

# Somerset Market Towns Forum

*Promoting and supporting community-based action  
to revitalise our Market Towns*



**This Briefing explains our work with towns and some of the issues our members face in revitalising their communities, and is for Councillors from all tiers of Local Government.**

## **Our Membership**

SMTF currently has 18 Member Towns; these are 18 Market Town Partnerships and Town Councils who have completed a Community Planning process (a Market & Coastal Towns Initiative, Parish Plan or similar). Market Town Partnerships usually include at least one Town or Parish Councillor, and often District and County Councillors too. Our Members are;

- Axbridge Town Council
- Burnham & Highbridge Regeneration P'ship
- Castle Cary Town Council
- Action for Chard Town
- A Better Crewkerne & District
- Vision for Frome
- Ilminster Forum
- Langport Area Development Trust
- Martock M3 Community Partnership
- Norton Radstock Brighter Futures
- Shepton 21 Regeneration Partnership
- South Petherton Parish Council
- Watchet Regeneration Partnership
- Wedmore Parish Council
- Wellington MCTi/Economic Partnership
- Williton Regeneration Forum
- Wincanton MCTi
- Wiveliscombe Area Partnership

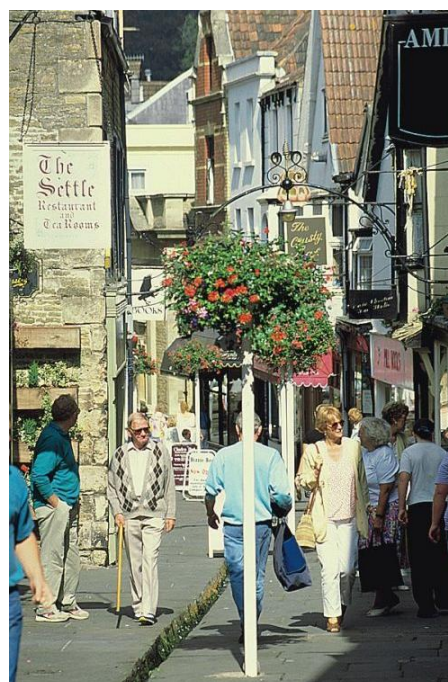
Where Town Councils have taken on the role of coordinating a Parish Plan after it's launch, they are eligible to join the Forum as full Voting Members.

We also have 'Standard' Members, who can be any individual or organisation who is

involved in regenerating or revitalising Somerset's towns and large villages. Examples are Chard 2000 (heritage group) and Transition Glastonbury. Town Councils who have not been involved in a Community Planning process are welcome to join the Forum as Standard Members.

## **We all know our Market Towns are important**

Our Market Towns are important service and employment centres for a large percentage of the population of Somerset (in towns and their rural hinterlands). Their role has changed over time, from important markets for agriculture, to employment centres for industry during the Industrial Revolution, to the current service and employment centres, with few major employers but many small businesses – both High Street retail and commercial businesses (sometimes on business parks).



The pattern of development varies widely across the County, with South Somerset's 10 Market Towns having a close inter-relationship with Yeovil for employment and shopping, while Wiveliscombe serves much of Exmoor and parts of Taunton Deane as a service centre to a large hinterland.



Many of our Member Towns have concerns over becoming 'commuter towns' with too much local housing being built without the jobs to go with these, which leads to more commuting. An appropriate scale of economic development and suitable and modern community facilities are needed to improve the economic and social wellbeing of our towns.

The Regional Spatial Strategy does not specifically encourage this 'sustainable development' in our rural settlements, however the development of Local Development Frameworks is an opportunity to create local policies that support our existing communities while still focussing large-scale housing development in Taunton, Bridgwater and Yeovil. Our Members must engage in the LDF consultation process itself and with the District-level LSP's who are tasked with producing the Sustainable Community Strategies that contribute to the LDF process.

### **Community Planning works!**

Community Planning at a Market Town level is a proven model of engaging with the

community, by undertaking a Healthcheck, developing a shared vision and delivering projects that address identified needs, or influencing others to do this. An effective Partnership is the final but crucial part of the jigsaw.

Town and Parish Councillors have taken an active part in all of the Market Town Partnerships that have produced Community Plans in Somerset – some are, or have been, the Chairs of the Partnerships, and likewise some community members of Partnerships have become Town Councillors to improve liaison and coordination.



Building effective Town Partnerships of Councillors, community groups and activists and Local Authority Officers can create extra 'capacity' to deliver projects and initiatives in towns, and be a channel for ongoing community engagement.

