

# Taking the Initiative in Wiltshire and Swindon

It's a county of extremes – market towns geographically separated by downs and a vast plain, and at the north east corner an industrial urban area that is home to several national company HQs. GWE Business West explains how they are taking the Initiative in Wiltshire and Swindon.

"It feels like I've come home!" said Ian Larrard of his appointment as director of the Initiative in Swindon and Wiltshire.

The Initiative is the brainchild of GWE Business West, and provides a highly successful influencing and lobbying programme on behalf of business in Bristol and Bath. Recently GWE Business West established an Initiative in Swindon and Wiltshire.

But that's not to say that GWE Business West is new to Swindon or Wiltshire. Far from it. A Midland/HSBC man for 32 years, Ian was seconded to GWE in Swindon in the late 1980s and early '90s, and as he settles into his new office at Emlyn Square he's clearly delighted to be back.

"The Initiative has been established in Bristol for 20 years and in Bath for seven, so while new to Swindon, it's tried and tested in other areas."

"It's a great opportunity to emulate that success in Swindon and Wiltshire. Swindon has some particular issues that mark it out from the rest of the South West. Our role is to provide a primary voice for the business community here to identify, articulate and address the issues.

"We will be lobbying, and challenging where appropriate, as well as supporting Wiltshire Council, Swindon Borough Council and Forward Swindon. My first job is to meet with as many businesses as I can and find out what may be hindering their growth and success – and identify how the Initiative can help take those barriers to business away."

The company recently held a well-received meeting with the town's two new MPs, Robert Buckland and Justin Tomlinson, and members



The Spectrum building

of the Initiative in Swindon to exchange views and information, and plans to continue these meetings once a quarter. The meetings are part of an ongoing dialogue, to discuss issues of importance to business and to debate the value of the British Chambers of Commerce "Business Recovery Test", as well as to hear from local MPs about issues of interest/concern to them.

Ian is optimistic for the future of Swindon.

"It's a great place to do business and an excellent location geographically.

"Commercial rents are still cheap and there are strengths in many sectors such as research, finance and heritage. And we are seeing physical

signs of economic confidence, like the imminent regeneration of the old Swindon College site, cranes on the horizon at the ex-Burmah Castrol site building a brand new community in an attractive location, and some major commercial lettings, including the iconic Spectrum building let to a growing manufacturing company."

In the view of Peter Beech-Allen, director of business development at GWE Business West, public and private sector partnerships underpin sustainable economic development. He works with economic partnerships across the Swindon-Gloucester-Bristol triangle to explore how different sectors can deliver on economic



Ian Larrard Director of the Initiative in Swindon & Wiltshire

strategies, and chairs the Officer Group of Wiltshire Strategic Economic Partnership (WSEP).

"The role of business and private sector partners working with the public sector is a crucial one. And GWE Business West understands that it's about delivering solutions, rather than holding meetings" said Peter.

"Our work with economic partnerships is all about looking at how different sectors can deliver on economic strategy.

"The change of Government is already proving interesting, and the new quarterly meetings between business and the Swindon MPs is a very encouraging step. We are a private company with a focus on improving competitiveness and encouraging business growth in the South West, and I've no reason not to feel optimistic about future growth here, and particularly in Swindon, as long as we all pull together and have a cohesive strategy."

Peter believes that GWE Business West's strong and fruitful relationship with Wiltshire Council augurs well for the Initiative in Swindon.

"The M4 is a dynamic corridor, Swindon has some manufacturing niches such as in the automotive and knowledge economies, and has room to grow its footprint."

GWE Business West Chair, Nicky Alberry, who has worked for GWE/GWE Business West in Swindon for two decades, is excited about the Initiative in Swindon and is optimistic that businesses in and near the town will want to be part of it.

"Our experience elsewhere shows that, as a group, we can help to make this a better place to work and live."

"Obviously, the recovery is still quite fragile but in Swindon we have a broad base and spread economically and a broad mix of businesses, and we're looking forward to helping those take advantage of the opportunities coming out of recession. Swindon businesses have been creative about holding on to staff and thereby holding all the knowledge and skills they need. That approach can only bode well for the future."

## INFLUENCE AND CHALLENGE

Policy and strategy director Tessa Coombes is passionate about working with the business community and representing business views to national and local government.

"In the West of England we already work with decision makers on issues of concern to business. We lend our support on key schemes and policies and challenge where we think there are gaps. We keep listening to what

## What does GWE Business West do?

GWE Business West - business leadership, business membership, business services. Playing a major role in shaping and supporting economic growth and success.

GWE Business West exists to help provide an environment in which business can thrive and prosper. It is a private company with a public, business responsible purpose. It delivers an extensive range of business to business services. Acting on behalf of its members and customers, GWE Business West is a powerful voice for the business community across the Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire region, with strong roots in each of its local communities.

businesses are saying and to keep talking to the local authorities, MPs and councillors, so the business message is heard" says Tessa, whose department provides businesses with briefings on key national, regional and local strategic documents, making them accessible and intelligible for each local audience.

"We collect responses from our members and feed those into key meetings with national and local figures, and sometimes work in collaboration with the British Chambers of Commerce, so get a double hit at an issue. Our 20 years of experience is important in facilitating engagement. Our rule of thumb is – keep everyone talking!"

## The Swindon-Gloucester-Bristol Triangle

The debate about whether Swindon is part of the South East or South West is one that runs and runs. But a number of key regional documents, such as the Spatial Plan and the Economic Strategy, clearly identify the triangle between Swindon, Gloucester and Bristol as the economic hub of the South West region.

GWE Business West director of business Peter Beech-Allen believes that is the case, but says Swindon can also grow its own identity.

"It starts with the advantage of great rail and road links and is in the heart of the country," said Peter Beech-Allen.

"Like Birmingham, it's very well situated. No one ever asks where Birmingham is, north or south, do they? If we can all work together to capitalise on Swindon's positioning, I believe its potential is huge."

## To learn more go to:

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