DEVELOPING RESILIENT TOWN CENTRES

Department for Communities and Local Government

CLES
Centre for
Local Economic Strategies

ATCM
association of town & city management

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INTRODUCTION

What makes a resilient town centre? This paper, aimed at people working to support their high street, town or city centre, provides an overview of what it means to be 'resilient', and draws on lessons from nine locations to help create strong policies, form sustainable partnerships and develop appropriate projects in local centres throughout the UK and Ireland.

Background to the research

As part of the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) support for Town Teams, the Association of Town & City Management (ATCM) and Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) undertook research in nine locations across England, between February and May 2014, working with local Town Teams. These were:

- Gillingham, Dorset;
- Hull, Yorkshire;
- Liskeard, Cornwall;
- Market Weighton, Yorkshire;
- Middlesbrough, North East;
- Minehead, Somerset;
- Pontefract, Yorkshire;
- Ripon, Yorkshire;
- Tamworth, West Midlands.

A report with a resilience assessment[1] was developed for each area, together with a set of strategic and practical recommendations aimed at all interested stakeholders in the town from across the public, commercial and social (commonly defined as voluntary and community) sectors.

This briefing paper, aimed at town centre stakeholders, local authorities and national policymakers, provides a review of the key lessons learned throughout this process, highlighting the stronger and weaker aspects of resilience, before considering what towns and policymakers should be focusing upon to create stronger and more resilient towns for the future.

What makes resilient towns?

Resilient towns are those which have the ability to respond to challenges they face, to be adaptable and flexible in the face of change. This means it is important to have the right blend of interactions between the public, social and commercial sectors, with a culture of joint working between them all that results in positive outcomes for places. This is shown in Figure 1 - across the research in the nine locations it was evidence of this type of interconnection and linkages that were being sought. Towns that understand that they are part of an inter-connected system of partners from all sectors will be best positioned to be able to address challenges and exploit opportunities that come their way.

1 See the CLES website for a guide on resilience and how to undertake a resilience assessment http://www.cles.org.uk/publications/a-guide-to-delivering-a-resilience-review/ Further information is available on the approach to the resilience assessments, together with a list of the measures, in Appendix 1

Figure 1: Diagram showing the characteristics of a resilient place where public, commercial and social sectors are well represented and collaborate effectively

Resilience: creating strong local centres

The issues

Leisure shopping, more demanding shoppers, the growing importance of the internet, and the continuing rise of out of town shopping destinations all pose significant challenges to traditional high streets. However, our high streets, towns and city centres provide vitally important functions, such as being a focal point for local communities, a centre point for economic activity and job creation and retention, being nodal transport hubs, spaces for leisure and increasingly places to live.

The resilience reviews identified seven broad, common challenges across each location:

- Locations that had a shared vision for the future of their area fared better, as it allowed local stakeholders to work together in a common direction;

- Strong partnership links between different groups and stakeholders is vital. Where this was not in place - often where there were differing agendas - this was the single biggest barrier facing the town's development;

- Local partnerships often struggled to access landlords for vacant or underused sites. Having a means to access property owners and bring sites and units back into use, for instance by community groups or for start-up projects, is required;

- A number of local centres need to redefine or broaden their functions; not everywhere can be a retail centre that draws people with national brands; a more balanced view is required to encourage leisure use and office space alongside retail functions, as well as focusing on local community needs;

- Local teams need the tools to understand their local catchment. Social disadvantage, unemployment and worklessness in communities can affect the potential for growth in towns and create disconnect between projects being delivered and local communities needs and desires;

- Local demographic changes mean some locations are experiencing an influx of new residents, providing challenges for town centre development as per the point above;

- Geographical disconnection: some towns in rural areas are self-contained, with connections between them and other places being limited due to poor transport connectivity.

The opportunities

The resilience reviews also assessed the range of opportunities local centres can focus on to make stronger, more resilient towns. Examples include:

- A strong social economy (especially volunteering and broad community engagement), across private, public and third sector organisations, provides a basis for developing and driving partnerships forward and should be recognised as a vital asset in the early development of Town Teams. The presence of existing public-private partnerships was a driving force behind being able to move forward with development and regeneration agendas.

- Local centres performed well when able to tap into a rich cultural heritage and vibrancy, which is ultimately used to forge the identity of places and drive interest in them.

- Likewise, areas with a higher proportion of independent retailers were able to offer a more unique retail and leisure perspective and therefore stand out as a regional centre while providing stronger links to the local community.

- Local assets which are currently underutilised, such as gardens, public buildings, publically-owned buildings and market places, have the potential to deliver much more

- Population growth around town centres is both an opportunity and a challenge. How local teams are able to embrace this change ultimately determines the positivity associated with 'new blood'.

What needs to be done?

A new 'network of networks' approach to town management, with a broad range of constituents, is required to address the challenges and opportunities in towns. Delivering a strong partnership between the commercial, public and social sectors, and local communities must be seen as a way of harnessing the energy of local traders, leaders and residents to enliven our town centres. The key is building a vibrant, creative community that in turn breathes new creative and economic life into our towns and town centres. There are many good examples of initiatives which have proven to be innovative models in strengthening many places – the challenge is to build on such successes as well as tackling areas of weakness.

EXAMPLES OF RESILIENT PRACTICE

Common aspects of good practice

There are a number of characteristics of resilience which have been identified throughout the research. This is focused around developing and building strong relationships between different sectors, through collaborative working and support. Examples from across the towns that were assessed for this work are provided below. In short, there are a number of common themes that have been observed.

- *Collaboration between the public and private sectors:* the public sector has a key role to play in enhancing the vibrancy of the local business base. For example this can take the form of incubation units in publically-owned buildings. Operating in a facilitative environment and actively seeking private sector input will help develop policies that support local needs and provide job creation and retention opportunities.

- *Collaboration between the public and social sectors:* this is characterised in many forms, including the provision of support for local neighbourhood planning, developing local social enterprises to provide opportunities for local people, utilising social media to communicate and break boundaries across different groups, and working together to ensure that public assets are utilised to maximise economic and social gain.

