

BLACKPOOL COUNCIL
REPORT
of the
HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
to
THE GATEWAY AREA PANEL

THE GATEWAY AREA FORUM MEETING
HELD ON WEDNESDAY 21ST JULY 2010

1. Introduction

The Chairman of the Area Forum and Ward Councillor for Brunswick, Councillor Gary Coleman welcomed members of the community to the meeting. He introduced his co-Ward Councillor for Brunswick, Councillor Simon Blackburn and the Councillors for the other Wards that represented The Gateway Area Forum Councillors Ivan and Mrs Sylvia Taylor (Claremont). He also tendered apologies on behalf of Talbot ward Councillors Ron and Gary Bell, who due to the rescheduling of the meeting and prior commitments were unable to attend the meeting. Councillor Coleman introduced Mr John Donnellon, Assistant Director - Housing, Planning and Transport, Blackpool Council and Mrs Yvonne Ablett, Democratic Services, Blackpool Council.

He also raised awareness of the forthcoming January Forum at which there would be an election of three Community Members. Councillor Coleman reported that nomination forms were available at the meeting for anyone interested in becoming a member. He added that the Panel was responsible for the role of the Forum and the approval of Area Panel funding.

Councillor Coleman explained that the evening would consist of a presentation from Mr Graham Page, Group Planning Officer, Blackpool Council regarding the Core Strategy and would include the opportunity to ask questions.

2. Context

The Area Panel at its meeting held on 11th May had agreed that the theme of the Area Forum would be to consider the proposed consider the implications of the Blackpool Core Strategy Preferred Option document.

3. Theme

Mr Graham Page, Group Planning Officer, Blackpool Council explained that the Core Strategy was a new plan designed to focus on the big issues and difficult choices about Blackpool's future development over the next 10 to 15 years. He added that the focus of the Strategy was distinctly on the regeneration of the inner areas with the potential supporting growth in the Marton Moss/ M55 area.

He reported that the big issue was the promotion of a 21st century resort and town centre offer and the regeneration of the resort neighbourhoods. Mr Page explained that the success of the Town Centre impacted widely on the rest of the town and this was evident with the development of new buildings and open spaces e.g. Hounds Hill expansion, St Johns Square and Clifton/ Birley Street. He added that irrespective of

the withdrawal of some public sector funding the development of both the Talbot Gateway and the Winter Gardens would continue.

The Forum was advised that the proposals for the Town Centre included:

- High Quality niche shopping
- Development of Blackpool's café culture
- Attractive public spaces
- Enhancement of the Winter Gardens
- New Promenade Leisure frontage.

Mr Page explained that due to the withdrawal of Government funding, the site at Rigby Road was now likely to provide new quality housing on a mixed-use development.

It was reported that the headlands were near completion and would provide a welcome boost with the development of an events arena, attracting more people to the Town Centre. Mr Page added that the focus would be to secure new investment and development in the three key resort gateways, Central Drive, Lytham Road and Dickson Road, which currently provided a poor first impression due to the surplus of run down, poor quality properties.

Mr Page reported on the future of Blackpool's holiday areas, which was of significant importance to the Forum members. He explained that currently there were 1,650 hotels and guesthouses providing over 56,000 bed spaces. Following two public consultations in The Gateway area, the findings indicated that the majority of businesses agreed that there were too many bed spaces, too little quality and too little accredited and top end accommodation. It was believed that the failing holiday accommodation attracted houses of multiple occupation, the wrong type of resident and its associated problems were undermining the visitor economy and communities.

The consultations confirmed that businesses and residents wanted the right amount of quality accommodation, to retain the holiday accommodation where possible, to increase visitor numbers and provide mixed neighbourhoods (e.g. residential and commercial) that were successful.

Mr Page explained that the Promenade provided the core shop window frontage for Blackpool and whilst holiday accommodation would be safeguarded this would not preclude existing properties from being redeveloped into higher quality establishments. He added that the buildings and the use of those buildings along the promenade were vital to Blackpool's future.

The Forum was advised that off the Promenade the main holiday accommodation areas would focus around six reduced areas:

- The Cliffs
- Lord Street – extended to both sides and between Springfield Road and Mount Street.
- Town Centre – south of including Albert Road, Adelaide Street and Hornby Road.
- Foxhall Village
- South Beach
- Pleasure Beach

Mr Page added that a supporting document to the Core Strategy, 'Holiday Accommodation Supplementary Planning Document' had been drafted and was currently out for public consultation and he welcomed comments by the end of July.

