

A Market Town Renaissance: The Next Ten Years

Supporting Self-reliance in Communities



The country's small towns have enjoyed a renaissance over the past decade –whether archetypal market town, former industrial centre or fishing port. Over 12 million people are served by these small towns and this renaissance has helped tackle hidden deprivation and ensure that, collectively, the towns are a major economic force. Where it has worked well, it has combined strategic support from principal local authorities with strong local leadership and a spirit of self-reliance and enterprise by town councils, community partnerships and business forums. But the progress has been patchy and is incomplete.

This paper sets out the challenges that need to be met to continue this renaissance over the next 10 years. It seeks to learn from the best recent activity, using Action for Market Towns' (AMT) knowledge and experience gained from strategic research, work across regions and its regular interaction with over 400 member towns across the United Kingdom. It recognises that global economic and environmental circumstances have changed and that competition for public and private investment will become even more intense. It also recognises that some things need to be done better, including developing the links between urban and rural communities, better aligning local action plans with wider strategies and consistently supporting effective local leadership.

The path ahead is not easy but the territory is largely well charted. The central theme of this paper is that further success can best be achieved by combining the strategic understanding of the public sector with a local spirit of self-reliance and enterprise that is right for the time.

Strategic Support

❖ **Strengthening Local Leadership and Capacity:** Support for grassroots activity over the last decade has revealed the potential of a new localism that is now advocated by all political parties, although less consistently supported. It is important to learn the lessons of a decade of community-led regeneration within market towns to help improve upon existing good practice. This means devolving some decisions and delivery from the principal local authorities to the town level. Local people have a unique perspective on their community's needs and are sensitive to the value of proposed change. The help and support of principal local authorities, which have the powers and capability, will enable local organisations to have the confidence to take decisions and to help implement them through their own efforts.

Suggestions for increasing capacity and effectiveness include improved leadership skills, new models of local governance and techniques for achieving greater strategic influence - in short, helping communities to help themselves. The Network of Empowering Authorities (NEA)¹ has recently produced such a framework for local empowerment which emphasises the need for a positive culture within councils and good relationships with communities, rather than legislative change. Success is dependent on consistent policies, institutions and a move away from stop-start

¹ The IDEA's work with the Network of Empowering Authorities (NEA) builds on current good practice in community empowerment. (See www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=9381744)

funding that creates disparities between communities, leads to wasted resources and weakens commitment over the longer-term.

A future scenarios study of rural towns undertaken in 2007 by Yorkshire Forward, suggested that different types of towns may face a range of possible futures. It concluded that effective community leadership will be as important a determining factor as governmental intervention².

AMT has responded to these challenges by founding a Market Towns Academy which helps town councils, community partnerships and development trusts to assess their business planning and training needs and provides tailored training courses on leadership, fund raising, financial management and other core skills. The success of the Academy depends on greater recognition being given to the value of local leadership.

❖ **Joining-up Settlements and Policies:** Arguably, success to date in regenerating individual small towns, has largely happened despite the lack of a strategic understanding of the interactions between communities³. This has limited the opportunities for policy coordination in areas such as tourism development and retail strategies. For the best use of available resources, policies and strategies for regenerating individual small towns and wider areas now need to be developed with a better appreciation of how different communities complement, inter-relate and compete with their neighbours. There also needs to be a greater emphasis in policy-terms on the collective economic value of small towns and their contribution to urban economies in terms of workforce and support industries. Equally, wider regeneration strategies and policies need to take account of any ripple effects, such as the inadvertent impacts of strong urban-focused economic development and housing strategies on smaller rural towns. Thinking even more broadly, it is increasingly recognized that external influences such as climate change and global economics inevitably have local impacts and it is important for these factors to be reflected in policies and appropriate local responses. The inference from this is that rural policy cannot be developed in isolation and that perhaps existing spatial theories need to be updated to provide a better understanding of different types of small towns and reflect increased mobility and a global economy.

As part of the activities of its *Knowledge Hub* and *Small Towns for Tomorrow Policy Forum*, AMT has worked with the Rural Evidence Research Centre to apply analysis from its emerging *Typology of Small Towns*. This typology is helpful in improving the statistical evidence about issues, creating a better understanding of the inter-relationships between communities and helping to plan strategically for the future of neighbouring towns. The Welland group of towns in the East Midlands is an example of a cluster of towns that have used the typology and have cooperated to better work together by understanding their inter-relationships and individual distinctiveness.

❖ **Managing Change through Community-Led Planning:** Effective tools and techniques for community-led planning have been tried and tested in rural areas over the past decade. As an example, in the East of England region since 2002, 231 communities have created plans that

² Yorkshire Forward, 2007. *Market Towns of the Future: Yorkshire and Humber* (See www.yorkshire-forward.com/sites/default/files/documents/Low%20res%20version.pdf)

³ Rural Evidence Research Council, 2009. *A Typology of Smaller Rural Towns of England*. (See <http://towns.org.uk/files/TypologyFinal.pdf>)

contained over 9,000 individual actions to improve their locality. 47% of these actions were able to be taken on by the community themselves without external support. Of the remainder, 34% required negotiation with public service providers to bring them to fruition. As a structured process, a community-led planning technique such as AMT's recently re-launched *Town Action Planning Framework*, can provide an over-arching mechanism across a wide area. It can also be used alongside other techniques such as *Planning for Real* that can be used to deal with particular localities or issues.

