

Enterprise and Business Committee

Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration

Evidence from Robert Croydon, Representative in Wales, the Princes Foundation for the Built Environment

Background

The Enterprise and Business Committee of the National Assembly for Wales has invited views on the following issues as part of a consultation process on the regeneration of town centres;

- The roles the Welsh Government and local authorities play in the regeneration of town centres.
- The extent to which businesses and communities are engaged with the public sector led town centre regeneration projects or initiatives, and vice versa.
- The factors affecting the mix of residential, commercial and retail premises found in town centres - for example, the impact of business rates policy; footfall patterns and issues surrounding the night-time and daytime economies within town centres.
- The impact of out-of-town retail sites on nearby town centres .
- The use of funding sources and innovative financial solutions to contribute to town centre regeneration – including the Regeneration Investment Fund for Wales; the use of Business Improvement Districts; structural funds; Welsh Government, local authority and private sector investment.
- The importance of sustainable and integrated transport in town centres– including traffic management, parking and access.
- The potential impact of marketing and image on the regeneration of town centres – such as tourism, signage, public art, street furniture, lighting and safety concerns.
- The extent to which town centre regeneration initiatives can seek to provide greater employment opportunities for local people.

The Princes Foundation for the Built Environment (The Foundation) is an educational charity which seeks to improve the quality of people's lives by teaching and practicing timeless and sustainable ways of planning, designing and building. Drawing upon practice based learning the Foundation teaches

skills to support successful place making and demonstrate principles which put people and the communities of which they are a part at the centre of regeneration and development projects.

Over the last 25 years, The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment has developed strong working partnerships with many of the leading stakeholders in urban design and architecture, both in the UK and internationally. By actively and passionately promoting both a diligent application of time-tested principles, as well as a deeper understanding of the importance of building in a more sustainable way, there has been a burgeoning recognition of the possibility of easily achieved improvements in public health, and affordable, livelier and safer streets and communities.

Another of the Foundations fundamental beliefs is that lives and livelihoods can be enhanced and improved simply by implementing proper planning consultations, as well as through the practice of timeless and ecological design and build processes. The strength of such communities and the value of such lifestyles will have long and far reaching benefits not only for the people living within them, but also in economic terms, both locally and nationally.

By investing in education and sharing knowledge and practices now, we can create an invaluable rich legacy for generations to come.

Some of the Foundations work in Wales and elsewhere is outlined in the following submission.

Further information on the Princes Foundation for the Built Environment may be obtained from its website;

<http://www.princes-foundation.org>

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In 2007 he joined the Princes Foundation for the Built Environment on secondment from King Sturge, retiring from the partnership the following year to join the Foundation as its Representative in Wales. A full CV is available on request.

SUBMISSION

- 1 The extent to which businesses and communities are engaged with the public sector led town centre regeneration projects or initiatives, and vice versa.

Meaningful and effective community engagement has at best been variable in many town centre regeneration projects in Wales. At one extreme some projects have been implemented with minimal local engagement, at the other some exemplary town schemes have been implemented through local community initiatives with little public sector support.

Examples offered of the former may include several retail redevelopments promoted by the Land Authority for Wales, the WDA and some local authorities which were perceived as being imposed upon communities. Implementation of such projects in partnership with commercial property developers may sometimes have promised or had local 'consultation' which at best amounted to public exhibitions or presentations of proposals.

Examples of the latter community led regeneration of towns will recur through this submission as projects which deliver many of the principles promoted by the Princes Foundation

In many major regeneration projects the question is then posed -"who is it for?" Often it may be claimed that the 'community' is the principle beneficiary but that term has often been poorly defined. In some major regeneration projects the local community may perceive little direct benefit in terms of environment, amenity or their own financial well being. Such community benefit may be more readily identifiable in those places where towns have been revived by the actions of local people, with or without the support of local or regional government and their agencies.

In the Foundations view effective and meaningful engagement with the community is critical and the process of **Enquiry by Design(EbD)** developed by the Foundation is central to this. An outline of this process, which seeks to maximize stakeholder engagement to collaborate in creating a vision for new or revived communities can be downloaded from;

