

# Market leaders

The market towns initiative has been a catalyst for regeneration, supporting an ongoing culture of improvement. **Diane Jackson** looks at how towns can continue to move forward now the initiative has come to an end

At one time a town was called a market town simply because the local farming community held a regular market for the sale of livestock and associated products and services. Some town markets were granted a Royal Charter as early as the 12th century. This dependence on agriculture was highlighted when the arrival of foot and mouth disease led to the sudden closure of markets, having a significant impact on the rural economy.

Nowadays, towns that apply for official market town status must undergo a 'health check' that looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the area in economic, social and environmental terms.

The market towns initiative (MTI) was initiated by the Countryside Agency in 2001 to identify and support those towns that operated as rural service centres, supporting the town hinterland. In 2005 responsibility moved from the Countryside Agency to regional development agencies (RDAs).

In a nutshell, the initiative was a formal route to finding local solutions for local problems. From better street furniture and flowers in Padiham, Lancashire to an enhanced retail offer in Ulverston, Cumbria as well as family centres, business premises and community venues, the initiative has had a significant impact.

Although it formally ended on 31 March 2008, initiatives for market towns will continue in a number of ways. However, a number could find it a struggle, especially as some were supported under MTI more as areas of need than opportunity. The strength of the town partnership could well be a deciding factor.

In the words of one experienced project officer, who did not wish to be named: 'If a strong partnership has been built up during the three years of the MTI, then they could feasibly carry on, but they will not have any funding unless they can raise money themselves. So some may just become lobbying groups or talking shops. If the town loses its project officer because of the lack of funding, and the local authority or A N Other cannot pay for the post, then the partnership group will be very much affected. There will not be a "point of contact" with knowledge of the workings of the local authority and/or the RDA; no one with the knowledge of how to apply for any funding that does exist. Without money and/or anyone to steer the group, it is likely to lose purpose, lose capacity and drift along, which is a real shame as a lot of what has been achieved is likely to be "unpicked".'

The links and partnership that have been formed will break up, and if, in another few years, another initiative comes along to support rural areas,



Retail-led revivals in the market towns of Ashbourne in Derbyshire, top, and Garstang in Lancashire

those partnerships may well have disappeared and a lot of hard work will be needed to set them all up again. Plus there will be a lack of confidence in any future initiatives.'

However, it can be done. After a 12-month struggle to find funding from the MTI, the South Lakes Development Trust received support from private organisations. This may be a route forward for other towns in the future.

Some initiatives in the retail sector may also offer a way ahead.

#### ■ Ashbourne Partnership, Derbyshire

The Ashbourne Partnership was formed as a private limited company to support and develop local businesses. It created a reward scheme for local shoppers using innovative chip technology – the first

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in the midlands. The scheme was then followed by a programme of practical marketing workshops to help retailers make the most of scheme.

**Details:** [www.visitashbourne.co.uk](http://www.visitashbourne.co.uk)

#### ■ Garstang and District Partnership, Lancashire

This partnership is structured as a limited company. As part of its action plan to invigorate and enhance the trading infrastructure and retail image of Garstang as a historic market town, retailers were offered a short programme of presentations and specific individual consultancy on window dressing and visual merchandising. This practical business support package enabled those who had applied for a grant to get significantly more from the investment. The partnership recently initiated a business improvement district feasibility study, which, if it has a favourable outcome, will go some way to ensuring the future of similar projects in the town.

**Details:** [www.garstang.net/garstang\\_partnership.html](http://www.garstang.net/garstang_partnership.html)

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

## Case study Northwest Development Agency

With the end of MTI funding as a programme-based resource, it is important that partners understand the legacy and sustainability of town-based structures in order to move forwards.

There is an awareness in Cumbria that there will be support for key service centres more widely (which includes the nine market towns that received NWDA support). In addition, there are indications that Cumbria Vision is considering the provision of support to rural areas (potentially in the form of a rural delivery team), which would provide support (perhaps

in the form of a small, specialist team) to a range of market towns/key service centres in the sub-region.

