

# It's eyes down for casino

A GBP 10m casino in Swindon would create 800 jobs and transform run-down areas of the town, according to the council's official bidding document.

The town centre is the front-runner for any gambling complex, but council planners have also included Sussex Square, the Gorse Hill district centre, County Ground or the Abbey Stadium in Blunsdon as possibilities.

A submission by the council and the New Swindon Company to the Government made in March has now been made public.

It shows that the proposed Exchange development (near Fleming Way) and the Promenade (along Princes Street) in the town centre are the favourite places for a casino.

Swindon is among 41 local authorities in the running for one of 16 new casinos to be licensed nationally.

The complex would have up to 80 slot machines with GBP 4,000 jackpots and cover 30,000 to 40,000 square feet.

It will be classed as a „small“ casino, although such an establishment would be bigger than most of Britain's existing 125 casinos.

The document reveals the council has already been in detailed talks with three casino operators Gambling International Plc, Stanley Casinos and Harbour House Casino Ltd.

The companies have identified the town as a perfect location in which to expand their own gambling empires.

Council leader Mike Bawden (Con, Old Town and Lawn) said the submission did not mean the council wanted a casino in Swindon.

Coun Bawden said the submission was aimed at keeping the casino option open.

„We decided it would be totally inappropriate of us to not express the interest in the possibility of a casino in Swindon,“ he said.

The council would not be offering any inducements or special deals for a casino to open in Swindon, he added.

„It’s not something Swindon Council would be interested in funding.

„Once we are told Swindon is a possible site, it’s up to private enterprise to fund it.

„I don’t gamble, never have gambled, but if you want Swindon to be a regional centre it needs to consider these developments.“

Not everyone is convinced.

Walcot councillor Mavis Childs (Lab) said it was „stupid“ of the council to even raise the option of putting a casino in Sussex Square.

„Why would you want to put a casino in to what is called a deprived area,“ she said.

„I can see it creating a lot of problems for some families.

„I can guarantee there will be some families where one of the two parents go in there to try and get some money and lose more. It would be in the wrong place. I shall argue against it all the way.

„Why they have looked at it, I don’t know. It’s stupid. If a casino’s coming to town, let’s put it on an industrial estate.“

North Swindon Labour MP Michael Wills is opposed to a casino

coming to Swindon.

„The town centre needs regeneration but I don't think a casino is the answer,“ Mr Wills said.

„I'm actually surprised the council are spending their energy on a casino.“

Conservative cabinet member for resources Nick Martin said he was personally opposed to a casino coming to town.

„The casino concept is something that's better suited to rejuvenating parts of Blackpool than Swindon,“ said Coun Martin (Shaw & Nine Elms).

„Gambling can be fun but the highly professional gambling of Las Vegas is so stacked against the player as not to be fun.

„For Swindon's further success, we don't need a casino.“

Swindon Council's submission states: „Operators and developers of casinos that have advised this bid are firmly of the view that Swindon is on the radar' as far as markets and opportunities go.“

The document states that no specific site has yet been earmarked but the council is considering a „wide range of possibilities“.

However, the bid states: „The council recognises that the town centre would likely be the best location for a new casino.“

And in the town centre it pinpoints the Exchange and Promenade as being the most „appropriate“ sites. But the door has been left open for casino development on the outskirts of the town.

The document adds: „Yet it is firmly believed that a casino located anywhere in the town would have significant economic, cultural and social benefits.

„Locations that would benefit from the incorporation of a

casino into a wider regeneration programme might include: shopping centres located in the wider urban area (eg Sussex Square, Gorse Hill district centre)...specific existing leisure sites (eg Swindon Town FC and the Abbey Stadium).“

The council believes an GBP 8m to GBP 10m development would create 200 jobs inside the casino and 600 jobs „indirectly“.

But the bid admits the scheme will provoke controversy.

### **Protests last time idea suggested**

This is not the first time a casino has been mooted for the County Ground. In 1997 Swindon Town got the go-ahead for a new multi-million pound casino. The casino would have created 150 jobs and been the first at a football ground in Europe. Furious residents from County Road protested against the 10,000sq ft gambling hall, which was to be built between the Town End and North Stand, arguing that it would lead to more noise and traffic congestion in the area. But other residents said it was the best thing the club had ever done. The proposals were part of a Home Office shake up of the rules on gambling. Swindon was one of 13 towns around the country that was designated as a place where the Government would allow a casino to open. The government believed the new guidelines, which saw membership time of bingo and casinos dropped to 24 hours, would bring new trade and tourism to towns. But the plans were shelved in the run-up to the 1997 General Election.