

# **ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SUSTAINABILITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER 2012**

PRESENT:- Councillors Peter Heaton-Jones (Chair), Mark Dempsey (Vice-Chair), Junab Ali, Mike Bawden, Wayne Crabbe, Toby Elliott, Emma Faramarzi, Mary Friend, Richard Hurley, Julian Price, James Robbins and Steve Wakefield.

Councillors Des Moffatt and Bob Wright were also in attendance.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Nicky Sewell.

## **8. Declarations of Interest**

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting. Councillor Emma Faramarzi made a non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of Agenda Item No. 7 in her capacity as Chair of the Federation of Small Businesses and as a member of the Influence Board (formerly Swindon Strategic Economic Partnership).

## **9. Minutes**

Resolved – That, subject to it being noted in Minute 4 that costs associated with the Mechanics Institute had not been recovered but that a charge on the freehold of the property had been made in the Council's favour, the minutes of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2012, be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

## **10. Public Question Time**

With the agreement of the Committee the Chair indicated that Public Questions relating to the Mechanics Institute would be taken as part of Agenda Item 6 (Mechanics Advisory Group). There were no additional Public Questions.

## **11. Co-ordinated Approach to Strategy Development**

The Committee considered a report of the Scrutiny Officer setting out the background to a presentation on a Council Co-ordinated Strategy Development.

Paddy Bradley (Head of Commissioning – Economy and Attainment) and James Griffin (Head of Strategy and Innovation) made a presentation to the Committee setting out the short, medium and long term Council strategies covering core functions, the economy and corporate strategies and how these fitted together. They highlighted the following key points:

- A brief outline of the Council's current strategies.
- The differing scopes and purposes of the strategies.
- An outline of measures of success.
- The long term aspirations set out within the plans (ie Swindon 2030).
- The medium term aspirations which tended to be more precise on desired outcomes (ie One Swindon and Stronger Together).
- The use of economic strategies that covered the whole Council and its

functions.

- Functional strategies, such as the economic strategy, which sets out six priorities and informs and shapes the Core Strategy, Local Plan and sets out the drivers of economic growth and which is therefore of fundamental importance.
- That it was timely to look at the Council's priorities and strategies to ensure they reflected the corporate priorities and the current economic situation and progress in the town centre development.
- It was important to realise that the strategies, including the economic strategy couldn't exist or function in a vacuum.

Members discussed the presentation and raised the following points through questions and answers:

- The Core Strategy was the key economic strategy as it was a strategic document that would influence and inform others covering a wide range of issues from the number of houses being built to the availability of employment land.
- The availability of employment land was a key determining factor in Swindon growth.
- The Core Strategy and Economic Strategy Consultation processes and timetables and the reasons for the differences in these.
- The need for the Committee to adequately consider both strategies.
- Officer accountability for strategies and elements within them.
- The information under-pinning the key economic strategy and the need to ensure this was reviewed to ensure the strategies remained as valid and accurate as possible.
- The role of localities in the consultation process.
- The effect of an ageing population in strategy development.
- The importance of ensuring that policies didn't operate in silos.

Resolved – (1) That the Officers be thanked for their presentation.

(2) That an additional meeting of this Committee be held on Tuesday 23rd October 2012 commencing at 6:00 p.m. to consider the draft Economic Strategy.

(3) That officers submit a report on the Local Plan to the December meeting of this Committee and that this report be the focus of the meeting.

## **12. Mechanics Advisory Group**

The Committee received a report of the Mechanics Advisory Group updating it on its work to date and conclusions and provisional recommendations.

The Chair, with the agreement of the Committee, indicated that the initial discussions would be framed by a series of public questions submitted in writing by Mr. Daniel Rose on behalf of the Mechanics Institution Trust (appended as an appendix to the minutes). Mr. Rose would be invited to briefly introduce the questions prior to their consideration.

### Question 1

The Chair apologised to Mr. Rose that the invitation referred to had not been received by the Mechanics Institution Trust which was the result of an oversight. He also outlined the recommendations on page 10 of the agenda papers which had superseded those outlined on page 21 and highlighted the earlier recommendations which still stand, specifically in relation to the continued involvement of the Mechanics Institution Trust. Councillor Garry Perkins (Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Culture) reiterated the Chair's apology indicating he had been under the impression the invitation was from the Mechanics Advisory Group.

## Question 2

Mr. Daniel Rose indicated that he understood the context and asked for clarification on references to the renovation of the exterior of the building and whether or not this was the policy of the administration?

Councillor Garry Perkins (Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Culture) was not the policy of the administration but was based upon information to hand. It was anticipated that Forefront Estates would cease to trade and that the property would be taken over by the Crown but a determination on how to move forward would be taken at that time based on the circumstances faced. The Council had examined the costs of bringing the building back into use and had estimated that this would cost in the region of £20-40 million. Discussions regarding funding with the Lottery Funding and English Heritage were on-going but had not reached a conclusion and to date no commitments had been received, and until there was an accurate costing there was unlikely to be a firm commitment. Councillor Perkins noted that if the exterior of the building were renovated this would likely make progress in moving forward easier.

