

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Director of Development and Environmental Services

Community Safety and Environmental Services Committee : 1 March 2006

Subject: West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative Review

1.0 Purpose:

- 1.1** This report sets out the content of an independent Consultant's review of the West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative and makes recommendations as to the way ahead.

2.0 Background:

- 2.1** The Council and Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire jointly established the West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative approximately eight years ago. Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire indicated a desire to review the initiative, and an independent consultant was engaged to carry out the following remit:-

- to obtain views of key stakeholders on West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative (TCI) and its role in the management and regeneration of the Dumbarton and Alexandria Town Centres;
- to facilitate a strategic discussion between Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire and West Dunbartonshire Council on the way forward;
- enable those discussions to be informed and take into account the views of the other key players; and
- to outline views and key issues to Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire and the Council;

- 2.2** Key findings from the consultant's report are summarised below. A copy of the full document has been made available within Members' rooms.

- 2.3 With respect to the progress of the TCI towards meeting its objectives, it is considered that there has been an over emphasis in terms of master planning eg. the preparation of the Town Centre Action Plan. Moreover it is questioned whether this is a proper role for the TCI or whether these aspects should be taken forward by the Council using statutory planning and other powers. It is commented that, if the remit is to encompass town centre regeneration responsibilities, the distinctive contribution and role of the TCI would need to be clear, as against the role of other key players such as the Council and SED. Moreover, most interviewees felt that the TCI remit for Clydebank should now be dropped.
- 2.4 It is considered that there remains a surprising lack of consistency or clarity as regards to the vision of what successful town centres of Dumbarton and Alexandria might look like and consist of in the future. Some stakeholders, including some local traders, expressed the view that the futures of these centres should be in some combination of discount retailing, speciality shopping and activities with a high service content. This view contrasts with the desire of the TCI and other partners to attract more leading retailers to the centre. This difference of approach requires to be considered and reconciled.
- 2.5 With respect to governance, WDC and SED are the sole legal “members” of the TCI. With this comes both the responsibility and power regarding its governance and operations. However, it is considered that the TCI itself provides little by way of formal reporting to its funding Members. Moreover, it is considered that there is a lack of daylight between the TCI and the Council in particular and confusion exists as to which party is implementing various aspects of the town centres strategy.
- 2.6 From Scottish Enterprise’s point of view, it is reported that there is a weakening in strategic fit between the overall strategy of Scottish Enterprise at a national level and the role of the TCI. Apparently a number of other local enterprise companies have withdrawn from Town Centre Management Initiatives in recent years and the fit of the TCI with SED’s strategies is questioned.
- 2.7 A range of other issues are raised which require discussion. Particularly in Dumbarton, traders questioned the traffic management arrangements which are proposed and why further car parking had not been introduced, though no mention is made in the report of the parking management proposals which have been agreed by the Council and which seek to address this issue.
- 2.8 It is considered that opportunities exist to promote Dumbarton Town Centre as a business location. Opportunities exist within the Artizan Centre for office development. Effective promotion of Dumbarton and Alexandria Town Centres is going to be required in the period ahead, both to underpin the current round of investment/development and also attract a further round of investment/commitment to these locations. Clarity is needed on who is going to do what if this issue is to be taken forward properly.

- 2.9 Finally, a number of respondents questioned whether Council Offices could be relocated to Dumbarton Town Centre and this is an issue which needs to be resolved one way or another.
- 2.10 Arising from the report, the Consultant draws a number of implications. Firstly, it is stressed that there is a need to act. The status quo is not seen as a realistic option by virtually all respondents. At the very least, a clear time frame should be set. Any future arrangements should have the confidence and backing of funders and other key players. The relationship with the business community is considered to be a major weakness in the current arrangement and needs to be addressed. Also, funders must ensure that their own performance, in whatever improvements on the arrangements are put in place, is characterised by clarity, consistency and decisiveness.
- 2.11 Arising from the publication of the report, consultation has taken place between the senior officials of SED and the Council and the Board of the Town Centre Initiative. Full written comments have been submitted by the TCI and these have been assessed along with the consultant's report.
- 2.12 The Board of the TCI indicate that the number of voids within the Dumbarton Town Centre is overstated, given that many of these lie within the development at College Way which is being promoted and marketed by Dunedin. Moreover, a number of new tenants have been attracted to the town by the College Way and other developments. It is strongly argued that there has necessarily been a focus on project development and an opportunity will exist as this work is completed to focus on Town Centre Management and marketing issues in the future.
- 2.13 Significant comment is submitted in respect of the efforts which have been made with respect to improving relationships with local businesses and it is considered that progress is being made.
- 2.14 The TCI Board also points out that any reduced emphasis and commitment to Dumbarton and Alexandria Town Centres could have an impact on the confidence and momentum underlying existing regeneration strategies.
- 2.15 The Chair of the TCI Board has raised specific concerns regarding the welfare of the staff arising from any new arrangements which are brought forward.

3.0 Main Issues:

- 3.1 The fundamental issue for the Council to determine is how it should respond to the review of West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative Limited.

- 3.2 Discussions have taken place with Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire and, while final decisions have not been taken at Board level, it is understood that the recommendation to the Board will be that SED should withdraw funding from the TCI in the near future. SED contributes around £50,000 per annum in support of the operation of the TCI, and the TCI has requested that this amount be increased. Officers of SED believe that the role of the TCI no longer fits sufficiently closely within Scottish Enterprise's strategic priorities. Obviously, this would require a consideration of what steps should be taken by the Council.
- 3.3 Presently, the Council makes an annual revenue contribution to the West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative Limited of £53,000 per annum. In addition, the TCI does have some financial reserves. However, these resources would not be sufficient to allow the continuation of the TCI in its present form, particularly when it is noted that historically the initiative has received rent free premises from a combination of Regentpost/Vico/Dunedin at College Way and this is a situation which is unlikely to continue.
- 3.4 Arising from the above and the content of the Consultant's report, it is considered that it would now be appropriate for the Council to withdraw from the Town Centre Initiative.
- 3.5 As members, West Dunbartonshire Council and Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire have the power to resolve to wind up this company. In these circumstances, it would be for the Board to take appropriate steps with respect to the winding up and to arrive at an appropriate arrangement for the termination of the contracts of the staff. The Town Centre Initiative presently employs a Manager, a Project Officer and Administrative support. In the event that the company is wound up, an appropriate mechanism should be put in place to ensure that any remaining resources can be retained for the promotion of Dumbarton and Alexandria Town Centres.

4.0 Recommendations:

- 4.1 That the Council note the content of the Consultant's review of the West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative.**
- 4.2 That the Council resolve to seek the agreement of Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire to wind up West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative Limited.**

- 4.3 That an appropriate mechanism be put in place to ensure effective engagement with local businesses, marketing and that any resources remaining within the accounts of the Town Centres Initiative are retained for the promotion of Dumbarton and Alexandria Town Centres.



Dan Henderson
Director of Development and Environmental Services
Date: 13 February 2006

Background Papers: West Dunbartonshire Town Centres Initiative Review
Wards Affected: All
Person to Contact: Dan Henderson, Director of Development and Environmental Services
Development and Environmental Services
Council Offices, Rosebery Place, Clydebank G81 1TG
Tel. No.: (01389) 738214.