



Gasworks Campaign update

The long-awaited planning application for the Gasworks site was made public on 10th December. It didn't get off to a great start. Many of the 214 documents were in a sorry mess. Many were complex technical documents over one hundred pages long. Dozens were untitled.

We wrote to the Case Officer as follows:

"We are concerned... that the Design and Access Statement has been divided into 16 documents, none of which ... give any indication of their contents... Even worse (was) the Environmental Statement Vol.2 (which) has been cut up into 61(untitled) sections. This makes it virtually impossible ... to find and view the content without spending an enormous amount of time. Even we, who are used to trawling through planning applications, found it confusing and inconsistent. How Joe Public will be able to navigate this impenetrable arrangement is beyond us."

The council took a week to make the documentation less confusing, but it still isn't very clear. Dozens of documents still give no clue as to their contents. But the upshot of this mess was that the date when the public consultation officially started was delayed a week, to 17 December. Yes, just before we all downed tools to enjoy our Christmas break. Objections were due in by 21 January.

Please object

It's been a very hectic few weeks since then - and still is. Members of the Gasworks coalition, of which the Brighton Society is a member, have been meeting every week via Zoom to discuss the enormous number of issues raised by the application, our responses them and how best to organise the campaign on the ground, via social media and using the Brighton Society and AGHAST websites, to encourage as many objections as possible.

At the time of writing (2 February), there were around 650 objections - and they are still coming in. For comparison, there were about 130 objections against the huge Marina development which was recently turned down at appeal. At one point the planning department was overwhelmed!

Please - if you haven't lodged an objection yet - do so now. This is the worst planning application I have ever seen in my time as a member (and in recent years, as Chairman) of the Brighton Society. If you would like to object, here is the link to our website page which tells you how to do so and provides you with potential objection material: <https://t.co/nXZccRGDQs>

Objections can be lodged right up to the date of the planning committee hearing, which could be in mid-March, though the sooner they are lodged the more likely it is they will be noted in the Planning Officer's report to the committee. The Brighton Society objection runs to thirty pages - probably a record for us - the full document is on our website.



See double decker bus and tiny person for scale

Two important issues have come up recently.

The first is affordable housing. There is **no** affordable housing proposed in the planning application. This contravenes council policy. Under council rules the application should never have been validated in its current form. There is more about this in section 9 of our objection.

The second issue is Fire Safety. The Health & Safety Executive has lodged its strong concerns as it appears that the designs do not comply with new Fire Safety policies introduced in August last year, partially because of the Grenfell disaster. See section 5.5 of our objection.

Letter to councillors

The Gasworks Coalition emailed all councillors requesting that the planning application be withdrawn as it should never have been validated. We are waiting for a response before deciding our next steps. One option would be to ask the Secretary of State to call in the application on the grounds that the affordable housing and fire safety issues are of **national importance**.

The Chief Planning Officer, Liz Hobden, did respond to us, but far from allaying our concerns, she has increased them, and they were further inflamed by the publication of a council statement on the Planning Portal implying that the planning process is now subject to further discussions on design and affordable housing issues with the Berkeley Group. This added yet another layer of confusion.

Subsequently the council appears to have finally realised the extent of the opposition to this scheme and has now announced a further round of public consultation. Quite what that means is anybody's guess. We included the following comment in a long list of questions to the Head of Planning: *We are now in a sort of no-man's-land where the application is proceeding and the council is attempting to draw up an as-yet undefined list of further issues to discuss with the developer, the results of which will be put out for some form of public consultation, the timescale for which is unknown.*

We also asked about the status of the current application and whether the council and Berkeley were trying to force it through before the new government affordable housing measures, with their 25% First Homes requirement, come into force on 28 March. We queried again the acceptance of the application without either a commitment to 40% affordable housing or any documentation to justify a lower percentage.

We copied in all councillors and await a response.

Some good news

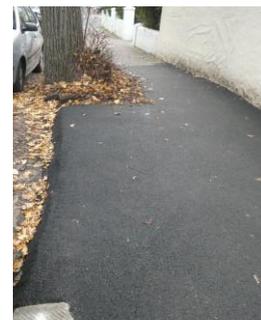
For some years we have been asking the Council not to redact information from our objections. Not only have they blacked out the name of the Society, our address and the name of the signatory but, even worse, they have refused to identify us on the list of objections on its website. So, in a case like this, with hundreds of objections, ours would disappear without trace into the middle of pages and pages of other anonymous objectors.

Previous requests for this to be changed were refused, so I asked again when I submitted our objection. This time it was agreed! It now stands out in the middle of all the others, but still has our address and my name as signatory redacted! My dreams of fame have been dashed.

