

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM

PUBLIC MEETING

VISION FOR WINCHESTER

4 November 2004

1. Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman of the Forum, Councillor Pearce, welcomed to the meeting approximately 120 members of the public, representatives from local community organisations and Councillors.

2. Presentation on the "Vision for Winchester"

Simon Eden, the City Council's Chief Executive, explained that this was the second meeting of the Town Forum to discuss the Vision for Winchester and that the views stated at this meeting would help shape the form of this document. In summary, the Vision for Winchester would be a single, accessible document linking together the aspirations of the City Council, its strategic partners and the wider community for Winchester over the next ten to twenty years. Mr Eden explained that following this meeting, the City Council's officers would prepare a draft and then engage the community in a series of consultations (including use of the Council's website) before presenting the document to the Councillors' meeting of the Town Forum and Cabinet. Although there was no statutory date by which the Vision needed to be completed, it was hoped that it would be by early 2005.

The Forum heard a presentation from Robin Cooper, the City Council's Director of Development Services. He anticipated that the Vision was likely to comprise eight distinct subjects:

1. History and Heritage
2. Business and the Local Economy
3. Shoppers/Visitors
4. Housing
5. Transport
6. Leisure/Cultural
7. Environmental and Design Issues
8. Realising the Vision

1. History and Heritage

Mr Cooper stated that the Vision would need to reflect the importance of Winchester's heritage. It should address how the historic assets of the town could be made more accessible to the public (beyond the Heritage Open Days that are currently held every year) and how to best enhance and maintain the view points of the town from places like St Giles Hill. He also suggested that some of Winchester's historic buildings could be better presented through imaginative floodlighting whilst others could be re-generated through an innovative use of their internal and external spaces, particularly the historic buildings at risk.

Mr Cooper added that the Vision could also include aspects of Winchester's architecture that were generally disliked by the community with the hope of either improving or replacing these buildings. He suggested the City

Council's offices, the Wessex Hotel and the Hampshire Constabulary Headquarters as examples of this.

During the debate that followed, it was suggested by a speaker that Winchester should attempt to gain World Heritage Status, but Mr Cooper explained that very few sites in Britain were awarded this status and that it took many years to achieve.

The Group noted the £7m joint project between the City and County Councils to redevelop the Jewry Street Library. This included a cultural facility for 200 people and plaza area between the Library and the Theatre Royal. Several Members of the public raised concerns about the decision to name the development "The Cultural Centre" as they considered that this sounded more akin to something from Soviet Russia.

The Forum also heard an opinion that in order to maximise its use the Cultural Centre should be located within the Broadway/Friarsgate development. However it was noted that this would affect the economic viability of the new development and, in response to questions, Mr Cooper added that such a scheme was unlikely to be able to draw upon Lottery Funding or be affordable as the land might need to be acquired through a compulsory purchase order.

During discussion, several members of the public underlined the need for the Vision to defend Winchester's heritage and others recommended that the public rights of way through the Penninsula Barracks area should be made more accessible and welcoming to the public.

2. Business /Local Economy

Mr Cooper explained that the Vision should address how proactive the Council and its strategic partners should be in attempting to encourage the success of businesses in Winchester. Should the town be trying to help existing firms expand and/or attract new businesses to the area, perhaps through the re-generation of the existing industrial estates or creation of a state-of-the-art business park? What would the effects be of the possible new offices for the City and County Councils? Should more mixed used developments of residential and business uses be encouraged? What sort of businesses do we need to encourage?

The Forum heard from Graham Love, the City Centre Manager, who underlined the need for the town to keep working with businesses and Mr Cooper reported that the City Council had recently appointed a Business Manager to assist businesses with grants and planning issues.

Mr Cooper also explained that there were a number of practical options the City Council could take, including the creation of a business improvement district which, after a referendum, could enable the local council to levy an additional premium on businesses to finance specific projects for the benefit of the whole community. Mr Cooper also reported that from April 2005 some new business rates may also be returned from central Government to local authorities and that the Council would need to determine how this might be used for investment in the town and district.

The Forum discussed the importance of the educational facilities in Winchester and Mr Cooper explained that they all had aspirations to expand their number of students.

