



# CoP Public Infrastructure and Social Services

## Example of Good Practice

March 2020

Aberystwyth University

Jesse Heley

[eyh@aber.ac.uk](mailto:eyh@aber.ac.uk)

## Transforming Towns

Living Lab Mid Wales, United Kingdom

**Key words: Regeneration; services and connectivity; commercial development; community facilities**

### 1. Introduction

The Transformation Towns initiative (TTI) is a regeneration investment vehicle which is focused on revitalizing and developing town centres across Wales. Intending to increase activity and footfall, this strategy involves relocating public sector activities into town centre locations, reducing the number of unoccupied and underutilized buildings and through 'greening' the urban environment. The TTI also intends to improve connectivity in these locations, with a particular importance attached to the provision of high-speed broadband.

The TTI is of particular relevance as it directly connects regeneration projects in rural localities with both national and regional strategic priorities and funding streams. Specifically, in Mid Wales the TTI has formed a key point of reference for the activities of the Growing Mid Wales Regional Partnership, and is embedded in the development of a regional growth strategy which looks to secure a Mid Wales Growth Deal from the UK and Welsh Governments.

The TTI constitutes a primary mechanism for delivering substantial regeneration funds outside of a city-regional context. It also constitutes an example of good practice insofar as it provides local organizations with a template for developing a business case for investment which is supported by Local Authorities at the outset, and where Authorities play an advocate role throughout the process. As such, projects developed through the TTI are able to build on pre-existing expertise and connections with national and regional planning stakeholders.



## 2. Project Intention / Background information

The TTI is intended to counter the process of decline of town centres across Wales as centres for consumption and service delivery. This is a long-term phenomenon driven by a range of processes. These include: the rise of out-of-town and suburban retail parks and outlets; the growth of online shopping; a trend of stagnant growth and declining wages in many regions, reducing spending capacity; rising business rates and inflation, reducing the profitability and costs of high street businesses; and, a lack of modern infrastructure in many town centres rendering them less attractive to consumers, particularly parking. Connecting transport and land use policy, the policy to maintain and increase parking in urban centres has been identified as an important factor in maintaining the attractiveness to both retail and commercial enterprises. This, however, stands in contradiction to parallel efforts to pedestrianize urban spaces and increase public transport usage. On this point it has been noted elsewhere that ‘parking policy may not be theoretically appealing, but is practically essential’ (Marsden, 2006, p. 453)

In light of the processes outlined above, the decline in town centres disproportionately impacts upon less mobile social groups, and particularly those with limited mobility. More broadly, around 40% of the population in Wales live in towns with 20,000 residents or less. Geographically, a significant proportion of investment will focus on towns in south east and south west Wales, with a considerably lower amount of funding earmarked for locations in Mid Wales, comprising of Ceredigion and Powys Local Authorities (see figure 1)



Figure 1: Regeneration priorities, Mid Wales (Source AECOM 2018)

In Ceredigion, the market towns of Lampeter, Tregaron and Llandysul have been prioritized as recipients of regeneration funding. In Powys, Newtown, Llandrindod Wells and Brecon have been identified as key recipients for regeneration funding. These locations have all been subject to past rounds of investment (for example, through the Community Regeneration and Development

Fund), and have been prioritized on the basis of ongoing need and their role as key service centres in their respective localities.

The TTI is a relatively new programme, being announced by the Welsh Government in January 2020. It follows that the medium and long-term impacts of this initiative are yet to be fully realized. This includes the bulk of evaluation for the TTI, and for those localized projects which are/will be funded through this initiative, is forthcoming.

Financial assistance associated with the TTI comes via one or more of the following funding streams:

- **Building for the Future Programme**, a £54 million fund available to those 15 authorities within the Convergence Area of Wales, operating between 2017-2022. £38 million provided by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF),
- **Town Centre Loan Fund**, an interest free loan administered by Local Authorities (LAs) payable over 5 years, available to social housing associations, property developers, private landlords and businesses.
- **Targeted Regeneration Investment Programme**, a £100 million fund available from 2018-2021. Funding is split across; 6 LAs in north Wales (£22 million); 2 LAs in mid Wales (£7 million); 10 LAs in south east Wales (£44 million); 4 LAs in south west Wales (£27 million).

These funding streams incorporate European, national and Local-Authority levels, and co-ordination of this investment is undertaken across and between these actors. In Mid Wales, economic regeneration strategies are primarily developed through the Growing Mid Wales Partnership (GMWP). This body has produced a Framework for Action providing a rationale for regenerating key sites across the region, inclusive of the settlements of Lampeter, Tregaron, Llandysul, Newtown, Llandrindod Wells and Brecon. However, through building on three primary funding streams, the extent to which the TTI represents a new funding – as opposed to policy – initiative is limited.

### 3. Main Description

The TTI is being delivered through projects which develop and improve town centres and nearby areas. As part of this process, the Welsh Government (WG) has adopted a ‘Town Centre First’ approach which involves locating their services in town centres wherever possible. Other public sector organizations have been encouraged to follow this example. In broad terms, the TTI follows in the wake of recommendations set out in a report on *Town Centres and Retail Dynamics* commissioned by the Welsh Government (Genecon, 2014). The summary recommendations in this document include the ‘town-centre first’ approach and the diversification of uses outside of retail, including business and leisure. The importance of integrating town centre planning policy within regional and national economic strategies.

The TTI is implemented as a joint initiative between LAs and partner organizations who actively apply for funding. In the context of Mid Wales, these institutions include Tai Ceredigion housing association and ‘Open Newtown’, a trading name for the Going Green for a Living Community Land Trust (GGCLT).

