

National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales

Report of the High Streets Debate at the Senedd on 21 May

Alun Ffred Jones AM and Ann Jones, Chair of NFWI-Wales welcomed delegates to the event. Ann Jones stated that NFWI-Wales had organised the Debate in response to the resolution passed at its Annual Meeting in June 2013 calling on WI members to support their local shops and on decision-makers to work collectively, at all levels, to help bring an end to the decline of our high streets and to ensure that they flourish and provide a focal point for local communities.

Marylyn Haines Evans, Chair of NFWI's Public Affairs Committee reported that the challenges facing our high streets and towns were complex and reached to the heart of the communities - from planning and parking regulations to property ownership and business rates. Changes in shopping patterns, along with an increase in out of town shopping centres and online shopping, had meant a steady decrease in footfall to town centres. The decrease in footfall led to a vicious cycle of falling numbers of shoppers and shop closures. It also jeopardised other town centre amenities dependent on a critical mass of consumers, including banks, dentists and libraries.

Marylyn noted that businesses faced with high rents and increasing costs were struggling to survive. Shopkeepers needed rates and rents that were a fair reflection of the market and encouraged (rather than inhibited) trade and investment.

Sharing the initial findings of research undertaken to gather members' views, it was outlined that:-

1. WI members relied heavily on their local high streets and town centres; over 70% of respondents stated that they had used the high street in the past two days.
2. We need to retain and support those specialist shops and services that anchor our high street.
3. We need to make sure high streets are attractive places to visit.
4. We need to give power back to the community.
5. We need the right foundations to enable communities to put these building blocks in place.

Marylyn stated that NFWI had been encouraging its members to put local high streets and town centres onto their WI agenda, to celebrate them, and where appropriate use them as a first point of call. It was not about turning back the tide, boycotting the internet, and abandoning every other means of shopping but about supporting high streets that are fit for purpose in the 21st Century. Action taken by local WIs included a pop up shop in Caernarfon; cash mobbing high streets and town centres; a cookery book featuring recipes from a selection of the independent businesses; and poster-bombing high streets to encourage people to shop locally.

Marylyn highlighted that the challenge of creating vibrant and flexible high streets and town centres was not solely about shopping. It was as much about addressing a community's health, education, housing and entertainment needs.

Despite the challenging times facing our high streets and town centres, Marylyn believed that they did have a real future. This would require collaboration by decision-makers at all levels to ensure a co-ordinated approach in developing high streets and town centres that were fit for purpose in the 21st Century and meeting the needs of communities as well as consumers.

John Munro, Director of the Welsh Retail Consortium highlighted the importance of local vision and building a sense of community. He questioned what the high street of the future would look like. He said that high streets won't exist in the same shape and form as in the past; there could be fewer or small high streets and that would be acceptable.

John emphasised that the high street is not all about retail and that there is a need to think about what can be done with vacant units. He described vacant shops as a 'cancer' destroying the attractiveness of an area. We can't, he said, give a prescription for the high street as every area is different and will need a different approach.

John highlighted the importance of communities coming together and ensuring that the needs of communities were met. He also spoke of the barriers presented by business rates and said that it was crucial that these barriers were removed if businesses were to be encouraged to take initiative. In conclusion, he urged WIs to take a lead in getting communities together and in pressing local authorities to develop partnerships.

Martin Blackwell, Chief Executive of the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) spoke of the need for town centres to be co-ordinated and diversified as they went through significant cultural, social and economic change. He said that not one size fits all; there is no silver bullet. He felt that the Vibrant and Viable Places framework was setting the scene for recovery. While Councils have been given discretion with the rate relief scheme, there was not requirement on local authorities to spend the money in town centres. Martin said that the current system of business rates was not fit for purpose and outlined the ATCM calls for new economic policies with a comprehensive review of the current business rates system.

The social aspect of town centres was highlighted and Martin emphasised the need to translate belonging into action. He shared some findings of the ATCM report 'Town Centres Futures' that will be launched in June which whilst showing the biggest decline of footfall in Wales also shows positive growth in Wales.

Martin highlighted the need to focus on digital. He explained that 1.6million SME's do not have basic digital skills and one-third of SME's don't have a website. He also spoke of creative destruction and said that we are ready for a renaissance if we can get the support right.

Martin mentioned the Portas review in England and the contribution it had made in putting town centres at the heart of our discussions. He said that we need to think beyond retail and highlighted that in some places up to 25% of turnover takes places after dark. He told delegates about the night time economy award - purple flag status - achieved by Aberystwyth.

Martin reported that ATCM welcomed the BIDS and spoke of the importance of co-ordination between local authorities, the business sector and the community and the engagement of town and city managers. In conclusion, he reiterated the need for strong leadership, vision, strategy and an action plan for every area.

Jeff Cuthbert AM, Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty addressed delegates concerning the Proposed Future Generations (Wales) Bill and the National Conversation on Sustainable Development. He said that sustainable development was at the heart of the Welsh Government and that the Bill provided an opportunity to put key goals into law. He explained that as a smaller devolved nation, Wales could take the lead in putting sustainable development into practice. He informed delegates of the pilot national conversation that was currently taking place to gather people's view on the Wales they want and urged delegates to feed back their views which will in turn help inform the progress of the Bill. The Bill would place a duty on public services however the Minister hoped that the principles would be taken forward by all sectors.

Discussion

Mandy Powell from CILIP Cymru highlighted the important role of public libraries in developing communities. She said that 50% of people who used public libraries went on foot. She referred to the ALMA report that looked at the monetary value of using public libraries and found that 596 jobs were supported in Wales by local libraries during 2012-13 over and both those directly employed by the service.

Martin Blackwell responded that in order to create sustainable town centres, there was a need to get more public services back into town centres. Elin Jones AM spoke of the enthusiasm of young shopkeepers in Lampeter who were selling on the internet and drawing people into the town. She said that training and taking the fear factor away from the internet was important.

Jane Lorimer from Sustrans Cymru reported that people who accessed high streets and town centres by walking or cycling spent more than those who travelled by car.

Martin Blackwell noted the importance of digital skills. Through ATCM's digital high streets programme, 100,000 people had been trained in basic digital skills. A small programme in Wales was under evaluation.

Rhun ap Iorwerth AM said that, in this digital age, a focus on infrastructure spend was necessary. All changes, he said, provided opportunities, threats or both. He emphasised that the internet offered huge opportunities and there was no reason why retailers couldn't be internet experts. Within the Proposed Future Generations (Wales) Bill, he said that innovation was key and there was need to be innovative in legislation and provide the tools to change business rates. The lead on innovation has to come from Government and from communities.

Julie Williams from the Federation of Small Businesses explained that the rural aspect was different to city centres and required a different approach. She said it had been difficult for town planners in Swansea when offices had moved out of the city. John Munro responded that it was vital that the services that were offered were high quality services. He said that independent retailers needed to focus on good innovation and good offers and said that the expectations of consumers were high.

Mark Barnes from Revive and Thrive highlighted that a community combined with new technology could make a difference. A project that he had been involved in had raised £230,000 of goods and services. He emphasised the need to connect communities in towns and the importance of social media. He spoke of the Time 4 Towns initiative which interacted with people in their homes 24/7 about the opportunities available in their towns.

Joyce Watson AM shared the experiences of businesses in Narberth who had built their success by trading on the name Narberth. Their success was built in the name of the town; they sell the same as is sold elsewhere but consumers recognise Narberth and like to buy from there. Retailers had also gained significant internet sales against the name. She said that there was a need to look at the most successful town centres and why there were succeeding. Town centres would never be fixed; we need ownership by people of their town and what it means to them. In addition, independent traders need to pay fair wages and buy support of the locals.

Andrew Highway, Town Centre Development Manager, Caerphilly CBC said that there was a need to change behaviour patterns. He welcomed the Welsh Government focus on town centres and said that town centres were about detail. He emphasised the need for a joined-up approach and to share good practice in towns and cities. He highlighted some of the things that retailers care about, such as vandalism and litter, and the need for a town centre model to fix these issues. John Munro responded that retailers want people to come into

their shops and there was a duty on community leaders to support initiatives that get people back into towns.

Adrian Evans, Town Centre Strategy Manager, Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC highlighted that engagement with retailers was a problem. They don't want to get involved in local issues on high streets such as promoting local events. He stressed that there was general apathy and that businesses needed to help themselves by engaging with communities.

Rebecca Hooper, Team Leader Neighbourhood Regeneration at Cardiff Council said that funding failed to recognise the need for business support. She highlighted the importance of the environment and improving access to trading areas. Due to pressure on local authority budgets, Rebecca noted as an example that damaged benches were not being fixed but were being taken away.

The need for good quality parking was raised. Martin Blackwell highlighted the research on car parks undertaken last year 'Rethink! Parking on the High Street' undertaken by the ATCM and partners. A quality score was provided for towns and the research noted that as the quality score went down, so did the car parking score. Overcharging for the quality of the car park was also noted.

Chris Wading from the office of Huw Lewis AM reported that there was a lot of apathy from business owners in Merthyr Tydfil. He said that there was no shortage of enthusiasm for things to happen and noted that Merthyr has the BID scheme.

Isobel Garner from Wrexham CBC also highlighted apathy from town centre retailers and the difficulty in communicating with businesses. Julie Williams from the Federation of Small Businesses noted the red tape faced by businesses to apply for a small amount of funding. She noted that even 20% contribution was too much for small businesses.

It was noted that the Aberystwyth's purple flag award had not filtered out as a news story and highlighted the importance of promoting success stories.

Closing remarks

Ann Jones thanked delegates for attending and for their contributions to the Debate. A report summarising the event would be circulated to all delegates.