



# **‘PROMOTING OUR MARKET TOWNS’ FEASIBILITY STUDY**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **Somerset Market Towns Forum**

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## **Executive Summary**

This study demonstrates how a variety of community led tourism initiatives have the potential to deliver economic benefits to rural Somerset towns and their hinterland. It also shows that they can achieve wider sustainable tourism objectives. It makes recommendations for how these initiatives and events can be supported.

The study illustrates the valuable economic impact that can be achieved through community led events and how community led initiatives, particularly those with a tourism focus, can generate vital income for a community.

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## **1. Background**

This study has collected information from organisations involved in the community planning process in 13 Somerset market towns or rural service centres. In every market town studied the community planning process had resulted in new initiatives to attract visitors to the area and existing initiatives had been re-energised by the process.

The towns and service centres were;

- Axbridge
- Burnham and Highbridge
- Chard
- Crewkerne
- Ilminster
- Langport
- Martock
- Shepton Mallet
- Somerton
- Watchet
- Wellington
- Wincanton
- Wiveliscombe

It also draws on the results of an Evaluation of two community led events, including an economic impact assessment of the Langport International Walking Festival and the Somerset Showcase at Axbridge which was carried out by Bournemouth University MRG Group to inform this study.

This Study focuses on identifying initiatives which improve the economic viability of market towns and rural service centres and looks in detail at the economic impact of two community led events and the potential of tourist related community led projects to generate additional income for their town; therefore the focus of this study is on the economic impact of these initiatives.

It also documents the wider objectives of these initiatives and their links to the community plan.

## **2. Findings**

The study identified a wide range of initiatives to help attract visitors to Somerset market towns which can be divided into the following categories;

- Events
- Access to the Countryside and Linear Routes
- Formation of Tourism and Marketing Groups

- Publicity and Promotion
- Interpretation
- Gateway to the town/town features
- New or improved visitor facilities

The Study identifies examples of successful initiatives in each category and highlights information on their economic impact where available. It also identifies where new projects are coming forward.

These initiatives are having an economic impact by attracting visitors into town and village centres. In some cases the groups organising the initiatives are clear about achieving economic objectives through their activities and in many cases this is a long term aim.

The study found very few existing reports available on the economic impact of community led events. One report that included events with community involvement was the 'Festivals and the Creative Region', an East Midlands study which found that money spent by those attending contributed almost £7 million to the economies of the towns hosting the 11 arts festivals studied.

The total economic impact of visitor spend at the Langport International Festival of Walking has been calculated as £53,685 in the Langport area, with a further £7,490 impact on the rest of Somerset (Source Bournemouth University MRG Group). Visitor number estimate was 798.

When grant income is also taken into account, the total economic impact of the Langport International Festival of Walking 2006 on Somerset is £100,450, and £106,844 on the UK. It should be noted that this project was able to bring in £31,378 of grant funding in 2006, including European funding, because it is in a Leader+ priority area and because the Festival is an innovative project, which had clear objectives linked to funders' objectives and a clear plan for financial sustainability in the long term.

The total economic impact of the Somerset Show case at Axbridge was estimated to be £12,000. Visitor numbers were much lower than normal due to bad weather - approximately 800.

The reasons for the high economic impact per visitor of the Langport event can be attributed to a number of factors, including that the event was designed to encourage pre-booking and overnight stays.

At the Wellington Food Town launch in December 2006, the average spending per head at this community led event was just under £20 per head. The event was attended by nearly 5,000 people and 725 completed the full visitor survey. This gives a total spend of £100,000 at the event which all went to local businesses and organisations. The event was held in the centre of Wellington, and town centre retailers reported increased custom as a result of the event, any spending in the town itself by visitors would be an additional benefit which has not been quantified.

This study also discusses some of the issues involved in measuring the economic impact of community led events, and work that is being done to improve the measurement of economic impact.

Community led initiatives, such as the three local initiatives mentioned above, achieve sustainable tourism objectives because they are linked to community objectives (identified in strategic community plans), incorporate environmental objectives in their planning and have support from the community and local businesses.

*The study has identified a wide range of different types of community led initiatives, outlined below, which attract visitors to market towns and their surrounding area;*

### **Events Organisation**

This study has collected a large amount of data on community led events, and also on the type of support needed for an event to achieve economic and sustainability objectives. It has also documented how important successful events are in achieving a wide range of community objectives in in-depth interviews with community groups (see Appendix 1 of the Study).

### **Access to the Countryside and Linear Routes**

The majority of towns in this study had prioritised countryside access and linear routes in their plans. These projects achieve a wide range of key objectives including increased/improved amenity, maintaining the environment and linking the town with its neighbours. They also achieve economic objectives.

