
Market towns – victims of market forces?

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Abstract

The importance of the role played by market towns in the vitality of rural England has become increasingly recognised in recent years, and has attracted considerable attention from government development agencies in support of major public policy initiatives. The example of the East of England Development Agency's Market Town Initiative is used to review recent approaches to market town partnerships and their links with retailing activity within the context of town centre management. The paper concludes by suggesting possible mechanisms to support market town partnership initiatives in achieving sustainability once the public funding stream ends – as the potential basis for a future research agenda in this area.

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Introduction

Market towns in the UK have historically played a major role in shaping community-based retail activity, yet a commonly held view has developed that the dynamic drivers for retailing and economic growth generation have moved “onwards and upwards” to another level. Market forces, as typified by “bigger is better” superstores and out-of-town retail developments, have sometimes been perceived to be leaving market towns as sleepy backwaters with little to offer – either to the consumers in the local community or the more concentrated number of national retailers. Many small towns have also been facing pressure to maintain a role as centres for both the town's residents and those in the smaller settlements of their hinterland, yet in practice they have often been experiencing comparative economic decline. Increasing numbers of people living in such towns and rural areas have chosen to “outshop” by travelling to larger scale, and more distant, shopping centres when shopping for food in bulk and seeking perceived benefits of wider choice, easy parking, lower prices and amenities offered by retail complexes (Guy, 1990).

Although the relationships are complex, retailing plays an important part in the mix of socio-economic, legislative and geographical factors that drive the viability of market towns – as noted by the National Market Towns Advisory Forum (Action for Market Towns, 2002) in its advice to the Countryside Agency, stating that retailing:

- contributes to the vitality and vibrancy of the town centre through shaping the focus of activity and physical appearance;
- supports local employment;
- acts as a catalyst for strengthening the sense of community; and
- provides a range of added-value public and private sector services for those people who cannot easily shop further afield – counteracting the risk of “food deserts” or populated areas with little or no food retail provision (Wrigley *et al.*, 2003; Cummins and Macintyre, 1999).

The impact of retailing in this context has been further shaped by the spread of supermarkets to smaller market towns, driven by major operators responding to market saturation in larger centres. Although government planning regulations (such as PPG6) have favoured town and district centres for retail developments, the centres of market towns have often been seen as less suitable for their large-scale formats – and limited out-of-town development has occurred. However, despite some



criticisms, these planning rules have been significant in raising the profile of the issue of “vitality and viability” for existing town centres (Ferne, 1997; Guy and Bennison, 2002). This has been further reinforced for market towns (defined by the Countryside Agency (2003) as towns having a population between 2,000 and 20,000) with UK government initiatives in recent years recognising their central role in regenerating rural areas (Powe and Shaw, 2003).

Notable among these government policy statements have been those deriving from the Rural White Paper *Our Countryside: The Future* (DETR, 2000) and an earlier DoE report on the impact of large foodstores (DETR, 1998). One of the outcomes has been the development of the Market Towns Initiative (MTI) by the Countryside Agency (2003), which has sought to equip market towns with the resources and methodologies to be more proactive in their own development. The MTI has adopted a partnership-based approach that sits within conventional definitions of town centre management (TCM) schemes (Warnaby *et al.*, 1998; Healey and Baker, 1994), yet examples from the east of England indicate a broader community view that suggests a wider scope in practice.

This paper seeks to explore some of the TCM research issues raised by Warnaby *et al.* (1998), in the context of MTI's operating in the east of England since March 2001 – including issues of the impact of different stakeholder interests in partnership-based schemes, the involvement of retailers in the development of TCM structures and identifying areas for future research in market towns.

Background

Research into the dynamics of change affecting town centres in the UK has been typified by a focus on the different approaches taken to TCM, with the development of typologies of TCM by Warnaby *et al.* (1998) and more recent work anticipating the forthcoming introduction of the Business Improvement District (BID) concept in the UK (Hogg *et al.*, 2003). Literature on the application of TCM within the context of market towns had been relatively limited prior to the case study of Achmore (Paddison, 2003), which illustrated the formative stages of TCM development within a market town – including examples of the strategic business planning, infrastructure, funding, marketing and management issues faced in such situations.

Specific research into the impact of the arrival of superstore developments into small town locations has tended to focus on work conducted in the USA (Arnold and Luthra, 2000; Brennan and Lundsten, 2000; Davidson and Rummel, 2000; Seinders *et al.*, 2000). However, while these studies looked at the effect of new Wal-Mart stores in towns with population of under 25,000, the historical development and socio-economic context of the towns is completely different from that of UK market towns, especially those within the east of England. These US studies did, however, provide some pointers towards possible retailer action for towns to deal with the challenge of out-of-town stores – particularly the limitations of responses such as price-cutting or expanded product ranges (where the superstores have a stronger competitive position), compared to more effective service differentiation strategies.