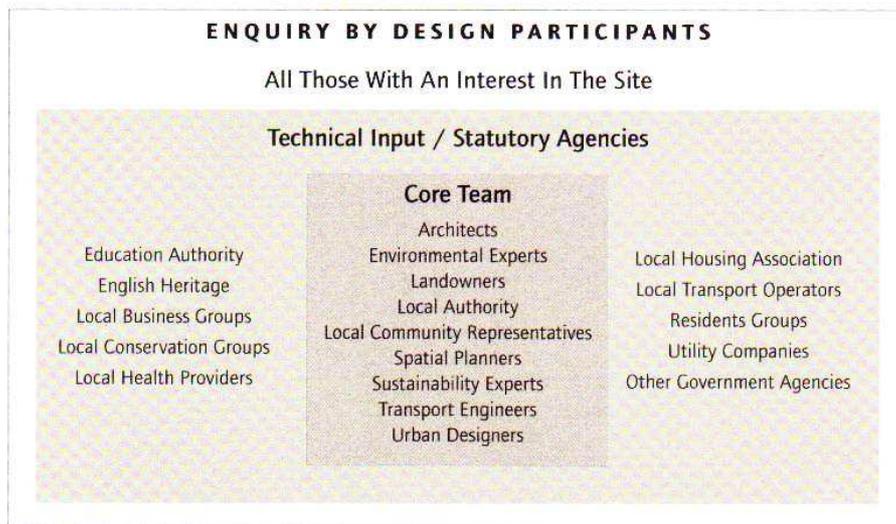
www.princes-foundation.org/sites/default/files/enquiry_by_design_ebd_pdf.pdf

or further information can be provided on request.

The Foundation for the Built Environment considers effective engagement of ALL stakeholders essential for a number of reasons. These are outlined in the course of the following issues to be addressed but the properly facilitated early involvement of the local community to create – or re-create- places which have a civilizing influence, meet people’s needs, desires and aspirations and engender civic pride has encouraged a pro-active and holistic approach to planning and, in our experience, ensured;

- a) wider ownership of proposals
- b) greater participation in the formulation of a vision and its implementation
- c) provided more accurate ‘market testing’ of such proposals

The range of participants will vary but may be broadly illustrated as follows;



The role of some of these in the successful revival of town centres is outlined below. The Foundation has conducted some forms of EbD in Wales but to date such engagement has been minimal compared to that with the Scottish Government who have made much more extensive use of the process in town centre regeneration. Forms of EbD also appear to be now used more widely there as a matter of course than in Wales.

Successful engagement through forms of EbD do of course rely on meaningful collaboration and clearly some communities are better equipped and resourced locally than others. This may be self evident in those cases of towns which have successfully implemented their own reinvention (Narberth, Llandeilo, Hay on Wye) or simply continued to prosper (Abergavenny, Crickhowell). Such resources may be characterised as greater knowledge, wealth, creativity than less

advantaged communities but an important factor is the collective will and cohesion of such communities in the successful realization of a vision, whether it be that of a small active group or a wider community. Strong local chambers of trade and commerce may be more effective in this respect than elected representatives of the community.

Through practice and experience the Foundation recognizes the power of specific self interest groups whether they be commercial, political, environmental or whatever and has sought to ensure that wider- and perhaps less vocal or articulate- community interests are properly represented in the process. With this objective the Foundations preliminary scoping workshops serve to identify areas where such interests may need to be assisted and supplemented. Some of the more obvious areas may be technical – highways, engineering, environmental etc- and with the other 'softer' skill requirements such as marketing and branding are referred to below. Basically 'communities' may lack such expertise and the role of the Foundation is to identify what is needed and ensure that it is provided as effective facilitation for the wider community. This is central to the Foundations objectives as an educational charity.

On this point we then return to the provision of such resources by local/ regional government and their agencies in town centre regeneration projects in Wales. The first point is that such expertise has been variable. This may be best evidenced at local authority level where the more successful and better equipped authorities may be manifested in the relative health of their principle towns. Perhaps the most obvious example of failure is the centre of Swansea, our second largest settlement. Numerous smaller towns evidence the failure to manage change whilst others (Carmarthen, Brecon, Neath, Cardigan), in my subjective view, do not appear to display the worst symptoms of town centre decay and some of these town have actually improved in recent years.

Good stewardship of towns and the management of change should be central to local government and the issue here is their ability to secure and maintain the required levels of skill and expertise needed. In Wales we have relatively small local government units and it is questionable whether they are of sufficient size to attract, develop and maintain the required skills.

As regards regional government and its agencies its role might be to ensure that the required skills are available as a central resource. The Welsh Development Agency (WDA) and Land Authority for Wales (LAW) might have been said to have provided such a resource. This was to some degree compromised by the sub-regional structure of the WDA, and in its latter years its incorporation of the Land Authority for Wales and Development Board for Rural Wales. Instead of having a concentration of expertise and proven success dealing with like problems in comparable towns individuals were allocated to specific areas. Some towns got lucky by having skilled people allocated to them who could provide effective leadership and expertise to communities and developed meaningful engagement between local stakeholders. Others did not.

