

# New Life for Smaller Towns

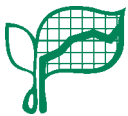
A HANDBOOK FOR ACTION





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**URBED** (Urban and Economic Development Group) is a not-for-profit consultancy and research group who specialise in devising practical strategies for regenerating urban areas and promoting local economic development. URBED has advised over 50 different towns, including 30 smaller towns, and has produced a number of other key reports for revitalising towns, including *Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge* for the Department of the Environment (1994) and *Town Centre Partnerships* for the Association of Town Centre Management/Department of the Environment (1997). URBED runs the Market Towns Research Network for the Rural Development Commission, to bring together researchers in smaller towns and provide a basis for collaboration and further research.

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### Foreword by Richard Caborn, MP

Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning

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The Government is committed to revitalising our existing town centres. One of the first actions last year was to reaffirm our support for policies to get traditional town centre uses - shops, offices, leisure and entertainment, public services, including health and education - back into town centres. We want to focus new investment in these centres and to re-establish them as the focus for their communities and for their wider catchment areas. We want to see our market and other smaller towns revitalised.

We expect local planning authorities to set out their strategy, identifying the centres where they will encourage investment and town centre sites appropriate for new developments. We expect them to identify smaller towns as key locations for new investment. We expect planners to be positive and proactive, not negative and reactive.

Planning policies on their own, however, will not be enough. Local communities must realise that the future of their town is in their own hands. But it is not just a matter for the local authority or for business, it requires commitment and action by the whole community working together to create a shared vision and then to bring it to fruition. Whether this exercise is called regeneration or town centre management, the keys to success are partnership between all the major local stakeholders and concerted action.

I welcome this new handbook to meet the special needs of smaller towns. The Checklists for Action will help the partners to get to grips with the key issues. It will enable people to get moving quickly, to identify key areas for action and to draw up their action plan. The handbook is timely and fills a clear gap in the market - equipping smaller towns with an action plan for survival. I commend it to all who want to ensure a vital and viable future for their town in the 21st century.

*Richard Caborn.*



**Foreword by Ian Coull,**  
Group Property Director, J Sainsbury plc

**SAINSBURY'S**

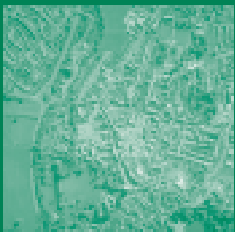
Sainsbury's is pleased to support the preparation of this handbook by URBED (Urban and Economic Development Group), which has been produced in conjunction with Action for Market Towns and the Local Government Association.

A great deal has already been written about the effects modern forms of retailing such as superstores and retail warehousing have had on the fortunes of towns and cities. This publication takes a new - and quite different - starting point. Rather than consider what might have been, it demonstrates how smaller towns can respond positively to the social and economic changes which are taking place, the challenge presented by new forms of retailing, and the effect of competition from larger centres nearby.

*New Life for Smaller Towns* demonstrates how smaller towns can begin to revitalise their attractiveness to shoppers, visitors, businesses and residents. The main text is complemented by a diverse range of case studies from throughout the country to illustrate how specific initiatives and ideas have effectively been put into practice.

I believe this is a useful handbook for anyone who is interested or actively involved in the revitalisation and planning of smaller towns throughout the country.

*The views expressed in this report are those of URBED.  
They do not necessarily accord with those of J Sainsbury plc.*






# INTRODUCTION TO THE HANDBOOK

Many smaller towns today are at a turning point. From being on a historic crossroads many literally have been bypassed, and the increased use of the car, changes in shopping habits, and the decline of small shops, has left many with numbers of empty or charity shops, and without a clear role, or the means of knowing which way to turn. Smaller towns, and there are well over 1,000 in England and Wales with populations of between 2-20,000, are in many ways the backbone of Britain. After all, they include not only traditional market towns (and there are still over 270 with operating markets) but also seaside resorts, some industrial towns and even towns that have been swallowed up by the spread of urban conurbations. What unites them is a common concern about the problems of vacant shops, traffic problems and parking, how to attract visitors, and business rates, which have been identified in surveys by Action for Market Towns, the new association representing the smaller town.

If their centres die, then in some way the heart of Britain is that much weaker. Not only do residents suffer, but there is also a loss of local employment opportunities, and less to attract visitors. The consequences of decline are felt most heavily by those who can least cope with change, including the elderly, the poor, and the young - that is, all who lack access to cars - as well as by the independent traders and small property owners who suffer when they lose their livelihood and savings. Hence, at the Millennium, when thoughts are turning to the future, it is all the more important to focus on the options for the thousand or more places that give people their identity, and which represent the most tangible human achievement, and the one at the heart of any considerations of sustainability, social inclusion and environmental quality.

This handbook is a response to our experience of working with over 50 different communities, and draws on the fruits of many years of research, as well as a series of conferences organised for the Rural Development Commission under the title *Revitalising the Heart of Market Towns*. Useful experience was also gained from producing a short guide for Wiltshire's towns and villages. Many people had assumed that because small towns had often been around for six or seven centuries they were impervious to decline. Our *Vital and Viable Town Centres* report for the Department of the Environment found that different types of town faced different problems, and that it was wrong to generalise. However, what we classified as market towns were no longer doing as well as they had been five years earlier; according to 57% of their planning officers, and a significant number were declining, despite the prosperity of their catchment areas.

Many blamed supermarkets, but whether one likes these and other forms of modern shopping or not, they are here to stay, and there is no turning back the clock. Just as coaching inns closed when the railways opened, and then found new roles, so too many town centres are having to adjust to change. Indeed in many places increased competition has led to long overdue initiatives to make the centres more attractive and to diversify the uses. People everywhere expect higher standards of choice and environment, and will spend time and money where they can get what they want most easily. Sadly some councils have still acted like ostriches, or pursued unrealistic grand plans or even taken actions that are counter-productive, such as excluding cars from their centres after the customers have bolted.

To provide the many people who care about smaller towns (that is, with less than 20,000 population) with a source of practical information and advice, URBED has produced this handbook. It draws together some 30 different ideas for improving town centres under five main themes. These cover improving the shopping offer, diversifying the attractions, coping with the car, creating a pride of place, and resourcing town centre initiatives. The themes are backed up by checklists with one hundred questions in all, to help those looking for new ideas or wanting to undertake a more comprehensive assessment of the health of their town. More than 50 case studies illustrate the range of possibilities, including good practice on strategic issues such as how to fill empty shops, as well as advice on processes, such as raising funds. The case studies are referred to throughout the text with the symbol  in the margin and a reference number, and while each one has been chosen to illustrate one particular theme, it will usually be relevant to some of the others as well. The case studies are looseleaf and can be read separately, moved around and added to. We have also tried to include useful contacts, interesting facts, and sources of further information.

The format is that of a working document, and this cannot be the final word, as the process of managing and improving town centres, like running a theatre, is never ending. We hope readers will add their own examples, and that they will tell us what does or does not work so we can update the handbook. It already draws on a huge amount of experience, and we are very grateful for all those who have helped us along the way. If you want to use parts of the handbook or case studies we would very much like to hear from you. Permission will usually be freely given.

Regeneration is a much misused word, which is why we have called this handbook *New Life for Smaller Towns*. URBED's core philosophy is that the key to successful regeneration is making the most of existing assets and this depends on local people working together in a spirit of partnership. This is emphasised in our other research and publications such as *Town Centre Partnerships*, a report published in 1997 for the Association of Town Centre Management and the Department of the Environment, and *Building the 21st Century Home*, to be published this year by Architectural Press. While information is not the whole answer, it is an important element in going from vision to results, and a published strategy, based on a process that has involved the main stakeholders, is an essential element in all the most successful projects that we have worked with or studied.

The handbook could not have been produced without the initial encouragement of Richard Butt and colleagues at the Rural Development Commission, who took up the challenge we identified of focussing on the needs of market towns. It benefitted from the advice and support of Ailsa Blair and colleagues at what is now the Local Government Association, and members of the District Planning Officers Society, who commented on early drafts. It is being distributed through Action for Market Towns, who are also involved in the new Market Towns Research Network that URBED are setting up.

Finally, the research and publication have been generously sponsored by J Sainsbury plc, and we would like especially to credit Huw Williams for his active encouragement. However, the opinions expressed here are entirely those of URBED, and URBED must take the blame for any errors and omissions, which we hope to correct in a future edition.

**URBED**  
Urban and Economic Development Group  
October 1998



## 1

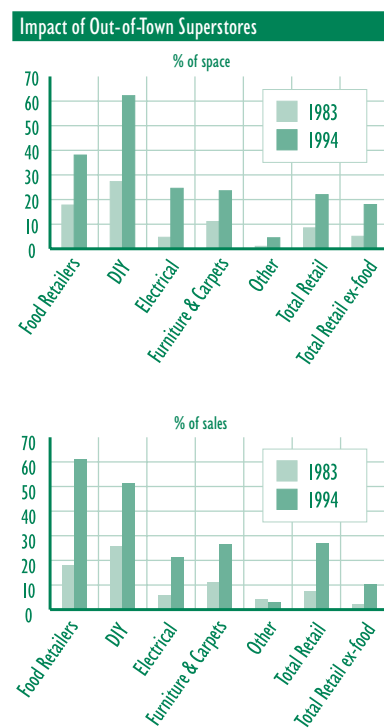
# IMPROVING THE SHOPPING OFFER

- Accessible food stores
- Friendly individual shops
- A lively market
- New uses for empty shops
- Value for money

While people are attracted to towns for a variety of reasons, shopping is a high priority. The challenges seem daunting, with competition coming not just from other towns and larger cities, but also from new forms of retailing, including mail order and the Internet as well as superstores and retail parks. The changes have been dramatic in terms of the loss of independent shops and the growth of the large supermarket chains.

Town centres are still an important source of local employment and trade, but over the past 20 years they have seen many independent shops close with a shift of trade to national multiples and superstores. The economic effects of losing small shops are hard to assess, but experience from other countries, such as the USA, suggests that independent shops plough back more of their takings in the local area. This can be particularly important in rural areas where already low levels of purchasing power need to be prevented from 'leaking away'. Independent shops and markets are also more likely to provide outlets for local produce, creating a multiplier effect, as wealth is recycled in the area. Furthermore, though employment levels in each shop may be low, they often provide essential part-time and training opportunities which would be hard to replace as they are in highly accessible locations. The American adage 'Use it or lose it' means one should not take small shops for granted, but instead ensure that they adapt what they are doing to the changing market place.

The smaller and more isolated towns often have the greatest problems when they lose their shops and trade and many small towns can only expect to be lively on several days of the week. A town with a population of under 10,000 and perhaps 60-100 shops can be extremely vulnerable if too many basic shops like the butcher and baker close. Few



The New Economics Magazine (issue 40, 1996, New Economics Foundation) states that 'A local corner shop can create one job for every £50,000 worth of turnover whereas a supermarket provides one job for every £250,000.'

Successive government guidance has toughened the constraints on development out of town, and reinforced the 'plan led system' through the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Planning Policy Guidance Note 6 - PPG6. In the first draft of PPG6, which covered town centres, in 1993, the emphasis was on local authorities encouraging consumer choice whereas now the interests of the town centre are predominant. The June 1996 version of PPG6 advocates a sequential test to find appropriate sites, with preference being given first to town centre, and then edge of town sites, but states that 'If however there is no need or capacity for further development, there will be no need to identify additional sites in the town.' 'Edge of centre' has been defined as within easy walking distance of the primary shopping centre to enable one trip to serve several purposes. The Secretary of State overruled the Inspector in the case of Daventry in May 1996 because he thought the inner ring road acted as a barrier and that an uphill route to the town centre would deter linked trips. Developers are now required to investigate alternative sites, to be flexible in their space requirements, and to accept planning conditions limiting the range of goods to be sold, to prevent comparison shopping following bulky goods out of town. In the case of Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, where an appeal was turned down, positive benefits are sought, with the Inspector concluding: 'In the present case there is no evidence to suggest that this scheme would have any positive effects on Wisbech town centre. The site is too distant from the centre to encourage any significant element of linked shopping trips and the scheme would certainly not of itself diversify and extend the range of provision there or otherwise make it more attractive for shopping purposes.' The Labour government rejected out-of-town proposals in Cirencester, Gloucestershire, and the outcome stressed the need for stores to fit into the space available.



*Sainsbury's new Country Town Store turned a derelict site into a riverside attraction. Melksham, West Wiltshire.*

towns can depend on tourism, and certainly not for the bulk of the year. The prospects of new retail development in such circumstances are often pie in the sky and simply lead to derelict sites and vacant shops. Far more important is to improve the environment and attract people to occupy the empty space, even if the occupiers are not ideal. Nothing is more off-putting to customers and investors than a series of empty (or even worse, semi-derelict) shops.

### Accessible food stores

The three growth trends of car ownership, home refrigeration and women going out to work, as well as changes in retailing methods, have created a seemingly inexorable shift towards shopping in large supermarkets and superstores. This has been the main source of retail investment in recent years and the impact on small local town centres can be controversial. On the one hand if such stores are located in or close to town centres, they can bring 'headline' jobs to the town and attract customers who may otherwise not come to the town at all. They can also use vacant or derelict land which may not otherwise find a use. However, if such developments are poorly linked to the centre, they can result in a loss of business for town centre shops which can lead to closures and job losses, as evidenced in a recent DETR report on the impact of superstores. This argument, together with concerns about the environmental effects of relying on private transport, has led to Government action to limit out-of-town development. Local authorities are now expected to identify sites for retail development and prepare briefs to ensure site assembly where necessary, and strategies for improving their centres, applying the principles of town centre management. Developers have to prove their schemes do not harm the vitality and viability of existing centres, travel patterns or the development plan strategy.



*Witney, Oxfordshire*

However, while some towns may be too small or space simply not available, there are an increasing number of examples where major food retailers have developed in town. For instance, in Witney, Oxfordshire, the Waitrose store forms part of a comprehensive scheme, undertaken to meet the Council's planning brief, and shoppers often make 'linked trips' to other shops in the town. In Reigate, Surrey, a Safeway store and







some unit shops have been developed to join the main shopping streets together, and the empty shops in the centre have begun to be occupied by restaurants. In Melksham, West Wiltshire, a new Sainsbury's County Store has attractively redeveloped a site just off the centre and contributed to opening up the riverside as an attraction.



*In Farnham, Hampshire an old yard has been successfully developed for specialist shops anchored by a food store.*

## Friendly individual shops

The future of small town centres is very much bound up with the fortunes of independent businesses, who account for the bulk of retailers there. Originally most shops grew up in the front of workshops and the shopkeeper was involved in measuring and packing what was sold, as well as often processing the materials. Today, with the growth of self-service and one-stop shopping, small shops have to compete in different ways. For example they can emphasise friendly and knowledgeable service, or provide something special and locally made, or change their opening hours to suit customers who now go out to work. Customers get to know shopkeepers and

part of the experience is often a chat, or discussing the latest news. There are still a number of possible niche markets that a small town centre can seek to serve. This is especially true if they are in an area with significant numbers of affluent residents or visitors, and specialist suppliers of food and drink can thrive even with modern superstores nearby, as can be seen in towns such as Wallingford in the Thames Valley, or Cirencester in Gloucestershire.