There is yet more good news. Save Britain's Heritage has sent us a copy of its excellently argued objection to the Gasworks proposals. To have the strong support of such a nationally recognised heritage organisation is invaluable. We have also contacted Historic England. JM ♦

Tarmac pavements – a depressing saga of destruction

The use of tarmac by the council for repairing pavements has escalated since we covered the subject for our newsletter a year ago. We reported then on the destruction of hundreds of paving slabs in Preston Park Avenue where the footway has been replaced by tarmac for its complete length. Since then, similar treatment has occurred in Preston Drove, Westbourne Gardens and Woodland Drive. All these are within Conservation Areas (CAs) or on the boundary of one.



Photos 1 and 2

Photo 1 shows the huge number of paving slabs broken up in just one length of Preston Drove and photo 2 shows the completed "transformation". And this is within a CA where householders cannot alter their front garden walls without planning permission.

Getting any information on this policy has been unbelievably difficult: we get brief replies not addressing our questions or no replies at all. We asked last December why so much work was being carried out in CAs without any reference to the extensive CA planning controls; why good quality paving slabs were being broken up without any attempt to re-lay them; what further replacement work is planned; what consultation had occurred with residents and councillors; and why this policy was being implemented without any approval by a committee. Not unexpectedly no reply has been forthcoming.

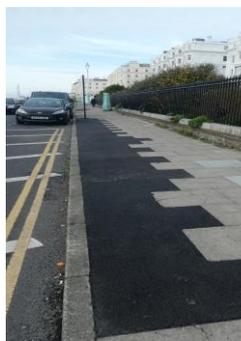
We have however managed to speak to the council's maintenance contractors, which brought even more depressing news. Paving marked with a cross signifies that it is a "potential trip hazard" and the contractor's instructions are to break it up and replace with tarmac. In many cases the paving could be re-laid but they are instructed not to assess whether this could be done – just break it up and replace with tarmac. All this adds to the unkempt, jumbled appearance of so many of our pavements with a hotchpotch of different materials.



Photo 3 above shows the results in Southover Street, one of the steepest roads in the city. Here the ribbed paving

has been removed and replaced with smooth tarmac. Ribbed paving was presumably used here by a more enlightened highways department to help pedestrians walk down the road in icy conditions. This does not seem to be a consideration today.

The lack of any detailed information is annoying, so we have had to spend days tracking down the answer to a question at the Environment, Transport and Sustainability Committee on 18th January. One of our members happened to hear it on a live webcast. We eventually found the recording of the meeting with Cllr Robert Nemeth asking the Chair, Amy Heley, about the use of tarmac for footway repairs. Her reply concentrated on how the use of tarmac would help with the council's aim for a low carbon future. Nothing about the appearance, nothing about the really low carbon solution of the re-laying paving slabs and nothing about submitting proposals to the relevant committees for scrutinization.



Photos 4 and 5

The latest result of this misguided policy is illustrated in photos 4 and 5. These "repairs" are on the north side of Marine Parade in front of Sussex Square – one of the most important examples of Regency Architecture in the city. They illustrate the council's answer to pavement maintenance. Interestingly, they have chosen a stretch of paving with the remains of one of the dismantled listed lampposts.

How can staff in Highways or councillors responsible for the actions of Highways staff consider that this policy of tarmac repairs is an acceptable solution?

Where has Civic Pride gone?

MD ♦

A mess of unimaginative buildings

In recent years the city has been transformed by unimaginative huge developments that have pretensions to stylish architectural significance. These new builds seem to be fashioned from recycled design and presented to the public in glossy CGI fantasy brochures and display boards, the reality being miles away from the developer's hyped-up rhetoric.

A recent Argus article showed the smiling faces of councillors and developers posing for a photo op in front of the newly opened Circus Street development. Their smiles belie the dull, dark buildings behind them: perhaps when you are a happy smiling person in authority looking forward you might miss what's behind you. Circus Street and the Preston Barracks development are a mess of generic and unimaginative buildings, with the odd kitsch

embellishment. Like most tall, dense structures, they bully their way into the urban realm to the detriment of the surrounding area via the political power base of the oligopolistic housing building industry.



Preston Barracks site © Brighton Society

Tall buildings may be today's fashionable alternative to low-rise high-density developments, but tall buildings are not like some dress or jacket you pick off the retail hanger which in a couple of months you discard. These out-of-scale blocks of glass and concrete are with us for decades and will set a precedent for more of their kind.

There is a pressing need to build on available urban land; a need to build homes not rabbit hutches, homes that respect people, homes that have a positive impact on the individual's wellbeing, homes that are low-rise and bring a real sense of community, not some CGI mock-up photograph with visual trickery to seduce the viewer into a developer's make believe.



