



EHA STATEMENT ON EASTBOURNE BOROUGH COUNCIL'S PLANNING COMMITTEE

For years tensions have been rising between the Eastbourne Hospitality Association (EHA) and Eastbourne's Planning Authorities. Now publicly for the first the time the EHA makes a full statement.

At the planning committee on 5th January 2016 there were two planning applications before the planning committee affecting hotels. The first was in relation to a retrospective application for PVC windows at the East Beach Hotel. This was opposed by officers and was unanimously refused by the planning committee. Despite there being no policy preventing PVC windows on the seafront, members of the committee, such as Conservative councillor Barry Taylor, continued to erroneously refer to "the policy". Despite a plea from the owner and the EHA saying that there needs to be a radical change in thinking by planners, committee members continued to claim that wooden windows could be replaced with like for like wooden windows easily – whilst missing the point that these windows are very expensive, will deteriorate and will require higher maintenance which the industry cannot afford. They also fail on grounds of the environment. It would appear that their two major concerns were that the 'original' wood on the conservatory that the planners seem to believe is Edwardian was a slightly thinner width, and that the external appearance of the upstairs windows had been changed due to a strip of beeding that was no longer present, which presumably could be added. This was a highly expected decision and one that will be taken further on appeal.

It was however, the members' disrespect in relation to the second application, namely the Courtlands Hotel which has left the EHA fuming. This was an application to convert a 45 bedroomed hotel into a mix of part residential and a 15 bedroomed boutique guesthouse, as per the recommendations of the planners own hotel survey from 2008. This application had been before the committee previously where it had been refused and then appealed to the Secretary of State. The planning inspector representing the Secretary of State considered all of the evidence by experts and the EHA and ruled against the committee and furthermore ordered £15,000 costs against the council because they UNREASONABLY contested the matter against the weight of the material. The case though had to go back to committee on a technicality.

During his three minute address the Chairman of the EHA was stopped by the Chair of the Planning Committee, Jim Murray, from speaking any further. This was because in his speech Mr Weir was outlining to the committee, their failings in the past few years when it came to decisions concerning the tourism industry. The biggest of these was the decision to grant permission for the conversion of a town centre shop unit, which already had planning permission to change to

many much sought after residential properties, into a hotel, although this was outside of the Council's own Tourist Accommodation area, and not permitted under the Town Borough Plan, which was in use at the time. It was pointed out to the planning committee at the time that granting this was against all their own 'Policies', and would cause severe hardship for the independent hoteliers of the town. Additionally the decision not to allow temporary rides on the pier this past summer had a negative impact on this year's season. It was clear from the comments made by the members in the general discussion that they were not sorry that they had cost the tax payer £15,000+ in costs. They were of the view that the Secretary of State's Inspector was wrong and they were right. They believe that Eastbourne needs more bed spaces not fewer. They believe that the £42million Devonshire Park development is going to bring in so many new people that Eastbourne will need more beds. As a result seven of the members abstained and the Chairman voted the Courtlands Application through only because he had to as he was advised in the strongest terms to do so by the Planning Solicitor and Mr. Leigh Palmer, Lead Advisor of Planning.

Let us make this clear. The EHA largely supports many tourism initiatives by Eastbourne Borough Council. However, what we do not support is the Planning committee's views on what they think is the best way to support tourism. It is clear that these members are unwilling to alter their outdated views, despite the mounting stack of evidence against them, which can only be interpreted as arrogance. The fact of the matter is that the members had clearly failed to read the judgment in the Courtlands Appeal, thus their suitability to continue to practise in their roles must be questioned.

In 2015 the planning department commissioned a report and survey to provide evidence and a strategy for Eastbourne's hotel stock. The applicants in the Courtlands Hotel application instructed independent experts and in response for the appeal the planning department commissioned another independent expert report. All of these experts and the EHA say the same thing. Eastbourne has too many bed spaces. There is in effect a saturation of the market and in order for there to be an improvement in the quality of the bed stock (to be ready for the more demanding tourist and conference delegate) there needs to be some adjustments in the amount of bedroom stock that we have in the town. Because many members of the planning committee have worked together in an isolated bubble for over 10 years they are out of touch with an industry that has changed dramatically in the last 5 years. Many existing hoteliers would love the chance to improve the external appearance of their properties by upgrading the windows, but the cost of wooden replacement sash windows is prohibitive, and PVC can look attractive and avoid the rattling noise, heat loss and draughts of the existing current frames. Barry Taylor, who made a point himself of saying he used to own a guesthouse many years ago before turning his business into nursing homes said that the answer was "advertising". He made many other wild claims such as that many hoteliers in the town support their stance (which is just wrong as the majority of the 101 signatories to a petition saying that we believe that the planning committee is not working in the best interests of tourism was signed by hoteliers). This just illustrates how little he and his fellow committee members know about the town's main industry and main economy.

Darren Weir, Chairman of the EHA said,

“I was astounded by the disrespect and arrogance of this planning committee. To be cut off whilst telling them some home truths as we saw it in areas where we say they have gone wrong (which was linked to the argument as to why the application should be granted) was truly astounding. This group of people genuinely believe they know best and that they are always right. The East Beach result was expected and is a case that will be taken to the Secretary of State (again, with the likely result of more expense for the residents of Eastbourne). But what they said and did in relation to the Courtlands Hotel was truly astonishing. We have to remember that initially the Planning Officers supported the application (of sorts), and the Tourism Department supported the application. On top of that there have been numerous reports commissioned – 2 by the planning department itself and the strategy they urge us to follow is a readjustment of our bed stock – which will involve slight reductions. But with a focus on higher quality accommodation. More boutique style accommodation, higher end hotel accommodation like the former Ambassador Hotel which will be coming on line at the end of the year, apartahotels like those (apparently) being built at the former Congress Hotel. This will mean though that some of the lower end quality accommodation will have to go to make way for these changes. The experts, the Planning Department’s policy team and the council’s Tourism Department, acknowledge this but not it seems do these 8 anachronistic members of the planning committee, who continue to plough on in their own direction, rather than within the remit and wishes of the governing council, or for what is best for tourism in the town. The stance taken by Mr Murray and his colleagues seems to be that the £42million development at Devonshire Park will save the day in the town’s declining tourism economy and we will need more beds to cope. As the Planning Inspector said in her judgment – Brighton accommodates 200,000 annual conference visitors with their 2,599 bedrooms whereas Eastbourne has more bedrooms at 3,805 for our current 8,000 – 14,000 per year conference delegates. Thus there is plenty of potential for growth notwithstanding a loss of inferior rooms to make room for higher quality rooms. I should add that what the members on the committee don’t get is that the new build at Devonshire Park will actually result in a slightly lower conference floor space and footprint than is currently the case. The strategy we are all working to is attracting the higher end quality conferences and for that we need the higher quality accommodation. You know, to be given a lecture by 8 out of date councillors, some of whom are failed hoteliers, when I have just won Les Routiers Guest House of the Year was pretty insulting.

David Tutt, leader of the council, needs to take control of this situation. The planning committee risks alienating the hospitality industry, which puts an important partnership at risk. Don’t forget for example that it is the hoteliers who through membership and conference commissions pay for the staffing of the council’s conference sales team because the council cannot afford it themselves. I also believe that all members of the Planning Committee need to have some in-depth training into the current situation of Eastbourne’s tourism industry – something which can be delivered in partnership with us. If they are not

prepared to listen and be so trained then they must be asked to resign. As an aside I found Mr. Taylor's comment that the type of people who were likely to take up residence at the new flats at the former Courtlands Hotel were the type likely to hang their washing out of the window highly insulting."

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