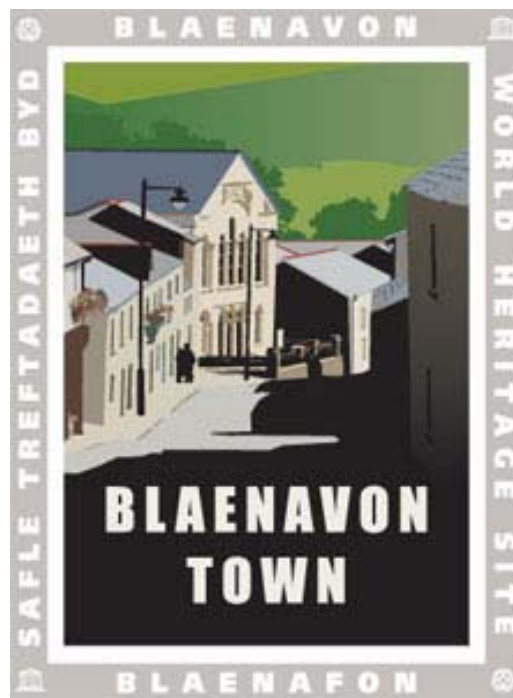


MILLER



Research Evaluation Consulting



## Blaenavon Retail Distinctiveness Study

### Final Report

June 2009

## Report From



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**Dated: 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

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**DISTINCTIVENESS**



Local, from the ground, menus, packed lunches, hampers, food festivals, markets, diet, healthy eating, home-made, organic, open between 5pm and 7pm, coffee houses, tea rooms, sandwich bars, hotels, restaurants, pubs, micro-breweries, catch of the day, 'local brew', farm produce, tastings, ambiance, lighting, nights out, friendly service, dietary needs, aroma, cookery demonstrations, music nights in restaurants, fine wine, comfy bedrooms, hearty breakfasts, morning papers ...

**FEEDING  
DISTINCTIVENESS**



Opening hours, small of fresh coffee, chat across the counter, "do you know a good place to eat?", gift wrap, "going the extra mile", home delivery, "can we order it for you?", mailing lists, window displays, bi-spoke shop signs, web-sites, art and crafts, groceries and clothing, antiques and books, fair-trade, open door, the great outdoors, animate the pavement, X boards, show off your produce, clear pricing, "come back again!" ...

**SELLING  
DISTINCTIVENESS**



Stalls, frequency, regular event, awareness, variety, cleanliness, layout, local produce, visible, central, information, covered, music, banter, colour, quality, themed, antiques, flea, collector, farmers, arts and crafts, tasting, labelling, managed, bustling, 'getting a bargain', publicity, complementary to town, local stall-holders, continental market, Christmas, laden with bags, evening markets, street theatre, personalities, showcasing the town and its backdrop ...

**MARKETING  
DISTINCTIVENESS**



Announce your town, clear signage, avoid street clutter, create functional space, celebrate heritage, interpret the past, managed parking, easy to get around, exploration, hanging signs, use of artwork, alleys and lanes, the market place, create diversity, places to dwell, public toilets, maps and fingerposts, "who lived here?", upper storeys, roofs, pride in your frontage, trees and greenery, local materials, quality finishes, be innovative, memorable places...

**BUILDING  
DISTINCTIVENESS**



Where do you want to be?  
What's on your shopping list?  
Do you have all the ingredients?



**PLOTTING  
DISTINCTIVENESS**



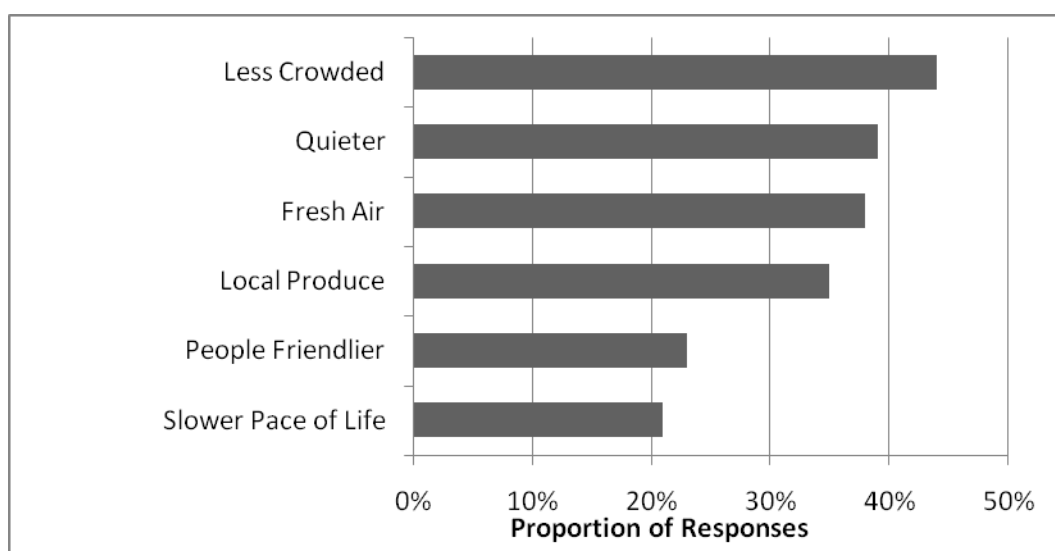
## 1. Introduction

Miller Research was commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government (DE&T) Heads of the Valleys Programme, to undertake a pilot Retail Distinctiveness project for Blaenavon. The work is based on a short version of the Retail Distinctiveness model developed for ONE North East by Miller, which has been run in fifteen towns across the UK.

The original rationale for the Distinctiveness model was to counter the “cloning” of town centres and to aid thinking in creating and preserving vibrant small communities – especially rural market towns.

Primary market research in urban centres helped to define the factors which contribute to a successful small town. Four hundred people were interviewed on street and asked to think of a small town that they visited regularly. They were asked to think about the aspects of that town that they found attractive and what made them go there. Examples included a sense of the town setting, a countryside context, a less crowded or rushed shopping experience, and the availability of local produce.

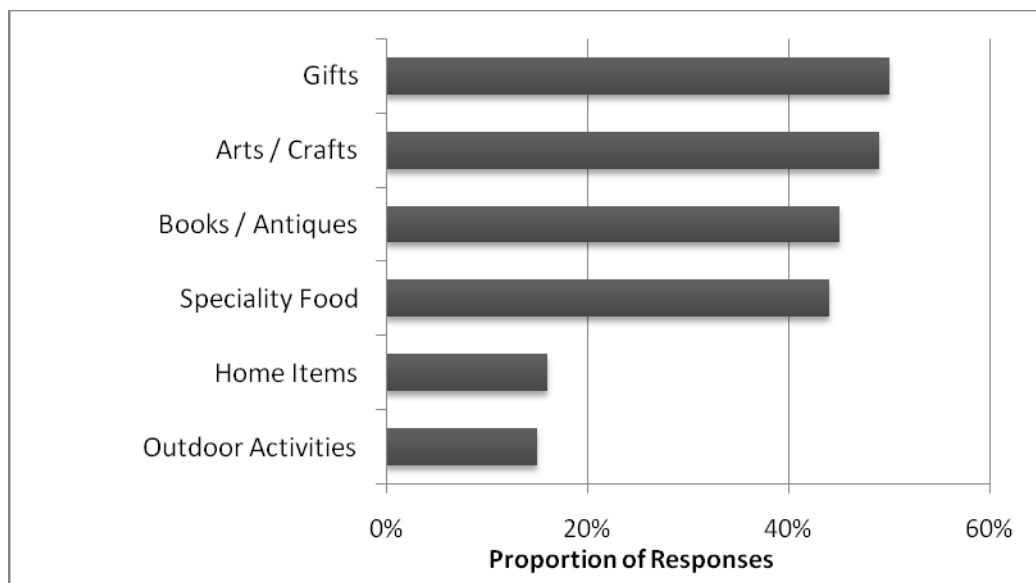
**Figure 1. Small Towns – Main Attractors**



*Source: Retail Distinctiveness Research*

In terms of the retail offer, the main attractors for visitors were gifts, arts and craft shops, along with speciality food retailers. Home items, outdoor equipment and independent clothing shops were also featured.

**Figure 2 Small Towns – Retail Attractors for Visitors**



Source: Retail Distinctiveness Research

These factors, along with others from the original surveys and complemented by the results of a series of focus groups, led to a working definition of the variables affecting Distinctiveness, as shown below.

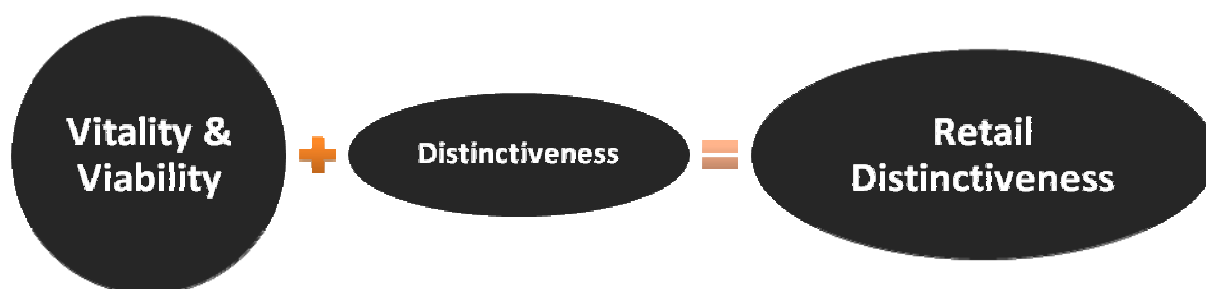
**Figure 3 Overall Variables Contributing to Small Town Retail Distinctiveness**



Source: Retail Distinctiveness Research

The Retail Distinctiveness model aims to provide a relatively simple assessment of a retail centre, examining factors such as the physical fabric of the town, its independent retail offer, food and drink provision and levels of customer service. The results give a profile of the town, which can be benchmarked against neighbouring or comparator locations, or used to assess the impacts of regeneration projects.

The model becomes more meaningful, however, when combined with a vitality and viability assessment. This allows the subject town to be benchmarked as both a distinct destination for visitors and as a local service centre for residents. The model can then be used more effectively to consider comparator centres and can be used to plan what sort of town centre offer a community wishes to develop.



The overall model comprises the following elements, which have all been covered to some extent in the Blaenavon survey, with the exception of the markets assessment (due to the lack of a market presence in the town).

**Table 1 Retail Distinctiveness, Vitality and Viability Indicators**

Theme	Activity
<b>Vitality and Viability</b>	
	Diversity, accessibility, rental levels, satisfaction levels (primary market research results), footfall, vacancy rates, accessibility, etc
<b>Retail Distinctiveness</b>	
<b>Visual Assessment</b>	Shop-fronts, shop-windows, shop-floor goods, local products, accessibility
<b>Food and Drink Assessment</b>	Segmentation, quality, local produce sourcing, customer care, locational issues
<b>Markets Assessment</b>	Frequency, types, coverage, layout and stalls/equipment, user mix, management
<b>Customer Care</b>	Welcome, knowledge of product, added value
<b>Retail Environmental Assessment</b>	Public space, built environment, accessibility, street furniture, signage, event space, street care

Source: Miller Research (UK) Ltd



The following sections of this report present some brief context to the town and its retail and hospitality offer, along with the Distinctiveness survey results.

This leads into some broad areas for consideration, with regard to increasing the competitiveness of Blaenavon as a retail centre for residents and visitors alike, followed by some more specific action plans for delivery.

## 2. Blaenavon Overview

### 2.1. Retail

A significant amount of regeneration work has been carried out in Blaenavon in recent years, linked to the development of the town as a World Heritage Site. There has been significant inward investment in retail and a number of new businesses have been established, which have wide visitor appeal. These include several bookshops, the Blaenavon Cheddar Company and the Welsh Gifts shop amongst others, complementing some excellent existing independent shops.

The physical fabric of the town has been much improved through a wide ranging programme of works, including:

- Development of the World Heritage Visitor Centre
- Extensive repaving and remaking of key public spaces
- Tree planting on main streets
- Shopfront improvements and restoration
- Town centre lighting scheme
- Pedestrian signage in the town centre



Despite this, a recent shoppers' survey for Torfaen County Borough Council shows that 80% of Blaenavon residents interviewed in home never use the town for shopping, preferring instead to travel to the neighbouring retail centres of Pontypool, Cwmbran and Brynmawr. Blaenavon was perceived to be inconvenient for shoppers, with a poor choice of non-food shops. More than 40% of those questioned felt that Blaenavon was either "not very" or "not at all" favourable as a shopping destination.

