

# WIRRAL COUNCIL

## ECONOMY AND REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 SEPTEMBER 2012

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>TOWN CENTRES UPDATE</b>
<b>WARDS AFFECTED:</b>	<b>ALL</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b><i>DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION, HOUSING AND PLANNING</i></b>
<b>KEY DECISION</b>	NO

### 1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Following the Regeneration and Housing tour undertaken by this Committee on July 3, 2012, the Chair has asked for an update report on Wirral's retail centres, the challenges they are facing and the initiatives that are being pursued to support them.

### 2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

- 2.1 This report outlines progress to date on various strands of work which are in the process of being or have been carried out by Officers in relation to the Borough's retail shopping centres.
- 2.2 There are a number of external constraints that need to be considered in respect of supporting the development of sustainable shopping centres. National reports have shown that across the country there is an over-capacity issue in the market, resulting from matters such as the growth in the use of the internet for shopping, banking, travel and betting.
- 2.3 Difficult trading conditions are prevalent across the Country and are also being faced by traders in Wirral. The British Retail Consortium Retail Sale Monitor continues to report limited growth in retail sectors in July 2012. National Research (Local Data Company 2012) shows that the percentage of vacant shops in shopping areas has reached an average of 14.6%. This is a very real issue affecting high streets up and down the Country which cannot be solved quickly due to the complexity of issues which affect the shopping patterns of people and the ability of businesses to continue trading.
- 2.4 Over the last 3 years some well established and household names have disappeared from our shopping centres, including Woolworths, Peacocks, Habitat, Clinton Cards and T J Hughes to name just a few.
- 2.5 The impact of the global economic recession has been felt by retailers, with consumers spending power being reduced and disposable income being tighter. The consequences of which mean less money is being spent in shops and consumers are shopping around for the best deals, including using the internet for price comparisons to find the best deals. The internet accounts for a rapidly growing proportion of retail

sales particularly in the non-food sector. Experian forecast suggest non-food non-store sales (including catalogue shopping) could increase from 8.2% of all sales 2008 to 13.9% in 2014. The growth of smart phones with internet access has meant that shoppers can have instant access to on line shops and price comparisons applications.

- 2.6 The National Planning Policy Framework issued in March 2012 (which replaces the former PPS4) retains the “town centres first” approach of previous guidance. It indicates that planning policies should be positive, promote competitive town centre environments and set out policies for the management and growth of centres over the plan period. Local authorities should require planning applications for new development to be within town centres, then edge of centre locations and only then in out of centre sites (the sequential test). When an application in an out-of-centre location fails to satisfy the sequential test or is likely to have a significant adverse impact on the vitality and viability of a centre it should be refused (paragraphs 23-27). Planning policies should also guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would guard adversely impact on the community’s ability to meet it’s everyday needs (paragraph 70).
- 2.7 The importance of local shopping centres in the community is significant and they can provide a valuable service to many in the community. Often the local shopping area provides key facilities to many people. For example, older people often use their local shopping area to purchase items daily and use services such as the post office, pharmacy etc and not having these services available could make people feel excluded or isolated.
- 2.8 Whilst the Council has and continues to support as many shopping areas as it can, it is not an issue that the Council can solve in isolation and requires the support and involvement of the local traders to drive and deliver many elements, as well as the local community to rally and support their local businesses.
- 2.9 The Council is a Member of the Association of Town Centre Managers (ATCM), whose members work together to learn from Best Practice across the Country. The ATCM have been working closely with Mary Portas (the Government’s advisor on the high street) to look at the issues affecting shopping areas. The ATCM has recently launched a new website called 100 Ways - [www.100ways.org.uk/](http://www.100ways.org.uk/) which looks at a variety of ways to help support traders, town centre managers, town teams and Business Improvement Districts.
- 2.10 As Members will be aware, Mary Portas was commissioned by the Government to carry out a review of high streets and produced a report – ‘The Portas Review: an independent review into the future of our high streets’ in December 2011 ([www.communities.gov.uk/publications/regeneration/portasreview](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/regeneration/portasreview))
- 2.11 The Portas report set out a series of recommendations to tackle some of the issues high streets are facing. Government issued a response to the report in March 2012 – ‘High streets at the heart of our communities - the Government response to the Mary Portas Pilot’ ([www.communities.gov.uk/publications/regeneration/portasreviewresponse](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/regeneration/portasreviewresponse))

2.12 In February 2012, Government launched 'Portas Pilots- Prospectus: an invitation to become a Town Team'. The Government invited bids under the umbrella of 'Town Teams' and Government selected twelve pilots across the Country with up to £100,000 funding available for each.

