

Lessons from the Wales Town Boost Pilot Programme

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All photos from the Wales Town Booster Pilot Programme March 2026.
Credit: Creative Communities International, DCFW, Vale of Glamorgan Council.



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Bridging the Gap Between Planning and Action

The Wales Town Booster Pilot Programme tested a hands-on, community-engaged approach to town centre regeneration which seeks to generate immediate visible action to bridge the persistent gap between planning and delivery. This case study provides an overview of the programme and draws out learning that can be applied beyond the pilot.

Across Wales, town centres face a mix of economic, social and environmental pressures, often reflected in vacant units, reduced footfall and declining civic confidence. While local authorities have made progress in developing placemaking plans, a long 'pause' often follows while funds are raised to deliver the projects they propose.

The Wales Town Boost Pilot Programme was developed by Creative Communities International and led by placemaking practitioner David Engwicht. The concept of short, intensive periods of community-led activity to transform the physical environment and narrative of town centres had already been tested in over 40 towns across Australia and New Zealand. In spring 2026 a Welsh Government-commissioned pilot overseen by the Design Commission for Wales, adapted the programme to a Welsh context and was trialled in three Welsh towns – Abertillery (Blaenau Gwent), Llantwit Major (Vale of Glamorgan) and Abergele (Conwy).

The Pilot Programme Overview

The programme centred on a one-week process in each town, combining workshops with training for town-centre businesses, and culminating in a 'makeover day' involving low-cost interventions to improve the look, feel and social function of town centres. Beyond physical changes, the programme aimed to build community confidence, encourage businesses to attract footfall, and support local authorities to take a more enabling role, demonstrating that regeneration can begin immediately, even with limited resources.

Prior to the one-week sessions, online meetings were held with the local authorities and town councils, and local businesses were invited to do online training in their own time on how to boost footfall and attract spend. The Town Boost events were promoted via posters, websites and social media to encourage residents and businesses to get involved. A modest budget of £2,500 was allocated for each makeover.

The table below shows how the week-long programme was structured for each town:

Monday	Creative Communities International tour of town centre	To understand context and help identify potential sites for the makeover
Tuesday	Placemaking on a Shoestring & Freedom to Flourish Workshops with local authority and town council	Introduction to agile placemaking principles & councils to establish 'permissions' for changes in the town centre
	Public information meeting	To inform, build support and encourage involvement
Wednesday	Make-over planning day	Volunteers decide which projects they want to invest time in and form project groups to plan the makeover within the budget
Thursday	Training for town-centre businesses	
Friday	Training for town-centre businesses	
Saturday	Make-over day	Volunteers implement the makeover as planned, to transform and space in the town centre

This video was commissioned to capture the process across the One-Week Town Boost in Llantwit Major:

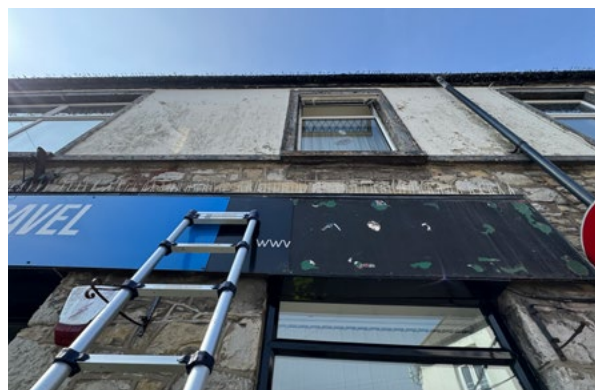
> <https://youtu.be/-K8pHKoHQtc>

A Learning Process

Overall, the programme was successful, with outcomes including impactful makeovers in each town and mindsets beginning to shift from negativity to thoughts that positive changes in the future could be possible. However, as with any pilot project, there are lessons to be learned. In the spirit of agile placemaking, Creative Communities International adapted and adjusted the programme in response to feedback and engagement during the process; and suggestions for further shaping of the programme for future roll-out have been informed by lessons learnt.

The makeovers demonstrated that meaningful change is possible with a small budget and a short amount of time, and that small changes can make a big difference to people's attitudes towards and place and their optimism for the future. The business training received varying levels of engagement across the three towns, so finding the best format for this will be important. The process of change required from local authorities and town councils to act as enablers met similar barriers in all three towns, highlighting some issues that need to be addressed in the format of the programme.

Because of the visible impact it has, there is a risk of the Town Boost to focus only on the town centre makeover element. However, the business training and work to shift the mindsets and working approaches of local authorities, town councils and local community are equally important parts of the process. Looking below the surface of the makeover, the pilot programme provides invaluable lessons about the importance of a holistic approach to town centre regeneration.



