

“Swindon Strategic Partnership Conference”

February 2009



Swindon
Strategic
Partnership



*Sharing future success in
a changing Swindon*

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I. Introduction

Monday 23 February 2009 was the first of the two conferences planned for 2009 that are dedicated to the partners and stakeholders of the Swindon Strategic Partnership.

This was the largest meeting held to date with around 200 participants of which around half were from resident groups, Parish or community groups. The Conference was held in the Great Western Hall at the STEAM museum in Swindon. STEAM is a modern attraction built upon Swindon's railway heritage and is clearly a fitting venue to get us all thinking about how we can share future success in a changing Swindon.

The key debate was to focus on the Connecting People Connecting Places agenda and I would wish to thank all the delegates who worked hard and thoughtfully to highlight what matters to people in different neighbourhoods across Swindon.

Delegates raised many challenging questions and constructive suggestions as to how we might work in partnership to address this agenda. Some questions could be responded to on-the-day; but solving others forms the basis of our on-going work together.

This short report is not a minute of our conference but is meant to provide a summary and a reminder of our work together. It highlights themes and provides a selection of the questions and suggestions raised to support our on-going dialogue.

On closing, my thanks to you all for setting aside your time, for your inputs on the day and for providing your comments on the conference itself. Your feedback is very important and it will help us to plan our next event later in the year. I look forward to continuing our work together and to meeting you then.

Tom Charnock,
Chair of Swindon Strategic Partnership Overview and Monitoring Group,
February 2009

2. Pop-ups

Pop-ups are short focused presentations to update partners on specific initiatives. Presenters spoke with passion and enthusiasm about their themes and about Swindon.

James Griffin, Head of Policy, SBC – Update on Local Area Agreement (LAA)

- The first LAA ends on 31 March 2009
- Success of first LAA could result in a Performance Reward Grant of £2m
- Swindon's second LAA has now been running for about a year. A first year progress report is being finalised

Dr Mike Pringle, Director Swindon Cultural Partnership – Think Swindon project

- Many good things about the culture and history of Swindon
- Report available “10 thoughts for Swindon culture”
- Celebrating culture in Swindon today

Clarry Bean, Culture programming Manager - Swindon Arts

- Swindon Does Arts established with 40 partners
- Aiming to increase the number of people in Swindon engaging in the arts by 3% to 38.3% by 2011 (LAA Target)
- Encourage people to recognise when they are engaging in the arts so that when they complete the questionnaire they will record their usage accurately!

Geoffrey Lutaaya, Chief Executive Voluntary Action Swindon – Empower Swindon

- Role of the voluntary sector in breathing life into Connecting People Connecting Places
- Update on steps being taken to develop Empower Swindon
- Business plan now developed

Phil Smith, Senior Planner - Core Strategy

- Aim of the core strategy is to enable Swindon Borough to develop to its full potential
- Consultation will follow submission of “Submissions Draft”
- Plans for strategy to be adopted in 2010

If you would like any more information on these ‘Pop-Up’ subjects, please contact the Partnership Team on jbeattie@swindon.gov.uk



3. Community Strategy Action Plan

Tom Charnock, Chair of the Swindon Strategic Partnership Overview and Monitoring Group presented a report “Community Strategy Action Plan -Year 1”. Particular successes included the opening of the new library and launch of the Streetsmart project. In summary it was noted that 20 targets were “green”, 24 “amber” and only 2 “red”.

Delegates were asked to consider the priorities for years 2 – 5 and whether they were still appropriate especially given the current economic climate. Generally delegates were content with the priorities. A selection of comments relating to each theme are shown on the following pages.

Theme 1 - Swindon as a destination of choice

“there’s nothing about culture or aims and aspirations”
“vibrancy, night-time and day-time economies”

Theme 2 - All Swindon people are benefiting from our growing economy

“is the current economic downturn sufficiently recognised in these targets?”

“focus on re-building of Oasis and Link centres is insufficiently aspirational!”



