

Aberdare Town Centre

STRATEGY

Early Engagement Findings

February 2023



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

Contents

Section	Page
Executive Summary	4
1.0 Overview & Objectives	8
2.0 Engagement Methodology & Response	8
3.0 Overview of Stakeholders Engaged	10
4.0 Overview of Findings	14
5.0 Young Generation Workshops	28
6.0 Conclusions & Next Steps	33

Figures

Figures	Page
Figure 1 - Distribution of Respondents (Online Survey)	4
Figure 2 - Overall Summary SWOT Analysis	6
Figure 3 - Summary Demographic Profile of Respondents (Online Survey)	10
Figure 4 - Stakeholder Mapping	11
Figure 5 - Workshop & Meetings Timeline	12
Figure 6 - Leaflet Promoting Online Survey	14
Figure 7 - Online Survey: Key Strengths	15
Figure 8 - Online Survey: Key Challenges	16
Figure 9 - Prioritised Investment Theme Table	18
Figure 10 - Welsh Language Question: Findings	19
Figure 11 - Engagement Boards	20
Figure 12 - Photos of Engagement	21
Figure 13 - Overall Summary SWOT Analysis	23
Figure 14 - Workshops: Summary of Strengths	24
Figure 15 - Workshops: Summary of Weaknesses	24
Figure 16 - Workshops: Summary of Opportunities	25
Figure 17 - Workshops: Summary of Threats	25
Figure 18 - Prioritised Investment Theme Table: Workshops	27
Figure 19 - Photos of Younger Generation Workshops	29
Figure 20 - Younger Generation SWOT Analysis	30/31
Figure 21 - Younger Generation: Prioritised Investment Themes	32

Executive Summary

- This report details the main findings from an early engagement exercise conducted, between November 2022 and January 2023, to inform development of a Draft Aberdare Town Centre Regeneration Strategy.
- A wide range of approaches was used to engage with stakeholders including: an online survey; a series of in-person workshops and meetings; leaflets and posters were distributed within the town and displayed in key buildings; face-to-face meetings with businesses and organisations in the town centre; social media posts shared a link to the online survey and email invitations to access the survey were sent to key stakeholders.
- 614 survey responses were received and a further 45 stakeholders engaged in in-person workshops and meetings.
- No phone calls were received in relation to the engagement exercise. However, 3 emails were received.
- In total, over 650 people were engaged.
- Of those respondents that input their postcode, over 453 were from the Aberdare area, 32 from Mountain Ash, 4 from Treherbet, 7 from Ferndale and 2 from Pontypridd (as shown on the map below).

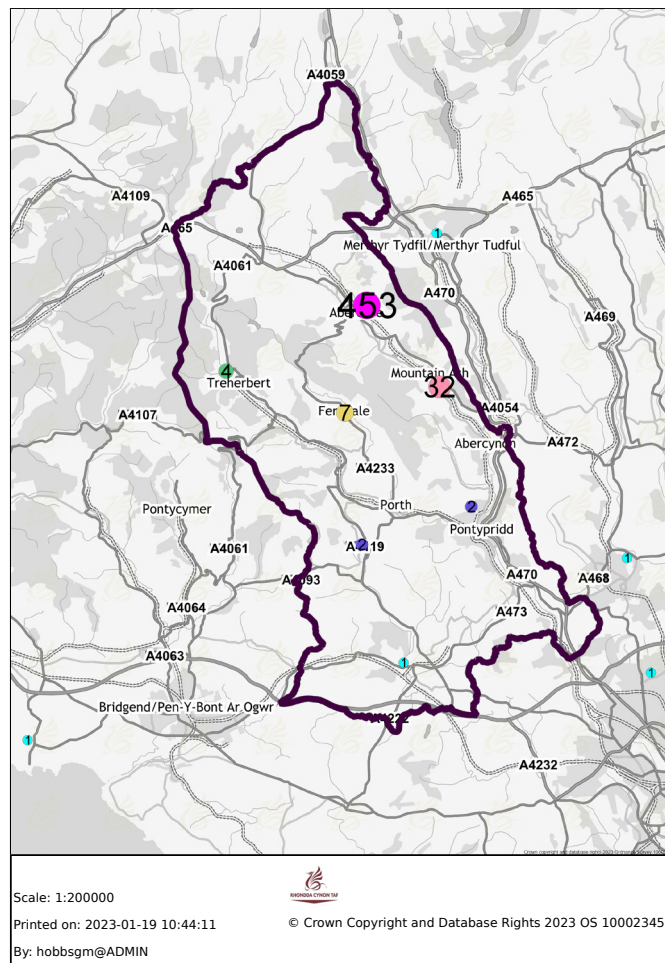


Fig. 1. Distribution of Respondents (Online Survey)

Executive Summary

- Demographic information collated from the online survey shows that less people aged between 16-24 years old and 75 years + responded to the survey. The engagement from under-represented groups was monitored closely and in response to these findings, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCTCBC) has organised additional in-person workshops with these age groups, to be delivered in February 2023.
- The engagement exercise has assisted with identifying and prioritising the Town's key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. A summary of these findings is provided below for both the online survey and in-person workshops/meetings.
- Online survey respondents strongly agreed that Aberdare Town Centre has the following key strengths:
 1. Proximity to nearby tourism destinations (e.g DVCP/Zip world)
 2. Readily available parking
 3. Accessible active leisure facilities
 4. Good public transport links
 5. Strong community spirit within the town
- Online survey respondents strongly agreed that Aberdare Town Centre has the following key challenges:
 1. Decline of the high street (e.g. vacant shops)
 2. Impact of Internet Shopping
 3. Cost of Living Crisis
 4. Economic Downturn
 5. Competition from other towns

Executive Summary

Attendees of workshops and meetings further identified Aberdare Town Centre's key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as follows:

<p>Key Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - History and heritage - Strong community - Natural landscape - High quality educational institutions nearby - Enough parking - High quality buildings - Ongoing programme of events - Public realm - Green spaces - Aberdare park/ Dare Valley Country Park - Growing hospitality offer - Indoor market 	<p>Key Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overall town's appearance - Lack of variety of shops - Poor advertising of what's going on - Visitor information - Lack of offer - Negative perception - Large vacant retail premises - Same type of shops - Nothing for young people to do - Lack of leisure offer, cinema/bowling etc - Derelict Buildings - Poor shop frontages - Anti-social behaviour
<p>Key Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong Tourism Opportunities - Repurpose large vacant properties - Utilise first floors of shops - Promote natural landscape - Enhance pedestrian routes in and around the town - Visit Wales 2023-2025 'Year of the Trails' - Build on the towns 'green credentials' - Foster an inclusive business environment - Support business growth and innovation - Circular economy initiatives - Aberdare BID - Diversify the offer - Improve signage - Keep money in Aberdare - Pop-up shops/temporary uses - South Wales Metro 	<p>Key Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changing consumer trends - Ongoing impact of COVID-19 - Decline of the high street - Rent and rates on buildings - Current cost of living crisis - Absent landlords - Need for a stronger identity - Competition from other towns - Weak partnerships working - Digitalisation - Rising cost of energy - Local lettings policies - Poor health and well-being of residents - Potential rising unemployment - Poor first impressions - Lack of advertising/promotion - Potential for Aberdare to become a 'commuter town' - Prioritisation of economic outcomes over social and environmental concerns.

Fig. 2. Overall Summary SWOT Analysis

Executive Summary

Based upon the outcomes of the SWOT analysis undertaken, the following investment themes were identified and agreed as priorities by participants in the engagement exercise:

Top 10 Priority Investment Themes (Online Survey)

1. Bringing empty buildings back into use
2. Attracting new businesses/facilities into the town
3. Investing in the Town's appearance
4. Creating vibrant streets with lots of activity
5. Diversifying and developing the 'offer' within the town
6. Providing support to local businesses
7. Making it easier to travel to and within the town
8. Making the most of Aberdare's important historic buildings
9. Improving physical connections between the town centre and attractions
10. Improving provision for sustainable modes of transport

Top 10 Priority Investment Themes (Workshops & Meetings)

1. Enhancement and diversification of the town's offer
2. Redevelopment and re-use of vacant/derelict buildings
3. Strengthen overall town's appearance/brand - live, work & visit
4. Physical connections between key sites, via active travel
5. Tourism and visitor offer
6. Partnerships and local level innovation
7. Sustainability and biodiversity
8. Aberdare's history and heritage
9. Hospitality and evening Offer
10. Further enhancement of public realm

It became clear, from the discussions during the workshops and responses to the online survey, that the theme of 'Sustainability' should not be differentiated as a stand alone 'investment theme'. Instead, it was felt that it was more appropriate to incorporate it as a key consideration within all investment themes due to its importance and strategic influence.