The Makeover

In all three towns the physical makeover of a space or series of spaces in the town centre was very successful. The modest budgets of £2,500 for each makeover proved that meaningful change can start small and does not need to wait for big capital investment to be secured. However, running the makeover planning workshops just three days before did not allow sufficient preparation time for sourcing materials and pre-fabricating features.

In Abertillery, although engagement with the events during the week was low, the makeover day generated strong public response. Volunteers cleaned shopfronts, painted bollards, installed bunting, created a shutter mural and vinyl wrapped an unsightly derelict shop front. The visible impact sparked positive feedback and growing interest from local businesses keen to replicate improvements. A social media post about the makeover attracted over 400 likes and a raft of positive comments, reinforcing the sense that the changes, although small, had had a meaningful impact on the community. Here, the local authority had pre-arranged for the bunting installation and ordered the vinyl window wrap, which helped significantly with lead in times.

In Llantwit Major, the makeover day saw 29 participants take part, following good attendance at the planning workshop three days before. Although Creative Communities International and the local authority had identified two potential locations for the makeover prior to the planning day, volunteers pointed out other opportunities on a walkabout during the workshop. One of these – a beach-themed mural on the toilet block – attracted enough interest to form a project group that planned and implemented the transformation. This reinforced the importance of balancing professional guidance and participant ownership. Other improvements in Llantwit Major included planters, movable street furniture to encourage social dwell time, and a hand-painted town map; all intended to help link the different parts of the town. The outcome created a strong sense of energy and optimism and a desire for further improvements.

In Abergele, the makeover day focused on transforming a public space in front of the library. Located close to Tesco, and at the end of the high street, this spot is ideally placed to encourage shoppers to linger after their visit to the supermarket. The transformation saw volunteers deep-clean the area, install new planters and loose beach-style seating and the creation of an informal play space for children. The centre-piece of the makeover was two large books to make it clear that the building is the library. The books also close off a second entry point to the space, making it safer for children to use; and double up as seating. Lots of local businesses got involved in the makeover, and battled through a hail shower to get it complete. However, the lack of lead-in time meant it was a race against time to get the book centre pieces finished and installed.

Lessons Learnt

With all of the makeovers, people being able to see and experience a physical change in a short period of time was impactful and helped people to be more optimistic and to see an alternative future for the civic and social function of the town centre, rather than decline and negativity. By engaging volunteers from the community and local businesses, with councils as enablers, rather than relying on councils to deliver change, people came together and a sense of civic pride was ignited. Volunteers were keen to continue the momentum and make further improvements in their town centres. This raises an important issue – what happens next after the makeover? To get the best value from the Town Boost, there needs to be a mechanism for encouraging people to come back to the town and celebrate the physical changes, leading to changes in the ways people use the space too. Consideration could also be given to using the week long programme to generate interest and involvement from the community that would feed into a longer term programme of improvements, shaped by the Placemaking Plan.

In some instances, business-owners were reluctant to engage, perhaps weary and apathetic due to consultation fatigue and the demands of keeping a business running on a declining high street. Expecting them to do online training in their own time was not successful, and this element of the programme needs rethinking. However, where businesses did engage in the process it proved to be fruitful. Participants started to see how they could improve the situation on the high street themselves, both individually and collectively, without relying on councils to make changes for them. This led to an enthusiasm to keep the momentum from the Town Boost going into the future.

One of the most challenging aspects of the pilot programme, and perhaps something that had been underestimated, was the change in ways of working and mindset of councils that was required. Despite there being enthusiastic and dedicated staff in each of the towns, bureaucracy, internal processes and the enormity of changes being asked were barriers that were difficult to overcome.



What next?

The long-term success of the three pilot towns will depend on sustaining momentum. This includes local authorities adopting enabling roles, businesses and communities becoming active contributors, and continued follow-on activity. In this sense, the programme is as much about cultural change as physical improvement.

Other towns looking to capture some of the benefits demonstrated by the Town Booster Programme could look at running their own programme or make a start in developing an enabling culture that provides support for local involvement rather than imposing restrictions.

Reframing Regeneration

Perhaps most importantly, the programme challenges the narrative of decline that can become entrenched in struggling town centres. By enabling visible, collective action, it helps communities see themselves not as places waiting for investment, but as communities capable of initiating change.

As lessons from the pilot are considered, the model offers clear potential for wider application across Wales, demonstrating that regeneration does not need to start with scale, but with action.

