Regenerating Blaenau Ffestiniog
Case Study
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The background

Blaenau Ffestiniog is a town located in the heart of Snowdonia. It is surrounded by a dramatic mountainous landscape, with imposing slate slopes to the North (a legacy of its industrial past) and spectacular views of the Moelwynion Mountains to the south. The town was founded on the rise in demand for slate in the 19th and early 20th century, with quarry workers establishing a settlement in the very centre of the quarrying landscape. As with most booming industrial growth, there inevitably came the decline in demand which took place during the second half of the 20th century. At its peak the population of the Ffestinog parish reached 11,274 in 1881. It has since declined owing to the closure of quarries and the reduction in employment and fewer than 4,900 people live in Blaenau today.

A time for change

The impact of slate quarry closures over a number of decades and the inevitable economic and social pressures now facing the population meant that in recent years there was an increasing call for some significant changes to be made to the physical fabric of the town. In addition there was a need to diversify the industry offer to one which could support the economic viability of the place and its people.

The town had an above average shop vacancy rate of 32%, and although the potential for tourism to contribute to the town centre economy was there, this in practice was not easy to exploit. The average visitor spend amounted to only 27p in shops in the town, this albeit that Blaenau has some of the most well visited tourist attractions in the area, including the Ffestiniog Railway and Llechwedd Slate Caverns.

Tourism is a well-established industry in North Wales, with numerous visitor attractions dotted along the coastline and in Snowdonia. Consumer demands have changed significantly, however, and more people are looking for adventure and outdoor recreation opportunities when visiting the area. North Wales in general has sought to exploit this trend, with cutting edge projects taking place to capture a target audience which is looking for that unique experience. Blaenau Ffestiniog - as a place - had much to offer this target market, but needed to work hard on re-focusing the economic development and ambition of the town.

Creating the conditions for change

The regeneration of Blaenau Ffestiniog is an ongoing programme which involves a number of organisations and groups who have contributed to the changes taking place, each playing a key role in developing networks of people and progressing with projects for the betterment of the town. A key feature has been the natural partnership working between various organisations which has proved vital in securing some lasting change. Developing a network of people and organisations to drive change in a town can be a lengthy process, with a significant amount of time being spent building those crucial relationships between organisations who can provide a commitment of resources to develop a strategic plan. It is very apparent that public representatives from national to local and community level were able to align priorities with the assistance of other community groups operating in Blaenau.
Transforming the public realm

Blaenau Ffestiniog, once known as the town that ‘roofed the world’ - owing to its status as a global slate producing town, was struggling to be able to boast a particularly inspiring public realm. The absence of high quality and well-designed public spaces often, and unfairly, reinforced negative perceptions. It was felt that the sense of emotional attachment between the community and their public space had been lost, and it was important to rebuild this relationship between people and place.

Blaenau Ymlaen was set-up in 2006 as a local partnership, consisting of a number of organisations and representatives who wanted to encourage and create change within the town. The partnership enabled good communication with the community to develop ideas on how the town could change for the better. After much discussion and consultation, it became apparent that one element that should be addressed was the uninspiring public realm. It was agreed that a bold and visual statement in the centre of the town was required. A physical transformation in the centre of the town would be ambitious, and require a significant investment to achieve this change. A project was starting to take shape, and the development of a creative, artistic public realm, rooted in cultural distinctiveness, was to be a significant aspect to it. A full and detailed overview of the project can be found here: www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1388271/blaenau_rtpi_submission_a3.pdf

In order to get to this stage, a significant amount of community engagement was undertaken, facilitated and aided by Miller Research UK (www.miller-research.co.uk), with the emerging ideas and opportunities being presented at drop-in sessions which were organised throughout the town.

Communicating and engaging with the community

- Creative day long visioning exercise
- Public exhibition attracting over 150 people
- Formal statutory planning process
- 9 public consultation drop-in sessions
- Meetings with local access groups
Funding for such a large project would be difficult to raise locally. Some did feel deserving of some significant investment from the national government, principally due to the abandonment of heavy industry and the physical scars which it left behind. With this in mind, the group engaged with the local authority who were able to provide valuable support which began in the form of a dedicated regeneration officer who helped steer the group through the complex nature of funding applications, and acted as a bridge between the community group and project board (a project governance requirement). It was also crucial that the community group was represented on the project board to ensure continuity with the original project brief, as developed by the town. The LA was also able to provide technical support, and - as the owners and managers of large parts of the land in which work would be done - it would provide an overseeing role on all aspects of the work.

