

2015

Revitalising Town Centres

Anthology of extracts from

Vital and Viable Town Centres,
meeting the challenge

for Department of the Environment

1994

Town Centre Partnerships,
a survey of good practice and report
of an action research project,

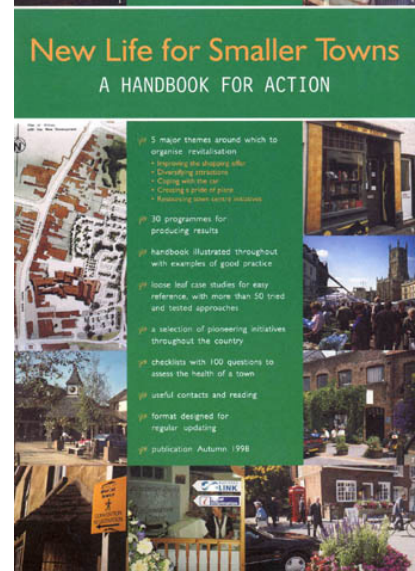
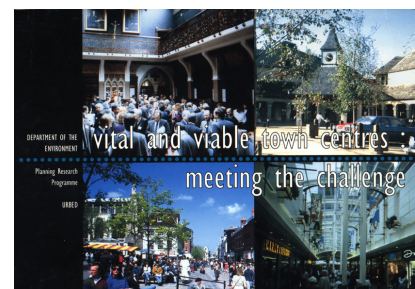
for Department of the Environment

1997

New Life for Smaller Towns,
a handbook for action

Action for Market Towns

1998



The need for revitalisation

Town centres are at the heart of communities, and it is their diversity of roles which makes them special. Like the inner cities, town centres have to cope with strong pressures for dispersal, fuelled by the growing dependency on the car and changing patterns of work and lifestyles.

- from "Vital and Viable Town Centres"

There is growing recognition that the problems facing many of Britain's town centres are not the result of a temporary recession, but of a longer-term dispersal of activity. This is due to increasing dependence on the private car, and changing patterns of work, shopping, and leisure.

- from "Town Centre Partnership"

Many smaller towns today are at a turning point. From being on a historic crossroads many literally have been bypassed, and the increased use of the car, changes in shopping habits, and the decline of small shops, has left many with numbers of empty or charity shops, and without a clear role, or the means of knowing which way to turn. The consequences of decline are felt most heavily by those who can least cope with change, including the elderly, the poor, and the young - that is, all who lack access to cars.

- from "New Life for Smaller Towns"

Managing town centres

The reasons for not spending time and money in town centres have to be recognised and countered. Recent developments have gone too far to rely on a shift in government policy to turn back the tide. This is leading to local authorities developing strategies for making the most of their town centres, but they are limited in what they can do on their own.

The idea behind town centre management is to get all the different interests and groups to pull together. Towns and cities, like all public spaces, have to be maintained, and the question arises of who is to pay for them. The initiative may come from many sides, from retailers concerned about the levels of vacancy and falling sales to planners concerned about the threat from new stores, or councillors worried about traffic. The starting point in a successful initiative is having a shared vision among all the key players, and this can take many forms.

- from "Town Centre Partnership"

Town Centre Management

Town Centre Management (TCM) has taken off because of the need to upgrade and diversify town and city centres in order to respond to increased competition and the higher standards customers now expect.

- from "Town Centre Partnership"

Securing improvements is always complex as it involves co-ordinating the activities of many different interests.

- drawing up action programmes and budgets for the short, medium and long terms
- establishing management teams or town centre managers and working with business and community organisations
- collaborating with networks of similar towns at county, regional and international levels to raise standards.

- from "Vital and Viable Town Centres"

What is a successful partnership?

- **Membership:** Partnerships must have top-level representation, chief executive officers and government officials with the authority to take decisions and the influence to carry out institutional change.
- **Mission:** Partnerships must have a broad charter to address issues that go to the core of the economic and social environment.
- **Money:** Partnerships require sufficient investment at each stage of the project, and a diversified financial base.
- **Management:** Given their sophisticated organisational structures and the complex problems they are confronted with, partnerships require highly competent staff enjoying the confidence of all participants.
- **Measurable results:** The application of entrepreneurial values obliges partnerships to produce tangible results and to be evaluated on their merits. Clear objectives, performance standards, and annual reports are prerequisites for evaluating and monitoring a partnership's progress.

- from "Town Centre Partnership"

Typical opportunities and management tasks by size of town

	Small market town	Medium industrial town	Large metropolitan city
ATTRactions	Food store Independent shops Market Schools	Comparison shops Leisure centre Cinema	Major shopping streets Department stores Universities Museum Theatre
ACCESSIBILITY	Bypass Car dependant	Pedestrianised centre Multi-storey car parks Buses	Rapid transit Park and ride
AMENITY	Historic centres Market place	Redundant industrial buildings Parks	Historic buildings
ACTION	Individual property owners Three tiers of local government District with 5-7 centres Little public funding	National multiples and managed shopping centres Two tiers of local government Public funding	Largely owned by institutions/property companies Unitary local authority Private funding

- from "Town Centre Partnership"

Positive planning

Local authorities should encourage investment in sites by:

- Identifying key sites where development is possible
- Devising and publishing planning briefs, for example to provide new housing, cultural facilities or specialist shops
- Considering the use of techniques such as securing outline planning consents
- Where space has been vacant for several years, using compulsory purchase powers to bring land back into use
- Channelling financial contributions from new developments to help implement initiatives such as improved public space

- from "Vital and Viable Town Centres"

Town centre focus

The most successful places are ones which receive continued care and attention from the local authority and where the different interests work together for the good of the town over a period of many years. All local authorities should ensure, as part of the planning process, that the health of their main town centres is kept under review.