Occasionally a single shop will give a town a reputation and offer a reason for visiting it, like the children's clothes shop in Herne Bay, Kent, which even attracts people from Canterbury. In towns which produce consumer goods there may be scope for a linked 'cut-price' retail outlet, as a nationally known garment maker has done in Littleport,

Over the last 40 years, according to the Barclays Bank Review of Small Businesses in Retailing, the market share of the large multiples has almost doubled to 65% of total retail turnover. The decline has been sharpest among independent food stores, which fell from 275,000 in 1950 to 79,000 in 1992. Small retailers still own nearly 250,000 shops and employ more than 750,000 people, but persistently lag behind the larger firms, partly due to economies of scale and buying power. Barclays believe that as price competitiveness continues to be key, so small retailers can only compete by providing a superior and more personal service, by finding a product niche, and by developing their business skills to control costs.



*Friendly service from a butcher attracts customers in Woodbridge, Suffolk.*

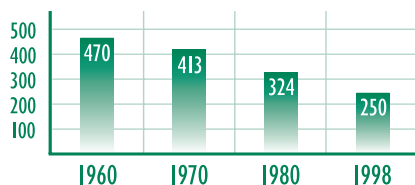


*An attractive display draws trade in Atherstone, Warwickshire.*



*A good window display draws the attention of passers-by.  
Northallerton, North Yorkshire.*

The number of local shops in the UK has been falling



source: Verdict

Cambridgeshire. Towns with attractive streets can sometimes draw in a combination of bookshops or boutiques, cafes or bars, creating a 'Continental' atmosphere. Towns that are on busy routes used by tourists often end up with antique or craft shops and galleries, as is evident in the Cotswolds and the Lake District, but may lose the basic shops that sustain local trade. Often the most interesting looking shop in a small town is the traditional ironmongers, with its outside display, which offers something special that a DIY store does not. Similarly a delicatessen can create a mouth-watering display in its window (contrasting with the 'blank' windows of many supermarkets) which encourages passing trade to stop as in Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire. Good windows and shopfronts can be encouraged by awards and advice. Small shops in isolated locations may use mail order to widen their market (including the Internet). They can also make some of what they sell, to add value and to use their time profitably, such as running a café in a bookstore or art-shop.

While an individual new or improved shop will not generally draw in additional customers to a town centre, the establishment of several can create the critical mass and image which can draw customers from a wider catchment area as well as retain the loyalty of its local residents. A classic example is Hay-on-Wye, on the edge of Wales, which has become internationally known as a centre for secondhand books. However, all too often towns disperse their attractions and fail to open up the most attractive areas at times when customers are available (unlike the out-of-town stores and major city centres, who have taken full advantage of Sunday opening, for example). Finally, though traders are often against it, changes in opening hours can be an important way of winning trade, provided enough shops act together. It is noticeable how in many Continental towns shops are closed in the afternoons and reopen in the early evening when people with money to spend are around.

1.2

### A lively market

The most successful small towns seem to be ones where the market still forms a colourful and lively attraction, by offering the combination of good value and friendly service. Certainly, towns that said they were 'improving' in URBED's 1994 survey were



A regular market enlivens the main square in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire.



more likely to have adopted policies for improving their market (and also places to eat and drink). It is a great pity when the market has disappeared or is hidden away from the centre, as in Bedford or Sandwich, Kent, for example, or is no more than a collection of travelling vans. Markets can help to animate dead spaces and pedestrianised streets. New types of markets, such as car boot sales, which according to Boots The Chemists are visited by one million visitors a week, and craft and flea markets have grown up recently, while the medieval fair has been replaced by modern shows and rallies, which flourish throughout the summer in many places. In the USA farmers' markets have been very successful, enabling smallholders to sell direct, and the results from the first experiment in Britain, in Bath, are encouraging.

1.3

Despite out-of-town superstores, the most fundamental reason for going into town is still to buy food and market towns are busiest on market day. By 1600 there were some 800 market towns in England and Wales and though today there may be fewer stalls, the market place has usually survived as the heart of the town. Some markets have been finding it hard to survive where shops have gone 'down market' and offer cut price goods, and where people do most of their shopping in one shop. However, in other places, like Wellington in Shropshire, the market is the main reason for going to town, and has been extended in size and frequency.

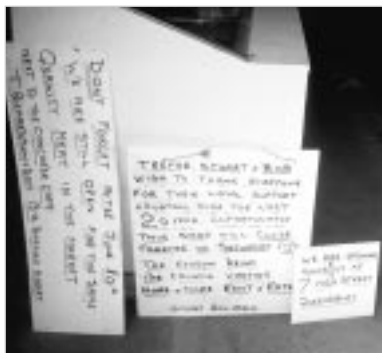
1.4

There are sometimes conflicts between shopkeepers and street traders, yet generally street traders help to enliven small towns, and bring a sense of occasion, creating somewhere distinctive and different. They also allow people to start up in business and can offer goods, such as fish or cheese, which may not support a full-time shop. Markets can sometimes be revived by creating attractive places, with colourful stalls and space nearby for storing vans. But most markets will resist movement, and probably rightly so. They also often benefit from new blood, and from allowing people to experiment by selling different kinds of produce, on different days, for example craft goods over Christmas, or even on Sundays. The outdoor market may be reinforced by a market hall, possibly a converted building, with changing events and sales, for example 'celebrating the beginning of summer or with a 'goodwill event' for voluntary organisations and charities.

URBED's 1994 survey for *Vital and Viable Town Centres* defined 'winners' as towns that considered that their centres were still improving. 54% of winners had promoted distinctive markets as compared with 34% on average. They had also promoted a rich mix of uses in their centres, including cafes and entertainments - not just pubs (42% of winners had encouraged cafes as against 28% on average).



The market still takes place in the heart of the town. Cirencester, Gloucestershire.



This sign in a shop in Halifax, West Yorkshire, tells a story which is only partly true.

## New uses for empty shops

A major concern in most small towns is the level of rents and rates, and these are often blamed for shops closing. The problem is particularly severe in secondary or fringe areas where rates can sometimes exceed rents. The government is consulting about changes to business rates to help small businesses but, while any relief would be welcome, research suggests that rates are seldom the critical factor influencing the viability of shops. Hopefully the government's review of business rates will lead to improvements, but there is often a more basic problem that the level of trade can no longer support so many small shops and the centre needs to contract. While the national average is nine retail units in the town centre per 1,000 population, in Builth Wells and Brecon in Mid Wales, for example, there are 35 per 1,000, and some towns now have more shops than they can support.



Having charity shops may be better than the building staying empty. Dorchester, Dorset.



Ramsgate, Kent, Impact office reused a vacant shop as a project base which also brightens up the centre.

Experian (formerly Chas E. Goad) publishes information on the breakdown of floor-space and units into different categories for over 1,000 centres in Britain. Estimates have been made of the numbers of different types of shops which include some 1,500 cyclist shops, 2,412 fishmongers, 3,000 wholefood shops and 3,790 booksellers, to give a few examples.

At first sight the long-term decline of independent shops is discouraging. However, Frome in Somerset shows how it is possible to reverse the decline through promoting new uses for an area that had lost most of its shops, and providing financial incentives. In Stroud in Gloucestershire, as in a growing number of towns, shop windows are being used for temporary displays by voluntary organisations and even by local artists, and this helps to make the street seem friendlier and less of a 'disaster area'.

1.5

Many landlords and banks are reluctant to deal with new businesses, as they expect to see them fail, yet there has been an astonishing growth in the numbers of people running their own businesses. From one of the lowest levels

in Europe a decade or so ago, the numbers have doubled, creating a potential demand for premises in town centres for small businesses. While many self-employed people work at home or in buildings that have been converted into business centres or managed workspace away from the centre, many more welcome the chance of contact with other people and the satisfaction of meeting customers' needs. With new products and interests, there has therefore been a growth in the number of specialist businesses, from wholefoods, or healthfoods, and wood stoves, to security and computer supplies. There has also been a growing number of small multiples selling unusual clothes at attractive prices. In some small towns and villages, craftsmen and women have sometimes taken over former shops as places to live and work, which helps to make the town somewhere interesting or memorable to visit. The recent spate of conversions of former bank premises to pubs, wine bars and restaurants, was a development that could not have been foreseen at the beginning of the 1990s.

1.6

Some people complain about the growing number of charity shops that have taken over empty units. While these may not add to the town's attractions, they may serve a useful role in 'recycling' goods, such as clothes and bric-a-brac and so are probably here to stay. However, charity shops are becoming more professional and help to provide places for browsing and leisure shopping. It is far better that a shop is in use, particularly if it is prominent, than standing empty. Letting an empty shop be occupied

by stalls or displays as a temporary measure can provide a practical way for a local initiative to have an early impact. It can also act as a project base or office, as in Ramsgate, Kent, for example.

1.7 Towns need to start thinking positively about who they need to attract. Only a few have yet adopted retail recruitment policies, as a number of American small towns have done as part of the US National Main Street Program, often capitalising on the 'three-Bs' - bars, books and bread. The opportunities can sometimes be identified by comparing the profile of the town's shops with other comparable places. By looking at what is missing, it may be possible to attract a business that is already operating in a non-competing town in the same area. It is also possible to encourage businesses to start up to fill gaps or to broaden what they are already doing by publishing lists or directories of what is available, as in Deal, Kent, for example, and by providing counselling as in Powys, Mid Wales.



Second-hand designer clothes are sold from a grand shop that was once a jewellers. Portland, Maine, USA.

## Value for money

Town centres are tending to be most heavily used by people with time but limited budgets and it is therefore important that shops are seen to be offering value for money. This is particularly important to customers such as the elderly or young parents at home who want to go out every day and have more time to shop. Indeed, there is some evidence that value for money is an increasingly important factor in decisions on where to shop, as fears of recession encourage people to find ways of saving money. Many people are looking to recycle household goods and furniture and to buy better quality second-hand clothes than they could afford new. Quality second-hand shops provide character and interest to the high street, as well as value for money.

While many now find it easier to do a 'one stop shop' where they think that prices will be lower and the choice greater, small shops and market traders can fight back by emphasising service, including advice on what to buy. Some use memberships of associations to reinforce quality standards and much of the well-publicised growth of small businesses in the USA has been due to franchising and the opportunities for independent businesses to take advantage of group buying and marketing.



Traders in Leominster, Herefordshire, encourage shoppers to be loyal.



Discount stores can offer an interesting place to shop. Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire.

In the 1990s, there has been a huge increase in the use of plastic cards for both payment and reward schemes, with 27 million personalised supermarket loyalty cards in use by the end of 1996, to encourage the card holder to be loyal to the issuer. In comparison, by the end of 1996, only 50 town loyalty cards had been either researched, developed or implemented in Britain.

In Chester 25% of households have a smart card, for use in Chester town centre only. The card costs £1 for two years. A directory lists all outlets where cardholders can get 'good value' including car parking, museum entries and restaurants as well as shops. This can be 5-10% off prices, or free delivery or 'added value' gifts, such as a free bottle of wine in a restaurant.

Others are collaborating through involvement in initiatives like loyalty schemes and, though it can be difficult to generate enthusiasm among depressed retailers, there is little doubt that more is to be gained through collaboration than competition. Loyalty schemes provide incentives to support small shops, but also, as in Leominster, Herefordshire, help to generate ongoing publicity. Loyalty cards are used as a form of marketing to build a collaborative programme that will emphasise the assets of a town centre to its potential customers. They vary in their sophistication, from a piece of card where you fill in your name and address as in Leominster, to a 'smart' card like the one used in Chester. The incentives can be a collective points schemes which allows reduced parking or prizes related to individual promotions displayed by a notice in the window, which can be changed as often as the retailer wishes. Some of the more sophisticated 'smart' cards charge the customer for the card and generally have incentives that last for six months at a time. Retailers within schemes have generally seen an increase in their turnover, with the most successful being the ones with the most imaginative incentives. While a number of the original low-tech loyalty cards are now losing momentum, they have nonetheless been very successful for a period of time and worked as a catalyst, not only to motivate the retailers but also to recapture the loyalty of the users. They also often succeeded in gaining support for partnership funding for enhancement schemes or other capital funding schemes which would not have happened otherwise.



## Checklist for action

# 1

- a **Does the centre look alive, with only a few vacant shops (say, less than 10%)?**
- b **Can you buy everything you need regularly in the centre (if not, what are the significant gaps)?**
- c **Is there a good food store within walking distance of other shops (if not, could one be attracted)?**
- d **Are shopfronts attractive and are window displays inviting?**
- e **Do the individual shops offer friendly service (if not, is training available)?**
- f **Do opening hours match customers' needs?**
- g **Is there an area where it is interesting and pleasant to browse?**
- h **Is there a list or directory, with a map, showing individual and specialist shops?**
- i **Does the town have a lively market?**
- j **Does the market sell a variety of goods not otherwise available?**
- k **Is there value for money in terms of specialist shops or good quality second-hand shops?**
- l **Is there a loyalty scheme to encourage regular customers?**
- m **Are the main empty shops in good use, for example as charity shops?**
- n **Are empty windows used for temporary displays?**
- o **Is there encouragement and support available for new high street enterprises (e.g. is there an effective Chamber of Trade or trades group)?**
- p **Is the town centre developing a 'niche' that attracts customers?**
- q **Do rents and rates reflect trading conditions in different parts of the town?**



## 2

## DIVERSIFYING THE ATTRACTIONS

- Education and training opportunities
- Good places to eat and drink
- Arts and community activities
- Promotion and events
- Tourism and visitors
- Living in town
- Enterprise development

Shops only form part of the life of a town. People are drawn into town for a variety of reasons, such as seeing the bank manager, arranging a mortgage or dealing with a will, obtaining health or welfare services, mailing a parcel, or dropping a child off at school. These needs encourage 'linked trips' where people combine shopping with some other purpose, thus keeping traffic down while the numbers of users remain up. Maintaining the range of professional services and public services - police, council, transport, education and health - in a town all helps to keep it busy. An analysis of what shop units are being used for often reveals that most of the units (though not always the space) are given over to services of different kinds.

During the boom times, many small shops complained of being squeezed out by redevelopment or by the growth of financial services and estate agents. Today with the rationalisation that is taking place there is a choice of space in most towns. The challenge is to attract enterprises that will be viable, as well as add to the overall attractions of the town centre. This can include a wide range of services from colleges and cafes, to arts centres and accountants, or even fitness centres, and it is better that these are on the street than hidden away. These are the sorts of services many people are now looking for in smaller towns.

### Education and training opportunities

The Germans have an expression '*town air makes man free*', and this refers to one of the important roles town centres play in spreading information and ideas. (Centres have also grown by attracting different groups who are commemorated in the numbers of





*Young people from the local school contribute to planning their town in Warminster, Wiltshire.*

*In **Just a Bite**, Egon Ronay's guide which lists over 900 establishments, the success stories are surprisingly diverse with over 30 small towns with more than three entries each, and many more with two entries.*



*Shops on the fringe of town centres can be turned into attractive and accessible restaurants. Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire.*

different churches and chapels they contain.) One important function that keeps many smaller towns alive, is education as for example in Marlborough in Wiltshire, Malvern in Worcestershire and Sherbourne in Dorset. Many people have moved to smaller towns for the education they can offer their children. Estate agents have found that the highest property values are associated with towns with good schools.

2.1

Education in its widest forms can often fill empty space, for example a redundant shop might become a museum or even a training centre or adjunct to a college. There is likely to be a continuing demand for education at all ages, and face-to-face contact is vital along with easy access, making town centre locations ideal. Education authorities may not consider the impact of closure or expansion on the life of towns, going instead for where they already own land or expansion is cheap, and it is vital that town centre strategies take their needs into account.

Schools often require large sites, but may be able to make use of multi-storey premises. They can take over historic buildings that might otherwise go to waste and which lend themselves to sub-division into classrooms or even hostels, such as country houses or hospitals. The growing demand for student accommodation provides a use for empty space, particularly over shops, in towncentres. There is a real opportunity for education to be a catalyst for revitalising a town, particularly as students and young people often require public transport and support cafes and gift shops. Many people can contribute to revitalisation by undertaking surveys and of course by helping to improve the standards of service in shops. Now that most schools are involved in information technology, young people could even be ambassadors for changing work practices.

### Good places to eat and drink

One of the most important functions of a town centre is to provide sustenance and hospitality. The English pub is famous and many in country towns can trace their origins back to coaching inns, with yards where the horses could be changed while travellers were refreshed. They occupy historic buildings that often provide information about the town to visitors. However, a decline in drinking, partly as a result of the breathalyser, together with shifts in leisure habits towards more home-based entertainment, family entertainment complexes and the rationalisation of brewery chains has meant that many pubs have become vacant. At the same time there are trends in the leisure market from which town centres can benefit.

Before the last war, apart from Italian restaurants, there was a lack of interesting places to eat and it was said that the British did not like eating out. However, this is in part a Victorian hangover, and many towns have increasingly adopted a more Continental way of life. Within the last couple of years there has been an increase of 40% in the numbers of families eating Sunday lunch out. Almost every town of any size has its Indian and Chinese restaurants and in turn these lead to spin-offs as former staff open their own places. Pubs are increasingly relying on food sales and becoming more like cafes, with places to eat outside. There is also a growing number of groups that seek to repeat a formula, and benefit from bulk buying, from Witherspoons and Harvester to Cafe Rouge.



2.2

Good places to eat are not just to be found in the obvious tourist centres like Cambridge and Bath, but also in many smaller towns that offer places which are a pleasure to walk around, and which succeed in developing a loyal clientele. Unlike top restaurants, which can afford to be in isolated places (though with plenty of parking attached), cafes, tea-rooms and bars need to be on routes which people walk regularly. They are rarely to be found in pedestrianised precincts, in part because they cannot afford to compete with the rents that multiples will pay, and also because they rely on being visible to passing trade, and on on-street car parking. There are a number of substantial smaller towns with a wealth of multiples but few pleasant places to eat or drink which are now suffering as a result. This may offer an opportunity for smaller towns to compete.



*The cafe in the Old Needle-makers in Lewes, East Sussex, provides a meeting place within a business and retail centre just off the main car park.*

2.3

The expansion of small groups may provide the answer, for example in Yorkshire there is a Betty's Tearoom in Northallerton and also in York and Harrogate. In some places the cafe has been at the heart of a complex that draws visitors into the town, like the Old Needle-makers in Lewes in Sussex. In Dedham in Essex the cafe forms part of an art and crafts centre which enables this smaller town to create a cultural centre. In Stroud, in Gloucestershire, a café in a development by the Stroud Buildings Preservation Trust has played a leading role in efforts to improve the centre, and the town is a magnet for young people. A few others have found a new role, by attracting business people at lunch and also providing a distinctive evening out. Looking at the success stories it is easy to think that these towns have always been attractive. Yet it is possible for places to change their attractions and image, provided there is concerted effort over a period of many years. It is interesting how many notable places now feature vegetarian food, often as offshoots of wholefood shops, which may reflect a new breed of entrepreneur and also a new market to be satisfied in town centres.

### Arts and community activities

Town centres provide an important focus for people's cultural lives and what goes on in churches and public halls as well as commercial premises, such as pubs, helps to keep the town alive in the evening as well as in the day. In some towns, schools in the centre have opened up their sports facilities to the public outside school hours, as in Shifnal in Shropshire and Alford in Lincolnshire. The desire to provide customers and employees with easy parking, and to achieve lower operating costs, has led to many large organisations moving out of town. The trend is still continuing as financial services (banks and building societies) merge and close down surplus branches or switch to machines. As a result many towns contain grand buildings, like town halls, churches, banks or even factories, that are empty or under-used and in danger of decaying, as well as large empty shops.



*Brewery Arts provides workshops and gallery space in Cirencester, Gloucestershire.*



*The arts centre in Kendal, Cumbria, reuses a redundant brewery.*



*The library occupies a large store in the centre of Sleaford, Lincolnshire.*



*Hay-on-Wye, Powys, is now known as the town of books.*

Sometimes prominent buildings can find new roles as centres for cultural activity, sports and recreation. These use a combination of public grants and voluntary effort to provide a wider choice of activities than would be commercially feasible. Some form part of a complex of cultural activities, like the Brewery Arts Cafe that is part of Cirencester Workshops, Gloucestershire, or the Gallery Restaurant, Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire, that forms part of the former town hall, and is now an arts and theatre complex. An arts centre might include a cinema. Other uses help to draw people into specialist shops, such as a cafe on the top floor of an antiques centre, as in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, and Leominster, Herefordshire, or the restaurant in Wirksworth, Derbyshire, linked to the heritage centre that formed a key element in the town's regeneration. Many of these projects are due to the missionary zeal of their founders, like the vegetarian co-operative in Hereford that also runs a second-hand clothes shop, or the cafe and craft centre in Pewsey, Wiltshire, that grew out of the community getting together to revitalise the centre.

In Sleaford, Lincolnshire, the library has taken over an empty shop, while sites have become doctors' surgeries and even alternative health centres. In Devizes, Wiltshire, the old Corn Exchange has been converted by the Town Council into a multi-purpose meeting place which can take conferences. In Blaengwyfi, Port Talbot, a co-operative has re-opened the old grocery to accommodate a variety of different shops and services.

2.4

2.5

New roles can sometimes be found even in difficult circumstances, as has happened in the Border town of Hay-on-Wye which is now an international centre for the second-hand book trade. Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire and Totnes in Devon have become focal points for alternative lifestyles, supporting craft and wholefood shops, for example. Many small historic towns which have become known as attractive places to live or retire to, such as Rye in Sussex, support a significant number of craftspeople and artists living and working in former shops. They also attract tourists in substantial numbers, which helps to keep craft galleries or bookshops going, producing a wider choice than would otherwise be possible. There is an important role for workshops where people can make or repair things, which can benefit from being part of a network, like the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen, for example. Organisations like Regional Arts Boards, and the Crafts Council are playing an important role in putting such places 'on the map' and their guides to what is available can help to identify the gaps. Just as important as developing arts and community uses is hanging on to whatever functions make the town special and retain links with the past, such as the breweries in Devizes and Tadcaster, for example, or the project to develop Shaftesbury, Dorset, as a working craft centre.

2.6

## Promotion and events

Successful businesses recognise the importance of marketing and promotion and the same is true for towns. Events are good ways of promoting the town, securing free publicity, and generating early signs of action. Festivals are also a very good way of involving local people and trying out new ideas such as markets. Many towns have traditional festivals which can be revived or expanded. If properly organised, festivals can bring people into the town, many of whom will come back if they enjoy themselves.

2.7

2.8

2.9

Towns that have the potential to draw visitors also need to develop attractions that are listed in guides and directories. These can range from independent museums and specialist shops to good restaurants, hotels and bed and breakfast establishments.

While not every town can support a full arts centre, most can generate enough activity to support a festival, and many of these have a strong arts theme. Sometimes people in one town are inspired by what has happened in another, as for example in Sandwich, Kent, where a talk by someone from Hay-on-Wye as part of the process of developing a strategy for the town, led to the setting up of the Sandwich Festival. This went on to promote proposals for using empty churches for a regular arts festival. Brecon is a good example with a Jazz Festival making a small town famous and then encouraging visitors to return at other times.



*A temporary display in a shop to let in Herne Bay, Kent makes the place look more inviting.*

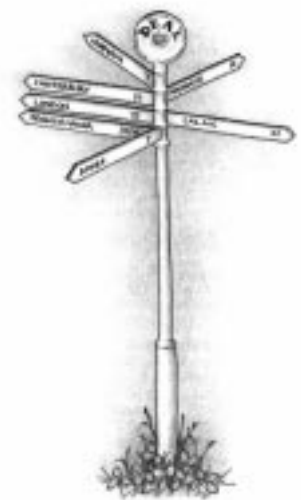
Promotion is a much under-used technique in the regeneration of small towns. Nothing breeds success like success: if the local community as well as those who live beyond the boundaries of the town believe that a town is improving it very often will. A good principle is to celebrate a victory every six months. Even if there is little to show, it is essential to find a cause for celebration in order to maintain morale and promote a positive image. Strategies should be planned to ensure small projects are brought forward which can reap short-term results. Every achievement should be recorded and publicised, whether it be planting a new tree, putting up hanging baskets or competitions for the best dressed window. This publicity should give credit to all concerned, and can be linked to the preparation of the project or group's annual reports to monitor achievements against objectives.

2.10

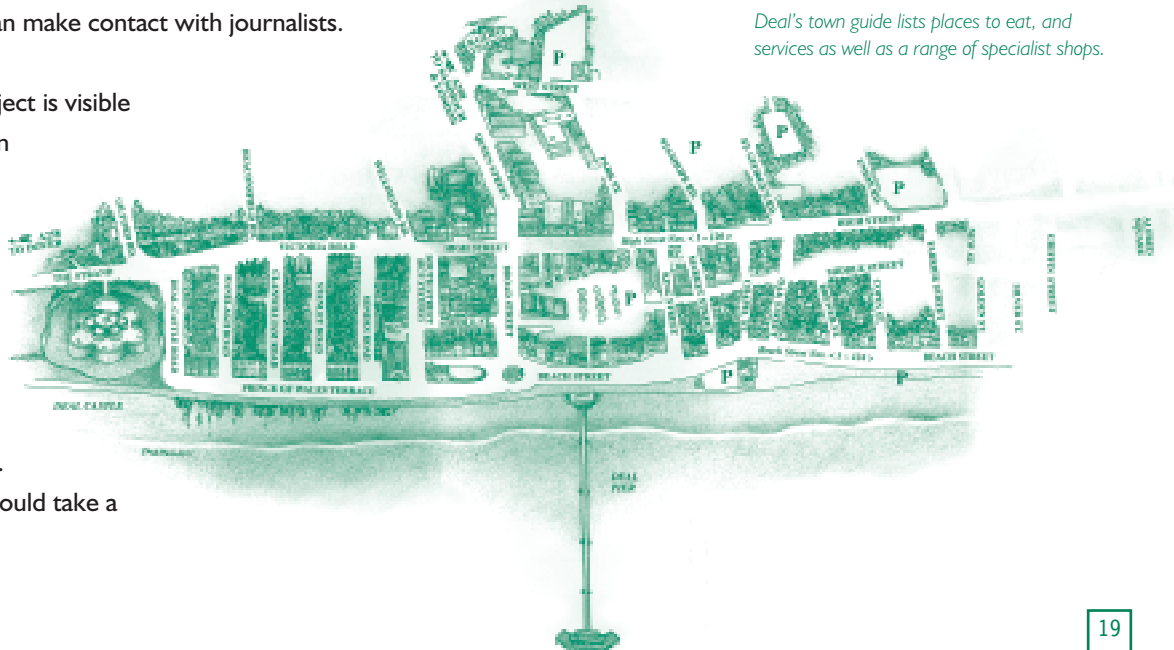
A close relationship with the local media is essential. It is a very good way of communicating with local people as well as non-residents since people believe what they read in the press. The press is usually only too happy to give coverage to local initiatives. The group should identify items of interest and pass them to contacts in the press, preferably with a good photograph. Partnerships or groups should establish a promotions committee to provide a point of contact with the press. It should include people who can communicate the strategy in simple terms and who can make contact with journalists.

2.11

It is important that a project is visible and there may be value in opening a project base in an empty shop staffed by volunteers, or at least putting a display in a window. The window can be used to illustrate initiatives and information on the town. Alternatively the group could take a



*Deal's town guide lists places to eat, and services as well as a range of specialist shops.*



market stall or a space in the tourist information centre to display promotional literature which publicises the town, as well as being a point of contact for interested people. The literature could include town trails and postcards with lists of shops and services, with the aim of generating revenue as well as repeat visits. Not only can guides provide information for visitors, they can also be used to provide local people with advice on how to implement initiatives, possibly developed by the County Council, sharing examples from other towns in the area.

2.12  
2.13

### Tourism and visitors

The tourism industry has become an important part of the national economy. It is, however, no longer based around the annual family holiday where competition from Continental resorts has drastically reduced the UK market. Despite recessions, the market for weekend breaks, second holidays, and day trips is growing and opening up opportunities for many smaller towns which were not previously on the tourist trail. This is particularly true of towns which have been bypassed by development since the War and so have retained much of their character.

To be successful, towns need to generate sufficient attractions to occupy visitors for at least half a day, to promote these attractions effectively, and to provide a range of support services such as hotels and restaurants. With an ageing population nationally, there are more people with time to spend on what is called 'leisure shopping' which can be an important attraction in smaller towns. Unfortunately tourists tend to flock around a few 'honey pots', but there is potential for smaller towns to work together and tap into this existing market. While many small towns will never have enough to offer on their own, they may be able to present themselves as part of a route in a wider area. Towns in districts like the Cotswolds or the Lake District benefit from the image of the area as a whole. Some towns are beginning to promote themselves as part of a cluster of attractions or networks, to overcome their limited resources. Examples are the English Marches or the towns on the other side of the Border in Powys, Mid Wales, that can boast spas, castles, pretty villages, light railways, canal trips and outdoor pursuits. One good approach used in Germany is to promote towns along a route, and the 'Romantic Road' in Bavaria provides a model that other areas could follow.



*A heritage centre in the old market hall provides Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, with a new visitor attraction.*

Towns need to think particularly about what first impression they give to visitors. Tourist information centres in prominent places can give a good first impression, and many do better if they are seen as information centres (like the French Syndicat d'Initiative) whose sign boards in smaller towns can show that visitors are welcome. Towns need to recognise that responsible tourists should be welcomed rather than exploited and a deeper understanding and appreciation of their needs will have a positive impact on tourist numbers.

It is important to think about Sundays which is one of the favoured days for visitors, but happens to be the day when many towns are deserted. It can be worth encouraging a corner of the town to open on Sundays, particularly if there is somewhere popular to eat and interesting to visit. For example interesting buildings or gardens can be opened to the public, and support given to exhibitions of local art or craft work. Often such



initiatives can be tried out experimentally as part of a festival. The key to success can be developing and promoting a distinctive historic area around a public space.

While in many places tourism could become an important aspect of local economic activity, it will never replace the existing activity in a bustling town. But the things that make a town attractive to visitors are often no different from those that are needed to satisfy the local market. Hence, tourism can be a good excuse for doing what the town needs anyway.



*A well designed board with local information and a map helps visitors appreciate Sandwich, Kent.*

## Living in town

Though there has been a long-term trend of people living in the suburbs away from the centre of town, there are signs that the trend is beginning to reverse. The government has calculated that over four million new homes are needed to cope with a growth in households over the next two decades. As most of the extra households would not have children, and there is considerable opposition to building on green fields, it is possible we may see a renaissance of people living in or near town centres, as they do on the Continent. It is important for local authorities to encourage new housing in the centres of smaller towns, if necessary compulsorily purchasing properties that have been empty for years. There are a growing number of towns where redundant historic buildings have been successfully converted into housing, for example an 18th century silk mill in Devizes, Wiltshire. Where a whole area has been left redundant, a comprehensive scheme can produce a high quality environment, as has been done successfully in Calne, also in Wiltshire, or in Beverley in North Yorkshire. In the USA there is a scheme that allows individuals tax relief on refurbishing buildings for residential use, and encouragement needs to be given to individuals who will respond to opportunities that developers neglect.

