

# Policy Position Statement

## Action for Market Towns Policy Position Statement on Prosperous Places

### AMT's Position

Action for Market Towns (AMT) is committed to supporting market towns through the economic downturn and preparing them to be local leaders of economic recovery. When considering market towns, there is often a tendency to focus purely on the traditional high street retail offering. Whilst this is an important aspect of every town, the wider town economy within which this sits, must not be overlooked. This position paper identifies the key challenges that AMT believes need to be addressed in terms of both the wider economy of market towns and the traditional high street.

### What do we mean by Prosperous Places?

Market towns provide unique and strategic hubs for both their residents and those of their rural hinterlands. AMT's definition of a 'prosperous place' focuses on the economic viability of towns alongside factors contributing to their wider sustainability including being appropriately developed, connected and provided with appropriate private, public and voluntary services. Towns with a well-developed sense of place, that are aware of their strengths and able to capitalise on them, will be well-positioned to benefit from an economic upturn.

Market towns each have their own distinctive heritage and character, and have developed over time in non-uniform ways to become places where people want to live and work. However the challenge of recession, highlighted the economic issues faced by many towns - including rising unemployment, national/regional effects on employment sectors, increased competition from out-of-town/ online retailers, cuts in public spending and declining trust in democratic processes – is something that these towns face and must address if they are to sustain their wider economies and remain viable and to position themselves ready for the post-recession recovery. AMT wants to support market towns by ensuring that they are always considered as part of policy decisions so that residents of these smaller communities are given an equal opportunity, freedoms and access to funds and are

not disadvantaged as a side effect of funding/ priorities in other areas. We want to them to act as leading generators of economic recovery for their local areas.

This Position Paper focuses on the key challenges to towns developing and maintaining a thriving, flourishing and diverse economy. It explores the challenges in terms of the wider economy and the more traditional market towns high street/ retail focus.

## The Policy Context

### National Policy

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, formed in May 2010, stated that the most urgent issue to address is the budget deficit. They announced **£6bn cuts to non front-line services** in the current financial year. Much of this saving is to be made through the abolition of numerous quangos and regional bodies, deemed unnecessary within the Government's aims of pushing power down to the very local level.

Of particular significance to market towns, the abolition of the **Commission for Rural Communities** (by March 2011) which will result in the moving of some current deliverables to within Defra. There will be a need to ensure that the work on market towns is not lost in this process, and AMT will need to play a role in this.

Two national priorities are of supporting job creation and promoting green investment. A **reform of the Banking System** promises to promote a competitive economy, sustain recovery and protect and sustain jobs.

Underlying all these proposals is a push towards giving more power to local communities, through the **Big Society** programme. A promise to implement the Sustainable Communities Act is a key step in this process, and one that AMT has been supportive of.

### Regional/ Sub-Regional Policy

Change is very visible at the regional level. With the need to reduce spend, the Government has taken the decision to abolish the Government Offices, the Regional Development Agencies and the Regional Spatial Strategies.

Local Enterprise Partnerships will be established as joint local authority-business bodies, which exist to promote local economic development, and in the main will replace the existing RDAs.

Housing and planning decisions, previously taken at a regional level, will be pushed to local councils.

The decentralisation of planning system will also be rolled out, based on principles of Open Source Planning.

### Local policy

At the very local level, the Big Society agenda means that much more power will be accessible to local councils and citizens. The Place Survey has been scrapped, and greater financial autonomy for local authorities is planned, with a Comprehensive Spending Review due to take place in Autumn.

Already AMT promotes the benefits of Community Led Planning through 'Town Action Planning', and the new Government is supporting such schemes as the community right to build, buy, or bid, where local groups can effectively take over the running of state run local services.

A core priority is flow of credit to viable SMEs, essential for supporting growth and Small Business Rate Relief has been doubled from Oct 2010 for 1 year.

