

An aerial photograph of a Welsh town, showing a mix of residential buildings, green fields, and a river on the right side. The town is nestled in a valley, with the river flowing through it. The image is used as a background for the text.

# Welsh towns: the foundational approach

- *Presenting the Small Towns Big issues report*
- *Foundational Economy Research Ltd*

# Urban renewal? the foundational approach

**Small towns Big Issues?** a report from a FERL research project about 3 towns (Bangor, Bridgend and Haverfordwest).

**Complements the Audit Wales report:** shared aim = how to develop policies + practice which deliver more than “pepper potting” of sympathetic rebuild

**FERL adds the foundational approach:** towns through a wide angle lens

- **The (auto)mobility problem** about towns in their car dependent hinterlands (not just the activity problem about replacing retail in the town centre)
- **The balance of forces:** private developer business model pro edge of town development vs Welsh planners pro town centre
- **Policy and practice:** Westminster help is unlikely, Cardiff Bay has some good policy options and we can all share the creative work of building local agency

(1) Automobility,  
urban re-  
formatting and  
collateral  
damage

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**Automobility:**  
*cars bring  
live/work/spend  
disconnects*

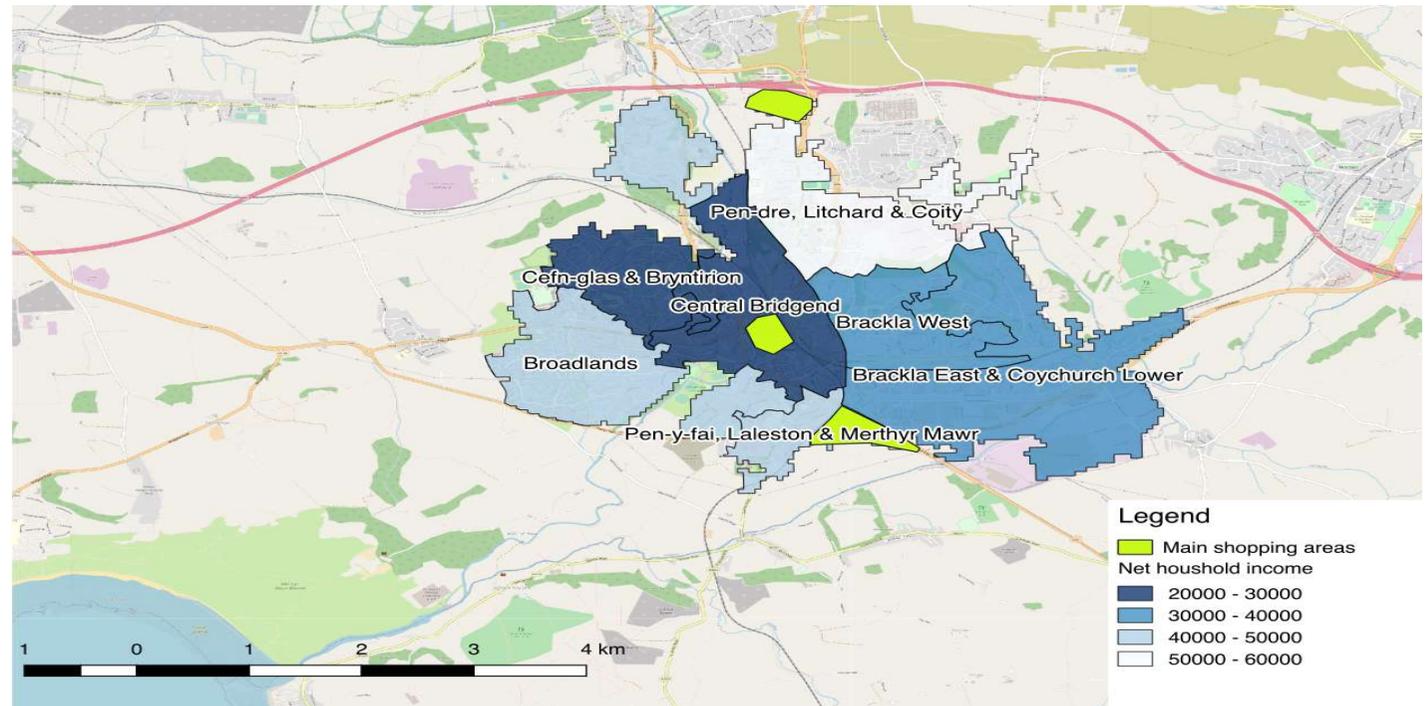
- Post 1980 the car is a (nearly) universal tool for accessing work, retail and leisure
- 80 % of Welsh households have car access, c. 1/3<sup>rd</sup> have 2 cars; 95% with 1 car in new build middle income suburbs + 70% with 2 cars; social housing 70% with 1 car
- Car allows live/work/spend disconnects; especially for the ¾ of couples with kids where both partners work; irregular door to door journeys across an everyday hinterland in a “30 minute drive to” radius
- With mixed consequences: gain in amenities/ access for rural areas + small towns vs reformatting of urban space around mono functional car dependent zones like retail parks