Those using the town valued its closeness to their home and its range of services, such as banks.

A parallel, on street, survey of shoppers in Blaenavon showed that the majority of users were from the immediate community, accessing top-up shopping. These shoppers were characterised by frequent (generally daily) visits and a low average spend of less than £10.

### 2.2. Tourism

Blaenavon offers a number of successful tourist attractions, which bring large numbers of visitors into the area from across the World. These include:

- Big Pit – One of the most successful tourist attractions in Wales, the former colliery attracts more than 140,000 people per year for live underground tours.
- Blaenavon Ironworks – The exceptionally well preserved 18<sup>th</sup> Century ironworks and associated community – most recently made famous by the BBC Coalhouse series.
- Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway – An enthusiast-run steam railway offering short trips in a spectacular setting.
- Cordell Museum – a small museum housed in the town library, featuring personal effects of the local writer.

Unfortunately, only a relatively small proportion of visitors to these attractions make use of the town centre and its retail and hospitality offer.

In addition to the attractions listed above, the excellent natural and reclaimed industrial landscapes around the town offer high quality walking and off road cycling opportunities for residents and visitors alike. However there are few facilities in place to support these activities at present, with the exception of the Mountain Tours guided walks and cycle hire in the town.

There is some good quality accommodation available in Blaenavon, for example at the Rifleman's Arms, Oakfield Bed and Breakfast and flats in the Old Post Office. However, many visitors accessing the attractions and facilities base themselves elsewhere, perhaps most notably over the mountain in nearby Abergavenny, leading to a loss of potential income to the Blaenavon economy.



### 3. Vitality and Viability

#### 3.1. Measuring Vitality and Viability

Vitality and viability has been briefly surveyed, to provide context for the work. As noted above, the vitality and viability elements of the Retail Distinctiveness model include factors such as:

##### Customer Satisfaction levels

The level of customer satisfaction within a town centre is generally measured through quantitative or qualitative surveys. These cover issues such as residents' use of the town, perceptions of the retail and hospitality offer and overall attractiveness of the town as a retail centre for residents and visitors.

In this project we have had access to the latest Torfaen Shoppers' Survey results from Torfaen CBC.

##### Accessibility

An important factor in the vitality and viability of a town centre is its accessibility. This can be measured in terms of the availability of car parking, public transport services and the ease of pedestrian and cycle movement through the centre.

Within our model, accessibility is rated under the following headings:

- Car parking - Supply and management
- Public transport - Level of provision
- Pedestrian / Cycle - General accessibility: Provision of pedestrian and cycle routes and facilities

We have carried out a brief visual survey of these factors.

##### Footfall

Footfall is the measurement of pedestrian flow within a town centre environment, which demonstrates activity which may lead to direct purchases or an association with town centre related uses. These types of studies are generally conducted with the main shopping area of a town centre and are normally carried out on an annual basis.

These types of surveys can be undertaken by market research or survey companies, through the local planning authority or by community based organisations.

In this project, we have not had access to a footfall count and so a "finger in the air" estimate has been used, based on very limited observations of the town.

##### Investment

Analysis of rental levels and commercial yields can provide a useful indication of the retail performance of a town centre. They are generally measured in terms of 'Zone A' rates, or the primary retail area.

In this study, we have accessed local agents' views on current rental yields and demand for premises.

### **Confidence or Retail Performance**

The measurement of investor confidence in a town, as illustrated by demand from retailers and property investment yields form a part of the vitality and viability survey.

Ideally, the survey would begin by identifying gaps in the existing retailer representation and then contacting relevant national, regional and local retailers to ascertain whether Blaenavon featured on their radar in terms of potential investment and, if not, what the barriers to investing in the town consist of. If they have considered opening in Blaenavon, they would be asked why this has not gone ahead to date.

The resources were not available to us in this project to conduct such a survey and so assumptions have been made on this.

### **Retailer Representation**

This is an analysis of the present representation of retailers wanting to come into a town centre. It will focus primarily on national and regional retailers, as the range of independents is accounted for in the retail distinctiveness element of the survey.

A brief visual survey has been carried out within this project.

### **Retail Diversity**

The diversity of town centre uses is a measure of how much space is in use for different functions, such as shopping, offices, cultural and entertainment activities, restaurants, accommodation, community and educational uses and housing, amongst others. More specifically, the retail diversity includes an assessment of the proportions of:

- Convenience outlets - supermarkets, off-licences, grocers, bakers, butchers and newsagents.
- Comparison outlets - general retail outlets, launderettes, video shops, showrooms and D.I.Y.
- Service outlets - banks, building societies, hotels, estate agents, solicitors, offices, post offices, restaurants, cafes and takeaways.
- Other Town Centre Uses, such as post offices, public houses, community centres etc.

A visual survey of Blaenavon has been carried out to assess diversity.

### **Vacancy Rates**

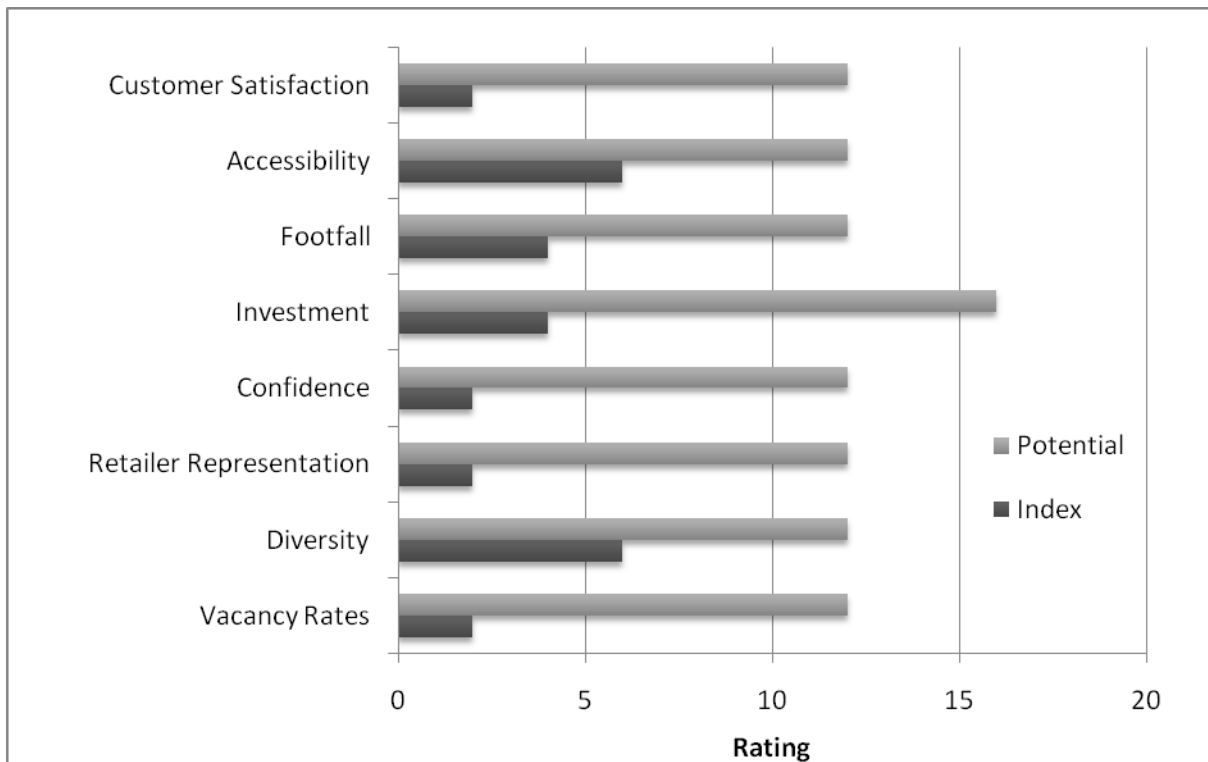
The presence of vacant ground floor units within a town centre is a visible indicator of how the town is trading. Vacant units can be due to factors such as the location of the unit, immediate environmental conditions, servicing facilities, ownership, and the degree of confidence in investing in the town centre.

It is also important to note that turnover of premises occurs due to businesses moving to larger units or to more favourable locations, and that town centres have a natural vacancy rate level.

### 3.2. Vitality and Viability Results

The results of our headline survey of vitality and viability for Blaenavon are shown below. The “potential” bars refer to our weighted model, based on market research elsewhere, displaying the maximum score that can be achieved for each indicator. The “index” level is the score for Blaenavon.

**Figure 4 Vitality and Viability Results – Blaenavon Town Centre**



Source: Miller Research (UK) Ltd

Overall, Blaenavon is positioned very much where it might be expected on vitality and viability, given its small size and relatively isolated location.

On customer satisfaction, the outputs from the Torfaen Shopper Survey demonstrate an overall low level of satisfaction amongst potential customers in the locality. This is not to overlook the fact that those local residents who use the town do so on a regular basis and are very loyal. Hence, the issue is one of perceptions of the town, rather than individuals experiencing poor service, for example.

The town is relatively accessible, especially given its location. There is ample, free car parking close to the town centre and limited parking on street for opportunity shoppers. Public transport links are good, with regular bus services to Newport via Pontypool and Cwmbran, to Brynmawr and to Abergavenny.

Pedestrian and cycle navigation through the town is good, although no cycle storage facilities were apparent. Pedestrian signage is of a high quality and well located. However, the chosen design is

vulnerable to vandalism and the main signs in the town centre had been altered to point in a single direction, rendering them useless to visitors.

On investment, although rental levels are comparatively low (a typical retail unit can be secured for around £50 per week), local agents report consistent demand for space and regular expressions of interest from potential independent retailers.

Confidence levels are low, in terms of national or regional retailers wishing to invest. This is unsurprising, given the nature of the retail units



available and the retail profile of the town. However, it represents a major issue, in that retail leakage to neighbouring (larger) centres is a substantial draw on the local economy.

This is linked into current retailer representation, as the representation of national retailers is comparatively low. Although there is a Co-Operative Pharmacy, a Spar and Costcutter, the latter two are franchised.

On diversity, the town scores relatively well, enjoying a range of convenience outlets, including a good quality butcher, greengrocer and cheese shop. In addition, a range of book, arts and crafts and gift shops complement this offer, along with a range of food and drink outlets and

key services, such as hairdressers, banks and accountants. The town is well served for community services, with two post offices, a library, the Workmen’s Hall and other buildings.

The town has a relatively high vacancy rate, although there is substantial retail turnover and several new businesses have moved into the centre recently. There may be a case for the retail core shrinking a little, as it is currently spread quite thinly, especially towards the top end of Broad Street.



Overall the town was rated as scoring 28 points out of a possible 100. However, it is worth noting that a town of Blaenavon’s size would be unlikely to score significantly more than this, and probably has a maximum potential of around 50 points.

## 4. Retail Distinctiveness

### 4.1. Overview

In compiling the distinctiveness methodology, we set a number of guiding principles, which underpin the actual variables measured through the town survey work. These include:

- Distinctiveness is not neat: it is not marketing, it is fuzzy, overlapping, and necessarily inclusive, and impossible to pin down precisely.
- Local people have primacy: if they feel a place is distinctive, then it is – and this can be used to draw in outsiders.
- Distinctiveness must be authentic: what is distinctive is not usually susceptible to marketing unless it has genuine roots – often historic roots – in the places where it is claimed.
- Assets are more than just economic: they might be a communal memory about a place or a sense of good neighbourliness. They will not always be assets that can be exploited economically, though they may make economic exploitation easier.
- Small things are as important as big things: it is the texture that makes a place authentic as much as recordable economic assets, and very small changes – like signage or the removal of very small eyesores – can enhance people’s sense of that as much as anything that requires major investment.
- Distinctiveness requires a sense of responsibility: building distinctiveness normally requires new local institutions or practical alliances capable of bringing local stakeholders together to make things happen.
- History gives depth to a place: it gives added dimensions – but it has to be about history alive and well today, rather than just about the past which leads to deadness.