In Mid Wales, the construction of a Riverside Venue in Newtown is among the first projects to secure funding through the TTI. With a budget of £1.5 million, this initiative is part funded by the National Lottery’s Community Fund in Wales. This development is a two storey building



Figure 2: Artist impression of Riverside Venue on completion (source: Shropshire Star)

on the site of a now-redundant local radio station. Situated adjacent to the River Severn, the space is intended as a ‘gateway’ between parkland and the town centre and will be a mixed-use facility. The development will combine a café

and bar with a retail space, conference room and external store for outdoors recreational equipment (canoes, bikes, etc).

In Ceredigion, the Canolfan Dulais Enterprise Centre has also received targeted regeneration investment. Awarded to Tai Ceredigion housing association, this development involves removing existing local Government buildings and constructing a two-level community space. This enterprise hub will house up to 15 SMEs and a range of local charities. It is also intended to serve the local community through a range of other roles, including family support services and a food bank.

Tai Ceredigion and the GGCLT pre-date the TTI and have established links with Ceredigion and Powys LAs, respectively. This relationship, alongside prior experience for applying for grants has contributed to the successful application for Canolfan Dulais and the Riverside Venue. It is also the case that these projects are both situated in those market town locations identified by the Mid Wales Growth Partnership as key sites for development. In this way, these projects resonate with economic strategies devised at the regional and national scales and have been successful, in part, for this reason.

In both cases, LA representatives have an advisory role on the project, and act as brokers with funding bodies and other local and regional institutions. In the case of the Riverside Venue, for example, initial plans for the development were challenged by existing local food traders who objected to the proposals for a café with 178 seats, fearing a significant loss of business. A revised proposal was subsequently submitted to the Powys Planning Committee with a reduced number of 25 seats.

Both TTI initiatives in Mid Wales also have strong local links, in particular with Lampeter and Newtown Town Councils, and the development of these projects has been tied into a range of commensurate local planning policies. These include LA Development Plans, as well as other strategies tied into tourism (including the Welsh Government Strategy for Tourism), social sustainability (including Newtown Community Action Plan; Wellbeing of Future Generations Act; Powys Public Service Board Well-being Plan) and social care/ welfare (West Wales Area Care Partnership Plan).



In respect to Canolfan Dulais the business case puts a strong emphasis on the circular economy, although the concept is not directly invoked. Specifically, the importance of creating premises for small and medium sized enterprises which will support both local entrepreneurs and the local rural economy of Lampeter and Ceredigion through their activities is foregrounded. Alongside the provision of work spaces, the project is also investing in increased broadband connectivity, trainers, mentors and support staff in the Social Enterprise Centre. It is also the case that this development has been funded on the basis of cross-sectoral provision, putting business start-ups alongside family support services and charities.

In the example of the Riverside Venue and Canolfan Dulais, planning has now been secured following a lengthy period of public consultation. Although construction work has commenced in both locations, opening dates have not been formally announced and this will inevitably be impacted by COVID-19. Community support has been forthcoming for both enterprises, although the Newtown development has caused some concern regarding the potential impact on local businesses in the hospitality sector. On this point it has been suggested that growth in one part of the town might come at the expense of another. However, efforts to integrate hospitality with the environmental and 'lifestyle' economy have been welcomed, as has the role of local community organizations in securing these funds. In the case of Canolfan Dulais, this has been identified as a positive development in that it provides a better, more technologically supportive working environment for existing health and charity provision in the locality. It is not challenging existing provision, but rather adding value to existing platforms.

#### 4. References

AECOM (2018) Mid Wales regional plan for targeted regeneration 2018 – 2033  
<https://powys.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s28443/Appendix%20%20-%20Regional%20Regeneration%20Plan%20draft.pdf>

Genecon (2014) Town Centres and Retail Dynamics: Towards a Revised Retail Planning Policy for Wales  
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-10/town-centres-and-retail-dynamics-research.pdf>

[Marsden, G. \(2006\) The evidence base for parking policies – a review. \*Transport Policy\*. 13\(6\) pp. 447-457](#)

Mid Wales Regional Plan for Targeted Regeneration 2018 – 2033 (2020)  
<https://powys.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s28443/Appendix%20%20-%20Regional%20Regeneration%20Plan%20draft.pdf>

Newtown Community Action Plan 2016-2020 (2015)  
<http://newtown.org.uk/assets/images/Web/Newtown Action Plan - V1 Dec 2015.pdf>

Open Newtown (2019) Riverside Venue Business Plan (2019)  
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/ATISN%2013368%20-%20Doc%205.pdf>



Powys Public Service Board (2018) Towards 2040 – the Powys Well-being Plan.  
<https://en.powys.gov.uk/article/5789/Towards-2040---the-Powys-Well-being-Plan>

Welsh Government (2015) Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.  
<https://futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/>

Welsh Government (2016) Partnership for Growth: Strategy for Tourism 2013-2020  
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/partnership-for-growth-strategy-for-tourism-2013-to-2020-strategy-progress-review.pdf>

Welsh Government (2020) Guidance: Transforming Towns: support to improve town centres.  
<https://gov.wales/support-improve-town-centres/building-future-programme>

West Wales Area Care Partnership (2018) Delivering Change Together: West Wales Area Plan 2018-2023 Plan. <https://www.wwcp.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/West-Wales-Area-Plan-English-Final-Version-29-03-18.pdf>