

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM**PUBLIC MEETING****IS WINCHESTER GOOD FOR BUSINESS?****3 November 2005****1. Chairman's Introduction**

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting approximately 30 members of the public along with representatives of local groups and Councillors.

The Chairman explained that the purpose of the evening was to debate whether Winchester was good for business and, to fuel the debate, the Forum received presentations from a number of prominent local business people. To that end, the Chairman welcomed Jim Sawyer (Director of Palmer Fry and Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce), Jeremy France (Director of Jeremy France Jewellers) Paul Morgan (Managing Director of Warrens) and Kate Crawford (Winchester 4 Business).

**2. Presentation by Jim Sawyer
(Director of Palmer Fry and Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce)**

Mr Sawyer chaired the debate and explained that Winchester needed a stronger voice to represent the town's business interests. During his opening presentation he raised the following issues:

- The town had lost 100,000 square feet of office space and approximately 1000 jobs as established companies found it impossible to find suitable space for expansion;
- That the Winnall Business Park required modernisation;
- The benefits of local people working near where they live;
- How would the Silver Hill development affect local businesses?
- Would branding as a 'Slow City' (Cittaslow) have a positive or negative impact on business?

**3. Presentation by Kate Crawford
(Winchester City Council's Winchester 4 Business Officer)**

Ms Crawford gave a background to Winchester's economy. She explained that whilst Winchester appeared to have a very healthy economy with low levels of unemployment and a low deprivation index, there were areas of difficulty faced by local businesses, such as staff recruitment, expansion and better linking between rural areas and the town-centre.

The City Council had therefore established a new post (the Winchester 4 Business Officer) to work together with partner organisations to develop an action plan to help businesses.

Ms Crawford also explained the City Council's interest in helping to develop the town's evening economy which it was hoped would attract more people to stay in the town area between approximately 5-9pm. To do this, the City Council was looking into ways of improving public transport links with the rural areas, safety issues and encouraging longer opening hours of shops, cafes and restaurants.

Local Businesses were also considering Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) whereby local businesses would be consulted as to whether they wanted to pay an additional sum, in the order of 1% on their Business Rates. This additional money would be spent on items agreed by local businesses, for example additional street cleaning, maintenance or increased policing. It may also help attract further grant money.

4. **PRESENTATION BY PAUL MORGAN**
(MANAGING DIRECTOR OF WARRENS)

Mr Morgan stated that, against a national backdrop of declining High Street sales (due partly to the growth of out-of-town retail centres and on-line shopping), Winchester had particularly suffered because of a perception of parking problems. He commented that the County and City Council's policy on Park and Ride had changed from aiming the Park and Ride sites to commuter parking towards replacing town centre parking on a space by space basis which would affect shopping. This, he suggested, resulted in a perception that shops in central Winchester were difficult to access by car.

Mr Morgan also commented on the loss of a number of offices and employment sites to residential development in the town centre which had the danger of turning Winchester into a dormitory town for commuters.

He explained that there was a widespread misuse of trade sales to the general public from units at the Winnall Industrial Estate, which should be investigated by the Council as this weakened the appeal of the High Street to shoppers.

5. **PRESENTATION BY JEREMY FRANCE**
(JEREMY FRANCE JEWELLERS)

Mr France commented on the importance of location in securing the success of a retail business. He added that, in this respect, Winchester was an excellent place to do business which had generated for his company a large base of loyal and informed clients.

However, whilst he considered that there was not a lack of free car parking spaces that available to town centre shoppers, he suggested that the availability of these spaces should be highlighted to drivers through a network of digital road signs.

Mr France also commented on the need for Winchester's traders to act together to increase trade in the town centre through joint advertising campaigns to reverse a recent drop in footfall trade. Whilst previous advertising initiatives had failed through a lack of interest from most town centre traders, Mr France was fully supportive of the BIDs process.

6. **QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

During the question and answer session which followed the presentations, the following issues were discussed:

Tourism/Coaches/Toilet Facilities:

Whilst Graham Love (Winchester City Centre Manager) confirmed that tourism was Winchester's most developed industry, the presenters explained that most of the income from tourism went into the town's hotels, bars and restaurants rather than retail traders. However, Mr Sawyer suggested that the town should consider initiatives to encourage tourists to stay longer which could perhaps be achieved through the development of a new facility based on the history of Winchester.

The Forum also discussed the poor facilities for coach tourists in Winchester and in response Ms Crawford explained that the City Centre Partnership was working closely with national coach companies to develop marketing strategies and that it was probable that the Silver Hill development could incorporate a new facility for coaches. A member of public who spoke suggested that the Saxon Suite in the Guildhall should be used as a welcome facility for coach tourists.

A Member of the public, commented that it was ironic that the British Toilet Association was based in Winchester, given the poor condition of the public conveniences in Abbey Gardens which were near the current coach set down area. In response, Mr Eden (Winchester City Council's Chief Executive) confirmed that these toilets were scheduled for refurbishment in 2006.

During debate, Mr Love confirmed that the fountain next to the Brooks would be covered and used as the location for the Christmas Tree and as a space for street entertainment.

Parking and Transport Issues:

A member of the public spoke in support of the Council's park and ride policies and suggested that a study should be undertaken on the effect of town centre trade at cities where traffic had been removed from the centre.

During debate, Mr France suggested that the County Council staff parking at Tower Street car park should be transferred to a Park and Ride site, which would free up more space for town centre shoppers.

In response to a comment on congestion caused by the one-way system in Winchester, Mr Sawyer disagreed that this was a serious problem and stated that congestion was a rarity caused by phasing of the Jewry Street pedestrian crossings at lunchtimes and occasional delivery lorries in St Georges Street.

Mr Dibden spoke as Chairman of the Winchester Housing Group. He supported the BIDs initiatives but explained the difficulties of providing affordable housing near to where people worked. He explained that the conversion of town centre employment sites to residential added further pressure on the limited number of parking spaces available and that, for small businesses, the Park and Ride sites were often impractical for those attending business meetings, carrying heavy equipment and those making frequent car journeys to and from the office.

The Loss of Employment Sites to Residential Development:

The Forum discussed the balance required between the need for employment sites and the need to encourage affordable housing in sustainable town centre locations. During debate, it was noted that Mott MacDonalds had recently vacated its town centre offices because of a lack of suitable space accommodate its expansion plans.

Staffing Issues:

In answering a question, Mr France explained that it was difficult to attract staff with the necessary skills and Mr Seftel (Managing Director of Benedicks) explained that a large proportion of his seasonal semi-skilled labour had recently come from Poland via an employment agency that administered their housing and transport needs. However Mr Seftel also commented that the success of his and other businesses on the Winnall Estate depended more on the pressures from customers, competitors and new regulations rather than any powers within the remit of the local council.

Other Issues:

The Forum also discussed the contribution of the two universities to the town's economy and Mr Love confirmed that representatives of the universities were active members of the City Centre Partnership.

The need for small live/work units within the Silver Hill development were also discussed along with the need to repave the pedestrian High Street.

Conclusion:

At the conclusion the evening, the Chairman thanked the presenters and the public at the meeting for their contribution to the debate and underlined the need to continually improve communication between the business community and the Council through the newly appointed post of the Winchester 4 Business Officer.

The meeting commenced at 7.00pm and concluded at 9.05pm

Chairman