

Bringing Empty Shops Back Into Use - Motion at Council

Cabinet

Date: 5th February 2014

Author: Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration and Culture
Board Director Commissioning (DCS/DASS)

Wards: Central

Locality Affected: Town Centre

Parishes Affected: None

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1 The report informs members of the Cabinet about activities to develop the economic performance of Swindon Town Centre (the town centre).
- 1.2 This report is in response to the Motion at Council from the 11th April 2013 (Minute 126 2012/13 refers)
- 1.3 The contents of the report relate to the One Swindon priority, "We can all benefit from a growing economy and a revitalised town centre" and the objective of the Corporate Strategy "Right skills, right jobs, right place".

2. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Endorse inSwindon's plans to develop a range of themed markets to assist the local economy and improve the experience of residents when shopping in Swindon's town centre.
- 2.2 Request that the Council note the contents of this report in response to the Motion at Council on 11th April, 2013.

3. Detail

- 3.1 The Motion agreed by the Council on 11th April 2013 stated:

"That this Council notes that in large towns and cities such as Brighton, Pop Up Shops have brought empty shops back to life, have enabled new businesses to grow and have assisted young retail entrepreneurs onto the high street."

This Council notes the work already undertaken by the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Culture, the North Swindon MP Justin Tomlinson, Forward Swindon Ltd and InSwindon to find sustainable as well short-term uses for properties in the town centre, including funding from Mary Portas Project and the Coalition Government.

Council requests the Chief Executive and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Culture to provide a report to Cabinet on the continuing work that InSwindon,

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in collaboration with Swindon Borough Council, have been pursuing with the shop owners to ensure empty premises are brought back into use.”

- 3.2 There is a wide range of work underway to open up economic development opportunities and to improve the town centre “offer” to residents, visitors and businesses.
- 3.3 Swindon Borough Council has set a priority within its Economic Strategy, agreed by the Council in January 2013, to revitalise the town centre (Council Minute 93 2012/13 refers).
- 3.4 The implementation of this priority is set within the framework of the master plan for the town centre, procured by Forward Swindon Ltd., which enables a coherent programme of development to come forward.
- 3.5 Current projects that Swindon Borough Council is supporting include the extensive developments at Kimmerfields, North Star and Regents’ Circus, which together encompass more than £450m of private sector investment in the town centre.
- 3.6 In December 2013, Cabinet agreed to develop a new museum and art gallery in the town centre, which will not only aim to house the Borough’s important historical artefacts and nationally recognised collection of paintings and ceramics, but will also create jobs and commercial opportunities (Cabinet Minute 67, 2013/14 refers). This initiative has emerged from the master planning process with keen support from a range of partners.
- 3.7 Swindon Borough Council is leading developments to enhance the cleanliness of the town centre and improve the management of the environment around Fleet Street and Bridge Street.
- 3.8 The Council is working with a range of partners to improve the town centre offer. The Council is a key investor in the operating company for the Swindon Business Improvement District (BID), inSwindon, which has been operating since 1st April 2007. The activity of inSwindon BID Company Ltd is crucial to the success of Swindon’s town centre and its work is largely under three headings:
 - 3.8.1 **Marketing** – to develop and improve on current marketing products in order to ensure the image and profile of the town centre is well regarded (www.swindontowncentre.co.uk).
 - 3.8.2 **Events** – to develop and enhance activity in the town centre through partnerships with community groups and sponsors. These include, for example, the Christmas campaign, which includes the Christmas Light Switch on Event and the Festive Market. More recently, inSwindon has introduced a weekly Farmers’ Market in Havelock Square.

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- 3.8.3 **Projects** – these have at their heart the aim to provide quality tangible benefits to the BID Company investors in the form of cost savings. Such benefits include the Swindon Town Centre Loyalty card, trade improvement, and distribution of information as well as inSwindon's responsibility to address the safety, security, and cleanliness of the town centre. The inSwindon Street Ambassadors help to reduce problems such as crime and theft, street drinking, begging and rough sleepers through liaison with businesses and Wiltshire Police. This work is further strengthened by the project sponsored by the One Swindon Board to increase collaboration between One Swindon partners in order to improve the experience, particularly in the evening, of residents and visitors by co-ordinating groups that monitor the behaviour of young people and adults in and around the town centre.
- 3.9 inSwindon has established a town team to revitalise retail opportunities, working with, the Member of Parliament for North Swindon, Justin Tomlinson, GWE Business West and Forward Swindon Ltd. through the use a grant of £10,000 as part of the extended work of the Mary Portas Town Centre Pilots. The main drive to revitalise the town centre retail offer will come from the promotion of themed markets. These include the Farmers' Market, the Festive Christmas Market, but also other markets relating to different types of foods. In addition, inSwindon is developing the concept of a Teenage Market. The concept of the Teenage Market aims to support Swindon's young people by providing them with a platform to be entrepreneurial, try out a new business idea and sell creative products. In addition to the retail opportunities, the idea of a Teenage Market would also include a performance element, providing a free platform for local performers and large community groups to showcase their skills and talents.
- 3.10 Street markets have been part of the town centres in the UK for many years. In the past they tended to be very local affairs but the last decade has seen a growth in specialist markets such as Continental, German and Food Markets that offer a more specialised experience. Street markets can bring benefits to the town centre. They offer an alternative shopping experience; a place for social interaction; provide an attraction for tourists and can make a contribution to the local economy.
- 3.11 The objectives of a strategy to develop street markets are to:
- 3.11.1 support the local economy;
 - 3.11.2 enhance the shopping experience;
 - 3.11.3 provide an additional attraction to encourage more shoppers to Swindon Town Centre;
 - 3.11.4 encourage local producers and businesses; and
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3.11.5 add vibrancy to the town centre.

- 3.12 Swindon Borough Council has supported the development of a form of Pop-Up shops, such as Artsite, but this is a long-term commitment to cultural activities in Swindon, rather than a short-term commercial opportunity. inSwindon has looked at the way Pop-Up Shops have developed in places such as Brighton. Spaces which could become Pop-Up Shops are rarely comparable, with each site in each town subject to its own variations in rent, rates and services; fit out and refurbishment requirements; natural footfall; and location within the town.
- 3.13 Existing tenants and owners also do not see the longer-term benefits of Pop-Up Shops and, in particular, do have concerns about potential differences in approaches taken by the Council in relation to business rates and, in some cases, rents. As a result, the use of Pop-Up Shops is not the main strategy for improving the town centre retail offer. Currently, the number of empty shops in the town centre is declining to 15.8% in January 2014, compared with 21.3% in February 2013.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 inSwindon and the Town Team could develop a different range of activities to support an improvement in the retail offer in the town centre.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 Funding for improvements is covered by existing budgets in addition to the grant awarded by central government as part of the Mary Portas Town Centre Programme.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.2 All legal and human rights implications have been taken into account in preparing this report. It is considered that the report's recommendations are compatible with Convention Rights.

All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.3 There are no immediate implications for staff although, through inSwindon and Council, officer priorities, roles and capacity will be reviewed on an on-going basis.

Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.4 A Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA) has not been undertaken at present, as this report does not recommend any service changes. However, as this report

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involves work to develop business opportunities in the town centre led by inSwindon, a DIA will be undertaken as part of the development of the proposed projects.

Risk Management

- 5.5 No risk management issues have been identified at this stage, any risk management issues will be identified at the appropriate time.

6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Board Director, Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None.

8. Appendices

- 8.1 None.

9. Key Decision/Decision in Forward Plan

- 9.1 This is not a Key Decision and is included in the Cabinet Work Programme / Forward Plan for December 2013.