Date: 4th April 2023

To Isobel Woods, John Roseblade

CC: CEO Tim Johnson
Cllr Ian Brookfield (Council Leader)
Richard Lawrence – Director Regeneration
Cllr Stephen Simkins (Deputy Leader)
Ian Fegan
Cllr Steve Evans

Cllr Lynn Moran

MP Stuart Anderson
MP Pat Mcfadden
MP Jane Stevenson

Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Simon Bennett

Cherry Shine – BID Director

Scrutiny Panel:

Contact: Martin Stevens
Chair : Paul Sweet
Vice Chair Ellis Turrell

Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel
Contact: Martin Stevens
Chair: Jacqueline Sweetman
Vice Chair: Sohail Khan

URGENT ATTENTION

Re: City Centre West Relaunch Grant Scheme

Following receipt of letters disseminated by the council dated 3rd April to some of the traders on Westside. **We write on behalf of Westside Traders Group, those who have received letters, that we are absolutely insulted by the offer of £5000 that has been made. Its ludicrous.** There is a lot of anger and we are confused as to how Coumcil think it would be acceptable.

This offer is more suited as a gesture as a support package POST PEDESTRIANISATION and not the hardship support that was requested in 7th April 2022. Council directly taken away footfall through the works without due diligence of impact. Businesses were not consulted or given any time to prepare for this.

At the meeting held 12th March 2023 it was clearly agreed with Isobel Woods, Cllr Stephen Simkins and Ian Fagen that a meeting would be held at council chambers with all Westside Traders to present options directly to traders and address issues. **This has been retracted**

and instead Council have rushed ahead without discussion and any address to the attachment sent dated 20th March 2023 for relevant points that needed to be considered for the directed choice that has been forced on businesses. All members above received this via email.

Email response received from Tim Johnson 22nd March 2023 stating that Isobel Woods and John Roseblade would respond to concerns. For the record **Concerns Arising From Scrutiny meeting have been ignored by all as it represents the truth and we have had no response.**

We are aware that the pre-elections are coming and that the council would like to quickly rush this to demonstrate that they are helping businesses. This is, as the Scrutiny chair said "a shambles", no formal apology and now this insulting our intelligence with a poor offer.

Its been 12 months since we had a meeting April 2022 when we raised issues following **5 months of disruption**. (See Enclosure 1) To date Westside have faced 17 months of disruption. The council came to the meeting of 12th March 2023 with-holding information. It was clear that decisions had already been made. Council should have been honest and told us 12months ago that businesses were going to have their time wasted by the council. How can there be fairness in what is being put on the table. **Businesses who have suffered and evidenced proper accounts proving loss are being ignored hardship as a consequence of road works**.

Westside have been nothing but co-operational during this whole process. The council need to honour what Westside suggested and proved the real windows of losses businesses have suffered because of a plethora of mistakes and cover ups by council members & Eurovia.

SCA Management Accounts were employed to undertake Financial Health Check and gather financial data to identify financial impact incurred by businesses during the Phase 1 development works of the Westside area (Victoria Street -upper and lower, Salop St, School Street and Skinner St. – NOT North Street). They were instructed by Council to use 9-month window of comparison between periods Jan 2021–Sept 2021 & Oct 2021–Jun 2022. **Please note businesses, in particular Retail were still in lockdown until start of April 2021**.

WSTG raised errors/anomalies/concerns in spreadsheet and conduct of how data was being collected. WSTG proposed a more realistic window showing impact of works on businesses which was more inclusive of all businesses within westside. WSTG also were aware that no auditing was carried out by Council. WSTG proposed that new window Apr 2021 – Dec 2021(period 1) & Jan 2022 – Sep 2022 (period 2) be adopted to correctly show disruption and resolve the errors found. In council minutes it was made clear that there would be no legal issues if this was altered. Again retracted by Council.

25th May 2022 a statement of fact was sent to council. (See attached Enclosure 3)

When Cllr Simkins was brought back to the table to discuss with WSTG in October 2023, Cllr Simkins admitted that he did not have sight of the spreadsheet and requested Council accounts department should look into the realistic window that Westside proposed. Cllr Simpkins requested Ian Fagen to look into the cashflow spreadsheet window that council had commissioned SCA Management to identify business losses incurred as a result of the roadworks with consideration to new realistic window. Isobel Woods followed this up with an email stating this was her action not Ian Fagen's and Council finance team were not accountants. THIS WAS IGNORED by Council.

