

RETAIL DEVELOPMENT

Newport state of

The latest addition to Newport town centre is the ambitious Friars Walk retail and leisure complex.

Luke Tugby visits the construction site and assesses how the centre fits into the bigger picture of UK retail

For sale. To let. They are four words you simply can't avoid as you take a lunchtime stroll through Newport city centre. Clutches of retail units lie sad and empty on this South Wales high street – a depressing reality for an area that was once a busy shopping hub, attracting thousands of consumers from across Wales.

Instead, Newport locals are now among those seeking shopping solace in nearby Cardiff and Swansea.

But the local authority here is in the midst of an ambitious £2bn regeneration plan dubbed 'Vision 2020' to change all that – and at the heart of it is Friars Walk.

Located idyllically beside the River Usk, the shopping centre is perfectly placed, in more ways than one, to become a success.

Also neighbouring a leisure centre, a university campus and Kingsway Shopping Centre, with the Riverfront Theatre and Arts Centre lying directly opposite, the £100m Friars Walk development will link the ageing high street with the riverfront, civic squares and residential streets.

The scheme will create 1,200 long-term jobs, contributing an estimated £15m in salaries to the local economy, while it aims to nearly double the city's catchment population from 206,000 to 411,000.

Returning confidence

The development will help put Newport on the map but on a wider scale though, Friars Walk also forms a significant piece of a much bigger puzzle. The 390,000 sq ft retail and leisure destination is one of just four shopping centres that will open in the UK in 2015, alongside Grand Central Birmingham, Flemingate in East Yorkshire and Westfield Bradford Broadway.

Friars Walk developer Queensberry Real Estate says the openings signify that confidence in the market is returning – an opinion seemingly backed up by the list of retailers that have signed up to the scheme.

Debenhams will anchor the centre with a 93,000 sq ft store, which already looks impressive, even in its empty concrete shell form. A cafe will sit on the first floor, where those hoping for a timely break can overlook the rest of the centre from a large window – a view that will encompass retailers such as H&M, Topshop, New Look, River Island and Next when Friars Walk throws open its doors on November 12.

Talks are also understood to be under way with retailers such as The Body Shop, Clintons, JD, Schuh and Tiger, while "a quality toy store" is also a top priority to take space among the remaining 35% of units.

Leisure centre

As for the leisure offering, an eight-screen cinema and 11 restaurants including Nando's, Frankie & Benny's, Chiquito, Gourmet Burger Kitchen and the most recent addition, TGI Friday's, will help to attract the centre's target footfall of 10 million to 12 million visitors a year.

It is that blend of retail and leisure that Queensberry commercial director Stuart Harris regards as being vital for shopping centres to remain popular in an increasingly digital era.

"This development signifies confidence in the market and shows there is room for good quality, well thought through retail and leisure development," Harris says.

"But I think it's got more importance than that because of its regenerative effect. It is a model for regeneration and for master-planning. What you have here is a collection of different uses in very close proximity which will feed off each other.

"Shopping centres have to do that now – they have to be more than just shops. It has to be about the experience. The combination of leisure and retail works well because it allows the retailers to extend their opening hours.

"If it's just about retail, then you're probably looking at 9.30 to 5.30, but if people are there and the leisure and restaurant offer is strong enough, that will persuade people to open longer and help people come in the evenings."



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**Stuart Harris,
Queensberry**

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FRIARS WALK FACTS

- 390,000 sq ft of retail and leisure space
- 1,200 long-term jobs created
- Will add £15m in salaries to the local economy
- Aims to double Newport's catchment population from 206,000 to 411,000
- 60% of retail space already let
- Opens November 2015

got the library and museum, so I think the only thing we are missing is bowling. That's the only other sustainable leisure use that you've not got here at the moment and we are talking to operators to see if we can accommodate them in and around the scheme."

Rebirth of a city

All things considered, it's not difficult to see why Harris is "as excited, if not more" about Friars Walk than he has been with previous Queensberry developments. He points to the firm's work in Belfast and Bath as the only two that come close.

He explains: "Belfast was a massive regeneration – it was probably the most underdeveloped city in western Europe and also the timing of it followed on very quickly from the peace accord and the impact that had nationally within Northern Ireland and Ireland.

"Bath was another genuine regeneration of the southern part of the city, but if you're talking about regeneration and seeing the rebirth of a city, Newport tops it.

"It's a city that was on its knees, but you can see every week there's something new happening, whether that's residential builds, a new shop opening, a planning application to convert an old hotel into a new hotel – all the time that excitement is growing and that's only going to continue over the next four or five months."



Another potential masterstroke of the Queensberry blueprint has been to acquire a stake in the nearby Kingsway centre.

Rather than setting up shop next door to a rival shopping centre and competing for custom, developers hope the two centres can actually work together, the latter becoming an "add-on" to Friars Walk.

Working in tandem

Harris's aim is for Kingsway to house "a mid-market and value offer" to complement the "quality mid-market" stores signing up to Friars Walk. Together, the centres hope to capture a large chunk of the £600 a year available clothing spend per capita in Newport.

"In the past, one criticism was that some schemes had maybe turned their backs on the rest of the city. The great thing about this is that

the scheme sits within the heart of the city centre, but connects back in," Harris explains.

"It would have been easy for it to turn its back on the waterfront or the rest of the retail, but it's not afraid to engage with the rest of the city. There is a public that is loyal to Newport, had been loyal shoppers here, who were now going elsewhere – but they wanted to be persuaded to come back.

"There have been lots of failed attempts at getting things off the ground here, so it was clearly in need of regeneration. But I think what really attracted us was the physical signs of investment, whether it be the Riverfront Theatre, the new university campus, or the bridge across to the rugby and football ground, you could actually see it. In other towns and cities, people talk about it, but you can't see the physical investment.

"Now, there's not much missing. You've also