

Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee – 9 June 2016

Item 4 - Cardiff Coal Exchange

Cardiff Civic Society submission

The Coal Exchange is a Grade 2* listed building, which puts it in the top 8% of listed buildings in the UK – it therefore deserves the best possible treatment as one of Wales' most important buildings.

While Cardiff Civic Society is broadly supportive of plans to restore the building, we feel that guarantees are needed that Signature Living will, in reality, deliver a sympathetic restoration of the Coal Exchange. To date, the information received has amounted to little more than PR material from Signature Living.

We have, for example, no evidence that Signature Living can meet the immense costs of restoring the building to its former glory. Restoration costs invariably run beyond initial budgets. How will Signature Living address such contingencies without compromising the integrity of the building? Theirs is a commercial venture, therefore making a profit is likely to be a priority over restoring the building to its former glory.

We are also concerned at Cardiff Council's apparent misuse of section 78 of the building act. At no point, despite repeated requests, was a justification supplied for this action. The suggestion that the building was 'dangerous' appears to have been entirely spurious. This lack of transparency has inevitably led the public to believe that the council has a hidden agenda. Such a lack of transparency is deeply inappropriate, given that this is a building of national importance.

Cardiff Civic Society is also concerned about the procedure used to select Signature Living as the developer. As MP Stephen Doughty said "Cardiff Council officials have been conducting a very secretive process with a preferred bidder, and now appear to be trying to cut a backroom deal to hand over a major piece of Cardiff and Wales' national heritage without proper democratic scrutiny of the proposals..."

Cardiff Council also appears to have been cavalier in its dealing with the Save the Coal Exchange Campaign and with the tenants of the building – for example, the building has been repeatedly described as abandoned, which is far from being the reality.

To date the Coal Exchange has not been treated with the respect it deserves. In any other city this building would be cherished and treasured, but in Cardiff it has been treated in a totally offhand manner. It is time for this to change. It would be a tragedy if, in years to come, we look back on the Coal Exchange story, and realise that a major opportunity to save a magnificent building was thrown to the winds.

Nerys Lloyd-Pierce
Chair, Cardiff Civic Society