THE FUTURE OF TOWNS IN WALES

Prepared by Peter Williams

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The means: to change places for the better

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1.0

Executive Summary

The FSB brief for this work sets out the context succinctly:

Wales is a small nation. With just 3 million people and a population density of 148 per square kilometre in some ways Wales resembles the Czech Republic or Denmark more than its neighbours in the United Kingdom. Where the population is most dense it is in Wales' cities, but again these are smaller than those elsewhere in the UK. As a result of this, a significant proportion of the day-to-day economy in Wales takes place in towns. Towns are where things are made, bought and sold or where we go to consume our leisure and public services. Despite this, the economic narrative in Wales focuses largely on cities. Thus, we have city regions, city deals and agglomeration economics that focus on building bigger, more connected urban areas. This undoubtedly provokes questions around the role of the Wales' towns. What are the policies that are needed today to shape how towns look, feel and respond to their long-term challenges? These are the sorts of questions the research will hope to answer.

Not only do towns face different challenges to cities, they also exhibit differences between one another. To grasp some of the implications of this we broadened the required survey of four towns to encompass a less deep look at a further eight places. In addition, we invited the FSB membership throughout Wales to contribute through an online version of the survey. The range and disparity of local conditions and traditions present a quandary for policy making at the national level. A legitimate response for government is to define mechanisms and interventions in terms of their desired outcomes, providing general guidance and allowing that to be interpreted and customised at the local level. There is plenty of precedent to inform how this might be administered through a "town challenge" type approach. However more thought (and resource) needs to be given to how learning from different places can be transferred between towns. There is an imperative to use what investment there is to best effect.

Why should government get more involved in the future of Welsh towns and commit further resource? Firstly 40% of the Welsh population lives in our small towns, the very places that are most under threat from the technological and demographic trends that are underway, and are outlined in Chapter 2. Secondly it is evident in the results from our survey (set out in Chapter 3) that large proportions of the population consider that towns play a vital part in our social and economic life.

Thirdly, despite the gloomy predictions of many pundits, respondents were optimistic that improvement would be achieved over the next five years. Our review of the changing scale of towns over the years testify to their ability to flex over time.

Fourthly, the message that towns need to evolve in order to prosper is generally understood and accepted.

Fifthly, new tools are already being utilised to good effect, and the effectiveness of levers applied in other policy areas provide ideas and confidence. In Chapter 4 we recommend a suite of actions - most of which are relatively straightforward to implement – that would produce benefits in the short to medium term.

Lastly there is the growing number of exemplar towns that are once again proving they can be attractive places to work, live and visit.

This is not to argue that town centres are facing anything other than significant headwinds. In addition to the challenges alluded to above can be added the more insidious ones of disinterest, complacency, and fashion. Our policy review (see Appendix 1) suggests that legislators in some other countries have been more active in addressing these issues than in Wales.

It is also important to note that the private sector is often more committed elsewhere e.g. in Germany through chambers of commerce, a reminder of when guilds and the like were more commonplace. The willingness of businesses in the UK to support their centres has been evidenced through the growing number of Business Improvement Districts in which businesses are freely voting to impose an annual levy on themselves to fund improvements to the centre. However too many businesses prefer to trade in isolation, insulating themselves from the communities that surround them other than for the purpose of economic transaction. Successful towns depend on the energy and efforts of their enterprises.

Finally, our review of the key megatrends caution that towns don't stand still. They must respond positively to the demographic and other forces that impact them, or face decline.

Action needs to take place at several levels – government, the town centre and the individual firm, property owner and organisation. To optimise the potential impact, the efforts of all players need to be co-ordinated.

2.0

Mapping the landscape

2.1 Introduction

This study was commissioned by the Federation of Small Businesses in the summer of 2018. It was undertaken against the backdrop of constant bad news from the high street. Seemingly a week did not pass without an announcement about another well-known retailer running into difficulties and tipping into administration.

According to the Centre for Retail Research, 2018 is on course to be the worst year for high street retail store closures since 2008. Undoubtedly this is having the effect of depressing the number of new entrants into the sector. Short term rate relief may serve as a welcome respite. But they will not attract entrepreneurs who want to make a long-term commitment. They need something more to overcome the gloom and doom.

Those who are coming into the High Street raise broader well-being issues?

- A growth in the number of fast food shops by 4,000 between 2014 and 2017, the most deprived areas now have five times more fast food shops than the most affluent areas
- The number of vape shops has doubled from 1,000 to 2,000 in the past three years

The FSB brief set out the objectives as follows:

Wales is a small nation. With just 3 million people and a population density of 148 per square kilometre in some ways Wales resembles the Czech Republic or Denmark more than its neighbours in the United Kingdom. Where the population is most dense it is in Wales' cities, but again these are smaller than those elsewhere in the UK. As a result of this, a significant proportion of the day-to-day economy in Wales takes place in towns. Towns are where things are made, bought and sold or where we go to consume our leisure and public services. Despite this, the economic narrative in Wales focuses largely on cities. Thus we have city regions, city deals and agglomeration economics that focuses on building bigger, more connected urban areas. This undoubtedly provokes questions around the role of Wales' towns. What are the policies that are needed today to shape how towns look, feel and respond to their long-term challenges? These are the sorts of questions that the research will hope to answer.

In order to address the question[1] the nature of town development in Wales and the importance of small towns in the overall picture of the development of the Welsh economy (see below) was considered. FSB's brief asked whether the focus on City Regions risked having the unintended consequence that smaller towns falling into a policy void.

Their proposed methodology required looking at four very different towns which although not to be taken as representative of any "town types" did encompass a range of locations that reflected different drivers to their development, and exhibited recognisable leading characteristics:

Caernarfon – heritage/tourism

Aberystwyth – public sector/ university

Haverfordwest – market town

Maesteg - post-industrial /valleys

The focus was extended to include a further eight places, to acknowledge that these towns are very individual and policy development needed to be informed and responsive to their specific requirements.

[1] - *Our methodology is described in some more detail in Appendix 3*

2.2 Small towns in Wales

What is a 'small town'?

What do we mean by the term "small town"? A town, by definition, is a built-up area, with defined boundaries, a name, and is larger than a village yet smaller than a city (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). Refining that further, a town's population can be between 1,000 – 100,000 at which point it becomes a city (Study, 2018). Settlements with a smaller population than 1,000 are classed as villages.

A large town's population would be between 20,000 and 100,000. Therefore, we take a 'small town' to be one with a population of between 1,000 – 20,000.

How many people live in small welsh towns?

The mid-year estimate (2016) of Wales' population was 3,113,150 (CityPopulation, 2018) From data collected from City Population, the amount of people living in Welsh towns (population between 1,000 – 20,000) is **1,239,221**. This represents 39.80% of the population. Most small Welsh towns are situated along the M4 corridor in South Wales and the A55 in North Wales.

The map opposite (*Figure 1*) shows a breakdown by county.

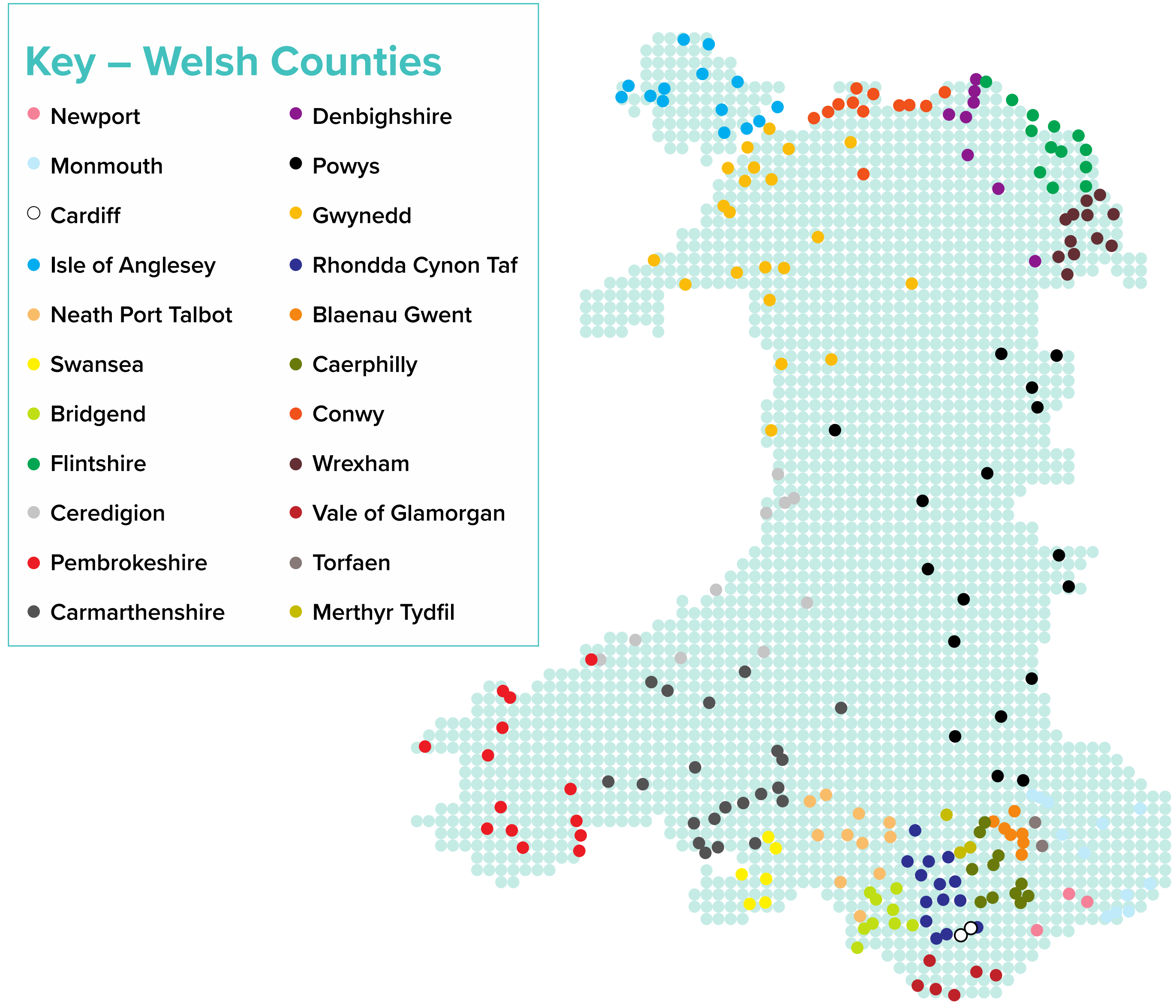


Figure 1 - The location of small towns in Wales

The viability of small towns

We have developed an approach that assesses the viability of towns from six different perspectives. We believe that it can be applied regardless of size.

Referred to as the '6Cs Framework'. This ensures due regard is given to the diversity of uses and functions that create successful places, including cultural as well as commercial purposes, civic and educational facilities or functions, transport infrastructure, and the creation of social cohesion. Each place has its own unique mix of each of these, and understanding the relative importance of each to a particular location is important in understanding where interventions may be required.

