

Strategies for Smaller Centres

A Practical Guide

Final Draft



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STRATEGIES FOR SMALLER CENTRES

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INTRODUCTION

Aims

A key objective of Government policy is to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres. However one effect of the success of Planning Policy Guidance Note 6 (PPG6) has been the concentration of new investment and public services into larger centres, and the top 200 centres now attract over 75 per cent of non-food sales, compared with 50 per cent 20 years ago. At the same time out-of-centre retail parks and superstores have eaten into the markets once catered for by independent shops. While there is evidence of an urban renaissance in some cities and larger towns, many **smaller centres** – including small market towns, resorts, former industrial towns, district and local centres – face difficult issues in finding viable new roles and attracting investment.

This guidance, which supports PPS6, deals with:

- a) the value of developing **strategies** for smaller centres as an essential part of planning for their future vitality and viability;
- b) processes involved in developing strategies; and
- c) some practical approaches and examples towards the development of Area Action Plans.

Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 6: Planning for Town Centres argues that smaller centres are essential to maintaining a hierarchy or network of places, *'to ensure that it is not overly dominated by the largest centres, that there is more even distribution of facilities, and that people's everyday needs are met at the local level'*.

This guidance draws on:

- a review of the literature on smaller towns and strategic planning;
- workshops with practitioners in a range of towns;
- a postal survey of local authority planners and town centre managers;
- ten process case studies of different types of town and planning situation;
- URBED's consultancy experience in working with over 60 smaller centres throughout England and Wales to draw up strategies and action plans; and
- advice from members of the Steering Group* *(names to be listed in a footnote)*.

Despite an increasing number of projects to revitalise smaller towns (see for example reports produced by Action for Market Towns¹), our survey of local planning authorities shows that strategies are not yet being fully used to sustain and enhance smaller centres. Indeed the Beacon Councils theme of Town Centre Regeneration found great difficulty in attracting any applications from smaller towns (with the notable exception of Gravesend in Kent). The report of the

¹ Action for Market Towns www.towns.org.uk



Countryside Agency's own Beacon Market Towns ² highlighted the problems that many initiatives faced in turning research and consultations into projects that made a real difference. It is the smaller centres that are suffering most from competition, as the New Economics Foundation's report *Ghost Town Britain* points out, and which have tended to be neglected by retail and other planners until recently.

Definitions

Smaller centres are essentially groups of shops and services that are largely made up of independent businesses. As a guideline we suggest focussing on smaller centres with less than five national multiples but more than say 20 retail units. (We also believe that the guide can be applied to, and is of benefit to, secondary shopping areas.)

A **strategy** is a kind of route map that helps in setting a course, and keeping on target.

'a statement outlining the broad path or method that is to be followed to reach or help reach an objective. ... it therefore ensures that management attention is focussed on longer-term priorities, and helps to guide the preparation of programmes and projects.'

The changing planning context

Planning is going through major changes, and smaller centres (are important building blocks). Although smaller centres may no longer be significant from a retailing point of view, they certainly matter to local communities, and may hold the key to both creating more sustainable communities and also tackling social exclusion. There is a range of relevant policy documents, such as the Deputy Prime Minister's *Sustainable Communities Plan*, which highlights the importance of encouraging a healthy network of town centres and combating the trends towards dispersal and car-based lifestyles. *The New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan* refers to a number of initiatives that could take place physically in local centres, including: business incubation/Phoenix Fund, Universal Banking Services, extra funding for post offices, local retail strategies, Action Teams for Jobs, increases in childcare provision, the Urban Bus Challenge scheme and Neighbourhood Wardens. What is lacking is a practical way of joining it all up!

'Joining it all up' is not easy as centres fulfill a number of roles, social and cultural as well as environmental and economic, and smaller centres can feature in different plans and strategies, going from the big picture to the details:

- **Spatial development plans** or frameworks, which are being prepared at a regional level, may identify centres that are at risk of losing their vitality and viability, and propose policies for intensifying development in the areas of highest accessibility by public transport, including much needed new housing, as in the London Plan, for example (see case study 1);

² Countryside Agency www.countryside.gov.uk

³ Ghost Town Britain, New Economics Foundation



- **Regional Economic Strategies** are identifying towns that are in need of regeneration, and the Regional Development Agencies, who have taken over responsibility for the Single Regeneration Budget through what is now called the 'single pot', may coordinate action at a sub-regional level along transit corridors, as in the case of a number of small industrial towns in the Upper Calder Valley in Yorkshire (see case study 2);
- The **Local Development Framework** which replaces the **Unitary Development Plan**, will include policies for retail and changes of use, and may promote the improvement of local centres to maintain a critical mass of choice and boost regeneration, as in Birmingham for example (see case study 3);
- The **Community Plan** provides Local Strategic Partnerships with a way of coordinating the activities of services like health and the police with the work of local authorities, and may stress the importance of local centres; a number of Counties have taken a lead, as the example of Shropshire illustrates (see case study 4);
- **Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies** provide extra funding for the 88 most disadvantaged local authorities, and are being used, sometimes with backing from European funds, to help areas that have suffered from economic decline, as for example in Birmingham and Sheffield (see case studies 5 and 6);
- **Market Towns Initiative**, which the Countryside Agency has been promoting with many of the Regional Development Agencies, has provided funding for health checks and coordinators in rural areas, sometimes covering groups of towns as in Wiltshire (see case study 7);
- **Heritage Economic Regeneration Strategies** are being used by English Heritage to support bids for funding through the Heritage Lottery for improving shop fronts and street surfaces (see case study 8);
- **Business Improvement Districts** are a new method of encouraging businesses to take the lead in promoting the revitalisation of town centres, and some pilots are underway as in Warwickshire (see case study 9); and
- **Suburbs** face special challenges, and some authorities are beginning to look at groups of centres together as in Stockport (see case study 10) [also case studies 1 and 2]

While these situations are all very different in terms of both their context and the triggers that led to the strategy, they do show the value of taking a strategic approach, rather than simply responding to crises or planning applications.

Using this guidance

Who it will help: This guide recognises limited local resources in terms of time, people and funding, and should be useful to local authorities, regeneration practitioners, and Regional Development Agencies who are producing Local Development Frameworks, Community Plans, Area Action Plans or bids for funding. It may also inspire community groups, businesses or residents who want to take positive action to sustain their local centres.



How it is structured: The structure of this Guide reflects the responses to our survey of local planning authorities across England, and discussions with practitioners in smaller centres. These called for *succinct, practical guidance – a manual for the process of developing successful strategies* – with case studies and examples of successful approaches in different types of place. A menu of approaches and solutions from which towns could choose in the light of local circumstances was requested.

Finding out more: Although this short guide does not cover in detail those areas where there is already substantial information, for example Town Centre Health Checks, links to further, more detailed sources of information are signposted throughout the document. A wider literature review of all the current guidance can be accessed through www.urbed.com/changingplaces

The guide is divided into three main sections:

1. The Need for Strategies explores

- why bother about smaller centres?
- what issues do they face?
- why develop a strategy?
- what form can strategies take?
- what are the barriers?

2. Strategy Development provides tips on

- drawing up the profile
- agreeing the vision
- devising and communicating the strategy

3. Towards an Area Action Plan discusses possible actions on five common strategic themes you can take to

- get the basics right
- secure connectivity
- meet shoppers' needs
- promote diversity
and ways in which you might
- resource improvements

Each subsection has an accompanying checklist.

Case studies illustrate a range of processes that have been successful, working down from a regional level.

1. THE NEED FOR STRATEGIES

- 1.1 Why bother about smaller centres?
- 1.2 What issues do they face?
- 1.3 Why develop a strategy?
- 1.4 What form can strategies take?
- 1.5 What are the barriers?

1.1 Why bother about smaller centres?

People tend to take local shops for granted, whereas in the USA, where there is a longer history of Main Streets collapsing, they say 'use it or lose it'. Their importance goes beyond providing customers with a convenient choice. They are the roots, and were once the heart of many of our communities and neighbourhoods. They also give English towns their distinctive character, and so many are part of our national heritage. They are particularly important to groups such as the elderly and mothers with young children, who want somewhere they can reach on foot.

Local Centres

Local centres include a range of small shops of a local nature, serving a small catchment. Typically, local centres might include, amongst other shops, a general grocery store, a newsagent, a sub-post office and occasionally a pharmacy. Other facilities could include a hot-food takeaway and launderette. A network of local centres in an authority's area is essential to provide easily accessible shopping to meet people's day-to-day needs and should be the focus for investment in more accessible local services, such as health centres. The mix of uses in local centres should be carefully managed and the impact of other proposals on such centres carefully assessed.

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The typical English centre differs from its Continental counterpart in being relatively close to other centres, but with a smaller proportion of potential customers living within walking distance, as housing densities are generally lower (with far fewer blocks of flats). For some the centre's origin was as a market place, at a convenient place to trade, such as where roads joined, or next to a church: market charters kept them more than a day's walk or seven miles apart. Others developed in the 19th century to serve the needs of local industry, often along waterways. With the development of buses and trams in the late 19th century, shops sprang up along the lines to serve the new suburbs as they extended into the country. In the 20th century, parades were built along arterial roads, and small numbers of local shops were often located in the centres of new housing estates. Hence there is no one set of problems or solutions, and the situation varies according to factors such as population density and income levels.

The terms district, neighbourhood and local centre are used very loosely. Although a precise definition of 'smaller centres' will vary across the country, for the purposes of this guide we include district centres and below in metropolitan areas, and in rural areas, market towns and



centres with a surrounding population of up to 20,000 (which can mean over a hundred shops). As well as basic differences in evolution, which affect the size and shape of the centre, our case studies show there are also differences between suburban centres that form part of an urban conurbation, remote country towns, coastal towns, and other market towns in terms of their potential market, and therefore in what they can support in terms of shops and services. This makes it impossible to lay down rules about catchment areas and makes many retail impact studies spurious. However all smaller centres share the challenge of having shops that are of relatively little interest any longer to national retailers, who prefer to operate in larger retail units that are readily accessible by car.

While smaller centres and small shops are playing a much less important retailing role than they used to, they still offer a range of public benefits, and their future therefore needs to be planned, not just left to chance. They are particularly valued by people with time but not much money, such as people who are retired or mothers with young children. Hence they should be in the 'front line' of tackling social inclusion and sustainability. The following checklist of benefits might be useful in identifying environmental, economic and social opportunities and shortfalls (SWOT analysis). The relative importance of each of these will vary with the nature of the location and catchment area:

CHECKLIST OF BENEFITS	
Environmental e.g.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of our heritage • Development opportunity • Identity and pride of place • Conservation of resources/good use of existing (possible redundant) buildings • Convenient food and services • Space for new uses e.g. health care • Mixed uses and street life • Starting point for sustainable development • Focal point in the transport network 	
Economic e.g.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail variety • Work experience • Local multiplier/less leakage • Opportunities for enterprise • Survival of independent businesses • Consumer choice and competition • Customer service • Response to market needs • Niche markets • Affordable quality food • Starting point for regeneration 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location for the evening economy 	
Social e.g.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting place for all • Somewhere to walk to • Cheap activity for the elderly and young mums • A friendly word for the isolated • Place for young people to hang out • Heart of the community • Convenient part-time jobs • Starting point for diversity and social cohesion • Range of community facilities 	

1.2 What issues do they face?

The success of PPG6 in focussing new investment, including public services, into larger centres has increased the challenges faced by local planning authorities in sustaining and enhancing smaller centres. To use a medical analogy, many are 'at risk' of losing their critical mass. The warning signs are groups of empty or charity shops, properties that look in need of repair, as well as 'to let' signs.

Findings: URBED Survey of Local Planning Officers

The survey showed that the **health** of most smaller centres is considered to be 'stable' (38%) or 'declining' (20%) rather than 'more vibrant' (11%). There are regional differences, however, with no smaller centres identified in the survey as more vibrant in the North, with the central region and the South predominantly stable. There are also differences within a local authority, the result, for example, from a change in economic circumstance, e.g. a decline in tourism, or the inability for local centres to withstand competition from superstores. Some local authorities report that district centres in urban areas show more decline than rural areas, some find smaller urban centres more stable than rural ones, while others have to cope with pressures for growth. A concern about growing polarisation between centres can be seen throughout the country.

A very wide range of **issues** facing smaller centres was identified, but broadly grouped they show that, although competition, the quality of the environment and questions of accessibility and parking are all important, the overwhelming issue is maintaining the 'vitality and viability' of the centre – particularly in terms of retaining investment and ensuring the 'appropriate offer' of retail and services. In those centres that are said to be more vibrant, the most important issues are parking and access, followed by the quality of the environment; pressure to change use from A1 and then leakage to outside competition. In those areas where the centres are said to be 'Declining', there is a wider range of issues, that also includes crime, economic change and local competition e.g. from petrol stations and superstores offering a competing range of goods and services. The most important issues are increased vacancies, investor confidence, the quality of the environment, meeting local needs, leakage to outside competition and parking/access.



