



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

**CLIMATE CHANGE, FRONTLINE SERVICES & PROSPERITY SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

**UPDATE ON TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION STRATEGIES AND
PLACEMAKING PLANS IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF**

22 NOVEMBER 2023

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PROSPERITY & DEVELOPMENT IN
DISCUSSION WITH THE RELEVANT PORTFOLIO HOLDER COUNCILLOR
MARK NORRIS**

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 For the Committee to consider progress on developing and delivering town centre regeneration strategies and placemaking plans in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Note and consider progress on developing and delivering town centre regeneration strategies and placemaking plans in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Town centre regeneration strategies are a key tool in establishing a framework for supporting growth and development in our town centres to enable them to reach their potential to be thriving and prosperous places where local people and visitors want to be.
- 3.2 In Rhondda Cynon Taf, (RCT) we have developed a range of strategies for key town centres which are appropriate to the opportunities and challenges of those towns. Further strategies are well advanced in their preparation or planned for the future.
- 3.3 This report summarises progress on the development and delivery of those strategies and also sets out the benefits of the approach with examples of specific projects and investments which have resulted from having an appropriate town centre strategy in place This report allows Members to consider progress to develop and deliver town centre strategies in RCT to

date and sets out next steps proposed to be taken to adopt the draft strategy for Aberdare and begin the development for one in Tonypanyd,.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Town centres are at the heart of our communities in Rhondda Cynon Taf. Their role in providing services for local people, leisure and retail opportunities, and as places to live means it is critical that they are the most vibrant and sustainable places they can be where people will want to visit, live and work.
- 4.2 The economy of our town centres in Rhondda Cynon Taf has been challenged over the last few years as a result of the external economic influences of Brexit, the Ukraine war, the COVID 19 Pandemic, storms and flooding and the changing patterns of the retail sector which have seen national chain retailers leaving high street locations. Because of this, Town Centre Regeneration continues to be a key priority for the Council with the development and delivery of appropriate strategies a key tool to achieve improvement.
- 4.3 Town Centre Regeneration is central to the Corporate Plan, 2020-2024, which sets out the actions that we will take to deliver improvement. These include:
- Investing in our town centres bringing jobs and homes to create vibrant, thriving places where people wish to live, work and socialise.
 - Delivering major regeneration and transportation schemes maximising the impact of the South Wales Metro to create better places to live and work.
 - Supporting new businesses to open up in town centres and existing businesses to expand their offer through a wide package of support and interventions.
 - Where the private sector is unable to tackle empty or rundown sites and premises in town centres, the Council will proactively acquire them where appropriate.
 - Develop town centre strategies for our town centres which value their uniqueness, building on Metro benefits including office accommodation, increasing employment and homes above shops creating increased footfall.
- 4.4 Welsh Government also recognises the importance of town centre regeneration and has adopted a Town Centre First Policy where public sector investment in new services and buildings should be at the heart of towns wherever possible. This is now being supported and delivered by the Welsh Government's Transforming Towns funding which is a key source of investment to support the delivery of town centre regeneration in RCT.
- 4.5 An important feature of Welsh Government's Town Centre First Policy is the Placemaking Charter developed in conjunction with Design Commission for Wales which was adopted in 2022 This encourages local authorities to develop town centre plans and strategies to act as a focus for development and

investment. Welsh Government have now also made having a town centre plan in place or in preparation a condition of accessing their Transforming Towns funding.

- 4.6 With the focus on town centre regeneration provided by the Council's Corporate Plan and Welsh Government policy and funding approach we have committed to the creation of town centre strategies and plans to guide future investment in our key town centres. These draw on each town's unique characteristics and involve the local community and key stakeholders in their development through engagement and consultation.

5 PROGRESS ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY OF TOWN CENTRE STRATEGIES AND PLACEMAKING PLANS

- 5.1 Town centre regeneration strategies have been developed and are being delivered in Porth, Mountain Ash and Pontypridd with an advanced draft strategy in place for Aberdare and plans to develop one in Tonypany beginning in 2024. The terminology used for the naming of the strategies and plans in each of the towns varies slightly because of the distinct nature of the opportunities and challenges in each and the specific solutions set out to achieve improvement. The following paragraphs summarise the distinct approach which has been taken in each town centre along with examples of the significant regeneration benefits which have already been achieved and some which are in the design and delivery stages.