## 10 key challenges for market towns

In a time of changing policy and governance, coupled with major spending cuts and the loss of institutions that have championed the needs of market towns, there is a need to focus action on how to ensure that the voices of towns continue to be heard. Market towns face pressures of development and competition over the coming years. Of key importance will be the need to develop our towns so that they are sustainable into the long-term. The key challenges that AMT wishes to address are:

Challenges relating to the wider market town economy are:

1. **Lack of policy recognition for wider economic role and diversity** –Reference to market towns within national and regional policy can be patchy, and does not always recognise the crucial role that these centres can play in creating prosperity in rural areas. There is a misconception that market towns are purely shopping centres for a wider rural hinterland, when in actual fact, they often have a complex economic foundation and it is vital that this is understood and clearly presented. The challenge will be to enhance visibility of this within datasets, to change the way market towns are perceived by policy makers and to guarantee better access to funding for small towns. This can take place by demonstrating the pivotal role market towns can play in national economic regeneration.
2. **Poor access to latest digital technologies** – Not all towns are able to access the latest digital technologies. Yet this is essential for homes and businesses to enable people to live and work more effectively and flexibly. This may require equipping people with additional skills for the digital age, but could result in more efficient working practices and reduced travel resulting from greater home working opportunities, leading to a greener, more carbon free economy (see point 4 also). New technologies can be most beneficial to local residents and businesses that are more remote from city centres and would lead to increased levels of support for the self-employed and micro businesses.
3. **Worklessness, inequalities and training** - Unemployment has risen more steeply in market towns than elsewhere. Wages of people who live and work in market towns are also lower on average than in urban areas and of residents who commute into urban areas. A greater majority of people in rural areas are on low pay compared to their urban counterparts. The number of economically inactive people in market towns also tends to be higher than the national average, with a large percentage of retired, homemakers, and unemployed. The challenge is twofold: first to enable better access to skills and training for not only the unemployed but also for those who are in low wage occupations or underemployed and would like to access training. Second to deliver the infrastructure that will bring employers to market towns, thus creating a demand for workers. Widening the issue is the need to help to promote an increasingly prosperous community, maintaining a diverse community but helping people to aspire to prosperity.

4. **Threatened environmental sustainability** – Small towns very often fall within wider travel-to-work areas with significant commuting taking place, often by car. The challenge is to understand the interdependency of market towns with other towns and cities, and ultimately to identify ways to reduce the carbon footprint of towns and to support low carbon economies. This might include exploring small scale low carbon technologies that can be used by local businesses and also be attractive to small scale energy providers. In addition, using local resources more effectively (land, materials, labour) and sustaining the cultural mix of the town.
5. **‘Not in my back yard’ attitude to change** – Market towns are in general popular places to live in, given their heritage and links to the surrounding countryside. A crucial challenge is working with those living in market towns to support their understanding of the need for change, be it in response to climate change, demographic shifts and housing development, or increased competition from other towns and larger urban areas.

Challenges relating to the wider economy but having a particular impact on town centres:

6. **‘Stop-start’ regeneration and investment** – Many market towns offer a focal point for commercial, business, social, cultural and transport services etc. They can reverse decline in remote rural areas, and form attractive, vibrant hubs in the rural economy. The challenges to achieving this are plentiful. Investing in the public realm, ensuring there is a range of suitable commercial properties for both start up and expanding businesses across a range of sectors, having attractive shop fronts, facades, signage and effective use of green spaces is vital. Creating a civic focus for community life is important for creating lively, safe and prosperous town centres and can be achieved through, for example, events and festivals. Reducing economic leakage (where money originating from a town’s economy is spent, or ‘leaked’ elsewhere) from market towns is important and many market towns are already initiating loyalty and other local economy schemes: encouraging workers to spend more time, and money, in town and developing the right mix of shopping and services is a key part of this. Finding new and innovative ways to promote the market town, both internally to residents and externally to visitors and inward investors, is key to overcoming competition from other areas and the internet. Likewise it is also important that market town businesses look to diversify how they sell and market their products/ services to take advantage of internet/ wider catchment areas and have the right skills and access to infrastructure which will enable them to do this.
7. **Limited transport and access** – A flourishing market town requires good access for residents, customers and businesses. The challenges to address include access and ease of movement for vehicles and pedestrians within and around the town and associated car-parking provision. Car parking in particular poses a series of challenges, where market towns already facing competition from out-of town centres with free parking, are often subjected to rising local parking costs. Access considerations for those with disabilities, and those with children and babies, is important. Providing improved access into and out of the town is vital for achieving a sense of arrival. Improving, integrating and potentially reopening public transport provision is a useful way to provide links with the wider hinterland and encourage reduced car usage.
8. **Decreasing economic diversity and distinctiveness** – Helping towns to identify their individual economic strengths, enabling them to thrive - including optimising opportunities presented by their heritage and the visitor economy, niche markets, or simply a critical mass of retail – is vital.