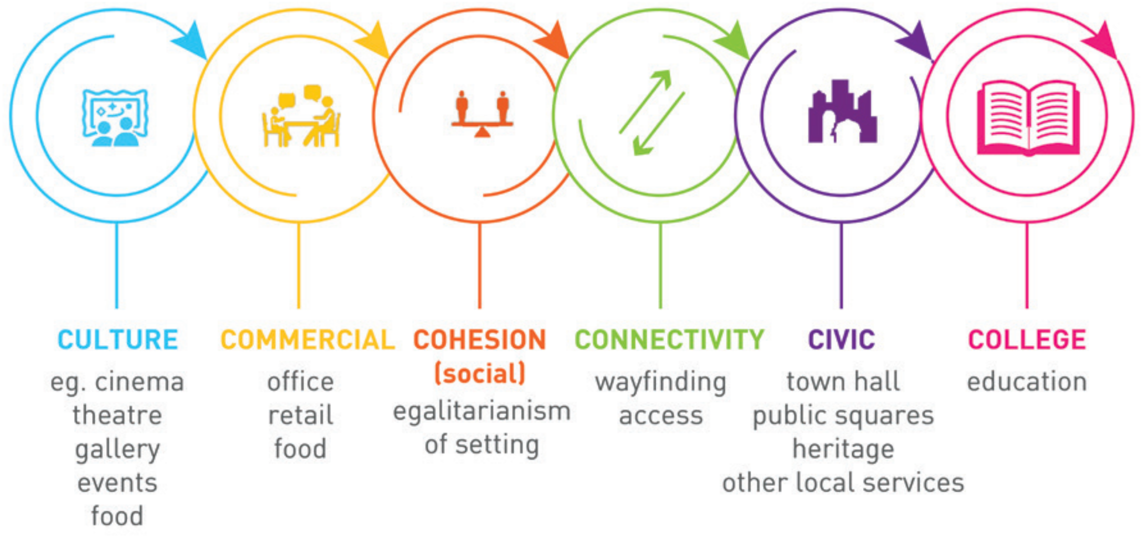


Figure 2 - The six Cs

The means: to change places for the better

2.3 Megatrends

That towns are resilient is evidenced by their longevity. Their fortunes have waned and waxed over time but relatively few have disappeared from the map. Even when their original raison d'etre has gone, most have been able to re-invent themselves, though recovery is often slow. Arguably the biggest consideration for towns are the external trends affecting them. Those societal forces which are outside their ability to influence. Here we refer to them as megatrends and have identified three broad categories:-

- Social and demographic changes, divisions within national population
- Urbanisation to cities and clustering
- Technological breakthroughs and changes in consumption patterns

Social and demographic changes

Three main types of migration affect rural areas and small towns:

- the exodus of young adults
- the arrival of retirees
- 'counter-urbanisation' by pre-retirement groups of 30 and 40-year olds with their children

Projections (based on 2003 data) for the UK population in 2028 indicate that the number of people aged in the 60-80 years span will see large increases. Settlements, outside major conurbations, are likely to have almost half their residents aged over 50.

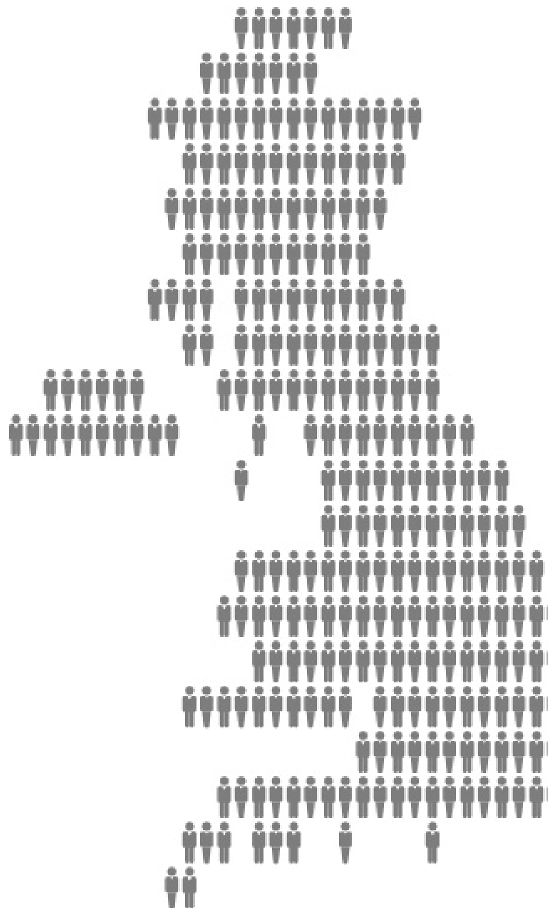
In the UK, based on 2014 figures, the sector of the population set to grow the fastest in every region is that aged 65 and over. The number of children is set to decrease by 1.5% by 2041 and the number of people aged over 65 is set to increase by 36.6% by this time. These changes will all feed into demand on welfare in towns, and a local economy orientated towards older groups. The size of towns may actually increase as the proportion of the UK population over 65 goes up, resulting in more opportunities for work in services catering to the elderly.

Urbanisation to cities, and clustering

Globally there is an ongoing trend of urbanisation. An increasing proportion of the population are relocating to live in cities from rural towns and villages. This century, this has been coupled with the clustering effect of newer and higher paying industries; media, finance, tech etc., locating in closer vicinity to each other.

For the smaller towns of the UK this has meant a decline in the economically active population, and a flight of medium and higher salaried jobs. Many towns are witnessing higher levels of unemployment, benefit dependency, unskilled and or seasonal work, as jobs and working age people concentrate in dominant cities.

This could result in what has been described as a "dichotomy of identity". Younger people increasingly wanting to feel connected to global trends and fashions and choosing to live in a place that provides this sense of connection and culture, as well as a reliable job. On the other hand, are those who choose their home based on the quality of lifestyle, health benefits and affordability. This group is more likely to choose to live in towns with clean air, a more homogenous population and local culture.



Towns across Europe have been developing their identity and appeal to such groups, celebrating the sustainable aspects of governance and living. From its 1999 inception in Greve in Chianti, Italy, the 'cittaslow' movement (see Appendix 3) has been gaining support and membership throughout Europe. The movement has the goal of improving the quality of life in towns and cities through slowing the pace of activity, minimising congestion and sourcing food and goods locally. Similarly, Totnes rebranded itself as a 'Transition Town' in 2006. The purpose of this was to allow residents to feel they were living in a community independent of scare resources. By rethinking their approach to transport, food, health and wellbeing amongst other things, the population are looking to minimise their negative impact on the environment while bolstering the local economy and providing quality of life to all.

Urbanisation to cities and clustering - Wales

Over the past twenty years the characteristics of a business cluster have been explored by those seeking to boost local economic development. They have sought to understand the advantages that arise from groups of companies and institutions being co-located in a specific geographic region and linked by interdependencies in providing a related group of products and / or services. To what extent does having specialised business and / or services together in a concentrated locale, allows firms to realise economies of scale and local production networks, known as **'agglomeration economies'?**

Clusters build on three main pillars:

- Geography – cultural perception and tourism
- Value creation – such as supply chain optimisation, potentially lower transport ation and production costs.
- Business environment – industry innovations and increased knowledge transfer, local employment and training opportunities

Clusters tend to foster competitiveness and can enable companies to leverage the business environment quality to reach higher economic performance.

In the Welsh context the clustering effect is evident with the major cities having much higher productivity than the regions.

While Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan have a GVA per head of £24,701, a short distance away in the Gwent Valleys this figure is £14,759, whilst in Anglesey it is £13,655. Towns in Wales may have to plan to cope with a future of relatively low productivity, and explore ways in which jobs can be drawn from dominant cities to smaller locations.

Our demographic research showed the extent to which town populations in Wales have both expanded and contracted over the last two hundred years in response to changes in economic patterns. This is not a new phenomenon.

Technological breakthroughs and changes in consumption patterns

The huge growth of the internet in every aspect of daily life has significant implications for towns and cities across the UK. The connectivity made possible by the internet has effects on both the working and leisure habits of the population. Working remotely has become far more possible than in the past, which should benefit those looking to live outside of cities but still earn a comparable salary. Similarly, goods and services, previously only available in large cities, are now accessible to all through online shopping and communication. Finally, the internet has drastically changed the nature of relationships between people and how individuals attach value to their own life and experiences. These changes made possible by the internet are affecting the consumption patterns in the UK and impacting on the make-up of town centres.

The nature of high street retail is changing in all of the UK, this is of importance to towns as the hig street is the main social and economic hub.

Those kinds of shops seeing more openings than closings include: health clubs, jewellers, coffee shops, American and Italian restaurants, and take away food shops. Those seeing a declining number of units include: fashion shops, department stores, banks and mobile phone shops. This is demonstrative of high streets becoming a destination for leisure activity as opposed to strictly shopping. A Barclaycard report indicated that although consumer spending rose by 2.8% between 2016 and 2017, this was massively outstripped by spending on entertainment which went up by 12%. Britons are now moving towards spending on experiences over objects, this is most strongly demonstrated by the 11.7% rise in dining out between May 2016 and May 2017. While towns may suffer a loss of jobs in the retail sector they should seek to recuperate this through the hospitality and entertainment industry.

Commentators are citing a combination of social media pressure to advertise your life and increasing rejection of materialism for the shift in spending from goods to experiences. By choosing to spend your income on a locally sourced meal or theatre event you are seen to be getting better value for money than buying electronic goods or home furnishings. The term 'stuffocation' is being used to summarise the anxiety and wasteful spending of material based consumption. To escape this and restore tranquillity to their lives people are now seeking out meaningful things to spend money on with personalised value. This can then be shared through social media to the envy or applause of friends and family members, reaffirming your choice. All this could bode well for towns with such spending patterns bringing vitality to high streets, especially in the evening.

The closure of department stores and struggles of supermarkets in recent times is also indicative of a change in consumer demand towards more authentic, ethical, organic and locally produced goods. According to the 'Ethical Consumer 2017 Report' local shopping grew 13.3% 2015 – 2016, and purchase of ethical clothing by 22.4% in the same period. This trend has been in place for the past ten years, its continuance may well be dependent on economic stability, but as it stands it should be central to the discussions on the offer towns have.

Towns already have a strong sense of place, with emphasis on community and local heritage. The trend of ethical purchasing can be capitalised on by towns by championing local, healthy produce stimulating the economy and reinforcing the town's unique identity within an ever-globalising landscape. This will also feed back into the experience economy offered by towns.

Wales has endured fewer net retail closures than other UK regions. High streets are still important to towns in Wales and present a profitable opportunity. For this to continue to be the case, high streets will need to adapt to market demands and provide the relevant offer.

The shopping habits of the Welsh population have modernised in pace with the rest of the UK. The average monthly online spend is £74 while the UK average is £89. Those living in Wales who use their smartphone for online purchases outnumbers the UK with 34% compared to 28%, suggesting a dependency on external Wi-Fi sources or mobile data. In particular 48% of online shoppers in Wales regularly buy clothes. This is affecting the composition and function of the high street and consequently the way towns will position themselves to their existing and prospective residents.

As of 2017 Wales had some of the slowest broadband internet speeds in the UK. Out of the 10 constituencies with the slowest download speeds in the UK, four are in wales. More generally it was found that 6.7m UK connections didn't reach 10MB/s, the minimum required to stream videos for a single user. This has been combated with the Superfast Cymru project, started in 2013 to make Wales a modern digital nation. The Welsh government has used its own funding as well as sources from the UK Government, the European Regional Development Fund and BT to provide superfast broadband to as many homes and businesses as possible. For towns to be attractive and considered of high amenity, the provision of high-speed internet is essential. The health benefits and beautiful scenery of a small town will be overlooked and ignored if quality internet provision is not guaranteed. While retirees may be prepared to settle for sub-standard internet, working age migrants moving from bigger cities to start a family will require high-speed, high download rate internet.

High speed broadband availability in town centres was not seen as a big issue by participants in our survey with only 24% of respondents saying it detracted 'a lot' from the performance of the town centre. However, many of the one-to-one interviewees did state that broadband availability was still an issue in the surrounding, more rural areas.

3.0

Analysis of the field research

The results from the different elements

The primary research was designed to capture a broad range of perception of the challenges facing Wales' small towns. The reach of the one-to-one interviews was extended to encompass another eight towns, making twelve in all. We carried out interviews with a standard form questionnaire with 87 participants from across the twelve study towns. More broadly FSB sent out an online questionnaire to its membership and received 106 responses. The results are set out in the pages that follow.

The majority felt that towns are still relevant to the prosperity of the local area with only 8% saying that towns were no longer relevant. 63% said that they were still highly relevant and 75% were hopeful of improvement within the next five years.

The three biggest factors identified by the survey as detracting from town centres were:

- **Online retailing**
- **Business rates**
- **Empty shops**

Online retailing is unsurprisingly seen as the biggest factor detracting from town centres with 77% of respondents saying that it detracted 'a lot'. 67% of respondents also identified business rates and empty shops as the major challenges.

There was a difference in the online survey and one-to-one result. Online, out-of-town developments are identified as the second biggest factor. Whilst, the one-to-one survey identifies empty shops as the second biggest.

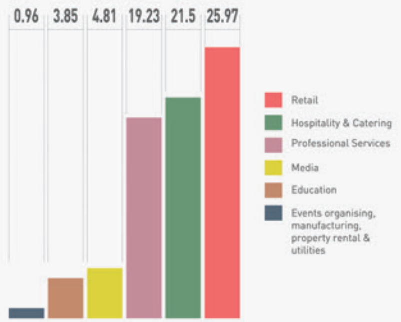
There are other differences in the on-line and interview survey results. In particular with regards to parking. Online, 67% of respondents said it detracted 'a lot' from the town centre whilst in the one-to-one interviews this was 47%. This may be due to some of the survey towns, for example, Maesteg and Barry not having parking charges.