- *Collaboration between the social and commercial sectors:* this is frequently the weakest relationship, but one which will grow in importance as public sector resource decreases and the functions of town centres change. There have been examples across the towns where the sectors do work together, although this is not often in a joined up or fully collaborative way. There are though, numerous cases of businesses and shopping centres which are now beginning to understand their wider role in the vitality of towns and residents, and also in providing the space for community activity.

Development of public-private sector partnerships

Minehead: good partnership arrangements based upon clear and measurable objectives

Although effective partnership working was perceived as a key weakness in some cases, there are some examples of where this is being achieved. In Minehead, for instance, the Vision Group have a significant role in the development of the town. The group consists of a range of cross sector stakeholders such as the Minehead Vision Manager, Minehead Town Council, the Chamber of Trade, West Somerset Council, Somerset County Council, Engage (voluntary and community sector), Minehead Eye (youth service), and West Somerset Community College. The Vision Group has an agreed action plan, with significant input from across all partners, which sets out six clear and achievable priorities

for achieving the vision, and the group's specific stakeholders have identified a number of projects to help realise them. All of these stakeholders have specific tasks which will result in tangible outcomes, and have real buy in to the town's development.

Middlesbrough and Tamworth: Stimulating local entrepreneurship

Middlesbrough

The council has worked hard to ensure that local businesses are supported, particularly through the development of quality incubator units. Middlesbrough has a lot of good quality managed workspace, and this is important if future entrepreneurs are going to emerge from local communities and drive development of the town.

- 'Boho One' is the flagship building of Middlesbrough's Boho zone, designed to be the creative and digital hub of Tees Valley. All of the Boho buildings are close to a 100% occupancy rate.

- 'The Emporium' was an enterprise arcade in the town centre where new independent retailers could test trade their business ideas. Entrepreneurs were incubated for up to six months and a business coaching package included one-to-one support and business growth assistance. This was widely regarded by private sector partners as an effective scheme, and many felt this should be further scaled up using nearby units. Middlesbrough Council is now working in partnership with Dundas Market, located in one of the town's shopping centres, to allow new independent retailers to test trade.

- The council received £100,000 from the High Street Innovation Fund. It has used the monies to assist businesses in Baker Street, located in the south of the town centre area. Previously run down units have been refurbished and used to provide space for new independent businesses (both retailers and other sectors) at lower rents. It has created a 'bohemian' atmosphere to Baker Street and the neighbouring areas, and local entrepreneurs are being actively supported.

Tamworth

'Created in Tamworth' was launched in October 2013 as a focus for creative businesses in Tamworth. It is now home to five local creative businesses including a local artist, designer and artisan baker. All five businesses share a downstairs shop area where they can sell their work direct to passing customers. The initiative was led by Tamworth Council who own the building and decided that it could be used as an incubator unit for local people to test out a new idea with customers but in a low cost, low risk way. The idea is that businesses can start at the shop and, if successful, move on to larger, permanent premises. The initiative was particularly pertinent given the council's long term plans to develop a cultural quarter in the town centre. The scheme generates rental income for the council. At the time of the research, all five places at the shop were filled and one of the original tenants had moved on to take up a permanent stall on the town's weekly market.

Tamworth: developing a brand identity
One of the key objectives of the Destination Tamworth Town Team has been to establish a distinctive brand identity for the town. This is a shared vision that underpins the work of the group, helping them to set priorities and benchmark against these. This identity also helps to clearly advertise the town and its offer to residents and visitors. This initiative was launched in 2013 and is used on a range

of brochures and leaflets about the town. The Town Team initiative grant of £10,000 has been used in part, to help support the development of the Visit Tamworth website, which provides an online platform to use the Tamworth branding and signpost potential visitors to the town centre shops, visitor attractions and leisure facilities. The partnership has also been working closely with retailers at the retail parks to site leaflets about Tamworth and its visitor attractions within some of the shops, in an effort to encourage those people who may have visited local retail parks for the day to make the short journey to visit the town's castle or town centre shops.

Developing a stronger social and community presence

Middlesbrough College as a community enabler

Middlesbrough College views itself as a community enabler. It relocated from outside the town centre to Middlehaven, a major development area which has extended the town centre, just north of the core. It provides employability support and works to release the entrepreneurial skills of people, helping residents support themselves and therefore lowering public service demand. It is strategically embedded in programmes to assist job creation and business prosperity, has launched over 300 businesses in the last decade, and is working with local businesses to create apprenticeships. In addition to the obvious economic benefits that the college provides, there are clear social benefits too that could help develop civic functions. New developments being added to Middlehaven by the college are viewed as community resources, aimed at enhancing the civic vibrancy of this area, including local sport and ICT facilities. This connection with the local community is important, ensuring a link between the developments within the town core and residents – key in maintaining the town's vitality.

Liskeard: promoting the vibrancy of a town centre whilst addressing social issues

The Real Ideas Organisation (RIO) CIC is an Arts Council Bridge Organisation, which works with young people, adults, families and communities to deliver genuine, lasting improvement, all with a social enterprise flavour. The Town Team had a focus upon Arts and Culture, and so was able to leverage resource into Liskeard, through the Arts Council, which funded RIO's activities. It was able to utilise one of the empty shops on a longer lease to have a physical presence within the town centre, and ran a series of successful evening events. The aim was to give young people not in education and employment the chance to organise an evening event for local people. These events have helped in highlighting the potential of a night time economy in Liskeard whilst at the same time increasing the confidence and skills of young, disadvantaged people.

Market Weighton: community shop supporting the local community

Within Market Weighton there is demand for the 'Community Shop' – a type of charity shop which relies on donations, sells items at low cost, and in turn donates all profits within the local community. It provides opportunities for volunteers and funds activities in the town. Community shops offer a vital source of retail provision within rural communities in particular and are recognised as helping to reduce rural social isolation and loneliness. They are sustainable, co-operative businesses that respond directly to local needs and help residents take control over the future of their communities and secure the provision of essential services.[2] Across the UK there are over 300 community-owned shops.