All the groups who were interviewed were clear that their linear route projects could achieve economic objectives. See section 7.5. As the linear routes are based on pedestrian and cycle travel with rail links in some cases, the projects can also achieve low impact tourism objectives.

The Coleridge Way project in West Somerset and Sedgemoor has demonstrated how visitors from all over Britain can be attracted to follow a well publicised route through the countryside. See section 5.21 for economic benefits of the Coleridge Way.

### **Tourism and Marketing Groups**

The study has documented three cases where tourism and marketing groups set up by the community have initiated action to attract visitors to their towns. These are Axbridge, Langport and Somerton. The study documents how these were set up and achievements in section 5.25 onwards.

## **Publicity and Promotion**

This study documents community involvement in providing directories, websites and ad hoc promotions.

## **Interpretation Projects and Town Trails**

The study documents a large number of interpretation projects initiated by groups in the study in section 5.29 onwards. Town trails are included in this section because of the strong interpretation element.

## **Gateway to the Town/ Physical Image of the Town**

The community planning exercise in a number of towns has identified work required on the image that the town presents to visitors and how this can be enhanced. See section 5.33 for how this is being approached in Shepton Mallet and Chard.

## **Facilities**

A number of community planning groups support information centres which provide information to visitors. In South Somerset nearly every market town has a Local Information Centre and these often work closely with the community planning group and are active in initiatives to promote tourism in the town. As each LIC has an active group of volunteers it provides a basis for drawing residents into activities. The LIC also becomes an important communication channel as people can call in to hear about the latest community activities.

A number of groups in this study expressed interest in taking action to increase the number of bed and breakfast facilities in their town at peak times and when large events are held nearby.

A number of groups have identified proposed building or refurbishment projects which will attract visitors to their town.

## **3. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study has shown that community led tourism initiatives have the potential to increase their economic impact while still achieving other key community objectives. It has also identified that members of community planning groups are willing to incorporate this in their plans. It is crucial to receive advice at an early stage, as planning to achieve economic impact needs to be built into the project design.

### **Community Led Events**

The study has identified that a key factor in the success of major community led events is the involvement of experienced volunteer event organisers or the employment of experienced events organisers by the community group.

Support from District Council tourism and regeneration officers has also been a key factor in the success of many of the events reviewed.

Access to small grants is a crucial success factor and supports large inputs of volunteer resources. Grants need to be agreed up to one year in advance of the event to assist advance publicity.

Community events organisers have identified a range of technical information which is necessary for events organisers, this needs to be updated regularly.

Key factors which can contribute to the economic impact of events;

- Use experienced event organisers, either volunteer or paid
- Involve local authority tourism and regeneration officers
- Small grants can give a working amount for marketing and essential costs
- Access to up to date technical information
- Involve local businesses in planning the event
- Incorporate opportunities for visitors to use local businesses within the event
- Plan the event to attract visitors to stay in the area for the whole day or overnight
- Research the target market and plan publicity to attract the target market required
- Allocate time and resources to marketing activity which will attract these visitors
- Develop solutions to parking and congestion issues, to allow more visitors to attend
- Identify simple methods of recording visitor profile and spend and use the results to inform planning for subsequent events

It is recommended that advice is provided to events organisers on ways of improving the economic impact, financial sustainability and environmental sustainability of their events. An effective method of doing this would be to convene working groups of events organisers with an advisor to work on this.

In order to increase the number of successful community led events it is recommended that support is offered to community groups and town partnerships to assist with planning and promotion of new events. The Exmoor Events Project provides an example of how this can be achieved on a District wide basis.

The Wellington Food Town launch is an example of how a major event has raised the profile of a town and achieved a number of key objectives. Investment in the provision of specific events to achieve clear objectives to raise the profile of a town is recommended. Grant funding should include staff time planning and delivering the event and promotion costs.

## **Access to the Countryside and Linear Routes**

This study recommends that every linear route project should receive advice on achieving economic and sustainable tourism objectives, with particular reference to involving the settlements along the route. Advice should cover ways of linking route users to local town and village centres and to local retail and hospitality businesses. Advice should also cover the marketing and promotion of the route which should be received from the initial planning stage.

Many market town groups are involved in achieving countryside access and linear route projects and Somerset Market Towns Forum can assist by providing networking opportunities.

There are a number of examples of proposed linear routes which involve several market towns and Somerset Market Towns Forum may have a role to play in supporting market town groups to collaborate.

## **Tourism and Marketing Groups**

Successful initiatives have occurred where there was considerable time and skills invested by participating organisations. If sufficient resources and commitment are available, setting up marketing groups can achieve economic and sustainable tourism objectives.

SMTF can assist by providing information on existing initiatives.

