

Meeting 2 of the Swindon Local Policy Forum
The Preparation of an Area Action Plan for Swindon's Central Area

21st June 2006
The Pilgrim Centre, Regent Circus, Swindon

OUTCOMES REPORT

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Summary of Outcomes

The second meeting of the Swindon Local Policy Forum was held at The Pilgrim Centre in Swindon on the 21st June 2005.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the issues and options associated with the regeneration of the Central Area. The meeting commenced with a brief introduction, following which the Forum broke into four workshop groups.

Workshop 1 – Issues that need to be addressed in the Central Area

The first workshop focused on issues affecting the future planning of Central Swindon building on the outcomes from the Forum meeting held in April. A number of key topic areas were put forward for discussion, and a base map and acetate overlays were provided to record key spatial and locational outcomes.

A summary of the Forum's comments is set out below under each topic area.

Transportation and Access

A common theme emerging from the Group discussions in relation to transportation and access centred on the fact that Swindon is very difficult to navigate. This is partly due to poor signage and the one-way system but also due to the fact that the town is effectively carved in two by the railway line. The north-south links across the railway are poor and the fact that the private bridges are sometimes closed was identified as an issue. There are major bottlenecks at the railway crossings. The closure of Fleming Way to through vehicles was raised as an issue by two of the Groups.

The fragmentation of different parts of the Central Area was also raised. In particular, the Railway Village Conservation Area suffers from severance as it is bisected by a major traffic route to the station. The linkages between the Outlet Village and the town centre were also felt to be poor. Access to the leisure facilities north of the railway was also identified as a problem.

A number of Groups felt that the bus station could be better located, closer to the shopping centre.

Open Space

Issues raised by the Forum in relation to open space centred on the fact that existing open space is fragmented and underused. It is not very accessible and lacks links with the town centre. One Group suggested the development of green ways through the town centre as a means of improving linkage between existing open spaces. It was generally felt that there was a need for better quality open space in the centre that could be used for general enjoyment and performances. It was noted by one of

the Groups that the town centre tends to be inward facing and therefore does not present an appealing image for those coming into the centre.

Shopping

The Forum generally felt that shopping in the Central Area was poor. The lack of linkage between the Outlet Village and the town centre was raised by a number of Groups. It was also felt that the impact of out of town retail parks and the Outlet Village had damaged the mix of shopping available in the town centre.

The need for an 'anchor' store was also raised. However, it was noted that the town centre in its current form was unlikely to attract major investors and therefore there is a danger that additional retail provision would not be taken up. It was also felt that a food store is needed in the town centre to serve the needs of the resident population.

It was noted that Swindon is being affected by increased competition and 'spend leakage' from developments in Cardiff and Bristol.

Crime

The main issues raised by the Forum in relation to crime related to anti-social behaviour in the leisure quarter (Fleet Street/ Bridge Street area) due to the concentration of pubs. The relocation of the police station has removed their visible presence in the Central Area and has increased perceptions of danger. The fact that Swindon has a very dense centre with few open spaces and not much natural surveillance also contributes to the perception of the area as being unsafe. Other concerns relating to public safety raised by the Forum included the danger of crossing the railway, particularly at night.

Graffiti was also raised as an issue by a number of Groups.

Leisure

The general lack of facilities for youths was raised as a common issue by the Groups. The skate park has been closed and there is no cinema in the town centre. The swimming baths in Faringdon Down have also been closed and the Oasis needs improvement.

It was noted that the town centre tends to die at night. The concentration of pubs in the town centre and Old Town was also identified as an issue. More restaurants and a variety of pubs and bars are needed.

The links between leisure and tourism should also be exploited.

Housing

The Forum generally felt that there was not enough housing in the Central Area and that this was critical in getting the heart and soul back in the area.

The problems associated with sub-division of existing houses was raised in relation to parking as well as in terms of the loss of family housing. The vibrancy and sense of community in the centre is dependent on an adequate mix of dwellings of different types and tenures. Family housing should not be forced out into the suburbs and the town centre should not be dominated by flats.

The need for mixed-use development and adequate infrastructure and facilities to support new housing development was raised.

Art and Design

The general consensus amongst the Forum was that design in the Central Area lacks flair and imagination. The design of street furniture and shop fronts were particularly cited as being poor as was lighting.

One Group felt that the townscape of the centre needed to be protected and were opposed to more tall buildings. The Old Town was highlighted as a particular area worthy of protection. Another Group felt that it was important to establish key development principles for future development linked to an appropriate vision for how Swindon should develop.

The need for exhibition space was highlighted by a number of Groups. It was also noted that the town centre lacks any notable art or sculpture works.

Identity

It was widely agreed that Swindon suffers from a poor image and lacks identity. The town centre lacks a heart.

One Group felt that it was important to develop Swindon's image as a modern town with a creative and technological workforce. It was felt that the presence of the university would raise the profile of the town.

Redevelopment Opportunities

As a general rule it was felt that redevelopment should be cohesive not piecemeal and guided by a masterplan. It was suggested that a new north-south bridge is built and the northern area was identified as being particularly important. The character and heritage of the town centre should be retained.

The Forum identified a number of sites for redevelopment.

Regeneration Opportunities

Of those Groups that discussed this issue, it was felt that opportunities for regeneration should centre on the linkages between the various parts of the Central Area. A number of areas were identified as being appropriate for regeneration.

Several of the Groups identified additional topic areas that need to be considered as part of the preparation of an Action Area Plan for the Central Area. These included:

Employment / Offices

The Group felt that offices are an appropriate town centre use and should be encouraged particularly around the station so that it does not exacerbate traffic problems in the Central Area. Swindon currently lacks mixed-use opportunities.