The Chair noted that the wording of bullet point 3 on page 10 would need to be reworded.

## Question 3

The Chair indicated that he hoped the Trust's question would be answered in the forthcoming discussions.

## Question 4

Mr. Daniel Rose noted the Mechanics Institution Trust's view that it was illogical to split renovation of the building from its future use; potential grant funders would need to understand the public benefit/use.

Councillor Garry Perkins noted the likely way in which Lottery Funding and English Heritage would view any grant determination and noted the building was a Grade 2 Listed Building and its architectural merit.

The Committee, with contributions from Mr. Daniel Rose, and Councillors Des Moffatt and Bob Wright discussed the following issues in response to the outstanding public questions:

- The architectural merits of the Mechanics Trust building in its own right being a Grade 2 Listed Building (and in the top 6% of buildings in the country on this criteria).

- The need to promote the building's architectural merit, its cultural significance and national significance in moving forward.
- The need to promote the Working Group's view on the building rather than relying on the wording provided officers or experts which tended to be formal and dry and not necessarily reflect the true value of the building.
- The skills required to complete any renovation project agreed.
- The potential benefits of the Mechanics Institute Trust and Council working together.
- The potential availability of funding streams through the Mechanics Institution Trust that might not be available directly through the Council.
- The need for a robust business plan when seeking grant funding.
- The need for the Mechanics Institution Trust to ensure its Business Plan was up to date.
- The need to explore partnership working between the Council and Mechanics Institution Trust.
- The money already spent by the Council in ensuring the maintenance of the fabric of the building.
- The option of transferring the ownership of the building to the Mechanics Institution Trust.
- The need to ensure the on-going process remained as open as possible.

In response to a request from Mr. Daniel Rose, Councillor Garry Perkins agreed to re-look at the Princes' Trust Report, and with the agreement of the Princes' Trust, to see if it could be released in part, or full, to the Mechanics Institution Trust.

The Chair thanked all those present for their part in the debate. He also recorded his thanks to Councillors Mike Bawden, Mark Dempsey and Bob Wright for their input, to date, in the Working Group.

The Chair also noted that it might be an opportune time to see grant funding with the Heritage Lottery Fund looking more favourably at single building projects.

He also indicated that it might also be timely for the Mechanics Advisory Group, Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Culture and Mechanics Institution Trust to meet to ensure all three parties were up-to-date with developments and options.

Resolved – (1) That officers be requested to consider the views expressed at this meeting and update the Mechanics Advisory Group report and its recommendations accordingly.

(2) That, further to (1) above, the revised report be circulated to members of this Committee, the Mechanics Advisory Group, the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Culture, Ward Councillors and Mechanics Institution Trust for information.

### **13. Town Centre Masterplan Consultation Submission**

The Committee considered a report submitted by the Scrutiny Officer setting out the final conclusions and recommendations of the Committee's review into Town Centre Regeneration and changes to the Committee's views over the previous three years and plans had developed.

The Chair outlined the historical context surrounding the report and review

and noted that the full consultation report was available on-line and that the Committee's views would form part of the consultation.

The Committee discussed the report and consultation and raised the following points:

- Discussions with Forward Swindon regarding the consultation exercise.
- The increase in projected population in Swindon, as evidenced in the census and subsequent projections and the need to ensure any plan was robust and relevant to Swindon in the light of this change.
- The report was the reflection of the debate within the town on its future development and the report was a useful addition to the consultation.
- The effect of Strategic Plans on any development.
- The benefits and importance of connecting the town centre to developments across the railway line and to ensure appropriate transport links were established.
- The effect of cross border interaction within any strategic plan.
- The need to have a clearly identified point of contact for inward investment.
- The need to establish a clear vision and flexible plan.
- The need to identify and establish an appropriate mix of usage and shops within the town centre area that can respond effectively to changing consumer trends.
- The need to ensure Swindon's image reflected the fact it was one of the safest towns within one of the safest counties in the country.
- Swindon's heritage and history offered a unique opportunity for attracting businesses.
- The need to ensure transport infrastructure accommodated future development plans.

Resolved – That officers be requested to update the tabled report to reflect the views expressed at this meeting prior to its submission as part of the consultation exercise.

(Councillor Emma Famarzi made a non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of this item as Chair of the Federation of Small Businesses and as a member of the Influence Board (formerly Swindon Strategic Economic partnership.)

#### **14. Inward Investment**

The Chair invited Members to discuss the future direction of the Inward Investment review. He updated Members on the current situation and outlined the impact that strategies and strategic policies would have on the report. The Committee also discussed the role and impact of the Government's body of UK Trade and Investment, the identifications and pursuit of international links and the timescales involved.

Resolved – (1) That the Council's Scrutiny Officer be requested to liaise with Forward Swindon to identify (a) the current position on inward investment performance measures, and (b) work and relationships they have with UK Trade and Investment.

(2) That the Council's Scrutiny Officer, in liaison with the Chair, prepare a report on inward investment for consideration by this Committee.