If more groups are to be set up and run successfully it requires investment in staff time to bring together local businesses and community in effective action. Where a paid worker is already employed by a town partnership, grant funding could be directed to funding their time spent setting up and supporting marketing groups to achieve economic and sustainable tourism objectives. Alternatively support could be directed through Local Information Centres if clear guidelines were given for an experienced LIC manager to fulfil this role. If there is no worker based in the town, a worker with a support organisation could fill this role.

## **Interpretation Projects and Town Trails**

The large number of these type of projects reported shows their popularity, they are often suitable for 'quick win' projects for community planning groups. There is considerable expertise within market town groups in running these projects.

There are opportunities for market towns to collaborate on the production of interpretation panels, with savings on costs, and with the opportunity to present a coherent image. South Somerset Market Towns Investment Group is currently collaborating on this and their experience may be useful to other areas. There is an opportunity for the Forum to network information on this subject and identify ways of disseminating information.

The larger scale interpretation projects, such as the Battle of Sedgemoor Interpretation Trail, offer many opportunities for building community cohesion and for raising the profile of a locality. As with linear route projects it is important for projects to receive advice on how the project can be designed and promoted to attract visitors to the locality and to consider how the economic impact can be enhanced.

### **Gateway to the Town/ Physical Image of the Town**

It is very difficult to measure the economic impact of this type of initiative but it may have considerable indirect effect.

This type of work is well suited to joint working between towns. It is often difficult for those closest to a town to 'think outside the box' about how the town presents itself. Members of other town groups may be able to assist with an outside view, offering an 'appraisal' of the town's image. Also examples from other towns can stimulate ideas. There are opportunities for SMTF to provide assistance by networking information and by providing opportunities for groups to work together on this.

### **Facilities**

Representatives from Local Information Centres should be invited to any workshops, training and networking events to support community led tourism in market towns, as they have a key role to play. SMTF should include LIC steering groups in its outreach to groups active in the regeneration of their towns.

A number of groups in this study expressed interest in taking action to increase the number of bed and breakfast facilities in their town at peak times and when large events are held nearby. There is an opportunity for SMTF to network information on these initiatives as they develop.

A number of groups have identified proposed building or refurbishment projects which will attract visitors to their town. See section 5.40. Again, SMTF can signpost groups to other groups with experience of this.

## **4. Support Available**

**Local Authority Officers** - District and Borough Council officers often work closely with groups to achieve the type of initiatives described in this study. They play a crucial role as they are the main contact with the community group and they also liaise with officers from other Departments and SCC officers, this can be seen clearly in countryside access and linear route projects which involve collaboration between many different partners. SCC's rural project officers also play a crucial role by providing information on sources of funding available through SCC and liaising with officers from other Departments in the County Council.

South Somerset District Council has been co-ordinating an innovative process to support town councils and regeneration groups in achieving the Vision for Market Towns through the **South Somerset Market Towns Investment Group** (MTIG) which has allowed towns to collaborate on issues of mutual importance. Those issues include the promotion of Market Towns and MTIG are currently implementing a project to site interpretation boards in each town which give a coherent image that promotes these towns.

The lessons being learnt from the process in South Somerset can inform initiatives to support collaboration between market towns in other areas of Somerset. It is recommended that the Somerset Market Towns Forum supports any opportunities to disseminate information from this process.

The **Hidden Somerset** website provides an opportunity for market towns and villages to publicise their events, and for villages to have their own webpage to publicise their attractions to visitors. SMTF is publicizing this opportunity to groups in market towns and large villages. [www.hiddensomerset.co.uk](http://www.hiddensomerset.co.uk)

The **Exmoor Events Project** has provided support from an officer and small grants to support community groups in organizing events in West Somerset. This support has brought steering groups together to achieve the launch of a number of events including Watchet Festival, Porlock Arts Festival and Dunster Days Gone By. The Events Project has now attracted funding for the next phase of its work. The experience of this project in working with volunteers to monitor the success of events and passing on events management skills to volunteers may provide useful guidelines for town groups in the rest of Somerset, and it is recommended that SMTF seeks opportunities to pass on this information to groups in the rest of Somerset.

**Somerset Food Links** can provide assistance to groups organizing a wide range of food related initiatives, where funding is available and through arrangements with local authorities. The Forum will signpost food related initiatives to Somerset Food Links and liaise with Food Links Officers. [www.foodlinks.org.uk](http://www.foodlinks.org.uk)

**Somerset Market Towns Forum** provides opportunities for groups involved in the revitalization of market towns to network, share information and build their capacity, through a website, information service, networking and training events. Examples of good practice identified in this study will be publicised through the website and network events and a presentation will be prepared. The Forum will aim to broker and provide training opportunities to meet training needs identified in this study.

Find out more at [www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk](http://www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk)