

Meeting	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
Date	8 June 2023
Title	Gwynedd Town Centres
Author	Esyllt Rhys Jones, Regeneration Programmes Manager, Economy and Community Department Llyr B Jones, Assistant Head of Economy and Community
Cabinet Member	Cllr. Nia Jeffreys

Details to be scrutinized

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider the following in the context that an element of the "Community and town centre regeneration" project in the Council's Plan 2023-28 is to prepare Placemaking Plans for individual towns:

- The arrangements for preparing action plans;
- Who is involved in their development?
- How is it intended to measure the impact of the action plans?

1. Background and Context

1.1. Town centres and high street areas are in a period of change. Challenges from online stores, changes in social patterns and customer expectations have been intensified by COVID and are forcing places to adapt more quickly.

1.2. More recently, wars and the energy price crisis add to the uncertainty for businesses and as a result, to the future of town centres. Centres that are able to evolve and diversify are more likely to succeed and prosper. In March 2022, 16% of high street shops in Britain were empty, with one in 20 having been empty for 3 years.

1.3. There are many challenges facing town centres including:

- Increase in online purchasing - in May 2022 its value was around 33% of all sales. It is predicted that the pattern will continue as it is convenient, offers choice and a lower cost/price;
- Change in social patterns - over the last twenty years there has been an increase in spending on experiences, and less spending on goods.

- Number of retail units - with the increase in online shopping, many town centres offer more retail units than can be sustained. This has led to an increase in empty units - which impacts the viability of the high street. Also, many retail units are too large for the market's requirements, and therefore difficult to install with many being empty for a long period, their condition deteriorating and disrupting the environment in prominent areas within our towns.
- The growth of supermarkets - over a period of several decades there has been a significant increase in grocery sales in supermarkets, also extending to goods.
- Shops or developments on the outskirts of towns - the 1980s and 1990s saw a significant increase in shops and developments on the outskirts of the main towns which are usually more accessible locations, offer free parking, and are often under one roof. (Note that sites like these also face similar challenges to town centre areas).
- Business rates and rents - businesses argue that business rates - which are based on property value rather than turnover - are higher compared to locations on the outskirts of towns or businesses that sell online.

1.4. There are also opportunities for town centres, and especially Gwynedd's town centres as a number of our towns provide a diverse offer such as:

- Unique streets with a high percentage of independent shops and markets;
- Diverse opportunities, events and experiences through the medium of Welsh;
- Attractive environments and landscapes with World Heritage statuses within our towns.

1.5. With all the changes afoot, it is a real challenge to repurpose town centres and to develop and implement interventions with the intention of trying to make them lively, attractive centres and nice places to live, work and spend time in.

2. Strategic context

2.1. The trends in Gwynedd are common to those throughout the country and policies and programmes at all levels, from UK Government to local programmes, have been developed to try to respond to these challenges.

2.2. In recent weeks, Welsh Government published a Town Centre Position Statement which outlines the challenges and how they will support them to regenerate. The Town Centre First Principle and their Transforming Towns Regeneration Funding Programme is an example of their commitment to regenerating our urban areas.

2.3. At a Regional level, town centre regeneration also plays a central role in the North Wales Regeneration Strategy (2018-35). The vision notes: *"[in] 2035 North Wales will experience less inequality, increased employment, regenerated town centres, better quality housing, a stronger visitor economy, a resilient rural economy, and better health for local people"*.

- 2.4. Locally, the work of drawing up the Gwynedd Regeneration Framework, and engagement to draw up 13 Area Plans within the County, has highlighted concerns across the County about the future of town centres, and the need to support the viability of town centre businesses. As predicted, from the initial consultation, town centre challenges are identified in most Gwynedd Area Plans.
- 2.5. Gwynedd has a large number of towns of different nature, function and size. The definition of a town can be interpreted in many ways. Through the Gwynedd and Anglesey Joint Local Development Plan 2011-2026 and Eryri Local Development Plan 2016 - 2031, towns are interpreted on many levels, as follows:

Sub-Regional Retail Centre	Bangor
Urban Retail Centre	Caernarfon, Porthmadog, Pwllheli
Local Retail Centre	Abersoch, Barmouth, Bethesda, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Cricieth, Llanberis, Nefyn, Penrhyndeudraeth, Penygroes, Tywyn
<i>Local Service Centre*</i>	<i>Dolgellau, Bala</i>
<i>Service Settlement*</i>	<i>Aberdyfi, Harlech</i>

** Eryri Local Development Plan 2016 - 2031*

- 2.6. Town centre work has been based on the above since 2020. Having said this, more recently, a different interpretation can be seen within the North Wales Town Centre Regeneration Priorities Report (Hatch 2022).

