

# FROM THE HILL TO THE SEA

## TRANSFORMING THE CULTURAL LIFE OF PORTSMOUTH

### SUMMARY REPORT OF CULTURAL CONSORTIUM BUILT ENVIRONMENT FORUM HELD ON 6<sup>th</sup> JULY 2005 IN PORTSMOUTH

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Independent Cultural Consortium of Portsmouth (referred to as the Cultural Consortium) is committed to improving all aspects of cultural life in Portsmouth, and aims to do this by consulting our members, and lobbying those who have influence and can deliver change.

As part of this commitment, the Cultural Consortium held a forum on Weds 6<sup>th</sup> July at 6pm at Admiral Lord Nelson School, Portsmouth, to confirm the content of Objective 2 of the Portsmouth Cultural Strategy, and discuss its implementation. Objective 2 is:

*“To make Portsmouth’s urban environment a beautiful, vibrant place based on the principles of sustainability, accessibility, and inclusiveness”.*

This is a summary of the forum report, but also includes conclusions and recommendations by the Cultural Consortium Executive Group (CCEG) as a result of considering and analysing the forum’s output.

Some 90 people were invited from various domains including planning, architecture, neighbourhood forums, council members and officers, minority groups, education, and individuals. On the Cultural Consortium website ([www.cultural-consortium.co.uk](http://www.cultural-consortium.co.uk)), there is a full forum report, containing all the ideas and comments raised, a list of attendees and apologies, the full Objective 2 wording, and completed feedback forms.

#### 2. FORUM PROCESS

Peter Wainwright and John Phillipson facilitated the forum. Peter is a member of the CCEG, and John is its Chair.

First, Objective 2 was discussed, and the attendees offered a number of ideas and suggestions for amendment of the main description.

Next, suggestions for implementation were generated. From these suggestions, the facilitators proposed a number of topics for further discussion. Attendees then gathered in self-selecting groups around these topics to develop the suggestions further. A representative from each topic was asked to summarise the findings.

At the end of the forum, feedback forms were handed out, and 11 completed forms were returned to the facilitators.

#### 3. KEY OUTCOMES

##### 3.1 Objective 2 remains relevant

There was unanimous support for Objective 2. The key additions suggested in Objective 2 wording were to:

- make a link between the objective and benefits in term of “community cohesion” and “generating sustainable communities”
- link the objective to the local development framework
- refer to citizens (which includes students), not just residents, and the City’s broad ethnic mix.
- include a reference to the heritage/historic environment, and link to Portsmouth City Council’s (PCC) budget.
- consider accessibility in its widest sense, not just focussing on disabilities.

### 3.2 Setting high aspirations

The City needs to raise its aspirations as to the quality of the built environment, and PCC should be taking a lead. Improved design will reduce community problems, and should lead to greater cohesion within our communities.

### 3.3 Consultation processes

Consultation processes for developing the built environment need improving in many areas. There is a need for new and innovative ways of asking people for their views, and then feeding back the results and progress to them. There are plenty of innovative examples from the continent on this, and we should be learning from communities and cities outside Portsmouth.

Consultation needs to be an ongoing process – and must have a greater local focus. Tipner regeneration was cited as an example of a good dialogue with the developers, but this is not widely the case across the city – processes such as this need to be designed and not occurring ad hoc.

PCC should improve the publicising of planning proposals and listen to objections. Furthermore, there needs to be a mechanism whereby proposals are not just accepted or rejected but can be improved, with involvement by citizens.

### 3.4 Design Quality and Planning Action Group (DQPAG)

The role of the DQPAG is mentioned in some depth in the Cultural Strategy. The DQPAG is closely linked to consultation processes, and it is intended<sup>1</sup> that it:

- will have a wide remit, to include, but not be limited to planning applications, traffic infrastructure, signage, public art proposals and other matters affecting the design of public space.
- would be linked formally to the planning process through the City Council's Development Control Committee.
- would ensure that residents and other interests have effective means to participate from the earliest possible stage in consideration of proposals.

---

<sup>1</sup> The bullet points are taken from the Cultural Strategy.

- take a ‘vertical slice’ sample of planning applications of all sizes and types (eg. large-scale development to small domestic applications) from each planning cycle and comment on design and related matters.
- will comment generally on other decisions affecting built environment.
- over time establish good practice guidance and inform thinking about building and the use of space within the urban and natural environment.