The marketing and promotion of towns and town centre shopping areas through different strategic approaches, in response to the aggressive expansion of large-scale retailers and out-of-town centres, has attracted more widespread attention through specific UK case studies. In their study of TCM schemes in the northwest of England and North Wales, Pal and Sanders (1997) noted that the reasons for towns adopting a TCM scheme were driven more by increased competition from neighbouring centres than from pressures of out-of-town developments. Furthermore, within these competitive drivers for TCM schemes, there could also be subsets of defensive as well as offensive competitive orientation – as identified by Warnaby *et al.* (1998).

Among more creative marketing approaches that have been tried are schemes to implement loyalty cards to create differentiation and minimise “leakage” of local shoppers through creation of a clear economic advantage to shop in the market town. Hallsworth and Worthington (2000) identified that although a number of such schemes had been implemented in market towns – including Leominster, Market Drayton, St Andrews and Ulverston – these had only limited long-term impact. Their detailed examination of the Leominster loyalty card scheme concluded that despite being retailer-led (and involving a low-cost/low-technology approach), it was compromised by lacking differentiation from the schemes of national food retailers and it soon lost its novelty value in the eyes of the consumer. The Leominster case also illustrated one of the common issues facing such approaches – namely, that any response from a market town is dependent on gaining consensus and commitment from a number of independent retailers, who are probably

not accustomed to working collectively – even if there is a “common enemy” to pull them together.

Dennis *et al.* (2002) and Warnaby *et al.* (2002) have also looked at the marketing of UK towns as shopping destinations. Although not specifically looking at market towns, they identified that a “special type of marketing” is needed to cope with the mix of private and public sector interests, as well as the complex web of interlocking formal and informal relationships of stakeholders. With only limited human and financial resources available, market towns are also unlikely to develop sophisticated marketing activity for the town as a shopping destination without access to specialist expertise.

Although the majority of TCM literature has not focused on market towns, it does provide a stimulus for research issues that are relevant for the context of market towns in the east of England:

- The suggestion by the Association of Town Centre Management (cited by Warnaby *et al.*, 1998) that such TCM schemes pass through four life-stages of “conception”, “infancy”, “growth” and “maturity” (characterised by a declining role for the public authority as partnerships become more formalised with private sector involvement). The question of the relative “life stage” (linking to the concept of a “product life cycle”) for the market town could also be seen in a broader context of the town’s life cycle relative to its competitive economic environment.
- The temporal context of the market town’s development in response to external pressures – what has changed over time? Most studies have taken a “snapshot” or retrospective view – in practice a period of over two years may be needed to assess the full impact of a new out-of-town store.
- The effect of geographical context – the town’s hinterland catchment area can have significant influence (depending on the number of villages, their total population, concentration/spread, and communication links), and proximity of other nearby towns.
- The mix of national brand versus local/regional/family retailers operating in the market town and its impact on the town’s economy. Does this impact on co-ordinated action through partnership, versus that of individual retailers?

East of England market town initiative

Market towns have a particularly strong significance within the east of England region – encompassing the counties of Bedfordshire,

Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Suffolk and Norfolk. Some 247, out of a total 1,000 market towns in the whole of England (DETR 2000), lie within this region, yet there are no major cities acting as a counterbalance. Studies, such as those by Lockwood (1999), have noted that larger regional towns such as Cambridge (population 108,879 – Census, 2001), Chelmsford (157,053), Ipswich (117,074), Norwich (121,553) and Peterborough (156,060) act more as local hubs (Census, 2001).

The issues identified within the Rural White Paper, and subsequent policy initiatives generated by the Countryside Agency, created a stimulus for the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), to introduce its own regional Market Town Initiative (MTI) in March 2001. A funding package of £5 million over a three-year period was established, for capital and revenue projects, and channeled towards the 20 towns listed in Table I.

The MTI selection criteria for these towns was based on the town completing a “Healthcheck” questionnaire developed by the Countryside Agency (2002) from criteria identified in the Rural White Paper. This included a range of parameters, such as: diversity of the town’s economic base; attractiveness of the centres’ environment; security; retail and other business activity; accessibility; and community involvement. Each of the towns was required to organise its funding bid via an umbrella organisation providing a focal point for activity – some of which existed previously (including district council economic development officers), but most of which were established specifically for the purpose of the MTI application. These organisations became the precursors for what were to become MTI partnerships once the activity commenced.

Research methodology

The research study involved parallel activities of desk research alongside a series of interviews/meetings with stakeholders in the market towns and funding bodies. In addition to a review of academic literature, desk research examined the latest delivery plan documents for each of the MTI towns covering the third year of the MTI (April 2003 – March 2004) that had been submitted to EEDA for approval. Although this approach had methodological limitations, in its focus on specific project funding applications, it provided some important insights to the individual MTI’s:

- The structure of plans identified the involvement of stakeholders in the

Table I Towns participating in the EEDA market town initiative

County	Town	Interview	Questionnaire response	Salaried TCM/ co-coordinator
Cambridgeshire	Chatteris	✓		✓ ^a
	Ely			
	March	✓		✓ ^a
	Whittlesey	✓	✓	✓ ^a
	Wisbech	✓	✓	✓ ^a
Essex	Brightlingsea	✓	✓	
	Harwich			
	Manningtree		✓	
Norfolk	Walton-on-the-Naze	✓	✓	✓ ^b
	Aylsham	✓	✓	✓ ^b
	Diss			
	Downham market			
	East Dereham			
Suffolk	Harleston			
	Watton			
	Beccles	✓	✓	✓ ^b
	Brandon			
	Debenham		✓	
	Wickham market	✓	✓	
	Woodbridge	✓	✓	✓ ^b

Notes: ^a MTI co-ordinator employed on a fixed-term contract by district council (responsible for two MTI towns each);

✓^b MTI co-ordinator employed on a fixed-term contract (exp. April 2004) by district council

“partnership” organisation and their relative prioritisation of issues.