Sub-Regional Centre	Bangor
Market Town or Commute Hub	Dolgellau, Porthmadog, Pwllheli, Caernarfon
Traditional Coastal Town	Barmouth, Cricieth, Tywyn
Rural Centres	Bala, Nefyn, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Bethesda, Penrhyndeudraeth, Penygroes
Visitor Centres	Abersoch, Llanberis, Harlech

3. Prosperous Gwynedd (Gwynedd Lewyrchus): Regeneration of communities and town centres

- 3.1. In response to the initial consultation through the Gwynedd Regeneration Framework arrangements, the Regeneration of Communities and Town Centres has been included as a priority project under the theme Gwynedd Lewyrchus in the Council's Plan 2023-28. The Economy and Community Department is currently preparing a Project Plan and operational steps.

3.2. The Project Plan will be a 5 year plan which will develop and implement interventions to support town centres with the intention of making them lively and attractive centres once more, which will be nice places to live, work and spend time in. It is anticipated that the plan could include the following milestones during Year 1:

- Setting a baseline for the current situation of towns in Gwynedd;
- Placemaking Plans commissioned for Bangor and Caernarfon;
- Financial applications and a programme in place for the preparation of other Placemaking Plans such as, Bala, Pwllheli, Porthmadog, Dolgellau and Barmouth;
- Consider options for reviewing the current plans / strategies of world heritage towns - Bethesda, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Penygroes, Llanberis, Tywyn and Harlech;
- The Bangor City Centre Investment Plan has been drawn up and agreed with key partners including the Welsh Government, Bangor University, and the Health Board; Implementation of a programme of interventions to support town centres as a result of Programme investments such as the Levelling Up Fund and the Shared Prosperity Fund;
- Invite town centre regeneration projects from external organizations to be considered as part of the Welsh Government's Transforming Towns.

3.3. The preparation of Placemaking Plans for a number of towns is key. The purpose of these is to identify and agree on action plans and priorities for individual towns. The Placemaking Plans would give specific attention to high street areas, and offer an opportunity to address issues such as:

- Residential units (for example empty space above shops);
- Support (grants/loans) for the restoration or conversion of empty properties;
- Infrastructure and green spaces;
- Improving public places and spaces;
- Markets and events;
- Support for town centre businesses;
- Digital Towns (provision and use of technology);
- Transport and green travel;
- Facilities within town centres;
- Promotion and marketing of local centres;
- Local enterprises and enterprising communities.

3.4. The work of drawing up a Placemaking Plan has already been commissioned in Bangor and Caernarfon. The work started in the two towns as they identified them as towns of need in the North Wales Regeneration Strategy. The Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 was the basis of this analysis. The process

of securing a budget from Welsh Government is underway for other towns such as Porthmadog, Pwllheli, Dolgellau, Barmouth and Bala.

- 3.5. There are specific requirements from Welsh Government and the Design Commission for Wales when drawing up an effective Placemaking Plan. In towns where plans or strategies are already in place, consideration will be given to options for updating and revising these to avoid duplication. This applies to towns such as Blaenau Ffestiniog, Bethesda, Llanberis, Penygroes, Tywyn and Harlech.

4. The process of developing Placemaking Plans

- 4.1. Drawing up a Placemaking Plan is an inclusive process. The initial discussion with Local Members is to highlight the arrangements, opportunities and challenges in the town. In the same manner, conversations will be held with the relevant Council Departments in order to highlight the intention to undertake the work, and outline the process.
- 4.2. Securing resources to undertake the work is the first step. Welsh Government has a revenue fund to support this. This is followed by procurement arrangements to commission specialist consultants.
- 4.3. The initial role of the consultants is to familiarise themselves with the town, to understand priorities and challenges together with any current local research and consultation work. The work also includes identifying the town's current situation as a basis for measuring any improvements against it.
- 4.4. Consultation is a key part of the process. This work will include a series of engagement and consultation sessions with Members, organisations, groups and stakeholders in the towns. The type of consultation varies depending on local requirements and recent consultations within the town.
- 4.5. Although the Economy and Community Department is leading on the Plan, several Departments/Services across the Council provide services, plans or improvements within town centres. The Placemaking Plans will offer a cross-departmental tool to co-ordinate the Council's efforts. More broadly, the Placemaking Plans are an opportunity for other agencies to share their vision for towns. It is essential that the engagement work reflects this.
- 4.6. There will be an opportunity to present findings to Members, before sharing with the wider community. An Action Plan will be linked to each Placemaking Plan which will outline what the town's priority plans are, who will lead and what funding opportunities are available.

