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By Fred Searle

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## 'Toughest time in our history,' says New Covent Garden



Daniel Tomkinson at the CGMA lunch reception

### Head of tenants' association criticises market authority for running behind schedule and driving away customers at lunch reception

**N**ew Covent Garden is going through the "toughest time in its history", according to the market authority's chief executive Daniel Tomkinson, whose team faced a barrage of criticism over the ongoing redevelopment at its annual lunch reception.

Speaking at the event for tenants, Defra sponsors and members of the community, Tomkinson acknowledged that the construction project, which began in April 2015, "has had many problems", causing confidence and trust issues between the market authority and its tenants.

"It's had design challenges – some of them in consultation with our tenants; some of them have changed the numbers of buildings; some of them have moved the flower market into a temporary building rather than into the food exchange building.

"So there are sequences that have

changed and with those sequences has come different operational issues and different reasoning."

But he stressed that it was impossible to prepare the market for the future without causing some disruption to operations in the present.

"Without change there will not be a future, and the only way that we can deliver that change is by working alongside each other," he said.

Tomkinson spoke after an impassioned delivery by the head of the tenants' association, Gary Marshall, who roundly criticised Covent Garden Market Authority's (CGMA) handling and delivery of the project.

Marshall had been given an official slot to speak at the event after his impromptu intervention at last year's reception.

Marshall's main accusations – some of which were refuted by CGMA – were that

the redevelopment was almost a year behind schedule; was likely to take ten years to complete as opposed to seven; was running over budget; was "threatening the future of many companies"; and was "driving away customers" due to a lack of parking space.

He also criticised the temporary flower market, opened in April, for being too small and reducing customer footfall.

"These are just a few of the problems that are causing us great worry, destroying confidence and creating a complete lack of trust," he said.

Marshall also branded the market authority's plan to destroy the bridges that connect the two main market buildings as "complete unbelievable nonsense".

Responding to Marshall's speech, the market authority's director of business development Helen Evans said some of

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the information that Marshall gave was untrue, and that he was "exaggerating to make a point".

In particular, she said he was missing the point when he said the project was running over budget.

"The budget for the total project, set down by treasury, is £130 million," said Marshall. "We're only a fifth into the development and already the CGMA have spent £80m. That only leaves £50m and we haven't dug a hole in the ground yet."

But Evans stressed that this was missing the point, since a set price of £130m was agreed with developers Vinci and St Modwen Properties regardless of how much the project eventually costs.

She added: "We have consulted with tenants from the beginning and continue to do so. We have taken a number of their points on board."

By way of example, she mentioned the fact that the original plan to build four market buildings

was changed to three after consultation with the tenants' association so that the wholesale buyers' walk would be in the centre.

"We need to focus on getting a market that works, not going back five years and talking about a different plan," Evans said. "The current design has government approval and planning permission. That is what is being built."