- The development of strategies for each town and the consistency of delivery plans with these over time.
- The history of specific projects already implemented in the towns.
- An indication of how the partnerships envisaged sustainability of their work on termination of direct EEDA funding in 2004.
- The existence of any retail-specific actions, together with promotional material published by the towns (for example, brochures, leaflets, Web sites, etc).

One-to-one interviews were also conducted with MTI co-ordinators for ten of the towns (see Table I for details of respondents) to gain a fuller understanding of the practical implications of their role. These interviews identified the respondents' learning over the course of the MTI, best practice ideas and how these might be developed to add value to future sustainability. This was supported by a questionnaire survey sent to all MTI co-ordinators by e-mail and/or post – with a response from ten MTIs (see Table I for details of respondents). This focused on specific issues of partnership structure and retail activity profiling to establish more consistent baseline data for comparison purposes and address information gaps in the delivery plan documents, rather than for creating case study examples. However, the

twin track approach of interviews and questionnaire survey enabled the research to capture limited qualitative data on partnerships' TCM experience, as well as quantitative information – although these benefits were offset by response rate and its “snapshot in time” nature constraining views of temporal change.

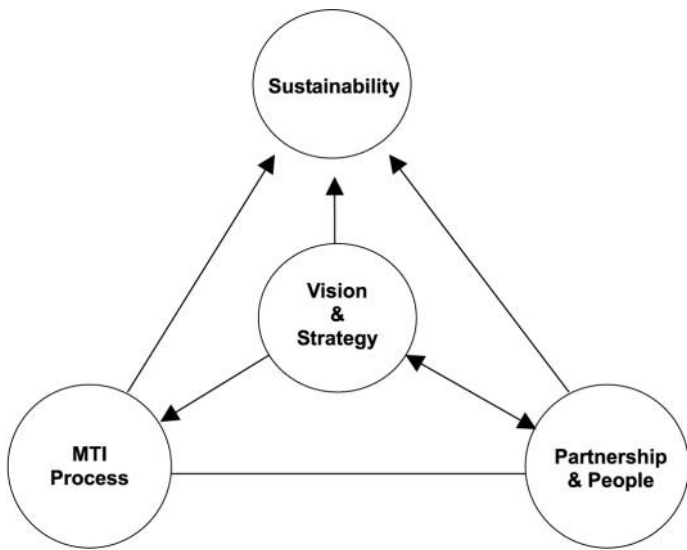
Findings

From this research a range of issues have been identified concerning the development of MTIs in the east of England, which can be consolidated into four thematic areas: Partnerships and People (who); Vision and Strategy (what and when); MTI Process (how it developed); Sustainability (how the vision could be maintained). The possible relationship between these is shown in Figure 1.

1. Partnership and people – composition and structure

The structure of the individual partnerships varied considerably, with differing levels of involvement from local government versus voluntary and commercial sectors – with the dynamics having a fundamental influence on the vibrancy and vision of the MTI partnership. The mix of stakeholder participants for the questionnaire sample set of MTI partnerships can be seen in Table II.

Figure 1



As might be expected, local government representatives (district, local and county councils) formed a significant element of the membership of most partnerships – with an average of 29 per cent of the partnership body, but as high as 47 per cent (although there was one MTI with no public sector representation). Given that local government authorities acted not only as the conduits for EEDA funding, but also as potential co-funders of projects, their proportionately large representation is not surprising. However, the largest stakeholder group on the MTI partnerships was the voluntary sector (for example, town associations, schools, and individuals), averaging 37 per cent of the partnerships – and in one case two thirds of the partnerships. This perhaps reflects a high degree of civic pride and sense of “ownership” felt by individuals within the towns that “something

should be done” to protect the character of the MTI towns.

Interestingly, the level of participation from local/district councils was not necessarily viewed as having a positive impact. For some towns, the involvement of the district council was seen as having significant tangible benefits, such as funding for a full/part-time co-ordinator or access to economic development and planning skills (for example, in Aylsham). However, for others it was initially seen as being “more interference” by local bureaucracy, until potential benefits became clearer. In the case of Wisbech, this latter perception took over 12 months to reverse in order to involve stakeholders in more positive engagement and contribution.