Theme 3 - We have safeguarded our environment for future generations

“what support/resource is still available for green initiatives?”
“we need an emphasis on community engagement, not just enforcement”

Theme 4 - A healthy, caring and supportive community

“need to join up resources to target individuals/families that are particularly vulnerable and in need of support – likely to have a positive impact on domestic violence, repeat offending, obesity, underage pregnancy etc”

Theme 5 - A place where high aspirations are supported by superb education provision for all ages

“the future for Swindon lies in educating its young people for technical jobs”

“Can we make better use of unlocking talent locally and support entrepreneurial spirit? Could more be done at schools?”

Theme 6 - A place where local people can have real influence and where they feel safe

“this needs a sense of community, sense of belonging”

“needs to reference Connecting People Connecting Places”

“needs emphasis on engagement not just enforcement”

4. Connecting People, Connecting Places

Cllr. Brian Mattock, Cabinet Member, Connecting People, Connecting Places introduced the programme. Below is an abridged version of his presentation.

“Some would say that for decades councils have been bureaucratic institutions taking broad-brush approaches to what they do; that the man or woman in the street cares very little about what councils do or which public service provides what. Lets be honest - why should they?

What matters most for people varies greatly by neighbourhood, town, suburb, or village. But with public services working across a wide geographical area in Swindon Borough, there can be a tendency for us to think of all places as the same. It's not always easy for us to understand what really matters to people in their places.

Connecting People Connecting Places sets about changing that.

Through Connecting People Connecting Places we aim to provide more locally attuned services, build a strong sense of community and engage people so that we hear all voices in our communities.

To start the process, we are “localising” the Borough into what we are calling seven “Cluster Areas”, collections of wards working together to make more meaningful links with communities and the people who live there and to give them more influence over where they live.

To engage our partners in this programme we need to demonstrate that:

- Communities will be able to have meaningful conversations about topics that matter to them

- Connecting People Connecting Places will add value over and above what we already do
- Change starts right here. We are not asking everyone else to change.

We acknowledge the council needs to change first.

Some say the clusters are too big. Perhaps they are! But the idea is that we will work at the level of neighbourhood and parish as well as cluster. Think of clusters as the level that things come up to, not down from.

We want cluster forums to be thriving hubs, not talking shops. Some levelled this criticism at area forums and we will have to work together to make sure this isn't the case. They need to be places of listening and then sorting, not places where we only tell, educate and inform. Much of the work will go on outside of the forums with many people and partners involved.

We will need to be flexible. The overarching aim is to connect people and connect places to each other, to you, to public services. Cluster forums are a vehicle for bringing together ideas and actions but they are not the reason.

So, why Connecting People Connecting Places?

The first reason is more locally attuned services. What does that mean? It means listening together to what matters most for people and communities, having meaningful conversations and, where we can, "sorting it" together. By together I mean people, the community and voluntary sector, councillors (borough and parish) and public services.

Over time we have managed to work pretty well as a Swindon Strategic Partnership. Our relationships are good and we can point to visible achievements. But I emphasise the word "strategic". Our Community Strategy in the main says what we are going to do across Swindon. So does our Local Area Agreement. But people relate first and foremost to their own neighbourhood.

How much better might it be if public services – together – came to people, taking decision-making to a lower level? Of course where things are working well now, carry on with them. But where there are issues that somehow you just can't get sorted or that currently take years - that drain that keeps getting blocked, that dog bin that has been sited in the wrong place, or perhaps that piece of grass that never seems to get cut – could we work locally together to get that sorted?

What would it be like if we had a better shared picture of each neighbourhood or parish in Swindon and what mattered to the people living there? It might be different opening hours in your GP surgery; it might be graffiti, access to dentists, buses or better pavements.

Being realistic, some things will always be agreed across Swindon, such as methods of recycling and waste collection and planning our Borough highway network. We can't wave a magic wand and promise lots more money into the system – especially in the current climate. But over time and with the right governance in place, why shouldn't we devolve budgets to the clusters. And why shouldn't we begin to talk about participatory budgeting where residents have a say in how their council tax is spent? Public services working together more closely might actually begin to reduce costs.

We believe with Connecting People Connecting Places we can do this.

The second reason for Connecting People Connecting Places is to build a sense of community. It's true that the "sense of community" varies in Swindon. Some places have it and guard it jealously. Some places have little sense of identity or community spirit. Our challenge is to learn from those places that have it and ask you to help us build it with people in those places that don't.

The third reason is to better engage people – how can we hear all the voices in our communities, not just some of them?

