

LRAG News Update – 1 August 2023

Sustainable Travel Reference Group (STRG)

Notwithstanding what is written in the latest Surrey CC website update, the STRG meeting at 7 p.m. on 26th July was extremely disjointed.

Mid-morning on 26th July STRG participants were told that they would be asked to vote on the public engagement questions at that evening's meeting. In advance of the meeting The Consultation Institute (TCI) specialists had analysed the MIRO Board input and developed 24 headline statements, by grouping the comments. The document containing the topics and comments did not arrive until early that afternoon in the form of a 20-page document. The stated objective was to select "around 8 questions that will be used in the public engagement".

Prior to the meeting, at least 2 stakeholders raised concerns with the STRG chair, and with the Leader of Surrey Council, who was intending to be present, that the time made available for proper study was insufficient and there should be a postponement. The answers given were that there would be resolution at the meeting.

This late submission of documents mimics the point raised before the previous meeting, about the refusal to circulate the traffic management plan in advance, and this now appears to be an uncomfortable trend of attempting to steamroller discussions without time for adequate contemplation.

At the start of the meeting, in the absence of any form of agenda other than the need to be prepared for a vote, LLAG chair made an opening statement that he would attend, but only as an observer, because he had not been allowed time for adequate scrutiny, and would not participate in any voting. At this point TCI revealed that the voting plan had been scrapped!

Unfortunately, this process confusion then set the whole tone of the meeting, which again lacked the presence of several invitees. Instead, there followed much discussion about the format in which the topic headings had been couched. There was no explanatory preamble in the document, but TCI explained that they intended them to be read as if they were preceded by some form of question, along the lines of: "On a Scale of 1 to 10, would you say ...?" It was confirmed that SCC had no hand in crafting the statements.

Questions arose about how public opinion would be accurately assessed; what metric would the Council leader use to determine what counted as a significant lack of support; how would the voices of those most affected be afforded adequate weighting, in comparison to distant lobbyists, and so on. None of the exchanges between stakeholders proved conclusive.

The TCI final proposal was to rewrite the topic headings in a more neutral tone, and then to ask each stakeholder to assign a score, in writing, for each topic, which would then be used to determine perceived priorities. The Council leader intervened at this point asking why TCI could not just create a series of questions and answers, to act as a straw-man for stakeholder consideration.

Post-meeting, LLAG chair has written to the STRG chair and Council leader making clear that the principles of Active Travel Schemes, described in Cycling Infrastructure Design LTN 1/20, should be the topic headings to be used. These are: Coherent; Direct; Safe; Comfortable and Attractive, not unconsulted inventions created by TCI.

The next STRG meeting is not planned until September, when 2 further meetings are anticipated, one about design and the other about construction, at which it is expected that finalised plans will be shared before the public meetings. In the meantime, LLAG waits to see how TCI/SCC decide to make their next approach to the stakeholders.

Eventual publicity for the drop-in events will need to receive maximum distribution, as it is crucial to obtain and determine public reaction.