These investment themes, together with the broader conclusions from the engagement exercise, will now help inform and shape the development of a Draft Regeneration Strategy for Aberdare Town Centre.

1.0: Overview & Objectives

- 1.1 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 regeneration strategies/ plans to guide future investment in RCT towns, drawing on each town's unique characteristics, with such documents having already been produced for Mountain Ash, Porth and Pontypridd.
- 1.2 In this context, RCTCBC has begun to develop a Regeneration Strategy for Aberdare Town Centre, which will act as the focal point of the Principal Town in northern RCT. Building on Aberdare's considerable existing strengths and opportunities, whilst acknowledging the unique challenges that the town faces, the strategy will act as a key guiding document to focus and coordinate future investment.
- 1.3 For each existing strategy, a context-specific approach and bespoke strategy development process was adopted, with resultant lessons learned including the need for early, open and inclusive engagement of stakeholders in the development process. In this context, in November 2022, the Council initiated an early phase of 'Early Engagement' to provide a wide range of stakeholders with an initial opportunity to inform, shape and focus interventions at an early stage, aimed at addressing issues that affect them most. Key objectives for this early engagement included:
 - Gaining a better understanding of the 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, 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.

2.0: Engagement Methodology & Response

- 2.1 The 'Early Engagement' phase was conducted 'in-house' between November 2022 and early January 2023. This report presents the findings from all engagement exercises undertaken as part of this work and will subsequently be presented to Officers and Cabinet to enable the feedback received to be considered and to reach agreement upon how this will be integrated into the development of a draft strategy.
- 2.2 A variety of engagement tools and techniques were used with stakeholders, including:
 - **An online survey** titled, 'Aberdare Town Centre: What do you think?', was

publicly accessible on the Let's Talk online engagement platform, between the 16th November 2022 and 9th January 2023, and provided a user friendly and interactive form of engagement. 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.
 - Current hospitality offering.
 - Promotion and integration of the Welsh Language.
- **In-person 'workshop'** style sessions at Sobell Leisure Centre, with internal and external stakeholders, in which stakeholders were asked to work collaboratively to undertake a SWOT analysis of the town 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.

2.3 Social media was used to communicate key messages to residents and service users and to encourage engagement with the online survey.

2.4 Hard-copy leaflets and posters, with a QR code to access the online survey, were distributed to numerous businesses and organisation in Aberdare Town Centre and displayed in key buildings such as Aberdare Library, Cynon Valley Museum, St Elvan's Church and Sobell Leisure Centre.

2.5 An email was sent to a range of key stakeholders to promote the online survey.

2.6 Local Councillors and the Our Aberdare BID (Business Improvement District) shared the link to the online survey via social media.

2.7 RCTCBC Regeneration Officers attended a local Neighbourhood Network meeting to inform the community stakeholders about the engagement exercise and to share leaflets.

2.8 As with previous years' "digital by default approach" we continued to consider those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods:

- A telephone consultation option is now in place for all Council consultations, through the Council's Contact Centre. The option allows people to discuss their views or as a minimum to request consultation materials.
- Individual call backs on request.
- Consultation free post address for postal responses.

2.9 614 survey responses were received, with a further 45 external stakeholders engaged via in-person sessions. No telephone calls were received regarding the online survey. However, 3 emails were received.

2.10 Additionally, over 15 internal stakeholders across 10 different council Departments were engaged as part of this work.

3.0: Overview of Stakeholders Engaged

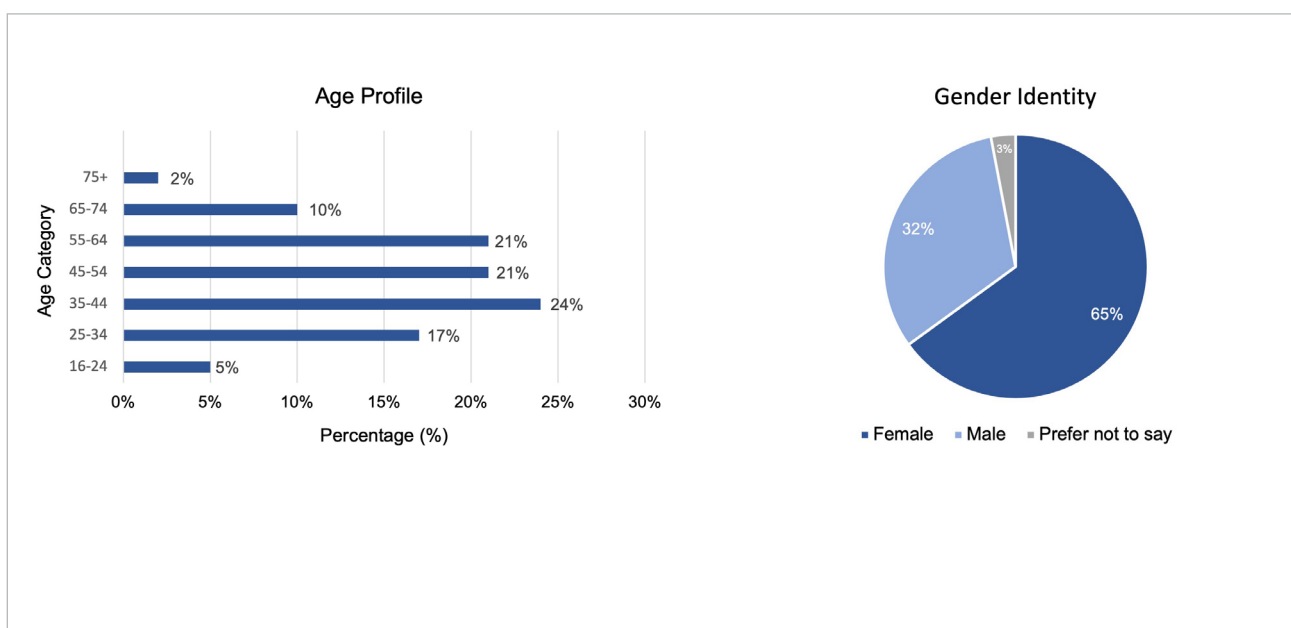
3.1 Careful consideration was given to the demographic profile of people engaged with as part of the exercise and to the approach adopted with the aim of ensuring that a wide range of people were involved with this phase of work. Please see below a summary of the demographic information for those engaged via the different methods:

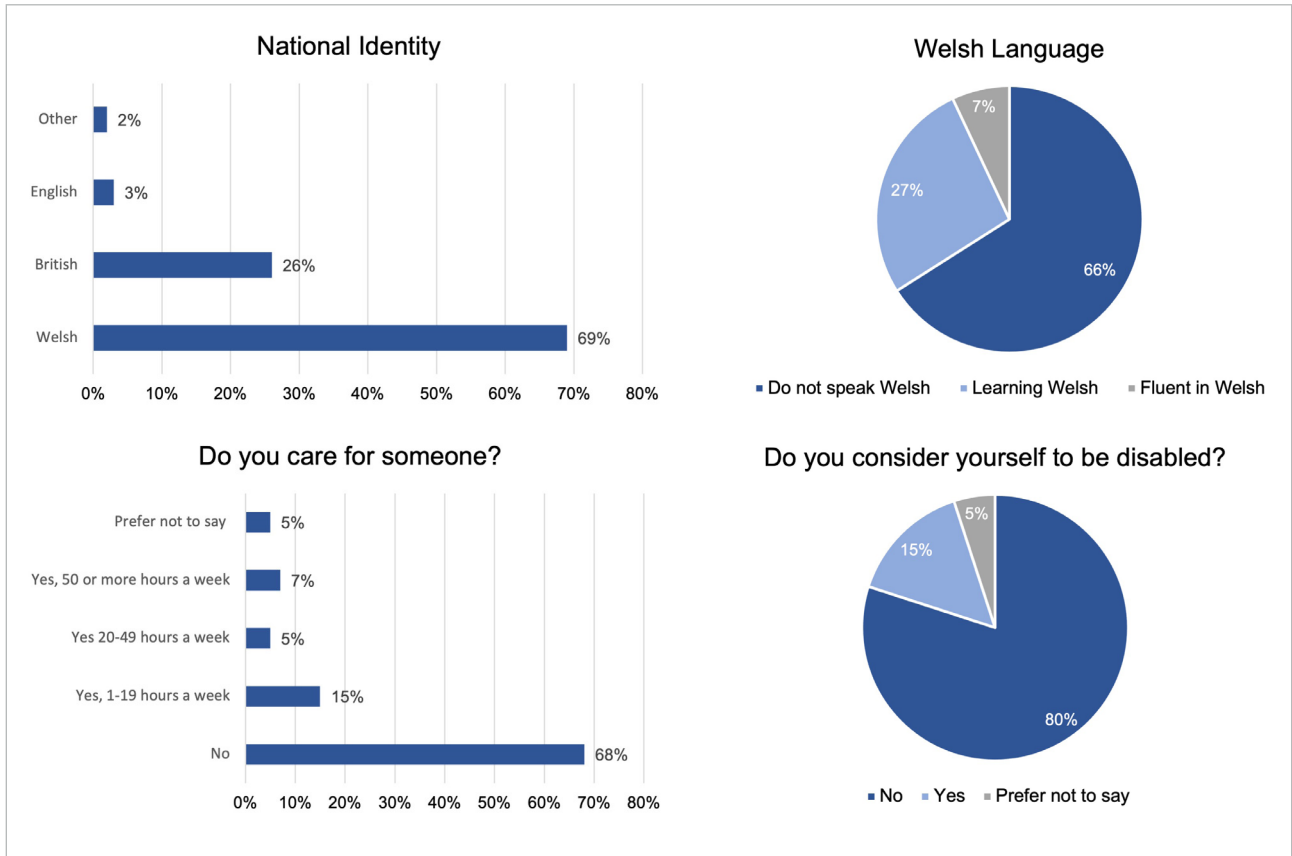
3.2 Online Survey

Of the 614 responses to the online survey “Aberdare town Centre: What do you think?” 605 respondents chose to provide personal information including age, gender and national identity. A summary of this information is provided below (Fig.3):

- Age: There was broadly even representation amongst most of the various age categories. This suggests that the engagement methods/techniques implemented were appropriate for the majority of age groups. However, there was a more limited response from those in the 16-24 and 75+ age groups. Additional workshops will be delivered, during February 2023 to address this.
- Gender: Considerably more women than men engaged with the survey.
- National Identity: The majority of those that engaged with the survey identify as having a Welsh National Identity, which reflects the strong local identity.
- Welsh Language: Whilst the majority of those that responded do not speak Welsh, 27% said that they are learning welsh, with 7% being fluent.
- Caring Responsibilities: The majority of respondents do not have any caring responsibilities. However, a fair number of respondents did care for someone, with most caring for between 1-19 hours per week.
- Disabilities: The majority of respondents did not identify as having a disability (80%). However, 15% of respondents identified as disabled in some way.

Fig.3. Online Survey: Summary Demographic Profile of Respondents





3.3 Stakeholder Mapping: Prior to the commencement of a series of in-person workshops and meetings, comprehensive stakeholder mapping was undertaken. This exercise was produced collaboratively by the RCTCBC Regeneration Department and other internal departments and the subsequent diagram, seen in Fig.4, has been added to over the period of the ‘Early Engagement’ Phase as more stakeholders have been identified.

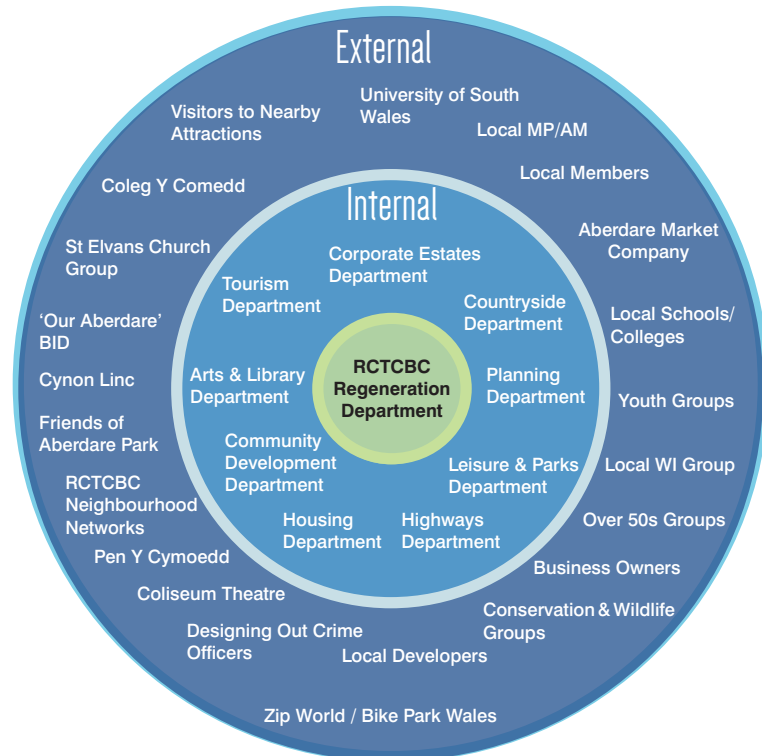


Fig.4. Stakeholder Mapping

3.4 In-Person Workshops & Meetings

Whilst specific demographic information was not collected at in-person workshops and meetings, a wide-variety of stakeholders were engaged including: Local Councillors, Local Community Groups, Funding Organisations, the ‘Our Aberdare’ BID and Internal Council Officials. Because this phase of engagement will be followed up with a formal phase of statutory consultation, it was felt that the 6 workshops/meetings conducted provided a sufficient early insight for key stakeholders.

As mentioned above, it was felt that more could be done to hear from the younger generation and subsequent workshop sessions have been undertaken to engage with this age group specifically.

3.5 **Fig.5.** Provides a time line of the workshops and meetings held during this phase of ‘Early Engagement’ and shows the range of stakeholders engaged with.

Fig.5. Workshop & Meetings Time line

Timescales: November 2022 - January 2023

Details:	Key Stakeholders:
RCTCBC Regeneration Officers met with the local MP and AM to inform them about the development of a Regeneration Strategy for Aberdare Town Centre and to discuss key challenges and opportunities within the town.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local MP • Local AM
RCTCBC Regeneration Officers attended a Community Group Funding Advice Surgery , organised by Vikki Howells, at Abercwmboi Rugby Club in Aberdare.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Llwydcoed Community Action Group • University of South Wales • Cwmbach Community Wetlands • Accessible Wales • Friends of Aberdare Park • Cynon Valley History Society • Aberdare Town Church Primary School
Local Member Workshops: RCTCBC Regeneration officers facilitated two workshops, at Sobell Leisure Centre Aberdare, for Aberdare Town Centre and surrounding area councillors to identify, discuss and agree a series of priority investment themes which will inform the development of the Regeneration Strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aberdare Town Centre Councillors • Aberaman Councillors • Aberdare West / Llwydcoed Ward Councillors • Cwmbach Councillors • Penywaun Councillors

NOVEMBER 2022

North Cynon Neighbourhood Network: An RCTCBC Regeneration Officer attended a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network meeting, on 17th November to inform local and wider community groups about the development of a Regeneration Strategy for Aberdare Town Centre and to provide information about how the local community can engage with the online survey. Leaflets were handed out to all attendees.

