

Date: 5th December 2022

	Council Attendance	Westside Attendees	Company & Representing Westside Traders Group
Isobel Woods	Attended	Des	XBrand Furniture
John Roseblade	Attended	Billy	Equinox
		Esmea	Tunwells
CC: Tim Johnson	Abstained	Kimberley	Richard & Co Hairdressers
Ian Brookfield	Abstained	Wayne	Framers Gallery
Richard Lawrence	Abstained	Owen	George Wallis
Stephen Simkins	Attended	Andrew	Faith Hope & Charity
Ian Fegan	Attended	Vijay	Native Menswear
Steve Evans	Abstained	Nico (late)	Nimo's
		Bruce	Ill

Cllr Simkins, council members have stated that they want to pay 7 of the business that demonstrated a loss from the health check that was submitted, whilst independent company to review process is being procured. No Date Was Given by Council!

Cllr Simkins and members agreed that a caveat will be included to ensure and reflect any subsequent findings/changings for those of the businesses that will be paid.

WSTG Subgroup expressed **that they are not happy** with this as it means waiting longer for any financial hardship support, when businesses are already on the brink.

The meeting was scheduled to be held at Equinox on 5th Dec, however due to sensitivity of, what we now understand to be a BBC, Isobel suggested it be moved to Council Offices. Temperaments of traders are running high as they see nothing but delaying tactics by a council who is not showing care or concern.

Response to council

1. We are disappointed that a number of council senior representatives **chose not** to attend the meeting.
2. We are disappointed that it has taken Isobel 5 weeks to respond to the clear presentation on the 7th November of issues Westside have encountered with the Health Check. This was an action point that arose from Cllr Simkins meeting October, requesting Isobel, John, Billy, Des & Esmea to understand issues around the health check. Miscommunication and failings came to light.
3. Westside also demonstrated clearly an amicable solution that would resolve the failings of the health check. It was made clear by Cllr Simkins that the understanding of the health check required just the **sales turnover of 2 periods would demonstrate losses as a result of the** and not the full income and expenditure cash flow as businesses were required to provide. It had been raised at the time when Isobel was questioned over how the data collected from businesses would be used.

4. Following email received from Isobel see below, Cllr Simkins had requested Ian Fagan be actioned to set team up to look at the sales turnover again. Ian has subsequently declined and referred it back to Isobel, to whom we have already demonstrated issues.

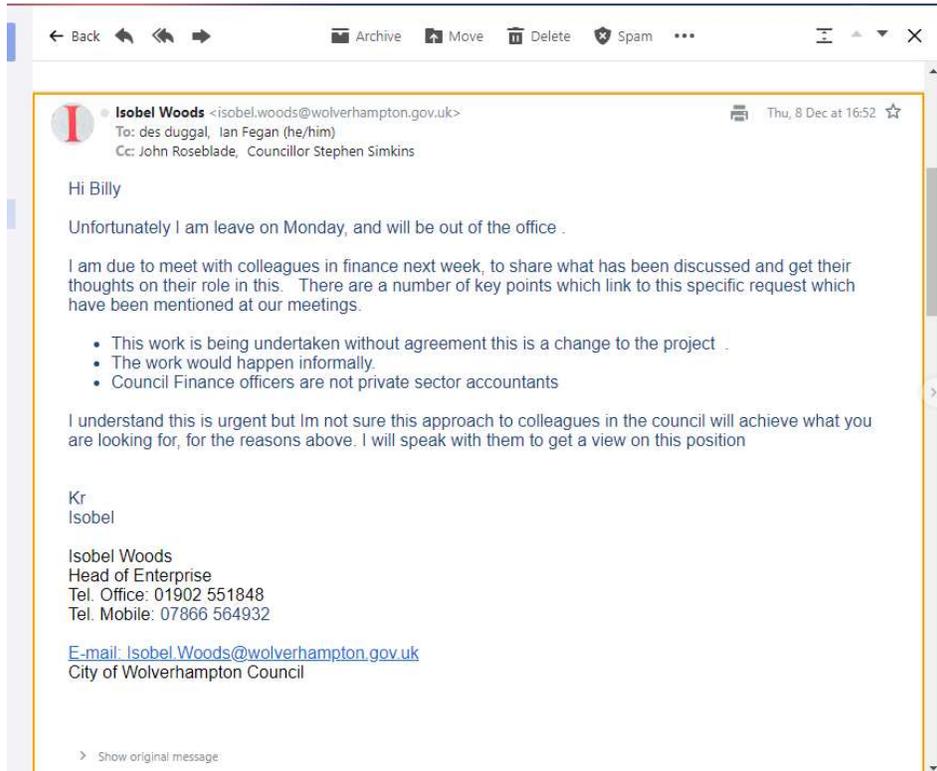
Over 20 businesses have submitted updated information based on new window.

Isobel stated that not all businesses submitted data to her using the same spreadsheet format. Some submitted management accounts showing profit and loss. Hence, she is not wanting to look at this, currently.

Isobel is insisting that the parameters have changed in terms of the window being moved by 3 months and deems it to be a new project, which WSTG disagrees with.

WSTG emphasised the **real data is more relevant** and that factoring still needs to be considered to help businesses and hospitality as covid restrictions were still in place.

Additionally, this easily demonstrates the real losses experienced businesses using the new window, which the council are in denial of.



5. **Cllr Simkins stated that the spreadsheet was never seen by him.** He commented that it should have been based on sales turnover and not income and expenditure cashflow. This clearly demonstrates that the remit of what Sam and his team were to undertake was not clearly specified from the outset, hence a lot of confusion could have been avoided.

Cllr Simkins realised that the turnover should have been kept separate, as merging it with the health check is what's caused the issues. It is the businesses that are bearing the brunt of the mistakes that council are making. They are the ones whose livelihoods are at stake whilst council can write it off as a learning at Westsides expense. This is not acceptable.