Or it could be indicative of the fact that the one-to-one interviews were conducted with a range of participants including council officers, elected members and the voluntary sector who may have a different viewpoint to the business-only online respondents.

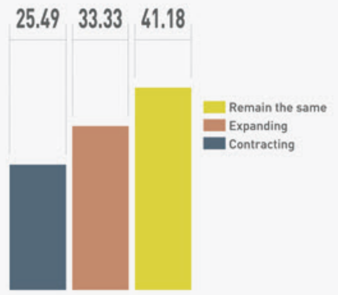
The majority of those interviewed overall were in the retail sector. Only 25% of respondents said that their business was contracting whilst 37% said their business was expanding and 38% saying their business was remaining the same. There is a difference in the one-to-one and online survey on this question with 46% of the one-to-one respondents saying that their business was expanding whilst this was only 33% for the online respondents, this in itself is interesting as the 87% of the one-to-one interviewees had a business located in the town centre.

ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

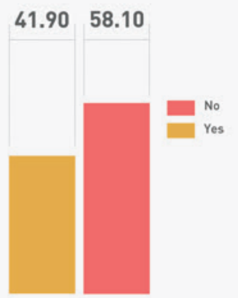
Which Sector is your Main Business in? (%)



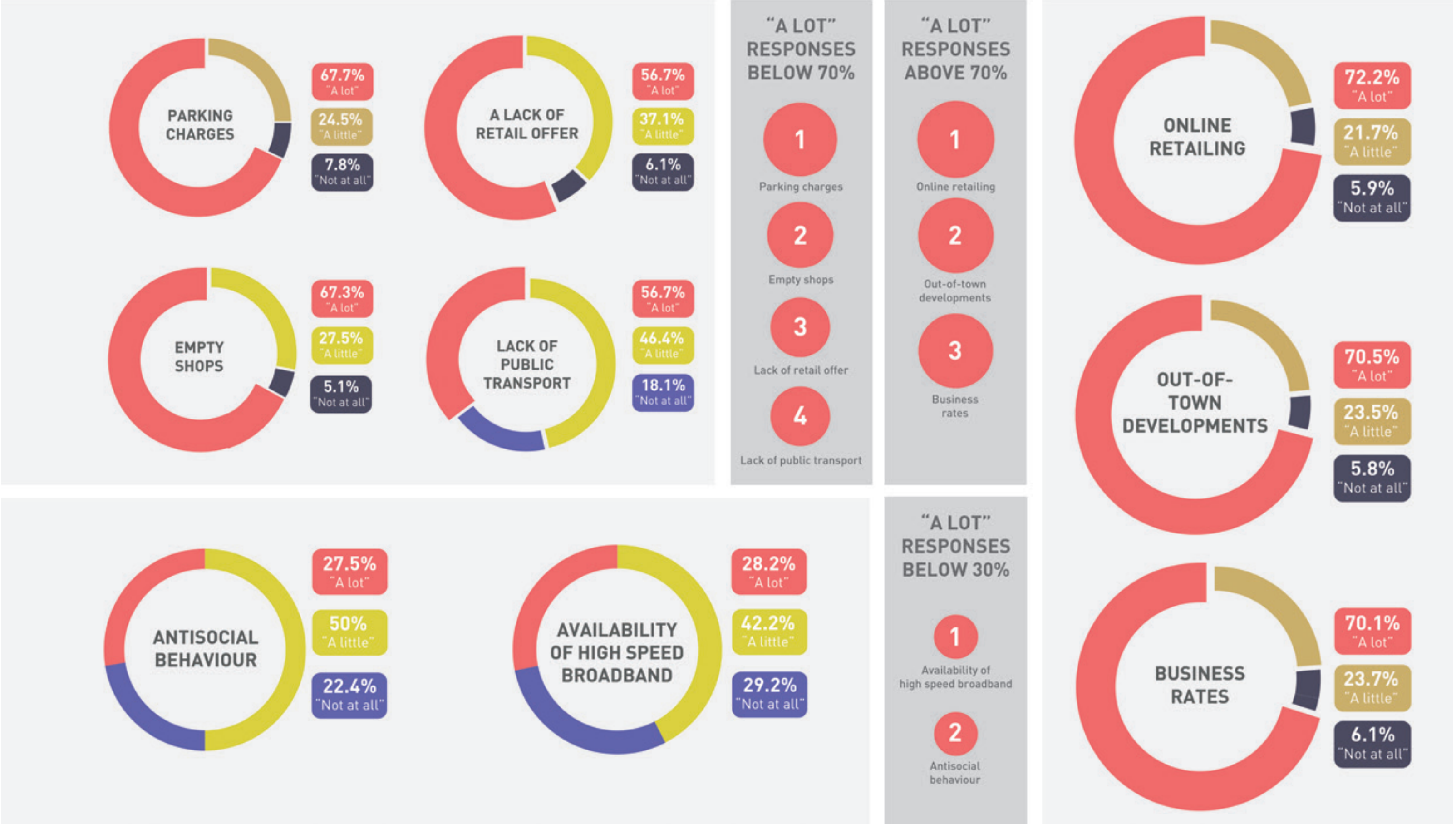
How is Your Business Performing? (%)



Is Your Business Located in a Town Centre? (%)

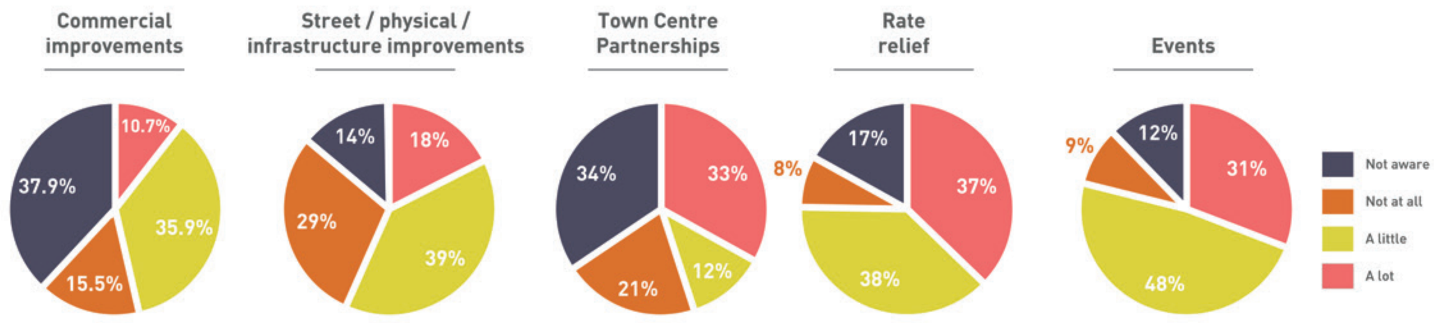


How do these factors detract from the performance of Welsh town centres?

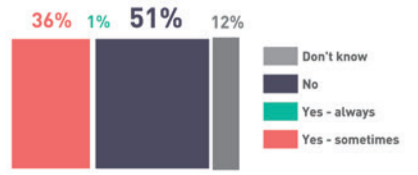


How far do you think these initiatives have made a difference to the fortunes of towns?

ONLINE RESULTS

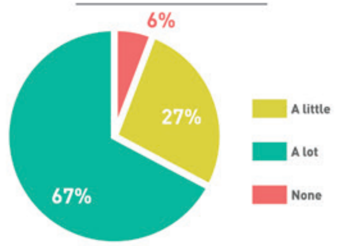


Do you feel that the opinions and expertise of businesses are taken into account when formulating policy?

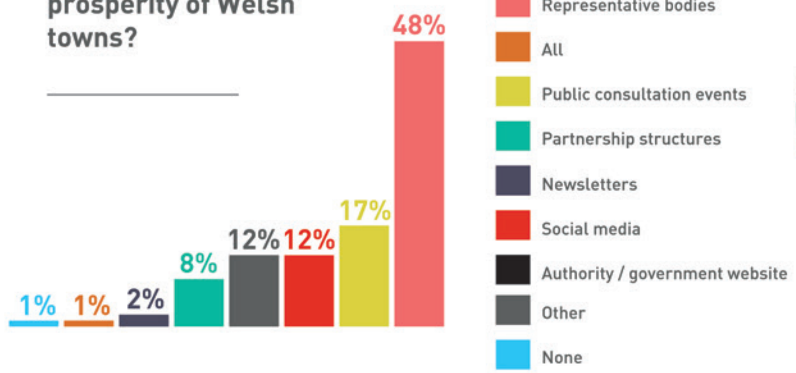


Are you currently engaged in any of these fields?

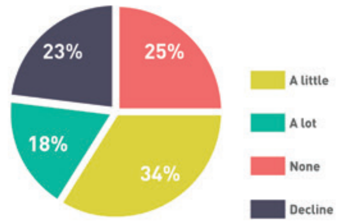
Historically, town centres have been important in bringing prosperity and employment to the local area. Do you think towns are still relevant in this way?



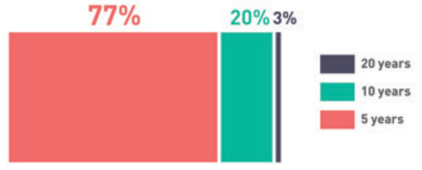
How do you think businesses could be better engaged in plans for the future prosperity of Welsh towns?



Do you expect to see an improvement in your town centre?



Over what period?

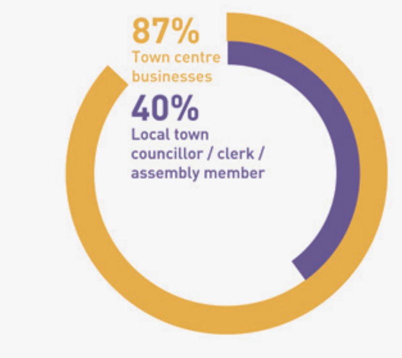


52% of those interviewed felt that the opinions and expertise of businesses were not taken into account when formulating policy. However, those in the public sector invariably pointed out that they felt it was hard to engage with businesses as a general rule. When asked the question, 'How do you think businesses could be better engaged in plans for the future of Welsh towns?' there was a marked difference between the online and one-to-one interviews. 48% of the online respondents felt that representative bodies were important compared to 4% of the one-to-one respondents, 66% of whom felt that all methods of engagement were important. Social media scored quite low with only 2% overall believing it was relevant to engagement.

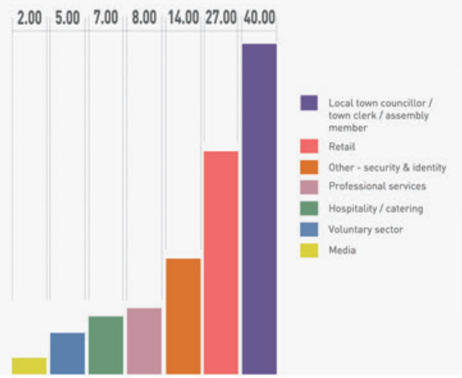
Overall 47% of respondents felt that Town Centre Partnerships had made 'a lot' of difference to the fortunes of towns, although in the online survey this was only 33% which could be due to the fact that over half were non-town centre businesses.

Surprisingly, overall only 39% of respondents felt that rate relief had made 'a lot' of difference to the fortunes of tows although for the one-to-one interviewees this was higher at 59%. Events scored highly with overall 46% of interviewees feeling they made 'a lot' of difference to towns.

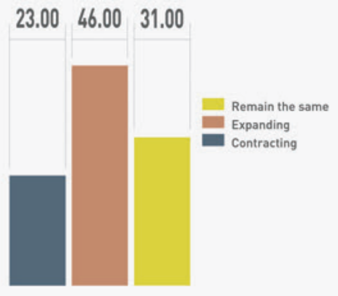
ONE-TO-ONE SURVEY RESULTS



Which Sector is your Main Business in? (%)



How is Your Business Performing? (%)



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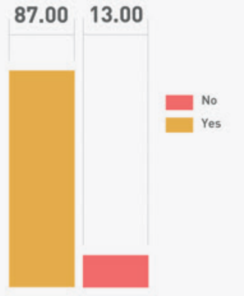
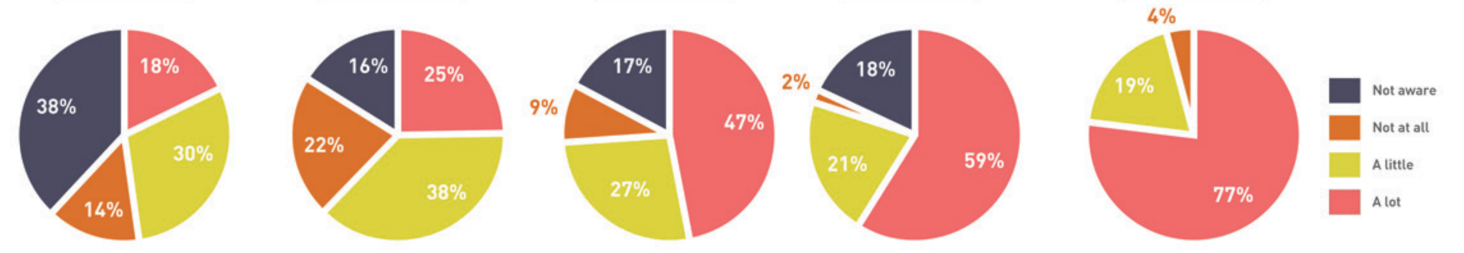


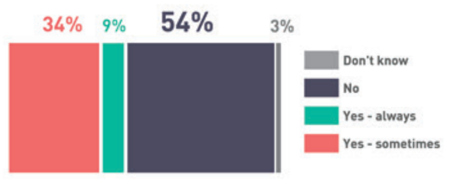
How do these factors detract from the performance of Welsh town centres?

How far do you think these initiatives have made a difference to the fortunes of towns?

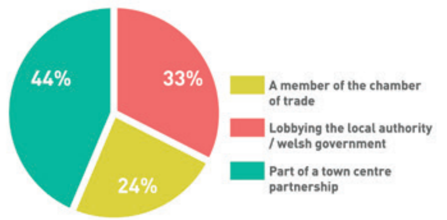
1-1 RESULTS



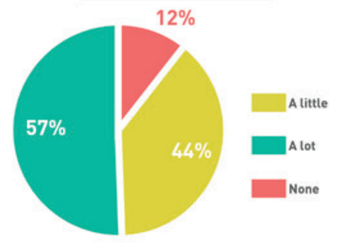
Do you feel that the opinions and expertise of businesses are taken into account when formulating policy?



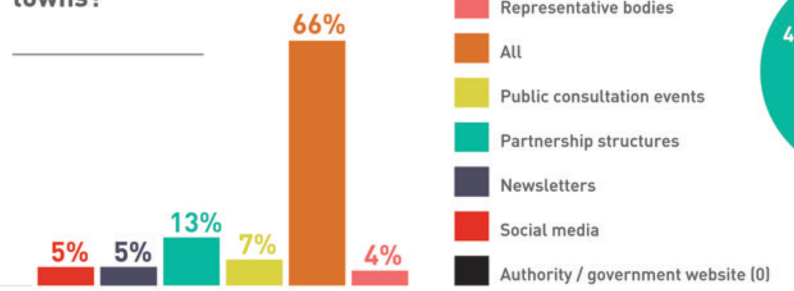
Are you currently engaged in any of these fields?



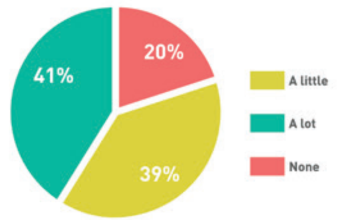
Historically, town centres have been important in bringing prosperity and employment to the local area. Do you think towns are still relevant in this way?



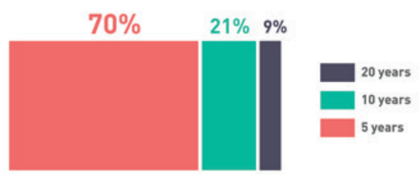
How do you think businesses could be better engaged in plans for the future prosperity of Welsh towns?



Do you expect to see an improvement in your town centre?

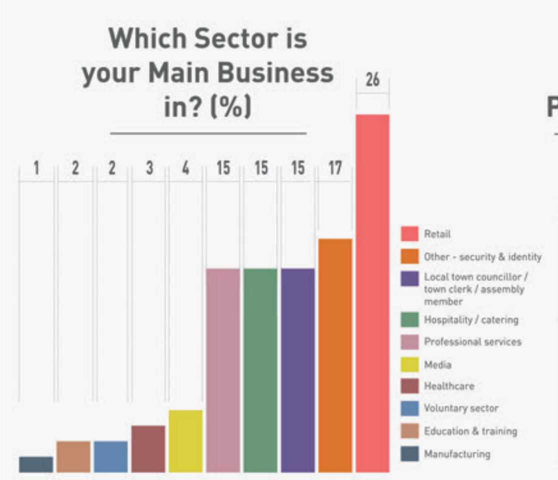


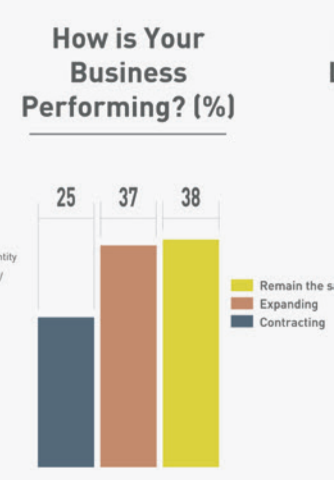
Over what period?

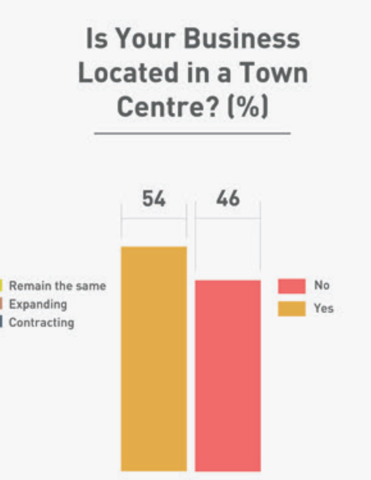


Overall 47% of respondents felt that Town Centre Partnerships had made 'a lot' of difference to the fortunes of towns, although in the online survey this was only 33% which could be due to the fact that over half were non-town centre businesses.

Surprisingly, overall only 39% of respondents felt that rate relief had made 'a lot' of difference to the fortunes of towns although for the one-to-one interviewees this was higher at 59%. Events scored highly with overall 46% of inter-viewees feeling they made 'a lot' of difference to towns.



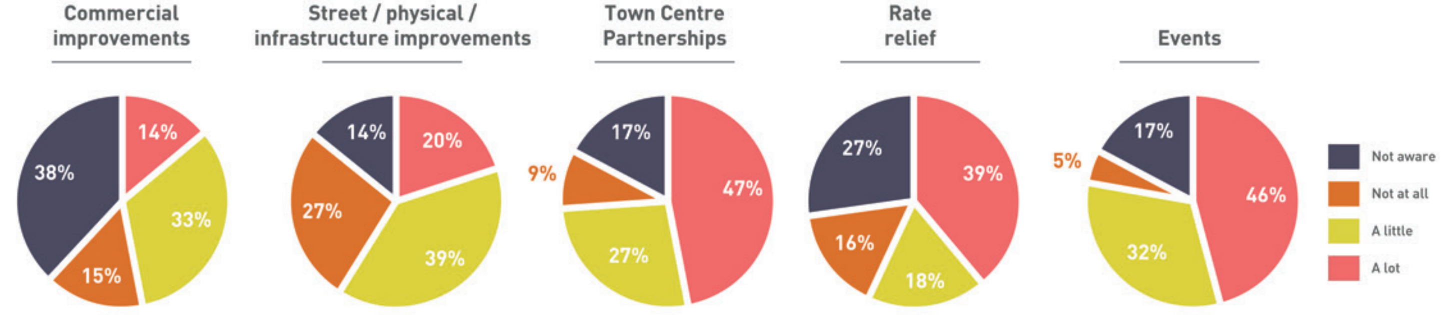


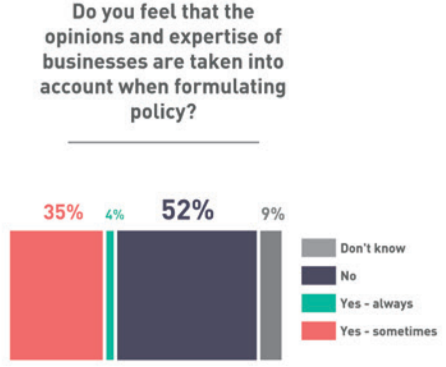


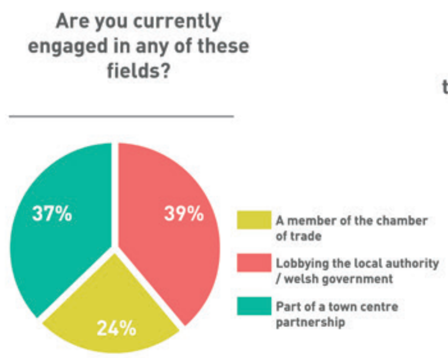
How do these factors detract from the performance of Welsh town centres?

How far do you think these initiatives have made a difference to the fortunes of towns?

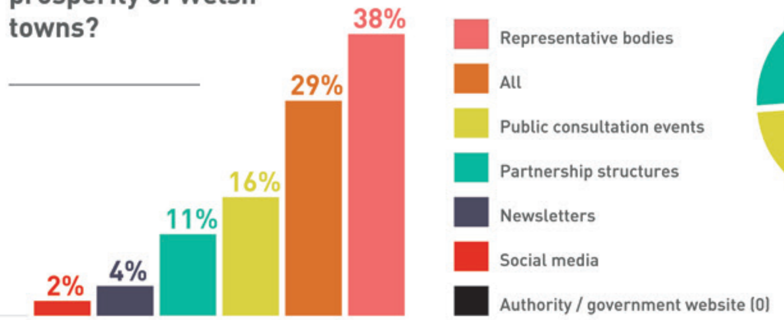
ONLINE & 1-1 COMBINED RESULTS

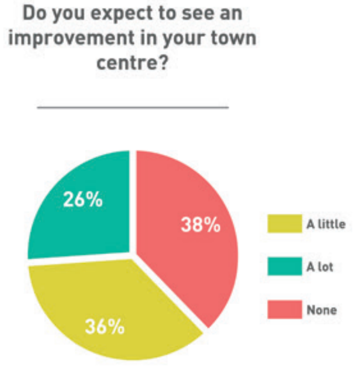


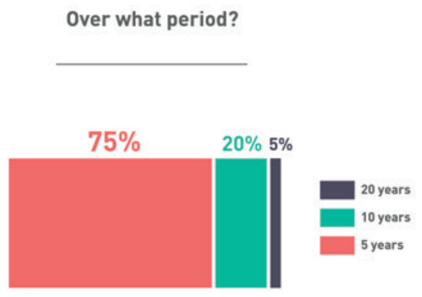




How do you think businesses could be better engaged in plans for the future prosperity of Welsh towns?







4.0

Proposals for change - conclusions and recommendations

In this nationwide review much was learnt about the state of our town centres from those who know them best, those who live and work there and use them recreationally and professionally. The three biggest challenges were identified as:

- **online retailing**
- **the "unfair" impact of business rates**
- **empty shops**

The recommendations below respond to these and other concerns. Town centres have evidently experienced decline, but 92% of those who responded recognised their continued importance to the social and economic lives of their areas. Our calculation suggests that approximately 40% of the Welsh population lives in these small towns, highlighting their importance to politicians and policy makers. They remain optimistic about the future of towns with about two thirds expecting to see improvements, and overwhelmingly accepted that this would take place over a period of up to five years.

Hence from our survey the demise of the high street predicted by some, is called into question. But for renewal to take place town centres need to be more business-like, and like every good business they need to learn from their competitors. If centres are losing custom to the internet and to out-of-town shopping centres what tips can they take from them to reverse that trend?

There is a need for innovation – the consumer and his and her expectations have changed. To determine and deliver an adequate response, better and more unified management is required. One that is better informed through data, and from the active participation of a broader group of stakeholders. Currently our survey indicates that it is not felt that business views are taken into account when strategies and plans are enacted for town centres. On the other hand local authorities complained about the difficulties of meaningful engagement with the private sector on issues which they believe are very relevant to them. Indeed, we found it hard to achieve turn-out from the private sector at our focus groups in the four study towns.

We have grouped our recommendations into seven themes and had the opportunity to test the logic in workshops with the Welsh FSB policy group and at an event of broader interests and stakeholders hosted by Russell George AM chair of the Assembly's Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee.

1. Determining & delivering a proportionate & appropriate response

Welsh towns continue to serve important social, economic and cultural roles. People care passionately about them. They offer choice, alternative locations to live work and visit, and provide an important counterbalance to ever-growing and often overheating cities. They have become the victim of recent trends, and the response to these has been inadequate. But the essence of towns as easily accessible "centres" for commercial, cultural, community and civic activity remains, and is taking on an even greater importance as considerations of air quality and active travel (walking and cycling) come to the fore.

Town renewal has to compete for attention and resource in a crowded policy arena. Interest in our town centres peaks in response to threat e.g. the closure of a familiar high street name. But this interest is not sustained, and too often we fail to arrive at a comprehensive policy response. Towns' complex nature means that responsibilities are spread across governmental departments. And ownership and occupation of residential and commercial property is atomised without strong institutions or organisations to provide an unified response. It was apparent from the survey that the different sectors find it difficult to communicate with one another. As a result, decisions are often made in isolation without regard to the wider context.

The survey indicated that there is unease with, and scope to improve the current targeting of investment. Respondents cautioned that some of the more resource intensive interventions such as renewing the public realm are felt to have little impact. Whilst more popular mechanisms such as events and marketing programmes struggle to attain funding, and operate on a shoe string.What is required is a joint and co-ordinated response, informed by intelligence from a range of sources and incorporating the views of different stakeholders.

This should be fashioned into a **Town Strategy** that goes beyond the current planning considerations and embraces a wider scope of issues and concerns. Shared with and owned by all stakeholders this would help publicise, and maintain the focus and momentum of renewal efforts. Having one in place could be a pre-requisite for financial or other forms of support or powers granted from government. They should illustrate a breadth of support through exhibiting the names of signatories and the sectors they represent.

It would need to be at least annually reviewed and updated. The way that this is approached may differ in each town, depending on the sophistication of current partnership structures. But it should aim to be public and transparent, providing an opportunity for the citizen to keep those responsible for implementing different elements of the plan to account.

2. The shift to internet shopping

The UK has been quicker than other nations in adopting e-commerce. It seems safe to conclude that the proportion of items bought online will increase, but assuming the British consumer isn't unique, that rate of change can be expected to flatten out and become more aligned with that of other countries.
The current take-up reflects the huge amount of investment being made into making the online experience an enjoyable and easy one. Product presentation on sites is good, choice extensive, and rapid logistics makes for excellent fulfilment.

Price also remains a key factor in choosing the internet over the high street. Several retailers cited instances of customers asking if they could have the serial number from products they had viewed in shop so as to order from an online store later.

A fancy-dress store in one of the study towns explains how customers like to browse items at her store before choosing to shop online for the item. Some use comparison websites on their phones while in-store, and "a customer asked me to hold a costume for 24 hours in case the version she intended ordering off the web could not be delivered in time"!

However, this same shop owner remains optimistic as she detects that her quality suppliers are seeing dangers to their brands' reputations from competing simply on price. They are also concerned that web customers are making decisions based on thumbnail photographs that mask the quality differentiation between products. It is possible that we will see more retailers working with their supply chains to defend and promote this price /quality offer.

Town centres though need to embrace the advantages of the web to a far greater extent and probably in different ways. In past years there has been government support for businesses to gain a web presence. Whilst welcome, these type of funds maybe be better targeted to achieve different ends.

The challenge is that websites need to be as well and regularly managed as any retail space/shop window. They need to be promoted and kept up to date if they are to attract and retain custom. The big web retailers have sunk millions into their front and back ends, often over a number of years, before seeing any returns. They continue to innovate. For example, Amazon further broadened its appeal through recruiting sellers.

Steps should be taken to support individual businesses in developing a collective response. That is one that operates at the level of the town centre, rather than the individual firm. Centres need to achieve more of a scale if they are to compete.

Currently how many centres have a digital plan or strategy? How many explore their digital profile to the extent that their potential visitors/ consumers already do?

This is far more likely where a BID or strong town centre partnership exists. There are good examples of centre-wide websites promoting activities and events which are kept vital and up to date. These will have strategies to expand their reach and once users are attracted, will have links to businesses' own sites.

Of course, a multitude of town websites already exist. But too often these are under-resourced and insufficiently thought through. Most find it difficult to survive post the initial bout of founder enthusiasm.

We propose that a **digital centre manager** should be employed in each town. They would be charged with keeping content, offers and a calendar of events up to date. In the first instance these posts may need to be piloted through public funding. But in the medium-term sustainability lies through advertising revenue.

The potential for a tie in with the local press should be explored, as the internet shreds the business models of regional media.

3. The high street experience

"Meet you one o'clock, Saturday at Boots corner", and its local equivalents was the British version of *la passeggiata*. Like the Italians, urban dwellers here liked nothing more than parading with others, bagging longed-for purchases, Chatting over afternoon tea, window shopping, and toped with a visit to the cinema. Town centres were where you met friends and socialised. They offered so much more than the essentially commercial experience of the shopping mall. And if this smacks somewhat of "rose tinted glasses" it is worth reflecting that shopping centres have been quicker to learn and act on the constraints to their appeal. Eating and leisure activities have become core to their offer.
Yet malls lack the atmosphere and heritage that towns, even new towns, provide.

The *maes* in Caernarfon, busy with tables and chairs and providing the perfect backdrop for events is a good example of what is possible. Exploiting the intrinsic locational advantages is a must.

Another way that traditional retailers can fight back is through great customer service and making the in-store experience memorable. Customers will not be lured from their screens by ill-informed, disinterested shop assistants. Small changes can make a difference – a seat for customers' friends / family while waiting, a complimentary glass of water from a hydrant, help in loading the car. The FT reported that John Lewis has enrolled customer facing personnel on drama training to augment that retail theatre experience.

Much of this is in the hands of individual outlets. Other measures would require co-operation across the town centre. Promotion of the centre through advertising and an events strategy requires collective action. As would a home delivery service such as the one being developed by London's Borough market on behalf of all its stall holders.

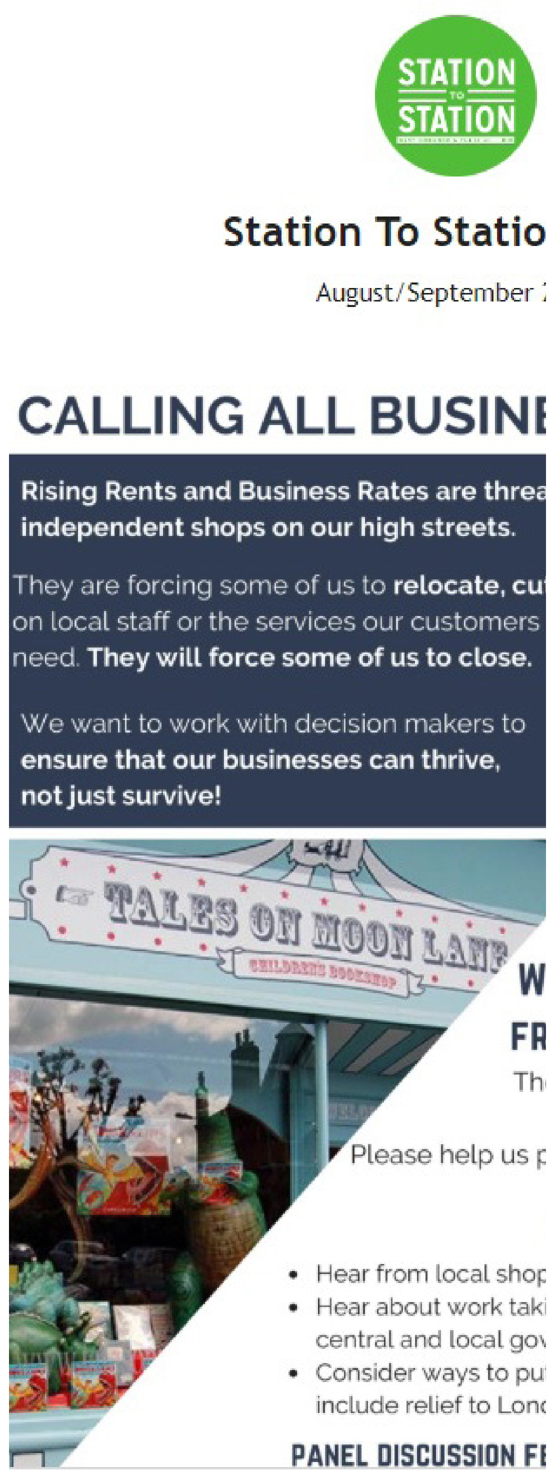
Lots of the tactics and techniques employed by the malls and large stores are equally applicable at centre level. The sharing of marketing data, the deployment of mystery shoppers, active participation in events through providing special offers and the like.

4. Declining demand for commercial property

One of the more shocking fallouts from the extensive big-name high street closures of the past year has been the impact on the pension schemes of often long-standing, loyal employees. Less well appreciated is the plight of independent retail owner-occupiers. Many have invested a working lifetime into their businesses and expected it to provide them with a relatively comfortable retirement through the sale of the business or succession strategy. Sadly, we met many who didn't now view this as a realisable prospect. A jeweller explained how after several years he had abandoned the hope of selling the business as a going concern. And if this wasn't disappointment enough, close to the point of closing the doors he had had no interest in purchasing his town centre property either. His plan for it to be a source of income into retirement was being replaced with a far less inviting reality. With empty property taxes and repairs, his putative asset was instead becoming a liability. How many times is this scenario being played out across Welsh towns? What are the quantifiable community impacts, never mind the human costs.

In Maesteg empty commercial properties are approaching dereliction and are marring Commercial Street. What can be done when owners are absent and lack of demand coupled with the overhang of commercial space mean that repair is often not economically viable? In Llanelli the local authority has acquired and refurbished several commercial properties through a scheme known as Opportunity Street. This has helped a number of owners and made better grade accommodation available for leasing.

This is one step short of the British Property Federation's blueprint for **Town Centre Investment Zones** where all (or as much as possible) of the centre's commercial property is pooled and managed collectively. A Welsh pilot to explore the practicalities of this would be welcome.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August/September
CALLING ALL BUSINE
Rising Rents and Business Rates are threa independent shops on our high streets.
They are forcing some of us to **relocate, cu** on local staff or the services our customers need. **They will force some of us to close.**
We want to work with decision makers to **ensure that our businesses can thrive, not just survive!**

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PANEL DISCUSSION FE

5. New retail, new office, new uses

Narberth provides an example of where the efforts of a small number of retailers arrested decline and transformed the prospects of the centre. Even a single "destination" shop can provide an impetus, through instilling confidence in others. Coaltown Espresso Bar is the Ammanford expression of the burgeoning growth in independent coffee shops. Loft Co's proposed scheme at Newport Market could provide the counterpoint to the successful Friar's Walk and attract those consumers who are less interested in the more ubiquitous brands.

This is the complexion of the high street fightback – innovative, quirky, broadening the appeal. And it includes other use classes beyond retail and f&b, especially cultural and leisure. It is encouraging to see the substantial investment being made in cultural hubs at Maesteg and Haverfordwest, the introduction of Yoga classes at Aberystwyth Museum, the volunteer effort bearing fruit at Narberth Museum the heritage work in Caernarfon and Haverfordwest, the plans for the Old College at Aberystwyth sea front, to name just a few. All provide an antidote to the impact of our changing habits on town centres' fortunes.

Additionally, our recent review of the potential demand for co-working for Monmouthshire County Council indicated that the disruptive change experienced by the office rental market elsewhere has its own implications for Welsh towns. There are relatively few Welsh examples as yet. But what may prove useful and viable are:

- spaces that could be hired periodically, on a project-by-project basis
- meeting space where home/mobile workers can hold client meetings
- a 'club' character, where sole traders can identify opportunities for intra-trading and share support

Unlike in the centre our metropolitan cities, financial support to trial such initiatives will be hard to access in smaller towns. This could be an opportunity to use tailored financial incentives, by means of grant or loan to encourage the private sector to take the risk of targeting such specific intervention. Or it may be the opportunity for dedicated special vehicles involving public and private interests.

