

BUDGET CONSULTATION - NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATEPAYERS

MONDAY, 23 JANUARY 2017

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

Swindon Borough Council: Ms Jan Willis, (Interim Corporate Director, Resources) and Mr Mick Bowden (Interim Head of Finance).

Representatives of Swindon Non-Domestic Rate Payers: Mr Richard Lay (White Horse Holding Group), Mr Rupert Cox (Stagecoach West), Mr Steve Bizley (JLL) and Mr Peter Davis (Worcester Black Limited).

Apologies for absence were received from Mr James Phipps (Excalibur Group), Mr Jason Titcombe (NKS Contracts (Central) Ltd), Ms Ann Bradley (Department for Work and Pensions (Swindon Jobcentreplus), Ms Candida Astle (Intel), Ms Jane Weston (Headway Swindon), Ms Cheryl Sloan (Public Power Solutions), Mr Martin Rees (Blue Bird Innovation Group), Mr Ian Larrad (Business West), Ms Comfort Nwaneri (Hochitief), Ms Jane Stewart and Mr Kevin Gwilliam (The Brunel) and Mr Chris Brotherton (Thomas Homes Ltd).

1. Welcome and introduction

Councillor David Renard, Leader of the Council and Councillor Russell Holland, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services, welcomed the invited representatives of local businesses to the meeting.

2. 2016/17 Budget Management and 2017/18 Draft Budget

Councillor Russell Holland opened the meeting, advising that it was intended to inform local businesses of the Council's projected out-turn for 2016/17 and the financial context for setting the budget for 2017/18. Councillor Holland explained that the 2017/18 draft budget would be submitted to Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 8th February and that recommendations would then be made to the Council meeting on 23rd February 2017. 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 Richard Lay, White Horse Holding Group, commented that he recognised the constraints facing the Council, from a business perspective. However, he referred to the new build in Swindon since the last Budget Consultation meeting and suggested that, whilst the new developments were positive initiatives, they had, at the same time, created an issue with car parking in the town centre that might detrimentally affect businesses. He felt that businesses in the town centre were suffering from a decline in footfall and he was of the view that parking charges were a contributing factor. Mr Lay commented that the Council's Planning Department had a major role to play in promoting and supporting a successful town centre economy, referring to

the planning application for 26 starter units and to the restriction of car parking provision to be associated with for these units. Mr Lay suggested that residents' parking areas might be used during the day to provide additional car parking that would enable prospective customers to park nearer to business premises. He also requested the release of additional council-owned land for business projects.

Councillor Holland thanked Mr Lay for his comments and agreed to ask Councillor Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Economy, Regeneration and Skills, to contact him to further discuss his suggestions. Councillor Holland explained that Planning Policies were set by Central Government but agreed that discussions should be undertaken to help local businesses wherever possible.

Mr Rupert Cox, Stagecoach West, referenced the Council's long term car parking strategy and the link between car parking and congestion in the town. Councillor Holland advised that the car parking strategy was currently being reviewed. Councillor Renard referred to the success of the "£2 for 4 hours car parking" initiative in the town centre, aimed at increasing footfall, and was of a view that there was a balance to be struck between encouraging people to come into the town centre whilst still keeping congestion to a minimum. Councillor Renard commitment to improving the infrastructure, summarising the Council's level of investment in infrastructure and making specific reference to schemes at Bruce Street Bridges and Greenbridge Roundabout.

Mr Cox advised that, as a company, Stagecoach believed in the financial viability of re-introducing park and ride facilities in Swindon and as a means of reducing traffic congestion in the town. Councillor Renard explained that the Council had subsidised the Copse Park and Ride facility but, due to budgetary constraints, and recognition that this facility was being primarily used by north Swindon residents solely for car parking and not as a "park and ride" facility, the service had been terminated. He agreed with Mr Cox that he would be happy to review any viable business cases to reinstate this service.

Mr Lay referred to the detrimental effect on old town businesses that Wichelstowe bus route rescheduling and traffic flow restrictions had produced and he requested that these be removed. He was also concerned about the potentially detrimental effect of similar traffic restrictions in the vicinity of the Swindon Designer Outlet Village. In response to a query from Councillor Holland, Mr Lay confirmed he had included details of his concerns in his response to the Council's consultation.

Mr Steve Bizley, JLL, referred to the challenges that businesses in the town centre were facing. He also referred to the possible introduction of "accessibility channels" into the town centre and the benefit of such provision on town centre businesses. Mr Bizley commented on the need to ease the effect of congestion on those living in the town centre. He remarked on the current transport work at Junction 16 and the effect this would have on the community living in West Swindon. It was his view that businesses planning to relocate to the town centre would undertake feasibility studies that would include traffic, travel and congestion issues and that these issues might possibly have a detrimental effect on a company determining the benefit and suitability of a proposed move.

Mr Bizley confirmed that businesses were already contending with a difficult economic environment and car parking charges should not be raised as this would further increase the pressure on town centre businesses. It was his hope that Councillor Garry Perkins would consider these factors as part of his parking strategy review.

With regard to "out of town" retail sites, it was noted that that town centre car parking sites were maintained by the Council but that retail car parking sites were the responsibility of the relevant site management company.

Mr Peter Davis confirmed his support for new businesses within the technological service sector. He stated that, as Swindon expanded and grew, car parking issues would be a constant issue. His main interest was the economic development of the town and, with Swindon being ideally situated, due to its proximity to London, and had landmarks to attract people to the town, he recommended that technological and engineering skills sets might be exploited in order to attract businesses to the area. Mr Davis referred to the Council's support of local businesses and the role of Forward Swindon Ltd in this process. He suggested a conference might be held in order to provide an opportunity for SMEs to be able to drill down into the specifics of issues they face and agree a short term response plan.

3. Conclusion of the Meeting

Councillor Russell Holland thanked the representatives of the business community and non-domestic ratepayers for attending and hoped they found the meeting useful. He requested that they continue to liaise with the Council on topics pertinent to the growth and economic well-being of the local business community.

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