

Committee: **Regeneration Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **21st October 2020**
Report Subject: **Town Centre Task and Finish and Economic Response following COVID-19**
Portfolio Holder: **Councillor D Davies, Deputy Leader & Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development**
Report Submitted by: **Amy Taylor, Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
X	x	12.10.20			21.10.20			

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1. For members of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee to receive a status update on the work of the Task and Finish Group and agree to re-establish the task and finish group to continue their work on a Town Centre Strategy.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1. In December 2019, the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee approved a report to establish a Town Centre Strategy Task and Finish Group.
- 2.2. Members agreed that the group membership would consist of the following Scrutiny Committee Members:
- Councillor Joanna Wilkins
 - Councillor Keri Rowson
 - Councillor Wayne Hodgins
 - Councillor Phil Edwards
 - Councillor John Morgan
 - Councillor Lee Parsons
 - Councillor John Hill
- 2.3. The members above were selected to ensure that all town centres would have representation from a local Ward Member.
- 2.4. Two meetings of the Task and Finish Group were held prior to a UK wide lockdown being announced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2.5. The first meeting held on 30th January 2020 and explored the key areas requiring consideration as part of the strategy and work of the task and finish group. These discussions included:
- Infrastructure (accessibility, user friendliness, enforcement)
 - Common services underpinning town centres

- Mixed uses in town centres (residential above shops vs edge of town)
 - Event facilitation
 - Public conveniences
- 2.6. A further meeting was held on 9th March 2020 and included a site meeting to Aneurin Bevan House in Tredegar.
- 2.7. On 23rd March 2020, the UK entered full lockdown as a result of a global COVID-19 pandemic and activity in relation to the task and finish group did not progress any further.
- 2.8. In the 2020 Council AGM, Councillor Joanna Wilkins was successful in being appointed the Executive Member for Environment, therefore, she would no longer sit upon the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee. Despite this, there still remains representation for the towns across remaining members.

Present Position

- 2.9. Although progress of the task and finish group stopped as a result of COVID-19 in March, progress was still made to support the future work of the task and finish group and development of a Town Centre Strategy.
- 2.10. Following a ministerial announcement in January 2020, during March the Council was invited by the Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government to submit an application to receive revenue funding support. Each Local Authority across Wales was able to access up to £25,000 at 100% funding through the Welsh Government Transforming Towns programme.
- 2.11. The money was earmarked for spend on a menu of possible options which included developing masterplans; digital projects and provisions; community/stakeholder engagement; empty property/enforcement work; green infrastructure audit; place branding.
- 2.12. In order to secure their share of the funding each Local Authority had to submit an application outlining how they would propose to utilise the allocated funding. Within Blaenau Gwent work is already underway to develop masterplans for the Towns and we are working with Welsh Government on their programme to tackle empty and derelict buildings across town centres.
- 2.13. Our proposal therefore proposed to take forward an overall place branding approach for Blaenau Gwent which will then supported by each of the towns and the areas they most want to 'shout' about. This would also be supported through the investigation of how a digital approach can support the traditional 'bricks and mortar' trading.
- 2.14. Alongside the place branding work, an agreed programme of marketing and communications to support the town centres will be developed and put into action with support from the Town Centre Forums. This piece of work will help establish the town identities and messages the towns wish to promote.

- 2.15. This work will also form a key strand within the future Town Centre Strategy from a marketing and communications perspective. The Council has also recently completed the recruitment process for a Town Centre Business Development Officer role. This role will play a key part in the delivery of the Town Centre Strategy and supporting the Town Centre businesses.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1. Option 1

To re-establish the task and finish group (with the existing membership) and recommence their consideration of the Town Centre strategy. The group would revisit previous areas considered to ensure that they align with any COVID-19 adaptations that may be required but the focus would be upon the remaining areas not yet discussed with a view towards concluding the work of the task and finish group as soon as possible.

3.2. Option 2

To close the previous task and finish group and establish a new group to take the work forward.

