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Lessons from the Placemaking Toolkit for Wales

Introduction

While it is certainly true that the production of the *Placemaking Wales Charter* (2020) kickstarted a discussion of placemaking guidelines in the offices of multiple Welsh local authorities, it nevertheless lacked a good translation to implement and use them in practice. The aim of the project outlined here therefore was to co-produce with four carefully selected Local Authorities (LA) a *Placemaking Toolkit for Wales* (hereafter *Toolkit*) to support the implementation of the *Placemaking Wales Charter* (PWC) within the LAs. It focused specifically on a toolkit to reinforce the qualitative development of the public realm in town and city centres as these types of in-between spaces tend to receive less attention in the development process whilst likely contributing the most to the achievement of sustainable development and wellbeing goals that Wales has set for itself. The four participating LAs – Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Swansea and Wrexham County Councils – were selected because they received from the Welsh Government a £15.2 million placemaking funding package to accelerate the institutional changes needed to deliver the holistic goals of the PWC (Figure 1). Also, as Wales entails so many different areas, intertwining urban and rural, a variety of social and economic as well as cultural and linguistic contexts, the four areas provided enough contrast on multiple levels to illustrate the difficulties and opportunities that a toolkit aimed at supporting.

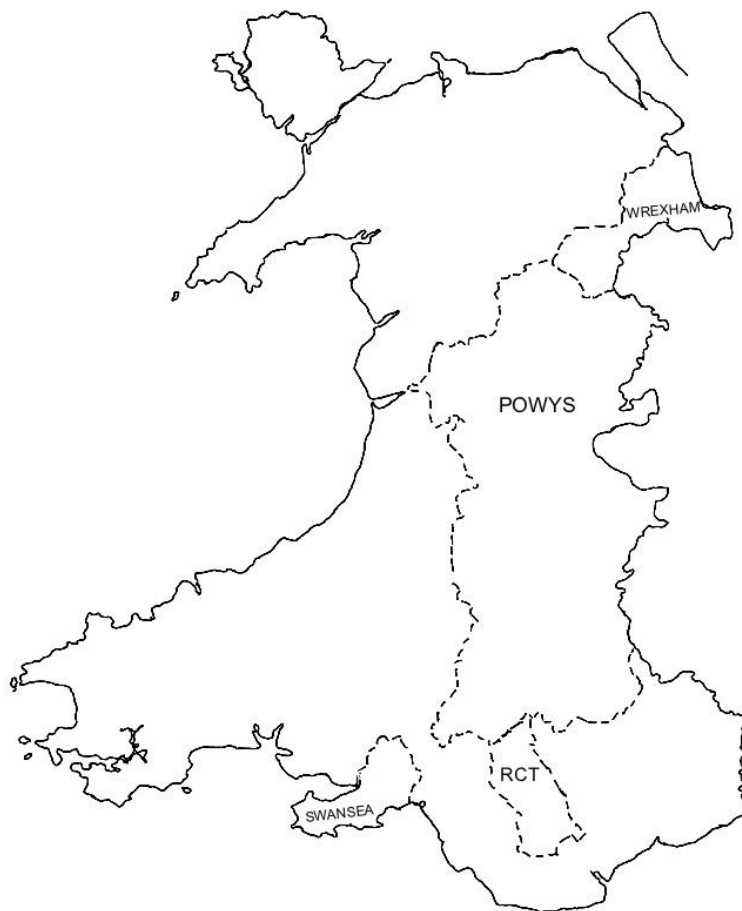


Figure 1 - Map of four LAs in Wales.

The toolkit aims and objectives

The project's primary aim was twofold: (i) to plot a route to effectively achieve the public realm goals outlined by the *PCW* whilst (ii) responding to the needs brought about by a significant reduction of public sector expenditure in LAs which impacted the in-house urban design provisions in many Welsh LAs.

The objectives were to co-produce a *Toolkit* to streamline implementation of placemaking principles by organising available resources (e.g. urban design guidance, training and skills) in a manner that could be readily used by officers in LAs to improve generalised public space literacy within local government institutions, to optimise collaboration across LAs' departments, to map and share available guidance across sectors, effectively involving all relevant stakeholders, and ultimately to play a key role in shaping placemaking practices that are holistic and inclusive.