2.13 From Wirral, eight town teams submitted bids in round 1 and 2, these were from:

- Central Liscard Town Team
- New Ferry Town Team (NFRAG)
- Victoria Road (New Brighton) Town Team
- Moreton Town Team
- Hoylake Town Team (Hoylake Village Life)
- Birkenhead and Oxton Road Town Team (Wirral Chamber)
- Birkenhead Market
- Seabank Road (New Brighton) Town Team

2.14 All unsuccessful bids from round 1 were considered by Government in the round 2 assessment. Unfortunately none of the eight bids from Wirral were successful, although they did help to galvanise support and ideas to help to address the issues within each town centre and focus on what can be done together to address these issues.

2.15 Following the second round Portas Pilot announcement, Government has launched a Town Team Partnership scheme which will be national package of support totaling £5.5 million. Town Teams who sign up to be Town Team Partners will receive backing to help put elements of their plans into action and will be able to access support from a variety of experts to gain further advice to tackle issues within their centres. Further detail will be released later this year on this national initiative and how town teams can become involved.

2.16 The Council's Local Development Framework Core Strategy is ongoing and Cabinet recently approved the Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy as the basis for preparing a final document for public consultation and submission to the Secretary of State (Cabinet 19<sup>th</sup> July 2012 minute 61 refers). As part of the work to form the evidence base for the Core Strategy, a Strategy for Retail, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure was produced by Roger Tym & Partners in 2009. The report set out the findings of a series of 'health checks' of the Borough's centres and made a number of recommendations one of which was in relation to the hierarchy of shopping centres. The report showed that a number of centres and the roles they played had changed. Following public consultation as part of the Core Strategy process, an additional two centres have been included to this hierarchy.

## 2.17 HIERACHY OF CENTRES TABLE

<b>Hierarchy of Centres</b>	
<b><i>Sub-regional centre</i></b>	
Birkenhead Town Centre (including Grange Road West, Oxton Road and Argyle Street)	
<b>Town Centres</b>	
Heswall	Liscard
Moreton	West Kirby

<b>District Centres</b>	
Bromborough Village	Hoylake
Woodchurch Road (Prenton)	
<b>Local Centres</b>	
Borough Road (Prenton Park)	Claughton Village
Dacre Hill	Eastham (Mill Park Drive/New Chester Road)
Greasby (Arrowe Road/Mill Lane)	Irby Village
Laird Street	Lower Bebington
New Ferry	Oxton Village
Seacombe (Poulton Road)	New Brighton (Seabank Road)
Tranmere Urban Village	Upton Village
New Brighton (Victoria Road)	Wallasey Village

- 2.18 In July 2011, the Town, District and Local Centre Study and Delivery Framework was reported to Members (Cabinet 21<sup>st</sup> July 2011 minute 75 refers). This study set out the background and context to shopping patterns and the current health of centres. It also outlined an assessment of the key 23 centres across the borough (except Birkenhead which was being considered through other mechanisms) which were assessed using both quantitative and qualitative information relating to each of the centres. This also allowed some short, medium and long term interventions to be drawn out from the analysis.
- 2.19 As Members will recall the report identified 6 centres which were to be looked at as part of a first phase of more detailed action planning work - Liscard, New Ferry, Seacombe (Poulton Rd / Borough Rd), New Brighton (Seabank Rd), Wallasey Village and Irby. The intention is that action plans will be ultimately be prepared for all 23 centres.
- 2.20 The range of issues to be addressed within each action plan will vary between centres depending on their individual circumstances, but are likely to include such things as:
- Clustering of non- retail uses and the appropriate policy response;
  - Detailed assessment of upper floor uses;
  - Detailed work on scope for contraction (or expansion) of the centres and how this would be managed;
  - Potential detailed environmental improvements;
  - Traffic management and parking;
  - Centre-specific design and other guidance;
  - Options for the local marketing of the centre and linkage to any borough wide initiatives.
- 2.21 Currently work is underway on compiling the Action plans for the centres listed above, working with existing trader groups in the area. An internal Council Team are looking at each of the centres in turn with expertise from Urban Design, Forward Planning, Transport and Investment Strategy. A programme of work is being finalised, including an engagement plan with trader groups in the centres.
- 2.22 Through this work the unique make up of each of the town centres can be considered. Wirral has many centres which are long and linear in nature which may benefit from a

more focused and centralised hub to cluster retailers together. Issues such as this can be addressed through the more detailed action plan work.

2.23 Alongside this work a trader toolkit is also being produced to help areas without a trader group to set one up and outlines the benefits that come from traders working together, along with advice on planning and other regulatory issues tailored to the specific needs of retailers.

2.24 Currently the Council already engages with many existing traders groups such as:

- Liscard Traders
- Bromborough Traders
- New Ferry Traders
- Seabank Road (New Brighton)
- Victoria Road (New Brighton)
- Hoylake Town Team
- Seacombe Town Team
- Birkenhead Oxtan road TownTeam

2.25 These groups work together with the community to tackle the issues which affect their shopping area. We regularly meet with groups to provide advice, address licensing / transport issues and support them to access any available funding both nationally and locally. Retailers have many issues to contend with such as Business Rates for shops. As Members will be aware Business Rates are currently a national scheme with rateable values being set through the National Valuations Office.

