

Civic Quarter Liaison Group

Minutes

Date: Thursday 18 September 2025

Time: 5:00pm – 6:00pm

Location: Guildhall and MS Teams

Chair: Councillor Rosy Moore (RM), Executive Councillor for Climate Action and Environment

Attendees:

A list of attendees who provided their name and organisation is included as an Appendix.

Elected Members Present in Room or Online:

- Cllr Rosy Moore (Chair)
- Cllr Simon Swift
- Cllr Naomi Bennett
- Cllr Katie Porrer

Cambridge City Council representatives:

- Ben Binns – Assistant Director of Development
- Tom Conlon – Senior Development Manager – Civic Quarter
- Jaques van der Vyver– Senior Development Manager

Design and Engagement Team:

- David Roberts – Cartwright Pickard
- Richard Griffiths – Cartwright Pickard
- Oliver Deed – ECF (online)

Introductions

- Cllr Rosy Moore (RM) welcomed attendees, outlined the agenda for the meeting and then handed over to Ben Binns (BB) to provide an update.

Cabinet Papers and Programme

- BB opened by confirming that everything being shared in the meeting was already in the Cabinet report, with scrutiny already completed and Cabinet

due next week. He stressed the project remains on track for Cabinet approval in September 2025 and planning submission in October 2025.

- Four delivery options were presented: doing nothing, which would still cost around £60m to maintain compliance; delivering the full £92m scheme; pursuing a partial scheme with reduced scope and lower revenue potential; or taking a step-by-step approach. Officers recommended the latter, as it allows the project to be de-risked before making a full capital commitment in September 2026.

Project Vision and Benefits

- BB outlined the overarching vision of the proposals, describing the project as the most significant public realm investment in fifty years. He said the aim is to create a modern, thriving and inclusive Market Square that supports both existing and new businesses, while transforming the Corn Exchange and opening up the Guildhall to the community. A further objective is to provide a long-term headquarters for a future unitary council. Sustainability is central, with designs enabling the Guildhall to operate as a net zero carbon building by 2030.

Guildhall Proposals

- David Roberts (DR) explained the key proposals for the Guildhall. These include a new public “heart space” with a coffee bar and reception, a ground-floor customer service centre, and office accommodation for 150 Council staff supplemented by commercial offices. He emphasised the importance of reducing running costs, as well as improving sustainability and accessibility, saying the Guildhall will remain the seat of democracy while becoming more welcoming. The Chamber would be reconfigured into a multi-functional space with heritage furniture carefully removed, restored and relocated elsewhere.

Corn Exchange Proposals

- DR and Richard Griffiths (RG) outlined the Corn Exchange plans. They explained that accessibility would be significantly improved through new lifts and better wheelchair viewing areas, while heritage features would be revealed. The foyer and bar would be modernised, with a mezzanine level added, and Parsons Court would be transformed from a bin store into a vibrant space with food and drink outlets. It was noted that business planning has been developed with external experts to boost revenue and widen the venue’s appeal.

Market Square Proposals

- RG presented the Market Square proposals, which centre on restoring the fountain and arranging fixed stalls to the north with demountables to the

south. He described new features including integrated storage units, subterranean bins, and lockable gates to improve security, as well as shaded seating and planting. He stressed that the iconic striped roofscape would be retained to preserve Cambridge's aerial view.

Public Realm and Transport

- DR set out the public realm vision, which will retain historic routes such as Hobson's Conduit while increasing planting, biodiversity and accessible green routes. Traffic Regulation Orders were also discussed: Market Square's closure extended to Sundays, Corn Exchange and Wheeler Street closed after 3:50pm, and a ban on right turns from the Grand Arcade car park.
- Linda Jones of Living Streets raised concerns about pedestrian safety, especially at Bennett Street and the Grand Arcade junction, and called for full pedestrianisation.
- Camcycle representatives reiterated the importance of cycle parking, with RG assuring that final provision would meet or exceed current levels and include accessible spaces for adapted cycles.

