

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM

PUBLIC MEETING

VISION FOR WINCHESTER

13 March 2007

Introductions

The meeting was held at the Theatre Royal, Winchester and attended by approximately 300 local residents. It was chaired by Mark Oaten MP who explained that the purpose of the evening was to consider the Vision for Winchester document that had been drawn up by the Town Forum and for people to think about what sort of Winchester they wanted for the future.

You can read the Vision for Winchester document by clicking on:

<http://www.winchester.gov.uk/GeneralM.asp?id= SX9452-A7832EC3>

The evening was run along similar lines to the BBC's "Question Time" TV programme.

The Panellists were:

- Chris Turner – Pro Vice Chancellor of the University of Winchester
- Evelyn Thurlby – Visitor Focus Ltd
- Graham Evans – Managing Director of Penyards Properties
- Councillor George Beckett – Leader of Winchester City Council
- Councillor Peter Rees – Chairman of Winchester Town Forum

Question 1:

The Winchester Voice on the City Council seemed to be outweighed by the views of Members from the rural parishes. Should Winchester have its own Town Council?

From Alan Weeks (Winchester City Residents' Association)

In summary, the Panellists' response were:

Councillor Rees: The Town Forum is the nearest body the unparished town area has to a Town Council. The Forum had started the debate on the merits of establishing a Town Council and he acknowledged the concerns of town residents that drove this debate. However, he considered that the Town Forum already did a good job in representing the views of local people in the town and that the Forum should only seek additional powers if it could result in practicable benefits to the local community.

Chris Turner suggested that most people were against creating too many tiers of government and that the best of way solving problems was through meetings such as this and people coming together.

Graham Evans: The local business community understood the potential advantages of a Town Council, as it would be focused on the needs of the town, but there was a danger that it would become bureaucratic and bogged down in issues of little real significance to residents.

Councillor Beckett: In response from a suggestion made by a member of the public, he agreed to consider the case for more local input on planning matters. He went on to state that, in practice, the Forum enjoyed more powers than any Parish Council, as its members were City Councillors and could therefore sit on the Planning Development Control Committee and determine planning applications. He also confirmed that whilst there were currently no members of the City Council's leading Cabinet committee from the town, Cabinet had encouraged the Forum to consider adopting new powers.

Evelyn Thurlby disagreed with proposal for a Town Council and that she expected City Councillors to represent the entire District and not to be focused on parochial issues.

In opening the question out to the audience, the following points were made:

- Winchester's residents were disadvantaged in comparison to those in the rural areas which had Parish Councils.
- That a Town Council would not be able to determine planning applications, but merely pass comment on applications to the City Council.
- That it seemed unfair that the town should be run by residents from villages often miles from the Winchester.

The audience were asked to take an unscientific vote on the idea of a Town Council for Winchester and, from a show of hands, a slight majority voted in favour.

Question 2

Many of the big changes to the town come from the County Council – what's the relationship like between the City and County Councils?

From Professor Stanfield-Smith

Councillor Beckett: Winchester is locally governed by two tiers of Government, in contrast to some areas that have unitary local authorities. He explained that the relationship between the City and County Councils was improving but that there was still scope for further improvement. As Leader of the City Council, he met regularly with Councillor Thornber of the County Council and from this had come practicable benefits, such as some progress on the repaving of the High Street.

Councillor Rees stated that residents were often justifiably confused by which authority was responsible for services, but that his experience as a City Councillor had demonstrated considerable co-operation between the two councils.

Chris Turner: The two Councils should be wary of being drawn into "petty squabbles" and should instead concentrate on broader, more strategic issues and remain conscious of developments that affect the town made at the regional level.

In opening the question out to the audience, the following point was made:

- The City Council should consult more with its County Council Divisional members.

Question 3

The document (Winchester - Towards Our Future) states “we will reduce levels of congestion and manage traffic to reduce vehicle emissions and improve air quality”. What specific actions, using its planning, regulation and budgetary powers will the Council take in the next twelve months to reduce carbon emissions?

From John Launder, Winchester Friends of the Earth

Councillor Beckett stated that the City Council was working with the County Council on a new transport plan for the town, called the Winchester Access Plan. It was also working towards the development of another Park and Ride facility at Compton which would help reduce congestion in the town centre. The City Council had also developed an Air Quality Action Plan for the town.

Evelyn Thurlby suggested that the responsibility to reduce carbon emissions rested primarily on the individual and considered the introduction of personal carbon allowances likely in the near future. However, she argued that concern about the environment should not be used by governments as an excuse for raising additional taxes.

Graham Evans explained that the proposed Business Improvement District (BID) Initiative (see below for more information on this) for the town centre would help deal with issues such as emissions and traffic control.