The retail distinctiveness survey focuses on a number of areas:

- The independent retail offer
- Food and drink
- Customer care
- The town context
- Townscape
- Streetscape
- Street elements and furniture



Within each of these variables, some simple indicators have been developed which can be easily surveyed in the target town. The scoring for each of these is weighted back to the results of the original market research, to ensure that important factors are given greater significance in the results.

### 4.2. Independent Retail

The survey of independent retailers focuses on the types of shops described as important to the visitor appeal of a small town. The variables measured include:

- Whether opening hours and days are displayed



- The extent of local or distinct produce in the shop window display
- The extent to which this is carried through onto the shop floor within
- Cohesion: Is the retailer a member of a specialist trade group or local business association?
- Does the shop open beyond the standard 9-5 day?
- How many days a week are the premises open?
- Finally, does the town have an “iconic retailer” – that is the kind of shop that will make visitors go out of their way to visit?

**Results**

Blaenavon scored 62% overall for its independent retail – a strong score, which reflects its significant strengths in this area.

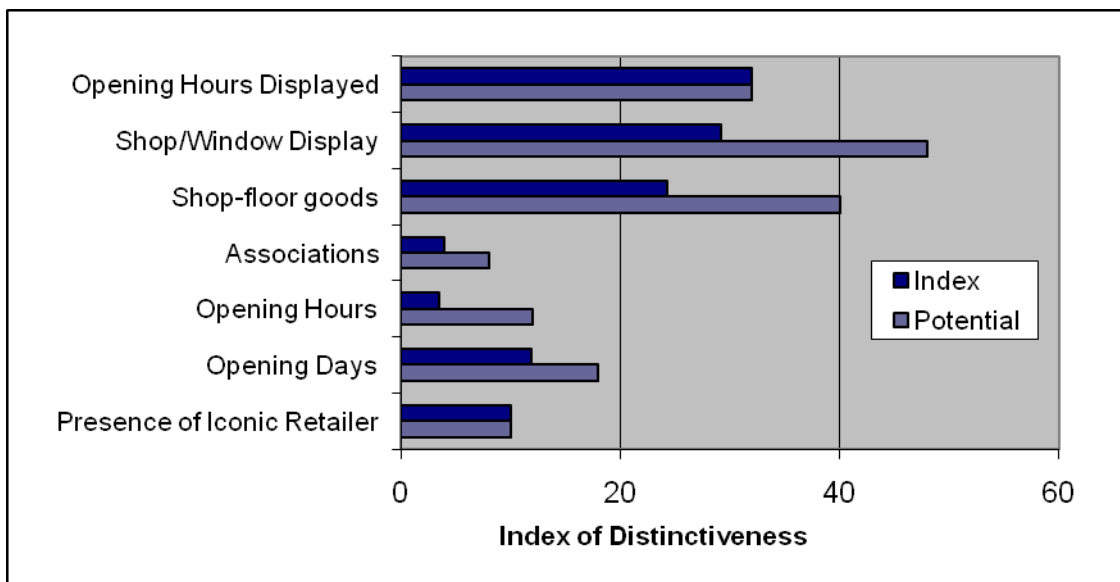


The town scored well on information to customers and there are several “iconic” retailers. The balance of independent shops gives Blaenavon an interesting High Street for visitors to browse, whilst retaining some good food and non-food shopping for more local clients.

Areas which could be improved include a greater presence and promotion of locally sourced food (although there are clearly strengths here) and consideration of

extended opening hours and days.

**Figure 5 Distinctiveness Survey – Results for Independent Retail**



### 4.3. Food and Drink

The food and drink survey looks at premises selling hot food and drinks – both alcoholic and non-alcoholic. The variables measured include:

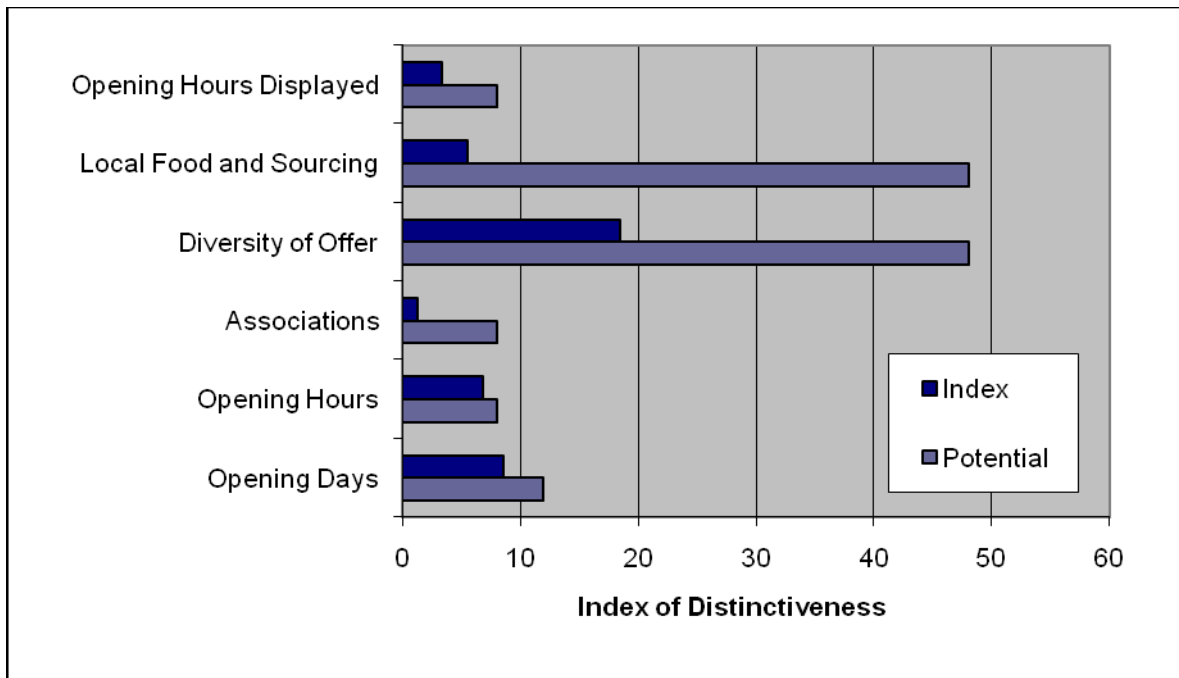
- Whether opening hours and days are displayed
- The extent of local or distinct produce on the menu and whether it is acknowledged
- The diversity of the food and drink offer, in terms of Fine Dining/Specialist, Popular Dining/Pub Food, Fast Food or Takeaway and Coffee Bar/Tea Shop
- Cohesion: Is the retailer a member of a tourism group or local business association?
- What hours are the premises open – is it just daytime, just evening or both?
- How many days a week are the premises open?



### Results

The food and drink in the town centre scored relatively poorly, at 33% of the potential score. It is acknowledged that the World Heritage Centre, Rifleman’s Arms and Butterflies Bistro lie outside the area surveyed and that these offer a good range of food and drink which was not accounted for.

Figure 6 Distinctiveness Survey – Results for Independent Food and Drink



In the town centre itself, there is a predominance of hot food takeaways and traditional cafes of varying quality. Whilst there are strong cultural ties to traditional cafes and fish and chip shops in the Valleys, which should be valued, local food is not prevalent in the town and there is little cohesion in

terms of membership of business or trade associations. A key gap is for a quality evening restaurant in the town centre itself, to complement existing premises on the retail fringes. This could help to engage the local community more effectively and provide a draw for visitors to the town's attractions.

Much of the public house offer is targeted at younger, weekend drinkers (as is the case in the majority of small towns throughout the UK), with little in terms of a family offer or selling pub food. (The Queen Victoria is a possible exception to this). Two prominent premises are vacant or semi-utilised, presenting a poor image to visitors.

#### **4.4. Customer Care**

A mystery shopper is used to assess customer care, by visiting the shop or restaurant unannounced to the retail assistant or shop owner. They can then scrutinise the quality of customer care they receive in a number of areas including:

- Initial welcome: the length of time taken to greet the mystery shopper,
- Friendly service: the degree of friendliness demonstrated,
- Willingness to engage: readiness to devote time to the mystery shopper,
- Knowledge of products,
- Attention to detail and added value to customer service.

The final category (added value) includes an open ended option that allows the mystery shopper to credit any extra effort made by the individual to improve the level of customer care demonstrated.

The mystery shopper process lasts approximately 10 minutes in the case of retail and in the majority of cases assessment is made based upon the way the mystery shopper was treated personally. However, on some occasions, for example where the shop may be particularly busy, judgement may be based upon the standard of care shown in dealing with another customer.

### **Results**

The mystery shop was carried out on a Wednesday in late March 2009 and took place over either side of midday. The results were generally very encouraging, displaying a high standard of customer care, genuine interest in products sold and a real pride in Blaenavon as a regenerating retail community. The town scored 100% of the potential score on measured variables, although this does not mean that there is no room for further improvement!

#### **Initial Welcome**

The standard of welcome within those shops included in the survey was predominantly very high. In all but one of the businesses, the mystery shopper was greeted immediately, even in those cases where the retailer was already engaged with another customer. The only anomaly was in one case where the shopkeeper was occupied reading, and expressed no acknowledgement at all.

#### **Friendly Service and Willingness to Engage**

There was a strong inclination among these retailers towards openness and dialogue with their customers, both with the mystery shopper and other customers. Some specific examples of friendly

service included one pub landlady who apologised for no longer serving food, and recommended somewhere else in town.

Another retailer came to help with a door which was difficult to open, whilst another talked openly about the history of their business. By contrast, there was one individual who neglected even to make eye contact throughout the time the mystery shopper was in the building, but remained listening to the radio and reading a magazine.

In terms of how far retailers were prepared to spend time communicating with the mystery shopper; again the trend was very encouraging. One retailer was happy to talk about their many different craft products and the broad range in price across the items. Another individual came to the window to show a poster on a forthcoming event in town: *“have you heard about this? I’d really recommend it!”* One other offered to accompany the mystery shopper to the end of the street in order to indicate where a particular building was.



### Knowledge of Products

Given that many of those included in the survey were the proprietor of their business, and many of these businesses were fairly specialised, it was unsurprising that in the main, most were very well-informed about their commodities or services. One individual who sold craft products was able to describe the origin of some of the items on sale. In another shop selling locally produced consumable products, some detail was given about the production process: *“those rissoles are very popular. They are homemade by the family down on the farm.”* In another business, the shop-keeper explained the influence of seasonality on some of his fruit items.

### Examples of Added Value in Customer Service

There were multiple examples of retailers included in the survey who provided some additional element which enhanced the level of customer service. One shop-keeper described an alternative payment option she currently offered to customers: *“I appreciate how hard things are for everyone in the current climate, so if someone fancies a particular item, I don’t mind putting it aside for them and letting them pay for it in instalments. That way they know it won’t get bought by someone else before they have the money saved.”*

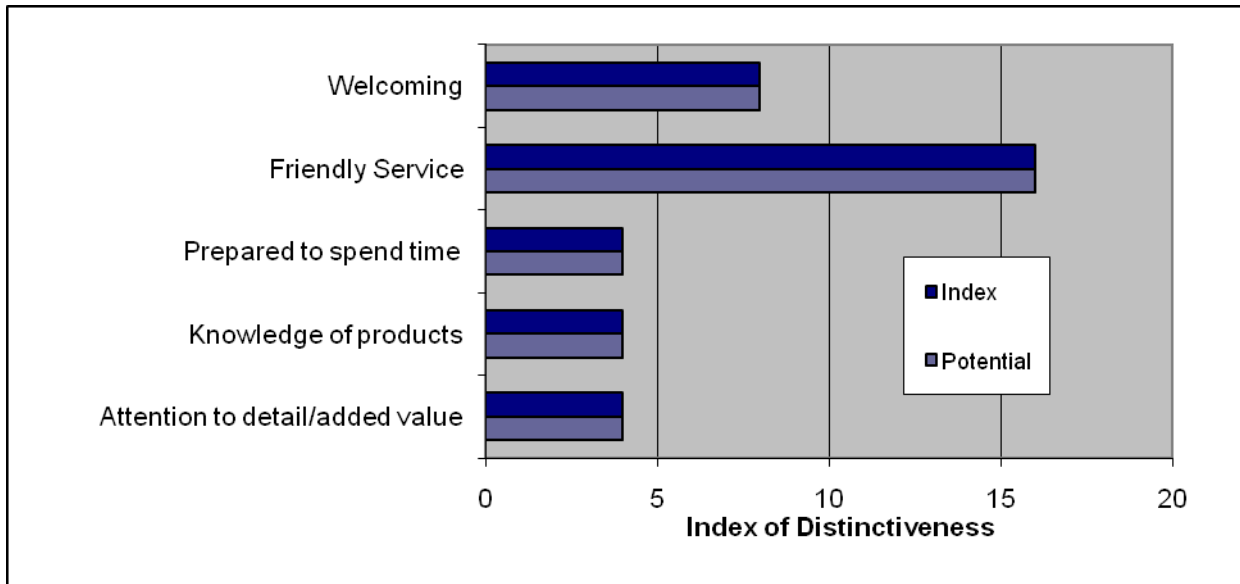
In another shop, the proprietor offered alternative arrangements to the mystery shopper for booking and paying for a particular beauty treatment: *“If you don’t live locally, it’s fine to send a cheque and I can send a gift token back to you.”*

Another retailer asked if the mystery shopper had a preference for Fair Trade items, and subsequently pointed out some of those on sale in her shop. In more than one shop, the retailer was happy to recommend another local business: *“If you are looking for a nice meal in the evening, I’d suggest you go to...”*

## Conclusions

The prevailing impression gained from the mystery shopper exercise was that retailers in Blaenavon are keen to provide a warm and friendly service to those browsing in their shop – regardless of whether the customer is known to them or not. Even in situations where the retailer was engaged with one or more other clients, with only one exception, the mystery shopper was acknowledged immediately and almost always with a smile.

