

Empty Shops Conference

Action for Market Towns (AMT)

Monday 19 October 2009

The Empty Shops Conference

Action for Market Towns (AMT) was invited to speak at the first national Empty Shops Conference by the [Empty Shops Network](#). The conference was designed for people already working in the sector, or who want to use empty shops and void spaces in the future. It was a practical one-day event to:

- find out what works and what doesn't, looking at empty shops projects across the UK
- look at what funding is available
- network and share ideas, inspiration and advice

Empty Shops Network founder Dan Thompson talked about the history of the empty shops movement, and looked at the current situation, using Coventry and its council's work to develop a Void Space Strategy as an example. Dan spoke about why local councils should be supporting the sector, and the real benefits it can deliver to people who live, work and invest in our towns.

Delegates also heard from the London-based [Space Makers](#) who are looking at co-working spaces, hack labs, arts spaces, social centres, community cafes and similar uses of space - and from Action for Market Towns about how empty shops have a big effect on smaller towns. There was also an introduction to the work of the [Meanwhile Project](#) and a variety of experts on hand to lead and take part in various workshops, including representatives from the Local Data Company.



Katie Fewings

Towns-4-Towns Coordinator

Action for Market Towns

Promoting Vibrant and Viable Small Towns



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What is a market town?

- Small rural towns or service centres (approx 1,600 across rural England)
- Approx 3,500 – 35,000 population (over 50% >5,000 residents, 80% >10,000)
- Home to nearly 11 million people – over 20% of the population
- Not always a market! But economic and social hub for surrounding area.

What is Action for Market Towns (AMT)?

- National membership organisation set up in 1997 to support regeneration of market towns
- Lobbied for Market Towns Initiative (MTI) to be included in the Rural White Paper (2000)
- Supported implementation of MTI and market town partnerships. MTI ended in 2005.

What does AMT do?

- Provides services and advice for MTPs and similar groups through membership
- Helps market towns to network, share learning and support one another across the country
- Serves as an authoritative voice for all market towns at a national level



Towns Alive

- 5 year programme funded by Big Lottery Fund
- Knowledge Hub
- Market Towns Academy
- National Voice
- Towns-4-Towns



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AMT and Empty Shops

- We want vibrant and viable small towns
- Empty shops don't serve this purpose!

AMT and the Town Centres Fund

- [Looking after our town centres report](#) released Apr 09 by Communities & Local Government (CLG)
- AMT and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) meets with CLG on 17 Jul 09
- £3m empty shop fund allocation announced Aug 09 – [CLG press release](#)

CRC Recession Report findings

- In majority of market towns surveyed number of vacant shops up over last 6 months
- **60%** of already vacant premises stayed empty during this time
- Local partnerships and councils taking some action – but funding changes = fewer town centre managers

CRC Recession Report findings

A few more examples...

- **20%** empty or due-to-close properties out of a total retail base of **80** in Kirkham, Lancashire.
- In Westerham, Kent, **33,000** out of **115,000 square feet** of commercial office space is empty
- Small stores closing and supermarkets buying them up - Tesco now owned **70%** of retail space in one East of England town

CRC Recession Report findings WOOLWORTHS

In half of the rural towns where Woolworths had closed...

31 = still vacant

23 = re-occupied

5 = just been let

If re-let, mostly discount retailers e.g. **Poundland**

Or mainstream retailers e.g. **Iceland** and **WH Smith**

CRC Recession Report suggestions

- Government should allow market towns and larger rural villages to apply for Town Centre Fund
- Encourage Local Authorities to find ways to ease **change of use for empty retail space** in difficult locations that has **community or business benefits**
- More flexible payment methods for landlords with significant holdings in smaller towns + rental incentive schemes for concentrations of empty properties.

AMT and the Town Centres Fund

- Majority of the 57 authorities to receive a grant = urban / inner city
- **Yes** – more shop closures in cities (often due to size of area)
- **But** – shop closure in market town (smaller geographical area) = bigger impact

CRC Recession Report – what next?

- Written to John Denham, Secretary of State at CLG
- Meeting senior official at CLG to talk about future funding allocation
- Should not rely solely on index of multiple deprivation but other issues too, e.g. geographic

Bedtime reading

Read the CRC report



Read Understanding
and supporting the
resilience of market
towns



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Examples of empty shops initiatives

- Advantage West Midlands – some marginal empty properties converted into residential units
- Hythe, Kent – empty shops down from 8.6% to 3.2% by moving shops, shop local campaign, town centre events
- Harrogate – property finder service – help firms with growth potential to locate in the district

Empty Shops projects

Eckington, Derbyshire

- Local artists transform empty shops
- Paint donated by public. Small grant from parish council.
- Temporary measure while town officials work with landlords to improve their buildings and get them back in use

Empty Shops projects

Eckington, Derbyshire

- Grants of up to 50% for structural repairs
- Town's development company (leading the regeneration and leveraging in funding) also refurbished Barclays Bank as units for small businesses
- Another building used as a community resource centre

Empty Shops projects

On view art project, Dursley

- Winner of Business & Economy category in 2009 South West Market Town Awards
- Converted windows of 4 vacant shops into temporary art galleries – 11 local artists held exhibitions
- 2 now let to new tenants and 1 sold for redevelopment

Empty Shops projects

On view art project, Dursley

Plans for the future...

- Link with the Royal Academy of Arts for a community drawing project
- Work with local schools and festivals
- Expand idea to nearby Stroud

Read about [more Award winning projects](#)

Empty Shops projects

Not empty shops but redundant buildings...

- Empty above shop space for start-ups
- Old stations turned into affordable accommodation and business space for young entrepreneurs
- Derelict buildings transformed into community centres

Towns-4-Towns Fund

- Share your successful initiatives
- Learn from others' successful initiatives
- Study tours, mentoring, learning materials

Read more about the [Towns-4-Towns Fund](#)

Prosperous Places

Campaign Plan

Updating and looking for your input

- Highlight your successful initiatives
- Raise specific issues e.g. Empty shops
- [Become a Policy Advocate](#)

Contact **Alison Eardley, Policy Manager** for more info

Get in touch!

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