

# **A New Council For Swindon?**

## **Overview of Our Approach**

### **Introduction**

The Local Government Act 2000 and subsequent guidance from the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (since June, 2001, Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions) requires that the views of the public must be taken into account in deciding the most appropriate political management structure for Swindon Council.

It is a requirement that when the Council's submission is made to the Secretary of State on its proposed structure this must be accompanied by a statement on the steps the Council has taken to consult local people and other interested parties, a summary of the outcomes of, and responses to, that consultation, and a description of how the proposals for executive arrangements reflect these proposals. This document is the basis for the proposed submission to the Secretary of State in respect of the statutory consultation.

### **Swindon Borough Council**

Swindon Borough Council was established as a Unitary Authority in 1997. It replaced the former Thamesdown Borough Council, which in turn had replaced the original Swindon Borough Council in 1974. As a Unitary Council it is responsible for the full range of Local Authority functions including Education, Social Services, Housing, Highways and Transportation, Libraries, Leisure Centres, Community and Youth Services, Environmental Health, Planning and many others.

The Borough has a population of approximately 177,118, covers an area of 23,031 hectares and has 59 elected Councillors.

The Borough Council has a total budget of £246,000,000. It has assets worth £600,000,000. It will spend approximately £48,000,000 on capital project works in 2001/02.

The Council employs approximately 7,500 staff and is one of Swindon's largest employers.

### **Political Modernisation Consultation Strategy**

Swindon Borough Council is committed to building an effective modern Council. It is committed to further improve the quality of the organisation and the quality of the services it delivers to the people of Swindon.

Consultation with the community is an integral part of our improvement culture. Recent major consultation exercises have taken place in respect of “The 30 Year Vision for Swindon Initiative” and “The Swindon Central Area Strategy”. A number of other significant consultation exercises involving all elements of the community in areas such as service use and social inclusion have taken place over the last year.

Building on the guidance issued by the Government we have attempted to engage the whole community, particularly our partners and stakeholders, in a dialogue on “A New Council for Swindon?”

The basis for our consultation strategy was that it was:

- 1) was fair and open describing all options/choices in an understandable and balanced way;
- 2) enabled all local people and stakeholders, including hard to reach groups, to have an opportunity to respond; and
- 3) employed a variety of methods both quantitative and qualitative; as well as where ever possible utilising the local media and new technology.

## **Overview of Our Approach 1999 to 2000**

Following the publication in 1998 of the Government’s White Paper “Modern Local Government – In Touch with the People” Swindon Council determined to undertake an exercise to inform the Swindon public of the Government’s views on the modernisation of Local Government. This was undertaken primarily through the Council’s newspaper “Swindon News”. The consultation commenced seriously with the publication of the Local Government Bill in 1999. During the Local Government Association’s Local Democracy Week 1999, a special edition of that newspaper was published, setting out the background to the Government’s “modernising agenda” and explaining the proposed options for new structures. (An extract from that publication is incorporated within the Annex). This coverage also led to issues being raised and discussed in the local media. A leaflet describing the proposals was also made available to the public by way of Council outlets and local libraries.

As the Government’s intentions became clearer during 1999 the Council determined that, in order to examine the implications of the modernising agenda, it would seek to develop an experimental “pilot” structure, based on the “Leader and Cabinet Model”, which it would seek to introduce from May, 2000. This in turn led to debate in the local media and a heightening of the awareness of the “modernising agenda” in Swindon.

In the run up to the introduction of the Council’s new “experimental” structure from May, 2000, a “simulation day” was arranged for Councillors and key stakeholders. This was facilitated by the South West Provincial Employers and was an exercise to enable both Council Members and key partners to experience how the modernised structures might work in Swindon.

Swindon Council introduced its “pilot” structure in May, 2000, and this again stimulated debate in the local media on the whole of the Government’s modernising agenda.

In June 2000 the Council circulated to all households (78,000 homes) and to numerous public outlets (libraries, Council premises, community centres, etc.) an information booklet containing details of the structure of the new Council, the Councillors who had been elected in May, 2000, together with details of the new decision making models set out in the Local Government Act.

During Local Democracy Week 2000, in September of that year, the Council again used “Swindon News” to publicise the options available to Local Authorities through the new “Local Government Act” (that had received the Royal Assent and become law on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2000).

As part of Local Democracy Week the Council organised a major stakeholders conference, facilitated by the South West Provincial Employers, on the theme “Local Leadership – Local Choice – Your Say”. The feedback received from this Conference that involved many of our key partners, has formed a significant element of the Council’s consultation strategy. (Details of the Conference are included within the Annex.)

During October of 2000, the local media contained articles on the Council’s pilot system, which also referred to the other options that were available to Local Authorities under the new Local Government Act. (Examples of media coverage are included in the Annex.)

In early 2001 the Council, through its all-party Modernising Local Government Working Party, considered the consultation requirements proposed by the Local Government Act and the Guidance that had subsequently been received from the (then) Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It decided to undertake a comprehensive consultation programme that would be made up of a number of elements.

## **Consultation Programme 2001**

The Council adopted the following key elements in its consultation strategy:

### **Citizens’ Panel Survey**

The Council used a special edition of the Swindon People’s Voice Survey to seek the views of 2640 local residents on the options proposed within the Local Government Act. The survey is recognised as providing robust quantitative results. The questions were carefully prepared to ensure that they complied with the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions’ requirements, particularly in respect of the avoidance of bias towards any particular option.

## **Presentations to Key Stakeholders/Groups**

Presentations to key partner and stakeholder groups were seen as an effective method of consultation. The Borough Council undertook a number of presentations to partner and stakeholder groups and also used a video produced by Somerset County Council and its District Councils on the issues surrounding the Local Government Act. This video had been produced in such a way that it could be used by any Local Authority. Swindon Council purchased 40 copies of this video and circulated it to a wide range of partner groups, in particular parish councils, for their consideration. Presentations were made to parish clerks, parish councillors, Swindon's Equality Coalitions, (representing ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, older people, lesbian and gays and women) and to a number of community organisations. The video was also shown and debated at meetings of the Council's six Area Panels. The feedback was by way of response from the organisations concerned and completion of a special "questionnaire". (A copy of the stakeholders' questionnaire is included within the Annex.)

## **Focus and Similar Qualitative Work**

The Council appointed the independent RBA Research Ltd. to undertake qualitative research work on behalf of the Council. The Company undertook detailed in depth "focus group" and similar qualitative work with groups representing "young people who were not regular voters, "older people who were regular voters" and people from ethnic minority communities. (RBA Research Ltd's report is included within the Annex.)

## **Leaflet**

A key element of the Council's consultation was a leaflet, with a tear-off reply-paid response slip, was distributed to all 78,000 households in the Borough. This leaflet explained the options available to the Council under the Local Government Act and sought the public's views. (A copy of the leaflet is included within the Annex.)

## **Publicity**

Further publicity was given to the consultation exercise by way of the issue of a press release and this resulted in coverage within the local newspapers and an invitation for both Councillors and a member of the Consultation Team to appear, at different times, on local radio in Swindon to explain the purpose of the consultation exercise and to encourage participation.

## **Staff**

Consultation was undertaken by way of e-mail with all staff working within the Swindon Borough Council (with e-mail access).

## **Coming to a Judgement**

The Council was aware as it undertook consultation during 2001 that it would need to come to a judgement on the outcomes of the various methods of consultation. It would need to, in accordance with the Guidance, “weigh” the evidence before it from key stakeholders who have an involvement in Local Government and from the general public. It decided that a review panel should be set up involving the three political group leaders on the Council and three independent persons representing the education, business and community sectors within Swindon. This group would consider the outcome of the consultation process and the recommendation to be put forward to the Council on the type of new constitution to be adopted in Swindon.