**Figure 7 Distinctiveness Survey – Results for Customer Care**



### 4.5. The town context

This first part of the survey of physical elements of the town is based on a simple set of indicators to assess the quality of the town setting in its wider landscape, along with the initial impressions gained from the quality of approach to the town:

- How does the town fit in its wider landscape? Is there a perception of it fitting in with the surrounding countryside?
- How does it announce itself?
- Is there a sense of arrival?
- Is the entrance to the town impressive? Clean? Well Maintained?



### Results

Blaenavon scored a respectable 71% on this measure, boosted by its position in spectacular, historic landscape, which provides a constant backdrop to the built environment.

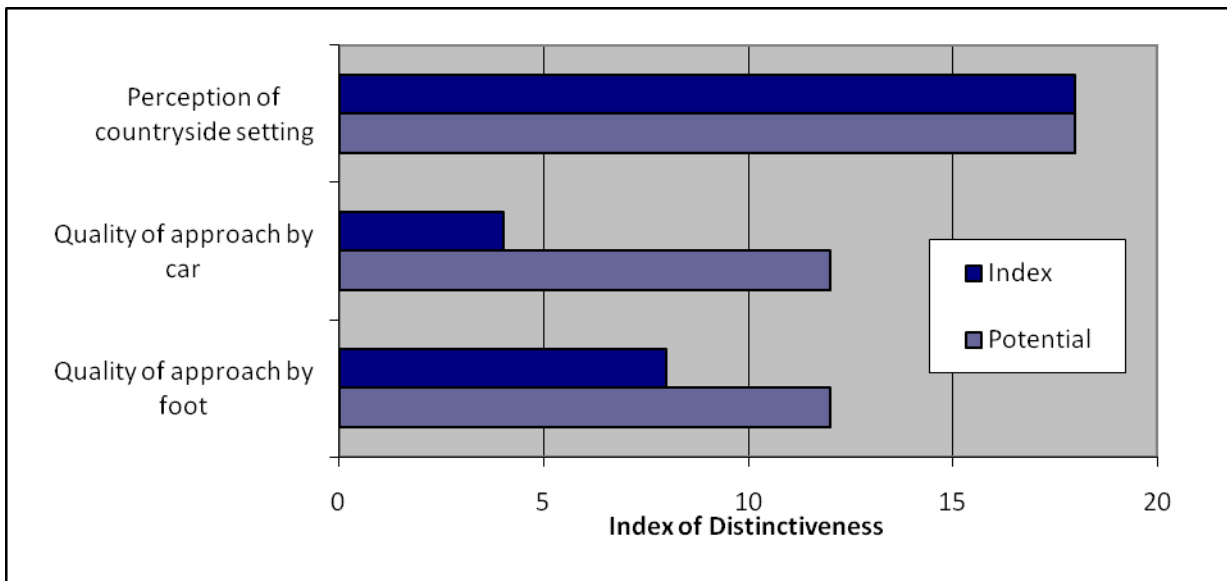
The quality of approach by car scored less well: although the context for the road journey from the South is attractive as the town is approached, the Northern approach from Keeper’s Pond is marred



by poor quality buildings, jumbled signage and a cluttered landscape – although recent tree planting is helping to improve the overall impression.

On foot the approach to the town centre, from the car parks or bus stop, is better on account of the extensive restoration work that has been carried out in recent years.

Figure 8 Distinctiveness Survey – Results for Town Context



### 4.1. Townscape

This part of the survey provides a visual assessment of how well the elements of the town fit together to create a cohesive character.

- How complete is the streetscape? Is it continuous, or is there a mix of architectural style and age of buildings?
- Does the town offer a sequence of spaces which invite exploration?
- Are there accessible public spaces that people want to use, to relax, meet others and pass time?
- Is there a market? If so, does it add to the character of the town?

### Results

Blaenavon scored 42% on this measure. On the positive side, the buildings and restoration work have created an attractive streetscape, which is continuous, though not complete at present. High quality Victorian shopfronts and upper storeys are





punctuated by vacant or derelict premises, some of which are in extremely poor condition, or awaiting renovation.

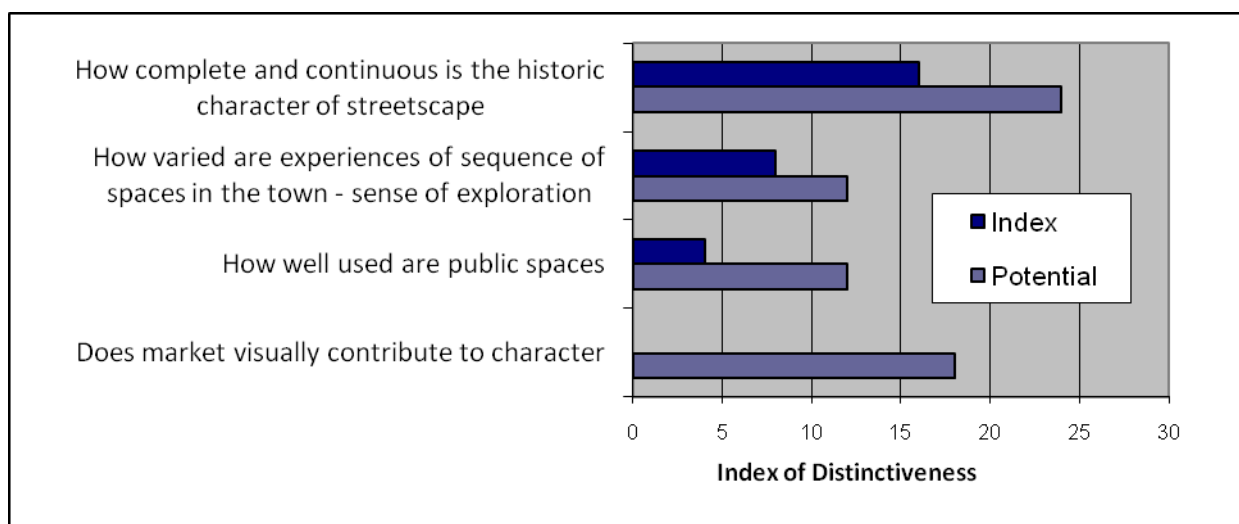


As mentioned above, two key hospitality premises are poor contributors to Broad Street at present.

The town centre has some pleasantly renovated public spaces, which offer space to gather, meet or sit. These have been enhanced by tree planting in some cases, which softens landscape a little. On the day of the survey, these spaces were not widely used, but this may have been a result of the time of year, weather conditions or time of day.

The absence of a market is a weakness for the town in terms of distinctiveness and this has not been scored.

**Figure 9 Distinctiveness Survey – Results for Townscape**



#### 4.2. Streetscape

The streetscape element of the survey looks at how the street fixtures and fabric contribute to the distinctiveness of the town.

This part of the survey includes:

- The use of appropriate building and paving materials
- The extent to which the shop facades and shop windows are appropriate and contribute to the character of the town
- The state of maintenance of the street – street cleaning, lack of vandalism or graffiti.



### Results

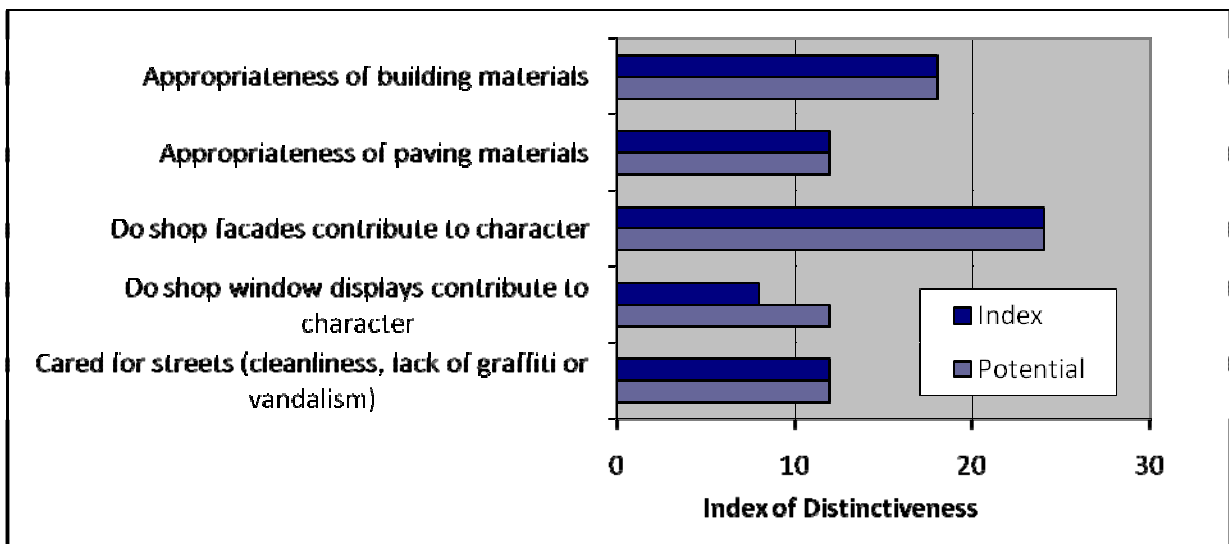


Blaenavon town centre scored very high (95%) on this measure, reflecting the extensive recent investment in paving and floorscape, shopfront improvements and buildings restoration. High quality materials appear to have been used throughout and the quality paving extends off Broad Street into side squares and the entrance to some side streets. The restored shopfronts on some key premises are especially attractive and contribute strongly to the Victorian character of Broad Street. These are complemented in many cases by interesting shop windows, which invite exploration.

The streets were also found to be generally clean and free of graffiti or vandalism. For example, planted trees had not been damaged and there was no dog fouling and only very limited chewing gum residue on the pavements.

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Figure 10 Distinctiveness Survey – Results for Streetscape



### 4.3. Street elements and furniture

The street elements section examines the contribution of the street fittings to the overall distinctiveness, including:

- The appropriateness of the street furniture, planters and signage.
- Does the lighting contribute to the town’s character?
- Are there trees on the street and do they fit with the built environment?
- Are hanging baskets contributing to the overall effect?



