

ConferenceNews

Water performance

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By Paul Colston

If you are old enough to remember Arthur Scargill in his pomp, you will also recall the heyday of the UK seaside conference. From miners to ministers, workers across the class divide agreed that a conference by the coast was a highlight of the year. But now that companies are reluctant to allow their staff out of the office for more than two days in a row, meetings on the fringes of the country are not flavour of the month.

Venues must punch above their weight and offer more than fresh air and funfairs to earn their keep. In Brighton, perhaps the most quintessential seaside location, major changes are planned to entice delegates. New plans unveiled by the city council are expected to cost at least £450m and generate up to 2,000 jobs.

The Brighton Centre, widely regarded as one of the ugliest buildings in the country, has been earmarked for demolition. A new conference and entertainment centre, with seating for up to 10,000 people – twice the capacity of the Brighton Centre – is being proposed for a derelict, council-owned site near Brighton Marina.

Also looming on the horizon is the Brighton i360 observation tower. Currently under construction at a cost of £36m to the taxpayer, the attraction will offer a venue for corporate events and business meetings, catering for up to 600 people, with a ride on the i360 for up to 200.

Managing director Eleanor Harris says: “Visitors will be able to enjoy a pre-meeting breakfast ride or an evening drinks and canapés reception on the i360 and hold meetings or receptions in one of the hospitality rooms.”

Howard Barden, Brighton and Hove City Council’s head of tourism and venues says: “We are currently exploring an opportunity to develop a new conference and events centre; it’s still early days but nevertheless it is great news to see a proposal of this magnitude on the table. Conference business is a vital part of the city’s economy and this reflects the growing confidence in Brighton as a hub for business and investment.

“Several of our flagship venues have invested heavily in refurbishment programmes recently and a new centre would be a welcome addition to the city’s strong portfolio. We will be keeping a keen eye on the planning process as it unfolds and look forward to extending the benefits this scheme would present to existing and new clients over the coming years. In the meantime, it is business as usual at the Brighton Centre and clients can expect the same unrivalled level of service.”

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.”

Along the coast at Bournemouth, more than £220m is being invested in the town’s infrastructure. Business Events Bournemouth is responsible for pulling together the town’s conference jewels and aims to provide a single point of contact for planners.

A spokeswoman for the organisation said: “Representing a close and active partnership between BH Live, Bournemouth Borough Council through Bournemouth Tourism and Bournemouth Coastal BID, and supported by Bournemouth Accommodation and Hotels Association (BAHA), we work with venues, hotels and local businesses to create unforgettable delegate experiences. The service is completely free and able to set up events ranging from a half-training session to a full-scale, 4,000-delegate international conference and exhibition.”

The Bournemouth International Centre is the largest, purpose-built event venue on the south coast with capacity for 10,000 delegates, while the City Gate Centre is a new events and conferencing venue in the heart of town.

The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum is a niche building for corporate events. It offers drinks receptions for up to 150 people, meetings for up to 25 daytime delegates and 100 in the evenings, and banquets for up to 50.

Blackpool has been offering conference and meeting facilities for over 125 years and has witnessed some of the most historic conferences in the nation's political history. Iain Duncan Smith's 'quiet man' speech at the 2003 Blackpool conference badly wounded his leadership of the Conservative party, while David Cameron's learned-by-heart speech in 2005 at the same Winter Gardens venue positioned him as a prime-minister-in-waiting.

The Winter Gardens is the largest conference venue in Blackpool and can accommodate up to 3,000 comfortably. The Victorian grande dame has had a recent facelift and the investment is ongoing with the team in Blackpool keen to show organisers the changes that have taken place.

The array of unusual venues is impressive from board meetings at the top of Blackpool Tower to sitting round the table with guests from Madame Tussauds, and teambuilding at the zoo.

However, campaigners in the town mourn the loss of such treasures as the Art Deco Derby Baths, Christ Church on Queen Street which was designed in the Decorated Gothic style and opened in 1866 and the Grosvenor Hotel, at the corner of Cookson Street and Church Street, which dated from 1874, was demolished in 2007.

Joan Humble, chair at Blackpool Civic Trust, says: "It's down to fashion. Architects and planners weren't impressed by Victorian and early 20th century building and wanted something new. We are now more aware of our heritage. Blackpool Council is working with the civic trust to revalue the old buildings and we are not going to let more of them be lost."

In Southport the flagship venue, the Southport Theatre and Convention Centre, overlooks the Marine Lake. The venue recently underwent a £40m investment programme virtually doubling the existing capacity. The venue can now comfortably accommodate up to 1,600 delegates in its main auditorium and the new Waterfront Suite can be sub-divided to provide up to six self-contained syndicate rooms, add to this additional breakout areas and the 1,000sqm multi-use Floral Hall.

On the other side of the country, in the north-east, the National Glass Centre and the Stadium of Light, both sit on the banks of the River Wear in Sunderland and offer a variety of versatile spaces.

The Beach House bistro, which opened last year, overlooks the seafront at Roker and is available for exclusive hire.

All three are managed for catering and events by 1879 Events Management, a specialist subsidiary set up by Sunderland AFC. No doubt they'll be looking for more home wins in the future.

Southampton's waterfront venues

The City Cruise Terminal has capacity to host conferences for 2,000 + and offers exhibition space. It is available all year round when not in use as a passenger terminal. Events hosted include: