

NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Communities Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	14 May 2013
TITLE OF ITEM	Town Centres
CABINET MEMBER	Cllr John Wyn Jones

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Revitalising and Improving the Image of Town Centres Scheme was included in the Gwynedd Council Three Year Plan for 2011-2014.
- 1.2. The main aim of the Scheme is to try to assist towns in different parts of the county to rediscover their purpose as the main employment and services centres, and their image as lively and attractive places for residents and tourists alike. The Scheme includes specific activities funded through 3YP budgets and also intertwines with some of the Department's other activities and projects during the same period.
- 1.3. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the current situation.

2. The Context of Regenerating Town Centres

- 2.1. Regenerating town centres is an increasingly important theme with the threats of online shopping and out-of-town shopping becoming more and more apparent. It is a challenge to try to maintain the vitality in our town centres, particularly in a period of recession, and more recent national / regional strategies and studies have highlighted the significance of the challenges faced by town centre areas.
- 2.2. It is anticipated that increasing attention will be drawn to the vitality of our towns in the coming years with strategies and policies encouraging and setting foundations for the regeneration of our towns.

3. Revitalising and Improving the Image of Town Centres Scheme

- 3.1. The Revitalising and Improving the Image of Town Centres Scheme has been divided into six main activities. A brief summary of the current activities is included in Appendix 1. It is also noted that the Scheme ties in with the Council's other strategic projects to regenerate town centres, also included in the Appendix.
- 3.2. In accordance with the request of the Scrutiny Committee, the next parts of the report present information about matters involving the work undertaken along with the associated challenges.

4. Work undertaken to date

Stage 1 – Preparatory Work

- 4.1. The scheme was started by scoping and researching the County's town centres and identifying which schemes, ideas and aspirations existed locally. The following summarises the type of research undertaken:
- Initial consultation with officers, Chambers of Trade and Business Groups
 - Holding information events with Chambers of Trade and Business Groups
 - Preparing a survey of empty buildings within the towns' trade boundaries
 - Identifying good practice within the town centre regeneration field

Stage 2 – Identifying Town Centre Areas in Gwynedd

- 4.2. It was decided to define Town Centre areas and to address 'Sub regional Centres', 'Towns' and 'Local Centres' as identified in the Gwynedd Unitary Development Plan and Eryri Local Development Plan.
- 4.3. Consequently, several town centres have been identified including Bangor, Caernarfon, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Pwllheli, Bethesda, Tywyn, Porthmadog, Barmouth, Dolgellau, Bala, Llanberis, Penygroes, Harlech, Nefyn, Abersoch, Cricieth, Penrhyndedraeth and Aberdyfi.
- 4.4. The town centres were defined in accordance with the boundaries of trading areas in the Gwynedd Unitary Development Plan Eryri Local Development Plan.

Stage 3 : Fostering links with Business Groups / Chambers of Trade

- 4.5. Following initial consultation with business groups, arrangements were put in place in order to ensure that a specific link had been identified for each individual business group. Consequently, considerable emphasis is placed on trying to collaborate with the activities of these groups, rather than develop entirely separate schemes.
- 4.6. Further information about aspects of the scheme was distributed, and advertisements were placed in the local press inviting expressions of interest from business groups to submit proposals or ideas for various measures within the Scheme.

Stage 4 – Implementing Activities

- 4.7. Preparatory work and initial implementation has been operational since 2011. 2013/14 will be a year of completing the action associated with the Scheme. Appendix 1 refers to the individual activities (along with associated

additional activities) outlining an update of the activities and the work which needs to be completed in 2013/14.

5. Challenges associated with the Scheme

- 5.1. The Revitalising and Improving the Image of Town Centres Scheme is operational with clear steps having been followed when developing and implementing the scheme. Challenges were faced in each stage of the scheme from the initial research to the implementation.
- 5.2. In general, the following were identified as challenges:

	Challenges	Response
1. Development Stage		
1.1.	Tight timescale for implementation	Outputs were set for the early years of the programme without acknowledging the volume of the preparatory/research work required.
1.2.	Cross-section of small towns in Gwynedd	There is a great number of towns in Gwynedd which serve as main centres for the residents. These vary from the main towns, market towns, seaside towns to small towns. It was a challenge to define which towns to focus on in order to have the most positive impact throughout the County.
1.3.	Background work needed	There was a lack of research and baseline for the County's towns which would reflect the specific needs and the opportunities available in all towns.
1.4.	Link between town centre business establishments and the Council.	The need to strengthen the link between the business establishments in the towns and the Council was highlighted. This was strengthened by contacting every business establishment directly.
1.5.	Invite ideas and interest for the Improving the Image elements of the Scheme.	Mixed response to press campaigns to share ideas which could be realised through the scheme.
2. Implementation Stage		
2.1.	Budget limitations	It is only possible to implement a programme of small schemes due to the budget limitations, with £223k allocated to the project. Additional funds were targeted for some elements of the scheme.
2.2.	Wider issues and challenges facing town centres	A number of factors affect the image and vitality of town centres, which are beyond the control of the project. The condition of the economy, changes in shopping patterns are a few examples.
2.3.	The capacity within the Department to implement.	The Scheme has an extensive number of schemes with a lot of work involved in them. Consequently, resources within the Department had to be increased in order to proceed with the implementation arrangements.

2.4	A slippage in the timescale	Circumstances beyond control and the period of the preparatory/development stage meant that the majority of the implementation is in 2013/14.
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- 5.3. The Scheme has been a useful medium to trial measures to rejuvenate town centres – and seeking to build on good practices in other locations. However, due to the challenges above and specifically the comparatively limited budget, responding to the significant challenges facing the town centre areas and associated businesses was a challenge.

6. Future Opportunities

- 6.1 The Revitalising and Improving the Image of Town Centres Scheme was programmed as a three year project. During the first two years, considerable work has been undertaken, particularly in relation to developmental work and establishing communication and operational arrangements. It should also be noted that associated strategic schemes have also been implemented during the period, securing substantial external grants.
- 6.2 Since developmental work has now been completed, arrangements and commitments are already in place for implementing and completing the work streams during 2013/14.
- 6.3 Associated with the existing work, it is anticipated that there are opportunities to develop other aspects for improving and Revitalising town centres. Further developmental work would be needed, but the opportunities currently highlighted include:
- An opportunity for the Council to take a holistic overview of town centre areas, considering a broad range of services provided by the authority
 - The Gwynedd Promoting Local Shopping Card Scheme
 - Researching opportunities of establishing Business Improvement Areas
 - The Welsh Government's intention to launch a campaign with the aim of Supporting the High Street in Wales in June 2013 (as noted in its New Regeneration Framework)
 - The development of a Gwynedd Destination Management Scheme, including the possibility of developing it further to a local area
 - The development of detailed policies within the Local Development Plan in respect of the use of land and buildings within town centres.
 - Welsh Government Business Rates Review
- 6.4 It is anticipated that any development work would need to be considered in relation to the above in the context of the Council's new strategic plan. It is expected that proposals will be developed as part of the priority of 'Strengthening Business Resilience and Retaining the Economic Benefit Locally'.

APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF EXISTING ACTIVITIES (2011-2013)

	Scheme	Description	Budget	Other Financers	Work completed	Comments
1. 3YP : REVITALISING AND IMPROVING THE IMAGE OF TOWN CENTRES						
1.1	Rationalising the High Street	Analysis of individual towns' retail capacity prepared (via Planning Department)	-	Planning Dept	Town Centres' Retail Capacity Study completed	Information prepared to be considered when drawing up Local Development Plan planning policies
1.2	Improving the Image of Town Centres	Small scale environmental improvements in order to improve the image and increase pride	£90k	3YP Môn Menai	Implementing improvements in Porthmadog and Llanberis. Innovative process trialed for drawing up a package in Bethesda – opportunity to adopt it in other areas.	Ideas for small landscaping schemes accepted in Bala, Barmouth, Pwllheli, Dolgellau and Harlech.
1.3	Improving the Image of Empty Shops	Improving the appearance of empty buildings by organising vinyl pictures in the windows.	£15k	3YP	Company appointed to design and install the vinyls. Target of 36 properties dependent on the size of the property. Two pilot schemes identified in Nefyn and Bethesda to be installed in May 2013.	Evaluate first phase; press campaign in order to attract more interest by properties. Implement Phase 2 in 2013.
1.4	Empty Shops Initiatives	Scheme to encourage use of empty shops by supporting and promoting entrepreneurship targeting the Communities First Cluster.	£15k	3YP Communities First Môn Menai	Financial package of £165k secured and operational during 2013/14.	Brief to manage the scheme drawn up and a procurement process in the pipeline with tenders to be returned mid May.

