

BUDGET CONSULTATION - NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATEPAYERS

TUESDAY, 30 JANUARY 2018

PRESENT: Councillors David Renard (Leader of the Council) and Russell Holland (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance and Commercialisation).

Swindon Borough Council: Mr Paul Smith (Head of Finance).

Representatives of Swindon Non-Domestic Rate Payers: Ms Sarah Fish (Atkins), Mr Mike Godfrey (Business West), Mr Richard Lay (Lay Holding Group), Mr Mark Sansome (Red Penguin Solutions) and Mr Leo Santana (Right Fit Properties).

Apologies for absence were received from: Mr Mick Bowden (Swindon Borough Council), Mr Ian Larrard (Business West), Mr Andrew Wells (Business West), Mr Peter Davis (Cart Consult), Ms Danielle Mottram (Rombourne Serviced Offices), Mr Chris Seston (Signs Express), Mr Daniel Smethurst (Smethurst Property Consultants), and Mr Jol Rose (The Enterprise Network).

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor David Renard, Leader of the Council, welcomed the invited representatives of local businesses to the meeting.

2. 2017-18 Budget Update and Budget Strategy 2018-2020

Councillor Renard opened the meeting and advised that it was intended to inform local businesses of the Council's projected outturn for 2017/18 and the financial context for setting the budget for 2018-2020.

Mr Paul Smith, Head of Finance, explained that the 2018-2020 draft budget would be submitted to Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 7th February 2018 and that recommendations would then be made to the Council meeting on 22nd February 2018. It was noted that consultation feedback in relation to the budget proposals, including feedback from this meeting, would be included in the submission to the Cabinet meeting.

Mr Smith provided some updated figures on the projected outturn for 2017/18, including the reduction in the overspend against the revenue budget from £2.2m to £0.5m, and the projected variance for the Children Services budget increasing from £3.3m to £3.9m. Mr Smith explained the reasons for the projected overspend and variances, and made particular reference to the Swindon Programme which aims to save £30m over the next 30 months across all Council services.

Mr Richard Lay (Lay Holding Group) commented on the adult social care pressures being faced by the Council, and expressed concern over how business rates could be targeted for raising money in the future. Mr Lay also referred to proposals to use existing public parking for residential parking, and empty commercial buildings being turned into residential properties, which he feels detrimentally impacts the commercial development in the town. Mr Lay was of the view that the loss of public car parking spaces would decrease footfall, particularly for smaller local businesses

within the town, which could lead to commercial failures. He also felt that residential parking spaces would tend to be empty during the day and could be utilised for public parking during that time.

Ms Sarah Fish (Atkins) queried if there are opportunities within the planning process which could potentially be utilised to help businesses, and explained how current developments in technology – such as sensors in car parks being linked to apps on mobile phones – could help to provide digital solutions in the future to parking issues.

Mr Lay referred to how some parking bays only allow one or two hour parking at all times, and how he believes one simple solution could be to allow unlimited waiting times during the day and only place restrictions in the evenings.

Councillor Renard confirmed that a review of parking restrictions in the town centre is currently being undertaken.

Mr Mike Godfrey (Business West) queried who will be responsible for determining the methodology for calculating the business rates tax in the future, and what improvements will be provided to local businesses from their local authority once they start to receive funds from the business rates. Mr Smith advised that government regulations will continue to set business rates and local authorities will collect it, and also that the move towards 75% retention of business rates in 2020/21 may be offset through reductions in revenue support grant and that, consequently, it wasn't clear at this stage what the financial impact may be.

Mr Godfrey referred to the 'Switch on to Swindon' campaign and expressed his hope that promotional activity like this will continue. He felt that attracting potential employees to an area can depend on what that place has to offer in terms of transport links and the cultural offer, for example, and also how employees having the right employment skills is critical for business retention and growth.

Councillor Renard confirmed that it is a priority for the Council to grow the economy in Swindon.

Ms Fish explained how local authorities increasingly have to bid for transport infrastructure funding, and having development plans already in place for an area can assist with this process.

Mr Lay referred to how some members of his staff have to park over three quarters of a mile away from the place of business and walk back, and how unused parking spaces during the day are a resource that he feels could be used to help businesses with this issue.

Mr Leo Santana (Right Fit Properties) queried what the Council's plans are for the regeneration of the town centre. Councillor Renard referred to the proposals for Kimmersfield, North Star, Aspen House and the tented market, explaining the activity taking place in respect of each of these schemes, and reaffirmed the commitment from the Council to regenerate the town centre.

Mr Lay commented on planning conditions that are placed on development proposals, and that he feels these can be a barrier to development. Mr Lay

suggested that developers might build more office developments if these were not be liable for business rates.

Mr Mark Sansome (Red Penguin Solutions) commented that improving the leisure offer in the town would increase its attractiveness to people looking to move to the area, and queried the funding for the new museum and art gallery proposals. Mr Smith confirmed that a £5m capital budget had been approved and allocated for the project, and that the revenue budget for the existing facility was also earmarked should the current bid process be successful.

Mr Lay queried what the anticipated benefits are going to be from the proposals for the new museum and art gallery. Councillor Renard advised that the business plan for the Heritage Lottery Funding had set out the benefits, and how it will be an educational facility as well as a museum.

Mr Sansome suggested that changing the look of the town centre is critical to improve the profile and attractiveness of Swindon and to attract the right people to the town. Councillor Renard advised that the proposed site for the museum will be part of a designated cultural hub for the town, and that tourists travelling to see the twentieth century art collection displayed there will spend money in the town centre. He added that residential development is a big part of the Council's future plans for the town centre.

Mr Lay queried the future of 'Forward Swindon' and Councillor Renard confirmed that it has recently been asked by the Council's Cabinet to deliver nine separate projects and the decision was in the December 2017 Cabinet report.

Mr Santana queried if the Council has a strategy to attract large employers to the town. Councillor Renard explained how the 'Switch on to Swindon' project has been promoting the town and has had 360 businesses sign up to it, and also how the work of the Council's inward investment team has been attracting new businesses.

Mr Godfrey referred to how there is currently only 70 hectares of land available for business development within Swindon and so a large employer would not be attracted to the area. Councillor Renard acknowledged that there is insufficient land for business development within the current plans, but that it is expected that additional sites will be designated as employment land in the future.

Mr Santana asked about the number of people who both live and work in Swindon. Councillor Renard advised that around 40% of people migrate in and around 30% of people migrate out for work each day. It was also noted that developers do not build large, executive homes within Swindon and so people on higher pay grades tend to live elsewhere.