Working towards a common vision in placemaking

Placemaking in Wales

It is important to emphasise that placemaking and urban design are not enshrined in legislation in Wales and do not constitute statutory requirements. This is no different from any of the four UK nations. In policy formulations, placemaking constitutes a relatively new concept, but its recent introduction in Welsh planning policy has followed an impressive pace and the concept is included in a variety of documents constituting the framework effectively shaping planning practice in our country. In Welsh national policy and guidance placemaking is a concept subsuming in space some key political aspirations that the Welsh Government has nurtured since devolution began. As such, the development of the concept and its adoption across different practice areas is noticeable and likely helpful in streamlining the Planning Policy Wales (PPW) and Wellbeing Future Generations (WBF) principles and outcomes in planning (Figure 2). However, this project argues that more could be provided to support effective and meaningful placemaking practices as it develops in specific places and is performed by public bodies and other stakeholders.



Figure 2. Delivering Placemaking through Planning Policy Wales (Source: PPW 11, p 21)

What is a toolkit to shape public realm?

The scoping review consisted of a desk-based study which aimed to investigate existing toolkits and determine current best practice. This review identified a wealth of toolkits from across a set of related urban design and planning fields. It shows that urban design toolkits appear to be drawn from an uncritical understanding of placemaking with a limited theoretical position, that of 'managerial technique'. This explains also why an effort should be made to make sure that a Placemaking Toolkit for Wales clearly speaks to the contexts' placemaking practice today, taking into consideration the emerging and developing policy shaped by the WCFG Act ethos and ways of working, as well as the distinct character of our towns and cities.

National survey of placemaking skills and resources

To understand the current extent of placemaking and public realm design and management expertise in local authorities in Wales a national survey was launched as part of the first phase of the Placemaking Toolkit for Wales project. The online survey (October 2022 – March 2023) completed by 9 of the 22 local authorities aimed at establishing the skills and resources available in the four co-producing LAs. As findings from the four partner LAs showed huge disparities across LAs, to build a better understanding of the national picture, the scope was then expanded to cover all LAs and NPAs in Wales. The survey set out the context of Placemaking and what constitutes Public Realm along with asking questions about how placemaking and public realm design are interpreted by and carried out within LAs in Wales. It sought to understand the capacity and individual approach of each local authority. Inevitably, the findings may not entirely reflect how placemaking and public realm design is supported and managed in detail within each organisation, but this is the first and most accurate survey done that focuses on placemaking skills and resources in Wales, and hence, provides a meaningful snapshot presenting challenges vis a vis potential for the placemaking agenda in Wales.