In terms of private sector involvement in MTI partnerships, retailers and business in general were less well represented (averaging 9 per cent representation) – and in three out of the nine towns returning information there was no retail sector representation on the partnership. This indicates a contradictory position for retailers and local businesses with a stake in enhancing the economic vitality of market towns, yet being unable to come to terms with collaborative activities of this nature. The competitive nature of such business communities can make it difficult to share a common vision, unless a more direct threat (such as a new out-of-town superstore) acts as a catalyst or common enemy. One of the recurrent issues across the interviews with MTI co-ordinators was that it was difficult to get retailers involved in MTI meetings and activities, and even more difficult to achieve consensus among them. Such group dynamics do not bode well for the potential introduction of business improvement districts (BIDs) in smaller market towns – where the principles of financial contributions could have a greater impact for both

Table II EEDA MTI towns partnership member profile

	Town council (%)	District council (%)	County council (%)	Sub-total public (%)	Voluntary (%)	Retail (%)	Business (%)	Other (%)	Total (No.)
Aylsham	10	5	5	20	25	5	20	30	20
Beccles	0	20	0	20	40	20	0	20	5
Community Reach	8	17	8	33	25	0	25	17	12
Debenham	27	7	13	47	33	13	0	7	15
Stour Valley	43	0	0	43	43	7	7	0	14
Walton-on-the-Naze	19	19	6	44	13	13	13	19	16
Whittlesey	13	13	0	25	50	13	13	0	8
Wickham Market	0	0	0	0	67	0	0	33	6
Wisbech	13	8	4	25	42	13	4	17	24
Woodbridge									
Average (No.)	3	2	1		5	2	2	3	
(%)	15	10	4	29	37	9	9	16	

the individual retailer and BID initiative (Hogg *et al.*, 2003).

Furthermore, the relative lack of involvement from retailers could preclude opportunities to leverage benefits from the MTI. Not only is retail a key economic driver for towns, generating income and employment, but also physically shapes the persona and character of the town centre – which is at the core of many of the strategies and visions pursued by the MTIs. However, where efforts have been made by MTI co-ordinators to broaden and deepen the involvement of retailers through personal intervention, such as in Aylsham and Beccles, positive benefits have accrued in aspects such as reduced vacancy rates.

The mix of partnership structures identified in the sample can be mapped onto the framework for TCM activity scope and organisational facility that was proposed by Warnaby *et al.* (1998). The resultant mapping, as shown in Figure 2, displays more hybrid characteristics than identified in the original typology with a skew towards the discretionary origin of funding reflecting the EEDA funds allocation. Although the “formal” partnership membership had a strong public sector bias, the day-to-day operational co-ordinator’s role was generally carried out by an individual with previous experience in retail management or as a town centre manager (in larger town centres). This created potential cultural conflict with local government operation style, yet facilitated empathy with retailers to offset this.

2. Partnership and people – organisation style and role of individuals

Clarity of leadership, with empathy for the town’s key issues (and politics, in the broadest sense), can also contribute significantly to the MTI outcomes. As with any collaborative project-based organisation, MTI partnership effectiveness is dependent on the dynamics of their membership, with a range of stakeholder backgrounds, perspectives, agendas, and perhaps vested interests. The mix of personalities also played a part, and it was clear that strong individuals could have a positive impact in the role of co-ordinator. In particular, shaping the MTI vision and turning this into a practical reality to effectively engage a broad cross-section of the town can be central to stimulating a vibrant market town, with good examples of this in Aylsham, Brightlingsea and Walton-on-the-Naze.

In practice MTI partnerships tended to act more as steering groups rather than actual management teams with day-to-day responsibilities (due to the part-time or voluntary roles resulting from limited funding).

Consequently, the actual execution of projects fell on the shoulders of key individuals – MTI/partnership co-ordinators, project managers, town centre managers, etc. – often with limited resources to support their activities. Thus, the perceived success and progress of an MTI can depend heavily on personal traits of the individual undertaking a “shaper” role requiring attributes including leadership, diplomacy, selling skills, planning, political intuition, commitment/dedication, project management, vision, and persuasiveness. Those MTIs with strong individuals, or with depth of support, appear to have a much higher likelihood of achieving the goals they set out to achieve.