# Reformatting: *the 30 minute drive to hinterland*



- Here's the 30 minute drive to hinterland of the Designer Outlet at M4 junction 36; 2.5 miles N of Bridgend Town centre with 3 X the visitors and 5 X the non food turnover
- Everyday Wales (for middle income households) is about drive to free car parking in mono functional zones:
  - ✓ Live in an off roundabout housing estate with 2 cars in every drive way
  - ✓ Work in business park eg WG offices at Penllergaer, Merthyr, Llandudno Junction
  - ✓ Food shop in edge of town supermarket: your local Tesco superstore with 7 million visits per annum
  - ✓ Clothing + durables ex out of town retail park ( eg M4 junction 36 or Trostre RP)

**Collateral  
damage:  
*low income  
doughnut  
around hollowed  
out centres***



- Here's the low incomes + cheap housing in a doughnut ring around the town centre, as in Bridgend with half the income of Litchard or Coity
- Bridgend town centre is bypassed. Many living in or around Bridgend have no reason to go into the town centre. Retail and leisure has shifted N to M4 junction 36; employment is concentrated in the SE industrial estates off M 4 junction 35; new housing built and planned is in an outer ring of car dependent estates
- Hollowing out elsewhere as in Bangor with little benefit from employment in a research university and a regional hospital. Less than 2,000 live and work in Bangor vs 6,250 commute in by car from commuter villages like Menai Bridge, a 15-20 minute drive from the University; social housing estate of Maesgeirchen has 1200 workers but only 300 commute into Bangor

