

NCAP's contribution to the EIP AT EXETER MAY 2007

For the benefit of those who have not taken part in an EIP, participants sit around a table and a fast-moving debate takes place. Fortunately participants are allowed to have advisers sitting behind. I found this extremely useful because whilst I was speaking in answer to one question Richard was kindly penning a response to the next.

There was a better ratio of participants to developers than in previous years.

THE FUTURE ROLES OF SWINDON AND CHIPPENHAM LOOKING BOTH EAST AND WEST

The Panel recognised that a huge leap in growth is planned for Swindon. CPRE pointed to a 5% decline in economic activity since 2000 and asked for reference to a national growth centre to be deleted. This was met with some concern since that designation carries the hope of Government funding which would be necessary to enable the huge leap. SBC made a point of asking GOSW for substantial contributions.

The developers were keen to provide a mass of housing for Chippenham and leisure facilities. Contrary to what WCC had stated, Chippenham was not a dormitory town of Swindon but was an ancient town. Transport 2000 confirmed that it looked towards Bath. Lachlan Robertson for NWDC said they were about to produce their Core Strategy. He thought 5,500 more houses would be the limit.

PERIPHERAL SETTLEMENTS

There were fewer commuters to Swindon from settlements such as Malmesbury and Devizes, there were more from those nearer, labelled dormitory settlements: these needed their own jobs. Lachlan Robertson, NWDC, volunteered that there were limits to growth in Malmesbury but Calne might be the next town to grow after Chippenham. In his view Wootton Bassett was a suburb of Swindon - which view drew a sharp retort from CPRE who advised that the inhabitants would hate to see it so described. Devizes, where the developers were keen, was defended because the traffic is already gridlocked.

APPROPRIATE LEVELS OF HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT

The developers argued for much higher housing numbers. However the Panel had taken on board CPRE's case that job numbers were aspirational. SBC stood firm and GOSW pronounced that development would not go anywhere else; only to Swindon. SBC, WCC and SWRA were supportive about strategic gaps to protect existing communities and for the 50 houses a year in North Wilts to be more flexible to allow for them to be in North Wilts or Swindon - such flexibility had originally been suggested by NWDC.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF SWINDON TOWN CENTRE FOR OVERALL GROWTH

There was unanimous agreement that this is important. SBC even let slip that the lack of a flourishing town centre had made it difficult to recruit for jobs.

There was a difference of opinion about how the renewal was to be achieved with NCAP and CPRE saying it needed to be achieved before further polycentric development and others saying that it should be developed in tandem in order to achieve the required number of houses - 1700 pa. GOSW produced a new policy for the town centre which includes affordable housing.

HAS ENOUGH CONSIDERATION BEEN GIVEN TO DEVELOPING TO THE WEST?

The developers with landbanks to the west redoubled their efforts in saying that they could build immediately and pointed to existing infrastructure. NCAP refuted this comment and pointed to gridlock on country lanes built for horses and carts and through which 26 buses and coaches passed, many of which transported students from Swindon to Bradon Forest School. There was also a severe flooding problem since the building of the Northern Expansion - a number of fields being flooded which previously had not suffered; Cricklade, Purton and Lydiard Millicent being cut off from each other; the Link Centre being flooded and out of action for several weeks, and houses backing on to fields beneath Lydiard Park experiencing their highest level of flooding.

SBC explained that the study into where the houses would go was nearly finished and would be released in June; schools were full and there was a need for infrastructure. The RSS was not site specific and that should be left to the LDDs. The HA said that J16 was at capacity. If there was development it should go to the east. NCAP and CPRE stressed the importance of protecting communities. Flooding had become a huge problem since the building of the Northern Development.

DELIVERY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

SBC gave a glowing account of how they could help delivery. The Environment Agency made a brief declaration that all was well.

The Panel asked the HA if improvements would be needed to the M4 Junction and were astounded when the HA said that they had not yet reached a conclusion. More modelling was required. The Panel thought that three years since the Structure Plan EIP should have given time. CPRE queried major road improvements in the light of climate change.

In summing up the SWRA defended their Plan, saying it created a step-change. It would seem that strategic gaps and green lungs, rather than the Rural Buffer, will appear when the RSS is adopted.

I asked the last question of the Chairman - I requested that a strategic gap should appear as a policy and not just in the text of the document, and then referred to Bristol's 'Green Lungs' alongside the M32 which had achieved policy status. Here's hoping!!

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6.6.07