

I Newtown

Summary of findings from a public consultation
in October 2011 on ideas
for developing Newtown, Powys



December 2011

Introduction

The I Love Newtown group, made up of residents and business people who care about Newtown, organised a community consultation in order to let Powys County Council and Newtown Town Council know what the people of Newtown would like to see in their town.

For one week between October 17th and 22nd 2011, volunteers from the group staffed an exhibition in an empty shop in the town centre. This included maps, models and display boards featuring nine ideas for developing the town, as well as comments made during an earlier public meeting in July 2011 on the future of Newtown.

The exhibition was well attended with around 500 people passing through the doors during the week, of whom 321 completed a questionnaire. The level and quality of information provided demonstrated a real desire among local residents to have a say in how Newtown should be developed in the future. A summary of the results is provided below. Full results are available in the final report which can be downloaded from www.uppersevernnews.org.uk

Do we need more housing in Newtown?

Results showed a slightly higher percentage of people considered that additional housing was not needed in Newtown compared with those who thought it was. Comments indicated strong support for making sure that existing unoccupied premises were used first. Most people said that if new housing is proposed it should be built in, or close to the town centre. Some mentioned specific sites and others referred to the need for particular types of housing such as low cost rental, affordable housing for first-time buyers, and housing suitable for older people.

Do we need more industrial or commercial premises in Newtown?

Most people who took part in the consultation answered 'no' to this question and many commented that there are already plenty of units and the priority should be to fill these. If new industrial/commercial premises are built it was felt that these should be built on existing business parks or trading estates, that they must be affordable and that there should also be incentives to get existing industrial premises back to full usage.

What shops do you think are missing in Newtown that would encourage you to shop in the town centre?

A wide variety of shops were felt to be missing from Newtown even though in some cases, the type of shop cited does exist, suggesting a need for better promotion and signage. There were two main and opposing trends: for more 'better quality' clothing and food shops with fewer charity and 'downmarket' outlets on the one hand; and for more low-cost shops (second-hand, recycling, home bargains) on the other. Concern was expressed about the recent loss of shops in Newtown and it was noted that rents and rates needed to be affordable, and more attractive shop frontages were needed.

Most people felt that any new shops should be in the town centre because 'shopping out of town kills town centres' and it was felt that existing vacant shops in the town centre needed to be used before proposing to develop new sites.

Comments on the nine images displayed as part of the exhibition

1. Transport and movement

People commented that a bridge (as pictured) would provide a clear route from the area around the station to the town centre, and would draw the town together for pedestrians and that this would also provide a safer crossing of the busy main road. Concerns expressed in relation to this idea centred on there not being a clear need for a bridge, and the likely cost. Although there were no questions in the consultation on the by-pass, this undecided issue was clearly at the back of the minds of many people. Had the decision been made either to build or not to build a by-pass, this would probably have affected the way people responded to the various ideas put forward.

2. Townscape – High Street

Many people commented that they like the idea of pedestrianising part or all of the centre of Newtown and some said this would be relatively easy to try out. Positive comments focused on providing a better, more attractive, cosmopolitan look to the town with more green space and trees. People commented that a pedestrianised area is a good way of making visitors and residents feel safer and encouraging them to spend more time socialising and spending money. The main concerns in relation to this idea were to do with the loss of free short- stay parking close to the shops, the need to maintain good vehicle access to the town centre, and the need to ensure full disabled access and parking. There was also concern that pedestrianisation alone would not bring in shoppers and more would need to be done.

3. Youth – Trehafren Hill

Provision of facilities and activities (such as dry skiing, tobogganing etc) for young people on Trehafren Hill was a popular idea and many people said they thought young people in Newtown need more things to do. They also said these types of activities would be good for families and encourage visitors to the town. The main concern was to do with potential vandalism and other anti-social behaviour and it was felt that appropriate supervision would be needed at all times. People also commented that children, young people and youth workers would need to be involved in any such development at an early stage.

4. Signage

Improved signage was the most popular of all the ideas in the exhibition. Many people commented that existing signage was poor and that better signage would encourage visitors to the town. It was felt that this could be a 'quick win' achieved at relatively little cost.

5. Park and river frontage

There was widespread agreement with the view that more needs to be made of the river and park which are seen by many as an under-used asset. People said that in other towns, there would be cafes and places to sit all along the river. Some people commented that opening up the park and river frontage would improve tourism and that riverside development could create jobs. Concerns expressed were to do with safety and upkeep, vandalism, risk of flooding and water levels not high enough for boating (as suggested). Some people said they would prefer the park and river to remain as green open space.

6. Arts and culture

This again was a popular image and many people commented that the Pryce Jones building is a beautiful building and a feature of major historical interest to Newtown that is currently 'in a mess and going to waste'. People said that the buildings should be revitalised and reused with sensitive development to retain their character. Lots of suggestions were made for using the space including providing studio space to local artists and craftspeople with exhibition areas and retail outlets. It was suggested that this type of use of historic buildings would be good for tourism and that Newtown could learn from other places such as Saltaire, Gloucester Quays and New Lanark.

7. Retail

Many people commented that this part of town (Severn Square) is under-appreciated and that it is an attractive area in need of revitalising. People liked the idea of additional green space with seating and the potential for a meeting space, speciality markets etc. Concerns were to do with reduction in parking and potential traffic problems as well as the need to use empty units and shops before developing any new retail areas in town.

8. River

Similar comments were made in relation to this picture (boathouse on the river) and picture 5 and many people agreed that more use should be made of the river through sympathetic development in order both to attract visitors and provide facilities for residents. Concerns were mainly in relation to the depth of water in the river being inadequate to support boating activities, and about potential vandalism.

9. Visuals – Severn Square and pedestrian route from station

People commented that these areas need a 'facelift' and are currently too detached from the town centre. Concerns in relation to the Severn Square drawing focused mainly on cost or on the possible reduction in parking. The idea of improving the pedestrian route from the station also attracted mainly positive comments and it was felt that this could be done very quickly at low cost. Concerns centred on potential for the hoardings to look scruffy quickly, be used for fly posting and graffiti and that they could obscure the distant landscape. It was also felt that pedestrian routes such as this needed to be part of a more co-ordinated transport system rather than an ad hoc development.

General comments and suggestions (most common summarised below)

- Need to sort out the traffic situation/by-pass first
- Concern about impact of developments on parking in town centre, including disabled parking
- Important that any development is in keeping with the town and maintains Newtown's character as a country/market town so that it would not become like every other town centre
- Concern about feasibility of plans – where will the money come from?
- Need to move away from pub culture by introducing family friendly eating places and things for young people to do
- Restore A&E at the hospital
- Revitalise the Market Hall
- Negative comments about the recent work done on pavements described as the 'yellow brick road'
- Need to maintain any new developments, ensure security etc
- Priority to create more jobs – and use local firms in any new development

Conclusions

- Newtown is much loved by its residents but they are concerned about the decline of the town
- Local people have valuable views on how Newtown should develop and want to be involved in making decisions about its future
- People want to see a range of coordinated improvements across the whole of the town centre with a more pedestrian friendly and accessible feel to the town
- People want to see more made of the history and special character of Newtown to encourage visitors and celebrate its historic and cultural past
- The river and the park are beautiful and unique areas that are underused and could be sensitively developed for leisure and commerce/tourism whilst being preserved as publically accessible green spaces
- People want to see better facilities for young people in Newtown
- Better signs are needed to direct visitors into the town and tell them (and locals) what Newtown has to offer