In this context we may briefly return to local government, the variability of required skills from locality to locality. Regeneration – or more accurately financial intervention by the public sector to address market failure – became a distinct commercial occupation in Wales particularly. I draw a deliberate distinction between such occupation and *profession* in addressing what has clearly also been a variable contribution of regeneration ‘experts’. This again was partly compounded by public sector procurement policy which was frequently geared to the lowest common denominator of securing ‘half a job for half the price’ or ‘cheapest possible option’.

One effect of this was to ensure that the more expert/ expensive/professional consultants were engaged by the private sector ‘partners’ in regeneration projects leaving those of their competitors to engage in the unseemly Dutch auctions of public sector tenders.

One should not leave this issue without returning to the more positive comments on regeneration agencies. Whilst offering variable levels of skill and commitment to the regeneration of communities the Welsh Development Agency appears to have been far better recognized and far better engaged with the property and construction industry and other stakeholders than the Welsh Government is now. The current perception appears to be that the Welsh Government does not offer such skills and assistance to that industry nor to communities. Those town centre regeneration initiatives that it is sponsoring appear to be confined to the Heads of the Valleys Initiative and Newport Unlimited, both of which are considered under-resourced for the issues that they are charged with addressing.

In conclusion it may be noted that a recent report for the Scottish Government – *Better Places, Scotland* – recommended that a Scottish development Agency be re-established as a matter of priority to provide a visible and effective interface between regional government and other stakeholders in regeneration and development.

- 2 The factors affecting the mix of residential, commercial and retail premises found in town centres - for example, the impact of business rates policy; footfall patterns and issues surrounding the night-time and daytime economies within town centres.

The Princes Foundation for the Built Environment is committed to several principles including the promotion of mixed use, mixed income and mixed tenure to ensure lively, safe and sustainable places.

In the course of the recent property boom we witnessed the welcome re-population of some town centres through extensive apartment development but there are some aspects of this speculative development activity that attract negative comment. Much of this may relate to the subsequent property crash in that many apartment blocks currently accommodate tenants, the private sector activity being dominated by speculative purchases including ‘buy to let’. In

consequence neither the owners nor the occupiers of such property are long term stakeholders in the community. In the longer term a more positive aspect may be the inroads made in returning vacant accommodation over shops to residential use.

On retail use itself the plain fact is that shopping patterns have been changing for decades and change more quickly than the physical fabric of towns. Many of the shops in our towns were originally residential properties and were adapted for retail use as shopping demand grew. In consequence the linear streets that characterize the centre of many settlements now evidence long 'tails' of very secondary retail activity or vacant retail premises that are not reverting to their original use for economic or other reasons.

Coupled with this has been a prevailing attitude of 'out with the old and in with the new' in town centre regeneration initiatives. Large scale demolition, reconstruction of shopping centres – and the consequent privatization of once public space- road access 'improvement' and other physical reconstruction has resulted in the loss of a distinctive character of many town centres. Most of the towns which may be considered successful above are those least affected by such development. In several cases retaining the essential and distinctive character of a place by encouraging the adaptive re-use of buildings appears to have been more successful than major redevelopment. One must concede that market towns have had the advantage of being able to facilitate change by redeveloping former livestock markets but many of our (post) industrial towns might, in hindsight, have revitalized their centres more effectively than through demolition of buildings of character and replacement with enclosed shopping centres and multi storey car parks.

However, importing ideas and aspirations from apparently successful projects elsewhere does not appear to have been a success overall. Those towns that have had a genuine belief in themselves and a vision that has reinforced their sense of place appear to have been those that have succeeded. The underlying problem elsewhere is that the promoters of regeneration have a scheme not a dream.

Encouraging and managing evolutionary change of building use must also be addressed. An example may be under used shops with residential accommodation above which would be suitable for (re) conversion to 'live/work units'. The Foundation has encountered resistance from planning authorities to the development of 'live/work units', particularly in market towns where the need for such accommodation has been voiced in community consultation. Such resistance on the part of development control officers is considered 'ironic' in such towns where many of the (often listed) buildings were originally 'live/ work units' whether shop, post office, farrier, dairy, or whatever.

The concept to be understood in the foregoing points is that of 'pace change' and it is critical in ensuring that town centres are sustainable. In essence this is that occupational demand changes in property sectors and buildings that are able to accommodate such change will prove to be enduring and therefore sustainable in terms of a longer life and their lower life cycle cost.

