

# Executive Summary

of Report by Tom Jones

## Bristol Zoological Gardens

The Most Beautiful Zoo In The World

A report against the Zoo's case for closing the 186-year old Bristol Zoo site in Clifton with details drawn from the Zoo's own reports, accounts and strategic plans, revealing the true state of the Zoo's finances, visitor numbers and the fate of the animals.

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## Summary of Principle Findings

### **A CHANGE IN STRATEGY**

Until 2020 the Zoo's strategy (e.g. Strategy To 2025, published 2019) had always been to maintain both the Bristol Zoo site in Clifton and the Wild Place in South Gloucestershire in parallel, run as complementary attractions under the umbrella of Bristol Zoological Society. Every annual report to this date reiterated this approach and spoke of the joint success of both sites in financial, conservation, educational and popularity terms.

In 2020 (ref. BCWEZSL Accounts 2020) the Zoo announced a dramatic change in direction (Strategy to 2035) with a plan to close the historic Clifton site, to sell all their properties in Bristol and direct all efforts and resources into the Wild Place. The primary reasons given were that the Wild Place would be an all-round better site for animal conservation, but also claiming that visitor numbers were declining and the Zoo group's combined finances were on a downhill trajectory over the following 20 years.

### **FINANCES**

While there had been significant expenditure on the Wild Place project, the Zoo's finances were in better shape than the public has been led to believe. According to their own accounts, in the nine years up to 2020, the Zoo reported annual profits of between £200k and £1.8m, with one year in balance and one year in deficit. The most profitable reported years were in 2017-2019. Losses were reported for the two Covid-affected years but the Zoo also received a business interruption insurance payout of £2.5m. Since 2016, the Zoo's income has consistently been over £10m with a £13.6m peak in 2018.

While the Zoo's Reserves Policy is not stated in their Report and Accounts, their total reserves are substantial, including liquid and semi-liquid invested reserves estimated at £7m, as well as its substantial capital assets which have a book value of £36m but whose realised value may be much more.

The Wild Place is ambitious and has always been seen as a vital addition to Bristol Zoological Society, however it was never intended to need so much funding that the Clifton site would have to be sold to pay for it. As Professor Alice Roberts said at a recent public meeting: 'shutting a major attraction in Bristol to fund another zoo in South Gloucestershire is simply wrong.'

### **VISITOR NUMBERS**

The decision to close was also made partly on concerns about visitor numbers. Clearly the Zoo suffered like everywhere else during Covid restrictions, but it always attracted well over 500,000 visitors each year up until Covid and numbers were recovering when the site reopened.

This is down from the heydays of the 1960's and 70's, but is more than enough to be viable. The numbers compare favourably with other zoos (e.g. Dublin) and are higher than any other comparable local attractions (e.g. We The Curious attracts about 250,000 a year; Noah's Ark Zoo around 200,000).

Bristol Zoological Society's stated target, set out in their 'Strategy To 2025' was to attract 800,000 visitors a year in the future, but they were already successfully achieving this, between their two sites, by 2019. They have scored an own goal by closing Clifton and relying on the Wild Place which will take many years and huge investment - well above what they hope to sell their Clifton site for - to develop into the 'World Class, Fit For The 21st Century' zoo that they frequently mention.

The reasons for static visitor number at Bristol Zoo in Clifton must also be questioned. This externality cannot be the sole problem. Would a different set of management priorities, a redesign, some fresh paint and a new thinking about popular attractions have led to different results? A 'Zoo for the 21st Century' was proposed in earlier strategic documents but evidently never acted upon.

### **GOVERNANCE AND DECISION-MAKING**

The Zoological Society has for over a century been much respected by Bristolians and has always attracted the great and the good to its Board. Its shareholders in many cases have proudly held and guarded their shares across generations. As a result, the decision makers have inevitably been conservative, white, often male and not young. This has changed to a degree in recent years, but arguably not enough. At least two external reports advocated wholesale change but no action followed. The recent change in management was welcome, but too late, and with too narrow a brief for meaningful change to be successfully introduced.

The Report reveals that the decision making and the ensuing closure divided stakeholders. Furthermore, significant pressure has been brought to bear from the top on Trustees, shareholders and employees alike.

