



Save Dreamland Campaign

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Dear Councillor

Thanet Local Plan: Council Meeting, 19 January 2006

On 19 January, you are being asked to consider the Inspector's Report on the Public Inquiry into objections to the Thanet Local Plan and to consider what actions to take on his recommendations. We are writing regarding Chapter 8 – Tourism and specifically Policy T11 (Dreamland), which has aroused so much local interest.

The Save Dreamland Campaign now speaks on behalf of several thousand local residents, businesses, visitors to Margate and a number of key local organisations (our total membership numbers around 14,000). We have some fundamental concerns regarding the advice contained in your officer's report, which suggests that the Council rejects the Inspector's recommendations. Your officer appears to have misunderstood the crucial points made by the Inspector. In this letter, I set out briefly why we consider this to be the case and what we consider is the likely outcome if you choose to proceed on the basis of your officer's recommendations.

Firstly, we wish to clear up a misconception. Mr Fitt repeatedly states in his report that he considers that Dreamland is not viable. We have never been persuaded by that argument, nor was the Inspector. It is merely what the owners would like the Council to believe, so that they can release this important site for redevelopment. We know for a fact that the fairground operator who ran the park in 2003 and 2004 had success with the park – he told the media at the end of the seasons! We also know that a number of well-established amusement park operators are willing to acquire the site at full, independently-assessed open market value for an amusement park (not residential or retail value) and invest millions of pounds in new rides and attractions. This includes Philip Miller MBE, the owner of Southend's massively successful, 52 weeks-a-year Adventure Island, who presented compelling evidence to the Inquiry (enclosed). The Inspector was under no illusion that the 'problems' with Dreamland are problems of management (see paragraphs 77, 83 and 99 of his Report) – he was convinced that the park could thrive. So are we. And so, it appears from the recent consultations, are most of Margate's residents.

I now turn to the options put forward by your officer.

Option A is to reject the Inspector's recommendations. Your officer states that "this is the quickest way to achieving the Council's aspirations for the site". We question what those aspirations are, as they have not yet been made clear, a fact the Inspector criticised. They are certainly not the aspirations of the people of Margate. This option will result in an unprecedented amount of objections to the Plan, and (as the Inspector clearly stated) will lead to the loss of an important tourist attraction, raise hope values, and perhaps result in dereliction. This Option must be dismissed.

Option B is to accept the Inspector's recommendations. We won't repeat the points made by the Inspector. His reasoning is absolutely clear and his conclusions sound.

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We do want to clarify a point in your officer's report that we consider disingenuous, and which seriously undermines his advice. There are references to 'opportunities' in the report, as if having millions of pounds invested in a modern, family amusement park is not an opportunity. But what are the opportunities referred to by your officer? The site has been available since December 2002 and – even without any policy protecting it – not one single opportunity has come forward. Even the consultants behind the Margate Masterplan could not identify a specific opportunity for a visitor attraction on the site. There is, of course, one opportunity on the table and it has been there for two years: the revitalisation of Dreamland as a modern, year-round family amusement park, an opportunity that has been confirmed in writing by more than one leading operator. As the Inspector clearly stated, that opportunity is unlikely to be realised if the Policy does not revert to its original wording.

Option C is what I call the 'fudge' option. I am absolutely certain that it is little better than Option A and would be unlikely to have found much support from the Inspector.

The fundamental point that your officer appears to have missed is that of the implications of land value. The Council's case at the Inquiry was that the redrafted policy did not preclude the use of the site as an amusement park. But that is exactly what it did. With the prospect of uses such as residential, retail and commercial leisure (as opposed to the much less valuable tourist attraction use), it made it impossible for any amusement park operator to acquire the site. I know that more than one established operator has had talks with the owners regarding acquisition of the park and offers have been made. The owner was holding out for a much bigger prize. A great opportunity, which we believe will be the catalyst for the regeneration of Margate, will be lost because of the inflated land value the Council has created.

