

Report by Robert Austin of Highcliffe Residents Association regarding concerns over the proposed Beach Chalets on the Highcliffe undercliff based on a Meeting between:

Matthew Reeks – Community and Open Spaces Manager at Christchurch Borough Council, and
Robert Austin - Chairman of Highcliffe Residents Association CIC.

The purpose of the meeting was for CBC to discover further detail of the animosity and resistance from Residents of Highcliffe, and for the Residents to discover answers to controversial questions arising from the building of twelve Holiday Chalets by CBC in conjunction with Plum pictures and Channel4 Television companies.

As background information, C4 with George Clarke the presenter of ‘Amazing Spaces’, ‘Shed of the Year’ etc are holding a competition for the design of an overnight Beach Cabin. The twelve winning designs to be featured on a TV programme screened by C4 and built on Highcliffe undercliff.

Mr Reeks explained that the origins of the project lay in the need for CBC to find greater financial return from its assets, he stated that the costs of keeping Highcliffe beach clean and safe are considerable but gave no figures, they currently have income from the car park and café and have for several years been considering the re-instatement of Beach Huts as a possibility. The filming by C4 on Hengistbury Head inspired the involvement of Channel 4 in the current project.

We began by walking along the undercliff from the Cliffhanger Café to discuss the location of the proposed structures, the sites can be identified as naturally occurring terrace areas on the lowest strata of the undercliff in positions from below the Cliffhanger to a red marker buoy about 400 metres to the west. The positions have not been finalised but suitable sites are fairly easy to identify in the terrain by visual inspection. Access to the sites may be across individual footbridges spanning the drainage gullies, from the foreshore to the sites. I will include photographs of the terrain.



The question of who is paying for the hard standings, bridges and footways was discussed but no costs were revealed and the financial input from C4 remains vague.

Any forecasts of financial returns from rental, or research into who may want to rent the cabins is similarly vague, and I find it hard to believe that a project of this magnitude has been undertaken with no business plan, figures for overall build costs, surveys, meetings, consultations, advertising etc. “Mr Reeks made clear that a full and comprehensive business case had been developed and that CBC were satisfied that the project offered a good return on the financial investment involved”, but offered no figures or statistics at this time.

I raised the concerns of many residents regarding the behaviour of proposed tenants.

Mr Reeks gave an assurance that controls would be in place to avoid rowdiness and quickly evict tenants reported for unseemly behaviour. I expressed concern that by the time unruliness had been reported, investigated and action taken, the tenure would have finished and the harm already done.

I raised concerns about sanitation and waste disposal and Mr Reeks advised that prospective renters would be made aware that the nearest toilet facilities were by the Cliffhanger Café and that competition entries may include Porta-Potti type facilities.

The question of transporting a portable lavatory up to 400 metres to an emptying point, or preventing someone from nipping round the back of the Hut in the night, rather than walk the 800 metre round trip to the loo, was discussed but the answers remain speculative.

We discussed the question of Planning Consent, CBC feels entitled to proceed using Permitted Development, it has been pointed out that the height limitation under this scheme is 4 metres, Not the 6 metres quoted in the design brief on Plum Pictures website, Mr Reeks gave an assurance that the structures would be no higher than 4 metres, I asked that the specifications and website be updated as soon as possible to reflect this. CBC have also not identified a need for Building Regulations to apply, stating that a structural engineer will oversee all designs to ensure robustness, weather resistance and safety.

[Following our meeting Plum Pictures have revised the technical specification and emailed all interested parties to make them aware of the change.]

The height and design of the buildings has caused a great deal of concern, Mr Reeks confirmed that the height would be no greater than 4 Metres and that any zany, wacky or extreme designs would be filtered out before final judging. I pointed out that anyone entering the competition would try to create a design that stood out from all others and would by definition be radical, Mr Reeks assured me that the design brief states that the external appearance has to sit well in its environment.

I asked why an acceptable uniform exterior design had not been adopted with the creativity lavished on the interior design and fitting, he answered that this was considered but thought to constrain the creativity of the designers too much. I also asked what resolution there would be if George Clarke insisted on favouring the more extreme designs, Mr Reeks claims that CBC has ultimate control.

I put it to Mr Reeks that many residents would welcome conventional day huts as these are in keeping with the seaside image and are more likely to be rented by those living locally, he said that was a very good point and some of these could be built as well at some stage, if that is what the residents want.

Concerns about the geology and stability of the terrain were discussed, the clifftop was receding by 1 to 2 metres a year prior to stabilisation and it was/is not unusual for large chunks to collapse following inclement weather conditions. There is concern that some stabilisation work might be undone I expressed the opinion that the lifetime of these buildings might be shortened by the high winds and fragile cliffs and asked if this was factored into the revenue forecasts. CBC are convinced that the construction and foundations will withstand these conditions. The site is being monitored by Natural England.

I put it to Mr Reeks that in the absence of any real information it was not surprising that people are drawing their own conclusions based on the outrageous designs from a similar competition in Eastbourne and the worst excesses of human behaviour reported daily in the press.

I hope that this report will provide useful information for readers in forming their own opinions, for my own part I now see both sides of the case for and against building Beach Huts but I remain sceptical about the costing and returns, and the overnight aspects of the buildings with inadequate sanitation and access. Communication by Council and Councillors with the community is vital to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, resentment, and indignation over this and future projects.

[Mr Reeks has agreed to attend the residents meeting organised by Mrs Jo Pollen on the 6 May]

Robert Austin HRA-CIC