2 See more about Community Shops at the Plunkett Foundation http://www.plunkett.co.uk/whatwedo/rcs/ruralcommunityshops.cfm

Minehead: using social media to communicate and bridge local divides

Minehead's social sector is challenged by the cultural divide in the town's population. The older population are generally more active and engaged in the town's development and are largely concerned about conserving Minehead's independent character and promoting cultural and community activities. The younger, working-age population are generally less affluent and less engaged in community activities and so are unaware of local initiatives and events. To encourage this cohort of the population to participate in community development, one resident began 'Revive Minehead' which mainly communicates with residents through Facebook. Other groups lack the skills to use social media and so Revive Minehead engages residents who other groups fail to reach. This is a very important organisation for bridging the community divide and communicating accurate information about local developments to all residents. It has greatly improved communication between local residents, the local councils and other organisations, and is supported by the local authority.

Liskeard: using social media to promote the town

One of the commonly cited strengths of the Liskeard Town Team was that it had a developed understanding of social media, understanding its importance from the outset. In addition to the Town Team utilising social media for its activities, it has also attempted to embed it within the local business base. For instance there was a social media training seminar for micro businesses and SMEs, and a second session was delivered for local retailers. Feedback from social media training was positive, and indicates the Town Team's ingrained understanding of the importance of technology to progress and market itself effectively.

Pontefract: collaborative working to use a public asset to enhance the tourism offer

The development of Pontefract Castle as a tourist attraction for Pontefract is well advanced and has the potential to provide a significant visitor attraction for Pontefract and the surrounding area. The Friends of the Castle worked closely with Wakefield Council to develop a Heritage Lottery Fund bid with the aims to safeguard the castle as a scheduled monument for the future whilst at the same time, improving and enhancing the quality of the visitor experience to the castle. The HLF included plans for landscaping, interpretation, car parking and a new visitor and learning centre. The successful collaboration between the council and the Friends has already resulted in the project securing £65,157.

Pontefract: creative design to revitalise and extend the use of a historic building as a community hub

St Giles Church in Pontefract town centre is an example of how to enhance and revitalise historic churches to keep them as active places. The Grade II* listed building was the winner of the Pontefract Civic Society Design Awards in 2013 and the prestigious RICS Pro Yorkshire Awards for Building Conservation in 2014 following major internal alterations to provide improved facilities on a new first floor and flexible ground floor space which address the issues of community access and inclusion. The £650,000 project completed in late 2012 received support from nine grant-making bodies including The Coalfields Regeneration Trust, WREN, Biffa Award and The Garfield Weston Foundation together with substantial donations from the church congregation and other individuals. The project has secured the long term future of the building as both a church and community hub in the heart of Pontefract.

The second and final phase of the £600,000 external fabric repairs programme in collaboration with HLF, English Heritage and other funders is due to commence in Spring 2015 which will enhance the historic buildings visual appearance within the Conservation Area and reinforce the church's provision of a secure and lasting legacy to the town and future generations.

Pontefract: using a transport hub as a focal point for the community

Also within Pontefract there is the example of how the main bus station is being used as a focal point for the wider public good. The station has benefitted from an active and forward thinking management which has developed close links with local schools and community organisations. The bus station views itself as a 'community hub' with a constantly changing display of work from children at the local school and a community notice board which provides details of local community events, services and volunteering opportunities. The management have also developed a series of fundraising days at the station to support local charities and in doing so have raised thousands of pounds for local groups. The station is well maintained as are the flowerbeds around the bus station, something commented upon by Britain in Bloom judges in 2012/13. The bus station has also sought to challenge expectations about the quality of food available at bus stations. Its small station coffee shop has a range of sandwiches, cakes and bread which is all baked freshly on the premises by a small independent baker and provides the station with a welcoming and friendly atmosphere.

Development of commercial-social sector partnerships

Minehead: community focussed Chamber of Commerce

The Chair of the Chamber of Commerce is the principal link between the commercial and social sectors in Minehead. The Chair is a member of local social sector organisations such as the Development Trust and so plays a critical role in bridging the two sectors. Revive Minehead (a local social media resource) is also an important link between the two sectors since it is used by residents, community groups and businesses to discuss current developments and promote local events. The Chair of the Chamber, and the founder of Revive Minehead, work together closely to share information and improve communication between businesses, community organisations, residents, and the Town and District Councils.

Middlesbrough: local shopping centres outreach to the community

There are a number of examples of where local businesses are working to support social activity. This is reflected in Middlesbrough for instance, through the pro-activeness of the owners of one of the shopping centres. The centre is part of a pilot project (TestTown) which is predicated around providing the space for young local r etailers to test their ideas and products, and this provides important links to the community. It is also undertaking discussions with the local college for a new art project, and most recently has launched a bursary scheme. This is designed for community groups and schools to apply for a bursary of £500 for community and education based activities.

Another element of social responsibility is providing employment opportunities for the local community. A number of the shopping centres and retailers feel it is important to provide jobs for local people and so are involved in retail apprenticeships.

In addition to this, local businesses are members of a community liaison panel. A key part of its activity is a gift in kind and grants programme, which has invested in local community hubs. There is potential here for businesses within the town centre to tap into this and explore further options for contributing to social and community development.

Tamworth: role of the traditional town centre in providing space for community activity

The role of the town centre in providing space for community activity was a strong theme in several of the towns, in particular Tamworth. This was not only in relation to the dedicated community space already provided, but within existing buildings run and managed by the commercial sector. One example is the Ankerside Shopping Centre which sits in the centre of Tamworth adjacent to Tamworth Castle. It views itself very much 'at the heart of the community, seeing its role as wider than simply the provision of retail, but providing a community asset which everyone can access. Ankerside actively facilitates the link between the community, the commercial sector as well as other parts of the public economy. For example Ankerside regularly welcomes local community services into the centre - NHS Blood pressure screenings, health awareness raising sessions, charitable activities and fund raising collections, local school activities and the provision of space to local charities. They have a close attachment to Tamworth as a place and the community who live there.

