

Regeneration of  
Welsh Town  
Centres

**DLP BRIEFING NOTE 82**

Prepared by  
**DLP Planning Ltd**

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## Regeneration of Welsh Town Centres

The Enterprise and Business Committee of the National Assembly for Wales has published its Report on the Regeneration of Town Centres.

The committee recently held an inquiry into the regeneration of town centres and have now published a report and their recommendations to the Welsh Government (WG). It found that the proportion of vacant premises in Welsh centres is 11.5% (slightly above the UK wide average of 11.1%). Understandably, reasons for declining centres across the country include the economic slump and the associated downturn in consumer spending, as well as longer-term structural issues and lifestyle changes.

The report provides **21 recommendations** for WG to take forward. This DLP client briefing looks at the potential implications for planning, not least because of the ongoing work by WG towards a Welsh Planning Bill.

It calls for strong leadership from national to local levels and co-ordination between policy, planning and finance. Collaboration between public, private and voluntary sectors is also required, as Government needs to create the conditions to stimulate investment and local bodies need to deliver on the ground. There is also a recognition that the public's mindsets need to be influenced in order to help town centres thrive. Allied to this, **a strong and proactive planning policy framework for town centres is encouraged.**

Town centres should not just be focussed on retail; a mix of complementary uses such as healthcare, culture, leisure, learning, working, living and also flexible spaces ought to be encouraged to assist with improving the vitality of centres.

It is recognised that Planning Policy Wales (PPW) already requires a sequential test to be undertaken for out-of-centre retail developments, but the committee also noted that not all out-of-centre development is necessarily negative.

During the inquiry, WG advised the committee that one in three appeals against local authority refusals to grant permission for out-of-centre retail development are subsequently allowed. However this is not particularly high compared with the success rate of any appeal.

Whereas local authorities and other bodies such as Sustrans are concerned about out-of-centre development (they view that it should be a last resort), the private sector, including the British Retail Consortium, took the view that consumers must come first.

There were differing views on the impact of car-parking on town centres, such as the effects of charging for parking in centres set against the availability of free parking at supermarkets out of town. Other bodies also noted that some significant parts of the population do not have access to a car, such as 66% of single pensioners in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

According to the report, there are different views, both in academia and in practice, about the impact of supermarkets on town centres. In some locations, supermarkets can support and increase the footfall in centres, but usually an out-of-centre store is likely to have a more negative impact.

It is noted from the report that several bodies have said that the Wales Spatial Plan has lost its way and doesn't serve to the best of its potential. This is something DLP agree with and indeed commented on in our response to the Call for Evidence ([http://www.dlpconsultants.co.uk/planning/news\\_detail.php?id=773](http://www.dlpconsultants.co.uk/planning/news_detail.php?id=773)).

One recommendation of the report is that WG should establish ministerial leadership for town centres and also set up a policy forum that brings together different departments and representatives from all sectors.

The planning-related recommendations include:

- That WG take measures to **ensure PPW protects town centres** from potential impacts from out-of-town retail.
- That WG commission more research on the effects of supermarkets on the quality of town centres; also that **the impact of all supermarket proposals, irrespective of location, upon town centres should be properly assessed.**
- That LPAs should see office and workplace development as a means of increasing footfall in centres and that they should carefully assess potential negative impacts from any out-of-centre proposals.
- That WG ensure that the development of **integrated sustainable transport in centres is a priority** in the delivery of the National Transport Plan and that the integration of transport is integral to regeneration and redevelopment plans.
- That **WG update the Technical Advice Note on Planning and Retailing** to include guidance for LPAs about imposing conditions regarding more flexible working hours for town centre premises and elongating the daytime economy towards the night time economy.
- That WG works with local authorities to **develop a planned innovative approach that incentivises property owners to let vacant town centre properties (and upstairs) for living and working uses** that could contribute to vitality but not undermine long term values.
- That LPAs set out **positive visions for town centres and high streets within their LDP**. Also that **LDPs should contain action points and plans for addressing issues affecting the viability of town centres.**

These recommendations are an obvious response to the perception that out-of-centre retail developments are a threat to town centres; wider lifestyle issues such as changing shopping habits seem to be glossed over somewhat. The thrust of the report does seem to encourage proactive approaches to planning for retailing via the Local Development Plan rather than controlling development proposals through the planning application process.

It is pleasing however that the report identifies that town centres are not solely shopping areas; mixed uses, flexible operation of premises and spaces, and moves to draw together the day-time and night-time economy should be encouraged and supported. There is a sense of the report wishing to see the public sector create a framework on which the various components of the private sector can flourish.

It remains to be seen how the Welsh Government will respond to these recommendations, but they give a reasonable indication of issues and potential actions to be considered as Wales moves towards its own Planning Bill.

**DLP Planning are monitoring all matters discussed about the planning system in Wales and will continue to advise on 'the direction of travel'. DLP also have wide experience of retail planning across both England and Wales, whether in support of retail proposals, reviewing schemes on behalf of Local Authorities or preparing evidence base studies underpinning development plans.**

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