Viable Rural Communities and Economies – Through the lens of the Market Town

Discussion Summary

What is a market town?

➢ Towns that have a market element and/or where a market is integral to their function.

➢ Many 'market' towns function as service centres – acting as a community hub (a meeting point, for leisure, shopping).

➢ The history, heritage, culture, location and being the centre of an area that the community look to and have some feeling for.

➢ 'Market' heritage can miss a holistic view of what a market town is.

➢ Market towns support a broader rural hinterland.

➢ Market decline is affecting towns (e.g. people shopping online). But markets can be reinvented and drive towns. Do market towns need a market?

➢ The word 'market' can be confusing as some market towns have a market and some do not. Is 'hub' a better label?

➢ Where does a market town fit with other settlements (e.g. how a town fits within a settlement hierarchy or pattern of settlement). What is the relationship between Market Harborough and London? Market Harborough has a skilled and well paid workforce because of its proximity to London. Market Harborough also appeals to people from Northamptonshire as a place for food and shopping.

How can activities in market towns be supported?

➢ Physical fabric – history, winding streets, open and narrow spaces that charm and delight residents and visitors.

➢ It is important to understand the historical evolution of market towns – developed organically over time by residents coming together.

➢ There are many layers to making a market town/town successful – physical fabric and communities of interest (e.g. for some people the town is where they live and/or work, for others it's a dormitory).

➢ How can people in rural areas get to market towns? Reductions in public transport, use of community transport. What role can market towns play in reducing rural isolation?

➢ How can you encourage local residents and businesses to use the facilities in market towns?

➢ Branding – e.g. Love Loughborough http://loveloughborough.co.uk/

➢ The market town needs different market offers (e.g. craft market, farmers market). The offer needs to constantly evolve.

➢ Where do the people come from that sustain a market town? I.e., is it residents, businesses or visitors?

➢ The radius of market towns does not always follow administrative boundaries.

➢ Market towns have high levels of home working (there are issues around access to broadband and mobile phone connectivity).

- Where does tourism fit? What do visitors want to do when they come to a market town (food, drink, something to do, the whole experience). What is the attraction of market towns (e.g. retail mix of independent and national chains?)
- What incentives can be provided to businesses to encourage them to locate, remain and expand in market towns?

Governance and participation

- Do market towns benefit from having a Town Council?
- What's the added value of having a Town Council? There's a risk of adding another layer of administrative complexity?
- The devolution agenda. Could the bidding/competition element divide communities? But collaboration and towns working together is important.
- Town and Parish Councils will remain uncapped during the current Government – but many Councils do not raise the precept.
- Having a sense of community and a sense of pride in market towns.
- Social capital – and how can we measure this in our market towns?
- Market towns need leadership and a means of galvanising people.
- Recognition of the diversity of issues and opportunities that market towns are facing. How can we engage local communities around shared priorities? Joined up thinking and solutions needed from residents, businesses, Local Authorities and other stakeholders.
- Residents think creatively at a local level (e.g. flower festivals, food and drink festivals in market towns).

Benchmarking

- There is a wider context which we need to bear in mind when we compare individual towns.
- The importance of benchmarking to understand how towns are doing and as a reference point to do even better.
- Without Action for Market Towns, Towns Alive – and with a 'centre for cities' – do we need a 'centre for towns' to provide evidence base for policy and decision makers?
- Where do market towns fit within planning settlement (e.g. small towns, larger towns, market towns)?

Retail

- The perception is that village shops are more expensive compared to supermarkets (not always the case).
- Village shops provide opportunities for local producers to pass on excess produce for sale.
- Village shops can respond quickly to what customers want.
- A village shop needs to act as a community hub or anchor and offer various services (e.g. café, dry cleaning, pay point, parcel drop, photocopying, library loans etc.)
- Village shops can provide volunteering opportunities for local people (ask for a commitment of 2 hours a week; recruiting, training and managing volunteers: volunteers are not free).
- Village shops can work together to buy stock (volume and scales) but competition between villages can prevent this.

Further information

- Defra interim results identifying rural hub towns:
  https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307939/2011_Rural-urban_statistical_classification_for_local_authorities__interim_results_-_hub_towns_.pdf
- Government Rural Urban Classification: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/rural-urban-definition

- Government's Rural Productivity Plan: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towards-a-one-nation-economy-a-10-point-plan-for-boosting-rural-productivity
- Secondary Centres of Economic Activity in the East Midlands (Summary Report) http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/2484/1/EMDA-Secondary_Centres_Summary_070809.pdf
- Secondary Centres of Economic Activity in the East Midlands (Full Report)
- http://www.lsr-online.org/files2/483/emda-secondary-centres-final-report-70809.pdf