

Report to: Communities Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 13 September 2012

Lead Member / Officer: Leader and Lead Member for Economic Development

Report Author: Rhyl Going Forward (RGF) Programme Manager

Title: Rhyl Going Forward – Retail & the Town Centre Workstream Update

1. What is the report about?

This report provides an update on the Retail & the Town Centre Workstream of the Rhyl Going Forward Regeneration Strategy.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To provide information regarding progress in terms implementing the Retail & the Town Centre Workstream of the Rhyl Going Forward (RGF) Regeneration Strategy, its financial implications, and the progress or prospects in terms of benefits realisation.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That Members note and comment on the progress made

4. Report details.

4.1 Background

In order to deliver effectively, the work of the Rhyl Going Forward Regeneration Strategy has been organised into workstreams:

- West Rhyl Regeneration Area
- Tourism & the Coastal Strip
- Retail & the Town Centre

4.2 A snapshot of the strategy

The town centre retains much of its splendid Victorian architecture, and offers a good range of high street brands along with quality independent shops. However, to remain competitive in a rapidly changing retail environment, a comprehensive package of training, enterprise support, physical improvements, marketing and promotion is necessary.

Improving the quality and management of the physical environment is a priority. This will include improving public spaces such as the streets and pedestrian areas, but also addressing problems with those private properties in the town which have been allowed to deteriorate and are now a bit of an eyesore.

We are also exploring how we can create a “Free Ideas Zone” for the streets at the edge of the town centre. The aim would be to embrace experimentation and innovation to encourage entrepreneurs to respond to tourism, retail and business service opportunities. This type of offer could be complimented by the street market, which currently has planning consent until December 2012. Until then we will continue to make improvements, manage and monitor the market, with a view to renewing the planning consent if its positive impact on the town centre can be clearly demonstrated.

There is a longer-term aspiration of the redevelopment of the Queen’s Market area as a new shopping centre, offering units of the right size and quality to retain and continue to attract new shops into the town.

4.3 Monitoring of the strategy

Progress for the workstream is monitored by the RGF Neighbourhoods and Places Programme Board. The specific workstream report for Retail & the Town Centre is attached:

- Appendix 1 – Retail & the Town Centre Workstream Report

4.4 Key Projects

4.4.1 Bus Station refurbishment

Rhyl Bus Station reopened in September 2010 following a £3.7 million revamp. Directly adjacent to the Railway Station this scheme, with its new shelters, improved access arrangements and high quality landscaping, creates a real sense of arrival for visitors travelling by public transport. The scheme was also extended to improve part of the main town centre shoppers car park and create better pedestrian links with the town centre

4.4.2 Town Centre Manager

A Town Centre Manager has been appointed to co-ordinate action to ensure that Rhyl remains a desirable and attractive town centre. The role will include liaising with local businesses to develop initiatives to improve the town centre, developing a programme of events that will create activity and interest, and generally promoting the town as a place to shop, visit and invest. A town centre management group of key partners has been established to direct the work of the Town Centre Manager, and work is in progress on a Town Centre Management Business Plan.

4.4.3 Bee & Station Office development

After standing derelict for many years, works to renovate this former public house opposite Rhyl Railway Station were commenced in spring 2012. The building, which is Grade II listed, will be refurbished to the highest environmental standards to create high quality office units.

For the latest position with the Bee & Station project, the latest Project Status Report has been attached as:

- Appendix 2 – Bee & Station Project Status Report

4.4.4 Costigans

Like the Bee & Station building on the other side of the road, this building opposite Rhyl Railway station has been derelict for many years and a major eyesore. It was acquired by the Council in December 2011, and works on a comprehensive refurbishment scheme completed in August 2012. The building will be suitable for a number of uses such as a shop, pub, cafe or office, and we are currently seeking a suitable occupier to bring the property back into a productive use.

4.4.5 Rhyl Market

The market was established in 2011 and currently has a temporary planning consent. It is currently the subject of a review by independent consultants to establish whether or not the market is having a positive impact on the town centre. At the time of writing this report we are still awaiting the consultant's report.

4.4.6 Other projects and activities

In addition to the projects detailed above, work is ongoing with the Council's Public Realm service to investigate ways to improve the street cleansing regime in the town centre. Some work has been undertaken with local property owners to undertake some maintenance and improve the appearance of their buildings, and further investigation of possible enforcement action on owners of buildings in a poor condition is being progressed.

4.4.7 Benefits Realisation

A major challenge to Rhyl town centre is the way that people shop has changed beyond recognition. The phenomenal growth of online retailing, the rise of mobile retailing, the speed and sophistication of the major national retailers, the epic and immersive experiences offered by today's new breed of shopping mall have all conspired to change today's retail landscape. New expectations have been created in terms of value, service, entertainment and experience against which Rhyl town centre has simply failed to deliver.

In the face of the fundamental restructuring of the retail industry, without intervention Rhyl town centre will continue to decline. Thus we need to develop the strategy, and subsequently undertake the work required to deliver that strategy. More than any of the other workstreams the activity currently being undertaken tends to be addressing the symptoms of decline – untidy streets, unmaintained properties, etc – rather than the causes. Rhyl town centre needs a new economic rationale which includes retail, but is not entirely reliant on it.

