

Feedback received regarding the Town Twinning Review requested by Cabinet.

Roger Gower (Swindon Salzgitter Group):

The Town Twinning Network offers the following important support to an individual twinning association such as ours:

- The existence of the TTN shows the commitment the SDC has for twinning.
- If the TTN didn't exist there would be problems in operating a twinning group simply because there would be the need to identify who one needs to deal with. This would be especially exacerbated with a change of officers in the twinning group.
- There are opportunities to meet with other local twinning groups and exchange ideas on the most effective ways of running a twinning group.
- The TTN offers individual twinning groups an excellent way of understanding the functions of the Council and get advice on whom to talk when Council assistance is needed.
- Although advice can be gained from existing long-standing members of our association, the TTN has corporate knowledge of how individual associations have run in the past. This can improve the efficiency of how these groups are managed now and in the future.
- The modest funds made available to the Swindon Salzgitter Twinning Association through the TTN have been vital in allowing us to fulfil our commitments to hosting visitors from Germany.

Mike Ide (Wroughton Twinning Association):

- *What benefits your group has gained/hopes to gain from twinning activities (social, economic etc)*
Wroughton is a 'Peoples Twinning' group of people who are interested in the life of people in our partner community. We benefit by participating in our exchange visits to France, from experiencing life in French homes in a community similar to Wroughton and from educational and cultural visits during our visits and 'en route' to St. Germain. We also benefit from enjoying our social events in Swindon and devising a social programme when we entertain a group from France when we are proud to show them our everyday lives in our homes.
- *How you feel Swindon and its residents have benefitted from your twinning activities*
The benefits to the group (as given above) devolve to our members who, while mostly from Wroughton, all live in Swindon including Highworth, Toothill, Lawn and Pinehurst.
- *How do you see twinning developing over the next 10 years*
Interest in Twinning has declined since 1980 and is now in its last stages. Our members are mostly retired and we do not expect to be

able to undertake or receive a group visit of twenty plus persons again. We intend to continue our social programme and explore the opportunity for small-scale exchange visits. A parallel situation exists in France.

- *What support/resources do you need from the Council in order to be successful*

We were grateful for the financial support in the last few years when our membership became old and few in number. We were not as energetic in fund-raising as in our younger days and the economics of coach hire when the numbers reduced from 30 to below 20 made money even tighter. However we don't anticipate needing support in future as we will not be running big events any more.

- *What could be done differently*

The Town Twinning Network could be wound up to save council-tax.

- *How do you feel the Town Twinning Network supports the activities of your group*

When a twinning forum was originally set up (around 1997?) on the initiative of David Martin, there was a useful exchange of ideas between several 'Peoples Twinning' groups who were alike in wanting to run exchange visits on a shoestring (after a bit of fundraising) and who enjoyed being guests and hosts with foreigners in private homes. Once the group evolved into this one, run on council lines, another model of twinning took over in which people stay in hotels, travel by taxi, and claim expenses. This is not twinning as we see it and we feel the Network is not relevant to our twinning any more.

Bruce Clarke (Swindon Ocotal Link):

What benefits your group has gained/hopes to gain from twinning activities (social, economic etc)

Firstly, I would hope the review goes beyond the formal Twinning arrangements to include school links, community links and other business links.

Twinning has given our group an opportunity to work together on a project of civic and community value. It has provided a foundation experience of international awareness for the many hundreds young people who have participated in twinning activities.

- How you feel Swindon and its residents have benefitted from your twinning activities

Schools, community lunch clubs, old people's homes, Rotary, Festival of Literature, Swindon Festivals, Swindon Mela, Duke of Edinburgh's awards, Swindon Library, Torun and Saltzgitter twinning groups and Mayor's office have all benefited. Particular town wide support was gained during the

Evening Advertiser appeal that raised £30,000 and 7 tons of aid to the town following the Hurricane Mitch disaster; aid that was transported by an RAF Lynham hercules aircraft.

