

## Appendix 1

### Market Town Investment Group The “Portas” Investment Programme Briefing Note September 2012

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#### Section 1 Background

In December 2011 Mary Portas published her independent review into the future of High Streets.

The report considered a myriad of problems and issues that impact on our High Streets. It drew attention to the complex web of interests that are involved at varying levels within town centres. Portas highlighted the apparent lack of collaboration between the various stakeholders and contrasted the absence of recognised, legitimate leadership needed to bring everyone together with the way out-of-town retail centres and supermarkets are managed.

It is clear from the Portas Review that the revitalisation of Britain’s High Streets is not just about halting the increase of empty retail units in a town centre by encouraging more shops to open. Our High Streets are dynamic, evolving places. Recent trends have had a significant influence on the way people shop and these combined with the current economic recession have had an impact on the state of the High Street.

- When buying non-food items people increasingly want an experience when they shop and will travel to nearby cities and large shopping centres where there is greater choice and shopping can be combined with leisure activities such as eating out, visiting a museum or gallery or watching a film.
- Internet shopping has increased year on year over the past decade and is expected to continue rising with more people using mobiles and tablet technology to shop online.

For the High Streets of South Somerset to compete with cities, larger shopping centres and e-retail they need to be places that people want to visit to socialise and interact with others, as well as a place to buy goods and services. To encourage greater economic activity in a town there is a need for investment in and the creation of places where people choose to take part in a wider range of interesting activities. This could involve supporting and marketing more opportunities for general and niche shopping, socialising, drinking, eating, browsing, walking, keeping fit, volunteering or viewing artworks and heritage sites.

Investment in our High Streets needs to be considered in relation to other general trends that will affect how they will be used in future:

- Our ageing society – Market towns in South Somerset all have a significant proportion of their population over the age of 60. As the UK is an ageing society

and South West England is a popular place to retire, the number of retired people in South Somerset will increase.

- Increased cost of living and reduction in disposable income – rising fuel prices will impact on the cost of goods and will also affect peoples' ability to travel further afield to shop. In addition, as we get older and move from early retirement into our 80s and 90s, the level of disposable income available to us will generally decrease.

## Section 2 MTIG Portas Workshop

The Portas Review included 28 recommendations which can largely be divided into six topics:

- Town Teams & business networks
- Planning
- Parking
- Markets
- Business Rates
- Landlords & Properties

At the 15 June 2012 Market Towns Investment Group (MTIG) workshop, we explored their impact on South Somerset's Market Towns.

The aim was to:

- 1) Establish the issues and opportunities for investment that could be explored through future MTIG meetings.
- 2) Develop criteria for a new MTIG funding programme using the £66,670 "Portas Plus" fund money (High Street Innovation Fund) and additional MTIG monies.

The workshop used a world café style approach with six tables; one for each topic. Each table had a paper table cloth and plenty of pens and was staffed by a facilitator. Attendees were asked to write their comments and highlight particular concerns in relation to the six topics and how they impact on their own towns.

All the written comments were then analysed to establish:

- a) The key concerns / messages in relation to each topic in South Somerset
- b) Opportunities for SSDC to realign the resources it could bring to MTIG to support High Street regeneration
- c) Potential projects for a new funding programme

The key messages and concerns of those taking part in relation to each topic are highlighted below:

### **Topic 1: Town Teams & Business Networks**

To counteract the problems that can arise when different stakeholders, often working in isolation, set out to make changes that impact on the High Street, Portas recommends

setting up a Town Team. Stakeholders can form a Town Team that works as one to tackle the issues and problems that affect their High Street.

Comments from the workshop acknowledged the sense in the concept of Town Teams. However, many also remarked that the effectiveness of a Town Team was reliant upon the following:

- Good communication
- Composition - who should be involved? The need for a variety of players e.g. dynamic people within the town with a reputation for getting things done and not just retailers.
- Relationship with existing Chambers of Commerce and concerns over duplication, legitimacy and recognition
- The need for a clear project focus – do not just want a talking shop. People quickly lose interest in meetings without actions.

### **Topic 2: Planning**

Nine of the Portas recommendations concern planning and these relate to Neighbourhood Plans, Changing permitted use classification(s), the financial contributions from developers and out of town developments versus town centres.

It is clear from the comments made that Market Town representatives would value further information and guidance on many of those issues and in particular:

- Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and whether this can be used to improve and enhance High Streets.
- Planning Use Classification – An explanation of what evidence is used in the decision making process to decide a property can change use?

### **Topic 3: Parking**

The comments made in relation to this topic highlighted a number issues relating to parking in the market towns;

- The need for parking schemes that encourage shoppers / visitors to linger rather than rush back to their car.
- The introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement has highlighted the lack of residents parking for people living in the town centres.
- The lack or perceived lack of long term parking for workers.
- The need for parking and / or drop off areas for tourist coaches.

### **Topic 4: Markets**

There was a high level of interest in markets with people recognising that different types of markets, e.g. farmers markets, local produce, vintage, crafts and continental markets will attract a broad mix of people.

Many people recognised that markets have a role in increasing footfall into a town centre but accepted that some local retailers can feel threatened and perceive markets as competition.

