

## The end of the pier show in Brighton?



By John Keenan

The city by the sea would be nothing without its shop window. The seafront is a magnet for tourists and visitors alike throughout the year. Its property portfolio pours more than £1.2m a year into council coffers, while up to 23 tonnes of refuse is collected on busy summer days. So it may surprise those who have not visited the area for a while that that this major attraction is suffering from neglect. Three years ago the council drew up a seafront strategy document which outlined some well-meaning, if vague, objectives. Since then, there has been consultation, meetings and talk. But there has been precious little action.

The city's daily newspaper, The Argus, has launched ten-point manifesto offering a more robust vision for the seafront's future. The key aim is to lobby at Westminster to make the case for funding the city as a regional powerhouse.

Meanwhile, the huge, publicly-funded, Brighton i360 observation tower is slowly rising over the derelict West Pier. Steven Edwards, who won MasterChef: The Professionals in 2013 will team up caterer Centerplate when the venue opens next summer.

The i360 will feature facilities for conferences, corporate and private events and wedding receptions for 10 to 800 guests; a heritage tea room in the 1866 West Pier toll booth; and a beach-level 400-seat full service brasserie. Centerplate, which is providing capital investment through the funding and installation of the i360's kitchen and dining facilities, has a background in hospitality design and management services. The caterer said it plans to stage regular special 'pop up' dining events where people can enjoy exceptional cooking as well as meeting with chef Steven Edwards.

Eleanor Harris, CEO of the Brighton i360, said: "I am delighted to be working with Centerplate, who have proved that they can cater well for thousands of visitors at top attractions across the country."

As the i360 takes shape, plans have been revealed to demolish another landmark structure nearby – the Brighton Centre itself.

The Brighton Waterfront project involves proposals for a major new conferencing and events venue for the city on the Black Rock site next to the Marina as well. Brighton and Hove City Council is working with Standard Life Investments and Venue Ventures, to deliver the new venue in the east of the city. Councillor Warren Morgan, Labour group leader and member of the project board, said: "This project has the potential to deliver city-wide benefits as well as regeneration and investment, including new homes, jobs and apprenticeships in areas where it is sorely needed. We're confident the project is exactly the sort of investment that will help the city continue to thrive and we remain firmly behind it. We're also confident that the mix of private and public sector investment is the surest way to guarantee delivery."

Charlie Hepburn, managing director at Vivid Event Group, believes that Brighton's location is an advantage. He says: "The majority of our clients are in London. That's a 50-minute train journey. Our clients say the city is a good choice

for encouraging fresh thinking – it's the sea air. It has a huge variety of venues that can accommodate for groups of up to 4000+.

“But Brighton needs a major and modern conference centre. The Brighton Centre has been a wonderful servant, but a larger state-of-the-art venue would be nothing but beneficial to the entire hospitality industry to the city.

“The i360 as a venue for events will work really well for us - I can't think of many better ways than entertaining guest right on the beach, especially when the sun is shining.”

Figures released last year by the Office for National Statistics put Brighton as the eighth most visited town for city breaks with 50,000 more overnight visitors staying overnight than in 2013. The stats also show the city as the country's most popular seaside destination for overseas visitors and readers of Conde Nast Traveller magazine voted Brighton and Hove the 'Best UK city for restaurants and bars' – ahead of London. According to the latest economic impact report, Brighton and Hove now attracts more than 9.5m visitors a year.

The 'grand dames' of Brighton's seafront, the Hilton Brighton Metropole and the Grand Hotel, have both benefited from refurbishment programmes to give business and leisure guests an added touch of luxury. As well as revamped bedrooms and conference spaces, the Hilton has a sea-facing champagne and cigar terrace while the Grand boasts a luxury spa and upmarket seafood restaurant, GB1. Arts Council England has pledged £5.8m towards a revitalisation of Brighton Dome and Brighton Festival's heritage venues.

The plans are the first phase of a plan to create a world class destination for heritage, culture and the performing arts.

In April, a group of conference organisers from the corporate sector were invited to find out about the changes in the city for themselves. Sales representatives from 10 venues including the Hilton Brighton Metropole, the Dome and Grand Hotel, together with the city's convention bureau, VisitBrighton, hosted a two-day familiarisation trip designed to showcase the city and attract more corporate business.

The itinerary included a welcome reception at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, a mini expo at the Brighton Centre and lunch at former royal residence, the Royal Pavilion.

Clients including representatives from Purina-Nestle, Coca-Cola Enterprises Ltd and Mercedes, took the opportunity to check out the city's venues and meet the sales managers as well as having free time to explore the city.

Isabelle Morgan, from the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists, said: “I had been to Brighton for a day trip but this was a chance to experience it from a professional point of view. We were looking for a venue for our AGM and in the end we went for Edinburgh but we will be bringing other events to Brighton later this year. I was very impressed with the reception in the Brighton Dome and the Brighton Museum and Art gallery.”

#### Business leaders take the stage

The Sussex Business Awards this year marked its 26th anniversary. Sixteen awards were presented by comedian Simon Evans at The Grand hotel in Brighton.

The event, organised by Midnight Communications, was attended by 500 of the county's business community including Peter Field, Lord Lieutenant of East Sussex; Caroline Lucas, MP for Brighton Pavilion, and the Mayor of Brighton, Councillor Brian Fitch.

Caroline Brown, managing director at Midnight Communications said: “In order to reach as far across the county as possible, Midnight held three launch events in one week – in Uckfield, Crawley and Brighton – attended by more than 300 people. The quality of the entrants was high with more than 200 entries received from businesses across the county. Forty two companies were named as finalists.”

Ms Brown said that 69% of sponsors said The Grand was 'excellent' and 31% said 'good'.

She said: “All of our sponsors were happy with the management of the scheme, with 46% of sponsors felt the value of sponsorship was 'excellent' while 54% said it was 'good'.”

Julien Jones, director at event sponsor Morgan Sindall, said: “Morgan Sindall has been involved with the Sussex Business awards for five years now and really value the connection it gives us with some of the leading companies and brands in the area. It is also an opportunity to give something back to the Sussex business community – and it is always a great night out!”