Financial Case

- BB presented the financial model and noted that currently, the Guildhall, Corn Exchange and Market together operate at a net loss, with the Guildhall costing around £1.2m annually. With the proposed investment, the Guildhall is forecast to generate an £870,000 surplus annually by year five, while improvements to the Corn Exchange will also increase revenue. The Market will dip slightly due to higher maintenance and security costs, but overall the portfolio will move into surplus. Borrowing costs of £4m annually are expected, but over a 30-year period the scheme will deliver a positive net income. BB confirmed that the business plan has been reviewed and stress-tested by consultants and the Council's Section 151 officer.

Questions and Responses

- **Market Decanting and Demountable stalls:** Wendy Blythe and other attendees pressed for clarity on the logistics of market decanting and the business viability of demountables.
- BB responded that the Council has been holding monthly meetings with traders as well as one-to-one sessions (around half of traders engaged so far), and that different decanting options have been reviewed with traders' input. TC explained that, subject to planning approval expected in March 2026, the market would be decanted in January 2027, with work starting the same month. The timing has been chosen to avoid the busy Christmas trading period, and the aim is for traders to return to the square in time for the following Christmas. BB noted that logistics are being developed in

partnership with McAlpine, and that while the move will be challenging, regular engagement is helping to shape the best possible solution. BB added that separate meetings are necessary due to the contractual relationship between traders and the Council, but stressed that feedback from traders is feeding directly into design work.

- **Trader and Resident Engagement:** Community members questioned why discussions with traders were held separately from residents and customers, urging more inclusive engagement.
- BB explained that while the traders' meetings were more technical, there was no barrier to wider discussion, and the aim was to find solutions that would work for both traders and the public.
- **Coordination with Other City Projects:** Questions were also asked about how the Civic Quarter will align with other developments such as Project Agora, the Rose Crescent works, and the Cambridge Arts Theatre.
- BB confirmed that the Council has been meeting with colleges and developers such as Gonville & Caius and King's College to share proposals and discuss impacts such as road closures and hoarding. He said further coordination with shops and retailers will take place as the construction programme is developed.
- **Tourist Information Centre Provision:** Taj Khan, speaking as City Ambassador and on behalf of the Tourist Information Centre, emphasised the lack of tourist provision in the plans, highlighting that millions of visitors need accessible services.
- BB responded that the Guildhall's commercial spaces are designed to maximise revenue to help fund the project but acknowledged the TIC's contribution and confirmed discussions are ongoing. TC added that the TIC currently operates under a lease with Allia, intended as short-term in light of redevelopment, but options such as alternative Council-owned spaces or market stalls are being explored. TIC representatives confirmed they are preparing a formal business case to remain in the Guildhall.
- **Pedestrian Safety and Public Realm:** Linda Jones, representing Living Streets, argued that pedestrian movement is often overlooked in favour of buildings and trader concerns, despite the large numbers of residents and visitors who use the area daily. She highlighted dangerous conditions at the right-hand turn out of the Grand Arcade car park and on Bennett Street, where she said near misses occur "almost every day," and called for Bennett Street to be fully pedestrianised. She also criticised poor paving quality, street clutter such as bike stands reducing walking space, and the lack of benches and seating, noting that these were priorities raised repeatedly by participants on the free walks her group runs through the city centre.
- DR agreed with her assessment, acknowledging that the space is currently too car dominated. He said the three proposed Traffic Regulation Orders — including Sunday closure of the Market Square, restrictions on Corn Exchange and Wheeler Street, and a ban on right turns from the Grand

Arcade, were designed to reduce traffic and rebalance the space. However, he stressed the need to strike a balance between making the Civic Quarter pedestrian-friendly and allowing businesses to receive deliveries. He noted that highways management is currently a county function, which complicates matters, but that a move to a unitary authority could simplify decision-making. He also underlined the importance of retaining medical access for the Corn Exchange and ensuring sufficient disabled parking.