A number of towns either want a market or require help improving an existing market and as a consequence there were quite a few questions relating to licensing and other regulations involved in the setting up and running of a market.

#### **Topic 5: Business rates**

A lot of questions were raised regarding processes and procedures especially in relation to empty properties and business rate relief for new and small businesses and charity shops.

Attendees were keen to encourage entrepreneurs and felt that business rate relief should be considered in relation to new start up businesses.

Comments were also made in relation to community groups and organisations that want to make use of empty shops and other town centre buildings on a Meanwhile Use basis.

#### **Topic 6: Landlords & Properties**

Many of the towns have derelict sites and / or old properties in prominent locations that have looked unsightly for a long period of time. These sites and buildings are often owned by absentee and / or negligent landlords. Comments demonstrate that attendees feel frustrated at the lack of power they have to make changes.

There were also a number of comments regarding the use of empty properties and the recognition that Meanwhile use of sites and properties would be a beneficial way to improve the look of a place but again people were unsure how to progress this.

### **Section 3: MTIG Portas Town Centre Investment Programme**

It is proposed that this investment programme is developed in 3 stages.

#### **Stage 1: (October/November 2012)**

Using the project themes identified below, each town makes an initial bid for project(s) funding as an expression of interest.

You will need to indicate how your project(s) will/can involve a variety of stakeholders and key players, including local businesses.

Funding can be for capital and/or revenue projects. Bids over £10,000 for capital or revenue, or requests for 100% project funding are unlikely to be approved.

Please involve your SSDC Market Town Co-ordinator when working up your project proposal.

Expression of Interest Forms (enclosed) should be submitted by November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012.

#### **Stage 2: ( November 2012 /February 2013)**

Project development workshops organised as needed to support the number and type of projects put forward.

#### **Stage 3: (March 2013)**

Full Project funding bid submitted no later than March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012.

## Project Themes

- **Community Facelift** – use a creative / innovative approach to improve a derelict site or empty building located in a prominent part of the town. This might involve a community arts or heritage project that is used to improve a site that will otherwise sit empty and look a mess. For example engaging an artist to carry out workshops with residents to create artistic hoardings that help screen a derelict site. Alternatively you could work with landowners and other relevant stakeholders to carry out permanent works that improve and enhance a central town area that currently creates a poor impression. For example, similar to the work carried out in Crewkerne to create a pedestrian link between shopping areas, <http://towns.org.uk/2011/05/04/action-for-market-towns-awards-2011-pedestrian-link-crewkerne>
- **Meanwhile Use** – support the temporary occupation of identified empty properties by community groups or new enterprises. For example setting up a pop-up shop for local crafts people or a temporary space where local community groups carry out workshops or drop-in sessions. Alternatively could an empty building be used as a site for a new market?
- **Rents & Rates Package Incentive** – working with specific local landlords to devise a reduced rent and rate package that encourages new local businesses to set up in specific empty properties. Identify one or more empty shops / units in your town that would be suitable for new businesses and broker an arrangement between the landlord and SSDC Business Rates for a time limited package that would encourage new local start-ups.
- **Markets** – development of a new regular market or improvements to an existing market. This may be as a pilot making use of an empty property to house a market on a temporary basis. Alternatively, this could be to extend and improve an existing market making it more attractive to shoppers and helping to increase footfall within the town centre.
- **Town Image** – successful promotion and marketing of a destination requires good brand development which conveys a clear image of the type of experience visitors are likely to have.

## Project Development Workshops

Project Development Workshop(s) will be arranged to give Town Representatives the opportunity to discuss their potential investment projects in more detail in relation to particular issues in their town centres and seek any missing information needed. Subjects could include;

### **Town Teams**

- Both Chard and Wincanton have already set up Town Teams when they submitted a bid to become Portas Pilots. Representatives from each of the two Town Teams could make a short presentation to MTIG and answer questions. Not all towns will want to set up a separate Town Team but instead may well want to build upon an existing network such as the Chamber of Commerce or a Community Regeneration Group.

**Parking**

- What scope is there to experiment with local parking schemes that encourage people to visit and stay longer in town centres?

**Markets**

- A number of towns would like a new or improved market. There is a whole host of legislation and regulation to consider, as well as day-to-day processes and procedures. A session outlining these could be arranged.

**Business Rates**

- A presentation and Q & A session to explain the business rates system in relation to empty properties and Meanwhile Use. Can the system be made easier so that the creative use of an empty property is not jeopardised by restrictive legislation and red tape?

**Landlords & Properties**

- A number of towns had identified empty buildings and derelict sites within their town centres that needed improving even if only temporarily. What can be done in relation to Meanwhile Use and / or enforcement.

**Planning**

A presentation and Q & A session to explain particular aspects of planning and in particular:

- Planning use classification and Pop-Up shops – an explanation regarding the new proposals from central government that would allow landlords to temporarily change the use of a shop for two years.
- Section 106 & CIL – how towns can get involved in the process and whether the funds can be used for town centre improvements.
- Neighbourhood Plans in relation to town centres.

(Please note: See also the attached invite to separate local seminars on this)

ZH/ARG/2012