

Awards 2013 Case Study

Award Winner

Client of the Year

The Blaenau Ffestiniog Regeneration Project

Town centre regeneration is notoriously problematic, often encountering hostile attitudes to change and easily dismissed as a waste of public funds.



However, Gwynedd Council's foresight in creating a meaningful partnership with the community of Blaenau Ffestiniog has resulted in the ambitious £4.4m regeneration scheme being whole-heartedly embraced.

Blaenau Ffestiniog is the 'town that roofed the world' but the long decline of the slate industry has resulted in economic and social hardship, with just a handful of slate quarries remaining, employing less than a hundred workers.

The Regeneration Project began in 2007 as a partnership with the local community group Blaenau Ymlaen (Blaenau Forward) from the outset. The council went far beyond the scope of the usual 'community engagement' commitment by rejecting tokenism and placing group members on the board of the project delivery scheme.

Developing a shared vision for the town's future was essential for community buy-in. The vision was to build on the assets of the town – its heritage and history, strong sense of community and stunning natural environment – and move forward with the support of the private, voluntary and public sectors.

This support was nurtured by the client at 13 consultation and information sharing events, with regular press releases which were also published on CD for the visually impaired, active engagement with the local access forum and with other stakeholders. These include the Chamber of Commerce and the Town Council, who are responsible for maintaining the finished work. A liaison officer was appointed as a key contact point for businesses and residents and the energy and enthusiasm invested by the client resulted in a can-do culture where everyone felt their opinions counted.

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Pryderi Ap Rhisiart

Senior Strategic Regeneration Officer Gwynedd Council



A video diary highlighting best practice and documenting the project from a wide range of perspectives was filmed and published on YouTube, on behalf of the client, by local young people. This creative use of social media, and of community ambassadors, to raise awareness and increase involvement were factors that particularly impressed judges who awarded Gwynedd Council, with partners Blaenau Ymlaen, the CEW Client of the Year Award 2013.

The scheme raised aspirations within Blaenau Ffestiniog and is having a significant economic impact with private sector investment starting to flow, a town-centre hotel undergoing renovation and tourist numbers increasing. Gwynedd Council's Senior Strategic Regeneration Officer Pryderi Ap Rhisiart hears regularly from individuals now wanting to invest in Blaenau.

"It's created a buzz in the town that was present even during those early discussions," said Pryderi. "They wanted to celebrate the place, respecting its history but were full of ideas for moving forward with energy, innovation and modernity. We wanted the private sector to respond and that's exactly what is happening."

Major physical works were considered essential in reversing the fortunes of this essentially 19th century town, and included investing in the makeovers of 13 shop fronts and examining ways to maximise tourism potential. The project used innovative engineering solutions to create striking features and a sense of place, using sustainable, traditional materials that fitted into the landscape in a contemporary manner, and supported local quarries.

In addition to working for a shared vision and true partnership with the community, the Council deliberately pushed its own organisational boundaries in terms of the procurement process for this project. For the first time, Gwynedd Council incorporated community benefit requirements as part of the tender process, gaining extensive added value by doing so.

As a result of the Community Benefits Clause in its contracts, more than 22 jobs were created and local craftsmanship developed. Local quarrying jobs were supported, five short-term apprenticeships created for Llandrillo College students and health and safety presentations delivered to 250 pupils in two local schools. Main contractor Balfour Beatty took on a young person initially on work experience but then on a contract and carried out repairs in the town's skateboard park.

Project artist Howard Bowcott employed two people as part of his community benefits obligation, one of whom suffered mental illness and the other who had been unemployed for six months and was on the Intermediate Labour Market scheme.

The Community Benefits Clause has set a precedent for future projects within the authority and beyond, and proved Gwynedd Council to be a client that was willing to take risks and challenge organisational 'norms'. As well as bringing significant economic, employment and educational benefits to the town, this openness to new approaches went a long way to enabling the people of Blaenau Ffestiniog to realise their vision for the town.

"This really went beyond anything Gwynedd Council had done before in terms of a town centre regeneration project: it was challenging, different and bold," said Pryderi.