The Inspector was not persuaded by the Council's arguments, nor was he persuaded by their proposed policy wording:

“Such a ‘policy’ maximises speculative interest in the site and encourages hope-values beyond any ordinary expectation.” (Para 93)

Your officer states that Option C “allows amusement park issues to be explored”, but he also states that Option B may not succeed because “hope values may well have been raised”. Your officer does not appear to recognise the contradiction in that statement. If you are in any doubt that Option C is flawed, ask yourself this question. If your officer is concerned that hope values will prevent the continuation of the amusement park under Option B (the Inspector's recommended option), then how can the Council realistically expect the amusement park to have any hope of remaining under Option C, where the carrot of redevelopment is dangled in front of the owner? The fact that your officer appears to believe that this policy can possibly go any way to addressing the Inspector's concerns quite simply beggars belief. (And don't forget, it is the Council that has “raised expectations unrealistically” [the Inspector's words] in the first place – two wrongs don't make a right!)

If Option B is chosen, we are confident that the developers will bring on board an amusement park operator as part of the overall redevelopment, who will invest the millions of pounds required for the continuation of a permanent amusement park on the site. If Option C is chosen, there is no incentive to do this so the best we can hope for is a travelling fairground operation, similar to the last three years, with no investment in infrastructure, landscaping or permanent rides and attractions. The aim will be to demonstrate that an amusement park is not viable to allow the developer to progress with a more lucrative development. There is already evidence of this, as an advert has been placed in the travelling fairground trade newspaper 'World's Fair' offering a short-term lease of up to three years "pending redevelopment".

I would also like to highlight another major flaw in Option C: its treatment of the Scenic Railway. Whilst we welcome recognition of the structure in the Policy, the idea that the Scenic Railway should be retained in a “parkland” or “green park” setting suggests a complete misunderstanding of listed building legislation. I assume this ‘idea’ came from the discredited Margate Masterplan, about which the Inspector said:

“[The Margate Masterplan] shows the retention of the Scenic Railway in situ, as the centre of a landmark open space, and the Cinema on the frontage as a key historic landmark. This Framework is based on a false assumption that the amusement park is no longer in operation.” (Para 102)

The Inspector was unequivocal about the Scenic Railway:

“The setting of the [Scenic Railway] is also to be conserved, in accordance with Government policy in PPG15. This restriction would seriously prejudice any proposal to use the site for anything other than an amusement park.” (Para 93)

What is now proposed in the plan is no more appropriate a setting for the Scenic Railway than a car park or a housing estate. It cannot be acceptable for a Local Plan policy to specifically encourage the loss of a listed building’s setting when that setting has statutory protection! For this reason, Option C will almost certainly result in a very strong objection from English Heritage. Being the Government’s statutory adviser on the historic environment, this will significantly increase the chances of the Plan being called in by the Secretary of State, with all the delay and embarrassment this will cause. We will be making the strongest possible representations to English Heritage and the Government Office if the Council takes this ill-judged approach.

A Way Forward

The UK planning system is plan-led: this gives certainty to communities and to businesses. The Inspector was highly critical of the Council’s policy on Dreamland because it failed to meet this requirement. As I hope I have demonstrated, Option C also fails on this front. It will simply result in further delays, prolonged uncertainty and undoubtedly the loss of Thanet’s biggest tourist attraction.

The Save Dreamland Campaign now asks you to take a step back from the Planning Manager’s report, and carefully consider what the Inspector recommended. He had heard all the arguments and his conclusions were unequivocal. If you are still in any doubt about how to vote, please also consider the massive amount of consultation that the Council has undertaken on this subject over the past two years and the response that the people of Thanet have made every time. The original policy (Option B) was virtually unopposed. The revised policy (Option A) resulted in a large amount of objections. 44% of all responses to the Margate Masterplan were on Dreamland, with almost all of them strongly supporting the use of the site for a major amusement park (even though that wasn’t an option!). The view was that the Council should be steadfast in its opposition to retail and housing development on the site.

We are asking you to listen to the residents and businesses of Margate, whose views have been affirmed by the independent Inspector, and do everything you can on 19 January to ensure that Option B is chosen as the best way forward for Margate.

Yours Sincerely
for the Save Dreamland Campaign

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