

Councillor Vimal Choksi
Executive Member
Towns & Communities

Julian Jackson
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Chair of the Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Yvonne Cartey

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Dear Councillor Choksi,

Ashton Market Square Consultation

I write on behalf of the Council's Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel. At a meeting of the full Scrutiny Panel on 20 September 2022, members received an overview of the Tameside Town Centres Framework and wider investment proposals.

In line with priorities set within our work programme, a separate working group will carry out activity linked directly to Town Centres. Members will also take account of the delivery timetable and phases to determine the timeliness of such oversight. The working group met for the first time on 23 November 2022, with a session focused on the Ashton Market Square consultation.

The Scrutiny Panel wishes to submit a formal response to the consultation. This letter therefore aims to provide a summary of collective discussion points and to express any issues and concerns raised by panel members both at the meeting and from subsequent conversations. I would be extremely grateful if on receiving this letter you are able to take the appropriate action to record the collective response. I hope that a response of the Scrutiny Panel can be referenced in future reports and may support wider governance in terms of stakeholder engagement and feedback used to inform decision making in this area.

At a national level, town centres are facing a number of significant challenges. Notwithstanding, Tameside's town centres remain a crucial asset and component to the future economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the borough. It is therefore very pleasing to hear that Tameside Council is utilising £10.8 million of the national Levelling Up Fund (LUF) to redevelop Ashton's Market Square as part of the wider Public Realm Strategy.

The overarching Town Centre Framework can act as a strategic umbrella and identify common themes, subtle nuances, bespoke planning and direction for Tameside across all town centres. Creating a clear and tangible link between strategy and delivery is very important and Scrutiny asks that attention is placed on the pace of delivery over the next 2 years.

There is an ongoing and evolving need to understand the complexity of town centres and the potential for generating a diverse local offer for retail, housing, events and leisure. Building on Tameside's heritage and improved connectivity, the investment can act as a catalyst to rebrand Ashton Market Square as a resource to communities and visitors. A vibrant and active town centre can help breathe life into a place and its people.

I have listed some of the main points below, which are to be viewed as individual responses from members, under the collective of Tameside Council's Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel.

- Investment and improvement in Ashton Market Square is welcome. Members are supportive of the consultation process and proposals to improve the outdoor market offer and public realm, including the creation of a flexible town square that will aim to enhance the area as a visitor destination in its own right.
- Creating an environment that is attractive, accessible, inclusive and safe remains of the utmost importance. Consultation responses can allow for greater understanding of what connects people to a place and identify any existing barriers.
- Ashton Market Square needs to be a modern and fit for purpose space that delivers a diverse mix of uses. The extent of adaptations is dependent on the future ambition, commitment and connection between the indoor and outdoor markets.
- While important to maintain local heritage of the site, members are keen to ensure that the Council's ambition for the project remains as bold as possible in supporting a wider pull factor. To create something that differentiates Ashton Market Square within the region.
- Members are keen to ensure that work is undertaken to understand what, in addition to the current offer and mix, will lead to greater use and footfall. Future functionality for parts of the space appear somewhat vague and it is hoped that significant attention can be placed on facilities, lighting and extended use of the square outside of trader and shop opening times.
- Ashton Market Square is a very large space and members feel that while future options for events and general greening of the area is welcome, this may not avoid potential infrequency or underutilisation of space for periods of the year.
- There is currently a large number of access points to the market square, outdoor and indoor markets. Potential to create a more structured approach to entry and exit that supports footfall to traders and businesses, whilst maintaining the ease of movement to wider public services and the college.
- That Ashton Market Square development seeks to maximise the use of environmentally friendly and sustainable methods, actively reducing the carbon footprint and for this to be an exemplar project in Tameside for materials and renewables.
- That continued and progressive methods of dialogue and engagement with key stakeholders is key to the success of the project. Potential option to establish - Ashton Market Square Advisory and Delivery Panel - for the duration. To include representatives of the Council, Elected Members, Market Traders, Businesses and the Town Team. To promote transparency and deliver key messages and updates at agreed intervals.
- The importance of effective costing, delivery timetables and transparency of communication throughout the length of the programme with key stakeholders. In order to work for all, the project needs to be informed by all.

- For future consideration regarding expansion of public realm and accessibility to the market square from all available public transport locations and car parks. To signpost the market square as a destination.
- That a future maintenance strategy and long-term financial commitment is needed for Town Centres, beyond LUF investment and one-off monies.
- Engagement with Scrutiny remains a priority as development phases emerge across Tameside's town centres.

Following completion of the consultation, I am keen to ensure the working group remains suitably updated on key findings. Moving into 2023, Scrutiny will seek assurances on how responses have fed into the final plans, to review progress and the potential for any learning to inform future consultation and delivery phases.

If further clarity is needed on any of the above points, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Yvonne Cartey

Chair – Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel