

Wales Planning Conference 2011

Workshop Report: Beyond Retail: Finding New Purpose in our Town Centres

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“Town centres don’t do very well commercially, should we bother with town centres or let market forces determine what will happen?” CREW Researcher

The purpose of our town centres within Wales is one which planners and researchers are struggling to define. The workshop delivered by CREW and the debates held between the delegates which followed, identified that a one size fits all approach to finding new purpose in our town centres, simply does not work.

To understand our town centres, it is critical to understand the following:-

- The context in which our town centres sit;
- The importance that our town centres have and;
- The influence which public and private sector bodies have upon our town centres.

It is apparent that our town centres have changed over the years and are continuing to transform however, as the presentation illustrated, town centres are not functioning effectively. Although not an exhaustive list, the workshop identified a number of factors one must consider when trying to recognize why town centres are not functioning:-

Technological Change:

- A major change in our shopping habits is the way in which we can buy goods on line using the internet without the need of going into our town centres.

Accessibility

- Public Transport - An adequate level of public transport provision is also required in order to make the town centre accessible for all.
- Car Parking – Inadequate provision of car parking discourages local communities from going into the town centre.

Government Planning Policy

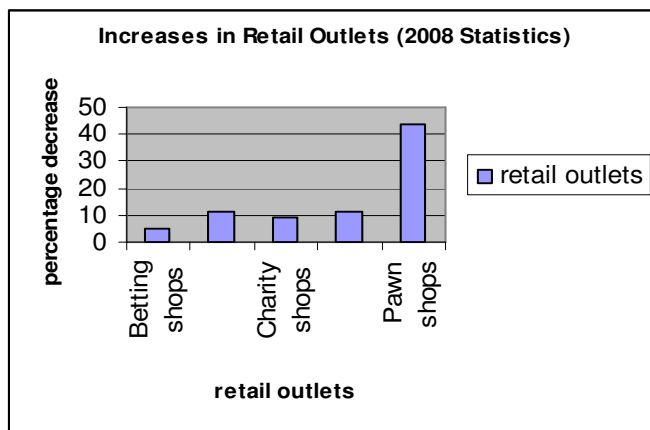
- Government changes in planning policy can impact on our town centres. The workshop discussions highlighted that within Wales, there are too many protection policies in planning and too often we are high bound by our own constraints.

Economic Climate

- Town centres suffering are suffering through a lack of access to finance and loans. Local Authorities do not have the money available for investment whilst private investors may have the finance; they are more reluctant to invest.

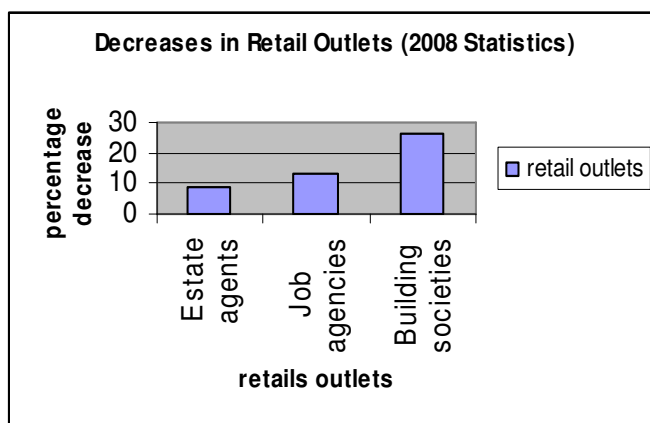
The presentation highlighted that our town centres are changing and this is depicted in the 2008 Statistics below. Whether these changes are consequences of factors such as technological changes, accessibility requirements, Government Planning Policy, the economic climate et al; is one which is open for debate.

Figure 1: Increases in Retail Outlets (2008 Statistics)



Betting shops	5%
Pound shops	11%
Charity shops	9%
Specialist food shop	11%
Pawn shops	44%

Figure 2: Decrease in Retail Outlets (2008 Statistics)



estate agents	9%
job agencies	13%
building societies	28%

Many of our town centres in Wales are all facing a similar crisis of ineffective functioning however, CREW illustrated that town centre can function effectively if we change our approach to town centre redevelopment.

Case Study: Bridgend Town Centre

“...putting the core back into the town centre.”

Throughout the workshop discussions, it became apparent that assessing the needs of the community and their involvement in the decision making process is the key component for revitalising our town centres. When redeveloping our town centres, we don't want to create a market that will not support the local community. To lose the community, potentially means that you have lost half of your market. Planners need to be able to achieve a balance between meeting the needs of the resident community with the ability to encourage visitors into their town centres and of course, for visitors to keep returning.

Whilst Bridgend welcomes large high street stores to the town centre, CREW identified that big high street stores (as an example) such as the Next and Marks and Spencer may not be attracted to the area. There was a debate within the workshop that the answer to town centre rejuvenation does not solely rely on high end stores being located in the town centre. A common assumption is that all town centres need a Next or a Marks and Spencer however; this may not be the solution for every town. Instead, the workshop identified that planners must be able to offer an alternative solution to rejuvenation of town centre regardless if big named brands are not willing to locate in their area or not. There is still some debate as to whether planners should

be looking at redesigning our town centres to be contemporary towns rather than generic cloning. As it has been recognized earlier, a one size approach does not necessarily fit all, maybe a move towards contemporary town designs could be one of many solutions to finding new purpose of our town centres.

The workshop raised a number of questions which planners and developers should be asking themselves when assessing what we want from our town centres. Questions such as “Should we not be asking ourselves how do we compliment our town centres”? “Do town centres have to perform the same way”?

The change for Bridgend was to attract those who were not currently using their town centre and encourage those to shop in Bridgend rather than neighbouring Cowbridge and Cardiff. It was evident through the workshop that the local community using the town centre were predominantly using the town centre to visit the one of the supermarkets and then visiting the town centre as a secondary function.

Elders Yard

Town centres in Wales are facing a funding crisis and Bridgend was not an exception. Unfortunately, public money for town centre investment is just not available. Bridgend town centre however has received £40 million worth of investment through convergence funding, with £1 million through public sector finance and the Heritage Initiative Grant fund. The workshop identified that although the town centre schemes appear small, they still require a large amount of funding. One of the schemes deemed a success is the redevelopment of Elders Yard.

The refurbishment of Elders yard is one of the schemes within Bridgend which has brought the core back into the town centre. An attractive Grade II Listed Building, Elders Yard is seeing commercial and leisure opportunities brought back into the area. It is recognised that retail alone does not bring in the footfall as indicated through the 2% drop in retail sales.

The redevelopment of the heritage area within Bridgend will create jobs which in turn will encourage those working in the town centre to use the facilities which the town centre has to offer and support the services which are provided. The redevelopment of Elders Yard has brought with it town centre recognition and a pride in the community which in turn can act as an economic driver for the area, although this cannot always be guaranteed.

What is the future of our town centres in Wales?

The key question which planners and developers must ask themselves is what is needed in our town centres and how do we achieve it?

It is clearly evident that there is no one single view on how to develop our town centres and one solution will not fit all. Different approaches may be needed for different town centres and as such, different levels of within the hierarchy will require different levels of change. Debates held within the workshop highlighted that businesses which are identified in the lower levels of the hierarchy require radical change. Is radical change achievable? There is debate that smaller, independent businesses need to rethink how they deliver what they have to offer and work in partnership with each other rather than in competition.

It is clear from the case study that and through discussion in the workshop that retail alone cannot independently support our town centres. It is suggested that planners must start to acknowledge the social and cultural elements of communities which need to be adopted into the town centre. Rather than town centres being focused centrally on retail, town centres need to be re-designed to be multifunctional incorporating learning spaces, health provision, parking and event spaces. One delegate highlighted that much more emphasis needs to be given on the shared realm / public space, which will impact on community cohesion. Is this the contemporary town that we should be striving for?

Debates highlighted that we need a different way to determine what is needed in our local areas in order to then work out how we can deliver it rather than ask ourselves what are the rules and regulations which subsequently leads to asking how we apply these in our local circumstances.

It was evident that there are conflicting opinions as to whether the current planning system needs to be deregulated in order to support a different approach to town centre planning. The workshop sparked debate that there are too many controls in place, such as the use classes order, statutory planning and society. It appeared to be a foregone conclusion that if we want our town centres to survive and deliver a new purpose, planners may have to start thinking differently and adopting a different approach to the one we currently adopt now.

This report was produced by Rachael Evans MTCP, Planning Monitoring Officer, Knowsley MBC.

This paper is a report of proceedings of the workshop and does not necessarily reflect the views of the author, their employer or that of any individual attending the workshop, including the facilitators, or the RTPI.