

## Personal Submission by Martha Parry

During the past 7 weeks, while serving as the Trust's Coordinator (and author of its submission) I have been caring for an 82-year-old dependent who broke a hip, and then was laid out with flu for 3 weeks myself.

Turning in desperation to try to get this submission together, I have found myself entangled in IT issues beyond my 62-year-old skill level. I am also trying to write in a (re-activated) state of Chronic Fatigue (pain, and shaking hands). This is not a plea for 'sympathy', but a plea to be allowed to develop verbally any points at the Hearing, for which I am (still) not offering sufficient information (especially 'evidence') herewith.

I have kindly been offered an extension, but still find it extremely difficult to produce the material in the manner expected. What follows is the very best I can offer, under very limited circumstances (writing in my kitchen; without scanner or copier; with much reference material in storage elsewhere).

As an individual 10-year resident of the GWR Railway Village, and the appointed Coordinator of the New Mechanics' Preservation Trust Ltd for 12 years, my personal testimony is this:

*"At every turn, and during all administrations, the political culture of the Council (whether Thamesdown or Swindon) has been one of arrogant, manipulative abuse of power. I had hoped for better as the new administration settled in, but am dismayed to say that there has just been a changing of the guard politically, with the prevailing centrist 'culture of control' surviving every effort locally (community and voluntary sector) and every central government initiative(LSP, LAA, etc.).*

*Personally and professionally, I consider that Swindon and its district (to Oxford, Newbury and Cricklade/Purton/Wootton Bassett) has been under-estimated in terms of its potential to the SW Region and to the English nation as a whole, sitting as it does at a 'crossroads' of FOUR REGIONS.*

*Swindon has languished due to national rate-capping since 1985; enforced and unnecessary railworks closure in 1986; inadequate national contributions and extraction of Business Rates since that period; and mal-administration as a direct consequence of inadequate finance, exacerbated since re-organisation and its associated, unsound dis-aggregation of budgets vis-a-vis Wiltshire County Council in 1997.*

*Change of party political control was achieved by blaming local (labour) councillors for national (Conservative) government action; how ironic! Neither political grouping has understood or appreciated the complex character of the Swindon community, let alone its associated social achievements in a non-partisan, historical context, nor its fullest economic potential since the M4.*

*The new (Conservative) administration has been enabled by (Labour) national government's re-structured local government framework to damage further, at a rapid pace, Swindon's prospects of maximising its (national and international) potential. (I am not partisan; I would vote with Shakespeare for a "plague on both their houses".) Government support for infrastructure to match Swindon's post-1970's existing scale is essential, as is a planning concept which recognises the inter-regional context referred to above. Intervention from a regional and national level offers the only hope of recovering the (almost thrown away) ground. If there ever was a case for professional planning intervention, then it is Swindon; hence the significance of this (non-partisan) Inspection.*

*I support expansion of Swindon in an even larger context than envisaged by SBC and NSC, but only with a regionally and nationally conceived Master Plan, that takes in the environmental and social prospects, as well as the exclusively prioritised economic and land value ones. My view is that Swindon is being sold off to the lowest bidders...see Fleet Street and Regent Circus as the prime examples. The Locarno development is another example of wasted opportunity, as is the lack of provision for a decent connection between Great Western Way, which is essential for both Old Town (see Kingshill/ Bath/Devizes/Croft Roads) and the Swindon Centre. More thought needs to be given to integrating Wichelstowe with Old Town, and accessing Old Town via the M4, rather than just the Town Centre.*

*I urge a further year of consultation, based upon the Transport Study and a GWR Heritage Quarter Study to be undertaken by ARUP's, and integral and subsequent consultation."*

**Relevant Personal Background:**

As background, I think it appropriate to state that I came to Swindon in 1980 with applied (professional) experience of regeneration in USA and Canada; I was a highly-regarded social researcher, developing the sort of indicators which are sadly being thrown about wildly by central government in the context of LAA's 30 years later! I had completed a further degree course in Environmental Planning before emigrating from Canada, which was applied in my job as Community Engagement Officer for a regional Crown Development Corporation in Nova Scotia. My comments on Swindon are informed by that knowledge and experience base, applied to local knowledge gained living and working in Swindon, as well as raising a family of three and residing for 20 years in Central Swindon.

I worked for the Council in Swindon for 10 years, managing an experimental Community Centre after opening 2 sheltered housing schemes in West Swindon (as it developed in the 1980's); was a Governor for 5 years (with responsibility for SEN) at an innovative Secondary School in West Swindon; was a Council Social Policy Officer (Women's Issues – supporting the establishment of the first 6 nurseries in Swindon, and servicing the Women's Panel) until early retirement due to ill health in 1992, a casualty of the wretched management culture of the Council.

