

Carmarthen Town Centre Local Development Order

Report 2022 - 2024

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1.0 Introduction

Background and Purpose

1.1 Where a retail centre is demonstrating signs of decline, national planning policy makes provision for that decline to be managed and/or for action to be taken to regenerate a centre. In such circumstances a Local Development Order (LDO) may (as part of a collective approach) contribute to local economic development and regeneration, helping make places more attractive and more competitive, helping in incentivising development and reducing vacancy rates. The impact associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic impact is particularly relevant in this regard and there is clear evidence that Carmarthen town centre faced challenges arising from what was an unprecedented time. Whilst this may not have impacted wholly across the wider town centre, there were areas where implications on the retail sector were more prevalent and raised specific issues in relation to prospective long-term vacancies.

1.2 The Carmarthen Town Centre Local Development Order acknowledges a shifting role for Carmarthen Town Centre to that of a destination and living environment as well as a retail centre. It seeks to introduce a permissive planning regime that would allow specified changes of use to take place without the applicant having to apply for planning permission.

1.3 Having been through a public consultation, the Carmarthen LDO was approved (adopted) by Carmarthenshire County Council. The Carmarthen Town Centre LDO was launched in February 2022.

1.4 The Carmarthen Town Centre LDO has been active for 2 years now. It was intended to be terminated after 18 months, or in conjunction with the adoption of the Revised Local Development Plan (LDP), the policies of which supersede many of the LDO policies. However, the adoption of the Revised LDP was delayed due to a number of reasons and it is envisaged that the LDO in its current form will run until the adoption of the Revised LDP.

1.5 The Carmarthen Town Centre LDO grants conditional planning permission for specified uses in ground and upper-floor units. It is envisaged that the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO, in permitting a wide range of compatible uses, will help to increase occupancy levels and footfall in the town centre. The Carmarthen Town Centre LDO does not grant approval for external works.

1.6 The Carmarthen Town Centre LDO is subject to a two-stage process – mainly in recognition of the other regulatory regimes that may be relevant outside of planning permission – eg building regulations approval. Proposals cannot commence until a Commencement Notice Approval is issued by the Council, irrespective of whether a Certificate of Conformity has been issued. A Certificate of

Conformity will last for 3 years, and should the proposal not commence before the end of that period then it will lapse. In terms of policy alignment to the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO, it can be considered that the main measure of alignment and success of the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO in planning policy terms is at the Certificate of Conformity stage. The fee is £90.00, which is payable at Certificate of Conformity stage.

Requirement to produce Annual Monitoring Reports

1.7 The Welsh Government doesn't prescribe the format by which Local Authorities should prepare monitoring reports for Local Development Orders (LDOs). However, the circular 'Local Development Orders: Guidance for Local Planning Authorities (circular 003/2012)' does provide some general guidance on the content of such reports and where they should be published. The circular states that reports should be published in accordance with section 76 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and should form part of a Local Planning Authority's (LPA)'s Annual Planning Performance Report.

1.8 Of note within the circular is this extract from paragraph 1.27 "LPAs will also be obliged to report each year to the Welsh Government on the extent to which it is achieving its purpose as part of the Annual Monitoring Report. The form and content of the report as it relates to LDOs has not been prescribed but is left to the reasonable discretion of LPAs".

1.9 Also reference is given to paragraph 2.20 of the circular: "LPAs will be required (Schedule 4A, para 5) to prepare an Annual Report on the extent to which any adopted LDO is achieving its purpose. This will form part of the annual monitoring report required to be published under section 76 of the 2004 Act. It is not intended to prescribe the form and content of the report, but it should consider how successful the LDO has been in securing improvements to development management in the context of the Statement of Reasons. In particular, the report could address benefits arising to stakeholders, the effects of development on the environment, and matters relating to developer performance under the LDO."

Monitoring Period for this report

1.10 It was intended to publish the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO monitoring report at the end of either the 18 months or the adoption of the Revised LDP, however, due to the delays with the Revised LDP a monitoring report was not produced.

1.11 Therefore, this ‘stand alone’ Carmarthen Town Centre LDO monitoring report has been produced. However, given the time period elapsed it will cover a period of two years - February 2022 – March 2024.

1.12 This Report will be sent to all of the recipients listed on the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO notification list, together with the Welsh Government’s Planning Department. This Report will also be available on the Councils LDO webpage.

1.13 Whilst not formally inviting comments on the content of this Report, the Council would be happy to receive any feedback and as such any comments should be sent to forward.planning@carmarthenshire.gov.uk

2.0 Monitoring Indicators and Results

2.1 The below is extracted from Paragraph 1.4 of the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO (and is also set out in paragraph 2.6 within the Statement of Reasons): *“At the end of its period, the LDO will be considered a success if two or more of the following changes have occurred in the LDO area:*

- *Five or more vacant ground-floor units have been issued with Certificates of Conformity (source: Forward Planning);*
- *Annual footfall has increased within the LDO area (source: Council Regeneration Department footfall counters);*
- *The number of vacant ground-floor units has decreased within the LDO area (source: Forward Planning);*
- *Three or more upper floor vacant units have been issued with Certificates of Conformity this includes flats and residential uses – use class C3 - (source: Forward Planning).*

Ground floor units (Information Source: Planning Department

2.2 In regards the number of vacant ground-floor units that have been issued with Certificates of Conformity, the Council issued 4 Certificates of Conformity in the monitoring period. All of the Certificates of Conformity have a ground floor focus apart from one which is for the change of use for the second floor from an office to A1 Beauty Parlour. The application references for the certificates of Conformity are: PL/03865 - PL/04385 – PL/06136 – PL/06949. A Commencement Notice Approval has been issued for two of the proposals.

