

SWINDON CIVIC TRUST - Ref: 108

Swindon Central Area Action Plan 2008

Written Statement – Session 1

Strategic Policy Issues (1)

Clarification of Submission Paper issues raised by the Trust

“Pg 18, Tall Buildings - last paragraph

Object to the word: considerable. This is subjective and the interpretation could easily defeat the argument in the previous paragraphs. Even "moderately higher" may adversely affect the amenity of a neighbourhood.”

Design Strategy, Pages 18 and 20, Policy 1 continued.

Agree that this policy is required. Do not agree that it is sufficiently robust. The CAAP is about a specific area with its own defined boundary and issues. It can afford to be more prescriptive in addressing relevant issues. The policy stated is broad-based, generic and could apply to virtually any large building. Consider that the policy should also seek to address the following, with relevance to the CAAP's specific area of context.

There is a considerable amount of two storey housing within the area and abutting the Area. Clear guidelines need to be set out regarding the mitigation of impact of large/tall buildings upon any surrounding low-rise residential. With diagrams such as are employed in assessing good estate layout. i.e. microclimate effects, overshadowing, privacy, etc. Whilst the CAAP document was circulating for comment, a project was approved for the old Swindon College site. This contains a tower block and one could reasonably expect that the policy in the CAAP document would be respected. Either it was not respected, or it was inadequately interpreted, but the surrounding residential community is concerned that the impact of the tower will have a detrimental effect upon their amenity.

The policy is not founded on a robust and credible evidence base and needs to be specifically clear where large, multi-storey buildings/tower blocks can be sited in order that low-rise residential areas will not be adversely impacted.

“Pg 19, Policy 1

The design policy should also include: "the respect for grain and texture", with particular reference to the residential townscape. This aspect has already been well covered in the guidance for backland development. Extracts from this guidance could be used in respect of new residential development in existing residential areas within the central area, irrespective if it is backland or not.”

Design Strategy, page 19, Policy 1

Withdraw “grain and texture”. There is a limit to how good design principles can be specified beyond certain practical and sensible guidance. Really good buildings

depend on the intelligence and sensitivity of the commissioning culture. Developers, architects, building control officers, planning committees and the communities they represent all have their part to play in determining a good end product that suits their cultural aspirations.

Planning Control and the Planning Committee are the gatekeepers who approve what development can happen in the Town. However sound the CAAP is, unless these bodies wholly support it, inferior product can occur. At one stage in the evolution of the Plan it was proposed that there be "Gateways" indicating that one had arrived at the Town Centre. These were to be demarked by building of high quality, promoting the image of as a place of high excellence. One site, at the corner of Station Road and Corporation Street has been demarked with an ugly block of flats, another at the corner of Princess Street and Fleming Way has approval for a hotel, the design of which could have come from a second rate firm of fifties architects. Neither uplift the spirits or announce the fact that the town wishes to represent the cutting edge of excellence.

The policy is not the most appropriate in all circumstances and propose that the policy promotes the importance of the involvement of CABA. Reference to "The Swindon Design Guide" also should be included in the policy (although this Guide also needs to be strengthened.)

"Pg 30, Gateways

It is not clear in the document how the "Gateway at Kingshill" will serve vehicular traffic from the West."

Public Realm, page 30, Gateways. Page 44, Policy 3

It is not clear in the document what purpose the "Gateway at Kingshill" will serve other than a demarcation for people entering the Central Area by canal boat. The Canal Route Study suggests a signature bridge or a piece of public art. Do not object to either proposal, but suggest that most people entering Swindon would not recognise this as a Gateway to the Central Area.

The policy is unsound as it does not consider all the alternatives. The Public Realm Statement needs to indicate where most people entering Swindon from the West will encounter a Gateway.

Public Realm, page 34, The Railway Village

The objection to the bus route down Oxford Street is withdrawn, as this route was in the plan by error.

