

Rachel Jones
Deputy Clerk
Enterprise and Business Committee
National Assembly for Wales

27th April 2015

Enterprise and Business Committee Briefing for Town Centres Debate

Dear Rachel,

Following a meeting of ATCM Wales on Friday, 24th April, I am able to provide an overview of the opinions of town centre managers prior to the Enterprise and Business Committee debate this week on Wednesday 29th April. The issues below were raised during the meeting.

Funding

ATCM Wales is clear that the funding provided by the Welsh Government to town centres, through various forms, shows a clear intent to support their revitalisation. Our members are pleased with this support and view it as a step in the right direction. However, the way these funding schemes have been structured and allocated displays a lack of awareness for how town centre regeneration works. Members feel that it is extremely difficult to maximise the benefits of public money as a result and suggest that the Government works with those in regeneration at a planning stage to help positively shape these funds ensuring effective delivery.

High Street Campaign

Members feel that the high street campaign was not thought through and has made little impact. They have concerns about future campaigns and, again, offer support at a planning stage to improve effectiveness.

Business Improvement Districts

Members are pleased to see support by the Welsh Government to form BIDs. They can add an important dimension to town centre regeneration. However, members are concerned about an assumption that BIDs will be able to thrive in every location. This is misleading. A number of factors will determine whether a BID is viable, including the quantity of leypayers and resources available. Members are also concerned that BIDs are seen as an alternative to public sector support for town centres. Across the UK we have seen examples of BIDs thriving when local government and other public agencies support the town centre by coordinating activity with a BID. Town centre management and BIDs should coexist.

Planning

There is unhappiness with the ineffective application Town Centres First. Many members have struggled to stop businesses relocating out-of-town with negative impacts for town centres, its users and the wider Welsh economy. Members urged that this be addressed in the forthcoming review of town centre planning policy. There is also an appetite to see planning improved to control the proliferation of betting shops and payday loan shops.

Business Rates

Members have identified the rates system as a major barrier to securing private and public sector investment in the high street. We are pleased to see the report from the Welsh Government on the devolution of rates which is open to reform. We are concerned about an underlying assumption that the rates system does not distort investment. Distortion is, in fact, a significant factor given the major shifts in business and consumer practices over the past 20 years and this must be recognised by the Welsh Government to achieve adequate reform.

Cardiff-Centric Focus

While there is an acknowledgement of the importance of Cardiff to the whole of the Welsh economy, there are concerns that investment in surrounding towns and cities is being suffocated because of the capital city. The regeneration of Cardiff cannot come at the expense of wider regeneration.

Social Issues

Members have also voiced their concern about a number of social issues that manifest themselves in town centres that must be approached with sensitivity, through coordinated action. This includes drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness and the emergence of 'legal high' shops.

Minister for Town Centres and Ministerial Advisory Group

For all the issues referenced above, we think great improvements in the quality of policy-making can be achieved by the Welsh Government fulfilling a recommendation of the Enterprise and Business Committee by bringing forward a Minister with a remit for town centres who establishes an industry-led working group populated by town centre managers, BID managers and high street businesses. This is fundamental to ensuring regeneration meets the aspiration of people and businesses across Wales.

I hope this is useful in guiding the discussion on the day. I will be happy to go into more detail on these issues during the debate.

Yours sincerely,

Ojay McDonald

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