

## **The Waterfront Project**

### **Introduction**

1. The purpose of this paper is to set out the current views of the Regency Society concerning the Waterfront Project.
2. The project is a partnership between Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) and Standard Life Investments (SLI). It proposes the development of a new conference and entertainment venue at Black Rock to replace the existing Brighton Centre in Kings Road. The Brighton Centre will be sold by BHCC to SLI who will demolish it along with the neighbouring Kingswest building, which it already owns. This will then allow SLI to expand the Churchill Square shopping centre southwards to the seafront.
3. The Regency Society has been following the progress of this project since early 2016 when it was discussed at our public forum about the future of the seafront. We are grateful to representatives of BHCC and SLI who have met with us to explain the project and respond to our questions about it.
4. The two elements of the project would together represent one of the most significant developments within our city for many years. The changes it would bring about will have wide-ranging environmental and economic effects. We have become increasingly concerned that the project is fundamentally flawed in a number of ways:
  - BHCC are close to the point of signing a major contract with SLI committing both parties to the project, apparently without having established clearly the business case for it;
  - there has been little if any public consultation about either element of the project;
  - there are serious questions about the suitability of the Black Rock site for a large venue, which the Council has not yet attempted to answer, namely its size, its accessibility and its proximity to the Kemp Town conservation area.
5. The rest of this paper sets out these concerns more fully and ends with three specific recommendations.

### **The business case for a new venue at Black Rock**

6. Any major investment project requires a business case; that is, a statement of why it is needed, together with evidence to demonstrate that the investment proposed is the best way to meet that need.
7. The proposal is to replace the Brighton Centre with a 10,000 seat venue, re-located at Black Rock. A business case to support this proposal would need to include:
  - evidence that the existing Brighton Centre is failing; we hope that the Council has figures demonstrating the decline in activity at the Brighton Centre;

- a statement of the project's objective, which we believe should be along the following lines: to replace the existing Brighton Centre in order to support the city's economy by attracting major events; while creating a new building which enhances the city's built environment
- evidence that a 10,000 seat venue of the kind proposed would meet this objective by attracting more events to the city;
- a feasibility study of the possibility of re-configuring the existing Brighton Centre site to house the new venue; we have been told that various schemes for the existing site have been considered and rejected, but no information about these schemes has been made public;
- identification and appraisal of a number of potential options such as alternative sites; the Council has simply announced that the new venue will be located at Black Rock;
- a "do nothing" or "do minimum" option should be included; this could involve retaining the Brighton Centre, perhaps updated to make it more attractive to potential users;
- explanations of how the potential alternative options could meet the requirements for a new venue, what the relative costs would be and how each option could be financed; no significant work has yet been done in solving the Black Rock site's problems of size, accessibility and impact on the conservation area;
- a reasoned conclusion as to which of the alternative options best meets the project's objective.

### **The need for public consultation**

8. If a business case along these lines does exist, it has not been made public. Sometimes it is said that a business case of this kind must remain confidential for commercial reasons. We accept that some aspects of the proposed agreement between BHCC and SLI may need to remain confidential. Even so, a general outline of the case for the Black Rock venue should by now have been subjected to public consultation.
9. We have been told that public consultation will take place when the planning applications are submitted for the two developments (at Black Rock and Churchill Square). There are of course opportunities for the public to comment on all planning applications, but in this case that is not good enough. The applications are unlikely to address the basic principle underlying the project, namely whether a 10,000 seat venue will boost the city's economy. Nor will they consider whether Black Rock is the best possible location for the venue.

### **The planning context**

10. The City Plan (DA1) proposes replacing the Brighton Centre with a new 25,000 sqm convention centre along with 20,000 sqm of new retail space within the existing Churchill Square / Kingswest / Brighton Centre site. Meanwhile it identifies the Black Rock site (DA2) as suitable for 7,000 sqm of leisure and entertainment space,

acknowledging the constraints of the site. Clearly the planning applications arising from the Waterfront Project will not be consistent with the City Plan. A proposal to deviate so significantly from the approved plan needs to be explained to the people of Brighton and Hove and should be subject to public consultation.

11. The planning decisions will be made by the Council's Planning Committee. In theory this committee is independent of the Council: it bases its decisions on the principles of planning law, on the City Plan and on related policies. In practice its members are democratically elected councilors. So, in a case like this, where a major development on Council owned land is being promoted by the Council, there is a potential conflict of interest: some at least of the Planning Committee members will have an interest in seeing the Council's plans approved. For this reason we suggest that the applications should be called in for determination by the Secretary of State.

