

Enterprise and Business Committee Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration

Evidence from the Pembrokeshire County Council

Pembrokeshire County Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Committee's inquiry into the regeneration of town centres. The following comments relate to the issues the Committee would be particularly interested in hearing.

The roles the Welsh Government and local authorities play in the regeneration of town centres

Welsh Government (WG) role

- An overarching national strategic regeneration framework. There is a need for a national strategic regeneration framework for town centres, which aligns and coordinates the Governments' policy and funding priorities in relation to town centres. A holistic, joined-up, whole of Government approach is required, which provides meaningful assistance to towns, including those towns which fall outside of the designated strategic regeneration areas.

Funding. A key role of WG will be to investigate and initiate innovative funding mechanisms to regenerate town centres. Public sector intervention will be essential to maintain the vitality of our town centres in the foreseeable future. A mix of interventions will be required, which are complimentary and work together to achieve the long term regeneration of town centres. One intervention on its own, for example, business rate relief will not be sufficient – a more sophisticated and coordinated approach is required. Public sector funding is required to stimulate investor growth and confidence, and kick –start the regeneration of our towns.

Local Authority role

Local authorities play a crucial role in providing local leadership to develop shared visions to regenerate town centres. Developing a coordinated strategic plan for town centres is important which addresses the planning, transportation, commercial, leisure, marketing and urban design aspect. Strategies should always include a practical delivery plan, with appropriate funding and measureable targets. Strategies should be prepared by dynamic partnerships comprising the private and public sectors working closely together. Local authorities should be at the heart of, but not necessarily leading town centre regeneration partnerships.

The role of town centres is evolving in response to changing retailing trends and patterns. Town centres will need to be assisted through this transition and supported by a mix of innovative financial incentives.

- Having an up to date development plan and a strong evidence base to inform planning and investment decisions is important. Pembrokeshire County Council has an adopted Joint Unitary Development Plan (JUDP) and is progressing its Local Development Plan (LDP) . The LDP has identified regeneration sites for retail and criteria based policies that will enable appropriate regeneration projects to be developed. As well as engaging on specific projects, the LDP consultation process offers a good opportunity for businesses and communities to contribute at a strategic level in the future of their communities and town centres. In the case of Pembrokeshire's LDP, key community groups such as Chambers of Trade and Commerce have engaged in the process as well as individuals. The County Wide Retail Study (CWRS, 2010), produced to inform the LDP is an important piece of evidence and has already been used to assess a number of planning applications

The extent to which businesses and communities are engaged with the public sector led town centre regeneration projects or initiatives

- Partnership approach is key to regeneration. Pembrokeshire County Council has worked with a wide range of partners to develop the Pembrokeshire Regeneration Masterplan 2008/13, which identifies key projects and priorities. Partners include the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, Milford Haven Port Authority, Pembrokeshire College and Welsh Government. A number of regeneration frameworks have been prepared for Pembrokeshire's towns and progress is outlined in the attachment.
- Defining a clear role for town centres. Businesses and town centres which succeed are those who have carried out an assessment of their role and developed a plan to achieve the stated aims. In 2010 a pioneering study called "A Complimentarity Study of Towns in the Pembrokeshire Haven Wales Spatial Plan Area" was produced by the then Welsh Assembly Government, Pembrokeshire County Council Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority and Carmarthenshire County Council. This study suggested that in all areas (including retail) there was a need for Pembrokeshire towns to identify clear roles for themselves, so that instead of competing against each other, they can successfully provide different types of services for residents and visitors.
- Developing partnerships and producing regeneration studies which lead to agreed strategies, as has been achieved in Milford Haven and Saundersfoot. Key to success is community and business sector leadership, which has been achieved in Saundersfoot, for example, which grew out of the Regeneration Study Steering Group and has led on to an ambitious Community Development Trust.