- RCT Together
- Coalfields Regeneration Trust
- Cwmaman OAP Group
- Signposted Cymru
- Abercwmboi Group
- Penywaun Forward Together
- C4W+
- ASD Rainbows
- Snapshot Camera Club
- Over 50's Forum
- Cynon Taf Housing Group
- Friends of Aberdare Park
- Hirwaun YMCA
- ACM
- Interlink RCT
- Penderyn Community Centre

'Our Aberdare BID' : RCTCBC Regeneration officers met with the Our Aberdare, Business Improvement District Board members to discuss what they consider to be the key strengths, opportunities, challenges and weaknesses in Aberdare Town Centre.

- 'Our Aberdare' BID Board Members

Internal Stakeholder Workshop: An internal stakeholder workshop was delivered, by RCTCBC Regeneration Officers, in person at Sobell Leisure Centre, Aberdare. Attendees were asked to identify, discuss and agree on a series of priority investment themes which will inform the development of the Regeneration Strategy.

Representatives from the following RCTCBC departments attended the workshop:

- Corporate Estates Department
- Countryside Department
- Planning Department
- Leisure & Parks Department
- Highways Department
- Housing Department
- Community Development Department
- Arts & Library Department
- Tourism Department
- Regeneration Department

Pen Y Cymoedd: A meeting with Pen Y Cymoedd representatives was held in early December 2022, to inform them of the development of a Regeneration Strategy for Aberdare Town Centre and to discuss their thoughts on the key challenges, strengths, opportunities and threats evident within the town centre.

- Pen Y Cymoedd

Accessibility Wales: RCTCBC Regeneration Officers met with a representative from Accessibility Wales to understand what are the key issues regarding accessibility within the town centre and to hear suggestion as to how these could be overcome.

- Accessibility Wales

Young Generation Workshops: Arrangements have been made to deliver a series of workshops (in Feb 2023), at Sobell Leisure Centre, with different groups of primary and secondary school children from both welsh speaking and English speaking schools.

- Aberdare Park Primary
- YGG Aberdar
- Aberdare Community School

4.0: Overview of Findings

4.1 Online Survey

The following section provides a summary of the findings from the main engagement activities, including the online survey hosted on the 'Let's Talk' website and in-person workshops and meetings.

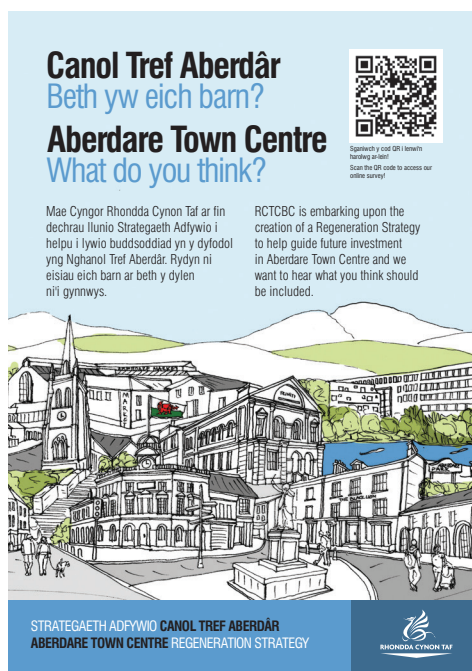


Fig.6. Leaflet Promoting Online Survey

- 4.2 A total of 614 completed surveys were received. For the purposes of this report, any blank responses to individual questions have been discounted. Due to the nature of this type of early engagement, the questions in the survey were designed to enable users to respond to suggested answers and also input their own thoughts and ideas. This was important due the purpose of this work to provide increased opportunities for stakeholders to inform and shape the development of a draft Regeneration Strategy for Aberdare Town Centre.
- 4.3 Therefore, the findings from each question have been considered individually with careful consideration given to the information input in the 'other' boxes at the end of the answer option lists.
- 4.4 The first two questions focused on identifying key strengths and challenges within the town centre and provided respondents with a list of 'suggested' answers from which they could choose to agree, or not, and an 'other' box' within which respondents could input their own ideas. The findings from questions 1 and 2 are shown below in (fig.7 and fig.8) and are expressed in terms of 'number of people that agreed' with each suggested answer. For example, for question 1, 319 out of 614 respondents agreed that 'Proximity to nearby tourism destinations' is a key strength for Aberdare Town Centre.

4.5 Question 1: What do you consider to be Aberdare Town Centre’s key strengths?

From the responses to question 1 (What do you consider to be Aberdare Town Centre’s key strengths), five key ‘suggested strengths’ were agreed with more strongly than the other ‘suggested strengths’.

4.6 These include:

1. Proximity to nearby tourism destinations (e.g DVCP/Zip world), 319 agreed
2. Readily available parking, 259 agreed
3. Accessible active leisure facilities, 248 agreed
4. Good public transport links, 230 agreed
5. Community spirit within the town, 163 agreed

4.7 There were also 39 responses input into the ‘other box’, with several respondents stating that ‘Aberdare’s History & Heritage’ is a key strength. Other responses included:

- “Friendly people”
- “Existing volunteer initiatives”
- “St Elvan’s Church”
- “Location near key cities such as Cardiff and Swansea”
- “Aberdare Market”
- “Strong history & heritage”

4.8 However, over half of the entries in the ‘other box’ insisted that Aberdare has no strengths at all, and that the town is experiencing significant decline. This was a theme that was also identified during the ‘In-Person Workshops/Meetings’, in that respondents found it difficult to identify strengths within the town centre because of an overriding negative perception of the town.

4.9

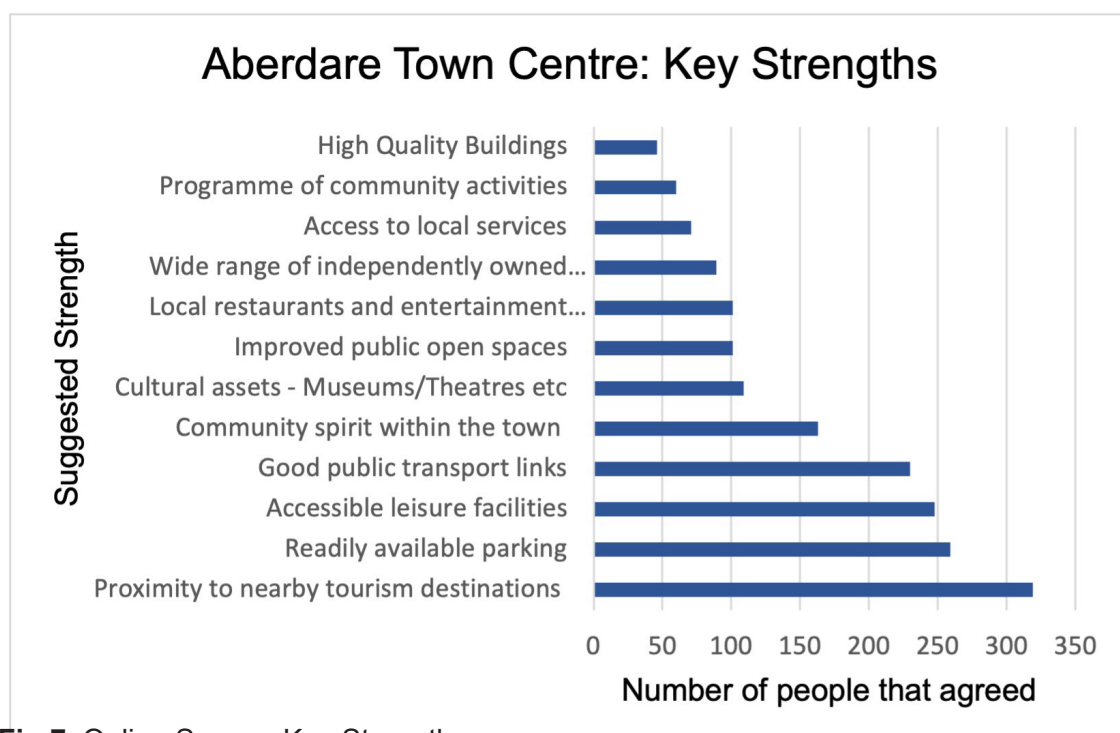


Fig.7. Online Survey: Key Strengths

4.10 Question 2: What do you think are the key challenges that face Aberdare Town Centre?

4.11 The responses to question 2 clearly show that most respondents felt that the “decline of the high street (e.g vacant shops)” is a principal key challenge that the town centre faces, with 572 of 614 respondents agreeing. Another 4 key challenges were agreed with more strongly than the others, and these included:

1. Decline of the high street (e.g. vacant shops), 572 agreed
2. Impact of Internet Shopping, 403 agreed
3. Cost of Living Crisis, 398 agreed
4. Economic Downturn, 356 agreed
5. Competition from other towns, 282 agreed

4.12 83 respondents input ‘other suggestions’ with a number of themes of concern emerging, including:

- “Business Rates”
- “Lack of different shops”
- “Nothing for people to do”
- “Poor condition of buildings”
- “Anti-Social Behaviour”
- “Lack of investment”
- “Negative attitude towards the town”
- “Buildings not fit for purpose”
- “Lack of Free Parking”
- “Current law restricting outdoor markets/events”
- “Large supermarkets on the outskirts of the town”
- “Too many buildings no longer fit for purpose”

4.13

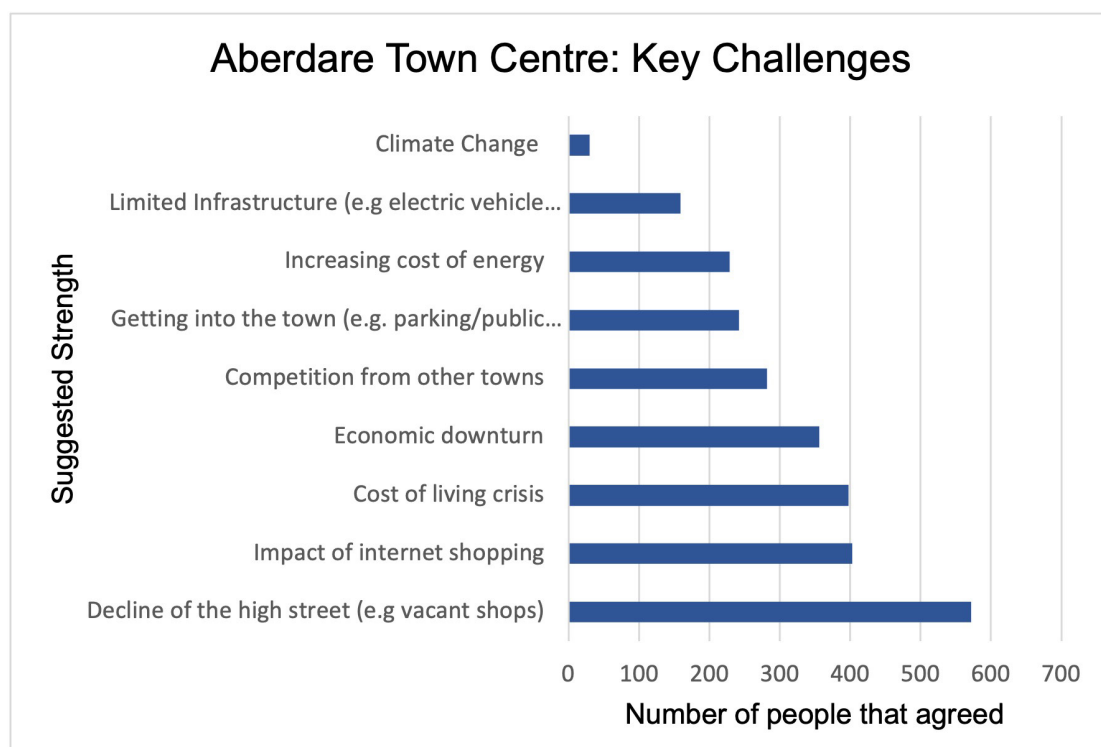


Fig.8. Online Survey: Key Challenges

4.14 Several of the responses stated that the town hasn't seen any significant investment for several years, even though over £100m has been invested in new leisure, education and public realm facilities over the last decade. This may suggest that there is limited awareness/understanding of the investment already made and ongoing within the town.

4.15 **Question 3: Thinking about the issues identified above, which of the following themes do you think our Regeneration Strategy might best focus on?**

4.16 For this question, respondents were given a set of 20 potential 'Investment Themes' to prioritise from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most important and 5 being the least. The overall prioritisation of the themes can be seen below, in Fig.9. To evaluate the findings from this question, the 'Investment Themes' have been categorised into 5 priority groups, with a value assigned to each theme.

4.17 These values have been derived using the following scoring criteria.

4.18 **Scoring Criteria:**

Step 1: For each theme, the total number of people that prioritised it as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th was collated (see table below as an illustrative example)

Proposed Investment Theme	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th
Parking Provision	58	20	17	16	25

Step 2: A weighted scoring system was then used to provide an overall value for each theme. 10 points was awarded if the theme was prioritised as first, 8 if 2nd, 6 if 3rd, 4 if 4th and 2 if 5th. Please see table below for an example of how the weighted scores were arrived at.

Proposed Investment Theme	1 st (10 points)	2 nd (8 Points)	3 rd (6 Points)	4 th (4 Points)	5 th (2 Points)
Parking Provision	58 x (10)	20 x (8)	17 x (6)	16 x (4)	25 x (2)
Weighted Scores	540	160	102	64	50
Total weighted score = 540 + 160 + 102 + 64 + 50 = 956					

4.19 Following this, the total weighted scores were ranked from highest to lowest, with the higher scores illustrating that the investment theme is of greater importance overall. The findings show that the top 5 priority themes that emerged from this question are as follows:

1. Bringing empty buildings back into use
2. Attracting new businesses/facilities into the town
3. Investing in the Town's appearance
4. Creating vibrant streets with lots of activity
5. Diversifying and developing the 'offer' within the town

Please see Fig.9. for the complete list of prioritised themes with corresponding weighted scores.

Fig.9. Prioritised Investment Theme Table

Proposed Investment Theme	Weighted Score
Priority Group 1	
Bringing empty buildings back into use	3466
Attracting new businesses/facilities into the town	3428
Investing in the Town's appearance	3136
Creating vibrant streets with lots of activity	2524
Priority Group 2	
Diversifying and developing the 'offer' within the town	2498
Providing support to local businesses	2446
Making it easier to travel to and within the town centre	2346
Making the most of Aberdare's important historic buildings	2204
Priority Group 3	
Improving physical connections between the town centre and attractions	2186
Improving provision for sustainable modes of transport	1848
Enhancing the range of 'on street' activities and events	1832
Strengthening Aberdare's role as a visitor/tourism destination	1826
Priority Group 4	
Celebrating the town's history and heritage	1808
Expanding the range and availability of business accommodation	1682
Enhancing the range of visitor facilities	1678
Diversifying the range of local services available	1616
Priority Group 5	
Parking Provision	1536
Increasing the town's sustainability through sustainable initiatives	1490
Enhancing natural habitats and biodiversity sites	1330
Reducing the town's carbon footprint	1122

4.20 Question 4: What do you think about the current hospitality offering within the town centre?

4.21 220 responses were received to this question, with an overwhelming majority of respondents stating that the town needs more high-quality restaurants. Many respondents referred to the recently opened restaurants in the town, such as the Black Lion, and stated that they would like to see this continue. Several respondents commented on the opportunity to increase outside dining, utilising available squares/ outside areas around the core town centre area and some referred for the need to consider a mix of dining options to respond to affordability concerns.

4.22 Responses included:

- “More places to eat/high-end restaurants”*
- “Too many takeaways”*
- “Less charity shops”*
- “More outside seating areas”*
- “Make more of the market, street-food, pop-up shops”*
- “Better options for a sit-down evening meal”*
- “Opportunity to create unique dining experiences”*

4.23 Question 5: How well do you think the Welsh Language is currently promoted within the town centre?

4.24 251 respondents felt that the Welsh Language was promoted ‘Well Enough’ within the town centre. However, 185 respondents felt that ‘More Could Be Done’ to improve the promotion of the Welsh Language.

