

## **BetterBath Forum third meeting 18 June 2008**

### **Conclusions**

The third meeting of BetterBath on 18 June discussed Sustaining Bath's economy – what needs to change? The key points which emerged in the discussion are summarised below. The organisations indicated in each Conclusion have been asked to provide a response within a month. These responses will be posted on the BetterBath website, and people will be able to add their comments.

Participants in the debate agreed with Colin Skellett's analysis of the problems faced by the city's economy and his conclusion that 'doing nothing is not an option'. Bath is in competition, for new jobs and for Government funding for transport and other infrastructure improvements, with other towns and cities in the the South West and beyond: the city therefore needs to be very clear about its aspirations, and to communicate these aspirations effectively to central and regional government bodies. It also needs to develop and demonstrate a coherent and consistent approach to deciding on development proposals.

Cities which attract and retain successful businesses need to offer modern office accommodation; high quality housing at a cost commensurate with salaries; efficient and affordable transport; high quality public realm; and a lively cultural scene. Bath does not compare well with leading cities in the UK and Europe on these criteria, although it has the potential to be among the best. If it is to capitalise on its natural and architectural assets, it must cherish and enhance what makes it unique, including its diverse independent retail sector and its Rugby Club based in the city centre. And it must smarten up the run-down scruffy public realm.

The meeting heard that thanks to its two strong universities Bath was well-placed to create new businesses, particularly in the knowledge-based and creative industry sectors. However new businesses struggle to find suitable office premises, and there is evidence that growing businesses are forced to locate their expansion elsewhere or to relocate away from Bath altogether.

Several speakers pointed to the need for economic regeneration to focus on all sectors of the population, not just the highly skilled. Concern was expressed about the risk of exacerbating divisions between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

Speakers questioned whether Bath is thinking widely enough about the longer-term future. Do we understand the need to change our lifestyle in order to reduce carbon emissions? Are we prepared for the implications of substantially higher fuel and food prices?

So what needs to change if Bath's economy is to be sustainable in the medium to long term?

### **Conclusion 1**

B&NES Council and the B&NES Initiative (representing the business community) are working closely together to address some of the issues identified in the discussion. But the city is widely considered to be resistant to change, and this deters potential public and private sector investment. If Bath is to present a united front to the rest of the world, a wider understanding and acceptance of the need for change is needed, and better processes, embracing all sectors of the community, need to be developed to encourage consensus. **The Council and the Initiative should state what further steps they think they could take to improve dialogue about economic and social regeneration issues across the community as a whole (business, education, culture, leisure, residents, heritage, the third (voluntary) sector). If there is a need for other organisations to take parallel or complementary action, what steps will the Council and the Initiative take to encourage them to do so?**

### **Conclusion 2**

The scale of potential development in the city, particularly along the river corridor, is huge. Clear and coherent planning policies, applied consistently and effectively, will be essential to ensure high-quality developments. However the Council's published plans for the Local Development Framework do not refer to Supplementary Planning Documents for any of the key development sites except Western Riverside. **The Council should state what mechanisms they will use to ensure that major new developments are designed to high standards which preserve and enhance Bath's special character.**

### **Conclusion 3**

A healthy economy needs to provide job opportunities for everyone of working age. Bath is fortunate in having high-performing schools, the City of Bath College which seeks to support the skills needs of local employers, two strong universities and potentially the new Dyson School of Design and Innovation. But the meeting felt that more is needed to help people on the bottom rung of the ladder. **Can the B&NES Initiative, Business West, the City of Bath College, the University of Bath and Bath Spa University identify further ways in which Bath's successful businesses and education establishments can help people who fall through the cracks in the system?**

#### Conclusion 4

**Does the Council agree with the views of many at the meeting that a step change in the way we live and work will be required to adapt to the pressures of climate change and the declining availability of oil? If so, what steps does the Council consider should be taken to help people understand the implications, and what role could/should local groups play?**

#### Conclusion 5

There is an urgent need to improve the public realm in Bath, both in the city centre and more widely. Major redesign of many of the important spaces in the city centre is required – the area in front of the Guildhall is one example. **The Council should set out its proposals, including the planned timetable, for comprehensive upgrading of the public realm.**

#### Conclusion 6

Simple steps should be taken now to improve cleanliness across the city, without waiting for major investment. **The Council and Future Bath Plus should set out their short-term plans for cleaning up the city centre and improving standards of cleanliness across the whole of the city.**

#### Conclusion 7

Regeneration of the London Road area could make a huge difference to an important gateway to the city, to the benefit of residents, businesses and visitors alike. **The Council should state whether it considers that comprehensive regeneration of the London Road area is feasible.**