Characterisation of place: commonalities and communication tools

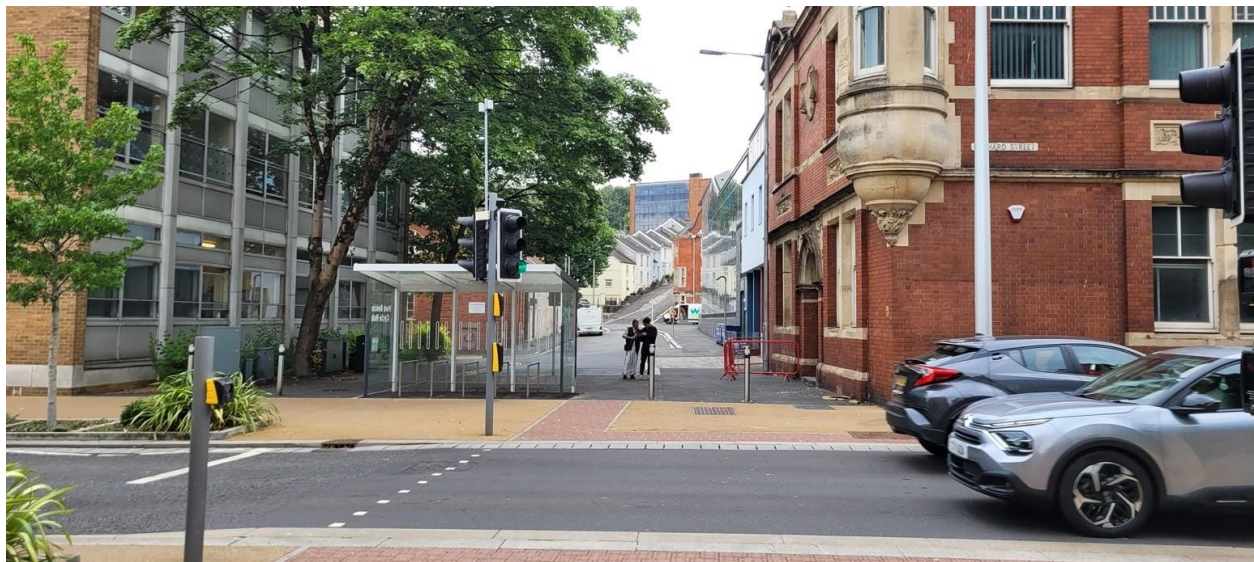
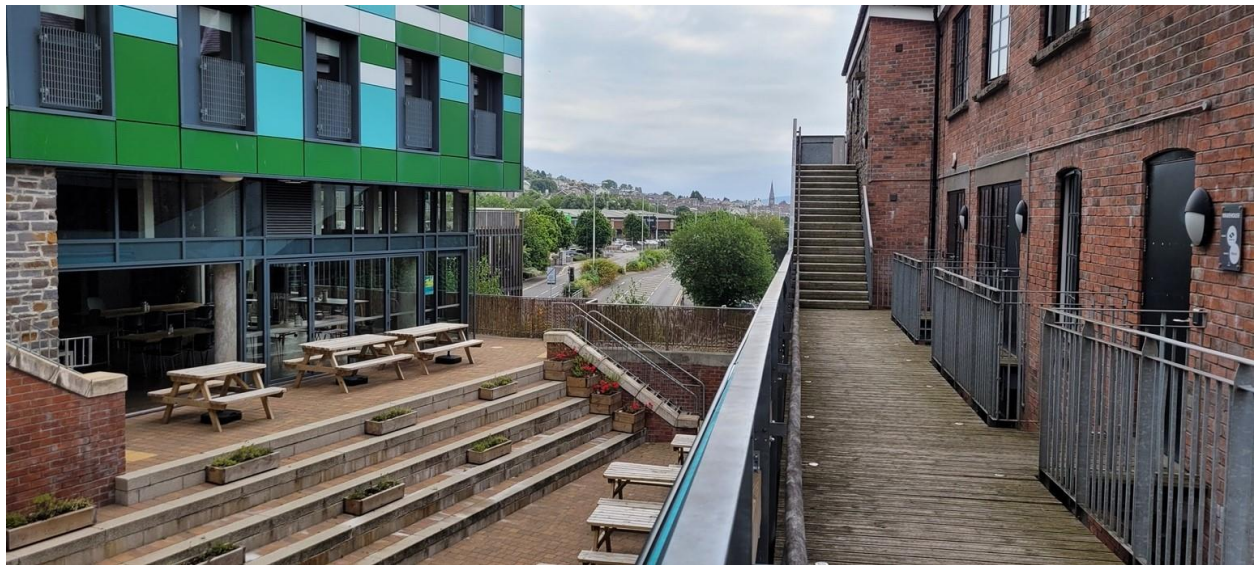
Through placemaking characterisation of four urban areas we identified findings showing similarities and differences across the four LAs under the six PWC principles - people and community, location, movement, mixed use, public realm and identity. It appears that Swansea is the most prepared to implement the placemaking agenda. Not only has it proactively set its own placemaking agenda well before the PWC was launched, it also has put in place a clear regeneration strategy and vision for its city centre, which was the product of fifteen years of investments and initiatives. Swansea shows visible efforts in advancing placemaking across all key areas of social economic and urban regeneration, which work in tandem with all six placemaking objectives, and can set a precedent for other LAs in Wales.

Wrexham shows a good level of awareness and preparedness to implement the three placemaking principles of movement, people and community and identity. Its placemaking agenda is still modest if compared to Swansea, but it shows that it has been proactive in active travel and community engagement and heritage conservation. Its community engagement toolkit and heritage strategy are its major strengths and should be acknowledged as best practice examples in Wales.

The focus in Aberdare is placed on movement by building an active integrated network of bus, rail and active travel to connect the towns in the valley to Cardiff. Much emphasis is also placed on developing a local identity via the green parks, the historic nature of the surrounding landscape and 'properly' conserving the historic architecture.

Like in Aberdare, Powys has a similar focus on green infrastructure, the historic environment and retail in the town centre because of its central location and function as a retail hub for the area.

By approaching characterisation of the four LAs from this angle, we developed a communicative tool that might bring stakeholders involved in placemaking together with a sense of common and shared goals.





Figures 3,4 and 5. Swansea City centre: recent public realm interventions.

What next?