Footfall Figures (Information Source: Footfall Counters)

2.3 The total footfall data is based on volume rather than numbers of individual persons visiting the town centre. Percentages comparisons are provided. For the purpose of this monitoring report the data shown will be from Start of 2021 to end of 2023. The inclusion of the 2021 data will shed some light on the situation of the town centre before the LDO was adopted.

2.4 The total annual footfall for the period starting January 2022 to the end of December 2022 was 54% higher than the period starting January 2021 to the end of December 2021 (Note, the Carmarthen Town Centre Local Development Order was launched in February 2022). The total annual footfall for the period starting January 2023 to end December 2023 was 6.1% lower than the period starting January 2022 to the end of December 2022. This quite clearly shows that 2021 footfall figures were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns and that there was a recovery period in the following years.

2.5 Given the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO hadn't been adopted until February 2022 perhaps a more comparable analysis – particularly from a retail point of view (Christmas period) – would be December 2022 and December 2021. In December 2022 the footfall was 12.3% lower than the December 2021 footfall. However, the December 2023 footfall was 23% higher than the December 2022 footfall. The December 2021 footfall figures are a little anomalous, however, December 2021 was the first "close to normal" Christmas period we had since 2019. This may have resulted in more visits to the town centre.

2.6 Although 2021 was at the tail end of the Covid-19 pandemic, in the case of Carmarthen Town Centre, it seems to have had a significant influence over the footfall. This will have to be taken into consideration when looking at the 2021 footfall data. However, we can be pretty confident that the 2022 and 2023 footfall data reflects a time where no restrictions were present in regard to town centre visits and reflects the true nature of the town centre's situation.

Vacant Units (Information Source: Planning Department)

2.7 In regards vacant units, reference is made to the Carmarthenshire Town Centre Retail Audits on this webpage. These represent the best available data for vacancy levels within Carmarthen Town Centre, albeit the study area is a larger area than the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO Area itself (i.e. it is based on the Town Centre boundary as set out within the LDP). With regards, Carmarthen – notable analysis is as follows. (Note - figures rounded).

- March 2018 : number of units in the study area: 556, 10 % vacant.

- March 2019 : number of units in the study area: 563, 9% vacant.
- March 2020 number of units in the study area: 559, 12% vacant.
- September 2020 : number of units in the study area: 559, 14% vacant.
- December 2020 : number of units in study area: 559, 13% vacant.
- March 2021 (site visit in June 2021) : number of units in the study area: 560, 14 % vacant.
- September 2021: number of units in the study area: 560, 14 % vacant.
- March 2022: number of units in the study area: 561, 16% vacant.
- September 2022 : number of units in the study area: 562, 17 % vacant.
- March 2023 : number of units in the study area: 562, 18% vacant.
- September 2023 number of units in the study area: 562, 18% vacant.
- March 2024 : number of units in the study area: 562, 19% vacant.

Upper Floor Units (Information Source: Planning department)

2.8 In regards upper floor vacant units that have been issued with Certificates of Conformity, a total of 1 Certificates of Conformity were issued. The certificate of conformity submitted did not include an upper floor residential aspect.

3.0. Conclusions and lessons learned

Marketing

3.1 One of the key elements that required improvement is marketing/awareness raising of the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO. It is not considered that this should be done in isolation by the LPA.

'One team' approach

3.2 Internally for the Council, the development and rolling out of the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO has required a one-team approach in terms of Forward Planning, Information Management, Development Management and Regeneration. An area based approach (Carmarthen) as opposed to a section / departmental based approach, has allowed for this to happen.

Limitations

3.3 Limitations on the usage of the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO (particularly in terms of upper floor residential) can include financial viability and ownership of units. Furthermore, the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO only allows internal changes of use and does not waive the requirement to obtain 'non planning' related consents. This can be especially relevant in cases where the proposal is for a change of use to A3 Food and Drink as proposals of this nature often require external work. LDO's also do not apply to listed buildings, this is especially problematic for Carmarthen due to the fact a large proportion of the town centres buildings are in fact listed buildings.

Lessons Learned

3.4 In terms of statistics, of the 2 Commencement Notice Approvals issued since the LDO started in 2022, it is understood that one has been enacted, whilst the other is part of a larger development that is currently under construction.

3.5 Developing the Ammanford and Carmarthen Town Centre LDO has allowed for the Council to consider the introduction of LDOs in other areas. The lessons learned in implementing two Local Development Orders are invaluable given the relatively limited number of LDOs in place across Wales.

Recommendations

3.6 The future form and function of the Carmarthen Town Centre LDO will be subject to review as part of the adoption of the Revised Carmarthenshire Local Development Plan