

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM

PUBLIC MEETING

VISION FOR WINCHESTER

22 July 2004

1. Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman of the Forum, Councillor Pearce, welcomed to the meeting approximately 35 members of the public and representatives from local community organisations, in addition to approximately 15 Councillors.

2. Presentation on the "Vision for Winchester" Statement

The Forum heard a presentation from Mr Robin Cooper, the City Council's Director of Development Services.

Mr Cooper explained that there was a need for the town area to draft its "Vision for Winchester" Statement that would set out in a single and concise document what the City Council, its strategic partners and the local community wanted to achieve over the next ten years.

The Statement would need to answer:

- What sort of town do we want?
- Why do people do business in Winchester?
- Why do people choose to do business here?
- Why would people want to invest here?
- Is there a bright future?

Mr Cooper suggested that the Vision Statement should cover the following issues:

Economy

Should the town try to encourage shopping? Should it attempt to try and win back shoppers who were now using the newer shopping malls at Southampton and Basingstoke? Should the town attempt to build on its successful Farmers' Market and become a centre for rural enterprise? Mr Cooper also suggested that the catchment area for the shopping centre should be considered, along with the implications of promoting Fair Trade in the Vision.

In terms of commerce, Mr Cooper stated that the Vision would need to consider whether Winchester encouraged businesses. The City Centre Partnership's Award System was acknowledged and Mr Cooper explained that a new post had been established at the City Council to act as a "one-stop" service for local businesses as part of the Winchester 4 Business Initiative. He further explained that it may now be possible for local councils to retain money collected in business rates from new local companies, so that more could be spent on local projects, such as graffiti clearance, street cleansing and promotions.

The Forum also discussed the need to revitalise the Winnall and Bar End Business Parks.

Public Services

Mr Cooper underlined the importance to the town of the large public sector employers and suggested that the Vision should consider whether Winchester should attempt to establish itself as a centre of regional or sub-regional Government.

Leisure and Culture

The Vision would need to consider the balance between encouraging the evening economy and protecting the town centre residents' quality of life. The Vision would also need to evaluate the possibility of further investment in the leisure centre or to floodlight historic buildings or the river. Mr Cooper added that there could potentially be more use made of existing private leisure facilities in the town centre and explained the proposals for the new Cultural Centre in Jewry Street and the improvements to Winchester Guildhall.

Education

The Forum noted that King Alfreds College had recently achieved university status and had changed its name accordingly to University College Winchester. In addition to Southampton University's School of Art faculty in Park Avenue, Mr Cooper suggested that the Vision should plan for the likely future increase in Winchester's student population. The Forum also recognised the large number of high achieving schools in the area.

Tourism

A large part of Winchester's economy benefited from the number of tourists that visited the town and Mr Cooper therefore recommended that the Vision should consider how the town was promoted. Should Winchester, for example, aim to be a gateway for the proposed South Downs National Park?

Homes

Mr Cooper explained the development pressures that would affect the town over the next ten years. It was likely that Government targets for new homes could increase from 600 to 830 new dwellings per year across the District and the implications of this should be highlighted in the Vision.

Environment

The Forum discussed the public open spaces in Winchester and Mr Cooper stated that the Vision could include proposals to further improve these, to maximise the use of existing buildings and to improve the gateway approaches into the Town.

Infrastructure

The Vision would need to tackle some of the infrastructure issues that were likely to arise in the next ten years. Mr Cooper advised that the Council should not adopt anti-car policies, but that issues such as parking, public transport and green travel plans would have to be considered.

Other Issues

The Vision would also have to deal with some of the new challenges the town was likely to face. One of these, Mr Cooper suggested, would be the redevelopment of the Broadway/Friarsgate area. A masterplan for the area had been agreed which included the demolition and replacement of the Friarsgate multi-storey car park, the medical centres and bus station. The new development would be a mixed use of residential (with a high proportion of affordable homes) and employment uses. It was noted that a series of consultations were likely to be conducted prior to the anticipated submission of the planning application in early 2005.