### **The problems with the Black Rock Site**

12. We have four areas of concern about Black Rock as a location for a 10,000 seat venue:
  - i. The site is constrained on three sides by the cliffs, the marina wall and the sea. It may well be possible to construct a building of the required size on it, but we are not aware that BHCC has yet demonstrated how this can be done. The projected size of the venue is in excess of 25,000 sqm; the size of the site is around 11,000 sqm; these figures suggest that it would need to be a massive building that would rise close to or above the level of the coast road.
  - ii. It is not clear how up to 10,000 people can get to and from the venue without unacceptable levels of congestion and delay. The site is at the dead end of Madeira Drive. It is well over 3km from the station and badly served by public transport. This problem cannot be solved without a massive investment in infrastructure.
  - iii. Immediately to the north of the site is the Kemp Town conservation area which includes some of Britain's finest 19<sup>th</sup> century, sea-front architecture. Developments at the Marina have already had a detrimental impact on views towards and from the conservation area. This new development will be closer to it and is likely to have an unacceptable impact on the neighbouring heritage assets.
  - iv. The present Brighton Centre is located in the heart of the city, amongst numerous hotels, restaurants, bars and places of entertainment. These businesses serve users of the Centre, so its removal is likely to have a significant impact on the economy of the area. Event organisers may be less attracted to Brighton if its main venue is no longer located close to these city centre facilities and to the train station.

A good business case needs to identify these problems and explain, at least in outline, how they can be overcome. We have been told that work on feasibility studies to address these problems will not start until the agreement between BHCC and SLI has been signed. By then both parties will be committed to the project subject only to planning permission being granted for both sites.

13. Finally, in relation to the business case, BHCC has identified two aspects which are relevant to it. The first is that the site at Black Rock is already owned by the Council. The second is that the sale of the Brighton Centre to SLI will ensure that enough finance is available for the Black Rock development. These facts are important but they do not, on their own constitute a business case. They are enabling factors but they are not enough to demonstrate that the project should go ahead.

### **The Expansion of Churchill Square**

14. No doubt SLI has a business case to support its plans to expand Churchill Square. Since it is a commercial body we cannot expect it to make the detail of its case public. However, we can ask whether its plan is desirable for the city.
15. From our discussion with SLI we understand that the proposed expansion does not simply involve more of the same, namely large, rectangular chain stores. SLI recognises the changing nature of the retail industry. The proposal is to use the expansion to change the character of the mall, providing more catering, event and entertainment space, alongside the usual shops.
16. The development will also involve at least one new tall building to provide housing.
17. Many city centre malls, including the present Churchill Square are monolithic, visually unattractive structures which close off large areas of the city centre, making them accessible only during shopping hours. This does not need to be the case: the new Liverpool 1 development is a very successful example of how a shopping area can be created using existing street layouts and a range of different and interesting architectural styles.
18. We hope that any expansion of Churchill Square will be seen by SLI and by the planning authority as an opportunity to put right the failings of the existing mall. It also provides an opportunity to create an imaginative and iconic piece of new architecture on Kings Road. Visual improvements to the east side of Cannon Place would also be very welcome. The enlarged mall should integrate with its surroundings both visually and by allowing people to wander easily in and out.
19. An enlarged Churchill Square would undoubtedly impact on the viability of businesses in the surrounding shopping streets, particularly Western Road, North Street and East Street. These currently house national chain stores, such as M&S, French Connection, Primark and T K Max. It would be good to know if BHCC has considered the implications of several of these stores moving into the enlarged Churchill Square.

### **Conclusions**

20. On the basis of the information currently available the Regency Society is opposed to the development of a new venue at Black Rock.
21. We do not believe that an acceptable answer will be found to the transport problem mentioned above. We also believe that the development will have a detrimental impact on the character of the Kemp Town Conservation area.
22. At the same time we believe that more effort should be made to find a way of providing a new venue on the city centre site, while still allowing for an expansion of the Churchill

Square. For example, the current shopping floors could be extended southwards over Russell Road, dropping down in level to provide an entrance on Kings Road. Meanwhile a new venue of the size needed could be created on the site of the existing Brighton Centre, rising higher than the present building (which is currently lower than the neighbouring Grand Hotel). The Mall could even drop down again to create a shopping area below Kings Road with an entrance from the lower promenade. We are aware that schemes along these lines have been considered by the Council, but rejected as financially unviable. Further investigation of such schemes should be undertaken, possibly based on financing from enabling development on other sites owned by the Council, for example Black Rock.

### **Recommendations**

23. So, we will end with three suggestions. The first is that BHCC prepares a proper business case for replacement of the Brighton Centre, including serious analysis and appraisal of alternative options
24. The second is that BHCC publishes the business case and consults the people of Brighton and Hove about it.
25. The third is that, if and when the proposals for a venue at Black Rock and an expansion of Churchill Square do become planning applications, the Secretary of Site is invited to call them in, so as to avoid any conflict of interest on the part of Planning Committee members.

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