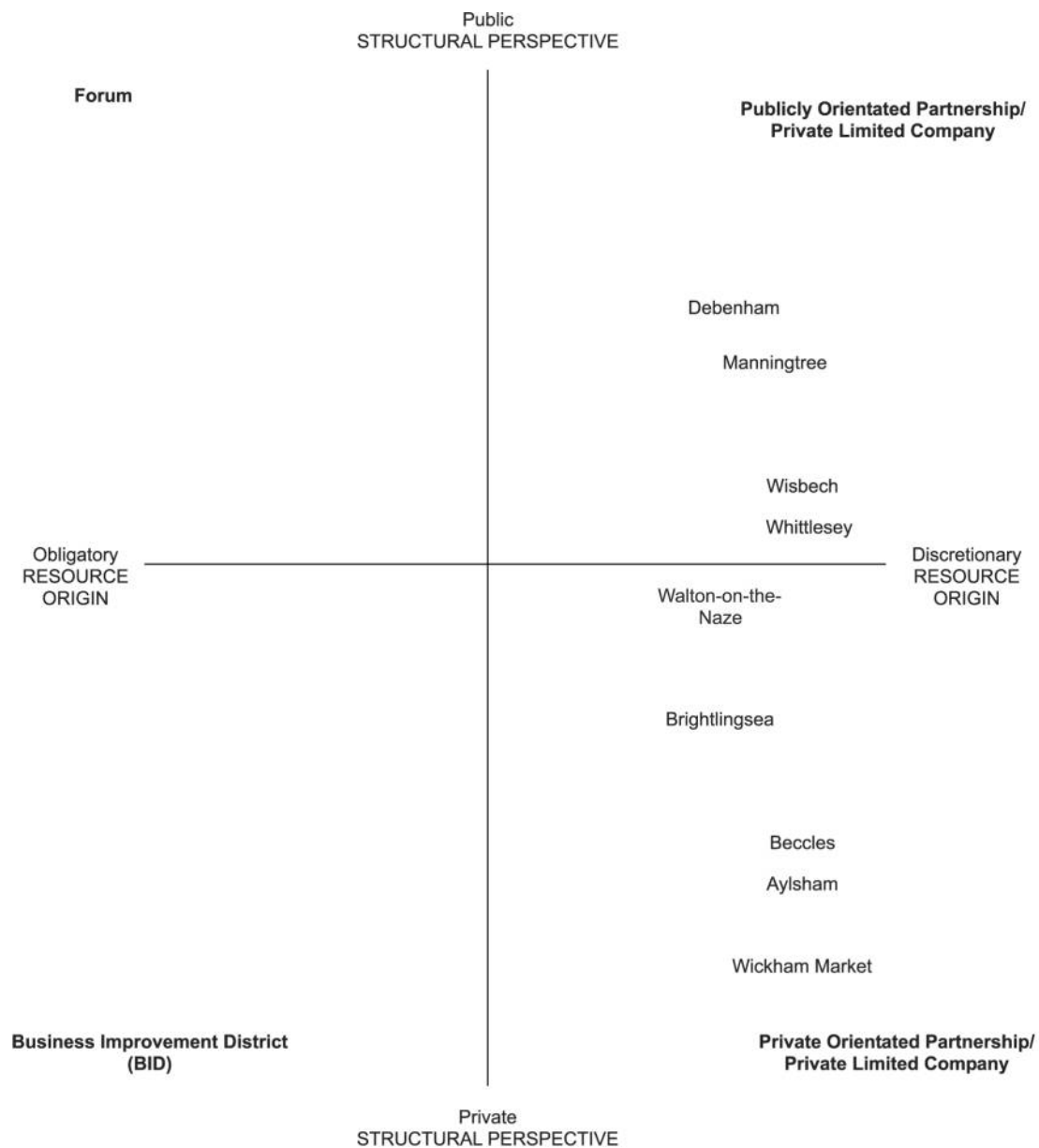
Possessing the ability to disengage from immediate practical issues (such as who is responsible for watering the hanging baskets!) and taking a more holistic view to integrating activities, and engaging stakeholders with the central issues of strategy development and implementation, are important skills that a partnership requires. Equally, personality has an influence here, as the coordinator also needs to be a diplomat as well as having a feel for the vagaries of local history and politics. The experience of the EEDA MTI towns also reflected that of Leominster (Hallsworth and Worthington, 2000) with potential risks from over-reliance on the contribution of one key individual. This issue was emphasised by funding constraints inherent with the EEDA MTIs, as the co-ordinator’s position was frequently part-time or combined with responsibilities – often with only two-three days per week available in practice for “full-time” issues. Although the commitment and dedication of individuals often meant that activity levels were “flexed” to achieve required tasks, this perhaps creates a pressure point weakness for the potential effectiveness of MTIs

3. Vision and strategy

The research found that definition and ownership of the vision and strategy created by MTIs was often constrained by limited prior experience in such activities, particularly in towns with less district council involvement or commercial sector exposure. Consequently, many towns struggled to create integrated and holistic strategies that could be translated into practical action plans. For some towns this was also connected to the original Healthcheck survey analysis carried out prior to involvement in the MTI scheme. Some MTI participants viewed this activity as a “tick box exercise” to obtain EEDA cash, rather than being a planning tool for future use.

Other important issues identified through the research included:

Figure 2 Activity scope and organisational facility for EEDA MTI towns



Notes: All the MTI towns noted above operated through partnership agreements, but the majority envisaged a change of status to private limited company or charitable trust post cessation of EEDA funding in April 2004

Source: After Warnaby *et al.* (1998)

- Lack of clarity.* The vision and strategy were often expressed in a “wordy” style that struggled to engage stakeholder involvement and commitment to the MTI. There was a tendency to incorporate every possible issue, leading to a bland message trying to be “all things to all people” despite positive intentions – for example:

X will be an attractive, safe, lively and accessible place for all those wishing to live, shop, work, visit, or spend time there during the day or at night. It will offer a range of shops and services which reflect the character and people of the local area, and act as a social and economic focus for the local area.
- Strategic focus.* Resulting from a diverse range of stakeholders, the MTI partnerships also displayed a lack of strategic focus, as a product of the “committee style” of partnerships. Adopting a narrower focus on the key issues that are unique for individual towns proved

beneficial – for towns such as Aylsham and Beccles.