It was explained that outside the designated holiday areas, those hoteliers that wished to continue to trade would continue to be encouraged to provide better quality accredited holiday accommodation, while the policy provided greater flexibility for those wishing to convert to residential use. Mr Page reported that under the draft new guidance 'Residential Conversion and Sub-division Supplementary Planning Document' any conversions would be to a high standard providing either two/ three bedroom apartments or suitable family accommodation and not one bed/ small flats which attracted a benefit dependent population. He added that the policy supported enforcement action to secure satisfactory compliance with the planning permission.

Mr Page explained that the consultation was a statutory process and encouraged residents to put their views in writing. He acknowledged that through the consultation process, the proposed boundaries would be fully reconsidered, and changes would be made where appropriate.

Councillor Coleman thanked Mr Page for his presentation. Following the presentation, local residents asked a number of questions.

A local hotelier asked why the proposed holiday areas excluded Reads Avenue, Palatine Road and Havelock Street yet including Foxhall village, which consisted of predominately unaccredited premises in a poor state of repair. Mr Page explained that the boundaries had been determined based on a criteria that was not solely based on appearance, but the strengths of individual areas and the future potential of that area. He added that no decision had been made and through the consultation process, recommendations would be made to the Executive.

A local resident asked when the regeneration of the sea front would be completed. Mr Donnellon reported that it would be substantially finished by May 2011 and the tramway improvements by 2012, although the trams would be operational during the holiday season. He acknowledged that the timescales had slipped, but the Council had structure contracts so the Council was not at financial risk and they were reliant on a range of contractors.

A member of the Forum asked whether the proposals for Snow City were on going. Mr Page explained that an 18-month exclusivity deal had been agreed with a potential developer to assess the viability of the proposals and there was a remaining 6 months before any conclusions could be made.

A number of hoteliers asked why the consultants employed to identify the proposed boundaries had not approached businesses, as vital trading information was unknown when the boundaries were drawn. They added that Blackpool catered for one night stays, with the number of clubs/ bars and limited family entertainment/ bars. Mr Page confirmed that the consultants had not visited premises, but had received accreditation information from StayBlackpool, planning records, enforcement and land use information and had recommended areas of focus and potential boundaries to Officers for consideration. He explained that the Council sought to address the imbalance and focus on families, but the marketing of properties across the town was ultimately a product of individual business decisions. Mr Page added that the Council would raise awareness of the narrowing offer and promote investment in the shopping offer and high quality attractions. He acknowledged that where a strong holiday focus had been identified in a particular street it would be reconsidered.

A resident complimented the open space provided by the promenade development and asked that this not be ruined by the development of various structures e.g. public toilets, sub stations etc that obstructed the sea view, as this would be detrimental as proven in the South Shore area and at Morecambe. Mr Page explained that key facilities were needed, but would be designed not to undermine the sea view, but to retain the open aspect.

A Forum member commented that the proposed holiday areas looked smaller and if Blackpool achieved its goal to encourage families to visit would those areas be able to accommodate the estimated 10 million visitors and if there were too many beds why was planning permission granted for further Travelodge developments, which were destroying the character of Blackpool. Mr Page explained that the holiday areas were reduced and focussed on over 100 promenade and 500 off promenade premises, but the proposals made provision for the number of visitors, including the continued provision of substantial numbers of holiday accommodation premises across the mixed use areas. He further commented budget hotels were a normal part of the holiday accommodation offer across towns all over the country and it would be unwise to refuse quality new developments.

Several hoteliers enquired how the Council proposed to prevent properties that would no longer be included in the holiday area from becoming houses of multiple occupation when they were currently unable to prevent this from happening. They felt the enforcement process was too slow and after four years, properties were legally permitted to operate as houses of multiple occupation. Mr Page acknowledged that there were issues with those types of properties and current planning controls and loopholes did not always allow for prevention. He added that the Core Strategy would prevent further unlawful changes and support enforcement action. He added that following a Council restructure in April 2010 the licensing, planning, housing and enforcement teams were now within the same Department, providing a coordinated no tolerance approach and residents would soon see improvements.