In the last twenty years many smaller centres have seen their traditional economic base eroded. A review of the trends is set out in *New Life for Smaller Towns*, (<http://changingplaces.urbed.com>), and further information is available through sources such as the UK Foresight programme, which brings together key people, knowledge and ideas to look beyond normal planning horizons (<http://www.foresight.gov.uk>). The trends suggest that centres need to change or die. While every centre is different, most face five common challenges, as below:

Common Challenges	Trends
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Rising expectations – surveys of consumers show they typically want more choice, greater security and easier access, and are put off by places that look neglected and where parking is difficult. There is a further problem that small independent shops find it difficult to compete with multiples on cost and quality, due to their greater purchasing power. Their numbers are also declining as children no longer want to take over the family shop, or work long hours for little reward; Increased competition – the increased use of the car for most shopping trips widens the freedom to choose from nearby towns and out of town shops. Convenience is no longer enough when superstores offer ‘one-stop shopping’ with free parking, and are open all hours; Changing lifestyles – smaller centres have to cope with increased congestion and parking problems. There is a growing contrast between those with limited money but plenty of time, such as the elderly, and those with money, but little time, such as working families. Gatherings of young people, particularly at night, can be off-putting, and small shops in poorer areas are often victims of crime; New demands for space – with retail growth concentrated in the largest centres, the dominance of supermarkets and a rapid decline in the number of independent retailers, most centres are having to find different uses for empty shops and the space above them. At the same time there are growing demands for living near shops and services. Demographic changes are creating new ethnic markets in some places, while others decline; and Conflicting priorities – planners are asked to take a more holistic and longer-term approach and have, for example, to balance concerns to cut traffic with the need to preserve local choice and jobs, with calls for easier parking. They also are being asked to secure ‘joined-up action’, when the resources and powers are very fragmented. They are faced with the decline of bus usage, and the tendency for public services, such as health and education, to concentrate on out-of-town sites with large car parks, further reducing the attractions of smaller centres. 	<p>4,500 items were the average stocked in supermarkets of the mid 1960’s compared to the 30,000 items today.</p> <p>23,000 butchers were in business in the UK in 1985. There were 9,700 butchers in 2000.</p> <p>15% of consumers use specialty shops like bakers.</p> <p>50% of the country’s food is sold from just 1000 giant stores. In 2001 Supermarkets had 8% of floor space and 26% of sales, whereas High Streets had 36% of floor space and 32% of sales.</p> <p>33% of all retail is out of town compared to 1/5 ten years ago.</p> <p>35% of food is now consumed eating out.</p> <p>80% of retail expenditure is car born.</p> <p>26% of the increase in car usage over the past 30 years is from commuting and 17% from shopping.</p> <p>6500 miles travelled by car was the average for the UK in 2003 compared to 4300 in 1976.</p> <p>1 hour’s drive radius yields an area 150 times that of 1 hour’s walk.</p> <p>20% decrease in walking in the past decade along with a 6% increase in car travel.</p> <p>50 % of non-food sales came from only 15% of towns in 1971 and from 5% of towns today.</p> <p>10 square feet per person of retail space is the average in Britain, 5 times that of Europe.</p>



1.3 Why develop a strategy?

While the need for some kind of strategy may be obvious, the pressures of reacting to unwelcome development proposals or statutory requirements, make it difficult to find the time to draw up a strategy, particularly if there are no obvious resources or tools for implementation, and no one wants to collaborate. However it is usually better to be prepared, than to be forced into responding when it is too late. The impetus for action can include:

- a crisis, such as the closure of a major employer, the threat of a new out-of-town centre or pressure from concerned citizens or traders or simply the realisation that a lot of jobs are at stake; or
- the chance of attracting investment or funding, for example from the Countryside Agency's Market Towns Initiative, which was a dominant trigger identified in the survey. A number of centres have been improved as part of a neighbourhood renewal strategy, for example Soho Road in Birmingham, and a few are benefiting from efforts to restore historic buildings.

Local planning authorities should adopt a positive and proactive approach to planning for the future of the centres within their areas, whether planning for growth, consolidation or decline. Drawing on both the regional spatial strategy and their community strategies, local planning authorities should set out a vision and strategy for the pattern and hierarchy of centres, including local centres, within their area, setting out how the role of different centres will contribute to the overall vision for their area.

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The value of a strategy includes:

- giving a sound basis for preparing and reviewing local planning policies;
- adding value to individual responses to funding or development opportunities;
- addressing issues that might have provoked a further downwards turn in the position of the centre;
- building confidence in an area's future;
- supporting bids for funding; and
- coordinating action by different departments and agencies.

A strategy does this by:

- finding roles that generate ongoing investment, and satisfy local stakeholders, such as residents, businesses and property owners;
- providing a written framework around which to mobilise resources and plan projects that take time to materialise; and
- reinforcing a partnership between the local authority and the other stakeholders, and perhaps forming the basis for a 'charter' or 'compact' specifying what each commits to doing.



1.4 What form can strategies take?

A strategy does not need be very long, and can range from a few pages to a fat report. Following a consultants study, the Mayors of five town councils in West Wiltshire and the Chair of the District Council signed a Declaration in 1998 to:

'work together in a sustainable way to achieve a shared vision for the five towns of West Wiltshire. The purpose of our partnership is to celebrate each town's distinctiveness, encourage community participation, generate prosperity, and develop viable, vibrant towns which compliment one another within our unique district.'

In some places, especially larger urban authorities, smaller centres will already be affected by a number of wider strategies, plans and policies, e.g. arts, libraries, highway management schemes, and also by Supplementary Planning Guidance for specific issues relating to development pressures or amenity concerns, such as retail frontages or food and drink uses, as well as planning/development briefs for specific sites. A strategy needs to go beyond this, and generate the vision to move an area forward. It may apply to the whole of a centre or the parts that are at risk. An integrated strategy should create an agreed written framework around which to mobilise resources and plan for an appropriate time frame (2-20 years) in a specific locality or group of centres. It needs to be published if is to have any influence, and will need to be updated from time to time.

Findings: URBED Survey of Local Planning Officers

Evidence from the survey shows that in many smaller centres **overall** strategies have been valuable in allowing both broader vision and focus on a framework for future action, establishing common goals and clear priorities – and specific benefits that protect and enhance smaller centres, such as making development control decisions easier to uphold, establishing different roles in the retail hierarchy, stemming retail losses and assisting funding and investment, including the Regional Development Agencies and the European Union. Benefits can be divided into those that have a particular economic benefit, and those that reinforce the planning process, involve the community, and improve the coordination of different services. Strategies for **individual** centres are seen to have positive outcomes for community groups, particularly through an increased sense of ownership and engagement. Individual strategies are also particularly important where local circumstances vary significantly.

Finding a role for a smaller centre that generates ongoing investment, and meets the needs of local stakeholders and residents may mean planning for survival rather than for growth. Many centres have more small shops than they can support, and some consolidation will help improve the fortunes of the rest. In some cases where the shop is single storey, or sits on a larger site, there will be opportunities for multi-storey, mixed use development as housing or leisure uses (and as these can conflict, the strategy needs to be clear what functions should go where). The strategy also needs to reflect plans for other centres, including ones that cover a range of centres, as in the Birmingham and London case studies. In areas visited by tourists, such as Ambleside, it

is important that strategies cover a chain of centres, for example by promoting farmers markets in different towns at different times.

Some types of strategy		
Definition	Context	Issues
Consolidation Cutting back number of retail units through alternative uses or redevelopments e.g. Castle Vale, Birmingham; Seacroft, Leeds	Poor catchment area with limited local spending power, significant catchment area, too many small shops, large site, housing renewal area	Feasible site for food store? Links with housing renewal strategy?
Community hub Developing services to meet neighbourhood or community needs e.g. Manor & Castle, Sheffield; Melksham, Wiltshire; Soho Road, Birmingham	Limited local spending power, strong competing centres, distinct ethnic groups	Youth provision? Health care? Enterprise development? Distinct ethnic groups?
Convenience shopping Making it easier to stop and shop e.g. Daventry, Northamptonshire	Dense (or growing) population, location on major road	Parking charges? Pedestrian priority?
Concentration Developing a critical mass of attractions e.g. Hay on Wye (books); Ludlow, Shropshire (food); Rusholme, Manchester (curry mile); Nailsworth, Stroud Valley (arts and crafts, specialty food)	Too many small secondary shops, availability of local entrepreneurs/community enterprise, potential market niche	Community benefits? Promotion?
Character enhancement Making the most of old buildings and environmental quality e.g. Ely, Cambridgeshire; Sowerby Bridge, Colderdale (waterfront)	Historic town/resort, legacy of historic buildings or waterways, market nice or sufficient spending power, availability of public capital funding	Image? Business development? Community engagement? Tourism development?
Customer care Reinforcing local loyalty and distinctiveness e.g. Coleshill and Southam, Warwickshire; Frome, Somerset.	Reasonably affluent catchment area, independent shops	Town centre management? Evening Economy? Signage?

A strategy as defined in this guide should therefore be seen in summary as:

- a means to an end;



- a series of steps or a route map;
- a chosen scenario, from survival or consolidation to smart or sustainable growth;
- the art of the possible;
- developed through partnerships and networks; and
- a tool in motivating people, not a substitute.

1.5 What are the barriers?

The main reasons cited by local planning authorities for not producing strategies were a lack of resources, in time and in staff, as well as a perceived lack of need. In some cases there is clearly a problem of getting different departments or levels of government to work together. Common issues include resolving conflicts within the community, and accessing funds for projects. Planners want to know what a strategy should look like, and to have a toolkit of help they can draw on, including sources of information and advice. There has been criticism of over-complex health check methodologies that confuse gathering data with resolving issues about what to do. There is very little knowledge of what guidance already exists. Many authorities are acting in isolation, and learning about better practice is difficult where they are not members of networks like the Association of Town Centre Management or Action for Market Towns.

Strategic mistakes

With limited choices and few resources, it is important to avoid making strategic mistakes, such as going down the wrong path, or delaying action until it is too late to have any effect. Research from business successes and failures has shown the importance of building on strengths, finding a market niche, and having a clear mission or set of values. But for every success story, like Sony, there have been many more failures, and reasons turn out to include inertia and a preference for the status quo, lack of consensus, and a reluctance to write-off past investment.

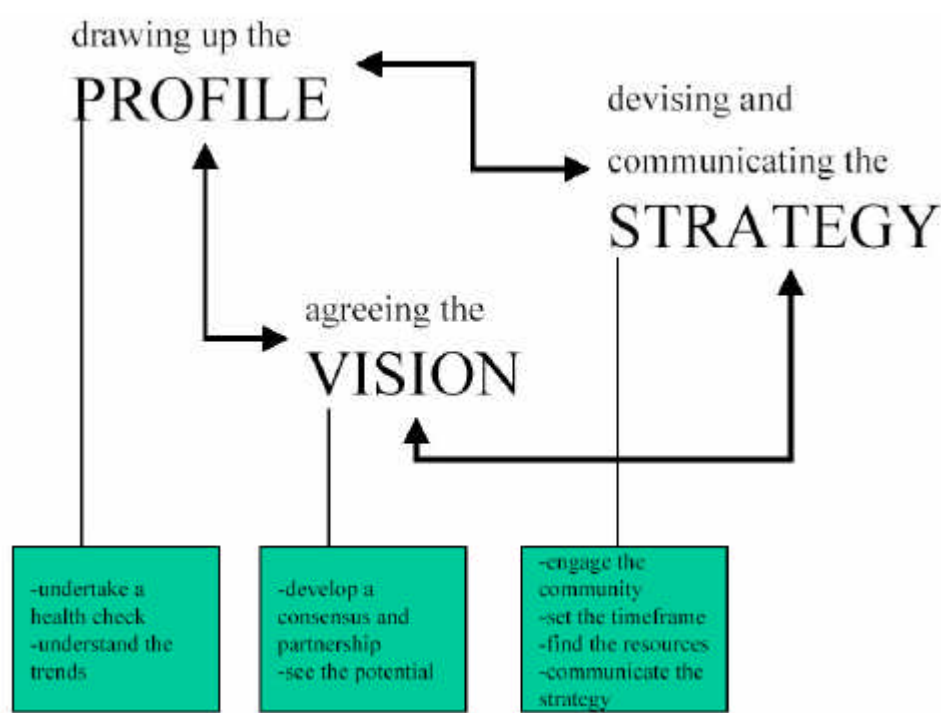
Evidence from the Beacon market towns suggests that voluntary initiatives can suffer from excessive delays in funding and implementing projects, and consultation overload. As far as smaller centres are concerned, other common mistakes include:

- Relying on a single project to turn the centre around, such as CCTV;
- Lack of engagement with small businesses and local property owners;
- Inappropriate traffic schemes, and failure to attract car-borne trade;
- 'Paralysis by analysis', with studies that lead nowhere, and then end up being repeated; and
- Excessive development of large stores and retail parks.

Next steps

This section has drawn on the findings of URBED's survey of Local Planning Officers, and has shown the value of producing strategies for smaller centres, as well as the issues, challenges and barriers that they face. The next section sets out the main **processes** involved in developing a strategy.

2. STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT



A good strategy is far more than just a ‘wish list’, and is only valuable if it leads on to action. This means understanding what is feasible in a situation, as well as knowing what local businesses and customers would like.

Town Centre Strategies

1. In partnership with the private sector, property owners, infrastructure agencies and the community, local planning authorities should:

- *identify the essential qualities of the centre and seek to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the community it serves by consolidating and building on existing strengths;*
- *assess the role of the centre and the need and scope for change, renewal and diversification*
- *draw up a shared vision, a strategy and action plan for the centre; and*
- *develop a centre management initiative, which may include appointing a town centre manager, to improve links between public and private sector initiatives (for centres too small to support a town centre manager, the sharing of such a post between several centres may be an option).*

ANNEX B: PPS6 December 2003

Implementation and Community Involvement

In this section we use the model outlined below which provides three component parts of the process to be taken into account in developing the strategy. It can be applied in any place.

2.1 Drawing up the profile

Undertake a health check The idea of a health check is to assess fairly quickly, and without much research, how well a centre is doing. Deciding whether or not to develop a strategy relies on having a good understanding of a centre's health, and the London case study provides a framework for dealing with a large number of different centres. It is common practice for consultants and partnerships to prepare a **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)** analysis, which is used in developing the strategy and enabling it to be tailored to the locally distinctive circumstances of a particular centre.

In the context of promoting and enhancing existing centres, planning authorities should consider the pattern of provision of different centres – their network – and the roles, range of facilities and degree of specialisation of those centres . . .

Section 2.7 PPS6 December 2003:

The usual starting point is bringing together commercial sources of information on floor space and retail units, broken down into comparison, convenience, and leisure or services. This can now be enhanced by using the ODPM's *Town Centres Statistics* (see www.iggi.gov.uk/towncentre). URBED's report *Vital and Viable Town Centres* suggested using the framework of the '**Four A's** – **Attractions, Access, Amenity and Action** – to provide a more comprehensive way of assessing the health of a centre than a straightforward SWOT analysis. This analytical framework can be used as a capacity building process, and is used by a number of local authorities.

Carrying out a town centre health check

- History
- Distance from other centres
- Population in the catchment/travel to work area
- The scale and type of residential area
- Key components of the centre/roles and functions
- What works and what does not work
- People's perceptions
- Existing services and facilities
- Retail offer (number of shop units, and the number of national multiples)
- Amount of floor space
- Potential for inward investment

Town Centre Management Initiative in Lincoln

Some authorities and partnerships have found the usual commercial sources of information to be insufficient, and several places – from cities such as Liverpool and Manchester to historic centres



such as Bath, have commissioned more detailed **health checks** of their district and neighbourhood centres. A good example is Stockport, which is collaborating with other Greater Manchester authorities to acquire and share basic data (see case study 10). In the process, these are helping to secure collaboration between different departments, and engage the support of councillors.

Market Towns Initiative Health Check

The Countryside Agency's Market Towns Toolkit provides local partnerships and communities with a framework for strategy development, and sources of expertise and funding. It includes a Health Check Handbook, Worksheets, Directory of Community Participation techniques, relevant data sources and survey methods, sources of previous research, sources of funding, lists of business support agencies, sources of expertise, and regional support networks. The Health Check looks at the town as a whole, not just the centre (see West Wiltshire case study).

About Town Health Check (ATCM), Community Futures www.atcm.org

Market Towns Initiative Health Check

www.countryside.gov.uk/NewEnterprise/MarketTowns/Index.asp

Understand the trends An important and time-consuming aspect of a health check is gathering data. Many towns have found it helps to identify and agree on a few basic indicators that can be used to **monitor and manage** performance over time, and also to 'benchmark' the town against similar places or competing towns. Key steps are to:

- utilise town centre statistics from ODPM, where applicable;
- consult commercial sources of information, such as Experian GOAD, CACI and Local Knowledge, who all produce map and chart-based information;
- pick Key Performance Indicators e.g. floor space, number of units, sales, openings and closures;
- draw on previous studies to assess change;
- benchmark or compare with other similar places that have undergone change; and
- analyse surveys of businesses and consumers to understand priorities.

Profiling towns

Collaboration between North Yorkshire County Council and the Regional Assembly led to the production of the *Regional Spatial Strategy Settlement Study*. This classifies all the centres in terms of their location e.g. whether they are linked, or stand alone, the services and functions they perform e.g. tourism, and whether they are prosperous, stable or less prosperous. Charts are provided for each market town showing how it compares. It is available as a CD Rom as well as in printed form.



2.2 Agreeing the vision

Build consensus Before a strategy can be developed there needs to be a broad based consensus or a shared vision for the future that builds on the profile and provides a firm foundation for the strategy. Ideally a vision needs to:

- raise expectations and reflect aspirations;
- be challenging, but achievable;
- create a common and shared understanding of the future by involving all key partners;
- identify key opportunities within the 'big picture', and prioritise potential action;
- provide a framework for the development of a strategy (and later business and delivery plans); and
- result in a document that becomes a reference point to be revisited

In practice visions are often 'borrowed' from other places, and the best ones start from seeing at first hand how other places have tackled similar problems. They should therefore at minimum:

- be based on several sources of information (quantitative, qualitative, comparative – including what the centre's main competitors have to offer);
- make use of the variety of known approaches and techniques to stimulate creative thinking (see below);
- involve those whose actions will be key in delivering the vision; and
- be communicated widely, beyond those who have participated in its development

Vision statement for Greenford town centre, Ealing:

'A strong and healthy urban village with:

- **A quality local centre** (*investment and development*)
- **Access for all** (*transport*)
- **Pride of Place** (*Environment and design*)
- **Caring Greenford** (*Partnerships and TCM*)'

Ealing Council/Greenford Town Centre Partnership

See the potential One of the most challenging aspects of developing a vision is to get people to think creatively and in a longer time frame. Most people are unable to envisage what the future might look like in 20 years, and indeed for many small, independent retailers even two to three weeks can be a long time span. A number of techniques have been developed to overcome this problem and include visioning events such as Future Search, Action Planning, Planning for Real, Enquiry by Design and Round Table Workshops. As a quick introductory guide, twenty one approaches are set out in the New Economics Foundation's publication *Participation Works* (ISBN No. 1 899 407 17 0), and these provide ideas that can be tailored to fit the situation. *The Community Planning Handbook* (ISBN: 1 85383 654 0) by Nick Wates is another useful publication.



Creative thinking techniques need to engage with feelings, and provide an opportunity to express issues, concerns and ideas in different ways. The following examples are ways to get people to 'think outside the box':

- **guided visualisation** where participants are encouraged firstly to relax, and then to envisage walking through their town centre in five years' time, with the facilitator asking them what they can see, what they can hear etc;
- **envisaging and drawing the town/centre as an object** such as an animal or type of car can provide a way to encourage participants to explore their centre using a different mindset, and enable challenging observations to be made and discussed;
- **'a postcard from ...'** can be useful in summarising and expressing ideas that have emerged in a succinct, but fun way. Participants are asked to write a short postcard, imagining themselves in the place 20 years hence. Alternatively they can draw their future image on the front of a particular aspect, with descriptive words;
- similarly drafting a short **newspaper item from the future** can stimulate the imagination.

In addition study tours provide tangible examples of what is possible, including towns that have been awarded Beacon status. Networks such as Action for Market Towns with its newsletter and popular annual Convention, and the Association of Town Centre Management with its publications and high profile conferences provide opportunities for sharing experience, and generating new ideas.

2.3 Devising and communicating the strategy

Often a strategy needs a reason to be initiated. This might be 'top down', for example, through a local strategic partnership, which will take a slower, longer-term view. Or, 'bottom up', by businesses who tend to have a shorter-term vision, and wish to seize opportunities quickly. In either case the strategy is likely to need a figure head; someone who can build consensus and will 'make things happen'

Town Centre Manager, Lincoln

Develop the partnership Partnerships are teams that need to be developed early on and continually throughout their lifespan. It is important to identify the stakeholders and support development of the partnership throughout its evolution, recognising that different people will make important contributions at different levels and at different times e.g. some are more suited to developing the broader vision and others the finer detail. Members of partnerships are not always capable of taking an holistic approach to issues – and often need to be moved away from 'pet schemes'. A flexible approach allows for constant review and change when appropriate.



In 2002 the University of Westminster examined how community-based organisations, such as development trusts, set about mobilising local communities. The report looks at the skills that 'leading lights' bring to organisations, how to attract volunteers to sit on management boards, how to create and sustain networks of 'moving spirits' and the kinds of relationships that work best in sustaining and promoting community engagement. It concludes that that information is crucial, and that existing networks should be used as people cannot be coerced into participating, but must be supported over a long time. The authors call for further work on establishing 'community mentors' and 'community consultants' to link up and disseminate good practice.

***Celebrating Community Involvement* Deborah Peel and Nick Bailey, Development Trusts Association and University of Westminster. Copies from DTA 0845 458 8336**

Building a successful partnerships:

- **securing top level commitment** – this may need to be non-political, and cross-sectored to ensure that the strategy and action plan moves forward;
- **providing enough resources** for developing the vision and strategy - it is essential to ensure the commitment, and technical and financial support of the local authority; and
- **learning together** - visit other places and use study tours, and organise away days to build the partnership: events provide opportunities for partners to get to know one another better and encourage moving forward as a team.

Engage the community The wider community needs to be fully engaged in the development of the strategy and action plan in order to reach consensus and move forward together. A number of techniques have already been mentioned in the section *Agreeing the Vision*. In addition some market towns have successfully used volunteers in the collection of health check information, such as vacant premises and pedestrian counts (footfall). There are many other ways of engaging the community, including projects in local schools, and the use of community development experts to act as facilitators.



Engaging the community

- Innovate – and treat seed capital as investment capital
- Tailor to specific interests – recruit volunteers by linking people with projects that interest them
- Respect cultural differences
- Use surveys carefully to help resolve conflicts eg former customers
- Provide performance indicators to show progress
- Get time and location right – recognize that working with residents, who may welcome the maximum number of meetings, can be different from local businesses, who may prefer a minimum number of time commitments
- Start with major concerns
- Meet aspirations – be aware of the dangers of raising aspirations but not meeting them
- Be responsive to local 'live wires'
- Go beyond the 'usual suspects' e.g. try and involve schools in generating ideas

Renaissance Market Towns

Building on the success of the Renaissance Towns initiative, the Regional Development Agency for Yorkshire and the Humber, Yorkshire Forward, has introduced a programme for Renaissance Market Towns that aims to work with up to 80 smaller towns over a 10-year period. Strengthening civic development and engagement is at the heart of the initiative of a 'Town(s) Team' or – a network of residents, voluntary and business sector representatives and local elected representatives with professional support (see Calderdale case study). Commitment from the local authority is crucial. Support from the RDA is focussed on capacity building and developing a strategy, which then leads to key agencies and individuals agreeing a 'charter' to work together for the good of the town (or group of towns where possible).

Set the timeframe The advantages of departments or organisations working in a coordinated way together are reinforced when the timeframes for strategies coincide with other work e.g. the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Strategy or bids for external funding. Strategies can also be important in preparing and reviewing local planning policies, and commissioning Area Action Plans within the new Local Development Framework. The survey identified the time required (at least two to three years) to implement strategies, and hence the importance of long-term commitment by public bodies. Nothing succeeds like success, and once one project or part of the strategy has produced results ('early wins'), it encourages further successes by creating trust and giving access to wider budgets and projects. A mark of success is when a town centre strategy is quoted by other departments to give their own strategies support and legitimacy. The success of the wider strategy, therefore, depends on identifying and harnessing a number of keys that can be used to get things going.



Find the resources Even with limited financial resources, it is important to consider human and administrative assets, and the local resources that are available in skills and time. An 'in kind' value can be put on these within the strategy. Examples of different kinds of expertise, which could be combined to suit local circumstances, include:

- **Community groups or businesses** can help organise promotions, clean-up schemes or festivals, although the time that individual business people can offer is limited, and in smaller centres encouraging businesses to think strategically or give much time can be very difficult;
- **Town Centre Management** has taken off in many larger towns and cities. Town centre managers (TCMs) employed within the wider authority can help to draw together the various disciplines needed to make a centre work;
- **Grouping smaller centres** to share a town centre manager has been successful in both urban and rural areas where resources are limited. It is important to agree a wider strategy that all the centres are working to, and be aware of local competition. Larger well-established TCMs may be willing to share or **sell** services to smaller centres, and this may range from simple advice, through to the organisation of security initiatives;
- **Buddy systems** are a way of sharing expertise with a town that has already developed innovative solutions;
- **Part-time town centre managers** can be recruited, for example individuals who have taken early retirement from retailing, the police or local authorities;
- **Town Centre Partnerships**, in which responsibilities are shared between the private and public sectors can develop out of the preparation of strategies. Little real progress can be made without engaging the interest and energy of local traders and property owners; and
- **Development Trusts** may be used to secure long-term funding by generating an income from a property asset, and Ambleside provides a good example (case study 8).

Accessing resources

- *Local Government Association Urban Renaissance Toolkit* (<http://changingplaces.urbed.com>), intended to help Councils find information, good ideas and best practice related to the Urban White Paper.
- *Evidence into Practice: New Deal for Communities National Evaluation focusing on 39 pathfinders (2002)* and
- *Neighbourhood Renewal Skills and Knowledge programme* (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, www.neighbourhood.gov.uk) which includes results of *Evidence into Practice*.

External funding resources are available from a number of agencies e.g. Heritage Lottery, Regional Development Agencies, Countryside Agency Market Towns Initiative. These can be used to support local partnerships with funding for project coordinators and a resource team, or for packaging funding for key projects.

Communicate the strategy Communications with stakeholders and the wider community are essential throughout the whole process of devising the strategy. However it is very important to



ensure that the final version of the strategy is fed back both to those who have participated in the process and to the wider community. There are a number of ways of doing this e.g. follow-up meetings, newsletters, other forms of publicity and websites, which are being used by increasing numbers of small centres). In communicating the bigger picture to a wider audience, which is crucial, visual representations of change such as maps, especially interactive ones, and street perspectives can be inspiring as well as overcoming the barrier of technical jargon with a non-specialist audience. The London Borough of Ealing uses mapping to communicate actions already taking place. In Keswick in Cumbria advice was obtained from marketing consultants on how to rebrand the town.

Next steps

This section has set out the principal **processes** involved in developing a strategy, including understanding the profile, agreeing a vision and devising and communicating the strategy.

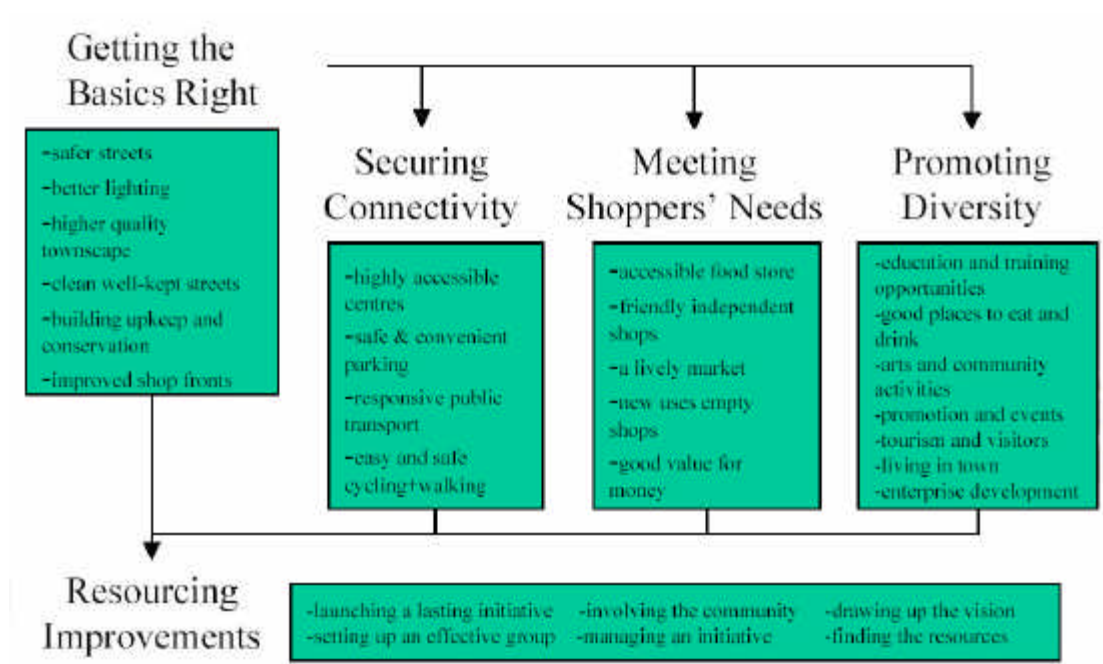
Strategies should draw together and address a wide range of issues involved in the planning, design and management of centres, and complement the statutory planning tools. Such strategies may form an important part of the preparation of the Local Development Framework, including reviewing local planning policies, providing part of the evidence base for Development Plan Documents, or as a basis for preparing Area Action Plans.

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Moving from strategy development towards agreeing an Area Action Plan is the next stage of the process, and in the next section we consider the **products** as a combination of potential initiatives/projects, based on common issues that face smaller centres, and the ways in which the plan can be resourced.

Implementing the Area Action Plan includes co-ordinating public investment with private improvements, completing projects successfully, and monitoring and evaluating outputs and outcomes, i.e. project management. This step is beyond the scope of this short guidance.

3. TOWARDS AN AREA ACTION PLAN



This final section deals with how to move towards an Area Action Plan. It introduces four common strategic issues that arise in smaller centres, and identifies a set of potential initiatives and projects in the form of checklists, which can be used as tools to gain agreement and to prioritise. These are developed from checklists in a report published by Action for Market Towns *New Life for Smaller Centres* (available through Action for Market Towns and from the URBED Changing Places web site www.urbed.com), with reference to over 50 case studies of tried and tested approaches. A fifth section looks at resourcing options for improvements (also with a checklist).

As every place is different, there is no simple answer. It is dangerous to try to copy the nearest town, or simply to deal with one issue, like security or empty shops. All the successful towns we have worked with are agreed that it is vital to show some early results followed the American adage of 'fixing the basics first'. This means addressing immediate issues, while having an eye to the longer-term role the centre should be playing.

Evaluation by the University of West of England of the Countryside Agency's Market Towns Initiative process found that there is a tendency for local initiatives to adopt stock or fashionable solutions, e.g. more diversification, more tourism and visible crime prevention measures, without much analysis of local opportunities, feasibility or efficacy. Many found it difficult to draw in the wider communities that the town centre once served. Although this guidance includes a range of good practice, it also stresses the value of exploiting distinctiveness and comparative advantage and not following the herd. They found that **integrated consideration of all issues affecting towns is rare.**



The aim should be to design a strategy with projects that meet a number of objectives simultaneously rather than following a fad. An acronym that can help as a checklist is SMART: strategies that secure development through being Sustainable, Measurable, Attractive, Robust and Tried.

The following sub-sections first introduce the **issues**, then draw on the responses to the survey and to other research to suggest what action could be taken (**findings**), and finally provide **examples** and further sources of **information**.

Each subsection contains a **checklist** organised around a series of elements, with illustrations of examples. The checklists are intended to be used either by individuals, as a basis for reviewing a possible programme of improvements, or by groups of people, who want to build a level of consensus on what needs to be done. The idea is to assess each of the elements (and others can be added), in terms of how good they are at present, and then to rank them in terms of priority or relative importance. In undertaking the assessment it may be helpful to look at them from different perspectives, for example from the point of view of a resident of the town or a visitor, or from a younger person or a family. If resources allow, or if there is controversy, it may help to get the views of a wider group of people. The checklists may be used by themselves or in combinations with other checklists that are available such as Placecheck (www.udal.org.uk/projects.html). Together these can help to provide both a depth of understanding and a realistic framework for action based on priorities and resources.

3.1 Getting the basics right

Pride of place is a useful term to describe the way people feel about how an area looks. It is a reflection partly of a place's history, and how well it is doing, but also of factors to do with the design and maintenance of the public realm and key buildings. It ties in with the ODPM's Cleaner, Safer, Greener Communities programme, which has its own web site and CD Rom (www.cleanersafergreener.gov.uk).

Issues Planners have traditionally been concerned with how to improve the look of places, and there have been a succession of guides encouraging higher standards. There have also been a multitude of projects, funded by sources such as the Single Regeneration Budget and English Heritage. However if these fail to draw extra customers they can look like 'cosmetics on a corpse'. Unfortunately most of the guidance and success stories are drawn from larger city centres, where different approaches are both needed and possible. Common issues arise over what the priorities should be in improving townscape, and in particular the impression given by the gateways to the town centre.

Findings General experience and results of consumer surveys show that people of all ages and classes are particularly concerned about the basics of 'clean and safe streets'. Equally they are put



off by the side effects of empty shops. The *Broken Windows* theory of Professors Kelling and Wilson suggests that small things make a difference, and that vandalism and opportunistic crime are discouraged by maintaining a sense of order, a feeling that someone in authority cares and is in charge, as well as by catching and punishing repeat offenders. Improving first impressions is important both in retaining the confidence of local residents, including the elderly who may feel insecure, and also in attracting those with more money to spend from further a field. Any strategy therefore needs to include 'pilot projects' to build confidence, and it is important to respond to basic concerns before dealing with more difficult and longer-term issues. As restoring buildings is very expensive, it is important to stop decay before it spreads. Improving the look of the streets can act as a signal to property owners and businesses to take complementary actions. Even small actions, like hanging baskets or welcome signs and banners, can make all the difference. However, in more depressed areas it is vital to combine action on business development and promotion with environmental measures in order to achieve the 'critical mass' needed to attract more trade (which is why isolated projects, such as CCTV, are often wasteful or even counter-productive).

The main priority in **Soho Road, Birmingham** was improving security, leading to conspicuous street lighting and CCTV points. Improved cleaning regimes, plus action to tackle derelict property through CPOs, and shop front grants of £5,000 have produced a comprehensive improvement, thanks to letting the traders take the initiative, and half the properties have benefited.

Examples Rather than simply responding to the latest Government grant for CCTV or wardens or whatever, a strategic approach would tackle the roots of the problem, for example by providing places where young people can hang out without causing problems, rather than simply trying to catch and punish them (see Wiltshire case study 7). Ely near Cambridge provides an inspiring example of how improvements to urban quality can enable a smaller centre to survive close to stronger competitors, and shows the value of applying a simple framework (in this case the one promoted by the US National Main Street Center). The Health Check also revealed the resulting effect of making Ely more attractive in terms of rising house prices. As a result their strategy aims to provide more affordable housing (which will often be a better use for edge-of-centre sites than more shops).

The overall strategy for **Stockport** has generated several individual schemes, ... a series of environmental schemes, car park refurbishment schemes, street lighting improvements (with individual district centre inserts to emphasise local distinctiveness and identity), together with two pilot shop front improvement schemes. Two centres have received CCTV systems to help deal with crime prevention issues.



Information Although there are a number of guides on how to improve the look of High Streets, many still tend to look the same. The ODPM's website and CD Rom *Cleaner, safer, greener communities* signposts a wide range of possible initiatives and sources of help⁴. A Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) publication, *Lie of the Land*, emphasises the importance of local distinctiveness, and avoiding stock solutions. *Shopping Centre Futures* adapts Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which starts with sustenance and security, and shows how life-stage (pre-family, family, post family) influences why when, where and how people shop. This means that different types of people will see the same area very differently. However all are looking for signs that a place is cared for. Some of the best advice is provided by the Danish landscape architect Jan Gehl, who emphasises the importance of encouraging people to stop and linger, rather than focussing too much on the type of street surface (see for example *Life Between Buildings – Using Public Space* and www.rudi.net which is a web-based resource for urban design information).

⁴ Cleaner, safer, greener communities, ODPM
www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/divisionhomepage/041599.hcsp



A. GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT

EXISTING & FUTURE				
	How good is it?	How important is it to improve?		
	Yes, No, or Don't Know	Poor 1 – 3 Good	Less 1 – 5 More	Comments
SAFER STREETS				
1. Is there a safe area where young people can 'hang out'?				
2. Is there good communication with the police on methods to make the centre feel safer as well as cut crime rates?				
BETTER LIGHTING				
3. Is there good quality lighting for the main streets at night?				
4. Are some buildings floodlit?				
HIGHER QUALITY TOWNSCAPE				
5. Are environmental improvements using quality materials, and high standards of workmanship and design?				
6. Are there quiet public spaces where people can sit, untroubled by traffic?				
7. Is there sufficient street furniture in the right places?				
CLEAN WELL-KEPT STREETS				
8. Are the pavements uncluttered by signs, boards and poles?				
9. Are the streets in good repair, clean and free from litter and graffiti?				
10. Is the cleaning and maintenance of the town centre co-ordinated e.g. by a town centre manager?				
11. Is public art used to promote identity?				
12. Are the streets 'green' e.g. trees, flower displays, hanging baskets, window boxes?				
BUILDING UPKEEP AND CONSERVATION				
13. Is there sustained conservation funding for historic buildings?				
14. Are vacant building used as community meeting places and/or art projects?				
IMPROVED SHOPFRONTS				
15. Are shop owners encouraged to improve their windows and displays to make them more inviting?				
16. Are there hanging signs and well-designed fascias?				
SCORE				

3.2 Securing connectivity

Outside major cities, car-borne trade accounts for the bulk of retailing expenditure, and it is simply unrealistic in most places to exclude cars altogether or to expect public transport to take their place. But equally attracting people away from covered shopping centres depends on greatly improving the pedestrian's experience. The BCSC and ATCM report *Routes to Success* concludes that:

'Accessibility is one of two key factors influencing investment decisions, and hence the economic performance of towns, cities, regions and the country as a whole'

Issues Planning Policy Guidance for Transport PPG13 has stressed the importance of town centres as transport hubs, and the scope for integrated transport, including encouraging more use of car sharing and linked trips, and alternatives such as walking and cycling. But smaller centres can present some particularly complex problems, and we have a long way to go to match Continental towns in making it easy to park near the centre, while still giving pedestrians priority. Planners are increasingly faced with issues involving traffic management, and the type of parking to be provided. They have to reconcile pressures from residents and Councillors to reduce traffic and generate income from parking, with the concerns of businesses to enable their customers and staff to have easy access.

Findings A number of authorities are starting to relax controls on parking and to go for measures that give pedestrians priority, while still allowing cars to enter, and there have been experiments with doing away with yellow lines in Historic Core Zones, such as in Bury St Edmunds. Transport planners are beginning to realise that good urban design can encourage a change in people's behaviour better than lots of hostile signs. By working as a team, conflicts can be minimised, for example downgrading the main road running into Birmingham along Soho Road to allow short-term parking, thus making the street livelier. A number of highway authorities are starting to review their policies, and changes to the traffic regime can be one of the best ways of responding to community concerns and providing a boost to confidence.

