

REVISED DEPOSIT DRAFT THANET LOCAL PLAN

Summary Proof of Evidence of

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On behalf of the Save Dreamland Campaign

Objector Ref: 4006/10277-10279

April 2004



Save Dreamland Campaign

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- 1.1 My name is Nick Laister. I am a Chartered Town Planner and Technical Director at RPS. I have significant experience of working within the tourism industry as a planning consultant, and I advise a number of Europe's leading tourism and leisure operators/developers. My involvement with Dreamland began in 2001, when a report which I submitted to the DCMS resulted in the Scenic Railway roller coaster becoming a listed building.
- 1.2 I set up the Save Dreamland Campaign in January 2003. The Campaign speaks on behalf of over 13,000 people who are concerned about the future of the Dreamland site and the Grade II listed Scenic Railway roller coaster and the impact that its loss would have on Margate's local economy and heritage.
- 1.3 I have demonstrated in this report that the Dreamland site is of critical importance to Margate as a seaside resort, and must be retained and enhanced. It is the only tourist attraction in the Isle of Thanet that draws in more than 100,000 visitors (even in its current artificially run-down state it draws almost 700,000 visitors per year, placing it in the top ten amusement parks in the country). I have presented evidence that gives some initial indication of the effects of Margate's first Easter without Dreamland (9 to 12 April 2004), with disappointment expressed by visitors and tourism businesses.
- 1.4 Although the park has been run down over recent years, the Save Dreamland Campaign has evidence that demonstrates that the park would not only be viable under a committed owner, but could be the focus of the town's regeneration. I have presented evidence that shows that similar sized parks in other towns, with broadly the same size of catchment area, are thriving and drawing many more visitors than Dreamland. I have also drawn attention to Southend-on-Sea, which has an amusement park on the main seafront area, which is smaller than Dreamland, and which has been upgraded over the last few years. This investment has resulted in a huge increase in visitors to both the park and the town as a whole, and the business is very profitable. I have also drawn attention to a similar scenario at Southport.
- 1.5 I also make an important distinction between a tourism land use, which attracts people to a town, and other uses such as retail and leisure which primarily serve the local population (albeit that they also provide ancillary facilities for tourists).
- 1.6 I have also presented evidence on the heritage of the Dreamland site, which is unique in this country and should therefore be protected for the benefit of the town as a whole. The Scenic Railway roller coaster is the UK's oldest operating roller coaster and is considered to be of international importance. It is of note in terms of listed buildings policy that the Scenic Railway is viable as a stand-alone attraction.
- 1.7 I am also aware that there is interest from established amusement park operators in acquiring and investing in the park. I have presented a significant amount of evidence on this. I have no doubt that Dreamland could not only survive, but also prosper, under one of these interested operators. There is

absolutely no reason why Dreamland should lose its biggest tourist attraction, as long as planning policies continue to protect it for this use.

- 1.8 Thanet District Council amended policy T11 in early 2003 following representations from the owner of Dreamland which were received after the closing of the statutory consultation period. The Council has confirmed to the Save Dreamland Campaign that these changes were made solely because the Council did not believe that Dreamland would be viable or that any operators would have an interest in acquiring it. It was also based on the premise that Dreamland required a similar catchment to Thorpe Park or Blackpool. I have now provided evidence that conclusively demonstrates that both of the above assumptions are incorrect.
- 1.9 The interest of the two operators emphasise the following:
- **Firstly, and without a shadow of a doubt, the sole reason for Thanet District Council changing the policy on which they had consulted in the First Deposit Draft Local Plan, as set out in the Council Leader's letter dated 6 March 2003 (i.e. that they believe that the park is not viable and that no operator would wish to take it on), is simply incorrect.**
 - **The second, and perhaps more important point, relates to the Council's stance (also set out in their letter dated 6 March 2003) that the new policy would not preclude another operator taking on the park should one turn up. It is this very policy, as redrafted, that has precluded operators from taking on the park because it has created hope value, effectively pricing tourist attractions out of the market. The policy does not protect the site for tourism use, and tourism can rarely compete directly with leisure, retail and residential when it comes to land values.**
- 1.10 The recently published draft Margate Masterplan demonstrates that it is unlikely that other tourism uses will be found for the site in the foreseeable future, and it is likely that this unique site will be lost to other forms of development, such as leisure and retail. These uses will not act as tourist attractions. The consultants who produced the Masterplan were not aware of the serious interest in the site from established operators and that offers at full, independently-assessed, market value had been made for the acquisition of the site and refused. I consider that little, if any, weight can be attached to the Margate Masterplan due to this, and other, serious flaws.
- 1.11 I have therefore proposed changes to Policy T11 and supporting paragraphs 8.49 and 8.50, which essentially revert to the original wording of the policy, as amended following the statutory public consultation into the First Deposit Draft Local Plan. The policy should recognise Dreamland as an "important asset" and should create the certainty that is required to bring forward the significant private sector investment into the site as a tourist attraction that has already been promised. This wording should ensure that proposals that would lead to a reduction in the attractiveness or tourism potential of the amusement park will be resisted. Exceptionally, development of a limited part of the site may be accepted as part of a comprehensive scheme for the upgrading of the amusement park. I have also suggested that reference is now added to the need to retain the Scenic Railway, as the ride was not a listed building when the First Draft Local Plan was published.