Minehead: bringing commercial and social functions together

In Minehead, the YMCA has taken ownership of the previously empty Beach Hotel. The YMCA is now running the hotel as a social enterprise, offering training and work experience to young people. Refurbishing and reopening the Beach Hotel has turned the building into a key business and community asset for the town since it is located outside the railway station, where the seafront area of Minehead meets the beginning of the town high street. The Hotel functions as a business, contributing to the Minehead economy and also provides a social service through training and supporting young people who need skills and work experience to become job ready.

WHAT DO TOWN CENTRES NEED TO DO?

The above section outlines key areas of good practice and illustrations of resilient properties across some of the towns that were assessed. This section details some of the key facets across many of the towns which need to be built upon in order for them to become resilient and adaptable to change, and to address the challenges they face.

Table 1: Summary table illustrating what town centres need to be doing to become more resilient

Issue	Summary	What needs to be done
Develop more strategic leadership	Partnerships require strong leadership to enable each one to develop a shared, coherent long term vision and future strategy.	• Linking partnership objectives into a strong strategic regeneration policy context. • Focus on a smaller number of priority actions in order to concentrate resources and investment. • The challenges facing town centres should also form a focal point of local authority strategy across a wider range of themes (e.g. transport, housing, and community strategies). • Consider the sharing of resources with other nearby towns (e.g. a market manager or a town centre manager).

Issue	Summary	What needs to be done
Strong partnerships that have equal ownership	Partnerships, particularly within the smaller towns, can frequently be reliant on a limited number of individuals and personalities, and this can affect the success of what they are trying to achieve.	• Being specific about what individual partnerships actually deliver. • Provide clear clarity on roles and responsibilities. • Provide partners with the opportunity to shape planning, and proper input into activities which result in clearly defined outcomes for a place. • Assess the effectiveness of the partnership over a longer period, regularly considering if it is still required in its current format and if the partnership needs to be refreshed.
Working towards continuous improvement through good leadership and strong partnerships	Through embedding a relatively simple process of planning, action and evaluation, towns can build success and maintain it over time.	• Developing a cross sector partnership that is truly reflective of the town and its make-up. • Creating a town strategy and action plan to deliver defined benefits for the town, with clear timescales for delivery. • Delivering the action plan which would require appropriate resource and sustainable funding. • Continuous evaluation, including collecting information through regular reviews of benchmark data from the action plan. • Reviewing and revising actions and then feeding any changes back into the cycle. • Develop an effective communications strategy.
The need for the private sector to step up	There is still the perception from many in the private sector (across towns of all sizes) that the public sector should be taking the lead and will provide what is needed. Some private sector individuals have felt marginalised in partnerships as they have felt that their expertise was not being used as effectively as it should be.	• Ensure projects are of real value and perceived to make a difference to the town. • Good governance, strong decision making processes, and a focus upon actual outcomes as a result of the work. • Actual evidence of investment of time and resources in the town centre rather than 'just talk' makes a difference in improving business confidence and secures buy in.

Issue	Summary	What needs to be done
Greater focus on building social-commercial relationships	These are underdeveloped in many towns. It is crucial to develop the relationship. This is particularly important for town centres which in future will witness a mix of commercial and social activity and cater for different groups.	• Showcase to businesses how volunteering, peer mentoring and philanthropy can develop staff and managers, raise their profile, generate positive PR, enhance their reputation, and importantly create a more resilient and thriving local economy. • Chambers of Commerce, together with key local business stakeholders already involved in social activity, to showcase how such activity benefits the local community by sustaining social sector links. • Encourage more local business owners to become trustees for local social sector organisations. • Develop social enterprises, which could further break down the boundaries between social and private activities and which will result in further diverse use of the high street.
Embed the community sector within town centres	Many towns understand the need for town centres to be increasingly seen as social hubs for the community, but are unsure of how to go about doing this. This is where, in particular, greater focus upon the delivery of community asset transfer (public buildings/units and land to the community sector to manage and be based from) is increasingly important, as it can help give the social sector a stronger presence in town centres and develop local civic pride.	• Local authorities should identify potential assets in town centres and promote their opportunity for ownership by the voluntary and community sector. • More could be done to assist communities to explore the feasibility of the community owning and operating assets. • Local authorities and the public sector need to take a more strategic view in prioritising asset transfer in town centres and assisting communities where demand exists.

Issue	Summary	What needs to be done
Maximise the use of public assets	There isn't the strategic thinking across all places as to how public sector assets (which includes local authority owned buildings and spaces such as town squares) can be used in a range of other ways – such as for incubation space, providing space for social organisations, and meeting space for local groups which would add to the diversity of the towns, together with asset transfer (see above point). Instead of the short-sighted selling off of buildings and land that give town centres a focal point, attract visitors and prompt investment, it makes better financial sense to ensure these can achieve their full potential.	• Use assets as hubs for service delivery. • Promote the historical importance of town centre assets. • Highlight the importance of using assets in local authority strategy. • Encourage public sector employment in town centre assets and measure the impact of this to the local economy. • Develop partnership and investment vehicles: local authorities can use their asset base to facilitate partnership through joint ownership and investment with the private sector. • Measure and evidence the economic benefits assets bring for town centres. • Local authorities should work with the commercial and the voluntary and community sectors to bring empty properties into meanwhile use and consider the transfer of town centre assets. • Use public realm improvements (i.e. to civic and open space) to stimulate improvement, investment and growth. • Develop registers of public assets, including details of their value and wider economic benefit.
Capitalise on heritage and other assets	Towns could often do more to utilise the urban and natural assets that are in nearby proximity, either within the town centre itself or nearby.	• Places need to be putting more emphasis beyond the high street and considering the wider offer of the town centre and of nearby attractions. • In addition to utilising social media, developing a promotional programme could be useful for coordinating town-wide promotional activities, complemented in some places by better signage. • Towns need to promote such assets more to attract tourists and visitors, build community pride and interest in the town as a place to live and belong.

