

# Market Towns: Key trends and challenges

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# Key trends affecting in market towns

## Open society

- Motoring costs declining as a proportion of disposable income.
- Rural residents don't necessarily work, shop and enjoy leisure locally.
- Internet; new ways of gaining information, communicating and doing business.

## Population change

- Strong urban to rural drift often to bring up children and to retire, but out-migration of the young
- Population growth often due to rural housing being concentrated in market towns

# **Key trends affecting in market towns**

## **Changing rural economy**

- Urban based businesses more inclined to consider rural locations.
- Generally the structure of the economy within the towns is now similar to that of the nation as a whole.

## **Declining relevance of town centres**

- Organisation and scale economies in retail
- Decentralisation of food and concentration in large urban areas of non-food and leisure opportunities.
- However, market town centres are seen as leisure destinations by urban residents.

# Varying implications

- Very dependent on context (town and hinterland assets, geographical, regional, local capacity to respond).
- Some towns are thriving, others are surviving but others are struggling.
- Economic growth - ‘hard’ factors such as accessibility and location to large urban areas likely to be more significant than the attractiveness of the town and surrounding rural area.
- Usually it is the town centres that are suffering the most, with, for example, only 57% of towns of the size of Swaffham still designated as service hubs.

# Challenge

- Establish a viable trajectory for the towns which maintains their multi-functionality (vitality not just nice places to live) and character (maintain distinctiveness).



# Survey of People Working in Swaffham



## Purpose of the study

- Planning – an wide awareness of issues but focusing on key issues and people affected
- Everyday more than two thousand people go to work in Swaffham – a key user group often neglected.
- Survey (263 employees – BIG THANKS!) explores the experiences, attitudes and activities
- The research focuses on the dynamics of local employment and the contribution of employment to overall sustainability.

# Experiences

- People's experiences of seeking employment and working in Swaffham vary greatly.
- A significant segment of the workforce feel that they are underpaid, have limited promotion prospects and would struggle to find suitable alternative employment in the town.
- For others, working in Swaffham provides a comfortable living and lifestyle.

# Travel to Work

- Very few people travel to work by sustainable means.
- Internet increases the feasibility of working at home, many people do work at home but as extra hours not instead of going to work.
- Those travelling from outside the town almost invariably travel by car – for employees - bus more a social inclusion issue rather than sustainability.
- The majority of those living **and** working in the town travel by car, although a number do walk/cycle.

# Activities

- People who work in Swaffham make important contributions to the town trade through shopping, leisure and community activities.
- However, **where** people live and the **part of the town in which they work** seems to influence the extent to which they contribute to the town's economy and society.
- 10% of people working in the town never shop there!

# Contribution of employment to overall sustainability

In the context of an ‘open society’ town employment:

- enhances the vitality of the town - adding to local activities and spend.
- enhancing perhaps the only significant non-car rural transport occurring – walking and cycling.
- ensuring balance in terms of population structure (young and families with children) and multi-functionality (more than nice places to live)
- providing significant economic linkages and benefits to the surround rural hinterlands.

# Policy Responses

- Forces towards an ‘open society’ are national/international, but there are still local opportunities.
- Sustainable travel – walking and cycling – Swaffham is 55th out of 71 Norfolk settlements
- Town centre trade – need to challenge negative attitudes but can more be done to improve the offer? Shopping environment? providing something different to elsewhere?
- Linkages with sites away from centre-joined up thinking
- Ensuring a balance (housing, employment services) where opportunities occur – have made a strong case for the role of local employment.