The Community Empowerment Bill, soon to be published, seeks to support effective community engagement. We think Community Planning is a good basis for engaging with the community.

We need to find ways to undertake Community Planning without the funding and support that the MCTA brought; and tie it into Local Authority-led 'Place Shaping' regeneration schemes, as in Chard, which will become more common.

### Some issues that can come up

- Clarification of the role(s) of a Partnership – having a clear understanding of what a Partnership can do, and how it relates to the Civic leadership role of elected Councillors, is very important.



- The MCTi programme helped towns to undertake a Community Plan and create that shared vision, but also raised expectations of the volunteers involved by stressing the strategic links and influencing rather than the local action possible.

This has led to problems, both in delivering large, complicated projects which rely on multiple funders and consequently can take many years to deliver, and with the lack of 'Bridging' between towns' Community Plans and higher level strategies (such as Sustainable Community Strategies & LDF's) and local authority service plans.

National research shows that while 70% of local authorities in England support community planning, only 27% were using community planning to inform frameworks of local strategic planning such as Sustainable Community Strategies and the broader range of indicators which make up Local Area Agreements (ACRE 2009).

Town Partnerships have had to find their own ways of 'Bridging', some successfully, many not.

- A towns' Community Plan should be something that everyone can broadly support, even if they disagree with specific projects within it. Partnerships can be really useful in 'owning' the Plan – monitoring, coordinating and reporting on progress in the future, and problems can arise if no-one is doing this.

### SMTF – our work in supporting Market Towns

Our objectives are;

1. To promote mutual support and collaboration between Somerset Market Towns and the larger villages – by sharing good practice through visits, invited speakers and the circulation of information.
2. To develop the capacity of the Forum and its members to serve and assist Somerset's communities – by organising appropriate seminars and training for its members.
3. To establish an active role for the Forum in promoting regeneration in Market Towns – by acting as a 'voice' from across the County in discussions with other bodies and forums.

We provide the following services;

**Network Events:** Each quarter, members of the Forum meet to visit a member town and learn from their regeneration activities. This also provides a useful opportunity for networking and support. Guests are welcome.



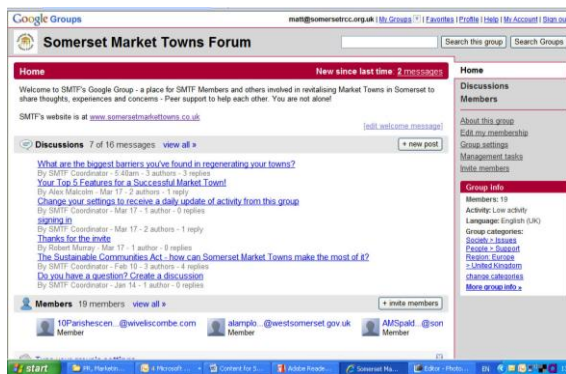
**Training:** The Forum Coordinator provides details of relevant training opportunities and

liaises with training partners to meet members training needs.

**Website:** The website for the Forum was launched in 2007. It has news of projects and events in member towns, free useful documents. It is developing into a hub of regeneration experience from across the County and allows Members to learn from each other and also promote their own activities – see [www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk](http://www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk)



**Online Forum:** We also now have an online forum to share news, views and suggestions with others involved in Market Town regeneration in Somerset. See our website for more information.



**Email Bulletins:** Topical information on funding, training and events. View past Bulletins on our website and sign up to receive them.

**Publicity:** We can assist our Members with producing Press Releases and other Publicity material.

**Regional Market Towns Network:** SMTF is part of the South West Market and Coastal Towns Network, a grouping of County Fora like ourselves, sharing knowledge and lobbying for Market Towns at a regional and national level. See [www.swmctn.com](http://www.swmctn.com)

Two pieces of work we at SMTF have completed recently may be of interest;

1. A '**Common Issues for Market Towns**' document pulls together those common issues and concerns Towns are currently facing – available on our website.

2. We have developed a **Projects List** - from 20 Market Towns - that lists all the Towns' current projects arising from Community Plans (over 500 projects), and aligns them with LAA Priorities, so Officers and Partnership members can easily see similar projects and their contact details. Email [info@somersetmarkettowns.co.uk](mailto:info@somersetmarkettowns.co.uk) to request a tailored version of this.

**We look forward to a continued, developing relationship with Somerset's Councils and Councillors.**

Matt Day

Coordinator

Somerset Market Towns Forum

Tel: 01458 252005

[info@somersetmarkettowns.co.uk](mailto:info@somersetmarkettowns.co.uk)

[www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk](http://www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk)