Develop more strategic leadership

In a number of towns there are not enough 'leaders' and this can impact negatively upon the long term viability of partnerships. Because of this there is often a lack of a strategic vision for local partnerships, meaning as a consequence local action plans do not feed into a wider shared vision. Without this, there is a potential for groups to lose focus on the big picture and therefore struggle to get full business or local authority buy-in. Although there is not much evidence in many of the places of a strong vision for the towns, many acknowledge this and are trying to work towards that. There is though a degree of uncertainty about what can be done, and their purpose within a changing economy. Increased support from external groups may be required to help town teams.

There is no easily prescribed way in which towns can develop greater strategic leadership, but:

- The role of the public sector as a facilitator and coordinator is important, especially to link potential objectives into wider strategic regeneration policies. Local partnerships should, wherever possible, link in with the prevailing regeneration policy so their projects are more likely to have sustainable outcomes (e.g. development of a Neighbourhood Plan).

- A limited number of short, medium and long term actions should all have a good strategic fit in order to respond to the wide complexity of town centre development. A number of the partnerships had an array of projects/actions but which were not all perhaps as honed and focused as they could be.

- Town centres should form a key element of other policy, such as transport planning to ensure connectivity both within and between centres. There should also be linkages to town centre vitality in any new housing strategy. Cumulatively this will provide a stronger sense of strategic direction for a town centre, and importantly, ensure an appreciation that town centres should be viewed as a system in which success depends on many component parts, not just isolated actions.

Develop partnerships with equal ownership

The complexity of interventions in town centres means that it is essential to ensure coordinated delivery across various local authority departments and to work closely with town centre businesses, land and business owners and voluntary and community groups. However the partnerships assessed as part of this research, particularly within the smaller towns, have frequently been reliant on a limited number of individuals. Evidence from the consultations highlighted the importance of being specific about what individual partnerships actually deliver and therefore there is a need for more clarity on roles and responsibilities. In some cases this might mean that a single partner contribution rather than joint delivery may be more effective at delivering a particular outcome but this must be clearly articulated. The key challenge here is for individual partners to clearly understand what they are delivering in order for them to do this effectively.

A further consideration is that, in developing sustainable partnerships, there is a need to critically examine the effectiveness of the partnership over a longer period, regularly considering if it is still required in its current format and if the partnership needs to be refreshed. The use of performance indicators and benchmarking should be regarded as a priority for local partnerships looking to sustain themselves in the medium term.

Work towards continuous improvement through good leadership and strong partnerships

This links directly to the above two points around strategic leadership and forming and sustaining strong partnerships. Through embedding a relatively simple process of planning, action and evaluation, localities can build success and maintain it over time. This includes a number of elements:

Developing a cross sector partnership that is truly reflective of the town and its make-up

This needs to include representation from key connectors within the private/commercial, public and social sectors. This will give it legitimacy across all interested groups and ensure that the economic, civic and community elements of the town are incorporated into future planning and delivery. The partnership would initially be facilitated by the local authority or other organisations such as CICs. The partnership's first key task would be to develop a vision, based upon talking to interested parties and developing communal themes, areas and projects for the town. The partnership should then develop a baseline for the town, based upon a range of indicators and also qualitative information.

Creating a town strategy and action plan to deliver defined benefits for the town, with clear timescales for delivery

This includes developing a strategy which complements local policy, ensuring that it can be fully endorsed and does not veer away from plans that are already in place. This strategy would be designed to address a range of economic and social challenges and opportunities, such as those outlined at the beginning of this document. It would also consider the changing functionality of town centres, with different uses for the high street being central to this, as a place for living, socialising, and a hub for community based activities. It would consider how to exploit the unique identity of a town and develop effective public realm management. This would conform to the vision and from this an action plan would be formed. This would have a number of highly focused and deliverable actions with specific projects which clearly define how the town will benefit, with measures/indicators to track progress. A strategy and action plan would be owned by the partnership and have a broad range of stakeholders represented.

Delivering the action plan, which would require appropriate resource and sustainable funding

The local cross sector partnership would be responsible for driving the delivery of the action plan, but successful delivery is of course dependent upon the scale of commitment of the local authority/other partners and securing funding to be able to implement actions. This includes bringing forward investment detailed in local strategy and using funds from other various sources which prioritises town centre development (Business Improvement Districts, in particular, have a long track record of securing extra investment); and from other initial seed funding and building consensus across multiple stakeholders to bring resources together, which includes volunteer time. Delivery of projects would be through local groups who have the necessary skills in place, with other members of the partnership monitoring progress.

Continuous evaluation, including collecting information through regular reviews of benchmark data from the action plan

This is important in ensuring that the supposed benefits of the delivery of projects is being realised. This would include developing a set of core indicators for the town, which are regularly reviewed. Indicators could be based around people, diversity and quality of place, consumer and business perceptions, and economic characteristics, as highlighted in GFirst's Indicator Toolkit.[3] This should also be accompanied by regular reviews of the cross-sector partnership itself, whether it is delivering its objectives, and if the current format and/or membership needs changing in order to successfully deliver.

Reviewing and revising actions

The process of evaluation will provide the partnership with key insight into how actions are impacting upon the town, community and local businesses. This may mean deviating certain elements of the action plan, strategy, or even aspects of the vision. Any changes would then be fed back into the continuous cycle of planning, doing and learning.

Communications

Finally, there would be a need for effective communications across a town. This includes utilising social media and websites, electronic newsletters, together with traditional modes of communication and feedback involving face-to-face forums and meetings. It does require skilled, professional input to develop and maintain effective communications – volunteering, whilst encouraged, cannot replace professional expertise.