2.14

On a larger scale there is often scope for building on sites that may not have been considered, including sites once proposed for commercial development, and the edge of car parks. In all cases, it helps if the local authority has prepared and published development briefs that indicate what density and form of housing is wanted, and how the parking and other planning constraints are to be met, as Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, has done, for example.

Another source of housing is in the spaces above shops. Few shopkeepers live over the shop any more, and though the space may be used for storage, it often lies empty. As a result, not only is there a lack of life in most small towns after the shops close, but the streets feel darker and less safe. With rising house prices, and declining retail demand, the upper stories are becoming more valuable. A number of towns have sought to encourage Living Over the Shop schemes (LOTS), which for a while attracted government grants. An obvious first step is identifying the amount of empty property through a visual survey, for example after dark or through rating records. Yet despite some important success stories, such as in Stamford (using a commercial lease promoted by Ann Petherick, from the University of York), the overall results have been



*There are now many more people living over the shop in Stamford, Lincolnshire.*

source: Ann Petherick, University of York



*Well designed new housing provides a good use for a derelict site in Calne, Wiltshire.*



*Withey's Yard, Stroud, Gloucestershire, provides an alternative place to meet and a mix of uses.*

disappointing. Many housing associations say that it requires too much effort for too few units. However, successful pilot projects can be used to encourage others, as in Fakenham, Norfolk.

2.15

A number of problems arise, some of them physical, such as access or planning requirements for parking that cannot be fulfilled. Modern buildings in the centre may be quite unsuitable and in pedestrianised areas the frontage may be too valuable to allow a separate entrance through it. However, the greatest problems relate to the attitude of the property owners, who need to have an incentive to use the space, and the minimum of hassle to deal with. A few

national multiples, such as National Westminster Bank and Boots The Chemists have produced significant numbers of units. Building societies are often keen to collaborate. But there are often problems in securing the support of both the occupier, who may be on a short lease, and the landlord, who owns the freehold, and who usually now lives elsewhere. Occupiers are concerned about security and a reliable source of income, which is why they are likely to respond more positively to a housing association with relevant experience. Landlords want to be sure their property is not reduced in value.

Securing a 'deal' depends on hard work, starting with landlords who are willing to collaborate, and prepared to invest in repairs to the structure, while the housing association takes on the renovation of the interior, which is often in a very dilapidated state. Where major works are required, it may be more economic to acquire the structure and lease back the commercial unit, through a commercial subsidiary. An approach which has worked well in a number of historic towns, such as Bradford-on-Avon for example, is for a Building Preservation Trust to acquire the property, taking advantage of low cost finance and conservation grants, and then to sell off part of the property, retaining the rest for income. This may enable back lands to be opened up and mixed use schemes to be developed that bring life back into the heart of the town, as with the Stroud Building Preservation Trust's scheme in Witheys Yard off the High Street in Stroud.

Local authorities and civic societies can help the process by researching into vacant property, assessing the condition to identify buildings at risk and devising a scheme to encourage alternative uses. This could include providing rate and rent relief for new businesses occupying the ground floor space, as in Frome, Somerset. The local authority can also serve repairs notices on listed buildings that have been neglected, and compulsory purchase orders on properties that have been vacant so long that they are unlikely to be reused through the ordinary market.

### Enterprise development

Another source of investment is attracting new employers to set up. As there is so much competition, there is little most towns do, other than respond to enquiries. However, as no employer is going to set up without having first checked out the town,

it is vital that the town creates a good first impression. Research has established the importance of good environment and amenities in influencing business location decisions, so the action required to make the town a nice place is also likely to make it more attractive in which to locate a business. Conversely, derelict buildings and neglected streets warn off investors.

Most employers prefer to locate in a place where there are a number of other firms, so that there are sources of trained labour. There are now hundreds of examples of large industrial complexes being broken up and managed as trading estates or business parks. Many modern processes can operate perfectly well from upper storeys. Some of the successful outcomes of 'adaptive reuse' have ended up employing more people than before. Business centres or managed workspace with office services on tap also have a role to play in some smaller towns.

Where there is an empty factory or mill with potential for reuse, the priority must be to stop it becoming derelict and ensuring that the external environment is inviting. Feasibility studies can help to show the potential, though conflicts can arise with owners or their agents who expect too much from their property. Again, expert advice may sometimes help to avoid deadlock, and enable a wider range of options to be considered.

Just as important as attracting new employers is retaining those that are there. Many small towns, particularly those that expanded in the 19th century, have major employers who in the past dominated the town. As organisations have merged, so branch plants become vulnerable, while technological and other changes are continually putting traditional jobs at risk. These include public services such as hospitals and schools, that can also be major generators of activity. Rather than being caught by surprise, it is important to involve major employers in discussions on the future of the town, and to ensure that any concerns they may have, for example regarding access or staff, are met as far as possible. Sometimes the threat of closure can be resolved through management buy-outs. It is possible that the chances of closure will be less if the value of the land is restricted, for example through the property being listed or in a conservation area. It is important to understand the economic pressures acting on key employers, so that planning can be positive and effective.

The main source of new jobs, and the main occupier of redundant premises, is likely to be small firms that have grown beyond the stage of working from home. Changes of products, technology and tastes are generating new opportunities all the time. With so many experienced people retiring early, or preferring to live in a small town, there is often a host of talent to be tapped. Furthermore, there should no longer be such a problem in finding premises now that so many shops are empty. Over the past couple of decades there has been a great growth in the number of people starting up



*Service and other businesses make good use of former shops. Frome, Somerset.*



*Towns create opportunities for new enterprise. Lewes, East Sussex.*

businesses. Small businesses provide much of the life of many small towns, and with shops closing, there are often opportunities for service businesses to take over former shops. This can often be assisted if office services can be provided, such as message taking or word processing. Smaller towns are attracting people who have moved to secure a higher quality of life. While the ideal may lie in attracting a company, possibly foreign-owned, to establish a new facility in the town or to relocate from elsewhere, this will only succeed if towns are able to offer what the incoming company seeks. This includes land and premises, a well developed and supportive business infrastructure, a supply of people with the right skills, and an attractive environment.

2.16

To succeed, small businesses have to find a niche, and this may often involve 'exporting' to customers in other areas, for example through mail order. Unfortunately, many places no longer have the critical mass of activity to support a business from the local demand alone, and it is in the area of marketing that probably most help is needed. Many small towns owe their vitality to having something special to offer, and Hay-on-Wye, largely given over to bookshops, is an example. The use of consultants and business training can help new enterprises to overcome the obstacles and hence reduces the risks of failure, and can sometimes enable existing businesses to adapt to change, for example in applying Information Technology. The provision of opportunities for collaboration and 'networking', for example through local chambers of commerce or traders' associations, are also ways of creating a more supportive environment. There is scope for linking action to promote a town and upgrade premises with help for the businesses themselves. In general Training and Enterprise Councils should be focusing on how to make town centres more effective as trading places, as a number are beginning to do, such as East Sussex and Kent TECs. Also planners need to play a positive not a reactive role.





## Checklist for action

## 2

- a **Does the town have any special attractions?**
- b **Can you spend a pleasant afternoon walking around the town?**
- c **Is the centre developing new roles and reasons for coming to town?**
- d **Have vacant buildings been successfully adapted to new uses?**
- e **Are there schools, colleges or other educational establishments near the town centre, and are they used out-of-hours?**
- f **Are there good places to eat and drink off the main thoroughfare?**
- g **Is there a focus for cultural activity, and does the centre have some arts or entertainment facilities?**
- h **Are there sports or recreational facilities close to the centre, such as a park, a fitness centre or a swimming pool?**
- i **Are there enough spaces for community meetings and events?**
- j **Is there an annual festival, or regular events that fill the streets with people?**
- k **Is the town known as a place to visit or on a tourist route?**
- l **Are there guides and other promotional literature publicising the town and its major attractions?**
- m **Is there a body responsible for promoting and marketing the town?**
- n **Are there community projects that are using empty shops as a base?**
- o **Are people moving in to live in the centre?**
- p **Is action being taken to use vacant space above the shops?**
- q **Does the town have a range of professional and public services in the centre?**
- r **Are small businesses starting up in the centre?**
- s **Are all the services that businesses need available in town?**
- t **Is workspace available where a small business could easily start?**



## 3

COPING WITH  
THE CAR

- Highly accessible centres
- Welcoming signs
- Convenient parking
- Safe parking
- Appropriate charging policies
- Responsive public transport
- Easy and safe cycling and walking

Car use is still growing, and whereas the number of cars rose by 47% between 1974 and 1991, the number of trips rose by 87% in the same period. Most towns lack any overall strategy for reducing unnecessary trips and improving the health of the town and lag far behind their Continental counterparts. For example, many small French towns have narrowed their carriageways and provided extra parking while taming traffic in their centres. The government has made it clear in its Transport White Paper that as the funds will not be made available to build new roads, the only answer is to manage towns better. Some Councils, for example Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire, have already shown how it is possible to improve town centres without spending a great deal of money.

3.1

Any measures to improve mobility within the town centre need to be linked to wider policies to encourage the use of other modes of transport, particularly for short distances, and to planning policies which reduce the need to travel. It has been asserted that 'If any one policy can be singled out for making people more dependent on their cars, it is the building of superstores in locations unreachable by any other means than cars.' Yet there are now some excellent examples of local authorities working with food stores to ensure that a new store is closely linked to the town centre, which can then be used on a more regular basis by people dropping by and either making linked trips, for example shopping after they have dropped off their children at school or walking home with their purchases. The RAC estimates that 50-70% of journeys do not necessarily have to be made by car (particularly the growing number of short trips), if the alternatives were more attractive to use.

Christian Wolmar, *Unlocking the Gridlock*, Friends of the Earth pamphlet.

### Highly accessible centres

With the growth of car ownership, and with most of the potential customers living away from the centre, often in small hamlets or suburban developments, poor accessibility can be a major factor in local spending power simply leaking away from the centres of small towns. Those with most money get into their cars and drive to the nearest superstore to stock up weekly, with food and other convenience items, or to a larger town to shop for clothes and other comparison items. There is also a growing competition from out-of-town centres, including sites that combine food and clothes (power stores) and the emergence of factory outlets in some places. With the loss of many traditional sources of employment in the town itself, such as, for example, civic offices or banks, there are also fewer people around to shop in their lunch hours.

Consequently, smaller towns need to take action to draw in car-borne shoppers, as well as other measures to improve mobility, particularly walking and cycling. This is best done as part of a strategy for all the competing centres, as in Devon for example, to avoid a 'car park ban' or cars being pushed into residential areas. The provision of easy access for all is particularly important to the health of towns who have little in the way of special attractions, and in rural areas where there are no practical alternatives to the car.

Most smaller towns need to be highly accessible to all their potential customers, rich and poor, young and old. A good way to check is to try pushing around someone in a wheelchair. Also see whether it is possible to stop off for a short while in a car without getting a ticket. This is particularly important to those who have disabilities or have small children with them, and who make up a surprisingly high proportion of the market. A highly accessible town should also be easy to walk or cycle into, without great detours.

A common response to actual or perceived conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians in small town centres, and to improve their attractiveness, is to adopt pedestrianisation schemes. However most smaller towns need to be very wary about excluding cars altogether and instead should concentrate on discouraging through traffic. Bypasses are one way of doing this, but one of the main conclusions from the report on *Bypasses* (Stationery Office) was the need to take complementary action in town centres to attract people to come and spend time and money in the centre, and this usually means allowing some access by car. Most of the arguments for taking cars out of streets altogether do not apply when there are not sufficient people to fill the existing pavements and businesses are struggling to retain custom. Where the pavements seem overcrowded, it may be far better to widen them than to exclude cars altogether. If cars are to be excluded at peak times, it is usually better to allow them in at night to make the town feel safer, and also to make it possible for more people to live in the town centre. 20 mph zones can be used to keep speeds down and to make crossing the road easier and safer. Redesigning the main carriageways to reconcile a variety of uses is an important element in any town centre revitalisation strategy and this can include the use of different materials and build-outs to encourage cars to give pedestrians and cyclists priority within the centre. An example of excluding cars for part of the day, is in Woodbridge in Suffolk, where the pavement has been widened and



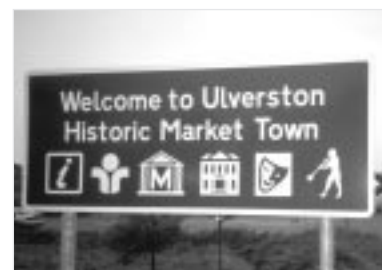
20 mph zones can be used to keep speeds down and make crossing the road easier and safer. Ayr, Ayrshire.

the carriageway narrowed to one lane in the heart of the town, and vehicles are only allowed in at night.

In addition to the quality and attractions of the town, there are four main factors that affect a town's capacity to attract car-borne trade: signing and facilities, convenience including location and linkages, security, and charging or cost.

### Welcoming signs

With more competition, and many smaller towns being bypassed, there is a need for towns to improve their signing as part of their wider promotional efforts. A growing number of towns now have negotiated the familiar brown tourist attraction signs on main highways, which summarise their attractions and distinctive theme. For example, Shaftesbury in Dorset calls itself 'A Saxon hill-town', and many others, like Ulverston in Cumbria, describe themselves as 'Historic market town'. Some have commissioned artists and craftsmen to create distinctive 'gateways', and to calm traffic at the same time, while others have relied on floral arrangements to give a sense of welcome.

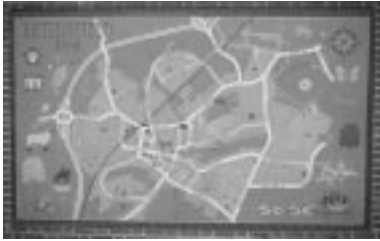


Brown tourist signs flag up the attractions of the town. Ulverston, Cumbria.

Gateways to towns should be bright and welcoming, as in Thornbury in south Gloucestershire, where floral displays enhance the ancient signpost. Signs can also indicate what facilities the town offers and how to reach them. An outline map of the town, indicating the main shopping areas and attractions, along with clear directions, can show the town cares. At the same time as new signs are installed, it is also vital to reduce the proliferation of unnecessary posts and a cull is often the answer. Signs can be installed on a single post or on the wall, thus removing unsightly and sometimes dangerous obstacles.



Thornbury, Gloucestershire, uses flowers to brighten up the gateways to the town.



Historic map of Petersfield, Hampshire.  
(Artist: Rosalind Wates)

The building of bypasses and one-way systems has turned many towns into hostile mazes, so the first requirement of the car-borne customer is signing, to be able easily to find a place to park. Highly accessible towns have signs distinguishing between short- and long-stay car parks. It helps to say how many spaces there are and how far each is from the centre (for example on signs and leaflets), and it may be necessary to have alternative arrangements for busy times, such as on market days.

Signs also need to set out clearly the charging policy and allowed times for parking. If there is a disk or voucher system as in Ripon, North Yorkshire, the signs near the entrance to the town need to explain how it works.

Once in the town's main car park, it is important to provide guidance on where the town's main attractions are located. Finger-posts tend to look alike and only a few towns will have enough points of interest to justify them. Instead specially commissioned signs and maps can leave a memorable impression, as in Petersfield, Hampshire, for example. Maps are useful in explaining how the town is laid out, so that the most interesting areas are not missed, and are a permanent source of information. A good example is Frome, Somerset, where wooden signs have been designed as a feature and where a specially commissioned aerial perspective gives a good idea of the town's layout. Artists have been commissioned to create maps that bring out the town's special attractions, as in Wareham, Dorset, and there is even a group of artists in Cumbria that specialises in public art commissions of this kind. Maps can be backed up by interpretive signs near unusual features, and specially carved or cast signs giving a building's date can be an excellent way of emphasising a centre's history in an unobtrusive way, as in Welshpool, Powys, for example. There is also a role for printed leaflets and of course information centres, as nothing is as good as some friendly advice on where to go.

### Convenient parking

Parking is always a cause of conflicts. There is generally little space for new car parks, and councils face increasing pressure to sell off land for the highest commercial value. Since the collapse of the property boom, it has been harder to provide car parking as planning gain in development schemes. As many small towns are at the junction of

several roads, and offer free parking in the centre, there is often congestion caused by people looking for a parking space. If there are no controls, all the best spaces are taken early, by those working in the town, who squeeze out potential customers. If the whole town is given over to parking, the resulting poor environment will put customers off.

There is no simple or easy answer, but increasingly local authorities are adopting the policy of a Controlled Parking Zone (CPZ), where parking is only allowed where it is specifically permitted. This requires an overall review of parking provision and traffic circulation to establish places



Clear, distinctive signs direct you to the different facilities. Frome, Somerset.

where cars can be parked with adequate safety. Policies are then needed for regulating their use (duration, category of use, etc) and making them attractive to use. There are a number of different factors that affect the quality of parking apart from just the availability and price of spaces, which can make a town appear welcoming. These may not always be obvious to those responsible. A comprehensive audit and parking plan, drawing on what is provided in other similar towns, can throw up fresh ideas to add to those put forward by the general public. The ATCM's *Guide to Car Park Design* may be helpful, and consultants can be used to resolve conflicts.



*Convenient parking in the centre can be sensitive to the townscape. Rye, Kent.*

Different types of parking should be located in different places, with longer-term parking further away from the centre (but still in places that are overlooked). In Thame, Oxfordshire, they have three categories of time to cater for different types of users. All towns however need to have a parking plan, supported by the traders, to ensure that long-term parking for businesses is on the periphery, that customers can stop briefly, and that visitors feel welcome. The car parks used by employees are best located on the periphery, so that shoppers can get close to the shops; in one free car park in Wincanton in Somerset, the row nearest the library is limited to half an hour to allow people to return books easily.

To avoid congestion, and to reduce unnecessary driving through town, there normally need to be several car parks, which should be allocated different roles. Sometimes the car park in a new development such as a food store can be used to provide additional parking for the town as a whole. However, if this is to be used for what are called 'linked trips', it needs to be within a few minutes walk only, and preferably with existing or new shops along the way to create an attractive route, as in Witney, Oxfordshire. Otherwise most people simply come to the food store, load up and drive away again. As many people are restricted in their movement (including people with prams as well as people in wheelchairs), it is important that there are direct routes from the car park into the town with dropped kerbs that do not form an obstacle course. Shops should be encouraged to take part in mobility schemes (for example, by making their entrances more accessible).

One of the most contentious issues is often how much parking should be allowed on the roads themselves. Many English towns are scarred by yellow lines, which can turn what is otherwise a pleasant looking historic place into somewhere that says 'no'. As these spread with successive repainting, they can appear most unsightly and detract from attempts to improve the look of the place. While these are sometimes replaced to better effect with narrower primrose coloured lines in conservation areas, it is far better to introduce a Controlled Parking Zone. An example is Bury St Edmunds, one of a number of historic towns that is collaborating on a Historic Core Zone Initiative. Small signs are generally quite adequate, and in narrow streets either common sense will prevail, or the police or a warden can arrange for offending cars to be removed.

But often there is no longer a need to restrict cars from parking in the centre, particularly where bypasses have been introduced. Cars in the right place can help to





Using part of the carriageway in the central square for parking. Thirsk, North Yorkshire.

create some colour and bustle, as well as enabling customers to make a quick stop at a shop or service. With good road design, traffic can be 'calmed', and consideration needs to be given to new road layouts. For example the carriageway can be narrowed down to two lanes, and a substantial car park created on one side. Another arrangement, where the road swells out to what was once the market place, is to use this to accommodate cars and divide the lanes of traffic, thus creating a refuge for people crossing the road, and the feel of a French square, as for example in Leyburn, North Yorkshire. This can be particularly useful in towns with long straight high streets that might otherwise encourage motorists to speed through, as in Marlborough in Wiltshire.

3.4



Echelon parking in Northallerton, Northumberland, is an efficient use of space.

Space in small towns is often very limited. By parking cars echelon style or diagonally, with their nose against the pavement, more cars can be parked, and the effect is often better. A good example is Northallerton in Northumberland, where space is tight. Although diagonal parking may appear more dangerous to some traffic engineers, it actually has the effect of slowing down traffic, and any collisions at slow speeds will not cause as much damage! Parked cars also separate pedestrians from the noise and fumes of traffic. Other sources of extra capacity is land which is only used part-time, such as car parks attached to offices and schools.

### Safe parking

Many people are worried nowadays about leaving their car where it is not overlooked, and women (who are usually the principal shoppers) may understandably shy away from peripheral car parks accessed down dingy alleys. The shrubs beloved by designers, can be seen as a threat by women in particular, and trees, grass strips and plants feel safer. While there is often pressure to introduce measures like security cameras, these are ineffectual without constant monitoring and rapid response, and other measures can be more cost-effective. What matters is making people feel secure.

A car park can be made to feel more welcoming if it contains or adjoins other facilities. These can range from civic buildings, such as libraries, to specialist shops, cafes and information centres, as in Lewes, Sussex, where redundant buildings have been turned into a centre for arts and crafts. Such facilities benefit from the flow of people, and help with surveillance. As Britain has short days for a large part of the time, good lighting is essential, and this can help to deter people from breaking into cars. The route from the car park needs to be as direct and as overlooked as possible, and where a new car park is being developed, a proper urban design appraisal is often needed. While CCTV cameras may help, the best solution is to ensure that the car park is overlooked by development which creates a 'defensible space'. One way of doing this as well as generating a revenue is to build housing along the edge of the car park (though care needs to be taken to ensure that there are still sufficient spaces in the car parks overall).

If the town aims to appeal to tourists, then the tourist information centre needs to be close to the car park which visitors are most likely to use, preferably in a building of historic interest. Other facilities can include toilets and places to leave shopping



trolleys, containers for recycling glass, papers etc, or for disposing rubbish. Properly designed, these can show the town cares about the environment, but poorly maintained, they suggest the towns does not. Signs of regular maintenance, such as flowers can make people feel safer. One of the most useful facilities at the entrance to a car park is a toilet, and this may sport a CCTV camera and lights, to discourage vandalism.

However, the safest place to park is usually in the town itself. One side effect of schemes to help traffic flow or to pedestrianise some streets has been to remove parking spaces. Often a better solution is either to reintroduce two-way traffic or allow parking down one side, and the reduction in traffic speeds will deter those who are using the town as a short-cut. If this cannot be accommodated at rush hours, it may still be allowable at other times, particularly in the evening. In this way some of the demand for parking for residents can also be catered for, who in going to and from their cars also provide the best form of security.

### Appropriate charging policies

3.5

Often the most controversial issue in towns is whether parking should be free or not. Some local authorities have used car parks as a major source of revenue rather than as part of a strategy for town centre revitalisation, and others have entered into cut-price contests with neighbouring towns. Although price is only one of a number of factors influencing how much people use the town, where towns have nothing particularly special to offer, 'free parking' is an important incentive, like in Daventry, Northamptonshire. Not only is the cost of parking a deterrent (and people will sometimes go out of their way to save a few pence), but finding the right change can be annoying, particularly if superstores are providing free parking nearby. People resent car parks where you have to pay for somewhere that is unmanned and looks unsafe and inconvenient. It is also annoying as a visitor to a town to have to judge in advance how much time one is going to be spending, even though one may be willing to pay to help support the town.

However, some form of control is needed because the various demands on car parks usually exceed the supply. Time limitations and wardens can achieve the desired balance.

Alternatively a more elaborate system such as discs or vouchers may be used as in Devizes, Wiltshire. The disc system (in which a card showing the time of arrival is shown in the windscreen) allows for rebates or loyalty schemes. The warden may help with providing a degree of security and also information. Vouchers are less obtrusive than parking meters, and there are various ingenious charging regimes, including season tickets for residents to encourage loyalty.

If the community decides that charges are necessary, it is important that the car parking provision is of high quality, safe and convenient. Charges can be varied to generate activity where and when it is most needed, for example cheaper rates on some weekdays can be introduced. Charges may be more acceptable if a proportion is directly used to fund a town centre management initiative, as in Kings Lynn, Norfolk, where local people agreed to car parking charges on the basis it would finance CCTV. If someone parks



A parking voucher scheme in Petersfield, Hampshire, is used to encourage shoppers.



*The post bus in Lutterworth, Leicester links seven villages, carrying people as well as post.*

illegally, it helps to explain that they have been hurting the town by inconsiderate behaviour. Any fines should be accompanied by an explanation of the town's parking policy, as in some small towns in the USA.

### Responsive public transport

An important part of government policy for town centres is to encourage alternatives to the car. Britain lags behind many Continental countries in the numbers living within walking distance of the centre, and the quality of public transport. The role of the transport system is to provide society with the level of accessibility and mobility it needs and wants to function successfully. With the deregulation of buses, the role of the local authority in co-ordinating improvements has become even more important. Any Local Agenda 21 plan for environmental sustainability will be concerned about reducing unnecessary car use, particularly travelling to work or the school run. Employers could use the 'carrot and stick' approach to encourage the use of public transport where available, as well as car-sharing and cycling. Larger employers such as local or health authorities could provide a lead by organising mini-buses and pool cars for people who need to drive during the day (and when taxes are imposed on private non-residential parking, this will make more financial sense).

Buses are still important to groups such as the young or the elderly, who may otherwise feel trapped. Better use can often be made of existing services and there have been some experiments in the use of different forms, such as the Postbus in Lutterworth, Leicestershire, that delivers both people and post, or that have special pick-ups for schoolchildren. Links between facilities that public transport is serving can also be forged, for example through taking people to community centres, hospitals and the town centre. An integrated transport system for schoolchildren, social services, health authorities or even voluntary groups can save costs and tap support from health, recreation, tourism and social welfare budgets. The same vehicle, for example a school bus, can work for different departments throughout the day, often carrying different



*The local bus in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, brings people right into the centre from the outlying areas.*

groups of passengers at the same time. It could also be hired by traders to provide a service to selected villages just as some out-of-town supermarkets do.

The key to rural public transport is marketing, which means understanding who the consumer is. This allows the operator to target potential demand and subsequently run a more effective system that meets the users' needs. For instance, the 'Fosseway Coaches Nightrider Services' with the assistance of The Rural Transport Development Fund, targets young people in rural areas and provides them with transport to Swindon and Chippenham from the early evening to the early hours of the morning. The potential for good public transport is limited when people are scattered, but regular Hoppa buses can attract customers if they serve as a link with surrounding suburbs, as in Exeter in Devon, where there has been a marked shift towards public transport. An important step is improving information about the services, and also ensuring that buses can park close to the centre, as in Bury St Edmunds.



*Distinct cycle-ways makes access safer. Newark, Nottinghamshire.*

It is also important to connect with other forms of transport, such as taxis or the railway station, if there is one. There is scope for further development of less formal types of public transport such as organised car-sharing, dial-a-ride taxis and community-owned buses which may offer the best prospects of reducing unnecessary car use, while maintaining mobility. Where possible bus routes should complement rather than duplicate rail lines.

### Easy and safe cycling and walking

Many towns are making efforts to encourage alternatives to the car such as cycling and walking. New traffic free routes are being created along disused railway lines or canals in most parts of the country. A national network of cycle routes is being developed through Sustrans, funded by a major Millennium lottery grant. However, just as important as the long-distance leisure routes are the short links that people use everyday, such as alleys and lanes, which are often neglected. It is particularly important to encourage people who live close to the centre to leave their cars behind. The task should be to create 'quality streets' which can be busy without people feeling threatened. Cyclists feel safest away from traffic and want racks in visible places where bicycles will not be stolen. They also need to be able to cross over busy roads and bypasses. Bicycle ownership is increasing, but we have a long way to go to reach Continental levels of usage (and, for example, in Denmark they have replaced roundabouts with crossroads to make cycling and walking easier). Campaigns have a role to play in encouraging people not to use cars for short trips thus making the roads safer and people fitter. It is also important for train operators, especially network services to allow more bicycles to travel on the train, thus enabling people to travel part of the way by bike.



*Pedestrian priority and dropped kerb stones make places more accessible to the elderly and people with disabilities. Temple Fortune, London Borough of Barnet.*

Before anyone can be a customer, they have to be a pedestrian, and it is important that people on foot feel safe, which means giving pedestrian priority within the core of the town centre. All too often, over-concern for safety has made it difficult or unpleasant for people to move around on foot, for example by installing barriers and bridges. However attitudes are changing, and instead of removing traffic altogether, which often leads to streets that are dead most of the time, while traffic hurtles round the periphery, many towns are starting to introduce 'traffic calming' measures, such as chicanes and wider pavements that aim to retain the 'street' feeling but make crossing the road much easier. They also allow cars back into the pedestrian priority area during off-peak periods which helps to generate an evening economy and makes it feasible for more people to live in the centre.

3.6

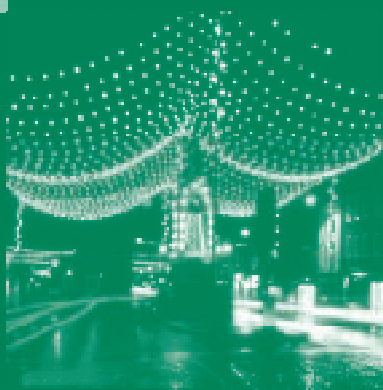
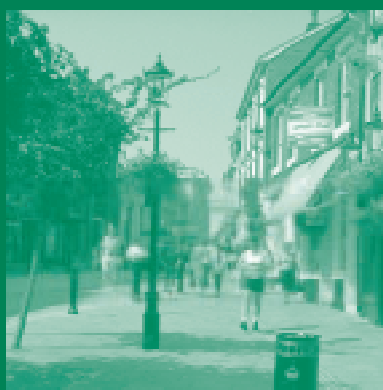
3.7



## Checklist for action

# 3

- a **Is it easy for cars, pedestrians and cyclists to find their way into town?**
- b **Is there a strategy to attract car-borne shoppers?**
- c **Is there a parking plan and/or a Controlled Parking Zone (CPZ)?**
- d **Are there distinct short- and long-term car parks?**
- e **Can customers park easily near the shops for a short while?**
- f **Are parking restrictions and charges clearly signed?**
- g **Are there maps of the town at main entry points, including car parks?**
- h **Are there clear directions to attractions and public facilities (including the tourist information centre, if there is one)?**
- i **Are car parks well lit?**
- j **Are car parks overlooked, by housing for example?**
- k **Do people, especially women, feel safe using the routes from the car parks?**
- l **Are there traffic-calming measures to keep speeds down?**
- m **Do pedestrians have priority over cars in the centre, for example through wide pavements?**
- n **Can you cross the main street easily and safely?**
- o **Is there a mobility scheme to ensure those with disabilities can move around town?**
- p **Is it easy to take young children and wheelchairs into and through the town?**
- q **Can people easily come by bus from the surrounding residential areas?**
- r **Are services well-publicised?**
- s **Are there visible cycle racks in key locations in the centre?**
- t **Are there safe cycle routes into the town?**





## 4

# CREATING A PRIDE OF PLACE

- Safer streets
- Better street lighting
- Higher quality streetscape
- Well-kept streets
- Building upkeep and conservation
- Improved shopfronts

An important part of encouraging activity and investment is to make the town look as if it is cared for. While there is little point 'putting cosmetics on a corpse', properly designed and executed environmental improvements can be used to provide early signs of action, and to enhance a town's distinctive identity. If deep seated problems are ignored, environmental improvements can only be superficial, and can even make things worse; for example, pedestrianising a failing shopping street may take away the last of the shops' customers, without attracting new traders, thus killing it completely. However, enhancing and brightening up a street can often provide an initiative with an early win. This will build confidence, and make it easier to access funds for tackling the deeper seated problems. Key factors in the health and attractiveness of a town centre are safety, lighting, quality townscape, management, building upkeep and shopfronts.