4.25 Over 100 respondents input suggestions as to how the Welsh Language could be better promoted within the town and these include:

- “Capitalising on the 2024 Eisteddfod to raise the profile of the Welsh Language”*
- “Encourage shop staff to converse in simple Welsh”*
- “Provide business with bilingual orientation signs”*
- “Create a Welsh speaking area/zone within the town where people can go to practice their Welsh”*
- “Offer free course in the town centre”*
- “More Welsh Themed Days/Events”*
- “Build on the strong Welsh history”*

4.26 However, it is important to note that a large percentage of those that responded felt the promotion of the Welsh Language was not a priority, given the considerable economic challenges and uncertain future that the town faces. Many also commented on the need to prevent businesses from incurring additional costs, to promote the language, when they are already struggling.

Fig.10. Welsh Language Question: Findings

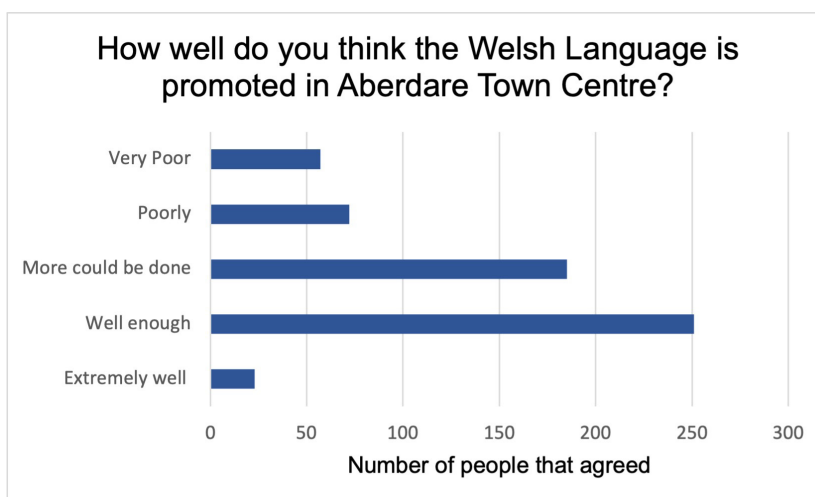
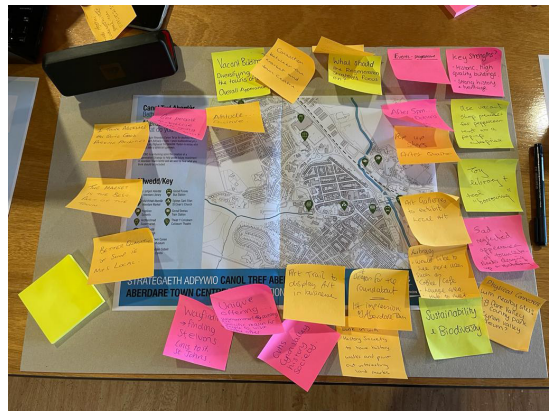


Fig.12. Photos of Engagement



Local Councillors attend engagement workshop at Sobell Leisure Centre, Aberdare.



Comments collected from attendees at 'Funding Fair' event at Abercwmboi Rugby Club.

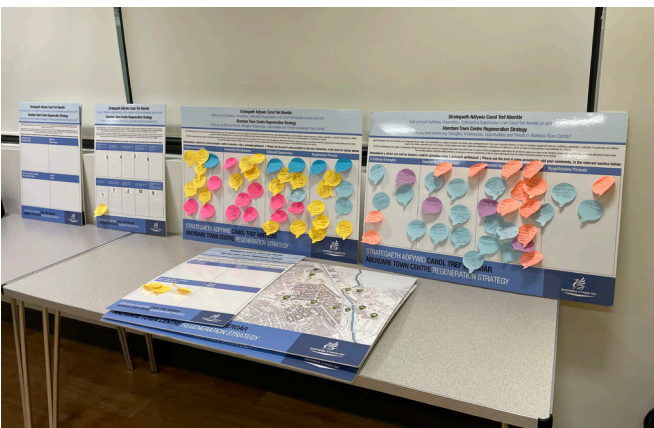


Photo showing how engagement boards were used to deliver workshop exercise.



Officers from different Internal RCTCBC Departments came together to take part in an engagement workshop at Sobell Leisure Centre, Aberdare.



RCTCBC staff members, Darren Notley (Regeneration Team Leader) and Emma Halford (Regeneration Project Officer) attended event at Abercwmboi Rugby Club.

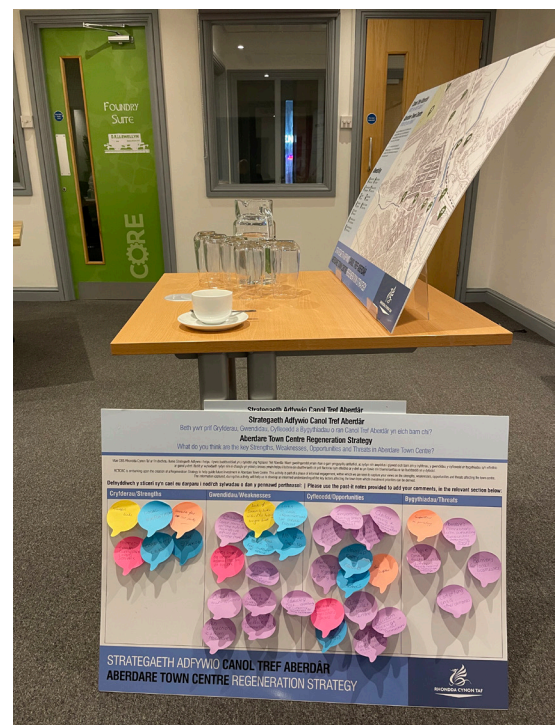


Photo of SWOT analysis produced during meeting with the Our Aberdare BID board members.

4.28 The workshops followed the following format:

1. Introduction to the project and rationale behind early engagement.
2. Overview of objectives for the session.
3. Exercise 1: Work together to create a SWOT analysis of Aberdare Town Centre, using post-it notes to add comments to an A1 board. This exercise acted as an 'conversation starter' with attendees being given the opportunity to add their thoughts individually.
4. Exercise 2: For this exercise, attendees were asked to discuss and collectively agree on the prioritisation of a set of 'Proposed Investment Themes'. Numbered stickers were used to rank the proposed themes from 1 to 10, with one being the most important and 10 the least.
5. Exercise 3: How well do you think the Welsh Language is promoted within the town centre? For this exercise, an open discussion was held with the attendees around the integration and promotion within the town centre and potential ways this could be improved. Attendees were asked to collectively choose 1 of 4 answers which included 'extremely well', 'well enough', 'more could be done' or 'poorly'. However, comprehensive notes were also taken to capture the detail of the conversation.
6. Feedback: RCTCBC Regeneration Officers presented the findings, from the session, back to the attendees to ensure all stakeholders were happy with the outcome and to provide a final opportunity for any more comments.

4.29 Photos of some of the workshops can be seen in Fig.12.

4.30 Positive feedback was received from a several attendees who felt that this additional engagement had provided a valuable opportunity for them to input into the development of the strategy at an early stage. Subsequently, many of the attendees shared the online survey with their communities to support this engagement work.

4.31 **Exercise 1: SWOT Analysis**

4.32 The information added by attendees to the SWOT analysis boards, during the separate workshops, has been combined to create a single SWOT analysis of the town centre. All comments, made via post-it notes, have been collated and transformed into a series of word clouds that illustrate the range of ideas discussed (see fig.14-17). It is important to note, that the larger the words are shown in the word cloud the more often that theme was discussed during the workshops.

4.33 It is clear, from these word clouds, that several themes were a priority for many attendees at the various workshops and these have been summarised below.