2.26 In addition to this existing support, 'deep clean' work has been undertaken in shopping centres across the Borough, as well as some environmental improvements. This work was done in conjunction with the traders and Members to ensure that the issues were tackled for each centre. Also, parking cost has been raised by traders as an issue and the Council's 'free after three' parking initiative has been in place to encourage shoppers into retail areas.

## **EMPTY SHOPS**

2.27 Members will recall that a number of projects for Empty Shops funding were agreed by Cabinet to help invigorate town centres throughout the borough (Cabinet 13<sup>th</sup> January 2011, minute 279 refers and Cabinet 24<sup>th</sup> November 2011, minute 207 refers). To date, £225,719.00 has been awarded to 22 projects and cumulative spend on those projects is currently running at £98,232.10.

2.28 Grant has been used primarily to support the costs of refurbishment of empty units, to help bring them back into use and to contribute towards the first year rental costs. A wide range of diverse projects have been supported across the eleven Area Forum areas.

2.29 A number of other projects are expected to go "live" shortly and a full evaluation of the programme will be undertaken by officers from the Regeneration, Housing and Planning Department later in the year.

## **LOCAL TOWN TEAMS**

- 2.30 In the Council's 2012-13 budget, £500,000 was allocated to help local shopping centres remain vibrant and to improve their vitality.
- 2.31 Traders within Wirral Town Centres were encouraged to work together to create a Town Team to bid for funding for up to £100,000 to help support and improve their centre. Fundamentally bids needed to show local support and demonstrate how traders will contribute their time and resources to create a successful outcome.
- 2.32 Cabinet on the 12 April 2012 agreed an approach and criteria for taking forward the funding and that bids should be invited for up to £100,000 from trader groups in Wirral for the creation of Town Teams.
- 2.33 The fund was launched on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2012 with a closing date of the 18<sup>th</sup> June. The opportunity was widely advertised via the Council's website, Invest Wirral, Wirral Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Federation of Small Businesses. Information was also directly distributed to shops in Wirral's town centres and parades.
- 2.34 The applications are currently being assessed in respect of the criteria outlined in the bid which were to:
- Improve vitality and increase footfall to the areas;
  - Help create local employment opportunities;
  - Reduce the vacancy rates of empty shops;
  - Demonstrate innovation and imagination in the way the high street would be managed;
  - Demonstrate collaborative working and having the support of local traders and other stakeholders and will be reported to cabinet at a future date.
- 2.35 The applications will also be considered in respect of providing value for money in the use of the funding.

## **3.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

- 3.1 A risk register for the development of the Town Centre Action Plans will be developed as part of the programme's management.

## **4.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 This report sets out the work to date undertaken to address issues within Wirral's retail centres.

## **5.0 CONSULTATION**

- 5.1 There has been extensive consultation undertaken on all of the elements outlined in the report. The Action plan work will involve a series of trader engagement meetings which will be arranged for each of the centres.

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS**

- 6.1 The Action Plan work will provide opportunity to involve voluntary, community and faith groups to inform the detail of the action plans.

## **7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS**

- 7.1 The work to date and going forward will use existing Council staff and resources from a number of departments.
- 7.2 The Town Team funding of £500,000 was set out in the Council's budget for 2012/13.
- 7.3 There are no IT or asset implications.

## **8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 All town centre initiatives covered by this report that require a funding agreement to be in place will each be subject to separate agreements in accordance with the Council's standard practice..

## **9.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Has the potential impact of your proposal(s) been reviewed with regard to equality?

(a) Yes and impact review is attached – (*insert appropriate hyperlink*).

<http://www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/community-and-living/equality-diversity-cohesion/equality-impact-assessments/eias-2010-0>

## **10.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The Town Centre work must be in conformity with national policy in terms of sustainable development.

## **11.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 Individual proposals within town centres will be assessed for their need for planning permission and determined as appropriate.

## **12.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 12.1 The Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the partnership work that is being undertaken to address these complex issues.

## **13.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 13.1 To update Members on the progress made to date on initiatives taking place in Town Centres, at the request of the Chair of this Committee.

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**APPENDICES**

*None*

**REFERENCE MATERIAL**

*As set out in the report*

**SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Cabinet- Town, District and Local Centre Study and Delivery Framework</b>	<b>21<sup>st</sup> July 2011</b>
<b>Cabinet – Neighbourhood plans and Area Forum funding</b>	<b>24 November 2011</b>
<b>Cabinet – Wirral Town Team funding</b>	<b>12 April 2012</b>