Mr Donnellon explained that 10 prosecutions were currently pending and a multi agency approach had been adopted including the Police, Fire Service etc that where properties were non compliant they would now be closed down. He added that properties both in and out of the proposed holiday areas would receive a consistent approach to both enforcement and support in seeking accreditation.

A resident reported that the Development Control Committee had approved an enforcement order on 2nd June 2008 as a property it was no longer trading as a hotel, but the Council had not enforced this. Another resident reported that a further hotel on Palatine Road that had been converted in a one bedroom flat and bedsits and no action had been taken in the subsequent five years. Mr Page explained that he was not part of the enforcement team, but it was agreed that those matter would be investigated and the outcomes reported at a future meeting.

It was reported that the holiday areas had been changed on two previous occasions. It was believed that in the current climate hoteliers running quality hotels in the inner areas should be supported not removed from the holiday area. There was negative speculation as to who would buy the former hotels/ guesthouses and convert them into residential properties. Mr Page explained that the Council had to spend wisely on a catalyst that would regenerate Blackpool as a whole and added that properties were already changing and without a defensible line, there was no basis to resist appeals for properties to be converted into dwellings, which would undermine the area. He explained that individual streets would be reconsidered and if future holiday use could be safeguarded then if appropriate the proposed boundaries would be changed.

A couple of hoteliers asked if the holiday accommodation, out of the proposed areas, was converted to residential dwellings where would people gain employment as tourism was the main area of employment. Mr Page explained that to do nothing was not an option, he acknowledged that whilst there was a cost of conversion it was necessary to aspire to new standards and improve the mixture of properties or the downward spiral would continue. He added that the Council was aware of the need to diversify the economy and the support of developments such as the Talbot Gateway, the Technology Business Park (Faraday Way) and the Blackpool Business Park (Amy Johnson Way) recognised the need for alternative types of employment.

A local resident referred to the unfinished development on Crystal Road, where properties had been purchased by the Council to demonstrate how properties could be converted and asked if it the conversion was cost effective. Mr Donnellon explained that promised funding had been delayed and that work was anticipated to start in August, but acknowledged that due to current market forces there might be a gap in value.

A number of attendees raised the issues of the property resale value, the reluctance of lenders to support hotels removed from the proposed holiday areas and suggested that a single plot would potentially lose £100,000. It was intimated that plans to change the holiday areas had been proposed in 2002, but surveyors were unaware and they had now been removed from the Council's website. Mr Page reported that the existing wide Resort Neighbourhood Policy had itself only been approved in 2004 by the Council, and that the draft Core Strategy proposals for a reduction in the holiday areas had only been approved by the Executive in March 2010. He added that negative changes were already occurring and by focusing on improving the quality of hotels and residential accommodation would in the long term result in better areas and increased property values. Mr Donnellon pointed out that the value of a business should be based on its turnover not its geographical location and offered to discuss proposals with financial institutions and estate agents.

A forum attendee commented that the number of hotels was dependent on the number of visitors to Blackpool and there was too much emphasis on hotels and not enough on attracting new visitors to the resort. He also disapproved of the St Johns Square development due to the on/off inclusion of public transport. Mr Donnellon confirmed that by supporting improvements to infrastructure such as the Winter Gardens and the Talbot Gateway would improve the visitor economy. He also defended the Council's approach to St Johns Square, adding the project was delivered to budget and was a fantastic example of open space.

A resident asked for clarification on whether vertical developments were required when converting a hotel to flats and was the provision of parking spaces needed. Mr Page explained there was no blanket rule for conversions and there were allowances for different types of developments, but the layout of properties would be considered to ensure noisy rooms e.g. a lounge was not adjacent to a quiet room in a neighbouring property. He added that the policy on parking was dependent on national/ local maximum standards.

Councillors Question Time

At the start of the allotted time, the presentation had not concluded and the Chairman, Councillor Coleman explained the position and asked members if they wished to ask their Councillors questions or continue the presentation. The meeting agreed to continue with the presentation.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of the meeting was to provide residents with an opportunity to receive a presentation from a representative of Blackpool Council and voice their opinions on the implications of the Blackpool Core Strategy Preferred Option document.

A number of issues had been raised as documented in the report and would be investigated and reported back to the Area Panel in the first instance.