



Report of the Head of Planning and City Regeneration
Economy, Environment & Infrastructure Policy Development
Committee – 18 February 2021

High Street Regeneration and Empty premises

Purpose:	To update the Committee on actions being undertaken to regenerate High Street and address empty premises.
Policy Framework:	South West Regional Economic Delivery Plan
Consultation:	Access to Services, Finance, Legal.
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FOR INFORMATION	

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Swansea High Street is the historic commercial backbone of Swansea, linking through Castle Street to Wind Street, containing a number of pre-war buildings and structures with great character. Post-war developments over time shifted the commercial centre of gravity reducing the retail significance of High Street itself, further compounded by out of town shopping centres transferring many retailers out of the city centre to lower cost locations and more recently online retailing. These issues are not unique to Swansea, and there are many activities underway exploring and implementing ways of addressing this.

1.2 Alongside investments by the Council and Welsh Government, Coastal housing in particular have invested in excess of £30m in new social housing and commercial space, which is increasingly populated by a variety of independent businesses and community activity, creating the green shoots of a new sense of vibrancy.

2. Regenerating High Street

2.1 The issues faced by High Street in Swansea City Centre is no different to those of similar locations across all cities, towns and local and district centres.

2.2 Many people have fond memories of bustling retail centres with multiple smaller shops selling a wide variety of goods and services, from the smallest village shop to the Georgian splendour of pre-war Swansea town centre. At every stage these retail locations were surrounded by extensive residential zones. The only reason for retail centres to exist is if there is a population needing access to retail and services to make them viable.

2.3 As shopping habits and needs change, arguably we are at the peak of the online shopping revolution, accentuated by the impact of the pandemic, which has pushed several trends harder and faster, in particular a move to working from home and using online ordering of even the most basic goods. Despite those dramatic headline facts, working from home has to an extent encouraged people to consider local alternatives to large-scale online providers. Where small local retailers have been able to establish an online presence and a delivery service they have been able to benefit from this trend. Arguably it does not need a major shift from large scale retail to enable multiple smaller providers to achieve sufficient sales to make them viable, and also maintain a physical shopfront presence. A steady increase in provision of all types and scales of housing in proximity to traditional retail locations is a further factor that will drive the need for more service provision.

2.4 As well as adapting to online/deliveries as well as a physical retail presence, there is an opportunity for new types of offer. Recent announcements of adventure and play-type activities are one good example of this, occupying former retail units with only minor adaptation required. An increase in local independent food and beverage offer is a further example, picking up on a desire for more authentic experiences in dining and socialising. All of the units forming part of the Copr Bay development are being let to local independent firms. New outlets that have opened on High Street during the pandemic are similarly new independent Swansea businesses taking advantage of newly refurbished units created with grant and loan support from Welsh Government through Swansea Council under the Transforming Towns banner.

2.5 Whilst there are many empty units creating a negative perception, enquiries made via the Council business development team often reveal that negotiations are already underway to refurbish and occupy these units, which are often working through financial, legal and planning processes that are confidential in the early stages. Reassurance can be given that despite appearances there are plans in hand for the majority of vacant premises. It can take several years to

complete negotiations and draw up plans for complex situations and funding packages which are commercially sensitive.

2.6 The Economic Recovery Plan sets out the range of initiatives that form the wider package of support needed for both the core retailing streets of the City Centre and the ancillary zones such as High Street. This applies equally to our district high streets.

2.7 For High Street Swansea, a range of programmes are already being deployed through the Transforming Towns package of measures. At the present time there is an extensive range of tools in place to support regeneration of High Street City Centre and wider, including:

- property enhancement grant for new commercial space and ‘homes above shops’ funding to release vacant upper floors for market housing.
- The Palace Theatre, as per the existing Swansea Central Area Regeneration Framework is the catalyst building for upper High Street, with the refurbishment works now on site and end tenant signed up.
- 0% Town Centre loan scheme
- Council investment in the small retail units in Dyfatty including community engagement and integrating a range of support services to help address the harsher problems but also build on interest in creation of new small businesses and community activities
- Meanwhile use programme underway via Urban Foundry repurposing indoor vacant space (retail, leisure, commercial) for meanwhile uses to support growth and sustainability of new and existing business
- Support businesses to adapt to outdoor trading/ social distancing through delivery of Transforming Towns (TT) Premises Outdoor Adaption Grant (POAG) in city and district centres
- Explore potential for pop up activity (food related, cultural events etc) in city and district centres and the beachfront
- Continued investment in private rented/ owned city centre living
- Administration of WG Covid-19 financial support grants for local businesses
- start-up and enterprise service now available
- Small scale business grants (capital and revenue) to support new business starts
- Shopfront improvement grants of up to £10k cross-county
- Shop local Shop Swansea campaign to support local businesses
- Provision of low cost, flexible business premises (office, retail, leisure) on easy access terms to make it easier to start up a new business
- Continuing to provide modern, flexible floorspace and co-working space to accommodate new and growing businesses.
- Develop local hub concept
- Business pathway tool kit – online resources
- Extend and adapt employability provision to continue supporting clients, including those who are newly unemployed
- Utilise labour market and business intelligence gained through the delivery of programmes, networks and business development function

to identify vacancy trends and skills needs to help shape service delivery and create career pathways.

