



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

28 JUNE 2023

ABERDARE TOWN CENTRE – DRAFT STRATEGY

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR FOR PROSPERITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN
DISCUSSIONS WITH THE RELEVANT PORTFOLIO HOLDER (COUNCILLOR
MARK NORRIS)**

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1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of the report is to:

- Advise Cabinet of work undertaken to date in the preparation of a Draft Strategy to focus and coordinate future investment in Aberdare Town Centre.
- Seek approval to commence a phase of formal, public consultation in respect of the Draft Strategy, and to receive a further report detailing the results from the consultation.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Considers the attached Draft Aberdare Town Centre Strategy, which has been informed by the outcomes of a phase of early engagement, the findings of which are at **Appendix 1** of the Draft Strategy.
- 2.2 Agree to commence a formal, public consultation exercise on the Draft Strategy, to be conducted over a 6 week period utilising online and in-person methods of engagement to capture a wide range of stakeholder's thoughts on the Draft Strategy as set out in the engagement plan at **Appendix 2**.

3.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Town centres continue to face unprecedented challenges following the global COVID-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis. Aberdare Town Centre is no exception and whilst it benefits from the activities of its strong independent business community it nonetheless has suffered from the departure of important local service providers, including banks and large retail operations.
- 3.2 The town has been the recipient of significant investment over the last decade including the redevelopment of several prominent town centre buildings, the creation of high quality secondary and higher education facilities, new industrial floorspace and 'state-of-the-art' leisure and recreational provision. This investment has assisted Aberdare in repositioning itself in the context of significant local and regional opportunities including those associated with the Cardiff Capital Region, the South Wales Metro and the emerging adventure tourism economy.
- 3.3 The Draft Strategy seeks to build upon this investment momentum, providing a focused and coordinated investment framework which seeks to establish Aberdare Town Centre as a vibrant, dynamic and attractive destination for both local residents and visitors to the area.

4.0 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Council's Corporate Plan, 'Making A Difference' 2020-2024, commits the authority to investing in town centres, increasing jobs and homes, to create vibrant, thriving places in which people wish to live, work and socialise. To this end, the Council has committed to the creation of a series of town centre strategies/plans to guide future investment in RCT towns, drawing on each town's unique characteristics. Such documents have already been produced for Mountain Ash, Porth and Pontypridd.
- 4.2 Aberdare has been the recipient of in excess of £100m in investment since 2010 with key investments including:
- New modern industrial units in Robertstown.
 - Upgraded facilities at Dare Valley Country Park.
 - The Coleg Y Cymoedd Campus.
 - Aberdare Community School.
 - Aberdare Town Centre Regeneration Project.

- 4.3 Additionally, several prominent town centre properties have been redeveloped and brought back into use, through a combination of public grant funding and significant private investment, such as the Boot, Old Town Hall and Black Lion. These have delivered a mixture of residential and commercial outcomes, bringing new homes and high-quality hospitality businesses to Aberdare, improving the town's overall offer.
- 4.4 If the town is to fulfil its potential whilst simultaneously addressing the significant challenges it faces following the COVID 19 pandemic and the current economic downturn, it is vital that a strong strategic approach to future investment is identified and adopted. Future investment needs to be focused and coordinated if the town is to take full advantage of emerging opportunities, such as the South Wales Metro and growing nearby tourism offer, in order to strengthen its regional identity as a great place to visit, work, explore and invest. It is therefore proposed that the Strategy for Aberdare Town Centre will provide an investment framework that builds on Aberdare's considerable strengths and opportunities, whilst acknowledging the challenges it faces.

5.0 Early Engagement

- 5.1 In preparing the Draft Strategy, a phase of 'Early Engagement' was undertaken by Regeneration officers, between November 2022 and February 2023, to ensure that the Draft Strategy under consideration is suitably focused and appropriate in its content.
- 5.2 Evidence confirms that early engagement and involvement of stakeholders in identifying and defining a town's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities considerably strengthens the production of town centre strategies. In addition to drawing upon local knowledge, such engagement ensures that local people have an opportunity to shape and focus interventions aimed at addressing issues affecting them most. Early involvement also helps to foster a sense of local ownership and commitment to the successful implementation of the strategy.
- 5.3 Key objectives for the early engagement exercise included:
- Ensuring that engagement exercises, facilitated by Regeneration officers, were fully accessible to all and promoted an inclusive environment within which stakeholders felt comfortable to share their views and opinions.
 - Gaining a better understanding of how stakeholders perceive the town's key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
 - Drawing upon local knowledge to ensure that the new strategy is relevant, deliverable and informed.

- Fostering a sense of local ownership and commitment to the successful implementation of the strategy.
- Identifying opportunities to collaborate with existing and current projects within the town to prevent duplication.
- Strengthening existing networks and creating new stakeholder relationships.
- Understanding how the Welsh Language is currently promoted within the town and what stakeholders think could be done to improve this.

5.4 A variety of engagement tools and techniques were used, including:

- **An online survey** titled, “Aberdare Town Centre: What do you think” was publicly accessible on the Council’s Let’s Talk online platform, between the 16th November 2022 and 9th January 2023. The survey focused on key themes such as:
 - Identification and prioritisation of the Town’s key strengths and challenges (including accessibility etc).
 - Creation of key investment themes to help focus and coordinate future investment in the town.
 - The town’s current hospitality offering.
 - Promotion and integration of the Welsh Language.
- **In-person ‘workshops’** at Sobell Leisure Centre were delivered, with internal and external stakeholders, at which stakeholders were asked to work collaboratively to undertake a SWOT analysis of the town centre and prioritise a series of ‘Investment Themes’. Questions about the promotion of the Welsh Language and Accessibility were also discussed.
- **Focused in-person meetings** with key stakeholders to discuss specific themes, such as funding and business community / wider community concerns.
- **Scrutiny** – consideration by the Council’s Climate Change, Frontline Services & Prosperity Scrutiny Committee 15th February, 2023

5.5 The findings from this phase of early engagement are set out in detail in **Appendix 1**.

6.0 **DRAFT ABERDARE TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY**

6.1 The Draft Strategy takes account of and responds to a range of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with Aberdare Town Centre and identified through the early engagement process. It is set within the context of the Council’s Corporate Plan and reflects the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 and the Welsh Government’s

National Plan 2040 which identified the need to adopt a placemaking approach when considering the creation of such strategies and plans.

- 6.2 It is apparent from the early engagement exercise that a consensus exists around the need for Aberdare Town Centre to improve its overall 'offer' if it is to capitalise upon the opportunities that currently present themselves and through that to fulfil its true potential as a principle town within northern RCT.
- 6.3 The primary focus of the Draft Strategy is that of the Town Centre area of Aberdare, broadly coterminous with the Town Centre Conservation Area, reflecting the Welsh Government's Town Centres First Principle. However, the strategy recognises the inter-relationship between investments within the town centre itself and those within its hinterland as both being of key significance to the town's future.
- 6.4 Work undertaken to date has culminated in the identification of a set of priority challenges and opportunities which have been captured under the following broad headings:
- Overall Appearance and Identity
 - Sustainable Towns and Communities
 - Tourism and Visitor Economy
 - Built Environment
 - Business Development
- 6.5 Analysis and discussion around these priority challenges and opportunities informed the creation of an overall vision and corresponding set of strategic objectives for the strategy. The Draft Strategy sets out the vision as: "***To build upon Aberdare's unique heritage and strategic location to create a more vibrant, dynamic and attractive destination for both local residents and visitors to the area***". The strategic objectives seek to:
- Improve the sustainability of Aberdare town centre through increasing visitor footfall and capturing a greater share of visitor spend.
 - Maximise the utilisation of sites and premises within the town centre to diversify and intensify the range of services and amenities available to local people and visitors.
 - Improve utilisation and safe use of public spaces and amenities through enhancing street-level activity and the provision of better connections with nearby destinations.
 - Support the development of a greater variety of businesses within the town that satisfy emerging opportunities from both growing visitor demands and local needs.
 - Enhance Aberdare Town Centre's overall appearance and identity as a great place to live, work and visit.