Let's be honest, most people just want a quiet life. Think about what matters most to the person who lives next door to you – probably home life, social life and work life. They don't want "to be engaged" constantly. Many people don't see the point – maybe they haven't felt listened to in the past.

As Borough and Parish Councillors, as community organisations you know your communities better than anyone. We need to keep community engagement simple, not turn it into yet another process. But are we hearing all the voices? Is there a tendency for the loudest to get what they want? In particular, I think most of us would agree that we sometimes struggle to hear the voices of young people, the elderly, the disabled and listen and understand what matters to them.

For many of you to have any ownership of Connecting People, Connecting Places you, will want to see what's in it for you and the people you represent. So, what does this mean for us?

Firstly – As community leaders and volunteers, this is about what we have spent years trying to do, achieve and say;

Secondly – To us in public services, this is what we have always wanted to do and deliver; but didn't know how to achieve it;

Most importantly – To me as a resident of Swindon, this is about how I can make a difference and help shape services to meet my realistic expectations.

And to us all, this is what Connecting People, Connecting Places, has to offer and what it can and will deliver."

5. Delegate Questions and Suggestions

In light of Cllr Mattock's presentation, delegates were invited to note down key questions and suggestions. A large volume of responses were received. These are being reviewed and will help shape the forward programme. A summary of key themes and suggestions is given here.

Community Engagement

Questions

How to engage people who are apathetic?

How do we get to know them?
How do we share with them the opportunity to influence?

How do we find new voices?
If we have the same voices, things may not change.

How will we engage with vulnerable groups, the disabled, the young?

How will we work with different cultures and languages at a local level?

Suggestions

We will engage people by making them feel listened to.

We need to mobilise community groups for positive reasons, rather than a reaction to negative things.

Schools should be the centre of communities.

Make it real. It's about relationships. Talk to people without making it too complicated. "blank canvas conversations work well not just taking an agenda with determined outcomes."

Develop Swindon stories and then find ways to connect them.

Councillors need to be more flexible and responsive.

There should be different ways for people to participate eg the internet, Swindon 105.5FM; Social networking; texting; websites; 2 way communication

We need a community "hub" type venue.

Need to engage with Pakistan and other Muslim groups to draw in their members and connect with them for social and cultural development.

Work with other BME groups to strengthen multicultural society.

Governance and Resources

How will it be better than area panels?

Can expectations be managed and terms of reference widely understood?

How will residents meet for discussions etc?

Will CPCP reduce bureaucracy?

What are cluster forums and how representative will they be of community interests?

Will decision making be devolved to clusters? What powers will they have?

What performance management, governance and budgets will clusters have?

How will you prioritise what you need to do?

What resources are available?

Ensure everyone knows about CPCP and how they can change things and what powers they'll have.

Have a central meeting / community facility in each cluster:

Devolved budgets would be essential to show people that something can improve as a result of their investment of time.

Need a clear indication of what will NOT be decided at cluster level eg waste collection.

Develop an action plan and timetable for each area.

Identify quick wins from data.



Sharing, Learning and Training

How do we join up our working across the council and partners?

How will we identify and manage cross cutting themes?

How will clusters learn from one another?

How will groups be able to share ideas / learn from the footwork of other groups?

How can we enable people to take part?

What skills are required for participation?

A need for each cluster to have a cross cutting representative.

Cluster leads need to meet regularly to share good practice and deal with issues affecting all clusters.

Groups need to share with one another using for example blogs, website, sharing stories, articles, showcase existing projects that demonstrate engagement.

A comprehensive training and development programme is needed including community engagement, needs assessment, policy, partnership, leadership.

Communities need to be shown how to participate and have an identity.





6. What matters to people in places?

Following a lively question and answer session in which partners asked questions of Cllr Brian Mattock and Leader of Swindon Borough Council, Roderick Bluh, groups were formed around the areas in which people lived and worked to build the story of these places by considering three questions: “What matters most to the people in these places?”; “What are the things that people and partners find most difficult to get sorted right now?”; and “What insights emerge about how we might work in partnership to improve outcomes in places? Delegates suggestions are summarised below.

South

What matters most to people in these places?

It matters to people in this area that they have a nice place to live, good schools and that they are left alone to get on with their lives. They want good local facilities, to feel safe from crime and to have meaningful consultation on things they can influence.