- from "Vital and Viable Town Centres"

Resourcing town centre initiatives

- Is there a broadly-based partnership to improve the town?
- Is there a clear focus and shared vision for the town?
- Is there a written strategy for the town centre that explains how it can be improved?
- Have local people contributed to the strategy?
- Have the retailers been surveyed?
- Are local schools involved?
- Does the District or Unitary Council sponsor the initiative?
- Is the Town Council supportive?
- Are members of the business community actively involved and have major property owners been consulted?
- Are different projects to improve the centre adequately co-ordinated?
- Is there provision for learning from good practice elsewhere, and training or capacity building?
- Is there a budget to cover running costs as well as capital projects?
- Does the initiative benefit from help 'in-kind'?
- Has the initiative explored all the sources of funding for projects?
- Is there a newsletter or other method, such as a forum, by which information is shared with all the town's stakeholders?
- Is there a clearly identified co-ordinator or manager with relevant experience?
- Has the initiative achieved some successes in the last six months, and publicised them?
- Are those involved having enough fun and attracting new blood?

- from "New Life for Smaller Towns"

Rethinking accessibility

Is it easy for cars, pedestrians and cyclists to find their way into town? Can you cross the main street easily and safely? Is it easy to take young children and wheelchairs into and through the town? Are there safe cycle routes into the town?

- from "New Life for Smaller Towns"

Public Transport Review

- improving traffic management with schemes such as bus priority lanes and precedence at traffic signals
- co-ordinating and extending public transport routes into residential areas
- creating better bus/rail/car interchanges
- providing attractive fare structures
- introducing friendlier and more efficient bus services
- providing priority measures for cyclists

- from "Vital and Viable Town Centres"

Coping with the car

Different types of parking should be located in different places, with longer-term parking further away from the centre. To avoid congestion, and to reduce unnecessary driving through town, there normally need to be several car parks, which should be allocated different roles. An important part of government policy for town centres is to encourage alternatives to the car. Many towns are making efforts to encourage alternatives to the car such as cycling and walking.

- from "New Life for Smaller Towns"

Diversifying the attractiveness

Do opening hours match customers' needs? Does the town have a lively market? Is the town centre developing a 'niche' that attracts customers? Do rents and rates reflect trading conditions in different parts of the town?

- from "New Life for Smaller Towns"

Diversifying the attractions

Shops only form part of the life of a town. The Germans have an expression 'town air makes man free', and this refers to one of the important roles town centres play in spreading information and ideas.

Education in its widest forms can often fill empty space, for example a redundant shop might become a museum or even a training centre or adjunct to a college.

One of the most important functions of a town centre is to provide sustenance and hospitality.

- Can you spend a pleasant afternoon walking around the town?
- Is the centre developing new roles and reasons for coming to town?
- Is there a body responsible for promoting and marketing the town?

- from "New Life for Smaller Towns"

Economically and commercially

While people are attracted to towns for a variety of reasons, shopping is a high priority. The changes have been dramatic in terms of the loss of independent shops and the growth of the large supermarket chains.

The three growth trends of car ownership, home refrigeration and women going out to work, as well as changes in retailing methods, have created a seemingly inexorable shift towards shopping in large supermarkets and superstores.

- from "New Life for Smaller Towns"

Resourcing town centres

Local authorities often say they lack the funds and staff time (and some town centre managers are struggling because there is no budget and no agreed plan). Retailers say they pay enough already in taxes. Financial institutions say they invest where the security and returns are greatest, and lack the management capacity to get involved in improving individual towns. There is therefore a major challenge for financial institutions to join with local communities in making it easier for new uses to occupy the space that is being vacated, and in providing the investment funds for diversification and improving the attractiveness of town centres.

- from "Vital and Viable Town Centres"

Creating a pride of place

“The most important change required is a change of attitude, so that town centres generally not just historic ones, are fashionable again as places to live and enjoy. //

- from “Vital and Viable Town Centres”

Is the local authority, Town Council or civic or amenity society **promoting positive initiatives** to improve the environment?

Are the **streets in good repair**?

Are there **pleasant public spaces** where people can sit, **untroubled by traffic**?

Does a volunteer group undertake periodic clean ups and **identify problems**?

- from “New Life for Smaller Towns”

An important part of encouraging activity and investment is to make the town look as if it is cared for. While there is little point ‘putting cosmetics on a corpse’, properly designed and executed environmental improvements can be used to provide early signs of action, and to enhance a town’s distinctive identity. If deep seated problems are ignored, environmental improvements can only be superficial, and can even make things worse.

However, enhancing and brightening up a street can often provide an initiative with an early win. This will build confidence, and make it easier to access funds for tackling the deeper seated problems. Key factors in the health and attractiveness of a town centre are safety, lighting, quality townscape, management, building upkeep and shopfronts.

- from “New Life for Smaller Towns”

Case study: Birmingham



As part of the process of finding new roles for the city centre, Birmingham City Council has developed an International Convention Centre and Arena, as concerns had been expressed over how to improve the city's image and attract private investment. A symposium drew together international experts, senior officers, and community leaders. Action planning techniques were used to come up with a vision for the centre as a series of distinctive quarters linked together by a network of pedestrian streets and public open spaces. A report called the Highbury Initiative was published.

One result was the commissioning of a series of urban design studies, which the council implemented, including downgrading the inner ring road and creating Centenary and Victoria Squares with their memorable fountains and sculptures. Although the expenditure and the involvement of artists was controversial, especially when there were so many other problems to tackle, the investment has paid off in increased pedestrian activity, leading to further investment by retailers and leisure operators, which in turn has driven up rental values and provided the confidence for major redevelopment of a much higher quality than in the past.

- from “Town Centre Partnership”



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