- How do you see twinning developing over the next 10 years

Without a clear strategic position within council's business plan twinning will continue as it is at the moment; based on the initiative of a few people. If given a larger role the activists are capable of delivering a more inclusive civic service. The adoption of service agreements in return for resources, both in kind and or financial, would bring council officers into the discussion about what the various link organisations can do. The role of twinning will develop into establishing international links probably not twinning in its traditional sense but working links that meet educational, business and community interests.

- What support/resources do you need from the Council in order to be successful

Firstly, we need recognition by Department Heads and Lead Members of the potential resources that twinning can bring to the Council. The council is not buying a service rather it is engaging the support of activists to further the international profile of the town. In-kind networking resources would be very helpful. a) Inclusion in Swindon News about Twinning/Linking activities b) Provision of meeting rooms and minuting / secretarial support c) invitation to twinning groups to work with economic and social projects. d) Invitation by schools to provide input into citizenship, history and geography themes. e) Access to printing and design services f) support with an annual twinning/linking event free room or hall facilities g) access to the Council's website

- What could be done differently

I think the starting point is to recognise that twinning or linking will continue to happen regardless of the Council's position or support. This is because twinning arises from the interests of communities, schools, businesses and clubs to forge meaningful links with international partners. The term Twinning maybe a problem. See the activity as an **International Relations Network** would open up the meeting and acknowledge the Mayor's civic role in receiving and facilitating exchanges.

Given that international links emerge all the time the Council might wish to establish a sustainable policy that included:

A stronger Mayoral input into any international visits.

Formal recognition by the Mayor of linking groups and higher level backing to important international relationships. This would require those international linking groups or activities, that wish to be recognised, to meet minimal reporting and structural conditions in return for use of the Civic logo,

Mayoral presence at events and so on. Possibly some sort of a 'recognised by the Mayor's office' status.

Help with communication, bringing together linking groups, marketing and raising the profile of twinning/linking, celebrating the diverse mix of links. All of this goes beyond the formal civic 'twinning' to include all the international links.

The Town Twinning Network has the official responsibility of reporting on Swindon Borough's formal twinning links. This can't be changed but what could be done differently would be to run bi-monthly meetings with an agenda geared to hearing about twinning or international activities from across the Borough and beyond with a mind to scheduling events and producing a news update based on the minutes. These updates be circulated to media and news networks using the borough's communication networks and website. This function of circulating news and notices of events would attract more members and would greatly assist groups to promote their activities and successes.

- How do you feel the Town Twinning Network supports the activities of your group

The network offers its members an important connection to the Mayor's office and the status of being a civic organisation. It places a responsibility on its members to report on activities in a public setting and therefore increases the accountability of the organisation. The small amount of funding is helpful for specific occasions. However, the network offers the minimum level of support and it struggles to gain the attention of Department Heads and Lead Members.

Conclusion

With no real increase in resources the network could take on a bigger role of being an international relations network, the council could identify how the various groups and activities can support the council's work, greater use of existing services providing in-kind support together with an agreed budget.

Ray Fisher (former Councillor on Town Twinning Network):

I think the Network has been useful for those who network through it. It could be really useful if it were used by designated Cabinet member/s to coordinate all the networking that goes on around the town, Trade Missions, Business Members' Clubs, Japanese lessons – the opportunities are limitless.

Councillor Kevin Small

I support Ray's comments and would also add that Town twinning can give a social and economic benefit to the borough. SBC through the TTN need to promote twinning more, senior council members and officers need to support twinning, and we should look to make more of EU funding to support this activity.

A number of Local Authorities were contacted to find out their arrangements with regards to Town Twinning activities. Only one response was received from Reading Borough Council:

'Reading has four twin towns and links with others, it was felt that while useful to have the representatives from each of the town twinning organisations to get together four times a year, it amounted to little more than an information exchange, Councillors who were appointed rarely turned up to the meetings, attendance was negligible, some of the twinning organisations had very small memberships and couldn't send any representation so as part of the budget cuts it was felt that it wasn't worth the while for the Committee team to continue its support.

Most of the twinning activities were arranged by, or certainly advertised through the Council's promotions team who attended the meetings anyway, and that is now the sum of the officer support for the group. I don't think we even appoint any councillors to the body any more. If it still meets the meetings are organised by themselves, although I suspect council rooms can be made available if they so wished.'