

Question Time Summary

Questions chaired by Henry Robinson, Rural Issues Task Force Chair

Q - Mike Jones, Transition Stroud and Stroud Town Councillor

The RDA aspires to have a zero carbon investment programme by 2013. To what extent is Peak Oil factored into RDA corporate strategy and plans?

A - Ian Piper

The aspiration is to move the economy to a much lower carbon base and SWRDA will show the way through the projects selected for its own investment programme. This is why we have a zero carbon investment programme plan by 2013.

Q – Mike Jones

Is this a live debate going on in SWRDA?

A - Ian Piper

Yes. SWRDA recognises that the carbon footprint needs to be lowered and they will be looking carefully at where and how they will invest. There is a strong desire to lead by example, reflecting the issues raised this evening.

Q - Jeremy Chamberlain, Maisemore Business Centre

This evening, we have looked at many aspects of the rural economy but not at the sticking point of planning. If we are not successful in gaining planning permission for economic development, it cannot proceed. What is in place to aid the planning process?

A- Ian Knight

The South West has recently been through the process of producing the Regional Spatial Strategy. This considers the growth that needs to take place and there are ambitious targets for housing and business.

The current delivery plan for SWRDA has ambitious targets for rising productivity and job creation and the emphasis will be on the existing urban settlements (Gloucester and Cheltenham) as they are considered to give the best chance of improving transport and reducing car dependency.

One of the underlying counter-arguments presented against this approach is that a dispersal approach would benefit growth in towns and smaller communities, but the delivery plan reflects the urban priority.

Comment from audience- So why do we talk about the rural economy?

Q - Paul Holliday, Stoke Orchard Parish Council

Of the 150 delegates listed, only around 10 are parish councillors. When rural communities are in need of support, why can this not be offered through the planning process?

A - Ian Piper

Central Government has been looking at the planning system over the last few years and has introduced changes. The jury is still out on whether the changes brought in so far have been successful. Matthew Taylor MP is likely to be examining and reporting specifically on planning in the near future.

However, local decisions are down to the elected representatives.

The capacity within local authorities to service the planning process has suffered due to resource issues and people leaving the profession but there are mechanisms in place to improve skills and capacity within the planning teams.

In terms of local planning, it is important to ensure that each settlement has the necessary support for their long term sustainability and it is important that communities get involved in this process.

Q - Graham Stanley, Transport 21

How long will it take for the government to understand and respond to the Peak Oil observation? The government is not moving in the right direction. Are we going to incorporate new environmental priorities?

A - Ian Knight

By 2013, every project receiving public funding from SWRDA will be carbon zero and this is a step forward for any government department. This will have an impact on the way SWRDA works with its partners however it will be a very difficult balancing act.

We must also remember that the SWRDA is involved in a number of projects at the leading edge of environmental sustainability— e.g. renewable energy.

A - Rob Hopkins

It is good to have a zero carbon approach but it is also important to weave Peak Oil into this argument. National Government needs to reconsider the assumptions which underpin its policies and plans e.g. oil barrel prices for 2010 and 2020 were vastly under estimated by the government when making assumptions to develop their policies and plans (\$53 per barrel assumed for the second decade of the 21st century, when it is already exceeding \$120 per barrel). These assumptions need to be challenged and approaches to sustainability should concentrate not just on zero carbon but also on building resilience as an integral part – not an add on.

A - Ian Piper

The transition movement is very locally driven and if you look at one of the SWRDA ways of delivering funding through local communities, these two approaches do align.

A - Ian Knight

SWRDA has invested heavily in gathering intelligence on the South West Economy. It has developed a set of regional accounts and has the ability to model the impact of changes on the South West Economy. I make a commitment to ask our researchers

to model the impact of rising oil prices on the economy and consider the steer that the analysis gives.

Q - Nigel Curry, Head of Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI)

How will you know whether you have done well in the economy? I ask this question as we have, this evening, been given three different sets of criteria. As well as the SWRDA system which looks at increasing productivity, the LAA system contains 198 indicators and we have also heard about moving down and slowing down. There is an alternative system based on Richard Layard's indicators of happiness which could be considered.

A - Rob Hopkins

Layard's and other work on happiness indicators reveal that while, in the past, increasing economic growth matched with increased happiness, more lately, studies have shown that happiness is decreasing while economic growth increases. There is a need to rethink growth because how can the economy increase if the energy underpinning it is decreasing? Resilience indicators can look at how low the carbon footprint is – e.g. how much locally produced food is consumed and trade in local currency.

A - Stan Jones

We can look at this from a different perspective, although not ignoring the other points made. The resources coming to Gloucestershire will need to be divided to meet the priorities of the LAA. The delivery of the economic strategy is an opportunity for people to contribute to and benefit from the local economy.

Q - John Ellis, Chipping Campden Town Council and Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum

I feel that we have been facing four different walls this evening, each one containing a different message, and we are left trying to make sense of them. In particular there is a contradiction between the SWRDA priority to concentrate on increased productivity rather than job creation, while the Gloucestershire LAA target is to increase employment. A major industry in the South West is tourism but this consumes a large amount of carbon. How do we relate these two?

A - Ian Knight

The corporate plan is far wider than the summary given this evening. Not all investment will be urban. Some rural priority areas have been identified for key intervention (e.g. Northern Peninsular in Devon) but none in Gloucestershire.

The major challenge that we face is productivity, however implicit in this is increasing skills.

A - Simon King

There is under utilisation of the knowledge base within universities.

Q - William Reddaway, Bridleways Officer

Is there a current definition of sustainable tourism?

A - Ian Piper

There is no definition, but as with the other sectors, we will be looking for a more sustainable and productive approach. We will tap into panels of experts to fashion appropriate interventions and to see how investment can be made.