- *Integration with the hinterland.* There was a potential risk with MTI strategies that the market town was viewed in a vacuum and that the surrounding hinterland settlements ignored them. On the other hand, some MTI strategies and delivery plans actively emphasised the role of the hinterland and its interaction with the market town “hub”. For example, Watton and Brightlingsea consciously adopted names that had a more embracing style (Wayland and Community Reach partnerships respectively). The latter, in particular, took more of a “big picture” approach with projects to deliberately integrate the hinterland villages with Brightlingsea rather than focusing on central activities.
- *Practical application.* The ability to effectively shape a vision and strategy into practical actions was seen to impact on the level of engagement from key stakeholders in the town. Commercial interests and the broader community became more intimately involved in the dynamics of the MTI partnership where the co-ordinator adopted a proactive role as lynchpin for communication (and often negotiation) for stakeholder involvement – with positive examples of this role seen in Aylsham and Beccles.

4. MTI process

The research also looked at operational aspects of how the MTI used the Countryside Agency’s Healthcheck template (Countryside Agency, 2002), to select strategic issues at their “conception” life stage. It was noted that the retail aspects of the Healthcheck questionnaires were generally given less emphasis than other community or infrastructure based issues. Furthermore, there was little reference in the subsequent annual delivery plans to the original Healthcheck surveys – possibly because they were not seen as an integral part of the town’s ongoing development as the MTI progressed into “infancy” or “growth” life stages. There was no evidence of any regular formal review or benchmarking procedures to assess progress being made by the MTI towards strategic objectives.

There are also important issues around the relative level of engagement in the MTI from national high street brands and local/regional retailers – which could form part of an agenda for further research on market towns. Influences on this may result from the dynamics of national retailer management (e.g. performance measurement systems, short-term tenure of

managers, and their cultural engagement with a local community) versus local business, which is often perceived as having a greater emotional engagement with the market town. However, this latter point may not necessarily be the case, for example, in the case of family-run businesses where ownership/succession issues have arisen, or the owners live in a neighbouring (or even “competing”) town.

The organisation of specific events, ranging from regular farmers’ markets to annual festivals, was seen to have positive impact on the towns, although not necessarily a panacea. Besides practical issues of location, access and promotion, there were negative attitudes from some existing “conventional” retailers to overcome – presenting further challenges for the MTI partnerships – for example in Brightlingsea and in Aylsham, where the shops felt threatened. On balance, though, most towns’ experience has been that incumbent retailers’ sales have actually been enhanced as a consequence of such events attracting additional visitors to the town.

5. Sustainability

The important question of sustainability of the MTI, as reviewed in the study by Danford (2002), is a central issue for all towns receiving funding. Given the termination of a central source of public finance in May 2004, the towns face the challenge of how the MTI partnerships will continue to function without dependency on this lifeline. This marks a potential step-change in their development “lifecycle” (Warnaby, 1998), as they are about to progress from “infancy” or “early growth” stage to one of stable growth and “maturity”.

Such an enforced step-change not only represents a challenge to secure alternative funding – from other public or commercial sources – but also potential change in legal constitution. There is a range of “not-for-profit” organisational structures that could be adopted – including unincorporated association, charitable trust, development trusts, and company limited by guarantee. The choices made by the MTIs were not measured by the study, as most towns were undecided at the time about the most appropriate for their individual circumstances, but overall the charitable trust approach seemed the most common form being considered. However, it should be noted that one of the MTI towns, Brandon in Suffolk, has been selected as one of the pilots for the forthcoming introduction of BIDs – which may provide important case study evidence in response to questions raised about BIDs (Hogg *et al.*, 2003).

Many of the MTI project co-ordinators and project managers faced uncertainty about whether they would retain their role (either full or part-time) once EEDA funding ceased. Although accepted as the nature of external funding-based contract employment, it still cast an uncertainty over the roles and the commitment of key individuals. In view of the potential positive contribution of such individuals, it seems surprising that there was little evidence of thorough succession planning or risk planning.

Beyond the operations-based issues of sustainability, there are also some important considerations about the balance of retail activity in the MTI towns and the potential impact on the “health” of the high street (Parker and Byrom, 2000). The profile of retail use mix in the towns that completed a questionnaire is illustrated in Table III – showing relative stability and no major skew in the mix of shop types.

Although the questionnaire identified that the towns had a wide range of different retail outlets without any clear dominant sub-sector, an interesting trend was the growth of services and niche retailing, for example beautician and tanning treatments, representing a movement away from “traditional” profiles of food shops. This could provide an interesting area for future study of retail profile for MTIs over a period of time – to track the impact of changing socio-economic dynamics of the towns and the influence on shop provision. From the questionnaire’s snapshot of changes in retail profile between 2001 and 2003 (see Table III), there appears to have been little change in the number of retail outlets in the MTI towns and they have relatively low levels of vacant retail premises. However, it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions about the longevity of retail stability without further research to understand the trends in the economic performance of the outlets over time.

