



REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 2ND JULY 2013

SUBJECT: VILLAGES REGENERATION

REPORT BY: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To report on the regeneration of small towns and villages in the county borough as requested by the chair of the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Physical regeneration activity since 1996 has concentrated strategically on the main towns in the county borough, though there have also been some significant projects implemented in smaller towns and villages.
- 2.2 Most of the smaller settlements now have a predominantly residential function and the future pattern of service provision will reflect this, with fewer but higher quality facilities in the most accessible locations in the county borough.
- 2.3 A systematic long-term programme of regeneration of the smaller towns and villages is recommended, in which the physical elements could consist of basic improvements to the centres and approaches to settlements.
- 2.4 Expenditure constraints currently dictate that any improvement programme in the short term must be opportunistic, taking advantage of existing departmental budgets and any external funding opportunities that may arise.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 Four of the smaller towns and larger villages in the county borough are identified in the Council's adopted Local Development Plan as important 'local centres' – Rhymney, Nelson, Newbridge and Bedwas. These local centres have a wider role than residential settlements but have a more limited range of services than the five Principal towns of Caerphilly, Blackwood, Bargoed, Ystrad Mynach and Risca/Pontymister.
- 3.2 The remaining smaller settlements are identified as having a primarily residential role in the Local Development Plan. Nevertheless to fulfil this role successfully they need to be attractive, vibrant villages with facilities appropriate to their size and function.

4. THE REPORT

Background

- 4.1 Substantial progress has been made in regenerating the five principal towns in the county borough over the past 16 years. They have all benefitted from major road schemes removing through traffic from the town centres and large scale projects to improve the public realm and provide transportation infrastructure. Private sector retail developments of varying size have also been facilitated in these centres. This concentration on principal towns is justified strategically as they play a crucial role in the economy of the county borough and through provision of urban facilities, in the quality of life for the wider areas that they serve.
- 4.2 There is still important work to be done in the main town centres as the balance of activity within them shifts more to employment, leisure and cultural facilities and less on retail but the major infrastructure investments have been made and the county borough's town centres are in much better shape to meet the challenges ahead than many of their contemporaries elsewhere in the country.
- 4.3 It is therefore an appropriate time to consider a more systematic approach to the regeneration of the small towns and villages where the majority of the population of the county borough live. Most have them have a predominantly residential role and their transformation into attractive, safe and confident communities would make a significant contribution to the regeneration of the county borough.
- 4.4 In many cases the primary need for a secure future for these communities will be new housing development, to widen the choice beyond the 100 year old terraced dwellings and social housing that dominates the housing stock in many of the smaller settlements.
- 4.5 A rationalisation of facilities across the county borough with fewer but higher quality facilities located in the parts of the county borough most accessible by private and public transport is inevitable but this should not be perceived as a backward step. Accessibility to high quality services is the key and not just physically but also through improved internet connections.

Achievements so far

- 4.6 Members may recall a report to this committee in January 2012 that identified some £77 million that had spent on regenerative projects in the county borough's smaller settlements over the past decade.
- 4.7 Over the past 16 years significant sums have been invested in projects in the LDP 'Local' centres. Over £20 million has been invested in Rhymney over this period including a programme of town centre enhancements, a Townscape Heritage Initiative and a Housing Renewal Area. Nelson has seen the creation of a large new park on its eastern fringe while Newbridge is currently benefitting from a £10 million programme encompassing the spectacular Calzaghe footbridge, extensive public realm improvements in the town centre and a refurbishment of its iconic Institute and Memorial Hall.
- 4.8 The settlements in the North of the county borough have seen millions of pounds invested in them through projects financed by the Heads of the Valleys programme over the past six years while the Communities First programme has facilitated numerous improvements in the most deprived parts of the county borough, encompassing social and economic measures as well as physical improvements.
- 4.9 Where improvements have been planned and co-ordinated into a comprehensive package the effect has been transformative. In New Tredegar a rationalisation of the settlement's primary schools was expanded to include a new library and resource centre, new business units and a partial by-pass of the village.

- 4.10 Elsewhere, large scale village centre improvements have taken place in Abertridwr, Senghenydd, Llanbradach, Cross Keys, Trethomas and Crumlin while many smaller projects have been implemented in other villages.
- 4.11 Housing Renewal Area programmes have been implemented in Llanbradach, Oakdale, Abertyswg and Rhymney resulting in a substantial upgrade of the older privately owned housing stock in these settlements.
- 4.12 The above improvements have all taken place in an ad hoc manner, however, rather than as part of a comprehensive programme of improvement integrating different aspects of village regeneration. Now is the time to plan to make all of the county borough's communities' pleasant places to live, through a systematic survey, analysis and planned programme.

A programme for village regeneration

- 4.13 There are over 50 smaller settlements in the county borough, ranging from large villages like Bedwas with a population of over 10,000 to tiny hamlets like Manmoel and Groeswen. Obviously a one size fits all solution would not be appropriate across such a diverse range of settlements.
- 4.14 Initially it is proposed that settlements be classified, largely on the basis of population, into large and small villages and hamlets and a realistic range of facilities identified appropriate to each category. This would be followed by an audit of facilities, public and private, that are actually present in the various communities complemented by a simple appraisal of the scope for physical improvements in the centre of and approaches to, each settlement.
- 4.15 The categorisation, audit and survey information would be brought together in a report that would form the basis for funding bids for a long-term programme of village improvements in the county borough. In many cases there will be a need for just one or two key projects in a settlement but in the larger villages a Village Action Plan similar to the Town Centre Action Plans that have focussed regeneration spending in the past, may be required.

Funding

- 4.16 Unfortunately current expenditure constraints mean that there is no dedicated Urban Renewal capital budget for either Town Centre or village regeneration over the next three years. However, Regeneration staff will continue to liaise with colleagues in other departments and external funders to make best use of monies which are available.
- 4.17 The Communities First programme is set to continue, now organised more strategically into four major clusters in Caerphilly county borough. Community Councils exist in most parts of the county borough and are able to provide small but often vital, match funding to projects largely financed from other sources. There may in future be small amounts of money available for local projects from the Community Infrastructure Levy, which should be operative in the county borough from 2014 onwards. To date 80% of wards in the county borough have qualified for Rural Development Plan funding from the EU and it looks like another round of the RDP will commence in 2014-20. The Council's funding team will also assiduously seek out appropriate funding sources such as Lottery funds and the Coalfields Communities campaign.
- 4.18 The Welsh Housing Quality Standard improvement programme in particular presents a huge opportunity to improve many of our most deprived residential areas. Environmental, social and economic projects should accompany the internal improvements to houses to achieve a significant regeneration effect in these areas.
- 4.19 At the time of writing, officers are investigating the new vital and vibrant places regeneration funding available from Welsh Government. This could in future be a potential funding source for some of the projects mentioned in the report.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5. There are no direct funding implications for the Council, as currently there is no capital budget for this specific purpose. However, if the authority intends to bid for funding from external funding sources, there will be a requirement to identify match funding at the bidding stage.

6. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no Equalities Implications arising as a result of the report.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The surveys and assessments proposed in this report can be carried out by existing staff in the Planning and Regeneration division.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 The report has been amended to accommodate all comments made during consultations.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 Members note the content of the report.

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