The need for the private sector to step up

There is still the perception from many private sector individuals that the public sector should be taking the lead and will provide what is needed; although there is growing recognition within other businesses that they need to 'step up' in future as public resource is scaled back. Some private sector individuals have felt marginalised in partnerships as they have felt that their expertise was not being used as effectively as it should be by public sector partners. Further, office based businesses often feel overlooked in the partnerships within town centres, where private sector representatives are mainly from retail. There is a danger therefore of not representing the views and needs of other businesses, especially those that provide a large, in situ population of shoppers and leisure-users.

There are limited cases from the research which showcase the private sector stepping up and undertaking co-ordinated activities which benefit towns. However a good example is from Tamworth's Town Team, known as Destination Tamworth. This has been relatively effective up to now as the projects that the working group has been involved in have been of real value and have been perceived to make a difference to the town. There has been good governance, strong decision making processes, and a focus upon actual outcomes as a result of the work, which links into the wider activities being delivered by the council. The view was that actual evidence of investment of time and resources in the town centre rather than 'just talk' makes a difference in improving business confidence and secures buy in.

A greater focus on building social-commercial partnerships

In terms of the specific relationships, the social-commercial unsurprisingly is the weakest, but this does vary from place to place. Collaboration between commercial and social sector organisations is largely based on individual business owners supporting particular organisations. It is often difficult to engage with national retail businesses, particularly those with a strong high street presence. Whilst these businesses were happy to help with one off support - for example, raffle prizes and event promotion - it was more difficult to develop a sustained relationship.

- Local partnerships should be utilised as a vehicle to developing more sustainable relationships between the two sectors. This could be through more effective communication to show businesses how volunteering, peer mentoring and philanthropy can develop staff and managers, raise their profile, generate positive PR, enhance their reputation, and importantly create a more thriving local economy. External bodies such as local Chambers of Commerce, together with key local business stakeholders already involved in social activity, can act both as a catalyst and link in working with the local businesses to showcase how such activity benefits the local community by sustaining social sector links – and how in turn this will make a stronger place in which they can do business.

- A further important way of building the necessary linkages would be to encourage more private sector individuals and local business owners to become trustees for local social sector organisations. It could be an effective

way of ensuring that social sector operations are more commercially minded, and that the private sector is more community focused.

- Another way of ensuring that the two sectors come together is through the development of social enterprises, which could further break down the boundaries between social and private activities and which will result in further diverse use of the high street. There needs to be greater focus upon increasingly important roles of social enterprises, and packages of support for social entrepreneurs who can deliver services within town centres.

Embedding community based functions within town centres

Many partnerships understand the need for town centres to be increasingly seen as social hubs for the community, but are unsure of how to go about doing this in a sustained way beyond events. This is where, in particular, greater focus upon the delivery of community asset transfer is increasingly important, as it can help give the social sector a stronger presence in town centres and provide a platform for the future development of the sector. A case in point is Ripon. Harrogate Borough Council are reviewing their assets in Ripon and evaluating where assets could be transferred to the community. An example is Hugh Ripley Hall, a community hall within Ripon town centre, which has been transferred to the City Council as a community asset and in the first 6 months of operation has benefitted from increased usage by community group. There is potential for other buildings and assets to be transferred and used more strategically as well, such as the two organisations working towards the transfer of management responsibility for the Market Place, which sits at the heart of the City. The aspiration is that the new arrangements will provide a sustainable funding stream to enable increased animation of the space, including growing the number of events

and activities taking place and help to achieve the strategic objective of making the City the meeting place of choice.

Community asset transfer is inherently linked to the Localism Act 2011; there is a particular opportunity for local authorities to further link the agendas through the Community Right to Bid. Local authorities are required to respond to voluntary and community sector requests to place certain assets (shops, pubs and community centres) upon a register of assets of community value. Local authority economic development and neighbourhood regeneration teams should work with property services to identify such potential assets in town centres and promote their opportunity for ownership by the voluntary and community sector. A particular emphasis could be placed upon empty units.

The trend of community ownership of some town centre buildings should continue in the future with the public sector looking to divest a variety of different types of property in a range of town centres. Where there are proposed new uses for buildings, clear demand needs to be demonstrated and a robust business plan prepared, demonstrating how the emerging project can respond to gaps in provision, market failures and achieve particular outcomes. More could also be done to assist communities to explore the feasibility of the community owning and operating assets. Local authorities and the public sector need to take a more strategic view in prioritising asset transfer in town centres and assisting communities where demand exists.

Community asset transfer should therefore be used to play a catalytic role in successful town centre regeneration by initiating voluntary and community sector businesses, bringing new economic uses into redundant but important buildings, and generating civic pride.

Maximising the use of public assets

This follows on directly from the above point, and is based on using public assets to revitalise town centres. Local authorities are key drivers of place development, and the assets they own (typically buildings and land) are vital as economic, social, environmental and cultural components of town centres. But there isn't perhaps the strategic thinking across all places as to how public sector assets (and spaces such as town squares) can be used in a range of other ways – such as for incubation space, providing space for social organisations, and meeting space for local groups which would add to the diversity of the towns, together with asset transfer (as highlighted previously).

Instead of the short-sighted selling off of buildings and land that give town centres a focal point, attract visitors and prompt investment, it makes better financial sense to ensure these can achieve their full potential. Previous research by CLES has highlighted the value of local authority assets with some examples below:[4]

- ***Neath Port Talbot -*** Employees based in the council's civic centre spend £4.4m in the town centre annually. Local authority assets attracted almost 100,000 visitors in a single year. Council grants to businesses are giving shop-fronts a face-lift and attracting further investment.

- ***Southampton -*** The city council has used its buildings for sustainable energy projects as part of a successful green city strategy. Every £1 spent on public realm improvements has prompted £5 investment and 1,200 jobs have been created as a result.

4 CLES/APSE (2014) The role and value of local authority assets in town centres

- *Ballymena -* Council owned assets, including a town hall, county hall and two major arts and cultural venues, are a key aspect of the town's economic regeneration, resulting in a 12% increase in tourist trips over two years. With 67% of council staff resident in the town, £6.1m in net wages provides a significant input to the local economy.

There are a number of actions that can be undertaken to ensure that public assets are valued within town centres, and used as part of a wider regeneration strategy.

