

Poles apart

Last week's *Courier* reported East Lothian Council's decision to refuse permission for an illuminated sign on a shop in Tranent on the grounds that it is 'harmful to the character and appearance of the building and the conservation area'.

The very same edition reported the installation, by East Lothian Council, of 57 unsightly parking cabinets and 141 poles, each 2.5m high and topped by a large sign, across the whole of historic North Berwick, including its conservation area. None of the poles had planning permission, and only some of the parking cabinets. No consultation whatsoever has taken place about most of the parking cabinets and all of the 141 poles. No assessment has been made of the impact of the scheme on the economy of the town or the viability of local businesses, or on the heritage, or on access. The irony is off the scale.

There are many reasons to object to the parking scheme now being imposed on North Berwick. Chief amongst them are the significant additional costs and massive inconvenience to residents, the adverse impact on businesses, especially those on our precious High Street, the increased difficulties of access with so much additional street clutter, and the adverse impact on the character and appearance of the conservation area – which East Lothian Council is statutorily bound to safeguard and enhance. But underlying them all is the extraordinary fact that North Berwick does not have a serious parking problem – as anyone who lives here will testify. The problem is entirely seasonal. Parking is only an issue on fine days in the summer and during Fringe by the Sea, but the new scheme does absolutely nothing to address this – it provides no extra parking at all for our visitors in the summer, while penalising those of us who live and work here all year round.

NB Heritage has repeatedly objected to the parking scheme on all these grounds, throughout the tortuous and highly questionable process that has brought us here – as have many hundreds or thousands of others. As well as all the obvious reasons to object, NB Heritage has always been concerned about the likely impact of the parking infrastructure on listed buildings, the conservation area and the wider historic townscape, but we never imagined that our Council would commit such an act of deliberate vandalism on our beautiful town and its famous seafront. Having closely followed every twist and turn of this long-running saga, we can confirm that there has been not one mention of the 141 poles in any of the published documents or in any of the consultations that have taken place.

Even the Councillors acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of residents and businesses of North Berwick oppose the parking scheme, but the Council has carried on regardless, spending an extraordinary amount of money to bring in a scheme that North Berwick does not want or need. And now they are planning to do the same to East Lothian's other historic towns: Haddington, Dunbar, Musselburgh and Tranent. In the case of North Berwick, Council officers usurped due process by failing to keep their promise of a public hearing, thereby preventing dialogue and independent assessment.

Statements put out by Council officers and Councillors suggest that what is happening in North Berwick follows extensive consultation, will bring a range of benefits, and does 'not have a detrimental impact on the conservation area'. This Trumpian word salad is nonsensical and duplicitous. The so-called 'consultations' were an exercise in futility since the Council had clearly already decided to go ahead. The so-called 'benefits' are highly dubious and not backed up by adequate environmental and economic impact assessment. And the assertion that the scheme would not have a detrimental impact on the conservation area is palpably untrue – as anyone with eyes can see when they look at the desecration that has been inflicted on our beautiful town.

In this, as in much else, East Lothian Council, its officers and Councillors, have lost the trust and confidence of its residents and businesses. In short, our failing Council and the communities it purports to serve are poles apart.

Empty street after empty street – but very few parked cars (pictures taken on a dry mid-morning in late January). Our Council is LYING to us. North Berwick does not need or want this parking scheme.



