



Save Dreamland Campaign

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Samantha Cannon
Economic Development and Regeneration
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Dear Ms Cannon

A Strategic Urban Design Framework for Central Margate

Please find enclosed the detailed comments of the Save Dreamland Campaign on the above document.

The Save Dreamland Campaign speaks on behalf of over 13,000 people and organisations who are all concerned about the impact the closure of Dreamland will have on Margate's economy and heritage. Our membership includes, amongst others, the Margate Civic Society, Isle of Thanet Hotel and Guest House Association and the Margate Historical Society.

The enclosed document sets out in our comments in detail; however, we set out below a number of wider concerns about the document (hereafter referred to as the 'Margate Masterplan') and pose several questions, to which we would appreciate a response.

Our first concern relates to Page 35 of the document. We are extremely concerned that Page 35 of the document is the only mention by the consultants of the possibility of Dreamland continuing as an amusement park. And even here it is dismissed on the basis of poor research. Whilst it is correct that "the market has moved on in product terms" from the sort of attraction operated by the site's current owner, it would be wholly incorrect to suggest that the entire market for seaside amusement parks has moved on. There are many successful seaside amusement parks around Britain. Some, such as Southend's Adventure Island and Southport's Pleasureland have seen large increases in visitor numbers over recent years following investment and have been one of the main catalysts for their respective resort's regeneration. These - and many other seaside parks - are attractive, modern family days out, and are profitable businesses.

Whilst it is correct to state that "modern theme parks [are] generally larger than Dreamland" it is, of course, entirely disingenuous in the context of this report because Dreamland is not a theme park; it is an amusement park. Whilst most inland theme parks are bigger than Dreamland, Dreamland is actually one of the largest seaside amusement parks in the country (the Save Dreamland Campaign has researched the site area of all the UK's coastal parks; this information can be made available on request). In fact, it has been confirmed to the Save Dreamland Campaign by more

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than one established operator that Dreamland would remain viable even if it were substantially smaller (perhaps even at only 50% of its current size). The preferred option, however, appears to be a continuation of the park at its present size.

The consultants do not appear to be aware that two established amusement park operators have confirmed their intention to acquire the site at full independently-assessed market value and invest millions of pounds in its rides and infrastructure. It is believed that this investment would return Dreamland to the major regional tourist attraction that it was before it was acquired by the present owner. We know that the consultants were not aware of this because the representative from Tibbalds Planning & Urban Design Ltd (the lead consultants) confirmed this at the stakeholders consultation meeting on 30 March 2004.

For the avoidance of doubt, a letter from Stockvale Ltd, the owners of Adventure Island Theme Park at Southend-on-Sea, is enclosed. This confirms that they have already offered full market value for the site and the offer has been refused. Adventure Island is generally regarded as one of the UK's best and most successful family amusement parks, having increased its visitor numbers from 750,000 to 1.5 million over the past five or six years. This is due to the investment and skilful operation of the park by Mr Philip Miller MBE. Most commentators agree that the growth in popularity of Adventure Island has been the main catalyst for the regeneration of Southend's sea front area over the past ten years. Having succeeded in Southend, Mr Miller now proposes to invest the same time and effort into Margate. This would be of huge benefit to the town, and would complement the investment in the Turner Centre at the opposite end of the sea front.

We can also confirm that Grevin & Cie, France's largest and one of Europe's premier operators of family amusement parks, has a serious interest in acquiring Dreamland. The Company has visited the park on several occasions but has so far not managed to agree terms with Dreamland's owner. With a chain of parks across France, Germany, Holland and Switzerland - including Parc Astérix in Paris - this would be the Company's first UK operation, a major coup for Margate.

In our opinion, the consultants should have known this. Some basic research would have revealed the interest of these companies in investing in Margate, and no doubt several more. This lack of knowledge and research seriously undermines the report and renders its conclusions virtually meaningless.

Our members are also extremely disappointed at the list of alternative options for the site put forward in the report. Perhaps with the exception of the proposed resort casino, not one of the options would act as a tourist attraction. Dreamland, even in its current run-down state, brings in almost 700,000 tourists to Margate every year (the advice we have received from the industry is that it should comfortably bring in around 1.5 million when operated by a committed owner). Almost all of the options in the report are the sort of leisure facilities that can be seen in almost any town in Britain; they would certainly not draw families into Margate in anything like the numbers that Dreamland does. The options, we consider, are seriously underselling Margate.

What is particularly galling, given the consultants' apparent lack of confidence that any of these proposals will come forward in the short to medium term, is that continuation of the site as a new-look, upgraded amusement park is not even included as an option. That is ironic as this is the only proposal currently on the table and is the one option that would be most beneficial to the future of the town as a seaside resort!

There are numerous other inaccuracies and/or ill-informed suggestions in the report, some concerning the Scenic Railway. For example, the consultants have clearly not

interviewed the people who maintained the ride for the past 25 years; had they done so they would know that it is neither possible nor economically viable to move the ride. They should also have known that there are no other suitable sites available in Margate (again particularly exasperating when we know that the ride currently stands on a site that is allocated for amusement park use and is viable). There is also no context on the international importance and rarity of the ride (we can provide letters from leading international historians confirming the status of the ride, something I was not fully aware of when I wrote to English Heritage in 2001 asking for the ride to be listed).

If only the consultants had properly consulted the Save Dreamland Campaign – as we were promised – a substantial proportion of these serious errors and shortcomings could have been overcome.

Whilst the above points, and the enclosed notes, raise a large number of very serious questions, we would at least ask for answers to the following:

1. Why is there no analysis within the report of the benefits to Margate of retaining a major regional tourist attraction in the town? The report seems to be predicated (virtually from page one) on Dreamland being redeveloped and lost.
2. Why did the consultants not undertake proper research to investigate whether the continuation of an amusement park would actually be viable? Why did they not look at case studies elsewhere in the UK? Why were they not aware that established operators have made offers to acquire the site and invest in modern rides and facilities?
3. When considering the future of the Scenic Railway, why was the option of retaining the ride within an amusement park dropped from the list of options in Question 5 of the Questionnaire? This is particularly inimical as it was one of the options listed within the main report?
4. The point that aroused perhaps the greatest amount of anger from our members (on the basis of the number of emails Sarah Vickery and I have received) was the loaded nature of Question 5. Why was the question worded in such a way that redevelopment of the site was implicit, when the retention of the Scenic Railway within an amusement park was an option put forward by the consultants in the report? This particular point is completely unacceptable and – in our view – invalidates the entire consultation exercise.
5. Will the exercise be undertaken again without loaded questions to allow the people of Margate – the people this very Masterplan will affect – a chance to have their voices heard?

Margate deserves more than this extremely poor piece of work. We hope that the Council will reject the findings of the Study pending more work on the part of the consultants. Margate's future – and its unique heritage - is far too important to be thrown away on the basis of this poorly researched, ill-informed and unimaginative Masterplan/Design Framework.

This letter has been posted on the Save Dreamland Campaign website. We look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.

Yours Sincerely
for the Save Dreamland Campaign

Nick Laister BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI MIPI MIHT
Campaign Leader

Enc. Letter from Stockvale Ltd to Save Dreamland Campaign dated 23 March
2004

cc. Sandy Ezekiel, TDC
Richard Samuel, TDC