

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 18<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2019

REFERENCE FROM ENVIRONMENT AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE: 10<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2019

“653 TOWN CENTRE FRAMEWORK – IMPLEMENTATION UPDATE (REF) –

The Operational Manager – Regeneration presented the report which had been forwarded by Cabinet in order for the Committee to consider the updated Town Centre Framework and Implementation Plan.

Members were advised that the Town Centre Framework was commissioned by the Council in 2012 and the work was undertaken by consultants Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners. The Framework contained a comprehensive Implementation Plan and since its adoption in February 2014, work had been undertaken to implement the key parts of the Plan. The Implementation Plan was attached at Appendix 1 with a column added to show progress made as of December 2018.

The Operational Manager advised that considerable progress had already been made in respect of most actions. Appendix 1 initially addressed cross cutting actions and then actions related to specific retail centres. Implementation of these actions required a corporate approach involving many areas of the Council and other stakeholders, and was often closely linked with other strategic documents such as the Local Development Plan.

With particular reference to Barry, Members noted that the established of the Barry Town Centre Forum had informed a better understanding of the needs of the key stakeholders in the town centre. This had resulted in several initiatives being delivered including the trial of the use of loading bays for additional parking and environmental improvements such as the painting of street furniture. It had also encouraged retailers to engage more effectively with the Council and consequently they had re-established the Holton Road Traders Group which was delivering initiatives on behalf of the retailers. The partnership working had led to a request by the local businesses for a more detailed evaluation of the potential benefits of a Business Improvement District (BID) for the town. The Council applied to Welsh Government for funds towards a feasibility study in respect of a BID and this was successful. The funding was part of the Welsh Government's BIDs (2018-20) Wales – Development Support Fund to fully investigate the issues facing town centres, identify solutions and outline a way forward to address problems. The Council had also facilitated, jointly with Barry Town Council, a Town Centre Summit on 13<sup>th</sup> November to engage with all stakeholders and encourage discussions about the future of the town centre. A separate report regarding the Town Centre Summit and its findings and output would be presented to Cabinet over the forthcoming months.

In relation to Cowbridge and Llantwit Major, the report outlined that the Council's rural regeneration partnership, Creative Rural Communities, was important in driving forward further initiatives and working with the community. Events were also key in these areas, and the Council had set aside funds to encourage new events to be established. Discussions had been held to establish a Stakeholder Group for Cowbridge to address issues and concerns facing the town centre and a further presentation was programmed for the New Year to encourage greater participation. Traders in Llantwit Major had recently restarted the Llantwit Major Chamber of Trade and the Council's Town Centres Development Officer had been making efforts to engage with this new group.

With regard to Penarth, future actions were likely to focus on gateway improvements and the Esplanade. The Penarth Retailers had agreed to establish a Business Group to undertake the following roles: Promotion of a shopping offer to visitors and locals, co-ordinating marketing and promotional initiatives and liaising with the local Councils for improvements to the town centre's infrastructure and facilities and responding to consultations. The Group planned and held a late night Christmas shopping event on Wednesday, 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2018 following the success of their similar event held the previous Christmas. The Council had provided marketing and organisational support for this event.

A Committee Member, in referring to road signs, queried why signs were written in Welsh with the English below. In reply, the Head of Neighbourhood Services and Transport advised that this was a requirement of current legislation.

The Committee requested clarification in relation to night time activities. In reply, the Operational Manager stated that this referred mainly to Broad Street in Barry and related to restaurants rather than just drinking establishments. The aim was to encourage the right type of activity and those that would not lead to an increase in the level of late night drinking.

A Committee Member, in referring to the level of rate relief available to business, commented that pressure should be applied to Welsh Government in order for a reduction in the level paid by businesses. Further to this, the Chairman referred to the temporary reduction implemented by Welsh Government. The Operational Manager, in reply, stated that he understood the rate relief now in place was on permanent basis, but this related to specific rateable values.

A Committee Member asked how the Council would measure success. He also commented that the Vale was fortunate in having some town centres that seemed not to have been affected by the economic downturn as had other parts of the Country. In reply, the Operational Manager stated that actions weren't always easily measureable but success would be measured by feedback provided by traders and members when progress was reported. Further to this, the Chairman referred to the ongoing Welsh Government initiative to create a Welsh brand, and for town centres the key aspect was to identify a unique selling point and how these were marketed. This needed to be undertaken in parallel with the Welsh Government's strategy. In reply, the Operational Manager in relation to Barry town centre, referred to the

'Sense of Place' programme. It was still early days for this programme, but a new officer had been appointed to progress the Heritage Lottery funded project. This, it was hoped, would help to rebrand the town.

Councillor Dr. I.J. Johnson, not a Member of the Committee but with permission to speak, stated that the Council was now five years on from when the initial Framework had been developed and he stated that he expected that more progress would have been made. He referred to the issues experienced in Holton Road that were partly down to the economic downturn and stated that people would judge success by the number of empty units. He went on to refer to the recent Town Centre Summit with businesses in Barry and the importance for the Framework to be refreshed on a regular basis. One key question related to the impact on town centres following the potential implementation of car parking charges and so he stressed how important it was to liaise with businesses. Another key consideration was to look at the types of grants available and overall he stated that a lot of actions had been going on for a long time. He stated that he was unclear of priorities for Barry and he queried whether the Council had sufficient resources.

In reply to Councillor Dr. Johnson's comments, the Operational Manager stated that traders had reacted positively to the recent Business Summit in Barry. With regard to the Framework, he stated that this was a journey rather than a destination and this outlined the direction that the Council wanted to go. He went on to state that over the past five years town centres in the Vale had experienced a lower vacancy rate than average across comparable centres although the rate in Barry was clearly increasing recently. He advised that other town centres in Wales and England had fared much worse. He outlined that the Summit was a way to tease out solutions following the rise in the vacancy rate in Barry. In terms of resources, the Operational Manager stated that all departments would like more, but one key issue was around grant money which could dry up. At present, for a number of grants, the Council was in a transitional period which had delayed projects. He stated that grant money in some cases provides for staff resources and every opportunity needs to be explored.

With regard to Dinas Powys, a Committee Member queried why this had been omitted. In reply, the Operational Manager stated that Dinas Powys was not considered to be a town centre as was defined in the Local Development Plan. He stated that if traders in Dinas Powys had any concerns then these could be reported to the service regardless of the Framework and assistance provided by the Economic Development Team as appropriate.

A Committee Member, as Ward Member for Llantwit Major, stated that some good work had been undertaken in the area by the Chamber of Trade but one of the biggest challenges was around how other departments linked in with the Framework. The Committee Member referred to the deteriorating state of the train station and bus facilities in Llantwit Major and the amount of litter and the need for proper street cleanliness. He also referred to the beach at Llantwit Major and the need to maintain facilities such as tables and benches which were in a poor state and had been affected by recent storms and bad weather. He also praised the funding for a new sustainable bus shuttle link which would help older people access the local facilities.

With regard to Penarth, the local Ward Member on the Committee stated that her concerns related to how new shops and businesses were attracted into the town, and she commented on the number of new businesses that failed and the number of new projects that did not happen. She stated that she could not see what the strategy was for Penarth and that a plan needed to be formulated, which was consulted upon with local people who were imaginative and had good ideas. These points were echoed by the Chairman who stated that emphasis should be given on consultation with the public in order to consider new ideas and opportunities. In reply to these comments, the Operational Manager advised that the service did regularly liaise with Penarth Town Council and he outlined that the Framework was not a single strategy but it provided guidance of what the Council and other stakeholders wanted to achieve. He added that the service was not able to tell Penarth Town Council or traders what to do, and the Council was frustrated when new businesses failed or when new opportunities did not come to fruition. With regard to attracting new traders to town centres, the Operational Manager stated that this had been brought up during the Business Forum in Barry with many traders expressing the wish for the Council to be more proactive in attracting new businesses. He stated that more could potentially be done subject to resources but many large companies would have already undertaken research of the local areas, supported by information provided by the Council in response to enquiries, and their choice not to invest in a centre reflected broader economic criteria and not lack of awareness of the centre. Following this, the Chairman referred to the importance of identifying the unique offering that each town centre had.