At the 6<sup>th</sup> July forum, there were diverging views on the DQPAG and considerable discussion about the DQPAG either being inside or outside the planning process. One view was that the mechanism might not work, as it was difficult to see how the DQPAG could be part of the planning process as well as having a review or monitoring role.

Although no clear way ahead on the DQPAG was reached, a number of ideas were put forward in the spirit of what it is trying to achieve as envisaged in the Cultural Strategy. These ideas included:

1. Broadening the Architects’ Forum to a body that includes artists, other designers and non-specialists, and make it less dominated by architects. This raises the question of how the Architects Forum relates to the DQPAG.
2. Involve children more in the endeavour to improve the quality of design, via school.
3. Greater public involvement from beginning, especially in larger projects.
4. Have a stronger filter to weed out bad proposals.
5. The DQPAG needs to be accessible by, and interface with, all groups involved in the planning and development process, and needs to link into the Design Champion role.
6. The DQPAG needs to account for the Draft Statement of Community Involvement dated Mar 05.
7. Have a 3rd party appeals process involving the public when dissatisfied with PCC decisions.

In conclusion, more discussion is needed with PCC on how to enhance the process of improving the quality of design of the built environment, and on the concept of a DQPAG.

### 3.5 Design awards and competitions for buildings and public art; public art strategy

There were widely diverging comments on design, public art, and public art strategy. There was also debate as to what is good or bad design, and who should be the judge of this.

There needs to be much more use of design competitions for the built environment, including public art. PCC should be much more proactive in this role, either as the landowner or as a facilitator and encourager for others. There is a balance to be struck in involving a wide section of people for their design ideas, and involving design professionals such as architects and artists.

PCC should develop a strategy for competitive designs.

PCC should develop a public arts strategy, and commit to the Percent For Art Scheme.

### 3.6 Training and development for Council officers and members

Development control and planning councillors and officers would benefit from training in good design eg by the Solent Architecture Centre. Councillors need help in undertaking planning and design decisions.

Cllr T Hall is the nominated Design Champion for PCC. This is a new role, arising from a recent nationwide government-led initiative, and requires clarification as to what it will mean in practice for Portsmouth.

### 3.7 Improve the accessibility of buildings

Accessibility should be seen in its widest sense, not just from a disabilities angle. We must encourage spaces where people feel comfortable, and where young people more feel welcome in public spaces – this has implications for design.

So often developers ignore access or implement it poorly. This can be mitigated by incorporating accessibility into development schemes at all stages. Where developers are at fault, there needs to be means of bringing them to task. In short, closer scrutiny and monitoring of accessibility is required.

Developers and contractors need to be educated on accessibility.

### 3.8 Managing and investing in our historic environment

There should be a working group for all historic buildings, including the historic dockyard, and Fort Nelson, in order to determine a coherent strategy for the way ahead for maintaining and managing the historic environment. Ownership of these sites is varied, and there is potential for this working group to address funding as a whole. Within PCC, there is a need to develop a strategy, and prioritisation, for financing investment in the historic environment. Innovative ways of raising income from our historic buildings should be considered (for example, by holding weddings there).

Free access to our heritage/historic attractions should be considered.

We should explore what we can learn from other cities, such Bath and York, regarding heritage/historical environment, and what we can share with others.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The forum unanimously confirmed that, subject to minor changes, Objective 2 remains relevant. Objective 2 must remain a key driver in stakeholders' approaches to the development of the urban environment.
2. Consultation processes must be more innovative, and the public need to be much more involved at all stages. The role of a body such as DQPAG requires further investigation.
3. Training in design must be improved for all who play a key role in the planning and development control process.
4. Accessibility requires a much wider interpretation than access for people with a disability (although this is essential), and developers need to consider accessibility at all stages. PCC have a key role in making this happen, as guardians of the planning

process, and in exploiting, for the benefits of all citizens, the link between good design and wider societal benefits

5. PCC must develop a Public Arts strategy, with public art integral to all developments and not just seen as an add-on or “works of art”.
6. There needs to be a strategy for managing and investing in our historic environment, with PCC playing a major role in facilitating an umbrella organisation for the many different site owners involved.
7. PCC needs to play a key leadership role in setting everyone’s sights much higher towards to achieving much better quality in our urban environment.
8. The CCEG should brief key stakeholders, particularly PCC, on the forum outcomes, and on what needs to be done to bring Objective 2 to fruition.