Even with the short hindsight to 2020, the decision to close the Zoo in a fire sale of assets and for supposedly sound business reasons, now begins to look flimsy, narrow and short-sighted. Worse, it does not take into account the significant wound to the spirit, heritage and collective memory of Bristol from the loss of the site. It fails to support biodiversity and the Zoo's own policy to act within the constraints of a carbon emissions target consistent with a 1.5° increase in global warming.

### **THE PR STORY**

One of the author's first surprises was the extent to which the Zoo had beguiled the public into thinking that the Zoo was failing, desperate for money and that all the animals were badly served by the space at the Clifton site.

The report finds that financial desperation was principally driven by the demands of Wild Place, as outlined above. But as great a falsehood, and one of the major planks of the new strategy, was that all the animals would get bigger, better accommodation at the Wild Place.

According to trusted sources, including keepers at the Zoo, only a tiny percentage of the animals will ever move to the Wild Place. Of the large mammal species, only one or two will move there. The rest

will be distributed to other Zoos - an expensive and time-consuming process. It is not out of the question that some may be put down, ultimately, if no home can be found.

### **THE PUBLIC FEELING**

The public universally understood that the Zoo was permanently safe and have been left bemused and disempowered by the closure. They are horrified to hear about the situation with the animals. But people also assume this is all a 'done deal' and that the site has already been sold to a developer.

The report makes clear that these decisions were made in the early desperate months of the pandemic and that insufficient time was given to give the 'Strategy To 2025' a chance.

The closure of the Clifton site was then presented as a *fait accompli* and there is no evidence of any concerted attempt to bring the public behind the survival of the Zoo, or to explore other options, but only to talk of the impact of the proposed housing development on the site. Discussions and 'consultation' were limited to the idea that development was the only viable option.

### **AN EXCLUSIVE HOUSING ESTATE**

A luxury housing estate is, financially, the best option for the Zoological Society. This would certainly maximise the value of the twelve acres in Clifton. The current planning application has been filed by the Zoo itself, at great cost, and if successful will allow them to sell the site to a property developer for an estimated £43m. The Zoological Society is now, in effect, a 'greedy developer' and the people of Bristol are under no moral obligation to support an organisation which is leaving town.

The claim is routinely made that the site will provide 'desperately needed housing' but this idea is risible. More expensive housing in Clifton, built on an historically important site, is not what is needed in Bristol. The apartments at the Zoo Gardens that Savills will be selling are luxury flats with no doubt delightful views over the downs and the city.

The current scheme includes '20% affordable housing'. This term is not legally defined - and is certainly not the same as 'social housing' - but usually means 80% of market rent and would still be well out of range for key workers. Furthermore, developers routinely argue the 'affordable housing' percentage down, to offset other planning conditions imposed on them.

Under the current plans, some of the open space is designated as publicly accessible, but this is a much smaller area than now, and will be locked out of hours, giving most people little reason to visit other than residents, who will pay for its upkeep. The access right is permissive and could be modified or withdrawn completely, so is not guaranteed for the next 10 years, let alone the next 180.

### **A BUILDING SITE**

As well as revealing the likely fate of the animals, the feelings and insights of zoo personnel, the views of independent experts, the short-term and faulty arguments pressed upon Trustees and Shareholders, the report points to a long period for the Zoo in Clifton when nothing may happen and the site is 'land-banked'.

It is possible that any development will be delayed, perhaps for years. The economic forecast in the UK is not good with a likelihood of stagnant or declining property prices. Indeed, a developer can always decline to develop the site while waiting for an economic upturn, as seen elsewhere in Clifton at the old W H Smith site.

## **CONCLUSION**

If the Zoological Society gets its planning permission then the city has thoughtlessly traded a unique historic site for a housing development. We will have lost our Zoo, beautiful gardens and a key green city space. If it fails to achieve its ambitious sale, fails to reinvent itself, fails to come up with new creative and business plans, then the Zoological Society itself may collapse, and result in an even worse outcome and break-up.

Our conclusion is, therefore, that the best solution by far is for the Society to reimagine Bristol Zoo as an attraction for the 21st Century, remain in Clifton, stick with its cherished site, welcome the hundreds of thousands of people who want to visit it every year and tap into the enormous goodwill of Bristolians with a dynamic and brilliant new direction.

We believe that there is a historic and moral obligation to do this, to save the Zoological Society, the Zoo, the animals and the gardens and to make a success of both sites.

**Save Bristol Zoo Gardens campaign**

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