Fig.13 Overall Summary SWOT Analysis

<p>Key Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - History and heritage - Strong community - Natural landscape - High quality educational institutions nearby - Enough parking - High quality buildings - Ongoing programme of events - Public realm - Green spaces - Aberdare park/ Dare Valley Country Park - Growing hospitality offer - Indoor market 	<p>Key Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overall town's appearance - Lack of variety of shops - Poor advertising of what's going on - Visitor information - Lack of offer - Negative perception - Large vacant retail premises - Same type of shops - Nothing for young people to do - Lack of leisure offer, cinema/bowling etc - Derelict Buildings - Poor shop frontages - Anti-social behaviour
<p>Key Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong Tourism Opportunities - Repurpose large vacant properties - Utilise first floors of shops - Promote natural landscape - Enhance pedestrian routes in and around the town - Visit Wales 2023-2025 'Year of the Trails' - Build on the towns 'green credentials' - Foster an inclusive business environment - Support business growth and innovation - Circular economy initiatives - Aberdare BID - Diversify the offer - Improve signage - Keep money in Aberdare - Pop-up shops/temporary uses - South Wales Metro 	<p>Key Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changing consumer trends - Ongoing impact of COVID-19 - Decline of the high street - Rent and rates on buildings - Current cost of living crisis - Absent landlords - Need for a stronger identity - Competition from other towns - Weak partnerships working - Digitalisation - Rising cost of energy - Local lettings policies - Poor health and well-being of residents - Potential rising unemployment - Poor first impressions - Lack of advertising/promotion - Potential for Aberdare to become a 'commuter town' - Prioritisation of economic outcomes over social and environmental concerns.

4.34 Having compared and contrasted the findings from the in-person workshops and online survey, it is clear that the majority of themes have recurred in both engagement exercises. The combining of the findings has presented a comprehensive analyses of the current challenges and opportunities, evident within the town. These findings will help to ensure that the draft strategy is relevant, deliverable and maximises potential benefits for all.

Fig.14. Workshops: Summary of Strengths

Dare Valley Country Park **Events** Outside Seating
Natural Landscape Accessible
Parking Indoor Market Cynon Linc
History & Heritage Planters
Walking & Cycling Routes Aberdare Park
New Restaurants Opening
Central Library **St Elvan's Church**
Strong Community Listed Buildings

Fig.15. Workshops: Summary of Weaknesses

Conservation Area Rules
Not Enforced **Events** Lack of Offer
Natural Landscape Vacant Buildings
No Free Parking Large & Empty Shops
Overall Town's Appearance
Negative Perception Poor Accessibility **Anti-Social Behaviour**
Visitor Information Same Type of Shops
Poor Signage **Poor Connectivity**
Nothing for Young People No Cycle Hire

Fig.16. Workshops: Summary of Opportunities



Fig.17 Workshops: Summary of Threats



4.35 **Exercise 2:** Prioritisation of Proposed ‘Investment Themes’

4.36 Attendees were asked to prioritise a set of 10 proposed ‘investment themes’, using numbered stickers, with 1 being the most important and 10 the least. It was made clear to all attendees, that the proposed themes were only suggestions and that attendees could add additional themes if they wished using post-it notes. However, no additional themes were added due to all attendees feeling that the themes suggested captured the full range of potential categories.

4.37 Some groups found it easy to come to an agreement regarding the prioritisation of the themes, whilst others found some of the themes difficult to prioritise over others. It became clear, even in early workshops, that a number of the themes are inter-related with some attendees asking whether they could be incorporated to create a reduced list. For example, in order to ‘Strengthen the Overall Appearance of the town’ it was felt that the ‘Redevelopment and Re-use of vacant/derelict buildings’ was required. Additionally, many felt that the ‘Visitor and Tourism offer’ was inextricably linked to ‘Enhancement and Diversification of the Town’s Offer’ and ‘Aberdare’s History and Heritage’. The integration of themes will be carefully considered during the development of a draft strategy.

4.38 Many attendees felt that ‘Sustainability and Biodiversity’ should not be a separate theme but instead be considered a priority within all themes due to the climate crisis. This was mostly agreed upon. The findings from each workshop were collated and a weighted scoring system was used to provide an overall ranking of the themes from 1 to 10, divided into two priority groups.

4.39 **Scoring Criteria:**

Step 1: For each theme, the total number of groups that prioritised it as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th (and so on) was collated, see example below. From the example below, you can see that for the ‘Tourism and Visitor Offer’ theme, 1 group prioritised it 4th and 3 groups prioritised it as 5th.

Proposed Investment Theme	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th
Tourism and Visitor Offer	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	0	0	0

Step 2: This step involves applying a weighted scoring system to each individual score, to create an overall weighted score. Please see the table below for an example of how this was done for the ‘Tourism and Visitor Offer’ theme.

Proposed Investment Theme	1 st (10 Points)	2 nd (9 Points)	3 rd (8 Points)	4 th (7 Points)	5 th (6 Points)	6 th (5 Points)	7 th (4 Points)	8 th (3 Points)	9 th (2 Points)	10 th (1 Point)
Tourism and Visitor Offer (Weighted Scores)	0	0	0	7	18	0	4	0	0	0
Overall Weighted Score = 7 + 18 + 4 = 29										

Fig.18. Prioritised Investment Theme Table: Workshops

Proposed Investment Theme	Weighted Score
Priority Group 1	
Enhancement and Diversification of the Town's Offer	39
Redevelopment and Re-use of Vacant/Derelict Buildings	39
Strengthen Overall Town's Appearance/Brand - Live, Work & Visit.	36
Physical connections between key sites, via active travel	33
Tourism and Visitor Offer	29
Priority Group 2	
Partnerships and Local Level Innovation	27
Sustainability and Biodiversity	23
Aberdare's History and Heritage	20
Hospitality and Evening Offer	14
Further Enhancement of Public Realm	11

4.40 **Exercise 3:** How well do you think the Welsh Language is promoted within the Town centre?

4.41 For this exercise attendees discussed, between themselves and with RCTCBC Regeneration Officers, how well they think the Welsh Language is currently promoted within the town centre. The aim of the discussion was to come to a collective conclusion regarding whether 'more could be done' to promote the Welsh language or whether it is sufficient. All attendees, from all workshops, agreed that 'more could be done' to promote the Welsh Language within the town centre. Suggestions for how this might be achieved included:

"Encouraging basic Welsh sign-age in shops/facilities within the town to integrate the language into everyday life."

"Address negativity around not speaking Welsh 'correctly' and try to foster a more inclusive environment within with Welsh is spoken."

"Introduce more 'give it a go' activities in the town that provide accessible opportunities for people to learn small amounts of Welsh, frequently."

"Signage throughout the town could be improved."

"Could small amount of funding be provided to businesses to integrate Welsh words/phrases into shops."

"Younger generation are key to promote the Welsh Language and thought should be given to how they can be integrated more into activities within the town."

"Could the BID support promotion of the Welsh Language in the town?"

"Must ensure that businesses aren't pressured or at a disadvantage if having to purchase new bilingual signage etc."

5.0: Younger Generation Workshops

- 5.1 Having identified a reduced amount of representation from the younger generation within the online survey findings, the Council decided to host two in-person 'young generation' workshops.
- 5.2 The workshops took the same format as those undertaken with other stakeholder groups but the exercises were adapted to be more informal and discussion based, to enable attendees to have the opportunity to share their thoughts about the town.
- 5.3 Both workshops took place at Sobell Leisure Centre, Aberdare on Thursday 16th February 2023 and involved a mix of students from both English and Welsh speaking schools.
- 5.4 A group of around 10-15 students from Aberdare Park Primary and YGG Aberdar, aged between 10 and 11 years old, attended the morning workshop and a smaller group of 5 students, aged between 15 and 16 years old, from Aberdare Community School attended the afternoon workshop. Photos of the workshops can be seen in Fig.19.
- 5.5 A key objective of these workshops was to understand, from the younger generation's perspective, what are the key strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities that they perceive to be most prominent within the town.
- 5.6 At the beginning of each session, RCTCBC Regeneration Officers provided the students with a high-level overview of the context within which the Town Centre Strategy is being developed and gave students an idea of the range of themes that had been identified by other stakeholders in previous sessions. Findings from each exercise can be found below.
- 5.7 **Exercise 1: SWOT Analysis**
The information added by attendees to the SWOT analysis boards, during the separate workshops, has been combined to create a single SWOT analysis of the town centre. All comments, made via post-it notes, have been collated and added to a 'younger generation' SWOT analysis table (fig.20).
- 5.8 Interestingly, the younger generation's responses to exercise one had a much stronger focus on sustainability and biodiversity than other stakeholder groups. They also identified considerably more opportunities for improvement in the town centre with a clear focus on more places for young people to go to reduce anti-social behaviour and vandalism. Many commented on the abundance of green spaces nearby the town but some felt more could be done to improve greenery within the town centre.
- 5.9 RCTCBC Regeneration Officers also talked to the 15/16yr old age group about work experience and local employment opportunities, for which they felt more could be done to provide young people with the practical skills to gain jobs and that there is a lack of local employment opportunities.