- **Cycle Parking Provision:** Camcycle representatives reiterated concerns about cycle parking provision, stressing the need for accessible spaces for hand cycles and adapted bikes.
- RG assured attendees that cycle parking numbers will meet or exceed current levels, with accessible options included, and will be refined further during the design phase.
- **Guildhall Chamber Heritage Concerns:** Heritage concerns were raised again by Cllr Richard Swift. Swift argued that the Chamber should remain a debating hall with permanent seating and questioned why multifunctional use was being proposed here rather than in the Guildhall's large and small halls, which he noted were already hosting events such as conferences. He expressed dissatisfaction that these halls were only receiving ventilation, painting and accessibility improvements, while more radical alterations were being made to the Chamber.
- In response, BB explained that the costings in the Cabinet report included significant investment in the large and small halls, and that ventilation works alone represented major expenditure. DR added that the halls were currently underused, hosting only around 40 events per year, and required acoustic and decorative improvements to reach modern standards. He said they would be refurbished for a wider range of uses, including classical music, banquets and conferences, while the Chamber changes were designed to complement this by making all Guildhall spaces work harder and generate income. Both BB and DR emphasised that alterations would also extend to underutilised areas such as the basement, maximising the Guildhall's value while preserving its role as Cambridge's democratic centre.
- **Use of Guildhall Halls and Events Programming:** Jocelynne Scutt questioned why the Guildhall's Great Hall and Small Hall had only hosted around 40 events in the past year, suggesting the events team should be more imaginative in programming existing spaces before investing heavily in redevelopment.
- In response, BB stated that the events team had achieved more than could reasonably be expected given the outdated facilities. He stressed that the Guildhall and Corn Exchange were not up to modern conference standards and were losing out to college venues and argued that modernisation was essential to increase income and broaden community use. Scutt also asked about event plans for the Market Square, and BB confirmed that reports outlining suggested events and projected income are available on the Council's website. A further question was raised about whether events in the

Market Square might involve ticketing or closures, which officers indicated would not be the case but could be discussed further outside the meeting.

- **Traffic Regulation Orders, Market Stalls, and Chamber Design:** Jocelynn Scutt raised three areas of concern. First, she sought assurance that the pensioners' bus service would be accommodated in the proposed Traffic Regulation Orders. Second, she questioned why a fixed number of demountable stalls had been agreed before trials were complete, describing this as "cart before the horse." Third, she challenged the practicality of raising the Guildhall Chamber floor to match entrance levels, warning that this could undermine the building's historic value and limit its attractiveness to tourists. She argued that the Chamber could host civic events such as youth parliaments in its current form and stressed that accessibility should be understood more broadly than physical ramps alone.
- In response, BB explained that the fixed stalls require planning permission, while demountables do not, meaning there is still time to test and refine the demountable model before it is finalised. DR added that demountable stalls are widely used across European and UK markets and are central to the vision of a flexible civic space. On the Chamber, DR confirmed the floor would be raised to align with the entrances using a simple removable inlay system, not a mechanical lift, and assured that heritage-appropriate materials and furniture would be used. It was also emphasised that changes are intended to preserve the Chamber's character while making it more functional and accessible for councillors of all mobilities.

Next Steps

- The Cabinet decision on the Civic Quarter project is expected in September 2025, with a planning application to be submitted in October 2025. Subject to approval, the next liaison meeting will be held in March 2026, timed ahead of Cabinet's return for contract approval in September 2026.
- If planning consent is secured, the market will be decanted in January 2027, after the Christmas trading period, with construction taking approximately one year to allow traders to return for the following festive season. A full heritage statement will be included in the planning and listed building consent applications, and ongoing engagement will continue with traders, colleges, retailers and transport stakeholders as detailed designs and logistics are developed.

Conclusion

- RM thanked the attendees for their feedback and concluded the meeting.

Appendix – Attendees:

List based on MS Teams attendance and in-person participants (excluding unidentified):

- Oliver Deed
- Ben Binns
- Hannah Coetsee
- Jaques van der Vyver
- Cllr Naomi Bennett
- Cllr Richard Swift
- Cllr Katie Porrer
- Dr Jocelynne Scutt
- Peter Landshoff
- Amanda Nilsson
- Maria Manion
- Pete Edwards
- Martin Macwhinnie
- Alistair Wilson
- Victoria Beechey
- Frances Alderton
- Laura Cook
- Jasper Green
- Charles Jones
- Linda Jones
- William Bannell
- Geoffrey Barnes
- Wendy Blythe
- Taj Khan

In person attendance

- Charles Jones
- Linda Jones
- William Bannell
- Geoffrey Barnes
- Wendy Blythe
- Cllr Richard Swift
- Dr Jocelynne Scutt
- Taj Khan