Furthermore, there are a number of towns in mid Cheshire (Frodsham, Sandbach, Northwich, Nantwich, Middlewich and Congleton) that would be on the periphery of the proposed Cheshire unitaries but would benefit from a more collaborative approach looking at the combined totality of the towns as service centres, and matching functional resources accordingly. While sub-regional arrangements are not yet clear

post-2009 in Cheshire, such an approach should be driven by the sub-regional action plan (SRAP) process.

Finally, the Lancashire SRAP clearly identifies the opportunities for rural service centres and market towns in the future, with projects and initiatives specific to each of the individual market towns that were supported by NWDA being identified. In addition, the plan also outlines projects that will cover a range of market towns and rural service centres in Lancashire (eg rural service centres, developing the knowledge economy).

#### ■ New Neston Partnership, Cheshire

This partnership was formed in response to the MTI. Partners are currently looking at setting up a traders' association to give businesses a collective voice, as well as to organise joint promotions and events to increase footfall. A new project manager for Neston, funded by Northwest Development Agency (NWDA) until September 2009, is charged with looking at a future strategy for Neston.

#### ■ South Lakes Development Trust (SLDT), Cumbria

In Cumbria a charitable trust has been set up to support and deliver work in market towns. This not-for-profit company was created to promote rural regeneration in specific areas of Windermere, Bowness and Ambleside. It is involved in numerous projects to deliver this objective ranging from community enhancement schemes to a state-of-the-art business resource centre.

**Details:** [www.sldt.co.uk](http://www.sldt.co.uk)

#### The key to success

It is clear successful towns have had a number of interrelated contributing factors. According to an evaluation of MTI by NWDA, these include:

- an experienced and able officer
- a strong and vibrant market town partnership
- proactive and positive support from the accountable body across all aspects of the programme
- the strength of the linkages between the officer, partnership and accountable body.

#### Know your RDA

It is included in the remit of regional development agencies that they provide funding for projects for market towns – among others. This structure of project-based funding is not new but it may affect the way in which future funding is allocated to market towns. With the MTI in place, the regeneration of market towns was at least officially encouraged. They were able to ring-fence some of the available RDA pots. Now they have lost that short-lived 'privilege'.

Projects applying for funding will have to satisfy the criteria established by RDAs, for example in Derbyshire they can still apply to East Midlands Development Agency for funding, and so on.

However, in the case of the NWDA it would appear there will be no direct funding of anything – all money will be directed to sub-regional agencies. In order to ensure local solutions to local problems, NWDA has helped establish five sub-regional partnerships (SRPs), which bring together

business, the public sector and voluntary and community groups.

The SRPs are responsible for leading economic development within their sub-regions and identifying economic priorities that will deliver the regional economic strategy.

The new name for market towns in RDA terminology is rural key service centres (RKSCs) serving hinterlands. But this does not award them any special status in funding terms – and unless the projects in RKSCs have been written into the sub-regional action plan submitted to the RDA they are unlikely to get funding.

It's interesting to note that Yorkshire Forward, the RDA for Yorkshire and the Humber, has put in place a pioneering ten-year plan to support sustainable rural towns called the renaissance market towns programme.

#### The direction of market towns

Be assured that the end of the MTI doesn't toll the bell for those who live and work within market towns. Nor is it too late for any market town that hasn't yet been galvanised into action. I would be happy to discuss individual situations and offer further examples of successful strategies. Readers may also like to consider the following two recommended routes:

■ **Action for Market Towns** is a membership organisation for all market towns in the UK and associated businesses. Its website includes details of hundreds of projects spanning the action plans of more than 40 towns.

**Details:** [www.towns.org.uk](http://www.towns.org.uk)

■ **The Institution of Economic Development** is a UK organisation for economic development practitioners, with a stated commitment to local and regional communities.

**Details:** [www.ied.co.uk](http://www.ied.co.uk)

For a number of market towns, creating effective business growth programmes is an ongoing process – not simply a project. None of the market towns illustrated in this article has plans to stop such projects because the formal government strategy has stopped. Indeed they have established a practical and viable way forward to address their local issues.

#### ► find out more

**Diane Jackson** is the founder of Main Marketing and PR and is a retail marketing specialist. For more details on other initiatives for regenerating areas, contact her via the firm's website at [www.retailsurvival.co.uk](http://www.retailsurvival.co.uk)