A Member stated that the actions within the Framework struck a familiar chord and were very similar to a report around town centres that was provided a number of years ago. A key action to have come out of that report was in relation to public art. The Member went on to state how important it was for themes to be linked together and referred to Penarth and the need for the beach area to be linked somehow with the town centre. He also stated that it was also important not to forget leisure and tourism and again he stressed the need for themes to be linked together. He then outlined how public art had raised the profile of Thompson Street in Barry which provided some value. In relation to Barry, he stressed the need to link the Island to the High Street and the need to encourage local residents to visit and use the facilities and amenities. He also outlined the importance of consolidating shops and convenience stores into one area.

The Chairman, in summarising some of the Members' comments, made reference to Holton Road and the need to make that a more attractive place to visit, and how important it was to link two areas together. In reply to these comments, the Operational Manager stated that around Barry, the 'Sense of Place' project would cover the Members' points. In relation to tourism, the Operational Manager outlined that the Destination Management Partnership and Destination Management Plan existed in parallel to the Framework and that recently the three year plan had been updated.

In relation to rate relief, a Committee Member stated that it had been a mistake to bring in the full relief for business rates as the money for this could have been invested in improving town centres. The Member stated that more events needed to

be arranged and the Council needed to think “out of the box”, for example by encouraging more car boot sales or by offering a free bus service.

Further to this, and in relation to Holton Road, the Chairman stated that the Framework seemed somewhat “passive” and he referred to the need to attract new investors into the area. The Chairman stated how important it was to closely consider what Holton Road was associated with, and he referred to how Holton Road differed to areas like Penarth or High Street. He posed the question of whether there was enough to attract new traders to Barry as there was a need to increase the range and type of shops in the area. In reply, the Operational Manager referred to the need to change the mind set of investors, and the Council’s role to create the right environment. He stated that the Council could not tell investors where to invest. The Operational Manager also referred to the Council thinking “out of the box” and referred to an example of using flexibility in planning policy in order to attract new businesses to locate in Holton Road. He went on to refer to a new grant funded initiative which should be announced shortly which would help to fund improvements to commercial properties within Barry centres and was on a much more substantial scale than had previously been seen.

A Committee Member then referred to the turnover of shops and that as people tastes changed then so would the type of shops servicing town centres. The Member queried how the Council would attract the small traders into town centres. In relation to this, another Committee Member stated that private retailers were the key and that the Council needed to find a way of reducing their costs and overheads. In reply to these comments, the Operational Manager stated that Council worked proactively, and he referred to a previously planned project focussed on the Council leasing empty shops and subdividing into small retail start up opportunities, the Council carrying that initial risk. This was due to be funded by Communities First grant but that grant stream ended.

The Chairman then queried whether an assessment of the impact of car parking charges had been undertaken. In reply, the Head of Neighbourhood Services and Transport referred to out of town shopping centres, which from an environmental and transport perspective were not as sustainable as town centres. What had been noticed was that many retailers that would have previously located within town centres would now choose to locate to out of town centres. This was as a result of the change in planning policy. The Head of Service stated that town centres were more sustainable from a transport point of view, with more options such as bus and train links. With regard to car parking charges, the Head of Service stated that the key aspect was about increasing customer turnover with most shoppers mainly concerned with the ability to easily find a suitable car parking space. The Head of Service also stated that car parking was not a statutory Council function, and so, the funding for this needed to be closely looked at. She stated that the evidence considered indicated that car parking charges did not overly affect town centres. This was also subject to a Welsh Government study which concluded that car parking charges did not have a detrimental effect on town centres.

The Chairman then referred to the possible negative public perception of car parking charges that could potentially put off visits to the town centres. He stated that the

key aspect for him was enforcement and he commented that the Council could increase turnover through more enforcement and not necessarily through car parking charges. Members noted that a report on the Car Parking strategy would be presented either in February or March.

Subsequently, the Committee

#### RECOMMENDED –

(1) T H A T Cabinet be advised of the importance and emphasis for stakeholder consultation around what town centre traders want from the Council.

(2) T H A T the importance of the Sense of Place initiative be highlighted and for this to be held in high esteem.

#### Reasons for recommendations

(1) In order that the Council can consider the views of all town centre stakeholders.

(2) In order to highlight the importance of the Sense of Place initiative.”