The Vision would also need to acknowledge Winchester's position as a centre of government and as public sector employer, with the City and County Councils, the Police and Prison Service and the hospital as examples. The Forum also considered the possible effects of the creation of a South East Regional Assembly.

3. Shoppers/Visitors

Mr Cooper explained that the Vision should consider Winchester's position as one of the top-ten tourist attractions for the south-east and the possible advantages of becoming a gateway to the proposed South Downs National Park.

The Vision could also explore the possibilities of cementing Winchester's position as a regional centre for food and drink and the Forum noted that, in addition to the regular French Markets, Winchester's Farmers' Markets were the most successful in the country and would now be run every two weeks.

In discussing how to best develop the experience of visiting Winchester, Mr Cooper commented on the need to increase the number of hotels in the town.

Broadway/Friarsgate

Mr Cooper explained the importance of the Broadway/Friarsgate re-development to the future of the town. He updated the Forum that at a meeting of full Council held on the previous evening, the City Council had signed an agreement with the developers, Thornfields and the architects, Allies and Morrison. The next six months would involve developing the plans with residents and businesses.

The development would create 41 new shops which represented approximately an 11% increase of retail units for town area. The development would re-create the medieval street pattern and reopen some of the water courses that currently ran under the medical centre and bus station.

Mr Cooper stated that the proposals included the demolition of the Friarsgate multi-storey car park and that they would be replaced on a space-for-space basis by a single level car park on top of the new shops. Another car park would provide 260 spaces for shop workers and some of the new residential dwellings. Mr Cooper explained that the car park would be screened by planting and that landscaped courtyards would be developed on the roof of the car parks.

The proposals for the re-development also included the creation of 364 new one or two bedroom flats of which 127 would be affordable units for keyworkers, shared equity or social housing rental.

Mr Cooper explained that, along with the relocation of the Friarsgate Medical Centre, a new bus centre would be created with the effect that the buses would no longer travel on the Broadway and along the partially pedestrianised High Street as the buses would enter the new station via Friarsgate. This would allow the Broadway to be used for markets (including the Farmers' Market), public entertainment events and open views to the Guildhall.

It was anticipated that a planning application for the scheme would be submitted, after extensive public consultation, in summer 2005. Because of the length of time the planning process and any compulsory purchase orders

may take, Mr Cooper explained that work on the site was unlikely to commence before 2007 and be completed before 2011.

Mr Sawyer, as a representative of the Chamber of Commerce, stated that a greater proportion of the Broadway/Friarsgate re-development should be given to employment, rather than residential uses.

In the general debate, the Forum agreed that the new development should attempt to offer shoppers a unique experience. Mr Cooper explained that the development would not attempt to echo or compete with other large covered shopping areas (such as Southampton's WestQuay). Most of the shopping units would be of a medium to small size and that the size of the units would decrease towards Eastgate Street. However, it was probable that the development would include a single large "anchor store" which was likely to be a food retailer. Mr Cooper added that the re-development was unlikely to adversely affect the vibrancy of trading in the areas around the Upper High Street.

In regard to concerns about delivery access to the Wessex Hotel and the shops at the western end of the High Street, Mr Eden confirmed that the re-designed Broadway would allow vehicular traffic to service shops and the Wessex Hotel, but would also give an opportunity for greater use by of the space by markets/festivals.

4. Housing

Mr Cooper explained that the Winchester District Local Plan predicted the need for 1,000 new homes in the town before 2011 and that this was achievable within the current rate of housing completions. However it was possible that central Government would increase this target across the south-east by an additional 6% and that the effects of such a change would need to be incorporated into the Vision.

The Vision would also need to address the difficulties of achieving affordable homes in Winchester and Mr Cooper reported that the 2003 average house price (based on a range of one to three bed homes) was £161,000 nationally, £204,000 for the south-east and £287,000 for Winchester. In an attempt to alleviate this problem, the City Council had promoted the development of affordable homes through its Local Plan and it was hoped that approximately 900 would be built in the period up to 2011.