It was considered important to have good employers in the town. It was noted that Swindon currently has a distribution focus and that it was important to consider how the town wants to develop.

University

The planning status of the university was felt to be unclear. Finding space for the central area campus is difficult. It was noted that the focus is on Coate.

Heritage and Conservation

The Group felt that the fact that the canal has gone and there is no water is an issue. They also noted that too much reliance on heritage and conservation could be limiting.

Sustainability

Sustainability was felt to be an over-arching issue to all the above topics. Best practice should be adopted in building design and operation. From an economic perspective it was important to encourage people who work in Swindon to spend more in the town.

Workshop 2 – Options for delivering the regeneration of the Central Area

The aim of the second workshop was to identify possible solutions to each of the options proposed in the earlier session.

Transportation and Access

A number of options were proposed for dealing with the issues raised in relation to transportation and access.

Safe and accessible pedestrian access should be provided in the centre promoting links between north and south of the railway. Improvements should also be made to the signage particularly in relation to parking.

Improvements to access to the station were also suggested involving a new link from the roundabout on the B4289 to Hawksworth Way and North Star Avenue. This would also allow for the provision of an additional car park north of the station.

The potential for innovative means of travel should also be considered such as mono-rail, sky-rail or tram. The canal should also be reinstated.

The linkages between the bus and railway stations should also be addressed. Suggestions included a pedestrianised link or rapid walkway. It was also suggested that the bus station is relocated towards Regent Street and linked to Granville Street.

Sustainable transport measures should be promoted such as improvements to public transport, safer walking routes, and the introduction of 'park and pedal' facilities.

Open Space

Linkages to existing parks should be developed and promoted and the existing small 'pocket parks' should be reinforced. Use of lighting and public art could enhance existing space. The opportunities arising from the university development should be explored.

The canal should be reintroduced into the town centre to form part of a green way as well as acting as a focal point. The quayside could be linked into the park / recreation ground to encourage greater use. It was suggested that the Carr Street and Queen Street car parks would be better used as public open space as they adjoin the canal.

The Newbridge Square development has the potential to address some of the issues identified. The Exchange redevelopment should also be used positively so that it becomes the 'heart' of the centre.

Shopping

The need for specialist outlets was suggested by a number of the Groups alongside the need for an anchor store. Other suggestions included use of the Mechanics Institute as a focal point to the town centre, a covered shopping centre and to move the market onto the street.

The need to explore and develop opportunities for mixed-use development and to consider retail alongside leisure was also suggested by the Forum. Something iconic is needed to make people want to visit the centre.

Crime

There was general consensus that the issue of crime should be considered in the design and layout of new development. Other suggestions included increasing the police presence in the town centre, greater use of CCTV and developing more housing in the Central Area to improve vitality and viability.

Leisure

Options for dealing with leisure issues suggested by the Forum included the need to make the central area more attractive at night and to promote a 'café society'. A central meeting or focal point would also be beneficial. Creating a quayside around a reintroduced canal and the development of open spaces and greenways were also

suggested. The need for a cinema and theatre in the Central Area (possibly in the Mechanics Institute) and a quality hotel were identified.

It was also suggested that opportunities should be taken to capitalise on Swindon's music and dance sub-culture.

Housing

It was widely agreed that more housing was needed in the Central Area. A mix of house types was suggested although high density housing was generally considered appropriate in the centre. The need to promote mixed-use development to provide a cohesive base for a new 'central area' was seen as key.

Art and Design

The need for good design was widely agreed and it was considered important to learn from examples elsewhere. It was suggested that exhibition space be provided in the town centre. Other suggestions included providing a heritage, art/sculpture trail and the use of temporary displays. One Group suggested using the existing Council Offices for an Art Gallery as part of a Cultural Quarter.

The connectivity between the different parts of the Central Area needs to be considered as part of a coherent strategy based on a single masterplan. The inter-relationships between key areas and land uses are important.

Identity

A number of Groups suggested Swindon's identity could focus on the town's green credentials. Other suggestions included promoting different aspects of the town through improved signage as well as promoting culture and leisure.

One Group suggested that the fact that Swindon has 3 of the 5 national research councils in the country should be capitalised upon as a way of developing the town's identity.

A vision or identity is needed for Swindon as a centre of excellence. This should permeate every decision affecting the town particularly the town centre.

Redevelopment Opportunities

The Groups suggested a number of potential uses for the sites identified as needing redeveloping. They felt that a vision was needed for all these sites and that it was important that they were not considered in isolation and that key sites were safeguarded.

The need for a University campus in the town centre was supported by a number of Groups and it was suggested that this was built before the campus at Coate.

Regeneration Opportunities

In terms of options for regeneration, issues raised included the reinstatement of the canal through the town centre to provide a focal point for waterfront development as a cultural quarter. Other suggestions included focusing regeneration opportunities around an integrated transport network.

Employment

It was noted by one Group that there are lots of empty offices in town but yet there are still proposals to build more. There is a need to promote and market employment opportunities and to encourage mixed-use development. There should be a move away from a 'zoning' approach to a 'planned' approach.

University

The need to provide student accommodation was seen as key. It was also important to build upon the opportunities arising out of a larger student base such as the promotion of the Central Area as 'lifestyle'.

Heritage and Conservation

Opportunities for the Mechanics Institute provides a fundamental way of changing the relationship between the outlet village and the town centre. Heritage and conservation aspects should not act as a constraint to development.

Sustainability

Swindon should strive to become the 'greenest' town in Britain. It should follow the lead of successful developments and achievements like the magic roundabout.

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Annex - A detailed description of the discussion points from each of the work groups.