Policy is unsound as it is not the most appropriate. Replacing the bus route down London Street is no better. A genuine attempt needs to be made to remove all through traffic in the Railway Village Conservation Area (which itself is proposed as part of a World Heritage Site).

"Public Realm, Pg 44, Policy 3

Areas outside pubs, especially popular concentrations need to much better lit at night and be provided with sound methods of disbursing "revellers" with the least disturbance to residential neighbourhoods.

Consideration to these nighttime economy issues is being given by the Council's licensing department and the CivicTrust. The project is called "Night Vision", and its findings and recommendations should be included in the Public Realm Policy. (talk to the Licencing Officer, Lionel Starling)."

Policy unsound as it does not consider all the alternatives. Propose that specific mention of the recommendations be made under Infrastructure Requirements

"Faringdon Road - Green Spine

Assuming traffic can be extensively removed from Faringdon Road, the opportunity exists to turn this into a lineal park leading into the GWR Park through the existing gateways. Certainly a traffic free area would be of benefit to its abutting residential population and be an asset to the general greening of the town. This work should be carried out as soon as the traffic issues are resolved, and not wait for "the canal"."

Public Realm Strategy, page 38 (map) and Page 44 Policy 3

The map on page 38 shows several green links but no mention of them is made in the text or the Policy. If it is possible to resolve the traffic issues, then urgent consideration should be given to using the Faringdon Road link as a bus priority route that also incorporates its status as a green link. This would remove the use of the Railway Village Conservation Area as a major bus route, thus significantly improving the amenity of its residents. The policy is unsound because it does not address these issues.

At present over 60 busses pass through Emlyn Square and down Bristol Street. This should be a quiet residential area, not subject to this intrusion of heavy traffic. Even more busses serving the Southern Development Area, are planned to pass through the Village.

There could be a phased operation. Convert Faringdon Road to a green link serving bus priority routes. When the green spine passing under the railway is complete, divert most busses down this route, leaving say one service to pass through the Village. This will probably occur when the canal systems outside the Borough are lapping up to its boundaries. At this stage the final decision as to where to run the Swindon canal link can be made.

Policy is unsound as it does not consider all the alternative. Propose that the green links shown on the plan be incorporated into the body of the text and into the Policy.

Policy is unsound as it does not consider all the alternatives. Propose that Faringdon Road be used as a green link and as a bus priority route, thus removing the routes through the Railway Village. (relevant alternative)

"Pg 50, Policy 4

We object to the proposed canal route on the following grounds:

Even if all the private car traffic were removed from the town centre, there would be

a corresponding growth in public transport, and more commercial traffic serving the "vibrant" shopping areas. Much of this is coming from Junction 16 to the west. We have grave doubts that with existing limited road widths from the ring road (partly governed by privately owned properties flanking the routes) and the limited funding for road works outside new development areas, that the transport issues of the Kingshill Gateway can be resolved. We need more evidence that there is a sound traffic policy that takes these issues into account, before we can believe, and support the closure of the road system from the west.

That the canal as detailed, breaks the wild-life corridor where the canal runs through the town. The alternative by-pass route would better serve this purpose. Obviously if it were embedded in our suggested lineal park, some of this objection would be overcome.

Our greatest concern is the economic pressure that would be placed on the canal to produce its "wow" factor. Many of the properties in the vicinity of the canal are rented or leased. Whilst adjacent property owners may benefit financially, those in rented properties will suffer from severe rent increases, leading to displacement of a currently fairly well integrated community. We consider that more well-directed consultation of residents who would be affected by the canal, is required before any further promotion of the canal is undertaken.

We do support the positioning of a canal basin and the upgrading of the properties in Fleet Street. However we consider that the basin would be better served by a spur from the north, connecting to our preferred canal by-pass route."

The Reinstatement of a Canal through Central Swindon Strategy, page 50, Policy 4

Support the provision of canal links through the Borough of Swindon that link it to the network shown on the map on page 47.