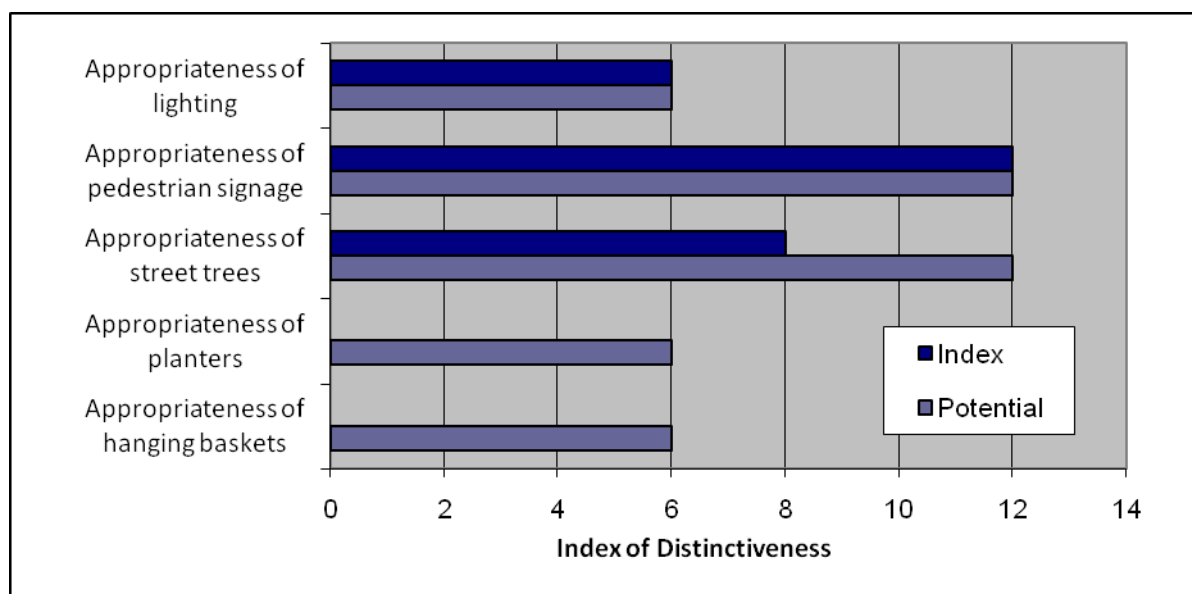


## Results

Again, the town centre scored well on these indicators, rating 70% overall. All of the street furniture is co-ordinated, with a traditional black cast iron appearance. Street lighting is recently installed and fits the streetscape well. Signage is branded with the World Heritage Site brand and of good quality, although abused, as discussed above.

The trees on the street and around the square add context to the paving and will become more attractive as they mature. The absence of planters and hanging baskets limited the scope of the survey a little (although early in the year for hanging baskets).

**Figure 11 Distinctiveness Survey – Results for Street Elements and Furniture**



### 4.4. Overall Distinctiveness Profile

Overall, Blaenavon centre rated a total of 365 points out of a potential score of 600, which renders it a relatively distinctive town, given its limitations of size and relatively recent history of decline.

The regeneration process has built on foundations of a strong community, compact town centre, attractive Victorian architecture and highly scenic backdrop, to produce an excellent canvas for the creation of a truly distinctive destination.

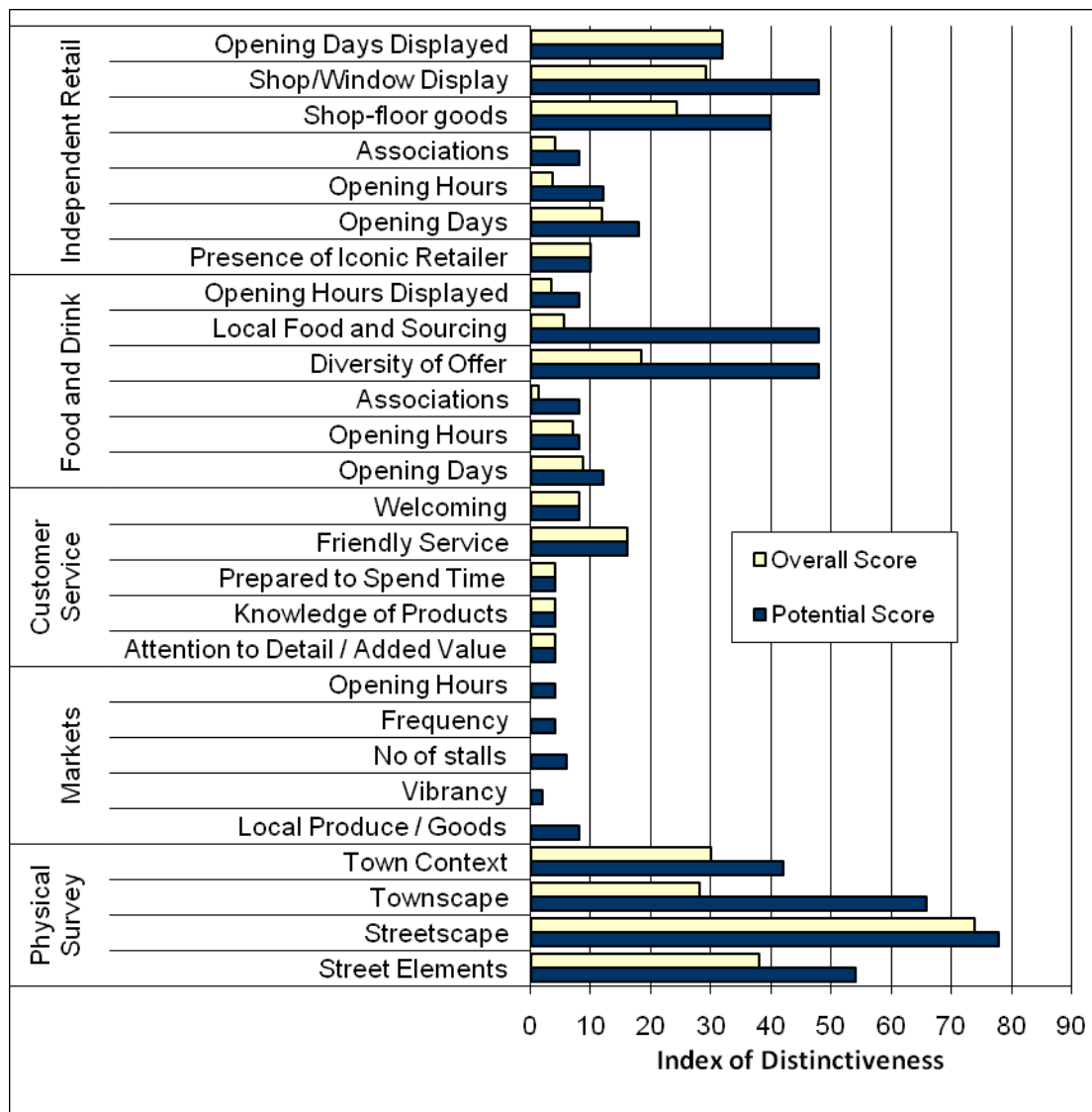
The range of well established and newly opened businesses demonstrates the confidence that many independent retailers have in Blaenavon. The continuing presence of undeveloped, derelict or vacant premises is testament to both the distance travelled and the scale of the challenge for the town.

Key issues for consideration include:

- Greater promotion and acknowledgement of local food and drink and increased presence of the same in food outlets.
- Extension of opening hours into the evening period on key event days and holidays

- Extension of opening days into Sundays and back holidays in the holiday season
- Sharing of best practice in customer service and development of ideas for joint initiatives amongst traders
- The establishment of a regular market, either general or specialist, in the town centre.
- Collective action amongst traders to encourage owners of derelict or vacant premises to tidy and enhance street frontages
- Consideration of how the entrance to the town, especially from the North, could be improved to create a strong announcement for Blaenavon

Figure 12 Distinctiveness Survey – Overall Results

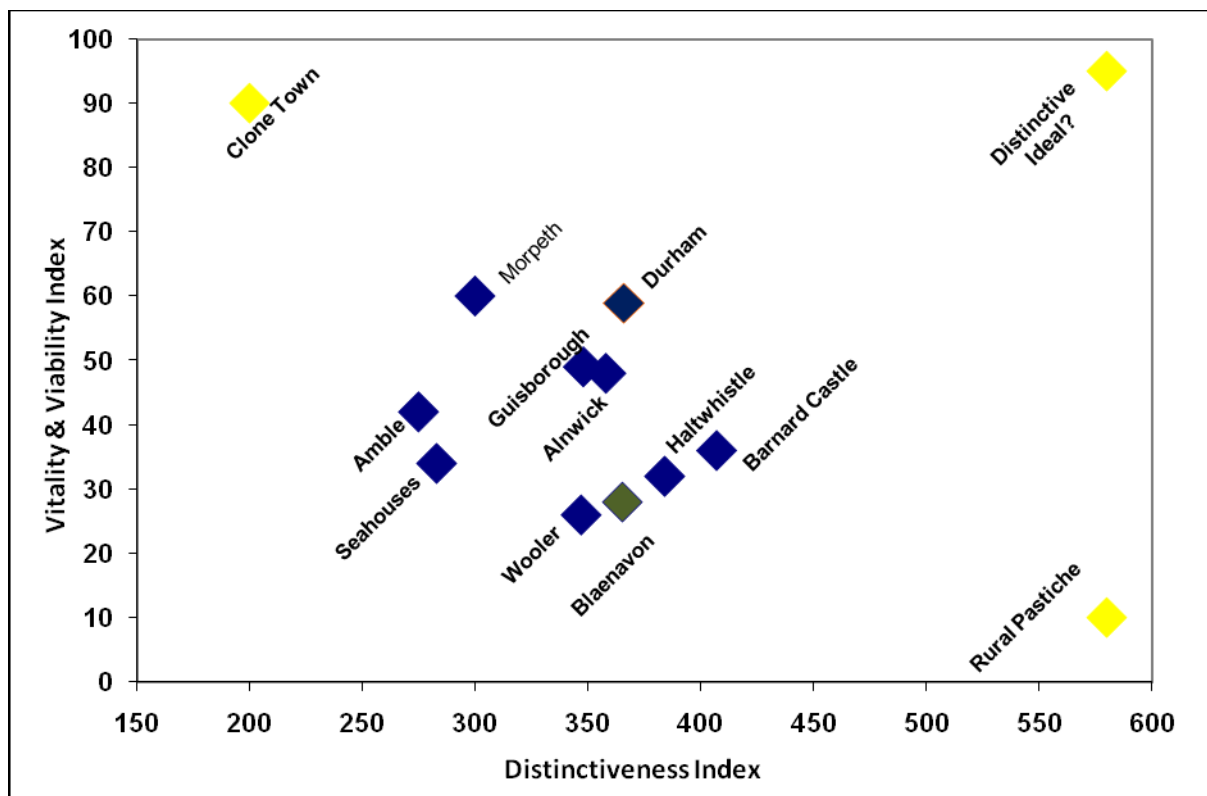


By plotting the overall distinctiveness score against that for vitality and viability, we can see Blaenavon in relation to other towns that have been through the Retail Distinctiveness process. The majority of these at present are in NE England, but the results show some interesting comparators.

For example, Blaenavon is clearly low on vitality and viability, as evidenced by the attitudes of those taking part in the retail shoppers survey. However, in terms of distinctiveness, the town scores well. The aspiration of the town should be to move up and to the right on the graph. This requires a mix of two factors:

- Encouraging the Blaenavon community and its hinterland to use what the town has to offer
- Creating linkages to Big Pit, the Railway and Ironworks to encourage visitors to extend their dwell time by exploring the town, dining out and ideally staying for a night or two.

Figure 13 Blaenavon: Distinctiveness vs Vitality and Viability



## 5. Traders' Workshops

### 5.1. Workshop 1

A workshop session for Blaenavon traders was held in the World Heritage Centre in March 2009. Following a presentation of initial thoughts, participants were asked to think of Blaenavon through a potential visitor's eyes and to consider what facilities are needed and what may be lacking.

To assist in the process, groups were asked to assume roles, representing four visitor segments, based on those developed by the Arkenford consultancy. These are described in appendix 1.

The results of this short exercise are listed below.

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Big Pit Ironworks Heritage Centre Cordell Museum Historic chapels and churches Garn Lakes – nature & fishing Landscape and opportunity to explore Walking – Waymarked routes & Guide for hire Cycling – Route 46 and mountain routes, with PDA Guides Paragliding Caving Go karts and horse riding nearby Specialist shopping – Arts / Crafts / Gifts Welcome and people – character Good value accommodation	Shortage of quality dining in town centre Lack of local produce Shops closed at weekends / Bank Holidays and Thursday pm Cafes closed on Sundays and after 5.00 Lack of hotel Limited amount and range of accommodation Limited relaxation area in the town
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
Picnic Areas Mountain Walks Cinema Supermarket Consolidate shopping and premises in Broad St Improved tourist information in town centre Markets	Lack of collaboration

## 5.2. Workshop 2

The initial workshop was followed up with an action planning session with the Traders' Group in May 2009. This built on the themes of the first session and on the outputs of the Distinctiveness Survey, to develop some themes and project ideas for improving the competitiveness of the town.

The starting point for this session was that the evidence base shows that intensive public investment in Blaenavon town centre has supported the development of an attractive and distinctive environment. The physical realm is excellent, with high quality, appropriate materials and sensitive approach to creating spaces for people to dwell. A good range of distinct shops have been developed, attracting significant private sector investment in the town.

However, Blaenavon still suffers from weak vitality and viability, especially with regard to retail and food and drink. It has a very poor connection to its community, with significant retail linkage down the valley to Pontypool and Cwmbran and across to Brynmawr.

In addition, the connections between the town centre and the "honeypot" attractions of Big Pit and the Ironworks have not developed and only a small proportion of visitor spend is finding its way onto the high street. Hence the development of such links is vital to building trade in the town.

**Figure 14 Building a Distinctive Future - Summary of Issues**



These themes were expanded to provide the discussion points for the traders' workshop, which are detailed below.

### Building Links with the Community

The key issues here were proposed to be:

1. Building the core retail by:
  - Reducing retail leakage
  - Improving the choice of basic goods available
  - Putting Blaenavon "on its own map".

Possible ideas for development put forward included:

- Selling what the town has to offer:
  - Marketing / PR / Events / Merchandising / Extended opening hours
  - Loyalty / Retail Passport / Town Trails
  - Wi-Fi Zone in the town centre
- Broadening the offer, by:
  - Holding themed / specialist markets in the town centre: farmers' / craft / antique / historic
  - Consider working to attract a mid-tier supermarket to the town, to mitigate leakage of spend on "main shop"
- 2. Improving the evening economy by:
  - Improving the range and choice of food and drink, especially a town-centre restaurant
  - Instigating a programme of events

Possible ideas for development put forward included:

- Measures to develop a local food culture, through:
  - Encouraging investment in a quality town centre restaurant
  - Improving the family offer in pubs and restaurants
  - Investigating the possibility of dining on street and in the attractive town centre squares
  - Creating an overall feeling of safety and welcome, to reclaim the streets
  - Encouraging more social events, such as film shows, literature readings, live music, pub quizzes and street art.
  - Developing more interest in local food, to stimulate demand

### **Building Links to the Visitor Economy**

The key issues here were proposed to be:

1. Improving Visitor Facilities in Blaenavon, by:
  - Increasing the range and supply of accommodation
  - Marketing Blaenavon to a wider and more diverse audience

Possible ideas for development put forward included:

- Encouraging a wider range of accommodation, such as bunk barns, camping, more guest houses and B&Bs and possibly a town centre hotel.
- Building infrastructure to support more activity-based tourism, such as:
  - Building / extending trails for mountain biking and family cycling
  - Working with existing providers of outdoor sports to base their businesses in Blaenavon, for example paragliding schools and equestrian operators.
- Building links with other towns, such as Abergavenny to provide a linked offer to visitors.
- Improving approaches to the town
  - Through a community clean up?
  - Working with existing owners to tidy up key buildings?

2. Linking to the existing visitor “honeypots”, notably Big Pit, the Ironworks and Bloreng to bring more visitors into the town centre.

Possible ideas for development put forward included:

- Transport links to Big Pit
  - Road Train? Heritage Bus? Cycle Rickshaws?
- Joint ticketing and discount deals
- Year round events strategy to complement the World Heritage Day
  - Goose and Cuckoo Wheelbarrow race?
- Circular walks signposted from the town centre.

## Feedback from Participants

The workshop session stimulated some lively debate, centred on the following issues:

### Building Core Retail

The group acknowledged that at present, Blaenavon is neither a strong retail centre, nor a tourist destination. There is no substantial attraction in the town centre to bring people in and few customers into shops in Blaenavon are passing trade at present.

However, it was agreed that Blaenavon has the potential to be a tourism town – if it could be marketed properly. Also, the town needs to encourage its specialist shops, as many people will travel for a particular favourite retailer.

Some traders were frustrated that advertising undertaken to date has proved ineffective, with a general perception that people do not read leaflets and so are not aware of improvements to the shopping offer or of extended or changed opening hours, for example. There needs to be an integrated promotion by retailers to the community of what Blaenavon has to offer.

One example of a very visual initiative was for traders to sit on floats promoting what they actually sell, for example at the World Heritage day. These floats would then pass through the town centre accompanied by a brass band, to capture people’s attention.

The World Heritage Day is not seen as having a very positive impact on trade levels in Blaenavon: *“I wouldn’t say that many more people actually come into my shop. They’re just passing by.”*

On markets, it was felt that Blaenavon doesn’t have an obvious location at present, in that if a market was located at either end of the main street, it would exclude a large chunk of the retail. One contributor suggested building a new market hall – potentially on the old Market Tavern site – in addition to developing regular street markets during the summer. Street markets could be located at different sites around the town to spread the benefit to all retailers.

### Reducing Retail Leakage

The group was generally averse to the suggestion of opening a supermarket in Blaenavon: *“the town doesn’t have the population for a supermarket, and it would stop anyone coming into Blaenavon at all if it was on the edge of the town centre.”* The point was also made that a supermarket would draw any existing trade from SPAR, which is the main reason why people come into the town currently.

However, there was a feeling that a shop of sufficient quality could attract people: *“If M&S came here, it would bring customers into town!”*

### Links to Big Pit

Big Pit is seen as a threat to Blaenavon retail by some traders, as visitors rarely include the town centre in their trip. However, it was widely agreed that some measures need to be developed to build links with the attraction, to deliver on the concept of Blaenavon as an integrated World Heritage destination.

These ideas fall into a number of categories:

- Some form of physical transport links between Big Pit and town centre. The road train was not considered to be appropriate for this given the initial expense, running costs and above all the lack of cultural fit with the town. Cycle rickshaws were discounted because of the gradient from Gilchrist Thomas to Big Pit, although it was agreed that a pilot scheme could be tried on a key weekend, such as the World Heritage day. The heritage bus has been run before, again on World Heritage day, and this seems to offer the best solution.

It was identified that the railway could have a key role to play in the bus service, through brokering a provider through existing contacts and through selling tickets in the railway shop in the town centre.

A low risk option would be to run the service as a pilot on event days, expanding to pilot weekends and finally to a more regular service if demand could be built. It was noted that Big Pit suffers car parking pressure on busy days and the bus service could be used as a means of relieving pressure at these times.

The following actions were identified:

- Talk to the railway company and Big Pit
- Identify potential bus providers
- Check Statutory Permissions
- Arrange Pilot Scheme for targeted weekends, event days and Bank Holidays
- Another suggestion was that town centre traders could offer retail discounts or special offers to those holding a Big Pit ticket and that this could be marketed at the Big Pit site to encourage visitors to come into the town.
- Circular walks signed from the town centre.

### Marketing and Awareness

The benefits of a robust web-site and extending web-based trade were put forward as a means to bring people into the town, as a website can lead to on-line customers actually visiting the shop, to



see products in person, and then buying more! This was apart from the means to access wider markets beyond the town.

### **Evening Economy / Food Culture**

It was agreed that there is a marketing opportunity to attract investors for a good quality restaurant in the town centre. The discussion also raised the issue that, although Blaenavon has a fairly good food offer, it still lacks a quality baker.

The following actions were identified:

- Identify premises
- Notify specialist agencies
- Use existing contacts to identify potential investors

### **Improve Tourism Infrastructure**

The work done on building cycle routes was acknowledged, but there was some frustration that the current route ends at the top of the valley. Hence, it was suggested that the town could work with Sustrans and the new HoV activity tourism fund to extend the Route 46 cycle way across to Brynmawr.

## 6. Summary, Conclusions and Suggestions for Action

### 6.1. Summary and Initial Conclusions of the Scoping Work

A significant amount of regeneration work has been carried out in Blaenavon in recent years, linked to the development of the town as a World Heritage Site. There has been significant inward investment in retail and a number of new businesses have been established, which have wide visitor appeal.

The physical fabric of the town has been much improved through a wide ranging programme of works, including:

- Development of the World Heritage Visitor Centre
- Extensive repaving and remaking of key public spaces
- Tree planting on street
- Shopfront improvements and restoration
- Town centre lighting scheme
- Pedestrian signage in the town centre

Despite this, a recent shoppers' survey for Torfaen Borough Council shows that 80% of Blaenavon residents interviewed in home never use the town for shopping, preferring instead to travel to the neighbouring retail centres of Pontypool, Cwmbran and Brynmawr. Blaenavon was perceived to be inconvenient for shoppers, with a poor choice of non-food shops.

- More than 40% of those questioned felt that Blaenavon was either "not very" or "not at all" favourable as a shopping destination.
- Those using the town valued its closeness to their home and its range of services, such as banks.
- A parallel, on street, survey of shoppers in Blaenavon showed that the majority of users were from the immediate community, accessing top-up shopping. These shoppers were characterised by frequent (generally daily) visits and a low average spend of less than £10.

Blaenavon offers a number of successful tourist attractions, which bring large numbers of visitors into the area from across the World. These include:

- Big Pit – One of the most successful tourist attractions in Wales, the former colliery attracts more than 140,000 people per year for live underground tours.
- Blaenavon Ironworks – The exceptionally well preserved 18<sup>th</sup> Century ironworks and associated community – most recently made famous by the BBC Coalhouse series.
- Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway – An enthusiast-run steam railway offering short trips in a spectacular setting.
- Cordell Museum – a small museum housed in the town library, featuring personal effects of the local writer.

Unfortunately, only a relatively small proportion of visitors to these attractions make use of the town centre and its retail and hospitality offer.

In addition to the attractions listed above, the excellent natural and reclaimed industrial landscapes around the town offer high quality walking and off road cycling opportunities for residents and

visitors alike. However there are few facilities in place to support these activities at present, with the exception of the Mountain Tours guided walks and cycle hire in the town.

There is some good quality accommodation available in Blaenavon, for example at the Rifleman's Arms, Oakfield Bed and Breakfast and flats in the Old Post Office. However, many visitors accessing the attractions and facilities base themselves elsewhere, perhaps most notably over the mountain in nearby Abergavenny, leading to a loss of potential income to the Blaenavon economy.

In terms of vitality and viability, the town suffers from a lack of critical mass, shortage of national retailers, significant retail leakage to neighbouring centres and poor community perceptions.

Rental levels are low and vacancy rates high, but there is consistent demand for units and some excellent independent shops have been established in recent years, complementing some high quality existing businesses. The top end of Broad Street has become marginalised as a retail area and the retail core may be expected to shrink a little in the next few years.



Town Centre accessibility is generally good and there is ample free car parking close to the town centre.

In terms of retail distinctiveness, the town centre scores well. For its size it has a good range of shops with visitor interest – selling speciality food, books, arts and crafts and gifts amongst others.

The food and drink offer is weaker, with particular gaps in terms of a town centre restaurant, non-takeaway food in the evenings and presence of local produce. There is a predominance of hot food takeaways and traditional cafes of varying quality.



Two key hospitality premises are in need of attention - one of them long vacant.

Customer care is a real strength of Blaenavon, with very friendly service, excellent knowledge of products and a real desire to refer customers to other businesses in the town – acting as a “virtual department store”.

The physical characteristics of the town have benefited from extensive investment, with high

quality public realm and the majority of retail premises renovated to a high standard. A relatively small number of frontages require attention, but some of these are in a very poor condition and detract substantially from the overall impression of the town centre.

Signage and navigation is generally good, although the one-way system which requires traffic to enter Broad Street via High Street masks the retail core to some extent. The road approach from Keeper's Pond is poor, with the town failing to announce itself and some poor quality buildings, jumbled signage and a cluttered landscape.

In summary, the heart of Blaenavon has been renovated very effectively to produce a platform for the development of a thriving business and residential community. At present however, there remain three key challenges:

- To persuade the residential community of Blaenavon to use the facilities that the town has to offer
- To make the linkages to Big Pit and the other tourist honey pots on the fringe of the town, so that the town centre can benefit from the large number of visitors to these sites
- To engage the business community successfully, so that the baton of responsibility for regeneration can pass from the local authority and Welsh Assembly Government to the town itself: its business, residential and social community.

