development impacts of the Canal Quarter car parking provision? (pages 30 and 47 of the strategy document)
2. Undertaking a feasibility study for redevelopment/reprovision of St Nics and Castle car parks in light of their age, nature, usage, and location not being fit for purpose to meet the needs of users and the city (page 30)

Dave Guest then threw the discussion open to the floor and sixteen people asked questions or made comments. The main points were ...

- that daytime parking charges were too high and businesses had reported a downturn in trade following an increase in charges; a gallery owner said that people spent less time browsing, as they were always conscious of the time they had left on their parking tickets.
- that the figures in the city council's parking strategy report seemed to be incorrect. A count of vehicles in the two St Leonardgate car parks during the evening on five days of the previous week had shown the upper car park up to 57% full (against the council maximum figure of 40% full) and the lower car park up to 96% full (against 60%).
- disabled people would be disproportionately affected and may have particular difficulty if they had to park some distance away from their destination.
- carers working in the city were already having difficulty parking near their clients.
- the apparent lack of co-operation and co-ordination with the county council was deplored.
- local buses were dirty and unreliable, and the park-and-ride closed early and was unattractive and potentially felt unsafe late at night.
- there was reportedly evidence that cities which had reduced city centre parking had reduced the footfall in the centre and damaged businesses; York, for example, had lost 50% of its evening trade and so central car parks had to be reopened and the park-and-ride sites abandoned.
- if people had to drive further to park, this would increase congestion, especially on the one-way system.
- sequencing was important; if car parks were closed before suitable alternatives were provided, trade would be lost and businesses closed, so providing new alternatives later would be pointless.
- could there not be more priority on social housing and less on student housing?

In summary, it was agreed there should be more engagement, consultation and involvement. The proposals should be better publicised. Councillors clarified that the timeline for each specific development will be:

1st stage - Planning application process starts for new dwellings on Nelson St car park – imminent.

2nd stage – Planning application process starts for new dwellings on St Leonardgate – December 2024.

Once any development reaches the point of planning application, comments including objections can be lodged as normal. Each planning application will also require the traffic and car parking situation to be re-evaluated considering the impact [on traffic and parking] that the previous stage had already had.

Lancaster City Council are pushing the County Council to be more co-operative regarding on street parking solutions.

From the Grand's point of view, there is no immediate threat to the theatre, but the trustees intend to work hard with the Theatre Trust, and other local venues and businesses to exhaust all possible approaches to ensure that any future development goes ahead in a way that helps meet the future affordable housing needs of the city, whilst at the same time preserving the very businesses and charities (including the theatre) that all existing and new residents would rely upon for years to come.

It was clear throughout the meeting that audience members shared common concerns around the potential loss of parking in the city centre. Although the audience recognised the need for housing and welcomed the prospect of development within the Canal Quarter, it was felt that the key issue of parking had so far been overlooked. Particular concerns were raised around the ability to meet parking demand at peak times and about the lack of any viable alternative transport into the evenings when performances at key entertainment venues including The Grand and The Dukes come to an end.

Lancaster BID were pleased that the meeting ended with a commitment from the Councillors present to ensure higher levels of engagement and consultation with the business community moving forward and of the need to review the full range of data available and potentially review plans as the Canal Quarter development progresses.

BID staff and Directors will continue to liaise with the City Council on behalf of businesses and will work hard to ensure the voice of businesses continues to be heard and is properly considered as Canal Quarter plans are developed further.