I have tried since 1995 to influence democratic change from the community (development) perspective with whatever energy I have mustered – probably equivalent to half-time voluntary working on average for 13 years, fluctuating with my energy levels. I have tried to return to employment, but my reliability (as distinct from ability) is only consistent with self-managed voluntary work, if that. I have studied every book and relevant planning document about Swindon that I could get my hands on during my illness, and subsequent voluntary engagement. To my bemusement, as in immigrant, I am often referred to by the local and regional media for informed comments on Swindon's history and current affairs; the most recent being:

1) Current LINK article here

**Four years ago, I was elected by, from among, a wide range of Swindon community cultural organisations, to serve on the LSP (Swindon Strategic Partnership), and the suppression of my input there is part of a Complaint in preparation -- additional to the Trust's Complaint about its accommodation issues.**

**Representation for New Mechanics' Institution Trust: 23 May 2008**

- I. **This submission has been extremely difficult to prepare, given the (lack of) resources of the Trust.**
- II. **As a general background to all of the Trust's comments below, which we have now had to give up trying to fit into the spreadsheet provided by SBC, we hope the Inspector will consider the following relevant:**

The personal view of Swindon Borough Council, expressed separately by MParry, is reflected in the Audit Commission's evaluation of SBC as still warranting only 2 stars (the third, we believe, being dependent upon the quality of relationships with the citizenry); rising from -0- stars since such a system was introduced; resting at 2 stars for 3 years(?)

In evidence of the Council's manipulative and corporately (as opposed to publicly) self-serving behaviour, we submit the following quotation from the recent local Conservative Party election booklet, which mis-represents to the point of scandal the latest Audit Commission evaluation:

2) Party election brochure extract here...

Similarly manipulated information was published by the local newspaper, as supplied by the Council itself (not the Conservative Group, as above):

3) ADVER article

There is also the evidence of the Community Strategy, published with a Canal on the cover – shown running past the Central Community Centre (no longer available for community management, and denied to the Trust for re-accommodation, despite assurances to the contrary, referring to the potential context of a canal):

4) February ADVER article by MPARRY here

The Trust has endeavoured to work with the Council, and then the New Swindon Co., since 1995.

It has been side-lined by political (of both parties) abuse of power, in our opinion; complaints are being prepared, but have been shelved (temporarily!) in the interest of prioritising the current submission.

Suffice it to say here that we have consistently challenged the composition of the NSC Board as not sufficiently widely framed as to draw upon local community knowledge, a role promised in the application for URC originally.

5) URC Report to Cabinet (1999?) and Trust's Response to Study

Evidence exists of the corporate 'deafness' to our representations in the form of an appeal to Full Council made in 2007. The resulting report could find very little record of any of the Trust's letters, over many years; a second report had to be tabled with the 65 pages of appendices, provided mostly from the Trust's own records. This report only covered the issue of our (subsequently revoked) premises, not the separate issue of the Mechanics' Institution building/issue (separate evidence, covering 1996 to present).

6) MP's letter, Lisa's, and the 2 reports....

Five essential background points are important for us to raise:

1. For 6 years the Trust sought to influence plans for the Town Centre from its offices and exhibition hall within a Council-owned premises in the Railway Village (and for 3 years before that, from private premises). We have tried to engage with every initiative, whether planning or community consultation-based, for 13 years, with very little to show for our efforts.

This includes:

- the Shillam & Smith Study (evidence), which under-pinned the URC application (Cabinet report as evidence, and our letter of representation);

7) Map and our Response

- the Arup's study (evidence) for the resulting New Swindon Co., which we welcomed with its 4 'Quarters' analysis, including a 'Heritage Quarter':

8) Map and article in LINK (called 'disingenuous' by NSC)

- the Fielden & Clegg Feasibility Study re: the Mechanics' Institution and Emlyn Square (EH and SBC) (evidence);

9) Report

- several disappointing NSC 'consultations', including most recently for Wharf Green (evidence);

10) Our early letter and Wharf Green (book) observations; photos before and after...

- the current Local Plan (evidence given at enquiry re transport supported by SBC Transport Officer);

- Swindon Strategic Partnership/Voluntary Forum/Stronger Communities Forum/both SBC on-going Planning Forums/Neighbourhood Renewal Task Group (SSP-embedded)

- A range of objections and proposals for specific developments (evidence) including Fleet Street, Coate, and Regent Circus.

11) Fleet Street;

12) Regent Circus Proposals by Swindon Civic Trust, facilitated by MParry; "A University for Swindon" report flagging up potential of Regent Circus/Prince's Street/North Star for

- Our own (circa 2000) representation seeking an expansion of the Railway Village Conservation Area boundary, which would have prevented the STUNNINGLY OFFENSIVE new-build between East Street and Holbrook Way/Fleet Street.