Examples Some of the best examples of coping with the car and improving connectivity are to be seen in the towns that were part of the Bypass Demonstration Project, which included Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, Market Harborough in Leicestershire, Petersfield in Hampshire, and Whitchurch in Shropshire. Good examples can also be found in many historic towns. An example of what can be done in a suburban town is Borehamwood in Hertfordshire. Good examples in inner urban areas are harder to find, but Soho Road in Birmingham is one example. The Greater London Authority's Red Routes include a small number of smaller centres where measures to improve the flow of buses have been combined with Controlled Parking Zones, and short-term parking e.g. Highgate.



Borehamwood is one of a number of Hertfordshire towns that have been transformed by traffic calming and environmental enhancement measures. These have narrowed the carriageway of the main street and created new slip roads for parking and loading, with small roundabouts (instead of traffic lights) at each end of the street to reduce stopping and starting. Central reservations and speed tables have made crossing the road easier and safer. Traffic speeds have been cut from 26 to 20 mph, and accidents have been halved. The narrower carriageways have deterred drivers from stopping. They use the slip roads instead, thus boosting local shops, and there are now few vacancies. Extensive greening, with planters that also serve as places to sit, has helped to soften the largely post-war buildings, and create a much more attractive centre. These improvements were largely financed from planning gain from a supermarket, which relocated, to the edge of town. This left an empty store, which has now been successfully converted into a cinema plus a bowling alley, restaurant and health club.

In the **Amble** the connection into the Sustrans cycling route and provision of new bicycle stands accommodate both locals and visitors and encourage commuting to the nearby East Coast mainline station at Alnmouth.

Information Organisations such as ATCM, Transport 2000, and Living Streets all produce practical guides on subjects such as car parking. Some lessons from major projects, including costs, are set out in publications of the English Historic Towns Forum (www.ehtf.org.uk). *Better Places through Bypasses*, a Department of Transport Guide, provides an assessment of carrying out comprehensive programmes in a number of towns to combat a potential loss of trade.



B. SECURING CONNECTIVITY

EXISTING & FUTURE				
	How good is it?	How good is it?	How important is it to improve?	
	Yes, No, or Don't Know	Poor 1 – 3 Good	Less 1 – 5 More	Comments
HIGHLY ACCESSIBLE CENTRES				
1. Are there good signs for cars, pedestrians and cyclists to find their way into town?				
2. Are there new marketing methods for attracting car-borne shoppers?				
3. Are customers able to park easily near the shops for a short while?				
4. Are there well positioned maps of the town at main entry points, including car parks?				
5. Are there clear directions to attractions and public facilities, including a Tourist Information Centre?				
SAFE AND CONVENIENT PARKING				
6. Is there a parking plan and/or a Controlled Parking Zone (CPZ)?				
7. Are there distinct short and long-term car parks?				
8. Are parking restrictions and charges clearly indicated?				
9. Are there well-lit pedestrian routes from car parks?				
10. Are there car parks adjacent to and visible from the main street or other active developments?				
11. Is the main street downgraded for additional parking and speed control (at all times or off peak hours)?				
RESPONSIVE PUBLIC TRANSPORT				
12. Does public transport meet the needs of all sections of the community (e.g. elderly/children) at all times of day?				
13. Are transport services well publicised?				
14. Do waiting areas feel safe and pleasant?				
15. Are there alternative transport initiatives such as car sharing?				
EASY AND SAFE WALKING & CYCLING				
16. Are there separate cycle routes adjacent to main road that offer links to the town centre?				
17. Are there bike racks that are visible from the main street?				
18. Are there traffic-calming measures to keep speeds down?				
19. Is there pedestrian priority over cars with provision of wide pavements or surface crossings?				
SCORE				



3.3 Meeting shoppers' needs

Issues The fundamental attractions in most centres are the shops and services. PPS6 makes it clear that retailing and other uses are to be concentrated in centres, not dispersed; it makes local authorities responsible for identifying appropriate sites that meet consumers' needs, not retailers' convenience. However despite some signs of success, many smaller centres are suffering from a loss of trade. Whereas families now tend to do a 'big shop' once a week, people who are retired, or mothers with young children often like to shop daily in order to meet people and fill social needs.

On shopping

i) Quantitative Need

In assessing quantitative need for additional development in its development plan, a local planning authority should assess the likely future demand for additional retail and leisure floorspace, based on existing and forecast population levels and expenditure in relation to the classes of goods to be sold, within the broad categories of 'convenience' and 'comparison' goods.

ii) Qualitative Need

In assessing the qualitative need for additional development in its development plan, the key consideration for a local planning authority is to provide for consumer choice.

Section 2.28 and 2.29 PPS6 December 2003

Problems that planners encounter include understanding the needs of modern retailers, what size of stores are needed, when to allow change of use from retailing, and how to overcome social exclusion, in which smaller centres end up with customers who have time but no money, while those with money go elsewhere. Many would like some guidelines on how much convenience (basically food and drink) shopping is needed to meet the requirements of local residents. There are particular issues about managing decline, as opposed to growth, and a number are concerned with land assembly and the use of CPOs.

Findings The starting principle in an American guide on *Reinventing America's Suburban Business Districts* states:

'Understand your position in the market: The essential foundation of any strategic plan for reinventing a suburban business district is an understanding of the demographic and market trends that influence that district and its associated opportunities.'

While there is no precise formula, and retail capacity studies tend to be unreliable where there are overlapping catchment areas, some guidance can be secured from looking at groups of centres. The Town Centre Statistics produced by the ODPM provides a starting point in comparing centres in terms of turnover, floorspace and employment, as does data provided by commercial firms like Experian, GOAD and CACI. A number of regional studies have brought together information on floor space, shops and rents, though they sometimes miss out the smallest centres. Some authorities such as Birmingham have commissioned research to provide them with guidance. However the research does not need to be that complex. Simple comparisons of



shop units in relation to the population in the catchment or surrounding area and analysis of GOAD or equivalent floor plans can highlight areas that appear 'over shopped', that is where the market is no longer large enough to support so many small units.

Examples Different centres will be at different stages of growth or consolidation, and so it is vital to understand what makes each centre special. For example in areas with strong ethnic populations, small food shops find it easier to survive. In other towns, for example Sheffield, the solution to revitalising a small parade involved replacing small units with a larger store that could carry a better range with reduced operating costs. Some Economic Development Units are starting to see the potential for attracting new businesses to fill the spaces left by shops closing down. Action often needs to be taken to encourage owners of empty property to fill their space, even with short-term uses such as charity shops or displays by local groups, if only to avoid ugly gaps. In the US it is common for Main Street programmes to feature 'retailer recruitment' by persuading businesses who operate in nearby but non-competing towns to open up a branch.

The first opportunity in **Manor and Castle, Sheffield** arose when a training project took over some empty shops, thus generating a lot of footfall, as well as improving the look of the shops. The resulting activity had knock-on effects on the rest of the parade, and made the Trust realise the potential for upgrading other local centres. In another local centre in three 1930's blocks, the Trust took the run-down buildings over from the Council, the flats were refurbished, and space below let to community projects, such as a local employment centre, a café, and a second hand clothing shop as well as a mini-market.

Information One of a number of useful Discussion Papers from Action for Market Towns on *Market Towns and Retail Issues*, based on the work of the National Market Towns Advisory Forum, concludes that:

'smaller market towns (in particular) therefore face the future increasingly reliant on independent rather than multiple retailers – but this could help them to reinforce their distinctiveness.'

The British Council of Shopping Centre's report *Shopping Centre Futures* summarises retail trends and facts about consumer behaviour, with recommendations that include 'attracting new shoppers' and 'developing segmented offers'. The New Economics Foundation has produced a well-publicised report on how the decline of food provision is turning many smaller centres into *Ghost Towns*. *The Smaller Towns Report* by the Bartlett School of Planning at UCL for the British Council of Shopping Centres highlights the trend for large retail centres to get larger while smaller centres are being left behind. The pressures are competition for trade between other centres and out of town shopping, and to attract investment. The report comes up with fifteen remedies. The National Retail Planning Forum's *The Role and Vitality of Secondary Shopping* suggests there has been a growth in the service sector in secondary areas which has compensated for the decline in retail.



The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's report *Changing Practices: a good practice guide for businesses locating in deprived areas* features case studies of a Birmingham based group called Shopeasy which runs a group marketing initiative and improves retail management, and of Tesco, whose investment in a new district centre on the council estate of Seacroft on the edge of Leeds has helped to turn around a run-down area.



C. MEETING SHOPPERS' NEEDS

EXISTING & FUTURE				
	How good is it?	How important is it to improve?		
	Yes, No, or Don't Know	Poor 1 – 3 Good	Less 1 – 5 More	Comments
ACCESSIBLE FOOD STORE				
1. Is there a large food store within walking distance of the centre?				
2. Can the centre's shops provide all essential items on an average shopping trip?				
FRIENDLY INDEPENDENT SHOPS				
3. Is there a list or directory, with a map, showing independent and specialist shops?				
4. Are shops open at suitable hours?				
5. Are there shopping streets where it is pleasant and interesting to browse?				
6. Is there a loyalty scheme, such as a discount card, to encourage regular and local customers?				
7. Is there an existing or developing 'niche' that attracts visitors/customers?				
A LIVELY MARKET				
8. Is there support and promotion for an active market?				
9. Is there a market that sells unique/ specialty goods?				
NEW USES FOR EMPTY SHOPS				
10. Do most shops have attractive window displays?				
11. Are empty shops put to good use, e.g. as charity shops?				
12. Are empty shop windows used for temporary displays with help from community organisations or local artists?				
GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY				
13. Is there value for money in terms of specialist shops or good quality second-hand shops?				
SCORE				

3.4 Promoting diversity

Towns traditionally have offered much more than just shops, and they can compete with out-of-town centres best by emphasising what makes them distinctive, not by trying to copy them.

Issues PPS6 also stresses the importance of locating other attractions, such as leisure and health care in centres, and these can sometimes provide new attractions to take the place of shopping. The *Rural White Paper* identified the following measures or ways of diversifying market towns, which would also apply to many other smaller centres:

- Improved primary health care using links to specialist centres
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT) learning centres
- Better bus and rail transport links
- Improved ICT and business support
- A stronger role as retail and business centres.

A diversity of uses in centres makes an important contribution to their vitality and viability. Different but complementary uses, during the day and in the evening, can reinforce each other, making town centres more attractive to local residents, shoppers and visitors. Local planning authorities should encourage diversification of uses in the town centre as a whole, and ensure that tourism, leisure and cultural activities, which appeal to a wide range of social groups, are dispersed throughout the centre.

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Attracting these new uses involves playing a more pro-active role than planning has played in the past. Planners who are concerned about mixed uses, particularly where they can create conflicts with residential areas, need to be more proactive by identifying areas in which alcohol licences will be concentrated, and ensuring these are away from areas that are intended for new housing. There is also an issue about the appropriate size of centres and the mix of uses and services that different populations can support. Unfortunately, due to the nature of over-lapping catchment areas it is hard to provide much guidance, though comparisons can always be made with areas that have similar population characteristics, by making use of one of the commercial sources of information, some of whom provide lists of 'benchmark towns'.

Findings Information on the non-retail functions of town centres is still fairly basic, though there is growing recognition of the importance of 'social capital', and the value of people being able to meet each other. An evaluation by UWE of the Countryside Agency's Market Town Initiative found a tendency to adopt stock solutions, such as more diversification or tourism, without much analysis of local opportunities, feasibility or efficacy. Other research has shown that market towns are not necessarily acting as service centres for the surrounding rural area any more, as people are more likely to use the services in the places where they work. It is vital not to follow the herd.



Furthermore, as consumers want choice, one strategy is to encourage clusters of uses in order to achieve a 'critical mass', the classic example being Hay on Wye, which promoted itself as the first Booktown in the UK, and which has been copied in Blaenavon, also in Wales. Instead of having a pub on the corner of each street, it can be far better for everyone to have a whole area given over to 'the evening economy' or pubs and takeaways backed up by appropriate cleansing and security regimes. This also makes it easier to encourage more intensive blocks of new housing, such as apartments for 'empty nesters' or retired people, without the fear of being kept awake at night.

Examples Case studies such as Sowerby Bridge in Calderdale show how centres can adopt new roles, in this case as a leisure destination with a choice of restaurants, as well as an active waterfront. Birmingham's Soho Road shows how it is possible for centres in disadvantaged areas to become the hub of a neighbourhood renewal programme with economic development projects as well as physical improvements. Sheffield has used community services such as training centres to boost footfall. Others have attracted in creative businesses, and Manchester even has a 'Curry Mile.' at Rusholme. A general conclusion is the importance of not letting empty properties fester, and the value of interim uses as well as redevelopment on the edges for example as housing.

The thriving, historic market town of **Ludlow** provides an example of success of a local Shropshire centre. Renowned for its annual events programme, including the Ludlow Festival and the Food and Drink Festival, its achievements have come from the integration of a number of factors: planning that takes into account heritage and conservation; independent shops and services with a high quality offer and shortened food chains e.g. farmers markets, farm shops; a commitment to sustained effort, and a forward looking town council and chamber of trade. In addition "*Ludlow Slow City*" is a pilot project emphasising slow and measured rural development, concentrating on quality of life and traditional food and hospitality.