Whilst such community-led planning techniques have been valuable in directing local delivery, their main shortcoming has been the continuing gulf between the creation of these local action plans and the strategies of local authorities and other public sector bodies. Local authorities need to be much more engaged in the production of such plans to ensure that they can make full use of them.

Working with key partners including ACRE, NALC and the Urban Forum, AMT is committed to further developing these approaches in a way that is both empowering to communities and enabling to local authorities. For example, AMT is managing an Empowerment Fund contract with CLG, to test how community-led planning can fit better with local authority strategic planning. As part of this, AMT is currently engaged in work with Northumberland County Council to assess how the approach can be improved to better meet the strategic needs of unitary authorities.

Self-Reliant Practices

❖ **Understanding Town Economies Beyond the High Street:** Whilst the health of the High Street is a very visible issue in small towns, it must also be understood that their economic and social well being is dependent on wider issues, such as employment, development, housing, training and transport. Equally, it is important to understand that small towns and their rural hinterlands play a much more significant part in the national economy than perhaps a recent policy focus on City-Regions as economic engine rooms might suggest. Evidence from a report published in 2007 by CSS and CEDOS⁴, for example, refutes the notion of so-called 'sleepy shires' and instead showed that county areas provide 15 million jobs (68% of national total) and that smaller towns and rural areas accounted for 42% of recent employment growth. At the same time, the challenge of recession and its aftermath - including rising unemployment and cuts in public spending - together with increased competition from out-of-town stores and online retailers is very real in small towns and must be addressed if they are to diversify their economies and remain viable.

In identifying the challenges facing small towns, in its Policy Position Statement on Prosperous Places⁵ AMT distinguishes between those relating to the wider market town economy - such as the lack of policy focus on towns, poor access to digital technologies and training - and challenges having a particular impact on town centres, including limited transport and access difficulties, decreasing economic diversity and distinctiveness, and prescriptive and reactive land use planning.

⁴ CSS and CEDOS, April 2007. Making the Most of Our Economic Potential: Looking Beyond Our Core Cities. (See <http://www.cedos.org/publications/0703%20CEDOS%20Subregions%20Economic%20Potential.pdf>)

⁵ AMT, March 2010. [Policy Position Statement on Prosperous Places](http://towns.org.uk/files/100217-PP-PPS_v4.doc). http://towns.org.uk/files/100217-PP-PPS_v4.doc

In responding to the challenges, the familiar themes of shortcomings in the level of local capacity, coupled with a lack of differentiation between types of towns, suggest that without appropriate intervention, future economic viability will be dependent on existing levels of local leadership and the inherent qualities of the town environment. The case remains that, while there are examples of successful initiatives bringing together the necessary mix of factors to realize a town's potential, it is doubtful whether most market towns possess the capacity and capability to proactively influence the wider agendas. A more sophisticated understanding is needed of the potential of different types of small towns, of mechanisms to transfer learning and good practice and of the local capacity necessary to ensure this potential is realized. Policies need to accommodate the diverse economies within and between towns and techniques such as the *Typology of Small Towns* and *Town Benchmarking* administered through AMT allow these differences to be understood.

❖ **Creating Affordable Housing Solutions** – Affordable housing, or the lack of it, is a key issue in many market towns. Higher than average house prices and lower than average wages have resulted in households on lower and median incomes being unable to remain in market towns and the surrounding rural hinterlands. Often people who were born and have family roots in a town simply cannot afford to remain to take up work or support relatives. This situation can create challenges for individual families, the local economy and the wider sustainability of the community.

Nationally, there is a push towards housing being at the heart of the 'new place shaping agenda' and government encourages local authorities to take full and proper account of housing as part of the strategic vision for the area. At the local level it is local authorities who have the key role of facilitating the delivery of affordable housing. Their role is to deliver the right amount of affordable housing, in the right place within the provisions of government policy guidance at the national and regional level and in a way that responds to local recognition of need. The recession has impacted on the housing sector in a number of areas: building new affordable homes; homelessness; and support for third sector organisations providing services to homeless / vulnerable people.

There are a number of ways that organisations can work together to improve affordable housing supply in market towns, in particular ensuring that the local community can have a greater say in shaping the way affordable housing is delivered locally. This may be it through more digestible guidance aimed at a less expert audience, improved community consultation and bottom-up involvement at an earlier stage of the process, and a move for Enquiry for Design to become standard practice as a way to involve all within a wider community-led planning framework.

❖ **Delivering Innovative Rural Services** – Access to services - be they wholly publicly funded, wholly commercial or between the two - is vital for the sustainability of all communities. The loss of such services not only affects the long-term viability of a community, but also directly impacts upon the quality of life of its residents.

Over the past 20 years, service provision has decreased across rural areas and it is not uncommon for rural villages to lack some very basic services. Many market towns, traditionally the economic, social and cultural centres for their wider rural hinterlands, have seen a reduction in many medium-scale services and often are no longer equipped to serve their residents or the needs of surrounding villages.

As the country emerges from recession, but faces public spending cuts, the need to identify innovative ways to safeguard local services is paramount as is the need to deliver an agenda for

change. This includes: developing more detailed statistics that highlight disadvantage in seemingly more affluent countryside areas; exploring the way services are run and lobbying for support to help build capacity in the voluntary and community sector; finding more efficient ways to deliver core services such as 'one-stop' shops where a collection of services are delivered; and above all maintaining the importance of community leadership in influencing and delivering appropriate local services.