

## **REGENERATION OF STOURBRIDGE : PUBLIC MEETING 28.02.09**

Chair, Lynda Waltho MP, opened by welcoming everyone and introducing David Cox, whose letter to the Stourbridge News had provided the initial spark for the meeting. She spoke of the proud history of our town and our concerns for its future. St Thomas's Church and the Hall in which the meeting was taking place had been built by public subscription for the benefit of the townspeople – very appropriate to the current situation. Having lived and worked here for more than 25 years, Lynda wondered if we could pinpoint when things had started to change, to decline? Was it with the Ring Road? The opening of Merry Hill? The answer would probably be different for different people but, whatever it was, we need to look forward to where we are going and what we can do to fight the economic downturn.

David Cox had lit the fuse with his letter to the News. Having received a lot of replies in support of his ideas he had contacted the MP who had agreed to organise a public meeting. Local specialists had been invited: people from the glass industry and local traders, John Parry, from Parry people Movers; Stephen Rhodes from Centro; Lynette Cutting from Stourbridge College; Hannah Rogers, the Town Centre Manager; the Chamber of Trade; Cllr Malcolm Knowles as Lead Member for Regeneration and other local councillors. Not all were able to attend but such a large turnout (about 100) of the general public suggested that there was both interest and support for the notion of the people taking a role in defining and resolving the town's problems.

Lynda stressed the fact that this was people led, not politician led. It was in everyone's interest that this and any follow-up meetings should be firmly a-political.

David Cox said he thought first impressions of the town could be much improved – the subway from the bus station is appalling, the range of shops inadequate. Visually, the gables on High Street are very appealing but ground level leaves much to be desired. He gave Ludlow as an example worthy of study; a town where the people proudly carry 'I love Ludlow' carrier bags. This notion was later supported by Geoff Harper who also proposed the idea of loyalty cards for use in Stourbridge shops.



The Local Government Association (representing councils) is asking for temporary measures to be introduced to allow them to let disused units at reduced rates. Questions are being asked about the use of Woolworth stores on a national level – the Stourbridge store has great potential.

The time has come when we must DO something rather than sit and do nothing.

Hannah Rogers was unable to attend; items from her written report are incorporated into the various sections of this report.

The meeting over-ran its time but was still incomplete. A show of hands indicated a desire to finish the discussion as soon as could be arranged. This was agreed. The agenda published for this meeting will be continued.

**Notes from the meeting are presented in alphabetical order by topic.** If there are any major errors or omissions please contact Barbara Sykes on [sykesb@parliament.uk](mailto:sykesb@parliament.uk) or at the office of Lynda Waltho MP, 2 Faraday House, King William Street, Stourbridge, DY8 4HD

### **Culture / Local History:**

Tom Cheney from the Glass House Centre – they had obtained money for the redevelopment of the site to enhance educational provision, and promote an arts' centre and art work to the level of becoming a major cultural and tourist centre. Support funding had been agreed by Advantage West Midlands and the National Heritage Lottery Fund but was now stalled. Lynda had helped to get the original promise of funding – could she make it happen? Lynda said that the Learning and Skills part of the funding was being re-assessed; some schemes that are well on their way may be able to continue – she was hopeful that this would be one of them.

Elaine Clout (via a written note) – we need a joined up vision; new buildings must be in keeping with older gables etc on the High Street. Stourbridge needs to be more individual, gain more personality, exploit its history as a market town with an important glass industry.

Chris Armfield – expressed concern that plans to use the Foster and Rastrick site as a Medical Centre had been turned down, similarly the nearby apartment development.

Cllr Jones explained that terms for the development were under negotiation, it needed to be two separate packages instead of the joint one being asked for by the developers; compromise was being sought.

Lynda said that, whilst supporting the need for development, she and the Canal Trust had joined in opposing the plans because the flats would have been too high for a canal-side development.

Chris Armfield – also concerned that the tunnels under the Ring Road had been so neglected that they had to be filled in instead of being better cared for and developed into a tourist attraction. He also introduced a sketch of an alternative frontage to the new Crown Centre, (see overleaf) which he felt was much more in keeping with the town's architecture. He wanted to see leisure facilities to attract our own young people into the town – not to the bars and pubs, not drug addicts etc. from out of town. We used to have 4 cinemas, none now; no youth clubs, community centres. We do have 2 historic pubs – he asked if we really needed another one as proposed by Whitbread (see Leisure section).

### **Innovation/Environment:**

John Parry raised the question of the development of eco-towns and asked: why not adapt Stourbridge to become one instead of building new ones, e.g in Warwickshire, from scratch.

Odila Mabrouk introduced 'Transition Stourbridge' – a local branch of a national organisation aiming to regenerate communities through links with land share, allotments, transport schemes etc. There are 30 members in Stourbridge thus far. They are producing a film series in partnership with the Glass House, are looking to develop a centre for



There was praise from several sources for the success of the Britain in Bloom involvement.

Work on the Northern Gateway Project (bottom of Lower High Street) has been deferred.

## **Leisure :**

Pauline Ashby - why does Dudley MBC always seem to get rid of Stourbridge's good things? She referred specifically to the closure of Ramparts skate board centre (Cllr Knowles later said they hadn't paid their bills so the council had to foreclose) and the previous farmers' market – the best stalls have gone elsewhere.

Peter Cox – why is Dudley MBC still issuing night licences, despite police opposition?

Cllr Jones explained that, under new laws, a licence almost has to follow a successful planning application and refusal of one of those is very difficult. He agreed with Lynda that powers available to the Council through Cumulative Impact Orders could be used to restrict further development and had caused the plans for The Yorkshire Bank and The Picture House to stall.

A lady expressed the opinion that the town was a disgrace at night; lap dancing clubs were disgusting and there was not enough policing. Many people agreed with her first 2 points but some disagreed re policing. Some thought that people come here at night BECAUSE police levels make them feel safe.

Maggie Oates (via a written note) - we need a decent theatre for touring companies, similar to the Arena in Wolverhampton; the Town Hall seating is uncomfortable and the acoustics are very poor. There is a wealth of potential in this area but the habit is engrained that theatre is elsewhere.

Belief was also expressed that we need things for families to be able to do together. One lady said her 16 year old daughter thought there was nothing at all for her in Stourbridge.

Although Hannah Rogers referred to the money spent to bring the Crystal Leisure Centre up to standard, Elaine Clout (via a written note) criticised the fact that it is frequently closed, swimming times for families are too restrictive, Ramparts is totally closed and there is nothing to replace it. More needs to be done to meet the needs of young people.

Mark Rogers, of Amblecote but also representing Whitbread PLC/Premier Inns:

Whitbread and Modus are committed to their developments. Whitbread want to bring a residential hotel to the town but the Council's restrictions on

the current planning application make the project undeliverable. Developers would need to close one lane of the Ring Road for 6 weeks – the council says this cannot be done. Were it to be done it would reduce construction time from 18 to 12 months, thus greatly reducing costs. The hotel would bring approximately £1 million of trade per year. They will look at other sites e.g. the Labour Club, if the current plans fail.

Several people remarked about current and previous lane closures on the Ring Road being for greater than 6 weeks – the reasons (e.g sub-way development) were considered to be irrelevant to the fact that the road regularly tolerated extended lane closures.

Mark also referred to the planning application for Aldi to open a store on the current B & Q site. He referred to the positive impact the store at Wollaston had had. He believed Aldi would be good for Stourbridge, regeneration would be aided by bringing FTSE 100 companies into town. (There was some disagreement about the merits of Aldi). He thought we should concentrate on quick wins, projects to bring people into town.

Someone asked if we wanted another hotel? If we had one would it be in architectural keeping with the town? It needs to look beautiful. Mark said that it would.

Mavis Wakelam questioned why it had been alright to build a red-brick Safeways and Crown Centre but suddenly it wasn't alright for an hotel.

### **Lynette Cutting: Principal of Stourbridge College:**

The College has 2500 students and provides training for around 5000 people; it deals with hundreds of employers and traders. In the short term the College can and will help by bringing more young people into town via moving some college provision into some of the empty shops – some Business Skills work could also be moved. There are cost issues but these can be resolved. The student presence (praised for a more positive image in recent months) would make the town more lively and increase revenue. The same applies to King Edward's college. How else can they help? The College is receiving £35 million for regeneration; she wants the town to share in those benefits. Lynette asked for ideas to be forwarded. Her contribution was applauded.

### **Pedestrianisation and related issues:**

John Parry spoke in favour of pedestrianisation. He brought with him a model of his vision of how the area around the rail and bus station could look, incorporated into a seating, cafeteria, small park development around St John's church.

Steve Aldred, of Parkfield Road (by the bus station) - the area is currently really tatty. As a first impression of Stourbridge it is awful and the High Street isn't much better. Lower High Street has the architecture. He advocated pedestrianisation – it feels nice, it brings in lots of people. Elaine Clout and Rob Hebron (via written notes) and several people via email all expressed support for pedestrianisation.

Graham Butler - the High Street needs to be more congenial for shoppers – current pavements are poor, too narrow, the victim of bad parking. Pedestrianisation works everywhere else, why not here? To sit at a cafe in the middle of the High Street would be lovely. The question of pedestrianisation really should be examined again.



Lynda reported that, in conversation with her on The Bridge Radio, Cllr Angus Adams had given an undertaking that this would happen; Phil Tonks and Alex Totney of The Bridge Radio confirmed that the statement had been made. Lynda asked Cllr Adams' council colleagues to remind him!

Joy Totney - she would come to town by bus if one were available but it wasn't. She drives in and has to pay for parking. Merry Hill is free. Stourbridge should charge (some said a great deal) to park on the High Street, everywhere else should be free.

Clarification from Lynda: Merry Hill is looking to introduce charges but original contracts gave free parking - re-negotiation of contracts is taking place.

### **Residential development :**

Hannah reported housing developments in Worcester, Enville and Market Streets. Further residential development is on hold. Margaret Underhill deplored the state of the derelict land by the new Webb Court – a negative impression right in the middle of town.

### **Retail development:**

Hannah - Modus are delaying construction work at the Crown Centre until 2010 due to the present global 'credit crunch.' She is hoping to work with letting agents to attract businesses into vacant retail units and to consider alternative and short term leases.

Les Jones – the future of the Crown Centre will rely on an anchor supermarket; it is crucial.



Chris Armfield – private landlords are a real problem – another business closed in Victoria passage last week. Landlords should be obliged to reduce rents and/or rates.

Cllr Knowles - the council doesn't own any retail property in the town centre, therefore rent control is out of their hands; rates have to be paid to government so the council has to charge them.

Mavis Wakelam referred to the fact that Dudley MBC had held a 99 year lease on the Ryemarket but had sold it off to private enterprise. Had they not done so we would have more say in what was being charged etc.

It was suggested that Dudley could try to be innovative, different, ask for new powers re disposal.

Colin MacDonald (provider of the Stourbridge web site: Stourbridge.com) quoted a BBC report saying that councils were being warned about the possibility of 'ghost towns' if they did nothing to encourage and facilitate the occupation of empty retail properties. We are not alone with our problems but we must make an effort to resolve them.

Elaine Clout (via written note) was critical of the quality of some grocery provision, of the price of other; she finds it almost impossible to buy boys' clothes in town.

Roseanne Adams (via written note) – we should try to protect and encourage small businesses in residential areas. They bring life, colour and energy e.g. Hanbury Nurseries was very good – it was bought up by a developer and is now left derelict.

A. Mansell, representing 3 traders, applauded the idea of the meeting but asked that future ones be held at a time more suitable for the traders. Lynda explained the thought process gone through before deciding upon noon on a Saturday – give traders an opportunity to attend but maximise the potential for public input. Now that the spark has been lit, future timing can be different but there will never be a time to suit all who wish to be there.

Ms Mansell said she had considerable retail experience in a number of towns; in her experience smaller communities often spark good ideas for others to follow. She liked the ideas she was hearing and suggested that empty shops could be used for exhibition space – themed displays could use more than one shop.

Cllr Hanif put forward the regeneration of Lye as a particular example of what can be achieved when the community works with local business.

### **Town Centre Manager's Report:**

Cllr Knowles had been delegated to speak to this in Hannah Rogers' absence. He spoke about Crown Centre redevelopment, acknowledged that people wanted to see that happen, declared himself a supporter of pedestrianisation, explained the process of Dudley's master plan and the planning process.

### **Town Centre Activities:**

Hannah reported results of a recent survey of traders:

Respondents – 32% of traders; reporting increased trade – 17%, same level of trade – 25%, reduction in trade – 58% , belief that town centre events are beneficial – 70%.

Car parking charges were considered to be an adverse factor.

A number of people referred to the positive effect of the Farmers' Market – some preferred the previous style and people but all references were positive in terms of atmosphere generated. Comments also supported the idea of greater frequency for the markets.

Hannah Rogers referred to recent infrastructure developments e.g. the pedestrian Crossing at the bottom of Hagley Road, car parking and subway improvements, recent enhancement of amenities – litter bins, lighting etc .

### **Transport:**

John Parry of Parry People Movers – transport is vital to the way a town works. The USA is beginning to realise that dependency on cars must go. The change to new urbanism asks how towns can work better – the answer is in improved transport.

The Parry People Mover will soon be operating on the Stourbridge Branch Line; a small, economic light rail system which has caught the imagination of the transport industry. Certification came through on 27<sup>th</sup> Feb; drivers are trained, the vehicle is ready and familiarisation training begins 1<sup>st</sup> week of March. The PPM makes transport more affordable but for now will only come to the edge of town; with Centro they are looking at bringing the tram/train into the town itself and then back up to the Junction.

Nottingham has been transformed by pedestrianisation and a clean transport system but it is very costly. Working with Centro, our system will be much more affordable, nearer to bus costs.

They are also looking to re-open the Walsall line at some time in the future. The Dept for Transport is giving first priority to a Yorkshire scheme but PPM, Lynda and Centro are pressing for our line to be next. They recognise that a heavy rail system is inappropriate and are looking at a tram/train system. Stephen Rhodes (Centro) supported this but said that the scheme will need government input – that is being sought. It will be a long term project but tram/train makes it much more feasible. This opinion was supported by Cllr Jones who also said that there were a lot of groups wanting it to happen, but it will take time.

Stephen Rhodes of Centro - the bus network changed last year; a new bus station for Stourbridge, of improved quality, is Centro's next priority. Sue Solly was concerned to make sure that Centro would bear in mind John Parry's vision to extend the line into town when planning for a new bus station. Stephen assured her this was happening; he assured Cllr Jones that the need to overcome problems of levels/the slope was also being borne in mind. Class 172 trains will be introduced on the Stourbridge line next year as well as an enhanced service.

**General Comments** : several written comments expressed gratitude for the opportunity being given for the people of Stourbridge to take part in this debate; the opportunity to move forward should be grasped, the opinions of the townspeople, the contribution they can make and their right to be involved in decisions about their town should be appreciated and respected.

### **Summary of submissions received by email:**

**Geoff Harper** – shopkeepers should use reward cards and loyalty schemes to attract customers.

**Rob Hebron** – we should work to create a unique shopping and tourist centre. The town has much character and architecture to recommend it but road congestion, car parking charges, lack of an indoor market and lack of a General Store are weaknesses. The present economic climate is

suppressing development and the Ring Road prevents expansion outside the immediate town centre.

He believes that some trade will be lost if we fully pedestrianise but thinks afternoon closure to traffic could be the solution. Access to the town, for strangers, is poor and problematical; the bus station, bus services and subways into town leave scope for improvement. All 4 subways should be of a good 'people friendly' standard. The Foster Street subway should be lined with poster boards displaying transport and tourist information.

Services into and from Worcestershire need to be better and more available. If bus and train operators or the PTE will not fund these services then we should work to identify available grants and raise funds independently.

The Glass Collection at Broadfield House should be split between sites; we should have some to display. We should have a Glass Museum in town or at the Park. We should have a general museum and an Art Gallery – perhaps a 'One Heart' society could staff it. We need a Tourist Information Office and a gift shop.

Rob makes the following suggestion re traffic flow:

Allow traffic from the Ring Road onto Duke Street, onto Coventry Street and along Market Street. 'Provide bus stops in Duke Street and allow buses to pull in from the inner lane of the Ring Road to bring passengers into the central area of the town. Change local buses to run cross-town and locate new bus stop beside subway near Mill Race Lane section of Ring Road. This would provide the facility for the outward journey if Duke Street provided the inward journey.'

**Geoff Paddock** – the Farmers' market not as 'genuine' as it should have been – it should be bigger, more frequent, sell local produce and have specialist stalls, not outlets for shops. A few vociferous shopkeepers should not be allowed to monopolise the town's future: people want pedestrianisation.

We need more specialist shops – cheese, delicatessen, good baker with specialist bread, greengrocer selling local produce, specialist butcher. We need quality shops to fill the gaps in Ryemarket; everything should be more 'classy'.

We must prevent Stourbridge becoming a town of clubs and pubs; local traders must not be allowed to stick their heads in the sand and ignore the public they rely upon.

**Claire Price** – it is wrong to compare Stourbridge with Ludlow – the two towns are totally different. We have no castle, no theatre etc. We need to keep a street market going and hold it weekly. We need Saturday pedestrianisation, interesting and specialist shops.