Use assets as hubs for service delivery

Civic centres and other administrative centres should not just be the domain of the local authority but a strategic asset where multiple partners in the public, commercial and social sectors provide services. This reduces duplication of provision and enables services to be delivered in a joined up manner for the benefit of service users.

Promote the historical importance of town centre assets

Local authorities should promote the historical importance of their town centres and the assets that they own within them. Effective marketing and promotion of assets can be a means of attracting specialist cultural events, investment, and visitors into town centres.

Embed the regenerative potential of assets into core strategy

Local authorities need to engage cross sector stakeholders in realising the potential of assets and highlight the importance of effective asset utilisation to wider objectives in corporate and community strategy.

Use local authority assets for employment and economic gain

Locating local authority assets in town centres brings a host of economic benefits for that town centre. Local authorities should be encouraging direct and indirect employment in town centres and measure the impact of this to the local economy in terms of the multiplier effect.

Develop partnership and investment vehicles

Local authorities can use their asset base to facilitate partnership. Joint ownership and investment with the private sector through local asset backed vehicles (LABV) offers potential. These are distinct legal entities with equal shares and risk between the public sector and private sector. The public sector contributes its physical assets to this arrangement, whilst the private sector contributes funding, capacity to deliver and expertise.

Measure and promote the economic importance of assets

Few local authorities have a standardised approach for demonstrating the economic role and importance of their asset base and for demonstrating the economic value of it. Local authorities need to measure and evidence the economic benefits their assets bring for town centres in order to demonstrate their importance and effectiveness.

Create meanwhile uses for vacant assets

Local authorities should work with the commercial and the voluntary and community sectors to bring empty properties into meanwhile use and consider the transfer of town centre assets to the voluntary and community sector.

Use public realm improvements to stimulate improvement, investment and growth

Local authority assets include open and civic spaces and the look of these spaces is critical for the vibrancy of town centres. Local authorities should value public realm assets and the role of future improvements in the functionality of towns.

Develop a public sector comprehensive asset register

Local authorities and the wider public sector should develop comprehensive registers of their own assets, including details of their value and wider economic benefit.

Capitalising on heritage and other assets

A common observation across the resilience assessments was that high streets are often operating in 'silos', not necessarily utilising the urban and natural assets that are in nearby proximity, either within the town centre itself or nearby. There are a range of examples of assets which can be further utilised to maximise visitor numbers and footfall:

- Ripon has a Cathedral and two museums in the centre of the city, and Fountain's Abbey, Yorkshire Dales and Lightwater Valley nearby, which should make Ripon a popular place to visit.

- Market Weighton: the town has a strong cultural heritage, and the Yorkshire Wolds, in which the town is situated, is a tourist attraction for many walkers. If the town was made more accessible to tourists then this could be a potential source of high street income.

- Minehead: the town has a number of important yet under-used assets, including its proximity to Exmoor, the coast, harbour and Blenheim gardens.

These are just some limited examples, but which are repeated to varying extents across many locations. Places need to consider the business and service mix of their local centre, and not put such a central emphasis just on retail use (although this still remains an important function). For example, Minehead needs to be more widely known as the gateway to Exmoor, a destination for moorland and coastal adventure and relaxation, as well as having a Butlins holiday camp.

- Such assets, whether natural or linked to urban and historical heritage, are very important for creating a more positive and forward-looking cultural identity and needs to be promoted to local residents as well as externally.

- In addition to utilising social media, developing a promotional programme could be useful for coordinating town-wide promotional activities, complemented in some places by better signage.

- Towns need to promote such assets more to attract tourists and visitors, build community pride and interest in the town as a place to live and belong. Schools should also be involved in the development of local heritage trails and promotional material could be developed through competitions between local schools which would serve to increase young people's sense of identity for towns.

Appreciate that volunteering can only go so far and is not a substitute for professional input

The volunteering aspect in many of the towns is a significant positive – but it can only go so far. On their own volunteers cannot achieve everything and need the appropriate assistance and professional expertise from the local public sector. It can be difficult to find people with the right skills for the long term development of partnerships, there can be hidden costs, and individuals will not always have capacity due to competing pressures. Additionally across a number of the towns assessed, the role of individuals is not always clear and this has resulted in disengagement from the process. Those places which have had stronger governance structures and incorporated some professional staff who can manage the process effectively and efficiently, have generally experienced better outcomes and have been working more towards shared objectives. Town Teams where an established town centre manager, economic regeneration team or BID were already in place have had substantially more success in organising stakeholders and allocating funds.

TOWARDS RESILIENT TOWNS

This final section provides a number of key strategic considerations for policy makers and practitioners, at both national and local levels, that contemplate key behavioural shifts from top to bottom that need to now begin to play out. There are no easy answers and it is for practitioners to take forward as part of a longer term process, but it requires a long term shift in behaviours and perceptions of how different sectors work, both within themselves and with each other. This includes:

Working with an 'enabling' and 'facilitating' public sector

The public sector is becoming smaller and, with this, its role as a universal provider of services will not be as it once was. This means approaches will need to change in future. The public sector will increasingly move from provider towards a partner and facilitator. The delivery model will need to change to one in which the public sector is not involved in all aspects of provision. This is something which is being recognised now, and which has significant implications for town centres. It means the role of the private and social sectors needs to be rethought, as advocated in this paper.

Helping a disparate social economy

In most of the towns in this research, the social sector is fragmented, and is not embedded within the fabric of town centres. One of the key reasons for this is because the sector is so diverse. It includes for instance, localised community groups servicing specific neighbourhoods, issues based groups (such as those providing local employability services for example), and other more formalised organisations such as social enterprises and large housing associations (which arguably often run more like private businesses). Despite the fragmentation all these groups share a common goal of making better places, and therefore there is scope for them to be joined up more effectively, with the help of the local public sector, which shares this goal. The fragmentation can be partly addressed by the development of community 'connectors' who could represent different cohorts across the sector, utilising them to develop and sustain networks within the sector. These connectors would provide a key conduit between different parts of the social sector, and provide important connections to the local authority.