What do people and partners find difficult to get sorted right now?

The most difficult thing is being listened to and having opinions heard. Communication is difficult and decisions seem to get watered down.

The elderly find it difficult to get benefits, concessions and credits sorted and others find it difficult to get public transport that's fit for purpose, housing and are fearful of crime. It is difficult to sort funding for secure places for children to go.

North Central

What matters most to people in these places?

People are concerned about poor quality of life and perpetuating problems. It matters to them to have open spaces and communal areas to meet. People here want respect, not to be labelled. Some communities have a strong sense of identity and community spirit. Fear of crime is a concern. Affordability of housing and transport matters.

What do people and partners find?

Long term leases for community assets to provide communal spaces, drug problems and differences in health and equalities are difficult to sort. Trust is a problem and it's difficult to sort free school meals. It is hard to get volunteers here and the community feels they have no control.

West

What matters most to people in these places?

High level needs are good schools, pre-school facilities, employment, transport and parking facilities. Lower level concerns are litter, speeding, anti-social behaviour and criminal damage, green spaces and the cinema. The convenience of the area is important to people here. As a community they want to feel they can express their opinions on issues they are involved in.

What do people and partners find difficult to get sorted right now?

Anti-social behaviour is a problem although neighbourhood policy teams are good. Litter is a problem as it's difficult to get people to take responsibility for the environment. Traffic 15 problems outside Brookfield School are hard to get sorted with other schools in the same

Town Centre

What matters most to people in these places?

Traffic problems matter – resident's parking, one way systems, park and ride, pavements and crossings, secure car parks. The Queens Park doctors surgery closure matters and there are a lack of dentists. A sense of community and community centre is important.

Clean streets matter – pubs and food outlets cause problems.

What do people and partners find difficult to get sorted right now?

The Mechanics Institute. Anti-social behaviour – late night drinking, noise, ash, litter. There are drug problems and there is a rehabilitation centre in the area and bail hostels. There's no public phone in the police station and insufficient residents parking.

North

What matters most to people in these places?

Good schools and sufficient places at them matter to people here. They want good road surfaces, sensible junctions and usable crossings. Anti-social behaviour is a concern and people here want good community policing especially at the weekends. They want to maintain their sense of community and community facilities. Transport and local facilities are important and those in rural areas want to feel they have the same level of services as more central areas.



“ It matters to people to be involved and be heard.”

What do people and partners find difficult to get sorted right now?

Dog fouling is a problem that we can't get sorted. There's a lack of dog bins. School run parking and commuter parking is a problem. Rural roads need to be repaired and fly-tipping dealt with. There's a lack of police so we can't sort the anti-social behaviour.

East

What matters most to people in these places?

Survival matters here – keeping jobs in the current climate. The quality of life is poor with run down shops and poor transport. Anti-social behaviour is a concern – vandalism, drugs, criminal damage. People here want decent standards of housing, open spaces for children, education and employment opportunities. They are concerned about basic needs of food, security, family and good health.

What do people and partners find difficult to get sorted right now?

Developers can't finish projects and no one is taking on shopping outlets to help improve facilities. There is insufficient investment and not enough provision of things to do and places to go for the old or the young. It's hard to engage with people here as there are no places to meet or socialise. Transport is poor, bus routes have changed.

North East

What matters most to people in these places?

Good transport. Concerns about flooding. Lack of visibility of the police is a problem. There's a lack of resources and facilities for young people. While there is a strong sense of community in some areas others lack this.

What do people and partners find difficult to get sorted right now?

Local community groups are charged too much to use community centres e.g. Parish Council over 50's group.

What insights emerge for partnership working to improve outcomes?

If we can get engagement right for the most marginalised we can get it right for the majority!

The importance of getting the views of the people concerned before making assumptions.

Cluster groups will have to work to bring together communities with distinct local identities that may be wary of and disparaging of different areas.

We need to work with small areas and build it bottom up. Have two way dialogue, work with the communities and be realistic.

Using the knowledge of organisations and individuals that work in the area. Officers and elected members need to get more engaged at a local level. Sharing information and resources.

This information about the SSP Conference is available on the internet at www.swindonsp.org.uk.