The Forum discussed the type of developments the community needed and the effects this could have on the surrounding area. Mr Cooper explained that, with the City Council's help, residents in areas such as Chilbolton Avenue and St Giles Hill were drafting Urban Design Statements which could be used as supplementary planning guidance to help preserve and maintain an area's character.

During discussion on urban capacities, Mr Cooper explained that very high densities could work well through good design (such as the 260 per hectre at David Cowen House in the Upper High Street). It was also suggested that increased residential development in the town centre would help the evening economy.

The Forum discussed the planning policies of the Council which limited new developments to a maximum of 1.5 car parking spaces per dwelling and that some new homes were sold on the understanding that the occupants would be unable to park their car.

5. Transport

Mr Cooper explained that the Vision would need to address the transport issues pertaining to Winchester and suggested that it should discuss the following issues:

- the possibility of a second park and ride site,
- the railway
- improved bus services
- the air quality management area
- congestion
- work travel plans
- accessibility for the disabled
- improved pedestrian access

However, Mr Cooper suggested that the Vision should not be perceived as anti-car.

During the discussion, concerns were raised that the transport infrastructure of the town should be improved before the completion of the Broadway/Friarsgate development. However, it was explained that the applicants for the re-development would be obliged to submit a full transport assessment which would include the likely increased pressures on the surrounding roads. In response to a call for a ring-road around Winchester, Mr Cooper explained that this was unlikely to achieve Government funding.

6. Leisure/Cultural

Among the issues the Vision could address as part of this sub-heading, Mr Cooper reported that the City Council would develop a cultural consortium to better promote all the entertainment facilities in the town, ranging from performances in the cathedral or Theatre Royal to pub gigs.

He also stated that there were proposals to make the Guildhall more accessible and suggested that the Vision could look at improving the facilities at the River Park Leisure Centre and whether Winchester should attempt to do more to compete with other towns as a conference venue.

7. Environment Issues

Mr Cooper outlined the possibilities of Winchester becoming a Fair Trade Town and a number of transport and planning initiatives the City Council were undertaking to improve the local environment. The importance of sustainability and good design were also highlighted.

8. Implementing the Vision

It was important that once produced, a way of implementing the Vision was agreed.

Other Issues

At the conclusion of Mr Cooper's presentation, the Forum heard a number of issues beyond those listed above.

- Did the City Council see its role as being to serve and reflect the local community or to implement Government policy? Others underlined the importance the City Council should place on defending the unique character and history of Winchester. In response, Mr Cooper explained that local authorities were bound to interpret central Government legislation.
- The impact of Winchester's student population was discussed. Some suggested that they added an extra pressure on the limited stock of affordable housing whilst others commented on the positive contribution the students made to vibrancy and economy of the town. Councillor Hiscock (as the City Council's Portfolio Holder for Housing) explained that the Council was working with the University College Winchester to better plan for the student population's long term housing needs.
- Kate McIntosh of the City of Winchester Trust introduced to the Forum the principles of the CittaSlow or Slow City Movement. She explained that the Movement began in Italy as a reaction to the fast food culture, following the opening of a McDonalds store in Rome in 1986. Since then the Movement had spread to over 100 towns across Europe. It rejected the homogenisation of High Street by multi-national chains and instead encouraged local skills and produce that would better protect the local environment. She explained that Ludlow and Farringdon had become CittaSlow towns and reported that the Trust was recommending that Winchester become involved. As practical examples of the CittaSlow's ethics, Ms McIntosh cited the existing Farmers' Market and the possibility of harnessing power from the River Itchen. In response, Mr Eden stated that the principles of CittaSlow complemented many of the Council's existing policies and agreed that City Council officers would join the Trust's fact-finding trip to Ludlow.
- Would the Vision recognise the importance of the army to the town?
- To what extent would be Vision affect the suburbs?
- How does the vision differ from the Future of Winchester Study?

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and comments. It was explained that the next step was for document to be prepared for wider discussion. The Council would be seeking to engage with the widest audience possible through its website, in the local press and by talking to local groups and it was hoped to produce the Vision early in the next year.

The meeting commenced at 7.00pm and concluded at 9.15pm

Chairman