6.6 The strategy then proposes six investment themes focused upon the realisation of these strategic objectives.

7.0 INVESTMENT THEMES

7.1 These include:

1. The redevelopment and re-use of existing under-utilised, vacant or derelict buildings within the town centre to accommodate high quality restaurants, visitor accommodation, workspaces and a unique retail offering.
2. Working with Aberdare's local businesses and wider community to bring the story of Aberdare to life, making the town's heritage and offering more visible and strengthening its conservation area.
3. Strengthening Aberdare town centre's identity as a desirable place to live, work and visit through enhancing the visitor experience, building on the existing and growing tourism offer and enhancing marketing and promotion.
4. Improvement and promotion of active travel routes, including provision of enhanced wayfinding signage, within the town centre and to nearby destinations, such as Dare Valley Country Park, Aberdare Park and Cynon Valley Museum.
5. Further enhancement of public open spaces in the town centre, including supporting bio-diversity, to create high quality outdoor spaces capable of supporting new business and leisure opportunities and hosting events to animate the town.
6. Exploration of partnerships between public, private, educational and community actors, building on the good work of the 'Our Aberdare' Bid to establish new initiatives to support local businesses to make the best of emerging opportunities, such as the growing tourism and visitor economy.

8.0 FORMAL PUBLIC CONSULTATION

8.1 It is proposed to further test the draft vision, objectives and investment themes with stakeholders during a phase of formal, public consultation.

8.2 As part of this consultation, an online survey will be made available on the RCT Let's Talk website (for a 6-week period) with links to the Draft Strategy and all supporting documentation. The purpose of the survey is to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to share their thoughts on the Draft Strategy and to gain suggestions for how it could be improved further. It is also an opportunity for stakeholders to see how their input, via the 'early engagement' exercise undertaken, has informed the Draft Strategy.

- 8.3 The survey will be promoted via a press release, social media campaign and via posters/flyers distributed within the town centre. Physical copies of the survey will also be made available at Aberdare Library and other public buildings.
- 8.4 In addition to the online survey, a series of targeted 'drop in' sessions will be delivered at key locations within Aberdare and its surrounding communities. These sessions will be open to all and will be promoted via the press release, social media campaign and physical posters/flyers. The Draft Strategy and findings from the early engagement exercise will be presented at these sessions.
- 8.5 As part of this formal consultation phase, it is proposed to invite the public to engage in identifying potential actions, projects or sites for intervention that could be pursued in order to realise the strategies objectives.
- 8.6 Following completion of the formal consultation, a findings report will be produced and submitted to cabinet for consideration.

9.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

- 9.1 The Council must satisfy its public sector duties under the Equalities Act 2010 (including specific Welsh public sector duties). Pursuant to these legal duties, Council's must in making decisions, have due regard to the need to (1) eliminate unlawful discrimination, (2) advance equality of opportunity and (3) foster good relations based on protected characteristics.
- 9.2 An initial, draft Equality and Socio-Economic Impact Assessment is being prepared, informed by the findings from the early engagement and will be made available as part of the supporting documentation to be published on the RCT Let's Talk website, as part of the formal consultation. Subject to Cabinet agreeing to initiate such a phase of formal consultation, in relation to the Draft Strategy, the impact assessment will continue to be developed and a final version will be submitted to Cabinet following the formal consultation phase.

10.0 WELSH LANGUAGE IMPACT ASSESMENT

- 10.1 An initial, draft Welsh Language Impact Assessment is being prepared, informed by the findings from the early engagement, and will be made available as part of the supporting documentation to be published on the RCT Let's Talk website, as part of the formal consultation. Subject to Cabinet agreeing to initiate a phase of formal consultation, in relation to the Draft Strategy, the impact assessment will continue to be developed and a final version will be submitted to Cabinet following the formal consultation phase.

11.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are no financial implications in respect of the development of the draft Aberdare Town Centre Strategy but as actions/projects are developed, the financial implications will be fully assessed and reported as appropriate.

12.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 12.1 There are no current legal implications, but as the opportunities are developed, the legal implications will be fully assessed.

