

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)

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.

CAAP: By Sessions

We still consider that the CAAP is not ready to be approved. It is substantively incomplete; missing the Transport Plan and Railway Village Plan; without cross

referencing with Community Strategy (which itself is only now being adopted, subject to our ongoing criticism and COMPLAINT); without references to Council's published Design Guide and to Swindon Central Area Draft Public Realm Strategy dated 02/06.

The list of bullet points raised in the Final List of Matters, Issues and Participants for the hearing sessions supports our belief the CAAP is certainly not ready for final approval. We urge the Inspector, to do all within her power to slow this process, taking advantage of the singular opportunity to achieve a truly reliable, sustainable and implementable document, for the significant PUA (among other roles) that is Swindon.

Session 1 –Strategic Policy Issues (1)

Design Strategy

As it stands, the plan does not adequately recognise current local identities. Otherwise it would not have left the GWR Heritage Area (World Heritage Status proposal, with Conservation Area Statement) out of plan, nor conceptualised and prioritised Old Town as part of Central Area.

No reference in CAAP to Swindon Design Guide (which itself contains many mis-representations, obscured by 'production quality', and how CAAP will relate to this. We have to understand existing local identity, and its complexity, origins and potential for evolutionary development, and in order to plan for high quality interventions.

We believe that the high graphic production quality of the Swindon Design Guide itself distracts from major omissions -- for example the omission of the Mechanics' Institution on pages 6 and 7. Nevertheless, this guide should have been better referenced in CAAP.

The Civic and Mechanics' Trusts co-sponsored two regional Urban Design Group study days; however neither trust was engaged in the development of the Council's Planning Design Guide, to the detriment of the guide, the community and the touted values of community engagement.

Flyers and reports of these days, plus 2 'Looking at Swindon...Together' events, and 'It's All Connected' Village meeting...

Design criteria not robust enough. An example is the Regent Circus/former College development -- a 17- storey development on a hill (reduced from proposed 20) overshadowing surrounding residences. This appears to have been rushed through, compromising the essential Granville Street retail development, perhaps in the interest of improved 'linkages' with Old Town. We are in full agreement with Donald Brunwin's comments, on behalf of the Civic Trust, on this matter.

We support mid-(4-6) and high-(under 20) rise development in the right places.

Opportunities have been lost – ie: NW corner building at ‘Millenium Square’ (sic), which has been rebuilt in the last 5 years. This missed three missed opportunities -- height and residential use; physical connection to Brunel Centre, anticipated in its 1972 design (note lost entrance at side); also opportunity for a mid-block pedestrian corridor between Fleet Street and Canal Walk (See coin operated toilet placement).

Green roofs should be provided for in the design guide as an example of how rapidly changing climate change adaptations should be facilitated.

Note winning painting by Tim Carroll, from NSC ‘Art Competition’

Public Realm and the Canal

The relationships between the various strategies have been developed without adequate/meaningful community input, and need integration with each other, and with the Swindon Design Guide (not, but could have been, referenced in the examination paper list of strategy documents) and CAAP in a further round of truly inclusive and participative consultation and production.

The canal issue has (like Coate, the university, and Regent Circus College site issue) been a distraction from the core work of producing the Community Strategy and CAAP in a form which would optimise Swindon’s potential.

The fact that a canal on an un-anticipated alignment has been belatedly forced into the process, politically, from the top down, while the Railway Village and the Mechanics’ Institution still have not been addressed (£50,000 paid for Canal feasibility study, with the transport and Village studies not done, and community capacity not funded) demonstrates the undemocratic/un-inclusive nature of the processes at work in Swindon.

We also wonder what the appropriate review period of the Canal scheme is, how the process will be monitored, what would trigger delay or abandonment of the scheme and how it will affect regeneration of the areas. The Council has not put forward adequate information to be able to answer these questions and we doubt that they can; hence we propose that they conduct an options appraisal of the several competing proposals for canal alignments, if indeed this is a justifiable priority, until AFTER the Transport Study is completed (WITHOUT a canal requirement, and WITH examination of ULT potentials).

See ADVER website for public opinion, seeking further information, and SCT article by DBrunwin