Councillor Rees explained that the Council had established a group to investigate Climate Change issues and that he considered there to be scope to improve co-operation between some of the public transport providers. He added that Winchester's location in natural bowl went some way in explaining its air quality problem and that, on a positive note, the Silver Hill development was likely to have space to lock 400 bicycles.

Chris Turner stated that the University did not allow first year students to bring their cars onto the campus and had policies to encourage all students and staff to use alternative modes of transport. He also commented on the unhelpful practice of some residents selling their parking permits to commuters and favoured new developments that provided no parking spaces.

In opening the question out to the audience, the following points were made:

- That the City Council could help reduce its carbon footprint by, for example, switching off lights at the Park and Ride facilities after midnight. Councillor Beckett agreed to investigate this suggestion further.
- That the City and County Councils should do more to encourage cycling through improving the condition of the town's roads.
- That the public transport system should be better integrated with a new bus station nearer the rail station.
- That, to reduce traffic congestion in the town centre, the timings of the pedestrian crossings should continue to favour vehicles, rather than pedestrians, at all times.

- That households in the controlled parking zones should be entitled to only two permits each.
- That Council owned buildings should lead by example and turn down their thermostats and that building control regulations should be used to development more environmentally friendly buildings.
- Councillor Pearson (the City Council's Portfolio Holder for the Environment, Health and Safety) explained that Stagecoach had been working with the local authorities to introduce cleaner engines on their buses and that the City Council's emerging Climate Change Plan would look at ways in which all residents could reduce their carbon usage. He added that the City Council's Air Quality Action Plan had been delayed because the Department for Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs, DEFRA (who needed to verify the Plan) had lost the document.

Question 4

There are many thousands of young people living or studying in Winchester. The recent Town Forum meeting held at Peter Symonds College consulted with *some* young people about *some* issues, but how can we more effectively engage young people in developing the Winchester of the future?

From Mike Simpson (Chairman of the Winchester District Children and Young People's Partnership)

Chris Turner commented that those responsible for making decisions often know little about young people and what they want. To find this out, more should be done to engage in conversation with the young, through events such as the Young Peoples' Issues meeting at Peter Symonds College (held 22 January 2007) and through better contact with the Student Unions.

Evelyn Thurlby suggested that to engage with young people, the Forum should go into schools, during school time, to reach a (literally) captive audience.

Councillor Beckett commented on his experiences working with schools in Citizenship Classes.

Councillor Rees spoke of the need to take account of young people's views, engage with them and not to demonise them. He also commented on the success of the Forum's meeting at Peter Symonds College.

In opening the question out to the audience, the following points were made:

- That the Council has got to follow through its commitments to better engage with young people.
- That the Council should prepare a questionnaire for school pupils, asking their views and, in particular, what could be provided in the town for them to do after 4pm. Councillor Beckett agreed with this suggestion.

Question 5

The Vision states that “we will insist on high quality design for all new buildings.” Who would the Panel look to as a judge of good design?

Question from Mr Merton (City of Winchester Trust)

Councillor Beckett explained that, as a non-architect, he based his judgements on an aggregate of expert opinions and that he placed additional weight on the views of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and English Heritage. However, in broad terms, he was against pastiche architecture and suggested that the town could have high quality modern designs given the right location and scale.

In answering a supplementary question, Councillor Becket commented that the City Council's Planning Department were “fit for purpose” in that it was able to cope with the large number and complexity of applications it received and still win the majority of cases at appeal.

Evelyn Thurlby commented that the most of the new buildings in Winchester were ugly and that successful designs were often those immediately welcomed by the public and given affectionate nicknames, such as the “Gherkin” in London. She also commented that the Brooks Shopping Centre had not been a successful design whereas good, modern architecture should appeal to the spirit.

Chris Turner commented on a number of new buildings the University had recently developed and explained that their designs had come about through architectural competitions. He suggested that Winchester's new buildings should be more innovative and exciting.

Councillor Rees agreed and explained that, whilst there should be balance between historical and modern buildings, developers should take risks in their designs and cited the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao as a good example.

Graham Evans explained that, from his experience as an estate agent, beauty was largely in the eye of the beholder but that he would also encourage developers to take risks and be forward thinking.

In opening the question out to the audience, the following points were made:

- That many of the new buildings in Winchester were bland – the reason the older buildings were seen as good derived from their original distinctiveness. Developers should therefore be braver.
- That the general public's initial reaction to buildings should not be the final comment on whether it was a successful design or not. Buildings can take 10-20 years to settle in their environment.
- That the key to the success of new buildings is that they should be sympathetic in scale to their surroundings.

Silver Hill

The Panel's discussions about design lead them to consider the Silver Hill re-development. In summary, the following points were made:

Graham Evans commented that there had been very wide consultation on the application, but that its success depended on it being economically viable.

