

Report

Brighton & Hove City Charrette

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Background

On 20th March 2017, 80 people debated 10 critical issues for the future of Brighton and Hove. After hearing from 4 speakers, participants worked in facilitated groups, exploring the challenges the city faced and collaborating on solutions. This report documents the findings of this city charrette. Organised and facilitated by Design South East on behalf of Brighton & Hove City Council, the charrette was held at and hosted by British Airways i360 and was sponsored by British Airways i360, Marks Barfield Architects, RIBA Sussex Branch, DMH Stallard, Platinum Business Magazine, Kreston Reeves, First Base Business and supported by the Brighton & Hove Chamber of Commerce.

Summary

Brighton & Hove is defined by its setting between the sea and a soft place: the South Downs.

Because this is a contained city, it is also a compact city with many walkable neighbourhoods. But there is a need for a movement strategy, one in which the roles of bus, rail and cycling as well as walking are recognised, and future possibilities such as a tram or a new transport technology are embraced. The starting point should be a detailed survey of how streets are used at all times of day and evening. Delivering the strategy will require partnerships in order to create and implement transport changes and improvements to the city's streets and public places; digital technology could play an important role.

Young and older populations appear to be polarised. The younger population need new ways of engaging in the conservation and enhancement of the city's valued historic fabric. Often well cared for, the historic fabric contrasts with much of the city fabric, which is tired, dilapidated and shabby despite the city's successful economy. How can this be addressed?

The city's population is entrepreneurial and diverse in character, but there appears to be no tangible vision for the future city. A clear vision and narrative for the future will help civic engagement and will help to attract business, investment, skilled workers and students.

Accommodating increasing demand for homes will be a critical issue. Could there be a digital model and a 'place' where everyone can find out about new projects and where emerging plans are illustrated in 3D to show how taller, denser development will be integrated into the fabric of the city?

Four talks to set the scene for the charrette

Julia Barfield, of Marks Barfield Architects spoke talked about the history and value of seeing places from above, birds-eye artists' impressions were common even in the 19th century before air travel. She outlined Brighton's past technological advances such as the electric railway and described the importance of innovation in the context of this history and the role the i360 will play in taking the city into the 21st century.

Nick Hibberd of Brighton & Hove City Council reflected on the changes that young people will see as they will live longer on average than previous generations. Existing jobs will be automated and new jobs will be created that have not even yet been imagined. A City Plan needs to help increase housing affordability, but also to recognise the need for a social mix. Great cities need great leadership, but we are all place-makers so everyone needs to become engaged in the process. Digital models and apps could help; in New York volunteers are using GPS to locate the city's trees.

Dr Andy Brown of Historic England suggested that 50 years after the original legislation was passed, the aims of Conservation Areas should be revisited. The effect of the legislation has been to restrict development, resulting in higher house prices, even though the aim of the legislation was to protect whole areas for the public good - not for individual owners' interests. If younger people will never aspire to owning homes in the Conservation Areas because the house prices have risen so fast, why will they want to preserve the status quo? Andy hinted at the risk of resentment by them in future if they do not see the value of a policy of protectiveness. How can we both enhance existing heritage and deliver good new development designed to provide places to live and work in?

Claire Bennie, Brighton & Hove Design PLACE Panel Vice Chair, summarised the evidence of a rapid growth in jobs leading to a young and growing population that, together with longevity, is causing natural population growth and rising housing demand. So where will we live? She suggested rethinking the fit between size of family and size of home, so that empty rooms in larger houses are released and wondered whether a new, cross-generational type of neighbourhood living could be considered as part of the solution.

The warm up sessions – identifying the character of the city, and its challenges and opportunities

The City of Brighton & Hove has an expanding population of diverse residents and enterprising businesses, with an enviably strong and growing economy. Centre for Cities data reveals that of the cities it studied, Brighton is the highest exporter of services per job after London and Edinburgh (Box 2 page 14, Cities Outlook 2017, Centre for Cities). But despite creative people living here, much of the built fabric feels tired and unexciting, particularly the 20th century interventions in the centre, and this presents a great contrast to the dynamism

of the people. It can be hard for the younger people to build a life in this city, if housing within their price range is not available. Also of concern is the need to address the pockets of deprivation and the lack of communication between the young and older populations. We need a clear and shared vision of what the city could be and more confidence, leadership, direction and ambition to deliver it.

Working in groups to tackle the key issues

1. Where will the people live?

Lack of space means there will need to be greater density of development on the sites that do become available, but sites need to also deliver affordable homes. What factors might motivate under-occupiers to move? There are some 80,000 or more 'spare' bedrooms in the City.

