

9 March 2016

**Councillor Phil Davies
Leader of Wirral Council
16 Westbourne Grove
WEST KIRBY
Wirral
CH48 4DL**

Dear Councillor Davies

'MOVE AHEAD BIRKENHEAD' CONSULTATION

Following a lively debate about the *Move Ahead Birkenhead* consultation after the close of our first annual general meeting earlier this week, I have been asked by a wide cross-section of Forum members to write to you formally and to make you aware of the views and expectations of members in relation to this consultation.

Make no mistake, a large number of people who live and work in Birkenhead are deeply concerned about any plans for changes to our town because of the 'massive effect' such changes are likely to have upon every aspect of our personal and work lives. For example, one member, who is a market trader, said: ***"I can actively say, on behalf of all of the Birkenhead Market traders, we all would like to be involved in the design project from start to finish."***

Taking into account all of the opinions expressed by our members, I can say that the Forum as a whole does welcome the concept of *Move Ahead Birkenhead* as a comprehensive, joined up approach to the regeneration of Birkenhead from Oxtan Road all the way down to Woodside. However, there is some concern about how the consultation has progressed so far. You have stated publicly that we will be given ***"ample opportunity"*** to comment on these plans. Given the scale, scope and duration of the *Move Ahead Birkenhead* project, what should ***"ample opportunity"*** mean?

Surely, communication is key to providing this opportunity? There is a sense of disappointment and even anger, therefore, amongst members that the Forum was not directly notified about last week's consultation events in *The Pyramids*. As chair, I found out about the consultation on *Facebook* and notified members by e-mail immediately. As the statutory planning body for the Birkenhead & Tranmere Neighbourhood Area and as a constituted community association

whose area of benefit covers the entire Birkenhead and Tranmere Ward, we ought to have been formally notified of the consultation in good time to pass on details to our members. As one member noted: ***“many members were unable to attend as by the time it was brought to our attention many (me included) could not attend due to other obligations which could not be rearranged at short notice.”*** Another member said we: ***“need a proper public consultation with at least 2 weeks’ notice not 1 day!”***

Of great concern to members is the candid admission by one of the consultants present at last weeks’ consultation that his company had been told by Council officers to talk only to the *Wirral Chamber of Commerce* and the *Birkenhead Business Improvement District* and that access to the Council’s community contacts database was refused. It therefore appears that a deliberate attempt has been made to exclude small businesses and members of the public from this consultation, which is completely unacceptable. This view is echoed by a market trader, who said: ***“I believe we all, who work, have businesses and live in this area should be involved from planning to completion of the project. As at this moment in time, we have been kept in the dark 100%.”***

Forum members want a meaningful say in how the *Move Ahead Birkenhead* project develops. We consider that last weeks’ consultation should be only the start of a conversation about the potential for regeneration in our town. We feel that any ongoing dialogue should be inclusive, transparent and provide the Forum with an opportunity to play an active role.

One member said: ***‘it would be better to include us from the beginning; it is better to work with us rather than against us because we are the community that the Council is supposed to represent. We will not lie down and accept something we don’t want and neither will we go away.’***

Members expressed general concerns that the consultation process thus far has not afforded local residents a meaningful say in what is proposed and is designed to produce support for a generalised idea rather than provide ***“ample opportunity”*** (in your words) to become involved in the detailed and meaningful consultations that will be necessary to bring the *Ion Developments* leisure proposal and the wider joining up of the town centre to fruition.

The market trader quoted earlier also stated: ***‘I believe that any professional body involved in the realisation of this vision should liaise with people like myself because we know what is going wrong and what needs to happen in Birkenhead to put things right’.***

The consultant referred to earlier recommended that one outcome of the consultation should be a representative ‘reference group’ convened to take forward the detailed proposals and ensure that the whole community is united behind the *Move Ahead Birkenhead* project.

This would not be a new thing for Birkenhead. During SRB6 *Wirral Waterfront* a Town Centre Programme Steering Group was set up, chaired by Mel Glasby of *The Pyramids*. Its membership included representatives of *The Grange*

shopping centre, small businesses in Grange Road West, *Wirral Council* (John Entwistle and David Ball) and the resident-led *Birkenhead Regeneration Partnership* (myself). Although relationships were sometimes strained (the Grange Road West traders walked away), we did manage to bring *Asda* back to Birkenhead and employed a town centre manager, Sheila Terry, who introduced some positive changes, such as enhanced security measures and limited public realm improvements.

Given the scope and likely duration of the *Move Ahead Birkenhead* project in relation to the more forward-looking plans for linking the retail core of the town with Hamilton Square and Woodside, the Forum welcomes the consultant's verbally-stated recommendation to establish a **"Move Ahead Birkenhead Reference Group"**. The Forum considers that this reference group should initially be made up of:

- *Birkenhead and Tranmere Neighbourhood Planning Forum*
- *Birkenhead and Tranmere Ward Councillors* (cross-party)
- *Birkenhead Business Improvement District*
- *Birkenhead Market Traders Association*
- *Friends of Hamilton Square Conservation Area*
- *Friends of Woodside Ferry*
- *Ion Developments*
- *Merseyrail*
- *Merseytravel*
- *Peel Holdings*
- *The Pyramids Shopping Centre*
- *Wirral Council* (relevant officers)

Given the strong feelings that the *Move Ahead Birkenhead* consultation has stirred up, the Forum seeks guarantees that a reference group will be established to steer the redevelopment of Birkenhead and that all of its representatives would be granted equal status in terms of voting rights.

Yours sincerely



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