Behind the overall breadth and depth of retailing that contributes to the vitality and

vibrancy of MTI market towns the questionnaire survey also revealed a surprisingly high dependence of MTIs on family-run retail businesses – which constitute an average 76 per cent of retail outlets in MTI towns surveyed (see Table III). However, while this could be seen as having benefits of retailer commitment to the town, such businesses face additional challenges, not least the question of succession – which will become an increasingly important issue as the UK population age profile rises. Combined with other socio-economic pressures on young people in rural economies (for example, housing availability and rising costs in rural areas as a consequence of increased demand), many family-run businesses may not be able to sustain their long-term economic existence. Subsequent generations in family-run businesses are facing higher lifestyle costs than the founders, and the businesses may not be capable of sustaining sufficient income levels to retain family members in the business, thus presenting problems for diversity and continuity of town centres. MTI partnerships need to be aware of these challenges and anticipate the need for contingency planning, rather than waiting until the family-run businesses reach crisis point, through development of support and advice, such as those being developed by family business “champions” within Business Links.

A future research agenda for market towns?

The experience of the EEDA MTI towns identified through this study indicates that there are practical opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of town centre management for such market towns. The primary areas that offer such opportunities and constitute a forward agenda for market town research are:

Table III Retail mix in EEDA MTI towns

	No. shops 2003	No. shops 2001	Change	Vacancy rate (%)	Family-run (%)
Aylsham	59	62	– 3	0	71
Beccles	162	153	+9	5.6	85
Community Reach	58	64	– 6	0	64
Debenham	39	35	+4	2.6	82
Stour Valley	47	49	– 2	2.1	83
Walton-on-the-Naze	102			2.0	85
Whittlesey	115			0	87
Wickham market	31	31	0	0	58
Wisbech					
Woodbridge	132			3.0	80
Average	83			1.7	76

- (1) *Lifecycle stage of TCM partnerships.* Longitudinal study of MTI partnership development over a longer period of time, to overcome any possible distortion through a “snapshot in time” perspective, which affected the current study.
- (2) *Profile of retailer ownership.* Profile of retailer ownership and management stability within the context of market towns – particularly the apparently high proportion of family-owned businesses. The difference in management styles and cultural characteristics could have an influence on the role played by retailers in the TCM partnership.
- (3) *Mix of the retail business use.* Mix of the retail business use – whether there are any significant shifts in the types of retail businesses operating in MTI towns. Analysis of any change from traditional retailing towards niche and service activity over time, and contribution of mix profile to stability and economic sustainability.
- (4) *Effective economic measurement.* To date there has been only limited use of quantified measurements of economic performance for day-to-day town centre management, or long-term strategic planning, in the EEDA MTI towns. Although discussed by academics and practitioners at a seminar organised by Action for Market Towns (2003), there has been limited progress towards implementing practical measurements to support MTI progress benchmarking. From the interviews with MTI stakeholders and work by Manchester Metropolitan University (Parker and Byrom, 2000) there are a number of measures that could be used to provide feedback to MTI partnerships in this context, through relatively simple customer surveys:
 - average value of customer spend in each shop;
 - total consumer spend for the town;
 - attendance at farmers’ markets;
 - car park usage; and
 - analysis of how people travel to the town centre shops (by car, on foot, public transport) and distance travelled.
 Additionally, these could be supplemented by regular update of elements from original Healthcheck surveys, to support monitoring and evaluation:
 - vacancy rate of retail premises;
 - rent levels on town centre premises;
 - town centre customer profiling; and
 - profiling of business mix.
- (5) *MTI performance measurement.* The MTI’s limited ongoing use of the Countryside

Agency’s Healthcheck could be due to a perception of it being a time-consuming exercise with limited direct benefits based on experience in the partnerships’ “infancy” life stage. However, now that MTIs are progressing to more mature partnership structures, they may be able to adopt more focused and selective use of measures. Through concentration on a more limited range, relating to the delivery of specific strategic goals, MTIs could harness a set of bespoke performance measures that support partnership management and strategy development.

A mechanism with potential to facilitate this approach is the balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1992, 1996), which could integrate a disparate range of Healthcheck data to engage the key stakeholders of the market town more effectively. A possible application of the balanced scorecard can be seen in Figure 3, based on four pathways that provide an integrated approach to illustrate how the MTI strategy for a town could be addressed through future testing in towns. By focussing on three or four measures per field, this approach could provide a straightforward integrative mechanism for individual towns to track their progress. In addition it could enable comparisons to be made between towns to enable shared learning between MTIs to support shared learning.

However, it should be noted that the balanced scorecard was developed for application in commercial organisations and, although it has been applied in public bodies, its application to a market town partnership may not necessarily align town centre management with MTI strategic objectives. Furthermore, shortcomings have also been identified in the balanced scorecard approach by critical academic reviews, which raise questions over its potential – including Kanji (2001), Maltz *et al.* (2003), and Norreklit (2003), who have put forward alternative approaches of their own. A summary of the strengths and weaknesses for the use of the balanced scorecard that have been proposed are summarised in Table IV.