Leases and or rents should be reduced to encourage people to have a go. Few of the night visitors are local but they leave a terrible mess for locals to contend with. Night-life should be prettied up for locals to enjoy – street furniture, outdoor jazz nights etc.

Too many traders have their own agenda. Everyone should pull together for the sake of the town, not themselves.

**Clive Sowerby, shoe shop** – Criticism of years of appalling planning etc. Praise for Stourbridge in Bloom and the Carnival. Organised events benefit the town. Praise for new market and street entertainment provided. We need to have free parking or a bus or tram service into the centre from Birmingham Street car park. We should encourage regular street entertainment. We need to pedestrianise the High Street but need better infra-structure for parking and deliveries. ‘... ring road on the college side should be turned into a car park, and erase the travesty of the ring road, that would also get rid of the trash underpass via Coventry Street.’ Business Link has been very helpful with advice and seminars. The town's greatest asset is the support of the people.

**Town centre PCSOs** - relaying comments from people around town –

Need more individual shops, e.g. D.I.Y., shoes, clothes (especially men's and senior ladies), Poundland or Argos, a good dedicated post office selling postal services not food etc. People should be encouraged to use Age Concern and Carlyle Hall centres as 'normal' cafes – they are better than coffee shops.

There are too many banks and charity shops.

Parking is too expensive – could we have short term refund of costs against the costs of a big shop? Parking on pavements is a problem.

We should pedestrianise but allow a delivery period. Markets should be held 2 days a week but the new farmers' market is expensive.

Some people for, some against the possibility of a Tesco development. The Ryemarket needs to do more to attract shop-keepers / shoppers – the suggestion is shorter term lets at reduced rates as an encouragement. Empty shops must be left clean – possibly be used to advertise the town.

No shop displays or sells cut glass for which Stourbridge is famous.

Street entertainment should be encouraged.

**Nick Townsend** – Songwriter / promoter / radio presenter. Says he is writing a song about Stourbridge and organising events which will bring extra trade and publicity to the town. A music TV show will be filmed at Stourbridge's Base Studio. He wants to bring bands and live gigs to come to town.

**Anne Wariner** – pedestrianisation is the only answer. Shopkeepers should not deny this to their customers. Whenever High Street is closed to traffic for special events there is a marked difference in atmosphere – people manage to park somewhere other than High Street on those occasions so what is the problem?

Street cleaning – the town is filthy after Saturday night activities. Perhaps take-aways etc should be obliged to cover the costs? Concern about discarded food attracting rats.

**Peter Webster** – access to Stourbridge shops is poor, parking provision is poor. He believes we need to pedestrianise and puts forward a detailed suggestion:

‘Stourbridge is the only town that I know that has a one-way ring road, and I am beginning to think that this is the cause of some of our problems. Local towns such as Kidderminster, Dudley and Brierley Hill adequately rely on two-way bypasses and through roads. They also, incidentally, have pedestrianised High Streets.

‘Perhaps it is time to accept that Stourbridge ring road has served its purpose, and that it is time to remove its restrictive stranglehold on our town. It must be feasible to convert the western part of the ring road i.e. Bath Road and New Road, into a two way through road with appropriate junctions for Worcester Street, Bridgnorth Road and Birmingham Street. The length of St John's Road from Coventry Street to Church Road could then be converted into a pedestrian area. This would give space for a market, street entertainment and perhaps for new developments. Furthermore, it would give permanent, level pedestrian access between the main shopping areas and the bus and train stations so that the pedestrian underpass can be abandoned. The Birmingham Street car park has, as an edge of town car park, great potential and could become a two-storey facility with suitable pedestrian access across the road into the town.’

**Tim Weller** – request that the Stourbridge / Dudley / Walsall disused railway line should be put on the agenda. He would like to speak to it.

**Mark Woodall** – there is a need to reduce leases and rents of empty premises. No more charity, pizza/kebab, coffee shops. We should entice a chain store to take the Woolworth building and re-install the escalator. We need a variety of sustainable stores, minimising competition - get River Island or Top Shop to take a store. Shops be selling affordable goods, not niche markets. We should make more of our glass history, maybe having a subsidised glass store exhibiting and selling works by local glass artists.

We must resolve the use of the indoor market and Crown Centre asap and get a multi-national supermarket to come to town. There should be free

parking at all times. We should thoroughly survey all age groups to discover what they want for their town.