

# Swindon Joint Strategic Needs Assessment Bulletin

## Economic Strategy Bulletin: –Town Centre Regeneration

### Key Points:

- The Town Centre has had increasing footfall throughout 2016 despite higher than average vacancy rates amongst its retail stock.
- The Town Centre is less competitive than our economic comparators. A survey of residents suggests the town centre needs more choice in the retail offer.
- Good quality Town Centre office stock is in short supply following a number of conversions to residential and a lack of new developments coming forward.

### A JSNA helps us to understand:

This JSNA helps us to understand:

- What we know about the needs of local people and businesses in the town centre
- How their needs are currently being met, and where the 'gaps' are
- What we think their future needs are likely to be; and
- How their needs can be best met in the future.

The Economy JSNA process involves many different partners and is monitored created by the Economic Development Team. Understanding Swindon's changing population, the factors that affect economic growth, the town's assets and the implications on future growth are vital in setting priorities and planning future services.

This JSNA is part of a suite of documents to understand the needs of businesses and residents in Swindon. It present an analysis of current evidence so that we can decide how best to facilitate and stimulate development and growth..

### Who is affected?

In 2015 Swindon had an estimated population of 217, 200, of which 118,600

were economically active. 114,400 people in Swindon are in employment, this is set to increase by 15,000 before 2026 in accordance with the expected population increase of over 40,000.

Swindon town centre has a 266 class A1 units that service a catchment area of around 519,810 (2016) people, which extends beyond the boundaries of Swindon. This number is set to increase by 70,000 people over the next 20 years.

### Constraints

#### Consumer Retail Demand

The town centre has been ranked as the 5<sup>th</sup> (Venue Score) in the local region behind Reading, Bath, Cheltenham and Oxford, but above Gloucester, Newbury and Salisbury. Evidence suggests the current retail offering in the town centre caters for a younger market than our neighbouring centres. A recent Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment (RLNA) identified some retail sectors that are underrepresented, compared to national averages:

- Furniture, carpets and textiles
- Booksellers, arts, crafts and stationers
- DIY, hardware and homewares
- China, glass, gifts and fancy goods
- Florists, nurserymen and seedsmen

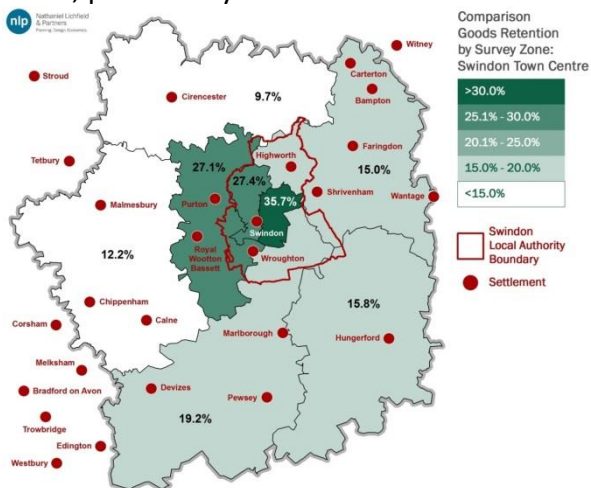
One thousand households were surveyed as part of the RLNA to establish views upon how the town centre can be improved. The results of the survey indicated that

- 13.5% of respondents wanted a better choice of shops in general;
- 6.5% were looking for better quality shops;
- 4.7% wanted a better range of independent stores/specialist shops;
- 4.5% wanted a better choice of clothing shops.

### Footfall

The top three priorities highlighted in the survey have a close relationship with some of the sectors currently deemed as underrepresented.

Despite ranking lower than some of its neighbouring urban high streets, footfall in the town centre is up almost 4 % (year on year) compared to a national decrease of 1.4% on the highstreets. Swindon Town Centre plays quite a strong role in attracting comparison goods spend from catchment areas, particularly from the east.



### Retail Stock

Swindon town centre has the largest retail offering with 73,390 m<sup>2</sup> Gross Floor space for comparison goods, more than treble that of the second biggest shopping area the Outlet centre.

Over the last six years Swindon Town centre has had above national average vacancy

rates, this currently stands (October 2016) at around 11.6% compared to 9.5% nationally in the same period. There are a range of reasons for units being empty, including inappropriate size of unit, low footfall in some areas of the town centre, high rents or business rates. There are a number of properties in the borough that are 'vacant' but still tenanted where the leaseholder is tied into a lease agreement but no longer trading from the premises.



The Swindon RLNA, conducted by Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, suggest that the quantity of our retail stock is not an issue, thus implying there are supply side factors dictating the vacancy rates rather than demand.

Of the occupied units in the town centre 49.2% of retailers are independents and the remaining being national brands. A large number of these independents are service based businesses on commercial road. In total, there are 111 A1 retail and 69 A3-5 food and drink businesses in the town.

### Wider economy consequences

Some of our largest businesses tell us that they face staff recruitment and retention issues in Swindon because of the perception that the town centre retail and leisure offer is of low or poor quality. For younger staff,

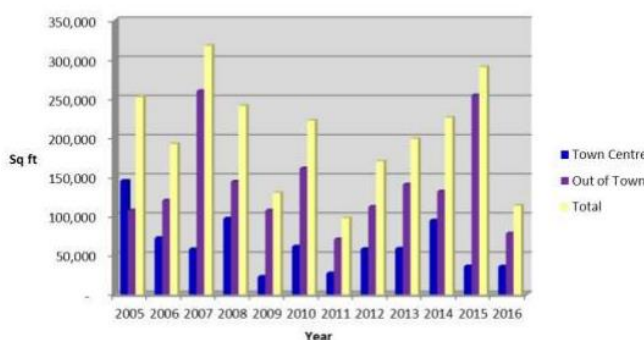
the evening (A3-5 uses) and cultural offer is cited as being particularly poor.