The construction of the new Town Square in **Amble** includes a strong urban design element with distinctive public art based on sails and flags, and the working harbour area adjoining the rebuilt pier now hosts a very popular Sunday market which often has the added attraction of some of the remaining fleet of 30 boats unloading their catch.

Information There are a number of sources of advice on urban futures, and growth trends, such as the *Foresight programme*. AMT's discussion paper on *Market Towns and Retail Issues* points out that

'restaurants, bars, video shops and other leisure related retail businesses are expanding. Service businesses such as fitness clubs are growing. Others, such as medical and dental practices, are changing their way of operating so that they become suitable for retail premises in or near town centres.'



D. PROMOTING DIVERSITY

EXISTING & FUTURE				
	How good is it?	How important is it to improve?		
	Yes, No, or Don't Know	Poor 1 – 3 Good	Less 1 – 5 More	Comments
EDUCATION/TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES				
1. Is there after-hour use of schools, colleges or other educational establishments near to the town centre?				
GOOD PLACES TO EAT AND DRINK				
2. Is there a licensing strategy towards the development of eating/drinking and entertainment quarters?				
ARTS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES				
3. Are vacant buildings, such as empty shops, used for art or community-based projects and meetings?				
4. Is there a particular area for cultural activity with effective arts and entertainment facilities?				
PROMOTION AND EVENTS				
5. Are unique attractions, annual festivals and regular events marketed to residents and tourists?				
6. Is there promotional material from the centre's existing marketing body, or alternatives such as a PR manager?				
TOURISM AND VISITORS				
7. Is the centre linked to a larger scale tourist route?				
8. Are there new roles and reasons being developed for coming to town?				
LIVING IN TOWN				
9. Are there areas in the centre designed for leisure activities such as a pleasant afternoon walk around town?				
10. Are there recreational areas easily accessible from the town centre?				
11. Are vacant buildings and the space above shops being considered for potential residential development?				
ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT				
12. Is there a range of professional and public services for small businesses?				
13. Are there workspaces that small businesses could easily use (and room for expansion)?				
14. Is there information on existing shop units to analyse varying uses and value?				
15. Is there an effective Chamber of Trade or trades group that supports new high street enterprises?				
SCORE				



3.5 Resourcing improvements

One of the benefits of having a strategy is to focus action, including other agency's programmes, on a particular place or group of places.

Issues Despite the priority that is being placed on town centres, and the use of a variety of funding sources, such as the Single Regeneration Budget, and the Townscape Heritage Initiative, there are always many more demands on resources than availability. Both money and staff are in short supply. There are particular issues about managing the process of implementation, which can take many years, and whether to rely on town centre managers or project coordinators, or use in-house staff, and how to fund ongoing management.

Findings While it is important to have individuals responsible for coordinating action, many projects are finding it hard to recruit or retain good coordinators. Many of the initial town centre managers came from a retail background, but as this guide shows the tasks, and therefore the skills required in revitalising smaller centres, are much broader. People who have been teachers, or who have a background in the voluntary sector have produced some of the most successful results. The Birmingham case study shows the value of having a team who can take on a number of centres in terms of providing continuity. The Amble case study demonstrates how in smaller towns a development trust, initiated and run by local people, can act as a catalyst for undertaking complex projects, such as reusing a key empty building. Mobilising voluntary effort is one the main ingredients in the success of the US Main Street approach. The Health Check process, and the checklists included here can provide a good starting point, along with 'action planning events' that enable people to express their concerns and hopes.

Examples Now that Regional Development Agencies are becoming involved there will hopefully be more initiatives to support improvements along a corridor or 'arc of opportunity'. The experience in upgrading the Marches towns along the Welsh border in Shropshire and also Herefordshire using funds from Europe is encouraging, and so too is the way that centres are being used as the basis for Shropshire's Community Plan, so that smaller centres start to work together rather than seeing themselves as rivals. Many authorities are beginning to look beyond conventional town centre management, and are considering ideas like Business Improvement Districts, to help share ownership of smaller centres with local businesses, such as Warwickshire County Council (with Rugby as one of ATCM's pilot BIDs).

Communicating the strategy and demonstrating success is important both to satisfy funders but also to motivate local activists and supporters. Effective ways include publishing newsletters, involving the local media, and setting up – and monitoring – dedicated websites. There are already several good examples of websites based on strategies for smaller centres – both local authority and community led.



The County of Warwickshire contains seven principal towns and a number of market towns on the edge of the Birmingham, Solihull and Coventry conurbations. the County Council has played a leading role in applying Town Centre Management, and is now involved in developing a pilot Business Improvement District in one of the towns.

The **Ely** partnership in East Cambridgeshire produced action plans in 2000, and secured a number of innovative improvements, including a shopping guide and welcome pack for new residents. A lunchtime bus link was provided from the outlying industrial estates to the centre. However with few resources of its own, developing a comprehensive programme of action was difficult. They therefore secured funding from the Market Towns Initiative, and employed a coordinator. The subsequent health check broadened the focus to include the whole of Ely and its hinterland, with much more stress on social and community issues, such as affordable housing. The design group has developed proposals for integrated transport, and the economic restructuring group has been looking into the evening economy. The partnership has been rebranded as Ely Perspective to deliver action on a broader front than just the town centre, and has applied the US Main Street approach, with its four-fold approach of organisation, design, promotion and economic restructuring.

The other two smaller towns of Littleport and Southam decided not to go for the Main Street model, and to work in a more ad hoc way on the wider area. Southam has set up six topic groups, after hammering out a vision statement, but with a design group modelled on the one in Ely. Support has been provided through Resource Teams funded by the East of England Development Agency, and run by ACRE, which represents Community Councils in the region. The resource teams carry out 'organisational health checks', following a background briefing, with structured interviews, a discussion of initial conclusions, and a report. The report covers the '3 C's' of characteristics, content, and competence.

Information The DETR's good practice guide *Investing in the High Street*, produced with Boots and the Civic Trust, sets out eleven principles for securing investment under the heading of vision, viability, value and vibrancy, with a large number of examples (published by the Civic Trust 1999). The British Chamber of Commerce's report *Centres of Excellence: strategies for town centre prosperity* encourages the use of road charging as a way of both controlling congestion and financing transport investment. Useful advice on the process of securing an urban renaissance, and some of the techniques is set out in *Partners in Urban Renaissance* project with 24 Towns and Cities, which can be downloaded free from www.urbed.com.

The Role and Vitality of Secondary Shopping, by the National Retail Planning Forum www.nrpf.org is a report on secondary retail areas and highlights their significance through case studies and survey work. High rent levels in primary areas, together with local demand, create favourable conditions for shops to survive in secondary areas.

The Beacon Scheme www.odpm.gov.uk promoted local authority improvements and helped to spread best practice under a number of themes including Town Centre Regeneration.



E. RESOURCING IMPROVEMENTS

EXISTING & FUTURE				
	How good is it?	How important is it to improve?		
	Yes, No, or Don't Know	Poor 1 – 3 Good	Less 1 – 5 More	Comments
LAUNCHING A LASTING INITIATIVE				
1. Is there a broadly based partnership for town improvements?				
2. Is there information and training to learn from good practice elsewhere?				
INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY				
3. Are voluntary groups invited to help organise promotions, clean-up schemes, festivals etc?				
4. Are regular retail surveys undertaken?				
5. Is there any support available for an existing local business association (or for creating one)?				
6. Is there a mechanism e.g. newsletter/forum for sharing information with the town's stakeholders?				
DRAWING UP THE VISION & STRATEGY				
7. Is there a clear focus and shared vision for the town?				
8. Is there a written town centre strategy demonstrating how it can be improved?				
9. Is there a viable base for the initiative in the town centre?				
SETTING UP AN EFFECTIVE GROUP				
10. Is there sponsorship from the District or Unitary Council?				
11. Are members of the business community involved?				
12. Have major property owners been consulted?				
MANAGING AN INITIATIVE				
13. Is there an action plan for implementing the initiative, specifying responsibilities and time scales?				
14. Is there a town centre manager from a non-retail background for possible alternative views and strategies?				
FINDING THE RESOURCES				
15. Are there reports (research and analysis) that can be integral in gaining support and mobilising resources?				
16. Does the budget cover running costs as well as capital projects?				
17. Have types of potential 'in-kind' help available for the initiative been explored?				
18. Are all possible sources of funding such as RDA's, Revolving Loans, Lottery Funds etc. being considered?				
SCORE				



4. CONCLUSIONS

Strategies for smaller centres are an essential part of good planning practice. We hope that this guidance will help. Remember four tips for securing successful results:

- **'the art of the possible'**: local energy can easily be extinguished, and the efforts of collecting data can take time away from analysis of the options. You cannot plan for everything, and so the best strategies are quite simple, but focus on areas where change is possible.
- **'see the big picture'**: it is important not to treat centres in isolation from their hinterlands or catchment areas (where their potential customers come from). They need to be seen in relation to other competing centres, and also trends in behaviour. Taking account of the hinterland is something that local partnerships find difficult, and may be best tackled by the local authority with its wider geographical responsibilities and technical resources. Local authorities can play a beneficial role in supporting the development of complementary strategies for groups of adjacent small centres. They can also work in partnership with neighbouring authorities to create a 'united front'.
- **'just do it'**: there is no perfect plan or strategy so pragmatism, so do not be ruled by perfectionism: this means identifying early on what the priority issues or choices are. It also means ensuring that the process of drawing up a town centre strategy, or better still a strategic framework for a group of towns, is linked to the processes of budgeting and making land use decisions.
- **'build on success'**: celebrate a success every six months to build on the momentum that has been created by devising a shared vision and communicating a strategy. The five checklists cover no less than 81 actions, so there is plenty for everyone to do.



CASE STUDIES

- 1.** The London Plan: seeing the big picture
- 2.** Calderdale Inheritance: seizing opportunities
- 3.** Birmingham's strategy for local centres: spotting the trends
- 4.** Shropshire's Community Plan: developing community strategies to include local centres
- 5.** Birmingham's Soho Road: packaging resources to produce results
- 6.** Sheffield's Manor and Castle estates: backing local champions
- 7.** West Wiltshire's Five Towns Initiative: scoring early wins
- 8.** Amble Development Trust: implementing regeneration projects
- 9.** Warwickshire towns: applying town centre management
- 10.** Stockport's suburbs: supporting local distinctiveness

1. THE LONDON PLAN: seeing the big picture

Differing roles ... benchmarking ... health checks GIS

Lessons

- tapping commercial sources of data
- benchmarking performance by making comparisons with similar places (and thus being able to set evidence-based priorities)
- looking at centres holistically (using Geographic Information Systems to bring together, map and display different sets of data)
- understanding the different roles that different size centres play

Context

The Greater London Authority has been a pioneer in using statistical information to help set priorities for the network of London centres, building on previous work by LPAC and the ODPM. For example the London Borough of Bexley alone has over 60 shopping centres, including local parades, and there are also huge variations in terms of the location, character, and role of each centre.

Trigger

The key question is how can planners focus efforts where they will make most difference, given the vast numbers of different-sized centres within the 32 London Boroughs. Differences in competition for space and thus in property values mean that in West London values are several times higher than in East London. Smaller centres are particularly vulnerable and a way was needed of looking beyond borough boundaries. In 1994 the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) therefore commissioned research for URBED to bring the 'hierarchy' of centres up to date, starting with data collected by Experian Goad is a report co-funded by the Government Office for London, and published as *High Accessibilities and London's Town Centre*.

Action

The research identified 10 centres that served a Metropolitan or sub-regional role, 38 major centres which provided a full range of comparison and convenience shopping, and a further 150 district centres with more 9,290 sq metres of retail floor space, which mainly provided food and other convenience items. In addition there were a further 32 major out-of-town developments, and at least another 1,300 neighbourhood and local centres that are too small to be covered by commercial sources of statistics.



Each of the 200 or so main centres was given a **Health Check**, in terms of its attractions, access and amenity, using both quantitative and qualitative assessments, and the results scored in order to produce comparative **Profiles**. The published results helped show where improvements were most needed, and were used to underpin policies for expansion or consolidation.

The results were updated five years later, and are being enhanced by the use of the first statistics from the ODPM's *Town Centre Statistics* project, which provides data on floor space, employment and turnover for the principal centres. The Greater London Authority is supplementing this with research from CACI, using data on consumer expenditure and travel patterns, to assess the market in each London Borough, and identify where there is either under or over supply. Each Borough has been encouraged to develop its own strategies, and many have undertaken their own health checks.

The *London Plan* is one of the first regional spatial strategies to be produced, and a major theme is strengthening the **network** of town centres that makes London A *City of Villages*, as one of the research reports is titled.



2. CALDERDALE INHERITANCE: seizing opportunities

Industrial Heritage...SRB...renaissance...animations

Lessons

- taking a long-term perspective of at least 20 years
- working through partnerships with local community groups
- using feasibility studies and masterplans to show the way forward and unlock difficult sites
- assembling sites in arcs of opportunity
- working with local developers
- tapping into whatever national and regional programmes are available

Context

Calderdale consists of a series of small textile towns in West Yorkshire strung out along the valley of the River Calder, all of which contain redundant mill buildings and small shops, along with other elements of the district's industrial heritage, such as the canal that crosses the Pennines. Today the canal is reopen and many of the old mills are back in use for workspace, housing and leisure.