Cllr Simkins has asked for a council finance team to address see if there is a possibility to re-use of the spreadsheet template showing the new window as it is clear that there is a lack of understanding of the spreadsheet by senior members.

6. Isobel stated that an independent specialist company has been identified and is looking to be procured by council to review the processes, where failings, mismanagement, miscommunication etc has occurred between council and Westside businesses. Council have stated that they understand the urgency and John Roseblade confirmed it would be fast-tracked. **WSTG are concerned as unnecessary additional expenditure to prove their failings and negligence and further the delays in paying hardship relief.**
7. Isobel stated that Sam still needs to be given an opportunity to respond to issues and concerns raised by WSTG around the health checks. **Isobel needs all comments from Westside traders about the conduct of data collection by Sam and his team. This should be no later than Friday 9th Dec as council need to do an internal contract review. Any issues businesses found must be sent in via email.**

WSTG thanks those businesses that have already submitted comments.

8. **Westside have explained sheer disappointment on the failings of Eurovia/Council :**
 1. Not sorting out delivery access for businesses when it should have been done over 2 months ago.
 2. The misuse of space at Bell Square wrt parking vehicles and making the whole space look like a Construction site.
 3. Reduce unnecessary barriers and create accessible walkways with Health and Safety in mind.
 4. Slowness of actually getting work done.
 5. Improved street lighting.
 6. No Xmas lights or lamp posts.
 7. No Christmas activity to generate/drum up trade for Westside.
 8. Westside suggested activities to coincide with an event to consider business trail.

Cllr Simkins stated he would like to meet with senior manager of Eurovia to challenge their lack of care or concern over businesses and urgency of work/ delays/failings and conduct in which works are being carried out.

WSTG requested a date of 19th Dec to get a review. This needs to be confirmed to be confirmed with council.

9. THE RATIONALE

WSTG strongly suggest data using new window be adopted and payments made accordingly. This is the easiest option to help businesses.

The outcome of the meeting is not acceptable as WSTG see it as further delays. Yes, you have agreed to pay 7 of the businesses. The WSTG suggest council should invest in someone sitting and looking at the data that they already collected and give each business at a minimum, a payment for hardship relief with a freeze of the business rates. Until this inquiry into the failings has been looked at. You cannot expect people to survive on thin air. Why should the councils' failings compromise businesses livelihoods.

WSTG have given the council every opportunity to support businesses and they have not come back with any constructive conducive plan other than an independent company to prove where they went wrong and how to rectify it. Thus, is at the cost of businesses going under. Council accountability is for them to look at. We need someone who understands and can work with the information already supplied. I.e. a finance person.

As businesses we are within our rights to change parameters especially if the process is based on base information that is not totally conducive to the process. Unless you write exactly what has been agreed, you as the council will chose to say what you believe not what we understand and are forced to take on only later to be told we agreed with it.

It is clear right from the outset the remit for health check/data collection has been convoluted and not clearly defined. Council have been selective in how they used or in this cased misused the information.

Over 20 businesses have demonstrated the new window and are appealing. **You as the council have the power to endorse and look at the sales turnover which is what was originally agreed.** It was quite clear that a simple activity has been over complicated for the mere reason that council's opinion showed some flaws in how businesses functioned. E.g. lacking proper accounts, marketing strategies. Independent businesses are not limited companies, that does not mean they should be treated differently. The health check was mis-sold to the business traders another reason why all these problems occurred.

We have traceability of our records; a lot of the council traceability is verbal words.

Businesses have proved losses. The council needs to stop changing the goal post because they don't want to pay businesses.

WSTG stated - Some sort of interim gesture needs to be given this side of Christmas especially where established businesses can show losses through vat returns or other means as they all take into consideration sales turnover. It is the simplest and most efficient way of dealing with the catastrophe occurring in westside and blighting the city as a whole.

WSTG attended the Wolverhampton Business Forum 8th December at the "Meet the Mayor Andy Street" the question asked of Andy Street was...

"When capital programs are instigated by Councils, what consideration and accountability is there to ensure the correct necessary steps are taken to enable existing businesses to operate with minimal disruption. What consideration, contingency plans/ financial support is there for those businesses that are severely affected by the improvements such as roadworks"

Andy Street stated that there is an agreed PUBLIC POLICY where compensation is available in such circumstances. WHY HAS THE COUNCIL NOT MADE THIS AVAILABLE?

Furthermore, WSTG were unaware of the sheer support from other businesses around the city and neighbouring towns such as Wednesfield. Many issues were raised with respect to the Wolverhampton city centre works.

We are appealing for immediate action on: -

1. Based on sales turnover use new comparative window and make payment to businesses who have demonstrated loss with appropriate caveat for review pending independent company review of whole process. This needs to be done by next week 20th with pay-outs before Christmas. I.e.19th Dec.
2. Incorporate some level of factoring based on govt guidelines during covid recovery in respect to operation functionality of businesses.
- 3.The urgency for fast tracking the new window is at no additional expense to the council. Westside are available to clarify this.
4. Provide a hardship package or relief for those that haven't qualified but have suffered.
5. Freeze business rates and backdate from at a minimum Jan 22- Mar 23.
6. For transparency, we need to understand the brief that is going to be given to independent company. Again, learning from SCA management procurement.
7. Full disclosure of communication to business traders needs to come from council issuing statements of what they deem should be communicated to businesses from their perspective as Westside integrity is being questioned because of misconstruing/ misunderstanding information delivery.

Isobel stated that all communication to traders' group is to be copied to council to avoid misunderstandings of information. This is to minimise businesses directly contacting council outside of subgroup and to ensure there is no confusion with both parties being are on the same page.