- Dedicated resource to support self-employment/ entrepreneurship
- Establish small start-up bursaries to support business starts/ self-employment
- Promote green infrastructure investment through delivery of the pilot Green Infrastructure schemes

2.8 Housing colleagues are also progressing the refurbishment of Croft Street residential tower. The ground floor areas currently accommodating the District Housing Office are proposed to be converted into accommodation with this relocated, potentially to two of the vacant retail units nearby, to complement the meanwhile uses described above, creating further footfall and active uses on this frontage onto High Street.

2.9 Resurfacing of the road between Ebenezer Street and College Street is taking place now, as part of an ongoing programme of public realm improvements.

2.10 In addition to these measures **Empty Premises** work is now supported by an Enforcement Action Plan created working with Welsh Government, again as part of the Transforming Towns initiative. This has involved briefings and training to ensure full understanding of routes available to encourage development of vacant or derelict sites and buildings, supported by a loan fund to enable works to be completed in certain circumstances. The action plan outlines the extensive range of options that can be called on in planning legislation to support regeneration of such sites, from simple negotiation to the last resort of compulsory purchase orders. Over time various key sites and buildings will be targeted to support them back into productive use.

3. Actions

3.1 The Recovery Plan actions are in progress and being delivered, adapting as more is learned about emerging trends and requirements. To update on the actions from February 2021:

- Grant funding allocated to local businesses through the Premises Outdoor Adaptions Grant, to support local businesses to adapt to social distancing requirements majority completed.
- Continuing to administer Welsh Government covid-19 financial support to local businesses through schemes such as direct NDR support and discretionary grants
- Recruitment of new business development officers was completed in March 2021 working under the Business Swansea banner and delivering a range of business support that has included start up grants, themed online seminars and increasing engagement with businesses across Swansea
- Shop Local Shop Swansea campaign rolled out across county, timed with easing of restrictions at different stages over the past 12 months
- Wide range of employability provision including Kickstart placements

- 44 start up bursaries issued to date

- 3.2 The Dyfatty Community Hub proposals outlined in February 2021 around the vacant shop units are progressing well, presenting a great opportunity to locate and test these approaches working closely with all relevant support services and providing a real opportunity to act as enablers in giving local people in particular the tools they need to strengthen the community and generate positive micro-business opportunities. Four of the six units are now refurbished with utilities activated. Initial community engagement has been undertaken, and support will be provided to various groups and individuals to try out their ideas which include new small businesses, support activities and services. Engagement activity has been very positive. In addition the former Lamb pub is acting as the site office for the Palace Theatre works, in itself creating footfall and creating a temporary use of an existing building complementary to the activities that will start in the shop units shortly.
- 3.3 The enforcement action plan is in place and work is starting on initial schemes.
- 3.4 The key is integration of these activities – no one sector or area of work has all the answers, but the opportunity to create a positive and cost-effective environment to enable people to realise their own futures is real, with a holistic package of support available at the same time at the right time.
- 3.5 As outlined above the report highlights positive progress as part of the overall recovery and how these actions can specifically assist in the regeneration of High Street in the City Centre as well as similar locations across our county.
- 3.6 The views of the PDC are welcome as to the actions set out and any areas that they would specifically wish to add as part of the work plan for the PDC in the months to come.

2 Financial Implications

- 2.1 As this report is for information there are no additional financial implications falling on the authority. The financial implications of individual schemes are included within other reports e.g. Palace Theatre FPR7 report.

3 Legal Implications

- 3.1 As this report is for information there are no additional legal implications falling on the authority.

4 Integrated Assessment Implications

- 4.1 The Council is subject to the Equality Act (Public Sector Equality Duty and the socio-economic duty), the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure, and must in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Acts.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Deliver better outcomes for those people who experience socio-economic disadvantage
- Consider opportunities for people to use the Welsh language
- Treat the Welsh language no less favourably than English.
- Ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

4.2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 mandates that public bodies in Wales must carry out sustainable development. Sustainable development means the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the 'well-being goals'.

4.3 Our Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process ensures we have paid due regard to the above. It also takes into account other key issues and priorities, such as poverty and social exclusion, community cohesion, carers, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Welsh language.

4.4 All projects and initiatives referenced in this report are subject to their own Integrated Impact Assessment.