Conclusion

The experience of MTI towns in the east of England observed in this study has indicated that the MTI partnership approach has provided a boost for smaller market towns. They have been

Figure 3 A balanced scorecard for market towns?

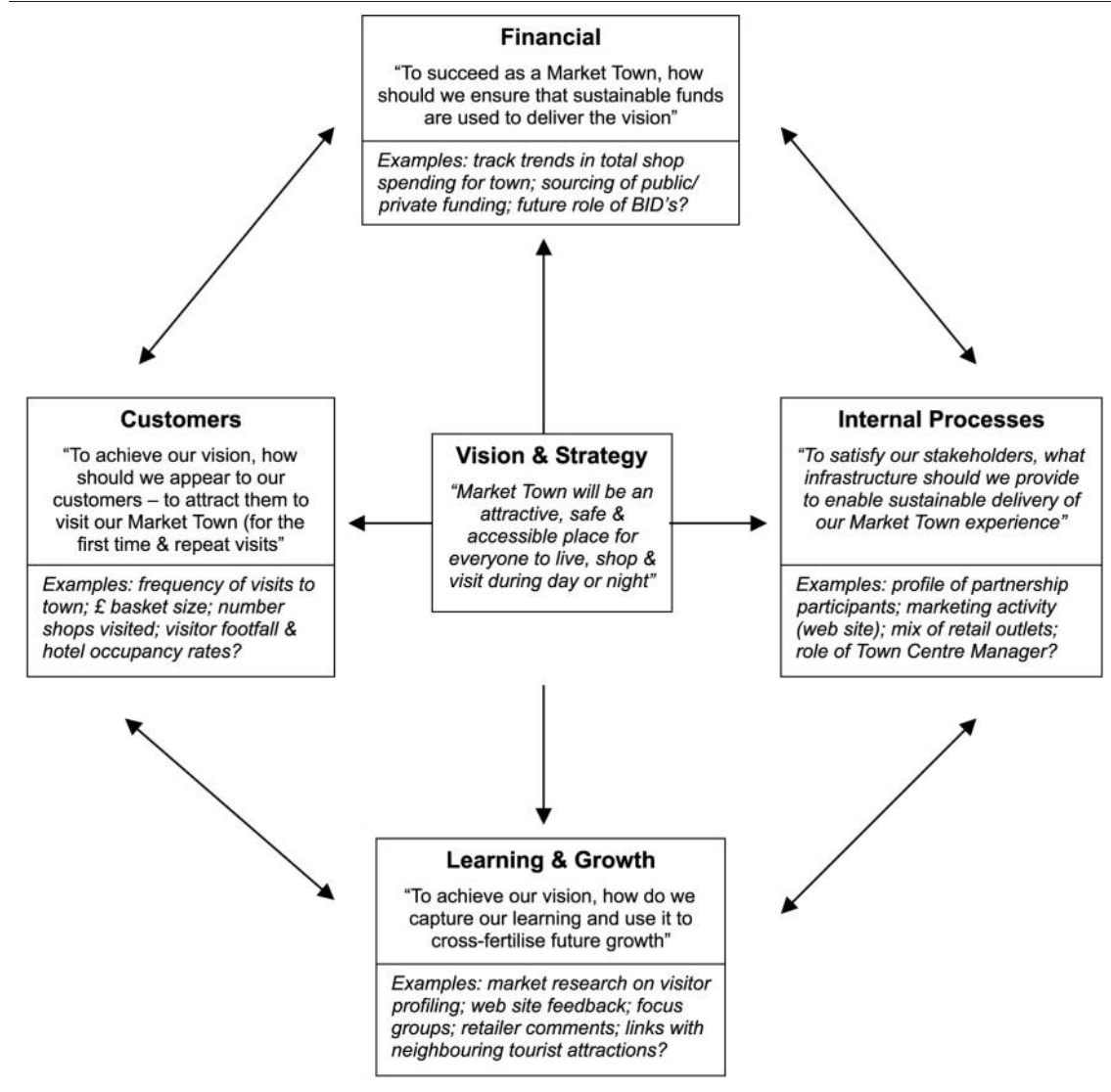


Table IV Strengths and weaknesses of the balanced scorecard

Strengths	Weaknesses
Comprehensive performance summary	Conceptual focus – difficult to translate to practical measurements
Enables vision and strategy to be translated to tangible objectives and measures	Focus on customers fails to identify measures for other important stakeholders
Holistic approach to performance measures	Lack of focus on human resource and supplier contribution
Sense of interdependency among organisational activities	Focus is primarily on top-down performance measurement
Focus on customer and market factors	Interactions between criteria are unclear
Easy to use	Fails to monitor competition or wider environmental dynamics

able to assume greater local control, through the use of additional funding support, to facilitate their passage through the early life stages of town centre management. It has also highlighted some important learning points around the MTI process itself, the role of partnership structures and key

stakeholder participation, yet also leaves open some important questions around the use of performance measurement tools to support economic sustainability of market towns – forming an agenda for further research on the issues noted above.

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