Mountain Ash Regeneration Framework

- 5.2 In 2018, Cabinet approved a Regeneration Framework to coordinate an investment package to deliver improvements for Mountain Ash Town Centre.
- 5.3 The project led Framework brings together a series of investment projects to improve access to the town centre and realign key services for local people. The Framework has already resulted in some significant outcomes:

The Redevelopment of Rhos Square (*known locally as Guto Square*) - an important asset to Mountain Ash town centre, its redevelopment created an attractive and inviting place for residents and visitors to the town, fostering a culture of community and social inclusion. It has also created additional parking spaces closer to the town centre, improving access for visitors and shoppers.

The Development of a Community Hub – Canolfan Pennar - the creation of the community hub has enabled the provision of a range of community based services in one centrally located building, which best serves the community. Community hubs provide a focal point and facilities to foster greater local community activity and bring residents, the local business community, and smaller organisations together to improve the quality of life in their areas.

The Town Centre Maintenance Grant - provides financial support to town centre businesses/property owners (including vacant properties) to undertake

minor improvements and maintenance works, which will improve the external front elevation of town centre properties. Since its launch the scheme has approved 35 applications, delivering £39,000 of grant investment in Mountain Ash town centre and leveraging in an additional £30,000 of private sector investment.

Key Town Centre Building Redevelopment – With Council support, private and third sector organisations have successfully redeveloped several key buildings in the town centre. The former Barclays Bank Building has been redeveloped and repurposed by Cynon Valley Cancer care as their new headquarters with a range of services offered to the local community. Mountain Ash Town Hall has been redeveloped as a centre for local businesses with flexible and modern space for a wide range of business needs.

The Mountain Ash Cross Valley Link - has diverted traffic away from the built up B4275 across the valley onto the A4059, bringing major traffic relief to both Mountain Ash Town Centre and the surrounding area. It has reduced traffic heading northbound along the A4059 after Cwm Cynon, reducing congestion and improving traffic journey times.

The Development of an Integrated Primary Care Facility – has delivered a state of the art healthcare facility in the heart of the town centre for the benefit of the wider community. Its location benefits from easy access, good parking and transport links and has contributed to increased town centre footfall.

The Redevelopment of 1-4 Oxford Buildings – a formerly disused site at the southern gateway to the town has been redeveloped to deliver high quality independent living accommodation for adults providing direct access to a wide range of services in a town centre environment.

- 5.4 Since the Mountain Ash Regeneration Framework was introduced significant improvements in the town centre have been delivered helping to generate a range of public and private investment. It has also helped create a more vibrant town centre.
- 5.5 In 2023, Mountain Ash also won the Rising Star award at the national Visa Let's Celebrate Towns Awards. The submission not only showcased what makes the town unique, but also demonstrated how its adapting to new challenges and opportunities in a rapidly changing environment, as well as actively encouraging the adoption of good practice across the country.

Porth Town Centre Regeneration Strategy

- 5.6 In January 2019, the Porth Town Centre Regeneration Strategy was approved by Cabinet following an extensive consultation exercise. The Strategy sets out a co-ordinated and holistic approach to town centre regeneration that takes into account the distinctive role Porth has at the heart of the community and its important location for services, employment, housing and transport functions.

5.7 The Strategy sets out a vision *‘To transform Porth Town Centre into a prosperous and attractive town, which offers a wide range of opportunities for visitors, residents and businesses; anchored by Porth Transport Hub and a much regenerated Station Quarter’.*

5.8 To support this vision a series of strategic objectives were developed to drive its delivery and translate directly into a series of projects and actions:

- To improve connectivity with the town centre and surrounding areas through the development of a Transport Hub.
- To create the conditions for the town to become a thriving Station Quarter.
- To improve the key gateways into the town.
- To support the development of housing.
- To provide the conditions to strengthen employment opportunities

5.9 In delivering the vision and strategic objectives, the Strategy set out a wide range of projects and investment opportunities in more detail. These include:

- The development of a modern quality Transport Hub and Station Quarter that efficiently links commercial development with residential areas.
- The development of Porth Plaza into the Community Hub for Rhondda South.
- The provision of additional long and short term parking to accommodate the future regenerated Porth Town centre.
- Extending the current Park and Ride provision within the town centre.
- The redevelopment of existing underused, disused and derelict buildings throughout the town to create housing, office and retail accommodation.
- Explore opportunities to relocate Council Staff into Porth Town Centre.
- Public realm improvements.
- The introduction of the Town Centre Maintenance Grant.
- The redevelopment of the former Porth Junior school site for residential use.
- Developing extra care housing for the elderly and vulnerable.

5.10 In November 2022, the Council’s Climate Change, Frontline Services & Prosperity Scrutiny Committee received an update on progress made to date on the Strategy.

5.11 Some of the key outcomes to date include:

Porth Transport Hub: In late 2021, the Council received a UK Government Levelling Up Fund grant approval to deliver this significant strategic project. Also funded by Welsh Government and Cardiff City Region City Deal, the Porth Transport Hub will deliver an integrated transport interchange between bus, rail and active travel as part of the South Wales Metro. Final project

completion is in line with Transport for Wales ongoing works on the Rhondda valleys railway lines, as part of its delivery of the South Wales Metro. The Porth Transport Hub is therefore set to open when the Rhondda railway services resume in the early part of 2024.

Porth Plaza/Community Hub: The aim of the Porth Plaza Community Hub is to provide a range of public facing services in a single multi-purpose community hub. This scheme was successfully completed during 2020 and now houses a range of services including the Public Library and One4All Centre, as well as a privately run day nursery. The hub houses bookable rooms and offers a number of programmes and activities that benefit the local community.

Provision of additional long and short-term parking: The Council has purchased land adjacent to 38 Hannah Street with a view to improving the street scene and providing additional parking spaces for visitors. A scheme is currently in developed and will be progressed, subject to any necessary consents and processes.

Extension of the Park and Ride provision: The completion of the Phase 2 park and ride facility in 2019 has delivered a further 72 parking spaces, taking the overall park and ride offer in the town to almost 150 parking spaces. The project has also delivered new EV charging points.

Relocation of Council Staff into Porth Town Centre: Oldway House in Porth town centre is a significant commercial office building that had been left vacant following the departure of the former occupants – Department of Work and Pensions. The Council has taken advantage of the availability of good quality office accommodation in this prime town centre location and has taken a lease on the building. In 2021 the Council completed the relocation of Finance staff to Oldway House. This has helped to support the generation of increased footfall into the town centre with the potential to also enhance the town centre economically.

Public realm improvements: As part of the Porth Transport Hub project, the redevelopment and surfacing the public realm in Station Street adjacent to the Transport Hub will pave the way for an attractive and well-designed arrival point that welcomes visitors to Porth that will serve as the new Station Quarter. In addition, road resurfacing work has taking place in Hannah Street, with further public realm improvements throughout the town scheduled in Spring 2024.

Town Centre Maintenance Grant: The Town Centre Maintenance Grant scheme provides financial support to town centre traders / landlords (including vacant properties) to undertake minor improvements and maintenance works which improve the external front elevation of town centre properties.

Since its roll out to Porth in 2019, 20 businesses have been supported delivering £67k of investment. Furthermore, the Council's new Commercial

Improvement Grant (CIG) has supported 1 application delivering £7.5k of additional investment.

Pontypridd Town Centre Placemaking Plan

- 5.13 The Pontypridd Town Centre Placemaking Plan was adopted in June 2022 after a process of consultation and engagement with the local community, businesses and stakeholders.
- 5.14 The Plan builds upon the foundations some significant successful regeneration investment in the town such as the Llys Cadwyn development and the National Lido of Wales in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park. These provide a strong basis for delivering new development and investment to further improve the prosperity of Pontypridd, enhance the townscape and make it even more resilient to future change.
- 5.15 The Placemaking Plan takes an overarching view of the key areas that make up the town centre and proposes a series of approaches that would strengthen the sense of place in each of the following five spatial areas that have been identified as areas of specific focus for development:

Southern Gateway - A redeveloped gateway to the town including the former Bingo Hall site and Marks and Spencer/Dorothy Perkins stores, enhanced links between the station and the high street and an improved public realm that opens the entrance to the town and establishes a riverside plaza.