## 6.2. Action Planning

The following pages list a series of suggested actions to improve the retail sustainability of Blaenavon Town Centre. These are based on the information gathered through the research and engagement process, notably:

- Background research
- Retail distinctiveness survey
- Vitality and viability survey
- Engagement workshops with traders
- Exploratory discussions with potential investors

These actions are suggestions for discussion by the town centre business community and for taking forward by them, with support from Torfaen CBC, the Welsh Assembly Government and other partners. These have not been costed at this stage, as they are aimed at inspiring further discussion by town partners. Many of them will require very little funding, but will instead depend on brokerage and effective collaboration.

The actions are broken down into four key areas:

- Retail
- Food and Drink
- Tourism Links
- Marketing and Events

**Table 2 - Proposed Retail Distinctiveness Projects**

Retail	Retail networking and support
	The Blaenavon Pound
	Establishing a series of themed / specialist markets across the year
	Actions to address retail leakage
Food, Drink and Hospitality	Improving the food and drink offer in the town centre
	A safe and welcoming town centre
	Feasibility study for a food centre
	Encouraging more events linked to the food and drink offer
Tourism Links	Increasing the range and supply of accommodation
	Building transport links to Big Pit
	Joint ticketing and discount deals
	Developing activity tourism in Blaenavon
	Building links with other World Heritage towns
	Town Trails and circular walks signposted from the town centre
Marketing and Events	Establish a more sophisticated web presence for traders
	Develop a year-round events strategy for the town
	Cross-marketing amongst attractions
	The Miners' Lunch Box

### **TITLE: Retail Networking and Support**

#### **DESCRIPTION:**

To strengthen dialogue and collective working across the town centre business community through support for the Traders' Association developing a unified approach to town centre development.

This should include:

- Development of an agreed format for promotion of local businesses, to promote the sense of a "virtual department store"
- Support for the current "Together we Mean Business" programme
- Agreement on collective delivery of actions listed below, along with others to be developed by forum members

#### **Aims**

To bring more local people and visitors into town, traders need to increase awareness of the excellent range of independent retailers that the town has to offer. Although previous advertising has been only partially successful, a targeted approach to marketing would be of benefit to the town. (See also section on marketing and communication below.)

The "virtual department store" concept can be strongly reinforced by a collective approach, conveyed through the website or supportive literature, providing a portal or signposting service to a wide range of shops and services.

Suggested material should include:

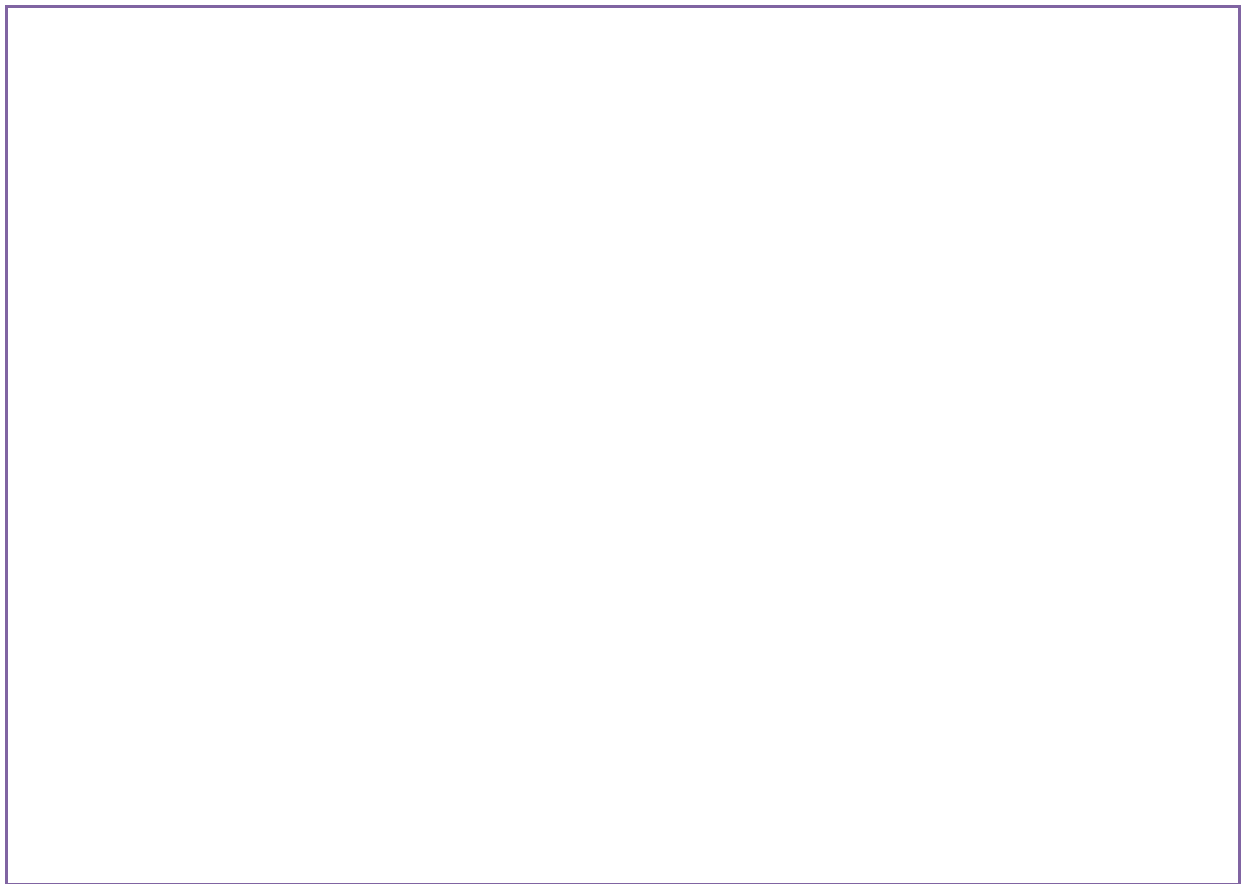
- Leaflet holders – wall or counter fixed
- Pocket sized maps (now available from the World Heritage Centre)
- Retail leaflet – promoting the town as a "virtual department store"
- Shopping bags
- Book-marks
- Quarterly events guides
- Useful contacts directory

The current business support programme "Together we mean Business" has assisted traders with marketing, product and business development and this now needs to be taken on by town centre businesses themselves.

#### **Actions:**

Traders to consider options for development.

## Actions: Retail



## Actions: Retail



### TITLE: Building Loyalty – the Blaenavon Pound

#### DESCRIPTION:

To build allegiance to town centre traders by producing a loyalty card, giving access to a range of benefits. To build on this by devising a “Blaenavon Pound”, which could form a local currency for circulation in the town.

#### Aims

Loyalty cards are used by a number of national retailers and service providers as a means of retaining customers. This concept could be usefully deployed in Blaenavon to encourage visitors to return, or local people to use the town rather than one of its larger neighbours.

Individuals with a loyalty card would receive small discounts in shops, or advance notice of special offers or promotional events in the town. Shoppers could receive a stamp on their card for each purchase, with a discount or two for one offer when a certain number of stamps was achieved.

One possible development of this is the idea of creating a local currency, harking back to the tokens formerly issued to miners and ironworkers for use in employers’ shops and making the link to the concept of the town centre as a coordinated, single retail offer. The Ironworks Museum houses an example of the tokens, known as “dibs”.



*Blaenavon token, known as 'dibs' (National Museum of Wales).*

The initiative could be based around:

- Shoppers purchasing loyalty cards could be given a rebate in the form of a local coin or note, which could in turn be spent elsewhere in the town, with a participating trader. These could gradually form part of the money in circulation in Blaenavon, ensuring retention of local spend.
- Initial stocks of tokens would need to be commissioned by the Traders’ Association and could feature artwork designed by local children, for example. Tokens would probably have

## Actions: Retail

a relatively modest value (20p / 50p), to reduce the attractiveness of forgery.

- The scheme would attract publicity for the town and help to build interest in the retail offer. Further publicity could be generated by exploiting the links to the “Coal House” theme.

### **Actions:**

Traders and Torfaen CBC to discuss the concept of a loyalty card and to assess the potential level of buy-in from town centre businesses. This would include achievable levels of discount or other benefits to cardholders.

Further, to discuss the more ambitious plan for the Blaenavon Pound, including likely costs, risks and benefits.

Liaise with Big Pit and other attractions to establish possible arrangements for marketing and distribution.

Consider study visits to other towns operating similar schemes.

### TITLE: Bringing People In – Programme of Markets

#### DESCRIPTION:

To build on the planned programme of farmers' markets, by arranging specialist markets across a range of interests. The markets will serve to bring a wider range of customers to the town centre, where they will experience the range of shopping on offer.

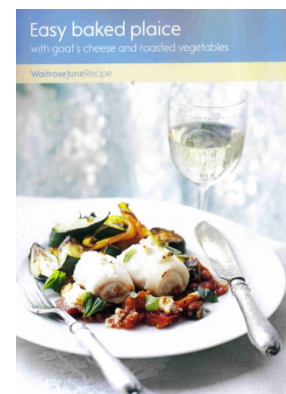
#### Aims

Markets are a strong attractor to small towns and Blaenavon has historic connections with a market (as evidenced by the Market Place, market tavern etc). Torfaen CBC is currently arranging a programme of farmers' markets for the town centre across the summer. These could be built upon, with a series of themed markets, such as craft / antique / historic markets. The last could again be presented around the Coal House theme, with traditional foods and gifts around the mining theme.

Existing shops could use the market as a means of showcasing their products in a different environment – thereby encouraging visitors to patronise their shops in due course.

Some ideas to include:

- **Incubator stall** for new businesses
- Collective stall for local retailers and businesses
- Market shopping bags
- Home delivery service
- Menu cards and marketing material



#### Actions:

Traders to work with Torfaen CBC to devise an engaging programme of markets.

### **TITLE: Addressing Retail Leakage**

#### **DESCRIPTION:**

**To consider the current low level of town centre usage by Blaenavon residents. To assess the feasibility of addressing this by encouraging investment in the town, ideally from a mid-tier supermarket operator.**

#### **Aims**

Blaenavon currently suffers very poor perceptions of its overall retail offer – perceptions which are wholly unjustified with regard to the range of independent shops in the town. However, there is a very limited range and choice of both convenience and comparison goods, compared with neighbouring centres such as Pontypool, Cwmbran and Brynmawr.

Whilst town centre traders in the workshops were almost universally opposed to the concept of an edge of centre supermarket in the town, the possibility should be thought through carefully. At present, some 80% of residents are not shopping at all in Blaenavon and those who do use the town centre do so on foot, for low value, albeit regular, purchases. If a more significant proportion of residents' weekly spend could be kept within the town, there would be scope for independent traders to benefit from top-up shopping, which is not present at the moment.

The presence of a mid-tier supermarket could improve the image of the town and bring customers in from a wider catchment. Its location, relationship to the town centre and research into how it could benefit the town in terms of local procurement, employment and other benefits would have to be explored, as well as how it complements the existing range of goods within the town centre.

If the principle is agreed, work could be carried out to identify a site for potential investors. Clearly, the current investment climate is not conducive to such developments, but Blaenavon could position itself as a potential location once things improve.

#### **Actions:**

Traders and Torfaen CBC to discuss ideas around stemming retail leakage and the implications (including local development policies) of different options.

### TITLE: Improving the Food and Drink Offer

#### DESCRIPTION:

To bring more residents and visitors into the town centre, through provision of an improved range and choice of food.

#### Aims

The scoping study identifies that there is a key opportunity to bring more local people and visitors into town by providing an improved range of food and drink. Whilst there is a good range of takeaways, pub food and cafes in the town, there remains scope for more family oriented dining and also for a quality restaurant in the town centre. Although Butterflies Restaurant provides a good service to local people, its location is not visible to casual visitors.



#### Actions:

The following actions were identified in the workshops:

- Identify premises – The Market Tavern provides a prime opportunity for development in a prominent position on Broad Street.
- Notify specialist agencies – The opportunity for a restaurant investor could be marketed via trade channels.
- Use existing contacts to identify potential investors – Members of the Traders' Association could utilise their existing contacts to seek out individuals with a potential interest in investing.

## Actions: Food, Drink and Hospitality

### **TITLE: A Safe and Welcoming Town Centre**

#### **DESCRIPTION:**

To bring more residents and visitors into the town centre, through creation of a vibrant, welcoming evening time offer.

