

Question: CS24.01

Cabinet – 9 March 2021

Re: Agenda item 24 – Bristol Beacon

Statement submitted by: Cllr Anthony Negus

Bristol LibDems have been asking lots of questions, within the constraints imposed by the Administration, about the cost over-run on the rebuilding project for Colston Hall, now Bristol Beacon. This has been explained as due to unknown 'discoveries' about the building structure and site. However a strip-out contract back to the shell of the 1951 auditorium building that would have enabled a detailed structural analysis and engineers' report to minimise unknowns and better inform the lowest tender for the main contract appears not to have fulfilled that purpose. Such a pre-contract is standard procedure with an old building for which it has been reported that no drawings or records can be found. In this case it is also to ensure that the best use is made of the time from stopping public performances to re-opening.

It is important to ascertain best cost estimates from the information available at each stage of any project. I spent my professional career as an architect working on major projects, many involving cherished heritage buildings. I have a professional interest in this project but my concern is as a city councillor. Like any proud Bristolian I want our city to have a nationally-acclaimed concert hall where our people can attend a wide range of musical and other performances, more so now that our Arena has been relocated out of the city. But I also want to be sure we are getting value for money so that we have resources to maintain services like social care and to restore cuts like those to public toilets and affordable housing.

I am aware that a forensic analysis of the costs of the Beacon restoration has just recently been carried out by Bristol City Council, which is welcome, if not overdue. True costs were revealed in confidence to a select group of councillors, of which I was one. We were shocked at the new cost, although there was some provision in the budget but there was consensus that there was more to lose if this project were to be abandoned. I am still not revealing this figure because we were told that it was to be made public in advance of the 25th February Cabinet. 28 hours after this topic was scheduled for a scrutiny agenda it was deleted from that Cabinet as negotiations over the contract sum had not been concluded. This is about how much of the agreed overall cost should have been included in the contractor's tender price, and how much could not have been foreseen within his risk and so is the responsibility of the client, BCC and all of us.

This risk split is the key to any contract and so it is crucial that unknowns are minimised. This is why the strip-out contract is there to inform and so give confidence to the tender process. Let's be clear, in the centre of an old town it is inevitable there will be 'discovered items'. It could have been a lot worse that finding three wells!

Experience shows that things more often go wrong when a sudden shock occurs in the midst of an ongoing malfunctioning system. In the specific case of the Beacon, was the pre-contract well-timed and designed to maximise assurance for the tendering contractors and was the lowest tender scrupulously checked to ensure that it allowed for all the outcomes from the information provided? I have asked for sight of the findings and reports from the strip-out and the timeline showing how this information factored into the tenders, their analysis, and the contract sum agreement. I have been told that officers are too busy to gather all this information, yet it is in one document – the project programme. If things that were or should have been known at that stage were not provided for in the scope of the contractors price where has the process failed?

The underlying context is why are so many things going so wrong in this council? In addition to this soon to be revealed cost over-run to the Beacon, we've seen the cataclysmic failure and likely £50mill loss of council taxpayers money over the Bristol Energy Company, the malfunctioning relationship between the council's 'arms-length' companies and the mayor as the single council shareholder, the huge cost of his 'mayors office', the over-dependence on expensive consultants and dubious pay-offs. Things are more likely to falter and fail in an autocratic system of 'one decision-maker: one solution' which drains initiative, collegiate action and sees everyone looking over their shoulders. This would account for the high turnover of senior officers and the huge proportion of councillors, mostly Labour, who are not standing again. It is regularly made clear to councillors that they are not trusted and certainly their views are not encouraged or noted. Just recently we've even had tweeted how councillors may be threatened about how they are to vote.

This inflexible top-down process is an accident that hasn't waited to happen. It keeps on happening. We must reset the costly Beacon but the bigger problem needs a complete redesign.