In commenting about the consultation process of the scheme, Councillor Beckett stated that the developer had attended 1000 meetings and that there had been many public meetings to discuss the scheme.

Councillor Rees stated that it was inevitable that the application would not please everyone, but that it was a welcome regeneration to that part of the town.

Evelyn Thurlby also broadly welcomed the development and, as a member of its steering group, recommended that the Woolstaplers Hall be used to house the proposed English Centre.

Chris Turner commented on the great potential the redevelopment offered to open up the Broadway in front of the Guildhall as a public space, but that the new buildings should not dominate the area.

In opening the question out to the audience, the following points were made:

- That the application was an overdevelopment of the site which had resulted in proposing buildings that were too large and too tall. This was a view that was shared by a large proportion of the audience.
- That the re-development should be sustainable.
- That the proposed application misses the opportunities presented by the river.
- That there was a petition to preserve the Antiques Hall.
- That the Brooks Shopping Centre should be re-developed as part of the Silver Hill scheme.
- That, given the fall in High Street shopping, will the redevelopment attract the kind of retail shops the town wants?

Question 6

Christmas 2006 in Winchester was one of the most vibrant and alive we have seen for many years and local businesses have reported good seasonal sales. It is vital we now build on that and make Winchester a clear destination of choice for people across the region and further afield. What do the Panel feel will be the positive effects of the Business Improvement District (BID) initiative, which will come into being subject to the poll of local business people in a few months time?

From Steve Brine, Conservative Parliamentary Candidate for Winchester

Graham Evans explained that the BID was a process by which local businesses paid a small amount in addition to their Business Rates. These funds would then be used in the local area to help schemes and projects (such as the Christmas Ice Rink) that would help improve tourism, crime protection and other issues. He added that similar

schemes had worked well in other areas and that such an initiative was needed in Winchester to combat the declining number of visitors to the town centre. However, he explained that the scheme should not be administered by bureaucrats and should be as streamlined and cost efficient as possible.

Councillor Beckett stated his support for the scheme and explained that the scheme would be run by the Winchester City Centre Partnership (a body made up of local businesses) so that local businesses will decide how the money is spent.

Councillor Rees and Chris Turner also spoke in support of the scheme.

Evelyn Thurlby explained that, as a local resident, she would be grateful for the businesses' additional contribution to the town but (mindful of how some National Lottery Funds had been spent) cautioned against the funds being used on schemes that were the responsibility of the local authorities.

In opening the question out to the audience, the following points were made:

- Jim Sawyer (Chairman of Winchester Chamber of Commerce) supported the scheme and stated that it was likely to help the local economy and was fairer than the current arrangement as all local businesses would contribute, based on 1.5% of their rateable value. He added that the scheme was time limited and could therefore (however unlikely) be disbanded in future if necessary.
- That the increasing number of the mobile phone shops in the High Street was making the town less attractive to shoppers.
- That the lack of medium to large office space meant that there was little opportunity for local successful businesses that wanted to expand to stay in Winchester

Question 7

Winchester City Council has 1700 people on its housing waiting lists – how will the Vision provide enough decent housing for local people?

From Councillor Coates, Portfolio Holder for Housing

Mark Oaten used this question to ask the Panel their views on the Barton Farm Major Development Area (MDA).

Graham Evans stated that the MDA should be encouraged, provided it was accompanied by the necessary improvements to infrastructure and services.

Councillor Rees welcomed the MDA as it would provide much needed affordable housing in Winchester and help the local economy.

Evelyn Thurlby also spoke in support of the MDA, but suggested that its development should be phased, according to developers' provision of infrastructure improvements (such as new schools and surgeries).

In supporting the MDA, Chris Turner recommended that the developer open the design of the development to competition to ensure that the new dwellings were unique and innovative.

Councillor Beckett commented that the City Council's rejection of a planning application was currently being challenged through the Courts. If judgement

supported developing the MDA it could re-invigorate the town and provide much needed affordable homes. Whilst the arguments were balanced, he could see a case could be made for development.

Question 8

If the Panellists were to commission a painted bollard, what design would they chose?

From Alex Hoare, the Colour Factory - further details from <http://www.bollards.org.uk/>

Chris Turner planned to commission a bollard as a retirement present to himself in the style of Georgia O'Keeffe.

Councillor Rees' bollard would be painted in the style of Toulouse Lautrec and Graham Evans was undecided between a "For Sale" board and Lowry.

Evelyn Thurlby chose Benjamin Chee Chee whilst Councillor Beckett asked that his bollard be a painting of Olivia Newton-John.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Mark Oaten thanked everyone for their attendance and contribution to a lively debate and Penyards Properties, the Theatre Royal and the City Council for sponsoring the event.

The debate commenced at 7.00pm and concluded at 9.00pm