The advent of the Millennium provides a good opportunity to identify what makes a town special and to enhance it. Funds may be available from grants or even from adjoining property owners for projects that utilise quality materials and good design to make a town feel a sense of pride in its past and future. Improvements could range from a thorough clean-up and new surfaces to commissioning a fountain or some other public art. The public space can provide a focus for a new initiative, such as a craft market or perhaps a place to park bicycles or wheelchairs or hold occasional festivals or street entertainment. Funding can be tapped in conservation areas through the Heritage Lottery, which is beginning to support



*Good materials, well laid, do make a difference as in the award winning scheme in Horsham, Sussex.*



*A festival with street entertainers and temporary stalls can help to lift a town's morale. Stroud, Gloucestershire.*



Well designed plaques bring a history of the town alive. Welshpool, Powys.



Youth Cafes as in Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, and Llandrindod Wells, Powys, can provide venues for young people to 'hang out'.

townscape projects, as for example in Pontefract in West Yorkshire. Smaller towns should ensure they are working towards a Conservation Area Partnership with English Heritage, if there is not one already.

### Safer streets

One of the major complaints is that customers no longer feel safe in towns, particularly after dark, whereas out-of-town shopping malls feel more secure. This is often because they appear to be looked after, cleaned regularly, are well-lit and may have evidence of security staff. Therefore, before rushing to erect CCTV cameras, there may be other options which tackle the real problems of town centres. The safest streets tend to be those which are well lit, which are active throughout the day or overlooked by housing, and which do not have blind corners and potential hiding places for muggers. During the day, people are put off by signs of disorder, of no-one taking care, such as broken windows, graffiti or piles of rubbish, and this affects children too so tackle 'crime and grime' together. At night, deserted and ill-lit streets are unsettling, particularly to women. Ill-thought out pedestrianisation schemes that create wall-to-wall paving (effectively removing the safety of pavements) need to be redesigned so that small groups of young people hanging about harmlessly do not look like gangs.

Positive options are also needed for young people, such as clubs and cafes that are in prominent places and that they can afford, to avoid there being nowhere to 'hang out', and it is best if places where young people drink are close to taxis and public transport. Money could be well spent on projects to create work and training opportunities for young people. For example, some towns have started to use empty shops to provide drop-in centres for young people, and in Dorset a number of towns are collaborating on a special youth initiative with support from the Single Regeneration Budget.

4.1

Living in the centre or above shops helps to make places feel safer, as it provides natural surveillance or 'eyes on the street' as do restaurants and illuminated shop windows. Aggressive behaviour can be minimised by creating a friendly and softer environment for example through greening rather than hard landscaping. Car parks are a particular area of concern and should, if possible, be overlooked by offices, housing or passing pedestrians. Not all safety issues are linked to crime. For many elderly and partially-sighted people as well as children, the design of crossings and the location of street furniture is particularly important. They need to know where it is safe to cross and whether it is possible to walk easily down the road, without having to negotiate difficult junctions. The police can play a positive role through their knowledge of how the town works, and need to review patrol methods, for example, when a centre has run into problems.

### Better street lighting

Many places can be made to feel more distinctive and safer, too, through better lighting. The replacement of yellow sodium lights by white lights that illuminate the pavement, not the road, have been shown not only to make people feel safer but also to discourage opportunistic crimes and vandalism (without leading to displacement).



*Simple but imaginative street lights brighten up the centre of Maidstone, Kent.*

Lights can also be used to enhance important buildings, such as churches or town halls. Lights in shop windows are a good insurance against people breaking in, and if shutters are installed, they need to be the see-through variety.

Almost every town seems to argue over Christmas lights and who should pay for them. However, as Britain is dark much of the year, better lighting provides one of the most cost-effective ways to make an impact. New lamp standards or simply attractive new lamps on repainted standards can also be an excellent way of showing that action is being taken. They can be combined with ‘greening’ initiatives, like hanging baskets in the summer, and the use of banners to promote events.

## Higher quality streetscape

Often the environment is the greatest asset of smaller towns and villages particularly when the historic character of a place has been retained and is recognised. The environment of a town is made up of its buildings and all the spaces between them - the streets, squares, parks, vacant sites, rivers and car parks etc. All need to be considered if an attractive environment is to be created. The quality of the built environment is a key element to the success of towns in attracting businesses, shoppers and visitors. It is also a subject on which local people and Councils find it easiest to make a difference. While it may be difficult to attract new businesses to the town, it is relatively easy to plant some trees or install street furniture and upgrade the lighting. However in doing this it is important to understand and respect the character of the town.

Councils tend to concentrate on the improvement of the street through repaving, street furniture (benches, litter bins, etc) and road improvements and, sometimes pedestrianisation. Since they own the street this is the easiest area to improve, but it is also an area where mistakes can be made. Fake Victorian benches and lamp-posts can look very out of place on a Georgian street, and cheap wall-to-wall paving can destroy

The shape of market places and of small towns can vary enormously but there are several basic patterns. The original market place had to be large enough for ‘beasts’ and these were often moved to the edge of town, and subsequently redeveloped. But some ran along the centre of long wide streets, such as in Marlborough or Chipping Sodbury. They may be terminated with a market cross or town hall, as in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, or Reigate in Surrey. Others form the centre of a square, as in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, or a grand place as in Devizes, Wiltshire. Some towns have grown up on a crossroads, with a complex set of streets, as in Sleaford in Lincolnshire, but the market can still be found close to its origins in the churchyard.

4.2

4.3



Often what looks like a muddle of streets on the ground still exhibits its original order from above, and aerial photographs or what are called 'figure grounds' (plans that black out the buildings to highlight the open space and linkages), reveal the underlying structure of the town centre, Cirencester, Gloucestershire.



the natural look of the street. A good rule is to make improvements as simple as possible, to use local materials, and to opt for high quality contemporary street furniture rather than 'off the shelf' replicas of the past. An even better rule, however, can be to ask before works start, whether they are really necessary. One way of enhancing a smaller town is to improve the public spaces that everyone sees. People often complain that there is nowhere to sit and look at the world passing by, and often public spaces laid out as a market place or to celebrate an important event, have been neglected or allowed to become dominated by traffic.

4.4

4.5

4.6



*Sensitive design and conservation has helped Rochester, Kent, retain its historic character.*

The planting of trees, bushes and flowers can, if done properly, hide a multitude of sins. However, again it is important not to plant for the sake of it. Within towns, street trees and hanging baskets tend to be more appropriate than planting larger containers which look out of place and collect litter. Wooden tubs and terracotta pots can create an



*Well kept green spaces make a town memorable. Marlow, Buckinghamshire.*



instant 'shot in the arm' to restore a tired street. On the outskirts of town more natural planting can be appropriate, but again make sure that views are not hidden, or potential hiding places for muggers created. Planters can be an excellent low-cost way of calming traffic, incidentally.

### Well-kept streets

An area which is often neglected is management and basic janitorial duties. This includes litter collection, emptying bins, removing graffiti, and small-scale maintenance of street furniture, for example ensuring it is well painted and in good repair. These jobs are generally done by the District Council, but may suffer because of lack of co-ordination. Physically, streets are also affected by the activities of organisations like the gas, water, electricity and telephone companies who routinely dig up streets and pavements without replacing the original surface. Town centre management has been successful in a number of towns in increasing the level of co-ordination between the public and private sectors and making sure that work is done promptly. But given limited resources, the key to success is usually tapping voluntary effort. Local people can organise clean ups and audit the town to identify problems, for example vacant property, and can encourage businesses to take responsibility for the area outside their property as they do on the Continent. Parish or Town Councils can also play an important role, and may levy a small rate to pay for employing an extra cleaner or town 'ranger', who can also help 'keep an eye' on what is going on. Selsey and Heathfield in Sussex are two examples of Town and Parish Councils that have played a leading role with other partners.

4.7

### Building upkeep and conservation

The buildings which make up a town are probably the most important element of its environment. Indeed, on a busy street they are probably all that can be seen. The design of buildings is carefully controlled through the planning system, but the condition of buildings is something which is the responsibility of the owners. Boarded-up or dilapidated buildings can undermine any amount of environmental improvements, and there is a range of action that can be taken to deal with them.

Grants may be available from the Council or English Heritage for repairs and refurbishments to listed buildings, but these only cover a small part of the costs. Councils have powers to serve 'repairs notices' on dilapidated listed buildings. However they are often unwilling to do this, because if the notice is not acted upon, they may have to purchase the building and carry out the works themselves. Alternatively an 'urgent works' notice can be served on listed buildings and other buildings in conservation areas. It is therefore important to keep the town lively and economically active so that there is sufficient money to maintain buildings and to fund their refurbishment.



*The Old Corn Exchange in Devizes, Wiltshire, that has been refurbished for community uses by the Town Council.*



*Fascia lighting and interesting window displays help towns improve their appeal. Llandrindod Wells, Powys.*

There are over 140 building preservation trusts, and they generally operate on a revolving fund basis, using the proceeds from disposal to take on the next project. Many have been promoted by local authorities and work closely with them. For example, the trust will enter an agreement which will take over buildings that the local authority may be forced to acquire, if it serves a repairs notice on the owner. Building preservation trusts are backed up by the Architectural Heritage Fund, which is investing some £8 million in 70 trusts, through two to three year loans which have to be guaranteed or which can be secured on the property. Over the last 20 years the Fund has invested over £22 million in the restoration of historic buildings, in turn leveraging further investment in the form of grants or commercial loans.



*Award schemes can stimulate action.  
Nantwich, Cheshire.*



*Historic shopfronts can be restored, as in this  
W.H. Smith's in Newtown, Powys.*

A good model for how redundant buildings can be reused is provided by some of the building preservation trusts who play a particularly important role in historic towns, such as Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, and Stroud, Gloucestershire. Building preservation trusts are constituted with charitable status, and their role is to bring back to beneficial use buildings that are at risk of becoming derelict. Sometimes this involves promoting a mixed use scheme, with flats above commercial space.

4.8

It is worth checking whether empty buildings are owned by public authorities and, if necessary, pressing them to maintain them in good order and to find new uses for them quickly. Conservation Area Partnerships can play an important role in encouraging co-ordinated action, as in Pewsey in Wiltshire, for example.

### Improved shopfronts

Run-down or ugly shopfronts can make a town look neglected, especially to pedestrians. Grants coupled with advice on upgrading the frontages can provide a town with a new lease of life. Better still are attractive window displays to entice people into the shop and make browsing a pleasant experience, as well as distinctive fascias or hanging signs. Restoring historic shopfronts, putting up better fascias and signs, and using window dressing and lighting to promote what is on offer, can be relatively inexpensive and cumulatively very effective. National chains can sometimes be persuaded to adapt their national style to local circumstances as some of the banks have done. While the best examples are often to be found in historic cities like York, Chester and Norwich, there are also some good models from smaller towns. For example, in Carrickfergus in Northern Ireland a designer was employed to provide advice and support to traders who wanted to improve the look of their shops. This is probably more effective than producing yet another design guide, which goes over most people's heads. Local authorities can help by encouraging and supporting projects to upgrade shopfronts, for example through a survey of the potential by the Civic Society; through policies to favour hanging signs, external displays, and better lighting; and through small grants and award schemes.

4.9





## Checklist for action

# 4

- a **Is the local authority, Town Council or civic or amenity society promoting positive initiatives to improve the environment?**
- b **Are parts of the town centre used by people in the evenings and on Sundays?**
- c **Do young people have somewhere to 'hang out' where they are not seen as a nuisance?**
- d **Are there enough clubs, cafes or other facilities for young people?**
- e **Are the streets kept clean of litter and graffiti?**
- f **Do enough people live in the town centre, and above the shops?**
- g **Are the streets well lit, including shop windows, and are some buildings floodlit at night?**
- h **Are the streets in good repair?**
- i **Have environmental improvements used good materials, and is there a good standard of workmanship and design?**
- j **Are there pleasant public spaces where people can sit, untroubled by traffic?**
- k **Is the street furniture in the right places, and is it well maintained?**
- l **Are the pavements uncluttered by poles and signs?**
- m **Do the lamp columns look attractive?**
- n **Does a volunteer group undertake periodic clean ups and identify problems?**
- o **Is there a 'town ranger', or someone to co-ordinate cleaning and maintenance in the centre?**
- p **Is there a regular audit of vacant properties and projects to fill empty shop windows?**
- q **Do businesses look after the area outside their property?**
- r **Is there a project to restore or reuse any prominent vacant building?**
- s **Are there well-designed shop fascias and hanging signs?**
- t **Is there a scheme to improve the quality of shopfronts?**
- u **Are the police involved in positive initiatives to make the centre feel safer as well as to cut crime?**



# 5

## RESOURCING TOWN CENTRE INITIATIVES

- Launching a lasting initiative
- Involving the community
- Drawing up the vision and strategy
- Setting up a group
- Managing an initiative
- Finding the resources

This handbook could not have been produced without drawing on the large body of experience that now exists on revitalising smaller towns. The experience in both Britain and abroad confirms the importance of local initiatives and partnerships. It also shows the value of an agreed strategy, based on research, in attracting the resources needed for implementation. A well-researched and well-presented strategy can open doors, and provide a sense of achievement.

### Launching a lasting initiative

Despite the hundreds of meetings and reports on the subject up and down the land, only a few initiatives seem to have fully gone from vision to successful results. Too many have involved a flurry of activity followed by ‘burn-out’, because they have not followed the right process. In contrast, when there has been a concerted effort, backed by all tiers of government, as for example in much of Kent, in parts of Wiltshire and Dorset, and on the borders of Wales in Herefordshire and Shropshire, some of the results have been impressive. Similarly in the USA, voluntary effort has achieved a great deal because it has tapped into the experience and professional support of the US national Main Street Program. The Main Street Program, which was set up by the American equivalent of the Civic Trust, is working in nearly two thousand towns and cities throughout the United States and has served as a model for similar programmes in many other countries. It has evolved from simple policies of conservation and enhancement of the built environment to a highly successful comprehensive approach to business/commercial development and developing the capacity of co-ordinated action to fend off competition from the large discount stores such as Wal-Mart.

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#### Launching an initiative

- Recognise the importance of town centres to the social, economic and physical well-being of the community
- Profile and undertake ‘Health Check’ of the town(s) and its competitors
- Establish local concerns
- Identify a champion within the local authority and potential allies elsewhere
- Set up a Forum for regular consultation with local interests
- Develop a vision
- Work up a strategy and a budget for some early action

source: Town Centre Partnerships

### The URBED seven-level model:

#### Going from vision to results

- |   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| 1 | Shared Vision             |
| 2 | Impetus for Collaboration |
| 3 | Balance of Projects       |
| 4 | Committed Partners        |
| 5 | Funding Packages          |
| 6 | Organisational Structure  |
| 7 | Monitoring Results        |

source: Town Centre Partnerships

URBED has drawn on Main Street and direct experience to create a seven-level model or checklist for use in drawing up or assessing town centre strategies and projects.

### Involving the community

A vital part of the development of a strategy is the involvement of the local community. Just because active members are drawn from the community it should not be assumed that everyone will naturally support the initiative. It should also be recognised that the community is very diverse and includes local groups and businesses, shopkeepers, clubs, churches, pensioners' organisations, as well as the general public. Different people need to be approached in different ways.

5.3

Local schools can be a very good way of involving the wider community. Work on the town can be incorporated into school projects and schools can also be used as a way of contacting parents. (There is a good kit for schools produced by Boots The Chemists Town Centres Support Unit.) Local conservation groups and civic societies are important to involve from the beginning as they are dedicated to the town and are often very knowledgeable about it. They can do useful work in identifying buildings of merit that need attention. The Chamber of Commerce should be involved, but it cannot be assumed that the Chamber will necessarily represent the views of all local businesses. It is therefore also important to contact individual local businesses, as well as major employers, the local managers of larger companies, and multiples such as Boots The Chemists. Shopkeepers should be consulted as a separate group since they have very different needs to other businesses, as too have market stallholders, who may belong to a separate traders' association. Professionals such as solicitors, accountants and estate agents are the route to involving property owners. All stakeholders including the key officers and councillors from the local authority (that is the County, District, and Town or Parish Council) should be involved early on if the initiative is to be taken seriously.

Information needs to be shared so that strategies and particular projects can move forward with general support. Too often people are invited to meetings without having first been told what is on the agenda, and poorly run meetings can soon dissipate a community's energy. Annual reports are useful but it is likely that only the most committed people will read them. Information should be available in manageable chunks and accessible formats which might include leaflets to summarise the strategy, a regular newsletter to report on progress, stalls in markets or the high street to distribute information, displays in shop windows and coverage in the local press, or on the local radio, which has the biggest audience of all.

### Drawing up the vision and strategy

The next stage is to give people the opportunity to comment on initial plans and to contribute their ideas. Here there are a number of cardinal rules. First, the consultation should come before plans are drawn up to avoid the impression that everything is sewn up, and to allow ownership of projects by the people most likely to use or benefit from them. Secondly, when proposals are presented you must avoid raising unrealistic expectations by making their status clear.

5.4

While the most commonly used technique to involve the local community is the public meeting, they are only effective if they are carefully planned. Meetings can easily get out of hand and can be dominated by those who 'shout loudest'. This may mean that the views expressed are not those of the majority. It is important that the chair of the meeting is someone who is used to getting the best out of a number of people with disparate views, whilst maintaining the momentum towards achieving agreement and action. A town centre conference involving examples from other towns is often a far better way of drawing together people who are interested in the town's future, particularly if it gets people talking to each other around tables.

More and more towns are using an 'Action Planning Event' or Planning for Real' exercise which brings together all the town's 'stakeholders' through workshops and brainstorming sessions. The use of yellow 'post-it' notes and simplified plans or models can be useful tools. These allow everybody to record their ideas, ensuring that all voices are heard. The groups can then prioritise the various problems, thinking of possible solutions that will gain overall support. The 'round table' approach has been successfully used by URBED in a variety of situations with expert presentations in formal sessions, followed by small focus groups discussing different issues. It has, for example, helped in developing strategies for groups of smaller towns in Powys, Mid Wales, West Wiltshire and East Shropshire.

Another useful technique for getting people to think about a town is to do a 'SWOT' analysis - of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The strengths and weaknesses are about the present and should be used to get people to think about the town as it stands. By contrast, opportunities and threats look to the future and get people thinking about what might happen and how this can be changed. A SWOT analysis can be a useful way of organising an initial meeting, or 'issues workshop'.

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Another technique is to organise a survey. This can be a useful method for getting the views of shopkeepers, businesses, local residents and visitors. Questionnaires should be brief, and only ask for information which is required. Questions must also be carefully framed to avoid bias. For example, questions with a choice of answers (such as 'Is your trade: thriving; surviving; declining?') will get more reliable results than questions such as 'What is your turnover?' Surveys that achieve the most productive results are often those that have been developed after a number of discussions with local stakeholders. This enables the questions to be realistic and feasible and relate directly to the concerns and wants of that particular town.

It is important to consider how the people to be surveyed are selected. Street surveys are good for finding out where shoppers come from (the catchment area) but will miss people who are staying away and a telephone survey is perhaps more appropriate. Likewise, school surveys will only involve parents. Alternatively, questionnaires could be distributed by hand and then either collected or returned to a local address. This is usually the best method if dealing with retailers or businesses, who always seem to be busy when you approach them! Thought should be given to how the information is to be analysed. Simple yes/no answers are easier than written answers and can be turned into percentages (for example 60%

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*Planning for real exercise. Wareham, Dorset.*

of people think this or that). Some smaller towns have successfully adapted the Rural Development Commission's Village Appraisal technique to find out what local residents think of the town, for example in Newport in Shropshire. However, there is a danger of initiatives running out of steam if they attempt to cover too much at one time, and shorter surveys may be more cost-effective.

### Setting up a group

Due to the fact that it is hard for an individual, or even an organisation such as a Chamber of Commerce or Civic Society, to represent the town centre as a whole, there is a real value in establishing some form of association concerned with the good of the town that cuts across existing boundaries. Though one can sometimes use an existing organisation (such as the Town Council), it is usually more effective to set up a group specifically for the purpose of revitalising the local town or village. Through this it is possible to bring leading members of different groups together and to improve communications. The group may also have a special name, like Abertillery Action, Wareham 2000 or the Heathfield Partnership, to project a positive image. A lot can be learned from other initiatives that are already up and running and it is a good idea to visit other relevant places to see what they have achieved.

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It goes without saying that views expressed as part of consultation should be taken seriously. People do, however, find it very difficult to abandon cherished ideas even if they are not well received by consultation and may find a host of reasons for ignoring the public's views. Inevitably you will get conflicting views and it will be impossible to take them all on board. This is where the art of the consensus builder or consultant comes in. If the views of main players are not taken on board it is important to explain the reasons to them, or to put them in a 'longer-term' category while focussing on what is achievable in the short term. Consultation is not a once and for all experience. Public involvement must be an ongoing process with people kept informed of progress and invited to comment again when plans have become more developed. To provide early wins it is best to build on common ground, so that an initiative is seen to be achieving progress, which in turn will create confidence. Stakeholders have often been on different sides of the fence for so long they have forgotten what they are fighting for but will, if encouraged, find a lot more common ground than first suspected.

The process of establishing a group will involve giving it a name, perhaps designing a logo or symbol, establishing an elected committee and some form of membership structure. It is important to emphasise that many initiatives have succeeded with little in the way of formal organisation, while there are countless constitutions that end up gathering dust. There are a number of different structures for setting up a group depending on the type of initiative a particular town wants to develop. The easiest model is simply to have a body that brings together representatives of all organisations interested in the town, without any formal status. It might be convened through the Parish or Town Council, but it is vital that it is seen as crossing boundaries. What matters are the skills and commitment of the members rather than bothering too much about numbers of representatives from each interest group. However, once substantial funds are involved the group can be formalised, and the best approach is to adopt an

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existing model constitution which a solicitor or the Council for Voluntary Service or equivalent should be able to provide. The usual options are a company limited by guarantee or a friendly society trust which involves members having one pound shares and not having personal liability (so if an event loses money, members will not be personally liable for the bill). This is especially useful if major projects are planned that involve financial commitments, for example to restore a building or run a major festival. Action for Market Towns, sponsored by the Rural Development Commission, whose members come from towns where an initiative is under way, may be able to provide useful contacts.

5.10

Sometimes charitable status may be needed, for example as a Building Preservation Trust to restore a building. The Development Trusts Association and the Association of Building Preservation Trusts can provide advice and there are plenty of successful examples. It may be sensible for the group to be registered as a charity so that it can undertake fund-raising and apply for charitable funds including those available from the National Lottery. Charities also have certain tax advantages but they are closely controlled by the Charity Commissioners, and have to have charitable objectives. Companies limited by guarantee can be registered as charities but it is important that the group works for the benefit of the whole town and gives no direct benefits to members.

### Managing an initiative

At some point it is important to clarify the mechanism for management or implementation. Some places have set up teams that bring together officers from different agencies as a kind of task force, which can then work closely with a forum or trader association. Sometimes the driving force will be provided through a town centre manager, and the Association of Town Centre Management has a growing number of members among smaller towns as does Action for Market Towns. Where there are a number of towns, some kind of town centre support or regeneration unit may be appropriate, based within the District or County Council.

Because results matter, there is a danger of taking on too much and not making a success of it. It is therefore better to focus initial efforts on projects that are seen as high priority, and where there is little disagreement, so that the initiative begins to be taken seriously. To do this, it is important to set out a clear work programme with short-term objectives. In this way, everyone knows what they are working towards and can unite around common goals. Groups can easily get bogged down in administration and detail. Issues which are likely to take a long time or which are complex should be delegated to working groups so that the main group can focus on action. The annual report and annual general meeting should be used to report on progress so that people can see that headway is being made and also to set the agenda for the coming year. Above all the group should seek to create a positive atmosphere, and to have some fun!

Few smaller towns can afford full-time town centre managers, and they may not need them if they tap local talent to the full. Running a local group is not easy and it is important to devote some time to considering how the group is organised to make it effective. If this

#### Town Centre Management

“ the effective co-ordination of private and public sectors to create a successful town centre through partnership and full consultation.”

is not done, you may find that a small number of people end up doing all of the work and grumbling at all the 'hangers-on'. At the same time, all the 'hangers-on' will be feeling ignored and excluded and may end up resenting the active members. Down this road lies disaster and conflict, but it can be avoided with a little early thought.

The groups which work best are those with a mix of people and skills. Strong personalities, able to lead by example, are important, but if there are too many of them nothing will get done. It is also important to have people who are prepared to do the legwork, literally in the case of distributing surveys. It can be a good idea to carry out a skills survey of members. This need not be very formal; it could involve a piece of paper passed around at meetings, a 'post-it' board in a temporary office or a brief questionnaire. People should be asked to indicate the skills and experience that they can contribute, as well as those areas in which they would like to get involved. This will help to identify the skills in the group so that people can be used most effectively, as well as identifying skills gaps where training might be required. It must be remembered that people are happy to accept a boss at work, but are less comfortable about this in a voluntary group. People volunteer their time and so should be treated as equals. Some people will have more knowledge and experience, which gives them power, but the principle of having 'professionals on tap, not on top', is a good one to remember.

It is important that the group is set up to get things done rather than to have endless meetings. This is often best achieved by setting up working groups on different topics. These may be short-lived such as a carnival committee or publicity and fund-raising groups. Each group should have a nominated co-ordinator with the authority to get things done. Working groups can help to spread the work of the group throughout the membership. A smaller committee, made up of the co-ordinators, can oversee the process, and possibly be the executive committee. URBED has found it is often practical to divide up the work into promotion, business development and environment, with perhaps a separate group on access, to accommodate different interests. The experience of the US Main Street Program provides a possible model.

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It is important that groups are seen to be open and democratic. This is best achieved by having a membership system or Town Centre Forum which is open to all local people, although donations or a small subscription will initially be required to fund postage, printing, publicity, hire of rooms etc. The membership can then be used as a mailing list for newsletters and can be invited to an annual general meeting where the committee and co-ordinators are elected. It is best to keep the rules at meetings to a minimum. However if there are internal conflicts, it may be sensible to agree some ground rules such as voting procedures and speaking through the chair. These may seem heavy handed but they will ensure that everyone has their say and the group is not dominated by vocal but unrepresentative subgroups.

### Finding the resources

An important part of any plan is identifying the resources to carry it out. Unfortunately, Councils are strapped for cash whilst private businesses are often struggling and feel that they already pay enough rates. There is little point, however, in developing a

5.12

strategy without having some idea about how it is going to be paid for. This can be the point at which many local groups flounder, throwing up their hands in despair at the enormity of the resources required. However with imagination and an agreed strategy substantial resources can be marshalled from different sources, tapping whatever public sector funds are available at the time, for example the Single Regeneration Budget, or European Union funds.

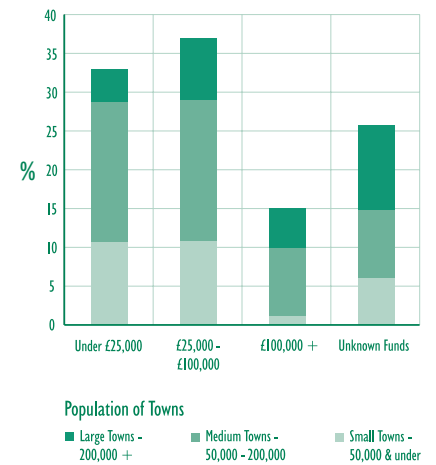
The most important initial resource is people's time and much can be achieved through voluntary effort or 'sweat equity'. There is often a range of people in small towns, including retired people, with the skills and time to contribute to initiatives. It is therefore important to involve people in the process of developing a strategy so that they understand it, are committed to its success and are therefore willing to help. It is also important to give people responsibility so that they feel valued. A small high level group may be able to decide things quickly, but is not what smaller towns need.

Secondments from companies may be possible. This can take a number of forms from part-time involvement, to a placement for a couple of weeks, or a long-term attachment for a year or more. This is particularly attractive to larger companies with a strong interest in the town and can be developed through their internal staff development programmes. Some small towns have found it possible to recruit people taking early retirement as co-ordinators, as in Richmond, Yorkshire, where Barclays Bank provided the co-ordinator. It is usually easier for local people and companies to provide help 'in-kind' than cash. This means the loaning or donation of equipment, premises and services. The Council, a local company or a retail chain may allow the use of premises or provide office facilities such as copying, telephones and postage. This could provide an identifiable base for the initiative which is very important when trying to build relationships within the town. If a company is refitting its offices, it may also be willing to donate its old office furniture and equipment. By identifying a common interest in the future of the town, people can more easily be persuaded to volunteer their time and resources.

There is also the possibility of sponsorship but companies will need persuading that this is in their best interests as well as the town's. Companies are interested in public relations and advertising and will have budgets for this. They may therefore be interested in sponsoring activities if they are compatible with the image that they are seeking to project, if they are thereby reaching their target market, or improving their image in the town. Town guides can include advertisements, and festivals can credit sponsors on banners and in programmes. Shops may be willing to sponsor litter bins and a major supermarket operator may be willing to provide more substantial sponsorship to build their local market, for example by contributing to a project that involves young people.

Local authorities may also contribute funds, although they find this more difficult than they once did. The chances are greater if the Council can realise funds from selling off land, and perhaps enter into partnerships under the government's Private Finance Initiative which encourages joint ventures with the private sector. It may be possible to tap into existing programmes, such as environmental or highway improvements, to

## The size of the town makes no difference to the funding



## How robust is your project?

This depends on its viability and the capacity of those promoting it to carry it through successfully.

Factors:	Criteria:
Vision	Realism/achievability
Impetus	Threat/opportunity
Balance	Relation to other projects
Guts	Driving force/champion
Yield	Matching funding
Organisation	Track record/local support
Results	Monitoring and evaluation

ensure that they include works of benefit to the town. Some Town Councils have raised substantial funds through property they own, and can raise a local rate or 'precept'. In some areas the Training and Enterprise Council has funded business development programmes targeted at retailers and they can be used to support more comprehensive strategies. A range of European grants is available for some types of towns. Increasingly it looks as if European funds will be focussed on 'human resource' development, and on projects that involve collaboration across national boundaries. English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund may also contribute to capital projects in conservation areas. The Single Regeneration Budget and Rural Challenge have helped some small town centres in the past, and from 1999 Regional Development Agencies will take on the role (as they have already in Wales and Scotland).

