

The Regency Society leaves the Conservation Advisory Group (Brighton and Hove City Council).

Statement by the Committee: July 2017

After much careful thought the trustees of the Regency Society have decided to withdraw from the Council's Conservation Advisory Group (CAG).

How CAG works

CAG was set up by the City Council to provide advice to the planners on conservation matters. It is made up of the representatives of local and national organisations. The Regency Society has always played an important role in the group and has provided its chair for a significant part of its life.

Many planning authorities have conservation advisory groups, but ours is unusual in that it can nominate a member to the Planning Committee. This member does not have a vote but is entitled to raise questions and contribute to the debate.

The group operates by considering planning applications which would have an impact on a conservation area or listed building. This usually results in an agreed recommendation to the planners either to approve or refuse a scheme. Reasons are given for the recommendation.

The group's decisions are not always unanimous, but once a majority decision has been made the members take collective responsibility for it and it is presented to the Planning Committee as the group's advice. On some occasions where views are closely split the group has not made any recommendation but simply reported views for and against an application.

How did things go wrong?

In September 2016 CAG considered an application for a large mixed-use development in Ellen Street, near Hove Station. There was considerable discussion with differing views being expressed. The final decision was to recommend approval while suggesting that the tallest building proposed should be reduced in height. It was not a unanimous decision but there was clear majority in favour.

The application was not considered by the Planning Committee until June 2017. The planning officer presented his report on the scheme, mentioning that CAG had "supported" it. He recommended refusal on the grounds that the plans did not include enough affordable housing. After considerable discussion the committee accepted the officer's recommendation and the application was refused.

CAG's substitute representative was present. His opening remark was that "it was not entirely true to say that CAG had supported the scheme". He said that there had

been a “divisive” discussion and the decision was not unanimous. He then went on to set out a number of conservation related reasons why he thought the scheme should be refused.

This was clearly a misrepresentation of CAG’s decision to recommend approval. The chair of CAG (Regency Society chair, Roger Hinton) raised the matter with the representative concerned but he was unwilling to accept that his remarks had been inappropriate.

The problem was then discussed by CAG and the chair proposed that he should write to the chair of the Planning Committee explaining what had happened and apologising for the confusion caused. This proposal was rejected by a majority of members. Some members were unhappy that the issue was being discussed at all: they felt it amounted to a “trial” of the member who had represented the group.

As a result of this outcome the chair of CAG resigned because he felt that the group was unwilling to recognise the seriousness of what had happened and that he no longer had the group’s support. A number of other CAG members shared this concern. The Council’s head of planning, the architect representing the scheme’s developer and a local councillor for the area have each written to CAG expressing concern about the way the group’s views were presented to the Planning Committee.

A proposal was put to the Regency Society trustees that the society should withdraw from membership. There was a lengthy discussion, during which it became clear that this incident was only one of a number of concerns that trustees have had about the way CAG makes and reports its decisions.

It was recognised that CAG does provide a valuable forum for different groups from throughout the city to meet and discuss matters related to conservation. It has also provided the main channel through which the Regency Society has pursued its primary charitable object to “promote ... the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and built environment of the city of Brighton and Hove”.

Now that the society has withdrawn from CAG, the trustees intend to establish new arrangements to ensure that the society continues to monitor development proposals throughout the city and comment where appropriate.

Trustees will monitor published planning applications to identify those which the society should review. These will be discussed at a regular Planning Forum meeting, just as applications on the CAG agenda have been in the past. Where comments are appropriate, the society will write to the planning officer concerned. Where there are major concerns the society’s views may be publicised more widely through the press and directly with the developer, as has been done in the past.

'The society will keep members informed of significant developments and the position we have taken on them. When appropriate we will invite comments and suggestions from members. The society's aim is to be well-informed, thoughtful and constructive when considering development proposals, rather than to perpetuate the obstructive and negative approach often evident elsewhere that has done no service to the city's development over so many years.

Two other organisations represented on CAG have also withdrawn from the group. The Regency Society trustees did not make the decision to leave CAG easily and regret that it was necessary. If CAG takes serious steps to deal with its present failings, the decision could of course be reversed. In the meantime trustees are confident that the new arrangements will ensure that the society continues to play a major role in protecting and improving our city.