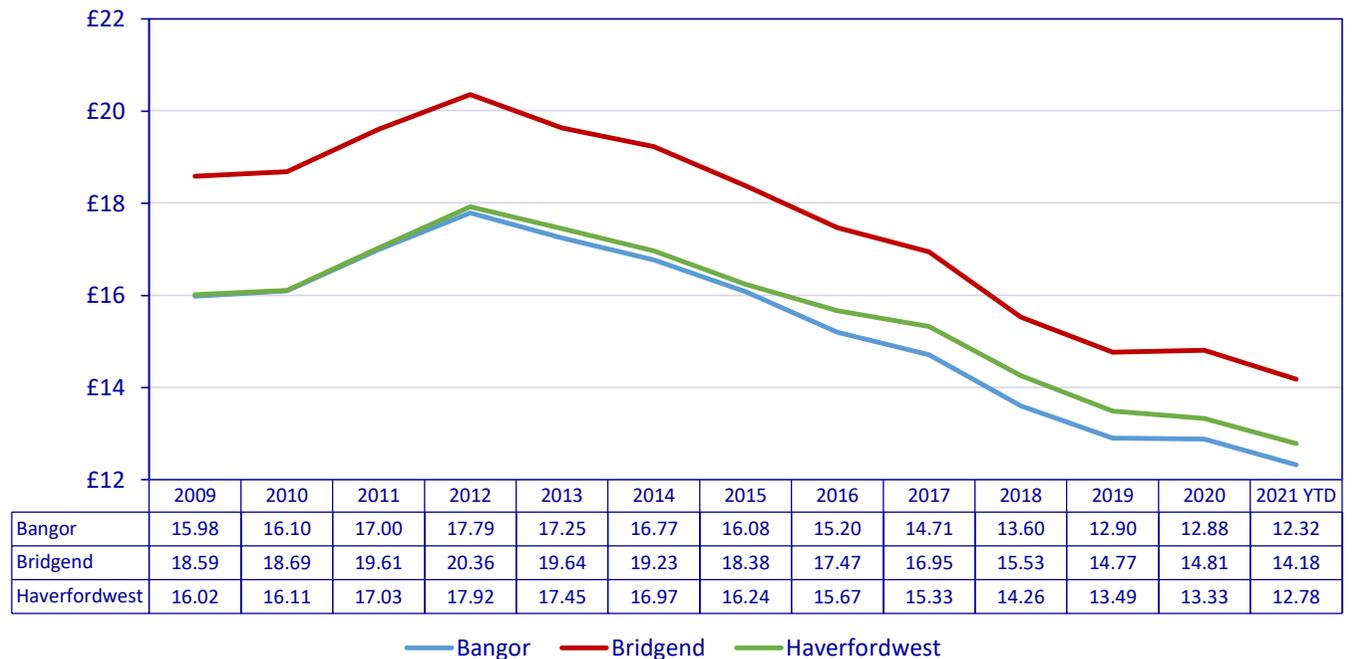
(2) Balance of forces  
in the built  
environment:  
*developer driven system*  
vs  
*Welsh new model*  
*planning*



**Balance of forces?**  
*a plan led + developer driven system*

- Automobility requires an infrastructure of roads and buildings that makes the car a default choice; the Designer Outlet could not exist without the M4
- How + why did we rebuild Wales after 1980? So that Haverfordwest becomes a “medieval town surrounded by tin sheds” with 2 retail parks, 2 edge of town supermarkets and edge of town housing estates =
- Balance of forces: the post 1990 Welsh town planning system was formally plan led but practically developer driven (helped by competitive localism amongst LAs)
- Post 1990 initiative is with private developers; eg 85 % of Welsh new house building is private + a Local Development Plan begins with call for developers to propose a long list of candidate sites from which a local authority will choose

# Developer priorities: town centre problems vs edge of town profits



- Private developers build what's profitable + scan capital values + rents (as in 3 town centres above)
- Town centre development has a cost vs market value problem ie market value of a newly refurbished or rebuilt property is less than the cost incurred; fragmented ownership in Welsh towns centres where retail rents capital values have been steadily declining since 2012 = a problem about stranded assets
- Edge of town, green field developments are less complicated + more profitable eg the major UK PLC housebuilders were making 20% ROCE after 2015 ( cf more like 5% in supermarkets); as retail moves on line, fund investors in retail parks have large bay sheds which are cheaply reusable for leisure, gyms, health centres etc.

**A new model  
Welsh  
planning:  
*Plan 2040 and  
Town Centres  
First***

- Wales has a new model of planning with an ideal of compact, mixed use settlements + aim of defending town centres:
- *Future Wales : the National Plan 2040* = a Welsh version of the European 15 minute city i.e. compact centred towns+ active travel + local facilities (diwygiad after 40 years of edge of town, mono functional, low density, car dependent developments)
- **Town Centres First Principle** = precedence for town centre sites in all large scale new developments + skirmishing about new build housing in the Vale of Glamorgan
- TCF = a good first step but not enough to redress the balance of forces; mainly applies to occasional public sector relocations where as in Bangor the FE College could plead cost + absence of a suitable in town location; edge of town development carries on eg Pentre Awel, Llanelli