Trigger

Following a conference organised to mark the Council of Europe's Urban Renaissance Year in 1980, the district focused on making the most of its heritage of old textile buildings, with particular successes in Hebden Bridge and Halifax as the result of woollen the energy and resources of local entrepreneurs. However producing a transformation in some of the smaller towns, such as Sowerby Bridge, which were considered as 'no go' areas at the time, was more difficult.

In 1984, when the West Yorkshire County Council was being wound up, it funded a feasibility study into what could be done with a complex of riverside mills in three ownerships in response to pressure from the local community.

Action

Despite the problems, which included the collapse of the oldest building just as the study started, the County were persuaded by the study to fund site assembly and pass the land over to Calderdale Council. To produce an 'early win', the pilot project was a canoe slalom course, which put the town on the map again. Subsequently the Council mothballed and facelifted the main



buildings, and landscaped the open space by the river, using a job creation scheme. Some of the initial ideas, such as converting one of the buildings into managed workspace, did not work. However a local developer bought the site to convert into flats, paying for it as the flats were sold. It was 15 years on from the initial study before the biggest mill was converted, and between 1997 and 2002 260 new homes were provided in the town, 75% of which were on brownfield sites.

The Council used the concept of a Calderdale Inheritance decade to help attract funds from whatever sources were available, as it was not eligible for funding for Assisted Areas. Thus an initiative from local businesses succeeded in attracting £3.8 million funding under the Single Regeneration Budget, and the scheme was unusual in not being targeted at the worst areas. This enabled many small-scale projects to go ahead, including 157 grants for security and property improvements, (though shop front improvements had a low take-up rate). Innovative measures included a Green Business Network to cut waste, and SPLASH, a Summer youth project in which nearly 1100 youngsters took part. The programme produced a real change in attitudes with 64% of residents thinking the town had improved, and 50% of the businesses expressing confidence compared with 23% in 1998. Major developments have included reopening the canal through the town, and securing a Heritage Lottery Grant for reusing buildings around the old Canal Basin. However, perhaps the most surprising success story has been the opening of five good places to eat, including a Mongolian Restaurant overlooking the canal.

In the process Calderdale has succeeded in interesting a whole range of organisations, including Business In The Community and Regeneration Through Heritage, which have given a positive profile, to previous neglected assets and encouraged others to invest. The latest stage has been Yorkshire Forward's commitment to supporting five towns in the Calder Valley under its Renaissance Market Towns programme. This started with community visioning exercises in each of the towns to identify opportunities and priorities, and help form a Town Team that can take the vision through to implementation. A panel of consultants has been assembled to provide selected towns with support in developing their strategies to the point where investment can be attracted to overcome obstacles.

The process involves seven stages: assimilation and a townscape audit; town events involving some 2000 people; a process of participative or hands on planning concluding with a 'saying it altogether' planning weekend, culminating with publishing a vision and charter. Finally this led to formalising a master plan, and investment plan with prioritised projects. The process is very intensive, with active town teams. A new idea was the 'Flying Shuttle' to link the different parts of the valley together, releasing land creativity, making new connections, and weaving all the towns together.



3. BIRMINGHAM'S STRATEGY FOR LOCAL CENTRES: spotting the trends

Vision...health checks

Lessons

- drawing up visions through 'action planning' events
- using research to set priorities
- employing a central team backed up by research from consultants

Context

With an increasingly multi-ethnic population of a million, and over 70 substantial shopping centres (of which only 21 are covered by GOAD plans as of interest to national retailers), Birmingham is having to deal with some very complex problems. Birmingham has used 'action' planning to bring local stakeholders and outside experts together through weekend conferences.

Trigger

The third *Highbury Initiative* conference in Birmingham in 2001 set out a vision for the city as a 'network of flourishing neighbourhoods' in which local centres are about far more than just providing convenient shops. Following research by consultants into how consumer expenditure was distributed, the Council produced *A Strategy for Local Centres*, which mobilised some funding, and enabled them to prepare a *Priority Centres Action Programme*. One impetus was pressure from Ward Committees and a realisation that now that the city centre was taking off again, the priority was revitalising the local centres, which range from large suburban centres to local parades of shops.

Action

Health checks by the local authority assessed the centres as either very good, good, moderate or poor. They considered the needs of the surrounding areas, and the potential for attracting investment. Common issues were the decline in the demand for small unit shops, and the high proportion of independent traders from minority ethnic groups. The centres were grouped into five categories in terms of the action to be taken, which ranged from building on success through diversifying the uses towards leisure, community or employment uses, to managing decline, for example through redevelopment for housing or light industry, and in a few cases filling gaps in the network of centres through retail development. Follow-up research has been undertaken to help set standards, and assess adequacy of convenience shopping provision in relation to local needs.



4. SHROPSHIRE: developing community strategies to include local centres

Community planning...partnership working...a town centre focus

Lessons

- Identifying the planning “building blocks” that need to be in place at an early stage
- Providing dedicated staff time
- Enabling community strategies to become umbrella plans by linking them with other strategies and plans (including regional and sub regional targets and frameworks such as Health, Learning and Skills Councils and the Countryside Agency)
- Ensuring grass-roots input into planning, as well as the involvement of “big” local players and employers and SME’s through local Chambers etc.
- Involving elected Members and linking planning with democratic structures
- Embedding consultation arrangements including contact with hard to reach groups and isolated rural areas
- Enabling and resourcing input from the voluntary and community sectors.
- Ensuring that someone takes the lead (and responsibility) for pulling the work together at the same time as encouraging joint editorial input by partners.

Context

Shropshire, faces similar problems to other rural areas, including an ageing population, poor transport links, a weakened economy, declining and expensive rural services (pubs, post offices, schools), and rising property prices due to inward migration of commuters and ‘second homers’. It also suffers from poor access to ICT resources, little skills training and viable employment, and the loss of younger people because of a lack of university and higher educational provision. Eight of its wards rank within the most deprived 25% in the country.

Triggers

The needs of rural areas tend to be hidden, with few visible signs of economic and social exclusion and deprivation, which makes it more difficult to make the case for additional help from government. By 1998 Shropshire recognised its lack of effort and success in bringing in external resources to the county, and established the Shropshire Partnership to spearhead regeneration, manage EU and regional funding programmes and to bring together public, private, voluntary and community bodies and agencies. The Partnership was reinforced by previous initiatives such as the development of Local Agenda 21 strategies, District Action Plans (1996), and the challenge introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 to develop community strategies.



Actions

Shropshire's councils decided to give responsibility for the co-ordination of Community District Strategies to the existing Shropshire Partnership, and actions included:

- Joint funding a 'community development and co-ordination post';
- Linking the community strategies with existing themes developed by the Regional Development Agency and Government Office for the new Rural Regeneration Zone, the Single Regeneration Budget and Objective 2 funding programmes;
- Forming a new countywide Community Planning Group, leading to the creation of new permanent community planning posts, many of which have been jointly funded.
- Developing a common framework for an action plan;
- Organising a programme of consultation across Shropshire, using different methods to highlight needs and agree priorities;
- Setting a common timetable for producing the Community Strategies;
- Identifying the top priorities for Shropshire from all five local strategies;
- Producing and launching in Summer 2002, Shropshire's integrated strategy.

These actions resulted in the impressive document, *Improving the quality of life in Shropshire: integrating community strategies 2002-12*, which provides an overview plan for the whole county, as well as setting out in a consistent and coherent framework the strategy for five geographic areas. Each area is covered by four key themes: supporting inclusive communities; improving the environment; promoting lifelong learning; and stimulating a thriving economy. Progress can be measured by 32 Quality of Life indicators (developed with the Audit Commission).

Shropshire has won national recognition for the process used to develop the integrated community strategies. Having dedicated staff to co-ordinate the work helped its success. Guidance was provided by the Shropshire Partnership and the County Council, as well as through the involvement of key agencies and many residents in this large, sparsely populated rural county (est. 283,300 residents). The result was an agreed way forward to meet its needs, including *regenerating the market towns*. There have been a number of major success stories, such as the development of Ludlow as a destination for eating, and Britain's first 'Slow Town'.



5. BIRMINGHAM'S SOHO ROAD: packaging resources to produce results

Neighbourhood renewal...funding cocktail...management team...enterprise development

Lessons

- prioritising in terms of potential as well as needs
- developing strategies out of constructive dialogues with the local community
- building on strengths to find each centre's unique role
- going beyond improvements to facades to tackle access and security
- linking planning with action by building up a central team

Context

Birmingham has adopted a strategic approach to its local centres that links visions with action on the ground. Soho Road has been turned from a trouble spot area to one of the most successful inner city centres, with low vacancy, continuing investment, and busy pavements.

Trigger

By mid 2001 the City had tackled 12 centres, and Soho Road in Handsworth was one of the earliest action plans. With over 200 shops on the old main road that leads into the city centre from the North, and a population where 80% of the residents are from black and minority ethnic groups, Soho Road was seen as a major problem, with falling retail turnover and a loss of 26% of its retail space, as a result of large shops closing. The adjoining residential area of Handsworth was hit by riots.

Action

The Action Plan was published in 1999 after two years of consultations. Whereas previous efforts had been confined largely to housing improvements, and measures to restore the physical fabric, this time, a much more holistic approach was taken. Innovative actions included marketing the centre through regular events, tackling common issues such as staff recruitment, and recruiting retailers from other centres, such as Asian clothes shops from London. The main priority was improving security, leading to conspicuous street lighting and CCTV points. Improved cleaning regimes, plus action to tackle derelict property through CPOs, and shop front grants of £5,000 have produced a comprehensive improvement, thanks to letting the traders take the initiative, and half the properties have benefited.



By downgrading the status of the road in the City's highway structure Soho Road is becoming more like a traditional High Street, with more small car parks, short-term street parking, and pedestrian controlled street crossings. New developments have included mosques, and the expansion of a local college. The benefits have included not only 300 new jobs, better run shops, and smarter looking streets, but also renewed confidence in living in the area.

The funding package involved an initial commitment by the Council of £250,000, which levered up a total expenditure of £3.2 million from five different funding streams, using a series of 'cocktails'. The great breakthrough was securing over £1 million from European funds (as previously shopping centres had not been considered eligible). Much of the success has been due to the way the local authority's integrated regeneration and planning team has worked with local businesses, through a steering group of about 25 people, and a budget that has enabled them to respond to local concerns with tangible improvements. By using a part-time project manager from within the Council, the problems of short-termism have been overcome (and indeed there is no 'exit strategy' because places like Soho Road always will need attention). This has also helped provide a clear sense of leadership, to develop better relations with organisations such as the Police, and to cross community and organisational boundaries.

6. SHEFFIELD MANOR AND CASTLE ESTATES: backing local champions

Development trust...new uses for empty shops...site assembly

Lessons

- drawing up visions through 'action planning' events
- using a development trust to package funds, assemble sites, and manage the units
- tackling building, enterprise and community development together
- securing a balanced mix of uses
- creating a working partnership between the local authority, community, and the private sector

Context

Sheffield has suffered from the decline of its traditional industries, and competition from the out of town shopping centre of Meadowhall. The award winning Manor and Castle Development Trust has upgraded local centres as a key way of renewing confidence in the future of once run-down council estates

Trigger

Many inter-war and post-war council housing estates suffer from run-down local centres with abandoned shops that are associated with crime and anti-social activities. Securing the renewal of areas of social housing requires more than just improving residential neighbourhoods. The challenge is how to use public investment, like the Single Regeneration Budget, to provide sustainable improvements in areas that are not attractive to private investment. This led to the formation of a community based trust to oversee the regeneration of several neighbourhoods.

Action

In 1997 the Manor and Castle Development Trust was set up, following several decades of community action, to manage the SRB 3 programme in two wards on the South side of the City Centre. The Trust sought not only to engage local people in the process, but also to acquire assets that would make the community more independent. The first opportunity arose when a training project took over some empty shops, thus generating a lot of footfall, as well as improving the look of the shops. The resulting activity had knock-on effects on the rest of the parade, and made the Trust realise the potential for upgrading other local centres.



In one of the better estates, the community complained that run-down and abandoned shops on the main bus route gave the whole area a bad image. The Trust was unable to persuade the private owners to make any improvements. So they worked with the Coop, who had a small unit they were planning to close, to upgrade their shop by matching the Coop's investment with a £400,000 grant from European funds. The Coop was only interested if the whole parade was improved, and so the Trust bought the rest of the parade. Units were improved, for example with better shutters which had to be opened when the shop was, and three were demolished to create some parking. The Coop then acquired two of the units, and set up a discount store, as well as expanding the range of goods it stocked, thus acting as an 'anchor' for the centre. Other businesses opened, including a beauty shop and one unit was used as a community space and base for the neighbourhood wardens. There are now 12 units, where there were once 15, and all are trading much better.

In another local centre in three 1930's blocks, the Trust took the run-down buildings over from the Council, the flats were refurbished, and space below let to community projects, such as a local employment centre, a café, and a second hand clothing shop as well as a mini-market.

