

Enterprise and Business Committee

Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration

Evidence from Wrexham County Borough Council

From 1994 until the end of the Welsh Development Agency, the Wrexham Strategic Partnership comprising officers from the WDA, elected Members from WCBC and officers from the Council developed a Strategic Partnership for the regeneration of the town centre.

The Partnership met quarterly to evaluate progress and to consider projects under development in the Action Plan. The co-ordinated approach meant that there was support from the top down, the ability to assess financial implications and to manage ways in which projects could be funded and the ability for different departments to work together in a co-ordinated fashion to achieve benefits from the town centre where there are sometimes conflicting challenges from different areas of work such as highways and car parking.

The Partnership engaged with the businesses through the Town Centre Forum that meets monthly and which is led by the Town Centre Manager and chaired by members of the business community. All town centre businesses are invited to attend the Forum and if there is a particular issue requiring further debate/input then additional meetings are planned at various times of day to suit business needs. In addition, the publication of a Town Centre newsletter which is then delivered to 650 businesses in Wrexham means that all businesses are kept informed of planned developments and proposals for development. The Town Centre Manager is also in contact not only with business managers but also with landowners/landlords and with agents acting for landlords.

Recommend : That an All Party Parliamentary Group is formed (with a Minister responsible for town centres and markets) to work with those responsible for town centre management in Wales and the Association of Town Centre Management and the National Market Traders Federation.

One of the challenges facing Wrexham is that, along with the other towns in the east of Wales, there is no eligibility for the funding that is available. This has had a noticeable affect, in particular with the current funding from WEFO and the Regeneration Investment Fund for Wales which has disadvantaged these towns. Wrexham benefited from applying successfully for Town Improvement Grants (public sector) and by managing Town Centre Improvement Grants on behalf of the WDA/WG for the private sector. A significant amount of private sector match funding was levered in by being able to work with the private sector businesses to improve their premises with the aid of the grant funding leading to a higher quality of material and finish being applied and thus improving the streetscape.

The business sector cites two areas that impact on their businesses in town centres. These are traffic management including car parking and signage. The ability for visitors to access the town centre easily, affordably and to then navigate their way around the town without feeling frustrated or lost is paramount. Public Toilets and the provision and opening times (in particular for the evening economy) are also seen as being of most importance to the businesses.

The use of Business Improvement Districts is something that has been discussed in Wrexham by the business community. The over-riding view from that community is that they would welcome the ability to manage a proportion of the income from rates payable for themselves (through an appropriate structure and working with Town Centre Management from the Council) but that, at this time in particular) this money should be ring-fenced from the current rates payable and not be an additional charge.

In the past bids for funding to the WG have been made for initiatives including the Local Regeneration Fund. The business community has expressed concern that, whilst happy that most of the funding has gone towards much needed environmental improvements, other funding that will directly help businesses through local grant funding initiatives managed by the Council on behalf of the bid, have not been supported by the Welsh Government. These initiatives would have provided for, for example, a match-funded grant to help provide capital purchases to help with, for example, stock control. Looking into the future, with the importance of the ability of companies to multi-channel, the ability of businesses to manage their stock control through the till system, for example, will be paramount and businesses need support with both training and capital funding to enable this.

Recommend : That research is carried out into the use of business rates and the feasibility of either ring-fencing a small percentage so that town centre partnerships have some funding to draw down that they can take responsibility for improving the business environment; and/or that a six month rate free period for new businesses can be introduced to provide support during the critical early months of setting up/fitting out etc in order to enable entrepreneurship. That the current concession against business rates is extended beyond the 31 September 2012 (nil rates up to the value of £6000 and thereafter tapered). That the town centre partnerships have more influence on planning decisions, especially the use of charging commuted sums for change of use which can prevent empty buildings being brought back into use because of the penalties incurred.

Various elements of town centres are currently used to benchmark towns against each other including footfall counts, vacancies and voids and Like for Like figures from the business community with reference to sales. Whilst this is useful, it is not consistently collected and/or shared. The ability to compare against similar towns is impeded by this and by the lack of information/ research that has been collected in England (Northern Ireland and Scotland) and not in Wales through either the Association for Town Centre Management

or Action for Market Towns. The ability to benchmark towns which are similar in not only size but also the demographics of the core catchment area in terms of income, type of employment etc would give a better indication of performance but also present a better opportunity for finding best practice. If this was led by the Welsh Government through, it could potentially be linked to initiatives to support the implementation of initiatives across Wales to support all our towns.

The diversity of our towns and cities in Wales and its offer for both local visitors and tourists needs to be recognised. In particular, many of our indoor markets are struggling in the current economic climate because of lack of investment in infrastructure and the rising number of value stores. A review of the markets in England and Wales in 2009 (Markets 21 by the All Party parliamentary Group) highlighted the need for a strategic plan for markets as a part of all town centre strategies and identified in particular the need for food provision within markets in order to drive footfall and to make them successful. Following the report no initiatives have taken place to ensure that the outcomes of the report are acted upon.

Recommend : A national strategy for data collection and research into typographies etc that will aid better future decision making.