Town Centre Core - A reinforced core of refurbished buildings that will provide workspace, homes, retail and leisure uses, a riverside walkway and better pedestrian connections and spaces.

Market Quarter - A bespoke Market Quarter within the Town Centre Core that includes a rejuvenated market building and a unique retail and leisure offer in an historic setting, creating a destination in its own right within the heart to the town centre.

Northern Gateway - Continued regeneration of the northern gateway to the town that includes a rejuvenated bus station, explores the potential for a new train halt, further workspace and mixed-use development at Berw Road, enhanced art and culture and better pedestrian routes.

Ynysangharad War Memorial Park - A heritage park that has a natural riverside setting, diverse sport and recreational offer, is a hub for cultural and social events and base from which to explore the Valleys Regional Park.

- 5.16 The plan also proposes a series of projects and interventions that collectively are aimed at transforming the town centre. In summary these projects will:
- Create distinctive and welcoming entrances into the town centre.

- Redevelop vacant or dilapidated sites and premises for new commercial uses.
- Deliver improved links between public transport services and high-quality cycle infrastructure.
- Restore traditional buildings with a range of new uses.
- Create new public spaces that link the town to the River Taf and Ynysangharad War Memorial Park.
- Make the town centre more resilient to potential future flood events.
- Deliver more tree planting and green infrastructure.
- Provide better pedestrian routes and create spaces for social and cultural events that people can enjoy, and which businesses can use.
- Develop a stronger digital presence.

5.17 The Pontypridd Placemaking Plan is already making significant progress in its delivery with projects recently completed, being delivered and in advanced stages of design and planning. Some of these are outlined below:

YMA – Pontypridd YMCA Redevelopment – This opened in June 2023 and has repurposed the old YMCA building into a landmark redevelopment in the Northern Gateway area. This was a collaborative project between Pontypridd YMCA, Artis Community, Arts Council for Wales and the Council to redevelop Pontypridd YMCA building to provide a modern facility for community use with a focus on social enterprise development promoting the arts, while continuing its traditional role in bringing people together.

The Muni Redevelopment – The Council has been successful in securing UK Government Levelling Up Fund support for the redevelopment of the Muni to be a state of the art cultural and event venue working in partnership with Awen Cultural Trust who will manage the venue once opened. Work is underway on site with the appointed contractor with completion due in early Summer 2024.

Improvements to Facilities for Visitors in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park – A successful programme of improvements has been taking place at the Park. This includes a £2 million package of support supported by the National Heritage Lottery Fund. Work is substantially complete and includes the new Calon Taf centre, refurbishment of the Bandstand Area and Sunken Garden and the former derelict toilet block for use as a Park staff welfare facility. In addition, contractors are on site undertaking the provision of a new event space at the former pitch and putt site supported by the Visit Wales Brilliant Basics Fund

Delivery of the Southern Gateway Masterplan – The redevelopment of the Southern gateway area is a key component of the Placemaking Plan and a masterplan has been developed which also formed part of the formal consultation on the draft Plan. Good progress is being made on delivery with the acquisition of the former Bingo Hall and M&S sites with demolition of the Bingo Hall complete and of M&S moving to completion. This will pave the way for the redevelopment phase in the near future with the Bingo Hall site

transformed into attractive high quality public space with bus interchange provision opposite the station. Preparatory works are commencing on site. Designs are progressing for the M&S site to be transformed into a riverside plaza with high quality public space.

Improvements to Key Town Centre Properties – The Council is currently working with private sector property owners and developers to redevelop and bring back into use prominent town centre buildings which will contribute to improving the townscape and mix of commercial and residential space in the town. These include the former HSBC Bank building and others in Taff Street and Market Street.