Of all the Rhyl Going Forward workstreams, the town centre one is the least well defined in terms of direction of travel and overall strategy. We need to develop a clear vision for the town centre, and be honest and open about how we see the role of Rhyl Town Centre developing, particularly in regard to how it can act as a complimenting rather than a competing location with Prestatyn. A possible approach to the strategy for Rhyl Town Centre could be:

- Try and retain and attract new national brands into the High Street area – initially accepting that the offer is probably in the value sector (Primark, TK

Max, Tesco Express, etc) – but with a longer term view of improving quality (M& S food, Next, etc);

- Support and grow the independent sector in the secondary retail areas (Queen Street, Water Street), especially those that offer something unique or quirky which might help attract some of the people who visit Rhyl for the beach to come into the town centre:
- Promote a stronger cafe culture and food orientated retail offer in the secondary retail areas
- Promote better use of upper floors with office and residential use;
- Promote new uses (residential, office, services) for units at the fringes of the town centre and high vehicle traffic areas that make trading more challenging (Wellington Road) as a way of beginning to contract the centre.

Thus it is fair to say that for the town centre a lot more work is required to define the strategy, and in doing so more closely identify the benefits of a new approach.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

The activity under this workstream contributes to the proposed corporate priorities:

5.1: Priority 1 – Developing the Local Economy and Our Communities

The main aim of this programme is to increase footfall in the town centre, and thus create more business opportunities and jobs in the tourism sector.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

The Retail workstream does not have a dedicated budget. Funding is allocated to specific projects, in the main utilising external funding sources, and the funding is monitored on a project by project basis.

A number of other service areas are involved in the plans, varying by the nature of the project. Key service areas that have regular input and engagement in the regeneration plans are:

- Leisure Services
- Public Realm
- Property Services
- Planning

7. What consultations have been carried out?

Individual projects have their own consultation strategy, but the overall consultation of the wider strategy has been appended to the West Rhyl Regeneration Workstream Update.

8. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

To have a successful town centre there are a number of issues/risks we need to recognise and address:

8.1 Street cleanliness – keeping a town like Rhyl clean poses a significant challenge because of the volume of people using the area and issues like seagull mess. We currently receive regular complaints from the public and politicians about this issue.

8.2 Maintenance, repair and investment in public street infrastructure – some of the street furniture looks very tired, repairs to damaged elements happens infrequently and often only as a result of sustained complaint. Regular complaints from the public and politicians about this issue.

8.3 Poor appearance of properties – the town centre has a potentially very attractive Victorian architecture and urban fabric, but many now are in very poor condition and present a very poor image to users of the town centre. We need to accept that the Council's enforcement role has not been as robust as perhaps it should have been, but there are also significant economic pressures that create this problem. The properties are large, and generally it is only the ground floor that has any market value. Owners do not have the resources to address the scale of refurbishments required (even with grants offered – take up of very generous grants in the town centre has been poor) and do not currently result in a significant economic return.

8.4 Parking – a regular complaint from businesses in Rhyl is about the cost of parking and its negative impact on business. Whilst there are strong reservations from officers on this (the desirability of a centre as a destination is more closely related to the strength of its offer rather than the cost of its parking), there is perhaps an issue with the accessibility of parking in Rhyl. Because of the one-way system and location of car parks in Rhyl, if you don't know the town the parking is hard to find, and once there it is not immediately obvious how to get to the shops

8.5 Business Rates – another regular complaint is the high cost of business rates in the town. The Council could consider how to use discretionary powers to give business rate concessions to businesses. Rather than a blanket reduction, consideration of how we can use these discretionary powers to promote the uses we are trying to establish and help flourish in Rhyl should be considered.

8.6 The rise of "value" retail in Rhyl – the brands that currently seem to prosper in Rhyl is on the value side – Peacocks, B & M Bargains, Poundland, etc. Whilst there is a local desire for more quality rather than value, currently the market is dictating the latter. Another aspect of this value offer is the increasing number of money-lending and betting shops, again unpopular with existing businesses and politicians but market driven.

8.7 Oversupply and inadequacy of retail units – changes to the nature of retailing means there is much less demand for town centre retail units as the trade moves online and out of centre. This trend is predicted to continue and thus we are faced

with an issue of an over-supply of units (evidenced by the increasing incidence of vacancy. Added to this, the Victorian buildings tend to offer small, narrow units, whereas modern retail desires larger, squarer units. This begins to raise questions with regard to a possible contraction of the town centre (easier said than done) and greater diversification of uses.

8.8 The impact of Prestatyn – the new development in Prestatyn and the move of key retailers like Marks and Spencers from Rhyl to Prestatyn will effectively mean that Prestatyn rather than Rhyl could become Denbighshire's prime retail location. Certainly this is the way the market, if not the Council, is likely to see it and this could manifest itself in demand for further retail development on a number of existing sites on the edge of Prestatyn town centre. Without similar sites to offer Rhyl could fall further behind Prestatyn.

9. Power to make the Decision

Article 6 of the Council's Constitution

Contact Officer:

Rhyl Going Forward Programme Manager
Tel: 01824 706495