



TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
TOWN CENTRES

## I INTRODUCTION

Town centres and high streets are under enormous strain. Household spending is falling, shops are closing and public spending is being squeezed. If our town centres are to survive and thrive again, we need to think more radically and more intelligently about their future.

The government has commissioned Mary Portas to conduct a review of the UK's high streets, looking at what is wrong and what can be done. Action for Market Towns (AMT) is working with a wider network of organisations to ensure that this review is informed by imaginative ideas and practical solutions.

This paper summarises the vision for our town centres and some steps we can take to turn it into reality, based on AMT's work in developing policy and devising practical solutions in towns across the UK.

## I OUR VISION

High streets and town centres that are fit for the 21st century need to be multifunctional social centres, not just competitors for stretched consumers. They must offer irresistible opportunities and experiences that do not exist elsewhere. They need to be rooted in the interests and needs of local people, and able to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

If we are to put the heart back into our local centres, we have to seize the opportunity to innovate that the current crisis presents. There are six elements to this vision.

### I NO GOING BACK

Our towns are changing and some of those changes are permanent. The high street of yesterday didn't have to compete with Amazon and out-of-town shopping. There will be new challenges too. Climate change may push up transport and food costs; recession will bite chunks out of household incomes. Our towns cannot hope to survive by selling more and more to people who have less and less.

That doesn't mean our towns will die. We need to find ways to turn the crisis into an opportunity.

### 2 UNIQUE PLACES, NOT CLONE TOWNS

Every place is different and any response to the challenges we face must respect and celebrate that difference. High streets can be re-imagined as start-up zones, health hubs or learning centres, for example. We need town centres that meet the needs of the people they serve in ways that are locally distinctive, connecting with local people's strengths, creativity and energy. Any framework for improving town centres needs to be flexible enough to take this diversity as a starting point, not a bolt-on.

### 3 COLLECTIVE ANIMATION

Each place needs to be collectively animated by the people who live there or visit it, not just planned or managed. Town centres and their managers need to be responsive to change, open to new ideas that enliven space, and able to seize opportunities. We must be ready to experiment and try new activities and take a few risks to bring the magic back.

### 4 MULTIFUNCTIONAL CENTRES – THE 21ST CENTURY AGORA

To create and manage town centres that work well in the future we need a multifunctional approach. Successful local centres are about much more than shopping. They are about enjoyment, creativity, learning, socialising, culture, health and wellbeing and democratic engagement – a '21st century agora'<sup>1</sup> where people engage in the life of their locality. By bringing different uses and groups of users together

<sup>1</sup> See 'Towards a 21st Century Agora': [http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?page\\_id=1028](http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?page_id=1028)

we can sustain new and existing markets. The experience of using a town centre needs to be different from the experience of using a supermarket or shopping centre, and much more interesting.

## 5 INFORMATION, MAPPING AND RESPONSIVENESS

To respond to the challenges we face we need information. We need to know likely future trends and issues. We need to know and map which people and organisations can make each place distinctive, and broker more dynamic relationships between them. We need to be tuned in to the public's interests and needs through intelligent use of information and technology. Local centres need to be able to match and surpass the smart information systems of Tesco or Amazon.

## 6 CIVIC ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A town centre is a civic space, not a private one, and everyone has a role to play. Successful town centres will be places where all stakeholders are aware of their responsibilities and opportunities. This includes the supermarkets and multiples that are often seen as part of the 'clone town' problem, and the landlords and local authorities who decide how property is used. This is particularly important in areas where large property portfolios are held by banks or other institutions with limited local knowledge and understanding.

# I MAKING IT REAL

A lot of work is already under way to turn this vision into reality. AMT has been playing a key role in developing tools we can use to help people work together and look differently at their town centres and high streets. The next pages sum up some of these practical approaches.

# I MAKING IT HAPPEN: LESSONS FROM AMT'S EXPERIENCE

Moving from a vision to reality can be long and complex. But AMT has developed practical approaches that could help us along the way, and is testing new ones. Five key points can be drawn from AMT's experience:

## I DEVELOP LOCAL LEADERSHIP

To achieve lasting change, action must be led by local people. This means local residents, but also other key players: the local authority - with the town or parish council if there is one, businesses, landowners, and community or voluntary organisations.

Having brought people together, they need to develop a vision they can rally around. The broad principles in the introduction to this paper will need to be worked out differently in every place. AMT and Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE) have developed an approach to Community Led Planning that can link such a process to the local authority's formal planning duties.

The framework, known as LEAD<sup>2</sup>, has four elements:

- Launch: attract community interest, develop a leadership structure and plan the work
- Evidence: gather data about the area and find out how local people see it
- Agree actions: consider what the evidence means, agree and prioritise how to respond, and draw up a detailed action plan
- Deliver and monitor: implement and review the plan

The neighbourhood planning provisions of the Localism Bill<sup>3</sup> may enable such resident-led approaches to become more widespread and directly influence local planning policy. The bill also introduces new community rights, including the right to buy assets of local value when they come up for sale.