Many market towns are constrained in the number and size of business units they can provide for a variety of uses – services, retail, industrial and office and businesses – for many reasons, including lack of available land with the right planning permission or from pressure on existing industrial land to be used as brownfield sites for housing developments and/ or commercial developers not being interested in sites with potentially lower returns due to the smaller size of the town and conversion of historic buildings with conservation constraints. High business rates and remote landlords can lead to vacant outlets. In addition many small towns have single commercial landlords/ monopoly landlords with little incentive for them to reduce rates and little direct benefit from the rates being ploughed back into the town. Business start-ups, support and development needs must also be addressed so that local residents can use their entrepreneurial abilities and also so that once established, micro businesses are not then ‘poached’ by neighbouring urban regions which can offer incentives as businesses grow and prosper. Business support agencies must be called to account regarding how they support businesses in and around market towns – for example, retail and land-based are vital sectors for market town economies yet are not well recognised by Business Link.

9. **Stretched local governance and partnership** – Market towns require strong, representative leaders who can make the case for market towns at each layer of government. Understanding the interplay between elected members and local groups, who both have a role in boosting the economy and cohesiveness of the town, will be necessary to ensure that efficiencies are maximised as public spending continues to be cut. The challenge will be to encourage greater partnership working and to reduce the democratic deficit – where government bodies are falling short of fulfilling the principles of the parliamentary democracy in their practices or operation. Every town should have a town council which is enabled to exercise maximum powers locally, rather than those powers being vested in remote authorities.
10. **Prescriptive and reactive land use planning** – Unused or under-used land within towns can lead to disconnection between areas and this is often exacerbated by land ownership issues and historic patterns of growth. Creating a coherent sense of place is the challenge especially as market towns often have fractured and historic land-ownership patterns making it very difficult to plan effectively for current and future need. Conservation and heritage, whilst a key strength of market towns as a pull to both residents and business, can likewise pose constraints. The challenge will be to ensure that national and (sub-) regional planning policies reflect these constraints and enable sustainable development that recognises the diversity of individual locations. Influencing private developers to ensure provision of appropriate housing, commercial and retail space is also vital.

### **What is Action for Market Towns doing?**

The challenges are many and wide-ranging. AMT seeks to promote and implement a multi-pronged approach to addressing the issues, including direct intervention such as tailored training, advice and support, lobbying Government and other agencies, setting up the systems to help others find a voice and lobby and translating the fruits of that lobbying into actions.

We are working with a range of national partners, including the CRC and the Rural Services Network, on a number of the areas outlined to lobby for change in the short to medium-term.

AMT is supporting the continuing work on the development of a typology for small towns, in partnership with the Rural Evidence Research Centre at Birkbeck College, University of London, and Lincolnshire University, which will enable us to identify trends among small towns and potential policy implications.

AMT has established a new policy forum on small towns – Small Towns for Tomorrow (STfT) - which will undertake research into longer-term future trends and policy needs. STfT comprises people from a range of disciplines including business, academic and practitioners.

Amt-i, the consultancy arm of AMT, offers a range of services targeted at town partnerships wishing to understand and improve their economic position, for example retail skills, car parking studies and town benchmarking.

In addition AMT supports a series of networking opportunities. Networking events are undertaken frequently which are open to both members and non-members. There is also an online community with discussion groups, where users can network with other towns, and access web-based case studies.

For more information on how AMT is addressing the challenges please visit the Campaign Plan on the AMT website – [www.towns.org.uk](http://www.towns.org.uk)

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