13) Planning Report

- Representations securing the up-grading of the Mechanics' Institution to II\* (government listing, not SBC!), and against unsuitable development (EH, Victorian Society and The Theatres Trust supporting our views) there; (As

evidence of 'attitude', note in various Mechanics' planning reports the term 'perversely' to characterise the II\* up-grade);

14) Listing, showing revisions from II, to II(\*)

15) Range of Planning Applications by Mountmead, then

- Our own proposals and associated Listed Building consent (Nov. 2005) for that premises;

16) Listed Building Consent Statements and Consent Received

- SBC Conservation Officer's (!) effort to consider the building as consisting of three separate buildings (!); and the statement in 2007 planning report on issue of proposed demolition, that "few" alternative proposals had been offered( when in fact only ONE has ever been offered, and no mention was made of our Trust having received LBC for it).

17) Relevant Planning Reports

- SBC supported a £50 million application to the BIG Lottery in 2006 by the Science Museum, based at Wroughton, when it might have supported the Trust's application for the same amount for regeneration of the 'GWR Heritage Quarter'. If the Trust's application had been supported, £250,000 was available to develop our proposals, whether or not we won the single pot of £50 million nationally.

18) Trust's 2006 BIG Lottery application, accepted but not prioritised due to lack of Council support; 19) Also 1996 Millennium Lottery application, which reached second round but could not progress without Council support (note similar £50 Million value Mill. Awards made to Portsmouth, Bristol ,Birmingham and London;

2. From May last year, the Council have subjected us to an enforced eviction (without re-accommodation, which was and is available nearby). Our affairs have been in turmoil for that entire period, as we have only Members' donations and voluntary staffing to rely upon. While the Forward Planners (a new team, as distinct from earlier planners) have said they have wanted to work with us, and we do not doubt them, we have been asked to work with our hands tied behind our backs

by other power centres within the Council. Our premises (or equivalent) were ESSENTIAL in order to hold the (planned) consultations focussing on the CAAP and Core Strategy.

One of the frustrations for citizens trying to engage with any local authority which is ill-willed toward their representations (as Swindon has arguably been for 20 years with regard to the Mechanics' premises), is that there are so many sub-'authorities' (Housing, Planning, etc.), and so many departments. Officers across Swindon LA have been 'upgraded' in 3 rounds since 1997; sometimes key officers have left and it was weeks or months before we realised.

Our premises were being denied in a draconian fashion by the Cabinet Member for Resources and the Youth Service Officer (with 80% of our activities engaging young people), from precisely the period when the 'Planning Authority' (at least the Forward Planning part of it) became more amenable to input, and Community Services less so than previously. A look at the Council's Organisational Chart will show how much resource is now committed to 'Public Relations', 'Design', etc., under the CEO/Policy branch, as opposed to the reduction of staff in Community Development in the same period!

18) List examples which 'disadvantaged' Trust's representations (and some which facilitated them)
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3. The type of consultation which WOULD HAVE enabled the sort of input we have to offer to have been effective, has NOT BEEN available despite the provisions of the SCI. What input we have had has been 'watered down' in the context of wide-ranging group meetings entirely organised by the planning team, where the (perhaps n=6 in all?) specialised community-based 'planning issue-based' organisations' input has been over-whelmed (though often supported by) the (essential) need to consult more widely-ranging interest groups.
4. We believe we have evidence that there has been a concerted effort to ignore/repress the interests and input of the portion of the local population associated with the railway heritage/community over many decades, and various changes of political 'control'.

The railway has been seen by shallow-minded decision-makers (hardly 'leaders'), arriving in Swindon from elsewhere and intending to personally 'progress' elsewhere in many cases, as well as those based in the commercial context of Old Town, as something that has been 'holding back' Swindon's 'progress'. A book could (and should) be written about how this thinking has influenced the town's development (or lack of it!). Even politicians who have been based in wards occupied by this population have long been persuaded that this is the root of Swindon's 'image problem', requiring 'moving on', when actually it is their own attitude that has contributed to the mis-conceptualisation of Swindon's character and potential.

The railway achievement which is moving toward World Heritage Status was above all, a communications revolution, not only an engineering and transport achievement. The roots of Swindon's anchorage of UK's 'Silicon Valley' (between here and Bristol) are embedded in the GWR, which joined up the world in its first 'network'. The social dimension of the railway achievement is as significant as the scientific/engineering dimension! The lack of appreciation of this fact, is signified in the lack of appreciation of the Mechanics' Institution building, organisation and associated (EXISTING) community, as well as the fact that the Village area still has not had the detailed planning done that SHOULD be done BEFORE the CAAP is fit for adoption (in our view).

19) Trust's Train/Internet image here

It is important to consider that half of Swindon's population is derived from these railway 'roots'. This population has been 'dis-empowered' for decades, at least since 1960. They have become invisible since the London overspill expansion post-1952, which was NOT formally part of the New Towns or London overspill programmes, but an initiative proposed by the Swindon Corporation itself, and undertaken without government Development Corporation funding. (Hence all those comparisons with Milton Keynes are spurious.)

It is this attitude which is reflected in the attempt to 'prioritise' Old Town over Gorse Hill and Rodbourne and Ferndale, in drawing the boundary of the town centre for the CAAP differently than that for the URC (which was drawn under a different administration, as well).

5. Perhaps this is the context in which we should mention the lack of recognition that the Central Area is designated as a Neighbourhood Renewal Area (as well as World Heritage proposed, and local Conservation Area designated! within the LSP/LAA framework, and that this is relevant in the lack of detailed content for that area within this CAAP.

The resident communities have NOT been consulted in ANY MEANINGFUL WAY WHATSOEVER, during the process of preparation of this CAAP; a last minute token attempt to do so, was embarrassing in its inadequacy and awkwardness (see Celia 's, N & Roger Wise's, and Martha Parry's comments, as residents).

The proposed community planning process needs to be conducted, as well as the Transport Study completed and consulted upon, before this CAAP can be relied upon other than as interim guidance, we argue.

## **Session 5: Overview**

### **Procedural and conformity tests**

Superficially, perhaps; but effectively, no. There are many provision in the SCI, which if they had been implemented, could have been effective; however the disclaimer quoting a 'balance' against resources has been unfairly used to justify the lack of engagement with a range of (6?) community organisations, with extensive local knowledge and values. Compare the £50k spent on the Canal's unanticipated single route feasibility study with the lack of resources targeted at community group engagement.

An example of the token engagement of community groups is the fact that the Developers' Planning Forum commenced a full 2 years before the Community Planning Forum; although the then Chairman of Planning (Lisa Hawkes) proposed/intended/sought both forums to be implemented simultaneously. In this context the series of local plan forums have also been totally inadequate in embedding existing community knowledge and priorities effectively.

The Stronger Communities Forum and the Neighborhood Renewal Task Group (both SSP based) are examples of where community engagement has been manipulated/suppressed. (Mechanic's Trust and MParry's evidence)

We note that the Community Strategy highlights Central Area as a "Neighbourhood Renewal Area" (therefore 'priority') This has been the case for 4 years; why is it still blank in so many respects, including the Mechanics' Institution?

Reliance upon Councillors (elected on average by 20% of voters) is not adequate. Neither are 'post-it note' road shows, given the complexity of the issues and their potential impact. It may be 'legal', but is not adequate in context of SCI, and other national (and all parties') policies.

There was an unfulfilled expectation of a "Community Planner", to be based in/shared with the community sector, some 2 years before the appointment of the current community planner whose current role (though useful) is not that which was anticipated.

We assert that, given the inadequacies of the CAAP as we see it, the sustainability appraisal cannot logically be considered adequate. In any case, we have not had the capacity to review it.

We also did not have (and recognised we did not, hence did not participate after the early session) the capacity to engage with the RSS process; but we are aware there were other localities looking for residential/business allocations which were ultimately allocated to Swindon. The member of our team who was engaged with the RSS (at the time an elected Member of SBC) can vouch for the fact that community representatives' (from Swindon and beyond) specific comments and feedback were generally ignored by those running supposed "consultation" sessions and writing the RSS itself.

**Coherence, consistence and effectiveness tests**

The structure and presentation of the plan, proposal maps and annexes, etc...would benefit from a further round of review, upgrading, revision, and integration.

We do not believe sufficient consideration has been given to alternatives. An example of this being that our own proposals, over many years have not been taken into account, the Council's responses being inadequate; to the detriment of the present development, let alone upcoming plans for the future. Consider the 'waste' of the Regent Circus site, which could/should have made an optimum position for a University in the town centre. This may yet compromise the eventual essential development of Granville/Morley Street.

We doubt that financial provisions, Council staffing and resources for feasibility studies, and corporate commitment to engagement, are adequate in this context. In addition, community organisations need to be resourced (money, facilities for meetings and exhibitions, and advisors) to properly engage -- in a plan as locally, regionally and nationally significant as this CAAP. It might be adopted as an interim guidance, and brought forward more in line with the emerging (and also not adequately participatory – yet) Core Strategy.

We would strongly suggest that **Arup's** be brought back as a Community Consultant as their earlier work was responsive to community input.