

Swindon Local Policy Forum, Meeting 4 (14th March 2006)

An Update on the Preparation of the Swindon Central Area Action Plan and the Swindon Core Strategy

Summary of outcomes

Introduction

The session was introduced by Maureen Darrie of Adams Hendry Consulting Ltd. Instead of the usual workshop format, the structure of the meeting was based around two presentations by officers from Swindon Borough Council, which provided an update on the Swindon Central Area Action Plan and the Swindon Core Strategy documents. Delegates were invited to ask any questions they had on the various themes. In addition delegates were asked to complete a questionnaire seeking views on the emerging Preferred Options for regenerating central Swindon.

Swindon Central Area Action Plan

David Dewart (Project Leader, Regeneration Policy, Swindon Borough Council) provided a presentation on the results of the Issues and Options consultation and an overview of the emerging Preferred Options for the Central Area. The key areas of debate were as follows:

The Central Area Vision, Objectives and Development Strategy

Whilst the vision was met with broad agreement, some delegates felt there was too much specific emphasis on retail, although the officers explained they felt the vision represented a balance with no particular emphasis on any one topic. The reference to 'people' was queried in terms of who it is referring to, and the officers clarified that it means everyone who works, visits, and lives in Swindon.

The Action Plan sub-divides various sectors of Swindon's Central Area, and assesses their particular needs and opportunities. The four areas are the Central Area, North Star, the Heritage Area and the Central Area Fringe, which is larger than previously anticipated.

Design Approach, Public Realm and the Canal

The Council's aspirations for the reinstatement of the canal through the town centre, to act as a catalyst for regeneration and environmental improvements, were interrogated by a number of delegates. Concerns were raised about the cost and feasibility of undertaking such a scheme and whether its cost would compromise other regeneration opportunities. The officers pointed towards examples of other towns, such as Reading and Banbury, which have successfully used canal reinstatement or improvement to complement or stimulate redevelopment. Route options and feasibility is currently being considered by the officers and as such no decisions have yet been taken.

Transport and Movement

A number of delegates raised the option of precluding vehicular traffic entirely from a zone in central Swindon. The officers explained that this was not considered to be a viable option in the early stages of Swindon's redevelopment, as it would prohibit regeneration and discourage necessary investment.

The viability of park and ride bus services, and bus services in general, was discussed. It was suggested that a 'carrot and stick' approach is the best way of moving people from their cars and into public transport. This would involve making it more difficult and expensive for private car users to access the town centre, and making public transport a relatively inexpensive and convenient alternative. Integral in achieving this is the quality, frequency and timetabling of bus services. Many delegates felt that the current park and ride services are aimed at the '9 until 5' worker, with many services finishing too early during the week, and services too limited at weekends.

The hours that delivery lorries are able to access the town centre is seen as an important element of alleviating congestion in the area. Whilst there are regulations in place to ensure peak-time and daytime deliveries are restricted, some delegates observed breaches of these regulations, something which the officers said they would look into.

There was broad consensus that accessibility into the town centre needs to be improved, especially from the north across the railway corridor. Currently the North Star area is isolated in accessibility terms and this will prohibit future regeneration. Concern was also raised about the charging of pedestrians using a particular cross-railway route.

A number of delegates raised issues about the use of Victoria Road as a link in promoting a green spine.

The Town Centre

One delegate raised queries as to why people would come to Swindon town centre when places such as Gorse Hill provide a good range of services and shops. Currently the town centre does not attract people. David Dewart agreed and stated that this is one of the key things the Plan is addressing. He stated that the town centre should be the cultural focus of Swindon and should be an uplifting and attractive centre that the people of Swindon can be proud of.

North Star

Following the news that Bath University have withdrawn from the Gateway project in Swindon, delegates queried the continued aspiration of the Council to attract and deliver a university presence in the North Star area of the town centre. The officers explained that, despite the news, this is still very much a priority for the town and will continue to be pursued.

One delegate raised a concern about labelling North Star as suitable for future residential development given the proximity of industrial land uses.

The Railway Heritage Area

There was general consensus that the railway heritage area is a real gem and should be used to raise the profile of the town, and serve as a catalyst for further redevelopment.

The Central Swindon Fringe Area and Old Town

One key emphasis for this area is to attract families back in order to rekindle a sense of place and community spirit.

Other Comments

A number of questions were raised about what life would be like in 2026 (which the Plan is working towards). Are we adequately anticipating demographic and environmental changes? For example, will people still be shopping or will the internet have superseded the more traditional shopping experience? David Dewart explained that shopping may become even more of a leisure pursuit and the retail dynamic of the town centre needs to reflect that. Is the plan anticipating the ageing population and the increasing number of over-60's with disposable income?

Another major issue on the collective agenda is climate change. It was suggested that a new specific climate change objective is required to ensure the principles are entrenched within all plan proposals and future development.

Concern was raised by one delegate, a Crime Prevention Officer with Swindon Police, who had not been contacted prior to the meeting. He queried whether recent Government guidance on safe communities had fed into the Plan, and offered his assistance and advice with the ongoing preparation of the Plan. The officers agreed to contact him and would appreciate his input.

Swindon Core Strategy

Phil Smith (Project Leader, Strategic Policy, Swindon Borough Council) provided a presentation emerging Issues and Options for the Swindon Core Strategy. The key area which stimulated debate from the delegates was consultation methods.

Following the news that the officers received a 7% response rate when they sent out 1500 newsletters to parties who had previously expressed an interest, a number of delegates expressed disappointment and provided suggestions as to how people could be reached in the future. Neighbourhood partnerships schemes, 49 residents groups, community forums, parish councils and community centres were suggested recipients of future consultation material and information. It was suggested that batches of information could be sent to the above to encourage the 'trickle-down' of information.

Summary and Plenary by Maureen Darrie

The meeting concluded with a plenary / round up session by the Lead Facilitator. Her closing remarks are summarised as follows:

- The impact of front loading in the new planning system – there is a balance to be struck in terms of the level of front loading and consultation fatigue
- The new system is designed to be “spatial” and as such brings in more than just land use planning e.g. transport and community plans
- With that there is a need to reconcile competing interests
- Local distinctiveness is a key issue and needs to be reflected in the emerging documents
- Maureen commended that Group on the continuing level of support for the process and their enthusiasm for their town.
- She reminded the Group that there is still an opportunity to formally respond to the consultation documents.

The next meeting will be held in July 2007 – details to follow.