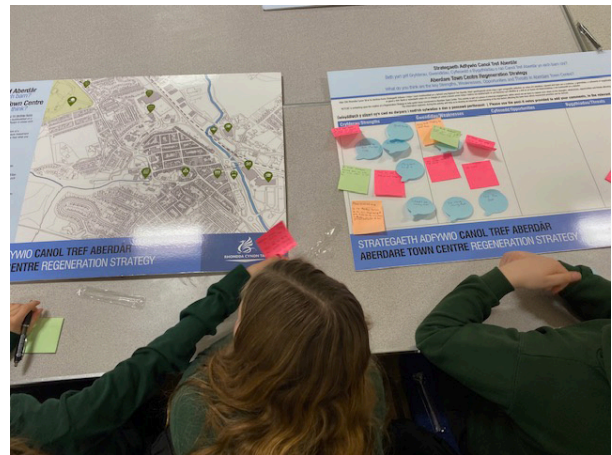
Fig.19. Photos of Younger Generation Workshops.



Discussions with students from Aberdare Park Primary and YGG Aberdar.



Students worked with RCTCBC Regeneration Officers in smaller groups to prioritise investment themes.



Maps of Aberdare Town Centre were used to help students to orientate themselves within the town.



Students from Aberdare Community School discussed ideas with each other before adding them to the SWOT analysis board.

Fig.20. Younger Generation SWOT Analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great bike tracks up to Dare Valley Country Park • Really good parks and green spaces • “Thinking space” - outdoor parks • Easy to go and see nature/wildlife • Good shops like Wilko’s & B&M • Fairs/events in Aberdare Park • Local shops • Some nice buildings • Aberdare market - can go and get lots of things in one place • Local news agent • Dare Valley Country Park • Comic book shop • Nice streets with lots of shops • Antique Shop • “Lots of places for learning - schools, library’s and the museum”. • “I like buying things from the charity shops”. • Good trains • Quite safe • Places to eat - “especially in the market”. • Central library • “Kind people to talk to” • Places to eat - Subway & Greggs • “It’s good that there is a swimming pool near the centre of town” • Forest nearby • Easy to get around, not as overwhelming as Cardiff/Merthyr (smaller scale) • Country Park • Lots of biodiversity / tree coverage • Convenient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “People could be nicer to each other” • Lots of teenagers wandering around at night • Feeling of being unsafe, especially at night • “If it is raining there is very little shelter in the town”. • Vehicles in the town can be dangerous to people crossing the road (need to give the pedestrian more priority). • Need more of a balanced offering in the town, can’t just be shops • Poor lighting on key routes to and from town where anti-social behaviour is • Poor road safety • “Too many smokers” • “Too many people are going to MacDonalds and getting overweight” • More nature and greenery is needed in the actual town centre • YEPS clubs and activities are for younger children, nothing for the 15/16 yr old age group • “Some buildings are out of place” • “If your not from Aberdare it can be hard to find places”. • “It is hard to get to the park because you have to cross many roads”. • “We can’t get to Merthyr because we don’t have a car but if there was a cinema in Aberdare we could go!” • “Too much of the same thing!” • No recycling bins in the town centre • No lighting on the fields • Not enough advertisement • You have to spend money to stay in town all day • Run down buildings • No pet shops • Too many charity shops

Fig.20. Younger Generation SWOT Analysis.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce new species of animals/ support biodiversity • Use digital technologies to show people what's available in the town • New gaming shops & places for young people to meet/socialise (off the streets) • Help to introduce renewable energies into the town and electric cars etc • "We need more local youth clubs so children aren't wandering the streets on their bikes and scooters". • Promote the use of electric cars/buses • Green spaces on rooftops - local plant ecosystems • Make opportunities for young people to gain practical work experience • Community gardens - meet people and learn new skills • Night-time events to bring more activity to the streets • Increase peoples well-being by utilising the good green spaces better • "More local cinemas because they are mostly based in Merthyr and Cardiff". • More zebra crossings • "Support people in need and charities for homeless people". • "Help animals more". • Promote walking as a well-being activity • New arcade • Incentives to encourage people to pick up litter and keep the streets clean. • "We should have more homeless shelters because there are people getting kicked out of their houses". • Planting of more trees • Create another comic shop • Put more bins around the town • Create more free things for people to do • Make a community building • "Change the abandoned buildings to cinemas, theatres, homeless shelters and apartments". • More little shops • More places for teens to go - escape rooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "People could be nicer to each other" • Lots of teenagers wandering around at night • More trouble around the world, e.g in Ukraine • Loss of community feeling • "Places are more attractive in Merthyr" (competition from nearby towns) • Climate change • "People aren't very nice to homeless people" • Online shopping • Peoples mental health and well-being has suffered since the pandemic • Ageing population • Poor connections to nearby communities causing residents to go elsewhere • "Climate Change - stop making new roads". • Vandalism by the younger generation • Shops closing down because people weren't using them • "Young people stop buying from local businesses and going to the supermarket, out of town, so businesses can't stay open" • "People are buying too much online" • A worse virus than COVID-19

Exercise 2: Prioritisation of Proposed Investment Themes

- 5.10 Following completion of the SWOT analysis exercise, students were asked to get into smaller groups to discuss and collectively agree the prioritisation of a series of investment themes. A RCTCBC Regeneration Officer was assigned to each groups to ensure that the students understand what each theme meant and to facilitate discussion. Students enjoyed the challenge of trying to convince each other of their own argument and developed strong negotiation skills in the process!
- 5.11 The results from each group have been collated into a single, prioritised list of investment themes (see fig.21) using the same weighted system as shown for other stakeholder groups.

Fig.21. Younger Generation: Prioritised Investment Themes.

Proposed Investment Theme	Weighted Score
Priority Group 1	
Overall town's appearance/brand - live, work & visit.	25
Redevelopment and re-use of vacant or derelict buildings	24
Enhancement and diversification of the town's offer	20
Sustainability and biodiversity	18
Tourism and visitor offer	17
Priority Group 2	
Physical connections between key sites	15
Partnerships and local level innovation	14
Hospitality and evening offer	12
Aberdare's history and heritage	11
Further enhancement of public realm and green spaces	9

Exercise 3: Discussion about the Welsh Language

- 5.12 An open discussion was held with both groups of students, within which students were asked to answer the following question: "how well do you think the Welsh Language is currently promoted and what do you think could be done to improve promotion of the Welsh Language?".
- 5.13 All groups felt that more could be done to promote the Welsh Language. Students from the welsh speaking school explained that they tend to speak English outside of school because Welsh is generally not spoken. However, they would welcome more opportunities to speak welsh within the town and students from the non-welsh speaking schools explained that they are all learning Welsh but would not attempt to speak it outside of school. Suggestions for improvements included making a more friendly atmosphere around 'having a go' at speaking welsh which may include younger people acting as champions for the language within the town.

6.0: Conclusions & Next Steps

- 6.1 This 'early engagement' exercise was successful in engaging over 650 people in an initial conversation on the key issues facing Aberdare town centre. Their valuable input will now assist the development of a Draft Regeneration Strategy for the town which will propose a series of 'Investment Themes' to help focus and coordinate future investment within the town.
- 6.2 The Draft Strategy will be the subject of a formal consultation exercise, during spring/summer 2023, which will further 'test' whether the strategic direction and investment themes proposed are consistent with the views of the widest possible audience. That objective will be pursued through utilisation of the full range of online and face-to-face engagement techniques.

