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# SWINDON TARGETS CULTURE AS KEY TO GROWTH

Swindon's got the fundamentals sorted out – can it develop the 'X Factor'? Neil Tague reports



ANY QUESTIONS Rod Bluh addresses the audience

## THE PANEL

(L-R):

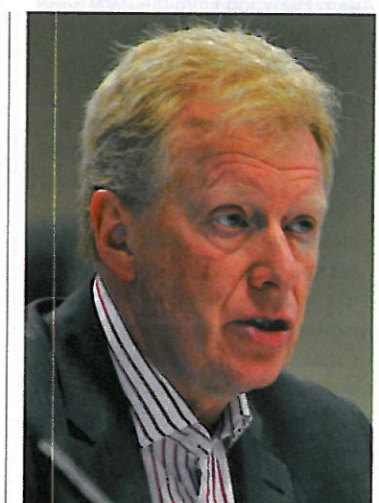
**PETER FOSKETT**  
Partner, Withy King

**ROB BEALE**  
Partner, Morris Owen

**JAMES GREGORY**  
Partner, Alder King

**CHRIS LEWIS**  
Property adviser, Moirai Capital

**CHRIS HITCHINGS**  
Forward Swindon



Swindon's got large companies, low unemployment and excellent transport links. Yet for some critics, it fails to fire the imagination and give people enough reasons to visit, or to put down roots.

But things are starting to change. Indeed, the Wiltshire town's leadership is confident in the regeneration projects lined up for Swindon in 2013 – and culture is at the top of its list of priorities.

Speaking at *Insider's* Swindon Regeneration Debate at Isambard House, council leader Rod Bluh said: "The year 2012 may have been one to forget for many, but it's been an exciting year for the regeneration of

Swindon. There is a sense of things on the move. The college site is finally coming down and there will be a supermarket and much-needed restaurants there. Schemes like Regent Circus and Union Square are making progress. It was also the year Moirai came to Swindon – its plans for the Oasis leisure centre could be hugely important in improving visitor numbers.

"This is about fulfilling Swindon's potential. We know improving Swindon's image is a challenge but we think it's a great place – it's important that we get people into the town to challenge perceptions. A theatre and an art gallery are being looked at.

*"Too much of what Swindon has is stuck in boxes and we need to get it out there."*

ROD BLUH

We have a great art collection that is underplayed. Too much of what Swindon has is stuck in boxes and we need to get it out there."

Moirai Capital has now taken over the Oasis leisure centre from the council and plans to refurbish and extend its offer. The company's Chris Lewis said: "We've been looking for the right site for a ski centre for a long time and Swindon is perfect for this. A concert venue is also important.

"Developers have had to accept that they need to be more imaginative in getting projects funded. We're looking at all types of funding."

Swindon often stands accused of being a 'headquarters town' – some

people say that because it is home to so many large corporations, the best brains in the area get sucked into the big company life, leaving the town with a relatively small volume of start-ups and innovative small businesses. But that's not necessarily the case.

James Gregory, a partner at property consultancy Alder King, said: "It's true that Swindon has a lot of headquarters occupiers, but we do see a lot of activity at the small business end – Swindon's got a really high rate of startup businesses. But what the town needs is better space for all sizes of company. There's a lot of stock out there but not all of it fit for purpose for a modern occupier."

*"We have no problem recruiting lawyers in Oxford or Bath, but Swindon is a challenge. That's where the cultural offer comes in."*

PETER FOSKETT

Rob Beale, partner at Morris Owen, said: "Swindon's a good place for us to be and there are a lot of entrepreneurial businesses. We're enthused by the way the various plans are coming together in Swindon."

Also on the panel was Withy King partner Peter Foksett, who said: "Recruitment remains an issue. We have no problem recruiting lawyers in Oxford or Bath, but Swindon is a challenge. That's where the cultural offer comes in."

Foksett urged the city's leaders to make more of the town's heritage. "Manufacturing is sexy again," he said. "The government is encouraging the banks to back the sector. Swindon's

a traditional manufacturing town and there has to be a chance to strengthen our branding around that, to use the town's heritage."

Foksett also suggested it might be time to give up on longstanding battles to save heritage buildings in the town and to focus attention on new spaces.

But Chris Hitchings of Forward Swindon said that wouldn't be happening: "The heritage buildings are a hugely important part of what Swindon is and why businesses are here," he said. "Some of the sites do need improvement, but we're not going to damage the historic fabric of Swindon."