Circus Street © Brighton Society

Professor Steffen Lehmann from the University of Portsmouth, writing for *Create Streets*, suggests that when it comes to the built environment, the citizen and not the profits of the developers, many of whom don't have a stake-hold in the city, should be the first consideration. The Brighton Society agrees with this view and has in the last two years worked with other societies and community groups to bring them together to form a powerful coalition to challenge out-of-scale, badly thought through large developments presented in planning applications. We invite you to join us in our quest to improve your city. More information can be found on our website. AG ♦

SUBSCRIPTIONS are due on 1st April!
See details on the website

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The failure of our political class

Across the twenty years I've lived in this city it has become apparent that when citizens voice an objection to something the council is doing others are keen to point out a basic flaw. Namely, *citizens* are responsible for placing a council administration in power. If we are unhappy, runs the argument, then the ballot box can fix it. Setting aside the myriad debates on how just or fair our electoral system is (and briefly noting that the Green Party administration did not assume control last summer as a result of an election), the idea that the people get the council they deserve merits some investigation.

Newsletter readers will know that on these pages and on the Brighton Society's website our scrutiny of suspect large-scale planning applications and their frequent approval by the council increasingly highlight the issue of public awareness. In a nutshell, if residents citywide know of a grotesque over-development looming on the horizon early enough they might have a chance to oppose. They may even propose something much better, something orientated around environmental and human needs.

The ongoing campaign to oppose a development at the old gasworks site in east Brighton is a case in point. Civic groups like the Brighton Society, the Regency Society and an array of community groups across the city have come together to oppose the proposals. Importantly, they were able to catch on to the true nature of the proposals long before the application was logged. Through these groups, significant numbers of the public have been made aware of the plans and galvanised to register objections (please note: more objections are needed).

Bitter experience tells us that getting wind of a juggernaut of unscrupulous development inching its way toward us is key. West of the gasworks, the 2018 neighbourhood campaign for a better solution to the old Amex site was denied this head start. Residents were reassured by council drawings published in 2013 extolling the virtues of the *Edward Street Quarter*. The vision was sensitive to the community and the surrounding built environment. Unaware that backroom decisions about an entirely different development *had already been made*, the reality revealed by 'notice of application' letters tied to lampposts came as a shock. From this moment in February 2018, the statutory clock began ticking all the way to the July hearing. Over the years (though with a few uplifting exceptions) some of these hearings may as well have been theatre scripts written long in advance.

The murky quasi-judicial world of planning departments is undemocratic. If planning officers having meetings with developers behind closed doors isn't troubling enough then consider the PR and 'events' organisers that developers deploy. In 2018, this included the so-called 'community' dinner held for neighbours close to the Amex site (but mostly for Argus photographers). Here the Mayor sat alongside residents bussed in from far and wide. Consider the case of the University of Brighton students tricked into sending letters approving the development when really they thought it was just a questionnaire ('A café would be nice' was one of many 'approval' comments that appeared on the council's planning portal as a counterweight to the detailed letters of resident objectors).

My personal chilling favourite is cited in Anna Minton's excellent book *Big Capital*. She describes the 2008 plans to demolish the King Alfred sports centre on Hove seafront. Based on Frank Gehry designs for 750 luxury apartments, the project generated sufficient public controversy to warrant a surprisingly corny but no less shocking tactic. Minton describes how an events company was hired to approach local drama students and, according to one student, offered 'cash in brown envelopes' to attend a planning meeting and 'shout down the local opposition'.



Our elected representatives seldom act as ward lookouts.

Dangers appear on the horizon and very often councillors know but don't tell us.

And the ship sails on.

Of course, the notion of Brighton and Hove's 'political class' should not be applied to senior officers alone. Increasingly, new and inexperienced councillors rely on officers to guide them through all aspects of governance, be it planning or environment and transport, schools strategies, budgets or anything else. Our council is more or less a technocracy. As such, it has scant regard for democratic process. In turn, officers rely on elected councillors to go along with their 'recommendations'. So long as diligent councillors are spread thin with party matters and putting out the fires started by ill-conceived policy, time devoted to constituents is compressed. Little wonder that the less than diligent councillors make their constituents a low priority.

This is why our city needs a dramatic shift. A new era of independent councillors derived from civic life and community and business enterprise would breathe oxygen back into local democracy. Opposed to the byzantine ways of Hove Town Hall and the tribalism of parties, independents can embody outlook diversity but still agree on the things most people want. As the big parties disintegrate, the election of independents might one day influence a shift toward a council that becomes largely invisible. In this model the town hall becomes a machine that simply serves citizens by maintaining (occasionally enacting) the basic conditions of a functioning city. Gone would be the strategies and vanity projects cooked up by powerful officers and party ideologues with little or no public consultation. I note that independent councillor Bridget Fishleigh is offering the city a lightning rod for achieving this very thing.

AH ♦