



**BLACKWOOD TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT GROUP – 4TH JUNE 2008**

**SUBJECT: BLACKWOOD STUDY – THE WAY FORWARD**

**REPORT BY: TEAM LEADER – URBAN RENEWAL**

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**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To inform members of a study that the Council in conjunction with WAG's DE&T have commissioned in order to aid the wider regeneration of the town.

**2. LINKS TO STRATEGY**

- 2.1 Regenerating the County Borough's town centres, including Blackwood, is one of the main priorities in the Council's economic development strategy – "The Smart Alternative".

**3. THE REPORT**

**Background**

- 3.1 Blackwood is a bustling town that acts as the second primary shopping centre in Caerphilly County Borough. Its status as a sub-regional shopping centre needs to be secured, as there are a number of external influences acting on it at present. In recent years various studies have been undertaken to guide Blackwood towards prosperity. An Economic Study was undertaken in 2004 to identify the main threats and opportunities for the town and at the same time a Public Realm Strategy was developed to guide how the public realm of the centre could be regenerated physically. The Economic Study produced by Donaldson's highlights the lack of sizeable footprints for multiple retailers along with a frail service sector as being primary weaknesses of the town's overall offer.

In the last 5 years millions of pounds has been invested into improving the infrastructure of Blackwood. The authority has delivered a major road scheme – the Sirhowy Enterprise Way, which provides an alternative route around the town centre. The new road also opens up Oakdale Business Park as a potential customer base for every retailer in the town. The iconic Chartist Bridge succeeds in breaking the stereotypical image of the valleys providing Blackwood with a new sense of identity. It symbolises the town's ambition to emerge from its industrial past as a strong, vibrant and modern sub regional centre, with a unique character.

- 3.3 The current CACI rankings show Blackwood at 20<sup>th</sup> position within Wales with little appetite for investors to focus in on Blackwood. The completion of a totally redesigned bus station in early 2007 ensured that the transportation infrastructure around the town is robust enough to allow the town to successfully expand and grow economically in the coming years. This landmark structure, added to the implementation of many of the proposals within the Public Realm Strategy and Public Artwork Strategy gives the town a very strong identity that can be capitalised upon in terms of promotion and marketing. The Blackwood town centre branding 'Defining The Future' captures these qualities and conveys to a wider audience of investors and developers that Blackwood has an exciting future and presents them with a genuine investment opportunity.

- 3.4 The Macgregor Smith Public Realm Strategy was developed before the introduction of the SEW and therefore did not address treatment of the High Street itself. Now that the SEW provides a quicker route around the town it is time to investigate options for the best treatment of the High Street to create a more attractive retail environment.
- 3.5 Up until this point the investment has been around the periphery of the town with the core retail area not being addressed. It must be highlighted that the future of Blackwood, certainly in the next 10 years, will be determined by how the town centre's retail area develops. Innovative and bold ways need to be found to create space for expansion in the number of larger retail units available to multiple retailers. In doing this, a balance needs to be struck so that the large number of independent retailers in the town, which give Blackwood its character, are supported and encouraged. In addition, the potential for employment (particularly office accommodation for the service sector), along with recreational opportunities within the town margins needs to be investigated further in order to achieve the goal of producing a very strong economic hub.

### **The Study Aims**

- 3.6 The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive regeneration framework for the town centre. In doing so consultants will investigate how the town can broaden its economic base and establish a framework that can be used to ensure that the town itself benefits from the introduction of the Sirhowy Enterprise Way, the development of the bus station and the range of measures implemented to make Blackwood a far more attractive proposition for investment.
- 3.7 In summary the overall aim of this commission is:
- To evolve the town's overall economy in line with the aims of the "hubs" identified within the Wales Spatial Plan.
  - To provide an attractive, accessible and distinctive town centre environment where ease of movement for pedestrians is given particular attention
  - To ensure that the town centre realises its potential of achieving sub regional shopping centre status
  - To facilitate and encourage investment opportunities in both the Employment and Leisure sectors
  - To reduce the adverse impact of traffic passing through the High Street including the negative impact that large volumes of traffic have on air quality.
  - To provide a better experience for both visitors and shoppers alike

### **The Consultants**

- 3.8 In line with the Council's Standing Orders, a number of consultants were invited to bid for this work. Submissions were received and interviews held in early April. Powell Dobson consultants were appointed based on their strong team, experience of working in similar areas to Blackwood and their enthusiasm for the work.
- 3.9 An inception meeting has been held with officers of the Council and DE&T with the Powell Dobson team. Powell Dobson will now be working to wards producing:
- A masterplan that draws upon and builds on the ideas and initiatives identified within the Town Centre Action Plan and Public Realm Strategy documents but concentrates more on the opportunities that exist for commercial, leisure and office growth. Currently there are insufficient large sized units within the towns existing building fabric to accommodate the main/strongest multiple retailers. Likewise there isn't a strong service economy and this is due mainly to the lack of adequate accommodation or sites in the town centre. The town centre's limited evening economy highlights the need for increased leisure opportunities in the area. The master plan should identify opportunities for growth in each of these 3 sectors and should be supported by sketch perspective and three-dimensional drawings, which illustrate how proposed elements could sit within the existing townscape. All design

issues will need to take account of the WAG's Design and Sustainability Guidance.

- Although not competing directly with large retail centres on the coastal belt, the challenge facing Blackwood is achieving an attractive environment that balances the needs of both pedestrians and vehicles alike. Powell Dobson will undertake traffic flow modelling to establish the levels of traffic that the town centre currently experiences post Sirhowy Enterprise Way along with the impact on traffic of any proposals for High Street itself. This will lead to appropriate proposals that identify realistic options that could be introduced to the High Street. The consultants will also be looking at the issues relating to parking, loading and disabled access as well as the problem of car cruisers.

The programme outlined by Powell Dobson in their submission will see the final draft report being available by September 2008. Before this date a number of consultation sessions have been built into the overall process including key stakeholder groups of which the Blackwood Town Centre Management Group will be one. In addition members of the Powell Dobson team will actively be engaging with retailers from Blackwood to gain an understanding of their concerns so that they can be built into the proposals within the final report. Once further research has been carried out any draft proposals will be presented to the BTCMG and also to the wider public.

#### **4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The cost of the study is £50,000 with the costs being shared between the Council and the Welsh Assembly Government Department for the Economy and Transport.

#### **5. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 None.

#### **6. CONSULTATIONS**

- 6.1 As indicated in the report.

#### **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 7.1 The report is for information.

#### **8. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 8.1 To inform the Blackwood Town Centre Management Group

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