The Vision Statement should attempt to improve upon the many good things about the town, such as its heritage, appearance, creativity, farmers' markets, leisure facilities, surrounding countryside and low levels of crime.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Mr Cooper stated that the Statement was likely to be adopted by the Council in early 2005 and that a similar document had recently been prepared by Southampton City Council. Such a document, Mr Cooper argued, could be used in practical terms to improve the quality of planning applications and decisions.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Following Mr Cooper's presentation, a number of comments were made by the public in attendance. A summary of the points raised are as set out below:

Mr Storey spoke against the past achievements of the City Council and considered that the town had seen an increase in litter, graffiti, drunkenness, noise, pollution and parking problems. He added that over the same period there had been a decrease in the facilities for disabled parking, fewer green spaces, less respect for heritage and less democracy.

Mr Weekes spoke on behalf of the Winchester Residents' Association and recommended that the Vision should place a greater emphasis on conserving historic buildings. He also suggested that the High Street should be re-paved and that the Broadway/Friarsgate re-development should include a mews style residential development near St Johns.

Mr Love spoke as a representative of the City Centre Partnership in support of the need for the Vision document and he saw it as a good tool to encourage greater investment in the town. He suggested that the Broadway/Friarsgate development should include a diverse range of shops and mix of retail units that could keep pace with the changing needs of Winchester's business community. Mr Love also raised a concern that the development would draw life away from the High Street. In response, Mr Cooper commented that the development was unlikely to result in a large increase in the number of vacant units on the High Street as the market value of the rents would readjust accordingly and that, in comparison with other shopping centres, Winchester had few vacant units.

Mr Sawyer spoke as a representative of the North Hampshire Chamber of Commerce in support of the principle of a Vision statement, and stated that there was a clear need to improve the business parks at Winnall and Bar End to encourage a better live/work community in the town.

Mr Charrett voiced his support for the Vision, but questioned how it differed from other projects undertaken by the City Council, such as the Winchester District Local Plan and the Future of Winchester Study. In response, Mr Cooper explained that the Statement would draw together the plans of the City Council and its partner organisations (such as the Police and universities) into one concise document and he underlined that the Vision was not merely a planning development document.

Mrs Edwards spoke as a representative of the City of Winchester Trust. She underlined the importance of the likely expansion of the universities and the existing difficulties of securing sufficient numbers of affordable homes.

Mr Higgins of University College Winchester acknowledged the concerns raised in relation to the provision of student accommodation and commented on the need for a Park and Ride site to serve the organisations along Romsey Road.

The Chairman read a request from County Councillor Dickens (who was unable to attend the meeting) for a ring-road around the town. However, Mr Cooper stated that such a scheme was very unlikely to attract Government support.

Mr Rutter commented on Winchester's attractiveness to shoppers. In response, Mr Love explained that the City Centre Partnership worked with the local learning skills centre to improve customer relations. Mr Rutter also suggested that there should be better management of the town's existing assets. He therefore suggested that there should be more tree and hedgerow cutting and greater use made of the fountain at Peninsula Barracks (especially by children) and of the open spaces at Winchester School of Art.

Mr Banks spoke in support of the need for the Statement and suggested that the Broadway/Friarsgate re-development should include a public space outside the Guildhall with a fountain and that the area should be used for open air concerts and an open air cinema.

Concerns were raised in regard to traffic congestion and the Forum noted that the City Council had declared an Air Quality Management Area in the centre of the town, and as part of an action plan to improve air quality, traffic management issues would be reviewed.

Other comments were noted about the need to improve Planning Enforcement and in reply, Mr Cooper explained that the City Council was about to increase the number of staff that worked on Enforcement Issues.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and comments.

The meeting commenced at 7.00pm and concluded at 8.45pm

Chairman