

A **RECOVERY** **MANIFESTO** FOR CITIES AND HIGH STREETS

January 2021

Who we are

As a business improvement district (BID), FOR Cardiff works hard to deliver improvements for the 750+ city centre businesses who fund us, as well as to the wider community in Cardiff.

We view Cardiff as a modern European capital with a unique personality that we want to nurture. We want Cardiff to be a great place to come for business and for pleasure, but also a place for locals to be proud of.

Much of the change we would like to see enacted for our city centres is beyond our gift and so, on behalf of our members in Cardiff and for the cities of Wales, we present our Manifesto for Welsh City Centres.

We hope that the next Welsh Government will take our commentary into consideration as they continue the work of reinvigorating and revitalising our city centres. We know that strong local economies, community spirit and a vibrant cultural sector are key elements in the future of a prosperous Cardiff and Wales. We will do what we can for our cities and we believe that the next Welsh Government must match that commitment and do whatever they can.



Where we are

The supposed ‘death of the high street’ has preoccupied the news agenda for many years and whilst the effects of lockdown have seen progress toward the revitalisation of local and community centres, our city centres are in a very different position and require their own unique approaches.

Cities are places that attract the creative and the ambitious, alternative thinkers and outcasts. For centuries cities have provided an atmosphere that breeds opportunity and whilst we welcome the strides in accessibility that the pandemic has brought through remote working and digital inclusion, we still believe in the power of the city melting pot. No government can force a vibrant city into being, but it can create the atmosphere that allows that city to develop itself.

The city centres of a prosperous and vibrant Wales must be places where people are safe, happy, and excited to be. Our cities can no longer rely on the necessity of office footfall and the nine to five – more than ever they must become exciting cultural and emotional destinations. They must feel alive.

Below we lay out eight recommendations which will help create the environment that our city centres need to rediscover and reimagine themselves for the next phase in the history of Wales:

01–

Conduct a large-scale review of business rates

Business rates have placed an unfair tax burden on town and city centre businesses for many years disincentivising local growth

and handing an unfair advantage to online businesses, particularly those operating at the largest scale. The year-long business rates holiday granted for most businesses in 2020/21 as a part of Covid-19 economic support provides a clear window to redress the balance in this taxation model.

Many parties have proposed piecemeal reforms to business rates over the years tinkering with small business relief, revaluation schedules and local retention. Whilst many of these measures have been welcome in their own way, they do not address the fundamental fault with a tax system which is not based on the ability to pay. Utilising its powers to propose wholly new taxes, the next Welsh Government should look to address the predictability of fixed property-based tax in order to create a more equitable system. This system should champion inclusive local growth rather than handing large benefits to economically extractive business models.

02–

Allow city centre partnerships to participate more fully in the development of cities through increased powers coupled with stronger regulation

BIDs enjoy broad cross-party support throughout the UK however, elements of their delivery are hampered by the shape of the current legislation. Reviewing BID legislation and the Welsh Government approach to place management partnerships will allow for more strategic intervention and locally tailored approaches. Suggested amendments to the legislation include:

- Provision for second term BID to ask levy payers to endorse a longer term than the current maximum of 5 years to deliver higher level and strategic projects
- Consistent provision for formally constituted place partnerships to apply directly for relevant funding, such as the Transforming Towns Fund alongside and, if necessary, independently of local authorities
- Greater protection of the principle of additionality. Confidence in BIDs and other place management bodies is damaged by into bank-rolling projects previously funded by the public purse and strengthening the protections offered by service level agreements and baseline statements
- Legally binding minimum operating standards to protect businesses and communities from poorly managed BIDs

The Welsh Government has supported the establishment of BIDs through several rounds of funding and parties outside of government have also expressed their support of the model in Wales and the UK. This is heartening, however a BID will not be the appropriate place management structure for all places in Wales. Rather than focussing specifically on BID development, the next Welsh Government should consider endorsing and supporting, including financially where necessary, a wider variety of formalised place management partnerships including BIDs.

There is also a prime opportunity for the Welsh Government to lead the way in the UK regarding the transparency of BIDs. They can do this by hosting clear



information about operational BIDs and any BIDs that returned a 'no' at ballot in a clear and accessible fashion alongside information on BIDs on gov.wales.

03—

Maintain the benefits of good office environments whilst transitioning to a blended and accessible working dynamic

Covid-19 has fast-tracked progress toward home and remote working worldwide. Whilst we recognise and celebrate the many benefits associated with this practice, particularly for care givers and people with disabilities, we strongly caution against throwing the baby out with the bath water when it comes to office environments. Some form of office environment will stay on in the new world, we must ensure that it is a form that is positive for our city centres cohesively.

The current Welsh Government have outlined an ambition for 30% of the workforce working from or near to home with limited clarifying detail – after accounting for work which cannot be conducted remotely such as healthcare,



manufacturing and hospitality. Without appropriate strategic intervention this figure will translate to an enormous hollowing out of city centre office spaces and other businesses such as sandwich shops who are reliant on employees who work within these environments.¹ This will in turn result in an evaporation of the associated social, economic and professional benefits of good office working environments. Various research has demonstrated that large proportions of the workforce would prefer at least a partial return to the office.² The ability to work flexibly and remotely is a perk – the same cannot be said for the enforced practice.

We acknowledge that there will be some contraction in office space as new ways of working take hold and do not object to this in principle. We recommend that the next Welsh Government takes steps, such as reviewing business rates or offering grants, to incentivise remaining office space to relocate to vacant sites in town and city centres with their associated transport hubs, economic diversity and social opportunities and away from car

dependent and unimaginative business parks. Steps to reap the positive rewards of more flexible and inclusive working practices must work alongside and in collaboration with office environments, not against them.