(3) Policy and  
practice:  
*the unlikely, the  
possible and the  
creative  
opportunity*

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**Policy and  
practice;**  
*2 out of 3 from  
Westminster,  
Cardiff Bay and  
the local  
opportunity*

- Our brief was to look at 3 small towns = a limited basis for generalisation but we bring our foundational approach from food, afforestation etc
- To get volume results in complex systems , we need coordinated, purposive interventions at various points and 3 different levels ( Westminster, Cardiff Bay and locality)
- Our argument = Westminster is unlikely to be helpful but Cardiff Bay has good, straightforward policy options and we have opportunities at local level if we can be more creative
- Two out of three inside Wales is enough to get some movement, so let's get on with thinking things through before going out to do something.

**Westminster  
policies:**  
*helpful  
support unlikely  
but focused  
Welsh lobbying  
sensible*

- Westminster is powerful + controlling: under Tory government and Treasury rule we predict they will spend much on town centre projects for negligible results
- Westminster unhelpful because see private developers as the solution not part of the problem; digging a deeper hole via deregulated conversion of town centre retail + presumption pro development on many edge of town sites
- But let's lobby the Treasury to do some helpful things which fit their world view eg designate renewal zones with tax concessions including no VAT on building refurbishment
- Press Rachel Reeves and the Labour opposition to look at serious alternatives to Section 106 levies: eg an urban renewal charge through rates + council tax (like the green charges on your electricity bill)

## Cardiff Bay policies: *possible to add edge of town policies*

- Add policies to manage edge of town development + get a better return from existing WG policies for town centre relocation and business support (ie Town Centres First + business rates relief, planning tools like LDOs)
- Get ahead of upcoming problems (a) re use of retail and business parks for gyms, shared work spaces, health centres etc with retail moving on line + more home working (b) off roundabout housing new build especially in Cardiff + the Vale
- Preventive and corrective policies for balance centre vs edge:
  - ✓ Set presumption against edge of town retail and business park change of use; unless such changes serve a neighbourhood purpose
  - ✓ Levy per hour charges or business rates on every available car parking space in edge of town retail parks (£1 a day in Bangor or Haverfordwest would create create a £500k p.a. revenue fund for the support of in town social infrastructure)

**local agency:**  
*creative  
opportunity to  
support alliances  
for change*

- **What we want for renewal is local agency:** local vision + execution because every place is different; LAs are key enablers and there is a capacity problem but for local agency we need two catalysts which provide momentum:
- **(1) the commitment of major stakeholders** with property and balance sheets eg in Bangor the University has to commit and so do more of the 35 Welsh Housing Associations (not just the usual suspects)
- **(2) the engagement of civil society groups** empowered to change LA decisions and drive projects with a social dimension ( as in Haverfordwest with the skate park or Haverhub)
- **This organic foundational approach breaks with the Welsh mechanical way:** as when LA engages consultants to draw up a masterplan plans + ritualistically consults or when WG adds a higher level of Development Plan or looks towards institutions like the BIDs. The mechanical outcome is formal compliance + performance of local divisions

**So much to play  
for:**  
*but it does require a  
change in  
governmentality*

- **There is so much to play for.** Welsh town centres are places of sociability and long dwell times when edge of town is transactional in; 1/3<sup>rd</sup> plus of Welsh town centre visitors already come from 10 minutes walking distance
- **But it does require a change in governmentality:** stop spreading funds thinly by competition for building projects
- **Concentrate suasion, org. support and modest funding** on a few places like Bangor or Wrexham where town alliances for change are close to take off; recruit key stakeholders for researched options, target high density mixed income housing
- **Organise networked learning + communities of practice** so many of the 22 Welsh local authorities can become **fast followers**; initially focus on the conditions of LA success with easier to solve problems eg Maesteg and Porthcawl (with Bridgend to follow)
- **Here's an agenda which can keep us all busy**