Preferred Option

- 3.3. The preferred option is to re-establish the existing task and finish group. The existing members of the Task and Finish group are familiar with the previous work undertaken and were working alongside the team to reach an agreed Town Centre strategy for presentation back to Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.

- 3.4. It is likely that nominations for any new group would include the members that sat upon the previous group and to make the progress that will enable this work to support our businesses in their recovery from COVID-19 restrictions and the continuing challenges of town centres as soon as possible.

- 3.5. In advance of the first task and finish meeting members will be provided with a briefing note of previous discussions along with a short presentation at the start of the first meeting to refresh previous discussions and confirm the next steps. This meeting will also include a discussion and agreement on timescales for the task and finish meetings and reporting of the outcomes of the task and finish group.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

- 4.1. The report supports the following Corporate Plan priorities:

- To protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities;
- To support a fairer sustainable economy and community; and
- An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to our communities.

The Town Centre strategy will consider existing infrastructure within our town centres and explore ways that this can change to support regeneration activity.

4.2. It also supports delivery of the Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan:

- Safe and friendly communities;
- To look after and protect the environment;
- To forge new pathways to prosperity; and
- To encourage and enable people to make healthy lifestyle choices in the places that they live, learn, work and play

The Town Centre strategy will seek to ensure that our town centres are safe and friendly communities for our residents and visitors to shop within. This will include projects to maintain and enhance the local environment, increase business occupancy and create an environment in our town centres that encourages our residents to spend time there for work, learning and leisure.

4.3. In supporting our statutory responsibilities towards the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act, the Town Centre Strategy will support in creating:

- A more prosperous Wales;
- A resilient Wales; and
- A Wales of cohesive communities

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

Cost

5.1. There are no direct cost implications to the Council for the areas discussed with this report. The Council has secured £25,000 revenue funding to support the work of the Town Centre Business Development Officer. This funding is 100% funded through Welsh Government for the 2020/21 financial year.

Risk including Mitigating Actions

5.2. There is a risk that further spikes within the COVID-19 pandemic could further delay the work of the task and finish group. This will be mitigated by utilising virtual meeting facilities where possible.

5.3. Site visits could increase the risk of attendees becoming infected with COVID-19. Site visits will only be arranged if they are essential to the work of the task and finish group and will be subject to COVID-19 safety measures (this will be considered at the time of the visits).

Legal

5.4. There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

Human Resources

5.5. Regeneration have recently completed the recruitment process to appoint a Town Centre Business Development Officer. The post will be responsible for

taking forward the Town Centre strategy and developing the partnerships and collaborations that will enable the priorities to be taken forward.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)

- 6.1. The task and finish group consists of members of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee. Future work will include wider stakeholders including town centre forums and town centre businesses.

Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)

- 6.2. The work of the Task and Finish group alongside the agreement of a Town Centre strategy will establish a long term plan for the future of our town centres.

Preventative focus

- 6.3. Town Centres across the UK have suffered a long period of decline which has been further exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19. There are however areas of alternative approaches and business initiative which should be capitalised upon in order to reduce the potential for even further decline.

Collaboration / partnership working

- 6.4. It will be essential that delivery of the Town Centre strategy is done on a collaborative and partnership working basis. It shall be a key role of the Town Centre Business Development Officer once in post to establish key networks and bring together a collaborative and partnership approach that will be used to deliver on our priorities together in the future.

Integration(across service areas)

- 6.5. As described above, future work will create a wider network of stakeholders and this will include officers from across other service areas which either support or impact upon the future of our town centres.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

- 7.1. As part of the Welsh Government Transforming Towns revenue funding we are required to report on our activity and the impact it has upon the towns. In addition reporting on this priority will be included within the departments business plan reporting.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- *Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Report – 9th December 2019*
- *Town Centre Strategy – Scrutiny Task and Finish Group Template (Appendix 1 to the 2019 Report)*
[Blaenau Gwent CBC: Democracy](#)