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## The Development Conversation - by Sophie Turton


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The Brighton development dilemma is fuelled as much by a shared love of the city as it is by the frequently debated question of how best to improve it.

How do you protect a culture of individuality, while encouraging large business growth? Who will provide the budget for regeneration? Will the students keep coming if the housing runs dry and what, exactly, is their contribution to the economic development of the city?

'Construction Voice', Brighton Chamber's most recent event for the construction sector, gathered a group of professionals from a range of industries with the aim of facilitating a discussion about Brighton's future development strategies.

"There are so many issues surrounding the development of the city but no forum where key players within the city can get together and discuss how we can improve Brighton," said Becky Cheney from Robinson Low Francis; who were one of the event partners, along with Graves Jenkins and the Centurion Group.

A shared desire to keep the 'development conversation' going appeared to be a consistent thread within the fabric of the evening. Many attendees expressed their dedication towards improving the city and the importance of getting the decision makers, largely seen as the council, and the doers, those in the development and construction industries, to communicate with one another.

The topics for the evening were regeneration, student housing and the importance of the student offer, the future of Brighton and Hove's retail sector and what should be done with council property. The guests were separated across eight tables and asked to come up with two questions for each topic.

During the initial discussion, key themes were a lack of funding, delivery costs and the length of time spent making decisions; a lack of space within the city and what is generally seen as a 'difficult' process to get approval from the council's Planning Committee, were also hot topics.

"We need investment over vague aspirations," said Council Member, Martin Randall.

The questions then went to a panel of experts – Tony Mernagh, Executive Director at Brighton & Hove Business Forum; Geoff Raw, Executive Director of Environment, Development & Housing at Brighton & Hove City Council; Angela Dymott, Head of Property & Design at Brighton & Hove City Council and Ed Allison-Wright, Director at Centurion. The panel chose what they deemed to be the most relevant questions for each topic and the debate began.

### 'How do we unlock development in the city?'

Geoff Raw explained that we need to think about economic possibilities and development strategies that reflect the times we are in. He highlighted the importance of building relationships and working together: "We should not be frightened to have conversations".

The frustration over the council's planning process was understood by the panel, yet Geoff highlighted the democratic mandate that councillors need to fulfill. "Members are responding to voices in the community", he pointed out.

From a development perspective, Ed Allison-Wright talked about the 07/08 recession, which saw funding reduced from the planning department: "Is the council asking too much of the team, given the amount they have to deal with?" It was suggested that now the economy is improving, more investment should be put into the council's planning department.

After the recession, the council bought in 'recession-busting' measures. Geoff asked whether they could really afford to keep giving free application advice; he suggested that the funding for the committee could come from charging a fee for the planning application.

An audience member responded: "It is an alarming thought that you may start charging us to help you with the planning process."

### Section 106 – is too much being asked?

Ed claimed, with particular reference to the King Alfred, that they are pledging something that already seems impossible. "How do we create a scheme that is profitable and viable when delivering 40% affordable housing? Maybe 40% has to turn to 15%," he suggested.

Martin Perry said from the audience: "There is a reputation in Brighton that it's not a good place to do development."

"It is not unusual that development companies pay towards the planning process. If we're not getting the money in fees for development then we'll have to see where else we can get it." Geoff pointed out that raised council taxes could be an alternative for financial subsidy.

### Is student housing good/bad for the city?

There is a specific culture in Brighton, a vibrancy that makes the city a great place for students, tourists and locals alike. However, Brighton is a small city

with limited space and as a result there are concerns about the housing situation for students, as the city's two large universities continue to expand.

*"We need to keep the students, they make Brighton one of the best work forces in the country", said Tony Mernagh, "So we need to house them."*

The panel and audience discussed a better alternative to the current situation, where students occupy family houses, which then results in a housing shortage for other demographics within the city. One suggestion was to turn London road into 'student town', which would significantly improve the area, as students have money to spend.

It was largely agreed that students are a huge part of Brighton and Hove's future. In response to a suggestion that we could, and perhaps should, control the amount of students coming into the city, Tony Mernagh said: *"We are not part of a Stalinist state. What we need to do is broaden our horizons."*

It was also suggested that we 'think outside the box' and bring the surrounding areas into our vision of Brighton, thereby physically broadening our horizons.

#### **Should we protect individual retailers or look to larger stores such as John Lewis?**

Tony Mernagh stressed how hard it is to protect a market. He pointed out that the indy shops bring tourists who may not necessarily spend money but who are excited by the wacky diversity of the North Laines. Retailers, he said, have to move with the times and understand the developing market. He used the case of Vegetarian Shoes who have a small shop in the Laines but who make an annual turnover of around ten million – this is because they are embracing the future of retail, the internet.

*"What can we do to protect them?"* Tony asked. *"Absolutely nothing because that's the market."*

The focus appeared to be on keeping Brighton quirky and Julia Chanteray suggested one way to encourage small, off-the-wall businesses was to let smaller spaces that are more accessible to independent retailers.

#### **Should the Council sell all of it's assets?**

Angela Dymott explained that it isn't as simple as the council sitting on property and rubbing their hands; there are economic and social benefits to the council's property investments. Angela explained that the council's commercial assets bring in a large income and keep council tax down; the Downs was bought to protect the water supply and the schools are a different issue entirely.

She asked the question: should we have the council as a social and economic support or should we give everything over to commercialism?

Ed added that financial success within the commercial industry is far more important than to the council, *"I'm not even sure if the private sector could hold the council estate."*

The panel agreed that the council and private sector need to work together more, creating a stronger dialogue and focussing on how they can develop Brighton and Hove together.

Regardless of whether the motivation was economic, environmental or social, the 'Big Debate' was much more of an equal discussion, with all members of the audience and panel sharing the belief that Brighton and Hove can be better. Working together appears to be the best way to achieve these goals.

The Construction Voice events will be organised quarterly.

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