Business rates are clearly a factor in extending the commercial life of retail properties in our High Streets and diluting their appeal to users. An obvious example is the proliferation of charity shops. Giving comparable relief to local ratepayers who wish to establish retail outlets may address some of the local economic development issues addressed below. Similar assistance extended to those engaged in the 'creative industries'/ arts and crafts has proved to be beneficial elsewhere.

3 The impact of out-of-town retail sites on nearby town centres.

This is self evident, has been well documented elsewhere and is the source of constant discussion. As noted above shoppers have voted increasingly with their wheels over the course of recent generations and shopping patterns have changed. If the cost of the car and fuel to their shopping bill were added in, the advantages of local shopping would be more apparent but the perceived convenience against the pressures of time etc still weigh in favour of weekly shopping at drive up retail stores. This is an important issue to consider in the current economy. Recent research suggests that there has been a greater decline in recreational use of private motor cars than in their 'essential' use. Might it be the case that even in the face of increasing fuel and other costs the use of the car for the weekly trip to the foodstore is considered essential? Conversely the outing to, say, Hay on Wye or Narberth for 'leisure shopping' may be taken less frequently in the face of such costs.

Another short point to be made under this heading must be that out –of-town retail sites might also include other towns. One cannot ignore the impact of the major centres, particularly Cardiff. The city region is a given in property markets and nowhere is this better evidenced than in the hierarchy of retail rental values. As with other areas of commercial, cultural and leisure activity no town centre in South East Wales- probably South Wales- can compete with the retail offer of Cardiff. Any town centre regeneration strategy that does not recognize that is bound to fail. This may seem a rather obvious point but the Welsh Government does not have a Spatial Plan which recognizes the pre-eminence of its city regions.

That said a spatial plan is not necessarily a solution, particularly one that presents constraints on places by imposition of a rigid hierarchy of towns thereby limiting potential investment and support. What many town centre regeneration projects have lacked is a genuine *vision* and a plan is no substitute for that.

- 4 The use of funding sources and innovative financial solutions to contribute to town centre regeneration – including the Regeneration Investment Fund for Wales; the use of Business Improvement Districts; structural funds; Welsh Government, local authority and private sector investment.

The short comment on this is that we appear to have been lacking innovation rather than innovative financial solutions. A lot of money has been spent on a lot of town centre regeneration projects in Wales and this current consultation needs to be supplemented by some forensic research by properly qualified, reputable and totally independent people. As noted above Regeneration has become a byword for financial intervention by the public sector in Wales and the long term benefit to many recipient towns is not that obvious. Such research may of course establish that they would be much worse places now but for such intervention.

As to current financial initiatives these appear at best labyrinthine and at worst unintelligible other than to those who have made it their business to excel in the abstraction of available subsidies.

Development partnerships, Section 106 and other planning agreements are a subject which require an entirely separate round of consultation and discussion.

- 5 The importance of sustainable and integrated transport in town centres– including traffic management, parking and access.

The primacy of the private motor car in planning policy is, together with the overall lack of prosperity in Wales, central to most of the problems that beset our towns. The Foundation is firmly of the view that sustainable places are designed around people. From its direct experience the Foundation has also found that the adoption and application of national standards of highway design to be entirely inappropriate and that highways, access and parking must be the subject of detailed local design as appropriate to the size and inherent character of towns.

Put simply the character of many of our towns has been adversely affected by insensitive application of highway access and parking and more intelligent and innovative design is critical to ensure that towns are made truly sustainable.

The Foundation has also, of course, carried out extensive research and implemented sustainable and integrated transport in practice and would welcome the opportunity to do so in Wales. Public transport hubs – particularly railway stations- should be central to town centre regeneration. I note only in passing that the public investment in Newport Station railway was recognized in a citation of that structure in the 2011 Carbuncle Awards.

- 6 The potential impact of marketing and image on the regeneration of town centres – such as tourism, signage, public art, street furniture, lighting and safety concerns.

Marketing and Image are clearly important but the Foundation would caution that in its experience it is the substance not the slogan that is more meaningful in the long term. The appropriate quotation here may be “you can call a cow a horse but it won’t win the Derby”. As noted above the Foundation has called in those with the required skills to enable communities to identify and develop those unique qualities that may allow them to realize an achievable vision for the regeneration of their town. The key word here is ‘unique’. If we accept that everywhere has history, heritage and culture then we might conclude that leisure is more important than tourism. Put simply the priority then is for towns to be first and foremost sublime places for the people who live there. Those towns which appear to be successful are those that have carved out a specific role for themselves and, as a result, attract a niche consumer whose requirements are often aligned with the residents of that place.