AMT has developed resources that can help in this process, including a Town Action Planning Toolkit<sup>4</sup>, a Sustainability Toolkit<sup>5</sup> that helps community groups assess the strengths and weaknesses of their locality and plan for the future, and the Market Towns Academy<sup>6</sup> which offers a more comprehensive programme of training and assistance. AMT is about to launch a service to support local organisations with information and facilitated action planning at an early stage of their work.

## 2 UNDERSTAND THE TOWN

Understanding the town is not just about collecting evidence, but deciding what evidence to collect and how to use it. It involves the big questions - what kind of town is it? - and the close detail, such as analysis of what the town offers and its competitors.

It's important to understand both the role and function of the town. The role is where it sits in the hierarchy of town centres: is it a primary centre with a regional role, a secondary centre for a broad local market, or does it cater mainly for those who live there? Function concerns local distinctiveness: is the town known for a speciality such as slow food (like Ludlow) or books (like Hay-on-Wye)? What big trends, such as an ageing population or falling household income, will affect its future?

AMT has developed a range of tools to help people think through these issues. These range from standalone approaches such as signage audits or mystery shopping, to a comprehensive approach that benchmarks a town against others. AMT's Town Benchmarking materials<sup>7</sup> assess 12 performance indicators, including the range and variety of local shops, the number and frequency of visitors, car parking, where shoppers come from, and local business confidence. Chippenham in Wiltshire is one town using this approach<sup>8</sup>.

## 3 ASSESS THE OPTIONS - THEN DO SOMETHING!

Once the evidence has been collected, it's time to decide what to do. There may be basic issues that could be improved easily. Many town centres, for example, are held back by poor signage or the lack of public toilets. Parking and public transport may also be problems.

AMT can show how other towns have put improvements into practice. There is a library of case studies available to AMT members, and information about winners of the Action for Market Towns Awards is publicly available<sup>9</sup>. These examples show a range of approaches, from simple 'quick wins' to more comprehensive regeneration programmes.

For a long term strategic approach, it will be important to agree priorities with planners and potential investors as well as local residents. A masterplan for the built environment can help to translate the overall vision into physical reality.

## 4 PROJECT MANAGE IMPROVEMENTS

A plan of action needs to be drawn up showing what is to be done, when it should be done and who is responsible. This plan and the vision that lies behind it need to be widely communicated, to customers and local residents as well as to the people who are delivering it.

It can be helpful to think of your town as a department store with consistent facilities, marketing message and brand. All sorts of activities take place within it, but everyone sees them as part of a whole, and the reputation of the whole place depends on each functioning well. AMT's Town Action Planning handbook provides a step-by-step guide<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> More information at: <http://towns.org.uk/2011/09/29/lead-an-overarching-framework-for-community-led-planning/>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/localism.html>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://towns.org.uk/2010/06/17/amt-town-action-planning/>

<sup>5</sup> See [http://towns.org.uk/sustainability\\_toolkit/](http://towns.org.uk/sustainability_toolkit/)

<sup>6</sup> More information at: <http://towns.org.uk/market-towns-academy/market-towns-academy-brochure/>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://towns.org.uk/amt-i/town-benchmarking/>

<sup>8</sup> Details at: <http://www.thechippenhamvision.co.uk/news.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Details of award winners are at: <http://towns.org.uk/market-town-awards/>

<sup>10</sup> The handbook is available at: <http://towns.org.uk/2010/06/17/amt-town-action-planning/>

## 5 REVIEW AND SUSTAIN

Once a programme of improvement is underway, it's vital to keep it under regular review and make sure it is viable in the long term. Improvements can be measured using AMT's benchmarking tools and customer surveys. A portion of increased spending, investment or development in the town should be used to fund and sustain town centre partnerships or managers.

## I MAKING IT HAPPEN: DEVELOPING NEW IDEAS

AMT is working with partners to develop two new approaches to revitalising town centres. The first, High Street UK<sup>11</sup>, is a comprehensive approach that is led by local residents; the second, My Card, is a new service designed to increase local loyalty and keep money within the local community.

## I HIGH STREET UK

High Street UK is a model for resident-led town centre regeneration, based on learning from the Civic Trust and New Economics Foundation and loosely based on the MainStreet USA programme, which has been adopted by more than 1,600 communities in the US.

High Street UK aims to put local residents at the heart of town centre development, harnessing local networks and generating holistic solutions that meet local needs and improve local quality of life.

Local people are aided by trained facilitators who stay with a project for two years. In pilot schemes testing this approach, local action has continued well beyond the departure of the facilitators as people have built their own organisations and raised funds.