The factors affecting the mix of premises found in town centres

- The role of town centres is changing in response to changing consumer trends and patterns. As the function of towns evolve the traditional town centre uses need to be re-examined, and this may include a re-evaluation of the mix of uses and premises. Towns need to link all their attractions and functions in a holistic and integrated way so that there is a co-ordinated network of opportunities.

- Understanding the reasons for decline is vital so that appropriate solutions are identified, and tough questions must be addressed. Strategies must be supported and based on a robust evidence base to support the appropriate policy interventions. In Milford Haven, for example, the Town Centre Regeneration Framework recommends shrinking the retail core through residential/mixed use development because of declining retail use. Difficult decisions like this can only be taken with the support of the whole community.

- There are a diverse range of factors which vary between different town centres which influence the mix of premises, these include:
 - Competition from neighbouring centres or out of town sites.
 - Competition from the internet and changing consumer retailing patterns – the types of uses in our town centres are changing and in many cases becoming more service based, often as certain goods are more cheaply and easily accessed online e.g. music.
 - Business rates and the removal of rural rate relief (historic low levels assisted in Narberth's development as a successful niche retail destination).
 - Spend levels available from the resident population, working population and visitors.
 - Planning controls – whether town centre boundaries and areas such as primary or secondary retail frontages are identified and controlled, other issues such as conservation areas or Listed Buildings.
 - Transport links and the availability and price of car parking.
 - Projects and grant funding available to implement townscape improvements.
 - Population make up of individual town centres (socio-economic groups).

Greater flexibility is required with regard to the mix of town centres uses as their roles and functions evolve. This, however, must be achieved within a managed framework to support existing landowners and provide confidence to new investors. Town centres are increasingly becoming places to visit in their own right - destinations for residents and visitors to enjoy.

Recent research has indicated that towns which are not regarded as "clone" towns are more resilient to economic downturns. Regional and specialist retailing should be supported and promoted.

The impact on out of town retail sites on nearby town centres

- Out-of-town retailing can have potentially negative impacts on nearby town centres. However, this is also the case with increasing internet shopping, large-scale supermarkets (increasing the range of goods sold) and competition from other larger centres. The planning guidance in Wales does correctly support a town centre first approach and the national policy tests in PPW are appropriate. The experience of the County Council is that the tests of need, sequential approach to development and impact are all important and should be maintained as part of the national planning policy approach.

The use of funding sources and innovative financial solutions

- Funding sources for the regeneration of town centres should be streamlined and simplified. Innovative financial instruments should be investigated and trailed. Integrating programmes to maximise regeneration potential e.g. road and access upgrading, associated public realm and parking enhancements with grant – funded shop front/building renewal projects in Town Centre Conservation Areas. A “place based” approach should be instigated rather than the traditional topic based approach e.g. transport/conservation, etc., in isolation.

The importance of sustainable and integrated transport in town centres

- Highway and transportation elements are essential to successful regeneration. eg: providing sufficient car parking providing safe pedestrian access and crossings, etc. It is important that highway works are appropriate in scale to their setting and enhance the users experience of the given town centre. Integrated and sustainable solutions are key. In term of urban design, legibility is crucial so that town centre users navigate their way around a towns instinctively.

The potential impact of marketing and image on the regeneration of town centres

- The marketing and branding of town centres is important. Creating awareness of events and, for example, farmers market, focusing on niche markets and speciality shopping all add to the appeal of town centres and enhance the shoppers experience.

The extent to which town centre regeneration initiatives can seek to provide greater employment opportunities for local people

- Harnessing the energy of the business community so that it works to further the fortunes of the town/resort as a whole, e.g. Saundersfoot Bay Development Trust is important. Formed in 2010, and arising from the Steering Group which led the Powell Dobson Regeneration Strategy, it has as its mission statement to “capitalise on our natural assets, to create sustainable and inspirational business, community and lifestyle opportunities”. Increased employment opportunities is a key component of town centre regeneration.