Either way towns should be **trialling responses to the new demand for agile working.**

Small towns need to harness energy and expertise from wherever they can, and there are instruments to support this. Community Asset Transfer legislation was introduced to match the enthusiasm and accommodation needs of the not-for-profit sector, with the surplus of publicly owned buildings. And the last years have thrown up many examples of meanwhile spaces and temporary, pop-up use. Are these tools achieving what they might in small towns? What is required in terms of training and support to increase their impact?

One respondent recommended the keeping of an **empty property register** as first step to developing a property strategy for each and every town centre.

indycube | coworking | cic

6. Parking

There are conflicting views about the impact that parking charges have on the attractiveness of any given town centre or high street. In the absence of hard facts, it was interesting how opinions expressed in our survey were divided largely on sector lines. The surveys illustrated that mostly the private sector considered that parking charges damaged performance, While the public sector were less sure of the causality of any linkage. Perhaps more tellingly those from the public sector had other concerns e.g.

- **environmental** - lessening the proportion of car borne shopping trips
- **financial** – the income from car parking is an important element of council budgets

What can't be denied is that the owners and operators of out-of-town shopping centres almost universally choose not to charge for the thousands of often at-grade parking spaces they control? The revenue from charging for these parking places would obviously be substantial, yet they take the view that it is in the overall commercial interest of these centres to offer these places free of charge.

Traditional town centres do not enjoy this unified, holistic view. Charges generated in the centre are over-whelmingly invested elsewhere. If town centres are to learn from their competitors, here perhaps is a case in point.

But there is a counter argument. Car parks have a cost implication – the land they sit on is valuable, their construction has to be financed and they need to be maintained. Why should public funds be put to that end? Several Business Improvement Districts have accepted that their members should contribute to the commercial value of free or reduced car parking charges. Swansea BID have led the way.

What may change the cost / benefit equation for councils in the way they approach parking charges is the localisation of business rates. Most higher-level value commercial property is based in town centres. Hence centres will generate the most concentrated business rate revenues. If and when that is retained by local authorities, then the financial incentive to support and encourage more town centre commercial activity will increase. This might lead councils to review the impact of parking charges.

An alternative to free car-parking which doesn't appear to be receiving enough attention is to invest in the type of systems that would greatly ease the transaction of parking. **Digital payment technology** should provide the solution. Removing the need to feed coins into a machine and hence the costs associated with its collection. This study was completed in the week that Amazon opened its till free bricks and mortar store, where customers simply pick up goods and leave with all transactions managed through their mobile phones.

7. Business rates and taxation

This research took place as the clamour for a fundamental review of the operation of the system of National Non-Domestic Rates intensified. A small independent retail business in Aberystwyth contrasted their business rates charge per square foot with that being paid by the new Tesco and M&S development at the edge of town and by Amazon in Swansea. It is difficult to respond to their question "how can that be right?".

The prospect of any change to NNDR look as distant as ever. Business rates have proved to be a very reliable, collectable and high yielding source of income for government. However, there is a recent example off where the tax system has been used in radical way to advance policy. The fiscal changes introduced by George Osborne to cool an overheating housing market have had a very direct impact. The raising of stamp duty on "second" homes and the diminution of tax relief to the buy-to-let sector have had significant effect.

Acknowledging that government will be loath to tamper too much with NNDR there have been alternative suggestions to level the playing field. One, inevitably referred to as an "Amazon Tax"", proposes a 1% levy of the profits of online traders. Given the ways in which large global players are able to domicile their affairs for tax purposes this may prove difficult to enforce.

Colliers International have floated a potentially simpler proposal. Arguing that consumers are already accustomed to paying differential rates of VAT in catering outlets dependent on whether they are "eating in or out", Colliers propose introducing a 22.5% on-line VAT rate and reducing the in-store rate to 17.5%.

It could be also worth examining the plea from the tourism industry, many of whose members are located in town centres, to reduce headline VAT rates that they are required to charge customers. There are several European precedents to learn from.

9% of Welsh businesses are in retail

25% of all business rates comes from retail

Appendices

Appendix 1.0

National policy context

- The policy gap for towns
- Policy comparison – Wales, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland

The policy gap for towns

As of yet, there is no policy framework that directly targets the condition and future of towns, as a specific entity, in the UK. Since the implementation of the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947, a plethora of orders and rules have been put in place affecting the development of land and its use, much of which applies to towns. However, within the subsequent policies and catalogue of national planning policy frameworks, no distinction is made between towns and cities are urban units. Obviously, it is recognised that cities are generally larger than towns, although there are multiple discrepancies where this is not the case, and can only be officially recognised as cities following Royal edict. Beyond this, there is nothing which targets the particularities of life in towns as a unique phenomena compared to life in cities.

The fate of towns in the U.K. for the past 200 years has been decided by three factors:

- proximity to major ports and cities
- the stock of natural resources
- the attractiveness of the town in terms of its natural environment and living conditions.

These factors are then exploited and managed by capital driven industries, transport infrastructure bodies, private housing developers, local authorities, tourism agencies, and migratory populations with enough income or savings to choose where they live. Much of modern planning policy affects life in towns by regulating the influence of these interested parties, but with the same criteria as used in the rest of the country. Often decisions are made on the future of towns, not for the benefit of that minor settlement, but for hitting of county wide or even country wide targets.

In the 1970s, UK politics began to consider the urban environment as the cause and solution to all nature of problems. In particular, derelict, vacant and low value parts of cities where seen as the source of social ills such as criminality, ill-health and unemployment.

Since then there have been countless cycles of funding efforts made available to regenerate parts of cities, with a belief that an intervention into the built environment will lead to increased land values in the area, which in-turn will increase the provision of quality services and facilities in the area.

Although it was recognised that personal deprivation was a reality that existed across the United Kingdom, collective deprivation was seen as compounded and intensified deprivation due to the density of different individual problems in an area. It was therefore natural for policy to target area-based intervention as it was easier to quantify and measure if done successfully. From the Urban Development Corporations devised under Margaret Thatcher's government to the Urban Task Force of New Labour, reports and rhetoric always focused on reviving cities, attracting more people to cities, and contributing to the wealth of cities.

This all makes political and economic sense, as today cities in the developed world contain a disproportionate amount of the population and drivers of production. However, the towns of the UK still do contain a large portion of the population. What's more, towns often contain a higher concentration of traditional practices and heritage assets producing cultural value for the country as a whole. As large cities becoming increasingly congested, polluted and unaffordable, it may be that life in smaller towns becomes a more attractive and a more sustainable option. In which case, governments should prepare for this eventuality now by developing policy and programmes that will safeguard the future and prosperity of towns.

	Wales	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Total Population	3.06 million	53.01 million	5.30 million	1.81 million
Number of Local Authorities	22 Unitary Authorities	353 Total 27 County Councils, 201 District Councils 32 London Boroughs, 36 Metropolitan Boroughs, 55 Unitary Authorities, 2 Sui Generis	32 Unitary Authorities	11 Unitary Authorities
GVA per Head	£19,140	£27,108	£24,800	£19,997
Number of Town, Parish and Community Councils	730	9000	1200	None
Number of Urban Areas with a Population above 100,000	3	73	4	1
Number of BIDs	12	288	39	6
Legislation and Planning Guidance	Planning (Wales) Act 2015 National Development Framework (NDF) 2020 Prosperity for All 2017 Well Being of Future Generations Act 2015 Local Government Act 2003 Welsh Assembly Government The Business Improvement Districts 2005 Regulations	National Planning Policy Framework 2016 Town and Country Planning Act 1990 Localism Act 2011 Local Government Act 2003 Statutory Instrument 2004, No. 2443 The Business Improvement Districts (England)	Scottish Planning Policy 2014 National Planning Framework for Scotland 2014 Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006 Scottish Statutory Instruments 2007, No. 202 Local Government: The Business Improvement Districts Regulations, 2007.	Programme for Government 2016 - 2021 Regional Development Strategy 2035 Planning Act Northern Ireland 2011 Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014

Figure 3 - Planning table (continues overleaf)

	Wales	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Most Recent Hosing Targets	2016-2021: 20,000 new affordable homes, 5,000 empty properties brought back into use	2017: 300,000 new homes a year	2016-2021: 50,000 new affordable homes, 35,000 of these for social rent	2016-2021: 36,0000 affordable homes
Government Grants for House Building	Housing Finance Grant 2017- 2047: Annual stream of £9m made available to local authorities Cardiff Capital Region City Deal 2016: A £1.2 billion fund part of which will be used to support a variety of developers deliver housing across the region	Home Building Fund 2016-2021 : £3 billion available in the form of loans to private developers and small builders Shared Ownership and Affordable Homes Programme 2016 - 2021 :£1.3 billion and £1.4 billion available in grants to be allocated by GLA for affordable homes in London	More Homes 2016 – 2021: £3 billion available to private and public sector, community groups and housing trusts to deliver sub projects including – £25 million for Rural Housing Fund, £5 million Islands Housing Fund , Housing Infrastructure Fund	No official programme in place, but £2.5 billion made available from UK government for nonspecific projects
Most Recent Hosing Targets	2016-2021: 20,000 new affordable homes, 5,000 empty properties brought back into use	2017: 300,000 new homes a year	2016-2021: 50,000 new affordable homes, 35,000 of these for social rent	2016-2021: 36,0000 affordable homes
Government Grants for House Building	Housing Finance Grant 2017- 2047: Annual stream of £9m made available to local authorities Cardiff Capital Region City Deal 2016: A £1.2 billion fund part of which will be used to support a variety of developers deliver housing across the region	Home Building Fund 2016-2021 : £3 billion available in the form of loans to private developers and small builders Shared Ownership and Affordable Homes Programme 2016 - 2021 :£1.3 billion and £1.4 billion available in grants to be allocated by GLA for affordable homes in London	More Homes 2016 – 2021: £3 billion available to private and public sector, community groups and housing trusts to deliver sub projects including – £25 million for Rural Housing Fund, £5 million Islands Housing Fund , Housing Infrastructure Fund	No official programme in place, but £2.5 billion made available from UK government for nonspecific projects
Contributions from Developer	Section 16.1 explains that the CIL applies in both England and Wales. Although most aspects of the planning system are devolved, the CIL is seen as a tax and is currently a reserved matter. The Welsh Government has however called for the CIL to be devolved as it closely related to the planning system. It has issued its own CIL guidance to the production of a charging schedule. Local Planning Authorities can also enter into Section 106 agreements with developers as in England. Local Planning Authorities in Wales have been slower than some in England to adopt the CIL. This is partly because of the further restriction on the use of Section 106 agreements now that the transitional period has finished (see Section 16.1).	Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) *** Levy charged by local authorities on new developments in area. Most frequently the levy is used to fund infrastructure improvements around the development, but also used for charitable purposes and social housing. CIL charges are at discretion of local authority based on size and type of development. Town and Country Planning Act 1990 Section 106 agreements introduced. To contribute to cost of required new infrastructure, contributions are a legal requirement and can be made in cash or in kind. Contributions must support objectives of Local Plans and Neighbrouhood Developlment Plans .	Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1977 Section 75 agreements are a contract between Planning Authority and the landowner that requires land use to be restricted or regulated to minimise potential negative impacts. This can result in payments being made towards associated infrastructure (roads, sewerage, community facilities. No equivalent to CIL.	Planning Act 2011 Section 76 enables the relevant Department or Council to enter agreements to facilitate, regulate, or restrict land use. Contributions may be required to offset the impact of development, reasons include: provision or improvement of infrastructural works, archaeological investigation, works external to the site being required. Contribution can also go towards social/affordable housing provision (DPSD) Developers are free to offer community benefits in kind or shared ownership, but they are voluntary.