The scheme has four main components. First, a local coordination group ensures everyone is working to a shared vision and brings together the people and financial resources to implement and sustain the programme.

The other elements are promotion, design and economic development. Promotion involves creating a positive image of the high street and surrounding area. Design involves making the most of the buildings and physical assets, but also making best use of the place's intangible assets – the goodwill, energy and creativity of local people. Economic development involves strengthening well-performing local businesses, identifying gaps, and encouraging new business activities that diversify the economy and keep money circulating locally.

### HIGH STREET UK IS BASED AROUND NINE PRINCIPLES:

- A comprehensive approach - look at the whole high street and don't expect one big-ticket item to change everything
- Incremental - start small, with simple activities that work
- Self-help - don't expect outsiders to come in and sort everything out
- Partnerships - everyone has a role to play
- Make the most of existing assets - identify what is special or is loved and use these assets as foundations
- Quality - aim for the best in everything
- Change - aim to change attitudes and perceptions
- Implementation - frequent, visible changes show that regeneration is happening
- High wellbeing, low carbon - we have to make our town centres fit for the future. That means focusing on low-carbon solutions and seeking to improve quality of life in everything.

<sup>11</sup> For more information contact Paul Squires: 07703 743418, email: [paulsquires1964@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:paulsquires1964@yahoo.co.uk)

## I MY CARD

My Card is a loyalty card that rewards local shopping. Customers buy My Card membership and receive discounts and other rewards in return for buying goods or services from participating organisations. The discounts are paid in the form of a 'cashback' credited to customers' accounts.

The aim of My Card is to support high street and independent shops by enabling them to compete with supermarket reward card schemes. My Card customers will be able to use their cards at a wide variety of outlets. Because the card works like other debit cards, stores don't need to invest in any new technology. A smartphone application has also been developed.

Businesses will be able to gather intelligence on activity within their store and contact customers with special offers or last-minute deals.

The programme helps to change residents' and traders' spending patterns, encouraging them to buy local. This means more money stays within the local economy, creating local wealth and wellbeing. Each time a card is swiped a percentage of the transaction fees go to the local high street or town centre partnership to be spent on regeneration activities.

My Card will operate as a social enterprise. The idea has been developed by Action for Market Towns, which is the major shareholder, and Mark Barnes, former town centre manager for Louth in Lincolnshire<sup>12</sup>. Four pilot schemes will be trialled over the coming months, after which it is hoped My Card will be more widely available. The cards can be branded to support local town centre loyalty campaigns.

Based on evidence from other loyalty schemes in the UK and abroad, My Card's directors expect participating towns to receive a return on their investment within three years, with continued income in future years.

## I MOVING FORWARD

AMT is working as part of a broader network to feed into the independent review of the high street led by Mary Portas and commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. This network includes Meanwhile Space, the Empty Shops Network, the think tank Res Publica and the consultancy Urban Pollinators.

AMT is not the only organisation that is grappling with these issues and does not claim a monopoly of expertise – many others have important insights and learning to offer. But AMT has the benefit of its members' experience and of approaches that have been tested in a variety of places.

Together we hope to create a movement for positive change in our high streets and town centres, proving that despite the gloomy economic outlook they can become better, friendlier, more enjoyable and more successful places for all.

<sup>12</sup> For more information contact Mark Barnes, 07590 005692 or email [mycard@btinternet.com](mailto:mycard@btinternet.com)

## I PLEASE CONTACT AMT FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit [www.towns.org.uk](http://www.towns.org.uk) or contact us at:

**Tel:** 01284 756567  
**email:** [info@towns.org.uk](mailto:info@towns.org.uk)  
**Post:** Action for Market Towns  
5 Baxter Court  
Higher Baxter Street  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk IP33 1ES

For details of the broader group of organisations involved in the town centres network, visit <http://reviveourcentres.ning.com/> or

*Urban Pollinators Ltd*  
<http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/>  
*Empty Shops Network*  
<http://emptyshopsnetwork.com>  
*Civic Voice*  
<http://civicvoice.org.uk/>  
*Incredible Edible Todmorden*  
<http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/home>  
*Meanwhile Space CIC*  
<http://www.meanwhitespace.com/>  
*My Card*  
<http://towns.org.uk/amt-i/loyalty-cards-shop-local/>  
*Research 00:/ [zero zero]*  
<http://www.architecture00.net/>  
*Res Publica*  
<http://www.respublica.org.uk/>  
*Wigan Plus*  
<http://wiganplus.com/>

Action For Market Towns

Unit 5, Baxter Court, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 1ES

Telephone: 01284 756567

Email: [info@towns.org.uk](mailto:info@towns.org.uk) Website: [www.towns.org.uk](http://www.towns.org.uk)