04–

Empower communities to take charge of neglected or mismanaged spaces and prevent the destruction of historic and socially relevant structures

The Placemaking Wales Charter is an exciting positive step in the process of embedding a truly place based approach in the future of development in Wales. The next Welsh Government must continue to lead by example in this field and ensure that the principles of the Charter are enacted in a positive and pro-active fashion in our city centres and across Wales.

Despite this positive step across Wales urban space and key buildings are held by absentee landlords who view property only as a commercial asset and not as a social one. This results in properties being left to stand empty and eventually fall into disrepair. Innovations such as the Community Right to Buy in Scotland and the Community Right to Bid in England have demonstrated how communities can come together in urban and rural spaces to reclaim mismanaged assets to the benefit of the community, the high street and the local economy.³ We recommend that the next Welsh Government investigates the best way to grant similar powers to the people and communities of Wales.



Extending these powers to communities will also require improving access to financing for such schemes. We recommend that the next Welsh Government extends the remit of the Town Centre Loans Fund to cover community groups and establish a Welsh Community Fund to allow locals to purchase/repurpose vacant space, as per the recommendations of the Grimsey Covid Supplement.⁴

05—

Supercharge the Town Centre First approach and bring public services into vacant central properties

In January 2020 the Welsh Government announced a Town Centre First approach

for their location decision-making process, including a policy of ‘encouraging’ local authorities to act in the same manner. This is a positive step for our town centres and city centres but it lacks firepower. The long-term social value of location decisions should be a required element of the framework used by the 44 public bodies bound by the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act regardless of their scale. Wherever possible public bodies should look to inhabit existing vacant space in our town and city centres rather than constructing new facilities. Public bodies should also look to use the city centre environment as a means for fulfilling the Wellbeing Goals wherever possible and relevant.

In whatever format offices emerge in the post Covid-19 landscape, it is vital that all Welsh public services and not just the Welsh Government, locate as far as possible in urban centres. Urban locations, as opposed to faceless business parks, not only drive local economic regeneration but also facilitate active travel and blended working practices, that will be so vital to the Wales of the future.

06—

Position, protect and strengthen cultural institutions in city centres

As city centre use becomes less about necessity and more about desire, cultural institutions and installations become more important than ever in ensuring the vitality of our places. Cultural destinations with high standard work and broad social appeal should be anchored, and protected, in our city and indeed town centres.

It is important to take the arts to people in their communities, but it is also important to attract all communities to the high standard arts activities delivered in our city centres, and to demonstrate to people from all walks of life in Wales that the Arts exist for them. People's lives are enriched by visiting cities to experience their culture and symbiotically those visitors enrich the city centre. We must empower our excellent cultural institutions to deliver more for our cities in the post Covid-19 landscape. Delivering arts venues in multi-functional spaces such as city centres creates the opportunity for them to be stumbled upon as well as purposefully visited and increase the potential for collaboration between



the Arts and business communities – strengthening the already significant value added that the Arts bring to the economy.

Connecting communities who feel cut off from institutions such as the theatre or the art gallery, with the inclusive reality of these spaces located in key public transport hubs, is a vital step in encouraging the continued exploration and enjoyment of our city centres.

07—

Defend free to access spaces and space for young people in particular

The increased marketisation of public space has eroded many opportunities to be passively present in our city centres. Space which people feel comfortable visiting, without being pressured to pay or buy, is vital for the social lifeblood of city centres.

Children and young people in particular must be made to feel welcome and encouraged to spend time in our town and city centres to ensure their vibrant futures. The provision of high quality, welcoming

public space, where young people can gather spontaneously without feeling pressured to spend money or move along is a vital part of this jigsaw. Cities should welcome young people and their social activities. They promote social engagement with peers and opportunities to be active on demand, rather than committed to structured programmes – any limitations on these freedoms must absolutely be needs based and evidence led.

Young people should also have the opportunity to actively participate in the planning process – we point to the Norwegian Planning and Building Act as a leading example of enshrining this practice in law.

08— Continue to invest in developing integrated high-quality public transport infrastructure

City centres are natural transport hubs. Our reliance on private vehicles must diminish if we are to meet the challenges of climate change and the public health emergency that poor air quality contributes to. However, this should not mean that our cities become places only accessible to those in walking distance or those paying high premiums to maintain their use of motor vehicles.

The next Welsh Government must utilise the opportunities created by the formation of Transport for Wales, to create a fully integrated and cost effective public transport service connecting rail, light rail, bus and cycle hire schemes and allowing people to easily travel into and around

our cities and surrounding communities. Public transport must become not simply the best ethical argument but also the best experiential one.

Public transport must connect vital economic, housing and recreational infrastructure, with city centres supporting and reinforcing the role of their neighbouring communities.

Footnotes

² Felstead, A and Reuschke, D (2020) 'Homeworking in the UK: before and during the 2020 lockdown', WISERD Report, Cardiff: Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research. Available for download from: <https://wiserd.ac.uk/publications/homeworking-ukand-during-2020-lockdown>

³ Power To Change: Take Back The High Street. Available for download at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PCT_3619_High_Street_Pamphlet_FINAL_LR.pdf

⁴ Grimsey Review: Covid-19 Supplement for Town Centres. Available for download at: <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Grimsey-Covid-19-Supplement-June-2020.pdf>

For questions about this briefing
or how you can help cities and
high streets recover, please email:

Emily Cotterill
Projects Manager
emily@forcardiff.com