	Wales	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Sunday Trading Laws	1000-1800 for larger businesses Smaller businesses with less than 3,000 sq ft. floorspace are exempt. Farm shops selling own produce exempt	1000-1800 for larger businesses Smaller businesses with less than 3,000 sq ft. floorspace are exempt. Farm shops selling own produce exempt Suspension of law in London during 2012 Olympics, subsequent research found it would lead to loss of jobs in grocery and convenience sector	Relaxed laws, shops have the option to remain open at any time. Employees have the right to refuse to work on Sundays	Small shops with a floor area of less than 3000 sqft. are free to choose their own opening hours, larger shops are restricted to opening between 1300 and 1800. Shops in holiday resort areas can apply to the council to extend their trading hours between on selected Sunday
Use Classes	13 excluding 'sui generis' – permission not required for change within a single use class, 1 use class for all establishments offering alcohol, less permitted changes between use class than in England	15 excluding 'sui generis' Change of use from office to residential requires no permission, permission not required for change within a single use class, many other changes of use class permitted	11 - permission not required for change within a single use class, less permitted changes between use class than in England	12- Changes within single use requires no permission, but change between use class does, less permitted changes between use class than in England
Level of Autonomy for Towns	No equivalent right for communities to produce development plans. Local authority required to produce strategy to improve local service National Assembly given legislative competence in respect to: Local referendums and council tax level, planning applications and enforcement, Housing Revenue Account and Subsidy Welsh Minister to decide timing of council tax revaluations. Local authority to have discretion over business rate relief	Neighbourhood forums and parish Councils have the right to produce a Neighbourhood Development Plan establish planning policy for local area. Provided the plan has regard to national policy, it is taken to a neighbourhood referendum. If it passes it is the legal obligation of the Local Authority to put it into force. Communities to have option to take over public services provided by local authority. Communities also to be given option to purchase sites of cultural or heritage value before being sold on market	Communities given more rights to have voice in decisions regarding their area and service provision. Neighbourhood and community plans are not a feature of the planning system.	Statutory duty on Councils to produce and implement a Community Plan for area based on engagement. Requirement that a number of statutory bodies become Community Planning Partners of the Council. (Housing exec., Sports Council, Health Trust, Council for Catholic schools, Tourist Board, Fire and Rescue, Police Service, Public Health Agency, Education Authority

Appendix 2.0

Comparators from around the world

- The German IBA Emsher Project
- French resistance to supermarkets
- The future of Irish towns
- The global phenomena of CittaSlow

Regeneration through experimentation – the IBA Emscher Project

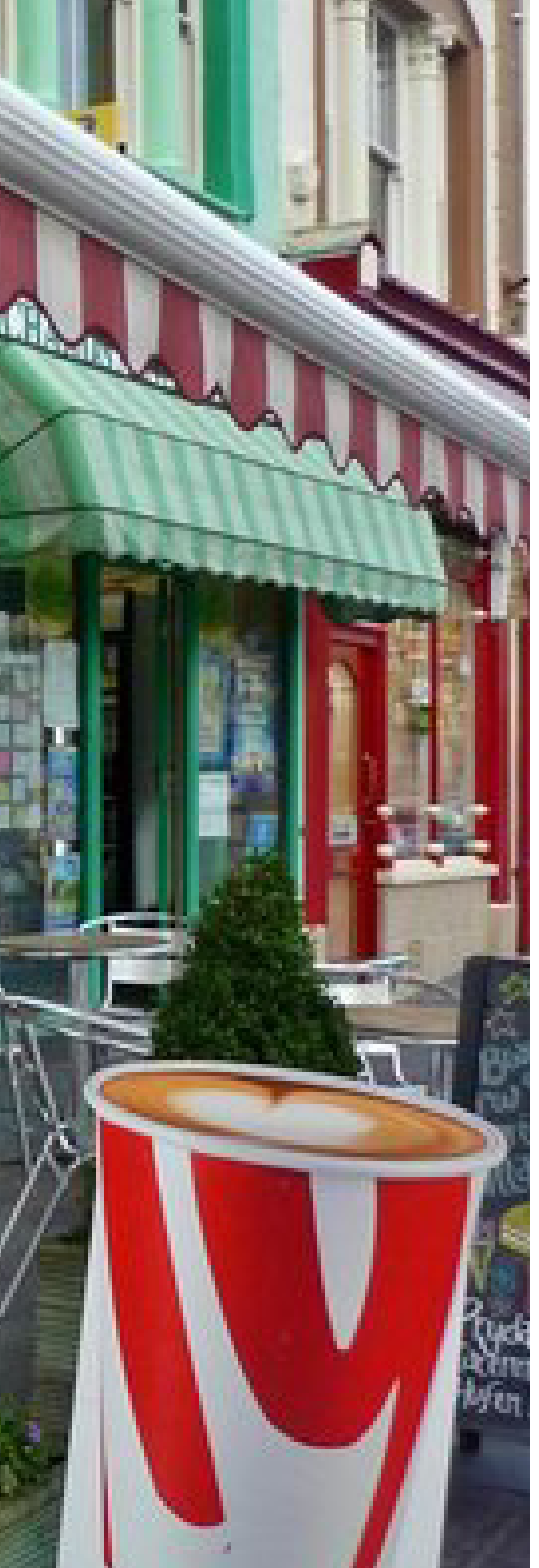
In the German region of North Rhine Westphalia, an experimental approach was taking to regeneration in the aftermath of industrial decline. Of relevance to the Welsh situation, this region saw huge levels of population growth during the industrial revolution of the late 19th century and early 20th century. However, towards the end of the 20th century, as industry dwindled, employment plummeted leading to shrinking towns and cities throughout the region.

Germany's three tier political structure is made up of the national government, state government and local municipalities. At the local level, governments are endowed with high levels of autonomy and independence with municipalities fighting against each other for their interests and states competing with each other. This has made the drawing of large scale plans problematic as achieving an agreed consensus has been difficult.

The IBA Emscher Park was an iteration of the German International Building Exhibition model set up in 1989 to inspire and instigate a range of projects across the country with the overarching aim of improving 'the quality of living and architectural, urban, social and ecological measures as the basis for economic change in an old industrial region'. Instead of redrawing political boundaries, imposing city regions which local authorities must adhere to, funding was made available for projects, proposed by any party, which met any of the following seven criteria: reimagining the area as a 'landscape park' celebrating industrial heritage and the natural environment, renaturalising the formerly polluted Emscher River, diversifying the economy and making use of abandoned factory sites, new and higher quality housing from existing stock, converting industrial infrastructure to tourism infrastructure, involvement of residents in projects to help them reach employment and new qualifications while culturally enriching the area, redevelopment of the Rhein-Herne Canal.

Over the course of the IBA Emscher Project, more than 100 projects have been completed, the decline in population and employment have been arrested, and the cities of Dortmund, Dusseldorf and Essen have been reborn as functional units the global knowledge economy, world class architects have wanted to contribute to the regional regeneration and new tourist opportunities have arisen.

The success of the project has been attributed to the lack of numerical targets or overly, spatially prescriptive plan. Parties applying for funding could do so without fear of admonishment if they failed to reach a certain objective. By assisting projects relevant to their local area and its settlements, but in tune with efforts elsewhere within the state of North Rhine Westphalia, municipal governments could maintain their previous power but also be part of something bigger.



French resistance to supermarkets

In France, although no set of policies explicitly dedicated to the preservation of towns, there have been laws put in place that indirectly protect the high street and the local economy of small towns. This has been done through the strict planning law in regards to use classes in town centres, and planning permission or large retailers outside of towns. Traditional town centre services such as butchers, chemists and tobacconists were given special protections. Certain uses classes and use types have been designated as such by local authority plans and given favourable financial incentives to stay as such.

On the other hand, in the UK, commercial units are indiscriminately regarded as space to be occupied, and are taxed with business rates accordingly. This has resulted in the situation of many UK high streets being dominated by fast food restaurants, betting shops and discount stores which can produce high margins, but do not necessarily enhance the culture or maintain the community traditions of an area. In France, the approach to planning begins with an idea of what a town should look like and what it should provide. While this may stunt growth or change, it succeeds in maintaining cultural expectations for local communities, a logical approach as members of a community who desire change would normally leave that community anyway and go to a large cosmopolitan city. With this French approach, the town does not change to accommodate the individual, if an individual chooses to leave, the town will remain as it was and probably there will be new arrivals who value it for that reason.

France has supposedly twice as many independent retailers as there are in the UK, which could be interpreted as positive for local communities and place identity. This is partly attributed to the 1996 'Raffarin Law' introduced to stem the growth and expansions of large supermarkets and out of town retail parks. The law stated that any store larger than 300 square metres would require full planning permission by way of review. In addition to the local authority making this decision, representatives of local artisans and traders would have to give their agreement on a new supermarket being built. In France 65% of the grocery market is occupied by giant supermarkets, however in the UK the figure stands at 90%.

SLIGO BID

The future of Irish towns

In October 2017 a summit was held in Sligo, Ireland for local authorities, local enterprise offices, chambers of commerce, business associations, planners and tourism bodies, to debate the future of Irish towns. Although Irish consumers are responding less quickly to the rise of online retailing than the UK, online spend is 6% of the market compared to 16% in the UK, the growth of e-shopping is outstripping that of high street retail. Coupled with fears about Brexit's impact on the Irish economy, this was sufficient stimulus for concerned parties to come together and share ideas and expertise to plan for a successful future. The agreed conclusion was that a collaborative approach based on extensive stakeholder engagement is essential for preparing renewal plans for towns. These plans would contain a vision, a strategy expressed with clear objectives, a programme of projects and key performance indicators to monitor progress. To ensure that plans are appropriate, the responsibility to prepare them is devolved to steering groups of local stakeholders which work in partnership with local government. This has been inspired by examples of 'town teams' and BIDs having a positive impact in their host locations. The examples of Roscommon Town Teams project and Sligo BID were given as evidence of best practice for the future.

In Roscommon, 2014, a business enterprise and innovation fund of approximately £100,000 was created from the revenue of business rates collection. The county council used this money to initiate a town teams project for six designated towns that were seen as in need of social, cultural and business invigoration. The local authority assisted in the development of the town teams; identifying representatives from businesses and the community, hosting meetings, steering on governance, employing a planner to advise them, training team members for social engagement, and conducting a SWOT analysis for each town. The county council would then continue their involvement by assisting with the writing of the action plan, and by making themselves available throughout the implementation of the strategy offering guidance on a project by project basis. The town teams themselves were responsible for deciding on projects that would be of benefit, securing additional funding for them, and seeing them through to completion. Delivered projects included; shop front enhancement, derelict premises cleaning, local heritage trails, and youth engagement initiatives.

Similarly Sligo BID delivered locally relevant projects, inspired by the needs of the businesses and communities. A key advantage is that through the imposition of a fixed annual levy on businesses, it is guaranteed an income to fund projects. One example of the positive work done by the BID is how through partnership with the council, Sligo was able to achieve the status of 'coach friendly destination'. Coaches are fundamental to the tourist industry in Ireland, this example shows how local stakeholders in Sligo recognised this important fact and made sure the town's future would accommodate it. In cases like this, the responsibility to plan and manage every aspect of towns' development shifts from national and local government. In its place local knowledge is championed, and funding made available for its application.