#### **Aims**

There is an opportunity to bring more local people and visitors into town by “claiming the streets” to create a bustling town centre environment in the evenings – for example with cafe tables on the pavements (subject to statutory licenses and permissions), buskers, brass bands, local choir and street theatre. Art, music and literature events in pubs and restaurants could help to build an image of a vibrant town that is attractive to a wider range of community members.

**Actions:** Convene a subgroup of the Traders’ Association to devise approaches to animating the town centre.

### TITLE: Feasibility Study for a Food Centre

#### DESCRIPTION:

To investigate the potential for a mixed-use conversion of a keynote vacant building, to provide a restaurant, cookery school, food retail and possibly a training school.

#### Aims

The former Market Tavern presents a key opportunity for the town to address a number of current gaps in one facility. The building is currently vacant and in a poor state of repair, but occupies a prime site in the centre of the retail area that relates well to the linkage with the World Heritage Visitor Centre. With accommodation on three stories, the site could be restored and sub-divided to create a range of food-related facilities, including:



- Food retail units on the ground floor. The workshops identified a need for an artisan baker in Blaenavon, to complement the existing butcher, greengrocer and cheese shop. There could potentially be space within the building for a bakery unit linked to a shop. Subsequent discussions with a regional investor recorded some initial interest in the concept. Clearly it would also be advantageous to relocate the existing fishmonger from Gilchrist Thomas Industrial Estate to the town centre
- Restaurant on the first floor
- A training facility could be provided for paying customers as well as being linked to the Communities Next programme within Blaenavon

**Actions:** Torfaen CBC, Heads of the Valleys Programme, Traders and potential investors to discuss ways forward in terms of feasibility, business plan, etc.

## Actions: Food, Drink and Hospitality

### TITLE: Encouraging Events linked to Food and Drink

#### DESCRIPTION:

To bring more residents and visitors into town through a comprehensive and engaging programme of social events linked to food and drink premises.

#### Aims

Given that a large proportion of Blaenavon residents do not currently visit the town centre because they are working elsewhere during the day, there may be scope to attract them to the town in the evenings. This could be facilitated by encouraging more social events, such as:

- film shows
- literature readings
- live music
- pub quizzes and street art.



Ideally, some of these could be linked into packages for a meal and a band, or an art exhibition with wine and cheese.

#### Actions:

Traders to discuss.



## Actions: Food, Drink and Hospitality

### **TITLE: Increasing the Range and Supply of Accommodation**

#### **DESCRIPTION:**

**To encourage investment in a range of new visitor accommodation in and around Blaenavon.**

#### **Aims**

It was identified in both the surveys and the workshops that there is currently only a limited, albeit good quality, accommodation offer in and around Blaenavon. The World Heritage status of the town attracts interest and visitors from across the World, but the town and community lose out on many of the potential economic benefits because visitors stay elsewhere.

The level of provision partly reflects the current seasonality of the market, but the range of initiatives currently planned will act to address this to some extent.

The town needs to actively seek investment in a quality mid range hotel facility in the town centre, along with a range of other accommodation for different market segments, such as bed and breakfasts and bunk barns. Collectively, these will begin to build the image of Blaenavon as a place to stay for more than a one day visit to Big Pit or the Ironworks.

The excellent World Heritage Blaenavon website currently has no accommodation information on it, and this needs to be addressed so that the town can get the most out of its visitors.

#### **Actions:**

- Actively seek investment in a mid range hotel for the town centre. This could be considered as part of any potential food centre in the Market Tavern building.
- Identify and encourage potential bed and breakfast operators in and around the town

The following actions were identified in the workshops:

- Identify premises
- Notify specialist agencies
- Use existing contacts to identify potential investors

## Actions: Tourism Links

### TITLE: Building Transport Links to Big Pit

#### DESCRIPTION:

To increase visitor traffic to the town centre by providing a heritage transport link between the town and big pit.

#### Aims

One of the critical issues for Blaenavon is that of bringing a higher proportion of visitors from Big Pit into the town centre, via some form of physical transport link.

Three initial ideas were put forward: a road train, a heritage bus and using cycle rickshaws.

The road train was not considered to be appropriate, given the initial expense, running costs and above all the lack of cultural fit with the town.

Cycle rickshaws were discounted because of the gradient from Gilchrist Thomas to Big Pit, although it was agreed that a pilot scheme could be tried on a key weekend, such as the World Heritage day.

The heritage bus has been run before, again on World Heritage day, and this seems to offer the best solution.

A key feature of such a bus link is that it should start from the town centre, offering a linked ticket experience. Clearly, as there is no entrance fee to Big Pit itself, the offer needs to include some added value of interest to Big Pit visitors. Possibilities include the inclusion of a Blaenavon Passport, with sticker chart for children linked to a trail around the town centre and incentives in shops and other local businesses. The bus experience itself could bring in some visitors, but services would need to be regular to be effective. It was also suggested that the service would need to have a different location for drop-off and pick up, so that people are required to walk through the main street.

It was identified that the railway could have a key role to play in the bus service, through brokering a provider through existing contacts and through selling tickets in the railway shop in the town centre.

A low risk option would be to run the service as a pilot on event days, expanding to pilot weekends and finally to a more regular service if demand could be built. It was noted that Big Pit suffers car parking pressure on busy days and the bus service could be used as a means of relieving pressure at these times.

Bus ticketing could be tied into a loyalty card or discount scheme for the town centre (see project above on the Blaenavon Pound), and /or a sticker trail for children around the town centre area.

#### Actions:

The following actions were identified:

- Traders to approach the railway company and Big Pit



## Actions: Tourism Links

- Identify potential bus providers
- Check Statutory Permissions

Arrange Pilot Scheme for targeted weekends, event days and Bank Holidays

### TITLE: Building Blaenavon as an Activity Tourism Destination

#### DESCRIPTION:

To build Blaenavon as an activity tourism destination, through extending current cycle route provision and encouraging existing operators to relocate to the town.

#### Aims

Although there is some activity tourism based in Blaenavon, such as guided walks and cycle trails, the sector has not been developed to its full potential. The extensive opportunities for paragliding on the Bloreng, high quality mountain walks and cycle trails appealing to a wide range of audiences could be further developed. In particular, there is an issue that participants are currently more likely to access the hills from the Abergavenny / Usk Valley side, rather than from Blaenavon. There is a medium to long-term opportunity to influence relocation of paragliding schools and bike sales / hire shops to move to Blaenavon and create a vibrant centre for activity trips. This will need to link to the development of improved / targeted accommodation and food and drink facilities.



The work done on building cycle routes was acknowledged in the workshops, but there was some frustration that the current route from Pontypool ends at the top of the valley. Hence, it was suggested that the town could work with Sustrans and the new HoV activity tourism fund to bring forward development of the Route 46 cycle way across to Brynmawr and hence link it to a wider network.

In addition, feasibility work could be undertaken to establish a network of mountain bike trails around the Bloreng, accessible from Blaenavon and marketed as such.

#### Actions:

Investigate the feasibility of attracting more activity tourists to Blaenavon, initially through marketing and signage of routes.

Look at possibilities for expansion, relocation of, or investment in cycling and other outdoor facilities.

Lobby support for early extension of the Route 46 cycle way.

### **TITLE: Building Links with other World Heritage Towns**

#### **DESCRIPTION:**

To market Blaenavon to potential visitors by traders “twinning” with other World Heritage sites.

#### **Aims**

For Blaenavon traders to exploit the town’s World Heritage status by building links with other towns and settlements enjoying similar status. These could include opportunities for cross-marketing, or sharing of best practice. Examples in the UK would include Ironbridge Gorge, but sites further afield could also be included.

#### **Actions:**

Traders to approach other World Heritage towns and link with marketing opportunities.

### TITLE: Town Trails and Circular Walks Signposted from the Town Centre

#### DESCRIPTION:

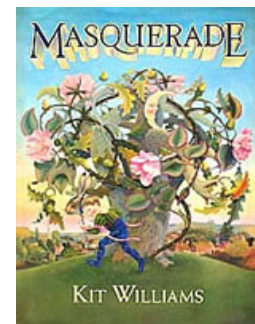
To encourage visitors to increase their stay and to focus their visit on the town centre through the provision of both in-town trails and hill walks starting and finishing in the town centre.

#### Aims

As part of the wider programme of encouraging visitors to see Blaenavon Town as a starting point for their visit, some simple walks starting from the town centre or World Heritage Centre could be developed to complement the existing range of trails published on the world heritage Blaenavon website.

In addition, an art-based trail around the town centre would provide a useful means of engaging visitors in the town and introducing them to the range of shops and facilities on offer. Other possible trails could include:

- Use of miners' tokens with pavements that links with the Blaenavon Pound proposal. This could be linked to a heritage trail as well as an educational resources for schools to include activities such as charcoal rubbings, etc
- A treasure hunt-type trail for children, possibly linked to collecting stickers or "passport stamps"
- History-based trails linked to individual stories or events – serving as a physical extension to the exhibition displays in the World Heritage Centre
- Discovery trails, linked to cryptic clues which require participants to visit individual shops or food outlets in order to decode the answers. This could be in the form of a book based on the area's industrial heritage that is written locally and guides people through attractions and businesses, working towards cracking the code.



#### Actions:

Traders to consider the most appropriate forms of town trails.



## **TITLE: Establish a More Sophisticated Web Presence for Traders**

### **DESCRIPTION:**

**To build on the excellent World Heritage Blaenavon website in order to market the retail and hospitality communities more effectively.**

### **Aims**

To develop more comprehensive website content for the existing site, giving more detailed information on the retail, food and drink offers in Blaenavon. This should also include scope for selling online and for taking bookings for events and bus trips. As noted above, an accommodation section would be beneficial.

As an information source, the site could list useful information for shoppers and other visitors, such as a directory of shops and services. Individuals registering with the site could gain access to special offers or advance notice of promotions, in return for providing basic marketing information, which could be held in a central online database.

If resources allowed, an occasional e-magazine could be developed for dissemination via the site and sections for simple web surveys, photo uploads and discussion threads could easily be incorporated into the design.

### **Actions:**

Traders to work with Torfaen CBC to discuss possible expansion of the site.

## **TITLE: Develop a year-round events strategy for the town**

### **DESCRIPTION:**

**To bring people into the town by designing a year-round programme of events, complementing the current World Heritage Day and associated events.**

### **Aims**

Blaenavon has an expanding programme of events, such as the World Heritage day and associated events, Garn Lakes Country Fair and the Railway Gala. This needs to be continually developed within the town centre to bring people into the town, both from other attractions and from elsewhere.

Possibilities include a music festival, food-related events, book / literary festival or action-based events linked to the heritage agenda. One example of this could be a reconstruction of the event described on a press cutting in the Goose and Cuckoo pub, whereby a man from Blaenavon pushed his grandmother in a wheelbarrow from the town to the pub for a wager in the early 1900s. This could be turned into an annual race, ideally starting at the Goose and Cuckoo and finishing in the town centre. Teams would dress



as “man and granny” in period costume for the race and an evening awards ceremony could be held in the town centre, with food and drink and possibly some evening market stalls.

### **Actions:**

Traders’ Association to discuss with other town groups.

## **TITLE: Cross-Marketing Amongst Attractions**

### **DESCRIPTION:**

**To ensure that all elements of the World Heritage Site effectively cross-market to maximise dwell time in the town and hinterland.**

### **Aims**

At present, despite the excellent common branding of the different elements of the World Heritage Site, there is to some extent a sense of competition, rather than collaboration in marketing a joint product.

Representatives of the different sub-attractions need to meet together to discuss ways of collaborating more effectively, marketing the site as a multi-day attraction.

### **Actions:**

Traders to instigate an initial meeting.

## TITLE: The Miners' Lunch Box

### DESCRIPTION:

To create a product which encapsulates Blaenavon, to be used as a marketing device.

### Aims

One of the issues for Blaenavon is that of attracting visitors to the town centre from its immediate and wider hinterlands, for example Abergavenny. One possible approach to this would be to create an iconic (albeit inexpensive) Miners' Lunch Box, which could be used to house packed lunches from local produce, or a selection of goods from retailers in the town to make up a mini hamper.



One further idea would be to secure space at the Abergavenny or Brecon Food Festivals and sell lunches in the boxes, along with leaflets and other promotional material (loyalty cards etc) to bring people into the town.

### Actions:

Traders to investigate costs of design and production



## **7. Next Steps**

The next steps for this short project are to take the themes discussed above and for business community representatives to meet and discuss ways forward – to develop and deliver on the actions listed.