The policy is unsound as it fails both parts of test 7. However formulation of the stated policy regarding the proposed alignment of the section of the canal through the Central Area is unsound on the following grounds:

The lack of a robust methodology in the assessment of a appropriate route, including possible alternative routes, their impact on the environment and adjacent communities (by informed consultation) and potential for mitigation, their compatibility with the environment and adjacent communities, potential constraints, impact on existing infrastructure, impact on future potential development. (Attached is an article published in the Swindon Civic Trust Newsletter suggesting that there are alternative routes.)

The lack of an Options Appraisal based on the above.

The lack of any information as to how and when the canal routes external to the Borough will be ready to be linked through the Borough. To build an expensive section of canal with no knowledge of when it would be connected to the rest of the system would seem foolhardy. As it may not be practical to obtain this knowledge or the finance required in the near future, the route would need to be protected from

encroachment by any other development for some period of time. A robust assessment of a practical route and its incorporation into Borough wide planning policy could provide its best protection in the long run.

Appendix 1

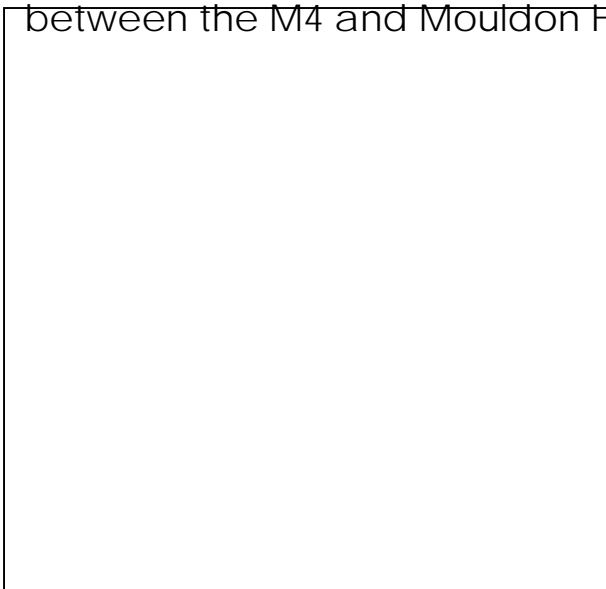
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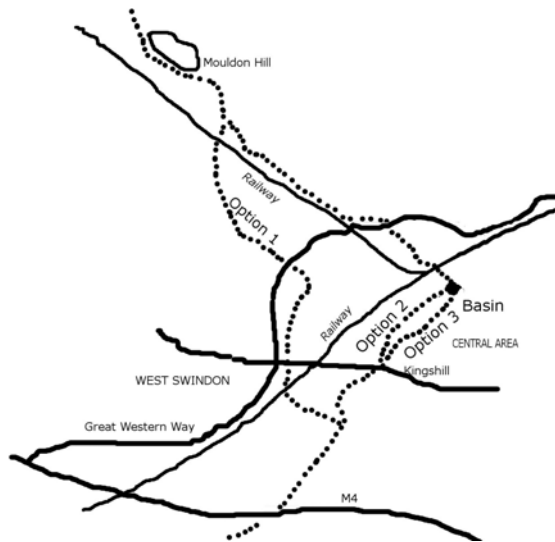
Finding a Canal Corridor Through Swindon



The proposed canal through Swindon is an essential piece of a puzzle, which would re-open a 19th century Southwest regional canal network, that once linked the *Wilts and Berks Canal* with the *Thames and Severn Canal*. The linking 'piece' flowed across greenfields, at the foot of Swindon Hill 30 years before Brunel and Gooch pinned Swindon to the GWR (and global) map. Known as the *North Wilts Canal*, its original junction with the *Wilts and Berks* was adjacent to today's Debenhams, where Fleming Way now runs with cars instead of water.

In the new canal restoration proposals, the junction will now be near the M4. However, a route around or across Swindon Town Centre is still critical to the completion of the whole puzzle. The map (below) shows three possible routes through the (now urbanised) Swindon area for a restored *North Wilts Canal*, between the M4 and Mouldon Hill.