“The role of the community was unusual, exceptional even. It was crucial that we engaged with the Local Authority at an early stage. The support it provided was essential and meant that we had the necessary backing and support to further develop the project concept. Gwynedd Council was fully appreciative of the role of the community in shaping this project, and understood that the community remained as the key stakeholder who needed to be satisfied with all aspects of the work.” – Jim Buckley of Blaenau Ymlaen

The project secured Welsh Government and European funding to deliver the public realm improvements. It was completed in 2013, and this together with the wider regeneration strategy was commended by RTPI Cymru 2013 at their annual awards and nominated for the RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence in 2013. The project was also awarded the Institute of Civil Engineers Cymru 2013 Roy Edwards Award and Chairman’s Special Award for Sustainability and Towns Alive Environment and Culture winner 2013. In addition to this, Construction Excellence Wales awarded the team ‘Client of the Year’ 2013.

Creating economic strength

The decline in slate production, once the principle economic driver for the region, severely weakened local development. The diversification from traditional manufacturing industry to tourism had long been seen as a way to help support a stronger local economy.

Antur Stiniog is a Social Enterprise founded in 2007. It was set up to promote and develop the Ffestiniog area as an important centre for outdoor activities. Back in 2007 the community venture received 2000 pledges of support from local residents, with a shared vision;

“To develop the potential of the Outdoor Sector in the Ffestiniog area in a sustainable and innovative way for the benefit of the local residents and economy”.

Antur Stiniog company development:
3rd September 2007:
1 self-employed part-time worker
1 part-time Communities First Development Officer
Completely Grant Dependent

3rd September 2014:
11 members of the local community (Managing Board)
steering and overseeing the work
19 employees
Turnover approx £500,000 in 2013-14

The project formed part of the original Communities First initiative in the town, and over the course of its inception became an incorporated company with local stakeholders as directors. Over the last 8 years it has accomplished many goals which have been in line with its original vision. Amongst its achievements is the opening of new mountain bike trails in the surrounding area, as well as a mountain bike centre of excellence near the Llechwedd Caverns and a shop selling cycling and outdoor equipment which is located in the very centre of the town.

Photograph courtesy of AnturStiniog©

Canolfan Ymwelwyr
• Scheme circa £260,000
• Purpose built Centre
• Toilets, Showers, and Bike cleaning facilities
• Food and Drink and staffed
• Promotional Resource for Bro Ffestiniog
**Llechwedd Downhill Biking Trails**

- Llechwedd Downhill Biking Trails
- Approx £890,000 scheme
- Approx 20,000 have used the trails.
- Employs 9 staff
- Festivals and championships

The company also organises the Ras Moelwyn fell running competition each year, and in 2015 had its largest ever number of competitors. This race also contributes to the overall British Championship, which has elevated its status among the running world. Antur Stiniog also offers a range of other outdoor activities, such as walking, kayaking, nature and history trails, caving and fishing, and offers a service for visitors to customise their stay in Snowdonia.
The latest project which is to be opened in 2015 is a Velorail, which is a low carbon, sustainable bicycle technology to propel an adapted carriage along a disused railway line. It is hoped that the Velorail attraction will run on a disused railway line between Blaenau Ffestiniog and Trawsfynydd.

This and other tourism attractions which are being developed in the landscape around Blaenau, such as the Titan Zip Line and the ‘Bounce Below’ attraction are starting to have a positive impact on the local economy, and this has been assisted by some positive coverage and exposure in the national media, owing to the uniqueness and adventure these attractions can offer visitors.

Taking environmental responsibility

One of the key aspects of a holistic approach to regeneration of our towns is the principle of sustainable development, and taking environmental responsibility. ‘Y Dref Werdd’ is another project taking place in Blaenau Ffestiniog which aims to address the sustainable development challenge at the local level, but also to:

- Develop the local economy and contribute to community development and culture
- Work to reduce social problems and to improve the health and well-being of the population;
- and through education in the broad sense, creating a community of stakeholders who are lively, motivated and passionate about the environment.

From 2007 to 2013 the project successfully supported and educated residents and families of the town on methods of saving on the cost of energy through smarter use of existing heating systems, as well as signposting them to grants available to make home energy improvements. The project also established 22 new allotments in the town to encourage people to grow their own food and vegetables. It has also set up a nature club, and facilitated the removal of the invasive Rhododendron in the surrounding landscape.

The partnership delivering the project, which consists of local stakeholders, has recently secured funding from the Big Lottery fund, and has now appointed new staff to take the project a step further on from the original business plan. The original business plan can be found here (in Welsh only)

Legacy and Sustainability

A combination of physical and community regeneration work has contributed to a lasting legacy of change in the town. Projects which have been developed locally are now visible and receiving attention from all parts of the UK. The development of social enterprise together with a transformation of the public realm has, and will continue to encourage a positive outlook for the town. Private sector investment in the area, such as that in the tourism sector is an indication of confidence in the wider market of what Blaenau Ffestiniog offers the 21st century visitor. It will be interesting to see how local business can take advantage of this trend, and ensure that as much money generated as possible is kept locally.