In many of the scoping workshops that have preceded EbD’s one of the initial questions put to community representatives is “name five things you love about this place”. An important outcome of the EbD process is reinforcement of a sense of belief in place, a full audit and rehearsal of the positive aspects of a place. Success comes from a place knowing and realising its assets and using these resources in a manner that allows it to position, brand and market itself in a highly differentiated manner. The positioning and brand values then help to define the product development requirements in line with a clear vision.

This is, in our view, critical to the formulation of a shared vision for regeneration of towns, one that is meaningful to its existing inhabitants. Marketing and advertising rely upon conditioned power. A feature of conditioned power is its bi-modal symmetry power- the strength and reliability of its external power depend on the depth and certainty of the internal submission. In this context we must ask whether a community can persuade others to visit it when they are more aware of its shortcomings than its attractions.

As to marketing and advertising it seems fairly evident that reputation and recommendation are generally worth more. If we make great places then over time their reputation will spread and recommendation to visit or invest in them will follow. No matter how catchy the slogan it will probably be drowned in the clamour of competing claims.

On the matter of signage we might usefully consider this part of problem not the solution. Another of the Foundations core principles is that places be legible and that the design of public spaces including street furniture, signage and lighting etc be part of a harmonious whole. What we have in abundance may be described as clutter. Town centres are not regenerated by planting faux- Victorian signposts, litter bins and benches among traffic lights and their attendant control boxes, traffic signs and galvanized metal pedestrian barriers.

7 The extent to which town centre regeneration initiatives can seek to provide greater employment opportunities for local people.

Again this is absolutely critical for town centre regeneration. A successful community takes into account all of its capital — natural, financial, social and built — and The Prince's Foundation believes that using a holistic approach to build community capital will provide a base for a vibrant and lasting environment. Effective and continuous community engagement and co-design leads to greater community empowerment and leadership — essential elements of success and sustainability.

The development of skills is central to this as is the encouragement and support for indigenous enterprise.

The Committee would also welcome any recommendations on what measures could be used to evaluate success of initiatives undertaken to regenerate town centres.

I have mentioned above the need for a thorough independent appraisal of public sector investment in town centre regeneration projects and the possibility that such research may conclude that decline has, in some case, been mitigated if not arrested. Perhaps the most important point I may make to conclude is that change of towns takes place over generations. Any evaluation must take into account that this has happened through history and all we might succeed in doing is better manage such change. Regeneration may be necessary to address sudden cataclysmic on communities affected by the closure of major industries upon which they were founded. It may be suggested, however, that many regeneration initiatives in Wales are addressing an accumulation of neglected urban management tasks.

A word that has been used above is 'stewardship' and the basic principles of stewardship are critical if our towns are to be sustainable. It is a long term game and too many regeneration projects have been conceived and executed as fixed term task and finish exercises and any objective evaluation should conclude that these have been 'unsuccessful'. The short term demands of commercial property developers and other private sector participants may be a convenient scapegoat. The aforementioned independent appraisal might consider what may be the shorter term demands of our elected representatives for regeneration 'outputs'. These may best be illustrated by the regularity in which the number of jobs created by the latest retail development are flourished by their political sponsors.

Footnote

Finally we must add a gratuitous footnote on the subject of *beauty*. This does not appear to have been a primary consideration for those engaged in the

management or reconstruction of our town centres but is a recurring theme in the foregoing notes. Whilst subjective – ‘in the eye of the beholder’ as it were – the visual appeal of a place and consequent attraction for many may be undeniable. The argument, put briefly, is that those places which are unlovely are unloved and ultimately *unsustainable*. This would appear to be the case in many centres which were the subject of redevelopment or reconfiguration in the latter part of the last century which may now be perceived to need further public sector intervention to revive and reinvent them. We may compare and contrast those with apparently successful towns which retain the character and form of preceding centuries and were not subjected to radical change in the latter part of the 20th century. Many such towns are considered attractive to both residents and visitors. Those places which have proved to have had an enduring appeal for the majority have proved to be *sustainable*, particularly in the sense of needing less public sector financial intervention.

At a recent conference in Cardiff delegates were asked to think of a **place** where they had been perfectly happy. Not a building but an urban place – a street, square, piazza or whatever – within a town which they would visit with regularity. Having considered that they were then asked whether their ‘favourite place’ had been built in their lifetime. Not one had. The failure to make places that people love has been perhaps the most conspicuous failure of both government and the property and construction industry for a century.

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