The reason for retraction of this action was that the realistic window demonstrated true losses and that would mean Council would have to pay hardship and request a budget that would be closer to 4 times that which they requested(350k) without the knowledge of traders. Isobel woods was sent updated spreadsheets by Westside traders showing exact losses in November 2022. It was clearly known exactly the amount that council would have to find for the poor planning and management by the Council. Council deliberately perverted justice for Westside traders by them introducing RSM to look into methodology, deliberately delaying the outcome and making the process longer so businesses would be forced to take option 2 as a directed choice, which reframed financial hardship caused by road works. We have a clear paper trail which proves the justification of hardship.

Council did not share the fact with Westside that they would present to the Economic board on 14th February and have the panel believe that traders refused SCA Management cashflow spreadsheet. This is NOT TRUE. Repeatedly the solutions were demonstrated to the council to move forward with realistic view of losses. This was damage limitation to save face for what traders proved to have been poor decisions planning and management of westside development. It was clear that they did not want to set this as a precedence as other phases of development move forward. Westside has to be dealt with separately and hence should not have genuine financial hardship DENIED.

Westside worked with council for over a year, with the mental stress and how this has affected the mental health of businesses is being undermined and insulted with this proposal. Council have put some businesses into debt some of which are irrecoverable. If business footfall is drastically affected by the disruption, then disruption payments should be made accordingly. **Council have wasted taxpayers monies when in fact they should have and still have the opportunity to rectify the situation to allow businesses to mitigate losses.**

We formally request a meeting and review with all traders of the proposal with either a revised offer which is tier based or an audience with the scrutiny panel, where general public/press will see how the businesses have been failed by the Council.

Should the tiered approach be considered, amounts should be reflective of losses that were either demonstrated in the accounting data that the Council collected and have in their possession.

We look forward to a solution which takes into consideration.

- Financial Hardship inflicted November 2021-April 2023
- Post pedestrianisation support (5k currently offered)

As businesses, if the offer is not revised and reflective of the hardship then the council will definitely have a vote of no confidence from businesses who they have failed.

We have requested a copy of the RSM report and if they are not willing to show this to us traders then it should be shown to the **scrutiny board**. We have taken the liberty to share this with them and MP Stuart Anderson and scrutiny panel.

Cllr Evans to explain as he stated on public TV how exactly has he and his fellow councillors listened and have been working with the traders and where loss is evidenced disruption payments considered. We make no apologies for this being scathing as Westside have been made fools off for entertaining that the council will listen.

Deputy leader Simkins stated that he promised to ensure he supported businesses and **that has not been fulfilled**. The council have no allegiance to businesses and have ruined, not supported but destroying businesses, several of which have already been lost.

Where has there been contingency built into this project because if there hasn't, then the competence here is questionable of the very authority that has been put there by general public/business who pay their taxes. Why should we accept and suffer the consequences of the council mistakes.

We request that **scrutiny panel is there to perform a function**, now is the time to challenge and restore public and business confidence in the council. **We would welcome counsel with scrutiny panel to put WSTG case across**. We can evidence in some cases contrary information to what has been portrayed by council.

Why did the council think that there would be no major impact on businesses when they decided to do 5years of development in 17months without any repercussions. Failure to do impact analysis and consultation has led to this. Where is the evidence to show businesses were consulted individually. It is stated in the Briefing Note (See Enc 4) dated 15.Feb.2023 Point 2.5 that -

2.5 By the end of 2018 all businesses in the phase 1 (Victoria Street) and phase 2 (Queen Square / Lichfield Street) areas that were directly affected by the proposals were contacted on an individual basis.

This not a true statement and is refuted by WSTG. Furthermore WSTG disagree with how some of the information is miscommunicated in this document. We have formally responded to this in Enc 5, which clearly demonstrates the misrepresentation of facts.

WSTG provided Isobel/John a list of businesses that the group represent in the Westside area. Can you please provide a list a complete list of who has been invited to apply for this grant as <u>some of the businesses in WSTG have neither received an email or letter in case there is any confidentiality issues that may arise.</u>

<u>Enclosures</u>:

Enc 1: Original document(s) WSTG Meeting Minutes 7.Apr.2022

Enc 2: WSTG Subgroup Council Meeting 9.May.2022

Enc 3: Statement of Fact 25.May.2023 - traders letter 2.pdf

Enc 4: Public Realm Support Packages for Businesses (Briefing Note) - 15 February 2023

Enc 5: WSTG response to Enc 4 – Briefing Note 15.Feb.23