2. Developing the urban fringe

The City is physically constrained to north and south by beautiful protected countryside and has a marine biosphere also deserving of protection. A review of all the options beyond the constrained city boundary could help but the South Downs has to meet its own housing needs as well as reflect its environmental constraints. With locations on the urban fringes such as Ovingdean, Woodingdean and Rottingdean wanting to keep village character and not raise building heights, how do we absorb an increase in housing? Some radical solutions are needed. The potential to develop on the fringes, along the coast and on the seafront can be explored. Could we consider, as the Dutch do, creating more space from the sea?

3. Transport and connectivity

The city's transport links are vital to its future, so creating and communicating a transport and a public space strategy are critical. In so doing, let's remember that transport connectivity offers an opportunity to spread cultural activities in the public spaces more widely across the city. In the long term should the city be constraining the car and using the seafront as a corridor for new transport solutions? A survey could reveal the use of spaces through both day and evening, and the variety of demands on key spaces and help determine how to allocate street spaces and find places for street furniture and trees. In particular more information is needed on pavement use at the very busy nodes for bus stops, crossing points, and meeting places.

4. How can Conservation Areas change and develop in the 21st century?

People and organisations are attracted to the city by the quality of the environment and the historic fabric of the city. Though policy is used to limit change to buildings, in practice the character at the public street level is

eroded with parked cars, traffic signs, front gardens lost to parking and other interventions that alter character. Meanwhile residents complain, but do not offer good solutions to problems? Can new design in the Conservation Areas reflect the existing historical forms that are already at a high density? Engaging younger residents could be explored through existing and new web sites. Could we explore co-living development in which different ages co-exist in multi-generational groups? There could be scope to explore ways of modifying Georgian houses for cross-generation living at higher occupancy levels in existing built-up areas.

5. Communicating a vision

Though emerging, there is not a clear vision for the city's future. The use of apps and digital models to convey data on, for example, transport assessment modelling could turn a very dry topic into something readily understood. With a digital city model everyone can visualise the future options, and it would be easier for a wider audience to become engaged. Some very good work with children is already underway and a 3D model of part of the city is already being trialled; both could be foundations to build on.

6. The role of the seafront

The seafront is Brighton's jewel, but at night certain areas such as Madeira Drive are unattractive and a street lighting strategy is needed for this area. The Volks Electric Railway was a technological leader when it opened, so could a new transport system for this century be used to extend it along the seafront? A Zoning strategy for the seafront, which is some 9 miles, 14.4 kilometres or just over a half marathon in length, could help - especially if the western end becomes zoned for family and children's sporting and leisure activities. The strategy could help the western end to attract more investment. There is a need for new indoor cultural attractions such as an art gallery and merit in exploring the potential for extending the Coastal Culture Trail on the South Coast to Brighton.

7. The impact of shared housing

The city provides temporary homes for a considerable student population, so it can feel transient. How could young skilled citizens be encouraged to stay and work in the city when they graduate? Second and third year students could be dispersed to Portslade and other areas if transport links are good, so central areas would have less impact from housing being taken over by students. Purpose built student accommodation will also help to free up family homes to return to families. Experience in Copenhagen of mixing accommodation for the students and young professionals is worth exploring.

8. Densifying around the stations

All major sites, including the station hubs, need to be seen within the overall city

context - there are consequences to a policy of densifying such as increased air pollution and pressure on amenity spaces. One way forward is to segment the housing market into sectors, and explore which sectors could be prepared to move to smaller homes or to new locations.

9. Public spaces and cultural events

Existing open spaces need to be made more attractive, and suitable streets modified for children to play on, adding street furniture and trees, and closing through traffic. A car-free city should be a long-term goal, with pedestrianised or shared streets it can offer spaces for cultural events, particularly when they are close to cultural venues such as in New Road.

10. Brighton's place in the wider region and the world

In a post-Brexit world, uncertainty is our biggest challenge and we need to be agile to respond and create a world-class destination. The whole city-region needs to face the challenge of where people will live, and attracting consistent future investment will rely on a clear plan and a consensus to support it. Space to support both the large businesses and the ecosystem of smaller supporting businesses should not be overlooked in the search for sites to meet the housing demands. A new conference centre would help greatly.

Where next?

Geoff Raw, Chief Executive of the Council, resolved to explore several initiatives in support of the outcomes of the charrette:

- Implement a digital 3D model
- Prepare a transport strategy, backed up by a survey of uses of streets and pavements to help decisions on how to allocate space
- Explore new innovative housing solutions: sharing across generations and mixing students and young professional workers as a single market sector.
- Zone uses along the 14 kilometres of seafront, and consider areas that could take denser development
- Use quiet streets by families for recreation and amenity, and in the long term, explore the potential for a car-free city.

For more information on this charrette and further events contact Design South East on 01634 401166

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