The strategy of improving and diversifying the local centres through a community based initiative has boosted confidence in the whole area. For example new houses that sold for £30,000 were being resold for twice that amount a couple of years later, while land values have gone from minus £20,000 an acre to over £180,000. Existing businesses have been helped to prosper and new ones have set up. The heart of each neighbourhood has been strengthened, and the residents now lead better lives. The development trust, recognising that SRB was coming to an end, has extended its role to work with other agencies as the Single Local Management Centre for the South Sheffield Partnership.

While there are plenty of examples of public funds being used to improve estates, sometimes by completely rebuilding the centre, as in the case of Castle Vale in Birmingham or developing a major food store on the edge of the estate, as in Seacroft in Leeds, where Tesco's caters for both the estate, and wealthier residents living further out, there are still very few examples of community development trusts being given the opportunity to build up assets, and play the role of 'social entrepreneur'.



7. WEST WILTSHIRE'S FIVE TOWNS INITIATIVE: scoring early wins

Charter...market towns initiative...town councils...youth...community strategy

Lessons

- getting all the stakeholders to work together over a period of many years
- starting with the town centres and then widening the focus
- supplementing voluntary effort with paid coordinators
- developing Community Action Plans which link projects to strategic themes
- using the Town Councils to help fund ongoing action

Context

Though West Wiltshire's five towns are surrounded by countryside, they are often only three miles apart, and grew up largely as industrial towns. They suffered from what was known as 'The Five Towns syndrome', in which they tried to ape each other. The centres are now funding complementary roles with the local communities playing a leading role.

Trigger

A new Chief Executive decided to commission a strategy in 1997, from a team of regeneration and retail consultants, for developing each of their town centres in complementary ways. Workshops in each town, backed up by market and other research, identified the main threats and opportunities. A consumer survey of 500 households showed that the main competition was from larger historic towns outside the District altogether. With limited capacity for developing more shops, the strategic priority was to make the most of existing facilities such as the railway stations, and to diversify the attractions. The next challenge was how to maintain the momentum.

Actions

To build a shared vision, the Five Towns Initiative (Fti) was initially launched as an innovative partnership between the District Council and the five Town Councils, supported by the County Council and the Wessex Association of Chambers of Commerce. An initial round table conference part way through the consultancy study drew together 120 key people for half a day to agree the main themes. This was followed up at the end of 1998 by a ceremony in which the partners signed a 'charter' to 'pledge themselves to work together in a sustainable way to achieve a shared vision for the five towns of West Wiltshire'. Subsequent events have helped to review



achievements and discuss plans for the future. Coordination has been provided through the Chief Executive's department. With the number of households growing by 1% a year, the pressures are considerable, and tend to focus on social rather than economic issues. There has also been a problem of 'confusing activity with progress'.

By 1999 the Fti had committed £600,000, mainly in capital, to projects ranging from hearing loops and CCTV to flood prevention and children's' nurseries. However there was concern that efforts were becoming fragmented, and that it was proving difficult to overcome the short-term expectations of the private sector. Use has therefore been made of the Market Towns Initiative to draw up a Community Plan for Melksham, responding to an initiative from the Melksham First Partnership (which itself grew out of earlier efforts to involve the community in town centre regeneration).

Funding for a coordinator to draw up a Health Check has provided helpful in thinking through the issues, checking reality against people's perceptions, and engaging with the wider area. Care is being taken to work within the framework of eight themes that the County is following, but with a stress on local concerns. For example the Partnership had decided that youth and social inclusion were key priorities for Melksham. Early wins have included setting up a youth café, and progress is being made on a skateboard park and two neighbourhood nurseries under the Sure Start programme. A well produced but simple action plan is helping to mobilise further resources.



8. AMBLE DEVELOPMENT TRUST: implementing regeneration projects

**Development trust... beyond physical refurbishment ... finding the funding ...
local distinctiveness ... 'Eat the view'**

Lessons

- working in partnership with all levels of government
- maintaining community momentum through physical regeneration achievements
- diversifying the strategy to include new sources of funding
- developing local distinctiveness through food and drink
- learning with other towns and development trusts

Context

Regeneration achievements in the small Northumbrian port of Amble have recently been recognised by several awards that have considerably raised its profile, including both regional and national RTPI awards. This success has been led by the Amble Development Trust, which has worked in partnership with the town, district and county councils as well as the sub-regional partnership of the RDA and Warkworth Harbour Commissioners, and a strong local community response. The Development Trust is now widening that regeneration strategy to include social and economic projects, although finding the funding is not easy, even for places that have established success such as this.

Trigger

Amble's local economy was strongly dependent on fishing and coal mining, both of which saw considerable decline in the 1980s. Community pressure at local and district level led in 1993 to Alnwick District Council proposing the establishment of a Development Trust in the town to coordinate a strategy for regeneration. The Civic Trust was commissioned to undertake a study and over 300 people attended the first meeting where different working groups were set up, which led to the regeneration strategy. The status of a Development Trust enabled the Regeneration Partnership to develop its strategy and secure funding.

Action

'The Fourways', the disused pub bought by the Trust for £1 has become both its headquarters and home to four tenants whose rental income contributes to the Trust's sustainability. Now full to capacity, the Trust with help from the Northumberland Strategic Partnership has recently



acquired another former pub, 'The Norseman', to develop Fourways 2. The Fourways was one of four physical 'refurbishment' projects that formed the core of the original strategy, together with the Pier, the Town Square and Queen Street, a traditional main shopping street, that has had investment in revised traffic management, car parking bays, and street furniture in the town's colours of silver and blue. The construction of the new Town Square includes a strong urban design element with distinctive public art based on sails and flags, and the working harbour area adjoining the rebuilt pier now hosts a very popular Sunday market which often has the added attraction of some of the remaining fleet of 30 boats unloading their catch. The question of the future viability of the fishing industry is one element that the Development Trust and local authorities must address as they look forwards, and will be reflected in a strategy to access funding through the Regional Economic Strategy (RES), via the sub-regional partnership.

The Trust believes that there is still a need to show 'progress' through a continuing programme of physical improvements – most recently the connection into the Sustrans cycling route and provision of new bicycle stands to accommodate both locals and visitors and to encourage commuting to the nearby East Coast mainline station at Alnmouth – but there is also a growing focus on community development work across all age groups, with regular community engagement through the Trust's highly successful community newspaper *The Ambler*.

However funding is becoming harder to tap as the RES has strict criteria for hard economic outputs, and the aim is now to diversify the strategy to include social enterprise initiatives. Building on the Countryside Agency's initiative 'eat the view', the new strategy will look at local food and drink as the basis for its distinctiveness, aiming to develop several Intermediate Labour Market projects such as mussel beds, a market garden, youth hostel and a restaurant serving locally-produced produce. However, although Amble has been asked to lead the food and drink strand for the European-funded North Northumberland Leader+ project, there is still a shortage of funding for this next stream of work, as well as a concern at funding the capacity within the Trust to actually deliver the new projects being explored. One way forward is through sharing expertise and resources with other local Development Trusts, and the Federation of Northumberland Development Trusts has been established to 'share the knowledge' within the sector.



9. WARWICKSHIRE TOWNS: applying town centre management

Lessons

- setting up partnerships takes time
- *joint working with* Town Centre Managers and Action Plans
- *Partnerships provide good consultation mechanisms and 'sounding boards'*
- dovetailing Town Centre Action Plans with Council Services
- sharing good practice through support at County level
- *developing new joint initiatives*

Context

The County of Warwickshire contains seven principal towns and a number of market towns on the edge of the Birmingham, *Solihull* and Coventry conurbations. The County Council has played a leading role in applying Town Centre Management, and is now involved in developing a pilot Business Improvement District in one of the towns. Rugby, as well as providing support for customer care initiatives in smaller centres like Coleshill and Southam.

Trigger

The County became interested in TCM in the mid 1990s, following review of the Warwickshire Structure Plan, as a means of both addressing strategic issues, and bringing together disparate County departments to provide a *more* coordinated service delivery. Counties are responsible for Highways, **Public Transport, Economic Development** and Libraries and are also significant landowners. Many of the Councils services now dovetail with Town Centre Action Plans, in particular access, transport, traffic management, streetscape, regeneration, inward investment, marketing and promotion.

Action

The County has helped created TCM partnerships in all the main centres to pursue a broader regeneration strategy. The aim has been to ensure co-ordination, provide strategic advice and support, service delivery in partnership with others and ensure that the towns make the most of their distinctive strengths. This has been achieved by the appointment of members and officers to TCM Forums in each town, which range from breakfast clubs to properly constituted company boards.

The Town Centre Action Plans were generally developed through consultation of varying types in each town. Town Centre Managers have been employed in the seven principal towns, backed



up by two full time TCM support officers at County Hall. In the smaller market towns, the County takes on a more direct role for the development and delivery of town action plans with three staff providing support.

The County provides £4,000 to support each manager, plus a fund of £40-50,000 county wide to support local initiatives. Other funding is provided through Regeneration and Transport Budgets. Local partnerships tend to be fiercely independent and to pursue short-term goals, but *several* worthwhile joint programmes have been developed. Christmas promotions and events are timed so they do not clash. A regular programme of craft fairs and farmers markets has been established. Joint marketing materials and a regular newsletter are developed between the County and town centre managers, and exhibitions are held on a regular basis.

The market town partnerships have taken a wider view looking at facilities for young people, new business start-ups and tourism as well as traffic, transport and crime. Two market towns have already completed civic pride improvement schemes and have embarked on programmes of events, activities, leaflets and advertisements to attract local people and visitors from further a field. In one market town a new business forum has brought businesses together for the first time.

The County also plays an important role in monitoring performance indicators for each town, which are used in benchmarking performance and trends. One further benefit has been that the Warwickshire towns are working together in promoting BIDS, with Rugby spearheading the process, with lessons being shared with other centres. Warwickshire was selected as one of the 23 national pilots. The approach taken is unique two pronged approach, seeking to implement a BID in Rugby Town Centre, developing 'added value' initiatives and developing BIDs opportunities in other parts of Warwickshire in the medium / longer terms. The Pilot was the only joint application between a County, Borough and Town Centre Company.

10. STOCKPORT'S SUBURBS: supporting local distinctiveness

Key performance indicators

Differing roles ... benchmarking ... dedicated officer team ... political commitment

Lessons

- recognising the economic value of retail as an important local employer and the environmental and social potential of thriving local centres
- supporting local distinctiveness
- tapping regional and local sources of data to produce KPIs
- developing an organisational structure
- seeing the value to the local community of an increased sense of local importance
- attracting political commitment

Context

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council is part of Greater Manchester and abuts onto the County of Cheshire, and the characteristics of the eight district centres in the borough vary correspondingly. Bramhall, Cheadle, Cheadle Hulme and Marple appear more affluent, Hazel Grove and Romiley are typically suburban, and Edgeley and Reddish more typically inner city in nature. The District Centres are a vital element of the economic, environmental and social fabric of the Borough – with each having between 100 to 200 shops. Economically, they are home to more than 1100 retail/service businesses, and provide in excess of 3,000 local jobs.

Trigger

By the late-1990s many of the borough's District Centres were facing decline with increased competition from elsewhere. Although retail employment often goes unacknowledged, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council recognised the significant local economic importance of the 3000 jobs that are dependent on the viability of the borough's District centres. They also recognised the considerable environmental and social benefits of District Centres – as attractive places to shop, providing easily accessible locations and services for the community as a whole, but particularly for the less mobile, and a very real sense of local identity. In 1999 the political impetus from the Local Authority led to the establishment of a District Centres team of officers within the Regeneration service, to help set priorities and to extend and implement the wider strategy pursued in the borough at a local level. The Council produced a District Centre Strategy early in 2001, and this has subsequently been reviewed and updated.

**Action**

Heavy investment was made in developing partnerships with a variety of local trader and voluntary and community organisations, as well as surveying residents, businesses and other local service providers. Dedicated officer working within the Regeneration section serve each of the Eight District Centres, and each centre now has its own individual Action Plan. This involves a discrete set of proposals for the centre, drawn up by the local partnership, and agreed by the Council's local area committee.

Understanding the health of the centres is essential, and SMBC purchase baseline research from AGMA (Association of Greater Manchester Authorities). This provides vacancies and footfall figures, but as it is only annual they supplement it with more specific indicators relevant to Stockport, including monthly vacancy levels, customer surveys, employment statistics etc. SMBC plans to update its Health check and Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) every two years.

The overall strategy has generated several individual schemes, including a bespoke business support initiative, a series of environmental schemes, car park refurbishment schemes, street lighting improvements (with individual district centre inserts to emphasise local distinctiveness and identity), together with two pilot shop front improvement schemes. Two centres have received CCTV systems to help deal with crime prevention issues. Communication and promotion is also considered important, and the District Centres have a dedicated section of the Stockport MBC website, whilst local partnerships have produced and distributed publicity material.

Over the past six years the health of Stockport's District Centres has ranged from those that are stable with modest improvements to those that have seen no improvement, or even slight decline. Officers are convinced that developing the strategies has had a direct impact on supporting the vitality and viability of the centres, and that without them decline would have far more marked. One reason for the success of the overall strategy for smaller centres has been ever more corporate involvement across the council and strong political commitment.