This research has highlighted five areas of focus for policy and guidance and three recommendations that are relevant to all LAs in Wales. A key conclusion and area of focus is **LAs require support to deliver the national placemaking agenda**. This research has uncovered that the current project of devolution is still ongoing and that - whilst it comes to completion - LAs require support and clarity to sustain their efforts in the delivery of placemaking processes capable of achieving the national sustainable placemaking outcomes. Devolution is a process that achieves institutional change gradually over time, with the provision of subsequent policy 'layers'. This process is still ongoing in Wales and appears to steadily and consistently pursue the principle of sustainable development.

The second main area of focus is **Placemaking has acquired a strong political meaning as it combines a number of Welsh Government political aspirations in space**. Therefore, a toolkit needs to make the most of what has been defined in law and policy so far in terms of goals, outcomes and indicators to frame, shape and assess local and national progress in achieving the national sustainable placemaking outcomes. A toolkit supporting LAs can effectively draw from existing resources and provide a role and route-map streamlining their use in placemaking practice across Wales. However, beyond LAs' uneven and limited skills and resources, the main barrier to what is effectively a cultural change as much as an institutional change is the way LAs work, still often locked-in in silos. The internal structures are a priority to change that needs addressing, drawing substantially on the WBFG Act five ways of working.

Thirdly, **Uneven provision of skills and resources**. The survey confirmed our initial assumption that the majority of LAs are mostly under-resourced and under-staffed, and do not have in-house staff with required urban design qualifications to fully implement placemaking initiatives. Each LA has different skills, experiences and approach to placemaking. There is currently little shared knowledge about what constitute good precedents of public realm policies, guidance, and practices in Wales and which ones are considered effective on the ground and to share them across LAs. There is limited understanding of LA's working structures and practices,

how they work in placemaking projects and initiatives, and how they collaborate with key stakeholders let alone, what resources and skills are needed, and how they can be facilitated, and the outsourcing of services and skills prevents upskilling of LA staff and ownership of placemaking priorities and practice.

Another area of focus is **Lack of coordination and collaboration between different LA departments**. It was identified that different LA departments work in silos and have little understanding of the remit of the work of different departments, or how combined they supports the application of placemaking practices. This project has highlighted the challenges of co-production and engagement with LAs.

Finally, there is a **Lack of a common vision on placemaking**. It was identified that most LAs are yet to adopt the PCW, it was not always clear whether this was a lack of knowledge or interest about PCW and placemaking more generally, or whether this was simply the result of lack of skills and resources. It was also noticeable that there is a current lack of understanding of the value and benefits of placemaking.

Recommendations

There are three overall recommendations for this toolkit which are:

1. More coordination, collaboration and sharing skills and resources among LAs

- The wealth of existing resources in terms of guidance and toolkits suggest the PTfW should aim to connect with and contribute to these existing tools and resources. More guidance is needed to coordinate departments and their efforts and promote placemaking partnerships and knowledge exchange and sharing resources. The relevant directors of the local authority should take the lead to identify the different departments that have a role in shaping placemaking, and to bring them together, to ensure that Public Realm improvement is embedded in the systems used.

2. More focus on processes than outcomes

- LAs require help to create a route map on how to develop a project, the skills, resources needed, and how to balance decisions, signposting all relevant material that is out there. The proposed tool can have a role in shaping future LA's practices by guidance on development process and key steps.

3. More focus on addressing barriers and challenges

- There is a need to focus more on the national placemaking landscape rather than the specific local and LA's scenarios, but with a specific focus on current barriers and challenges and to tailor tools as a solution to these (e.g., community engagement and participation, and/or other aspects), though bearing in mind that this approach has also some limitations, a broad tools might be too similar to existing placemaking guidance.

Key references

Design Commission for Wales (2020), *Placemaking Wales Charter*, available at <http://dcfw.org/placemaking/placemaking-charter/> [last accessed 31.03.2023]

Placemaking Wales (2020), *Placemaking Guide*, available at <https://dcfw.org/wp-content/themes/dcfw-child/assets/PlacemakingGuideDigitalENG.pdf> [last accessed 31.03.2023]

Welsh Government (2015), *Planning (Wales) Act*, available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/4/contents> [last accessed 31.03.2023]

List of figure references

Figure 1 - Map of four LAs in Wales

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Figures 3,4 and 5 - Swansea City centre: recent public realm interventions

Short biography

This project was a joint venture between Public Space Observatory, Geography and Planning School and Welsh School of Architecture, at Cardiff University. It involved a multidisciplinary team of academics and practitioners including Jessica Richmond, Patricia Aelbrecht, Wes Aelbrecht, Francesca Sartorio, Richard Gale and Michael Corr.