	Scheme	Description	Budget	Other Financers	Work completed	Comments
1.5	Package to Develop the Retail Sector	Specialist and independent advice package for individual businesses. Grant aid to assist to implement the recommendations of the business survey.	£26k	3YP	17 business reviews completed. Seven businesses received a grant to implement recommendations.	Continue to promote and offer support for businesses in 2013.
1.6	Upgrading Town Centre Properties	Grant of up to £1k for owners to upgrade the appearance of properties in commercial areas.	£25k	3YP	19 properties upgraded. Scheme targets areas outside the Môn Menai area.	Continue to promote and offer support for businesses in 2013.
1.7	Free Parking Scheme	Scheme offering free parking in the Council's pay and display car parks over the Christmas period.	-	-	Survey organised over the Christmas 2013 period to consider opinion about the scheme.	Future arrangements to be considered as part of a wider parking review.
1.8	Promoting Local Shopping	Campaigns to promote local shopping implemented over the period leading up to Christmas in 2011 and 2012.	£13k	3YP	Campaign on Heart FM and local media. Competition on local shopping experiences for young people. Establish a social media site to promote bargains/ reductions in local shops.	Identify opportunities to promote local shopping over other periods of the year other than Christmas. Create a Local Shopping Promotion Programme for Christmas 2014.
		Support for town centre events over Christmas 2012.	As above	3YP	Events held in Barmouth, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Llanberis, Bethesda, Pwllheli, Bala, Dolgellau and Bangor.	As above

	Scheme	Description	Budget	Other Financers	Work completed	Comments
		Branding and promoting local shopping in Gwynedd.	£9.5k	3YP	Project Board has identified the need to draw up Brand Guidelines for promoting shopping in Gwynedd and looking at options as to how to promote reductions for local residents.	Brief to manage the scheme drawn up and a procurement process in the pipeline with tenders to be returned end of May.
1.9	Marketing	Support for business groups to promote and market individual towns.	£30k	3YP	Originally programmed for Y3 of the scheme.	Drawing up an action plan for marketing.
2. TOWN IMPROVEMENT SCHEME (PART OF THE MÔN MENAI PROGRAMME)						
2.1	Town Improvement Grants	Grants for owners to upgrade the appearance of properties in commercial areas.	£1.1m	Môn Menai	22 commercial properties upgraded in 2011/12 and 27 properties during 2012/13.	A budget of £500k has been secured for 2013/14.
3. STRATEGIC URBAN REGENERATION SCHEMES (PART OF CONVERGANCE PROGRAMME)						
3.1		Urban Regeneration Schemes in Caernarfon and Bangor	£7.5m	ERDF, Welsh Government, GC	Schemes implemented in Caernarfon and Bangor town centres (Regulatory Department)	Capital investment completed.
3.2		Blaenau Ffestiniog Regeneration Project	£4.4m	ERDF, Welsh Government, GC	Town Centre Scheme implemented.	Final phase of scheme to be completed in 2013/4.

	Scheme	Description	Budget	Other Financers	Work completed	Comments
4. PREVIOUS TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION SCHEMES						
4.1		Responding to the Recession Plan – Pwllheli Pilot	£30k	Gwynedd Council	The scheme has contributed to and supported Pwllheli Partnership to implement a programme of visual improvements such as information panels, Pwllheli Art Scheme, banners and flower pots.	Scheme completed
4.2		Scheme to respond to the Porthmadog bypass See 1.2 above	£34k	Gwynedd Council Visit Wales	Establish a Group to Respond to the Bypass from communities/businesses of Penrhyndeudraeth, Minffordd, Porthmadog and Tremadog. Drawing up an Action Plan to respond to the challenge and take advantage of opportunities. Implement a package of improvements such as information panels, cycle racks, roundabout features.	Complete specific schemes in Tremadog in 2013.