5.13

5.14

5.15

There may also be scope to generate income. The good old-fashioned jumble sale or garden party should not be scoffed at. On a larger scale, it may be possible to earn income by running a market or even developing a building which can be let out to local enterprises. Competition for funds will be fierce so it is vital that groups present a united front and a coherent strategy. The best way to start is usually to learn from people (including professionals) who have a track record.

The chances of securing resources are improved by providing information on both objectives and achievements. A health check or audit of the town centre can provide powerful evidence in terms of key indicators or performance such as vacancy levels, the turnover of empty premises, openings and closures, multiple representation and information on pedestrian activity, or footfall. More detailed surveys can be undertaken to identify needs and priorities. Having set objectives, and agreed the action that is needed, it is then vital to monitor change. Annual reports or newsletters can keep sponsors interested. Comparisons with other towns can form the basis for useful research.

Further information on these and other topics can be obtained from URBED and the Market Towns Research Network. We would be particularly interested in hearing from anyone doing work on the impact of environmental enhancement on town centre performance and the impact of business rates and rentals on investment.

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**Though revitalising town centres involves a great deal of concerted effort, the result can be well worthwhile, as the case studies illustrate. Because the problems are complex, there is no right solution, and indeed this handbook describes some 30 different types of actions, each with many variants. As the clock cannot be turned back, the challenge is to devise and agree a set of actions that are appropriate for each town centre, and then to get on with implementation. While resources will always be tight, and projects will always be in competition, there is plenty of evidence that when there is a clear vision, a sensible strategy capable of being undertaken in phases, and a partnership involving all the many interests or stakeholders, the resources will follow, and so will the results.**

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## Checklist for action

- a **Is there a broadly-based partnership to improve the town?**
- b **Is there a clear focus and shared vision for the town?**
- c **Is there a written strategy for the town centre that explains how it can be improved?**
- d **Have local people contributed to the strategy?**
- e **Have the retailers been surveyed?**
- f **Are local schools involved?**
- g **Does the District or Unitary Council sponsor the initiative?**
- h **Is the Town Council supportive?**
- i **Are members of the business community actively involved and have major property owners been consulted?**
- j **Is there an action plan for implementing the initiative that specifies responsibilities and time scales?**
- k **Are different projects to improve the centre adequately co-ordinated (e.g. are there organisational mechanisms for making things happen)?**
- l **Are indicators of performance or output collected and published?**
- m **Is there provision for learning from good practice elsewhere, and training or capacity building?**
- n **Is there a budget to cover running costs as well as capital projects?**
- o **Does the initiative benefit from help 'in-kind'?**
- p **Has the initiative explored all the sources of funding for projects?**
- q **Is there a visible base for the initiative in the town centre?**
- r **Is there a newsletter or other method, such as a forum, by which information is shared with all the town's stakeholders?**
- s **Is there a clearly identified co-ordinator or manager with relevant experience?**
- t **Has the initiative achieved some successes in the last six months, and publicised them?**
- u **Are those involved having enough fun and attracting new blood?**

## Further Reading

Some titles are out of print at the time of publishing this handbook, but reference copies may be available through libraries or the publishing organisations.

Additional information is available in articles appearing in relevant periodicals.

## GENERAL BACKGROUND

- The English Country Town*, R. Chamberlin (The National Trust/Book Club Associates, 1983)
- The English Country Town*, A. Quiney (Thames & Hudson, London, 1987)
- The English Market Town*, J. Brown (Crowood, Marlborough, 1986)
- The English Town*, M. Girouard (Guild Publishing, London, 1990)
- The Impact of Superstores on Market Towns and District Centres*, Hillier Parker (DETR/Stationery Office, 1998)
- The Making of English Towns: 2000 years of evolution*, D. Lloyd (Gollancz, London, 1984)
- Market Towns: Options for a Share in the Future*, Action for Market Towns (AMT, Bury St. Edmunds, 1997)
- Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge*, URBED - Urban and Economic Development Group (Department of the Environment, Stationery Office, 1994)

## REFERENCE

- AA Book of British Towns*, ed. Reader's Digest Association (Drive Publications, London, 1982)
- Bypasses*, Department of Transport (Landor/Stationery Office, 1992)
- Community and voluntary transport in rural England*, W S Atkins with MCL Transport (Rural Development Commission, Salisbury, 1996)
- Farmers' Markets: An American Success Story*, H. Festing (éco-logic, Bristol, 1998)
- Futuretown! - an educational resource pack*, C. Hollins, A. Miller and Venture (Boots The Chemists, Nottingham, 1994; new edition, *Talk of the Town*, on CD-Rom, 1998)
- The Impact of Tourism on Rural Settlements*, Segal Quince Wicksteed (Rural Development Commission, Salisbury, 1996)
- Innovation and New Technology in Small Rural Firms*, Centre for Enterprise and Economic Research, Middlesex University (Rural Development Commission, Salisbury, 1997)
- Less Traffic, Better Towns*, Friends of the Earth (Friends of the Earth Trust Limited, London, 1992)
- Main Street Success Stories*, S. G. Dane (National Main Street Center, Washington, 1997)
- New Shopping in Historic Towns: The Chesterfield Story*, T. Aldous (English Heritage, London, 1990)
- Our Kind of Town*, Pedestrians' Association (Pedestrians' Association, London, 1993)
- Planning Policy Guidance (PPG6): Town Centres and Retail Developments*, Department of the Environment/Welsh Office (Stationery Office, London, 1993; revised 1996)
- Planning Policy Guidance (PPG13): Transport*, Department of the Environment (Stationery Office, London, 1994)
- The Regeneration of Loftus: a partnership led by local people*, Civic Trust (Civic Trust, London, 1994)
- The Retail Development Process*, C. Guy (Routledge, London, 1994)
- Retailing in Historic Towns*, Donaldsons (English Historic Towns Forum, Bath, 1992)
- Tomorrow - a peaceful path to urban reform: The feasibility of accommodating 75% of new homes in urban areas*, URBED - Urban and Economic Development Group (Friends of the Earth Limited, London, 1998)

*The Which? Guide to Country Shopping: Unique shopping opportunities in rural Britain*, Consumers' Association (Which, London, 1995)

*Young People and Town Centres*, H. Woolley (ATCM/University of Sheffield Department of Landscape, 1997)

## GOOD PRACTICE

- Action Planning: How to use planning weekends and urban design action teams to improve your environment*, N. Wates (The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, London, 1996)
- Building the 21st Century Home*, URBED (Architectural Press, Butterworth, London, 1998)
- Country lifelines: good practice in rural transport*, TAS Partnership Ltd (Rural Development Commission, Salisbury, 1996)
- Developing Structures to Deliver Town Centre Management*, ATCM (ATCM/Boots The Chemists, 1997)
- Farmers' Markets: The UK Potential*, A. Chubb (éco-logic, Bristol, 1998)
- A Guide to Car Park Design and Use*, Venture (ATCM, London, 1997)
- Helping Create Better Towns and Cities. A series of mini-guides on key town centre topics*, Boots The Chemists (Boots The Chemists, Nottingham, 1997)
- Helping Deliver Better Towns for Tomorrow: A review of transport issues*, Boots The Chemists (Boots The Chemists, Nottingham, 1998)
- Improving Design in the High Street: A Royal Fine Art Commission guide*, C.J. Davis (Architectural Press, Butterworth, London, 1997)
- Kent's Town Centres: Shaping up for Access*, (Kent County Council, 1995)
- Living Over The Shop: A Handbook for Practitioners*, A. Petherwick and R. Fraser (University of York, York, 1992)
- Main Street Success Stories*, S. G. Dane (National Main Street Centre, Washington, 1997)
- Managing Urban Spaces in Town Centres: good practice guide*, Chestertons (ATCM/DETR, Stationery Office, London, 1997)
- A Practical Guide to Crime Prevention for Local Partnerships*, Crime Concern (Home Office, Stationery Office, London, 1993)
- Safe and Secure Town Centres*, ATCM (ATCM, London, 1997)
- Town Centre Management: A 'Tool Kit' suggesting how to get started*, C. Green (Boots The Chemists, Nottingham, 1996)
- Town Centre Managers - selection, management and development: A guide to good practice*, ed. C. Hollins/Oxford Brookes University (ATCM, London, 1996)
- Town Centre Partnerships: A survey of good practice and report of an action research project*, URBED - Urban and Economic Development Group (ATCM/Department of the Environment, Stationery Office, 1997)
- Traffic Measures in Historic Towns: an introduction to good practice*, Civic Trust and English Historic Towns Forum (Civic Trust and English Historic Towns Forum, 1993)
- Urban Regeneration Partnerships*, C. Clark (Civic Trust, London, 1996)
- Village Appraisals: Helping you to understand your community* (part of a software pack, *Village Appraisals for Windows*), Countryside & Community Research Unit, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, Cheltenham (1998)
- Village Shops Mean Business* (Rural Development Commission, Salisbury)



## ADVICE AND INFORMATION

Action for Market Towns  
12 Looms Lane  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk IP33 1HE

The Association of Building  
Preservation Trusts  
Clareville House  
26-27 Oxendon Street  
London SW1Y 4EL

The Association of Small Historic  
Towns & Villages of the United  
Kingdom  
c/o Ray Green  
Parliament House  
Longcombe, Totnes  
Devon TQ9 6PR

Association of Town Centre  
Management  
1 Queen Anne's Gate  
London SW1A 6QY

Boots The Chemists  
Town Centres Support Unit  
Head Office  
Nottingham NG2 3AA

Business in The Community  
Better Towns Programme  
44 Baker Street  
London W1M 1DH

Centre for Community Visions  
*See New Economics Foundation*

Civic Trust  
17 Carlton House Terrace  
London SW1Y 5AW

Community Transport Association  
Highbank  
Halton Street, Hyde  
Greater Manchester SK14 2NY

Crafts Council  
44a Pentonville Road  
London N1 9DY

Development Trusts Association  
20 Conduit Place  
London W2 1HS

English Heritage  
23 Savile Row  
London W1X 1AB

Experian Ltd  
Talbot House  
Talbot Street  
Nottingham NG1 5HF

Focus Property Intelligence plc  
Ingram House  
13-15 John Adam Street  
London WC2N 6LD

Living Over the Shop  
University of York  
The Kings Manor  
York YO1 2EP

National Council for  
Voluntary Organisations  
Regent's Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London N1 9RC

National Federation of  
Community Organisations  
8 Upper Street  
London N1 0PQ

NatWest  
Property Asset Management  
York House  
207 Pentonville Road  
London N1 9UZ

New Economics Foundation  
First Floor Vine Court  
112-116 Whitechapel Road  
London E1 1JE

Neighbourhood Initiatives  
Foundation  
The Poplars  
Lightmoor  
Telford TF4 3QN

Planning Exchange  
186 Bath Street  
Glasgow G2 4HG

Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
The Homestead  
40 Water End  
York YO3 6LP

Rural Development  
Commission  
Dacre House  
19 Dacre Street  
London SW1H 0DH

Royal Mail Postbus  
Development Team  
Road Transport Commercial Office  
2nd Floor  
Burlington House  
Burlington Street  
Chesterfield S40 1RX

Sainsbury's  
Development Policy Group  
Stamford House  
Stamford Street  
London SE1 9LL

Sustainable Urban  
Neighbourhood Initiative  
Urban and Economic  
Development Group  
41 Old Birley Street  
Manchester M15 5RF

SUSTRANS  
35 King St  
Bristol BS1 4DZ

Town and Country  
Planning Association  
17 Carlton House Terrace  
London SW1Y 5AS

Urban Villages Forum  
10 Berners Mews  
London W1P 3LF

URBED  
Urban and Economic  
Development Group  
19 Store Street  
London WC1E 7DH

Welsh Tourist Board  
Brunel House  
2 Fitzalan Road  
Cardiff CS2 1UY

## FUNDING

Architectural Heritage Fund  
27 John Adam Street  
London WC2N 6HX

Arts Council of England  
Lottery Unit  
14 Great Peter Street  
London SW1P 3NQ

## Useful Organisations

The following are organisations and bodies who may be able to provide advice and information, or funding, or who have an interest in smaller towns. They are grouped under headings: Advice and information; Funding; and Other; but clearly some may provide advice or information, as well as funding. Separate information on those undertaking research is available through the Market Towns Research Network, which is managed by URBED.

For information on the Market Towns  
Research Network, contact

URBED,  
19 Store Street,  
London WC1E 7DH.  
Tel: 0171 436 8050  
Fax: 0171 436 8083  
e-mail: [urbed@urbed.co.uk](mailto:urbed@urbed.co.uk)

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## Useful Organisations

.. / continued

Arts Council of Wales  
Museum Place  
Cardiff CF1 3NX

The English Sports Council Lottery  
Sports Fund  
PO Box 649  
London WC1H 0QS

The Millennium Commission  
2 Little Smith Street  
London SW1P 3DH

National Heritage Memorial Fund  
7 Holbein Place  
London SW1W 8NR

National Lottery Charities Board  
Corporate Office & UK Office  
St Vincent House  
16 Suffolk Street  
London SW1Y 4NL

Rural Development Commission  
*See above*

The Sports Council for Wales  
Lottery Sports Fund  
Sophia Garden  
Cardiff CF1 9SW

Welsh Development Agency  
Principality House  
The Friary  
Cardiff CF1 4AE

### OTHER

British Chambers of Commerce  
Manning House  
22 Carlisle Place  
London SW1P 1JA

British Retail Consortium  
Bedford House  
69-79 Fulham High Street  
London SW6 3TW

Department of the Environment,  
Transport and the Regions  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London SW1E 5DU

English Partnerships  
3 The Parks, Lodge Lane  
Newton-le-Willows  
Merseyside WA12 0JQ

English Tourist Board  
Thames Tower  
Black's Road  
Hammersmith  
London W12 9EL

The European Commission  
8 Storey's Gate  
London SW1P 3AT

Federation of Small Businesses  
C/o Holly Tree Lodge  
Brownsover Lane  
Old Brownsover Village  
Rugby  
Warwickshire CV21 1HY

Groundwork Foundation  
Bennetts Court  
6 Bennetts Hill  
Birmingham B2 5ST

Home Office  
Public Relations Branch  
Room 133  
Queen Anne's Gate  
London SW1H 9AT

Housing Corporation  
149 Tottenham Court Road  
London W1P 0BN

Local Government Association  
26 Chapter Street  
London SW1P 4ND

Market Towns Research Network  
URBED  
19 Store Street  
London WC1E 7DH

The National Association of British  
Market Authorities  
NBMA House  
21 Tarnside Road  
Orrell  
Wigan WN5 8RN

National Federation of Women's  
Institutes  
104 Kings Road  
London SW6 4LY

National House Builders' Federation  
Buildmark House  
Chiltern Avenue  
Amersham  
Bucks

National Housing Federation  
175 Grays Inn Road  
London WC1X 8UP

National Main Street Center  
1785 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington DC  
20036  
USA

National Retail Planning Forum  
80-82 Grays Inn Road  
London WC1

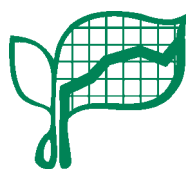
Royal Institute of British Architects  
66 Portland Place  
London W1N 4AD

The Royal Institution of Chartered  
Surveyors  
12 Great George Street  
London SW1P 3AD

Royal Town Planning Institute  
26 Portland Place  
London W1N 4BE

WI Country Markets Ltd  
Reada House  
Vachel Road  
Reading RG1 1NY





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