The canal's early route is reflected in the names of "Canal Walk" and "Bridge Street", as well as by several prominent 'bumps' in the road, where canal bridges rest buried (at the top of Milton Road, and in Station Road for example). The underlying canal alignments, and the hillside elevation nearby, together go a long way to explaining the challenges experienced in today's central Swindon traffic circulation system, which was made 1-way in the 1970's, in an effort to cope until further infrastructure could be afforded. (!)

The canal and its junctions (near Debenham's and at the Magic Roundabout) were still in place, though derelict until 1959. The generous width of Fleming Way is attributable to the Canal's Former position. In a similar way, Great Western Way is a legacy of the massive GWR sidings formerly located there.

Therefore, the present challenge of rationalising Swindon's traffic flow is itself a consequence of the historic setting of the canal and railway which opened Swindon up to expansion in 1810 and 1840. Who said "History doesn't matter"?

If Swindon is to have a new canal as an amenity for residents, and as an attraction for visitors, then some very sharp thinking will be required by all parties. In an effort to help discussions along, a

description follows of the 3 routes proposed thus far, with a suggestion for further exploration.

Option 1 is based on a proposal by consulting engineers, Scott-White & Hookins in 1994. This would branch from the original route at the foot of Kingshill Road and head for the low lying River Ray Valley to the north of Swindon. It would use two existing bridges to pass under the main railway line and connect back to the original route near Moulden Hill. It passes through mainly green areas, including along the edge of the Shaw Community Forest, and would provide a wild-life corridor. The main obstacle to this route is where it has to pass Sainsbury's carpark.

(In using this route there would be an opportunity to double back along the original route, under the main railway line, to Station Road, where a new turning basin could be created across from Bridge House; I do not think this opportunity was not considered in the 1994 version of the proposal.)

Option 2 has been promoted by the Leader of Swindon Council, Rod Bluh. It would by-pass the original route, now in the main Central Shopping Area, using a new route down Westcott Place and Faringdon Road, to a new canal basin at the end of Fleet Street. A Route Study was carried out in 2007 by consulting engineers Halcrow Group Limited. This showed that the route was feasible, but also high-lighted the technical issues involved, and the high costs in resolving them. Service and Sewer diversions are estimated to be £15 million; the total cost around £50 Million for about a mile of canal (1.5km). Although this section has no major structural obstacles in its way, there has been a general sense of apprehension expressed that this route would disrupt traffic flows, and people's lives, as well as impose, by its traffic consequences, upon the character of the Railway Village Conservation Area, which itself is part of a proposed World Heritage Site.

Option 3 would follow the original route through the Central Shopping Area, turning into a new basin at the end of Fleet Street.

From there it would mainly follow the original route under the mainline to Mouldon Hill. Whilst this route would cause less disruption to traffic and people living in its vicinity, it would need to pass through the main shopping area.

An opportunity does not appear to have been considered there, and might meet with opposition by commercial tenants, to convert the flanking shops into a two storey mall, with the canal running through the ground floor, with access across at first floor level. This could link up with the Regent Place proposal and run first floor access across the entire shopping complex.

A canal through a canopied shopping centre would certainly be unique, with plenty of "wow-factor". If a canal down Faringdon Road can be expected to increase shop-keepers profits by £8 million per annum, as Halcrow estimate, then how much more might it increase them if it ran right through the centre?

As routes 2 and 3 would run through the urban area of Swindon, the route needs some interim planning protection, in order to safeguard it from major developments being built in its way until the money is available for the canal. This needs to be enshrined in planning policy. Any Faringdon Road route policy protection may only have a short life, as there is concern that the policy could blight this area if it is not acted on quickly.

Maybe the best way forward is an Options Appraisal, comparing all 3 routes, so that an informed decision can be made, and the chosen route provided with the long term planning protection it requires. It may take quite a while to raise the sums of money needed to complete the canal.