In October this year, we received a delegation from the Royal Town Planning Institute including the RTPI President, who were keen to see how the Pontypridd Placemaking Plan was being delivered. They commented that their visit to the town, *“clearly demonstrated the holistic approach the Authority is taking to regenerate the town centre and to encourage private sector confidence and investment. The quality developments, including Llys Cadwyn, the Ponty Lido and the Yma building, provide important landmarks in the town, importantly with a variety of viable uses. This has been achieved at a time when town centres across Wales are facing numerous challenges, including competition from changing retail habits.*

The Authority taking leadership, working cross-departmentally and leveraging all of its powers to address the issues of the town centre, in a strategic way, is delivering real results which is raising confidence in the town. The well considered Placemaking Plan provides a strong strategy to guide the approach taken, showing the long-term vision for the town. Reflection on the approach taken and reviewing processes is also a positive way of working, for example learning from the successful Aberdare engagement approach.”

Sue Bridge, RTPI President subsequently commented on her social media channels that *“This is a great example of how interventions by the local authority in the right place at the right time can result in a step change to the vitality and viability of a town centre.”*

Aberdare Town Centre Strategy

- 5.18 The Council is currently developing a strategy to coordinate future investment in Aberdare town centre and we have made significant progress towards the completion of the draft stages.
- 5.19 Aberdare has benefited from significant investment over the last decade including the redevelopment of prominent town centre buildings such as the former Boot and Black Lion Hotel buildings which have been redeveloped for new commercial and residential uses. High quality secondary and further education facilities have been provided with the new school and college along

with new business units at Robertstown and 'state-of-the-art' leisure and recreational provision at the leisure centre and athletics stadium. This investment provides a strong basis from which to derive further improvement and investment following the adoption of the new town centre strategy.

- 5.20 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 is suitably focused and appropriate in its content.
- 5.21 The Draft Strategy takes account of and responds to a range of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with Aberdare town centre as identified through the early engagement process.
- 5.22 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"***.
- 5.23 The strategy proposes six investment themes focused upon the realisation of these strategic objectives. These include:
- 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - Further enhancement of public open spaces in the town centre, including supporting biodiversity, to create high quality outdoor spaces capable of supporting new business and leisure opportunities and hosting events to animate the town.
 - 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.
- 5.24 To further test the draft vision, objectives and investment themes with stakeholders a phase of formal, public consultation was undertaken from 7th August to 18th September 2023, through a Let's Talk Aberdare approach. The

findings of this consultation are scheduled to be presented to Cabinet in December 2023, for them to consider whether to formally adopt the strategy.

6 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS/ SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

- 6.1 None as a direct result of this report – these will be picked up during the course of the development and delivery of the strategies outlined or the projects that result from them.

7 WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None as a direct result of this report – these will be picked up during the course of the development and delivery of the strategies outlined or the projects that result from them.

8 CONSULTATION/INVOLVEMENT

- 8.1 None as a direct result of this report – the necessary consultation, engagement and involvement will be picked up during the course of the development and delivery of the strategies outlined or the projects that result from them.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 None as a direct result of this report – financial implications will be picked up within the context of the development and delivery of the strategies outlined or the projects that result from them. These will be funded from a range of sources including the Council's own investment and external funding including the private sector.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 10.1 None as a direct result of this report – these will be picked up during the course of the development and delivery of the strategies outlined or the projects that result from them.

11. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN/OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

- 11.1 The links with the Council's Corporate Plan are set out in detail in paragraphs 4.3 and 4.5 above. In addition there are strong links with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. By the nature of the strategic, inclusive and co-ordinated approach of the strategies referenced in this report there will be a significant contribution in particular to the economic and environmental well being of Wales, supporting the delivery of a prosperous Wales, a more resilient Wales and a Wales of Cohesive Communities elements of the Act.

12. CONCLUSION

- 12.1 Town centre regeneration strategies are a key tool in establishing a framework for supporting investment, growth and development in our town centres to enable them to reach their potential to be thriving and prosperous places where local people and visitors want to be. In RCT we are undergoing a programme of developing and delivering strategies in our key town centres which are appropriate to the opportunities and challenges which are unique to each of them. Strategies have been completed and are being delivered in Mountain Ash, Porth and Pontypridd. The Aberdare Strategy is in its final draft following extensive engagement and consultation and plans are being developed to begin work on a strategy for Tonypany town centre in 2024.