Recognising the need for a strong social economy

Linked to the above point, common across the towns was an understanding amongst the public sector at all levels that the social sector will be increasingly important for the future of towns' prosperity and success, and making the connections between the towns and the wider community is increasingly important. The social sector is underdeveloped in many towns and public sector engagement with the social sector has not been as cohesive, joined up and as targeted as it could have been to be effective. As a starting point, intelligence and understanding the relative strengths of community organisations within a place is important, and their potential for collaboration. There needs to be a more clear understanding of the different elements of the voluntary and community sector, of what they do, and a networked approach to how organisations work together. Networked places are those where there are key connectors or nodes for the sector across the locality, with a responsibility to signpost and develop the capacity of organisations.

Developing social-commercial relationships

These are underdeveloped in all of the towns and this reflects a wider challenge across the country. It is crucial to develop the relationship as public sector resources are reduced – these sectors will need to enhance their roles in collaboration to create resilient towns. This is particularly important for town centres which in future will experience a mix of commercial and social activity. There is also currently the issue of the nature of the relationships between the commercial and social economies – the commercial sector currently has a more philanthropic relationship with the social sector as opposed to a practical

and functional one which is based on collaborative working. The sectors need to come together to work practically with a relationship built upon common values of making stronger towns. For example these values could centre on supporting enterprise, employability, skills and health and wellbeing within the local community, which is mutually beneficial to all.

Developing stronger connections between town centres and local communities

There is an important point to make about the future vitality of town centres, where appreciation of the links between the town centres and local communities was mixed. The town centres are designed to be the heart of the community and, as such, need to function as a public centre as well as a private place. A town centre's future success and prosperity can depend very much on the community's continued relationship with the town centre. Strong connections to surrounding neighbourhoods, commercial areas and parks help to reinforce the view that the town centre is accessible to all users. There will of course be complex aspects of physical connectivity that local practitioners need to consider amongst planned uses, open space, roads and the surrounding neighbourhoods. Apart from these physical aspects, there is the emotional connection for people to a local town centre. The bonds between the centre and local people need to be considered across all 'hard' and 'soft' developments and interventions.

SUMMARY

There is no doubt that some town centres up and down the country are facing considerable challenges. But there are opportunities too in using this period of change to redefine town centres. There is an opportunity to explore the social and public functions of town centres, understanding and utilising the role of local government and the voluntary and community sector as equal partners in the future success of towns.

It seems clear that town centres must find a balance between function and enjoyment to become places for living, socialising, working, shopping and learning. Diversity and integration of functions, people and spaces may be the key to bringing town centres back to life. Town centres must become places which serve the needs of all social groups; elderly people, school children, families, young people and working professionals, and they must be places to bring these groups together, integrating different functions into the same spaces. Ultimately, there is an opportunity to consider a new vision which puts people back in the heart of our town centres. The slow, steady death of some town centres, as is frequently portrayed, is not inevitable and town centres can have an altogether different future.

This paper highlights some of the thinking that local authorities and other partners within town centres can begin to consider in order to create stronger, more resilient towns. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is a starting point where partners from different sectors can come together and use their combined resources and willpower to make a difference and reshape town centres as places in which have the right combination of a diverse business and retail offer, well cared for public spaces, easy access, cultural institutions as well as public services.

APPENDIX 1

Background to the resilience model

Our approach across the nine locations was to provide an assessment of how a town centre economy and wider functions operate by using a mix of data and local economic intelligence; and then, more importantly, using a bespoke set of tools to understand the relationships that flow internally through the local economy. This involved visiting each of the towns and undertaking face-to-face consultation with stakeholders from across the public, private and social sectors.

The level of resilience was judged by analysing information about a place through the lens of ten resilience measures. These measures relate to the different types of relationship that exist within a place both within and between the commercial, public and social sectors (by social we mean voluntary and community activities), and how these relationships mutually reinforce the resilience of town centres. The ten measures are outlined below.

- *Measure 1 –* The commercial economy: The commercial economy is defined as economic wealth creation generated by businesses that are privately owned and profit motivated.

- *Measure 2 –* The public economy: The public economy consists of services delivered on behalf of government organisations whether national, regional or local, and funded by the public purse.

- *Measure 3 –* The social economy: The social economy embraces a wide range of community, voluntary and not-for-profit activities that try to bring about positive local change.

- *Measure 4 –* Relationship between the commercial and public economies: Looks at the attitudes and actions of the commercial sector to the public sector and vice versa. It explores the existence and effectiveness of partnerships between the two sectors and the level of interaction between the two parts of the economy.

- *Measure 5 –* Relationship between the public and social sectors: Looks at how the public and social sectors interact, and the strengths of the relationships that exist. This particularly explores how the social sector interacts with the public sector, and how much influence they have in shaping the economy of the local economic territory.

- *Measure 6 –* Relationship between the social and commercial economies: Explores how the social economy works together with the commercial sector. This involves looking at the level of corporate social responsibility within a locality as well as other areas, such as funding volunteering programmes or working together strategically to develop positive local change.

- *Measure 7 –* Health and wellbeing territory: Examines how local health and wellbeing issues relate to the local economy. This includes ill health, quality of life and leisure patterns.

- *Measure 8 –* Working within environmental limits: Explores how the sustainability agenda has been integrated into the economy of the local area. This includes the propensity of green space, the quality of the local built environment, and climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies.

- *Measure 9 –* Local identity, history and context: To a large extent, individual histories, identities, culture and places shape the baseline that local economies start from and the direction they take in future development. This assesses the extent to which identity, history and culture shape an area.

- *Measure 10 –* Governance: looks at how policy has affected the local area, and understanding how the various levels of government encourage or restrict the development of a resilient economy.
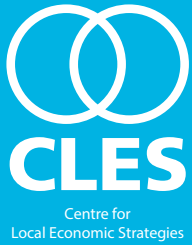
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