

# Market Towns in Somerset; Current Issues and Opportunities

November 2008

This document gives a summary of Market Towns in Somerset, a general SWOT analysis, common issues and some opportunities for Market Towns to adapt given the economic, social and Climate Change challenges we face.

At a national level, Market Towns have been identified as key service and employment centres within the country's rural areas. The importance of market towns, serving their rural hinterlands, had been previously identified in a range of key policies including the Rural White Paper<sup>1</sup>, SWERDA Regional Economic Strategy, the Countryside Agency's Market Towns Programme and Regional Planning Guidance.

Somerset County Council has recognised that market and coastal towns are an essential component of rural Somerset and offer a focal point for commercial activity and serve as centres of service delivery to rural communities, and *'that strengthening the economic base of these market towns and combating constraints on the competitiveness is key to the development of the County's rural economy in the future'*. It believes that all market towns have the potential to be:

- Comprehensive local service centres where people can access professional services
- Centres for the processing of local products
- Focal points for well planned and coordinated local transport networks
- Hubs or gateways for tourism, and access points for a wide range of training, education and employment opportunities
- Centres for culture

The Somerset Economic Strategy also recognises the key role Market Towns have in Somerset's economy. *'To encourage enterprise and business growth in the market towns and in rural areas, we need to attract inward investment and ensure there is sufficient future employment land available. We will promote the growth of higher value-added economic activities and encourage existing businesses to diversify and adapt'*.<sup>2</sup>

Many areas of Somerset can be characterised as one of rural dispersed settlements that look to the towns and larger villages for many services and the vast majority of employment opportunities. The economy is one of small businesses – 85% of Somerset's population is employed in small businesses of 10 or fewer employees.

Market Towns continue to be attractive places to live and work and their good quality of life may attract increasing numbers of professionals and business owners if the constraints are minimised.

They range in size from Frome (pop. 27,000) to South Petherton (pop. around 2500). They serve (town population and hinterland) approximately 164,000 people, which is 31% of Somerset's population.

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<sup>1</sup> Rural White Paper (Our Countryside – Our Future) – Defra, April 2004 and now the Rural Development Programme for 2007-2013

<sup>2</sup> Objective 5, Somerset Economic Strategy, Somerset Strategic Partnership

There is a varied inter-relationship with larger conurbations too – for instance South Somerset’s 10 Market Towns have a different relationship to Yeovil than, say, deeply rural Wiveliscombe has with Taunton or Wellington.

The larger towns act as gateways to the countryside, offering information to visitors and local services to all.

### Somerset Market Towns SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Environmental quality Strong local community identity, centred on towns Lower relative failure rate for new businesses Local Authorities recognise the importance of Market Towns (though intervention level varies widely across Districts/Boroughs) Tradition of community-led planning (MCTi & Town & Parish Plans) Environmental/Social concerns turning into action (ie Transition Towns)	Rural isolation– including loss of social networks Poor transport links beyond M5/A303 corridors and Taunton-London trainline Regional Spatial Strategy does not foresee/allow much development in Market Towns (focus is on larger settlements) and Regeneration funding focusses on larger centres Low relative Broadband speeds Lack of knowledge about Market Towns importance nationally Low relative rate of business startups/ innovation Lack of integration with Bristol, the centre of our ‘City-Region’ Weak support networks for small businesses Dependence on manufacturing Lack of skilled workers Poor retention of graduates
Opportunities	Threats
Developing sustainable tourism Developing local products and their branding further Environmental technologies	Climate change will bring more frequent and more severe flooding esp in coastal areas and on the Levels In-migration may further impact on local housing affordability Additional services could be cut (i.e more Post Offices, banks) Out of town shopping Economic downturn affecting tourism

### Economic vulnerability of towns<sup>3</sup>

- Manufacturing sector continues to play an important role in most Somerset towns - manufacturing employment is disproportionately important to the local economy.
- A tight labour market with businesses competing for higher level skills.
- The towns’ labour markets exhibit poor levels of skills from basic skills to higher level qualifications.
- There is a low wage economy in the towns.
- The towns have an ageing workforce.

<sup>3</sup> Somerset Market Towns Employment Project

## Common Issues

From an analysis of SMTF's 18 Member's 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, and 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 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 and Members.

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 engaged too infrequently by Local Authorities and are 'talked down to' rather than listened to or the results are not respected.

## **Opportunities**

There are a number of areas where Market Towns in future could develop and offer more to their rural hinterland;

**Visitor Gateways** – Sustainable tourism gateways; tourism marketing in the County has been through a thematic approach to the market (which fits with SW Tourism's approach) but Market Towns and their hinterlands do not feature highly on [visitsomerset.com](http://visitsomerset.com); there is potential for more localised sustainable tourism development. The LARC's (Local Action in Rural Communities) are an opportunity to develop this.

**Business Hubs** – Market Towns generally still have services such as banks, post offices and professional services that most businesses need, along with limited workspace options. Some towns have active business networks (Chambers or Associations) though these often tend to be High Street retail-focussed. Market Towns could develop as the venue for modern business networks, which could serve a large hinterland area. There are often a choice of venues such as Town Halls, community halls/centres and public houses. Local community planning groups have often built relationships with local businesses, and have experience of organising consultations or workshops, so could be a useful resource in developing better business networks.

Small businesses, apart from networking and peer support, can also require meeting rooms and office services such as copying and secretarial services. There has been a growth in cities for these 'virtual offices' and they provide a stepping-stone for very small businesses to develop, especially for homeworkers.

There have been a number of workspace developments in towns, including Minehead and Langport, which are proving popular. A number of empty units in out-of-town workspace developments with larger footprints shows the difficulty in estimating what the market will support in several years (the timescale to develop these). Flexible, quality spaces could help in the future.

**Access to the Countryside** - There are many sustainable tourism related projects that have been identified for development within the Market Towns and importantly link the environment, local communities and tourism together. The vast economic and social benefits that multi user cycle and footpaths can bring to a town or community along such routes have been evidenced by Sustrans.

**One-stop Shops** - Several communities are also looking at a more effective approach to ensuring that vital services such as local information, info on skills and training, library, CAB are housed in a more accessible and logical manner in a central community building.

**Marketplace** – Markets take place in the towns, including Antiques, French/Continental Food and seasonal markets, and there is a strong Farmers Market circuit. There is potential to develop markets further. Individual attractions also organise seasonal/specialist markets.

**Cultural centres** – Market Towns have for many years been home to theatre groups, and recent technological advances and demand for big-screen film projection have driven a recent increase in the number of small film clubs/nights in Market Towns. This also grows the nighttime economy. Towns often also have the only library for many miles.

**Festivals and Events** - Community groups in a number of Somerset market towns have organised festivals and events which;

- a) Link the town with its surrounding countryside and environment
- b) Have a significant economic impact
- c) Achieve objectives that the community have identified in their community plan.
- d) Achieve sustainable tourism objectives

Examples are Langport International Festival of Walking, Ten Parishes Festival, Somerset Showcase (Axbridge), Wellington Food Town Launch also town events in West Somerset organised with support from Exmoor Events Project. Their achievements are documented in 'Promoting Our Market Towns' (July 2007) - copies available on the SMTF website.

Promoting Our Market Towns also makes recommendations about how community groups can be supported to achieve these objectives.

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