

Enterprise and Business Committee Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration

Evidence from Dave Heggarty, Head of Regeneration, Flintshire County Council

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Dear Sian,

Inquiry into the regeneration of town centres

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion about the regeneration of town centres.

I have tried to collate our comments under the headings of your consultation exercise.

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

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

Flintshire has had considerable success in beginning to stave off and tackle the decline of the eight small towns in the County. With Welsh Assembly Government funding in 2008, we commissioned a comprehensive Healthcheck study of our town centres. As well as providing a detailed set of baseline data for each town centre,

this study also stimulated considerable local interest within the towns in regard to their vitality and viability. A Town Action Plan (TAP) programme was therefore launched in 2009 and Town Partnerships established, encompassing local representatives from the public, private and voluntary sector in each town and with most of the partnerships having a local business person as their chair. The Town Action Plan programme has been very well received by partners and businesses in the towns, and has also been recognised outside of the County and won the 2011 Action for Market Towns Wales Award for Partnership and Strategic Working.

Using the 2008 Healthchecks study as a starting point, most of the partnerships have developed action plans, and/or had masterplans prepared, and developed a range of short, medium and long term actions. FCC has provided funds for early win regeneration projects for each partnership and concurrently the Welsh Government Tidy Towns programme has provided further timely resources to invest in environmental improvements. (One of which, Mold Spring Clean, won the Keep Wales Tidy Award this year as well as the Action for Market Towns Wales award for Environment & Culture).

Importantly, as well as initiatives at the individual town level, Flintshire has also successfully undertaken town regeneration activities at a county level. In 2009 we therefore ran a programme for retailers from all town centres, entitled 'shop doctor' and a similar programme 'helping the high street' were run county-wide in 2010. Both of these initiatives were specifically targeted at town centre traders and encompassed a series of workshops on topics such as marketing, visual merchandising, etc. The 2010 scheme also included individual action plans and a small shop frontage grant scheme. The post project evaluation reports also include further information from town centre businesses about areas they would like support in. Both initiatives were very successful and the latter one, in particular, saw a good response from retailers.

The TAP process is ongoing and has been successful in bringing together the varied public, private and voluntary interests in each town to work together. It is therefore important for public resources to be pulled together too, to support this and ensure an integrated approach to town regeneration. For example, FCC is currently pulling together a package of funding for the TAP process including European Regional Development Fund, Rural Development Plan, Neighbourhood Renewal Area, Townscape Heritage Initiative, Flintshire County Council as well as private funds. Additionally, FCC is actively looking at ways in which its future investments in housing, and also future collaboration on public sector properties, can bring wider town centre regeneration benefits.

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

Within the County of Flintshire there is one major out of town comparison retail site, Broughton Shopping Park. The 2008 Town Centre Healthchecks Study quantified that only 34% of comparison expenditure of the County's residents is retained within the County, and that a third of that retained expenditure is accounted for by Broughton Park. Whilst this out of town site does clearly therefore have some impact on Flintshire town centre spending, the study identified that it is actually the nearby higher order centre of Chester City Centre to which the majority of comparison spend leaks.

Out of town convenience (food) stores, located within the County, have had significant impact on this market share for the town centres and had a subsequent negative knock on effect on trade for other town centre traders. The study identified the large Asda superstore on the edge of Queensferry and the Tesco store located at the Broughton Shopping Park as the main destinations for food and grocery shopping in Flintshire.

However, as part of the TAP programme, actions are being taken to try and alleviate this trend. The recently completed Buckley Masterplan has developed further the need identified in the Healthcheck Study for an additional foodstore for the town, and there is considerable interest from both developers and supermarkets in this proposal. Some of the towns do currently have small scale supermarket developments within their town boundaries, but evidence appears to be that these can still have a detrimental affect. The precise location, integrating such stores within the existing town centre, needs to be a key factor to ensure towns have the best chance to benefit from such developments.

The potential impact of marketing and image on the regeneration of town centres – such as tourism, signage, public art, street furniture, lighting and safety concerns.

The image and marketing of the towns in Flintshire has been identified as a key issue by most partnerships. Whether they are trying to attract visitors, shoppers, service users, investors or residents, it is critical that the town centres are competitive. A key approach FCC is currently developing in regard to this is Destination Management - to ensure a co-ordinated and high quality approach to all aspects of service provision and business service in key hubs.

Other key initiatives which relate to marketing and image have included:

- Market research in the main retail centre of Mold to identify local demand and to promote this to matching businesses.

- Events programme in Mold and Holywell to increase footfall, attract new customers, and encourage business investment.
- Environmental improvement schemes in all towns to regenerate poor sites, improve the street environment and tackle vacant premises.
- New promotional materials for towns and creating new interpretation and walking trails.
- Grants to improve shop fronts and one to one support for independent retailers to improve their visual appeal and customer service.

Evaluation measures & other key points

Over the last 12 months officers involved in town centre management and regeneration from across the 6 North Wales authorities, have been meeting informally on a regular basis. This has ultimately followed on from the Welsh Government's town centres workshop held in St Asaph in November 2009.

This North Wales Town Centres Group has been meeting to share experiences and best practice, and consider together how to address common issues. The group has also been working closely with Action for Market Towns (AMT), a not-for-profit national membership organisation that provides small towns, local authorities and others with information and advice, examples of best practice and national representation.

This joint working has directly led to the first Action for Market Towns Wales awards being held in 2011, the winner of which will go on to compete in the National AMT awards in Ludlow in October. The event was an opportunity for local partnerships and groups from across the whole region to showcase their regeneration projects and share best practice, and was organised jointly by the 6 authorities, with the support of AMT. A copy of the event booklet, highlighting the projects, can be forwarded if required. For future years it is intended to extend this event to include more opportunity to share ideas, etc.

This joint working between the authorities, and with AMT, has also led to 5 of the 6 local authorities in this group intending to implement the same town centre benchmarking scheme this year to measure health and performance in our town centres. This will be an annual measurement of 12 Key Performance Indicators to measure town vitality and viability and assess changes in individual towns over time. This is part of UK wide framework, thus enabling comparison of data with other towns in the region & UK as a whole too.

Linking the above two elements together, this North Wales Town Centres group is keen to continue this collaborative work and to undertake further joint work to support town centres and to work with the Welsh Assembly and others to, for example:

- Develop a joint strategy for improving the region's town centres;
- Audit and benchmark current performance as a baseline for monitoring, as stated above;
- Identify, share and promote best practice and innovation, via annual AMT awards and other similar activities;
- Identify which activities are best addressed at a Wales, regional, county, or local town / community level;
- Plan and deliver suitable pilot multi-town and multi-county initiatives – e.g. retail business support programme (for new & existing businesses), joint marketing and promotion of North Wales towns.

In summary, FCC has had considerable success in engaging with stakeholders in the town centres in the County and working closely with them to start the regeneration process. This is already beginning to bear fruit in terms of developer interest and community commitment. We would be very interested in working closely with the Welsh Government to identify how this good foundation can be further developed and expended to sustain the vital economic, social and environmental role that town centres play in the County.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute.

Yours sincerely,

Dave Heggarty
Head of Regeneration