5. Operating Arrangements

- 5.1. The opportunities that have been identified highlight the need to coordinate the efforts in order to ensure that the plans contribute towards the same vision. Developing the Placemaking Plans is a perfect way to do this.
- 5.2. It is foreseen that the operating arrangements will include the Project Board, in order to include main stakeholders in towns. Regular contact with Local Members is envisaged to develop, implement and monitor the Placemaking Plans.
- 5.3. Within the Council, cross-departmental arrangements are anticipated, with relevant departments, in order to share information about plans that will be developed and implemented in Gwynedd towns.

6. Related Regeneration Programmes and Plans

- 6.1. It is anticipated that there will be opportunities to regenerate town centres by interlinking the work of creating a strategic direction with the funding programmes and plans already available. Some examples of opportunities like this are:

UK Government Schemes

- 6.2. The UK Government has established a series of funds to support the regeneration field. The table below outlines these:

Fund Title	Description
Levelling Up Fund	A capital programme with 3 themes; Town Centre Regeneration, Infrastructure and Culture. Opportunities for budgets up to £20m for mature and strategic plans.
Shared Prosperity Fund	A programme combining capital and revenue funding focusing on three priorities namely Community and Place, Supporting Local Businesses, and People and Skills.
Community Ownership Fund	A fund for community groups to seek funds to purchase and/or renew assets and facilities for the benefit of the community.

- 6.1. The Llewyrch o’r Llechi scheme was approved in the Levelling Up Fund’s second round. The scheme will invest to maximise benefit from the recent designation of the North-West Wales Slate Valleys World Heritage Site. The £26m package includes a package of plans and specific developments in the town centres of Llanberis, Bethesda and Blaenau Ffestiniog.

6.2. A number of potential opportunities have been identified through the Shared Prosperity Fund to support town centre regeneration. Project plans and financial applications are being prepared for the schemes below:

- *Gwella Profiad Canol Trefi Gwynedd (Improving the experience in Gwynedd Town Centres)* - a series of cross-departmental interventions to improve image, upgrade facilities and promotional campaigns to increase excitement.
- *Diwyllesiant* - a plan promoting culture and a sustainable visiting economy for the benefit of Gwynedd's communities, environment and businesses.
- *Datblygu Busnes Gwynedd (Gwynedd Business Development)* - a series of funds and opportunities to support businesses to establish, develop and thrive.
- *Key Funds* - Funds to support communities and businesses to develop plans for the benefit of the County's communities.

Welsh Government Programmes

6.3. There are a number of opportunities through Welsh Government programmes. The main programme is Transforming Towns where there is financial support for mature plans. Town Centre Plans are essential to ensure investment.

6.4. There are further programmes and funding opportunities from the Welsh Government such as:

- Town Centre Loans;
- Smart Towns (Digital Towns Plan);
- Circular Economy Fund;
- Brilliant Basics Fund;
- Active Travel Scheme.

There are several other sources of funding such as the National Lottery that could support schemes in town centres.

6.5. There are wider opportunities and plans which include supporting third party partners to develop, apply for budgets and implement their plans for the benefit of the regeneration of the County's towns.

6.6. There are several programmes within the Council's departments which contribute towards the vision and these include the Housing Development Plan, the 'Ardal Ni' Tidying Up Team and various plans from the Environment Department in developing an urban fabric.

7. Recommendations

7.1. The Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider and provide comments on the following:

- Comments on the proposals and initial steps in preparing a Project Plan for the Gwynedd Lewyrchus theme: Regeneration of communities and town centres
- The arrangements for preparing Placemaking Plans;
- The basis for prioritising the regeneration of Gwynedd's town centres in response to the categories and types of towns specified in 2.5. and 2.6.