

Common Issues

From an analysis of SMTF's 18 Member Towns' Community Plans, a number of common issues can be seen;

a) Employment-related issues

- i. Simple access to local job opportunities, especially for the disadvantaged without internet access, is a concern in many towns
- ii. Support & advice for people looking to return to work after long periods of worklessness is lacking
- iii. Though there is good provision of Chambers of Trade/Commerce, these tend to focus on High Street retailers in Market Towns. There are more modern business network models that may suit small, growing businesses in rural areas.
- iv. Support to all small businesses, including retailers, is an ongoing concern.
- v. Modern Workspace suited to small, growing businesses is needed.

b) Townscape/Public Realm

This covers a wide range of concerns;

- i. Improving the pedestrian experience – from wider, better pavements to crossings to better legibility through suitable signage
- ii. Restoring historic buildings and retail frontages
- iii. Improving existing or creating new Public Space
- iv. The need to secure quality by developing Town Design Statements or similar
- v. A desire to be more involved in the long-term Planning of the town – to input local knowledge and concerns into statutory land-use documents such as Area Action Plans.

c) Transport and Traffic

- i. There is commonly a need to both mitigate traffic congestion (and its effects on the pedestrian) and reduce speeding in historic towns with a tight-knit urban grain. Better HGV routing is seen as a key priority, and Community Speedwatch is a response
- ii. Better Public Transport – though SCC financially supports some routes to towns, the services are sometimes expensive and not frequent enough. Some towns have developed Community Transport schemes which have helped but tend to focus on the elderly. Young people do suffer a lack of mobility. Chard's Transport Network Map Project is an example of better information needs.
- iii. Parking – a key feature of Market Towns is adequate parking for shoppers and workers. Local Authorities introducing charges has created a lot of debate about the economic effects, and some Town Councils are acquiring District Council car parks.
- iv. Improved Walking & Cycling infrastructure

d) Affordable Housing

Market Housing has become less affordable and Local Authority Housing Registers are currently high. RSL's are addressing this and Market Towns are better placed than villages because of available sites of a suitable size. However Towns are concerned that adequate affordable housing remains for young people and families.

e) Community Safety

Most Plans show concerns over Anti-Social Behaviour and Police response (both level of response and response times). Some have addressed these by creating Police Posts, such as at South Petherton.

f) Improvement to Community facilities

Physical improvements to buildings and open space for skills/training and wider community use. Ranges from improvements to or new community buildings to MUGA's and play facilities.

g) 'One stop shop' for Community services

In an era of Local Authorities reviewing their commitment to Community Offices in towns, and increasing amounts of information, having a physical place where people can access services is becoming a common aspiration. It can also address social exclusion. An example would be the Community Office in Wiveliscombe, which hosts an information point, community transport office, and surgery space for Police, Housing and Benefits agencies.

h) Social Inclusion & Community Cohesion.

Most Plans contain some social inclusion issues:

- i. Lack of activities for Young People, leading to boredom and sometimes ASB.
- ii. Lack of inter-generational contact and consequent lack of respect.
- iii. Integrating Migrant workers

i) Eco-projects

This category covers a wide range of environmental projects, ranging from Environment Centres (Chard) to Community Gardens (Castle Cary) to Transition Initiatives (Wiveliscombe).

j) Healthy Living

To improve healthy living opportunities, towns have identified a range of health information and practical projects.

k) Sustainable Tourism

Parking provision, public conveniences and townscape quality are recurring concerns that affect tourism, along with a desire for more coherent information services and better promotion. SMTF's Promoting Market Towns Study highlighted support that is needed.

- i. Promotion. The development of the Somerset Tourism Partnership and the Celebrating Somerset brand is welcomed and a good example of its use is the South Somerset Market Towns Investment Group's Interpretation Boards project. However there is little focus on the Market Towns by Somerset Tourism Partnership's thematic approach.
- ii. Access to the Countryside. Development of linear and circular routes to encourage tourism. Examples are NCN3 Chard-Ilminster and the Colliers Way from Radstock.

The issues above are found in more than 50% of the 18 Community Plans.

SMTF has developed a database of current Market Town projects that are addressing these issues and this will be available to partner organisations.

Additionally, there are several issues that are obvious and emerging but do not currently appear in many Community Plans;

a) Climate Change.

Though Eco-projects feature in the Plans, it is only in recent Plans (Wellington, Frome, Wiveliscombe) that Climate Change has been acknowledged as a driving force behind many of the objectives and projects.

b) ICT – Broadband connectivity.

Though coverage in rural areas is much improved, average speeds (bandwidth) are still much behind urban areas. Some businesses have found solutions to this but it can be seen as a detrimental factor to new business growth.

c) Building local capacity.

Partnerships have struggled to become effective bodies in towns. Some have received ongoing support from Local Authorities, others have not.

d) Engagement in decision making.

All Local Authorities in Somerset support community-led planning to some degree, yet the results are used infrequently in Local Authorities' service planning. Inclusion in the LDF process varies depending on the Planning Authority. Communities are meaningfully engaged too infrequently by Local Authorities and are 'talked down to' rather than listened to or the results are not respected.