



Strengthening Swindon

Managing the regeneration process

Peter James, Chief Executive of The New Swindon Company, explains how his team are seeking to manage the regeneration process in Swindon. The aim is to strengthen the town's appeal as a destination of choice for developers, businesses, investors and visitors.

Identifying the challenges

There are many obvious reasons as to why people would choose Swindon. The town's economy has been booming for years, with many major companies choosing to locate there. This is hardly surprising when you consider that the town's location is less than an hour away from London and has close links to the M4 between Reading and Bristol. A number of global companies are already present in the town, covering a diverse range from manufacturing to financial services to property.

However, just as consumers are faced with a huge array of choice when looking for a new car, investors are faced with a similar dilemma. There are many towns and cities across the UK that can offer a good location and good business sense when considering investing or relocating for business and development purposes. This is the issue that Swindon is facing at the minute – that challenge of implementing and managing a successful regeneration scheme that will benefit local people and create a vibrant economy.

That is not to say we have not been, in part, successful already. Swindon's prospering economy provides a good basis for regeneration and allows us not to be too concerned about the impending economic slowdown. Swindon is already the most productive town in the UK. It has been identified as a 'Strategically Significant Town' within the South West, essentially meaning it has a growth agenda with an additional 35,000 houses planned for by 2026, and a forecast increase of 32,000 jobs in the local economy.

There are many other reasons why Swindon can be classified as an economically viable town. It tops the league of the UK's 50 largest towns for the biggest growth in the number of new businesses. That position combined with a low unemployment rate, a buoyant commercial property market, and the fact that a large number of UK and multi-national companies are based in Swindon highlights the fact that, economically, the town is already a success.

Regeneration as a key to future success

However economic prosperity has not been accompanied by redevelopment of the town centre, where post-war planning and concrete buildings still dominate. This is changing with a dramatic regeneration programme in progress and a number of organisations working to put Swindon on the map as an economically successful town where people want to live, work and play. Part of this plan

is utilising a successful marketing strategy in order to ensure Swindon is top of the list when considering moving and relocating. The interesting thing for me is how to run and sustain hard-hitting marketing campaigns while at the same time establishing Swindon as somewhere with a strong reputation. This is most certainly a challenge, considering Swindon is a highly political, bureaucratic and risk averse environment, being in the domain of electoral politicians who have a short period in which they must provide success. This is something those in the private sector are not often in tune with.

However, that is not to say that the public sector cannot learn from the successes of the private sector when it comes to marketing destinations and place-making. Getting the right product, at the right time and the right price, and communicating it effectively to target markets is the sure fire way of competing on a level playing field within the inward investment market place. As with all products, you need the magic USP (unique selling point) and Swindon certainly has that. The town centre can offer a unique blend of political and business success, alongside a real desire to see the area improved. That, combined with its successful past, both economically and historically, sets Swindon apart from many other cities.

Swindon is not resting on its laurels however. In a bid to improve on what exists and to make the town more appealing, a major regeneration programme is breathing new life into the town centre, providing Swindon with retail, cultural and educational facilities that can match the economic success. This project is acting as a real catalyst for change, harnessing public sector powers and resources to assist the private sector in delivering a new town centre. With the potential for almost £1 billion of development within the town, improvements have been split into seven regeneration zones which will provide mixed-use developments, office space, retail and leisure space and residential, cultural and educational facilities. The scale of this regeneration framework represents a massive opportunity for redevelopment specialists, property developers and other investors, and indeed, since work began in 2002, Swindon has experienced high levels of inward investment, with recent entrants to the town including Handelsbanken, ODS and BuildStore.



Changing perceptions

Each area of development within Swindon town centre will include the highest quality design and architecture, to combine the needs and desires of the people living there, with commercially attractive opportunities for developers and investors. This will not only help improve Swindon town centre's slightly tired image, but will also create an even more vibrant and economically strong community. With the regeneration programme gathering momentum, the opportunities presented to businesses are extremely promising. An already booming economy is providing the perfect basis and support for redevelopment, and the regeneration of the town centre will deliver a new Swindon that is a vibrant and exciting place to live with a robust economy from which all can benefit.

Changing the perceptions or branding of a town is not easy and there is never a quick solution. It takes a generation, or at least a decade, to make a true change for the better, to forget past mistakes, and ensure that they will never happen again. That is why many urban regeneration companies (URCs) around the UK are embarking on projects to improve towns and cities. The New Swindon Company is leading the delivery of regeneration in Swindon. At a time when the economy in general is slowing down, and British URCs are reaching their tenth anniversary, it is a pivotal time for change, and it is vital that we get it right - in looking and listening to what people really want, and identifying what Swindon needs to become the top destination in the UK.

Saying that, I believe Swindon has the potential to be one of the UK's real success stories in the coming decades. In combining all of the raw elements in the town with the work of The New Swindon Company, and cutting through local authority politics to get to the heart of what people really want, the diamond that is Swindon town centre will certainly shine once again.

Peter James

Chief Executive, The New Swindon Company