13.0 THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

- 13.1 The development of a Draft Town Centre Strategy for Aberdare greatly contributes to achieving the Council's corporate commitment, as outlined within the Council's Corporate Plan 'Making A Difference' 2020-2024. This includes developing town centre strategies for all principal town centres, within RCT, which value the uniqueness of each town whilst optimising potential benefits from emerging opportunities. Therefore, the series of proposed investment themes, contained within the Draft Strategy, have been developed to help focus and coordinate future investment within the town centre. This ensures that corporate priorities including supporting new and existing businesses to expand, tackling empty or rundown sites/premises and enhancing visitor infrastructure to support a growing local tourism offer are realised.
- 13.2 The Draft Strategy also strongly supports the realisation of the Council's key objective of 'Making Rhondda Cynon Taf Carbon Neutral by 2030', as outlined within the RCTCBC Think Climate Strategy (2022-2025) through:
- Supporting the diversification and expansion of the range of facilities and amenities available within the town centre to increase the town's self-sufficiency and to reduce the need for people to travel elsewhere.
 - Enhancement of active travel connectivity to and from the town centre to make it easier for people to choose sustainable modes of transport.
 - Working with local and wider community groups to develop local sustainable solutions to global problems, such as climate change.
 - Raising awareness of the Council's Net Zero ambition via local-level action planning with a focus on the role that the younger generation may play in championing sustainable initiatives.

- Ensuring that all new physical developments utilise energy-efficient technologies whilst working with existing local business and property owners to retrofit energy-efficient technologies to reduce the town centre's reliance on non-renewable energy sources.

13.3 Such a focus on town centres is also strongly supported by the Welsh Government's 'Town Centre First' policy within its Future Wales National Plan 2040. The policy advocates for a town centre first approach via which the health and vibrancy of town centres is the starting point of locational decision-making. The policy also highlights the important multi-functional role that town centres are increasingly playing within communities, providing a diverse range of facilities and amenities, and therefore the growth and regeneration of such centres is a key national priority.

13.4 Additionally, the Draft Strategy is synonymous with the principles of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) as evidenced by a thorough evaluation of the proposed investment themes against the Act's 'Severn Social Wellbeing Goals' (see page 36 and 37 of the Draft Strategy). Importantly, the younger generation have been involved in the development of the Draft Strategy, via early engagement, and therefore the focus of the draft strategy reflects the views and ideas of future generations. Importantly, the design and development of local level projects will be subject to further comprehensive evaluation to ensure that the potential contribution of all future investment, within the town centre, to realisation of the Act's Seven Social Wellbeing Goals is maximised.

13.5 Finally, the Draft Strategy strongly supports the Welsh Government's Sustainable Development approach and the way in which the Draft Strategy has been developed reflects the 'five ways of working' which include:

- **Involvement:** As outlined in section 5 of this report, a wide range of internal and external stakeholders, including local residents, organisations and businesses, have been involved in the development of the Draft Strategy, strengthening the relevance and quality of the Draft Strategy and supporting the development of a sense of local ownership.
- **Long-term:** The Draft Strategy provides a long-term sustainable vision for the future, more diverse role that Aberdare Town Centre can play for local and wider communities and outlines how this will be achieved via a series of strategic objectives and corresponding investment themes.

- **Prevention:** The Draft Strategy aims to help prevent any further decline of the Town Centre by providing a framework via which targeted future investment can be focused and coordinated to address existing and future challenges combined with optimising potential benefits from taking full advantage of existing and emerging opportunities. The diversification of the town centre's offer is critical to further strengthening the multi-faceted role that the town centre can play as a focal point for local and wider communities.
- **Integration:** The Draft Strategy is synonymous with corporate and national priorities including those associated with town centre first approaches, tourism and sustainability. It is important to note that the Draft Town Centre Strategy provides a framework via which achievement of corporate and national priorities can be achieved at a 'local-level'.
- **Collaboration:** The Draft strategy promotes a collaborative way of working and the way in which the Draft Strategy has been developed reflects the Council's commitment to working with public, private and third sector partners to ensure that future investment, within the town centre, maximises benefits for all. Partnership working is a key priority, within the draft strategy, and is the focus of Investment Theme Six which promotes the development of new initiatives via working with the local actors, for example the BID, social enterprises, Aberdare market company.

14 **CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS**

- 14.1 The Draft Aberdare Town Centre Strategy proposes a vision, strategic objectives and investment themes to guide future investment in the town. The formal public consultation phase will further test the appropriateness of these. Following this the Draft Strategy will be reviewed and updated, and a final version of the Strategy will be presented to Cabinet later in 2023.