Ireland, like Wales, is a relatively small country with a settlement pattern of many small towns and few large cities. Town centre renewal has been identified as a key issue. For the country to prosper as a whole, the performance of each individual town must contribute. Town centre renewal features as a key policy in recent government documents including the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, Action Plan for Rural Development, Action Plan for Jobs, and the consultation for Ireland's National

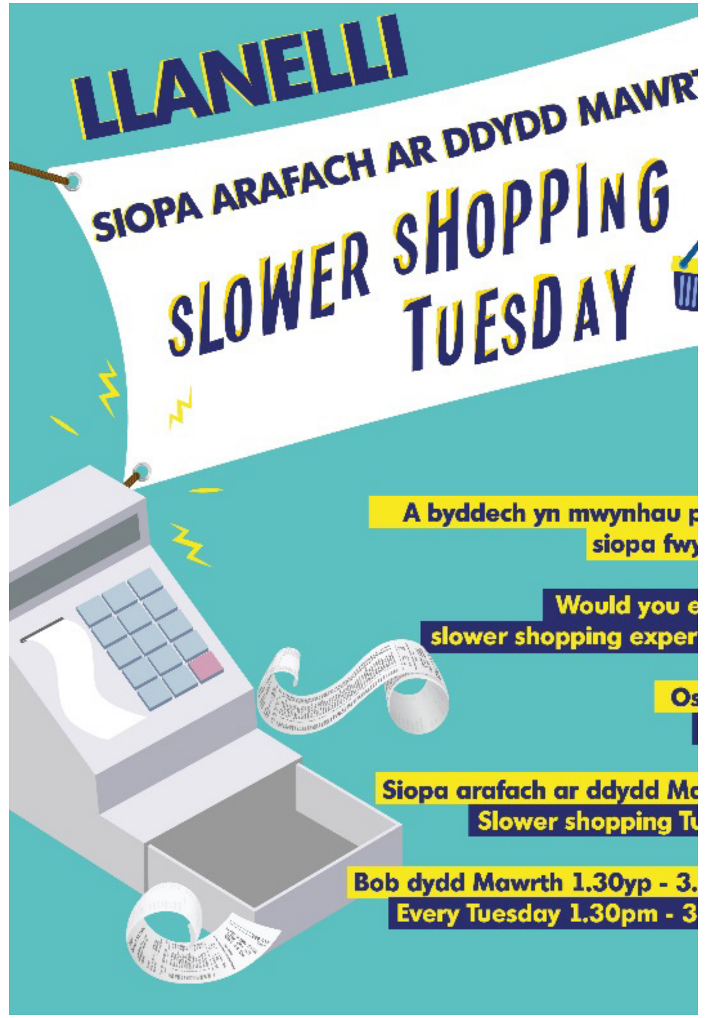
Planning Framework 2040. This is a progressive move from Ireland, focussing policy on the micro urban level, in addition to the macro, county or city region level. In 2016 the Town and Village Renewal Scheme was launched citing towns as the focus of social, commercial and civic life for wider communities. It argues that targeted action is needed to stop the deterioration of villages and small towns throughout the country. □380,000 will be annually allocated to each local authority, to fund projects that meet a list of criteria for enhancing towns as places to live or visit.

The global phenomena of CittaSlow

During the 1980s, the spread of neo-liberalism was in full flow, and cities across the developed world were becoming more similar, housing the same global brands and lifestyles. One reaction to this was that of Carlo Petrini, the Italian political activist who rejected the homogenisation of culture and wanted a to see local culture retained and celebrated. In 1986 he started the 'slow food' movement in response to the increasing fast food culture of Western Europe. Over ten years later, the principles of Cittaslow (slow town) were agreed upon by the Mayors of the Italian towns of Orvieto, Positano, Bra and Greve-in Chianti. The purpose of Cittaslow is to preserve the unique characteristics of each town in the face of a ever-globalising world. This could be realised by continuing and encouraging local traditions, identifying and using local produce, and prioritising the social aspects of living over material aspects. This is done with the intention of preventing standardisation and guaranteeing sustainable, healthy futures for the town and its people. No changes in law or legislation accompany the adoption of Cittaslow principles, however local authorities support the initiative and work in partnership with the activists pursuing these changes to lifestyle and business practice.

Today there are 236 towns around the world that now follow the principles of 'slow living' and are part of the Cittaslow movement. The majority are located in Europe, from as far as Iceland to Turkey, but the ideas have also been taken on in North and South America, Australia, China and Japan. It is advised that for a town to become part of the Cittaslow movement, the population can be no more than 50,000. To obtain certification and join the network of Cittaslow, a city must accept 72 guidelines divided into 7 marco areas, and pay a €600 joining fee. The 7 macro areas are in regards to policies to affect: energy and environment, infrastructure, quality of urban life, agriculture, tourism and artisans, hospitality awareness, social cohesion and partnership. Finally, an individual must be nominated to communicate with the international organisation and ensure that the objectives are met.

Beyond the expected benefits to the residents of the towns which include better health, more fulfilling social relationships and the guarantee of a sustainable future, the Cittaslow movement is now connecting towns and cities across the world to their economic benefit. This year, Serbian representatives have visited Orvieto to learn from the Cittaslow International about their work. Through this, the Italian member towns have been able to promote both their way of life, and their produce to new markets in terms of both food and drink exports and tourism. In this way Cittaslow allows smaller settlements to circumvent market trends dictated by larger urban centres, and instead to build independent networks of trade with towns also planning for a sustainable future. Similarly citizens of Cittaslow member towns are encouraged to visit fellow member towns when on holiday. As the Cittaslow movement becomes more well-known and more towns look to join the movement, it could have a powerful influence on the perception of towns as places to live. A particular issue facing many towns in the developed world, is depopulation as a result of younger people leaving in search of a more lively existence. If Cittaslow can celebrate the liveliness of towns because of their tight communities and their interconnectedness to hundreds of other towns around the world, this problem could be addressed. The success of the movement so far has been reimagining towns as not backward and boring, but the incubator of lifestyles that are better for everyone. This has been done without an overseeing government policy but through voluntary action with philosophy that can spread across borders as quickly as neoliberalism did in the 1980s.



Appendix 3.0

Methodology

Our approach

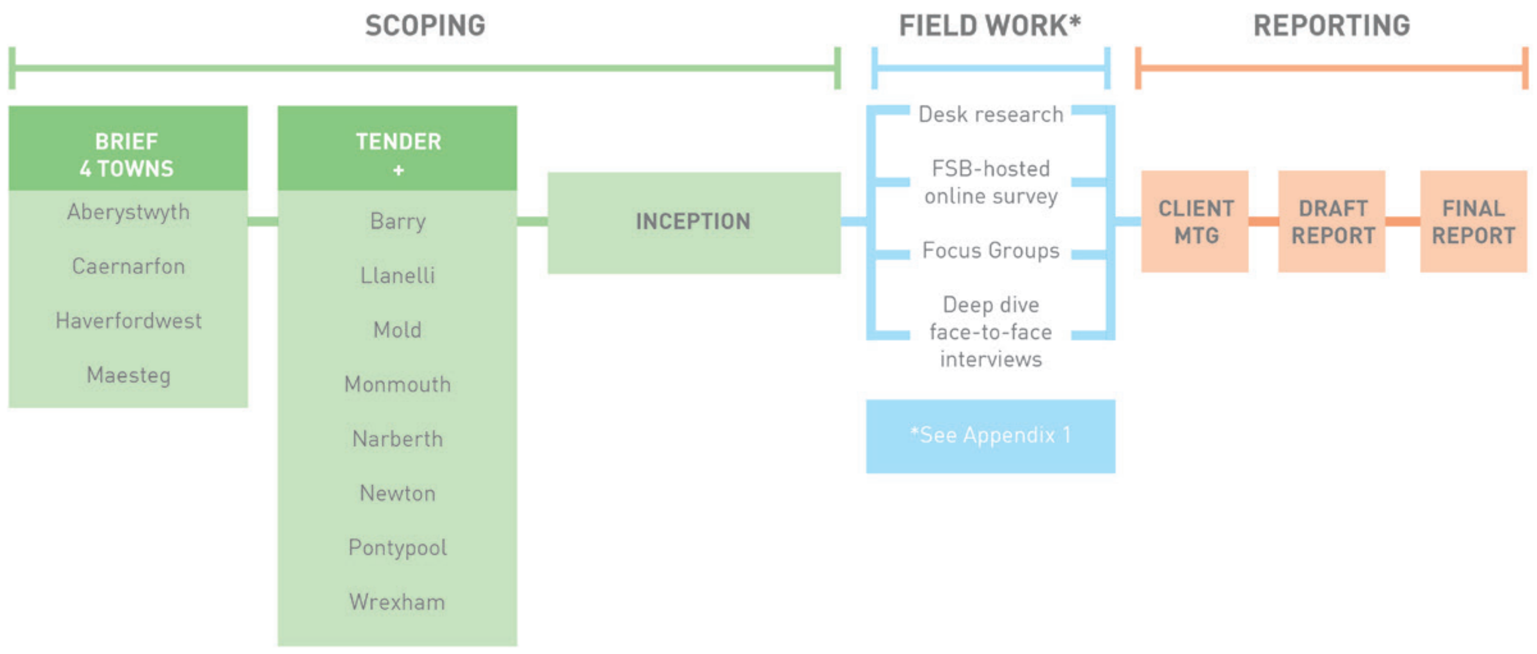


Figure 4 - Methodology

THE FOCUS GROUPS

1. Haverfordwest, Tuesday, 5th June (6 attendees)
2. Caernarfon, Monday, 11th June (6 attendees)
3. Aberystwyth, Monday, 2nd July (4 attendees)
4. Maesteg, Monday, 9th July (4 attendees)

ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEW CONSULTEES

- Businesses
- Landowners
- Local authority officers
- Elected members
- Town clerks
- Voluntary services

INDIVIDUAL CONSULTEE NUMBERS PER TOWN:

Barry	5
Pontypool	4
Mold	3
Monmouth	4
Wrexham	9
Llanelli	9
Maesteg	8
Haverfordwest	9
Newtown	6
Narberth	4
Caernarfon	8
Aberystwyth	8

Annex 1.0

The four towns

The four towns

The brief identified four towns as case studies. These represent a good spread spatially, and in their differing characteristics:

- Caernarfon
- Haverfordwest
- Aberystwyth
- Maesteg

Caernarfon

Caernarfon's historical prominence and landmarks (particularly it's castle, a UNESCO World Heritage site) have made it a major tourist centre. As a result, many of the local businesses cater for the tourist trade. The majority of the town's retail sector is located around Pool Street and Castle Square, or on Doc Fictoria, which was opened in 2008 as a retail and residential development with homes, bars and bistros, cafés and restaurants, an arts centre, a maritime museum and a range of shops and stores.

A market is held every Saturday throughout the year and also on Mondays in the Summer. The square was revamped in 2009. However, since then the square has caused controversy due to traffic and parking difficulties and the permission given by an old royal document for the set up of traditional market stalls on the square which makes it difficult to stage events and other activities.

The Caernarfon Waterfront and Town Centre Regeneration Initiative is a wide-ranging programme aimed at tackling social and economic aspects to make Caernarfon a better place to work and live and is led by Gwynedd Council and delivered through a multi-agency partnership that consists of Cadw, Arts Council for Wales, Antur Waunfawr, Gisda, Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways, Caernarfon Harbour Trust and Galeri Caernarfon.

Aberystwyth

Aberystwyth is a university and market town and tourist destination. It forms a cultural link between North Wales and South Wales. The town is the unofficial capital of Mid Wales, and several institutions have regional or national offices there. Public bodies located in the town include Welsh Government, the National Library of Wales, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, the national offices of UCAC and Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, the site of the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research, the Welsh Books Council and the offices of the standard historical dictionary of Welsh, Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru.

In recent years, there has been some concerns amongst town centre businesses over the University's decision to build a new student village on campus leading to less students living in and visiting the town. There are also two retail parks on the outskirts of the town.

However, it has benefitted from a new development on Mill Street which includes a Tesco and a Marks & Spencer store. The development has gone some way towards alleviating the perceived parking issues in the town. However, it is not overly popular amongst the independent traders who feel that visitors simply shop on site at the development and do not then come into town.

Haverfordwest

Haverfordwest is a market town and an important road network hub between Milford Haven, Pembroke Dock, Fishguard and St David's. The centre of Haverfordwest is dominated by the Western Cleddau river that runs through the middle of the town and the castle that towers above it. It is Pembrokeshire's administrative centre as well as principal commercial and retail centre.

Development of the riverside shopping centre has recently been added to in the suburb of Withybush on the outskirts of the town with the opening of a Marks & Spencer store in 2010 and Debenham's in 2013. Concerns have been raised about the relative decline of the historic town centre compared to the growth of the out-of-town centre retail centres at Withybush.

Haverfordwest Farmers Market is held on the riverside every Friday and there are a number of independent hotels, guesthouses and B&Bs. Pembrokeshire County Council as part of the Haverfordwest Townscape Heritage Initiative has been revitalising key landmark buildings in the town.

A local landlord has been buying up some of the older, more historic buildings in the town and making them available for more community use.

Maesteg

Maesteg has benefitted over recent years from a regeneration programme which has enhanced the shopping centre which includes traditional outlets, restaurants and cafes. Maesteg indoor market which was situated at the ground floor level of Maesteg Town Hall has recently been closed. The market site is being redeveloped into a cultural hub for the town.

A recent renovation of the outside portion of the market has been a success and is seen as attracting more people to the town's main shopping area. Maesteg was awarded £50,000 in Town Centre Partnership Fund investment. Projects included an events programme, brand identity and the creation of a loyalty card scheme, town centre improvements and installation of new signage.

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