The town centre is home to the boroughs most expensive properties, in terms of rent and rateable values per metre squared. The high values demanded can often act as a barrier to inward investment.

### Office demand

There are very low levels of office stock available in the town centre. In recent years there have been no new office developments in the Town Centre, whilst some larger units have been converted to residential. The remaining available stock is deemed poor quality, leading to the majority (75%) of take-up in out of town business parks. These out of town office parks now charge a premium due to their relative youth, quality and access to parking. The last two years have resulted in very little office take up in the town centre, under 100,000ft<sup>2</sup>. New stock needs to be brought to the market to help improve accessibility of employment sites through sustainable transport methods, enable Swindon to promote its best asset (connectivity to London and other major cities) and improve footfall in the town centre.

**Swindon Office Annual Take Up**



Source: Kenington's LLP

### Heritage

The town centre is home to “one of the earliest examples of a model estate comprehensively planned and built by an industrial company, the Great Western Railway Company, for its employees”. “The character and appearance of this urban conservation area is particularly vulnerable to damage from unsuitable

development and alterations”. Once proposed by the Secretary of State for designation as a UNESCO 'World Heritage Site, The railway village sits within close proximity to the central retail area of the town centre, the railway station and the outlet centre, providing some of its buildings of national importance with scope for considerate redevelopment, securing their future.

## **What strategies and operations already exist?**

### One Public Estate (OPE)

OPE is a significant driver for the realisation of our town centre regeneration partnership vision; catching the tide of change that electrification of the great western Main Line will bring. Through this innovative bid, we and our STCRP partners have received £375,000 of OPE funding in order to unlock two key development sites (Station Regeneration and Carriage Works regeneration).

### Parking Strategy

There are around 5,226 public car parking spaces in Swindon town centre, and a further 1,700 private non-residential spaces. Around 750 of these spaces are likely to be lost as a result of Town Centre regeneration proposals, but data indicates that for the majority of the time there is more than enough spare capacity to cater for current demand for town centre car park. A key constraint is parking associated with the railway station, with is often full early in the day. The Station Regeneration proposals will help to address this issue. A Town Centre Parking Strategy is in preparation that will seek to improve the efficient use of the town centre parking stock. This will also review the use of Park and Ride sites in Swindon, which are effectively mothballed at present.

### Forward Swindon Regeneration Projects

Forward Swindon is committed to improving the town centre, creating new opportunities

by speeding up the delivery of office and residential developments. Projects that Forward Swindon are involved in include

- Kimmerfields, a new Central Business District delivering 60,000ft<sup>2</sup> Grade A office, 400+ homes and a new public transport interchange
- Redevelopment of Aspen House and Granville Street Car park
- Public Realm improvements including Wellington Street the key gateway to Swindon Town Centre from the railway station
- Renovating the old Carriage Works to create modern workspace for innovative, digital and creative industries
- Commissioning of Flashop UK
  - o Commissioned by Forward Swindon Ltd, inSwindon and Swindon Borough Council to help bring more retailers into the town centre to minimise the vacancy rates using innovative solutions such as short term tenancies.
- Town Centre Master Plan
  - o Our town centre master plan identifies an “arc of opportunity” focusing on a number of schemes that will transform Swindon’s economic performance as a visitor destination and a place to live, enjoy and do business. This includes improvements to the retail, cultural, leisure and central business district.
  - o Swindon Museum and Art Gallery will create a modern home for our nationally significant modern art collection
  - o North Star Regional Leisure Hub will deliver unrivalled leisure facilities, including one of the UKs longest indoor ski

slopes and complimentary amenities.

#### inSwindon Business Improvement District

inSwindon is a democratically elected, business-led organisation which was formed to improve a defined commercial area in Swindon town centre. inSwindon has 4 priorities: Promotion, safety, Cleanliness and Supporting Businesses. During its tenure the BID has brought an additional 70,000 people to the town centre through its events calendar. The BID provide a network in which to communicate future plans to the existing retailers.

### **What do People Think?**

Swindon Borough Council can only play a limited direct role in improving the town centre; therefore it is important to maintain good relations with key stakeholders in the town centre. Key town centre stakeholders have been consulted throughout the above works.

Residents are also included in consultation works in the town centre, ensuring the resident’s needs are met by the business community. The town centre masterplan undertook a vigorous engagement process to define the projects to be delivered in the Masterplan. These were chosen by the residents and business communities for the residents.

### **Recommendations**

The JSNA identified 4 strategic objectives (listed below) to be explored by the Economic Strategy to 2036.

1. Reconnect the town centre to its’ Railway Heritage, a new ‘zone of enterprise’ with station regeneration at its’ core
2. Increase the supply of town centre office stock to address the

- current shortage and attract new occupiers
- 3. Improve the retail, leisure and cultural offer
- 4. Make it easier for people to get in and around the town centre

## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank all the businesses, officers and stakeholders who contributed to and gave their time to help inform this needs assessment.

## **Where to find more information**

More information about all Swindon's JSNAs can be found on the JSNA website:

<http://www.swindonjsna.co.uk/>

If you have any queries (or would like to contribute to needs assessment activities in Swindon) please contact:  
JSNA@swindon.gov.uk